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Seven Seas Entertainment

RIPPING SOMEONE OPEN ONLY MAKES THEM BLEED

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Exclusive Interview with Ogusu Nanoka

Your debut title was an instant hit, winning you a spot among the most popular authors in the country. It's been a few years since then, and I can only imagine your life has changed completely. Tell us, how are things for you now?

I feel truly blessed that my story has found its way to so many people who love it as much as I do. However, I wouldn't say my life has changed dramatically. My writing has more reach now, and I get a lot more feedback than I used to, but I've always known that I live in a world where my outlook is not shared by the majority. For me, the greatest prize is that I've found a community of like-minded people, as well as those who can disagree in a respectful way.

A lot of us are excited for the upcoming live-action film adaptation of your third book, *Girl's March*. How does it feel to have your writing recreated on the big screen?

Film and prose are two completely different mediums, with completely different ways of making a story come to life. All of my novels, including *Girl's March*, utilize the unique strengths of the novel format, but I hope my readers are looking forward to seeing how those elements are repurposed to suit the nature of the adaptation. Of course, it's possible some who love the book will inevitably be disappointed by the film's rendition of the story. If I could, I'd reassure those people that no adaptation will ever have the power to invalidate their personal interpretation of the original.

How involved were you in the adaptation process?

I met with the director in the planning stages and explained the overall message embedded in the work. Since then, I haven't really given feedback on the script or camera work. They're the experts, not me. As the author, I think it's only fair to stay in my lane, so to speak.

Can you go into more detail about this "embedded message" you explained to the director?

That is something I've only ever told the team directly involved with creating the film, and in my opinion, it's nothing the audience needs to worry about. I want my readers to have the freedom to love the story well beyond any limits I set for it. The way I see it, they have every right to discover the message for themselves, and not even the author has any business getting in the way of that.

In other words, there's no singular interpretation you want everyone to share?

I want the readers to have a good time, and there's a lot of feelings I want them to experience in the process. But most of all, I want it to simply be a story that they can pick up and put down as they please.

Many say your writing has a knack for reaching into the minds of your readers and letting them see through the eyes of your protagonists, making readers feel as though your story is just for them. What are your thoughts on that?

I think everyone in the entire world has, in some form or another, been depicted in a book or song or film or work of art, and I think this proves that the characters in our stories are very much real. Perhaps this is what gives us meaning, as writers. If you as a reader feel that you or your life is portrayed in the story, well, maybe you're right! Maybe someone out there is living a "storybook" sort of life. Maybe they transform at night. Maybe they rescued a princess. I'm not going to try to invalidate that.

Dramatis Personae: Ripping Someone Open Only Makes Them Bleed

THE TEENAGERS

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MUSIC VENUE STAFF

Ukawa Ai Fujino Mikoto Hashirayama Keiji

IMPATIENS

Takatsuki Sakuna, the Leader Wakayama Ran, the Hottie Gotou Julia, the *Kaiju* Katano Towako, the Elitist Emukae Maki, the Ditz Hashimoto Ao, the Brat Iizuka Mei, the Firecracker

BOOKSTORE STAFF

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THE OTHERS

Shinogi Yuu Horikita Asahi Kokubo Risa

THE NOVELIST

Ogusu Nanoka



The Girl
Well-meaning Family
Trusting Friends
The Record Keeper
Ai's Friends
Ai's Family
People the Girl Sees as Strangers

Ai

Itobayashi Akane

"The Girl was crying."
GIRL'S MARCH, PAPERBACK EDITION, PAGE 1, LINE 1

THE DAY AKANE FIRST DISCOVERED the book, she had wandered into a tiny bookstore after remembering the gift card collecting dust in her wallet. Near the entrance, marked "New Releases," was a tidy stack of sky-blue covers with *Girl's March* printed in a cutesy font. She recognized the author by name, and from that surmised it was a woman, but had never read her other works and knew next to nothing about her.

When she made the decision to buy the book, it wasn't because of its superficial appeal, or because she felt some magical connection to it. Rather, she determined after careful evaluation that it wasn't too nerdy a book for her to be seen reading, and thus was willing to give it a try.

Later that night, she decided she would read the first chapter before bed to get a feel for the prose. To this day, she still remembered the sensation at her fingertips the moment she offhandedly flipped to Page 1. Next thing she knew, she had finished the whole thing. Beyond the still-open curtains, she was shocked to see dawn timidly creeping in over the horizon, like it had half a mind to bolt.

The world was still just the same as yesterday, but something had shifted ever so slightly in the way Akane saw it. She was now possessed of a shattering realization: this book understood her in a way no one could possibly know. It saw the real her that her friends, her family, even her boyfriend, couldn't see. In some small way, it felt as though this story had given her the validation to exist.

She knew from the outset that she would never get to talk about this with anyone. She couldn't possibly risk exposing herself for what she really was. And yet, deep down, she held out hope that someday she, like The Girl in the story, would find someone who could understand and accept her.

Unfortunately, every time she was subjected to someone else's opinion of *Girl's March*, that tiny hope was squashed flat. Her boyfriend, her peers—none of them had ever experienced the same kind of isolation. Her coworkers didn't have a shred of empathy. And the adults in her life didn't even *try* to analyze its underlying themes.

So when the film adaptation was announced, she naturally thought that the people closest to the source material would be sure to understand it like she did. But when the cast was revealed, she was utterly aghast. These weren't the characters in the story! The only thing it retained from the source material was the plot summary!

No one could see what she saw. None of them understood a single thing about what made the original great.

Months went by with Akane's true opinion of *Girl's March* still locked away in her heart. All she could do was cling to the story as it was first written, all by herself, dreaming of the day she might finally change, the way The Girl did.

Oh my god, shut up.

On the subway, Akane tapped at her smartphone with a straight face, blocking some weird Twitter account blathering on and on about "the truth of our world." One of her classmates had retweeted it onto her feed.

The "truth" would never reveal itself to anyone. It was perfectly concealed from every angle, and there was no point in hoping otherwise.

Suppressing the perpetually looming threat of a mental breakdown with a sigh, she checked the LED display. Her destination was just one stop away. She was meeting up with her boyfriend, who went to a different school, and she had already constructed the appearance of nervous excitement.

Each time the doors slid open, the unique scent of each district wafted into the subway car. When she stepped out onto the platform, what greeted her was the smell she hated most of all—not trash or sewage, but warm bodies packed into close proximity. This district was shaped like a basin, so perhaps all the stink collected at the station square at the very bottom. But these trifling

thoughts were shoved deep down, where they couldn't reach her expression.

She walked with a cheerful gait, her head held high, her sights set on all that was yet to come. As she left the station, she took great care not to obstruct anyone's path as she replicated the pace of a teen girl seasoned with goodnatured innocence, crossing the street at the major intersection to reach the yellow record store that served as their meetup spot. She had considered that they might encounter each other on the street, but when she opened the door, she saw him already inside, listening to a CD on the first floor. Though his back was turned and he was wearing a run-of-the-mill school uniform, the keychain dangling from his backpack was the same one she'd given him. She paused to gently bite her tongue.

For a moment, she watched him from a distance. Then, right as he reached up to pull off the tester headphones, she took a step forward, stooping to intercept his lowered gaze as she peeked around his side. "Hey, Shin."

"Whoa! Jeez, don't scare me!"

She had carefully calculated her timing and body language so the surprise wouldn't impugn his dignity, and judging by his bashful smile, she had succeeded. She promptly grabbed the CD directly in front of her on the rack. "What were you listening to?"

"It's this new band I'm into. You probably haven't heard of them."

"Nope!"

Even if she *had* heard of them, she would still have said no, and when Shin offered her the headphones to let her listen, she still would have accepted them. She slowly pulled them on, feeling the residual heat in the leather cushions as the music began to play. She didn't comment right away, but instead waited for the first track to end before sculpting a smile and a nod, turning back to him.

"I don't know if it's got mainstream appeal, but it's really cool."

"I know, right?" her boyfriend beamed, and she felt a rush of inexplicable joy.

The feeling made her want to die.

Since it was available to stream online, they decided to leave the store without buying the CD.

The next day found Akane back in the same smelly district, after school, for one singular reason—she was scheduled to work that day. As for why she'd taken a job in her least favorite district—it was because a childhood friend worked there, and her parents wanted her to stay within sight of at least one trusted acquaintance.

She crossed the street, passing a different record store from the one she'd visited yesterday. Up ahead, she would make a left and climb the gently sloping hill to the bookstore where she worked. She was scheduled two or three days a week—four-hour shifts starting at 4 p.m. on weekdays and either 9:45 a.m. or 1:45 p.m. on weekends—making 1,050 yen per hour.

Before arriving at work, she made sure her appearance was flawless, purposely took two steps back to sculpt a fittingly drowsy expression, then walked into the busy store. Passing by the table of books with upcoming film adaptations, she put her hand on the doorknob to the back room.

"Good meowning!"

She chose her greeting based on who was scheduled that day. Today she would be working with the manager, the aforementioned friend, and a college student who shared a lot of the same shifts as her, so she could get away with being a little extra silly.

The back room was small, and whoever was inside had definitely heard her. As she opened the door, she pointed her smile in the direction of a soft giggle.

"You look so sleepy, your glasses are practically falling off."

"Well, duh! I just spent all day at school! I'm exhausted!"

Akane's pathetic whining was rewarded with a piece of candy from the older girl. She promptly said thank you, unwrapped it, and popped it into her mouth.

"Agh, it's sour!" She widened her eyes as if to suggest this had succeeded in waking her up a little.

Then she changed out of her uniform into her work clothes and apron, spat the candy into a tissue, and threw it in the trash.

Her main duty during her shifts was manning the cash register. Sure enough, as soon as she crossed paths with the manager, that was where she was directed. She made sure to greet the college student who had clocked in ahead of her as she obediently stationed herself behind the counter. Then, as she was barely a minute into reading the staff notes, her first customer of the day walked up.

An elegantly dressed older woman plunked down a pocket paperback with *Girl's March* in cutesy font printed on a sky-blue cover.

"Would you like a protective paper cover?"

"Yes, please, and can I get a bag?"

"Sure thing!"

Akane kept her voice controlled, at a reasonable volume, and tinged with a hint of a childish lilt. She wrapped the book with a deftness that favored speed over precision.

"Thank you for your purchase!"

Whenever she went more than ten seconds without a new customer, the color of the world around her seemed to grow one degree more desaturated. It was important that she strive not to let this vague, formless ennui seep into her expression.

"Itobayashi-san, have you read that one?" asked the college student, Nishio Fumikazu, standing at the other register.

"Huh?" Akane donned a hint of excitement at the prospect of a conversation. "The one I just rang up?" She already knew the answer to this, but having worked with him for quite some time, she understood that he liked to take the initiative.

"Yeah, Girl's March!" he exclaimed.

"Oh! Yeah, I have, actually!" she replied, matching his enthusiasm.

"What did you think of it? Personally I thought it was kind of meh, but I do see

the appeal. A lot of folks really seem to like the fuzzy, dreamy prose."

She envied the way he somehow managed to respond to his own question. Blissful, unbridled self-obsession.

"I loved it! It's a beautiful story, almost like a picture book, or a...a fairytale." Then she bit her tongue for throwing the L word around.

"The movie comes out next weekend, right? Do you want to go see it?"

"What, with you? Only if you're paying."

He burst out laughing, then crossed his arms bashfully. "I didn't mean it like that! You high schoolers are so opportunistic nowadays."

"Oh. Darn."

In truth, she knew he wasn't the type to hit on an underage coworker. But judging from his reaction, he seemed to enjoy this interaction, which made her feel at ease.

And that feeling, in turn, made her want to die.

She would ring up many more copies of *Girl's March* during that shift.

The day after that, Akane was back in the same reeking district for the third day running, and not without good reason.

Yesterday, as she was eating lunch with her usual group of friends in the classroom, one of them casually suggested she might go shopping the next day before her work shift. It fit right into the flow of conversation with no particular emphasis, so the most reaction it garnered was a lighthearted "Have fun at work! Buy me something when you get paid!" The topic changed to well-paying jobs for a moment, before switching gears to something else entirely. By that point, everyone had stopped thinking about the original statement—everyone except Akane, who rolled it around in her mind like a stone.

Once the girls had all finished eating, they parted ways to visit the restroom or some other classroom. Akane, however, headed down to the student store outside the cafeteria on the first floor. After buying a bottle of iced tea with the red label, she turned around and sluggishly climbed all the way back up to the

sixth floor.

Just outside the classroom, she paused to pull out her phone. Then she looked up suddenly, as if a thought had occurred to her, and walked over to where her friend was sitting. There, she crouched down to rest her chin on the desk.

"What's wrong, Bayashi?"

Every time someone called her by this nickname, Akane felt dopamine flood her brain. To her, it was a sign of affection. She bit her tongue to hold it in, then looked up at her friend from behind her fake glasses.

"Miyu, what time does your shift start tomorrow?"

"1:30-why?"

"I just remembered my family's having a thing tomorrow and I don't wanna go. So if you're going shopping in the morning, can I...tag along?"

Akane framed it as a selfish imposition—a humble request that the receiver could choose to grant at her convenience. Miyu was the type who avoided being alone as much as possible, unless it was mandated by work or school, but she was insecure about coming off as needy. So when Akane made it sound as though the stars had aligned out of sheer coincidence, Miyu lit up.

"Really?! Oh my gosh, of course you can!"
"Cool."

Akane displayed a consciously embarrassed smile, then flagged down another nearby member of their group to let her know so it wouldn't be a secret. Alas, the other girl already had plans and couldn't join, but that was no problem— Akane just wanted to get the word out.

The next morning, when Miyu showed up at their rendezvous point approximately five minutes late, Akane squealed in delight as befitting a teen girl.

Miyu was in the market for a new phone case; her current one, as she showed Akane, was visibly cracked. They browsed a handful of stores together and found a few decent candidates, but nothing that stole Miyu's heart. At that

point, they decided to swing by a fast food restaurant to relax and grab a bite to eat.

"Maybe I should try looking online... I don't like buying from websites, though. Sorry to drag you around, Bayashi."

"It's fine! Really! I enjoyed watching you try to decide with your eyes all bugged out like you were tweaking."

"Heyyyy, don't make fun of my face!"

They goofed around, taking their time finishing their meal. By then, it was nearly time for Miyu to go to work—but first, they walked to the most prominent street in the district and hopped into one of its trademark purikura photo booths. Inside, they took their time picking filters and poses—some silly, others more sultry, each with a unique expression. Akane had a great sense for how to shape her eyes and mouth at times like these, and she knew how to make other people naturally look good next to her. After the pictures were taken, they used the built-in photo editing software to perfect their faces.

"I'm super glad you came with me today, Bayashi. Let's hang out again real soon!"

"Totally."

Miyu beamed. "Just between us, no one else puts me at ease like you do. Makes me feel like I can just be myself, you know?"

"Awww, that's so sweet!"

Even if it was only one percent true, Miyu's words still filled Akane with resounding pride.

The feeling made her want to die.

"I feel the same way, actually."

With a wave goodbye and a "see you on Monday," they parted ways on the street, carrying with them the promise to reunite in the classroom. Akane waited for a moment, then turned and started walking in the opposite direction from Miyu's shrinking figure—heading home to the family who, in actuality, wasn't having any kind of event at all.

Be it with her boyfriend, her coworkers, or her friends, much as she hated herself for it, Akane was puppeteered by one singular desire: to be *liked*. It was a powerful hunger entirely separate from romance or friendship or camaraderie, and she suspected it must have been something she was born with, because it had controlled her all her life. By the time she realized she was in its clutches, it was too late to escape. It kept her chained within an indestructible cage, always watching, dictating her every move. Her hobbies, preferences, word choices, body language, expressions—if someone else could see her, her need to be liked was calling the shots. Introspection and imagination were the only tools given to her freely.

She *despised* being held at gunpoint by this stupid feeling. If only she could hack it to pieces and throw it off a cliff! But when she stopped to think about what would happen if she rebelled against it, a primal fear welled up from deep in her core to ravage her heart, reminding her she was powerless.

In exchange—not that it was much of a trade, all things considered—she was gifted with the looks and the charm to facilitate being liked. As such, she had skated through life without anyone ever discovering the real her.

Today, like every other day, she would choose to be liked.

After parting ways with her friend, she walked over the circular patterns on the sidewalk until she reached the main street, where she joined the throng of passersby living their own complex lives. Taking care not to cause problems or impede progression, she quietly assimilated into the background. Up ahead was the district's largest intersection. By the time she reached it, the traffic lights had turned red.

She came to a stop with the rest of the unhurried pedestrians. Unless she was late to a meetup, she never ran full speed to cross a street. Even with strangers, the desire to be liked was still in effect. It varied in intensity and priority depending on how well she knew the people around her, but generally speaking, if a given action might make her look bad, it was off the table.

At this crosswalk, she had two choices: wait for the light to change, or take the stairs down to the underpass. Both were equally viable. But then ten seconds passed while she was thinking about it, so she decided to keep waiting.

As she would soon realize, however, she had made the wrong choice.

Amid the murmuring of the city, one particular voice stabbed her eardrums with laser precision. And when subjected to an unpleasant noise, it was only human nature to turn and look.

A massive digital billboard towered over the intersection, reciting familiar dialogue in a shrill voice that was nothing like how it should have sounded. Onscreen was a flurry of action that blurred together in a jumbled mess unless you were paying close attention, followed by the title logo.

"Girl's March: coming soon to theaters. Ai will lead you to the truth."

Oh my god, shut up! But because she was so desperate to be liked, even by strangers she'd never see again, this thought didn't reach her voice or her expression. No one would ever know how the girl inside her felt.

All the people who made the movie, who designed the marketing materials, who massively miscast the characters...did any of them ever actually read the book?

"Ai will lead you to the truth"? A *child* could have come up with that wordplay. Did the soulless zombies who slapped it onto their product even have the brain cells necessary to understand the story's message?

Akane had asked herself these questions dozens of times. She wished there was something she could do, but of course, there wasn't—at least, not under the watchful eye of her need to be liked. As usual, she gently bit her tongue to self-soothe. It didn't do much, but it was better than nothing, so it had become something of a habit.

Soon, the light turned green and cars rushed by at dizzying speeds. Matching pace with the people directly in front of her, she stepped into the safe zone marked by white and gray. She kept her gaze pointed firmly forward, both to make sure she wouldn't bump into anyone *and* because she knew she looked prettier with her head held high.

As for what happened next, whether it was the product of all these small details combined or just sheer coincidence was entirely up to interpretation.

"Huh?"

As the oncoming crowd passed beside her, Akane glimpsed someone out of the corner of her eye, and a single pair of footsteps reached her ears. Shoulderlength hair, a black coat, a white skirt, boots that clicked loud enough to drown out the rest...but most captivating of all, the steely gaze of someone who would never run from hardship.

In that brief instant, she forgot all about wanting to be liked.

"Ai...?"

Whirling around, she called out—but her voice didn't reach. Instead it tumbled limply to the ground, where it was trampled by the other pedestrians.

Ukawa Ai

"N EED A LIGHT?"

This was one of countless tiny smoking areas peppered around the district like holding cells for society's unwanted. Beside him stood a woman in a suit, and when he noticed she was digging around in her pocket, he offered her his lighter.

"Oh, thank you. Wait, what?"

The confusion on her face was palpable as she gingerly took it and lit her cigarette. But this trepidation evaporated by the time she handed it back, suggesting she had managed to rein herself in—save for the furtive glances thrown his way.

Ai was used to getting his share of curious stares, and he was prepared for this outcome well before he offered. Thus he chose to turn a blind eye to it, returning the lighter to his pocket and exhaling a cloud of smoke.

Ultimately, the woman left before he managed to finish his first cig. Maybe she felt awkward around him, or maybe he was just slow.

After savoring the nicotine, he checked the slender wristwatch he'd chosen to match his outfit. He considered staying for

a second cigarette, but then remembered his Suica balance was running low and he needed to top it up. Luckily, there was a subway station on the way to his destination.

He stepped out of the smoky area, his black Chesterfield coat flapping in the breeze as he walked. At one point it smacked against a nightclub promoter in passing, but in this part of town, that wasn't enough to bother anyone. Passing under the railway bridge, he set his sights on the ticket vending machine.

In the station square, a large crowd of people were shrieking about something or other. "Keep your voices down," Ai muttered to no one in particular as he wove through the flow of foot traffic. After successfully adding funds to his

Suica card, he once again checked the round watch face pressed against the inner side of his left wrist. Though it was still a little early, he decided he would head onward to his destination.

He felt his heart race in anticipation of the night yet to come, and it made him happy. He liked being the sort of normal, simple guy who looked forward to supporting a friend's efforts.

As he waited at the major intersection for the light to change, he checked his hair and makeup with his smartphone camera. Following some slight adjustments to his windswept bangs, he faced forward with confidence.

On this side of the street, someone was shouting over a cheap loudspeaker; on the other side, a giant digital billboard was blasting promo material to draw attention to an upcoming film. But nearly all of the pedestrians were too focused on their own hectic lives to notice or care. No matter the volume, it was just noise. As for Ai, he found himself looking at the billboard—not out of interest in the film itself, but rather, the theme song used to promote it.

"Girl's March: coming soon to theaters. Ai will lead you to the truth."

They really phoned that one in, he thought to himself.

The crosswalk light turned green, and each person who'd been standing there set about taking their first step. There was a pair walking slowly while holding a smartphone up to film something—a music video or a YouTube video, perhaps. Ai dodged around them and strode forward, clicking his heels loudly. He could already see his journey's endpoint: the record store with the eye-catching yellow sign. Downstairs at the underground stage, a pop idol group was holding an event to celebrate their latest album release.

Normally at this time of day, Ai would be at his workplace up the hill behind this record store, but he had taken the day off. For someone whose shifts normally barred him from attending any sort of concert or music event, today was a break from routine.

The crowd continued well past the other end of the crosswalk, clogged with so many people that if he tried to catalogue them all, he'd be standing there all day. Tired businessmen, groups of teen girls taking up the entire breadth of the sidewalk, young guys who whispered "She's hot!" as they passed and then

looped back around a few seconds later with no subtlety whatsoever—Ai ignored them and kept walking at his own pace. He gratefully accepted their compliments, but he wasn't invested in their opinions of him.

When he loaned his lighter to that lady at the smoking area, it wasn't out of a desire to be thanked. All he wanted was to be of some small assistance to someone right in front of him who needed the help.

The only rule he set was to be himself. His appearance, his actions, his gait... each of these were reproduced precisely the way he wanted them to be. He liked being the sort of guy who was capable of following his heart.

"Ai?"

So in the moment when he heard that voice, hand on the doorknob to the record store, he turned back simply because that was part of living his truth.

Itobayashi Akane

"The moment they met was as mundane as a rolling orange colliding with someone's shoe."

GIRL'S MARCH, PAPERBACK EDITION, PAGE 9, LINES 2-3

AT THAT VERY INSTANT, the pocket paperback was watching over Akane from inside her bookbag, and the full-sized edition was waiting for her at home on her bedroom shelf.

With approximately 960,000 copies in circulation, *Girl's March* could be summarized like so:

The Girl spends every day concealing her inner ugliness behind a veneer of flawless beauty and poise...until she meets someone special. At first the two of them are simultaneously drawn to and threatened by each other's traits, but they develop a unique bond. The Girl's new friend sees through her façade and accepts her for who she truly is, and from that point forward, for the first time in her life, The Girl is able to confront the world as her genuine self.

Throughout the entire book, The Girl was never named—nor was her friend, technically, save for The Girl addressing him as "Ai."

There, in the middle of the massive intersection, it was no surprise that Akane could scarcely believe her eyes. This just wasn't possible. How could a fictional character be here in real life? And yet everything from the face to the height to the outfit was exactly as she had always imagined it. The deafening click of each footstep, in particular, had left a strong impression.

Just as she decided to give chase, however, a tall shadow appeared in front of her. When she looked up, she found a man in a suit looking at her with annoyance, and her emotions stabbed her like a knife.

"Oh! I'm sorry!"

Flinching, she donned an expression that suggested it was an accident and that she never meant to get in anybody's way. Then she gave him a quick bow and dodged around him without waiting for a response. Only then did the need to be liked withdraw its blade.

Before the light could turn red, she went back the way she'd come, back to the street corner. She couldn't afford to lose sight of her quarry until she got a better look. Making note of the trajectory of each person she passed, she took care not to get on anyone else's bad side. Even when she was in a rush, her actions were restricted.

Apologizing several times, she escaped the crowd of people and made it to the yellow record store where she had previously met up with her boyfriend. Her target had just grabbed the door handle. This second look only confirmed her suspicions.

"Ai?" she blurted out, almost uncontrollably.

Except her voice didn't reach an obtrusive volume, and "blurting" was entirely her intention. In reality, it was yet another action that prioritized her craving to be liked.

She had hoped, but had not expected, that this person would turn back. She didn't know if they'd heard her, but even if they had, surely there was no way they'd think "Ai" was directed at them.

And yet they withdrew their fingers from the door handle and looked over their shoulder directly at Akane, as if drawn to her by a magnetic pull. When she saw their face, she sucked in a breath.

Ai.

It couldn't be. There was just no way he could be standing here, or so she told herself. But that only lasted until she heard the mismatched voice.

"Who, me?"

The only thing that kept her standing upright was the perpetual ball and chain of her emotions.

Not once had she ever felt the joy of conveying her feelings exactly as she felt

them. Even if by some miracle she managed to throw off the shackles of wanting to be liked and expressed herself just for expression's sake, even if she thanked him at the top of her lungs through streams of tears, no one would understand her. Here in this busy district, they'd just label her a weirdo.

When Akane heard Ai's jarringly deep voice, she felt a bliss that was just for her.

I was right! I'm not destined to spend my life alone! she howled silently, deep in her heart where no one would ever hear. At the same time, she ignored the trembling awe she felt inside and performed mild confusion on her face. Times like these, she felt like a robot who could only operate based on logical analysis. "Hi, um..."

"Sorry, who are you? I don't remember."

It must have been the sound of his masculine voice and blunt word choice—two teen girls reacted with audible alarm nearby. Surely he must have heard them, and yet he didn't look bothered in the slightest. Akane chose not to care, either.

Unlike them, she knew to expect this. She was startled, but she wasn't *surprised*. After all, despite the feminine presentation, she had always known that Ai was a man.

"Uh—sorry to put you on the spot! It's just...when I saw you from behind, you looked exactly like...someone I know."

"Oh, okay." Ai seemed to accept whatever she said as fact. He glanced back toward the door for a moment, then looked at her again. "Is their name Ai?"

"Yeah, actually, it is."

"Huh. So is mine. That's why I turned around."

I know, Akane nodded internally. Externally, however, she expressed surprise. "Whoa, that's so crazy!"

"No kidding. Welp, say hi to your friend for me."

Leaving her with a personal message that was both effortlessly casual yet seemingly sincere, he turned back to the door—direct and unassuming, just like

in the book. Could this all be a very vivid dream? Either way, if she lost sight of him now, something told her she'd never see him again.

Ai took a step forward, and to avoid obstructing the flow of foot traffic, Akane followed suit. Then she realized the most natural course of action was also a perfect match for her objective, so she walked right up to the door with a look on her face that suggested this was her destination all along. Of course, she made sure to regulate her pace so she wouldn't end up breathing down his neck; she could never choose to do anything that might bother him, after all. So she waited for the right moment under the guise of sheer coincidence, hoping that they might exchange just a few more words. Surely her need to be liked would allow her that much.

Really, that was all it was.

But as Ai was about to open the door, perhaps out of habit, he shot a oneeyed glance over his shoulder. In doing so he must have seen Akane right behind him, because he paused to hold the door open for her.

"Oh, th-thank you."

"Mm-hmm," he replied nonchalantly, and in response, she carefully concealed her true feelings beneath a smile. The real her was deeply touched—not because of his kindness, but because there was a scene just like this in *Girl's March*, the world where Ai belonged.

Near the start of the story, The Girl found herself at a place she hadn't intended to visit. She met someone there, but before she could ask what was ahead, the other person opened the door and looked back at her, waiting for her to step forward.

The fact that Ai was here at all was more than enough, but now he was giving her the same treatment as the protagonist! Her heart was racing so fast, it was practically screaming. This had to be a dream.

"Anyway, I'm headed downstairs," he announced to her politely as they were about to part ways.

In response, she reflexively—well, no, quite purposely—shouted, "Me too, actually!"

"Oh." Ai raised his eyebrows openly, with no sign of concealing his surprise, and Akane ardently wished she, too, could react that naturally. "Impatiens fan, huh? How old are you, anyway? High school? College?"

"I don't know if I can call myself a fan, but...high school."

"I see. Y'know, I don't see a lot of kids your age at these things. Well, not in uniform, at least."

Akane knew that Impatiens was the name of a girl group, and she knew that all sorts of free and paid events were held here in the basement... Analyzing Ai's statements, she intuited what was going on and formed the appropriate responses. This was a skill she had honed over a lifetime of dealing with her desire to be liked.

"It's my first time here. I was supposed to come with a friend from school, but now it's just me."

"Oh yeah?"

Since they were headed to the same place, they decided to go together. Scanning the posters on the walls, Akane learned that tonight's event was a mini-concert and autograph session. Wrestling with the surreal experience of walking alongside a character from a book, she identified a few different ways this could go, then planned out her responses for each one.

At the bottom of the staircase was a staff member checking tickets. This, too, she had already accounted for.

"Wait, it's not free tonight?!"

In response to her sculpted shock, the employee frowned sympathetically and gave an explanation that was likely part of his job: "Tonight you need the ticket you get from buying a specific CD from us."

"Could I go buy it right now?"

"We're already sold out."

Akane turned and gave Ai her best "oh crap" face—but on the inside, she wasn't disappointed in the slightest. While it would have been more convenient had tonight's event been free to attend, she knew from seventeen years of

experience that real life didn't always work out perfectly. In the event that she couldn't get in, her plan was to wait around in the store until it was over, then hope to encounter Ai again on his way out. She had already rehearsed it in her head.

So the next word out of her mouth left at a volume that was more than strictly dictated by the situation at hand.

"I have an extra ticket she can use. Here, this is for her."

"What?!"

Ai gestured to Akane as he pulled a ticket from his wallet and handed it to the employee.

"Are...are you sure?!"

Crafting a tone of panic, she attempted to gauge Ai's intent. But then she realized: Ai wasn't the kind of person to have an ulterior motive. The Ai she knew was beautiful and protective and a little rough around the edges. Though they had only just met, he would never abandon a teen girl in trouble.

"Yeah, I have one already."

Sure enough, he produced a second ticket from his wallet and held it out to the employee. And so the two were waved inside.

"Thank you so much... Sorry I got mixed up about that..."

"No problem. If anything, I'm glad that second ticket didn't go to waste."

Instead of lording his good deed over her head, he simply headed for the entrance to the event venue, and she followed along right behind him.

The basement was dimly lit and nearly packed with people. Ai chose to stand near the back, and Akane positioned herself right next to him.

"So how come you had two tickets?"

She attempted a somewhat natural conversation, or as much as she could allow herself, anyway. After all, he had willingly explained why he turned when she called his name. Judging from that, plus everything else she knew about his book counterpart, she figured he would be receptive.

Sure enough, this calculation proved correct. At her question, he turned away from the stage to look at her.

"Three, technically. There were three different CD variations, and I'd preordered one of each before they announced this event."

"Wow. Lucky me," she said in the sort of tone reserved for self-directed comments, though she didn't fail to notice the chuckle it earned.

Swaying to the music playing over the venue loudspeakers, Akane wracked her brain, trying to figure out how Ai could be here in the real world. But before she could find an answer to this impossible question, a male staff member walked out onto the stage, mic in hand, to explain the rules of the event. As she was half-listening, however, at some point the man disappeared, and the next thing she knew, the lights dimmed further.

With an explosive sound effect, the girls appeared on stage. That was the moment Akane learned that there were seven members in total. All she had known about Impatiens going in was that they were an all-female pop idol group—but when the first song began to play, she realized she had heard it before.

It was the theme song for the film adaptation of Girl's March.

Unfortunately, hearing it live did nothing to change her opinion of it. She gritted her teeth, willing her ears and heart to endure the lyrical trainwreck that so massively misinterpreted the original work.

After thirty minutes, the concert ended, and a staff member announced that the autograph session would start soon, enabling those who bought a CD to get it signed. She looked over at Ai and found him looking back at her.

"I'm gonna go now," he explained, dutifully pointing at the exit so she would know where it was. Confused, she followed after him. The question on her mind was best brought to the surface with an ample dose of alarm.

"Don't you want their autographs?" she asked as they climbed the stairs to the ground floor.

"Nah, just wanted to see the show," he answered casually.

People engaged with their favorite artists in myriad ways, so she figured maybe he was the hands-off type. Perhaps all he cared about was seeing them sing and dance.

As for Akane, the part she cared about had only just begun.

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"Hey, um..."
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Right as he was naturally about to leave the store, she called out to stop him. Judging from the look on his face, he was genuinely unbothered that she had used one of his tickets.

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"What is it?"

"If you wouldn't mind..."

"Hm?"

"Wanna...get coffee or something while we're at it?"
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Obviously, this felt like a tremendous and bizarre request to make of a book character...but it felt just as much like her one and only chance to do so. She wanted this encounter to continue for as long as her emotions would allow. Her invitation was a mix of teenage social skills and childlike presumption toward a first-time acquaintance, plus a tiny hint of natural curiosity toward a man in women's clothing, as if trying but failing to hide it.

Hearing her own voice, she realized for the first time that, while reading *Girl's March*, she had planned out exactly what expression and tone she would use to make Ai like her. It made her want to die.

As she gently bit her tongue, Ai looked away for a moment, down at his wristwatch.

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"Sure, looks like I've got some time."

But it was still too early to celebrate.

"I'll go as long as there's a smoking area."

This, too—

"You got it!"

—was a scene in Girl's March. After the two met, The Girl joined Ai for a
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smoke break in order to talk to him. This had to be the best dream ever, letting Akane act out the events of her favorite story!

The cafe Ai recommended was less than three minutes away by foot. When they opened the door and scanned around, they found the tables fairly full, save for one near the entrance. Akane promptly set her bag down on it and pulled out her wallet.

"Go ahead and order without me. I'm gonna smoke first."

"Oh, okay then. Be right back."

"Hey, you!"

Behind her, she heard a low growl that she never imagined an acquaintance would ever direct at her, especially one who seemed otherwise reasonable. She conveyed her alarm by flinching her shoulders, then whirled around. "Yeah?!"

"Uh...what's your name?"

"I-Itobayashi Akane...?"

"Itobayashi Akane, huh. Well, take your bag with you. What if I'm the kind of creep who'd dig through your stuff?"

"Are you?"

"I'm being hypothetical!"

Grabbing her bag by the sturdy handle, he held it out to her. As she took it with one hand, she used the other to give a cheeky salute. "Roger that, captain!"

But he might not have been looking, for he pulled a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his coat pocket and slapped them down on the table.

For the second time, Akane turned away from him and headed to the counter. Internally, she was wrestling with an uncommon problem: how long had it been since she last had to fight to keep her nerves from showing more than necessary?

Briefly, she wondered why he had suddenly asked for her name, but considering his personality, quickly struck upon the answer. Most likely, he'd

felt bad calling her "hey, you" and wanted to rectify it. His use of an "uh" prior to the question was something she, too, employed in her day-to-day life.

She had inadvertently accepted his kind warning, but as she ordered a hot lemon tea, she couldn't help but question: what exactly was the endgame? The question was directed not at Ai himself, but at whatever forces had brought the two of them together. What if they hit it off and became friends? What if she woke up tomorrow and he was still real?

Wouldn't that make me the protagonist?

When Akane returned to the table, Ai offered her a simple "Welcome back" before moving to the smoking area. She had a great view of its interior from where she sat, allowing her to observe him as he lit up a cig, took a drag, and exhaled—but only because he didn't afford her a single glance.

She had previously tried cigarettes at the suggestion of an ex-boyfriend, but as a novice, she had no way of knowing how long a smoke break was "supposed" to take. Either way, when he was finished, he bought a coffee and walked back to their table.

"Sorry I took so long. I thought of a question for you, though," he said as soon as he was seated. The flutter of his skirt blew the lingering smell of tobacco to her nose. "You didn't bring me here to make me join a cult or trick me into some kind of badger game, did you?"

He spoke as though he was focused completely and exclusively on her. It made her swoon.

"What? No!" she exclaimed loudly in a blend of surprise, amusement, and the slightest offense. She withdrew her wallet from her bookbag and showed him her student ID card. "I'm a high school student—I don't do crimes! I work right over there at that bookstore, so you know I'm legit!"

"Oho. I see you go to one of those hoity-toity schools. All right, I'm sorry."

She accepted his honest apology and tucked it away with far more care than some silly ID card. "It's fine, but...I'm surprised you'd give me your spare ticket if you thought I was sus."

"No, it didn't even cross my mind until just now, when I was like, 'She's not

bait, is she?' Also, for the record, I'm a grown-up and I don't do crimes either. That includes getting handsy with minors."

"Bait? Oh my god!" Akane purposely burst out laughing. "I mean, there are plenty of adults who say they're safe to be around until it turns out they aren't, Ai-san. Not that I'm saying you're one of them, of course."

For the first time, she had found the courage to use his name. But he didn't seem to notice this momentous decision. Instead, the corner of his lip curled in a half-smirk. "Yeah, too many shitty people in this world. Hell, I might just be using this getup to get you to lower your guard. Always be careful, no matter who you're with."

He commented on his fashion choices matter-of-factly, without pride or guilt. That was just the sort of person she knew Ai to be.

"As it happens, I work at the live music venue up the hill from here. Ever been?"

"Wow, really? I haven't."

Working at a music venue seemed like something out of an anime. When she frowned in confusion, he told her its name.

While the location was never named in *Girl's March*, Ai was said to work "at a place where music is played." How deep did this rabbit hole go?

"Google it and you'll find our website. If that doesn't convince you, you should swing by whenever we're holding an event you think you'd like. I'll probably be working."

"Really?"

Internally, what she meant was: will you really still exist after today? But Akane's compulsive need to be liked took the word and changed it to a playful inversion of that suspicion. Thankfully, he laughed.

"I mean, you don't have to trust me." His smile was exactly as she had always imagined it would be. "Anyway, what did you think of your first Impatiens concert?"

Now that they had each established some level of legitimacy, Ai kindly served

up a topic they had in common. Fortunately, Akane had a deep understanding of these sorts of questions. To avoid threatening the other person's values, she would praise their good taste with every word, then pepper in her own opinions like curveballs.

"It was so cool! To be honest, I don't think I've ever really understood what makes music great until now. And sure, they're pretty, but they're also badass, so it's like a one-two punch. Also, that was my first time seeing an idol group, and I had no idea how hyped the crowds get. It must take so much energy to dance nonstop in those bulky costumes. I swear they must be like zero percent body fat."

Out of consideration for the other people in the cafe, she conveyed excitement with her expression and body language rather than her voice. With each statement, Ai was an active listener, nodding along and encouraging her to continue. Conversely, Akane made sure to ask questions so he could be part of the conversation.

"Do you have a favorite member?"

"I do." He nodded without missing a beat, suggesting he was comparatively more invested in one specific person than the band as a whole.

Indeed, the Ai she knew loved people at an above-average intensity. But the ability to identify and measure other people's emotions was crucial to avoid making unfavorable comments—so was it respect, romance, or just his protective nature?

"You know Gotou Julia, the one with the pixie cut?"

In truth, as someone with little interest in pop stars, Akane hadn't been able to size up every single member of the band, especially not from across a dimly lit room. The one in question, however, had caught her eye a fair few times.

"That's the tomboy-looking girl, right? She totally killed those dance numbers."

"Yeah, her. I've been a fan of Julia's from the start."

She felt a hint of fondness, but before she could analyze it, Ai changed the subject.

"You really were paying attention to the different members, huh? Sorry I doubted you."

"What?" She widened her eyes and pursed her lips in a wide, flat line to convey a level of charming uncertainty. Then, once she thought of her next words, she donned a guilty expression. "I mean...um...to be honest with you, I don't have all the names and faces down 100 percent..."

She cursed herself internally for letting her apathy show, but felt equally reassured that she had somehow inadvertently managed to be genuine. However, this was evidently not what Ai meant.

"There are seven of 'em, so that's normal. What I mean is...you thought I was your friend at first, but I turned out to be a random crossdresser, and yet you tagged along anyway, so...I thought maybe you were just rolling with it. And to be fair, that would have been fine. But you've made it clear you weren't lying about wanting to see the concert, so...I'm sorry I doubted you."

Those words were, in Akane's mind, what truly cemented him both as a part of her reality *and* as the real Ai from the book.

"No, no, it's fine, really!"

Anyone would feel guilty for having doubted someone in the past. Most people, however, wouldn't feel compelled to admit it after their feelings had changed, having the good sense to know that wasn't necessary. But Ai would admit it. He was the kind of person who presented his unvarnished self to others, regardless of whether he stood to gain from doing so. And just like the protagonist of *Girl's March*, Akane had always deeply admired him for that.

"I admit, it was such a crazy coincidence that I'd be suspicious too, if I were you. But I really did think it was a free admission night... If anything, I wish I was the kind of genius who could think of a scheme like that on the fly."

She had no difficulty whatsoever in lying to his face, and for that, she hated herself so much she could die. And whenever that happened...

"Well then, you're lucky you arrived right when you did."

"I'm grateful to you and this miracle both!"

Ugh, not again. Internally, she cringed.

Regardless of the context of their conversation, Akane could see it. In addition to Ai smiling beautifully in front of her, other customers within eyeshot, and their ordered drinks sitting atop their wooden table, she could see a colorless white room.

This was something she hallucinated from time to time. Whenever her self-hatred surpassed the point that no amount of tongue-biting could control it, a small white room would appear, overlaid with reality. Four blank walls with no windows or doors—silent and sterile, like a solitary confinement cell. Inside the room was the real her, dreaming of the day she would be allowed outside, even though she was sure it would only ever be just that: a dream.

"So tell me, what's this other Ai like?"

Until today.

Though she knew it would never get through to anyone, in truth, she was always screaming out: *SOMEONE HELP ME! SOMEONE FIND ME!* But now she realized that the person right in front of her might be able to hear that voice.

If she really was The Girl...

"Well...actually...the thing is..."

Manipulating the tone and tempo of her voice while desperately fighting the need to be liked, Akane opened up to him, secretly entrusting him with her hopes of understanding and compassion and salvation in a way that her outer self wouldn't notice. She felt no fear doing this, which was odd, because she could normally never admit to something so bizarre. Thus, she started to think that perhaps Ai had already begun helping her to change.

Alas, she was wrong. She was by no means freed. She simply knew that someone like him would react positively if she admitted to a lie in order to apologize and come clean.

After dinner, Akane relaxed in the living room until her father came home. She struck the perfect balance by calling out "Sup, bro" as if to a friend; when he smiled and started nagging her, she argued just enough to not seem like a suck-up. Then she waited for the right moment to take a shower, and after that, went back to her room.

Sitting on her bed while applying the necessary treatments to her hair and skin so that she would be liked tomorrow, she reflected on the dreamlike day she'd had, meeting a fictional character in real life.

Ai, you have the same name and appearance as a character in my favorite book, and when I called out to you, you turned out to have the same voice and expression, too. The more I talk to you, the more I'm convinced that you're him. The fact that you smoke and work at a music venue matches him, too. I'm sure this must be weird, but I've decided to be brave and tell you, because I think it might really be you.

When she said something along those lines to Ai, he visibly frowned and gave his honest opinion.

"That makes no sense." Staring back at her, he took a swig of coffee like it was a gasp for breath. "No one's ever said that to me before. What, so I look like I'm cosplaying him right now?"

She wasn't surprised by his lack of self-awareness. Fictional characters rarely ever realized what they were. Well, maybe they did in some books, but in the case of *Girl's March*, none of the characters were permitted to break the fourth wall like that.

"No, um, that's not what I mean. When I say appearance, I'm not just talking about your clothes or your vibe, but like...your face and stuff..."

"What? Hmmm..." Exhaling in confusion, he touched his face.

"That's why I thought maybe you climbed out of the book somewhere."

She knew it was nonsensical, and to convey this, she chose a hesitant voice and upturned gaze. But he denied it.

"Of course not. I'm my own person, not someone else."

She had expected he would say that, and yet the words pierced her all the same. He let out a long, baffled or possibly annoyed sigh, then folded his arms.

His sleeves bunched at the elbows, revealing the pronounced veins in his wrists.

"You're strange in a way I never imagined, Itobayashi Akane."

Pouting her lips, she shifted her gaze over his shoulder. "Nnngh... I knew you'd think that, which is why I lied the first time..."

"What's it called?"

There were so many options available to him at this point—to leave, to lecture her like her dad, or any number of other things—but he was Ai, so he chose to learn more.

In order to convey that she was really just a normal girl, Akane maintained an awkward, timid energy. "It's a book called *Girl's March* by Ogusu Nanoka-san. The movie version just released yesterday."

"The one Impatiens did the theme song for?"

"Yeah!"

Whenever she agreed enthusiastically, the other person could sometimes be tricked into thinking they'd seen her true feelings.

"Oh, is that how you got interested in them originally?"

"Partially, but also a lot of people in my class talk about them. So at first it was the theme song, but then I saw you, and...it felt like fate." It was a yes or no question, but adding more detail after a confirmation made it harder to tell where the truth stopped and the lie began. "And I know the word 'fate' is only gonna make me seem shady all over again, but..."

"Well, you're right about that."

"Do you read at all?"

"Nope." He shook his head matter-of-factly. "Not even once a year. So yeah, there's no way I'm a character from a book."

The Ai from *Girl's March* didn't read either, so ironically, this statement only further reinforced their connection.

"Who was cast to play him in the movie version, anyway?"

When Akane answered, Ai visibly frowned.

"A woman plays him?"

"Well..."

She glanced from side to side, as if concerned about eavesdroppers, then leaned forward across the table. Being the protective type, Ai followed suit. Heart racing faster than it ever did when she was with her boyfriend, she whispered:

"His gender is a plot twist."

"Ah, one of *those*," he replied, and she felt his breath against her cheek before he sat back in his chair. It smelled of cigarettes and coffee, and when she breathed it in, it lingered at the back of her throat.

"Th-that's why I was so stunned when I first heard your voice."

"Uh, wow. This is getting kind of scary... What's the word for it? Synchronicity?"

"I don't think that's it..."

They frowned in puzzlement for a moment. But Ai must have simply mentioned it on a whim, because he promptly steered the conversation back on track. "My point is, it's just a series of coincidences, that's all. I've lived my whole life in the real world, paying my phone bill and utilities and crazy-high taxes like anybody else. I'm not some fictional character."

She demonstrated obvious shock for a moment, then performed hastily swallowing her disappointment like a good sport. "Yeah, I mean, I figured."

Of course, on the inside, she felt very differently.

Ai, however, read no deeper than precisely what she displayed and responded with kindness. "I'm not saying you're stupid. I figure it's like when you see your favorite musician in real life for the first time—like, 'Wow, they really exist!' Anybody would be psyched."

She nodded eagerly, as if delighted that he understood where she was coming from.

But of course, on the inside...

"Can't say much for the book, but maybe I could watch the movie."

"Uhhh, the movie's...mmm...I don't know..."

"Oh, are you that kind of fan? Book purist?"

"It's just...Ai is supposed to be the main character's friend, but the way they're marketing it with the trailer and everything, it feels like they forced romance into it."

"Hmm. So they changed the source material to appeal to a wider demographic, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah, exactly." Pouting her lips, Akane shook her head softly. "Well, anyway, I'm sorry if this whole thing has made you uncomfortable. But just so you know, the Ai from *Girl's March* is a really great friend, and um, personally I think he's perfect...and also you're just really pretty, so yeah...haha...ha..."

She laughed awkwardly—just long enough that it didn't verge on annoying. It was a careful balancing act, but she was a pro. Her aim was for him to decide that she was weird but otherwise harmless...and from there, she hoped he'd agree to see her again.

But his reaction was one she hadn't bargained for.

"Sad to say, I'm just me, but I'll happily take the compliment."

"Mmm...okay..."

"Also, you can't say I'm 'perfect' based solely on my looks."

"Right..."

"But I'm totally fine with being friends with you."

Looking back, the sound she made at that moment seemed very much like genuine surprise uninfluenced by the public eye. But she knew the fact that she had to think about it meant she was still operating under the need to be liked. That was fine, though. She had acquired a reality worth far more than the fleeting joy gained from misconception.

Akane grabbed the smartphone lying on her bed, tapped the screen, and pulled up her address book to make sure she hadn't dreamed the whole thing,

just as she'd done several times already in the time since they'd parted ways. At the top was two letters she had typed herself: *Ai*. Shrieking was sure to make her family concerned, so she simply hugged her phone to her chest as tightly as she could without breaking it. Apparently he didn't use LINE because he thought read receipts were annoying. *Completely* in character.

In *Girl's March*, it was Ai, rather than the protagonist, who first suggested they be friends. Ai was also the first to initiate trading contact info.

When Akane gave him a rough outline of the protagonist's personality, he told her he couldn't think of anyone in his life who fit her description. In other words, Akane had gotten to him first. Now he'd offered to be friends with her and given her his number. And when she got home and Googled his workplace, sure enough, it did indeed exist.

Based on these events, plus his appearance and personality, she could only arrive at one conclusion.

At first she had thought Ai walked out of the story to get here, but that was clearly false. What if instead, today was the start of the story? Looking at it that way, it made sense why the protagonist's feelings and actions—even the things Akane herself had yet to experience—somehow felt like a depiction of herself. Perhaps it was all a prophecy!

In that moment at the cafe, she had vowed to find out. And so, for the first time in her life, she told another person her honest thoughts about *Girl's March*. Well, some of them, at least—she wasn't quite brave enough to reveal that she felt The Girl was exactly like her. But with Ai at her side, she dreamed of getting there someday.

Ukawa Ai

THAT NIGHT, as Ai was blow-drying his hair, he thought back to the weird teenager he'd met earlier in the day. She'd randomly struck up a conversation with him, and when he asked for details, it turned out she'd mistaken him for a character in her favorite novel. Then one thing led to another, and they ended up trading digits with the promise to hang out again as friends.

The bizarre encounter had initially made him ever so slightly wary, but at this point, he was no longer worried. The people in his life all had their own idiosyncrasies, so really, he figured this Itobayashi Akane girl was just a new category of friend. As far as he could tell, she didn't seem like a bad person, and in his mind, that took priority over all else.

Based on his gut instinct after talking to her, he had made the decision to be friends with her. If this turned out to be a bad move, well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it. For now, he wasn't going to worry about what-ifs. He liked being the sort of person who could trust a new friend with an open heart.

"Something interesting happen today, Ai?"

"Hard to say," he answered honestly, then told his roommate he was headed to bed.

Back in his room, he peeked into his pack of cigs and realized he still had one left. He opened his window and smoked it.

Gotou Julia

THE DIMMING LIGHTS. The explosive sound effects. The audible cheers. The other members shouting their cues. The high-fives with the staff. The rustling costumes. The hard floor. The air, trembling independent of sound.

Me and everyone.

After the autograph session, Gotou Julia went backstage to film an exclusive video for the fan club. Next, she and the other members met up with the staff for a postmortem. Only once they were done with that was she allowed to change out of her costume. Clad in her polka-dot street clothes, she chose not to restyle her hair before taking a solo selfie, which she would upload a few hours after the group footage went live to give her followers the appearance of a sneak peek at her relaxing in private.

Watching out of the corner of her eye as the other members headed home, Julia sat on the far side of the green room, typing on her smartphone. She liked to write a brief review of each concert and note down any problem areas or concerns raised at its postmortem. After she finished, she opened her email app, which had a number of unread notifications in red in the top right corner. Most of them were work-related or company PR, but one was from a friend: *You kicked ass.*

In response to this brusque message, she simply wrote back: *Thanks!* They had exchanged several similarly short emails over the course of their friendship.

"Jul, are you ready to go?" asked Shinogi, their manager.

"I'm good," she answered, then put her phone into her tote bag.

She usually got driven home by car after a concert. This wasn't the case for every gig, but if her schedule aligned with someone else who lived nearby, she could often get a ride. For that reason, she was forced to wait until another member, Emukae Maki, was ready to leave, at which point the three of them

exited the record store.

Outside, Julia took a deep breath. The air onstage was humid and heavy with sweat, and whenever she took her first breath of outdoor air after a concert, she suddenly felt like she was in the wrong place. That taste of alienation reassured her that her values lay not with the real world, but with her narrative.

They walked to the parking lot near the venue, where the two pop stars climbed into the back of a black van. In the driver's seat, their manager gave them a perfunctory heads-up in the form of "Here we go" before stepping on the gas.

As the car glided down the street, Julia rolled her window down halfway and looked out at the city. A trio of people waved at her, wearing T-shirts with the Impatiens logo printed on them. She tried to look as cool as possible when she waved back, but it all happened in a split-second, so she wasn't sure they even saw her.

"Seriously, Jul, can you please just tell me what the difference is between the book and the movie?"

Around the time they left the district, a voice called out to Julia while she was searching her own name online. She paused for a beat, as if baffled, then replied: "Weren't you going to try and figure it out on your own?"

"I did try, I really did! But it's just so *looong*, like, there's *soooo* much text! See?"

The girl beside her held up her smartphone screen, displaying a page from the novel on an e-reader app. And not a random page, either—it was literally Page 1. Julia recognized the opening prologue.

"You gave up after one page?"

"No, no, I got way farther than that! Like twenty pages!"

More like ten, Julia suspected silently.

"The author uses a ton of big words I don't know right out of the gate, but like, obviously I can't *not* read the source material, right? So if you teach me, then I won't offend the author if I ever end up meeting her!"

There were plenty of musicians who didn't bother reading the source material for the anime and films whose theme songs they sang. Surely the author wouldn't take offense. But Maki was the considerate type, and though Julia felt the energy she spent on overthinking the issue was better applied to reading the book itself, she didn't shrug off the other girl's concern.

Still, there was no value in simply giving her the answer, so instead Julia made a suggestion: "What if you just own it?"

"Own it?"

"Yeah, go on Twitter and tell everyone, 'Hey, I'm not good at reading, but this is our first movie tie-in based on a novel, so I've decided I'm going to push through.' Then each day you tweet your page count and all the words you had to look up in the dictionary."

"Won't that make me come off as really stupid?"

"You already do, so who cares?" Silently, Julia admired her own perfectly balanced nuance. "Own it. Make it your bitch. Instead of pretending you read the book, it'll make a better storyline if you let everyone see you overcoming your weakness."

"There you go talking about storylines again. But maybe you're right, Jul."

After that, Maki fell silent. Julia could tell that she didn't need to respond, so she didn't.

If she had to guess, a new campaign—a *reading marathon*, perhaps—would appear on Maki's Twitter account tomorrow. As she opened up about her shortcomings, the fans would read deeply into her passionate struggle, adding even more value to the cheerful, sincere image of her already in their heads. The storyline of an underdog rising to a difficult challenge would give her true star power.

Julia often referred to these sorts of PR moves and fan reactions as a "storyline." You might call it her idol's creed: in her opinion, the group needed to be crafting a narrative at all times.

Accordingly, the people who stanned Maki didn't need to know she was lazy or that the reading marathon was someone else's idea. Those things existed

outside the storyline. But of course, sometimes revealing "too much" was a valid tactic too.

Meanwhile, Julia went back to searching her name and their group's name on Twitter. It wasn't healthy to absorb every single amateur review of her singing, dancing, and choreography, so she only internalized the opinions of the staff, be they good or bad. That was not to say that fan opinions held no value to her—rest assured, they did. She used their praise and criticism to further refine her story.

"Jul was looking stressed for a while there, but now she's back to smiling again! Her dancing's gotten more flashy too. Whatever her problem was, she must've found the answer at her old stomping ground."

"I was so excited when Jul was put in charge of the lyrics for the movie tie-in song, but maybe it was hard for her... I love her work, but I don't want her to push herself."

"Omg this official photo!! Jul always plays it cool, so it hits different when she lets her real smile show!"

Through these tweets, she learned that her fans had enjoyed her most recent storyline. It filled her with a feeling of elation for which there was no substitute. Clearly the past few months of staging had paid off.

In every interview following the announcement of the movie tie-in song, Julia had made comments like "The thought that we might be on the verge of mainstream stardom keeps me up at night." Accordingly, she made an effort to keep a hard look on her face during their concerts, and when it came time to wave goodbye to the crowd, she would bow and exit the stage a beat ahead of the rest. This naturally prompted some tweets complaining about her "poor showmanship," but nevertheless, she kept biding her time—until tonight's performance on the very stage where they'd had their first-ever album release event during their big debut. There, she showed them a Julia who had overcome her struggles and rediscovered the joy of performing onstage.

It didn't matter what her reality was. She painted a picture of adversity, performed it start to finish with some catharsis at the end, and everyone had a good time. *That* was what mattered. And now she needed to think of a new

storyline.

"Please like it," she whispered down at her phone screen, as if casting a spell.

A few days after the event, Julia was back in the same district. But it no longer felt like a fun excursion to her.

Since the day she first became Gotou Julia of Impatiens, she'd had approximately four full days off in total. The rest of her time was spent at concert venues or pounding the pavement in this part of town. The office, the recording studio, the practice room, the voice training academy—all of it was right here. This district was more or less where her entire life as a pop star took place.

Today, she was scheduled for a magazine interview and streetwear photo shoot. Accordingly, she had dressed herself with all the elements of her established character: a black hoodie with white polka dots, skinny jeans, black sneakers with a *kaiju* motif that a fan had sent her, and a black bucket hat embroidered with a different *kaiju* that a different fan had sent her. She'd also brought a pair of earrings in her shoulder bag, but she would decide whether to wear them based on what her fellow interviewee was wearing.

Once she arrived at the designated building, she sent a LINE message to her manager to find out what floor they were on, then hit the corresponding button inside the spacious, empty elevator. When the doors next slid open, she came face to face with her manager, the group's usual makeup artist, and one of her bandmates.

"Good morning," she greeted the two staff members with a bow.

"Oh, it's Jul. Morning!" said Takatsuki Sakuna, the leader of Impatiens, waving from mere inches away.

"Yes, good morning, Sakuna."

"Almost mistook you for a guy wearing that."

"Don't I always dress like this?"

Instead of waving, Julia responded with a smile. Meanwhile, she took note of

the other girl's appearance. In contrast with Julia's androgynous style, Sakuna was wearing an outfit that reflected her own onstage persona: a frilly pale green dress.

From the moment they were scheduled to do this interview together, Julia had understood that the magazine was looking to contrast the two girls' opposing attributes. She was relieved to see that both of them had managed to convey their characters accurately. *No earrings*, she decided.

Their manager led them down the hall to a blank white room—a conference room, from the look of it. Inside, several adults were already seated and waiting. When they walked in, Julia and Sakuna greeted the room crisply, heads held high.

They were told some photos would be taken during the interview itself, and then they would all travel to the park to shoot the main visuals. After the makeup artist gave them a quick once-over, the two girls sat side by side.

The magazine editor offered them their choice of bottled drinks, lined up on the table, but there was only one option for Julia: the tomato juice. Her official profile listed it as her favorite, and there was a chance her drink would make it into some of the photos. Beside her, Sakuna went "Uhhhh..." and glanced around before taking the water.

The magazine writer sat down across from them and promptly set a voice recorder on the table. Another employee had started recording video footage, though it wasn't clear what it would be used for. In Julia's eyes, they were surrounded by hostile forces.

"We will now begin the interview."

The two idols bowed in unison. "Thank you for having us here."

The questions focused first on recent developments for Impatiens, including the movie tie-in. Then, after reflecting on their latest performance, the topic shifted to their hopes for the future. Julia answered each question firmly through the lens of her storyline, just as she had countless times before.

"To be honest, I was going in circles for a while there, and I think Sakuna got pretty worried for me."

"Um, yeah, of course I was worried! You suddenly started hassling another girl for what she was posting on Twitter, and I was like, 'What am I supposed to do about this as the leader?' Like, come talk to your big sis about it!"

"Hey, I'm older than you are. That said, I'm sure it'll happen again, so good luck."

"Nooo! I'd rather you come bother me than scare me like that again!"

This was a team interview, so Julia made sure to actively insert a lot of banter. Doing so, she had learned, would lighten the mood and bring out topics other interviews hadn't covered, improving the end product.

"Do you have a role model at the moment, Julia-san?"

When this question came up, she hung her head for a moment, sanding the rough edges off her true feelings to make the other person look beautiful. Lies would fall flat here, so she would have to answer both honestly *and* according to her narrative.

"This may sound like I'm sucking up to her, but I think it would be Takatsuki Sakuna right here."

"What? Are you serious?! That's crazy. No way!"

"Never mind, I take it back."

The room erupted in laughter. "And why is that?" the writer prompted.

"She has this really... shrewd, I guess...intuition as an idol. The other day when we were on break—I think I was searching my name on my phone—we came across this really nasty comment about her."

"Oh, was it the one on YouTube?"

"Ah, that's right! It was incredibly cruel, and when she saw it she was like 'Grrrr!' and started typing on her phone. Next thing I knew, she had tweeted out 'You guys are sleeping on me! Don't you want a girl who can treat you right?' and I just burst out laughing because, like, how can she be so invincible?"

"Oh, so that's why you laughed!"

"Yeah, I mean, I could never say it out loud."

Except she could, and she would, so long as it was deemed necessary. A blanket statement made today could easily no longer apply by tomorrow. For the sake of her storylines, she could conveniently forget the past at the drop of a hat; this included her old self, who used to be completely disinterested in the inner workings of pop idols. Ever since she joined Impatiens, however, she had made an effort to understand each member's most unique traits.

"You don't have to be embarrassed! We all support you. You ought to open up and tell us how you really feel."

Thus, she knew that cheesy lines like these were part of Sakuna's identity. But while understanding someone else's point of view was easy enough, actually *incorporating* it required entirely different circuitry, and Julia could find no merit in revealing her true feelings.

"So that's what made you start to see Sakuna-san as your role model?"

"Yeah. I want to learn from people who can do the things I can't, and since she's right here next to me, I may as well start with her first."

This outlook was by no means unreasonable. The world around her was full of things that she, as a celebrity, could never outright say.

For instance: the fact that Maki, who had recently started a Twitter thread about her reading challenge, didn't like Sakuna and avoided being alone in the same room with her. Or the fact that when a then-teenage member of the group caused a scandal that was better kept out of the public eye, Julia had criticized her until she started crying.

Or the fact that Sakuna—who played herself off as the perfect pop star in every respect, who *knew* Julia knew these less-than-flattering things and still suggested she should openly speak her mind, all the same—filled her with a nebulous sense of dread.

"Sakuna's the heart of Impatiens, after all."

Or the fact that Julia continually concealed this fear behind a façade of friendship in order to better sell the characters of Gotou Julia and Takatsuki Sakuna to the fans.

"It means a lot to hear you say that, but you're cool just the way you are, Jul."

"Nah, I'm riddled with more holes than these polka dots."

She aggressively linked arms with her "good friend," sharing a laugh that was captured on camera from every angle. The *real* Julia had been carefully disposed of, long before she ever took on the mantle of idol.

The interview concluded after approximately an hour, after which they reconvened at the local park and aced the photo shoot. Once the staff had officially okayed all the shots, the entire group applauded, for some reason.

"Hey Jul, you hungry? Let's get some food," Sakuna suggested, as they were taking selfies at the playground. It was just past two in the afternoon, and now that she mentioned it, Julia was a little hungry.

"I don't mind, but you decide where we're going. I don't know any restaurants around here."

"Sure thing—wait, I don't know any either! I'll check Yelp—wait, no, it'd probably be smarter to ask Shinogi-san!"

No sooner had the words left her lips than she walked over to their manager, who was talking to the magazine editor, to ask for local restaurant recs. Julia didn't hear how exactly the conversation went, but somehow, Shinogi decided to join them for the meal. Apparently, there was a foreign restaurant close by. As someone who ate nothing but the most basic of meals, Julia had had no idea.

Walking down the street, she never bothered to conceal her face with glasses or masks. Likewise, Sakuna's face was in full view, too. They were rarely recognized, but today proved to be an exception; passing a group of guys along the way, she heard one of them whisper, "Was that Sakuna and Julia just now?"

The exterior of the building looked like a second-hand clothing store. Inside, they were directed to a table with alarmingly soft booth seating. *Someone could really mess up their back sitting here,* Julia thought, needlessly worrying for a hypothetical stranger.

"Look, Sakuna, they have booze."

"Uh oh, you're right!"

Meanwhile, the other two were joking around. After they put in their orders,

the topic shifted to their tie-in song and the story upon which it was based.

"I saw Maki's been tweeting about reading the book," said Sakuna.

Shinogi nodded. "It was Jul who gave her the idea."

"Oh yeah? Smart thinking, as usual."

In response to this compliment, Julia shrugged as though it were nothing. "It's easier to find motivation when you have a goal in mind."

"You got to meet Ogusu-san, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"What was she like?"

Indeed, it was just the other day that Julia had met up with Ogusu Nanoka, author of *Girl's March*, for an interview. It would have been crowded with the entire group in attendance, so Julia was sent by herself, being the lyricist for the theme song.

"Her vibes were something else. She's probably a little eccentric, since most writers are, but she was kind to me, and she seemed like a good person."

This opinion was only slightly edited. In truth, she had the same fear of Ogusu Nanoka that she had of Sakuna. She didn't know if either of them was aware of it, but they both exuded the intensity of someone who believed without question, from the bottom of her heart, that her chosen profession was *special*. Julia viewed people who fell into this category both as the chosen elite and as nutjobs. Naturally, this was not an opinion she felt it best to share with the people in question.

"Did she like your lyrics?"

"Yeah, she said she liked that they were 'deeply linked with the story,' which was nice of her."

"That's awesome!" Sakuna beamed as if she herself had won praise from someone she admired. "Those lyrics are just *so* good. I mean, I like everything you write, but I really think this was your best work to date, and I'm glad the creator agrees."

"You're such a Jul fangirl," Shinogi teased.

As their drinks arrived at the table, Sakuna took hers in hand and puffed out her chest. "I'm an Impatiens *otaku*, okay?! But like, even if it's not targeted at our fans specifically, she really nails the... I mean, I've said this before, but you can really tell Jul's in sync with the protagonist. And now the whole dang *world's* gonna see how good she is at puttin' them there nuanced feelings into words."

"Are we cowboys now? Well, thank you kindly, pardner."

Smiling bashfully, Julia stabbed her fork into one of the side salads that had arrived alongside their drinks. As she chewed her first bite of lettuce, however, she ruminated on Sakuna's word choice. If she had used "in sync" to mean the lyrics captured the essence of that specific character, then her interpretation was correct. But if she meant to imply that Julia sympathized with the protagonist, she was deeply mistaken.

From the moment she was put in charge of the theme song lyrics, Julia had thought long and hard about The Girl. What came to mind was not the validation of understanding and love, but abject *pity*, and to this day, that feeling hadn't changed. After all, The Girl was deeply terrified of having her inner thoughts exposed to the world—and now they were printed in a book for everyone to read. How could an author be so cruel?

"Before it's captured in words, I hope you alone will see my story," Sakuna sang out suddenly, after they had replenished their blood sugar with the salads. That specific line was Julia's parting gift to the pitiful protagonist. "That's my favorite part. The main character's worries aren't that major, overall, but it's life or death to her. And she wants her special someone to realize how she feels, you know?"

"Thank you for the breakdown."

"And in the second chorus it turns into 'This pain will be mine to wield, and now no one else can have my story,' which is so good. It incorporates her more selfish aspects along with her positive traits, and like...I have to wonder if you see yourself as her when you sing it during our concerts, Jul."

"I can't say I do."

"Oh, but I'm not saying you're selfish..."

"No, it's okay."

Fittingly for a self-styled *otaku*, Sakuna only ever talked about idols, their work, or their fanbases. Conversely, Julia never volunteered information when speaking to a fellow bandmate in private. There was no need to share views or hobbies that had no connection to her storylines. In that sense, perhaps she *did* share some similarities with a character who spent her whole life hiding her real self. Perhaps she pitied The Girl because she could see herself in her.

The low-carb pasta that arrived a few minutes later had a flavor that she'd never known when she was young.

After the main course, as they were each eating a dessert matched to their personas, an employee came to their table. As it turned out, he was hoping to get autographs and a photo with Julia and Sakuna. Shinogi said no to both, so Sakuna offered a handshake as a consolation prize, which was permitted. After he left, Julia distinctly recalled Sakuna grumbling "Now we can never come back here..." as she ate her boozy tart.

They weren't exactly desperate to savor their first and last visit, but they ended up staying longer than expected all the same. Before they knew it, the sky outside the window was tilting toward sunset. To avoid the packed trains of rush hour, they rose to their feet. Perhaps if the booths were a bit firmer, the decision wouldn't have been so easy.

Outside, the sidewalks were busier than they'd been two hours prior. Since they needed to avoid people as they walked, the conversation between them dwindled. Julia always avoided making eye contact with the passersby—an instinct honed through the desire to avoid being flagged down or hit on. But as she was gazing into the distance across the street, she caught sight of someone and had to fight to suppress a gasp. Fortunately he didn't seem to notice her, so she quickly looked away.

As she faced forward, she recalled that the protagonist's friend in *Girl's March* had had the same name as that man.

Itobayashi Akane

"Her true self, like God, was a presence she tried to forget."
GIRL'S MARCH, PAPERBACK EDITION, PAGE 32, LINES 5-6

AKANE WAS CONVINCED. Of course, like any other conviction, it was only eighty to ninety percent situational analysis plus ten to twenty percent faith, so she was nervous. Luckily, she was allowed to show it on her face this time.

After school, every step she took in the direction of that yellow record store made her loafers grow heavier and heavier, as if her feet were somehow exempt from the laws of gravity, or the ground had turned super-sticky all of a sudden. She didn't exercise outside of gym class or the occasional bike ride, so she arrived at the front entrance slightly out of breath.

Inside, she found Ai standing out of view of the front-facing windows. When he noticed her, he raised a hand in greeting, and her leaden loafers seemed to practically lift off from the ground. Taking care not to seem strange, she jogged over. This was their second meeting.

"Oh hey, that uniform. Guess you really are a high school student."

She knew he was joking, so she was free to widen her eyes. "You still don't believe me?!"

"Relax, I'm kidding."

He looked like he was having fun, and it filled her with an irreplaceable feeling of joy. Then she bit her tongue just in case, like always. But she managed to switch gears quickly today, aided by the excuse that she hadn't come here just to earn brownie points.

"What's that axolotl-looking thing?" Ai asked suddenly, pointing at her bookbag.

"Huh?" She knew what he was talking about, but she went ahead and looked down anyway, then lifted the pink plushie dangling from the base of her

shoulder strap. "This? This is Anmanman. Heard of him?"

"Nope. Is it a new fad with the kids these days?"

"No, just me. See, he's also my pass case." She flipped him over to show the Suica card slotted into his back.

"He's so big and bulky... I guess you probably won't lose him, though."

He was neither praising nor insulting it—just making observations out loud. She wasn't bothered by it, but she donned an expression that suggested she was annoyed he didn't call it cute. She wanted him to think she had put it there for no real reason.

But in fact, there were two reasons behind it.

Firstly, with this plush adorning her bag, she could establish herself as a girl who liked somewhat unusual things. By making sure her interests didn't overlap with anyone else's, she minimized the risk that they would see her as competition. That was a characteristic she wanted to have in order to be liked by her friends.

Secondly, the protagonist of *Girl's March* was depicted as being fond of a mascot character. Thus, Akane had attached it to her bag like a sort of good-luck charm, hoping to attract events from the book into her life. And since it had clearly worked, she suspected she would love this little guy for the rest of her life.

That said, despite all her calculations, it was Akane herself who had chosen this particular character out of the countless other mascots available—and she *did* secretly harbor some genuine fondness for him, but right now, there was no need to explain how it differed from her external emotions.

Since Ai had commented on her uniform right from the outset, such observations evidently wouldn't come across as unnatural to him. She took the opportunity to scan him from head to toe. She couldn't see a single thing that matched what he was wearing the last time. Today he had donned a gray beanie, an oversized navy blue cardigan over a fine-knit white sweater, skinny jeans, and ankle boots, paired with a thin beige tote bag slung on his shoulder. With his long hair and glossy lips, he was once again beautiful enough to be

mistaken for a woman at first glance.

"You always look super pretty, Ai-san."

"Thanks."

She knew her unabashed compliments would be fundamentally perceived as the innocent charm of a child. In response, he thanked her without a trace of embarrassment. So far, this was going exactly as she'd anticipated, except...

"Do I still look like the other Ai?"

She hadn't expected him to be the one to bring up that topic. "Um...yes, I think so."

"Huh. Weird. Wonder what it is."

Judging from the fact that he didn't attempt to hide his confusion, she surmised there was no deeper meaning behind the question. He wasn't trying to sound her out; he was just thinking about what had brought them together. Internally, in her solitary cell, she was touched. But there was no time for that—this was her chance! She plunged a hand into her bookbag.

"Actually, um, I brought it with me today!" She pulled out the pocket paperback edition of *Girl's March*. "This is the book I was talking about. Wait—you didn't already read it, by any chance, did you...?"

"No."

She had expected this answer when she asked. That was the Ai she knew, after all.

"If I'm honest, I haven't read any of those Newbery books," he continued.

"Oh, I totally get that." She gave two small nods to convey her agreement.

"Just because something wins an award or even a Nobel Prize doesn't mean I'll automatically read it."

In response to her casual validation, he raised his eyebrows ever so slightly, as if the coffee he'd bought at a vending machine was hotter than expected. "Even the Nobel Prize, huh? I mean, I'm not one to judge, but...don't you literally work at a bookstore, Itobayashi Akane?"

"Yeah, but I mean...sometimes there are shady dealings between publishers and authors and stuff, you know? Besides, if some guy came up to me and told me to read a book, I'd be like, 'Who even *are* you?' I only trust recommendations if they come from friends and family, not total strangers."

This was partly true, but mostly just in-character for her persona to say. Furthermore, though Ai seemed to think her stance was unusual for a bookstore employee, it was precisely her experience working there that had shaped her actual opinion. Spending time at the bookstore had taught her that someone's emotional intelligence did not necessarily correlate to the number or length of books they'd read.

Thus, she put no stock in the recommendations of authors or editors, let alone critics. When *Girl's March* was nominated for an award, she couldn't bear to read their insipid commentary. Naturally, she didn't trust her friends' or family's opinions on novels, either. Most of them didn't seem capable of differentiating between the majority opinion and their own. Ultimately, she understood that the only way to find books that were truly special to her was through sheer luck.

"I don't know about anything shady going on with awards, but I agree, recs are a lot more trustworthy coming from friends. I feel the same way about music, too."

"Right? Speaking of which, I was wondering. Why do you call me by my full name?"

"It just feels right," he declared matter-of-factly, and she suspected that really was all there was to it. In *Girl's March*, the protagonist was never given a name, but perhaps Ai liked to use a proper term of address.

"Anyway, what should we do now? We still have plenty of time."

He seemed to interpret the name question as the end of their book discussion. He checked his wristwatch, then looked back at her. It, too, was different from the watch he was wearing last time. But what first appeared to be a dead end could, with a change of perspective, connect to a new road. In Akane's eyes, Ai had just brought the conversation back to *Girl's March*.

"Oh, that's actually why I brought the book with me today!"

"What? It's not a travel guide, is it?"

"No, but...um...I mean, if you don't want to, it's totally okay, but..."

"All right, what is it? Lay it on me."

No matter what it was, he was open-minded enough to at least hear her out. She imagined herself drowning in the depth of his sincerity, her face gasping for breath just above the surface. Meanwhile, her brain carefully constructed what she was about to say.

"Ummm..."

There was a reason she had wanted to meet up here today. They had previously made a verbal promise to hang out somewhere, and in order to make that happen, she had engaged in several email exchanges with him. During that process, she had told him an objective she couldn't complete without him:

"I wanna go see the music venue where you work, but I'm too scared to go alone! I'd like it if you could take me there!"

When she initially suggested it, she was mostly-but-not-totally sure he wouldn't refuse. She hadn't expected it would happen so soon—not even a week had elapsed since they first met—but from Ai's perspective, it was probably just his soonest available day off. And now, after what had felt like an eternity of waiting, the big day was here.

Akane had already planned how to use the free time created by meeting up earlier than the event started. Though perhaps "planned" wasn't altogether accurate. Like a travel guide, it was already plotted out for her.

"Now that I've met you, I was thinking maybe we could...do a couple things that Ai and the protagonist do together? It's this part, right here..."

She opened *Girl's March* to a bookmarked page and pointed at a specific section. Dutifully, Ai leaned in to read it, and she adjusted her arm so she wouldn't accidentally touch him as she held the book up.

But she hadn't been entirely honest with him.

Truth be told, there was also a scene in the book where the protagonist went

to Ai's workplace. But Akane wanted to present herself as sincerely interested in music venues, and she was confident Ai wouldn't bother to read the book himself, so she boldly concealed this fact and fully wanted to die.

"Let's do our nails together... Okay, so a nail salon?"

Ai's nails were glossy, but colorless.

"No, I wasn't thinking we'd go to a salon..." She nonchalantly closed the book around her fingers and held it to her chest. To make herself more likeable, she tilted her head down to the floor, then looked back up at him, as if uncertainly. "If...if it's cool with you...could we maybe go buy nail polish somewhere?"

"Sure." Knowing Ai, he likely would have agreed even if she *hadn't* whipped out the puppy-dog eyes. "I don't mind, but like I said before—maybe you're the main character, but *I'm* definitely not her friend, and I have my own taste in colors and stuff."

"That's fine! Oh my god, you really don't mind?"

"You're the one who asked!"

"Yeah, I know, but...it just means so much! Oh, um...again, this is totally up to you, but...would you be willing to choose a color for me?"

"Sure, if I see one that I think would look good."

"Yaaay! God, I can't believe it!"

She never dreamed that her wish would come true...or so her body language would suggest. Framing it like the other person's achievement made them feel empowered and accomplished—something she knew all too well.

Of course, deep down she understood that this, too, like the puppy-dog eyes, was wasted on a guy like Ai. Nevertheless, she couldn't stop herself from trying to be liked.

"You're so dramatic, Itobayashi Akane."

When she saw him laughing, it once again made her want to die.

The moment they met, she had yearned to free herself from this compulsion. That much was certain. And yet his smile seemed like proof that he liked her,

and she felt so elated... She smiled widely, then closed her mouth.

She could taste coppery red, clashing with the stark white room that overlaid her view.

"You think the way to seduce a teenager is to bring her to your workplace? Are you out of your mind?"

"What normal person jumps straight to *that* conclusion?! Shouldn't you ask if she's my cousin first?!"

They passed under an archway with the venue's name etched into it, then took the basement stairs down to the front desk, where a woman was seated. She and Ai bickered back and forth while Akane watched meekly.

"What? She's your cousin?"

"No."

"Well, waste my time, why don't you!"

They shared a laugh, and then Ai turned to Akane. "This is my coworker Fujino. We're the same age," he explained, gesturing to the woman. Then he turned back to her and gestured to Akane. "This is Itobayashi Akane."

"Um...h-hi..." Nervously, Akane pulled out her student ID and handed it to her.

"Perfect, thank you," she replied with a smile, comparing Akane to her picture. "Here's your ID back. But yeah, frankly, I know you have friends of all different flavors, so I'm not surprised at least one of them is underage. Oh, but I should warn you, dear: this man has a history of hitting on our performers, so don't let your guard down—what? It's true! Okay, fine, I'm sorry!"

Ignoring Ai's beautiful, sharp glare, the smirking woman took his money: two 1,000 yen bills and two 100 yen coins. Then it was Akane's turn to hand over 1,000 yen. Ai had informed her ahead of time that tonight's tickets would be cheaper, since the slated performers were all relatively unknown, and by reserving them in advance, they'd save an extra 500 yen.

Furthermore, Ai had decided he would cover their drinks and contribute 500 yen toward her entry ticket as an "investment in attracting a future regular."

She should have known a guy as protective as Ai would find an excuse to pay for her. Regardless, she was more than happy to let him cover the difference. Once she took her drink ticket, Fujino waved goodbye to her, and she headed in to achieve her goal of visiting Ai's workplace.

It was her first time at a live music venue, and the stage felt a lot closer here than it had at the event space underneath the record store. Ai had warned her about this, too: the wide seating area was practically empty. It was just past 5 p.m. on a weekday, and since she was more interested in the venue itself than any particular concert, he had kindly suggested this timeframe.

The two of them traveled deep into the dimly lit space. Only the drink counter was brightly illuminated, as if to serve as a meetup spot. There, visitors could exchange their drink tickets for drinks.

"Whoa. What are you doing here, Ukawa?"

"Gimme a beer, Keiji-san."

"I thought you stopped coming by on your days off after we went nosmoking."

"Me and everyone else, right?"

To Akane, this barely sounded like a comprehensible conversation, but neither Ai nor the man behind the counter seemed confused. Perhaps they were speaking in code like teenage girls. Naturally, even the most mundane of small talk was stressful for Akane.

"And you, Itobayashi Akane?" Ai prompted as he picked up his golden beverage in a plastic cup.

"Oh, uh, is it cool if I also get a beer?"

"Like hell it is, you moron."

The tacked-on insult carried the scent of sweet poison.

"I thought maybe I could get away with it."

She pretended to hand over her drink ticket to complete the joke, but Ai handled it respectfully, with an exasperated smile. "As if!"

"Okaaay. I'll stick to orange juice."

"I seem to recall *you* started smoking two years before you came of age," the man named Keiji remarked to Ai with a matching look of exasperation as he poured Akane's sunset-colored liquid into a cup. It was that classic "adult dealing with a kid" expression.

"But I didn't try to do it right in front of the grown-ups!"

"Mmm...pretty sure I was a grown-up by that point..."

"No you weren't! You're misremembering!"

Ai took a sip from his Solo cup; to Akane, it looked like he was intentionally cutting the conversation short, but most likely he was just thirsty. He wouldn't act like a teenage girl who was starved for approval. Likewise, Akane took her orange juice and sipped it along with him. It tasted sugary, just as the law intended.

"As I'm sure you've guessed, this is the bar. When I'm scheduled to work, you'll usually find me here. And needless to say, I don't serve booze to minors."

"Yeah, yeah..."

In response to the implication that she drank on occasion, Ai donned the expression of an accomplice turning a blind eye and added, "You wanna smoke or drink in your free time, that's your business."

"Is she looking for a part-time job or what?" the bartender asked idly, leaning forward over the counter.

"No, I've just never been to a place like this, so I asked Ai-san to bring me."

For this question, she answered with the dull, unvarnished truth. This man simply nodded without teasing Ai like Fujino had, but that suited her just fine. In order to curry favor with Ai going forward, she intended to inquire about his romantic relationships, so she couldn't afford to recoil from the mere mention of the subject.

As they moved a few steps away from the bar, Ai pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "That's called the PA. Basically, it controls the acoustics and stuff. I've been working here as PA staff to learn the ropes."

"What do you mean?"

"On-the-job training, I guess?"

Though she didn't know much about the job, she could tell from his word choice that the path ahead of him was a long one. But she didn't put too much weight on details that were unrelated to the story.

"I also man the front desk, from time to time, on a rotating shift."

"Is that when you hit on the performers?"

He burst out laughing, and it didn't sound forced. "Look here, brat," he snapped, probably on reflex, and she took this more aggressive term of address as proof that she had successfully crossed a line.

"I'm just curious!"

"That's my business as a grown-up."

"A grown-up who does do crimes."

He seemed to quickly realize that she was referencing their conversation at the cafe, and didn't even try to hide his annoyance. Of course, her desire to be liked would normally never let her provoke that kind of reaction from a friend, so she convinced herself that she was merely laying the groundwork to be *loved*. She further distracted herself from her own fears by reminding herself that the root of his annoyance was Fujino, the front desk lady.

"Listen—the world is complicated, all right? Timing and all that. You may be in high school right now, but you never know if someday you might...I dunno... date a guy or girl who already has a family. Once you turn eighteen, you're responsible for those life choices, get it? If you don't, you'd better learn fast."

"Okie-dokie!"

With another exasperated smile, he spoke their special code word: "Brat."

Truthfully, she had zero interest in his love life. Again, this was because it wasn't depicted in the story. Her *true* goal was just to get a step closer to him. More crucially, there was another comment made by Fujino that had drawn her attention. She had simply reordered the topics of interest to better suit the character of Itobayashi Akane.

"Oh, also, does 'friends of all different flavors' mean, like...all over the world?" That was what she actually cared to know.

"Uhhh, I mean, sort of...Canada, Korea, Brazil, to name a few...but I don't think she was just talking about nationality. More like different categories of people."

"Okay, so tell me about them."

Gazing up at the ceiling, he took a sip of his beer. "Well, let's start with the people I've seen today. First, there's the friend I live with. Female friend."

"Oh really ...?"

"Don't look at me like that. There's nothing between us, all right? She's a lesbian. We just so happen to have the same height and body type, so we turned one of the rooms into a walk-in closet and share each other's clothes. This cardigan? Borrowed it from her."

"You have a walk-in closet the size of a whole room?!"

"It's not that special. Anybody can rent a house with a friend who shares their interests. Though maybe the key is to make sure it's someone you have no risk of getting romantically entangled with."

"Ugh, that's like my biggest dream!"

Akane's admiration was genuine. In *Girl's March*, Ai had a great number of friends, and he described his home life as "living with a close friend who's like family to me." She decided to see what would happen if she revealed this fact to the real Ai.

"Seriously? Even that's in the book?"

"I'd love to see that closet someday."

"Fine, but it'll have to wait until you've graduated. No well-meaning grown-up brings an alcoholic high schooler to their house."

He smirked at her like he was getting revenge for earlier, and she could feel that their friendship had progressed. She could also feel herself measuring their connection in points, and it made her want to die.

But if she was following *Girl's March*, and she wanted the same outcome, then she would need to establish a close bond with Ai, be it with points or otherwise. To that end, a surface-level acquaintanceship was not enough—not when she would ultimately need him to accept and understand her in her entirety.

"What other friends do you have?"

"Let's see..."

He might have been about to say something, but a loud sound erupted from the stage, cutting him off and distracting him from the conversation. It sounded like a chime, and she suspected perhaps it was a signal to silence the audience.

By the end of the day, she still hadn't found out what information he'd been about to volunteer regarding his friends.

Going to Ai's workplace was integral to the flow of the story. Beyond that, Akane didn't care about the concert. It didn't feel necessary, and she didn't even remember the performers' names.

But there was one band in particular, singing about how much more fun life could be when you were true to yourself, that she soon came to despise. She didn't need someone to yell into a microphone to tell her what she already knew. And though she could see the group's fans eagerly recording the performance on their phones, she prayed they'd never go mainstream so she'd never have to see or hear from them ever again.

A few sunrises and sunsets later, she was back to her normal routine: sitting in class, half-listening to a lecture and half-thinking about Ai. In order to get grades fitting of her character, she needed to fully understand the subject matter, so she couldn't ignore the teacher completely.

In the back of the quiet room, inside a locker, was Akane's bookbag containing a copy of *Girl's March* and a bottle of nail polish, with an Anmanman keychain dangling from the strap.

Ai was so beautiful that day.

It had been a vignette from his everyday life. He was friendly with everyone around him, and they all accepted his brusque personality, his protective tendencies, his appearance, his chosen style—as did he himself. It was so obviously correct to live faithfully to one's true self, they didn't *need* to write songs and stories about it.

I want to be like that too one day, she found herself wishing yet again. It was little more than a dream for now, but she had faith that Ai would help her get there.

That being said, as long as she was in high school, she would have to carry out her daily life according to schedule. Even if she got to be her real self around her friends and family one day, today was not that day. In order to be liked, she would carefully conduct herself like normal.

Between classes she smiled, reacted loudly to a really bad joke, then smoothed things over. She always had multiple dialogue options at the ready—that way she could handle someone's heartbreak or family struggles or any other anomalies. As usual, no one called her out for being fake.

When she thought about how no one would ever love her if they knew the real her, she nearly forgot to breathe. This, she believed, was a line she could never cross on her own. The same was true for The Girl, too. Even though she had so many people in her life who considered themselves her friends, she couldn't trust a single one of them.

"Oh, I forgot!"

As she was eating lunch at a cluster of desks with her friends, she purposely raised her voice out of nowhere. Holding her chopsticks between her teeth, she rummaged around in her desk drawer and pulled out a single key, then threw it to the back of the room where a boy sat alone, eating a sandwich. But she had only bothered to control the strength of her throw, not the aim, and it collided with the bread before falling to the floor.

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"Gah!"
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"Oopsie..."

At the sound of her ditzy admission, he looked over; shamelessly, she pointed

at the key on the floor.

"That's from your sister."

With the message relayed, she went back to her lunch and didn't afford him another glance. Acting frigid to him better suited her need to be liked.

"Bayashi! You ought to be nicer to someone you've known your whole life! Sorry about her, Uemura-kun!"

At this, everyone laughed. It was obvious from Miyu's apology that she didn't actually give a damn about Uemura. Akane wondered how he reacted to being the butt of their joke, but again, she didn't look to see.

Her need to be liked had an order of priority: family, friends, acquaintances, strangers. Each category contained its own internal hierarchy. Normally the younger brother of her longtime friend and coworker would rank decently high, but in actuality, she had sacrificed her relationship with him.

It was too risky to indiscriminately make friends with everyone. There was a chance it could come back to bite her. Therefore, she needed to make it plain who she did and didn't like—and more people would think positively of her if the target of her hostility was a loser with bad vibes. Even those who initially found her attitude toward him strange would put two and two together once they learned the two of them had grown up together. Being childhood friends explained nothing, yet somehow was its own excuse.

Conveniently, Uemura was a weak-willed person; if he despised her for this, he had never complained to her directly. Akane's emotions seemed to understand that this was the most cost-effective strategy, and so they didn't stab her in punishment. But if he ever snapped—if he *literally* stabbed her, for instance—she was prepared to accept it. After all, everyone else would obviously take her side.

She felt no guilt toward him, because the second she did, she would want to die.

Picking at her *bento* lunch, she steered her thoughts back to Ai and their plans together, so that it might protect her soft tongue ever so slightly. In order to reenact the final scene, there were a handful of checkpoints that she and Ai

would need to reach. She couldn't afford to waste that energy on the old friend who now served as her meat shield.

In the girls' restroom, once she was alone, she took the opportunity to email Ai about his work schedule. The reply was so instant, she didn't even need read receipts: "I'll send it to you later. Pay attention in class."

Her face stiffened uncontrollably as she realized he had become protective of her. Luckily, the stall afforded her privacy.

"Yes, Dad!!"

After she sent her reply, she powered the screen off—but it lit back up. She had received a new message not from Ai, but Shin, her boyfriend of six months. When she opened it, she learned that his parents were going to a relative's funeral tomorrow night, and he would be home alone.

To avoid making him feel upset or anxious, she did a quick mental check of her schedule, then opened her calendar app to be doubly sure. Only then did she write back, filling the screen with her joy.

"Akane you reply too damn fast lol"

Sensing the embarrassed delight from the text, she was giddy to know that she had given him positive feelings. Then, as per usual, she bit her tongue.

I don't want to make you happy because I like you—it's because I want to be liked.

If only she could say it out loud, would the desire to die finally go away?

She didn't leave the stall until the expression on her face was safe to be seen.

Uemura Tatsuaki

BOOKBAGS NATURALLY DEVELOPED holes over time. And if you were careful, you could find a camera small enough to fit.

Between classes, though, he didn't have to be that sneaky. As long as no one was behind him and he wasn't too concerned with picture quality, he could openly use his smartphone and no one would know.

And so Tatsuaki walked off campus after yet another day of not getting caught.

First, he boarded the nearest subway and took it to a station he didn't normally visit. There, he climbed onto the bicycle his older sister wanted him to retrieve and, after twenty minutes of pedaling, arrived at the parking lot of their apartment complex. After locking it up, he gave it a good kick—just hard enough to avoid knocking it over.

He took the elevator up to the floor they lived on, unlocked the door at the end of the hall, and walked in. No one else appeared to be home. Stepping out of his shoes, he walked into the kitchen. Inside the fridge was a box of cream puffs with his sister's name on it. He took it into his bedroom and locked the door.

As soon as he set his bookbag down, he promptly pulled out the mini-camera and connected it via cable to the computer on his desk. While the data transferred to his hard drive, he changed out of his uniform, drank water from the bottle in his bag, and sat down in his desk chair. A few minutes later, he connected his smartphone to repeat the process, as per his routine.

Once his phone was wiped clean, he put on his headphones and hit Play on the footage he had spent the day recording. He wasn't worried about visual artifacts or judder. These things were irrelevant to his objective.

After the first video ended, he moved on to the next, then the next, all of them with different timestamps and locations, sipping his water as he scrutinized each one. And as the images flowed onscreen, he thought to

himself:

I can't believe no one's caught on.

Checking his footage after school was a daily activity, but even after all this time, the novelty had yet to wear off. With practice, he'd learned that acting casual made him less suspicious, but still.

Onscreen, right as an object came flying toward the camera, Tatsuaki paused the video, rewound a little to check, then resumed. Naturally, it wasn't the flying blob he was interested to see—it was the expression of the female who threw it. And he could easily tell that while her eyes were pointed in his direction, her mind was somewhere else.

I can't believe no one's caught on.

As he repeated the words in his mind, it unconsciously filled him with pleasure. This was how he established himself as intellectually superior to the blind sheep all around him. They lacked the capacity for observation or imagination, and yet they dared ignore him. Thus, to protest their unjust treatment of him, he spent nearly every day filming them on campus without their knowledge.

For the most part, he targeted his classmates. Among them, there was one female in particular who he focused on. He could already imagine what people would say to him if they knew he was doing this, but *no*, he most certainly did not harbor the slightest of romantic feelings for her, nor anyone else in their class. All he wanted was to shine a light on these monsters pretending to be goody-goodies.

For instance, the childhood friend he spent extra time filming: Itobayashi Akane. She was constantly surrounded by people who were smiling and having fun—all of them with good looks, good reputations, and good social standing.

I can't believe no one's caught on.

He felt this way not just about his illicit conduct, but about her screening process, too. How could she act like it was normal? Not just her, either—whenever he observed his classmates, he became convinced that he was the only decent human in the room.

But one of these days they were bound to slip up. In order to capture that moment, Tatsuaki filmed the classroom and the halls each and every day. Then he went home and combed through the footage to see if any of his classmates had done anything wrong. He had nothing special to show for it just yet, but he eagerly awaited the day that he could expose them for what they were.

At last, it was time to watch the final video of the day: his childhood friend chatting with some classmates after school. At some point her smile had turned ugly, and she started being picky about who she associated with, but though he despised who she had become, her appearance was still recognizably the same girl he once knew. Perhaps as a child he had innocently fallen in love with her from afar.

As several different strains of hatred welled in his chest, he deleted the final video and let out a long breath.

Tatsuaki felt no sense of belonging at home or at school. That being said, the places he lingered while his peers were spending time with friends or family (mainly the internet or his bedroom) offered him little comfort either. Be it in the real world or elsewhere, he pitied himself for being subjected to endless swarms of shallow, immoral worms and the torment of their emotions, and at the same time, he sympathized with those who, like him, were punished for being nice. That was why he needed to expose these disgusting manipulators and get justice—before more people like him could get hurt.

This belief served as the foundation for his *other* daily activities, too.

Online, Tatsuaki was known as "gentian4." He felt it was a sign of integrity to associate with a specific name in a place where anonymity was the norm, and this trifling "integrity" weighed on him like a king's crown, deluding him into thinking he was justified.

On the internet, if you hurled vicious abuse at someone, another person would attack you for it. Under the name gentian4, however, this exchange was a debate. In his eyes, his posts weren't defamation but merely criticism.

"God, you're everywhere. Get a life."

Even when ill-mannered replies interrupted his "debates," he didn't feel the need to give them the time of day. Everything beyond his own account was no different from what went on in the classroom. He kept watch over those who were showered in praise, waiting to pull the rug out from under them as soon as they slipped up. Major scandals were ideal but rare, so instead he used his powers of observation to evaluate their financial decisions, their health, the good and bad of their performances, their physical appearance, their heritage, and even their home lives.

He checked all their official photos, social media posts, and interview articles, and if he ever found something worthy of criticism, he became furious that the subject of his surveillance was confirmed to be one of *them*. Deep in his heart, he tasted something sweet, and it deluded him into thinking he had found yet another piece of proof that his suspicions and complaints were right all along.

Unlike his classmates, celebrities with fanbases always had at least one or two haters. Whenever he insulted a famous person, someone always responded to it, and he experienced a level of attention he never got in his normal life. It was an extremely easy way to feel something akin to accomplishment. So while he wasn't conscious of it, he *liked* when the celebs he targeted did controversial things on a daily basis.

After dinner that night, like every night before it, he holed up in his bedroom and searched until he found a tweet that he could prey upon.

"You don't need to know my past. All that matters is the present and the future."

There was no image or anything else attached to it—just those two sentences. Her crazed fans read into what was left unsaid and sent affirming replies back.

The slightest perceived arrogance from one of his marks made his blood boil. He searched through public tweets until he found people who agreed with him, then used that to fuel his criticism as he flung it into the void. The response was instant, and he felt a rush of relief. Once again, he had managed to salvage the heart of someone in the same sorry boat as him.

That satisfaction was the only thing that kept him going most days.

Gotou Julia

Y IKES," the youngest member, lizuka Mei, muttered as they were in the green room, waiting for the livestream to start. Julia ignored her at first; it wasn't in the group's best interests to coddle the youngest member, and besides, she figured another girl would say something.

"What's up, Mei-chan?" Sakuna asked, just as Julia predicted.

"Have you seen the people talking smack about Jul's tweet from yesterday?"

Since she was mentioned by name, Julia glanced over without turning her head. There was only one meaningful tweet she had posted yesterday, and she knew some were raking her over the coals for it.

"Just because they don't like something doesn't give them the right to say whatever they want. Don't they get that?"

"They're just desperate," Julia spoke aloud.

Instantly, Mei straightened her posture and looked over sharply. The fans loved her uniquely anxious disposition.

"They're desperate for something in life to care about, and they're dumb enough to think disparaging a stranger will give them a crumb of self-esteem. Your anger is wasted on them, Mei."

In actuality, Julia viewed her haters as a vital element of her narrative, so her true feelings were slightly different. Her inner circle was prone to becoming an echo chamber, and if she wanted to break out of it, she needed to make use of those with different views. However, she felt some performers didn't need to know about this tactic, especially hot-blooded Mei.

"But doesn't it piss you off that they're running their mouths about you?"

"Yes, they're annoying. But it'd piss me off more to let them live rent-free in my head, you know?"

"True," she murmured, half-convinced.

"She's right, Mei-chan! Use that time to make us *otaku* happy instead!" Sakuna chimed in.

Only then did Mei seem to convert her directionless anger into a cluck of the tongue and two heavy sighs. This was for the best. Once she started worrying, it was hard to get her to stop; when she was reading *Girl's March*, each time she came to a scene she didn't understand, she'd apparently struggled to push through it.

After the conversation ended, the green room descended into silence once more. The oldest member, Wakayama Ran, was reading a book and generally minding her own business, and now Sakuna and Mei were scrolling on their phones.

Julia opened the *kaiju*-themed compact mirror a fan had sent her. Anytime the topic turned to haters, she would always think back to a specific memory of the time she banned one of her own fans from attending her concerts.

Normally this was something venue staff were meant to handle, but Julia had taken it upon herself, as she'd felt it marked the separation of her old and new selves. Despite repeated warnings, this particular fan had continued to make a scene at the VIP pre-show (an event immediately preceding a concert in which the group members shook hands and took photos with fans), so she told him:

"Don't come back."

She still remembered the look on his face in that moment—a look of sadness, despair, and anger that drove home just how easily a person could convert their love to hate. How had she felt back then, standing in front of him? It had lasted only for a moment before she'd mentally moved on to the next fan, but for those precious few seconds, she had been consumed by an inexplicable emotion.

It couldn't have been anger, because Julia hardly ever got genuinely angry. When she complained at other group members on Twitter, she was merely giving their fans the gift of drama; when she told an online critic "I'm sure you meant it as a compliment, but saying someone 'doesn't fit the mold of a pop idol' reads to me like you don't respect idols in general, and it's infuriating," she was just reinforcing her persona. (In reality, she didn't care what people said

about them as long as it gave them publicity.) And even when she made another member cry, she only did it in order to enforce the rules. She didn't slam her up against the wall in a blazing rage.

So what had she felt when looking at a guy she would likely never see again? Julia closed the compact mirror, then took a sip of tea from the paper cup nearby.

It wasn't sadness, either—over time, she had converted everything under that category into bitterness—and obviously, it wasn't joy. Though she didn't regret doing it, the fact remained that she had exiled one of her fans. He was a member of a specific fan group, and the scandal went on to spark a ton of discourse about whether pop stars were allowed to be selective about their fans. It *did* ultimately create a little more publicity for Impatiens, but she couldn't have predicted that.

Every now and then, Julia would think back to this mystery emotion and try to identify it. Some part of her was afraid—though she had no proof—that leaving it unnamed would have a negative effect on her narrative.

In truth, she had experienced a similar feeling in a different situation...one which had *also* resulted in severed ties. But it wasn't the sadness of parting ways. She had that locked away in her heart where it belonged.

"Time to move, ladies," a staff member called into the room, followed by one final check from the makeup artist.

Before she left the room, Julia plunged a hand into the backpack she brought. Inside was an open pouch, from which she withdrew a bottle of nail polish. But instead of applying it, she simply gave it a squeeze before putting it back. This ritual locked the door that kept the loneliness imprisoned in her heart.

On a different day, after voice training, Julia was walking through that same sprawling district again. She wore a baseball cap, cargo pants, sneakers, and a bomber jacket by her favorite brand, and underneath, yet another *kaiju* in the form of a sweatshirt she had bought herself from a secondhand clothing store.

She walked in silence toward the subway station, no sign of fans or promoters

trying to flag her down. But partway there, as a couple passed her on the street, she overheard their conversation.

"Wait, seriously? The train's stopped?"

She stepped off the sidewalk, took out her smartphone, and opened Twitter. On her timeline, she could see a musician complaining about the same train the couple was probably referring to. And as bad luck would have it, when she searched "delay," it turned out to be the line Julia herself used to get home. Apparently there was a *bodily accident*, as the euphemism went.

Suppressing a sigh, she contemplated her next move. She had the option of taking the long way to get home at any cost, but she remembered the flyer she'd seen that morning and decided to simply take a detour until her usual train was running again. Her new destination: the closest of several bookstores that operated within this district.

Similar to Sakuna, Julia was seen by her fans as a pop star with one specific niche interest. As a result, the majority of gifts she received had some connection to that interest, and whenever she met people at pre-shows, the topic tended to shift in that direction. It originated from a single image posted right after their big debut.

In the car on the way to their next concert venue while on tour, Sakuna had taken a short video which had briefly shown Julia back when she was still experimenting with different fashion styles. The embroidered patch on the varsity jacket she was wearing, in addition to her passionate performance onstage, quickly became a hot topic among sharp-eyed idol fans.

"It's a kaiju!"

As the sky began to close its eyes, Julia set foot in the bookstore. She had two objectives, and the first one didn't take long.

At the New Releases section was a stack of dozens of Ogusu Nanoka paperbacks. Julia didn't know how highly she ranked as an author, but this giant spotlight would seem to indicate that at the very least, her books were selling well.

She picked up a book with a cover just as fanciful as Girl's March. By

purchasing the latest Ogusu Nanoka novel, it would imply that her interest was not just professional but personal, too, and she figured she could pander to Ogusu Nanoka fans that way. Of course, she'd need to post a photo to social media, but she would make it look natural.

Now for her second objective. Again, she didn't want it to look forced, but the new Ogusu Nanoka release had luckily given her a convenient excuse.

One book already in hand, she walked to the Hobby section, where she searched for another new release. This proved difficult, since all the covers looked mostly the same, but at last she spied what looked to be the right one. On the front, a slew of giant *kaiju* stood facing forward, as if to suggest subtlety was for cowards. She picked it up and decided to take a quick peek at the contents, just to make sure it wasn't something she'd already bought.

"Excuse me..."

She heard a girl's voice directly beside her, stealing her attention away from the monsters. It was firm and smooth, as if shaped from clay, reminiscent of a pop idol's voice.

Cautiously, Julia looked over. She couldn't see anyone nearby but herself and this teenaged employee—a part-timer, perhaps in high school. The girl stooped forward timidly, looking at her.

"Um, I saw you perform live for the first time the other day, and you were really cool!"

She spoke quietly, out of consideration for their surroundings, and Julia quickly parsed the situation. This sort of thing was hardly unusual. With her free hand, she shot the girl a thumbs-up and the coolest smirk she could manage.

"Thanks."

The part-timer seemed to sense the Gotou Julia energy from her frank reply. Her eyes widened, her face flushed, and with a bow, she went back to work. This reaction made a single flower bloom in Julia's heart...and its color and fragrance made her swoon.

In every corner of this city, there were people who enjoyed the story of Gotou Julia. No matter how angry it made Mei, as long as she continued having little

encounters like these, Julia would keep using her haters' insults as fodder for her narrative. This had only served to reaffirm her beliefs.

In high spirits, Julia headed to the register. Her cashier was not the girl from earlier. She knew she wouldn't come back here for quite some time, but perhaps they would meet again somewhere else. This thought gave her hope.

Outside the store, she pulled out her two new books, raised them along with the plastic shopping bag up to face height, and took a selfie. This was the first time anyone had flagged her down at a bookstore; perhaps she owed it to the popularity of the theme song. Now she just needed to think of a storyline to go with it.

It didn't matter if she feared the woman—she was still grateful to Ogusu Nanoka and *Girl's March* for bringing Impatiens to new fans.

After grabbing an early dinner and killing time until the trains restarted, Julia headed home. She got off at the nearest station, and one fifteen-minute walk later, arrived at an apartment complex that was neither dilapidated nor brandnew. Her apartment was on the third floor. When she opened the door, she was greeted only by the motion sensor activating the light at the entrance.

A few steps down the short hallway, past the door to the kitchen, was the living room. Once she finished washing her hands and gargling, she changed into loungewear and sat down to post the selfie taken outside the bookstore to Twitter and Instagram. The caption: "Got my paws on these. Excited to start reading them."

The result was a flood of replies, likes, and retweets. She didn't read clear intention in each interaction, but she *did* feel some measure of relief each time she attracted a response from her fans. After reading their replies for a while, she plugged her phone in to charge. Then, true to her word, she retrieved the new Ogusu Nanoka novel from the shopping bag and flipped it open.

As a celebrity, Julia avoided lying. She said what needed to be said and did what needed to be done. If someone asked a question she couldn't answer, she would firmly tell them she couldn't answer it.

She *did*, however, make adjustments to the order of chronological events. She could say she knew of something she'd never seen, or felt something she'd

never experienced, as long as she made up for it after the fact. To Julia, the flow of time was not linear. It could be rearranged like puzzle pieces to fit her mental image.

Likewise, she had just posted something to social media that was not quite true at this point in time. In truth, she had already read twenty or thirty pages while she was killing time in town. But if she told them she was just about to start, it would give some fans the impetus they needed to buy the book and read it along with her. This was her way of repaying Ogusu Nanoka.

Scanning her eyes over each letter, she turned page after page. Admittedly, it had been her work that had introduced her to this author, and the woman had indeed intimidated her when they met, but when Julia told her "I like the way you write," it was no lie.

In the past, she had affectionately described Ogusu Nanoka's writing style as having little to no clear boundaries. Her phrasing was lyrical, and her refusal to specify places, times, or even proper nouns made the distinction between scenes rather blurry. Furthermore, much of the dialogue was left unattributed, and according to an interview that Julia had read as part of her research, Ogusu Nanoka had outright stated she "didn't care" who said it.

These things, combined, left some readers unable to immerse themselves in what they saw as a story with no core, but Julia's experience was different. Because Ogusu Nanoka didn't directly offer readers a stage for the story, it wasn't restricted to a single shape, and could reflect any number of real-world problems, making the reader question their own hearts and daily lives. It felt like she was asking, "What would *you* do in this situation?"

Ogusu Nanoka's works were so fantastical as to be shrouded in fog, yet also seemed clearly linked to real life. If this unusual characteristic was unique to her as an author, then perhaps her popularity was due entirely to her one-of-a-kind style. During their talk, Julia had felt that it wasn't her duty to speak at length, so she'd settled for saying she liked it and discussing its impact on her lyrics.

After about two hours of reading in various positions, she slid the attached ribbon bookmark into her stopping point, stretched and let out a yawn. Now that she was back home in reality, she paused to envision how the author of

this book spent their days.

Judging from her appearance, the woman was rather wealthy. What did her bedroom look like? She'd mentioned owning a cat, but did she have any human family? Did her cat ever get in the way of her writing? And did she write on a computer, or with pen and paper? What did her desk look like? Did she keep a drink on hand? What sort of expression did she wear whenever she thought of a new setting, character, or backstory? She claimed her characters were all one hundred percent fictional, but was there ever one specific acquaintance plastered in the back of her mind?

If a real person had inspired The Girl in *Girl's March*, then Julia hoped her counterpart's innermost thoughts were safe from prying eyes.

As her questions turned into a prayer, she burst out laughing. The same way Julia herself was currently speculating about Ogusu Nanoka and a hypothetical girl, Julia's fans were surely thinking of her and the kind of star they hoped she would be. That was exactly why she put effort into her storylines. In that sense, perhaps she wasn't so different from the same novelist who had frightened her. The thought was amusing.

She was starting to get hungry, so she pulled a tomato from the fridge, gave it a quick rinse, and bit into it while she turned on the TV. There was a music program on, and to her sincere delight, the recently-released film tie-in single was already charting. She listened to the other musicians' songs until the tomato was gone.

Generally, Julia didn't open her wallet for other people's music—not when a single CD sale or stream could cause Impatiens to slip down the ranks and lose opportunities. TV and radio, however, broadcasted music at their sole discretion, and she could safely enjoy it as long as she didn't fill out the rating surveys.

Once the stem was all that remained of the tomato, she threw it in the trash, turned off the TV, and took off her clothes. But even when she was naked, even when she soaked herself in hot water, she never felt truly bare.

Then she thought back to the reaction from that girl at the bookstore.

Julia was proud of the walls she'd erected between herself and the world, and

she had faith that that was what everyone wanted. She never dreamed that they'd one day want her to tear it all down.

Itobayashi Akane

"Not once had The Girl ever found a flower already in bloom. She always had to make it happen herself."

GIRL'S MARCH, PAPERBACK EDITION, PAGE 50, LINE 21

W HEN SHE SAW AI standing at their meetup spot, Akane ran twenty meters forward. He turned at the sound of her footsteps, and the moment their eyes met, she already knew what she was going to open with.

"Oh my gosh, I have been *dying* to tell you!" she blurted out, revving the engine of her excitement.

This was her third encounter with Ai. It had been a while since the last time, but nevertheless, she pushed her affability front and center. Based on a friendship nurtured through several email exchanges and exactly one phone call, she was confident she wouldn't put him in a bad mood—and evidently this wasn't just her ego talking, because he didn't even bat a lash at the teenage girl who came racing up without so much as a hello.

"What's got you all fired up today, Itobayashi Akane?"

"Trust me, you'll get fired up, too!"

She could get away with a bit of shouting; the city would absorb the excess volume. Conversely, it was an indoor voice that was more likely to be overheard. She cupped a hand at her cheek and lowered her voice to emphasize the secrecy of the information she was about to relay.

"Julia-chan showed up at my work the other day!"

It quickly became obvious that she had surpassed his visibly low expectations. "Oh yeah?" His beautiful eyes widened, and this reaction was more than enough to satisfy her. But Akane had built her life on contradicting herself.

"What, you're not even surprised?! Oh, right, you work at a music venue. I guess you see pop stars in person all the time."

"No, I am surprised—I just don't flip out like a teenager. Seems like she prowls around this district, huh? I've never seen her around."

"Really? I was at work, and I came up to her all discreet like, 'Hey, I saw you live for the first time, and you were cool,' and she was like, 'Thanks,' like..." She imitated the nasally voice and the thumbs-up, making sure the performance within a performance wasn't too perfect. "Idols are still cool even when they're offstage, huh?"

"Well, it's their job."

It was the kind of response that suggested he already knew this, but still wanted to share the moment without raining on her parade. The maturity of the reaction aided and abetted her charming teenage annoyance. "Dang it, I thought you were gonna freak out with me... I met your fave and everything..."

"Well, sorry to disappoint." He laughed, and she could feel his sincere desire not to misrepresent his own feelings. She didn't care about *freaking out*—to her, this was the most Ai reaction possible.

"Bee-tee-dubs, what scored the most points with me personally was that she was buying a copy of Ogusu Nanoka-san's new book. Oh, and a *kaiju* magazine."

"Ah, yeah, kaiju."

"She likes them, huh? I read her wiki page."

"Isn't Ogusu Nanoka the one who wrote the...the character Ai that resembles me or whatever?"

With an awkward smile, Ai shifted the subject ever so slightly. He probably had no idea that the teenage girl he'd just met was the type of person to pay careful attention to other people's faces. But even if he did, he probably wouldn't have tried to hide a thing.

"Wait, did you read it?!"

"No, I don't read. I know it sounds dumb, but I'm not a books guy. I only learned her name because I saw on a music forum that Julia did some kind of interview with her."

"Ohhh, okay. Wait, I don't think I've read that one. Is it about music?"

"Let's talk about it on the way."

Ai pointed in the direction they were headed, steering her away from the monument where they'd met up. He was the one who chose this destination, since there was a smoking area nearby. A light breeze blew the smell of nicotine from his red sweater. He was also wearing an ankle-length black skirt and leggings with gray sneakers, but no overcoat—probably to maximize mobility to suit the day's plans.

By contrast, Akane wore a pale beige duffel coat over a pleated skirt. Her legs were always bare, no matter how cold it was outside, because her need to be liked had commanded her to use every advantage afforded by her youth. Far more chilling was the thought that if she hadn't met Ai, she probably would have kept dancing to the tune of her compulsions well into old age.

"The interview was mainly about the characters and Julia's lyrics," he explained dutifully as they took their first step. "Oh, and they talked about her pet cat or something. I was surprised, since I always figured novelists live in isolation like hermits. But considering I've seen firsthand that musicians are ordinary people, maybe that's a weird bias to have about writers specifically."

"That sounds like the way I feel about musicians, though."

"Yeah, that's fair," he nodded, facing forward. "When you're in high school, you don't get a lot of opportunities to... Wait, that reminds me!"

He stopped short and turned to look at her; likewise, she followed suit, her eyes wide. "Reminds you of what?"

"I heard you came asking about me the other day."

"What?! But I told her it was a secret!"

It took a level of skill to pretend to be shocked. This had quickly become apparent to Akane whenever someone in her friend group got a new boyfriend.

Ai promptly started walking again, as if he'd only stopped to fit the rhythm of the conversation. Evidently he didn't consider it alarming enough to need to grill her about it. Relieved, she matched his pace once more.

"If some random teenager shows up, starts digging for deets on a specific

employee, then says it's a 'secret,' it's gonna raise some flags."

"I'm not some random teen! I just swung by on my way home from work and saw that lady from last time—Fujino-san? She was cleaning stuff near the entrance, and she didn't look busy, so I thought I'd talk to her, that's all."

"Look here, brat, is your common sense borked or something?" The exasperated use of *brat* stung bittersweetly at the back of her nose, just as it had the last time. "Normally, if you meet somebody a total of one time, you're still strangers."

"But we had a really fun chat!"

"Yeah, because she was bored, and *her* common sense is broken, too. But when you're an adult, if something shady happens at work, you report that shit. And now it's made *me* look shady."

"What?! Oh god...I'm so sorry..."

By performing deep regret at the thought that her careless actions had had a negative outcome, she could make the other person feel ever so faintly guilty. This, in turn, could gradually garner forgiveness and even respect from them. She could remember her grandmother once praising her by saying: *Even when you make mistakes, you're a good girl who always reflects on your actions and considers other people's feelings.*

"Relax. It's not that serious. You were asking about my birthday, right? Because you wanna repay me for the nail polish and the cover charge? Well, I appreciate the thought, but you don't gotta worry about it. It's no big deal."

"Nnnn...okay..."

"It really means a lot, though. Thanks."

Ai was direct and honest, protective and nurturing. In response, Akane donned the frustration and embarrassment of a girl whose little scheme had flopped, and then she bit her tongue.

Naturally, all of her actions yesterday and her performance today were in service to a very different objective.

The day Gotou Julia turned up at her workplace, Akane didn't head to the

subway station after her shift ended. Instead, she went to the live music venue where Ai worked. When she peered through the entrance at the bottom of the stairs, she saw a familiar face out front, so she struck up a conversation. Originally, she was planning to visit as a customer, so this was a stroke of luck.

The woman seemed to remember her, referring to her as "Ai's friend," which saved her the hassle of having to reintroduce herself. She was told Ai didn't work that day, but she had chosen to come here knowing that. Then she revealed a plausible explanation for why she was there: she wanted to know when Ai's birthday was and what sorts of things he liked. She finished by implying a surprise with "Please keep this a secret if you can," but she had already anticipated a future wherein he would find out. The moment Fujino responded with a vague nod, Akane knew she had succeeded in her indirect message.

Her main objective wasn't repayment. To follow the storyline of *Girl's March*, she needed to meet a woman who was friends with Ai and ask her about him—and since Fujino was her only option, she went for it. In her mind, it was only a precaution. But the way she was reading the situation now, Ai's friend from the story probably *was* Fujino. This was due to the intel she had gained on the way home from the music venue.

"Come to think of it, weren't the trains delayed that day?" he asked.

"Yeah, they were! Not the one I ride, though," she nodded offhandedly. In truth, that train delay had been more significant to Akane than anyone it actually impacted. "I was happy about it because there's a scene in *Girl's March* where the main character goes to visit Ai's friend and gets hit with a transportation delay."

"Seriously? What is going on with that book...?"

He scoffed like he'd just heard a bad joke, but she couldn't detect any chastisement of a younger friend's selfish actions in his expression. She knew Ai would never get angry over something like this.

The book didn't seem to care what questions were asked of Ai's friend. It only said they were "questions about Ai." The reason she chose "repaying Ai" from all the other options available to her was in order to convey that, though she

sometimes had tunnel vision, she was a good, kind-hearted girl who cared about her friends. Ai would never get mad at someone like that.

They passed under the railway bridge and crossed the intersection.

Akane hated walking through this district just as much as she hated its smell. She always had to stay on guard to make sure she wouldn't bump into anyone, block their path, or otherwise provoke their ire. Ai, on the other hand, strutted these streets like they were deserted. He kept his head held high and clacked his heels, as if to suggest the passersby weren't even worth his consideration. As much as Akane wished she could take a second to admire and aspire, that would mean taking the risk of someone snapping at her.

The buildings in this district were packed like sardines, so they arrived at their destination in just a few minutes. Akane entered two steps behind Ai, embedding her eyes and mouth with interest and excitement at all times on the off-chance he looked back at her. They walked past the arcade on the ground floor and into a crowded elevator, then rode it to the seventh floor. When the doors slid open and she saw what lay beyond, she shouted, as if on reflex:

"Wow!"

Then, turning to Ai, she donned an expression that indicated embarrassment at her lack of self-control.

He looked mildly surprised. "Didn't think this was your first time at a billiard hall."

More surprising for her was that his voice carried no hint of smug superiority.

They signed in at the front desk, then walked along the pool tables until they came to one that was unoccupied. To claim it as theirs, she laid a hand on the rim; Ai didn't scold her for it, so evidently it wasn't bad manners. But even if it was, she knew dozens of ways to make her ignorance cute.

It was Akane who, as of a few days prior, first suggested they play pool together. As they were building rapport by exchanging emails, she determined that, given his personality, it was safe to be honest. "Hey, I wanna reenact another scene with Ai and The Girl. Will you hear me out?"

The reply was instant: "As long as it's nothing illegal."

"Of course not! It's good, clean fun!"

With an opener that was vague enough to potentially set off alarm bells, she recounted the scene from the book.

In *Girl's March*, Ai influenced the protagonist in numerous ways, the biggest of which ultimately being the impetus to reveal her inner self for the first time. Before they got there, however, he introduced her to new hobbies, interests, and other cultural aspects.

"I want you to teach me a game I've never played before."

Akane's phrasing was clumsy and suggestive, and she could practically see Ai's overprotective, exasperated smile on the other side of the screen. "Oh brother," he complained at first, then listed out a few of his hobbies, billiards among them.

Billiards was a game that could only be taught in person. To Akane, it was a sign that he was the real Ai. Furthermore, it appeased her desire to be liked. Unlike fashion or music, sports had rules. Until she grasped the basics, she, as the learner, could only do as she was told. In her eyes, being asked to show off your skill was a shortcut to the simple pleasure of pouring a bit of yourself into another person, and she was confident she could accept whatever she was given.

Because of that, she was shocked to find that, unlike any other adult she had met, he didn't show a trace of satisfaction at impressing an excited, inexperienced teenage girl. It should have been obvious by now that he was special, but perhaps deep down, she still thought she was dreaming.

She grabbed one of the pool cues lying on the table and lifted it up. It was longer and heavier than she had imagined.

"So where do we start? Rack 'em and crack 'em?"

"I know this is exciting, but we gotta start by teaching you how to shoot straight."

"I mean, I have a general idea..."

She grabbed the white ball and set it down close to her. Imitating a posture

she had learned through cultural osmosis, she readied her stick. When she tried to give it a tap, however, the tip went askance, and the ball staggered weakly to the left.

"What the?"

"First, I'll show you the basics of how to hold your cue." He picked up the other stick and walked up next to her. "You put your fingers like this."

His beautiful hand on the table was like a flower blooming against a canvas of grassy green. She could only admire it for a split-second before she raised her voice—theatrical, but not *too* theatrical.

"Wait...is that what I think it is?!" With this announcement, she was finally able to openly acknowledge the detail that had set her heart alight from the moment they met up that day.

He waved his hand with nary a trace of embarrassment. "Yeah, I figured it was a good opportunity, so I put it on." He curled his thumb in and out of his fist, twice, like he was flicking a light on and off. The motion highlighted his five fingers, each nail painted blood red, and she knew without asking that it was the same polish she had suggested to him a few days ago—before their arrival at his workplace and after learning that he didn't normally wear brightly colored nails.

She didn't want anyone to realize just how closely she paid attention, so as soon as she noticed it, she worked hard not to let her gaze wander back to his fingertips. She knew he probably chose it to match his sweater, but she didn't say this out loud. Ai's kindness sparkled just as brightly as it had in *Girl's March*, and she admired it privately.

"Awww, that's so sweet! Ugh, I should have worn mine!"

"You really should have, naked-nails."

"I swear I don't *normally* have bare nails—I just didn't want to mess them up playing pool! Isn't that why you only did your left hand?"

"No? It just felt like a waste since I'm gonna have to take it off by the start of my shift tomorrow. Besides, they say Freddie and Brian only did their left hands, too."

"Oh. That's cool," she replied, as if covering for her own ignorance.

"Anyway," he continued with a wry grin, showing her his left hand again. This time his pointer finger was slightly raised. "This is where the cue goes. Also, I know nobody's around right now, but you always wanna check your six so you don't hit anyone."

As instructed, she looked over her shoulder, then mimicked the shape of his hand with her own, sliding the cue under her index finger. This wasn't as comfortable as she'd expected. With his guidance, she refined the exact positioning of her hand, then set the finished product on the pool table.

"Be sure to spread your middle, ring, and pinky fingers. Once you've got a good balance, take aim and shoot."

He leaned forward and sent the rolling cue ball into a corner pocket. She reacted to the straight shot with "Wow, that's awesome!" but really she was more interested in the way the green backdrop highlighted his scarlet fingertips. Perhaps he had chosen to paint his left hand over his right not out of convenience, but purely for this aesthetic appeal.

Then he retrieved the cue ball from the pocket and set it in front of her, so she imitated his stance. When she took the shot, she found that the ball's speed had stabilized, but in altogether the wrong direction.

"You gotta make a circle with your thumb and forefinger in order to lock it down."

"Like this?"

She pressed her left hand back to the table and took another practice shot, but she could already feel the tip wavering. This was not an act in order to get him to teach her more; it was the genuine clumsiness of a beginner. And in the context of helping a beginner—or a friend—his next action was hardly unusual.

"Mind if I...?"

Akane only managed to react to his outstretched hand because she had been on the lookout for it. He was surely only trying to shape her into the correct position, yet she ran from his touch. She knew it was rude, so she used the newly escaped hand to stroke her cue stick as she smiled evasively. Add in -

rapidly blinking eyes the size of saucers, and the performance was complete.

As for Ai, he reacted with unfaltering confusion, followed by surprise (the *actual* emotions, not approximations). Then he turned bashful. "Sorry, that was thoughtless."

Akane, however, was relieved to get more or less the precise response she wanted.

That was close—this is the wrong scene.

"I promise I won't touch you. Now here it is again."

By withholding any excuses, she wanted him to misunderstand the degree of severity. So when he repeated the hand position, she timidly adjusted hers without a word. Her next shot sent the cue ball flying in a straight line.

"There you go! Very good."

"Th-thank you."

Of all the expressions she had learned to make, she was confident that she particularly excelled at shyness toward a guy. And as she continued to practice under Ai's instruction, she found herself thinking that maybe if she hadn't put all her skill points in something so mundane, she might have had a few left over for billiards.

Targeting a specific pocket chosen by Ai, she took shot after shot, but couldn't seem to hit the cue ball into it. So overpowered was she by the lingering feeling of failure that the one time it *did* miraculously go in, the success barely registered. She realized now that she was not a good fit for the game. Secretly, she felt a similar disconnect toward bowling.

"Let's switch to something where you can play too," she suggested, not even trying to hide her waning interest. But instead of taking offense, he thought of a different way for them to practice. He was protective like that.

This time they were apparently going to practice with the colored balls scattered around. In the process, it was decided that Akane would take a crack at the esteemed break shot that contributed greatly to her mental image of the game. Her first attempt, formed with a reasonable level of concentration,

somehow happened to fly straight toward her target. But it lacked strength, and its collision with the rack of stripes and solids achieved little more than a rattle.

"Jeez, this is hard..."

Slumping her shoulders, she passed her turn to Ai. But though he could have used the opportunity to make himself look cool with a flashy shot, he opted first to give advice.

"I think it'd help even you out if you try to pay attention to the position of your legs, like this. When I hit the ball, I imagine myself *pushing* it, not slamming it."

Only then did he take his stance and, with firm momentum, push the white ball into the triangle of colored cousins. Through some law of physics, each ball went rolling off in its own direction, and one fell into a pocket before either of them could even try to go for it. Akane wondered if this was what happened to the human body in a car accident.

"Yes, that's exactly it! So...who taught you how to play originally? Were you on the school billiards team, Ai-san?"

"It started in high school, when I made friends with an older student whose rich dad had a pool table in his house."

"Whoa!"

"We'd hang out there all the time, and at one point we started playing for ci—soda. I didn't wanna lose any bets, so I had no choice but to get good."

"You said you don't do crimes as a grown-up, but you definitely broke the law as a minor, huh?"

"I said soda!"

"Okay, but you're still not supposed to gamble!"

"Trust me, now that I'm an adult, I don't even play pachinko. C'mon, Itobayashi Akane, it's your turn. Don't worry about the numbers yet. Just try to go for whichever one you think you can get."

"Okaaaay..."

With that lazy response, the second round of practice began. Sadly, it didn't manage to awaken any latent skill in her. Ai still supported her passionately, and the time they spent together was precious and sweet. He had to have realized she wasn't cut out for this, and yet...

"Starting to get tired?"

She thought of a response to his concern, decided it wouldn't have a negative effect, then proceeded to say it aloud. "I'm just having fun hanging out with you."

By all accounts this was the essence of what was in her heart. And yet, the moment it left her lips, its purity was sullied by the need to be liked seeping into her tone. It was received with a toothy grin, and she wanted to die all the more.

"Nice of you to say, kid, but you should know that kind of talk will get you called a guilt-tripper."

"I'm a guilt-tripper now? Isn't it, like, objectively good to be as open as possible?"

Hypocrite, she scoffed at herself.

"Yes, I agree. But with your pretty face, guys your age will get the wrong idea."

"Pretty face? Don't be silly! I'm just average! Even my boyfriend says he likes me for my personality over my looks!"

And every time he said it, she would bite her tongue. Granted, she didn't much enjoy being praised for her looks, either. Both her quality parts and their stellar assembly were owed to the genetics she received from her parents. Weight management and makeup she only learned in order to be liked.

"Great, now the little teenager's bragging about her love life. Look, he's probably just too shy to admit it. If not, kill him."

"Don't be so dramatic! Does your partner compliment your looks?"

"Nice try with the trick question, but I already told you over email that I'm single. Anyway, uh...I'm getting a craving, so I gotta step out. Take a break until I get back."

As Akane's eyes widened, Ai reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Wordlessly, she waved goodbye, carefully sculpting her face so it would flash through his mind while he was alone.

Before he left, he dutifully pointed her to a couch where she could sit as well as a vending machine. No amount of performance could stop her from getting thirsty, so she decided she would buy a drink.

She watched Ai disappear across the room. As she continued to stare in that direction, she spotted a guy in flashy clothes walking the same way. Idly surprised by the number of smokers around there, her gaze followed his trajectory in reverse, to the point where he must have originated. There, she found a group of what looked like college students, smiling and looking in the direction their friend went.

Then she made eye contact with one of them...and that was when she realized.

Once she had put two and two together, she gathered her stuff and walked in the direction of the vending machine in the corner, where she bought a small bottle of tea, then bit her tongue in advance.

She could already see where this was headed.

Ukawa Ai

FOUR STEPS PRIOR to entering the deserted smoking room, Ai pulled out his lighter. By the time he was inside, he already had the cig between his lips. Right as the door shut, he lit it up and bathed his lungs in the smoke. This cigarette, one of countless dozens he had smoked in his lifetime, restored balance to his everyday life.

The first drag was like the first sip of a drink—the thirst-quencher. On the second drag, he let the scent rest on his tongue, and it was this second drag that seemed to help his brain process everything that had happened between his last smoke and now.

Teaching is so much harder than doing it myself, he thought idly as he stared at the wall. He suspected Akane wasn't suited to the game and was already starting to get sick of it. But to him, neither of these were bad things. Everyone had strengths and weaknesses, and even though it was her idea to begin with, he accepted her growing boredom just as it appeared, without any fact-checking.

If that was how she truly felt, fine. If she wanted to improve in spite of that, he was happy to keep practicing with her, and if she wanted to stop, then they could stop. He didn't want to force her into anything. He wanted the people close to him to be their true selves as much as possible. Thus, he would let Akane make the call.

He jiggled the cigarette over the ashtray, this time thinking back to the reveal that she'd had a run-in with pop star Gotou Julia. A chuckle tumbled out with the ash. As far as he knew, it was only recently that she'd taken an interest in Impatiens, immediately before seeing them live for the first time. How did she find the courage to speak to a group member in the wild?

Considering she'd struck up a conversation with him solely because he resembled a character in her favorite book, then went to his workplace to talk to his coworkers so she could surprise him for his birthday, it seemed social

norms did frighteningly little to rein her in. Put simply, she seemed like the sort of person who charged headfirst after whatever (or whoever) tickled her fancy.

For now, this was the extent of his opinion of Itobayashi Akane.

She was an assertive and proactive teenage girl with a conventionally beautiful face. Though she was fairly precocious, she would sometimes say or do careless things, and he suspected she was popular with boys and girls alike.

On top of that, she was bashful enough to recoil at his touch! She was almost too perfect—but not enough so to raise red flags. Among his many friends were some who didn't let people touch their things, and others who preferred to avoid skin contact as much as possible. Everyone had their own boundaries.

Around the time the paper tube of leaves cradled between his index and middle fingers had been reduced by one-fourth, he pulled his smartphone from his pocket. He'd received an email from Fujino, the coworker Akane had met with, asking him to trade shifts with her later this week.

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"Sorry, I have plans."

"Another woman?!"

"No, stupid!"
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As he was goofing off with his colleague, the automatic door slid open beside him. He knew people only came in here to smoke, so he respectfully moved one step deeper into the room. What followed was the sound of a plastic lighter and a masculine sigh.

A short while later, after the room had gotten considerably more smoky, a voice called out: "Come here often?"

At this, Ai looked over for the first time. They were alone together, so he needed to figure out if he was being spoken to or if the other guy was on the phone. If the former, he'd have to ascertain what the guy was after: a simple chat, or mistaken flirtation?

Of course, there were some who hit on him knowing full well what they were getting into, but those were rare.

"I was watching you play, and you were killing it."

Evidently this instance was indeed the most common of the three options. The best course of action was to let him know without delay.

"Eh, not really."

At the sound of Ai's voice, the young man reacted with exaggerated surprise. "Damn, you've got a nice, husky voice! I wasn't expecting that! But you must get that a lot, huh, sis?"

Men like these occasionally got too focused on dishing out compliments to realize they were accelerating their own misunderstanding. But Ai knew how to handle this. "I'm not a sis."

"Wait—are you her mom, then? You look so young!"

If Ai had to guess, the other man wasn't lacking in intelligence, but overburdened with pride. He didn't want to admit that he had hit on someone who turned out to be the wrong gender, nor did he want his buddies to find out. Thus, while it was quite possible that he was starting to realize the truth, he nonetheless prioritized the more convenient delusion. People were like this in all sorts of situations, not just romance.

He had the option of allowing this guy to believe he was Akane's mother, but he strongly preferred not to lie where possible, even to someone he would never see again.

"I'm saying I'm a man."

"...Excuse me?"

The other guy's tone shifted not to confusion, but bluster and bravado. He pointedly flicked his gaze to Ai's chest, then to his lower body. But because he was wearing a baggy sweater and skirt that day, there wasn't much to see. The man didn't seem to know how to react, so to show off his Adam's apple, Ai tilted his head back and exhaled smoke at the ceiling.

"Just in case you were hitting on me."

For the record, he was trying to give the guy an out. At times like these, if the other person knew how to save face, they would try to continue the conversation in spite of their surprise, e.g. "Oh, are you a drag queen? I've

never met one before," or if they were crude, "You're telling me you've got a dick under all that?" Either way, it would be clear that they were de-escalating, and Ai could happily forget all about it.

But in this particular case, it wasn't headed in that direction. The look on the guy's face when he learned Ai's gender suggested he wasn't capable of following grown-up social codes. Forcing a derisive smirk that was likely fueled more by embarrassment than actual hatred, he crushed his barely-smoked cigarette in the ashtray. "Well, that's gross."

Ai was aware that he had an admittedly short fuse. Because he always tried to be his authentic self, he let his anger live freely in his heart without trying to ignore it or tame it into something else. That said, he didn't blow up at every little thing anymore. He'd had opportunities to learn moderation and mature as a person.

There was once a time when he couldn't tolerate anyone talking shit about the way he liked to present himself. Back in the days when he was first learning to play pool, he would have told this guy to step outside for a fight. But the longer he lived and the more experience he gained, the less effort he put into changing the minds of those who would casually insult a random stranger who wasn't bothering anyone—in other words, assholes.

"Happens all the time. Don't worry about it."

A little sarcasm was all it took to paint over another person's shame. Hard to say if it worked this time, because when the man hurried out of the room, Ai didn't afford him a single glance. Without a trace of performative boredom or defensiveness, he simply looked back at his smartphone.

Anyone who saw the maturity with which he navigated these conflicts would surely never suspect he was the type to get easily agitated. If he had to guess, not even Akane would have gotten that impression. But the majority of those who were fairly close to him knew that he could flip like a switch at the slightest comment, and some had even seen his blood boil in person.

In this case, it was targeted at him, so he could ignore it. End of story. But when he found out a younger relative was getting bullied, or when he heard hate speech targeted at a friend, or when he saw his favorite pop idol getting

unfairly criticized, Ai openly spoke out the words that sprouted in his heart.

I want to kill them. I want to beat them until I see blood.

Naturally, he never acted on these feelings. He wouldn't be here smoking a cigarette, otherwise. Society had rules. But more than that, he knew no one wanted him to do those things. He was surrounded by friends and family who told him they'd be sad if anything were to happen to him. As a result, he sometimes blazed with rage until he was unable to sleep at night—such was the strength of the grudge he held against anyone who might hurt them.

He often wondered if he would ever resolve this catch-22 one day, only to give up on the idea a few minutes later. He was bound to get angry at some point or another, so why stress over it? He had more or less accepted that he would always get upset on behalf of the people he cared about, and as long as other people walked this earth, there was little he could do to avoid it.

A friend once told him she envied his ability to live his life true to his emotions. He hadn't talked to her in years at this point, but whenever he got angry, she used to smile and say, "I wish I could be like you and punch anyone who hurts me or my loved ones."

He wondered how she was doing now. Most likely she still hadn't punched anyone. Her voice echoed in the smoke as he crushed his cigarette in the ashtray.

Judging from the way he'd left the room, that other guy probably wouldn't hassle Ai again. Maybe he'd gone to a different floor entirely. Or if he'd brought friends with him, maybe they were consoling him with goofy antics. In any case, it was none of Ai's business. That being said, he didn't want to let his personal drama make anyone else uncomfortable, so if Akane seemed upset, they would leave. As someone who strived as much as possible to focus only on the here and now, he hadn't thought any farther ahead as he exited the smoking area.

He never imagined that, upon returning to the billiards room, his ears would find Akane faster than his eyes.

"Please just stop!"

It wasn't the kind of shout that could slice through empty air, which was

precisely why it got his attention. If it was a whimper drained of all personality, he would have written it off as the kind of fight that could happen anywhere. But sometimes, in this district, it was an indoor voice that was more likely to be overheard.

"Hm?"

When he looked over, he saw that Akane was standing not at their pool table, not at the vending machine, not by the couches, but at a table in the corner of the room, in front of a group of four young men. Among them was the guy who had hit on Ai. Based on this scene, plus Akane's statement, plus all of his accumulated life experience, Ai could hazard a guess at the situation.

No offense meant to Akane, but he couldn't help but chuckle. In order to relay the thought that had tickled him, he walked over to the group—partly because he felt it was his responsibility to settle the conflict, but more so out of the desire to tell a friend something funny.

"Hey, hey, hey."

It came out sounding more exasperated than intended, but nonetheless, the entire group turned in his direction. The fellow smoker was the first to notice, and he looked like he was biting back a scoff. The other three guys all looked innocently surprised.

For the briefest of moments, Akane looked relieved to see him, but she quickly seemed to hide it.

Their reactions were all exactly as Ai had imagined, and he let out another laugh as his lips curled in a half-smirk. "Bit cliché, don't you think?"

He'd meant to convey his opinion exactly as he'd felt it, but it seemed to fall flat, because none of the five reacted. He didn't care if the guys understood it, but he wanted his companion, who was being subjected to said cliché, to see the comedy of it from his perspective.

"Let me guess: you had one guy distract the babysitter while the rest of you went to harass the pretty girl, right? Well, don't think for a second that your half-assed plan was gonna work. This happens a lot, too—guys going after someone they see as meek, only to get their asses handed to them. I see it all

the time. Makes me laugh."

As his smile spread wider, he turned it to Akane. But for some reason, she didn't smile back. Then he realized she might be afraid that his sarcasm would provoke a fight in which he was sorely outnumbered.

"Now, when the 'babysitter' turns out to be a guy—that part's not so cliché," he added lightheartedly.

"That's not it," Akane pushed back. Then she pursed her lips and glared at the men in front of her, as if no further explanation was needed.

Confused, Ai followed suit and looked at the group. If he had misread the situation, then perhaps the looks on their faces would give him the answer. Best he could tell, they seemed like part-time coworkers from a bar, or maybe a group of friends who had met in college. Then the smoker guy's scoff finally spilled out.

"She's the one harassing us, dipshit."

"Wh-but you-!"

As Akane started to splutter, Ai held out a hand in front of her to stop her. The key to de-escalating conflict was to prevent anyone from restarting it. This he had learned through dealing with drunk people at his workplace.

"What's going on?"

He looked into Akane's eyes. She started to speak, but closed her mouth and looked away. From this, he determined that the men were telling the truth. Next, he looked over at the group, but none of them made a sound, save for the guy from the smoking area, who let out another loud scoff. Maybe he was their leader, or maybe he just wanted the other guys to deal with it.

"We were just laughing about the cross-dressing freak, that's all." Though he didn't seem to be enjoying this, the man recreated a pointed smile.

"Oh, is that so?"

Now Ai understood what was *really* going on. When he looked at Akane, she looked to be seething inside, ready to lunge at them all over again. But she probably wasn't used to getting in fights, because her eyes were damp.

Instantly, he knew what had to be done.

"Okay, well, let's end it here. You guys have fun—the two of us are gonna leave."

"Hey, hold it! She's the one who started shit!"

The moment Ai showed signs of retreat, one of the other guys piped up to prolong the problem, as if he'd smelled weakness. *Oh brother*. Guys like this were everywhere. The second they thought they had the advantage, they started talking big.

"None of us gain anything by dragging this out. We're all a little unhappy with this, but let's just suck it up and go home. I mean, aren't you legal adults now? Don't get pressed over some high school kid."

Ai could tell they valued personal benefit over reputation or pride. The reason one of them had dug their heels in was most likely because his instincts told him they stood to lose if they let the situation resolve unfavorably. Maybe they wanted to be plied with a show of remorse from Akane. Either way, Ai didn't want to deal with that level of aggro.

"Look, if you want me to apologize for butting into your fight, I will. I'm sorry. Let's see, what else... You smoke the same brand as me, right? I've only got two or three left, but you can have 'em."

He pulled the crumpled pack from his pocket and tossed it at the smoker. Then he steered a half-protesting Akane to the front desk, paid the bill, and dragged her onto the elevator with him.

As expected, the men didn't try to give chase. Akane's status as a minor likely kept them at bay more than anything else. And a few seconds later, he happily forgot all about them. Come to think of it, there might've only been one left in that pack...

He promptly forgot about that, too. There were more pressing matters.

"I'm in the mood for coffee. Wanna swing by someplace?"

He waited for her passive nod, then brought her to a cafe he knew.

Inside, they were directed to the second floor. Ai ordered coffee, and Akane

pointed to black tea on the menu. The two drinks were swiftly brought to their table.

"I hear the pumpkin flan is really good here, but they have a sign up that says they're sold out today."

"I beat them, you know," Akane said, ignoring Ai's remark and breaking the silence she had maintained until her Earl Grey arrived.

"What?"

"The guys earlier."

"Oh yeah. Almost forgot about them." Perhaps she considered her actions a considerate gesture toward him. "Look, there's no winning or losing when it comes to that stuff. Maybe it *feels* like winning when you make the other person mad, but it's just a waste of energy."

"That's not what I wanted. I wanted them to take it back."

"What, the shit they said about me? It doesn't bother me, Itobayashi Akane. Just forget about them."

"They crossed a line!" she shouted, then heard her own volume and quickly corrected herself. "Sorry. But I really can't tolerate it."

Her eyes were building moisture again, as if the fever from earlier had rolled back in. But Ai wasn't annoyed by leaky tear ducts. On the contrary, if she was this upset, then perhaps he was wrong to have dismissed it out of hand. "Fine, maybe you were winning the argument." He never told lies—he simply estimated the strength of her emotions and gave her his thoughts in turn.

"See, you get it!"

"But there was a chance it would've turned into a nightmare. Say I ended up duking it out with all four of them right there, or out on the street—well, okay, I'd fare better than you'd think, that's for sure. But beating their asses wouldn't change anything, and besides, I'm not gonna put a teenager in danger. That's why I needed to end it ASAP."

"So a teenager isn't allowed to get angry if someone crosses a line because it's too *dangerous*?" she hissed, turning the blade of her glare on him next.

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"No, it's-"
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"If you're under eighteen, it's not safe for you, so when someone makes fun of your friend, you should just stand there like a braindead moron?"

"That's not what I'm saying!"

A hint of emotion welled up inside him. To convert it into words, Ai took a sip of coffee, swallowed, and processed his thoughts. But Akane wasn't willing to wait.

"Just because I'm not physically strong, I should just let bad things happen?" "Look—"

It was so unnecessary. From an objective viewpoint, her stance was nothing more than extra trouble for him.

As someone who loved to wear makeup and clothes designed for the opposite sex, he had endured more attention than she could possibly imagine. Strangers volunteered their unsolicited opinions on a near-daily basis. But at some point, he had switched to thinking these idiots weren't worth his time, and though it still managed to provoke an ounce of irritation, he had learned better ways to vent. He didn't need the righteous indignation of a teenage girl he barely knew, and no one stood to gain anything from her throwing it around.

However...

"That's not what I'm getting at."

Ai was not made of stone, particularly when faced with a heart laid bare right in front of him. No matter how objectively unnecessary it was, no matter how little it ultimately achieved, he would always see value in the courage to protect a friend. It wasn't something logic could surpass.

"You're allowed to be angry, Itobayashi Akane. But if you act on that anger, and something bad happens to you, your friends and family will be devastated, and so will I."

He relayed to her the same message he had once received from his loved ones when something had made *him* angry. Then he added in his own feelings.

"Thank you, though."

At the very least, he wanted her to know that he applauded the bravery and integrity it took to defend a friend's honor, so he followed his heart. And when she sucked in a breath, he sensed that his feelings had gotten through to her.

Naturally, as someone who had carried an anger like hers, he knew it often had a mind of its own. Having felt it himself, he understood that anger on behalf of a loved one was no joke. Even when he knew people didn't want him to act on it, even when he tried to remind himself that the resulting domino effect could make them sad, a part of him still smoldered deep down. *His* friend was hurt, and so *he* was mad about it.

But though he understood the intrinsically selfish nature of the emotion, he still didn't want to invalidate her for answering her heart's call and rising to the challenge.

Akane remained silent for a while, then let a sigh slip subtly through the corners of her mouth, as if her concern had been resolved. She seemed to try to further conceal this behind a sip of tea.

"If I'm honest...I was pretty scared, Ai-san."

He was a tiny bit relieved to see her lower the fist she had raised.

"I'm not surprised." Someone who knew their way around a fight wouldn't get teary-eyed when they were trying to be intimidating.

She seemed to possess *some* degree of emotional maturity, so if he had to guess, she normally either turned a deaf ear to passing insults or found something to distract her until she calmed down. There must have been something that pushed her to act this time around. Perhaps their insults were particularly creative, or maybe she had calculated that the security staff would step in if things got dicey. Either way, he suspected there was some kind of special circumstance.

"But since you were with me, I felt like I needed to be brave."

Sure enough, his general suspicion was correct. But the specifics didn't match any of the reasons he had imagined would inspire her to fight on behalf of another.

"After all," she continued matter-of-factly, "The Girl in Girl's March doesn't let

the threat of violence scare her. When someone insults her friend, she stands up for them."

He failed to disguise his reaction. "Are you serious?"

At all times, be it joy or rage, gratitude or remorse, Ai tried to express himself as honestly as possible. This was the person he wanted to be, and he liked that he was capable of it. But regardless of his agency, he was fundamentally an open book, particularly when he was comfortable around someone. The concept of a poker face was alien to him; he allowed his emotions to take the wheel. In short, the essence of his humanity just so happened to match his ideal vision of the same, just as another person might be fond of their own face or voice. Even he wasn't sure which had come first: his aspiration or his nature.

In other words, the teenager in front of him could surely see on his face what category he had just put her in.

"It goes that far?"

He hadn't intended for this to slip out. Divorced of context, Akane likely had no idea what he meant.

Inside his body, his nervous system was at the wheel, making his already larger-than-average eyes widen all the more. The air he breathed seemed to steal the moisture from his throat, and he quickly took a sip of coffee. He was every bit as shocked as he looked, for he now realized his own misconception about Itobayashi Akane: he had thought she was playing a game, like two friends roleplaying as lovers. Assuming the two of them did indeed resemble the characters of that story, as she claimed, he figured a little reenactment was scarcely different from two music fans wearing the same merch together.

But this was more than that. She was telling him that the novel *Girl's March* had inspired her to risk bodily harm in the name of justice. Who wouldn't be shocked?

"I can't believe you, Itobayashi Akane."

"Wh-what?"

"I've known plenty of folks whose worldviews were influenced by a certain person or musician or what have you. But it's not every day I meet someone whose entire life is built on a single piece of media."

In response to his sincere opinion, she tilted her head bashfully. "I don't know if it's *that* serious. I just have a lot in common with The Girl from *Girl's March*, and I've always wanted to be able to fight for my friends like she does, and... when I met you, it felt like a push in the right direction."

"I see... Well, don't forget, I'm not that other Ai."

As soon as he said it, he cursed himself for being mean. He could have nodded along out of courtesy, but instead he only ever spoke his mind. Alas, there wasn't much he could do about it. Even if it came as a letdown to other people, he liked being the kind of person who could stick to his guns.

Akane smiled shyly, as if fighting to keep burgeoning disappointment from taking root deep in her heart. "I knew you were going to say that."

"I do envy you, though." To Ai, shallow praise was no different from an insult, so he would never say something on the spur of the moment just to make someone else happy. "It's a real blessing to find something that inspires you to be better, whether it's a person, a thing, or even a book."

At this, the smile evaporated into a more serious expression, though a trace of joy remained at the corners of her lips as she nodded. "This book means everything to me. Whenever I'm worried about my problems, I try to have faith that one day I'll change, just like The Girl. You know, I'd really like it if you'd read it sometime."

"You're gonna have to wait a while, Itobayashi Akane. At least until you can go toe to toe with me at billiards."

"That's gonna take forever!"

As they shared a small chuckle, Ai added a footnote about *Girl's March* to the opinion of Akane he had formulated in the smoking area. A little seed had taken root in him when she bared her heart earlier, but instead of plucking it, he merely grasped it. For now it was just a possibility, but it was there.

Going forward, if anyone were to deeply hurt Akane, he was most likely no longer capable of tolerating it. He hadn't asked this seed to sprout, but now that it was here, he chose to accept it just as it was. He was simply that sort of

After that, Akane seemed to have fully swallowed her anger. She explained that she probably wouldn't keep playing billiards—it was fun, but not her thing. As they idled in peace, each savoring their drink and admiring the cafe interior for as long as time would allow, she suddenly piped up, "Oh!" This was immediately followed by a look of regret. Her gaze was pointed over his shoulder, so he turned to look. A boy was awkwardly shuffling to a table in the corner.

"Guy from your school?" he asked.

Akane nodded reluctantly. "He's in my class, and we live in the same neighborhood. We're not very close or anything, but...you could say we grew up together," she explained with a weary sigh.

"I see..."

No offense to the kid, but it was obvious at a glance that he wasn't even close to her league. Still, Ai knew it wasn't his place to comment. Once they were adults, either their relationship would change or they'd never see each other again. That being said, a little teasing couldn't hurt.

"Talk about bad luck. Poor guy came here to relax, only to run into Ms. Cocky."

"Oh, please! Everybody in the *world* is cocky compared to him! He's so pathetic, I seriously doubt he'll ever survive in the real world."

Ai knew there was concern behind her fierce attitude. She was a contrarian with a heart of gold, and in the time it would take for the boy to recognize this about her, their relationship would likely change completely. But of course, this opinion would never spur him to stick his nose into a friend's business, so he decided not to pay the boy and his smartphone any mind.

More importantly, he was curious: "So where do you usually hang out?" "What, with him? Nowhere! We do *not* hang out."

Her denial was so aggressive, it made him laugh. But he didn't have any

childhood friends of his own, so he couldn't tell if it was normal. "No, I mean... with your friends, or your boyfriend."

"Oh... Eh, you know, the usual—we do karaoke, go shopping, hit up a *purikura* booth... Oh my gosh, we should totally do *purikura* together! Um, if you want."

"I don't mind, but I'm clueless about the latest tech. Last time I went with a friend was years ago."

"Well, I'm an expert, so just leave it to me. Do you have those pics on you, by the way? I wanna see."

"Not on my phone. The stickers might be somewhere at my house, or my roommate might've thrown 'em away."

"You don't like to look back at old memories, huh?"

"Pretty much. I don't need to hold onto 'em as long as the other person does."

"Wow, you're actually really laid-back."

"Yep. But if somebody tells me to hold onto it, I usually will."

"Well, you better hold onto ours!"

With this unspoken agreement to go to a photo booth after they finished their drinks, Ai started sipping his a little faster. Then Akane rose from her seat to use the restroom, and that was when it happened.

He only noticed thanks partly to coincidence and partly due to the nature of his job. In the case of the latter, he always kept an eye out for rule-breakers at his workplace, so he recognized the motions and body language. As for the former, he had watched Akane disappear across the room, then offhandedly remembered the boy in the corner and turned to look.

As soon as he caught it, he rose to his feet. Then he walked over to the boy, said his piece, and went back to his seat.

Having acted purely in accordance with his own morals, Ai pulled out his phone and started scrolling on Twitter as if the whole thing had never happened. To celebrate the success of the *Girl's March* movie, Impatiens had announced that they would be holding a talk show and mini-concert at a local

movie theater. He would have to check his calendar app to see if he could get the day off.

Once Akane got back from the restroom, he went to smoke one quick cigarette in the smoking area. By the time he got back to the table, the boy was gone.

Uemura Tatsuaki

T WASN'T UNCOMMON for Tatsuaki to come to this district. The biggest reason was that his sister worked there; on days that both of their parents were working overtime, he was instructed to come and grab dinner with her. The other reason was the number of movie theaters. With at least a dozen scattered around the district, he was bound to find a flick that caught his interest.

It wasn't all roses, however. Owing to the location, it was easy to run into people from his school there. In order to avoid detection, he would always wear a hat and face mask—not that he thought his peers would even recognize his face, but just in case.

He found her almost entirely by coincidence.

Tatsuaki was on his way to the subway station after a movie when he decided, purely on a whim, to swing by the arcade first...but not to play anything. As he was looking at the crane game prizes, he glimpsed through the glass the blurry figure of his childhood friend leaving the elevator, accompanied by a female he didn't recognize. With his earbuds in, he couldn't hear their conversation, but they were definitely talking to each other.

Careful to keep his distance, he quickly powered on the camera on his bag, then began his pursuit. This, he felt, was his sworn duty.

Outside, he trailed them slowly, turning at the intersection. In this busy district, if you lost sight of someone, you wouldn't see them again anytime soon. Fortunately, Akane's companion was wearing a bright red sweater.

They walked for a while, then stepped into a cafe. The cafe in question appeared to occupy the entire building, so he figured it wouldn't be too hard to go unnoticed. With his disguise on, he merely needed to delay his entrance, then sit a few tables away.

Unluckily for him, the pair had chosen a table directly beside the stairs to the second floor. He hastily averted his eyes, but all it took was one "Oh!" from

Akane to know that his cover was blown. He couldn't simply turn around and walk back out again, so he chose to sit at a mercifully empty table a short distance away. He was too far to pick up their voices, sadly, but with his bookbag on the table, he could at least record video footage with no trouble.

Thus he sat there for a while, drinking coffee and playing on his smartphone while filming his childhood friend. She didn't seem the slightest bit interested in him.

Then, about ten minutes later, Akane suddenly stood up. Thinking they were about to leave, he hastily reached into his bag and adjusted the angle of the camera concealed there. But as it turned out, she was just going to the bathroom. Relieved, he turned the camera back to their table—and a few seconds later, something unexpected happened.

He would have to check the footage later to see exactly when and how it came about, because from his perspective, Akane's companion simply appeared next to him at his table.

"Huh?"

The word slipped out in surprise, but the female ignored it. Upon closer inspection, she was startlingly beautiful. But he was too quick to relax, because in the next instant, he learned how it felt to be *truly* startled.

"Cut that shit out."

The woman spoke with a man's voice. With those four words, she—he?— pointed at Tatsuaki's bag, then turned and sat back down at Akane's table like everything was normal. Meanwhile, Tatsuaki was left to wrestle with his confusion.

A guy? A crossdresser? No, the issue here wasn't with his gender or appearance. The issue was that he had recognized the camera, and his words suggested he knew exactly what Tatsuaki was using it for.

If so, he was in deep shit.

Even if the guy wasn't a hundred percent sure, one word to Akane about it and she might tell the school to search Tatsuaki's bookbag. She was that kind of girl.

He decided he needed to get out of there ASAP. To ensure they wouldn't have a run-in, he waited until the moment Akane returned to their table. Fortunately, the crossdressing man headed off to the smoking area shortly afterward.

Bag in hand, he kept his gaze pointed firmly in front of him as he walked down the stairs and left the building. It didn't seem like either of them was coming after him, but he hurried to the subway station nonetheless. Heart racing, he stepped onto the train and realized how hard he was sweating.

Panic and fear, in the present moment, were nothing more than two emotions. But with the passage of time, he started to see them very differently...and by the time he got home, he was *angry*. Angry at that man. Angry at Akane for treating her friendships like fashion accessories.

It frustrated him to no end that he couldn't immediately strike back at them. He had no clue who that guy was. And even if he posted everything he'd seen of Akane that day to the school message board, everyone would quickly figure out it was him.

By the next day, Tatsuaki's mood had yet to improve. But that night, as he was struggling to shake it off alone, the perfect distraction fell into his lap.

Pop star Gotou Julia had finally slipped up.

Gotou Julia

W HILE THE STAFF stepped outside for a smoke break, Julia remained alone inside the Toyota HiAce, scrolling Twitter.

Just yesterday, Impatiens had announced a *Girl's March* movie screening with a bonus talk show and mini-concert. Checking the reactions she had missed while she was asleep, she found most were positive, but some said they didn't see the point in a band discussing a film they had neither directed nor acted in, and others were generally supportive of Impatiens but weren't interested in the movie. Both of these opinions had the potential to spark discourse, and Julia would take them well into consideration as she sculpted her storylines.

"I'll go milk the cows, shall I?"

The door suddenly slid open, accompanied by the sound of grumbling. Julia looked over and found group member Towako standing there, looking less than pleased.

"Good morning. What was that about?"

"Oh, it's you, Jul. Does this even constitute morning? Why are we starting work at four o'clock when it's pitch-black? I feel like a farmer!"

"What, because they get up at dawn?"

"Exactly!"

With that, Katano "Otowa" Towako climbed into the car and shut the door behind her, plopping down onto the row directly in front of Julia.

Outside the two-by-two square of passenger seats, the van was stuffed with filming equipment and costumes. They were scheduled to film a new music video at sunrise on the beach in another prefecture today. Naturally, that meant they needed to wake before dawn and climb into one of two vans dispatched to pick them up.

"There are like a *million* music videos set on the beach at sunrise. Couldn't they just...greenscreen us in with state-of-the-art CGI or whatever?" Towako

continued from the center row. No one else was in the car with them, and based on her volume, she wasn't talking to herself.

"That wouldn't really work. They said they want us to have our feet in the water."

"So I heard! And in *winter*!" She carried on grumbling, but the rest was under her breath.

Towako *always* had a bone to pick with the staff. In most cases she only vented in private, but every now and then she would let it show publicly. The group member whose tweet Julia had criticized—referenced by Sakuna in that magazine interview the other day—was Towako. She had not-so-subtly implied a lack of enthusiasm for a particular work project, so Julia had quote-retweeted her with the following message to their fans:

"All that matters is that we give everyone a good time. Nothing else."

As a precaution, she had explained to Towako over the phone that she wasn't angry, to which the other girl had laughed and said, "You don't need to go out of your way to piss off my fanbase like that."

Towako's sass was a treat for the fans and an element of her own storyline, and thus far, hadn't constituted a risk to the group's career. On the other hand, there was one recurring idea frequently brought up among those who stanned her: if anyone were to quit the group, it would be Towako.

Another factor contributing to the groundless rumor-mongering was the girl's family. A general overview of each member of Impatiens' history was made public knowledge, and only two came with previous stage experience: Sakuna, the leader, and Maki, the girl dutifully posting through her reading marathon. Julia was a working adult, Ran was a student at a four-year university, Ao was a YouTuber, and the youngest member, Mei, passed the audition when she was still in high school. As for Towako, not only her parents but her older brother and grandparents were all established classical musicians, and when she was first assigned to Impatiens, she was a stringed instrument major at a college of music. When the fans learned of this, they read new meaning into her negativity:

"Seems like Otowa never really dreamed of being an idol."

This suspicion was only half-correct. Towako didn't fully agree with her parents' music-centric lifestyle, and she rejected the idea that she was obligated to follow in their footsteps. She did love music, though, so she chose a world where she could embrace it in an entirely different way. No, Towako had never dreamed of being an idol, but she found value in pursuing it—she had said as much to Julia's face.

She also said the fans didn't need to know about the part that was true.

Towako knew there was more value in the status afforded by her heritage than the insecurity and constriction bound up in it. Thus she revealed that she'd been playing with instruments since she was two years old, that she possessed perfect pitch, and that her mother was a well-known violinist, using these details to further her career. Deep down, she understood better than anyone exactly how replaceable she was. And still, she showed up to work with the confidence of a first-rate professional.

But while she had adopted the persona of the Elitist who wasn't afraid to make her demands known, in truth, Towako's real self wasn't dramatically different. The same could not be said of Julia, who was known as the *Kaiju*.

"Doesn't anything ever bother you, Jul? You're allowed to open up," Towako had said offhandedly during the aforementioned phone call.

Obviously yes, Julia had her own complaints and criticism. But it was the staff who had constructed this little box called Impatiens and put them inside. All Julia needed to do was perform to the best of her ability. This she explained in a more embellished fashion.

"Gooood morning!"

"Oh great, the chatterbox is here."

"What's that, Otowa? Come sit next to you? Why, I'd love to!"

"No! I'm going back to sleep!"

Of all the members, the one whose persona, talent, and job description matched most closely was Sakuna. She sat next to a protesting Towako, then looked over her shoulder to acknowledge Julia.

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"Good morning, Sakuna."
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"Mornin'!"

Right as she reached out and shut the door, the driver and a young male manager returned to the car. They climbed into the two front seats, then turned to look at the two new passengers.

"Good morning, ladies. Looks like this is everybody, so we'll be taking off."

"Is Maki running late, or...?"

"She lives near the film location, so she'll meet us there."

"Oh, interesting."

"Also, this is for the three of you. Anyone who needs to eat breakfast, please do."

"Gracias!"

Towako took the corner store to-go bag and handed it straight to Sakuna beside her. After some muttered debate, Sakuna passed it back to Julia. Inside were two bottles of tea and four individually wrapped rice balls.

"I'm surprised you're not having any this time, Sakuna," Julia commented, out of consideration for the manager who had gone out of his way to buy this for them.

"Yeah, I know!" came the energetic answer. "I bought bananas yesterday, so for breakfast I had banana slices with yogurt plus my last cheese wedge. What about you, Jul?"

"I went for a quick run, then had some leftover soba noodles."

"Hot soba or cold soba?"

"Hot."

"Does the temperature matter?!" Towako cut in. Despite claiming she was going to sleep, she dutifully offered them her trademark sass; in exchange, Sakuna ruffled her hair.

Meanwhile, Julia took one bottle of tea, then set the plastic bag on the empty seat next to her.

The two other girls continued to goof off with each other long after the car ride began. Though she denied it profusely, Towako seemed to be having a good time, so Julia saw no need to comment. Instead she sat in silence and asked herself the same question she always asked in this situation:

Do these girls genuinely like each other?

For as long as they'd been together, this was something Julia couldn't quite discern. Setting aside girls like Sakuna, who had always loved pop stars in general, did they feel sincere fondness for each other on a personal level?

Yes, they supported each other. Yes, they helped each other. At times, they acted like friends. Julia wasn't opposed to this—there were moments when she actively enjoyed the time they spent together. But in all her interactions with them, she never once paused to categorize them as people she did or didn't like.

As a certain producer once said, Julia's focus was placed too wholly on the fans. But, even if that were true, was it really such a bad thing? If the fans weren't meant to be her top priority, or even a consideration, then who or what was?

At some point, the other two had fallen asleep with their heads nestled together. Julia hadn't personally planned to nap, but by the time their destination was only thirty minutes away, their soft snores had lulled her to dreamland along with them.

After hours of filming, morning was finally about to begin in earnest. While waiting for the crew to pack up, Julia walked along the water alone.

As always, filming music videos and promotional footage was brutal. Earlier this summer, she'd been completely drained after they filmed at the zenith of a rugged mountain. This time, they were asked to dance barefoot in icy ocean water without pause. By the end, her feet were so numb that she feared she could step on a needle and feel nothing.

Nevertheless, every last member endured these conditions without letting it affect their performance. The instant they officially wrapped filming, Towako

pointed straight at one of the cameras and shouted, "They're training us to be super-soldiers!" Everyone on set burst out laughing, and Julia suspected it would be used as B-roll at some point.

They had done their absolute best. Now it was up to the video production team.

The completion of a job filled her with a deep sense of satisfaction. Impatiens was not a cargo ship carrying the dreams of every girl in the world—it was an entertainment business comprised of a major record label and a handful of creators, and she was proud to do the hard physical labor at the forefront of the resulting product.

After a while, she arrived at a large rock. Making this her endpoint, she turned back. At the other end of her trajectory, Maki stood staring out at the ocean, lost in thought.

"You're local, right? Did you ever come here with friends when you were a teen?" Julia called out, unsure if she was interrupting.

"There was one time I came here with my family when I was in elementary school, but I joined the industry pretty early on, so I didn't do beach trips with friends or anything."

"Ah."

"What about you, Jul?"

It wasn't immediately clear what Maki was asking. After all, Julia wasn't from here, and her hometown didn't have a beach. When she displayed this confusion on her face, Maki responded with one of her trademark giggles.

"Did you ever go on a beach date with a boyfriend as a teen?"

Julia had rehearsed a stock "pop star" answer for this.

"No. While I had more of a 'normal' high school experience than you or Sakuna, it wasn't that magical." But while rehearsed, this wasn't untrue. "To be honest, I don't have many memories from junior high or high school. All I really remember is singing along while playing the family keyboard."

"What, were you born at a music venue?"

Sometimes Maki could cut deep with the slightest quip. "Maybe so."

Learning fosters wisdom, as the saying went, but there were moments when Maki seemed to prove this theory wrong. She hated studying so much that she lacked a lot of basic knowledge and vocabulary. (When she asked if tilapia was a type of dessert, Julia was sure she had to be joking, but she wasn't!) Management, the TV and radio shows they went on, even the fans treated her like the token ditz. And yet she, of all people, could somehow reach into Julia's heart.

Was there any way to showcase this trait for everyone? Julia sometimes tried to plot out storylines for Maki, but none made it out of the drafting stage. Portraying someone's true essence was a lot harder than one might imagine.

Obviously, each person had good points and bad points. To Julia, being an *idol* meant living your life with a select few—either the good ones or the charmingly bad ones—on full display to the public. If you were lucky, people would notice your strengths of their own volition, but in most cases, you had to shove it in front of their faces or into their ears. Otherwise, it would be overlooked.

Immediately after beginning her career as a pop star, Julia burned this mindset into her brain. This formed the foundation for the character she had defined thus far. In order to stand proudly on that stage in front of thousands, shoulder to shoulder with girls possessed of superior talent and background, she constructed her storylines.

She and the rest of Impatiens would always need to keep evolving. Earlier this summer, their first-ever national tour was a smashing success, and tickets to their final headliner concert of the year had just sold out as of yesterday morning. This was good, but it wasn't *enough*. As long as the fans wanted them, they needed to do more—stand on bigger stages in front of bigger crowds for bigger hype. For that reason, it was critical for each member to more aggressively promote their strengths. Maki needed to be seen not as a cute and ditzy sweetheart, but a cute and ditzy sweetheart who could hit the nail on the head with an offhand comment.

Once Maki finished her reading marathon, Julia thought to herself, maybe the two of them could do a book review livestream together. Maybe she would

have unique insight into the story of *Girl's March*. But Julia decided not to tell her quite yet. After all, the added pressure could interfere with her honest perspective.

They heard the staff calling to them. The scattered group members all walked back from the beach or climbed out of the cars where they were resting.

First, they said goodbye to the film crew, who went their separate ways home. Then the members of Impatiens split into two groups and hopped into their designated Toyota HiAce. Unlike this morning, when they were divided based on residential proximity, this time it was a matter of whether or not they had something else scheduled that day.

As it happened, Julia, Mei, and Ao were headed to the recording studio to guest on a web show livestream. It was originally going to be just Mei and Ao, but Julia was told that management had requested either she or Sakuna sit in as a chaperone. The reason she was chosen over Sakuna was because the topic of this particular show was "the road to stardom," or in other words, what their lives looked like before Impatiens. Sakuna had only ever been a performer, so the production staff must have decided Julia's history as a working adult was more relevant. That, and they liked the little anecdote she submitted.

After the three girls piled into the van, they were joined by a fourth, Ran, who settled in next to Julia as the door slid shut. Ran was scheduled for a photo shoot with a fashion magazine today, and in her case, had been chosen for no deeper reason than her obvious beauty.

"Hey Shinogi-san, when's mealtime?" asked Ao.

"We'll have plenty of time for a lunch break once we get back. I'm sure you don't need me to remind you, but do try to be mindful of what you say, livestream team," their manager replied from the front passenger seat, with a masterful use of the carrot and stick technique.

"Right," Mei answered firmly from the back row.

Next to her, Ao snickered. "If I say a slur, will I get arrested?"

It was obvious from her tone what she was playing at. Hashimoto Ao had no respect for any of the adults, their manager included. Julia saw this irreverence

as part of the girl's narrative, so as long as it wasn't in excess, she generally wouldn't comment on it. That being said, she didn't want a good opportunity to go to waste, so she offered a small warning: "You won't be arrested, but you will be held accountable."

"Uh oh. I don't like the sound of that. You'd better watch yourself, Mei."

"I never say slurs!"

As Ao cracked up laughing, Julia made eye contact with Shinogi. Evidently she had proven herself as a fitting chaperone.

"I love this combination of Firecracker, Brat, and *Nanny*," Ran whispered next to her.

"Spare me the new title," Julia muttered back with an exaggerated sigh and a laugh.

During the interview process with the producer prior to joining Impatiens, Julia was told—like all the other "normie" recruits, she suspected—that no pop idol group was ever truly *complete*. Sometimes members dropped out, new members were added, or the project's entire scope changed without warning. If a natural disaster or pandemic altered the status quo, they would alter their marketing tactics to match, or possibly abandon the framework of the current group altogether in favor of a new ship to sail. Once they had their major debut, there would be no option to coast along without bringing in numbers. The management team's goal was to advance the group through constant iteration.

Naturally, the fear of stagnation weighed heavily on the group's members. To Julia, it was more or less a gun to her head. Management would cut you loose if the situation called for it. If you tried to say no to something, you were off the project.

Of course, it was obvious they'd told her this both to measure her commitment and as a precaution in order to cover their asses later, but that wasn't all.

"That's why we want each member to have their own ambition," the producer had explained—a passionate dream that existed independently,

outside the overarching goal of the group. "What will you strive for, Gotousan?"

Looking back, it had been like making a deal with the devil. She was by no means bewitched, nor was she actually selling her soul, but she answered sincerely nonetheless.

"I want to use this group to stand in front of massive crowds I'd never get to see otherwise. I want to have fun, and I want the fans to have fun with me. To that end, I'll strive to be the ultimate performer."

If these adults could make it happen, then she was willing to dedicate herself to a world she never cared about.

How had the other members answered that question?

Julia found herself reminiscing as she sat in the studio and watched the prerecorded Impatiens introduction video. Onscreen, the footage transitioned to the final performance of their national tour from earlier this year; after the hook from their biggest hit played, the camera cut to a sobbing Mei as she announced the last song on the setlist. The frame was overlaid with a closeup of Ao's hysterical reaction in one corner: *God, she's bawling!*

"It's Impatiens, the idol group everybody's talking about! And today, we've invited three of their members to join us!"

As the host introduced them, the camera centered on Julia. They took turns giving their names in order, followed by a chorused "Thank you for having us!" The order was determined by the numbers they were assigned when they joined the group; in this case, Julia went first, followed by Ao, then Mei. This was the order they defaulted to if it was left unspecified by the program director.

Incidentally, they had previously met the host of this show on a different music program. This was briefly referenced as the conversation shifted to the main topic: life before stardom. Because this was being streamed live, and there were other guests scheduled after them, they couldn't veer too far off-track.

"Hashimoto Ao was originally a big-name YouTuber?!"

With a dramatic flair, the focus turned to Ao. After some banter, they played a video of hers from a few years prior.

Before she joined Impatiens, Ao used to regularly upload covers of popular songs under the name Bluuu. Her fanbase steadily grew, until eventually, she was noticed by the production team in charge of Impatiens. Enticed by the prospect of singing original songs penned by famous musicians, she agreed to join the group, and now she was one of its strongest vocalists. That said, Ao hadn't stopped making new videos—she just posted them to the Impatiens account instead, which made for great promo material in the age of social media. She was by far the most well-known member of the group.

"You say you posted your first video in junior high. What inspired you?" asked the female cohost, exactly as it was written on the cue card.

"Well, I already knew I was a good singer," Ao answered proudly. "Plus I wanted the attention. That's pretty much why I became an idol, too."

In response to her brimming confidence, the host donned a look of surprise. "Well, at least you're honest!" he laughed. He seemed to think this was her stage persona talking, but he was mistaken. Anyone who actually knew her would recognize that she was being entirely serious.

The way Julia interpreted it, after striking it big on YouTube and climbing the ranks among the members of Impatiens, the validation had gone straight to Ao's head.

This was not the same haughtiness with which Towako complained about work conditions and demanded better. This self-importance sprang from Ao's emotions of its own accord. They could try to lecture her all they wanted, but it would always exist within her in some shape or form, leaving its mark on everything she said and did.

As mentioned previously, however, Julia wouldn't admonish her for it unless she crossed a line. Partly this was out of respect for the narrative, but there was one other reason: Julia knew this little princess had gotten a *lot* better at self-control these days.

Once upon a time, Ao had no respect for what it meant to be a pop idol. Worse, she didn't try to hide it. This would frequently anger Mei, the youngest,

and Sakuna had to step in as the leader and say, "We're allowed to pursue this however we want, in my opinion. They're not forcing us to do this." With her desire for freedom explicitly encouraged, Ao then changed her stance. As far as Julia could tell, after that meeting, she seemed to start valuing her status as an idol on equal terms with her artistry.

Outside of the cockiness that was bound to draw ire from a portion of their haters, Ao's interview segment ended without any hiccups—much to the relief of their manager, surely. Next, the focus shifted to Mei.

Onscreen, they played a video that revisited the past few years of Mei's blood, sweat, and passion, starting in junior high with the moment she pledged to become a pop idol. During playback, the girl in question burst out laughing with embarrassment several times, and Ao snarked, "What is this, a *shonen* manga?"

For once, Julia was inclined to agree.

Mei's storyline had all the classic tropes. Unlike the other members of Impatiens and the majority of grown adults, "giving up" was not a concept she understood. Like the protagonist of a sports manga, she believed that as long as she had faith and never stopped trying, her dreams would come true. Because of that, success made her weep and cruel words made her rage, both with the dial cranked up to eleven.

That said, paired with talent and hard work, her naive idealism was more charming than cloying. Those who stanned her wholeheartedly shared in her tears and her triumphs. As an idol, she was the type who emotionally resonated with people. One might think she fit the theme of this program best of all...and yet, there was a reason Julia was saved for last.

As a punchline.

Once Mei's time in the spotlight was done and it came time to introduce the third and final guest, the female cohost looked down at the easel pad in her hands and donned a look of surprise, just as scripted. "Um...well, lastly we have Gotou Julia-san. Originally a regular working adult, she's respected as an authority figure by staff *and* fellow group members. But...it appears they weren't able to make a video for her."

"Why not?" The male host turned and shot a dubious look in Julia's direction.

She looked back at them, gleaning everything she could from the two hosts. "The truth is, I don't have any photos or videos from before I joined Impatiens."

"How is that humanly possible?! Digital files are one thing, but surely you must have old *purikura* photos with friends or something!"

"Barely. And the little I did have ultimately got tossed out, because back when I first started as an idol, I figured I wouldn't need it anymore. I never thought it would cause problems later on down the line."

Using this ambiguously coldhearted statement as a springboard, a staff member handed a memo to the female cohost, who leaned forward as if rapturously interested. "So you burned all your suits and school uniforms?!"

"No, I just put them in the trash. I did think about it, though."

As a professional reactor, the host laughed hard at Julia's casual joke. "What if you get invited to a friend's wedding or something?"

"Good thing I don't have a lot of friends."

"That doesn't answer the question," Ao cut in.

"If I have to, I'll just wear a stage costume."

As a consolation prize, they showed the childhood photos she got from her parents, as well as the driver's license photo that was taken after she became an idol. Meanwhile, she gave a brief retelling of her history leading up to Impatiens, culminating in "I'll be burning these after the show." Based on the vibes she was getting, she was indeed performing the role expected of her, which was a relief.

"Okay, now that we've learned which member of Impatiens should be kept away from lighters and matches, please give our young viewers the encouragement they need to pursue their dreams!"

Once again, the camera was directed at the three of them. As directed in the script, they spoke in reverse order from their intros.

"Well, I may have incinerated my past, but as you can see, I'm doing just fine. So for those of you having a rough time right now, just keep your head up and one day you'll get to burn it all down."

"When you're putting everything you've got into chasing your goals, it can be really hard sometimes. But if you can make it through, you'll see things you never dreamed of, so just do your best!"

"Don't sit around on your asses! Make it happen!"

"And that's all from Impatiens!"

They waved into the camera, and at the signal, exited out of frame while bowing. As the two hosts remained on set to give their overall thoughts on the Impatiens segment, Shinogi led the three out of the studio and into the green room, where they could watch the rest of the livestream on a monitor. In the hall, they encountered another band and exchanged pleasantries.

"Nice job out there! Really captured your good points. People online are loving it."

"I knew about Jul's thing going in, but I still just had to say something, you know?"

"That was great! And so was her response. I did a search and saw a bunch of folks who had no idea you were Bluuu at all."

"It's literally the same singing voice, people!"

Julia retrieved her wallet and phone from storage, sat down on a green room chair, and started checking social media. There was going to be a group photo at the end of the stream, so she couldn't change clothes just yet. Following a namesearch on Twitter, she was met with comments flying left and right.

"The new fans must be SO confused after that stream, like, 'I don't know much about Impatiens but I guess Gotou Julia is a nutjob!' lol"

"So much for being a trusted authority figure, huh, Jul?"

"Ao was running her mouth, Mei was a total sweetheart, and...Jul gonna Jul..."

She scanned over their opinions, both positive and negative, until she had combed all the way back to before the livestream started. There, she found a certain tweet from Sakuna with a photo attached. On the beach, she had drawn a big heart in the sand with all of their initials inside.

"Promise me we'll get married someday #idol #WakayamaRan #GotouJulia #KatanoTowako #EmukaeMaki #HashimotoAo #lizukaMei"

Julia had planned to comment on it after the stream, but she saw that Towako had already replied "I'm afraid polygamy isn't legal yet, Takatsuki-san," to which Maki had chimed in with "TIL our leader is a serial cheater. (*_*)" Though they weren't on the show themselves, they were still hard at work, and it put a smile on Julia's face.

"Jul?"

Just then, someone called to her, and she looked up sharply. It was Mei, and she had that familiar look on her face again, her eyes wide in visible panic. But the stream was over now, and she hadn't messed up, so what could it be? Julia tilted her head in silent inquiry, and Mei quickly held out her phone.

"Is this...bad?"

There was an entire table between them, so Julia rose to her feet to get a better look. Moments later, her own eyes widened, and she looked back at Mei, but the other girl was already glancing around for their manager.

Fujino Mikoto

T WAS MIDDAY on the weekend, and with no work to attend to at the music venue, Mikoto had just woken up. As she chugged a glass of water, her head throbbed with a hangover, curtained by freshly bleached hair.

Last night after work, she had begged Hashirayama Keiji to go drinking with her until morning. In a city that never slept, there were plenty of places that were still open by the time their shifts ended. When she carefully explained her desire for him to buy her drinks, he was reluctant at first, pointing out that they'd be wasted on someone who would puke them right back up again, and besides, unlike her, he had to work the next day. But it wasn't long before they were toasting beers across a table, joined by a third coworker.

Thanks to her stomach's most thorough rejection, she had been spared the worst possible outcome this morning. As she drank her water, she wondered how the other two were faring, since they were both scheduled to work that day. Not her problem, though.

Generally speaking, Mikoto lived her life with no hostility toward others. When a coworker brought a high schooler to their workplace, she warned the girl of his worst habit, and when that high schooler came back to ask questions about him, she willingly revealed his favorite brands. In both cases, she merely thought it would liven things up. But while her thoughtlessness had historically resulted in devastating consequences at times, she was quick to reflect on her actions. Thus, she had reported the girl's visit to the higher-ups, just in case.

In the kitchen, she heated up some frozen rice to make green tea soup. It tasted so good, she could almost trick herself into thinking alcohol's entire purpose was to facilitate this moment when she was freed from her suffering.

Now that she was feeling like herself again, she shuffled through the social media apps on her phone. Far down her Twitter timeline, during the time she was still at the bar last night, one of her new favorite accounts had started posting.

"That reminds me—what's that plushie your little high schooler has on her bag?"

"Don't call her my high schooler. Anyway, it's called Anmanman, so it's probably supposed to be a steamed azuki bun."

"Is that the latest craze?"

"It's her latest craze, at least."

Following this conversation from a few days prior, she had searched the character's name on Twitter and was now low-key obsessed with the official account.

"I wonder what he looks like on the inside."

Mikoto preferred characters with their own agency, and she would regularly binge-watch videos where they were integrated into real life. In that sense, she suspected she might have similar tastes to idol fan Ukawa Ai, her coworker.

After that, she put in a load of laundry, took a shower, and decided she would spend the evening watching a web show that had invited her bassist friend to guest on it. The "road to stardom" theme was mildly cringey, but perfect for the bassist's band, whose starry-eyed lyrics made her blush just listening to them.

She sat on the couch and set her laptop on the coffee table. When she searched for the web show, she found the stream was already live, and all four members of her friend's band were onscreen. Look at 'em shaking like a leaf, she thought to herself idly as she bit into a Ramune-flavored ice cream bar she found in the freezer.

Alas, she had barely started listening to their serious discussion when, not even twenty minutes later, their turn in the spotlight came to an end. Having quickly lost her main incentive to watch the show, it was nothing more than inertia that kept her from closing the tab—that is, until the next guests walked onscreen and she blurted out:

"Ai's girl!"

As she scrutinized the woman in the pastel costume, the melting ice cream bar nearly dripped onto her own clothes.

As someone with no interest in pop idols, Mikoto couldn't identify the other two girls offhand. All she knew was that their group was blowing up lately, plus she could recognize a couple of their songs. The show host focused on the girls one at a time, until he eventually reached the one even Mikoto knew about. Apparently the production staff wasn't given any footage of her from before her debut, and she looked really guilty about not having any material to offer them.

"Awww! You should've asked me, silly!"

She tossed the popsicle stick into the trash, then grabbed her wireless mouse and navigated to the Videos folder on her desktop. Most were filmed in terrible lighting that obscured the performers' faces, but she remembered one in particular that would work, and after a few minutes of digging, she found it. Unfortunately, in the time it had taken her to locate the video, the girls had already walked offscreen. Though she knew it was probably too late, she was nonetheless spurred to action by the tiny chance that she could help them. She was, at heart, a good Samaritan.

As a precaution, she did a quick search to check if it was public knowledge first—it seemed safe. Then she took the video she had filmed a few years ago for her own collection and attached it to a tweet directed to the group's official Twitter with the text "Feel free to use this if you want!" Lastly, just to make doubly sure someone would notice it, she added the relevant hashtags. This seemed to pay off, because the tweet quickly garnered a few likes and retweets. Some small part of her hoped they might showcase it live, so she left the stream open to play in another tab as she rewatched her footage and pored through old memories.

In the end, the show didn't report on Mikoto's act of generosity, but she wasn't devastated. Since it was a live show, they probably didn't have time to react to it. More pressing was the fact that the group's fans were spreading her tweet farther than she ever imagined. Some of them even questioned whether the video was taken illegally.

It occurred to her now that she might have been careless. Once again, she ran through a mental checklist to make sure she hadn't broken any laws. Then, just in case, she added a follow-up reply to assure everyone that she was given

permission to film this. As a further precaution, she checked the file creation date in her logbook and was relieved to confirm that yes, the video was filmed before she was hired.

The live music venue had specific events where visitors were allowed to record performances. It was almost always forbidden when major artists were involved, and anyone caught breaking the rules would be accosted by the staff, but depending on the event and the performer, there were occasional exceptions. Prior to getting hired there, Mikoto had a hobby of filming musicians at those events and making videos—partly to get to brag that she knew them before they were famous, yes, but more often because she just wanted to scout out hidden talent. For that reason, she would often revisit their performances whenever she was bored—even the ones who didn't initially impress her during their brief time live on stage.

The fans responded to her clarification tweet with gratitude, seemingly relieved that they weren't going to be complicit in someone else's crime.

"Thank you for such a rare look at Jul!"

Though it hadn't gone exactly to plan, she had still succeeded in helping someone, and her heart was practically singing. To relive the experience she had brought to these fans, she hit Play on the old video once more.

In that moment, she hadn't the slightest inkling that she would soon be apologizing profusely for her lack of professionalism to the boss and coworkers who had been filmed in the process. All she saw right now was a teenage Gotou Julia, singing a cutesy song with amateur lyrics she had surely penned herself, in a voice that had yet to undergo training, and beaming from ear to ear as she chatted with her favorite staff member.

Uemura Tatsuaki

KNEW SHE WAS tricking people.

This was Tatsuaki's reaction after watching the old video of Gotou Julia. It had only further reinforced his view that popular people based their whole lives on a performance built of lies. His body was trembling, partly from joy, but he mistook it for pure rage. Under this misconception, he gleefully went about criticizing Julia for creating a false character with which to milk her fans. Her mannish appearance and body language were just another costume.

By stating in her public profile that she used to sing to her own accompaniment, they had clearly misrepresented the truth to make the fans picture something masculine, he argued. No one would ever imagine something as saccharine as *that*.

He expected them to quickly trot out some kind of half-assed explanation, but then a full day went by, followed by a second, and the Impatiens account still hadn't addressed the video directly. The only thing that could be interpreted as a response was a tweet from the leader, Takatsuki Sakuna: "The girl I love will always be both cute and badass." But though Sakuna continually presented herself as a fellow otaku, she too remained silent in the face of the demand for answers.

With each passing day, the anger Tatsuaki felt toward their negligence grew stronger. They should have had *some* reaction to this leak, be it positive or negative, and the fans wanted to hear it. But no, they were too afraid of being politically incorrect.

What annoyed him most of all, however, was that most of these sheeple were still buying into the lie, even when the mask had slipped right in front of them. All day long, no matter how many of Gotou Julia's own statements he pointed to as proof of her apathy toward her fans, outside of the redpilled few, the vast majority praised the old her as an adorable ingénue and celebrated this rare pre-persona glimpse of her.

You're being conned, you idiots!

Unfortunately, those who lacked the ability to conceptualize on their own would need even more obvious proof thrust under their noses. Compelled by a sense of duty, Tatsuaki entered a drawing to win a ticket for a movie showing where Impatiens would hold a mini-concert and talk show. Why? Because it said that attendees, not just reporters, would have the opportunity to ask questions during the Q&A segment.

I'll rip that mask right off!

In the days leading up to the event, he decided he would read through interviews with the author and director—not because he was interested in the film itself, obviously, but in order to find and criticize any discrepancies between the original creators' views and those of Impatiens.

As for the source material, he'd already read it back when he first found out Julia was in charge of writing the theme song lyrics.

Itobayashi Akane

"There were a lot of callous people in the world who tried to say her worries were the same as anyone else's."

GIRL'S MARCH, PAPERBACK EDITION, PAGE 102, LINES 10–11

AFTER SHE MET AI, Akane had started following Impatiens on social media, just in case it ever came up in conversation. Coincidentally, her boyfriend Shin had also started listening to them recently, so as someone who needed to be liked, these tidbits of Impatiens trivia surely wouldn't go amiss.

"I'm not into idols, but Impatiens has good music."

In response to this LINE message, Akane couldn't help but notice an implied insult to all the other girls performing under that category. Alas, her only option was to reply: "Yeah, their songs are so cool! It's amazing how they can convert people who wouldn't normally care!"

Naturally, she had no real interest in behind-the-scenes details about the group. When someone retweeted the old Gotou Julia video onto her timeline, it struck her as something no one outside of hardcore fans would actually care about. She still watched it, along with the music videos and concert footage, but only as more conversation fodder.

She never imagined it would have her captivated in an instant.

This was certainly not because she realized modern-day Gotou Julia was playing a character, or because the crowd onscreen was so small. It was because she recognized the filming location.

She watched with eyes as round as saucers, hoping to catch every last detail, in search of a tiny possibility. And then she found it. In the final seconds of the video, a much girlier Gotou Julia finished her performance and sauntered over to chat happily with a staff member. His voice was inaudible, and his hairstyle was different, but Akane knew without a doubt that it was an equally-younger

Ai.

"Is this his friend?"

She was technically allowed to speak her mind freely in private, but even then she regretted it, worrying someone might overhear. After the feeling made her want to die, she sent an email to Ai:

"Did you know you're in that one Julia-chan video?"

She didn't get a response right away. As it turned out, this wasn't intentional but merely because he was at work. It was nearing midnight when her phone screen lit up.

"Sorry, I was working Yeah, it was recorded at our venue."

"You guys were friends this whole time?!"

"Don't you have school tomorrow? Go to sleep. I'll tell you about it next time we hang out."

"Grrr...ok gn."

After conveying her dissatisfaction, she quickly abandoned the idea of getting more out of him tonight. If she pushed too hard too early, she might never find out at all. But while they hadn't made concrete plans for their next meetup, knowing Ai, he would keep his word.

In Girl's March, the protagonist spoke to Ai's friend about him.

Akane had assumed it was Fujino from the music venue who would fulfill this role, but Gotou Julia would make sense, too. At the point in time when the video was taken, the two of them had clearly already met. Furthermore, after she found out Ai was a fan of Impatiens, Akane had looked into their events, so she knew there was a way for her to reunite with Julia. She didn't need to pray for the woman to coincidentally return to the bookstore—she could take the initiative herself.

Once it became clear that no reply was forthcoming, she powered off the phone screen and plugged it in to charge. The rest would have to wait for another day. Having set this boundary for herself, she pulled the pocket paperback from her bookbag and flopped onto her bed.

Lying on her back, she began to re-read Girl's March for the umpteenth time.

With each page she turned, she enjoyed the feel of the newly printed paper against her fingertips. She had experienced this moment dozens of times, and yet every time she opened this book, her heart still raced with excitement. She had decided it wasn't fitting of Itobayashi Akane to have a noticeably worn book in her possession, so she had replaced her copy multiple times, but even then—each page, each line, each word felt fresh enough to send a shiver of pleasure sparking through her, as if someone had run their finger down her spine.

Around the time she had reached the midpoint of the book, she set it down, rose to her feet, and turned her bedroom light off. Then, in the darkness, she flopped back down onto her back and pulled the book into a hug. Silently, she wept.

This, too, was a routine for Akane.

Her family wouldn't bat a lash if she was just a little teary-eyed while reading a sad scene. On the contrary, it was possible a show of tender-hearted sensitivity would make them love their daughter all the more. But Akane was not merely teary-eyed. Thus, as a precaution, she turned her lights off to give the impression that she was asleep.

To be clear, she wasn't re-reading the story in order to check her progress or plan for future storyline events. Tonight, as with every other night, she was re-reading it in order to keep herself from falling apart.

Using the pain of the tight embrace to stifle her sobs, she prayed desperately that this story would never fade away.

One might wonder why she felt the need to do so. From an outsider's perspective, she led such a privileged life that she scarcely needed one measly novel to save her. She never went hungry. She always had a warm bed to sleep in. She was never bullied at school, and after she earned a little pocket money from her part-time job, she went home to a kind, loving family. She had a lot of fun with her friends, and while they butted heads at times, they were usually smiling again in no time. The same was true of all her romantic relationships. Anyone who saw her would think she had it all.

Furthermore, she was born with the good looks that made it all the easier for her to acquire those things. Her environment had taught her how to read people, how to choose the right words on reflex, and how to balance out a group. She knew there were people who envied her, and she understood that in many cases, she was simply lucky.

But none of those things could rescue her imprisoned heart. None of them revealed the tyranny of her desire to be liked. Only *Girl's March*, with its story all but recounting her own life, seemed to present the real her—the one trapped in that white room—as the true protagonist. This was the one and only place where she could find her salvation…and so she cried tears that would never see the light of day.

Around the time those tears began to slow, she took the opportunity to roll over and grab an ice pack from the mini-fridge beside her bed. Wrapping it in a washcloth, she settled onto her back and laid it over her eyes. She kept these on hand at all times to prevent the swelling from carrying over to the next day.

In the pitch-darkness, she contemplated these periodic moments of respite. Maybe one day she wouldn't have to do this anymore. Maybe one day she would finish the whole book without crying. But the wait was as excruciating as it was exciting.

Chilled by the ice pack, her tears rolled down her temples.

To Akane, *Girl's March* was an extremely relatable story. (This opinion was shared by the masses, much to her chagrin.) But as she progressed deeper through the plot with Ai, there was an upcoming event that she genuinely had no idea how to contrive.

With every passing day, she became increasingly convinced that they were destined to reenact the story. Not only did Ai himself exist in the real world, but so did his roommate and friends. The Gotou Julia video from the other day was even more proof—after all, one of the characters in the book was referred to as "the Record Keeper." Therefore, she knew she merely needed to follow the existing outline—but there was one scene she simply couldn't imagine taking place with someone as protective as Ai.

In *Girl's March*, the protagonist and Ai spent the night together. Specifically, the text depicted them walking through the city, ending with the line: "By the time they had finally come to know each other in the truest sense, their only option was to stay there."

There were several ways to interpret the first half of that sentence, but if she assumed that the second half meant "the trains had stopped running," then she couldn't imagine Ai of all people would allow a high schooler to accompany him so late at night. He would sooner take the tough love approach and drag her to the station.

She pictured dozens of scenarios—karaoke, one of their houses, a diner, a hotel, the park, the street—but all of them hit a dead end.

Back when she was just a reader, she liked that the author had left the details vague on purpose, but now that it was happening in real life, she felt very differently. How in the world had The Girl talked Ai into it?

Akane had been iterating on real-world ideas for five days straight. Unfortunately, she hadn't spoken to Ai since that late-night email exchange, so there were no concrete plans in place. There was still time before the climax of the novel, but her desire to see Ai was more than just for show, and she was getting antsy. Though the reward was altogether different, she realized some part of her was pretending the impulse she felt was to please her loved ones, and so she bit her tongue over and over.

That afternoon, like always, she went to work at her part-time job in town. In the staff room, she changed out of her skirt and into her jeans, tied on her apron, then walked out front. Today she would be sharing the shift with Nishio the male college student, their manager, and a woman whom Akane acted like she was uncomfortable around. The elder Uemura sibling, the one who coddled Akane with candy, was scheduled to clock out two hours before closing, so she would need to adjust her level of tension after that.

She worked the cash register, helped with restocking, and around the time the sun had set, she told the manager about a male customer acting strangely. When the manager spoke to him, he practically ran out of the store, so Akane suspected perhaps he was a novice thief. But either way, the truth didn't

matter. After the manager thanked her, she punched away at the register with a look of pride on her face.

"Say, Itobayashi-san, can I ask you something?"

Around the time customers had gotten scarce, Nishio took the opportunity to call out to her, his expression comparatively glum. The strict female employee was on break, and the manager had gone into the back room to take care of something.

"Sure. Wanna know how to spot a thief?"

He responded to the teenager's cockiness with a puppy-dog smile. "Yeah, it looks like you were right about that! But, uh, no. Hypothetically, if you were mad at your boyfriend, what would you want as an apology gift?"

"Ooh, are you fighting with your girlfriend?"

He grinned wryly. "Guess I can't tiptoe around it with you, huh?"

"I figured you'd rather cut to the chase," she replied offhandedly. She knew this was the kind of rapport he wanted with her, and she knew about his slightly younger girlfriend because he had asked her for relationship advice several times now. "An apology gift, hmm... I'm not sure. If we're having a conflict and he gives me something special out of nowhere, it might feel like he's trying to buy my forgiveness."

"Oh, like it's too forced?"

"Yeah. It's more romantic if it's something small that shows you truly care," she explained matter-of-factly, as if her viewpoint was objectively correct. The word choice was dictated by her need to be liked, but the advice itself was genuine.

At times like these, though her biggest priority was how she wanted others to see her, Akane still tried to give her honest opinion. She organized everything she'd gained over her short life into a tidy package the other person could easily accept or discard. And this had garnered some success, because just the other day, a different friend had consulted her about her crush. Girls were more likely to seek advice from her if she didn't seem like potential competition, and having a boyfriend helped immensely in that regard. So did Anmanman, in a

more subtle way.

"I see. Well, you teenage girls do know a thing or two about romance."

"Make up your mind! Anyway, how are things with you and your boyfriend?" "Good, good."

This wasn't a lie. In truth, she could already tell the relationship was going to end soon, but at present, things were just peachy.

In all of Akane's romantic relationships, the guy would create the problem, she would create the solution, and the story would end. Sometimes she sensed their desire to cheat, while other times they would simply start to lose interest in her. Regardless, she would always break up with them before they could make the decision on their own—before they had the chance to stop liking her. It hurt less that way.

As for her current boyfriend, Shin, he was a good person at heart, but she sensed he was starting to question whether she was truly the girl he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, because he had started asking a lot of questions about their future. She didn't know which way he was leaning, but she couldn't afford to wait and see. She didn't think she could bear to watch him slowly fall out of love with her.

It was a shame, since she could tell he was an upstanding guy. But ultimately, this was good timing. Once she found the courage to be her real self, she doubted a genuine person like him would accept her, and she had no right to hope otherwise. Thus, she decided that she would start laying the foundation for their breakup in a few days. Before she got hurt. Before his love could fade.

Unlike a normal person, she treated romance like a strategy game. It made her want to die.

The bookstore remained quiet and peaceful until at last it came time for the doors to close for the night. She shuddered to imagine what it must be like to be a copy of *Girl's March* left lying in the darkness.

"Great work today!"

[&]quot;Surprise gifts are really nice, though."

Leaving the full-time employee behind, the three part-timers walked out of the store. On most nights, Akane would walk with them to the station, where they'd part ways on different trains. And right up to that moment—no, even well past that moment, her flawless mask would never waver, to the point that she wondered if it was made of plastic.

But no matter her intrinsic qualities or how she perceived herself, if someone were to cut to her core, they would find a human being. And like any human, she was capable of being startled.

"Itobayashi Akane."

Tragically, her reflexes could easily conceal the reaction of the real person inside, whether she wanted them to or not.

Akane wasn't the only one who turned at the sound of the voice. The other two part-timers also looked over dubiously. Meanwhile, she instantly overwrote her widened eyes and slackened jaw with firm intention.

"What the... Ai-san?!"

Ai was standing there, a coat she didn't recognize fluttering in the wind. He hadn't caught her off-guard like this since the day they met. And in spite of her initial joy, when she found herself wondering if this could be an opportunity to progress the storyline, she saw that white room once again.

Ukawa Ai

"NNNGH..."

Walking down the street, Ai voiced a groan as he clutched his head. Alas, he had earbuds in, so it came out louder than he intended, and the woman next to him looked at him in alarm. There was no telling what conclusion she must have jumped to. But he was merely living his truth, so he wasn't worried.

No, what worried him was Gotou Julia and Itobayashi Akane. Thanks to an old video, Akane had learned about the connection between him and Julia. Nothing wrong with that, per se (since it was the truth), but in his eyes, it was something he should have told her himself instead of letting her find out through an external source. It felt especially dishonest considering all the opportunities he'd had to mention it.

Ideally he wanted to have a conversation with Akane as soon as possible, but as a working adult, his day off wouldn't line up with hers for quite some time. And no, he didn't believe in apologizing over text.

Today he had come to this district wearing black high-heeled boots, a white skirt, a cocoa-brown trench coat and a chunky red scarf around his neck. The fake glasses were an uncommon accessory for him, but perhaps it was proof that Akane was on his mind.

In the evening, prior to meeting up with his friends at a pub, he decided to make a detour in order to pass by a certain bookstore he'd never been to before. Peering inside through the glass door, he could see Akane working the cash register.

So she really does work here... Not that he had questioned it, but this was his first time actually seeing her on the job, and it came as a relief. To avoid getting in the way of her work, he refrained from going inside and instead headed straight to the pub, where his friends had made a reservation.

The next three hours were spent making stupid jokes unfit for a teenage girl's ears.

"All right, who wants to keep this party train rolling?!" shouted Horikita Asahi, his friend and roommate, her obnoxiously loud voice melting into the winter sky.

Whenever Ai was presented with this choice, even if he had every intention of coming home before midnight, he typically chose to stay out until the last train. He wholeheartedly loved spending time with his friends, and as long as it wouldn't impact his work, he was willing to compromise.

The four who opted to continue headed down the street to their regular bar. As the others were joking about drinking a mutual friend's reserved bottle, Ai glanced at his wristwatch and got an idea. "Hey, anyone know how late the bookstore stays open?"

"Which one? There's like a million. Just Google it!"

At this suggestion, he pulled out his smartphone and checked the store's hours of operation. After some hazy mental math, his mind was made up. "Sorry, you guys go on ahead of me. I gotta take care of something."

"Something come up? Got a craving for a beef bowl at Yoshinoya?"

"You're quoting Beck, aren't you?"

"Ooh, how'd you know?"

"You reference that scene constantly." He considered himself truly blessed to have known a friend long enough to understand her silly in-jokes. "Anyway, no, I just gotta run to the bookstore real quick."

"That's a new one. Okay, well, I'll call you if they're packed."

He waved goodbye to his good-natured friends and headed off. Since he had some time to kill, he stopped into a corner store and bought a canned coffee on the way.

By the time he arrived at the bookstore, it was already closed. To avoid drawing suspicion while he watched for the employees, he stepped into the alley and leaned against the neighboring building. Some time passed, and he still hadn't heard from Asahi, so they must have managed to get seats at the bar.

As he tapped around on his phone, he kept tabs on the two entrances to the store. Eventually, three figures appeared at the one closest to him, one of whom was Akane; he recognized the big plushie hanging from her bag.

"Itobayashi Akane," he called, so the other two would know he wasn't a random stranger. Immediately afterward, he realized it would have been less weird to address her by first name only. It was too late now, but he didn't regret it.

Naturally, she was startled, and the other two looked at him suspiciously.

"What the... Ai-san?!"

"I see you just finished work. Can we talk for a sec?"

As he was debating how to explain himself to the other two people, who had the good sense to be cautious, Akane came to the rescue with her quick wit. "Sure, I don't mind. Oh, um, this is...uh...my friend who works at a music venue. He's not a stranger or anything, so you guys can leave without me."

"We're just gonna chat right here for a few minutes," Ai chimed in.

The other two seemed perplexed by the contrast between his appearance and voice. While they didn't look fully convinced, they inclined their heads and walked away. He had specified this location under the assumption that another employee was still inside the building, affording Akane relative safety, and evidently he was correct.

"Okay, seriously, what's going on, Ai-san?"

"Sorry, I know this is sudden. I just couldn't find the right timing."

"Whoa, you reek of booze! Are you, like, super drunk right now?"

"Jus' a little."

She laughed, probably at the unintended slur of his tongue. "Juss a little, huh?"

"I'm not that drunk, okay? I can still count how many drinks I've had. I'm about to head to another bar with some friends."

"Wow, sounds like a fun night! I'm jealous. Take me with you!"

"Ask me sometime when you're not carrying a school bookbag. Either way, the answer is no."

"Oh, I love the glasses!"

Through the faint haze of his mind, he found charming the ease with which teenage girls could change the subject. Regardless, he had come here for a reason. "I just wanted to talk to you about Julia."

From the look on her face, she had forgotten all about it until now. "Ohhh! Don't worry! I haven't told anyone that I know someone who's friends with Julia-chan!"

"Thanks, but I wasn't worried about that. It's the truth, so you're free to tell anyone you want. I just..."

It wasn't until he attempted to organize his thoughts that it occurred to him: while he *could* remember how many drinks he'd had, perhaps he was in fact fairly intoxicated. Every word he had rehearsed while waiting here had been knocked away into the shadows like the blocks of a Daruma tower. Reflexively, he went for a drag of his cigarette, only to find he wasn't holding one.

"Uhhh... Oh, that's right. People are allowed to know about it since it's the truth, but I thought maybe you'd think it was a little weird that I kept it from you this long. I just wanted you to know it's not because I don't trust you or anything like that."

He was looking into her eyes as he spoke, which was how he spotted the change in her immediately. Her eyes widened again, but only for a moment. In the next, as if she'd gotten bored, she switched to a tight-lipped smile. "You came all this way just to say that?" she asked, in a quiet voice befitting a dark alley.

Ai didn't make a hobby of reading faces, but even he could detect a blend of surprise and embarrassment and joy.

"Yeah, I did. But when I say I trust you, I'm not trying to be patronizing, either." He needed to explain to her that he wasn't here to suck up to her. "Anyway, I'm just making excuses. Point is, I support everything she does. Julia, I mean. When she chooses not to make something public, then it's not part of

her brand as an idol, and that's not my business, so I haven't complained about it and I probably never will. Even if it's as minor as being friends with the staff at a music venue. So it's nothing personal against you, Itobayashi Akane. It's not because you're underage or because I think all teenagers will blab to their friends—I don't. So if I made you feel bad or anything, I wanted to apologize."

This was most likely everything he had wanted to say over the past few days, but as he sipped air from the empty coffee can, he racked his brain for anything he'd missed.

When he lowered the can, however, Akane's face came back into view—frowning. Had he upset her? Well, no amount of excuses would change the fact that he hadn't told her the truth, so she was entitled to feel that way. He braced himself to accept whatever criticism she wanted to hurl his way.

And criticize him she certainly did...but in a way he never expected.

Glaring at him, she let out a sigh. "And you call me a guilt-tripper?"

"Huh? No, no! I'm not trying to do that! I was just worried it bothered you."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about! I bet your ex-girlfriends used to yell at you."

"Uhhh...I don't think any of them ever called me a guilt-tripper, no..."

"Oh my god. Then they must have had the patience of a saint. Every one of them."

"I've been told I have no filter, though."

"Yes! That!"

She shrugged and let out a cartoonishly dramatic sigh. The melodrama of it made him laugh, which earned him a second sigh.

"Guilt-tripping aside...well...I mean...uhhh...okay, thank you. Since you came all this way, I should probably be honest: I was maybe a little...teeny tiny bit worried."

Ai was the type of person to wholeheartedly appreciate a friend's vulnerability. "Sorry about that."

"No, it's fine! I'm just overly self-conscious, that's all!"

Had he inadvertently made her feel like she was wrong to be bothered about it? Now he felt guilty all over again. "Also, sorry I'm making you stand around out here when you're probably tired from work."

"Don't be! I wouldn't want to interrupt your plans."

"Nah, it's cool. It's just drinks, y'know. But since I'm here, why don't I walk you to the station?"

"Oh my god, I *knew* you'd say that!" After yet another sigh, she burst out laughing, as if to wrap up the whole conversation and stow it away in her heart. He suspected this was her way of being considerate. "That reminds me, there's something else I wanted to do with you, Ai-san."

"Something from the book again? As long as it's nothing bad."

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't."

She had a mischievous look on her face. Though he didn't know what exactly he was in for, he decided to hear her out. This was a new side of her, one she had to have kept hidden back when they first met—which was fine, of course, but he was happy to see it.

Itobayashi Akane

"Why are all the adults so weak to my charms?" GIRL'S MARCH, PAPERBACK EDITION, PAGE 115, LINE 3

THIS WOULD HAVE WORKED on anyone but Ai, Akane thought to herself as she crafted each expression for the intoxicated man in front of her. It was the weekend, at night, and they were alone, and he was drunk. He had demonstrated his empathy, she was touched, and they'd even revealed their inner thoughts to each other. Furthermore, he was dressed like a woman, so they could go anywhere together with minimal suspicion. There were countless reasons.

If this was anyone else, Akane would have teased his concealed desires out into the open, then vanished to anywhere he wanted, in order to be liked. Whenever she needed a cover story to tell her parents, she could always call in a favor from a friend.

If she wasn't Itobayashi Akane...if he wasn't Ai...could it have led to a whirlwind romance?

Alas, she would never learn the answer to these what-ifs. But she *had* learned that Ai and Gotou Julia were still friends, and that he was unmistakably the same character. Now she understood that "their only option was to stay there" meant that he and Akane were being railroaded into following the paths of Ai and The Girl...and this was what inspired her next move as the main character.

She would go to see Gotou Julia.

Gotou Julia

FROM THE FIRST meet-and-greet up until this very moment, Impatiens had sung and danced on stage in full attendance, each of them doing their utmost to be the kind of idol they wanted to be. In actuality, there was originally going to be one more girl in the group, but she allegedly backed out before the project was fully formed. And since Julia would probably never get to meet her, she had no way to picture her.

But she could vividly remember the seven of them seemingly trapped in that big white conference room. All six faces were burned into her retinas in that circular seating position they'd been put in. One girl was grinning like she had nothing but hope in her heart, while another already had the unruffled expression of a professional. Another was shaking like a leaf with insurmountable trepidation, while yet another appeared rather stuck-up. Then there was the prettiest girl, who was averting her eyes, while the final girl slumped back in her chair like she was sick of this ordeal right out of the gate.

As they introduced themselves, Julia pledged to fight alongside them, while also realizing that they would have to fight each other, too. But in this group of girls hand-picked to be pop stars, how could she make herself special?

She thought about it, and then, chopped off her long hair the next day. That way, her appearance wouldn't overlap with any of the others, and those who came to like her would be able to pick her out at a distance.

Once Impatiens got their start, Julia went out of her way to use masculine speech patterns that the other members would never choose, even in performances. As a result, her steadily growing fanbase shifted into a demographic that was different from the others. At their concerts, the voices who shouted her name were noticeably higher-pitched overall.

She had known herself to be a strong-willed person well before she ever became an idol, but after she joined Impatiens, she intentionally leaned into it. The old her never would have bristled at lazy whining from a coworker, and

under no circumstances would she have grabbed the shirt collar of a younger girl. This series of small but purposeful decisions came together to form her concept of Gotou Julia the pop star, and she was proud of the ideal she had created.

To her, this was what being a professional looked like, and she wanted that devotion to communicate itself to her audience through her storylines. In every moment, she was always aiming higher, broader, deeper. Through her years of work as a performer, she believed without question that everything she strove for culminated in the brief moments she got to revel in her narrative alongside the fans.

"I wanted to talk about something, just to get it out of the way."

"Oh, I bet I can guess."

"Yeah. Although I don't have too much to say about it."

"I mean, it's neither a good thing nor a bad thing, so like..."

"Exactly. It was just a phase of my life, and someone happened to record it. All I can really say is...I'm still Gotou Julia, and I always will be."

"Was that back when you were...um...just getting your driver's license?"

"If you're trying to be vague, it's not working. Anyway, uh, I think I'd had my license for quite a while at that point. But now that you've seen what I was like at that age, tell me, Towako: what was your life like back then?"

"Oh, I was a fairy back then. What about you, Maki?"

"Is that how we're supposed to answer? Okay then, I was...oh! A merry-go-round."

"Wh...what does that even mean?"

"You know, like at an amusement park?"

"No, I get that! But after I said fairy, I thought you'd pick something more... you know...alive! Well, you heard it here, folks. Maki used to be playground equipment."

"I thought the theme was something whimsical!"

Maki's crafted pseudo-anger made Towako laugh out loud, and Julia clapped. Then the program moved on to concert footage of a requested Impatiens song.

On the way to the music venue where today's event would take place, Julia listened to the audio through her earbuds. This was the Impatiens video podcast, new episodes of which were uploaded every Sunday night. Each Wednesday or Thursday, two to four members would be chosen based on their schedules to take part in the recording—thirty minutes at the shortest and an hour at the longest.

About four minutes later, the audio went back to studio-quality.

"Anyway, I'm Katano Towako, here tonight with Gotou Julia and...pfft...a former merry-go-round."

"Emukae Maki!"

Towako must have really enjoyed that joke, because her laughter lingered in the background. She kept teasing Maki with questions like "So were you one of the horses?" and "Were you the employee in charge of spinning it manually?" until eventually Maki got so genuinely annoyed that she snapped "Knock it off!" From there, Towako started trying very hard to kiss up to her, and then the forty-minute program came to an end without reading a single one of the emails their fans had taken the time to send.

The podcast listeners went crazy in the comments. "The chaos episode," they called it. "My god, Otowa refused to let that go," said one. "I feel like Jul's most at fault for not stepping in," said another. An hour after the episode went live, Maki and Towako made sure to post complementary Twitter banter:

"One of these days I'm gonna smack that fairy (; A ;) Everybody go listen to the podcast!"

"Sure thing, Captain Merry-Go-Round (*^-^*)"

Julia had already listened to this episode the night it aired, but since there was a chance fans would bring it up at today's VIP pre-show, she decided to refresh her memory on the walk there. Naturally, she understood that Towako had intentionally caused a stir in order to shift the topic away from that old video.

More than a week had passed since the day it leaked.

The video was taken before she was assigned to Impatiens, back in the days when she would perform solo at live music venues. And yet, her current fans already spoke about it as though it was common knowledge. It was filmed legally, and she knew full well that trying to have it taken down would only have a Streisand effect, so the management team hadn't done much about it. They had, however, held a meeting to discuss how to avoid any negative impact to the current Gotou Julia narrative. One of their ideas was for Julia to bring it up herself on the podcast. Thus, she had spent the past week acting as though it was no big deal. But when she saw Towako's shenanigans up close, she realized there was no fooling the other group members.

On the inside, Julia was miserable.

At 1 p.m., she contacted her manager outside the music venue, then walked inside, greeting the staff as they carried in their equipment. The show didn't start until 7 p.m., but with rehearsals and meetings, those six hours would fly by. Large-scale venues always had dressing rooms big enough for practically a thousand people; when she stepped inside, she found Ran doing facial exercises alone in front of the mirror spanning an entire wall. This was part of her routine, as someone with exceptional beauty who had lived her life without needing to use her mimetic muscles.

"Hello, Jul. How are you?"

They made eye contact through the mirror, and Julia raised a hand in greeting. "Hey there. I'm good. What about you, Ran?"

"Oh, same as usual."

That was the end of the conversation. Julia set her bag down on the long table, then took a seat in a chair. She knew Ran wasn't *actually* worried about her health; that was just how she always greeted people. Once she got her answer, she would stop talking.

As the type of girl who was voted Most Beautiful in high school simply for existing, Ran had lived her whole life with her ego relegated to her physical traits. She wasn't an eloquent speaker, nor praised for her communication skills, but she'd realized that if she stayed quiet, most people would extrapolate

a positive impression from her appearance and education. Now that she was a pop star, she had committed even harder to presenting herself as beautiful, refined, and intelligent, preserving the façade even among fellow group members. And since Julia respected her chosen narrative, whenever the two of them ended up alone together, the end result was typically dead air.

So when it was Ran herself, not a more boisterous member, who broke the silence with a whisper, Julia was caught off-guard.

"Your face looks stiff."

This time their eyes met not through the mirror, but in the real world. Julia put a hand to her cheek. She knew exactly what Ran was trying to say—both the literal meaning of her words and the unspoken concern afforded to her by the (just barely) eldest member of the group.

"Thanks." She nodded. In response, Ran gave her a faint smile, then went back to her facial exercises, and by the time Ao waltzed in blaring music from her headphones, the conversation had fully ended.

In the silence, Julia contemplated the misery that plagued her.

Ever since Impatiens was first formed, though everything appeared to proceed smoothly on the surface, they had naturally tasted hardship now and then. But what lingered on Julia's tongue right now was more bitter than anything she'd ever experienced. All she had to do was endure it, but her face and her vibes were starting to give it away. Worse, other people were misinterpreting it.

Once that video started going viral, Julia witnessed a marked increase in abuse and insults. Those who didn't know about Impatiens criticized her then-amateur performance, costume, and singing as if it was a professional production, and those who *did* know about Impatiens attacked Julia for presenting a fictional character as if it was her real self. Sometimes her dedicated fans would attack the naysayers on her behalf, but even *they* had the wrong idea.

Thus far, Julia had crafted a version of herself that wasn't afraid of her past being dragged out as a criticism. She would insult them in her mind, then let it go. Of course, she hadn't accomplished this entirely on her own—she had

written her storylines with the help of the people who stanned her, as well as general fans of the group who stanned other members. These things had produced the current Gotou Julia of Impatiens: a woman who stayed strong in the face of abuse.

What actually hurt was seeing the accomplices—the same people she considered co-creators—seemingly *reject* their own construction.

"Never seen Jul with long hair before! She looks more my type that way"

"Jul may be embarrassed about it, since she's such a professional, but I wish I could tell her it's super cute and there's nothing wrong with it."

"I love butch Jul, but I'd totally go to a concert just to see femme Jul live on stage! #GotouJulia"

"Wow, her singing voice hasn't changed at all!"

It was likely none of the fans, or the staff, or even the other group members saw this as criticism. No one did—except Julia herself.

Once all the members were present and the room was full of chatter, they headed off to say hello to the event planners in charge of today's concert. After some small talk, they held an all-hands meeting, followed by a full dress rehearsal. By the end, there was no time to rest—they needed to start prepping for the VIP pre-show.

For the most part, Impatiens ran their pre-show much the same as any other idol group. It was held at the concert venue, scheduled just before the concert itself would take place later the same day. Fans who wanted to take part would arrive at the venue several hours in advance and either purchase or pre-order the newest CD. In return, they received three pre-show entry tickets per CD sale. However, each concert enforced a purchase limit to prevent any one person from monopolizing the girls' time.

The entry tickets could be used as follows: one ticket for a handshake with a group member, two tickets for a Polaroid photo with a group member, and three tickets for a Polaroid photo with *two* group members. In short, someone would need to buy at least three CDs if they wanted to interact with the entire group. This system was partly why the pre-show member popularity rankings

didn't correlate purely to name recognition.

As a former child star who had established a fanbase years ago, pre-shows were where Maki stole the spotlight. Her friendliness, lack of common sense, and free-spirited nature triggered a protective instinct, even among those who weren't aware of her history, resulting in a demographic that trended older. As a result, Maki was the number one most popular at events like pre-shows, which required a certain level of disposable income.

For the opposite reason, the easily most well-known member, Ao, barely made a dent in the pre-show rankings. This was partly because her outspoken attitude made some fans uncomfortable, but the bigger, far simpler reason was this: her die-hard stans were overwhelmingly teens and tweens, many of whom were limited in their ability to take part in paid events typically scheduled on weekdays.

As for Julia, she ranked third, bested only by Maki and their leader Sakuna. Pre-shows were where her unique demographic became readily apparent, because the gender ratio skewed heavily in favor of women. Most of them seemed to want an idol who was cool rather than cutesy; during her Polaroid requests, many asked her for headpats, and she received romantic interest from both sides of the gender divide.

Her pre-show interactions were yet another aspect that she and the fans had sculpted together. Outside of the singular anomaly in which she had asked someone not to come back, the overall nuance had thus far remained mostly the same. Today, however, she was as nervous as if it was her idol debut all over again. This would be her first public appearance since the video incident, and naturally, she couldn't afford to let it show on her face. It wasn't part of the storyline she and the fans had co-written.

Externally, the pre-show appeared to proceed without a hitch. In her partitioned space, Julia spoke with fans of all backgrounds, shook hands, and took photos, during which most—though not all—brought up the video. A handful of them volunteered their opinion on the old Julia, and every word of approval stabbed into the new Julia like a knife to the gut. What hurt most of all, however, was a (most likely offhand) remark from a male fan whose smile she recognized from a bunch of other pre-shows.

"You're allowed to open up to us, you know!"

"I'm already open, though."

She donned her coolest expression for the Polaroid, promised to see him again, then waved goodbye. Obviously she knew he hadn't meant any harm, so she would never hold it against him or anything, but...it was wearing away at her. This was perhaps the first time she had ever felt exhausted emotionally rather than physically, and she was startled by the toll it was taking on her legs.

The only thing that kept her standing was the knowledge that there were fans out there who fully embraced the narrative she had so carefully cultivated for them. The next person who walked in was a female college student who, upon asking for a nickname, Julia had once christened after the charm on her bag.

"I know everybody's excited, and I don't want to be a wet blanket, but...
personally, I think you're really cool the way you are now," she told Julia with a
firm look in her eyes.

This meant so much to her. But if she expressed too much joy, particularly to one single fan, it could potentially damage the storyline later on. So she grasped the girl's hand with her usual Gotou Julia bravado and replied, "I'm gonna get even cooler, just you wait."

Thankfully, this fan wasn't the only one willing to assert that they preferred the current version of Julia. Over the past week she had seen plenty of them on social media, and in fact she'd spoken to some at this very pre-show. But Julia was only human, and even with hundreds of shields, it only took a single blade —even one that appeared innocuous to everyone else—to slice through them like paper.

The final straw that day came from a girl she recognized, who said it was her first time attending a pre-show.

"Oh, you're here! I'm glad to see you again."

"You remember me?!"

"Of course! When a pretty girl walks up to me, I take notice."

"Nooo, no, no, you're killing me! Oh my gosh, I thought I'd need to remind

you!"

The girl beamed bashfully, dressed not in an apron like the last time they met, but in a frilly miniskirt and a full-length plaid coat. Julia remembered thinking the girl had the vibe of a pop star. Then it clicked: she was likely the type who was used to hearing that she was pretty.

"So like, this is my first time doing a 'Polaroid' or whatever... How does it work?"

"Well, I can pose with you if you like, or we could do something more casual."

Julia was so relieved. When they first met, this girl had mentioned she had just seen them perform live for the first time. Judging by the nuances at work here, it wasn't that she was an existing fan who had been waiting for the opportunity, but rather that something about them had piqued her interest on a whim. And since she was clearly new to interacting with celebrities, this interpretation appeared to be correct. Most likely she was a fan of *Girl's March* who had found Impatiens through the theme song connection.

That was the moment Julia let her guard down.

To a new fan, her past, present, and future were equally unknown. A new fan would accept it all in juxtaposition in order to form a celebrity-fan bond with her from this day forward. Julia was confident of that. But of course, like any other conviction, it was only eighty to ninety percent situational analysis plus ten to twenty percent faith.

As the girl waffled back and forth over poses for the Polaroid, Julia made eye contact with a nearby staff member as she made a suggestion: "How about we link arms?"

"What, really? Am I allowed to touch you?"

"Yeah, as long as you don't try to manhandle me. I've even had people ask me to bite their heads before."

The girl's jaw dropped. Evidently, a new fan who didn't know about her association with *kaiju* wouldn't understand why someone would ask for that. Nervously, she positioned herself at Julia's side and timidly offered her arm.

Times like these, Julia knew exactly what to do. Linking their arms, she pulled the fan in close. She could practically imagine the girl's heart rate spiking, though all she actually felt was a hitch of breath and a petite frame beneath a heavy coat. The photograph developed in mere moments, and Julia handed it to her directly.

"Thanks for being brave enough to come see me. I hope I see you again." She'd be lying if she said she didn't care about sales or success, but she bundled it with her true feelings and delivered it in a fitting style, purposely signaling the end of her own respite.

"Yeah, same! Thank you, Julia-chan! I'll be back sometime!"

"Cool!"

"And, um...actually..." The girl donned an eager smile that carried no trace of cruel intent. "What gave me the courage was knowing you're friends with Aisan."

In an instant, Julia forgot to breathe.

".....Ai?"

It was like the girl had reached her fingers through a gap in Julia's heart and pried it open. From deep inside, she heard her own voice calling that name for the first time in years.

"Which Ai-san are you talking about? Is this a Twitter handle or something?" she asked, hoping she had managed to recover convincingly.

"The Ai-san from that old video! When I saw you two talking, you seemed really sweet, and it made me a bigger fan of yours."

"Ah..."

"I'm sure he and I will come see you again sometime!"

The innocent girl waved goodbye all the way until she disappeared beyond the partition. In response, Julia made sure to wave back. She even donned a smile, praying the girl couldn't see the alarm bells ringing behind her stiff cheeks.

Something deep down was screaming that she was in trouble—that

everything was going to fall apart, and soon.

The problem wasn't that someone had learned of a personal relationship. In the grand scheme of things, that was a minor detail. No, the problem was that a new fan had resulted from a positive impression of an attribute *outside* the pop star persona of Gotou Julia. This alone threatened to tear down every last shield protecting her heart. Normally, she could have stood her ground in the face of any malaise. Now, she suddenly felt as though there was nothing beneath her feet at all.

It wasn't the girl's fault. No one was at fault. The simple fact of the matter was that Julia now felt as though everything she'd built over the past few years, and the choice she had made on that fateful day, was invalidated. No one could point a finger at anyone.

As it turned out, her alarm bells proved correct, and she completely fell apart during the rest of the pre-show and the concert that followed (in her eyes, anyway, even if she'd only coincidentally made a handful of small mistakes). But because it was such a rare occurrence, most of her fans defended her visible flaws as real and raw and human.

Ukawa Ai

DUE TO HIS WORK SCHEDULE, Ai couldn't make it to the concert in person, but word traveled quickly of Julia's uncommon mistakes. While it *did* worry him, he was relieved to know they were the sort of slip-ups any human being would end up making eventually, like breaking formation and singing the wrong lyrics. Barely any of the fans who were in attendance criticized her for it, and when she tweeted "I'm so sorry to everyone who came to see us tonight. I promise to do better," after the concert, there were no angry replies.

Well, maybe there were, but Ai had a policy of blocking any account he saw being hostile to her, so he wouldn't have seen them.

Ever since his friend Julia became a pop star, he had firmly pledged not to contact her about anything except her concerts. Thus he had no inkling of Julia's feelings beyond what was officially made public. No point in agonizing over it, he figured, and so he went back to focusing on work. But when his break rolled around, the email in his inbox made him laugh out loud.

Itobayashi Akane had sent him a photo she'd taken of a Polaroid with her and Julia, where he could see the high schooler looking visibly nervous to be standing next to a celebrity. Now there was a surprise. But upon further contemplation, it didn't seem like an issue—until he realized:

"Don't skip school!"

The reply came immediately. "It could've been over the weekend for all you know!"

"The only pre-show they've held recently was the one yesterday. And besides, she's wearing her new costume!"

Ai was always comparing Impatiens concert dates with his work schedule, looking for ones he could attend. He smirked to himself, amused that he'd seen through her.

"...Crap!"

"Come to think of it, you told me two days ago that you'd have something to email me later! You planned to skip school this whole time!"

"Julia-chan was really nice, though!"

As a grown adult, it wasn't proper for him to encourage this behavior...but then he looked back at the Polaroid and was just glad to see she looked happy.

"Wait, so those two know each other?" his coworker Fujino asked, peering at the phone in his hands.

"Apparently she's taken such a liking to Julia that she skipped school to go to her first pre-show."

"Ah, to be young and stupid again," she mused offhandedly as she pulled a bottle of tea from the break room mini-fridge and took a sip. "You two seem to be getting real buddy-buddy. Don't you lay a finger on her."

"I would never!"

"So you say, but with you, there's no such thing as the friendzone." As both a colleague and a friend, Fujino knew a fair bit about his romantic history. "Ugh, I don't want to be able to say I know a guy who got arrested for statutory."

"If I get arrested for anything, I'm telling them you put me up to it. Have fun."

"You ass!"

In contrast with her words, she guffawed loudly as she retrieved the tool she was looking for and went back to work. Likewise, Ai had no business in a break room that no longer allowed smoking. He removed the employee lanyard from around his neck, put it into his locker, and pulled on his coat to head outside.

Out on the main floor, an amateur singer-songwriter had started her performance. For now, the only people here to see her specifically were her friends; the rest of the crowd swayed politely as they listened. To someone who had only ever known the mainstream music industry, it might seem sort of sad, but for a music venue, this was par for the course.

Outside, his breath took on the faintest opacity. The weather forecasts all said it was going to be a mild winter, but it was steadily getting colder. As he climbed the stairs up to street level, he thought back to that mundane glimpse

of daily life and quietly wished for the singer-songwriter to get at least enough recognition to make her happy.

This was something of a routine for him. Ignoring all the other circumstances and context, he wanted the musicians who performed at his workplace to see their dreams come true. Simple and straightforward, befitting his character.

This mutually beneficial prayer didn't take more than a moment. In the next, he was flinching against the cold as he walked down the hill to the smoking area. On the way, he was reminded of something Akane had once said: *I only trust recommendations if they come from friends and family, not total strangers.* His opinion from back then hadn't changed: he agreed with the first half but disagreed with the second.

Even an award created by a total stranger had the power to boost an artist's career. While some musicians found their footing through indie performances, others needed the marketing power of record labels and CD stores. Neither was inherently more ethical or "superior" to the other. Perhaps Akane was right about shady dealings behind the scenes, but even then Ai would never decry it, lest he in turn insult the artists whose only crime was trying to make it big.

Partway down the hill, he stepped into an alley and lit a cigarette at the public smoking area. What rose with the smoke was the mental image of Akane accompanying him to the flower shop two days prior.

Ai thought about her a lot lately. Not that there was anything wrong with thinking about a friend, but now he was starting to wonder if Fujino's warning was more warranted than he realized. While he would absolutely never make a move on her, he couldn't deny that some part of him was indeed fixated on her, and it gave him pause.

It had undeniably all started that day at the billiard hall, when Akane revealed her inner fortitude. Looking back, it should have been obvious how much she valued that novel from the moment she admitted to approaching him solely because he resembled a character in it—and yet somehow, he missed it. In his mind, he'd written it off as the sort of funny story that could happen to anyone. That is, until she told him she was willing to disregard her fear and common sense in order to mimic the story's conflicts.

For all he knew, there were others in his life who put that much stock in a piece of media. But in most cases, those people seemed to be clinging to memories of the past, not trying to change their future. Akane was definitely the latter...and he was curious to know more about her.

Above all, Ai liked people who were strong of heart—who were willing to take action to do the right thing. And those feelings were genuine.

After his second cigarette, he decided on his next destination. Typically, he spent his breaks outside with two objectives: have a smoke, then grab a quick meal. This time, however, he decided to add a third item to the itinerary. Today he would go and buy that music magazine featuring an interview with Julia.

He wasn't too fussy about where he bought it. There were plenty of bookstores in the area, and for that matter, the record stores probably stocked it too. His first thought was to grab it from whichever was closest to wherever he ended up getting dinner, but then a different idea struck him, and he headed to Akane's workplace. Judging from how quickly she'd replied to his emails, she probably wasn't scheduled tonight.

When he opened the door and walked in, sure enough, there was no sign of her inside the bookstore—well, unless she was on break in the staff room somewhere. But Ai wasn't here to see her, so he shrugged off the possibility and headed to the music section of the magazine corner. Once he found what he was looking for, he checked its contents and found the leader of Impatiens, Takatsuki Sakuna, smiling for a photo with Julia. His eyes glimmered as he saw the text "Wardrobe Reveal!"

He could have made a beeline straight to the checkout line, but he took his time instead, letting his gaze wander over the book covers one by one. As with CD jackets, each was painstakingly designed with professional skill and artistry, and he found his eyes drawn to them. Then he arrived at a little table right in front of the cash registers, which was where he saw a tidy stack of books practically screaming for attention, with ornate signage and a mini-monitor blaring an advertisement for a film adaptation.

For better or for worse, Ai understood himself to be the kind of person who had tunnel vision solely for that which appealed to him. As a result, he had next

to no brain space for anything outside that scope.

So he picked it up.

To be blunt, he had no interest in the book itself. He didn't get any enjoyment out of novels—all that tiny text made his eyes tired. In elementary school, he always hated being forced to read excerpts and describe how the authors felt writing them, and from that point onward, he had never once gone out of his way to read a book.

But his new friend said she based her entire life on this one.

At the register, Ai plunked down one magazine and one paperback. When asked if he'd like a disposable book cover, he answered, "Yeah, couldn't hurt."

In response to his surprisingly deep voice, the female employee dropped her customer service smile and did a double-take.

Itobayashi Akane

"She knew it was her true self because it was hidden somewhere only she could find it. And since she was the only one looking, she had a clear view of her own ugliness."

GIRL'S MARCH, PAPERBACK EDITION, PAGE 119, LINES 18-19

TO AKANE, the reunion with Julia was nothing short of a total bust. She had thought the story would progress if she mentioned Ai, but instead Julia just looked like she was desperately trying to hide her shock.

Would it take a few more tries? Akane searched for any other planned preshows, but as far as she could tell, nothing else was scheduled save for one final headliner concert of the year. When she saw the date, however, she let out a disappointed sigh. The story couldn't wait that long.

Girl's March never specified dates or times in its narration, but by connecting the dots, one could make a rough estimate. As luck would have it, in Akane's interpretation, the final day of the story took place on the very same day as the last Impatiens concert. By that point, it would be too late.

Was it possible Ai's friend wasn't Julia or Fujino, but someone else entirely? Akane had sent Julia a thank-you message over Twitter just in case, but evidently she wasn't the type of musician who engaged directly with her fans. The only option left now was sheer trial and error.

That said, there was a part of her that was okay with not achieving dramatic results immediately. After all, this was still the "rising action" stage of the story.

Even in *Girl's March*, there were peaceful sections where nothing really happened; the protagonist went to school, did her homework, spent time with her family, and went to bed. Through repeat interactions with Ai and her other friends, she established deep personal connections. Sure, this could seem boring to some, but it was incredibly meaningful to the story overall. For The Girl, they were the final moments in which no one understood her.

Akane followed that storyline accordingly, and other than the reunion with Julia, the days passed uneventfully.

Two days prior, she had gone with Ai to a flower shop downtown. In the book, there was a quiet scene in which their characters admired flowers together, and since Ai had mentioned that a friend's birthday was coming up, the timing was perfect. They went around to multiple stores, and in the end he decided to buy his friend a preserved flower arrangement in a clear glass dome. While he was at it, he also bought a single gerbera and gave it to Akane.

After expressing the utmost joy and bashfulness, she went home and immediately looked up how to take proper care of a cut flower. The protagonist of *Girl's March* was never shown having a flower, but she *did* receive a gift. According to the internet, a well-kept gerbera could last as long as three weeks, so she put the flower into a vase full of fresh water and placed it as a decoration in the corner of her room.

As for yesterday, she had gone to see Julia as previously mentioned, and now today she was back in town.

After school, she and her friend Miyu paid a visit to a building that served as a landmark for the district. The basement floor was chock full of dessert shops, so whenever they got a craving for something special, they came here. Akane bought brightly colored gelato while Miyu opted for an overstuffed crepe, and together they sat on one of several benches positioned around a pillar. Then they took pictures of their respective treats and shared a few bites.

"So where were you yesterday, Bayashi?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, you weren't actually sick, right?"

At Miyu's sudden remark, Akane donned her trademark wide-eyed surprise. With a slight motion, the gelato on her spoon fell to the floor. "Oh god, did someone see me?!"

"Wait, are you serious? I was just kidding!"

"You were?! Ugh, I totally fell for it... I'm so dumb." She slumped her shoulders, then quickly recovered and took another bite of gelato so the other

girl wouldn't feel bad. "Well, I don't mind you knowing, Miyu."

"Heh heh heh!"

"How do you always have a sixth sense for these things?"

"I swear, I was just joking!"

"Luckily I'm an only child, and my parents both work on the weekdays, so I can get away with anything."

"I'm so jealous! So what were you doing? Shin-kun?"

"Believe it or not, he's actually kind of a prude about that stuff."

"What? Even though he's in a band?"

"He's a straight-edge rocker."

"Okay, then what were you doing?"

"Having my first time." With a suggestive smirk, she offered a disclaimer to protect her friendship with Miyu. "I haven't talked about it with the others since I don't think they'd care, but..."

Meanwhile, she retrieved her wallet from her bookbag on the floor and handed Miyu the Polaroid that was still tucked inside.

"Isn't this that one pop star?"

"Wait, do you listen to Impatiens?"

"I don't, but I recognize the costume. I think someone in class was talking about them recently."

"Yeah! Shin seems to like them, so I started listening to them too, and when I bought their CD I got a ticket for a photo with a member, so I decided to go."

"Oh, I've heard of that! That's how they get you to buy multiple CDs!"

"Yeah, the guy in front of me bought three of the same one."

"Ugh, what a scam."

Akane envied the ease with which Miyu tossed out her blunt, honest opinion. If it was her, she could never say anything that could inadvertently insult the sales tactics of a band a friend liked. That being said, Miyu herself was generally

good at reading the room, so this was probably a sign of her trust and friendship. The thought filled Akane to the brim with warm fuzzies. Then she bit her tongue when it occurred to her that she, too, was essentially a scam artist.

"You look nervous in this pic, huh?"

"Yeah, I'm just your everyday loser who gets butterflies talking to a TV star."

"I never would've guessed. Normally you're quick to open up for teachers, older students, even total strangers..."

"Phrasing!"

Miyu had a great sense of humor, and she'd laugh at the smallest jokes, even if they were dirty or morbid. Akane wondered if this was what it meant to share a wavelength with someone. Then she realized some part of her was trying to mirror Miyu's tastes, and it made her want to die.

It wasn't just because of the wavelength thing, but over the past month or so, ever since the day they took *purikura* pics together, Akane had started talking to Miyu one-on-one a lot more often. They'd first met at the start of high school; every class had cliques, and it just so happened that the two of them ended up in the same one. What began as casual conversation had now evolved to sneaking away from the other girls to hang out in private. Miyu seemed to relish the tiny thrill of keeping a secret from the group.

"In your case, you only ever go for older guys, huh, Miyu?"

"Yeah, and it's great because they're more willing to foot the bill."

"Ooh, yeah, that's important."

Akane, on the other hand, sensed a different significance in this growing bond with Miyu. In *Girl's March*, none of the protagonist's many friends were able to see the real her. As the story progressed and The Girl took steps toward revealing her true self, the gulf between her and her friends only got wider—all except for one friend, who stayed loyal to her.

"Guess you'd better hope Shin-kun's band goes platinum!"

"Now that's a gamble I'm not willing to take."

This friend didn't drastically change the course of the story, but she was

critical to its overarching themes, and Akane was starting to think Miyu fit the bill. And since it meant her friendship with Miyu had an objective separate from simply being liked, Akane was able to enjoy their time together more naturally, if only slightly.

After they savored their sweet treats, they took the subway home together ahead of rush hour. Miyu was squishing the Anmanman hanging from Akane's bookbag when her stop came up. With a wave goodbye, she deboarded the train.

All in all, it was the perfect day for a little rising action.

At a certain point, the story of *Girl's March* began to accelerate rapidly. After making friends with The Girl and spending time with her, Ai sensed that she was hiding something and began to question her carefully constructed exterior. When he discovered her true self locked behind it, he understood and accepted her, then tried to rescue her from the prison of her heart. The Girl was afraid at first, but in the end, Ai's steadfast determination inspired her to choose a life of sincerity from that day forward.

When Akane imagined this happening for her, she was overcome with a freeing sensation unlike anything she'd ever felt before, immediately followed by fear. Not because she was scared of taking that step, or scared of the friendships she'd lose over it, but because *Girl's March* didn't detail what happened to the main character after the decision was made. On the final page, The Girl thanked Ai for being her one source of never-ending support, and the story ended.

Disregarding any subtext and extrapolating from The Girl's personality as depicted throughout the book, Akane couldn't possibly imagine all the other characters cheerfully carrying on like nothing had changed. Likewise, she herself would surely walk the same path as The Girl, but her heart was so poisoned by the hunger to be liked that she wasn't sure she could handle it, and she was terrified of finding out. Compared to a lifetime of this continued charade, however, it was nothing she couldn't handle. Thus, she engrossed herself in the story in order to make her wish come true.

She was prepared for the timeline to get a little off-kilter, of course. For instance, it was possible that the botched reunion with Gotou Julia had achieved what it needed to, even if it wasn't an exact match with the book. Judging from the way Julia had reacted, it would seem she and Ai were more than mere acquaintances. Perhaps that detail would become important later.

At this point, she was spending nearly every day with nothing to sustain her but *Girl's March* and the need to be liked.

That was when Ai shot an invitation her way.

"I need to talk to you. When are you free?"

Just like in the book, she was suddenly hurtling toward the climax. Even an idiot could tell that this was no ordinary meetup, and it made her heart quiver.

Ukawa Ai

A I FLIPPED THROUGH the book with the sole motivation of surprising a friend. He could picture her shocked, delighted reaction—*You read the whole thing?!* Why didn't you tell me?!—and it was this mental image that kept him going.

When he finally finished the book about a week later, he was in his bedroom. He turned the final page, discovered there was no afterword or author's notes, then gently set the book down on his desk. Stretching, he rose to his feet and slid a cigarette between his lips. As he opened the window, a chilly breeze descended into the warm room, but by the time he lit the cig and took his first drag, he could scarcely feel it.

Then he exhaled the smoke. Like blood coursing through veins, it gave energy to his brain, and as he watched it rise into the sky outside, he offered it a parting gift in the form of his unvarnished heart:

"What the fuck?"

Itobayashi Akane

"Today, for the first time in her life, someone had seen through her disguise."

GIRL'S MARCH, PAPERBACK EDITION, PAGE 152, LINE 12

 \mathbf{T} ODAY, FOR THE FIRST TIME in her life, someone was going to see through her disguise.

Lightly bleached hair. Just enough makeup to technically be against school rules but not incur punishment. A sloppily donned uniform with the skirt rolled up a few centimeters shorter than she would prefer. Lastly, a school bookbag decorated with an oversized pass case plushie slung over her shoulder. This was Akane's default look on a school day. Add on the navy blue coat she'd started wearing now that it was getting cold out, and the end result was classy without being tacky.

Morning and night, she stood in front of the mirror and wondered who this girl was staring back at her. Then one day she realized. This was the prison guard holding her true self captive—the wretched creature who overwrote all her other feelings with one singular compulsion.

If she went to school dressed like this, she could say hi to a handful of friends, share a laugh, commiserate, sometimes even fight, and all the other things that were necessary to build connections. She put on this act not for fun, but because she was just so desperate to be *liked*. Same with her boyfriend, and her family, and all the people she'd likely never see again, like passersby on the street, store staff, other diners at the same restaurant, random Twitter accounts, musicians, pop stars, and even authors who held autograph signings at her workplace. No matter who was with her, she only ever thought about what expression or word choice would win the most points. Everyone else could express their friendship and love without the need of such a filter, and she hated hers so much that she wished she could kill it dead. If only she had the guts.

Starting today, however, the story would progress. Ai was going to find the *real* Itobayashi Akane—cowardly and calculating, perhaps, but surely still capable of genuine love, just like in *Girl's March*.

"Die," she whispered to her sickening reflection. There was no response, so she reached for the doorknob and sculpted the sleepy expression she reserved for her family.

"Sorry, I have plans with a friend today."

"I'm guessing it's someone I don't know? Don't join a cult lol"

"Nah, I'm not into all that conspiracy theory nonsense, so I should be ok"

Ducking an invitation from Shin, Akane headed back to that district after school. As she watched the scenery race past outside the window, she donned a fitting expression. Chances were good someone from her school was on this train, so she couldn't afford to let her guard down.

As always, she hated the moment the doors slid open and that smell rushed in —the stink of human skin piled up like cabbage, trapping in the humidity. But at the same time, she knew she probably reeked of it more than anyone. Her exterior layer was so thick, daring to take up so much space, that no one in her family or at her school could hope to compete. In her eyes, she'd never actually felt the wind against her bare skin.

You'd never tell just from looking at her, but right now Akane was the most nervous she'd ever been—even more than the first time she ever took her clothes off in front of the opposite sex.

What was Ai going to say?

In the book, when Ai figured out The Girl's true nature, the first thing he said to her when they met up was, "I want to know what the girl inside you is thinking." The real world, however, didn't work that way. Most people started with a greeting, followed by small talk to feel the other person out. But that stuff was so mundane that the author didn't feel the need to include it... according to Akane's interpretation.

Their specified meetup location was a cafe where the tables were widely spaced out. Spotting Ai inside, she waved and walked over, then slid into the booth across the table from him. Today he was dressed in all black, pairing nicely with the black fabric of the seats.

As she ordered a lemon tea, his voice reached her ears.

"Sorry to spring this on you, Itobayashi Akane. I kinda wanted to know what you're thinking."

Akane gasped and swallowed, careful not to exaggerate it too much. "You really care that much about me?! Well, the feeling's mutual."

"I wouldn't go *that* far. It's just...I've been thinking about you a lot the past few days. Not in a weird way—well, okay, maybe it *is* weird, fundamentally..."

She frowned, looking puzzled, but internally, it clicked. Ai took great pains never to doubt his friends. The realization that one of them was two-faced wouldn't sit well with him; this was explicitly depicted in the story. Once again, he was the bona fide Ai in every way. "Wait, what's going on?"

"Okay, I know this is sudden, but can I just lay it all out?"

"Of course."

As always, her racing heart and burning impatience were both fully suppressed by the need to be liked—the demon whose reign of terror was fated to end today. For now, she would let it rampage as much as it saw fit. And so, with visions of a great evil exorcised from her bare self, she waited for Ai to speak.

For the moment she'd always dreamed of.

"I don't really get this."

"Huh?"

From the bag next to him in the booth, he retrieved something small and rectangular and set it on the table. She quickly realized it was a pocket paperback. But it was wrapped in a disposable paper cover, so she maintained her confusion until she could find out what he was getting at.

The slightest expression had the power to influence people. In this case, the

look on her face pushed him to remove the cover. From his perspective, perhaps there was only one book it could have been, but the possibility didn't even occur to her until she saw what was underneath.

To express her emotions, she widened her eyes.

Doodles of knick-knacks adorned a crisp blue background with the book's title wedged neatly in between. The original paperback must have sold remarkably well, because this smaller cover didn't deviate from that design much at all. The bottom one-third, however, was soiled (in her opinion) by an advertisement for the film adaptation, complete with photos of the actors.

She didn't need to open it to check.

"You read it?"

"Yeah, over the past week or so, which in my case is a new personal record."

"I can't believe it!"

"I wanted to surprise you."

And he certainly succeeded. Akane never thought of Ai as someone who might read a book; in *Girl's March*, he wasn't interested in plain text. But his next words bridged the gap in her perception.

"I'm not big into books usually, but you said this one inspires you, and I wanted to know why."

If it was something a friend was interested in, he was willing to go out of his way to do things he normally wouldn't. That was Ai in a nutshell. But one question still remained: were fictional characters allowed to read their own source material?

She realized her mistake so quickly, she was actually embarrassed. Of course he could read it. After all, *she* had read it, and she was a character too. "Now you're *really* being a guilt-tripper."

"I told you, I'm not! Not sure about you, though."

Had *Girl's March* exposed her? The thought was frightening. But then she realized that he'd probably already figured it all out, so really, there was no point in being scared. "Hey, I'm not a guilt-tripper either! So what did you

think?"

If anything about her could be described as genuine, it was that she was excited to hear his opinion of *Girl's March*. A character commenting on his own story! As a fan, she couldn't imagine a better treat. She believed without question that his opinion would further prove that The Girl was not destined to be alone. Thus, it didn't bother her that he hadn't started to address her true self.

But in this instance, she had misinterpreted his actions.

"It was more readable than I thought. I haven't touched a novel in years, but there were no complicated words, and it felt like the author was trying to keep it simple. Though I wasn't expecting the narration to be so stiff the whole time."

As she would soon find out, from the moment he showed her the book, he was already starting to ask questions.

"Wait, but...then what are you confused about?"

"It's nothing like what I expected."

Commanded by the need to be liked, Akane tilted her head approximately two degrees less than she wanted to. Then she reached out, picked up the paperback, and flipped through it. She didn't actually need to do this, since she'd practically memorized the story, given how many times she'd replayed each scene in her head—but she decided it would make for a nice punctuating moment in the conversation. "Well, it *does* go in some unexpected directions, like timeskips and stuff..."

"Not what I mean."

The barista walked up and set her lemon tea down in front of her. Ai must have seen this as an opportunity. He held his hand out, so she set the book into his palm. Now it was his turn to flip through the pages, though she had no way of knowing if he actually needed to or if he was just angling for punctuation like her.

"It's not about the storyline or whatever." Closing the book, he looked directly into her eyes, as if willing her not to run from him...and warning that he would give chase. "Here's what I don't get, Itobayashi Akane. How serious were you

when you were telling me about it all this time?"

In terms of story structure, where exactly did this moment fall? Unless she could somehow read her entire life like a book, Akane would go to her grave never knowing.

"What do you mean?"

"All right, listen."

But whether she was the author or merely a reader, perhaps the entire "story" was nothing more than her imposing her own biased interpretation on the text, without ever stopping to truly understand its characters.

"This Ai character is nothing like me."

He was still wearing the face of Ai, looking at the friend across from him.

"And she's pretty clearly a woman."

But The Girl was looking into the blank stare of her real self, locked away in that white room.

"What? No, you're really similar!" Akane protested, mixing surprise into her smile.

"It's not even about how similar we are. I mean, at no point does the story reveal she's secretly a guy."

"There are hints! They're just really subtle!"

"Well, as far as I could tell, she doesn't work at a music venue."

"It says he works at a place where music is played."

"That could be anywhere! Also, didn't you say her outfits are identical to mine?"

"Yeah! When I first saw you, I was shocked how perfectly you captured my mental image of him."

"But the book doesn't even *describe* her clothes! Or the weather, for that matter! I really struggled trying to picture it!"

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"Really? It was super easy for me."
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"There's a bunch of other stuff, too. Like, there was no scene where Ai and The Girl go buy nail polish, no scene where The Girl confronts someone who was shit-talking Ai... Also, it seems to me Ai lives with a bunch of pets, not a roommate. But on top of all that..."

"Yeah?"

"The genre's *fantasy*, of all things! Totally threw me for a loop when I started reading. Like, they talk about magic and curses and shit—there's no way it's set in our world. Certainly explains why the film trailer is all sparkly."

"You've just been influenced by the movie. *I've* been reading it in text form since way before they adapted it."

"I seriously thought I grabbed the wrong book, Itobayashi Akane. Just to double-check: this *is* the book you were talking about, right? *Girl's March* by Ogusu Nanoka?"

"Of course."

"And you're not trying to mess with me?"

"I would never lie about my opinion of a book!"

"To be clear, I'm not accusing you of lying..."

"No, no, I didn't think you were."

"Okay, good. It's just so different from what you told me, I started wondering why. Also, this might be more of the film's influence, but it's pretty obvious Ai and The Girl are romantically involved."

"Oh my gosh, I didn't take you for a shipper, Ai-san!"

"A shipper?"

"You know, when you ship two characters together?"

"Fine, whatever. Look here, Itobayashi Akane—do you still think I resemble

[&]quot;Well, maybe it's because I don't read a ton of books."

[&]quot;Yeah, maybe."

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this character, even now?"

"Yes, I do."

"And you think you resemble The Girl?"

"It literally feels like it was written about me."

"Well, I don't see it."

"What do you mean?"
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"Setting aside me and Ai—as far as I've seen, you're *nothing* like the protagonist this book describes. You don't try to manipulate people to do your bidding, you don't change your personality based on who you're with, and you're not arrogant. From what I can tell, you're a lot more normal."

"You're giving me way too much credit!"

"You opened up to my coworker Fujino, you were worried about that childhood friend of yours, and you even picked a fight on my behalf. I really don't think you're as rotten as The Girl."

"Maybe I'm just rotten on the inside. Hee hee."

"An actual bad person wouldn't say that. The Girl sure doesn't."

"You and I are both totally identical to them, though..."

"At the very least, I'm not this Ai."

"Then why do you coincidentally both have the same name?"

"Mmm... To be honest, I used to really hate my name."

"Aww, but it's so nice!"

"Yeah, and it's *everywhere*. Comedians, musicians, singer-songwriters, pop stars... I'm even friends with someone else named Ai. Plus, there are a million books and films and comics with characters called Ai, y'know?"

"True, there's a ton. Not sure why."

"Partly because it starts with the first letter of the alphabet. Plus, it can have so many different meanings—love, the color indigo, the pronoun I, the acronym for artificial intelligence... There was a time when I got real sick of hearing it

everywhere I went. But at some point I realized it's a waste of time to compare myself to all the others. When my friends and family call my name, they're not thinking about the uncommon kanji and how it means 'bring together'—they're thinking of *me* specifically."

"Wow, that's beautiful."

"So my name has nothing to do with the Ai in the story. And likewise, you're just Itobayashi Akane."

"I mean, yeah..."

"Not that I'm trying to say your interpretation's wrong, but you said you wanted to change yourself like the main character does, right? Well, this is just my opinion, but if you're worried that you're a bad person like she is, then don't be. Even if you relate to her struggles, you're still you."

"Ai would never say that."

It slipped out. A single drop of blood had leaked through the indestructible seams of a door that was normally sealed tight. But her need to be liked wouldn't allow her true self even this microscopic ray of hope, and so it quickly erased her cry for help.

"But now that you mention it, the Ai in the story isn't as nice as you are, so maybe you're not the same after all."

"Sheesh, you sure changed your tune quick!"

If she allowed herself to relish the warmth of the smile in front of her, the inner Akane would get too scared to let go. The girl in the mirror had trained her well.

"But that just proves my point. You're a super sincere person, Itobayashi Akane."

They had come so close, and yet...

"Nah, I can be pretty two-faced. I'm just a sucker for hot guys."

She wanted to die.

"That's not being two-faced—that's called being easily bought."

"Ugh, I don't like the sound of that. Being two-faced is cooler."

Kill me.

"Similarity stuff aside, it's wild that our opinions ended up so different."

"I think that's just how it goes with novels. Without any illustrations, each person has to imagine for themselves."

"Well, I have no idea how you read about this character and somehow pictured me."

"Believe it or not, I have a powerful imagination."

Kill me, kill me, kill me.

"Welp, I guess you're not Ai after all, huh? Can't really argue now that you've read the book..."

"Frankly, I'm glad you were wrong. I don't want us to be Ai and The Girl from the story—I want you, Itobayashi Akane, to open up and be your real self with me, Ukawa Ai."

"Okay, now you're trying to get called a guilt-tripper."

What do I do?

I was wrong.

This man wasn't Ai. He was no different from the rest of them—just another run-of-the-mill sheep with no understanding of *Girl's March* or the protagonist's internal imprisonment.

"You grown-ups don't play fair."

She wanted out of here ASAP. If this bluntly honest, cross-dressing man wasn't her Ai, then being with him had lost all purpose. Sitting across from him was like a dose of cold, hard reality, throwing all her wasted hopes and dreams in her face, and it hurt so badly, she wanted nothing more than to escape right that very moment.

Alas, if she was capable of that, then she wouldn't have had these hopes and dreams in the first place. She didn't need to play mind games like he was her boyfriend. Nonetheless, she knew storming out wouldn't win his favor, so it was

off the table.

"But 'you're still you' is a pretty cool line, Ai-san. I wish I was brave enough to say something like that."

"You are brave! I've seen you speak up against something you felt was wrong. You just have to pick your battles or you'll be fighting every day."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"Yeah, it happened a lot back when I was your age. But eh, eventually I figured out I didn't need other people's validation to be myself."

As she listened, she thought back to that one band whose performance she'd seen with Ai at the music venue. They sang about being yourself, living true to your heart, and how much more fun life was when you were genuine—all under the assumption that this was a positive message. But what about people like her, for whom it wasn't so easy?

"That's so cool!"

Right now, trapped within those spotless white walls, the inner Akane no one knew had only one thought: that it was too late to make up for the time she had wasted. The story's final day was approaching, but she had enacted it with someone who wasn't Ai. At this rate, she would witness the last day not as the protagonist, but some unnamed bystander...and then she would spend the rest of her life imprisoned, with no one coming to her rescue.

Entrusting the conversation with Ukawa Ai to the girl in the mirror, the inner Akane sat alone in the white room, utterly at a loss. But just then, oh-so-conveniently, a single comment reached her.

"Now that I think of it, you said you wanted to reenact all the scenes with Ai, but...surely not the last one, right? Because that'd be insane."

At the sound, the invisible girl looked up. She'd forgotten that ending was an option, but at this point, she was willing to settle.

Little did he know that, with his offhand remark, he'd inspired a wretched creature nowhere close to his vision of "the real Itobayashi Akane" to take action. He didn't know just how much his mere existence had kept her

together, right from the moment she had first spoken to him believing him to be Ai.

"We can just go skydiving or something for that part. I already decided that's when I'll touch your hand for the first time. Just like in the story."

"That explains your reaction when we played pool! Man, you're kinda devious."

"I prefer cunning, if you don't mind!"

Now that she had made up her mind, she would flatter and fawn as much as the girl in the mirror commanded, and she would no longer need to want to die.

The gerbera didn't even last a week.

Uemura Tatsuaki

TO HIS RELIEF, Tatsuaki had won a ticket, so that was the first step taken care of.

At this movie screening, Impatiens would stand onstage for a Q&A session. Sure, it was the perfect opportunity to interrogate Gotou Julia, but he would need luck on his side. When he tweeted that he'd won, the response from those with a common enemy was immediate. His heart danced as he promised them he'd expose the truth.

She probably had no idea that someone in this audience was waiting for her with fangs bared. At last, he could deliver a wake-up call to those still under the witch's spell.

He was also relieved to know that the hours spent digging through interviews and reading the source material wouldn't go to waste. It had pained him a great deal to spend time on that. Somehow they had clawed passion and gratitude out of these so-called *idols*, and it was exceedingly dull. As for the novel, not even a second read-through helped him see what so many people liked about it. From the very first page, the story structure could only be described as sophomoric and vague, and he patted himself on the back for recognizing it as trash the first time around.

"I mean, if you go in with preconceived notions, you're only going to see what you want to see!"

On his way back from grabbing a bottle of green tea from the kitchen, he overheard his sister arguing with the TV while eating dinner. But it was none of his business, so he continued on his way—

"Oh yeah, Tatsuaki."

The last time he'd tried to ignore her calling for him, it turned into an entire ordeal. Thus he stopped and looked over at her.

"Is there a really pretty guy at your school?"

"Pretty?"

"Yeah! The other day when I was working the register, one of my customers was this guy dressed in women's clothing, and today I saw him again in the same part of town. One of the part-timers told me he's a friend of Akanechan's. Do you know him?"

A drop of condensation rolled down the bottle and dripped to the floor.

"No."

Naturally, he had an idea of who his sister was talking about, though he couldn't remember much save for the beautiful face. Then those four words replayed in his mind, and something tightened behind his eyes. He tried to turn and leave, but she stopped him.

"How the heck do they know each other? Do you and Akane-chan talk much?"

"No."

"Well, you should! Not everyone can say they're childhood friends with such a sweet, pretty girl. You ought to make the most of it."

Really, he pitied his sister. She had a far closer relationship with Itobayashi Akane than he did, and yet somehow hadn't managed to see through the façade. The fact that a family member was being lied to added a warped sort of justification to his actions.

"Now that I say it, I haven't talked to her much myself lately. Has she been doing well at school?"

"Beats me. If she seems fine at work, then she's probably fine."

She quickly seemed to lose interest; her gaze drifted back to the news feature about urban legends. Freed at last, Tatsuaki returned to his bedroom, bottle in hand. First she interrupted him, then she made him relive that horrible memory, and then she had the nerve to tune out completely? He kicked a stray cushion to vent his frustration.

Despite what he'd told his sister, Akane did seem to be doing well at school. Using her looks and feminine charms to her utmost advantage, she disguised

her inner ugliness and blithely trampled over anyone in her path in pursuit of her own desires. Worse, she'd gotten even *more* cheerful lately, like she'd been blessed by some unfairly biased god, which was deeply worrying.

As for his other enemy, Gotou Julia, she was carrying on with her career as if she hadn't deceived anyone at all. In the time since the video was leaked, even the multiple amateur mistakes she'd made on stage hadn't been enough to force the brainwashed masses into opening their eyes. Even when she zoned out during the VIP pre-show, even when she forgot the same lyrics she'd performed countless times before, the fans only coddled her. It infuriated him that accounts like gentian4 were treated like they were in the wrong for presenting objectively correct criticism. Was it such a crime to speak up when something was amiss?

He struggled to dig his way out of this mire, but the next thing he knew it was morning, and his daily phone alarm was going off at its usual time. Like always, he got dressed and headed to school. The thought of the day ahead threatened to sap the energy from his legs, but what he didn't realize was that his overall motivation had actually increased. From the moment he first picked up a camera, it had inspired in him a sense of duty unlike anything he'd felt toward schoolwork or recreation.

Right as he walked into the classroom, a male student came crashing into him from behind. "Oh, my bad," he offered as a half-hearted apology, then went on to relay some asinine announcement to the rest of the class as if Tatsuaki was never there.

Like any other day, he sat down at his desk and hung his bookbag on the hook. Then he immediately turned his camera on the student who had rearended him. If this guy made even a single mistake, Tatsuaki vowed he would broadcast it to the entire world.

In the corner of the room, a group of girls were standing in a circle, whispering to each other. By stringing together the bits and pieces he could overhear, he learned that Akane had apparently ended her relationship with a student from another school. At first this information was utterly worthless to Tatsuaki, but on second thought, he was relieved to hear that this unknown stranger had escaped her clutches.

It wasn't common for him to glean new intel about Akane. As much time as he dedicated to surveilling his peers, topics of actual interest were few and far between...or so he'd always thought. But over the days that followed, she brought new changes into the room with her, some of which he only detected through the use of replayable footage.

One day, she stopped wearing her trademark glasses.

One day, she talked back to a teacher.

One day, she ignored the lecture and secretly read manga under her desk.

One day, she apparently didn't show up to work.

One day, she made small talk with a classmate she used to be friends with. It put him on guard, since she mentioned that day at the cafe, but she didn't seem to know about his camera. If anything, it seemed she'd struck up a conversation with the boy at random, and she didn't walk away until it was over.

None of these behaviors were in line with the female he had observed thus far. He sensed that something must have happened, because she seemed to be fumbling blindly. But he didn't feel the need to investigate, since it was probably just another of her stupid whims. Thus, for the most part, he disregarded it.

However, the night before he was scheduled to bring the hammer of justice down on Gotou Julia, there was a moment that brought Akane's odd behavior to mind. In order to prime himself to spot Julia's errors, Tatsuaki was re-reading *Girl's March*. He still felt the story was shallow and trite, but this time, certain parts stood out to him more strongly for some reason.

The Girl had once been close to him, but perhaps that gulf could no longer be bridged. Before she could take the first step, Ai had grabbed her slender wrist.

Their fondness for this vision-impeding accessory was not one The Girl shared. But even if she took them off, it wasn't like her true self was going to come leaping out.

The only reason she had obeyed her guardians thus far was because she was as weak as they were.

"Look at how selfish I can be! I can ignore an important conversation just to admire artwork! And I could stay this way!"

No matter what she did, there was always an eternity right before an explosion, like an unscratchable itch. But it was Ai's fault. Out of spite, The Girl relaxed, allowing herself a feeling of warmth until the time came for the day's work to end.

And so she decided to say hello to the boy neighbor she had thus far ignored. By interacting with someone who wasn't strictly necessary to her life, she added a new option that neither her inner nor outer selves wished for.

It all sounded kind of like Akane. Once he made that connection, he despised the protagonist all the more. But unlike The Girl, he was positive Akane didn't have a care in the world. Then her face sprang to mind, which made him even more irritated, and he closed the book.

Again and again, he thought back to that conversation with her. It had felt like old times, and for now, he lacked the courage to write it off as something neither her inner nor outer selves had wished for.

The day of the movie screening, Tatsuaki was a tiny bit nervous. He woke up an hour ahead of the alarm he'd set and, with no better way to spend the extra time, lay there under the blanket envisioning the pivotal moment in which Gotou Julia's future would be permanently altered. Outside of a daily "good morning," she wasn't posting on social media much these days, and he wanted to believe she could feel something coming.

The event was held at the biggest movie theater in the district. He arrived at the lobby fifteen minutes before the starting time and rode the packed elevator to the correct floor. There, he walked straight past the concessions stand and got in line to enter the auditorium.

Once it was his turn, he handed over the ticket he'd printed at the local corner store and in return received the stub plus a paper survey. The staff member explained that if he wanted to ask a group member a question, he could write it at the bottom and slot the paper into the corresponding box on the table in front of the door, from which questions would be drawn at random.

This came as a relief to Tatsuaki, who'd been worried he might have to raise his hand to be called upon. Deep down, however, some part of him was a bit disappointed.

To maintain his internal justification, he wrote in a sarcastically polite tone, filling the paper with his feelings as well as his question. There were seven boxes on the table, each marked with a member's name, with a slot at the top like a piggy bank; into the one marked for Gotou Julia, Tatsuaki deposited the contents of his heart. It slid in without a hitch, as if her box was comparatively empty, and he grew increasingly confident that his question would be chosen.

Slipping through the open door into the dimly lit space, he quickly found his designated seat in the center row and sat down. Quietly, he pulled a bottle of tea from his bookbag and took a sip. Then, around the time he had popped a piece of hard candy into his mouth, a female's voice rang out over the loudspeaker.

"Welcome to the *Girl's March* screening with a bonus Impatiens talk show and mini-concert. We would like to thank you all for coming. I'm Shinogi, event manager for Impatiens, and I will be your announcer this evening."

The resulting cheers were so loud, one could almost forget this was supposed to be a movie theater. Tatsuaki didn't know if it was like this with all the other idol groups, but at least where Impatiens was concerned, even the *staff* somehow had fans. Tatsuaki himself had no great opinion of them. Upon seeing a glimpse of smiling staff members in a video of Impatiens going to karaoke—one of many filmed by Takatsuki Sakuna—he complained that if they wanted to be buddy-buddy, the ethical thing would be to quit their jobs instead of abusing their employee privilege. Only a handful of people agreed.

Over the loudspeaker, Shinogi explained that the concert and talk show would take place after the movie screening, that they were allowed to leave at any time but re-entry would be restricted at certain points, that they were not permitted to stand during the concert, and a stream of other things that were already announced online. Unfortunately, the sort of people who would dutifully listen to this spiel had already read it all on the official Impatiens website—or they generally had the good sense to read the room and behave themselves regardless. It was the people who stood up during the

announcement, shouted across the room to their friends, and/or carried on with their conversations that drew Tatsuaki's ire. In his mind, his contempt toward flagrant rule-breakers was not a contradiction of his hostility toward the staff. Those two feelings, along with the sadistic desire to attack Julia, formed a single mass of righteous indignation.

He had come to this event with a lot of emotions, but one of them promptly lost its purpose once the entire audience focused on what was in front of them.

"Moving on, we will now review the rules of the film screening. Please turn your attention to the screen."

The dim lighting grew even dimmer, and a few seconds later, a text animation appeared onscreen that read *Movie Etiquette 101*. This text was read aloud by seven familiar voices. Just as a few people started to cheer, the screen switched to a shot of the front row of a similar movie theater, where Takatsuki Sakuna sat all alone in a dress that wasn't her normal costume. She pulled a smartphone from the purse in her lap and pointed its camera at the screen.

Just then, Gotou Julia leaned into frame, dressed in office casual clothes, and snatched the phone from a startled Sakuna. The video froze on this frame, and the text *NO FILMING* appeared in large font, accompanied by a voiceover from Julia.

"Absolutely no photos or videos, no matter how cute you think she is!"

The audience reacted with applause and laughter, praising the girls for recording this special video for today's event. But of course they were going to love it; it captured Sakuna's character while referencing Julia's past as a little Easter egg for the fans. Unlike some people who didn't get the joke until a few seconds later, Tatsuaki understood perfectly well and still chose not to laugh or clap. Regardless, the video kept rolling, oblivious to the mental state of a single teenager.

Carrying the smartphone from earlier, Julia walked onscreen and sat down next to Sakuna. When the phone started to ring, she said, "I gotta take this," and answered it. About three words into the call, however, Katano Towako suddenly leaned forward from the row behind them. With a wiggle of her fingertips, a sparkly effect appeared, and the phone vanished as if by magic.

"Keep your cell phones turned off or on vibrate! And certainly no taking calls! I told them to make me look like a fairy—did I do it right?"

This provoked another laugh from the crowd, albeit smaller. From there, Towako started eating a full-course meal to represent "no food or drink," followed by Hashimoto Ao putting her feet up only for Wakayama Ran to gently push them back down. After a couple more scenes tailored to the other members, the camera switched to a shot of all seven members—three in the front row and four behind them.

"This has been *Movie Etiquette 101* with Impatiens. We'll be watching the movie right along with you, so let's all try to have a good time. Now, sorry for the long wait, and please enjoy the show!"

The leader Sakuna gave the final send-off, and as the group waved goodbye, the screen faded to black, followed by a theater buzzer. For a few seconds the room went fully dark, like a long blink, until the newly widened screen switched to a slightly brighter black. Then the actress playing The Girl began to recite her opening monologue, and the movie commenced.

But Tatsuaki was so consumed by his own emotions that he couldn't focus.

Internally, he was freaking out. It had felt like Sakuna and Julia's little skit was targeted directly at him—like the resulting laughter was *mocking* him. Obviously this wasn't actually the case, but the feeling was still real. Nevertheless, he could feel on some subconscious level that he needed to do something, so he resorted to his usual defense mechanism: converting his shame into anger to ground himself.

These people were blaming an innocent person for a celebrity's mistake, as if the only crime was that someone had documented it! Ideally, he'd put a lid on that rage so he could at least get his money's worth out of the film—but his frustration was surprisingly persistent. It wasn't until the credits rolled that the last piece started to melt away like caramel...but even then, it was still stuck in his teeth.

As the names of the cast and staff scrolled by, accompanied by the theme song with lyrics penned by Julia, his eyes were drawn to something moving at the front of the room—stagehands dressed in black, placing seven mic stands in

front of the movie screen. All at once, the audience began to stir with excitement. This was the same stage setup Tatsuaki had seen at an Impatiens concert about a year ago; each mic stand was adorned with a decoration that symbolized its corresponding member.

Then, around the time the credits had reached the Special Thanks section, seven figures stepped out of the staff-only door near the front row. Even in the dark, it was obvious who they were, but as the director's name made its final appearance onscreen, the house lights slowly came back up. The audience took this as their cue to go quiet. There was a pause, as if they were waiting for everyone's eyes to adapt, and then the same song that had just finished began to play all over again.

In the time since Tatsuaki had last seen Julia perform live, her voice, posture, and body language had been perfected to an exact science, commanding more of a presence. It wasn't just her, either; the group was more unified overall. Then he cursed himself for the credit he was giving them. It didn't matter how good their performance was. The issue was Julia's behavior and attitude—the content of her character, he reminded himself. But in that moment, he had forgotten the taste of anger.

The concert consisted of five songs back to back with no banter in between. Later, Tatsuaki would read online that the fans were very happy with this setlist, since one of the chosen songs hadn't been performed live in over a year. Once the final song's outro came to an end and the audience began to clap, the group walked off the tiny stage where they had nevertheless performed flawlessly. Staff members took the mic stands and replaced them with a row of chairs on stage right. Meanwhile, on stage left, one more chair was placed all by itself, and in front of it, the table from earlier with all the boxes.

Instantly, Tatsuaki's temperature spiked.

"Hello, everyone! Was that concert awesome or what?!"

A woman walked out to address the frothing crowd with a wireless mic, introducing herself as a television presenter. After she gave her name and affiliation, she announced that she would be hosting today's talk show.

"Now, let's get them back on stage! It's Impatiens, everybody!"

The reappearance of the group was met with tremendous applause and cheers. Each girl sat down in a chair with her own designated handheld mic. Meanwhile, Tatsuaki swallowed the saliva and tension that he hadn't noticed was steadily building at the back of his throat. That must have been when the last of the candy was flushed away.

In hindsight, perhaps Tatsuaki should have kept chewing on that piece of anger. New emotions took a lot of energy to produce. He sat there, staring blankly, until he realized he was inadvertently blocking the aisle with his bookbag. When people started to glare at him, he hastily moved it to the empty seat beside him to let them pass in front of him. Then, once they were gone, he finally rose to his feet. In the corner of the venue he stood alone, trying to find his feelings, right up until a staff member finally asked him to leave.

The talk show had ended without incident. As in, no callout of Julia, no drama, no provocation via a problematic comment that would finally wake people up. And now it was over.

"I'm sure this must be your first time performing a concert in a movie theater of all places! Tell us, Sakuna-san, how was it?"

In response to the host's question, Sakuna rattled off an excited answer. When the same question was posed to Ao, however, she looked out at the audience. "While we were performing, I started to wonder if this is anyone's first time seeing us. Anyone?"

At her prompting, three hands timidly rose into the air. Tatsuaki knew this not because he looked around for them, but because she pointed each of them out.

"This is your first time? For real? Holy shit, you guys are real adventurous, huh?"

Ao was yet another topic of criticism for Tatsuaki due to her outspoken comments, but right now he only had enough mental bandwidth for his main target. The girls had no way of knowing what he was thinking, of course, but little lizuka Mei piped up with "I think it's brave and cool!" to cover for her bandmate. After some discussion about their opinions of the film and questions regarding the lyrics of the theme song, it was finally time for the fan Q&A

segment.

"Who wants to go first?"

"Why don't we do the opposite of usual?" Towako suggested.

Thus it was decided that they would reverse the order they typically introduced themselves in. (Perhaps it was an intentional choice to save the lyricist, Julia, for later.) The host promptly reached for the box marked lizuka Mei, plunged a hand inside, and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

"Let's see... This question comes from an anonymous fan. Dear Mei-chan: Similar to the black cat in the movie, is there an animal you wish you could have as a pet? If so, what name would you give it?"

"Are all the questions this boring?"

"Hey, they're allowed to ask whatever they want! Lately I've been going to a dog cafe with a friend on my days off, and it really makes me want a doggo of my own! Also, don't pretend you're not completely obsessed with your cat, Ao!"

"Yeah, 'cause Ramune's the cutest cat ever!"

Tatsuaki was wracked with impatience. Like Ao, he wanted them to get the boring part over with ASAP. Alas, the universe did not in fact bend to his will, and the questions continued, none of which touched on anything of interest to him.

"Dear Ao-san: Is there any pop idol outside of Impatiens who you consider to be a great singer?"

"Dear Maki-chan: What's the hardest word you learned recently?"

"Dear Otowa: I'd like to learn to play the violin like you. What brand of violin would you recommend? I'd love to get the same one as you if possible."

"Dear Sakuna: From your perspective as the leader, which *Girl's March* character is each member of Impatiens most similar to?"

For Tatsuaki, each of their answers flowed in one ear and out the other.

"Well, they've disbanded at this point, but I really enjoyed the vocal

performance of—"

"This question is no fair! It's probably, uhhh...impluvium? Wait, no, inpluvium? What do you mean, define it? The question never said—"

"The violin I have is actually on the fancier end of the spectrum. For a beginner, I would sooner recommend—"

"I don't know if they're similar, per se, but Jul understands The Girl's perspective the best. Then I guess Ao would be Ai-chan, and—"

Only Sakuna's answer managed to catch his ear ever so slightly—that is, until it was Julia's turn.

"Now then, let's move on to Julia-san."

Humans had the tendency to believe that luck would favor them specifically, no matter the odds, and Tatsuaki was no exception.

"This question is also from an anonymous fan."

By this point he was already disappointed, but then again, he realized it was silly to expect to be chosen in the first round.

"Congratulations on writing the lyrics for the theme song! Is there anything else you'd like to try your hand at?"

"I want to try everything I can, but for now, I think it's important I devote myself to singing and dancing. I want to keep those skills sharp." She must have sensed the room falling quiet at the sound of her stern voice, because she added, with a hard look, "So I suppose my answer would be spiritual training. We could all go and meditate under a waterfall, or try skydiving together—"

"Not happening," Ran, the member with a publicly known fear of heights, muttered just loud enough for the mic to pick up. The crowd laughed.

"Also, I think Impatiens has a lot of really good songs, and I'd like for people around the globe to listen to us, even if they don't speak our language."

"A world tour?" someone shouted from the audience, and Tatsuaki could tell from the tone that it wasn't meant as criticism.

"To make that happen, I need to work on myself right now. Besides, even Ran

can handle going on an airplane."

The exchange seemed too rehearsed, right down to the final punchline. This wasn't the true Julia that Tatsuaki wanted to see.

From there, Ran started telling some story about what happened on the plane when they flew to Okinawa for a concert, but the details weren't worthy of special mention. Then the conversation transitioned smoothly to her turn, whereupon she gave an inoffensive answer to yet another tepid question. But that was where the unthinkable happened—something no other fan saw as a major problem.

"Now then, unfortunately we're out of time, so we'll have to end the Q&A there. But before you go, let's hear everyone's thoughts about today's event!"

Tatsuaki didn't let it show externally, but his mind went blank, then began to run in circles. They still hadn't touched on the key issue. It was all trivial bullshit. Julia had chosen to hide behind her persona instead of being serious with the fans. Before he could emotionally recover, the event rapidly approached its conclusion, and he was thrown in two different directions. For a moment, he forgot how to move.

While the other spectators all filed out, he stood idly in the lobby, trying to summon his emotions once more. If he allowed himself to accept that he had gained nothing, then the past few weeks would seem like a stupid waste of time. Thus, he needed to feel anger toward Julia and the event—that way he could continue to believe he was in the right. But since he had already swallowed that piece of anger, he had to stop and wrack his brain for a fresh source of rage.

Come to think of it, weren't all those questions seemingly tailor-made to promote each member's persona? What if the staff never intended to read any fan questions from the start? Perhaps they had prepared their own prewritten questions—that would certainly explain why all the members' answers were so rehearsed, especially Julia's. The segue into Ran's plane story was way too perfect to be off the cuff.

In other words, they were crooks who lied to their fans, dodged questions, and tried to hide whatever was inconvenient to their narrative. This answer,

which he had struck upon through a sort of word association, felt like truth only he could see. And so, without even trying to acknowledge the fact that some unconscious part of him only felt secure when he was angry about something, he decided he had no further business here and finally raised his foot from where it was glued to the carpeted floor.

"Hey, kid!"

He had chosen not to film this time since it was too risky, but he did have a full audio recording, and he was itching to go home and edit it into something.

"You there! Childhood friend of Itobayashi Akane!"

He didn't turn to look in the direction of the voice beside him, but regardless, he soon found his path blocked. A pair of gaudy red boots appeared on the floor in front of him, making him flinch in alarm. He didn't know anyone who would dress like that, but after a moment of consideration, the voice was familiar.

He looked up, into that beautiful face once more, and was met with a raised hand and a casual "Sup!" as if they were friends. He didn't intend to respond, but he could tell from the look in this man's eyes that he would be afforded no escape. It pissed him off.

"You like Impatiens? I saw you here, so I just wanted to ask you something. This isn't about last time."

At this, the barely-suppressed trauma began to leak out. Now Tatsuaki was kicking himself for standing around lost in thought. He should have saved it for after he got home. If only he'd kept chewing on that piece of anger, maybe he could have evaded the man's detection.

Ukawa Ai

FROM THAT DAY FORWARD, the silly emails from Itobayashi Akane suddenly stopped coming.

Of course, everyone had their own lives to live, so if she needed a break from her friend Ukawa Ai, then he wanted to respect her wishes. That being said, the timing gave him pause. Last time they spoke, they discussed the book she had based her entire life upon. Had he said something that hurt her feelings? He hadn't noticed her looking upset, unless she was just really good at hiding it.

It was possible she just needed some space to figure herself out, so he didn't try to contact her...but still, it gnawed at him. So when he chanced across the kid from before, it was a godsend.

On this particular requested day off, he'd traveled to his usual district in unusually modest attire. Bright colors could potentially distract the pop stars during their concert, so he limited scarlet red to his footwear, which would be concealed behind the row in front of him. He didn't normally opt for glasses, but today he wore them as an extra precaution just in case. He didn't want to run the risk of anyone recognizing him from that old video.

That being said, his hair was shorter back then, and since it was summer at the time of filming, he was wearing a plain old T-shirt and jeans. But most importantly, he was only in the video for a few seconds, so someone would have to pause on just the right frame and look closely to identify that it was him. Really, the glasses were just a token of his goodwill.

The ticket he'd printed at the corner store assigned him a seat in the center section, closer to the back. Ignoring the survey paper, he sat down and waited for the show to start without thinking about much else.

As it turned out, the content of the movie was closer to his personal experience reading *Girl's March* than it was to Akane's. Ai was a woman, her relationship with The Girl was portrayed as romantic, and the only similarities between her and Ai himself were her brusque attitude and her nicotine

addiction (or so he assumed; in the book, she was depicted as "smoking," but tobacco was never specified). In other words, they were traits just about anyone could have. Furthermore—and this was an observation he'd made while reading, too—The Girl struck him as far more similar to Gotou Julia than to Akane. Of course, he didn't think of either friend as an evil liar, but in terms of having two distinct sides, a pop star like Julia struck him as a better fit.

All throughout the concert and the talk show, Julia radiated a strangely intense vibe. She must have really wanted to make up for her previous mistakes. While he supported this mindset, as her friend, he felt the fans would still embrace her even if she dropped the tough-girl act and approached them as her genuine self.

When the event ended, he saw no reason to rush, so he waited for the rest of his row to file out before following suit. Then, seeing a crowd of customers lingering on the concessions floor, it occurred to him that Akane might be here, though he wasn't going to get his hopes up too much. As he glanced around, however, he spotted not Akane but the childhood friend whom he'd caught recording her in secret the other day.

"Are you free right now?"

"No," the boy answered timidly, averting his eyes.

Ai was thinking of buying him a coffee or something if time allowed, but since the answer was no, he didn't question it and instead cut right to the chase. "How's Itobayashi Akane doing lately? What's she up to?"

"Uhhh...I dunno, same as always?"

"Anything different about her?"

He didn't mind if the boy ended up telling Akane about this conversation. All he wanted was information, not dirty secrets behind her back.

"Well...I heard she...broke up with some guy."

"Oh yeah? She told you?"

"She didn't have to. Everybody was freaking out about it."

He could easily picture Akane announcing the catastrophe to her friends at

school, be it angrily, morosely, or even as a funny story. Plus, a breakup was more than enough reason for a teenager to stop messaging for a while.

"Also, I don't know what inspired her, but..."

Ai hadn't pressed for further details, but the boy volunteered them regardless, so he listened quietly. He could tell this kid liked to hold the reins of conversation, probably as a show of defiance against adult authority. It reminded him of younger days.

"She stopped wearing her glasses and started talking back to the teacher, skipping out on her work, even talking to a guy she normally treats like dirt."

The boy's voice hardened at the end of his sentence, suggesting the last part was the most important. Ai could hear the passive-aggressive jab behind his words. Put simply, he was flaunting that he could see her faults in addition to her strengths. Perhaps he even felt possessive of her and was intentionally trying to drive Ai away.

If so, well, Ai didn't base his opinion of a friend on secondhand information. "Huh. Wonder what that's about."

"I'm gonna go now."

Right as Ai looked away to think for a moment, the kid grumpily stormed past him. Though it likely wasn't welcome, he turned and called after him: "Thanks for the help! And try to be nice to her, okay?"

The boy didn't answer, or even give him a passing glance, but Ai wasn't hoping he would, so he went back to his thoughts. His attention was drawn to the word choice: what inspired her. Of course, the kid probably hadn't meant it the way Ai interpreted it, but still—what if the glasses thing was yet another imitation of *Girl's March*? If so, then he couldn't think of a single correlating scene in the book or the movie.

"Weird," he murmured to himself.

A few seconds later, he decided to stop worrying about it. Even if he *could* come up with the answer on his own, he wasn't going to interrogate a heartbroken and depressed teenager over it. No point, then, in mulling it over. Besides, he had a policy of never doubting the word of a friend, no matter what

—and on the last day he saw her, right before they parted ways, she had told him:

"Next time we meet, let it be as the real deal."

Gotou Julia

THEY HAD DONE THEIR UTMOST—or at the very least, they hadn't made any mistakes as far as she could tell.

For Julia, a lot was riding on this event. Though the setlist had only five songs, she had polished her performance, all while handling a ton of other work. With the help of her instructors and the other group members, she had committed herself to her singing and dancing practice more rigorously than ever before, staying late after hours in the studio to check every last movement, down to her fingertips and gaze. All to ensure she wouldn't slip up like last time—to remove any unnecessary elements and nuances from her narrative. It took weeks of effort on her part, but the fans wouldn't receive the latest chapter of her story until the day of the concert.

Generally speaking, Julia chose not to openly discuss her training regimen or work struggles. Instead, she conveyed it indirectly through other group members. For instance, when Ran took a selfie, Julia would sometimes be in the background writing lyrics with a pensive look on her face, or sometimes Sakuna would "secretly" record a video of Julia dancing by herself and post it publicly.

In her opinion, boasting about hard work didn't always come across as flattering, depending on the person. For Sakuna or Maki, showing off their blood, sweat, and tears would seem natural and probably lead to good PR. Conversely, Julia's passion and sincerity became easier to swallow when her efforts were "discovered" through the lens of a third party. Most people wanted something that felt *pure*. From that perspective, silly as it was, it made sense to choose the most efficient methods with which to craft her storylines.

Recently, she had restricted herself to only posting the bare minimum on social media. This must have aided in directly conveying her commitment to her performance, because comments about the old video had become less frequent. In response to her "good morning" tweets, she received nothing but praise, well wishes, and excitement for the upcoming concert.

Because of this, she didn't fully approve of the movie etiquette skit. She would have told them there was no reason to bring it back up, but she was never given the opportunity for debate. She only agreed on the basis that management had a plan in place, and since it ended up getting some laughs, she decided to try and accept it, even if doubt still lingered in her chest.

During the concert, the past few weeks of focus paid off. Her body was filled with tension for the entirety of her performance, but even under these limiting circumstances, she felt she'd displayed improvement in her voice and carriage.

When the talk show started, she braced herself for whatever question was about to come her way. Thankfully, they selected something much more normal than she was dreading, and she barely needed to dig through the annals of her mind before finding an answer. With the aid of some battle-ready nuances, the words flowed smoothly from her lips.

They were told there was a time limit on their use of the theater green room once the event was done, so they got changed, packed up their things, and headed out. Taking the staff elevator to the first floor, the seven members walked outside and piled into the Toyota HiAces waiting for them right there at the curb. Their destination was the studio located in this very district.

A few minutes later they arrived at the building, rode the elevator up, and set all of their stuff down in the mirror-walled practice room. Meanwhile, another car arrived with their manager and the other staff.

Like always, the seven girls formed a circle on the floor. While the adults were getting situated, Ao raised her hand to start things off.

"Jul, don't you think you were a little too stiff?"

Though her name was called, Julia didn't respond right away.

"I just mean like, if your energy is a ten at your absolute best, and the time you messed up was like an eight, it felt like this time you were at a twelve. Just a thought I had. Oh, and Towako, how much did that violin cost, anyway?"

"Does it *matter*?! I've only ever shown off one of them, and it's not even worth ten million yen!"

The adults in the room snickered out loud, while everyone else save for Julia

(and Towako herself) reacted with shock.

"It's Gran-gran and Paw-paw's money, anyway. More importantly, I *did* sense that Jul was worked up tonight, but I didn't think it was out of character."

"Yeah, I mean, there have been times where she acts stressed on purpose, so it's nothing we haven't seen before...but that all depends on whether she meant to do it."

Julia wasn't sure how to answer that. As far as she could see, choosing her words at this juncture would serve no purpose other than self-defense, so she shook her head. "No, it wasn't intentional. I did feel tenser than usual, but I was aiming for my regular best, the way Ao described."

"I thought so. It's just a vibe I got, but like...hmmm. Sorry if this doesn't make sense, but it felt like you were sort of...programmed. Do you get what I mean?"

"More or less."

"I thought it was just me, but Towako felt it too, so maybe it was only obvious to us on stage?"

Ao looked around at the members and staff who had yet to give their opinion on the subject. To be clear, she wasn't trying to be harsh. They held these postmortems after each concert, and it was a chance for the whole team to give candid feedback. One by one, the other members offered their thoughts.

"To me she felt eager, but not in a bad way. After what happened last time, I think it's good that she came out swinging way harder than usual," said Sakuna.

"I agree. Barely anyone in that crowd was a first-timer, so I suspect they knew the context," said Ran.

"Seems like the harder you try to be perfect, the worse you end up doing. It can be really frustrating," said Maki.

"I remember thinking I needed to match her energy, so I must have felt it too," said Mei.

Their manager Shinogi, who had served as the announcer for today's event and watched the concert from the back row of the auditorium, raised her hand slightly. "I think even the crowd could tell that her every movement was polished. But like Sakuna, I don't think it came across negatively. How did you feel you were projecting yourself to them, Jul?"

Again, there was no reason to play coy. "It was my first experience performing for a fully seated crowd, so I can't say for sure, but I don't think I heard any complaining like last time."

In a room the size of a movie auditorium, and with proper lighting, even Julia — someone who couldn't drive a car without glasses on—was able to see all the way to the back row. Though she obviously couldn't memorize *all* her fans' faces, she had quickly spotted a few who regularly attended VIP pre-shows, and they seemed happy.

"The regulars looked like they were having fun, which was great to see. But I'm going to keep in mind that there might be some who felt what Ao felt. I want them to see my enthusiasm, not me being pushed to my limit."

The first sentence was one hundred percent sincere, while the rest was closer to fifty. Even if Ao was completely right, as long as the fans were seeing Gotou Julia the way they were meant to, then today's mindset was the correct choice. And even if this performance *had* been somewhat excessive, she still needed to step up to the plate—because in the weeks since the previous concert, she had sensed she was one backstep away from plummeting to her doom. She didn't have room to pull back any further.

"By the way, Ao, wasn't there a moment where you nearly mixed up the song order?"

With this stray comment from Sakuna, the focus of the postmortem moved away from Julia.

"Ugh, you noticed? Yeah, I tried to play it off, but...my bad."

Ao craned her head back, then used the momentum to spring forward into a bow. In response, the staff began to coach her. Despite her excessive arrogance, she was at least willing to take feedback if it meant improving her stage performance. After two or three comments on the choreography, the meeting came to an end.

Since none of the members had other work scheduled today, they recorded a

video of themselves participating in a game of President as a treat for the fans. Ran ended up losing and, as punishment, was ordered to introduce herself to the camera in a silly voice until she hunched over in embarrassment. After that, they were all free to go.

While Ao and Towako packed up and headed out, Julia went to their manager to request the talk show questions the fans had submitted for her today. Normally, things of this nature were bundled with fan letters and mailed directly to her house.

"Okay, but I've already weeded out the weird ones."

"I'd like those too, please, just in case."

And so Julia added the small number of filtered messages back to the stack. Since the staff still had work to do, she decided to stay behind and read through her surveys. To avoid getting in anyone's way, she moved to the corner of the room, sat down with her knees bent, and started to flip through.

For the most part, alongside a variety of questions, the fans had expressed positive feelings or words of encouragement. Some of the names she recognized from social media. One person had even included a little doodle of her, which made her smile. But most of all, none of these made mention of Julia's non-idol aspects, and it truly felt like the past few weeks of purposeful action had paid off.

Next, she scanned through the "weird" ones the manager had removed. For these, she paid no mind to the names—haters and assholes would only ever be haters and assholes, and she'd be wasting brainpower making room for them as individuals. The only reason she still asked for their submissions was to find out how her storylines came across to people who didn't like Gotou Julia.

The contents were so predictable, it was actually anti-climactic. Then she heard the click of a photo being taken and looked to the side. There stood Sakuna, having finished chatting with the staff, now pointing her phone in Julia's direction.

"Just wanted to document an idol cherishing her otaku."

"The ones I'm reading right now are actually pretty rude."

"They're still fans, though. They just don't know how to express it the right way."

She was on her way out, so Julia decided to leave the studio with her.

"I hear they're gonna post a new AotowA soon," she mentioned on the walk to the subway station.

AotowA was the name given to the musical duo of Ao and Towako. At present, they mostly uploaded videos of song covers, and the only time they'd performed live was a mini-segment at a fan club event. But apparently, they were aiming to one day have concerts and record deals of their own.

"And Ran's going to do a swimsuit photo shoot right at the start of next year."

"The adults sure like to make us do these things in winter for some reason," Julia replied jokingly. In truth, she felt the group was very lucky that Ran's beauty continued to print money year-round.

In addition to the above, Maki was set to star in a drama-style music video and Mei was scheduled to appear on a TV show encouraging kids to do sports. Each member of Impatiens was steadily walking the path that best suited them as individuals, expanding the group's reach. Julia vowed to do the same to the best of her ability—to race like a meteor through a story all her own. The only version of her required by this narrative was Gotou Julia of Impatiens.

"See you later, my dear idol."

"Your what? Okay, bye."

Parting ways with Sakuna, Julia tapped on her phone as the swaying train carried her home. It had been a while since she last tweeted anything besides *good morning*, and it was time to change that. Not to toot her own horn or anything, but today's concert had felt like a solid step in the direction of who she was meant to be, and she thought they deserved to know that.

"No mistakes this time! I went all-out to show everyone what I'm made of. I'm cooler this way, you know? On to the next."

To this tweet, she attached a selfie taken at the entrance to the movie theater. Without waiting for their responses, she pocketed her phone and

stepped off the train.

On the walk back to her apartment, she stopped by the grocery store to grab a few things. Once she got home, she made dinner and took care of a few other chores. Only after all that was done did she sit down on the bed in the corner of the room and check social media. Posted to the official Impatiens Twitter and Instagram was a photo of the group posing with the presenter who had hosted the talk show.

Next, she scrolled through the reactions to her tweet.

As a general rule, Julia didn't reply to anything directed at her over social media, because she believed that performers and the audience could never be on an equal footing. Not because she looked down on fans of music or idol culture, but because if idols and fans stood side by side, it would spoil the fun of their special connection. From the moment she started her career, she was keenly aware of her role as a spectacle to be witnessed, and so she had scooted herself ever so slightly into the spotlight. Some people with no concept of this game called her arrogant as a result, but the majority of fans tacitly supported it.

Today, like always, those who had forged a connection with Julia still chose to tell her their feelings, even though they knew she wouldn't reply directly. Most of it was some form of praise, sympathy, or encouragement. And while some were disappointed that they couldn't make it to today's concert, Julia accepted their sadness with pride, knowing they would have high expectations for her in the future.

Perhaps some people, seeing how she never replied, assumed she didn't even read their messages. Perhaps for others, the lack of response enabled them to show their fondness openly, without embarrassment. In any case, Julia read all of her fans' messages and appreciated them in private. Make no mistake, there was a human being at the other end of all the words they typed on their phones and PCs.

And like any human, sometimes she got hurt.

Like any human, sometimes she made mistakes.

Don't pretend it never happened, read one message.

"Sorry, I know you didn't mean it that way, but your last concert meant the world to me. It took courage to buy a front-row ticket, and I'll remember that performance for the rest of my life. So, this may be selfish, but please don't call it a mistake and pretend it never happened."

It was a vent tweet, exactly 280 characters long.

Julia's smile stiffened.

When she tapped on it, she found that it was garnering quite a response from other fans. The likes and retweets were climbing with each passing second, and there were replies praising the fan's bravery and proclaiming their agreement with her. Some people were critical, but even then it was clear that they were still supportive of Julia, just in a different way. These were all indirect messages from fans.

Shaken, Julia kept reading through each one. The quote tweets were steadily increasing, too.

"LITERALLY like girl we were all there!!"

"You're probably gonna get hate for this, but I think it's beautiful. Don't worry, the memory will always be there, and I hope Jul reads this."

"yeahhh idk lately there's been a lot of ??? moments with julia"

"Way to misread the original tweet but ok."

"I wish she would embrace the old video the same way we do."

"Jul, I love you, but I'm with her on this one."

"jfc it's not all about you"

"Julia always tries to disavow her past, but her fans were part of that, so like??"

"Idk, I went to the concert today, and to me it was just as awesome as the last one. Maybe it's something only performers understand."

"yeah like she's not a speedrunner she's a pop star with a fanbase"

Meanwhile, all Julia could think was:

I'm sorry, what?

Despite her bafflement, however, waves of words continued to roll in. When she did a search, she found that among the reviews of today's concert, more and more people were beginning to comment on that single fan's message to her. She punched in a different set of keywords and refreshed the feed aggressively, but the waves of words were slowly and surely flowing away from the outcome she had wanted.

Julia's whole world had been riding on today's performance. She'd wanted to take at least one step forward to erase the imperfections of her nobody era, the previous concert where she had let a single fan's comment throw her off her game, and any other elements that had regressed her storyline. Every detail she put into her performance, every word she chose for her statements, was meant to serve that explicit purpose.

She could feel the void right behind her. Without looking, she knew it was waiting with its maw open wide.

Ao's casual observation from earlier was a drop in the bucket compared to the overflowing voices of her fans, all of them talking about her most prominent failures. And there sat Julia, alone in her apartment, refusing to acknowledge them.

Thus far, she had believed that a storyline's value lay in the progression of its narrative. To this day that outlook hadn't changed. Besides, hadn't the fans enjoyed each new chapter right along with her?

She wished she could reach out to every single person who was trying to convince her to look back and embrace her past, and tell them: *pretending it never happened is the only reason I'm even here.*

"It sucks be when I watched Julia's last performance and the pre-debut video, that version of her seemed way more like someone I could actually be friends with irl"

Julia was willing to endure anything if it kept her from falling to her doom. But when someone gave her what felt like one last push, she reached out and grabbed their sleeve in desperation.

Then, purely out of reflex, she flung them down instead.

"If I quit my job as a pop star, I could be your friend or whatever you want."

She posted it as a quote tweet, threw her phone down onto the bed, then buried her face in the pillow. A few minutes later, she came to her senses and deleted it, but of course it was too late by then. When she did a search to find out if she'd caused a stir, she found some accounts circulating her now-deleted tweet in screenshot form.

Whenever she took a step in any direction, it was inspired not by those who wished to see her fall, but the fans who had experienced her narrative alongside her. The words she'd let slip had hurt the people who liked her, and the shock of it shoved her backward.

As she plummeted into the abyss, she finally found a name for the mysterious emotion she'd felt the day she shut the door on a former fan: regret for the path not taken.

A week later in that same district, when the final Impatiens concert of the year kicked off, Gotou Julia was nowhere to be seen.

Sekiguchi Miyu

M IYU COULD SENSE that her friend Itobayashi Akane was trying to reinvent herself. They'd gone shopping for winter hats together just the other day, so at first, she wished Akane would have asked her for advice...but that quickly changed when she realized the impetus behind this reinvention was nothing positive.

Miyu had actually met Akane's ex-boyfriend Kikuchi Shin once before, when he came to their school's culture festival. Her first impression was that his ghostly pale skin highlighted the handsome features of his face, and also that—no offense to Akane—he didn't seem like the "loyal boyfriend" type. Admittedly, the foreknowledge that he was in a band had most likely contributed to this.

But over time, it seemed her playboy radar was proven defective. Akane had gushed about what a great boyfriend he was, and when she told everyone about her breakup, she had revealed that it was over a minor argument. To Miyu, it sounded like she regretted her actions and was now taking steps to change herself for the better, starting with her appearance. Classic Akane.

Miyu felt like she and Akane got along extremely well. They were on the same wavelength—not just their conversations, but their sugar cravings, their impulses to go into town for fun, and even the way they used their free time between work and school. They just seemed like really similar people.

But whether it be friendships or other kinds of relationships, no matter how good or kind the other person or how much time you spent together, if you weren't compatible on a fundamental level, the connection would eventually fade. This was clear from the way Akane and Shin had broken up. Thus, as someone who was compatible with Akane, Miyu was waiting for the chance to cheer her friend up—but she was starting to get impatient with herself for not being creative enough to think of a way to make it happen.

That being said, a few days later, she naturally came to see that there was no

reason to rush.

One day at lunchtime, Miyu went to the staff room to retrieve a worksheet needed for fifth period math class. While she was there, Akane walked in by herself. Their eyes met from across the room, and through hand gestures and lip-reading, Akane explained that she had forgotten the worksheet for sixth period.

Once Miyu got the paper she needed, she decided to wait for Akane outside in the hall. There, her eyes wandered at random over a list of older students accepted into major universities, then a poster advertising the student exchange program. The next thing she knew, suddenly Akane was standing beside her.

"You gonna do the exchange program?"

At this, Miyu shook her head. "Are you kidding? I suck at other languages. What about you, Bayashi?"

"Well, I like the thought of having a whole different life."

Now was the perfect moment to ask what was going on. But before she could

"If I left, would you wait for me?" Akane asked.

In response, Miyu nodded without hesitation. "Yeah."

She hadn't read into the question any deeper than it took to give an honest answer, but Akane reacted as though it was a heartfelt sentiment. Looking back, it must have been exactly what she needed to hear at that moment.

"It'd be really boring without you around, though."

"Yeah, I'd miss you for sure! Guess I won't be studying abroad, then."

It meant so much to Miyu to see her most trusted friend smile. "Hey, we should go get crepes again next time you're off work. My treat."

"Oh? Feeling bad for me, huh?"

"Is it obvious?"

"Super obvious. Thanks, though. I really appreciate your reassurance. Plus, I

was actually just thinking about those crepes the other day. They were so good."

This, too, was proof of how perfectly in sync their friendship was. One day, they'd surely know each other inside and out. But for now, Miyu was just happy she could offer her beloved Akane the slightest bit of encouragement.

Ukawa Ai

W HENEVER HE SENT HER his review of a concert, he typically got a reply back. This time, however, he got nothing. She was probably busy, or maybe she just didn't feel like it. Either way, he wasn't the type to demand a response, but...it still wasn't normal for her, and it worried him.

At present, these one-sentence email exchanges were Ai's only way of maintaining a friendship with Gotou Julia. If she decided never to reply again, he would have no other avenue through which to check in with her. Nevertheless, he chose not to send a follow-up, mostly because he had faith in her, but probably also because he couldn't think of anything else she'd want to hear.

By contrast, he got a reply from Itobayashi Akane that was so normal, it threw him for a loop. He told her he'd watched the film adaptation of *Girl's March* as part of an Impatiens concert, though he didn't mention his run-in with her old friend.

"Jealous about the concert, but the movie's a hard pass"

Unlike before, she didn't try to continue the conversation, but he figured she was still feeling skittish and didn't press her on it.

From there, the next few days were uneventful and ordinary. He went to work and carried out his duties with a practiced hand. The pro he was apprenticed to (for the "on-the-job training" he had mentioned to Akane) lectured him on acoustics. And after his shift ended, he talked to Fujino and a few other work buddies, then headed home on the last train, just like always.

On his day off, he had made plans to meet up with a female friend he hadn't seen in a while. They grabbed dinner, had some drinks, and fooled around. Then he headed home in the morning, said hello to his roommate as she was having breakfast, slept for a few hours, and went back to that same district.

This was his daily life—nothing special enough, in his eyes, to warrant mentioning to a friend. And since it was so ordinary that there was nothing to

explain, Akane didn't know about it, either. If he really was a fictional character like she claimed, surely his life wouldn't be this dull. Or maybe there was a book out there with a scene of a guy standing in his kitchen late at night smoking a cigarette under a ventilation fan, but if so, he couldn't possibly see why anyone would want to read it.

As he stood there, he thought of *Girl's March* and the young friend he hadn't seen in a while. In his mind, the two were inextricably linked.

Alone, he smiled softly to himself. In moments like these, when he was catching his breath after a hard night's work, he felt truly blessed to have the capacity to think of others. As he flicked ash into his ashtray, he wondered if she was feeling any better yet. Then he thought about their friendship...and then he thought about Ai and The Girl.

Through the haze of his fatigued mind, images and memories overlapped until at last, he had the smallest of epiphanies, if it could even be called one:

She doesn't even smoke like I do.

In the book, Ai only smoked during the most meaningful, pivotal scenes, whereas he considered himself a heavy smoker enslaved to an addiction. Her clothes were never described in detail, but at the very least, she probably didn't wear long-sleeved T-shirts and boho pants like a lazy bum. If Akane saw him now, would she still try to say he was identical to Ai?

Similar to the film adaptation, his mental image of the characters' physical traits and attire were totally different from Akane's. Wanting to understand her perspective, he had once searched online to find out how fans of the original book felt about the film. However, most—though of course, not all—of them said the adaptation did a great job at casting and costuming. In other words, the version that didn't line up with Akane's was widely accepted as canon.

Watching the movie, his honest impression was that the characters felt a bit too polished compared to their book counterparts. But even then, it seemed a more accurate portrayal than Akane's interpretation of Ai being exactly like him. Was she aware that her opinion was in the extreme minority?

"Ai, you've got an email from Mikocchan," a voice called from the living room. Wordlessly, he set his half-smoked cig in the ashtray and went to investigate.

When he walked in, Asahi held his phone out to him with one hand, a glass of sparkling wine in the other. "You should invite her over again."

"She's scared of you after that time you got drunk and bit her bicep."

Taking his phone from her, he went back to his cigarette in the kitchen. The email from Fujino read as follows:

"I forget, are you free tomorrow? My parents are having fancy meat shipped to my house so if you wanna have some, you know what to bring"

Before he could respond to this invitation, however, a follow-up email arrived.

"Sorry, I just saw on Twitter there's an Impatiens concert tomorrow! Swing by after if you want & I'll save some meat for you. Just make sure to bring booze!!"

Ai smiled, both at her kindness and her impatience. If Fujino had a heartbroken friend, she'd probably send them dozens of worried emails without even thinking about it.

He plucked the cigarette from the ashtray and slid it between his lips. Indeed, there was an Impatiens concert set to be held in that district tomorrow. For Julia and the rest of her group, it would be the final headlining concert of the year—and coincidentally, the music venue where he worked was closed that same day. So really, it was no wonder Fujino had come to the conclusion she had.

But Ai didn't have a ticket for tomorrow's concert. He'd originally made plans to do a small modeling gig instead, to help a friend in the fashion industry. As of yesterday, however, that friend had unfortunately canceled, and now the concert tickets were sold out. Thankfully there would be an official livestream, which he had thought he would end up watching alone, but now it seemed he wouldn't have to, and for that he was grateful.

"Let's watch the stream while we feast," he typed, skipping the full explanation. But before he could send it, an Incoming Call notif popped up.

Ai started to flick it away, but his thumb froze.

Slowly, purposefully, he blinked. Blinked again. Blinked a third time. Then he

took a drag of his cigarette, exhaled, set it in the ashtray, and finally picked up.

When he raised the phone to his ear, before he could say a word, he heard her voice.

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"Ai?"

"Uh huh." He nodded on reflex, though she couldn't see it.

"Sorry, I know this is sudden, but I wanted to ask you something."

"What's up?"
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Ai never lied. Nor did he say anything he didn't sincerely mean. To him, there was nothing more beautiful than living true to one's heart. And when he asked this question, he felt that heart spill from his lips.

For the briefest of moments, the ventilation fan seemed to get a little louder.

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"Ai..."
"Yeah?"
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"Do you still have my old clothes from back then?"

They went on to have a short conversation with no small talk, made arrangements, and ended the call. Over email, he sent her his current address. Then he set his phone at the sink in front of him and smoked his cigarette to the filter. He debated whether to light a second, but it felt like he was just using her as an excuse, so he decided against it. Then he went into the living room to tell his roommate.

"I've got someone coming over tomorrow."

"Who, Mikocchan? What a relief! I'm really not that scary, you know!"

A gleeful Asahi took a sip of her drink, giddy at the prospect of a pretty lady coming to visit. Alas, she was mistaken.

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"No."

"Huh? Then who?"

He didn't normally opt for dramatic pauses. It must have been the nerves.

"Gotou Julia."
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Asahi was on her way to bed at the time; he watched silently as she inadvertently sprayed booze all over the pajamas she was wearing. "After all this time?!" she choked.

But Ai had no answer for that.

Asahi debated whether to take the day off right up until her bedtime, but eventually concluded that she'd surely get another opportunity some other day, and went to work after all. Ai didn't normally see her off at the door, but he'd only slept for two hours before some small noise had woken him, and now he couldn't fall back asleep.

He endeavored to go about his day as usual. Before he knew it, the sun was setting, and the promised meetup time quickly rolled around. Two minutes went by with no sign of Julia. He started to wonder if she'd gotten cold feet, then scolded himself for jumping to conclusions.

The doorbell rang, and the intercom screen displayed a woman who by all accounts shouldn't have been standing there. Instead of buzzing her in, he walked to the door and opened it directly.

"Sorry to spring this on you."

She smiled, and contrary to his expectations, actually looked hesitant for once. He invited her in, then closed the door and went right to the staircase to show her to the room upstairs that they had turned into a walk-in closet.

"Is, er...your roommate at work?"

"Asahi? Yeah. Do you remember her?"

"Of course I do. Who could forget having their bicep bitten at a party?"

"She hasn't changed at all since then."

"Nor have you, it would seem."

"I'd say 'likewise,' but I don't actually know," he admitted honestly. In response, she offered only an evasive smile—an unpolished expression that would never appear onstage or in a magazine. It felt like the first time he'd seen her clearly in ages.

When they walked into the closet, Julia gasped in surprise. He gave her the same spiel he'd once given Akane, then lined up all the clothes she had requested. Most of them were brought over from when Ai moved in, and they were in oddly good condition despite having been left behind by their original owner. In addition, he also included some pieces in her size that the old her would have liked.

"Asahi's been wearing and repairing these, so they're not exactly the same, but..."

"That's wonderful. I should thank her."

"As for the shoes, I think you two are probably the same size. I'll show you later."

"Thank you for all this."

"No problem. Anything for a friend."

"Yeah..."

"...Okay, well, feel free to get changed in here. I'm gonna go downstairs and have a smoke. Holler if you need anything."

Behind him, as he headed down the stairs, he heard her thank him again. True to his word, he went into the living room and grabbed the pack of smokes he'd left on the coffee table. It was a comparatively nice, warm day outside considering the time of year, so he opened the window and sat down crosslegged on the floor.

As he gazed out at their tiny backyard, he exhaled the smoke upward. Asahi was the one who had found this rental house for them. Since they were both smokers, she had specifically looked for a place where the windows weren't right next to a neighbor, and times like these he found himself grateful for his friend's smart thinking.

By the time he finished his first cigarette, Julia still hadn't come downstairs, so he rose to his feet, closed the window, put the kettle on, and made some instant coffee. Then he sat down with his mug, sipping from it as he scrolled through social media on his phone. He wanted to know how the other side was faring, but there was no sign of any announcement from the official accounts.

They were probably hoping she could still make it in time. Ai felt similarly himself, deep down, and he wasn't even involved.

Around the time the contents of his mug had dwindled by half, he heard footsteps and creaking stairs headed in his direction. In walked a familiar sight from days gone by.

"How do I look?"

Julia was wearing a shy smile and a wine-red miniskirt, paired with an oversized black sweater under a girly white coat. Atop her head was an off-white beret, and from the skirt down, her legs were clad in a pair of sixty-denier tights that she must have brought from home.

"Very cute."

"That's a relief."

"I didn't know you still wore those glasses," he commented, pointing at the thin frames adorning her face. But she shook her head.

"My eyesight isn't that bad, so normally I don't bother. No contacts, either. Now that I'm wearing them again, it's making my vision all wonky."

"Then why put them on?"

"Well, I needed them to complete my old look."

"I guess you're right. Coffee?"

Out of politeness, he moved to stand up, but she stopped him. "No, that's all right. Thank you, though."

At her behest, he sat back down, then gestured to an empty chair. She took the seat across from him, as instructed.

"So."

"Hmm?"

"What now?"

Even with a friend he hadn't spoken to in person for several years, Ai didn't beat around the bush. Julia giggled, seemingly enjoying his forthrightness as a change of pace. "Good question."

"You don't have a plan?"

During that late-night phone call, she had asked for her old clothes and not a word more. In response, he explained that while some of it had been tossed out, he could offer substitutes, so he invited her to come over. He had seen the Twitter incident, but hadn't heard anything about what was going on behind the scenes.

At present, there were two and a half hours until the Impatiens concert was set to start—so why was she sitting here in front of him, clad in her old-fashioned style?

"Nope. Nor have I committed to quitting my job, either."

"Then you should probably show up. I mean, you could get fired for this, right?"

"Yeahhh..."

Be it on TV, radio, or live on stage, Gotou Julia would normally never drawl like that. It further drove home the reality that his friend was right in front of him.

She looked out the window, so he followed suit. The winter sun was already on its way out, and in the distance, a child could be heard crying.

If only I could stop time, Ai found himself wishing.

"You should just follow your heart, Julia."

"My heart, huh," she muttered, then fell quiet.

In place of a ticking clock, their breaths steadily inched them toward the pivotal moment of decision. But he felt the silence was itself a purposeful choice on her part, so he didn't rush her.

"All this time, I've never really thought about what my heart wants."

At this, his lip curled in a half-smirk. Of course, he didn't regard the last few years of her life with contempt or pity. "You sound like the protagonist of *Girl's March*."

"You've read it? Are you a bookworm now?"

"Nah. A friend recommended it, that's all."

Silence descended until he could hear their every breath once more. This time he was the first to move, sneaking a glance at his wristwatch. In a blink, fifteen minutes had passed while they were wallowing.

"Ai."

Had she misread the gesture as impatience? He started to curse himself, but then he saw the look in her eyes and realized he was wrong. "Have you made up your mind?"

"Yeah. Let's go have fun."

It wasn't clear what exactly she meant by that, but at the very least, he sensed she had decided to skip work for the day. "Sounds good. Where to?"

So when she unflinchingly said the name of the very district where she was already supposed to be tonight, it threw him for a loop. For the briefest of moments, he was at a loss for words.

"...Okay then. I have no idea where this is going, but if it's what you want, then I'm down."

When he struggled to understand something, he said so. And when he considered that he didn't *need* to understand it, he found he was able to take action. Right now, solving the inner workings of her heart wasn't nearly as important as granting the request of a friend he hadn't seen in years.

"Thank you."

Ai liked being the kind of guy who knew what his real priorities were. Upstairs in the closet room, he took his sweet time sculpting an outfit for a night out.

Unbeknownst to them as they left the house, however, a single announcement was cross-posted to all social media platforms.

Uemura Tatsuaki

TATSUAKI WAS FEELING isolated.

He had boldly infiltrated that Impatiens movie theater event to expose Julia's true nature, only for her to trip up of her own accord that same night. On the topic of her problematic tweet, the general opinion clearly leaned more toward his own for once. Even the most brainwashed fans were connecting the dots with her other behavior and washing their hands of her.

Normally he would have joined the growing trend, insulted Julia, and positioned himself as a champion for all those she had deceived, using it as a justification for his favorite method of stress relief...but he just couldn't get into it. The masses were starting to see something that only he and a select few comrades had been privy to thus far, and it made him feel ostracized, like he was in his classroom at school. These sheep latched on to whatever was thrown directly in their faces, whereas *he* had actually kept his eyes open and paid attention.

But obviously this line of thinking wasn't enough to make him recognize what was at the root of these emotions he felt, or else he would have stopped long ago.

Tatsuaki wanted to stand above the rest. For that purpose, he had searched far and wide for any information that was likely to put Julia at a disadvantage, but all he had ever found was either common knowledge or merely groundless rumors. Perhaps there was simply nothing left to find in her past.

He had already bought a ticket to the livestream of tonight's concert. Julia hadn't shown herself in public since the Twitter drama, and he sensed there was a good chance she would expose herself yet again. But when he arrived home from school and restlessly pulled out his phone, he found an alert from the official Impatiens account, whose Twitter notifications he had enabled.

"Due to circumstances beyond our control, tonight's concert will not feature Gotou Julia." In a thread, they explained that they were in contact with her, that there was no cause for concern, and that they would not be honoring any refunds over it. In regards to having wasted his money on an event Julia would no longer be a part of, Tatsuaki rapidly moved through the five stages of grief. Then, at last, he turned his attention to the most important wording: *circumstances beyond our control*. What could she have possibly done? If he could find out, it would bring him closer to the truth than anyone else.

The concept was, to him, a very convenient ray of hope.

Today's freshly filmed classroom footage would have to wait. He raced around the internet, digging for clues about what Julia was doing at that moment. Then, at long last, he found exactly one eyewitness account, though its credibility was extremely low. They claimed to have seen someone who looked like her in that very district, but she was dressed in a completely different style, so it "probably wasn't really her."

If he needed to, he could always watch the archive of the livestream later. Though it would surely prove fruitless, he was curious about this piece of intel, and so he decided to take a chance. He pulled on a beanie and stepped into his shoes, taking with him only the bare minimum.

It was—or at least it felt like—his only shot.

Takatsuki Sakuna

W HEN SAKUNA FIRST HEARD the name of their group, she had no idea what it meant. Then the producer who christened them taught her that it was the name of a flower.

Also known as *touch-me-nots*, these blooms symbolized vibrant individuality. That alone was enough to be a fitting idol group name in her eyes, but apparently it wasn't the flower's symbolic meaning that they were named for. When fully mature, its seed pods would explode at the slightest touch, sending its seeds flying. *That* was what management wished to see from them.

"It's not about your looks or your skills. We don't care if you cause a little trouble—we want stubborn fighters."

And so that same producer and the rest of the staff gathered up seven other girls in addition to Sakuna. Around the time they all finally met in person, she was shocked to learn that one of them had dropped out beforehand and another had immediately gotten a major haircut right afterward. She took this as a sign of the explosive days to come.

Over the years, as she came to learn more about each of the members—both on an individual level and as teammates—she started to see that the name Impatiens was actually *brilliant*. Not only did these girls seem like they might blow up at the slightest provocation, but they sent their seeds flying in all different directions. She also liked that the beautiful symbolism was just an added perk, as if to say "Yes, we're pretty, but that's not the point." It captured them perfectly.

As the leader of Impatiens, Sakuna proclaimed herself their biggest fan. She strongly admired and cherished each member's unique charms, but never imagined their individuality to be more vibrant than any other idol group's.

The venue had requested that tonight's pre-show be held *after* the performance, so the members had plenty of time to get to work. Five of the

seven were already in the green room when Mei walked in.

"You look amazing!" Sakuna shouted as soon as she laid eyes on her.

"You think so?! Thank you!"

The compliment sent Mei bouncing up and down. As of yesterday, she had changed her hairstyle from waist-length dark hair to a bleached wolf cut. While Sakuna had taken part in the image consultation beforehand, this was the first she'd seen of it in person, and when she suggested taking a selfie together to commemorate the occasion, Mei beamed from ear to ear.

Then, when she asked why no one else was saying anything, the other members complained that they couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"...Jul's kind of late, isn't she?" Ran asked, once the topic of Mei's haircut had petered out. Because she was normally so quiet, her words carried weight, and everyone in the room became conscious of the unnatural absence.

"Normally she shows up *ridiculously* early," said Towako, and everyone nodded.

Just then, someone's phone made an "incoming message" beep—it was Maki, who had forgotten to set her phone to vibrate. But as they would soon learn, the same message had been sent to everyone.

"Wait, what?"

Maki's reaction spoke for all of them. The unaccounted-for Gotou Julia had sent a message to their LINE group chat—"I can't make it tonight"—then left the group.

"Is...is this bad?!"

"Calm down, Mei. I'm gonna go talk to Shinogi-san real fast."

As the representative of their anxieties, Sakuna rose to her feet and left the room, striding briskly in the direction of the staff room. But she never made it that far, because she ended up bumping into Shinogi in the hall.

"Shinogi-san! I need to talk to you about Jul."

"Oh, perfect. I was just coming to speak to you about her."

They returned to the green room, where Shinogi explained to the confused group members more or less exactly what Sakuna had been planning to explain to her.

"Jul sent a LINE message to say she can't make it tonight. I tried asking her what's going on, but she hasn't replied. Does anyone know anything?"

Everyone shook their heads no.

"Not even you, Sakuna?"

"I haven't heard anything."

"I see. If she's sick or something, I'd like to know what her symptoms are, but she isn't picking up when I call."

"Would Jul really let a few symptoms stop her from showing up, though?" Ao pressed, and she certainly had a point.

"What if she got into an accident?"

"Then she wouldn't have been able to message us."

"The fact that she left the group is itself another message. She's fine, but can't come, and doesn't want to tell us why," Ran remarked. Sakuna didn't want her to be right, but at the same time, it did feel very in-character for Julia.

"I've asked someone to swing by her house, just in case," Shinogi informed them, and they all fell silent. There was no time for this—rehearsal would be starting soon. "Let's just do a regular run-through with the six of you, and Jul can join as soon as she gets here. But I need to go confirm it real quick, so everyone wait here for now."

"Shinogi-san!"

Before their manager could rush out of the room, Sakuna stopped her. Even if she didn't say this out loud, Shinogi had probably already anticipated it, and word would spread to the producer before long—but she felt it would mean more coming from a fellow group member.

"We should prepare ourselves in the event that Jul doesn't show."

"Starting now?" Maki asked, though she must have known the answer.

Sakuna was grateful for her incredulity.

"For the formation, we can probably use the one from when Ran got the flu."

Except in this case, they didn't have three days to prepare.

"What about the songs, though? Can we rehearse a no-Jul version of Danger and Loners starting right now?"

The full song titles were "Danger: Don't Touch" and "Let's Be Loners," respectively. Both were written by Julia, and she had large singing parts in each. Truth be told, all of them were surely thinking the exact same thing at this point.

Seven young women with seven vastly different personalities and skillsets. If they hadn't been assigned to the same group, they would never have thought so deeply about each other. In fact, the majority of them wouldn't have taken an interest in idol culture at all. But now they saw each other as professionals—as sisters-in-arms—and Sakuna knew she needed to express that on their behalf.

"After telling us she can't make it *and* leaving the LINE group, does anyone really think she's going to show up?" She could feel the room growing icy, so she turned to look at their trusty jokester Towako. "Well?"

"Why are you asking me?! Although...I doubt she would jerk us around like that. Worst-case scenario, we could leave Jul's parts instrumental-only, I suppose?"

As a group, it went against their principles to use anything pre-recorded.

"Even if Jul does come back, someone else might have an emergency later on down the line, so it couldn't hurt to have a plan in place," Sakuna told them. She knew they could tell she was hinting at the possibility that Julia might never return.

From there, the other staff rotated in as they continued their discussion. Sakuna's suggestion was intended to appeal to the higher-ups, so it was naturally accepted, and everyone who wasn't otherwise occupied switched gears to reassign Julia's singing parts.

As they worked, they heard from the employee who had gone to Julia's house that she wasn't there. Then, having heard the news, the producer rushed over from another artist's venue. With help from all the staff, they managed to slap together a new setlist. To give it a test run, the members all stripped out of their street clothes.

"Maybe it's a new storyline?" Maki murmured to herself as she got changed. No one responded, but now the question was on the table.

"What if it isn't, though? She's been dealing with Twitter drama... It's deleted now, but she mentioned quitting, right?"

Likewise, Mei's grave concerns went unanswered. No one knew the truth.

But Sakuna's beloved group did know how to lighten the mood.

"I'm just shocked Ao wasn't the first one to go," said Towako.

"Oh, like you're one to talk! The fans always said it'd be you!" Ao shouted back.

"Enough of the comedy routine. Let's go," Ran pressed quietly.

"Great, now Ran-neechan's mad at us!"

They were smiling, if only for show, and Sakuna was so proud of their fortitude.

She didn't know what had happened to Julia. Was it a storyline, or was it something else? Loath as she was to consider the possibility of a future in which the seventh member never came back, as a professional, she had no choice. But in case Julia needed even the slightest encouragement to find her way, Sakuna sent her a private message with the most sincere words she could manage, then headed off to rehearsal.

"I'm here for you, Jul."

As Impatiens continued their meteoric rise into the stratum known as "selling like hotcakes," the leader Sakuna never once felt it was because their vibrant individuality was more appealing than other idol groups. She knew someone with no interest in the culture would think they all looked and sounded the

exact same.

Of course, she was always ready to give it her all. She had worked hard to help create the ultimate performance that only Impatiens could replicate onstage, and she was confident it was a success. But that was just the baseline expectation. Any group would be asked to do the same. What the majority of people paid attention to—what generated profit for the agency and record label—was deeply tied to external elements beyond the girls' control.

Impatiens was a "major project," and so they were inundated with funding and marketing at a scale only big-name corporations were capable of. The veterans on the management team had a keen eye for the latest trends, and their vast network of connections provided a variety of benefits for the group. Famous artists wrote songs for them, popular bands wanted to compete with them...and that was just the tip of the iceberg. Even media outlets broadcast their songs in a variety of formats, and the more eyes and ears they reached, the more fans they garnered. People liked Impatiens so much that they told their friends, spreading the group's influence even further.

The group owed it all to the hard work, good taste, and passion of countless other people, the combination of which had miraculously produced their success. In short, while they had now grown to the point that their name alone was a selling point all over the country, the main reason for that could be summed up like so: They were lucky.

And Takatsuki Sakuna, leader of Impatiens, was deeply grateful for this. She wasn't trying to be modest. Because she loved pop idols, she knew *exactly* how critical the element of chance could be for any musician. With her own two eyes, she had seen groups oozing with talent and charm come to a premature end because of bad luck. She had seen hardworking girls shut out of their dream careers due to unfortunate circumstances. This was the real world, not a fantasy novel, and none of them could get this far merely by wishing hard enough—Sakuna felt it in her bones.

Of all the members of Impatiens, she was the one who dreamed most of being an idol. For that reason, she refused to humble herself or turn a blind eye to the treacherous path that would get her there. There was no dressing down the fact that other people had certain expectations of her. At the same time,

she genuinely loved the talent and hard work of her fellow members, and she had faith in the fans who shared both their dreams and their reality.

It would have been a different story if there were only five or six songs on the setlist, but this was a headlining concert with two full hours reserved just for them. Even if the lyric reassignment went perfectly, the fact of the matter was that this would not be a polished performance, and everyone was starting to realize that.

"I have a suggestion for Jul's parts."

All eyes were drawn to the hand raised into the air onstage. Among them were the authority figures that controlled the group's future. But she couldn't back down now. If she did, she'd be unfit to be called Takatsuki Sakuna, the heart of Impatiens.

"What if we asked her fans to help us?"

Gotou Julia

This was most certainly *not* a storyline. At the very least, Julia hadn't thought that far ahead. She was just afraid that everyone might prefer the version of her who walked a path she didn't take—that they would be happier if she went back to being the original Julia, the one she thought she'd long since discarded.

But the original Julia wouldn't have gone to some girl group's concert. Since she wasn't a pop star, she would have rather spent her free time with a friend. Nevertheless, she agonized over making that phone call until late into the night.

If she hadn't called, believe it or not, she might have walked onstage the next night as if nothing was wrong. But when she heard the voice on the other end of the line, everything she'd walled off over the past few years was suddenly set free.

"Aren't you cold? If you wanna add more layers, we could go shopping."

"I'm fine, thank you."

Though she hadn't seen him in years, Ai was just as protective as she remembered, and she was touched that he seemingly hadn't changed. She was starting to think she might really be able to go back to those days, if he wanted her to.

"So, what'll we do when we get there?" he asked as they were riding the subway.

Julia regarded this question seriously. She had spent so long only ever thinking of what she *needed* to do that it took her a moment to give voice to what she *wanted*. Luckily, Ai was willing to wait.

"I want some...nail polish."

After all that buildup, this rather mundane request must have caught him offguard, because his eyes widened.

"Remember when you gave me one a long time ago? I held onto it as a sort of

good-luck charm, but at this point it's clearly past its expiration date. So if you don't mind, I'd like you to get me another, even if it's a bargain brand. And I'll get you a gift in return."

"You still have that? Sure, I don't mind, if that's what you want."

"Thanks."

The whole time, he'd positioned himself so that the other passengers couldn't see her face, but personally, she didn't care if she was seen. On the contrary, if everyone was going to find out about her existing outside her narrative, then she wanted it to happen as soon as possible—hence why she had chosen a busy district as her destination. But Ai's overprotectiveness made her smile.

When he saw it, he smiled back. "What?"

It felt almost as though the years of being a pop star had never happened.

They arrived at the usual district, merged with the flowing crowd, and walked down a street she'd never taken. It took less than twenty minutes to find a cosmetics store and buy nail polish. Outside, they exchanged small paper gift bags containing the bottles they'd chosen for each other, then set off once more.

"Where to next?"

"Good question." Again, it took some time to answer, but eventually she figured out what she wanted. "I guess I'd like to see your workplace again after all these years."

"It's closed today. Some kind of inspection. But hey, you can come by anytime! The manager was just saying how we owe you for the free advertising."

"I see. Oh well." As she spoke, she realized she wasn't sure what exactly those words of disappointment were a response to. "Okay then, are any billiard halls still open? I kind of want to stop by."

For some reason, this surprised him even more than the nail polish suggestion. It wasn't something she felt obligated to comment on, but it would have been weird not to.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just...another friend invited me to do the same thing recently. Is it trendy with girls now or something?"

"I don't know about that. Personally, it's been so long since I did any non-work-related exercise that I think it'd be fun."

As Ai scratched his head over this coincidental similarity, he got in touch with a friend who ran a darts bar. Apparently they had a pool table there.

Walking into the dimly lit space, they found they practically had the whole place to themselves. Julia felt spoiled like a little kid all over again, but Ai explained that bars were always empty this early in the evening. As for his drinking buddy who ran the bar, he didn't seem to recognize Julia at all.

She ordered an iced coffee while Ai got a beer, and they had fun playing pool together for a while. In the past few years of industry parties, she'd always felt obligated to order green tea highballs to avoid coming off like a buzzkill, but in truth, she never cared for the taste of alcohol.

"You don't seem rusty at all."

"It's like riding a bicycle."

They played two games of nine-ball, both of which ended with Ai the victor. At one point Julia came close to winning, and though she regretted her mistakes, that was part of the fun. After they left the bar, Ai asked her yet again:

"Anything else?"

"It feels like I'm living out a story about crossing things off my bucket list."

"Yeah, you see it a lot in books and movies..."

"How would you know? You don't even like books or movies," she teased.

"I still have an idea of what they're like!" he shot back with a grin.

She fell into thought once again, searching for the next request she would make of him. But she knew that every last second of indolence that ticked by brought her closer to the concert's start time. She had left her smartphone back

at home, so she looked instead at her wristwatch. Yes, there was some part of her whose heart ached—but no part of her wanted to remain caught between opposing sides.

"Say, why don't we take some new *purikura* photos after all these years? I don't know what kind's popular with the teens these days, but I figure they're more or less all the same. Oh, and I'd like to go to a flower shop. I've never been able to buy flowers since it wouldn't match my image... What's wrong?"

"It's just...I went to *purikura* with that other friend of mine, too. Crazy coincidence, that's all. But hey, thanks to her, I know what the latest craze is."

"She sounds like a real go-getter."

"Yeah, well, I've got friends of all stripes."

"Classic Ai, all right."

"You're not talking about some other Ai, are you?"

"What other Ai?"

"Nobody. There's just a lot of folks with the same name, so I thought I'd ask."

Whenever she called someone by their name, her mind envisioned the way it was written, so she didn't really understand what he was saying.

After taking *purikura* pics at a nearby arcade, they stopped at the first flower shop they came to. As Julia ordered a simple bouquet to be delivered to her parents' house, Ai once again asked for her input.

"What now?"

Though it sounded similar to his past questions, she could feel it had a weight that the others had lacked. The concert would be starting soon.

"I really don't want to go to the concert right now."

"...Okay, well, don't blame me if you get fired," he sighed, with an exasperated smile that fit him like a glove: beautiful and overprotective and rough around the edges.

Then she realized that description also fit a certain someone else.

"You probably already know this if you've read it, but your vibe's kind of

similar to Ai from Girl's March."

She partly wanted to steer the conversation away from the concert—but the look on his face indicated that her randomly chosen topic had inadvertently explained her strange choice of outfit.

"That's what this is about, isn't it?"

"You knew all along?"

"No, that's not what I meant." His index finger pointed in her direction, but not in an accusatory way. "Let me guess. Everything you wanted to do today is the same shit they do in *Girl's March*, isn't it?"

She gave it some consideration, then replied with the same honesty he always offered her. "What are you talking about? I know there was a flower shop scene, but the rest of it?"

"It's not in the book?" Ai didn't try to hide his stunned expression. Like a fictional character, he was cartoonishly transparent. "Look, I don't know if there's actual scenes of it, but a friend of mine said you can interpret it like that. She specifically asked me to reenact the things they did together. So when you wanted to do all the same stuff, I figured maybe you were copying that, too."

"No, not at all. I was just saying whatever came to mind, so I'm afraid it's pure coincidence. Besides, I'd never claim to be the protagonist of a novel—that's ridiculous."

"If it really was all a coincidence, then maybe you're destined to be the protagonist."

"No, a protagonist would do it by choice." Just then, she realized: "Wait, is that why you were asking about 'some other Ai'?"

"Yeah, exactly. My friend's always talking about how similar I am to Ai from *Girl's March*. Not that I think she's right."

"Oh really. Well, I would agree that you're a bit like the book version."

"You sure ...?"

Charmed by the confusion and displeasure on his face, she found herself casually curious. And since she wasn't her pop star persona right now, she was

allowed to ask about anything that caught her interest.

"Say, I want to hear more about this friend of yours."

"Huh?"

"Tell me about her."

While she was away, someone else had spent time with him and come away with the same impression. As the lyricist of the film adaptation's theme song, Julia could only read the book through the lens of a pop star. And yet, someone outside that prison had somehow developed the same opinion of Ai—both the man and the character. Driven by faint surprise, mild jealousy, and the slightest camaraderie, she wanted to know more. Thus, it was her next request.

"Fine, but do you mind if I have a quick smoke?"

"Of course you can."

As far as she knew, this was the first time in world history that Impatiens would hold a performance without Gotou Julia. While she was huddled in the corner of a smoking area with a friend, coughing from the drag she bummed, the concert's start time quietly came and went.

Uemura Tatsuaki

AFTER IT WAS ANNOUNCED that Gotou Julia would be absent, social media naturally exploded with theories and suspicions. Was she sick? Was there an accident? Was it of her own volition? Since it was stated that they were in contact with her, fans could rest assured she wasn't in critical condition, at the very least. But there was another reason to be tense: the fact that they weren't willing to explain meant it was surely nothing good. And of course, some people took this opportunity to revel in *schadenfreude*.

"finally someone drops out Imaooo"

"So professional!"

"She was only there to appease the female minority anyway."

Tatsuaki didn't join in, but instead scanned quickly through the flow of incoming tweets. He was searching for eyewitness accounts of Julia.

"CALLED IT LOL"

"Ugh, I knew it."

Some, like these, tried to make themselves look omniscient.

"This was planned the whole time, and Julia's tweet was part of it. Why do you think they decided to livestream it? To milk your wallets after scaring you into thinking she's about to drop out. Oldest trick in the book."

The theories were so creative, they felt like something he could have posted himself, though they were more sloppily written. Even among the fans who were worried for Julia, over time the rumors became accepted as truth, and people began to raise concerns that they might lose their fave altogether. But it was the rest of Impatiens who reversed this negative spiral.

"I'm sorry the sudden announcement has you all so worried! As you know, tonight's concert will be performed by just the 6 of us. But to the fans who love Julia, whether you'll be there in person or watching the livestream, I have a request. Will you lend us your hearts and voices?"

This post from Takatsuki Sakuna was accompanied by a single photograph of an empty stage from the perspective of the audience. As usual with Impatiens concerts, there were seven mic stands—but this time, Julia's designated mic was turned to face the seats.

Having quickly caught on, the fans went nuts. "You want us to sing Julia's parts?!"

Following in Sakuna's wake, the other members began to post statements and photos of their own, but Tatsuaki ignored all the buzz. It was clear now that Impatiens hadn't given up on their seventh member, but at the same time, it reeked of the implication that Julia had gone rogue. Normally, he would have thrown this in their faces. Right now, however, he cared more about finding any tiny scrap of new information about her.

What made this course of action feel promising was that, amid all the discourse, sightings were slowly but surely increasing. This was a huge district full of people, and she couldn't hide from them. Of course, most were probably mistaken, since Julia was on everyone's minds at the moment. Women with pixie cuts, women wearing Julia's favored brands—hell, maybe some were actually just girly-looking guys. But Tatsuaki held out hope that one or two of these sightings were the real deal.

If he found her, he would take a photo and show the world the flaws no one but he could see. Envisioning that moment made his heart pump energy into his legs.

But obviously, finding her didn't prove that easy. And soon, it came time for the Impatiens concert to start.

Fans who entered the venue posted pics showing that one mic was indeed pointed toward the audience. And while the pre-show background music was normally a veritable mixtape of selections from the group members, this time it was all Impatiens's own hits. This generated various interpretations from fans and haters alike, but Tatsuaki paid it no mind. Phone in hand, he walked like he was combing every inch of the district. By exerting physical energy to achieve his goal, he didn't have to feel sorry for himself out in the cold.

Deep down, some part of him was ready to accept that his efforts would end

in vain. His mind hadn't processed this whatsoever, but subconsciously, what he truly cared about wasn't finding dirt on Julia. It was the process of passionately pursuing a single objective. The feeling of freedom this burning ardor afforded him was the quintessential teenage experience—or would be, perhaps, if it took a form that didn't hurt anyone, or in a world with its morals reversed.

And so he walked through the district for just under an hour with nothing to show for it. Reaching into the depths of his heart, he gathered up his bitter disappointment and let it unfurl outward. The concert would start any minute now. Checking the livestream on his phone, he started to wonder if his attention would be better spent listening for the other members to let something slip.

As a last-ditch effort, he decided to go to the music venue from that old video—not because there was any concrete proof, but simply because there was a chance Julia might be there. Thus, to reach the outer edge of the basin, he began to climb the hill.

The trees planted at the park up ahead cast shadows that threatened to engulf the whole district. In front of it stood the music venue, all by itself. It was his first time ever seeing it in person. Below the archway, he reached out to the gate and gave it a little push, but as circumstance would have it, they appeared to be closed today.

Naturally, he had no idea that this place employed the same guy who had hassled him twice previously. Giving up on this idea, he started to head back down the hill. But first, he popped in his Bluetooth earbuds, and pulled up the livestream on his phone. The screen still showed the Impatiens logo, but the chat was flooded with an endless stream of comments from viewers on standby. He slid his hand, still holding his phone, into his pocket and headed to the subway station.

Eventually the silence switched to the hum of dead air, then to murmurs from a crowd. Then their signature sound effects played, and cheers erupted. Tatsuaki stepped off to the side of the street to check the screen.

Beneath the glittering stage lights, the members of Impatiens walked out—and sure enough, Gotou Julia was nowhere to be seen.

Ukawa Ai

THOUGH IT WAS CLOSED for the day, the two decided to walk over to Ai's workplace regardless. They would pass Itobayashi Akane's bookstore on the way. Ai debated telling Julia, but then remembered that the two of them had already met, so he kept it to himself. After all, he wasn't sure if it was a privacy violation. As they waited at the intersection for the walk signal to change, he began to explain.

"We haven't been talking much lately, but she's a teenage girl in high school. First time we met, it was right around here. The way she tells it, she took one look at me and thought I was literally Ai from *Girl's March*, so she flagged me down."

"Wow, she *is* a go-getter," Julia replied, sounding impressed. Once upon a time, Ai himself had been surprised to learn that someone would bother reaching out to him without any ulterior motive.

As they crossed the street, they passed dozens of people, but none seemed to recognize Julia. Even if they knew of her, they'd surely never imagine a pop star like her could walk through town like it was no big deal—and that, in turn, made it a viable option. Thinking about it that way, perhaps Akane had *always* entertained the possibility of meeting a fictional character in real life.

"Tell me about it. Made me wonder what kinda kids they're raising these days. But when I actually talked to her, she seemed like a good egg, so I gave her my number."

"Your lack of boundaries is truly something, all right."

"Look, if she set off any red flags, I was gonna turn her over to the cops, okay?" Up ahead, he could see the yellow record store where he and Akane first met. "Anyway, she told me I had a lot in common with the other Ai—not just my looks or clothes, but a bunch of stuff. So she wanted to...reenact *Girl's March*, basically, by copying all the stuff Ai does with the main character. I didn't see any reason to say no, so I went along with it."

"How very romantic."

"You think so? I mean, all we did is buy nail polish, play pool, go to a flower shop... Maybe there were others too, but those are all the same ones you wanted to do. Oh, and take *purikura* pics." He remembered how overjoyed she was every time he accepted her invitations. "When you talk to her, though, it's clear she's just a normal kid. A normal girl with friends and a boyfriend. She goofs around like any girl her age—but she *is* a bit of an oddball, of course, since she thought I was a fictional character come to life."

"She sounds like she's easily influenced by the media she consumes."

"That, but cranked up to eleven. When we were playing pool, I got into a situation with these four college-age guys. They were being dicks, but I was like, 'Eh, forget it, I don't wanna drag this out.' But at some point this kid started picking a fight with them on my behalf."

"Oh god, what a troublemaker."

"Yeah. For a second, I thought maybe she had a short fuse. But she was halfway to tears, and it was so obvious she couldn't fight her way out of a paper bag. So I did whatever I could to de-escalate the situation, and when I talked to her about it later, she told me she was really scared. So I was like, 'Well then, don't start shit,' but she told me there was a special reason she needed to."

"Which was?"

To dodge an oncoming passerby, Ai briefly stepped away from Julia, then moved back in to resume the story. "She said the main character of *Girl's March* never let anyone talk trash about a friend."

"Uhhh..." Julia seemed to be thinking this over, so Ai continued.

"In other words, she was so dead-set on imitating *Girl's March* that she was willing to defy her better judgment and put herself in danger. That scared the shit out of me."

"That's...uh...wow."

"I think it's because I wasn't watching her at the time. Even a grade schooler who watches too many action movies has more sense than that!"

"She sounds wild, but..."

Yes, Ai already knew exactly why Julia looked so confused.

"...I don't remember any scene like that."

"Mm-hmm. I don't think there is a scene like that."

They made a left and headed up the hill. Out of consideration for Julia's high heels, Ai slowed his pace.

"She thinks she's identical to the main character of *Girl's March*, and she believes one day she'll change herself the same way. That's what keeps her going. I've never met anyone so obsessed with a novel in all my life, so it got me curious. Like, I don't read books normally, but I wanted to know why it drove her to pick fights and shit."

"Ah, yes, I was wondering what led you to that."

As they climbed the gentle slope, they passed by the bookstore; Ai peered inside, but Akane wasn't there. Or at the very least, he couldn't see her.

"Yeah, so I read it, and it scared me even more. Like you said, there was no scene about a fight. And there was a handful of other stuff she said was in the book that I never encountered at all. It doesn't even describe Ai's clothes or face."

"It's all very vague."

"Very. And on top of that, I was told Ai is a guy who presents like a woman. But no, she *is* a woman, right?"

"I believe so, yes. At the very least, a female actress plays her in the movie."

A loud group of five or six people was approaching up ahead, so the two of them stepped out of the way. For the most part, this district had no concept of quiet, which made it the perfect setting to gossip behind someone's back.

"At first I thought I had the wrong book, or that she was lying to me, but then I asked her about it. Turns out she wasn't lying or joking—she was dead serious. Supposedly it's just a matter of interpretation, although I notice none of the scenes she described were in the movie, either, except for Ai being a smoker."

"So she just has an uncommon interpretation?"

"I figure that's probably what it is. She said the hints of Ai being a guy are really subtle, and somehow she had a clear image of the character right from the first time she read the book. I guess the person she pictured was me."

"But she hadn't met you at that point, had she?"

"No, she said she read it way before they announced the film adaptation."

"Some kind of miraculous coincidence...?"

"Eh, maybe she got a glimpse of me somewhere. But really, it's not important."

"It's not?"

"I mean, yeah, I was surprised we each came away with such wildly different impressions, but as long as she doesn't mean any harm, then it doesn't matter."

"That's such a you thing to say."

"Is it? Even if she did mean harm, it's not like it actually hurt. I'm more concerned about her saying she's identical to The Girl and wanting to change herself."

Whenever Ai talked about a friend, he envisioned their face at the same time. He could see Akane clearly—her goofy grin, her wide-eyed surprise, her scowl, her pout. But his opinion of the book hadn't changed since the day he told it to her, and now he decided to relay it to Julia as well.

"The protagonist of *Girl's March* is extremely two-faced, constantly thinking about how to manipulate people into doing what she wants. You get the sense she's never had a normal friendship before, you know?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"I know the rest of the story is about how meeting Ai changes her for the better, but I mean...my friend really doesn't strike me as the two-faced type. I genuinely believe she's a good person."

"Oh?"

"For one thing, she's never tried to manipulate me. I've seen her fret over a

friend's lack of spine. And when I brought her to my work, she was very polite to the staff—in fact, one time, she showed up when I wasn't there and had a fun chat with my coworker. So the impression I have is that she's sweet, friendly, and *at most* a little weird. Sure, maybe it's just the version I see, but I mean...no one can disguise every single aspect of who they are! Why would she need to?"

Julia, not knowing Akane personally, didn't respond. He continued.

"The way I see it, her personality isn't something she should be stressed over. She just doesn't seem like a bad person." He simply wasn't the kind of person to lie to himself. "So I reassured her that she's nothing like The Girl, because I felt she deserved to hear it."

"...What?"

"I was like, 'Maybe instead of pretending to be a fictional character, you should just let people see the real you.' What's the matter, Julia?"

"You told her that?"

"Huh? Yeah, I did. She was like, 'Ai would never say that!'—referring to the character, of course, not me. But I'm a real person! *Obviously* I'm not gonna be identical to some made-up character in a story!"

"Ai."

They passed by a general store, where bright light streamed out through glass windows. There, Julia came to a sudden stop. He followed suit, turning to look at her as she stood a few paces behind him. Then, failing to parse her expression, he frowned. "Julia?"

It didn't make sense. Why did she look like she was in agony?

At the sound of her name, she opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, struggling to gather her thoughts atop her tongue, until at last a trembling voice rolled out from behind her lips and teeth.

"You can't do that."

Even then, he still couldn't get a read on what she was feeling.

Gotou Julia

Julia couldn't Quite decide if it was sympathy, pity, or guilt.

"Was that when she stopped messaging you?"

"Yeah. I don't have all the details, but I hear she's going through a lot right now, so I wanted to give her space," Ai nodded, as if there was nothing to worry about.

Her heart ached as she imagined the emotional reaction of a teenage girl she didn't know. It must have felt so isolating—so *invalidating*.

"Look, you're a nice guy, but..."

Even Julia wasn't quite sure what sentiment was threatening to spill from her lips. But she could tell it wasn't her place to say something, particularly to someone she hadn't seen in years, so she held it back. Still, her compassion for the teenager weighed heavily.

The girl was probably just invested in her own narrative. Believing that she was part of a story, that she would one day change, was likely what kept her together. Julia would know, after all—she had been there herself.

"But?"

"...You need to work on your tact."

"Yeah, I definitely do."

"What's she up to these days?"

"Dunno. Like I said, we haven't talked much. Maybe it was something I said."

Ai hadn't changed a bit; he still wore his worries openly. While she envied his ability to approach his friendships with such sincerity, it could be incredibly cruel.

"Okay, this is just my personal interpretation, so I want you to treat it the same as her 'Ai is a guy' theory."

"Sure thing."

Then, after a moment of consideration, Julia chose not to choose her words.

"That girl probably wasn't serious about being friends with you."

Even his look of shock was Ai through and through. "I wouldn't go that far!"

"The way I see it, she *is* on some level a two-faced person who thinks about how to manipulate people and doesn't know how to forge real relationships. To what degree, I couldn't say. But she recognizes this about herself and wants to change, so she desperately self-inserts into someone who managed to break free: the main character of *Girl's March*. If I'm right about this, then it's a struggle only she understands, and it doesn't help her to have other people say she's wrong."

She was talking about a stranger, but she could almost trick herself into thinking she was describing herself.

"Wow...I never considered that..."

Even when his behavior was criticized by someone who wasn't there to see it, Ai could accept her opinion as reasonable without getting upset. He'd lived his whole life embracing this as a valid facet of his personality. Confronted with it for the first time in a long while, Julia was dying to reach out to the mystery girl and say:

How in the world is he so transparent, unlike you or me? How does one go through life without ever doubting or hating themselves? I suspect that's exactly what people like us have always yearned for.

"If I ever meet her, I'll have to apologize on your behalf."

"...Actually, I'm kinda worried about her."

Assuming Julia's theory was right, it was hard to say whether the girl would be capable of bouncing back.

"See, I heard she broke up with her boyfriend."

"She told you that?"

"No, I ran into a friend of hers the other day. Come to think of it, he

mentioned something else... What was it again ...?"

His contemplative expression was among her favorites. It afforded her a sense of terror and thrill, like he was about to make the first fold on a crisp sheet of origami paper.

"Ah, now I remember. He said she's been acting out, arguing with a teacher, skipping out on work, and...what was the rest? Right, she stopped wearing her glasses... Oh, and she randomly started talking to the biggest loser in class, or something? He said 'I don't know what inspired her.' And I agree, her behavior does sound a—"

"Wait."

How long had it been since she last interrupted someone who was speaking? Julia couldn't even remember.

"What?"

Prior to becoming a pop star, back when she could interact with people as her genuine self without constantly thinking about PR spin, she was always the type to let him or her other friends finish their sentences. What compelled her to go against her own nature was a prick of dread so deeply chilling, she knew it couldn't wait.

"That's not good." In her panic, her first words were a statement of fact that needed no agreement. By the next set, her brain had finally caught up with her mouth. "She might still be reenacting *Girl's March* all by herself."

Ai reacted with unvarnished confusion, likely a perfect match to the emotion he felt on the inside. "I thought maybe that was the case, but like with the fight I mentioned earlier, there's no scene that corresponds to it."

"No, there might be."

In the process of writing those lyrics, Julia had read the source material over and over. Now, she recalled the story as images in her mind's eye.

"The way I pictured it, what The Girl stops wearing are barrettes on her bangs, the person she argues with is a middle-aged neighbor lady who she asks for directions, the 'work' she skips is a daily household chore she does for her

family, and the person she randomly talks to is her male childhood friend. But this girl might have interpreted it differently."

"I think your interpretation is pretty close to mine."

"Do you remember the part near the end where The Girl starts seeking out more and more changes?"

"That's right before the climax, isn't it?"

"That's not good!"

Overwhelmed by the urgency in her voice, Ai started to take a drag of a cigarette, only to quickly realize he wasn't holding one. "You think she's gonna go all the way?"

"Yes!"

"That's ridiculous."

"The only reason the protagonist survives at the end of *Girl's March* is because Ai's with her! You need to go find that girl, now. She could be right here in town today. The book describes the setting as 'a district where people gather,' and the day as 'a day where everyone prays for dignity for all mankind, if only to keep up appearances,' and today—"

"Listen to me, Julia."

This time it was his turn to interrupt. This was unusual for him too, unless the years apart had changed his conversational rhythm. From his slow cadence, she could tell he was trying to soothe her panic, so she took a deep breath. Alas, it didn't work, and her shoulders quavered. What if something was about to happen to the girl?

"I'm gonna be brutally honest about how I feel right now."

When are you not? she wondered silently.

"This is just some stupid book we're talking about."

She nodded. "True."

"I mean, maybe I shouldn't have said stupid. My point is, it's not real life, and no amount of imitation can change that."

"But your friend has been living her whole life that way, correct?" "Yeah."

Gazing into her eyes, Ai took a long, deep breath, then exhaled. She suspected he was debating whether it was safe to speak his mind. But she knew it went against his code of ethics to keep that sort of thing hidden.

"That changes nothing." As always, Ai was honest to a fault: "Attempting suicide to pretend you're the protagonist has gotta be the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Her ears picked up every last word. She sensed in him both discomfort at the prospect of a friend's death *and* the courage to take accountability for his statement.

"It's fiction. It's made-up! You wanna use it as moral support, knock yourself out, but the second you let it consume your life, something's wrong with you!"

Indeed, it wasn't healthy. But while she shared his view, she felt a bit differently.

"I agree, but to be clear, we don't know what her life is like." It was a question Julia herself had continued to wrestle with, even after falling into the abyss. She wasn't sure what her *own* life was, let alone the life of some high schooler she'd never met. "So we can't say for sure that she's wrong."

That was why people did their best to imagine. And Julia was no exception to this.

What did the girl see when she was cornered, standing on the edge of a cliff? Perhaps it was something like this.

Standing in the middle of a chilly street, she should have been able to feel the bite of the wintry wind, the joy of moments spent with local friends and comrades, the taste of the food in front of her—and yet everything outside her storyline rang hollow. But Ai was right: her body was here in the real world, and this fact could never be reconciled with her narrative, and the public would only make a record of that which they could observe, and over time those little records became like a second skin, and one would think that tearing it away

would reveal her pure essence, but at its root was a human heart with its own values, and since it didn't seem fit to show the public, she did everything she could to hide its shape—

Once again, though she was supposed to be thinking about the other girl, Julia had at some point started to picture herself as she was preparing to call Ai last night. Where exactly was she standing in that moment? Was it the realm of the real Gotou Julia or the one from the storyline? She was as clueless about her own truth as she was about the girl's.

If she kept mulling it over, would she eventually find the answer? Would her train of thought go down the right path? What if there was no answer, but instead an endless fog of ambiguity, and everyone was allowed to describe where they stood however they saw fit? It would be both true and a falsehood, real and fake, inner self and outer persona...

"Ai."

Just then, she looked down at her palm. It was the strangest sensation—like the world had just come into focus for the first time in years, and not because she was finally wearing her glasses. She contemplated its significance, curled her fingers as if to hold on tight, and looked once more into Ai's eyes.

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"I want you to go to her."
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"Julia..."

"Please."

Defeated, he pulled his smartphone from his pocket. Each movement was graceful, but didn't strike her as godly, the way it used to. Instead, it had become endearing. And she knew this emotion she felt would only make the choice ahead all the more painful.

"If you insist, I'll try to get in touch with her. What's your plan?"

"I..." Julia hesitated. If he asked her to join the search, believe it or not, she might have casually tagged along.

But that was when she heard a voice.

Uemura Tatsuaki

TATSUAKI HAD FOUND SOMEONE, all right, but it wasn't Gotou Julia.

Listening to the concert livestream through his earbuds, Tatsuaki was headed to the subway station. As with any real-world location—though not on the internet, of course—he made the utmost effort to avoid bumping into anyone, all the while silently insulting the fashion or physical appearance of everyone he passed. Redistributing the same negative energy he suspected his classmates directed at him made him feel in control.

Before long, Itobayashi Akane's workplace came into view. He didn't know if she was scheduled today, but he contemplated walking over with his camera at the ready nonetheless, just in case.

That was where he saw a man standing at the entrance, peering inside.

Like a child who could pick out their least favorite vegetable hidden in any dish, Tatsuaki recognized him instantly as the weird crossdresser, even in the dark. He quickly slowed his pace, then ducked into the shadows behind a building to avoid detection. The man appeared to be headed in his direction, so Tatsuaki figured he needed only wait for him to pass by.

Sure enough, the guy walked right past, chatting with his companion. A single glimpse of his face was enough to remind him just how beautiful he was, and Tatsuaki nearly started cursing Akane all over again for treating people like accessories. But when he saw the *other* person's face, those thoughts came crashing to a halt.

At first, he thought he was seeing things; meanwhile, the pair kept on walking. Before he could fully process his objective, he pulled the camera out of his shoulder bag, powered it on, and pointed it at their retreating backs. Then he started trailing them at a distance. Realizing he might get the chance to overhear their conversation, he hastily took his earbuds out and stuffed them into his pocket.

This was exactly what he was looking for, and yet he couldn't believe his eyes.

The crossdresser's companion had a face that looked like Gotou Julia's. But as he studied her from behind, he realized her clothes were nothing like anything Julia had ever worn in public. Had he been mistaken? Or was there some reason she was walking around here dressed like that? To find out, he matched his pace to theirs.

Some time later, the man suddenly turned around, giving Tatsuaki a small heart attack. Thankfully, there was still a considerable distance between them, and he hastily ducked into the nearest store. After a pointless lap around the shelves, he walked back out to get another look at them. Luckily, they didn't seem to have noticed him; they were speaking face-to-face, though he couldn't hear the details from here.

Burning with a sense of purpose, he thought quickly. If he wanted a second look at this woman who could potentially be Julia, he'd need a new plan. Gripping his camera, he vowed to his blazing heart that he would be the one to find the truth.

When he stepped away from the storefront, head tilted downward to conceal his face, the two were still facing each other. It seemed they weren't planning to move anytime soon. As he approached, he looked up to check multiple times, but the man was focused solely on his companion.

Each faltering footstep brought Tatsuaki closer and closer. As the gap closed completely, his heart began to race. Was he lucky? Did the guy just happen to have tunnel vision? Or had he actually noticed, but simply chosen not to address Tatsuaki directly? He couldn't tell, but either way his worst fears never manifested. He was in their proximity and nothing bad had happened.

Discreetly, he let out a small breath. He couldn't back down from this. As he walked past them, he casually glanced over his shoulder to see the woman's face from behind the man. The instant he caught sight of her expression, his suspicions and hopes fell into sync, and his heart exploded through his mouth.

"Jul!"

No amount of regret would take it back. Amid the hustle and bustle, his voice was heard by the two people he least wanted to hear it.

The man whirled around and spotted Tatsuaki instantly. "It's you!"

But Tatsuaki didn't meet his gaze. He was looking at none other than Gotou Julia, dressed in a wildly out-of-character outfit. Then she blinked back at him, and in that split-second, he alone bore witness to the precise moment that he knew on an instinctive level could only be described as *her eyes lighting up like fireworks*.

"Do you know what's going on at the concert?"

Her sudden question seemed to disregard everything happening around them. His gun-shy feet froze in place.

But of course, if he was at all capable of responding gracefully in these situations, then he wouldn't have had such a poor relationship with Akane and his other classmates.

"Th-the concert?"

"Yeah, I was wondering how everyone's doing."

"Everyone?"

Though he kept parroting her words back to her, he understood perfectly well what she was talking about. After all, he had seen entirely too much not to know exactly what she meant whenever she used that word.

Given more time, Tatsuaki might have dug up some sarcastic insult to fling her way. But he didn't have a response at the ready. Before he could process what he was doing, he pulled his smartphone from his pocket, walked forward a few steps, and held it out to her. Onscreen, the livestream was playing on a browser tab he had left open.

It wasn't until after she took it from him that the regret finally kicked in. What the hell am I doing?

Whenever his anxiety got the better of him in social situations, he had a habit of offering additional information in an attempt to maintain control of the conversation. Thus, before Julia could unmute the video herself, he decided he would tell her directly, as if it would give him an even slightly greater advantage. Though he wouldn't gain more than a paltry few seconds of authority, to him it was simply how communication worked.

"Everyone's singing."

At that moment, Tatsuaki had yet to consider that a nobody like him could be responsible for altering someone's entire future with a single sentence.

Takatsuki Sakuna

A FEW MINUTES PRIOR to the start of the show, Sakuna was standing backstage, watching the video feed of the packed venue on a monitor and thinking about a conversation she'd had with the producer a few years back. Then the man in question just so happened to walk past with a hard look on his face, so she flagged him down.

"You sure got what you wanted, huh? Stubborn fighters who cause trouble?"

He paused for a few seconds to think, then let out a sigh. "If I could go back in time, I'd punch myself." And with that, he walked off somewhere to give instructions to the other staff.

After that, Sakuna called over all the other group members and had them form a circle, like always. For as long as time permitted, she mulled over what to say to these five girls who were clearly far more nervous than normal. Ultimately, her first words were accompanied by a loud, melodramatic sigh.

"Impatiens really is just another dime-a-dozen girl group, isn't it?"

The others looked at her in shock; after a beat, Ao let a snicker slip.

"Ao thinks she's hot shit, but she's a nobody."

As the girl in question cackled out loud, Sakuna's gaze shifted clockwise to Towako.

"Towako doesn't even want to be an idol, so why doesn't she quit?"

"Of all the times to bully us, you chose right now?!"

Next: Ran.

"Ran's above-average looks don't cover up her below-average talent."

"You could have put it more nicely."

Next: Maki.

"As for Maki, sometimes I really wish she'd keep her stupid mouth shut."

"Harsh! Where did that come from?!"

Next: Mei.

"And Mei's so naïve, it's actually embarrassing to watch."

"That's not true!"

Then, before anyone could get sincerely hurt, Sakuna confidently pointed directly at herself. "But the one this group needs least of all is the leader. She's so fake, it makes me sick."

At this, everyone smiled, and she gestured for everyone to put their arms around each other's shoulders, tightening the circle till it was even smaller than usual.

"We've all heard the trash they talk about us, haven't we?"

The others nodded.

"And they're probably gonna say more after tonight. But even if they're 100 percent right about us, it doesn't matter."

Times like these, in which she had their full attention, were moments Sakuna dearly cherished.

"Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never hurt us. As always, we've got one shot at this, with or without Jul. So let's have fun with it!"

"YEAH!" the others shouted in unison. Maybe they didn't care if the audience heard them. They exchanged high fives until their palms hurt, and silently, Sakuna vowed to give Julia her own little trash-talk as soon as she came back.

Then it came time to start the show. The livestream was already up and running.

The dimming lights. The explosive sound effects. The audible cheers. The high-fives with the staff along the path to the stage. The rustling costumes. The hard floor. The air, trembling independent of sound.

She had experienced this moment dozens of times, but tonight, her heart raced faster than she'd ever felt it.

Normally, the seven members would line up in front of their corresponding

mic stands, strike their signature poses, and grab their mics. Then they'd move the mic stands behind them, and when the sound effects faded out, the intro to the first song would play and the concert would begin.

But tonight, one mic stand remained, facing the audience. The sound effects faded, but the first song had yet to start. In the silence, the lights came up, and Sakuna raised her mic to her lips.

"Gotou Julia will not be part of tonight's concert."

The lack of sound was almost chilling.

"I am truly sorry to all those of you who were looking forward to seeing her, and I know this might be presumptuous, but we have a favor to ask. If you love Jul, we want you to lend us your voice and fill her absence with your heart and soul. We believe in you."

Without waiting for the crowd to respond, the opening notes began to play over the loudspeakers. This song was a fan favorite from the early days of Impatiens's formation, and Julia's solo was located right after the first chorus.

The intro passed, and the A-melody transitioned into the B-melody. Sakuna sang and danced her heart out, just like she always did. She could hear the crowd chanting loud and clear. And then it came time for the chorus.

During the first line of Julia's solo, all Sakuna heard was the instrumental over the speakers and the sound of her own heartbeat.

But a second later, she sensed something else. Two seconds later, she saw dozens of faces all jostled together, their mouths open wide. And three seconds later, she envisioned herself consumed by their swelling passion, until eventually, she felt it mix with her own.

For Sakuna, this moment was not solely resonance, or solely gratitude, or solely impulse, but all those things combined, and that meant much more to her than having a fandom that loved Takatsuki Sakuna of Impatiens. This, she felt, was what she lived for: to hold a dream in her heart, even in a world where to do so ran counter to her own survival.

She moved her lips away from the mic, and it slipped out.

"See that? It's amazing what love can do!"			

Gotou Julia

THANK YOU," Julia told the boy as she handed his phone back. Then she looked over at Ai standing on the sidelines, and their eyes met. "Ai?" she called to him.

He nodded wordlessly, perhaps because the boy was still standing there.

"I want you to go find the girl."

In response, he shot a quick glance at the boy, then back to Julia. "Okay. If you want, you could wait for me somewhere..."

"I won't," she replied flatly.

He nodded several times in contemplation. Each nod forced the air out of her chest until she could scarcely breathe, but she intended to endure it.

"In that case, you could contact me if something comes up..."

"I won't."

In a split-second, she both anticipated and braced herself for the pain that was sure to come. Even then, she never imagined it would hit so hard. Still, she knew she needed to tell him.

"I'm sorry, Ai, but you don't need to wait for me. Or contact me."

She knew he was the type of person who never questioned the sincerity of a friend. He wouldn't suspect her of lying, and even if she was outright deceiving him, he wouldn't cross that bridge until he came to it. As a result, her next words held more meaning than anything she had ever said to anyone else.

"This is where we say goodbye."

All she did was take a step back—and yet, he immediately stepped forward to grab her by the arm, as if she was standing on the edge of a cliff. But she knew better now. There was no cliff. There was only the fog of ambiguity, within which not even she could predict where her next step might lead.

At this point, Ai might have completely forgotten about the dumbfounded boy standing off to the side. His sights were entirely set on the dear friend in front of him, and his gaze was so direct that her resolve wavered as she began to question whether she was actually capable of leaving his kindness behind.

"What's going—?"

"I was using you, Ai." As his grip weakened, she took another step back, and his fingers slid down her arm. "I only got in touch with you so I could figure myself out. You've been so nice to me, but when I thought about how I could get fired, and all these years could go to waste, and it could mean the death of Gotou Julia, I realized it's not you I want to be with. And you shouldn't have to wait even a single night for someone like that."

He listened to each and every word—accepted them, chewed them, swallowed them whole. As he held her gaze, his thin lips parted, as if some had caught in his throat.

"If not me, then who?"

"Everyone."

"The girls in your group?"

Though she knew it wasn't an appropriate time, Julia couldn't help but laugh. "Of course not."

"Okay then..." Without blinking, he took a deep breath, then exhaled. "Is this what your heart wants?"

"I don't know. I've thought about it, but I suspect I've never actually known what my heart wants. And right now, I want to keep living in that ambiguity."

His grip left her arm. For a moment, he stood there hanging his head. Then he raised a hand to his mouth.

"[..."

As she watched his face, waiting for the words to come, she clearly saw the change in him. The hand at his mouth slid down to his neck to scratch an itch, and then his lips curled into a sincere smile, and she knew his reaction was genuine.

"I wasn't planning to just *sit around*, y'know. But if you're asking me not to, then I won't. I won't think of you as a friend, and I won't contact you. But...if we run into each other someday...let's talk then."

She knew she was a hypocrite—she understood that full well. And she should have known Ai wasn't the type to lie. But in that moment, her heart was a two-tone gradient of praying he wasn't and wishing he was. In the fog of ambiguity, there was no telling which was which.

"I'll always be your fan."

Nevertheless, it was only polite to accept his words as truth and respond with some manner of sincerity in kind, no matter how ambiguous.

"Thanks. If I get the chance to stand onstage again, I'll give my coolest performance yet, so I hope you look forward to it."

He nodded, but the look in his eyes was distant, as if he had already moved past the conversation—as if she was no longer standing right in front of him.

"Welp, guess I'd better go save the girl."

With that, he turned to look at the boy rooted to the spot beside him. Right as Julia was wondering what he was about to do, however, he tossed out an unexpected question: "Hey, sorry to ask—do you know where I can find Itobayashi Akane?"

"Huh? Why her?"

"Wait, you two know each other?" Julia cut in, alarmed. Neither of them nodded.

"I wouldn't go that far," the boy replied, frowning evasively.

"Doesn't matter. Do you know what she's up to?" Ai pressed.

"What? No. Why would I?"

"Okay then, maybe I'd better start with a phone call."

Watching this exchange, Julia had an idea. It was incredibly selfish, and completely out of line with the professionalism she'd committed to thus far, but...in order to make peace with her future self, and all the people who loved

her regardless, she felt it was something she needed to do.

"Hey, you. If you don't have any plans, I have a favor to ask."

The boy flinched hard when she addressed him, and she wondered which Gotou Julia he was seeing when he looked at her. She was still a bit scared to know.

Uemura Tatsuaki

SORRY, I DON'T MEAN to spring this on you, but...you know who I am, right? You called me Jul."

"Well, yeah..."

"Okay, great. I promise this won't take too long!"

Tatsuaki matched pace with Gotou Julia as she sped down the street. In his hands, his smartphone camera was trained on her...and at her own request, no less. One minute she was talking to that crossdresser guy, and then suddenly it turned into *this*? He didn't understand what was going on—it was all so surreal, his brain couldn't keep up, and at this point he was more or less on autopilot.

For so long, he had seen her as the enemy. And now she was right in front of him. He was close enough to hit her with every insult he'd built up over the years—or hit her in the literal sense, if he decided to disregard the law and his own code of ethics. But she had chosen *him* of all people to be her cameraman. She wanted *him* to film her.

Then she began to talk to the camera.

"This may seem rather out of the blue, but I actually don't especially like being a pop star," she explained, her heels clacking against the asphalt. "I don't care about other idols, unless they're selling more than we are, in which case I hate them. In fact, I wish the other artists signed to our label would fuck off to make more room for us." As he reeled from this sudden confession, she shot him a smile and continued, "I also never liked *kaiju* at all. I just thought it would add something to my persona."

This was exactly what he had always wanted: the secrets she'd kept hidden from the public.

"So I studied my ass off in case any real fans came to talk to me about them. Over time, I've started to understand why they're so popular."

He could almost delude himself into thinking it was his activism that had

finally forced the truth out of her.

"I also don't like any of the other members. I don't *hate* them, but I've never once felt fond of them, I guess? I only acted like I cared because I knew it would make everyone happy. Although...one girl in particular I might've really hated if this was an alternate universe where we met some other way. But this isn't that universe, so it's all good. Here's a special message just for you, Leader: quit acting like you're the only one who was born to do this. But then again, I respect that about you."

She kept walking while looking straight into the camera. Her destination: the place where Gotou Julia was meant to be.

"These days, I pretty much only meet people through my work. But before I joined Impatiens, I had friends and even a special someone. Then I gave up on ever seeing them again, and I broke up with my sweetheart. In a line of work where the goal is to make people like you, it felt wrong not to put the fans first."

Each step brought her closer to the finish line.

This should have been the day Tatsuaki had always dreamed of. So much of his time had been spent hunting down her most careless remarks and criticizing her for them. And now, for some reason he couldn't possibly fathom, she was disemboweling her deepest truths free from the idol veneer. Desperately, he wracked his brain for some way to take advantage of the situation, but nothing came to mind. It was all too much.

"Before my debut, this was how I liked to dress. Girly, right? Back in those days, I was always in a miniskirt. But when you think about Gotou Julia as a concept, it's the pop star persona that suits me the best, isn't it? Am I right?"

When she posed this question to the camera, Tatsuaki nodded on reflex. Then the crosswalk light turned green, and they headed up the hill.

"I don't really care about my haters or whatever."

At this, a different heart inside him began to quaver.

"But I'm always obsessing over everyone who likes me. It may not seem like it, but every last word you say has an impact on me, pushing me forward, pushing me back." At the word *you*, she pointed at the camera lens—at the people who, unlike Tatsuaki, actually supported Gotou Julia. "And right now, I feel so blessed because of it. I'm standing on this ambiguous threshold where it's up to everyone else whether I live or die, and I don't know if I even like myself, but I *am* proud of what I've achieved."

Any minute now, they would arrive at the venue. Along the way, they encountered several passersby who seemed to recognize her; Tatsuaki suspected their shouts probably made it into the video.

"The same can be said of my relationship with everyone. This, too, is something I think will always be left ambiguous—musician and fan, idol and otaku, lover and loved, the grateful and the grateful-for, the sponsor and the sponsored...friends, comrades, partners in crime. In my eyes, we're all of those things mixed together, and I embrace it."

At long last, the building containing the live music venue had come into view.

"Was there anything else I wanted to say? Oh yeah—I can't stand producers. They only ever think about how to minimize their own risk. Very helpful for my career, though! But yeah, I genuinely like tomatoes and tomato juice. I also enjoy giving it my all onstage. I like singing, and I like dancing." Arriving at the front of the building, he thought for sure this would be where they parted ways, but instead she looked directly into his eyes and said, "Just a few more steps, okay?"

Then she dashed straight past the employee standing guard at the stairs near the entrance. Tatsuaki followed suit, lest she leave him behind. Fortunately, the employee seemed too stunned by the sight of Julia to even notice him.

"Performer and staff, coming through! I'll explain everything later!" she shouted as she bolted up the stairs.

At the top of the landing was a spacious floor with a reception table, in front of which stood several more employees, all with looks of shock on their faces. When she saw this, she looked over her shoulder at Tatsuaki and chuckled—not arrogantly or defiantly, but mischievously, as if enjoying a little troublemaking with a friend.

"Well, we made it to the goal."

Though he was completely out of breath, he readjusted his grip on the camera, making sure not to miss a single moment. But Julia hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Out of everything I said just now, which do you think is the real me and which is the storyline I made up?"

Tatsuaki had no answer to this. Unsure what to do with those few seconds, he looked not at the camera, but at her face directly. Their eyes met.

"Thanks for filming. I just wanted to leave some proof behind, somewhere. Is it cool if I let you decide what to do with the footage? You can upload it or forget it, whichever."

It almost sounded as though she knew about everything he'd been doing. Normally he would have felt attacked, then converted his disgust into pleasure. But now that the perfect opportunity had been handed to him, what first stirred to life within him was not discomfort at a pop star who was flawed like any human, but a part of him he thought had long since died—the part that liked her appearance, her singing, and her dancing.

He looked deep into her eyes, as if seeking her help. In response, she grinned —and this time it *was* the arrogant defiance she always showed onstage.

Between this and her earlier reaction, the line was blurred.

"I finally figured it out just now: there is no truth, so you get to decide."

With that, she slipped past the stunned staff members and through the door leading to the theater seats, and then she was gone.

From that day forward, a flower-themed account who used to regularly harass Gotou Julia suddenly stopped posting.

Its final message was identical across all social media platforms, with no photo or video to accompany the text:

"I thought she was trying to brainwash us."

And unlike all their previous messages, this one never got a single like or retweet.

Ukawa Ai

I'LL SHIP THE CLOTHES back to you in a couple days. It was the sort of thing one friend would say to another. And with that, Julia had taken the camera kid and walked off while Ai waved and watched her go.

"Uggghhh."

The emotion swirling inside him was strong, but not especially complicated. He tried to express it through a sigh, but it vanished into the greater hustle and bustle of the city district. Unable to shake it, he started tapping on the smartphone in his hand. He had been given a mission, after all.

That said, he wasn't convinced that Akane was actually going to martyr herself in the name of a novel. When he called her number, he was hoping she'd be lounging around at home, and he believed the chances were very likely. He only went through with it in order to confirm that his friend was indeed safe and sound.

But the phone rang and rang with no sign of anyone picking up.

With no choice left to him, he punched out a short email and headed back the way he had come with Julia, down the hill. He had half a mind to pay a visit to the bookstore; after all, there was a good chance she couldn't answer the phone simply because she was on the clock. Maybe she was on break in the back room when they passed by earlier.

Partway down the hill, when someone offered him a free hand warmer as part of some company's promo campaign, he took it on reflex.

When he pulled open the glass door and walked into the bookstore, he was greeted by a clerk busily reorganizing books on a shelf. Ai thought he vaguely recognized him.

"I have a question..."

"Looking for something in particular?" he asked, looking up at Ai. Sure enough.

"Actually, yeah. I'm Ukawa, and I'm friends with Itobayashi Akane. You might remember me from the other night after you guys closed up. Is she working tonight, by any chance?"

"No, she's not scheduled today."

"Oh, okay. Thanks anyway."

"Of course. No problem."

So she wasn't at work. He'd barely gotten started and already he was out of leads. But since there was no need to walk straight back out, he decided to amble around the store while he planned his next move. This brought him to a section he didn't normally visit. Here, he spotted *Girl's March*. If Julia's hypothesis was even slightly correct, then maybe there was something in the book that he'd overlooked... Picking it up, he opened it to the pages near the end and flipped through.

This is so stupid, he scoffed to himself. Surely he could have chosen to go home instead of buying into this crackpot theory. On the off-chance that Akane really was in danger, it was patently ridiculous to stand here flipping through a paperback.

He didn't *need* to be doing this. Surely the world wasn't going to end. But there were two things keeping him there: one, he knew his roommate would interrogate him about what happened today, and two, something Julia had said still lingered on his mind:

She could be right here in town today.

As far as Ai had noticed, *Girl's March* never described the weather or clothing choices, and there was no way to know if the story's world experienced the same passage of time as its readers on Earth. At the very least, he hadn't seen any hints of that nature. As a result, he had no idea what section might refer to today's date or this specific location.

But Akane had left him with one specific truth. Regardless of whether the author had *meant* to set the story in this district, this was where the two of them had always met up. Looking at it that way, perhaps Akane *did* share the same interpretation as Julia.

"You're a bad influence on teenagers, you piece of shit author," he found himself muttering as he turned the pages.

Ai had seen the writer's face once while reading an interview between her and Julia. By his estimation, she looked to be about their age or slightly older. Her face exuded purity and elegance in equal measure, like a spoiled rich kid.

"Excuse me..."

When he heard this sudden voice off to the side, he didn't immediately realize he was being spoken to. He glanced over purely out of reflex and was startled to see a female clerk looking straight at him.

"Sorry to bother you. You're friends with Akane-chan, right?"

At first he thought perhaps she was going to criticize him, be it for reading without paying *or* for waiting to ambush Akane, but one look at her expression told him this was not the case.

"I've been wondering—are you a model or something? Sorry, I don't mean to pry."

That was when he realized he vaguely recognized her, too. "Nah, I work at a music venue. This is just how I like to dress, that's all. She and I met through a shared interest, and I was wondering if she was here tonight."

He volunteered the name of his workplace to lend himself credence, but like Akane, she had never heard of it, even though it wasn't far from here. As he was explaining where the venue was located, however, he thought of something.

"Say, could I ask you a question about this book?"

"Oh, um, sure! Go right ahead."

"You know the part near the end when the main character tries to kill herself? Supposing that scene took place in this area, where do you think she'd do it?"

"Wha ...?"

He knew from the outset that it would be a weird question, but apparently, it was weird enough to warrant utter confusion. Embarrassed, the clerk clapped a hand to her mouth. Still, whether she was bored, duty-bound, or simply that

sort of person, she nevertheless cleared her throat and began to brainstorm.

"Well, the story's set in her subconscious, right? So it's hard to choose any specific real-world counterpart, especially when the prose is so overwrought. In the movie, it took place in a field of wildflowers."

"Ah, yeah, I remember that..."

"Oh, you've seen it? Yeah. In the source material, she tries to jump from the subconscious into the void, knowing her life is forfeit once she's touched it, but then Ai stops her. Thing is, the scenery isn't really described in detail from The Girl's perspective. Even the author has only ever gone on record saying it's where the two first met."

"Where the hell are people supposed to find out about this stuff...?"

It wasn't clear how she had chosen to interpret his unconcealed frustration, but her reaction was to smile bashfully. "Sorry, I'm kind of a geek about it! But the story *does* depict the actual location of where they first met. Personally, I interpreted it as a hazy sort of dream world."

"Me too, more or less." To Ai, the world inside The Girl's heart was like the music venue stage, all covered in smoke. "So I guess that's the answer, huh? Got it. Thanks."

"No problem! Happy to help."

"One last thing, actually, if you don't mind..."

As she bobbed her head in a cute little bow, Ai couldn't help but get his hopes up. After all, someone who had read all the interviews with the creator might know the answer to yet another mystery.

"Be my guest."

"My friend told me the character Ai is actually a guy. Do you think that's possible?"

"Hmmm... Hard to say."

Right as he was ready to accept that he and the creators of the film adaptation were indeed in the majority on the subject, however, he was stopped in his tracks.

"I do think there's a plot twist about Ai, but I'm not sure it's her gender." She leaned closer and cupped a hand around her mouth, likely to prevent other customers from overhearing spoilers. "If you ask me, she's just a figment of The Girl's imagination! But that's just my personal headcanon, of course."

Once again, this was a theory Ai had never considered. Before he could ask for more details, however, she was called away by another employee.

"Come by again sometime!" she told him as she left.

"Roger that," he replied offhandedly.

With nothing left to do, Ai started flipping through the book again. On a whim, he searched for the author's bio and found a small paragraph on the last page detailing how she had started writing stories in elementary school, followed by a list of other titles she had published thus far. Nothing about her personality.

He sincerely wondered how she must have felt, watching total strangers embrace her creation to the point of inventing their own headcanons. If she had even the slightest inkling that it could get someone killed, then she was a monster... Picturing Ogusu Nanoka like a mind flayer implanting parasites in people's heads creeped him out, so he shook that idea off altogether. Then he put the book back on the shelf and left the store. Thanks to that clerk, he had an idea of what to do next.

As the night wind caressed his cheek, he walked down the street until he arrived at an intersection, then crossed to the other side. There, he made a left and walked until he arrived at the yellow record store where he and his young friend had first met.

A few young women were standing out front, but none of them were Akane. He went inside and did a sweep of the ground floor, but didn't see her, so he took the escalator upstairs. There, he briefly checked his phone. No missed calls or emails.

He checked the second floor, then the third, all the while thinking about what Julia had said to him. Granted, he had vowed not to think about Julia herself anymore, so he did his best to think only of the words and not the surrounding context in which they were said.

Julia had offered a headcanon about Akane—that she was two-faced and unable to make real connections, and therefore wished she could one day change for the better, like the main character from her favorite novel. Julia also suspected that she was still reenacting the storyline. Likewise, Akane had had a headcanon about Ai, albeit far less realistic, and because of it, she had asked him to do specific things to mimic the fictional character she felt he resembled.

As for Ai himself—he was *terrified* of having a biased opinion of someone. At the same time, however, he knew that no matter how careful he tried to be, there was always a chance he would unconsciously project his own biases onto them. It was for that exact reason that he insisted on honest communication. Even if no human being could be fully honest 100 percent of the time, by opening up to friends and family, he had believed that the resulting relationships would be that much closer to the truth, and that this was the best possible outcome.

But that belief was starting to waver.

At the top floor, Akane was still nowhere to be seen. Thinking about it, he couldn't really imagine how she would kill herself in a CD store anyway, so this felt like a massive waste of time. Kicking himself, he took the escalator back down to the ground floor. Still no messages on his phone.

Right as he was preparing to give up and go home, however, he remembered the look of desperation in Julia's eyes. Thus he resigned himself to a quick sweep of the block, just in case. Luckily, this included a smoking area where he could stop and have a cigarette.

Outside the store, he followed the sidewalk in the direction of the biggest intersection in the entire district.

Itobayashi Akane

"None had the right to decide The Girl's happy ending save for The Girl herself."

GIRL'S MARCH, PAPERBACK EDITION, PAGE 257, LINE 16

MORNING DAWNED as Akane was reading *Girl's March*. Her heart was very much at peace. Normally she would take care to get enough sleep in preparation for the next day, but in this case there was no need to let her body recover, since she would have the day off tomorrow.

With a clear mind, she gazed through the window at the vermilion sunrise.

Once the proper time came, she donned an expression that suggested she had only just woken up, then encountered her family in the living room and ate almost all of the hearty breakfast they had prepared for her. Then she brushed her teeth, went back into her room to change into her uniform, and did her hair and makeup the same as always. Once she pulled on her coat and picked up her bookbag with the oversized plush, the completed look was rather adorable, if she did say so herself. Would they like her today? She gave herself one last scan in the full-length mirror, twirled her skirt, and left her room.

"Headed out!" she called lazily to her mother's turned back as she stood in the kitchen washing dishes in the sink. By the time the woman turned to reply, Akane was already facing away, putting her shoes on.

Outside, the sky was clear, and the weather was the warmest it had been in days. On the walk to the subway station, she was joined by the familiar sights of students from other schools, office workers, and neighborhood cats.

Akane always ended up in the same train car as a fellow classmate, but today they encountered each other at the entrance. There was no mutually agreed-upon plan, but they just so happened to stand next to each other every morning and chat all the way to the classroom. It was an unspoken agreement, and it was fun.

As soon as she entered her classroom, someone called Akane's nickname. She looked over at the nearby group of girls and saw her friend Miyu beckoning. Dropping her bookbag off at her desk, Akane walked over, and one of the other friendly girls lit up with a big smile. The group hassled her until she finally admitted that she had started a relationship with her longtime crush.

"Oh my god, congrats!"

The girl shyly recounted the story of how it happened—a story that she must have repeated a dozen times that day—while Akane listened intently. Unfortunately, this early-morning good news was cut short with the arrival of their homeroom teacher, who was uncommonly strict about romance among students. (According to a different teacher, it was a personal grudge.) To avoid both the needless concern and the inevitable lecture, their class had an unspoken rule: don't talk about dating.

From first to fourth period, Akane attended her classes like always—listening to the teachers, taking notes, occasionally zoning out. Fourth period was gym class, and at first she was worried her sleep deprivation would pose a problem. But the time flew by as she swung her badminton racket, and before she knew it, the bell was ringing.

At lunch, the girl with the new boyfriend was still the focus of conversation among Akane's clique. Apparently, the two had met at work. The rest of the girls eagerly asked questions, even when they already knew the answers, and the newly minted girlfriend was more than happy to answer them. To an outside observer, it might have sounded like they were coaching her through a press conference—but not a single one of them complained.

During cleaning time, Akane was assigned to take out the trash in the art room. Along the way, she crossed paths with Uemura Tatsuaki as he was disposing of the trash from somewhere else. As usual, he averted his eyes and flinched away from her, so she ignored him.

Fifth and sixth period gave Akane some trouble, since she was never very good at math or physics. Normally, she could get through it by slowing down and thinking it over, but that wasn't an option today. Since the same thing had happened that one time she went to school after spending the night at her

boyfriend's house, she could only assume the root cause was the lack of sleep.

Ultimately, she couldn't wrap her head around the lesson of the day. Gracefully accepting this, she closed her textbook. "Science makes no sense," she said randomly to Miyu, making her laugh.

After school, her clique was chatting about their plans for the day when someone suggested that they all grab dessert together. This included both Akane and Miyu, and while the two of them had gotten crepes together just the other day, that was no reason to decline the offer. Waving goodbye to the three friends who had work or dates scheduled, everyone else headed off to the busy district full of people.

To escape the stink of the streets, they fled into a cafe they had previously visited as a group. Each of them ordered cake and drinks, took their first bites, gave their reviews, and traded plates. Once this taste-test tournament was over, Miyu let out a sigh. "I'm so glad their relationship worked out."

Akane knew Miyu was the sort of kindhearted person who could celebrate someone else's happiness even when the girl in question wasn't around. She also knew that Miyu's words carried more than one meaning.

"Tell me about it! She's so fragile, I seriously don't know what we would have done if he said no."

"Yup, I wish I could thank him myself. But if he dumps her after cuffing season, I'll kill him."

"Ugh, I know guys like that..."

"By the way, ladies...I know it's early, but does anyone else have *plans* for the holidays?" Akane asked playfully, her eyes twinkling.

The other three reacted to this in different ways befitting their personalities, but as an overall theme, the prospects were dire.

"Welcome to the single club, Bayashi! We're so very happy to have you!"

"Why, thank you very much, my dear, but I'm afraid I'm not here by choice!"

Donning the theatrical air of snobby aristocrats, Miyu and Akane bantered back and forth. It was Miyu's favorite running gag, and Akane would

occasionally play along.

All jokes aside, it was revealed that none of the four girls present had plans on Christmas. After some negotiation, it was decided that they would have a slumber party at Miyu's house, which was the most convenient venue for a multitude of reasons. But Miyu was the type who was always starved for company, so to Akane this was a relief.

Before they knew it, the sun had set, and it came time for the four girls to leave the cafe. Akane had explained in advance that she had something else to take care of in the area, so she saw them off.

Yes, The Girl had important business to attend to.

The streets were so bright, one would never know the sun had set, and she walked them alone. Her next destination was a different flower shop from the one she had visited previously. Of everything she had done today, this was the only part that resembled the protagonist of *Girl's March*.

In the story, The Girl didn't start to like flowers until Ai introduced her to them. As Christmas approached (described in the narration as "a special day to spend with family"), The Girl stumbled upon a flower shop and decided to order flowers to be delivered to her family as a gift. After that, she headed to the place where she'd agreed to meet up with Ai, but instead of calling out to him, she simply gazed at him from afar. Alone, she fled into her own little world and prepared to leap into a shadowy void from which she could never return. This was what took place at the climax of the book.

Unfortunately, Akane didn't know where she could find Ai today. Instead, after she left the flower shop, she decided to take a stroll around the district.

For starters, she walked up the hill, then traced the outer rim of the basin, gradually arcing back toward the bottom. It drove home how surprisingly big this district was. She spotted a familiar music venue and cafe along the way, but there was no sign of Ai. She couldn't pretend she hadn't gotten her hopes up, but at the same time, she had known this was going to happen, so she accepted it.

On second thought, no—she had come to terms with it long ago.

Apparently, she wasn't the protagonist of *Girl's March* after all. Unlike The Girl, she didn't have a life adorned with special things. The book must have been written for someone else, because neither she nor anyone she knew was a character in it. And so she spent an unremarkable day as the unremarkable Itobayashi Akane, walking through the district and feeling very calm.

Must be about time now. She took her phone out to check the time, then put it back into her pocket. She had a few missed calls, but at this point she didn't feel the need to strengthen her relationship with a fellow nobody.

It all felt like an eternity ago.

She walked past the yellow record store where she had first deluded herself into thinking they were characters from a book. Gradually, the crowds of passersby were growing more dense. Twenty meters in front of her, at the very bottom of the bowl shape, she could see the crosswalk light at the big intersection. She adjusted her pace to match, and when the time came, she stopped short.

The woman directly behind her reacted with surprise at the girl who had stopped without warning in the middle of the sidewalk. As she passed, she shot a vicious glare over her shoulder. Likewise, a businessman let out a loud scoff, even though he hadn't been impacted in the slightest.

Perhaps some people in this world were born with thick skin, impervious to such things, but Akane wasn't one of them.

Please don't scowl at me like that. Please don't get upset. Look at me—I'm sweet and friendly, and sometimes a little lazy, but when push comes to shove, I know how to roll up my sleeves. I love other people just as much as I love myself. I care about romance and friendship. I don't always get along with my family, but I'm grateful they brought me into the world. I haven't figured out what my dream is, but I believe I can take it one day at a time and have fun along the way. With everyone I've met thus far, and everyone whose paths I'm sure to cross, I feel like a happy life is waiting for me somewhere out there. See? I can show you an Itobayashi Akane you're sure to like, I promise. I promise!

The need to be liked was slowly crushing her, and now she knew she could expect to be suffocated like this every single day for the rest of her life. In truth,

she wanted nothing more than to escape from this stark white void of isolation.

Please...!

But she wasn't going to find her courage from merely begging, so to psych herself up, she shouted—as briefly as possible.

"AAAH!"

Then she took off running—suddenly, it would have seemed, to an outside observer. With her bookbag still dangling from her shoulder, her ungainly gait made her brush and bump into several different people in front of her. Her actions were making them annoyed and suspicious. But she wasn't forced to look at their faces, so she didn't. Though the obstacles hindered her momentum, she kept going.

Each step brought her closer to the destination she had chosen. The place where she met someone she could believe was Ai, at least for a little while. The place where her dream was born.

She was waiting for the precise moment the crosswalk light turned red—the brief window of time in which the cars would race by at less-than-modest speeds. Conveniently, there was a gap between the crowds of people waiting at the corner for the light to change. She could run there. So she did, barreling toward her destination.

Right as she arrived, however, something happened against her will.

All the people and things she'd seen today—all the smiles that were directed not at her real self, but the façade—rose and faded in her mind, over and over, until just one remained. Not her family, not her friends, not even her exboyfriend, but the girl she saw every morning in the mirror, glaring at her.

"Die."

She stepped forward to the final landing: the oncoming traffic.

Fortuitously, there was a car rapidly approaching.

At long last, she would be free of this ugly, embarrassing compulsion to be liked.

The world she'd always dreamed of was right in front of her.

Happily ever after.

It didn't match the story anymore.

But that was fine.

"Like hell it is, you moron."

At that exact moment, of all possible times, she caught a whiff of sweet poison.

The final landing was denied to her by a force pulling her backward. A sudden sharp pain erupted across her arm and shoulder as it was practically twisted behind her back, making her yelp and squirm. Then something hard pushed against her chest—but before she realized it was a fist, or understood that he had grabbed her by the shirt collar, she felt the pushing sensation invert itself.

What happened next was an explosion of emotion, the likes of which she had never been subjected to in all her life.

"The fuck are you doing?!"

Before her eyes could focus on the man in front of her, she called out in a panic.

"Ai!"

Then she remembered: no, he wasn't Ai. This man who liked to dress in women's clothes, who was always honest to a fault, who was currently very angry for some reason—he wasn't her Ai. Not anymore. He couldn't possibly smell of sweet poison.

"Come here!"

"Let go of me!"

It felt to her like a scream, but in actuality, her voice had become so hoarse that even she could barely hear it—like someone was wringing her neck, and she couldn't speak. She could feel her body being pulled by force away from the road.

"Stop! I don't want to go there anymore!"

Again, the feeling didn't leave her lips, and so it didn't reach anyone around her. The crosswalk light must have changed, because the idling crowd ignored her cries for help and flowed away. But it was only because they didn't know—because they had no way of hearing a voice without sound. This she understood deeply. As usual, no one perceived her true desires.

She was once again yanked up by the collar, her feet lifting off the ground until she was on tiptoe.

That was when their eyes met.

"Look here, I don't know if you're trying to reenact that book again, but nothing gives you the right to put yourself in danger, you idiot!"

His face was the very picture of menacing, and as she gazed at it up close, she wondered what he could possibly be so angry about. A feeling of indignation rose in her chest until her heart threatened to explode.

You don't know me. You don't know a single thing. Someone who isn't Ai could never understand what it's like to drown. Do you know what gave me hope? You don't, do you? And yet you have the audacity to stop me and get mad at me with no intention of taking responsibility for the outcome of your actions—all so you can pat yourself on the back for "being authentic," right? You've never once stopped to imagine how it would feel to have your true self locked away, but that sure won't stop you from telling me I'm wrong, now will it?

She couldn't possibly let it go. Glaring back into his eyes, she took a deep breath. This time she would scream at the top of her lungs, and he would feel her rage.

But the words that came out were nothing like what she had pictured in her head.

"I...I'm sorry...I just...I don't know what came over me..."

She had donned a look of fear. She was shrinking into herself and trembling. Her eyes were damp and threatening to spill over.

What am I doing? After all that, I'm still a slave to that desire?

Then she saw the girl in the mirror standing there, smiling, and a sound unlike

anything she'd ever made before erupted from the back of her throat. But despite being the closest to that sound, she didn't hear it. With all her might, she flung off the arm gripping her collar and slammed her bookbag into the man in front of her.

Then, paying no mind to his reaction, she moved immediately to her next target, clenching her fist—and plunging it into her own stomach.

The impact shot across her entire body. With the pain came nausea, and she fell to her knees on the spot.

It hurts!

On the ground, she went for a second hit, and when she doubled over, a third. Since she wasn't attacking herself, she didn't need to hold back. Fluid sprang up from her stomach, and she spat it lightly onto the ground.

I can't breathe!

It was the truth, but she couldn't afford to stop now. There was still a different emotion on the surface.

Why am I doing this in public? What if someone I know sees me? What if rumors start to spread and everyone distances themselves from me? Even if they're strangers, these people still think I'm a freak! I need to stand up right now and show them it was just another silly teenage phase—

"Get out of me!"

This time the words escaped. Unable to stay upright, she plunged to the ground, her face messy with tears and drool—but he grabbed her by the arms, catching her.

"Knock it off!"

"Screw you!"

Whipping her head up, she felt her skull collide with something hard, and heard him cry out in pain behind her. When she turned, she saw that he had staggered backward, clutching his jaw.

"Look, will you just calm down?!"

"You don't get it!"

"What?!"

Evidently the headbutt and bag attack weren't enough to discourage him, so she rose to her feet and turned to face him. Now that she had weakened the girl inside her, this was her chance to finally say it.

"Someone with zero filter, who's only ever been his authentic self, has *no* right to stop me and act like he knows what's best for me!"

She had managed to say it, but there was no sense of accomplishment or self-actualization. All she felt was the anxiety of having lashed out haphazardly, and since she didn't know if she should keep going, she paused to swallow the contents of her mouth—bitter, sour, and sweet.

If she'd had the capacity to predict how he would react to this, how would she have interpreted the faint shift in his expression?

"Hey," he called out to her quietly, gruffly, as he took a couple steps forward. "Just let me say this."

The next thing she knew, he was mere inches away, and at that distance, even at the height of her crisis, she could read the look in his eyes. Though he wasn't her Ai, last she checked, this Ukawa Ai appeared to be even angrier than before.

"If I spent every waking moment as my 'authentic' self, I wouldn't have bothered coming to fucking find you, okay?"

Like his gaze, his rage was surely directed at Akane, and yet she sensed there was more to it. Right now, however, she had no way of figuring out who else was involved.

"I don't know what kind of 'filter' you have, and I don't care. No matter who you are inside, I don't want you trying to hurt my friend ever again. All this stuff about fictional characters and true selves—it has nothing to do with the fact that I came looking for you, Itobayashi Akane. I stopped you because I don't want you getting *hurt*, dumbass!"

Spittle flew from his mouth as he roared in her face, and with no counterargument, she fell silent. To be clear, this wasn't because she was touched to discover the depths of her friend's feelings, like in a novel or manga. Even now, he was willing to open up and be bluntly honest at the risk of making her dislike him, and she didn't understand why she couldn't have been born or raised that way, too, and that made her so frustrated and bitter and jealous.

There were no extra tears added in; Akane didn't know how to shed unintentional tears in public if they weren't caused by physical pain. But her throat hitched, and she couldn't speak.

"I hope you can understand that, but even if you can't, you're coming with me. We're getting out of here."

Through her eyes, she could see many different reactions from the people around her. They were ever-so-subtly giving the odd couple a wide berth. Then she caught a glimpse of something held out in her direction and took it on reflex, her arms buckling under its weight.

"Here, hold onto your Anmanman."

After setting the shoulder strap carefully onto her shoulder, he turned to lead the way. Before she could process what to do next, he grabbed her by the wrist.

"You don't have to be on death's door for me to hold your hand, because I'm not that other Ai," he explained cautiously, even though she hadn't protested. It made her wonder how someone who wasn't her Ai could still be so protective of her.

Ukawa Ai

AI HEARD WHAT SOUNDED like a scream and, despite his prevailing skepticism, ran to investigate. As luck would have it, he arrived just in time to grasp the fabric of her coat with his outstretched hand, and so he quite literally seized the opportunity. In his relief, however, his blood vessels expanded and the blood rushed all the more quickly to his head.

But though his high blood pressure had driven him to shout at a girl far weaker than him, and even grab her by the collar, Ai had no regrets. His anger was, at its core, born of the love he felt for a friend, and no matter how upset it might have made her, it was something he couldn't erase. As for the bookbag smack and the headbutt—they didn't bother him in the least. Over the course of his life, he had developed a high tolerance for physical violence among friends.

When Akane fell silent—be it in defeat, or merely as a different form of rebellion—Ai took her by the hand and led her up that same old hill once again. He wanted to find a quiet place where they could talk, but every inch of this district was teeming with people, and with her face all messy with tears and spit and whatever else, Akane likely wouldn't want to set foot in a cafe. Through this process of elimination, he thought of a new idea: his workplace.

The music venue was located at the top of the hill, and he had brought her there once before. Today it was closed, and both the front entrance and outer gates were locked up tight, but if they sat in between on the basement stairs, they could avoid detection.

Arriving at the gates, Ai took Akane's bookbag and helped her climb over first. Surprisingly, she didn't protest, placing her feet as directed and generally following his every instruction to the letter. Next, it was his turn. Once he made it over, he sat down near the bottom of the stairs. The concrete was cold, but at least down here they would be shielded from the biting wind.

As she stood there blankly, he gestured for her to sit nearby. Again, she did as

she was prompted, sitting one stair higher than him. Then she hung her head.

Well, now what?

After some thought, his first move was to calm himself down. He retrieved his pack of smokes and lighter from his coat pocket and lit one up; the click of the spark wheel drew a surreptitious glance from Akane, so he figured he'd explain just in case.

"I know I said I'm a grown-up who doesn't do crimes, but...sometimes I do."

With his smoking hand, he gestured to the wall, where a sign read *NO SMOKING ON THIS PROPERTY*. She glanced over at it, then went back to staring at the ground. When she finally spoke, it was in a hoarse whisper.

"Ai would never do that."

Without missing a beat, he nodded in agreement. "That's correct. But I do."

She fell silent again. Before long, he finished his cigarette. The first always felt like chugging water under the desert sun, so he lit a second to savor the taste. As he rolled the bitterness on his tongue, he contemplated what he should say to her.

"Need a hand warmer?"

She ignored this, so he put it back into his pocket. It wasn't that cold today, so she'd probably be fine without it. Somewhere above them, he could hear drunk people laughing.

Alone with his thoughts, Ai exhaled the smoke and reviewed the events that had taken place at the intersection.

Though the teenager's physical attacks weren't enough to damage him, her words certainly were. She had shone a light on the inexplicable, murky depths of his heart, so perhaps his anger was partially a defense mechanism provoked by his own sensitivity. Now he felt bad. Tangentially, he thought of something he needed to tell her.

"Itobayashi Akane."

She didn't look at him, but she was surely listening.

"This might be unrelated, but I need to apologize for something. A while back, I told you that you didn't need to worry about who you are, and...that was wrong."

She didn't respond, but she refolded her arms.

"I can't say whether you're anything like The Girl from *Girl's March*, but I don't get to dictate what you worry about, and I'm sorry."

At this, she finally looked over, so he inclined his head to her in apology. Then she averted her gaze again, so he continued.

"I admit...when it comes to this stuff, I'm like a bull in a china shop. Most times I can't figure it out on my own. Even now, I have no clue why you'd want to die, and I might never truly understand, but...if you're comfortable talking to me about it, I'd like that." He exhaled his true feelings along with the smoke. "I'd prefer to avoid hurting you if at all possible, but I do want to know more about you, so... If you can't talk about that, then maybe something else. If there's anything that's bothering you..."

The silence lingered for a while longer, but as he gazed up at the sky, this time it was her turn to break it.

"I need to be liked."

He didn't understand at first, but fortunately there was more.

"I'm chained down by the need to be liked."

Ai ashed his cigarette into his portable ashtray. "Is that how it feels? To me it seems pretty normal to want people to like you, but I can imagine it would suck to be trapped." After a beat, he slid the cig between his lips.

"...That's it?"

"Huh?" He took a drag, exhaled, and combed through his mind for whatever Akane seemed to want him to say, but... "Nope, sorry, that's all I've got right now. I need time to understand a feeling I've never felt myself. I'll give it some thought."

If he was a character in a novel, this was where he'd say the magic words that would bring her back from despair. Alas, he wasn't. She stared blankly at the

empty air.

"Anything else?" he asked, and this time the answer only took a few seconds.

"All the songs and stories about being true to your heart—if it was that easy, I wouldn't have this problem."

"Can't say I know any stories, but there *are* a lot of those songs, huh? Personally, I enjoy them in moderation. Anything else?"

"I hate things that gloss over their flaws. Pop stars. Movies and advertisements that airbrush the rough edges out of their source material. Awards, like I mentioned before. And a bunch of other stuff. It's all the same, and I hate it."

"...The same as what?"

But evidently Akane hadn't finished answering his previous question.

"I hate people who pretend to be your best friend but don't actually care about you the same way you care about them."

Ai could admit his comprehension was generally poor, but at long last, even he was starting to understand.

"I hate people who choose who they date based on optics, then end the relationship to suit their own whims. And I hate people who feel the need to kiss up to everyone, even their own family."

Put broadly, this girl only really hated one thing.

"People like me."

It seemed she couldn't perceive her own needs and nature in a positive light, so she projected them onto others and regarded them with needless aggression. Right as he began to suspect she was just being too strict on herself, however, her next answer threw him a curveball.

"Also, I hate clueless idiots who tell me that I'm 'still me,' or that they want me to open up and be my 'real self' with them. Idiots who constantly flaunt that they're *sooo* perfect and never tell lies...and wear women's clothes."

Ai, who had just taken a drag at that moment, exhaled a little harder than

usual. "Suddenly this is about me? How specific. Well, okay."

"And I hate being called a moron."

He must have upset her a great deal, because even though she was clearly referring to him, she refused to look him in the eye. Guilty as he felt, he couldn't help but laugh—not out of derision, but self-deprecation.

"I don't know how true the rest of it is, but I gotta correct the record about myself." He found himself gazing down at the bottom of the stairs, though he wasn't sure if it was because he felt bad or merely a whim. "I do lie. In fact, I told one earlier today."

""

"It was before I met up with you. As you said, I've always felt it's best to be fully honest when communicating...though to be clear, I wasn't intentionally trying to *flaunt* anything," he carried on in spite of her silence. "I always believed the best-case scenario would be for each person to make their decisions based on their honest thoughts and feelings. But today I was asked to make a decision that wasn't compatible with that, so...I lied."

Faced with his own emotional response to an action which felt anomalous to him, he was able to reflect logically, and the inexplicable haze in his chest got a tiny bit clearer.

"I thought I'd hate myself for doing it, but believe it or not, when I stopped to think about it, the answer was...no, not really. I was the one who wanted to play it cool, after all, and I suspect the other person felt a little better because of it. Plus, if I'd been honest, I wouldn't have made it in time to stop you." He could tell he wasn't making a ton of sense, so instead of trying to explain his philosophy, he spoke more vaguely of feelings, taking advantage of her silence to sort his own thoughts. "Sure, maybe it's no excuse. But even if you were lying to me every single second up 'til now, I had a fun time, so I'm fine with it."

He was just converting his heart into his voice, so she didn't need to answer.

"I wish I could help you with...y'know, whatever's got you chained down, but I'm not really sure what to do. It's not like I can just gut you and cut you out of there like it's a mascot costume." He glanced at the bookbag sitting beside her

and pointed to it with his cig. "Sort of like how your Anmanman's only filled with stuffing or...beans or whatever."

Without a word, she swiftly moved her bookbag behind her. He realized maybe she was afraid he'd burn it with his cigarette, so he apologized just in case.

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"Sorry."
"...hh..."
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She started to say something, but fell silent once more. He didn't know if she had changed her mind or just needed more time to think it over, but nevertheless, he decided to wait. After he finished his cigarette, he didn't even pull out his smartphone—that way she would know she was free to speak her mind at any time. Eventually, around the time he figured the Impatiens concert was probably ending, he heard her voice again.

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"...Hey."
"Yeah?"
"How am I supposed to keep living?"
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For the first time in ages, their eyes met. He ruminated on her question fully before giving an answer:

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"Beats me."

"Oh, come on!"
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"How the hell am I supposed to offer a solution when I can't even understand your problem?"

Again, he couldn't lie to her.

"But if you don't mind hearing my personal outlook, well...even if your personality or perception makes you so scared you want to die, I think you should keep living and do whatever makes you happiest, as much as you possibly can. This isn't me trying to pity you, by the way. I love all my friends, and none of them are perfect! That includes you. Or if you believe your inside and outside are two different people, then both of you." As he spoke, he thought of all the most frustrating aspects of each of his friends, and he smiled.

"Obviously, I'm not perfect either. So to be a little more honest...if you're still willing to be friends with me, despite knowing I'm a simple-minded, tactless liar, then we should hang out again sometime when you're feeling up for it."

His thoughts turned to his own selfish view of the future.

"Once you come of age, we can go out drinking together, and a few years after that, we can bitch about our jobs to each other and see who has it worse. That's what I want for us, Itobayashi Akane. But like you bookworm types would say, it's just my own personal 'headcanon,' right? It's not in the source material. So if you don't like it, you're free to ignore it."

It was the honest truth of how he felt, but he was afraid it would backfire, coming across as heartlessly self-centered rather than the constructive advice she wanted. At times like these, he wished he could make a good impression... but as usual, he was too blunt.

Akane appeared to agree with this evaluation, because she turned away and fell silent yet again. And since he lacked the grace to be able to think of anything that could cheer her up, he simply sat there next to her.

Since she showed no signs of turning back to him anytime soon, he lit up a third cigarette and held it in the hand furthest from her. Then, on a whim, he used the closer hand to rub her back. In response, she slid down to the step he was sitting on and ran her hands up his body until her arms settled around his neck. His cigarette nearly brushed against her clothes, so he hastily rubbed it out on the concrete.

"Whoa, whoa!"

She didn't respond. All he heard was her breath in his ear. As he tried to figure out what to do, he thought back to the day his coworker warned him not to make a move on an underage girl. He was pretty sure he was overthinking it, but he decided to tell her upfront, just in case. It was important, after all.

"Sorry, but my heart belongs to someone else."

"It's not like that," she shot back swiftly, and he chuckled.

Sure enough, he had nothing to worry about. In that case, at the very least, he had enough tact to be there for her as a friend for as long as she needed.

Before he knew it, a great deal of time had passed. Once their position started to make his back hurt, he called out to her, only to realize her breathing had fallen into the rhythm of slumber, and no amount of shaking her or calling her name would wake her. Chuckling to himself, he finally pulled out his smartphone and gave it a tap.

Itobayashi Akane

<u>"__</u>

THE NEXT THING SHE KNEW, Akane was in a familiar room—the white, square one—and oddly enough, she could feel a breeze.

When she looked up, she saw a window. She didn't know this place *had* windows.

Outside, the sky was a bright shade of vermilion. Be it a sunrise or a sunset, the beautiful sight captivated her all the same.

Then she noticed the red sofa in the center of the room. She couldn't remember it being there before, but she was currently seated on it. To her right was an armrest, but to her left was room for one more to sit—and it wasn't until she looked over that she realized she was not, in fact, alone.

Another girl was sitting there with a scowl, wearing the same school uniform, the same hairstyle, and most importantly, the same face. Yet Akane felt this girl was someone else entirely. She was wearing glasses she didn't need, makeup that was a step beyond a natural look, piercings she didn't like, a skirt that was rolled up a bit shorter than she would prefer, and she spoke in a voice that was higher than her own.

"I never meant to trap you in here, you know."

When she spoke, Akane remembered who this girl was supposed to be. Suddenly overcome with disgust, she averted her eyes. "Shut up."

"It's not okay to tell someone to die, either. That's messed up."

"Be quiet."

"I mean, you're the one who wants to be liked, not me."

At this, Akane shot her a glare, but the other girl simply stared back, so she averted her eyes again. When the girl descended into silence, Akane saw no

need to break it herself. Instead, as she gazed through the window, she wondered where it had come from.

"It was there from the start," the girl said suddenly.

But Akane was fairly sure she hadn't said a word out loud. Had the other girl somehow read her mind?

"Of course, silly. I live here, too, you know."

Akane's first reaction was to accept this as logical. Then she cursed herself for it and made an attempt not to think of anything at all. The girl next to her must have sensed this, however.

"Well, that sucks. I came here to talk to you, after all."

For a while they both gazed out through the window, and then the girl spoke again.

"How long are you planning to keep this up?"

Akane didn't answer—just kept looking at the sky.

"It meant a lot, didn't it?"

"...What did?"

Really, she didn't need to ask, since they shared the same heart.

"He wants us to keep living, even though he can't understand or sympathize in the slightest."

Akane thought back to the place where she was before this, and a hint of emotion rose up. She didn't even have time to identify it before she was caught in the act.

"Did you know?" the girl continued without waiting for an answer to her question. "The window isn't the only thing you never noticed was here." As she spoke, she rose to her feet and walked around behind the sofa.

Akane was interested to learn more about the room, so she turned her head to look. In the corner, she could see a small cabinet she didn't recognize.

"Come see."

Loath as she was to take orders from this girl, she was curious about the cabinet, so she got up from the sofa and walked over. Through its glass doors, she could see that it was empty inside, but there were a few items on top of it.

Several books, including *Girl's March*—both the pocket paperback and the full-sized edition.

Her Anmanman plush.

Nail polish.

The gerbera, which by all accounts should have wilted by now.

A small corkboard decorated with *purikura* photos taken with friends.

"And one more thing."

The girl reached into her pocket and pulled out a cheap necklace, which she set on top of the cabinet with the rest. It was once a birthday gift from the boy she used to date.

"We actually really liked Shin, you know. And yet we dumped him."

"No, you dumped him."

"Only because *you* decided to." With an exaggerated sigh, the girl went back to digging around in her pockets. "Nope, nothing else in here."

"What is this stuff?"

"Don't play dumb." With a knowing smirk, she reached out and gave Anmanman a squeeze. "This is all we have right now. It's not much, but we can work on it as we go."

"How?"

"Again, you already know the answer to that. I have a different job to do."

She didn't turn around to face Akane—probably out of embarrassment—but she looked over her shoulder, wearing a familiar smile.

"I'll keep you safe out there."

She was clearly trying to be cute on purpose, but not to an obnoxious degree. It was an expression carefully calculated to make others like her.

"So it's up to you to make this place feel like home."

Twirling her skirt, she walked off to the other side of the room. Upon closer inspection, Akane realized there was a door over there.

The girl put her hand on the knob. "See you later." And without waiting for a reply, she walked out.

To Akane, it felt right.

"See you," she muttered, once she was alone in the room. Then she went back to looking at the items on the shelf, one by one.

Before she knew it, she had forgotten her feelings of hostility and hate.

The next thing she knew, Akane was in an unfamiliar room, with wallpaper she didn't recognize.

Judging from the feel of the fabric against her skin, she understood that she was lying on a bed, so she sat up. She was in what looked to be a studio apartment, furnished with a sofa and coffee table. Empty beer cans littered the floor.

On the sofa, a blonde woman was curled up, asleep. Akane stared at her for a long moment until at last she recognized her.

She tried to comb through her memories, but they were fuzzy. She could remember sitting on the stairs, but nothing past that. How in the world had she ended up here?

As she was mulling it over, however, she heard a noise at the front door...and when she heard someone come walking down the hall in her direction, she braced for the worst.

This soon proved unnecessary, because what she got instead was Ukawa Ai.

"Oh, you're awake."

"Where am I?"

"See Fujino over there on the sofa? This is her apartment. You were out like a light, and her place was the closest."

"I don't remember coming here..."

"We both carried you."

Just then, it occurred to Akane that she didn't know what time it was. Through the gap in the window curtains, she could see only the darkness of night. Fortunately, Ai seemed to sense what she was worried about.

"It's 4 a.m.," he told her as he sat cross-legged on a cushion on the floor. "Fujino said she'd apologize to your parents on your behalf, but you should probably come clean to them and face their fury on your own."

"Ugh...I'd rather not," she replied honestly, then looked down at her palm. A moment ago there were two of her, but now she was back to one single body.

"Are you hurt?"

At this question, she looked over at him. Then she thought long and hard before answering: "I'm not sure, but...I feel like I could stick around a little longer."

He smiled. With his next words, she quickly learned that he had misunderstood.

"I'm flattered. Thanks."

"Not with you! I mean...not just with you."

"Gotcha." He almost certainly had no idea what she was talking about, but still he nodded along, sipping from his canned coffee. "Well, if you ever start to feel suicidal again, come by our workplace. I'll be there—most likely. And if I'm not, Fujino will be."

As usual, he was beautiful and overprotective and a little rough around the edges.

"Okay."

He wasn't Ai, and she was pretty sure she wasn't The Girl, but both of her selves refused to let this connection fizzle out quite yet.

"Before I die, we should go somewhere for fun. I think I suggested skydiving at one point?"

"I meant to tell you before, but I can't do that shit. I'm scared of heights."

"Are you serious? You are such a freaking guilt-tripper!"

She sculpted a teasing expression and paired it with a playful voice to test her older friend's patience. Though he wasn't entirely happy, he seemed to interpret it as charming, and the power imbalance inherent in their age gap narrowed ever so slightly.

"Lay off, brat."

Her every action was purposeful, and his reactions were more or less exactly what she was angling for. As instructed by her need to be liked, she shared a laugh with him, just to see what it was like.

Her heart still ached, but if she didn't have to bear it alone, then perhaps she could find it in her to keep trying, one day at a time.

Special Thanks

INTERVIEW COLLABORATION

Ayana-san for *Gotou Julia* (STINGRAY, KASVE)

Takai Tsukina-san for *Takatsuki Sakuna* (simpαtix)

Takeda Yuuki-san
(Kinokuniya Company, Ltd.)

Kubota Yuuki-san(shibuya eggman)

CAMEO APPEARANCE

Anmanman

Ogusu Nanoka

F YOU COULD CHANGE THE WORLD, what would you wish for, Ogusu-san?"

"Oh, I'd wish for a world in which there's always a second chance. In my ideal world, we could go back to the branching points and make new choices, or redo moments that didn't turn out quite right, no matter how many years have passed. Over time, I believe that flexibility would enable us to mend generational divides, class conflict, even the gender gap...and I feel the same way about the stories I write."

"That sounds like a great world to live in. Okay, before we wrap up, do you have a message for the readers at home?"

"Well, it's a bit cliché, but I wish them good health and happiness."

"Thank you. This concludes our interview. Once again, thank you so much for all your time today."

When the interviewer bowed to her, Ogusu Nanoka bowed back at him from across the table. "Likewise! I hardly ever get to do anything besides go on walks or sit at home and write, so I had a lot of fun."

"That reminds me—I read in a different interview that you have a pet cat. Do you bring it on your walks with you?"

"Mmm, I'm not sure 'pet' is the right word. She eats, sleeps, and comes and goes as she pleases."

"Semi-feral, I take it? It's actually adorable just how self-reliant cats are..."

She would have been content to carry on chatting with this apparent cat lover, but then her editor cut in to request an exchange of business cards. As social rituals went, it was rather dull, so instead Nanoka gazed out at the city through the window of the tall building. Below, she could see people and cars bustling past.

"What are you looking at, Ogusu-san?"

Once the boring formalities were over with, the editor walked over to her as she stood beside the window. Since the interview focused on her work as a creative, the magazine had contacted the publisher directly to arrange it, which was why her editor was also in attendance.

"Oh, nothing. Perhaps you couldn't hear us, Kokubo-san, with how loud this district gets, but we were actually having a pleasant chat about cats right here in this very room."

"Well then, I apologize. Must you always be so passive-aggressive?"

The woman's scowl of annoyance made Nanoka giggle.

It was the publisher who had reserved this room. The cat-loving interviewer gave one final, deep bow, then quietly walked out. Stretching her arms widely, Nanoka thanked the cameraman and the account executive for their hard work.

"And thank you, too, Kokubo-san. Any notes on today's events?" She always made sure to check with her editor for feedback, just in case.

"Nothing in particular. At most, I prayed the world would realize what a bully you can be. Is that okay?"

"I think they can already tell—not that I'm a *bully*, but my general disposition." When she realized the conversation was making the other staff members uncomfortable, Nanoka tacked on a half-hearted explanation: "We're peers, so it's fine."

"Any plans after this, Ogusu-san? If you'd care to grab lunch..."

"Now that you mention it, I am feeling a bit peckish."

"I know a place nearby. I can give them a call if you like."

"Could you? Fair warning, though: I've already had my fill of talking about work."

"Don't say the quiet part out loud, please."

And so it was decided that they would go out to lunch, just the two of them. Kokubo had attempted to invite the cameraman and account executive along, but both had other work to take care of.

Together, they walked out of the large room and boarded the elevator. When the change of elevation made her ears block up, Nanoka exhaled through her pinched nose to pop them.

Outside on the sidewalk, she followed Kokubo to a building that, on the outside, looked like a secondhand clothing store. Inside, they were directed to sit at a table with alarmingly soft booth seating. *Someone might mess up their back sitting here*, Nanoka worried needlessly.

"Why is it you editors seem to have more sophisticated diets than authors do?"

"Only in public. When I'm at home, I may as well eat cereal for every meal."

"And yet your salary is higher than almost any author's."

"You're one to talk, considering yours is too, ma'am."

The host handed each of them a menu. Scanning it, Nanoka quickly decided on the omurice, which was described as "thick and half-runny." Kokubo ordered a pasta dish, and both of them requested a glass of orange juice to drink. It was Nanoka's favorite beverage, and now Kokubo was hooked on it, too.

"That reminds me—did you hear the latest about Gotou Julia-san?"

"What about her? I listen to her music fairly often when I'm at home."

"As punishment for showing up late to a concert, she's been selling CDs in person at record stores and music venues."

"Interesting. Perhaps I'll pay her a visit if I get the chance. If it's anything like the bookstore tours they ask me to do, I feel sorry for her."

"As if you've ever once gone on a bookstore tour!"

"True. It doesn't strike me as especially necessary. A book's worth doesn't change just because its author is personable or likeable. And if it's about 'showing gratitude to the bookstores,' well, I'd prefer to do that by writing better and better stories for them to sell."

"That's just...I don't know if this is the right word, but...that's just savage."

"I shall interpret that to mean noble."

The orange juice arrived, followed not long after by each of their entrees. Looking at the table spread, Nanoka realized there wasn't a single vegetable to be seen. She thought about putting in another order, but if they had to wait for a salad at this point, both the food and the mood would go cold. Grabbing her spoon, she shoveled a big bite of omurice into her mouth like a child.

"Say, I just remembered—this isn't feedback, per se, but during the interview I thought of a new question about *Girl's March*, if you wouldn't mind me asking."

"Not at all, as long as you don't mind your pasta going cold."

"I'm eating it, thank you! It's just... The interviewer mentioned how the readers see themselves in the story through the eyes of the protagonist, but I was wondering if maybe The Girl isn't really the protagonist at all. Surely some readers self-insert into the other characters, right?"

"Hee!" Upon hearing this question from her assigned editor, Nanoka let out an eerie cackle. Before answering, she took another bite of omurice, letting the egg, sauce, and rice fill her mouth. Then she chewed it thoroughly, right down to the tiny pieces of mushroom and onion, before swallowing. "In that case, who would you suggest is the protagonist?"

"If not The Girl, Ai would be the next best choice. Although an argument could be made for the Record Keeper, too."

"I see," Nanoka nodded, sipping her orange juice. "Well, you're not wrong. In this story, the perspective and timeframe just so happen to favor The Girl, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"Should either of those two things shift, any other character could easily take the spotlight. Even one whose name was never given."

"Right. So you're saying everyone is the main character, then."

"No, I'm saying no one is."

"Ogusu-san, you've got a little something on your cheek..."

"Oh dear."

"Nope, other side."

Nanoka dabbed at her face with a napkin, as indicated by her editor. The white paper stained reddish-brown, like a wicked thought descending on the human heart. She balled it up and tucked it under her plate.

"Surely a lady such as yourself could have said so a little more discreetly."

"Yes, well, you were eating in quite the *girlish* fashion," Kokubo shot back offhandedly as she twirled her pasta neatly around her fork.

"Girlish! It's been so long since anyone called me that. Thank you for indulging me."

"Oh, you're very welcome. Wait, this isn't about your table manners! What do you mean, no one is the main character?"

"My, I was rather hoping you'd forgotten. Yes, that's right. Not once, during the story or any of the interviews, have I said any one particular character is the protagonist."

This time, Nanoka lifted a small amount with her spoon and gently slid it into her mouth. The description of "runny" certainly wasn't for show, because the egg rolled across her tongue like it was trying to escape.

"Every experience we have in life is purely by chance, be it favorable or not-so-favorable, extraordinary or mundane. So if every one of us is a protagonist, what are we to think of the people who meet tragic ends? Are we forced to accept that that's simply how their story was meant to go? Suppose the bullying you endured in high school had driven you to take your own life. Would you have thought that was the only possible outcome for your story?"

"No, I wouldn't have."

"Of course not. Every person, including you, including *me*, is a faceless character who was perhaps a protagonist at one point. Likewise, a novel is merely a narrow slice of the lives of *all* its characters, not an excuse to choose one to bless with disproportionate fortune. In a world where so many choices are readily made for us by circumstance, luck, and other things beyond our control, I'm grateful that you're still here today."

"Could you maybe not pivot so hard into fawning all of a sudden? I never know how to react."

"I wasn't trying to fawn, but if that's how you see it, perhaps I'll make an effort to be harsher. The fact that you've only just noticed the absence of the word *protagonist* in my story would suggest that you have worse reading comprehension than the readers posting reviews online. What do you say to that?"

"Has no one ever taught you how to balance the bitter with the sweet?" "I'm only a girl, after all."

In response to her editor's slightly exaggerated scowl, Nanoka giggled innocently. Since she was *only a girl*, she felt no qualms about asking for a bite of the woman's pasta, at which point Kokubo flagged down the host to ask for a new fork and a serving plate.

Despite Nanoka's intentions to eat gracefully, a single noodle drooped from the fork before it could reach her mouth, dirtying her face once again. By contrast, Kokubo elegantly savored her bite of omurice.

Though Nanoka had said from the outset that she didn't want to talk about work, she soon found herself recounting a few ideas she was thinking of incorporating into her next story, and before she knew it, the time had flown by. Perhaps the pleasant softness of the booth seat was partly to blame. As they walked out of the restaurant, she could practically feel the season suffusing the air around them.

"Seeing as there's still plenty of daylight left, I think I'll spend it shopping. You're free to return to your work."

"Okay then, I'll be heading off. Great work today, ma'am."

With a dutiful bow, Kokubo turned away and walked off in the direction of the subway station. As Nanoka watched her go, she was reminded that no amount of friendly banter would change the fact that their relationship was strictly professional. During these moments of farewell, the loneliness set in quietly, but at the same time she kept her head held high, ever mindful of the optics.

Perhaps we should go for a walk in the city sometime. I wonder if even a stray

would find these crowded streets perplexing.

As she thought of the black cat who came and went as she pleased, Nanoka walked up the gently sloping streets this district was known for, seeking a place with a bit more sun. With each step, the passersby grew more and more scarce, and at first she wondered if perhaps most people preferred to avoid the sunlight. She quickly realized, however, that it had more to do with the district itself being shaped like a basin.

Somewhere, in the liminal space between body and mind, Nanoka was humming. She felt it helped her seek out the stories hidden in the world around her. Granted, if she had been humming just a bit louder, or listening to music with her earbuds in, or chatting with Kokubo still, she might not have heard it, but...

"Are you...Ogusu...Nanoka-san?"

Someone was calling her name. And for that very simple reason, she turned to look.

There, she locked eyes with a girl wearing a school uniform—the sort of girl whose beauty was highlighted by the inherent imbalance of a dainty appearance that didn't entirely conceal her growing maturity.

"Yes, I'm Ogusu Nanoka, but I don't believe we've met. Are you a fan?" Nanoka asked, offering her estimation of the situation. If it was correct, then she predicted the girl would introduce herself and give some manner of opinion on her work.

From the outset, this girl seemed like the calm, collected type. She was wearing glasses, after all. But Nanoka would soon learn that her cold reading was entirely off-base.

"Uh, I...I..."

Before she could manage any meaningful sentiment, the girl whipped open the bookbag hanging from her shoulder, plunged a hand inside, and pulled out a single book. Nanoka didn't need to scrutinize it to know that it was a paperback she herself had written.

"I...um...I, er... This book you wrote..."

Breathing hard, she held the book out with both hands, but Nanoka looked past it into her eyes.

"This book really...um...really helped me."

The girl was so worked up, she was even starting to cry. Nanoka watched every last gleaming tear with rapt attention—not so much as a blink—and thought about how she would respond. What could she say? It would be all too easy to offer a simple thank-you, or to express some wild assumption about those tears. And yes, she knew doing so would surely make the girl happy.

"It was almost like...I mean, not to be weird...I could be wrong, but it was literally like, um...like you wrote it about me."

Nanoka envisioned the girl's barely-contained feelings spilling forth from the heart that held them, transforming into words and tears—the sort of lyricism that could only be found in the world of fiction. As the girl's body shook, her bag slid off her shoulder and hit the ground with a heavy *thump*.

Meanwhile, Nanoka kept thinking about what she could give to this fan in return. There was so much she wanted to offer—heaps upon heaps of gratitude and other warm emotions. But none of it was a match for the girl's radiance, so she hesitated.

"I always...you know, always wished for...um...that kind of story..."

Without a pen or keyboard—no, even with those things, an author was powerless. It was the girl's words that filled this useless adult's silence, inspiring Nanoka at last with both a response to these feelings and the courage to say it.

"Thank you, young lady."

"Huh? No, no..."

"The thing is..." Nanoka took a step forward and gently placed a hand over the girl's as she clutched the paperback. "I don't think it's possible for a story, or a novel, to help someone."

She met the girl's watery eyes with her own, prepared to accept whatever would rise up in them, be it surprise or even disappointment.

"Books cannot be eaten. They cannot slake your thirst, nor heal your

wounds."

This was the sort of common sense even a child might possess, but she chose to recite it.

"They cannot stop wars or shield you from senseless violence."

This was something people realized at some point in their teenage years, but she wanted to revisit it.

"A story printed on paper cannot change the tragedies that happen around you."

This was something every adult had resigned themselves to, but she elected to repeat it.

"I cannot ignore these things and claim that books help people."

They held no nutritional value. They couldn't counteract misfortune or disease. But like a little girl, Nanoka had once believed that stories and novels held the power to stop people from hurting and hating one another.

Back then, she would never have dreamed she would one day look at her life, at her creations, and feel so useless. Back then, she didn't know the feeling of emptiness that would result from a single cruel word crushing her imagination and all its countless tales. But then she grew up.

"However..." She cupped the girl's hands with both of her own. "If you insist that by some magic, some *miracle*, the novel I wrote truly helped you when you were in need..."

The girl had stopped crying. She looked even more beautiful now than the moment they first met, for Nanoka had witnessed her sparkle firsthand...and received a truly irreplaceable gift in the form of her feelings.

The girl had called it a wish, so as an author, it was only proper that Nanoka offer a wish in kind.

"I wish for this story to always and forever be solely yours."

About the Author

Yoru Sumino

First started writing while still in high school. Sumino's 2015 debut work, *I* Want To Eat Your Pancreas, has earned many accolades, winning the novel category of the 2016 Yahoo! Japan Search Awards and second place in the 2016 Japan Booksellers' Awards, among others. Other literary works include *I Had That Same Dream Again* and *At Night, I Become A Monster*. Sumino enjoys live music venues and bookstores.



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