

My Friend's Little Sister

vol. 2



Has It
IN
for
Me!

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**DON'T
SLAP
MY
BUTT.
THIS
IS ALL
YOUR
FAULT!**

**KINDA
FUN TO BE
RUNNING
SUPER
LATE
ONCE IN
A WHILE,
Huh?!**



THOUGHT I
TOLD YA TO
GIVE ME A
PROPER
HEADS-UP
NEXT TIME,
EH?

YOU'RE A
REAL PAIN
IN THE ASS
SOMETIMES.

BUT
WHATEVER,
WE'RE
HERE
NOW.

I'M
GOING
INTO THE
BOOTH
NOW. HAVE
YOU GOT
THE SCRIPT
FOR ME,
SENPAI?

MM?
WHAT IS IT,
AKI?

I wanted
to give
my reply
to your
confession.
That's why
I invited
you here.

Characters



Ooboshi Akiteru

The protagonist. In his second year of high school, and goes through life with the aim of living as efficiently as possible, having only a single friend as a result. Considers himself as average as they come, but is secretly the director of the 05th Floor Alliance. His profile picture on LIME simply says: AKI.



Kohinata Iroha

In her first year of high school, and Ozuma's younger sister. As a sweet and charming honor student, she is well-liked at school. Out of school, she is a high-energy girl without a filter, who likes to get on Akiteru's nerves constantly. She is a highly talented voice actress. Her LIME profile picture is a tomato.



Tsukinomori Mashiro

Akiteru's cousin, she's also in his class at school. Usually reserved, she is particularly cruel when it comes to Akiteru. She secretly writes under the pen name of Makigai Namako, and is a fan of everything under the sea. On her regular LIME account, her profile picture is a seashell. As Namako, it's a sea cucumber.



Kohinata Ozuma

In the same class as Akiteru, and his only friend. Kindhearted and handsome, he feels he owes Akiteru a great deal for something that happened in the past. 05th Floor Alliance's genius programmer, his LIME profile picture reads: OZ.



Kageishi Sumire

Twenty-five years old, and Akiteru's homeroom teacher. Beautiful and intelligent, she's known as the Venomous Queen among the students. She secretly works as an artist under the name Murasaki Shikibusensei, though she has trouble keeping deadlines. Her LIME icon is a bottle of sake, since she likes every type of it.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Chapter 0: Recap](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: The Girl Who Confessed to Me Only Has It In for Me in Real Life!](#)

[Interlude: Iroha and Mashiro](#)

[Chapter 2: The People around Me Have It In for My Sense of Reality](#)

[Chapter 3: My Friend's Little Sister Only Has It In for Me Online](#)

[Chapter 4: The Drama Club's Advisor Has It In for the Sports Clubs](#)

[Chapter 5: My Teacher's Sister Has It In for the Art of Drama](#)

[Interlude: Iroha and Mashiro 2](#)

[Chapter 6: My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Her True Self](#)

[Chapter 7: My Fake Girlfriend Has It In for My Response to Her Confession](#)

[Chapter 8: I Want to Apologize to My Friend's Little Sister](#)

[Chapter 9: I Have a Plan to Improve the Drama Club](#)

[Chapter 10: My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Everybody](#)

[Chapter 11: My Friend's Little Sister and I Live in Our Own World](#)

[Epilogue 1: Meeting with the CEO](#)

[Epilogue 2: Celebration and Thanks](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 0: Recap

Relationships are unnecessary. Friends are unnecessary; well, more than one, anyway. And girlfriends are *definitely* unnecessary. The way most people spend their youths is horribly inefficient, and I decided long ago to shed everything unnecessary in order to get ahead in life. Despite all that, there I was—Ooboshi Akiteru, epitome of efficiency—with this girl who kept sneaking into my apartment.

Kohinata Iroha. She wasn't my sister, she wasn't my friend, and she definitely wasn't my girlfriend. She was nothing more than my friend's little sister.

She was annoying and a bother, and had one secret she held close to her heart: she was a hidden member of the 05th Floor Alliance, a team of developers behind a popular mobile game who were shrouded in mystery.

I was the group's producer. OZ, real name Kohinata Ozuma, was its brilliant programmer. The illustrator was Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, real name Kageishi Sumire, and our scenario writer was Makigai Namako, a best-selling light novel author who decided to join us for whatever reason. We made up the group's core of four.

Our game, *Koyagi: When They Cry*, filled a niche in the market by being a horror game which also featured charming characters. It became widely popular, attracting a huge number of players.

Kohinata Iroha was the anonymous voice actress who lent her voice to the game. Man or woman, young or old, she voiced every last character with remarkable talent. I gave her this opportunity because there was no way she could express an open interest in voice acting. I wasn't looking for anything in return; I just hated how society encouraged people to throw away their talents. I was following my belief that inefficiency and anything unnecessary should be avoided at all costs.

Like I said, I wasn't looking for anything in return, but it looked like Iroha was intent on paying me back by being as annoying as humanly possible. Letting herself into my apartment, using her “assets” to embarrass me,

teasing me... The list goes on. Worse, it seemed she was targeting *me* specifically, which just made the whole thing even more annoying.

Still, life went on as normal. Until that transfer student showed up.
Tsukinomori Mashiro.

She was the daughter of my uncle, Tsukinomori Makoto, who was the president of the large entertainment enterprise Honeyplace Works. In other words, she was my cousin. She transferred to our school to try and turn her shut-in life around. The 05th Floor Alliance did our best to welcome her back into society, and though there was trouble along the way, eventually she accepted us and took her first step on a better path.

But then...

“I love you. More than anyone else in the world.”

A confession from her, out of the blue. A confession that was about to make waves throughout the whole 05th Floor Alliance.

Prologue

It was June, and the morning was hot and humid. I hated getting up in the mornings to find my sweat-soaked pajamas clinging to me. Today, however, was different. I was greeted by a sweet, milky scent, and the feeling of my body being rocked gently.

“...up. Wake up...”

A soft, motherly voice was calling to me. It pulled my consciousness to the surface ever so gently.

“Hey, you. You’re finally awake.”

I opened my eyes to find a girl smiling at me sweetly. Her hair was short and silvery, and at first I mistook her for a beautiful fairy. She wore an apron with cute starfish embroidered on it. I recognized her.

“Mashiro?”

Tsukinomori Mashiro. My cousin, and my fake girlfriend. Acting as her boyfriend was a task given to me by her father, Tsukinomori Makoto, as a condition for hiring the 05th Floor Alliance at his company, Honeyplace Works.

Except she wasn’t my *fake* girlfriend anymore.

“*I love you. More than anyone else in the world.*”

Ever since she sent that embarrassingly straightforward confession over LIME, our relationship changed.

She used to spit venom whenever I was within a certain distance of her. She used to hide in her shell, never daring to venture out into the light of day. But now, she was...she was...

Something pressed against my cheek, interrupting my thoughts. It was a porcelain bowl, cool against my skin. A bowl of rice and fish.

“Here you go.”

“What’s this?”

“Breakfast. It’s delicious!” Mashiro gave her answer without a hint of malice, pushing the bowl against my cheek.

I looked at the contents. Eel, roe, and rice, all wobbling about inside the

bowl. It looked so good and fancy that I had to stop myself from drooling.

“Wait. What is this?” I asked again.

“A purine-rich bowl of rice.”

“A purine-rich bowl of rice,” I found myself repeating.

“A purine-rich bowl of rice. It’s good.”

“And this is what you call...breakfast?”

It looked delicious, but for the first meal of the day, it was a little much. Mashiro froze, her face crumpling into a frown.

Shoot. Did I upset her?

I always had trouble deciding how I was supposed to treat the girls around me, but Mashiro was especially difficult. I upset her countless times since we met, and got her into all sorts of trouble. She went out of her way to cook this breakfast for me, and all I did was complain. I braced myself for the oncoming storm of abuse. I watched like a frightened deer in the headlights as she slowly opened her mouth and spoke.

“I’m sorry. I only know how to cook seafood...” she said meekly.

Wait. So she wasn’t going to abuse me? I made a mental note to check in with the devil later to see what kind of temperatures they were getting down there.

“Did you hit your head or something? You’re being kinda...not yourself.”

“No, not my head... My heart...”

“Poetry, huh? Well—Hold on a second...”

Mashiro woke me up this morning, and even made breakfast for me. Presumably, that meant I had accepted her confession and we had started dating. Otherwise, I’d have some serious questions about this situation.

The only problem was, I couldn’t remember any of it. All I remembered was getting that message from her on LIME.

“You’re thinking too much again. Just keep dreaming, okay?”

“Dreaming. Right. H-Hey, whaddya doing?!”

Mashiro put the bowl of food down at her feet and removed her apron before slowly undoing the buttons of her uniform underneath. Her blouse slipped down over one shoulder, leaving it exposed. She leapt up onto the bed like a touch-starved kitten, then placed her paws on my shoulders and pushed me down as her sweet lips came ever closer.



“We’re lovers, right? So why don’t we act like it?”

“H-Hey, w-wait—”

Her lips touched mine. I hadn’t expected my first kiss to feel so cold. I guess that was all I could expect from Snow White, and one who liked to hide away in her cave, no less.

“Mwah!”

But why was she kissing me so passionately? Her tongue found its way between my lips and pushed forcefully into my mouth, making it hard to breathe.

I felt like I was about to faint. I could barely gasp for breath anymore, and she was so cold. In fact, if I didn’t push her off soon, I would probably die...

“Gah!” My eyes flew open.

I narrowed them against the sunlight streaming in between the curtains, and the bed squeaked underneath me. It was only June, but the cicadas were already screeching outside. I could feel something cold being pressed against my lips—but it wasn’t Mashiro’s kiss.

“Omigod, Senpai, you look like a total octopus when you sleep! What’s with your mouth?! Ha ha ha! Oh, but you want this, right? C’mon then! Let’s kiss! Mwah! C’mon, if you don’t get up, I’ll eat it instead!”

“What the hell are you doing, Iroha?”

“Ooh! So you’re awake now, huh?”

I glared at the owner of the annoying voice that had kicked me out of my sleep and to the curb of reality.

Her bright golden hair was perfectly brushed, and she was wearing her short-sleeved summer uniform. She had a blue scrunchie wrapped around her wrist. A typical high school girl, and one who somehow managed to follow the trends without being preppy.

This was Kohinata Iroha, my friend’s little sister.

Since I lived alone, I entrusted a spare key to my neighbor and friend, Ozu. Iroha took it as an invitation to use the key so she could come and go as she pleased. For better or worse, I was used to her being here. At this time in the morning, though?

“I was trying to sleep, you dumbass! What even is that, anyway?”

“It’s a popsicle!”

“So trying to suffocate sleeping people with popsicles is a thing now?”

“Hey, I was tryin’ to help! You looked like you were having a nightmare, so I decided to cool you off! Duh!” Again she pushed the popsicle against my lips.

Give me strength...

At least I knew why my lips felt so cold. Not that it was any consolation.

“Did you even think to use the classic shoulder-shake to wake me up?”

“Classic? More like boring!”

“So waking me up is a game to you, huh?”

“You get woken up, and I get to have fun! It’s win-win, right? Now do you want this popsicle or not? I’ll even feed you mouth-to-mouth if you beg me for it!”

“It’s not win-win, it’s borderline abusive. And I don’t want your stupid popsicle.” I pushed it away.

Iroha pouted. “You’d think you could be happier about such a cute girl comin’ to wake you, huh?”

“Only a masochist would be happy about getting such shoddy treatment.”

“Oh, really? What *would* make you happy, then?” Iroha grinned, leaning over me slightly.

With her second button undone, I caught a full view of her cleavage. I quickly averted my gaze, which didn’t fail to escape Iroha’s notice.

“What’s the matter, Senpai? It’s rude not to look at people when they’re talkin’ to you, y’know!”

“Have some decency, dumbass.”

“Oh? So you *were* looking?”

I decided not to answer.

“C’mモン, no need to look so grumpy about it! They’re great, right, so of course you’d like ‘em! It’s only natural your other head’s in charge right now!”

If this was how she bullied men, she was going to get in real trouble one of these days. I’d just woken up, and so my patience was woefully thin. I could just feel the rage boiling inside me.

“Do you even know what time it is? Since when did you start coming here in the mornings, anyway?”

“Today’s an exception. You didn’t notice? You should be thanking me,

y'know." Iroha grabbed the alarm clock beside my pillow, and held it out in front of her chest. This digital-display alarm clock suffered morning-after-morning of abusive punches from me as I tried to shut it up. I only realized what was wrong when I noticed that the usual "7" I was used to waking up to was an "8." And the two numbers next to it were definitely not zeroes...

"Wh-What?!"

"You always get up at seven, right? But you left our LIME messages unread. So, Ozuma sent me to check up on you!"

"No way. There's no way it's past eight! You messed with the clock, right?"

"Even I'm not that mean! Quit freaking out. You just overslept, that's all."

"I lost an entire hour?! No way! N-No way!"

There was nothing more valuable to me than efficiency. Every last second of my life was under my complete control. My study time, working with the Alliance, deepening my bonds with those around me, my eating times, my commuting time and, of course, my sleeping time. Five minutes wasted here and there was fine; I was only human. But an entire hour?!

My head, its movements robotic with shock, turned to look up at Iroha. I asked her my final question, and hung all my hopes on her response.

"I-It's a holiday, right? A day off?"

"Nope! Regular school day!"

"Right, I'm gonna go to the hospital. I gotta be sick or something..."

"If you go to the doctor 'cause you overslept, they're just gonna send you to a psych ward."

She could be frustratingly logical at times. I guess even the most punctual person in the world was bound to oversleep at least once. But that I was considering going to the hospital should show you just how much of a shock this was to me. Why the heck did I oversleep?

"We'll worry about the whys later, yeah? You better hurry up, or you'll be late!" Iroha said.

"Shit! Why didn't you tell me I overslept instead of all that popsicle nonsense?!"

"Where's the fun in that?" Iroha said, but I jumped out of bed and rushed past her, paying her words no mind.

There was no way I could be late just because I overslept. I heard Iroha wishing me "good luck" moments before I launched myself into the

bathroom.

“Seriously, Iroha, if you’re gonna come and wake me up, don’t keep me lying around for ages like that!” I grumbled as I splashed my face with water and wiped it down with a towel.

Today wasn’t looking good. I had a super weird dream, woke up to Iroha playing her usual tricks, and now I was running late. At least with the cold water on my face, I was regaining some of my sanity. I thought back to my dream.

If I remembered correctly, Mashiro and I were living together as a young couple. Right now, I couldn’t remember how much of it was true. I knew for sure that she confessed to me, but I couldn’t remember how I’d responded or what our relationship was now. I took my phone out as I brushed my teeth, and checked LIME.

Mashiro: I love you. More than anyone else in the world.

Aki: What do you mean?

Mashiro: I mean what I said.

Aki: You mean love love, right?

Mashiro: Yeah. Love love. I want you to be my boyfriend ≡

Aki: Got it. Lemme think about it.

Mashiro: Sure ≡ Just let me know when you’ve made up your mind

≡≡≡≡≡

“I still can’t believe it.”

I couldn’t imagine Mashiro saying any of the words on the screen. Not to mention all those hearts. But I couldn’t deny the truth that she was confessing to me. At least I knew where I stood right now: I was still “thinking about it.”

What else was I supposed to do? I’d devoted my whole life so far to getting a spot at Honeyplace Works and never imagined anything so cliché and romantic could ever happen to me. It was no wonder I couldn’t answer right away.

I rinsed out my mouth and looked at myself in the mirror, steadying my breathing. *Look what you’ve done now, Tsukinomori-san. Thanks to your fake-relationship set up, your daughter’s ended up confessing to me.* Hadn’t this dude ever watched a romantic comedy movie?

Was Mashiro even in love with me? I mean, her messages were totally out of character, right?

No, I needed to stop. It wasn’t fair to second-guess her. If it was a mistake

or some sort of prank, then I should be the one to take the fall. But if she really did love me, it would be cruel to ignore those feelings of hers. I had to face her head-on.

“Okay.” Satisfied I was presentable, I took a deep breath.

Today, I would meet Mashiro and confirm that her feelings for me were real. And then, I would give her my answer.

“It’s really admirable that you’re willing to confront it directly, Aki. Though I guess that’s just like you.”

“Yeah. It’s not in my nature to beat around the bush.”



• • •



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

This week's episode of Death Account was so good! Best anime to watch with a bottle of sake!



AKI

Is that the one based on the Death Game manga? I heard the author has it in for anyone in a relationship.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Yeah! The couple from the first episode had their guts explode everywhere, and then in the new episode, the main character got in a relationship with the main girl, and they both died immediately!



AKI

Gross.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

He was getting really annoying with his whole "justice" shtick, so personally I'm glad he died in the most gruesome way possible :)



OZ

I've seen loads of people talking about it online.



AKI

It's a battle royale type thing and all the deaths are super interesting. Though a lot of these series start getting kinda ridiculous when they keep upping the stakes all the time.



AKI

Wait, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. I thought you loved every anime character who ever lived? How come you're happy about seeing them die now?



05th Floor Alliance (4)

• • •



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Their deaths become part of their character! You know a show's good when even the hated characters get great death scenes.



AKI

Must be nice to be able to enjoy absolutely anything.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

But the latest episode was seriously good! You like this kind of stuff too, right, Makigai-sensei?



AKI

Oh yeah, I feel like he would.



Makigai Namako

Nah.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Huh? Weren't you saying the other day about how much you loved that the virgins were always the first to die in horror movies?



Makigai Namako

Couples deserve to live. Think about all the time they spent working up the courage to confess.



Makigai Namako

And then they just get killed 'cause the author decides couples shouldn't be allowed to live. It just makes me feel bad for them.



• • •



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Huh. I thought you'd love seeing the drama unfold as a once-happy couple meet their demise.



AKI

I thought so, too.



OZ

Same to be honest.



Makigai Namako

Couples have to be treasured.



Makigai Namako

Go listen to some Mishino Kana songs to cleanse yourselves. I swear she'll change your lives.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Is it just me, or are you acting weird?



Makigai Namako

Ah, you got me...



AKI

Sensei... you good?

Chapter 1: The Girl Who Confessed to Me Only Has It In for Me in Real Life!

“Kinda fun to be running super late once in a while, huh?!”

“Don’t slap my butt. This is all your fault!”

“Nuh-uh! It’s your fault for being a big ol’ sweepyhead!”

“Dammit. You’re right.”

There I was, on one of those stupid bikes with a basket on the front, standing on the pedals as I tried to make it to school on time. The constant rattling of the chain was almost as annoying as Iroha’s voice from behind me. She was smacking me on the butt and cackling like a lone ranger spurring on her horse.

It wasn’t legal in the least, and I was sure someone was going to catch it on a dashcam and upload us to the internet, but right now all I cared about was getting to school. If we walked, we’d be late.

If the police stopped us, it’d take even more time, but I compensated for that by taking the shortest route that still avoided their patrols. I couldn’t afford to overlook even the smallest chance of a hitch if we wanted to make it on time.

What I hadn’t reckoned with was the dead weight behind me. I glanced over my shoulder. Iroha was still sitting sideways on the back, kicking her legs. “Hold on properly, dumbass, or you’re gonna fall off.”

“I’ll be fine! My balance is perfect! But if you ask really nicely, I’ll give you a super tight hug!”

“Watch the turn.”

“W-Wait!” Iroha screamed. “Wait! I’m gonna fall!”

I took the corner at full speed, the bicycle tilting as I did so. Flustered, Iroha threw her arms around my waist, forcing me to lower myself back onto the saddle. We could probably afford to slow down a little at this point.

“Who goes that fast ’round a corner? Sheesh.”

“Who sits on the back of a bike hands-free? See how dangerous that

was?”

Iroha grumbled, but I soon saw—or rather felt—her breaking into a grin again.

“Oh really? Sure you just didn’t want me to hug you?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t worry! I get it. After all, cycling while carrying a super cute girl with you is every hot-blooded high school boy’s dream! Ain’t I niiice, fulfilling the dreams of virgins whereeeever I goooo?”

Did she really have to draw out her vowels like that?

She pushed and rubbed herself against my back. I could definitely feel them, even if she was wearing a bra this time.

“Quit it.”

“Ooh, c’mon! I know your heart’s pounding!”

“Shut up and hold tight.”

Just calm down, Aki. Peace. Tranquility. Existence is meaningless.

Nothing matters. There is no Iroha.

I kept pedaling, filling my mind with peaceful thoughts to try and chase out the demons of temptation. If I let this situation get to me now, she’d notice, and I’d never hear the end of it. I didn’t want her to have that kind of power over me.

“Why so serious, Senpai?”

“What are you talking about now?”

“You could just be late, tell the teacher you overslept.”

“I don’t wanna ruin my reputation without a good excuse.”

“Who cares? You’re always such a goody-two-shoes, not like anyone’s gonna say anything if you’re late *once*.”

“Sure, but there’s something else.”

“What?”

“My homeroom teacher is Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, remember? And I do *not* want a lecture about tardiness from her.”

To our illustrator, Kageishi Sumire, deadlines were just meaningless dates. Not to mention she liked to draw young boys paired up with grown women, but maybe that was a different matter.

“I have to show I’m better than her, or she’ll start to rebel.”

“Damn, I guess our director’s got a lot on his plate!” Iroha chuckled, though it was clear she sympathized for once. “But are you sure you don’t

mind me riding with you?"

"Nah. It's not like any of the people looking know who we are. As long as Tsukinomori-san isn't out doing his grocery shopping or something, we should be fine. But it's a weekday, so he should be at work."

"That's not what I mean..." Iroha paused. "I'm more worried about... Well, what if Mashiro-senpai saw us?"

The sound of her name instantly made me tense up.

"You really wanna bring her up?"

"Why not, Mr. Popular?"

"Isn't that a compliment? Are you trying to use flattery to annoy me now? 'Cause that's not how that works."

"Don't get carried away now! It's just one girl! Mess it up, and you may have to embrace being Forever Alone! That's a real thing that happens, y'know."

"Happens where? To who? Citation needed."

"I read it in the latest issue of Cosma!"

"A fashion magazine is hardly a credible source."

"Y'know, if you really want to avoid messing things up with Mashiro-senpai, I could always give you some special...training," she whispered into my ear.

Any other girl, and I'd have no clue if she was serious or not. That was partly why I was still a virgin. But this was Iroha.

"Quit messing with me."

"What the hell?! That's a weak reaction! You're not even blushing!"

"If you wanna see me blush, why don't you come pay me a visit in the dead of night? But you don't have the balls, right?"

"Y-Yes, I do! I'll show you that I'm a world-class sex machine!"

"Sure, show up, and then I'll kick you right in those balls. That'll show you."

"Okay, that's rude and stupidly violent! I don't *actually* have balls! For your information, I have..."

We were at it again. It was just how things went with us. Even when she was trying to be alluring, or whatever, we ended up bickering. That was why I could never take anything she said seriously. A whole grain of salt was too much for anything that came out of her mouth.

"Okay, we're at the final stretch! I'm going all out now, 'kay?"

We whooshed past the final corner, and then I pedaled hard for the last spurt to school. I felt Iroha tighten her grip on me.

“So stubborn, Senpai. Though I guess that means nothing’s gonna change, huh?” Iroha’s murmur was carried away by the wind before it even reached my ears.

Motivation is a lot like money.

Homework and mandatory tasks were debts with interest in the form of extra motivation. So many people say they’ll just do it later, later, later...but that just makes things worse. Why? Because with each passing day, the energy and motivation required to complete the task piles up just like interest on a loan.

If you set yourself to completing them immediately, you’d be done in an hour. But when dragged out, they end up taking hours or even days.

What a waste of time. I struggled to think of anything more inefficient.

The same rule applies to human relationships.

If you have a problem with someone, you can’t just leave it unaddressed for ages. You need to tell ’em about it right away. Well, as soon as you get a socially acceptable opportunity to do so, that is. So I guess it’s less “tell ’em right away,” and more “tell ’em as soon as possible.”

I’m sure you’ve seen it all the time in manga and anime. A character just says: “Oh, I’ll tell them later,” or just assumes that their hunch is wrong because they have no proof, so they stay quiet about it. It’s so dumb.

Just say something, for God’s sake.

Oh, and that dumb trope where the other person isn’t listening for like one second so the guy is just like: “No... It’s nothing...” and leaves?

Dude, just repeat yourself. It’s not hard.

Anyway, that’s why I always try and sort things out as quickly as possible, or respond to any hunches as soon as I can. *And* why I’m going to tackle my fake girlfriend’s confession directly too.

I slid into the classroom just moments before homeroom was due to start. Mashiro was already at her desk.

It was weird, but she suddenly looked much sexier than usual. Was that

because she confessed to me? When I approached her, I could smell a sweet scent coming off her. It was like I was a bee thirsting for nectar, and she was a beautiful flower inviting me in.

What the hell was I doing, getting so worked up about a pretty girl?
Didn't I have a script to follow?

I tried to play it cool and put my bag on my desk, then turned to Mashiro.
“Hey, Mashiro—”

“What?” Her face snapped up and she glared at me.

If you were one of those shy guys always reading in a corner, you probably know the look. It's the same one you get when you try to interact with one of the popular girls, the sort that makes you nope out of talking to girls for the rest of your life. As for me, it certainly took off a good chunk of my health.

“A-About that message you sent me on LIME...”

“Who said you could talk to me?”

You know those super-serious teachers who spend twenty-five years teaching literature with a quiet passion? The sharpness in Mashiro's tone was enough to snap their glasses in two and put them off teaching for life.

I took another five points of damage.

“D-Did I do something wrong? You seem kinda upset.”

“Oh, nothing. Your voice just makes me sick, that's all. So don't talk to me. Thanks.”

Wait, so you know those guys who swagger round the streets like they're hot stuff? The poison in Mashiro's words was enough to send them to the hospital crying out in pain.

For me, it was a critical hit.

I clutched at my chest and doubled over in pain.

Why was she treating me like shit again? Never mind “again,” this was even worse than before! Was this really how a fake girlfriend was supposed to treat her fake boyfriend? I pricked my ears to see what other people were saying about us. Surely *they* could see what the problem was here?

“They're getting on swell as usual!”

“Huh? But it looks like she's being super cold to him. Are you sure they're actually a couple?”

“Bro, this is why you're a virgin and always will be. They're just communicating telepathically! We could never define what's been said

between his heart and hers!"

"Oh, yeah! I get it! So they're just like an old married couple!"

I didn't know what I was expecting. I wish they'd teach me some of their optimism, and how to identify telepathic communications. It seemed like a useful skill.

I turned my gaze back to Mashiro, who pointedly huffed and looked in the other direction. I could barely believe this was the same girl who confessed to me over LIME. Or maybe that wasn't a confession at all?

No, that was going too far. She literally said "I love you." Also, it came from her account. There was no doubt.

So if the confession wasn't sus, then how was I supposed to interpret Mashiro's attitude towards me right now? It completely threw me for a loop.

Also, was it just me, or was her desk a little further away from mine than usual?

None of this made any sense. If she refused to answer me physically, maybe it was time to take my efforts to the digital world. I pulled out my phone and opened up LIME.

AKI: Why are you ignoring me? I wanted to talk about your confession.

Mashiro: Because it's way too embarrassing! (≥ ∀ ≤*) I love you so much that I can't even look at you!*

It took her about two seconds to type that reply.

Okay, so she did like me. The bags of salt I got from her just now were replaced by a truckload of sugar. At least she didn't hate me, so that was good. I guess. I looked up at her.

"What are you looking at?" she snapped with enough hatred to send the greatest major league baseball player the world had ever seen clamoring to throw in the towel.

If she loved me so much she couldn't even look at me, then what did she think she was doing right now? She was looking at me like I was the cause of every inconvenience she'd ever faced.

I opened up LIME again.

Mashiro: I get too shy when you stare at me like that!

Mashiro: If you're going to stare, I wanna be wearing something nicer than this uniform.

Mashiro: I bought some new clothes by the way! They're super grown-up, and I think you'll like them :3c

Mashiro: I can't wait for you to see!

Was this a Jekyll-Hyde situation or something? Or had her LIME been hacked? My phone buzzed again as I was contemplating.

I nearly choked on my own breath when I saw who it was from.
Tsukinomori Makoto.

It was literally the worst timing he could've picked. Mashiro's dad, and my uncle... But more importantly, he was the CEO of Honeyplace Works, and the man whose daughter I was fake-dating to get me and my friends a job there.

He was weirdly prejudiced about today's youth being too hedonistic, and wanted to keep his daughter away from them as much as possible.

Oh yeah, and he had told me in no uncertain terms that I was forbidden from dating his daughter for real.

I wondered if he knew about her confession. He had to, right? Even if she was out living on her own now, Mashiro was his daughter. It was probably the kind of thing to come up in a conversation between them. I swallowed nervously as I opened up his message.

MAKOTO: I had a wonderful time last night. I can't wait to see you again.

There was a photograph attached. It looked like some sort of fancy restaurant with the nighttime city skyline visible through the window. A man and a woman were clinking their glasses and looking at each other.

The man, with an old-fashioned suave and an admirable attempt at facial hair, was my uncle. The other was a woman I'd never seen before. Or at least, I *felt* like I shouldn't recognize her.

She was looking at my uncle like he was the best thing since sliced bread, and her cheek was turned towards him. Much as she seemed to be enjoying his company, this woman was not his wife. It was a while since I met Mashiro's mom, but this woman looked nothing like my memory of her, not to mention she was far too young.

Who was she, then? I was sure I saw her with my uncle before.
Oh my God.

It was the waitress from Royal Guest. The one my uncle attempted to seduce every time we met up there, throwing weird compliments at her like: "I love the way you type our order into that doodad." He did say it wouldn't be long until he scored but, to be perfectly honest, I thought he was talking

out of his ass.

I knew he liked to sleep around, but he was certainly quick on the ball with this one. I just hoped it wouldn't turn into a huge scandal that got him fired—I needed him to stay as CEO, at least until me and my friends started working there.

Why was he sending this to me, anyway? Luckily, he was about to explain.

MAKOTO: Sorry, wrong chat.

Really? If this was the sort of thing he sent to people by accident, then it was a miracle he was still married.

Whatever. At least he wasn't messaging me about Mashiro's confession, which meant he probably didn't know. As long as I sorted it out before he found out, I was golden. It all depended on whether Mashiro was willing to talk to me properly or not. That was the real issue here, and I couldn't come up with a solution before homeroom started.

The classroom door rattled open, and all at once the chatter in the classroom ceased. It was time for the Venomous Queen to take her throne and lord over the peasants before her. The clacking of her heels echoed over the frozen classroom. Her gaze was as sharp as a knife, and not one hair in her immaculate ponytail was out of place. She was the very definition of regal.

"Good. It seems you've all learned when to shut up and pay attention," Kageishi Sumire said coldly, casting her gaze over the room. "Well, what are you waiting for? Who's starting us off today?"

"Y-Yes, Ma'am! Everyone rise!" the student on duty said in a wavering voice, as he led the bow to start the class.

There wasn't a squeak to be heard as everyone followed his directions. For a second I couldn't tell if this was school or a military training exercise, but that feeling wasn't unusual for one of the Queen's classes.

There was a good number of students who didn't like how Sumire ran things, though she quickly cut down such complaints using facts and logic. Strict as she was, her teaching methods made sense, and the average grades in her classes were much higher than in other teachers'. No one, neither student

nor teacher, could say a word against her.

If only she took her side hustle as seriously as her main job. Unlike Kageishi Sumire, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei was an organizational disaster, and if the day ever came where she actually managed to stick to a deadline, I'd eat my cell phone.

Her queen-of-the-classroom shtick was just an act. If the class knew just how useless she normally was, they'd probably all die of shock and she wouldn't have a class left to teach.

Anyway, homeroom went on without a hitch and eventually came to an end.

"There's one last thing," Sumire said before class was over, her voice low with authority. "As you may know if you bothered to pay attention, the National Drama Fair takes place in July. As the advisor for the drama club, I am not prepared for our school to walk away without a prize."

Sumire slammed her hand down on the desk to make sure everyone was paying attention before continuing. "The members of my club hold so much talent, that people call them the 'Generation of Miracles.' Nevertheless, we are accepting new members to assure our victory in the Fair. If you think you have what it takes, forget it. If you *know* you have what it takes, come and see me."

A small wave of voices rippled through the class.

"Since when was she advisor for the drama club?"

"What does the drama club even do?"

"I dunno, but I bet it's super hard to get in with her as the advisor."

"Yeah, I dunno. Seems like it'd be too much of a hassle to join."

"If you have something to share with the class, stand up and say it proudly!" Sumire snapped, her glare turning every face in the room pale.

I hated needless chatter as much as she did, but for once I couldn't help but agree with my classmates. I was as surprised as them to find out she was involved with the drama club. In fact, she never even expressed an interest in drama as long as I knew her. The theatrical kind, at least.

"Be warned that we won't accept just anyone. We need people who can outshine even our current members. That is all." With that, Sumire clacked out of the room with her head held high.

After a few wary seconds, the atmosphere in the classroom relaxed once more.

"I still can't believe she's advisor for the drama club," I said to myself.

How did she even find the time for it between her two jobs? In any case, if she had this whole Fair thing on her plate, the *fair* thing for me to do would be to extend her deadlines. Otherwise she'd just wind up on her knees in front of me again.

From one headache to another. I shot a glance at Mashiro.

"Don't look at me."

Why did I even bother? Still, I had to come up with a way to communicate with her in real life somehow. This lack of responsiveness was completely inefficient. For now, though, I forced myself to take a break. All this thinking wasn't working too well for me so far.

"Were you okay this morning, Aki?" someone asked me from the desk behind mine.

I turned around to see my bishie of a best friend eyeing me through a yawn, his golden hair sparkling in the sunlight. He was handsome enough to land himself a five-girl strong harem within two seconds of landing in a parallel world. Different as we were, he was the one person I decided to keep as a long-term friend: Kohinata Ozuma. I called him Ozu. Nicknames were an efficient way to deepen bonds.

"Yeah, I just overslept a little."

"Huh. That's not like you. You sure you're not tired from everything that's going on? Don't push yourself too much, yeah? I kinda like having you around."

"You flatter me, Ozu. As always."

"Hey, I'm serious. Friends are s'posed to care about each other, right?"

"I was being serious too. If I didn't have you looking out for me, I dunno where I'd be."

Ozu was my rock between the triple storms of Mashiro, Sumire, and Iroha. His words warmed me from the bottom of my heart, but that wasn't the only reason I chose him as a friend.

"I don't want you to push yourself either," I said. "The Alliance would be toast without you, and I mean it."

Ozu's extraordinary programming skills were the backbone of the 05th Floor Alliance. Without him, our game would still be a collection of ideas and drawings. He was constantly staying up all night to work on things, and I was much more worried about his health than my own.

“You’re a more important member than me. You’re the director, after all. But if it was exhaustion that made you oversleep, sending Iroha to check on you was probably a bad move.”

“At least you admitted it...”

“My bad.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s hers.”

While Ozu was kind and caring, his sister was nothing but a brat. They really were like chalk and cheese. Maybe one of them was adopted.

“You know Iroha didn’t even wake me up till the last minute, right?”

“That doesn’t surprise me. She probably wanted to watch you sleep.”

“Ugh, I hope not. I bet she was thinking of the most terrifying way she could wake me.”

“Nah, I like my theory better. Makes more sense, since she’s got a massive crush on you.”

“Bullshit. Like I’ve told you a million times, she doesn’t like me. If she did, she wouldn’t be such a b—”

I stopped.

Maybe I was under a huge misunderstanding. Mashiro confessed to me, after all. Maybe I didn’t understand girls as much as I thought I did and maybe, just *maybe*, some of them did like me, even though I wasn’t particularly handsome or talented.

Perhaps the time had come for me to rethink my long-standing assumptions. But then again, it wasn’t like Mashiro confessed to me like a normal person. The gears of my mind were turning, but Ozu inadvertently stopped them.

“Oh, right, I know you’re tired, but I wanted to ask you something. Don’t you think Makigai Namako-sensei’s been acting weird since last weekend?”

“Ah.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and let out a heavy sigh.

In addition to being the writer of the 05th Floor Alliance, Makigai Namako was a best-selling light novel author. I’d never met him, but on voice calls he sounded like a friendly guy in his twenties. I loved his story, which led to inviting him to join us, which he did.

Ozu was right though. He had been acting strangely ever since last weekend.

“Remember what he said on LIME?”

“Yeah, that thing about treasuring couples or whatever.”

In his award-winning work, he wrote in the afterword that he wanted to get away from his shitty reality, as though he had some kind of grudge against it, but now he was saying that couples and romance were wonderful. It was just too weird.

“Well, I guess it’s fine. Maybe he’s just going through a thing, or maybe he’s just gone soft for some reason. Who knows. But the bigger issue is this.” I pulled a bundle of papers out of my bag.

They were new scenarios that Makigai Namako-sensei wrote and sent me the other day for our next release. I printed them out so I could read between classes.

“He’s been sending me these since last week. Have a look and lemme know what you think.”

Ozu took them and began to read.

Our game, *Koyagi: When They Cry*, was a horror and dating-sim type game. Thanks to Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s artwork, the girls were all cute with gorgeous designs. OZ’s technological trickery made the horror scenes ten times spookier. Our mysterious “team” of voice actors put on an amazing performance to make the characters seem real. Finally, Makigai Namako and his way with words thrust the player into a horror-filled pit of despair.

What genius plots would this writer come up with next? Well...

Koyagi: When They Cry Chapter 7: Just Me.

My friend died! I’m so sad!

I was especially scared when all the blood came out of her.

Maybe the killer is one of my trusted friends.

I’m really scared.

But then I remembered what Yuuto-kun said to me!

“Don’t worry, Marika. I’ll get you out of this spooky house!”

He’s so handsome!

I’m so happy my heart is dancing!

I think falling in love is about more than just looks!

The guy has to be kind too.

But Yuuto-kun is really handsome and cool!

And when I was so scared because everyone was dying, he saved me!

As long as we’re together, I’m happy enough to die!

He’s so handsome and so cool that I’m going to make him mine, even if

the other girls get jealous!

I'm going to try so hard!

Even though the house was dark, the sun was coming up and it made it light again.

(Give the voice actress a piano solo here, and make her sing like in a musical)

The birds are so happy to see the sun and its blessings they are singing too!

I'm going to try really hard and escape from this house with Yuuto-kun!

“What the heck?” Ozu grimaced as he read.

“I know, right?” I made the exact same face when I read it.

“So what I’m getting is...the main girl’s friend died, but then she ran into the protagonist and he helped her be more, uh, optimistic? I guess?”

“That’s what I thought, yeah.”

It was fine for her to be more optimistic or whatever, but this was a bit much. “Delusional” didn’t quite cut it. Not to mention that she said that stuff about love not being “about looks,” but then also used the word “handsome” a total of three times. And what was with the singing birds after someone just *died*? Then there was the assumption that the voice actress could even play the piano, or that our game was supposed to have songs in it in the first place (it wasn’t).

And guess what? This was just a small fraction of what he sent me. Though I don’t need to show you the rest, because it was all like this.

Before this, everything he wrote was filled with the heavy atmosphere of the spooky house, the terror of the characters at the tiniest movement, the tension that gnawed away at your senses...but all of that was gone now, disappearing in puffs of cotton-candy smoke and heart-shaped confetti.

“Is this what you call writer’s block?”

“I guess. All I know is he’s never sent anything like this before.”

Perhaps something was going on in his private life. Whatever it was, I just couldn’t work out what could cause such a change, no matter how hard I thought. I didn’t have time to delve much further into my thoughts when the bell rang and our first-period teacher came in.

“Guess all I can do is talk to him and see what’s up.”

“Yeah, please do.”

And so I returned to my seat. It was then that I could sense Mashiro staring, if not glaring, at me.

“What?”

“Nothing. Don’t talk to me.” She turned away with a huff.

Why did everything have to be so complicated?

Mashiro’s confession paired with her abuse, and now Makigai Namako-sensei’s mental breakdown, or transformation, or enlightenment, or whatever it was. Much as I wanted to sort things out with Mashiro, I couldn’t turn a blind eye to this stuff with Makigai Namako-sensei either. The quality of his writing was directly linked to the popularity of our game. Unlike Ozu, whose work on the game improved it on a mostly subconscious level, most of the comments and requests for the game focused on its story. If the story was bad, the players would stop coming.

I could just imagine the comments that we’d get if we ran with this trash I’d been sent.

“Are the Alliance mistreating Makigai-sensei or something? Why else would the story end up like this?”

“Makigai-sensei! Stop wasting your time with this game and give us more novels, please!”

“I’m done. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei officially sucks.”

“Wait, what?! She didn’t write this crap!”

I didn’t know what that last part was all about, but I did know that our reputation would be shattered. With our popularity diminished and our downloads crashing through the floor, we would probably be waving goodbye to Honeyplace Works too.

Despite our job offers depending on my fake relationship with Mashiro, I really couldn’t blame Tsukinomori-san for dropping us if our game crashed and burned. He was running a business first and foremost, after all.

I had to do something. If not for the game, then for the future of the Alliance. I was so focused on coming up with a solution to the problem, that I couldn’t even tell you what was taught in the first class that day.

“At least Iroha isn’t going crazy on me. No more than usual, anyway.”

“Not yet.”

“Don’t jinx it, dammit. She’s still gonna be her old annoying self for the rest of time, right?”

“...”

“Say something!”

Interlude: Iroha and Mashiro

All the classroom's a stage, and I was its star player, Kohinata Iroha. That might make it sound like I'm super popular or something, but actually, it was more that little ol' me played many parts.

See, I played a character who shared my name, but *she* was actually an honor student, and I had to make everyone in class believe that's who I really was. Every day for six hours straight. Mess up, and it was game over for me. I guess you could call it practice for my dream job.

Anyway, it was because of all that stuff that my day went so badly! I was trying so hard to keep that stupid grin off my face aaall day! I just couldn't stop thinking about me and Senpai riding that bike together that morning.

Senpai was almost never ever late, so I didn't get the chance to do that kinda thing with him too often. Maybe if I messed with his alarm clock to make him oversleep, we could do it again. Well, not even I'm that mean.

It was just... His back and shoulders were so broad, and he was pedaling so hard just for me, and he was all warm, and it was super nice, and, and, and...

That was what was going through my head the whole day, not just when we were on the bike. I could still feel the fuzzy warmth of his back on my chest and arms. But I was supposed to be an honor student! I couldn't go around with my head obviously in the clouds! It was frustrating, but I had to conceal my feelings.

Plus, I had more important stuff to worry about anyway: Mashiro-senpai's confession. Ever since I saw what she wrote to Senpai, I've been feeling kinda queasy. Though knowing how dense he was, I doubted even a straight-up confession like that would make him fall in love.

It was Mashiro-senpai's guts that really surprised me. I was really hoping we could just be friends and keep having a ton of fun forever and ever without either of us making a move, but I guess I was too naive.

I let out a sigh at my desk in the corner of the classroom. I didn't know what to do. I hated the idea of Senpai dating someone else, but I didn't wanna

lose Mashiro-senpai as a friend. I just wished I could get rid of this icky feeling inside me.

It wasn't long until third period was over.

"Kokinata-san! There's someone here to see you from the grade above!"

"O-Oh, thank you! I'll be there in a second!" I quickly snapped back into Little Miss Perfect mode.

It only took a split second. Unless anyone had been watching closely, they wouldn't have noticed.

Still, I couldn't help wondering who was here for me. From the grade above, I knew Senpai and Ozuma, but they never came to see me during school unless they were together.

When I went out into the corridor, I saw that it was neither of them! In fact it was the last person I wanted to see right now!

"Mashi—uh, hi Tsukinomori-senpai. What's the matter?"

When I was in honor-student mode, I didn't call older students by their first names, and I always went with "-senpai." I had to keep up my polite image, after all.

Anyway, it was Mashiro-senpai who came to see me. She was trembling like a terrified kitten under the stares of the boys walking past and the curious students from my own classroom.

"I-Iroha-chan. Thank goodness you're here. I thought I was going to get molested..."

"Tsukinomori-senpai, it's midday and we are in a school! You shouldn't say such indecent things."

"H-Huh? You seem kinda different than usual, Iroha-chan."

"Different? Don't be absurd! What a ridiculous notion!" I winked at her, hoping she'd get the message.

C'mon... Hint hint...

"Oh, um... Um... Right!" Her face lit up, though she took her sweet time.

The next moment, she winked back at me and made a cute pose.

Omigod, no!

Why was she posing for a selfie like one of those self-obsessed influencers?! I mean, sure it was extra super cute because you'd never expect it from her, but she totally missed my message!

I held back the urge to say something or smack her by smiling at her as sweetly as possible. The silence that followed was unbearable.



“Um, did I do something wrong?” she finally asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“U-Um...” Mashiro-senpai’s face turned red before my eyes. “S-Sorry, I just thought that’s what high school girls did. So they put it on TickTack or Instogram? That’s what I thought you wanted, um... Ugh, this is embarrassing...”

She was just adorable, even more up close. It was kinda annoying, actually. I could hear the boys in my class wondering about her, noting how pretty the both of us were, and saying something about her being a transfer student. I already knew she was objectively pretty, but this just cinched it.

I didn’t like the way we were being watched so closely, though.

“Let’s go somewhere else. C’mon,” I whispered to her.

“O-Okay.”

I led her to a corner of the hallway, where there were far fewer people to stare at us. I felt safe enough to switch off my act.

“So, why’d you come see me, Mashiro-senpai?”

“Ah, you’re back to normal.”

“Well, maybe not completely. I might slip!”

“Oh, okay. Anyway I wanted to ask you something.”

“Oh? You wanna learn how to put on make-up? Or how to use tampons?”

“N-No, um... It’s about Aki.”

Shit. That was what I was scared of. I wished she asked me about anything else! She didn’t know that I knew she confessed to him! I didn’t want her to find out, because I couldn’t support her, but then I didn’t want to sabotage her either.

So whaddya wanna know, Mashiro-senpai?!?

“Aki came to class later than usual today. I mean, I don’t think he was technically late but, I just wanted to ask if you know what happened.”

“Uh, well, if he wasn’t late, then it’s no problemo, right?”

“But he always comes to class at the exact same time. That’s why I’m worried.”

“Aw, c’mon, he’s still human. He’s gotta have bad days like everyone else, right? What was he, like, a few seconds out?”

“Sixteen minutes and thirty-four seconds.”

“Huh?”

“That’s how late he was, compared to normal. That’s more than just a

‘bad day’!” ...

Was she really tracking his habits so carefully? What other data did she have on him? I mean, sure, I could be kinda stalkerish too but... Ugh! Why couldn’t we be in the same class too?! It’s not fair! I wanna sit next to him! Who knows what kinda dirty secrets I’d have access to?

Meanwhile, Mashiro-senpai was looking downcast. “He’s not, um, sick or something, is he?”

“Wait, that’s what you’re worried about?”

“Yeah. It’s not like him to cut it so close. I thought something might’ve happened.”

“Well then, why’re you asking me? Why not just ask him?”

C’mom, girl. You sit right next to him.

Her nose turned red, and she continued like the lovesick protagonist of a shoujo anime. “It’s just way too embarrassing to talk to him. I mean, I can’t say why, but I can’t say anything to him right now.”

I’m sorry, Mashiro-senpai, but I already know. You had the balls to send him a confession and now you’re dealing with his reply, or his non-reply, or whatever, but still I know what you did! Quit taunting me! Ugh! The guilt is killing me. I wish I never saw that dumb message!

“That’s why I’m asking you. Because, um, you’re my only friend, Iroha-chan.”

She really doesn’t know I know, right? ’Cause she couldn’t have said anything more guilt-trippy than that!

I knew it was normal to hate the girls who were after your crush, but I just couldn’t do it. Not that I wanted to, anyway.

I couldn’t keep quiet anymore after a knockdown line like that.

“I think he overslept. He was probably just tired.”

Tired racking his brains about what to do with your confession, I bet. But I didn’t say it out loud. She only needed to know the most basic truth.

“He’s not sick?”

“I doubt it. He’s a bit of a health freak.”

“Oh. Well, I’m glad to hear it.” Mashiro-senpai finally smiled, putting a hand to her chest in relief.

She must genuinely have been worried.

“So he’s tired? I guess I’ll eat lunch by myself then. He’ll probably feel rushed if I eat with him.”

“Nah, you’re overthinking it. I bet he’s always eating alone, so I think he’ll be super happy if you ask to eat together.”

“No, he’ll probably only say yes because he can’t say no. I’ll leave it, I think.” Mashiro nodded to herself.

Now she was resisting eating with the man she loved out of consideration for his feelings. She really was strong. For some reason, it seemed she was holding back around him. I was glad for that at least, ’cause if she showed him her true self, he’d fall for her in two seconds flat! Ugh!

Just then, the bell rang, and the corridor and nearby classrooms began to fill with chatter.

“Oh, I should be heading back. Thanks for your help, Iroha-chan.”

“No biggie. I just told you what I knew. See ya!”

“Bye... Oh, wait.” Just as she was about to scamper away down the stairs, Mashiro-senpai stopped and turned to look at me.

“Do you mind me coming to your classroom like this? I-I mean, I’d kind of like to come again, as long as it’s not a bother...” she murmured shyly.

I sighed as dramatically as I could. Mashiro-senpai obviously thought it meant she *did* annoy me, and started to panic. I smiled at her reassuringly.

“You didn’t need to ask something like that! We’re pals, right? So come whenever you want!”

“Oh! O-Oh, um, thanks. I’ll be back, uh, sometime, then!” Her face bloomed with a bright smile, and Mashiro-senpai turned and left.

I saved my next big sigh for when she was completely out of sight. To be honest, I felt like I had a zillion sighs left in me.

“Maybe Senpai *is* sick or something...”

Senpai had never ever been interested in romance, but I felt a girl like Mashiro-senpai might be enough to change that. She was plenty cute, after all.

“I don’t think he’d change his mind about dating after all this time, and I sure hope not. But...”

He’d never fallen for anything I did. Maybe it was because of that promise he made me all that time ago, about how he wouldn’t treat me as a potential girlfriend. If that was true, then it didn’t matter how cute or beautiful or kind or wonderful or perfect Mashiro-senpai was. He wouldn’t go for her at all. Right?

The unease continued to bubble up in my stomach through the whole next

lesson, and well into lunchtime.

Chapter 2: The People around Me Have It In for My Sense of Reality

The morning's lessons were finally over, and lunchtime was upon us. No matter how much I thought and thought in fourth period, I was no closer to a solution. I tried to signal to Mashiro or catch her attention now and then, but nothing got a decent response. When she noticed, she told me over LIME not to look at her because it was "embarrassing OwO".

Fine, but in that case I would've preferred if she stopped staring at me too. Eventually, I decided I had to ramp things up another notch if I was going to get anywhere. I shot her another LIME message.

AKI: Doing anything at lunchtime?

Mashiro: Not really. I was just gonna get a rice ball from the school store.

Meaning she wasn't planning to eat with anyone. This was good news. All I needed now was to get her to eat with me alone, and we could have a nice, fruitful discussion.

"Hey, Mashiro. Wanna go buy lunch together? Then we can eat somewhere together."

"Eating in pairs is so tiring. You should go eat by yourself."

Why?

I'd totally run out of the only idea I had.

Was she trying to attack me mentally now? Strip me of my morale or something? Whatever it was, I still needed to eat, and so I went to the store while leaving Mashiro behind.

There was a trick to getting to the store as quickly as possible, and that was to avoid the busiest routes. Technically, it was the long way round, but actually it was faster because you avoided the crowds.

"Curry bread." I indicated to the server with a single finger that I only wanted one; it was the most efficient way to secure my lunch.

Bread in hand, I went to eat in the cafeteria, taking my usual empty spot at

the counter in the corner. This whole process was the quickest way to go to the store, buy the bread, and eat it. You can have my guarantee on that. I opened up the packet and was just on my way to take the first bite when—

“Is this seat taken? Ah, who cares?! It’s mine now!”

I looked to my side to find that a wild Iroha had appeared next to me.

“Don’t worry, Senpai! I know you hate it when you look like a loser who has no friends, so I’m here to sit next to you! Now everyone will think you’re a total chick magnet!”

“How’d you even know I was here? You a sniffer dog or something?”

“Aww, c’mon! I know you’re secretly happy to see me! You’re just too shy to admit it!”

“Stop that.”

Iroha refused, continuing to poke my cheek and grin at me. I sighed.

“I saw you in the corridor, so I followed you! I know you’ve been eating alone for, like, ever, but it’s fine now! Why? ’Cause I’m here!”

“Have you ever considered I might prefer eating by myself? It’s way more efficient. You don’t have to bother socializing with other people, and can focus completely on eating your lunch in the quickest possible time.”

“Thanks for the lecture, Professor Know-It-All.”

As if my day couldn’t get any more annoying, here was the Queen of Trouble herself. Even without her attitude, she attracted the attention of other students just by sitting next to me.

“Kohinata-san’s eating with a guy!”

“Huh? Who is that? Does he even go here?”

I could hear their jealous whisperings as plain as day. If they really wanted to take my place, I’d be more than happy to give it to them.

“People are starin’, y’know,” I said.

“What, ’cause you’re already s’posed to have a girlfriend? That doesn’t mean you can’t have regular female friends.”

“People will talk, which is bad. You wanna get into Honeyplace Works too, right?”

There was more to my agreement with Mashiro’s dad than just acting as her fake boyfriend. The main thing he wanted me to do was to keep other boys with less pure intentions away from her. In his eyes, that wouldn’t work if I had a girlfriend already, so if he even caught a whiff of any such rumor, he’d be out with his pipe and deerstalker hat in no time.

“Don’t worry, Senpai. It’s not like they know who you are, anyway.”
With that, Iroha opened up her lunchbox.

I was about to ask why she couldn’t just eat in her classroom if she had a packed lunch, but I understood when I spotted a familiar juice box. That pure tomato juice was a brand supplied solely for our school store, using tomatoes grown in Chiba prefecture.

Anyway, tomatoes aside, it was clear she had no intention of leaving now. She wasn’t even reacting to the stares we were getting.

“You just gotta act like it’s no big deal! It’s when you start getting all nervous and twitchy that people ask questions.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yes, siree! Lighten up! Knowing you, it might be ages till you get to eat lunch with a cute girl like me again. Oh, want some omelet? I’ll even feed ya!”

“No.” Another sigh.

“Hey, grumpy guts! You know every time you sigh you breathe out a bit of happiness, right? Though I guess you didn’t have much to start with, since no one even wanted to eat with you!”

“It’s actually carbon dioxide you breathe out, not happiness.”

“Oh, wow,” Iroha replied, not sounding at all wowed.

Instead, she focused on gulping down her food as if she couldn’t care less.

“Besides, I’d be doing a lot less sighing if you weren’t around.”

“Oh, wow.” Iroha took out her phone and began texting with the agility that only high school girls possessed. She showed me what she’d written.
“Carbon dioxide bad! Sighing gets rid of it. I make you sigh. Therefore, I’m keeping your CO₂ levels nice and low! If I keep getting on your nerves, who knows how efficient your lungs could get!”

“I’d only waste all that extra breath arguing with you anyway.”

Oops. I sighed again.

The real drain on my happiness was having to talk to her. Somehow, Iroha was capable of making even the most mundane of conversations exhausting. If only talking to her came with some sort of benefit.

Wait a minute.

Iroha was a girl. A high schooler at that, right at the peak of puberty. Maybe she could help me figure out what the heck was going on in Mashiro’s brain. She was the only one who knew about Mashiro’s confession too. At

least it was nice of her not to tease me about it. I guess even Iroha was capable of a basic level of decency.

Welp, here goes nothing.

“Listen, Iroha, I know this isn’t really your area of expertise, but I wanted to ask you about girls and their...fragile emotions.”

“Um, hello?! I’m plenty fragile!”

“Sure, I guess.”

I mean, she did react pretty strongly to that.

“You know you can’t just say whatever you want, just ’cause I’m your sister, right?”

“If you get to treat me however you like, I get to say whatever I like. That’s called being fair.”

“Ooh, you’re gonna regret gettin’ on my bad side! D’you know how rare it is to have a girl as cute as me willing to put up with you? You’re lucky I don’t have a boyfriend, otherwise I’d be spending all my time with him instead!”

“Sure. So can I start?”

“You weren’t kidding? ...Okay, fine. Go ahead,” Iroha said with a pout.

“It’s about Mashiro.”

Iroha’s eyebrow twitched.

“Y’know, about the...message she sent me. The one you saw.”

“...Right. Figures.”

“I’ve been thinking for ages about how to reply...”

I started to explain in brief. About how coldly Mashiro had been treating me in person, but how sickly-sweet her LIME messages were. If her feelings were genuine, I wanted to give her a proper answer, but I really felt I should do it in person. If only she’d let me...

“I’ve never been in a situation like this, and I have no idea what I’m s’posed to do.” I laid everything bare to Iroha, much as I hated to admit how much a simple confession tripped me up.

Why did I choose to talk about this with Iroha, I wondered. Maybe it was because she already saw Mashiro’s confession, and that made things easier. Maybe...

“Iroha, I’m... Uh, Iroha?”

Only then did I realize she’d been totally quiet for a while. I looked to my side. Her cheeks were blown up like a puffer fish, and there was a disgruntled

gleam in her eyes.



“I-Iroha?”

What was she doing? Iroha was the type of girl whose emotions changed every split second, and it was always pretty clear how she was feeling by the look on her face. But I’d never seen this look before.

A nasty thought crossed my mind that I could probably burst her cheeks with a needle, but needless to say I didn’t act on it. Confused as I was by her reaction, there was one thing I could say for sure.

She wasn’t happy.

“S-So you’re really worried about Mashiro-senpai’s c-confession.”

“Of course I am; no one’s ever confessed to me before.”

“Right... Right.”

“Wh-What’s the big deal?”

“No one’s ever confessed to you b-before. No one’s ever said they loved you like that.”

“Yeah, like I said. How come you’re getting so upset?”

“Okay, I get it now. Girls like Mashiro-senpai, who are all prim and proper and cute and need protecting and stuff... They’re the only ones you count as actual girls!”

“What? I never said that. Wait, where are you going?!?”

Iroha leaped out of her seat and turned to face me huffily.

“I hope you never meet another girl who can actually hold her own ever again! Then you’ll appreciate what you’re missing!” She stuck her tongue out at me before stomping away.

“H-Hey! You left your lunchbox!”

“Whatever! You can wash it and give it back to me later!”

“What?! Why should I wash it?!”

Forcing her chores on me was something that was a little too unreasonable, even for Iroha. I never even had any of her lunch. I thought she must’ve been joking, but she didn’t even respond to my question. She just left the cafeteria behind.

I could hear hushed voices begin to stir around me.

“Kohinata-san stormed out!”

“That guy must’ve rejected her. How mean!”

I couldn’t make out any of the other voices, but they were probably spewing similar nonsense. Not that their words had any effect on my life. I was more concerned by the fact that I somehow managed to tick Iroha off. At

least if I knew why, I could apologize, but I was totally clueless.

“I just don’t get it.”

In the end, she hadn’t even given me any advice on what to do about Mashiro. Instead, my problems had only increased. My life was just getting worse and worse.

Just then, I felt a vibration in my pocket. I took my phone out to find a new LIME message from Iroha.

Iroha: Dumbass.

“Why, though?!”

Iroha teased me a lot, but it was very rare for her to insult me so blatantly. Usually, her insults were a little more, uh, creative, I guess. Well, maybe she had a habit of calling me names like “dumbass” when she lost one of our stupid games, but that definitely wasn’t what was happening now.

Mashiro, Makigai Namako-sensei, and now Iroha. It was like I was living in some kind of bizarro world.

I continued to stare listlessly at my phone when the PA rang out.

“Second-year Ooboshi Akiteru-kun. Second-year Ooboshi Akiteru-kun.

Come to the counseling room immediately.”

Ugh. It was Sumire in her Venomous Queen mode.

“Hey! The Queen’s calling for someone!”

“Oh my God!”

“He’s so dead!”

Again, excited voices tittered around me. I could feel a cold sweat breaking out on my back. No, Sumire didn’t scare me. I knew how pathetic she really was, after all. What scared me was being summoned by her, right after I left a trail of trouble in my wake. I had no doubt she was just about to add to that trouble.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s deadline was one week away. She should have plenty of time if—and it was a big if—everything was going smoothly.

“Damn you, Murasaki Shikibu! I really don’t need this!” My headache already well on its way, I trudged over to the counseling office.

“Akiteru-sama! I’ve done all the illustrations a whole week before the deadline!”

“The world really has gone insane!”

Among the students, the counseling office was revered as the Venomous Queen’s castle. It was filled with various (replicas of) torture devices that she used as references for her drawings. I walked inside the gloomy room to find Sumire with her forehead plastered to the floor and holding up her tablet PC as an offering.

“Why are you shouting at me?!” she wailed. “I did good for once!”

“Yeah! But why did it hafta be today?! God, I must be having some kind of nightmare or something! I *hope* I’m having a nightmare!”

At least show me the goddamn pictures! Get up!

“D-Dammit. I thought I was more resilient than this,” I grumbled, clutching my chest to try and steady my breathing.

Everything I did was set to a perfect routine for maximum efficiency. I even factored in the certainty of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei missing her deadlines. Of course I didn’t mind if, by some miracle which apparently decided to show up today, she actually kept to them, but this was just the next thing in a long line of irregularities that was causing my brain to implode.

“D-Did I actually do bad?” she asked, looking up at me with tears in her eyes.

“No. No, you didn’t. I’m sorry for blowing up.”

This was all my fault. I never thought I would utter an apology within the four walls of the counseling office either. At least Sumire was still on her hands and knees, so things weren’t *too* different from the norm.

“Thanks for beating the deadline. Now you can take a break until the next job comes up. Just watch some late-night anime or regress into your happy place full of shotas or something...”

I somehow managed to turn around on my trembling legs so that I could leave.

“O-Oh, but Akiteru-sama!” called the sweet voice from behind me. “I wanted to ask you something! You know, as a reward for sticking to the deadline!”

“It’s not gonna take too long, is it?”

“I-I think it might, actually.”

“Ask me later, then. I’m going home, ’cause I’ve got a fever.”

“What? Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine tomorrow if I just go home and chill for a bit. See you.”

“T-Take care...”

I left Sumire behind and wobbled out of the counseling room.

Mashiro’s sweet LIME messages and the sour way she treated me in real life.

Makigai Namako-sensei’s nausea-inducing scenarios.

Iroha’s weird mood.

Sumire’s miraculously early illustrations.

It was all too much for a single day. I thought so hard about what I’d say to Mashiro, but I didn’t even have an opportunity to talk with her. Not with the way she behaved. All the other crap sure didn’t help. I felt like a computer trying to open up twenty different instances of Word because a boomer kept clicking on the icon impatiently.

Akiteru.exe had crashed and needed to reboot. All I could do now was go home, sleep, and hope I woke up feeling better.

Dammit. What a waste of time. Especially when time was what I needed most right now. Time to make sure the 05th Floor Alliance wasn’t about to implode right in front of me with everything that was going on. It was nobody’s fault, but that didn’t mean I was looking forward to tackling it when I barely knew where to start...

“Ha ha. Yeah, the girls might be cute, but they’re not exactly normal, huh?”

“Ugh. I wish they were.”

“C’mon, just focus on their good looks and quit worrying about personality. If all of them were perfect, everyone would hate you, y’know.”

“Who the heck is ‘everyone’?”

Chapter 3: My Friend's Little Sister Only Has It In for Me Online

Once I made it home, I put a cool cloth over my head and lay down in bed for a few hours. Slowly, my overheated brain began to cool and my thoughts started to return to normal. My body felt sluggish, so I checked my temperature to see I still had a slight fever.

“Ugh. What a waste of time.”

It was already evening. I scowled out of the window at the crimson light of the sunset, lamenting just how inefficient the day had been. I had messages on LIME from Ozu, Mashiro, and Sumire to ask how I was doing. The truth was I was very far from okay, but they didn’t really need to know, so I just told them I was doing okay.

There was a mountain of problems in front of me that I needed to tackle. The most efficient thing I could do was probably to make a hierarchy and pick where to start. I began to set my clunky brain into action again when I was rudely interrupted by my front door opening, without even a knock to accompany it.

I could hear Iroha’s footsteps from the hallway. I readied myself to snap at her for breaking in like this, and to ask her just what her deal was at lunchtime. But after a while, I realized she wasn’t coming to the bedroom. I strained my ears. There was the sound of running water, along with a rhythmic knocking.

“The hell is she doing?”

I went to the living room to find Iroha standing in the attached kitchen.

“Oh, hi Senpai. Are you sure you should be up?” Iroha glanced at me, wiping her hands on the apron she was wearing over her uniform.

There was a pot on top of the stove. It looked like she was making rice porridge.

“Yeah, should be fine.”

“Glad to hear it. Y’know, I was pretty worried when I heard you left in the

middle of the day.” Iroha smiled at me gently.

I know what you’re thinking, but Iroha can be nice sometimes. This kind of “nice,” though, seemed a little off. Not to mention her uniform was perfectly buttoned up, and she wasn’t wearing her usual headphones. I instantly recognized what this was. She was in “Little Miss Perfect Honor Student” mode.

“You should take it easy if you need to. I’ll let you know when the porridge is done, so just go ahead and lie down again if you want.”

“Gnrgh.” I made a strange noise as goosebumps crawled over my skin.

What was all this about? She knew she didn’t need to keep up this act at my place, so what exactly was she planning?

“Don’t worry, I’m not up to anything shady,” Iroha said without turning around, as though she just read my mind.

I decided the best course of action would be to go back to my bedroom as I was told. I lay on my bed restlessly for a few minutes until Iroha came in, carrying the pot with her.

“Hopefully this won’t be too hard to digest. Think you can handle it?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah.” I tried to sit up, but Iroha stopped me.

“Don’t push yourself. I’ll feed it to you.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll eat it by myself.”

“Please, I insist. It’s a kouhai’s job to take care of her senpai when he’s not feeling well, you know.”

“Now you’re just exaggerating.”

“I am not. I can’t remember the last time you left school early. You’re always saying that your body is a temple, right? And how that’s how you stay healthy.”

Yup. That was my philosophy.

“I think you overworked yourself without even realizing,” Iroha continued.

“Yeah... Maybe you’re right.”

“Exactly. So please let me help you get better. You always do so much for me, so please let me do something for you for once.”

“O-Okay.” I nodded obediently.

It looked like she was going to keep this up. Iroha took the lid from the pot, filling the room with steam and the scent of stock. It was a simple dish

with few ingredients, but that just made it look all the more appetizing. On one side of the tray was a small plate of chopped spring onion. She had prepared enough so that I could have as much as I wanted.

Iroha scooped up a small spoonful of porridge, then began to blow on it.

“Y-You don’t have to go that far.”

“Of course I do. We wouldn’t want you burning your tongue.” Iroha moved the spoon towards me. “Okay, Senpai. Say ‘aah.’”

God, this was so embarrassing.

“Oh, Senpai, don’t make that face! There’s nothing uncomfortable about this. It’s all part of nursing you back to good health!”

I started doubting whether the girl in front of me really was Kohinata Iroha. Even as my stomach churned with embarrassment, I took the spoon into my mouth. The delicious porridge spread over my tongue. There wasn’t much more taste than the mildly salty broth, but it was perfectly seasoned without being too strong or too weak. The temperature was perfect too, thanks to Iroha blowing on it. I could feel my body growing comfortably warm.

“It’s good,” I said.

“Glad to hear it.” Iroha smiled, passing me another spoonful.

She gave me just the right amount of time to swallow what I had before passing me some more. The very moment I thought about having a drink, she passed me some tea. The perfect way she took care of me put some of the experienced nurses and care workers I’d seen to shame.

I was so relaxed and comfortable that I was shocked when I realized I’d finished it all.

“Th-Thanks,” I said.

“It’s my pleasure. Oh, Senpai, you’re dribbling.” Iroha pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed gently at the corner of my lip.

“O-Oh. Whoops.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re just tired, and I don’t mind cleaning it up for you like this.”

I didn’t know what else to say, so I said nothing at all.

“Can I do anything else for you? Nothing is too much.”

“No, that’s okay, thanks.”

“All right. Well, I wouldn’t want to get in your way, so I’ll leave as soon as I’ve finished washing up. Make sure you get some rest, okay?”

And with that, Iroha was gone. I listened to the sounds of her washing up before she finally locked the door.

Peace. Quiet. And then...

“Just kiddin’! You really thought I’d just head off home, huh?!”

Actually, that didn’t happen. From her arrival right up until her departure, Iroha was perfectly civilized. She was gentle, considerate, and totally patient. It was like she was trying to show me that she could be the complete opposite of the annoying girl I always complained about.

I didn’t really know what she was thinking, but she definitely didn’t have me fooled. This was Iroha we were talking about. The most annoying, cheeky, in-your-face girl I ever had the displeasure of meeting. Putting on an air of kindness like this was just creepy. Even if she wasn’t planning to jump through my window and start laughing at me because of how I reacted, I still couldn’t help feeling uneasy.

Trying to work things out in my head was pointless, so I decided to go right to the source. I took out my phone and opened up LIME to send Iroha a message.

Aki: What was that all about? You know you can drop the whole perfect act when you’re with me, right?

She read it almost immediately.

Iroha: I thought you liked girls who act like that? All prim and proper. So? You happy now? I was way more bearable then, right? I’m never gonna annoy you ever again, dum-dum!

I couldn’t help but feel relieved that her message read like her usual annoying self, but I quickly realized something. She was doing the complete opposite of what Mashiro was doing.

Mashiro was being completely sweet to me on LIME, but cold and harsh in real life. Meanwhile, Iroha was being a total sweetheart in the real world, but a bitch online. An interesting observation, perhaps, but I was still nowhere near being able to figure out why they were both being like this.

When I was trying to figure out what a girl was thinking, I’d usually go to Iroha for advice, but of course I couldn’t this time. That left two “girls” left who I could turn to. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, and Otoi-san, the sound engineer who helped record Iroha’s lines for us. I didn’t have to tell you what was wrong with the first of those two, but even Otoi-san was a little, well, *different* from your average girl.

My smartphone began to vibrate, interrupting my thoughts. It was Ozu.

“Hey, Ozu. What’s up?”

“I got this feeling in my gut like you were in trouble, so I thought I’d call. How’re you feeling?”

“Oh, so you’ve developed psychic powers now.”

It wouldn’t surprise me after all the crazy stuff that happened today, but Ozu left out a laugh. “Not at all, my dude. I just made this device that monitors your heartbeat 24/7. Lets me know—or guess at least—what’s going through your head most of the time.”

“Uh... Not gonna lie, that sounds kinda creepy.”

“Yeah, ’cause it’s a joke. Can you imagine the profits I’d make if I really did create a device like that? I’d be living the high life.”

“Don’t joke around like that. Knowing you, you’d probably do it and make it look like a breeze.”

“Anyway, truth is, Iroha just got back and shut herself in her room without even saying hi. Did something happen between you two?”

“Oh. I guess so, yeah.” I was about to launch into a tirade of how frustrating she was being, but quickly stopped myself.

Even if he didn’t acknowledge it himself, Ozu was pretty good at attracting chance encounters with beautiful girls. Maybe he’d be able to give me some advice. Thing is, I didn’t want to tell him about Mashiro’s confession.

Despite her shy nature, Mashiro had a real sense of pride. Not only that, but she showed extraordinary courage when she worked through her fears to walk a new path in life. Finally, I knew that exposing her true feelings wasn’t something that came naturally to her.

With all that in mind, imagine what would happen if I told anyone that she confessed to me. She might actually crawl into a hole and die. Or, more realistically speaking, there was a real risk of her returning to her shut-in lifestyle; just when she managed to shake free from it too. How different would I be from her bullies if I caused something like that to happen?

Okay, now let’s lose the holier-than-thou attitude. If Mashiro’s confession really got out and her dad found out, I’d be toast.

I heard Ozu laugh again while I was still trying to work out what to say.

“I’m guessing there’s something you can’t tell me, since you’re taking your sweet time.”

“Y’know, it’s really great to have a friend like you who can pick up on stuff without needing it explained.”

“It’s ’cause I know you so well, or I’d like to think I do. Don’t worry; if you can’t tell me, I’m not gonna make you. It does mean there’s not much I can do to help, though. You gonna be okay working it out by yourself?”

“I’m gonna have to be. This is something I gotta work out alone.”

Mashiro’s confession and Iroha’s bad mood. All of it was still a tangled mess in my brain, but there was one thing that talking to Ozu made me realize. This wasn’t a problem I could shove onto anybody else. It was something I needed to solve by myself.

“Thanks, Ozu.”

“Huh? I didn’t do anything.”

“You did. You called me at just the right time. You really are my rock, y’know.”

No matter how stormy my life got, Ozu was always there to give me a resting place. He always seemed to get the timing right too, like he was pre-programmed to respond in my time of need. His presence really was reassuring, and I hoped he’d stick by me for the years to come. If not for my sake, then for his own.

Wait, I’m getting lost in those old memories again...

I quickly changed the subject.

“I wanna do something about Iroha, but I think I’ll need your help with something.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“D’you think you could help deal with Makigai Namako-sensei for me?”

That was the third slice of problem cake on my plate. As the 05th Floor Alliance’s leader, I also needed to do something about the terrible scenarios he came up with. I was normally kind of wary of micromanaging too much, but in this case, something had to be done.

“Ah, right. Hmm.”

“I was just about to let him know we rejected them. Not looking forward to it, though.”

I’d never had to do it before, after all. Makigai Namako-sensei’s work had never failed to move me. I read his debut series more times than I could count, and every time he sent me a new chapter for *Koyagi*, my heart pounded with excitement as I read. It wasn’t just because he was a member of

my team either. He really did have a remarkable talent.

That was why the thought of rejecting his scenarios pained me so much. But it had to be done. As his producer—no, as an ardent fan of his—I had to do it. I had to tell him that his weirdly fluffy, sugary-sweet story just didn’t fit in the world we’d built.

I didn’t know how to phrase it, though. If I told him it was “boring,” he could just come back and tell me that was a matter of taste.

“...So I’d appreciate it if you could back me up,” I concluded.

“Got it. If he starts arguing back, I’ll chime in and say I agree with you.”

“That’d be great. I mean, he probably thinks it’s good, or he wouldn’t have written it, so if I went in alone it’d just be his word against mine.”

“Right. You can count on me.”

“Thanks a bunch. I’ll message him now, in the group chat.”

“I’ll keep an eye out.”

Now that both of us were on board, I hung up. Just where would I be without Ozu?



• • •



AKI

Are you free to talk right now, Makigai Namako-sensei?



Makigai Namako

Sure.



AKI

I wanted to talk to you about the scenarios you sent in.



Makigai Namako

Oh, nice. Did you read them?



Makigai Namako

You know, I don't think I've ever written anything more thrilling.



AKI

Thrilling is... one way to put it.



AKI

This is kinda hard to say, but I have to reject all of them.



Makigai Namako

You're kidding?



AKI

I'm not.



Makigai Namako

Well could you tell me what the problem is? I thought they were perfect.



AKI

They were too jarring compared to Koyagi's usual vibe, and it's way too different to the whole story up till now.



AKI

There's too much focus on their relationship. They're flirting when they should be terrified. Ruins the tension.



Makigai Namako

They're doing that exactly because they're in so much danger.



Makigai Namako

Actually, I think there hasn't been enough romantic description in the previous chapters.



Makigai Namako

I want people to know how great love is.



AKI

Hmm...



AKI

You really think people are gonna like this?



Makigai Namako

Of course.



Makigai Namako

I wouldn't write it if I didn't.



AKI

I don't really think the people who play our game are looking for that kind of thing, though.



Makigai Namako

Actually, this kind of thing is pretty popular nowadays. Remember that movie, "His Name"? All the young nerds in love went to see that.



AKI

Yeah, I get that. But...



Makigai Namako

I don't think you do, actually, since you've never dated anyone. You don't know what it's like to be a nerd in love, and maybe you never will.



AKI

I'm not talking about myself here, I'm talking about our audience.

Goldenagato | mp4directs.com

OZ

OZ

Mind if I say something?



Makigai Namako

Oh, hi OZZy.

OZ

OZ

Literally no one calls me that...

OZ

OZ

Anyway, I read it too, and I agree with AKI.

OZ

OZ

I don't think our players are going to like it.



Makigai Namako

Not you too...



AKI

See? It's not just me.



AKI

Do you think you could write something else?



Makigai Namako

What you're saying is that you didn't like my scenarios.



AKI

To put it bluntly, yes.



Makigai Namako

Okay.



Makigai Namako

I guess you guys are right. It's hard to tell when you're the one who wrote it.



AKI

So you get it?



Makigai Namako

Yeah. I just gotta pile on the lovey-dovey stuff until you guys are totally blown away by it!



AKI

Huh?



OZ

No...



Makigai Namako

If I add a hundred times more fluff it'll be fine, right?



Makigai Namako

Okay, I'm gonna turn off my router then, so I can focus.



Makigai Namako

Trust me, I'll make the masterpiece to end all masterpieces! You guys can count on it!



AKI

Wait a sec! At least let us tell you in detail what was wrong with it!



OZ

He's gone...



AKI

He didn't even read my last message.



OZ

Guess he really did turn off his router.



AKI

I just have one question...



OZ

What's that?



56

AKI

Why?

Chapter 4: The Drama Club's Advisor Has It In for the Sports Clubs

In my first stroke of luck in days, my condition improved after a single good night's sleep. Even my shattered thought processes were finally starting to come together to form something that made sense. Not one of my problems had been solved, but at least I had a clearer idea of what I was going to do about them.

It was time to turn things around. I wasn't going to let anyone get away with messing with my sense of reality anymore. One by one, I'd set everything back to normal mode. The most efficient way to start things off would be to list my problems in order of priority, and the easiest way to do that would be to reconfirm my own priorities in life.

Number one was to get the 05th Floor Alliance a spot at Honeyplace Works. The biggest hurdle to that now was Mashiro's feelings, but as long as she wouldn't let me confront her directly, dealing with that would be difficult. That was something to leave for later.

I decided instead to tackle the second biggest threat: the future reception of *Koyagi: When They Cry*. I'd let my subconscious work out what I should do about Makigai Namako-sensei's scenarios, while actively I would concentrate on something more productive.

I waited until break time. The time my classmates were always up in arms about having forgotten their textbooks, or about how they hadn't finished homework. Meanwhile, I set about working on the voice scripts for the five new characters we had. The ones Sumire somehow managed to finish up early. I connected my keyboard to my phone and began to type.

Makigai Namako-sensei was in charge of *Koyagi*'s story. However, I was the one in charge of creating their stock battle and UI phrases. Coming up with long-winded stories was something I didn't have the talent for, but coming up with unique lines for each character like this wasn't beyond me. At first, Makigai Namako-sensei looked over any lines I wrote before

eventually deeming my skills “overwhelmingly adequate” and letting me take full control over it.

I wasn’t sure if it was supposed to be a compliment or not, but not needing his approval anymore did make the process a whole lot quicker, and allowed him to focus fully on the main story.

“Okay, I think I’ll take a small break now.”

“Nice work, Aki. I’m done going over the illustrations too,” Ozu called from behind me as I stretched.

“Thanks, Ozu. Whaddya think?”

“Lookin’ good. Characters like these are really popular right now, and she even put all these little details in like the accessories and stuff. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei really did good. I don’t think we’ll have any issues with censorship overseas either.”

That’s one load off my mind...

Ozu always checked the scenarios and illustrations once I was done. I wouldn’t be happy approving anything without at least a second pair of eyes going over it.

“Nice. Well, I just finished writing up these lines, so could you look ‘em over too?” I asked.

The new characters were all pretty striking in their personalities and behaviors. There was one girl who lost her brother when she was young, and who was now extremely clingy with younger men; as well as an elderly lady who got off on seeing people losing their minds to paranoia. Then there was the guy who looked like a total scoundrel with his muscles and mohawk, but who was secretly really into girly stuff.

Anyway, you get the picture. They were all kinda out there, but it meant that their lines were easier to write.

“This girl with the whole brother complex kinda hits too close to home.”

“Huh? She’s supposed to be super creepy.”

“The other day, I was approached by a girl just like her, near the station. She thought I was her brother, who went missing ten years ago.”

“If that ain’t a set-up for a dating sim...”

“It’s fine in a game, but in real life, it’s kinda creepy.”

“Maybe that’s how women come onto men these days. What did you say to her, anyway?”

“I just took her to the police station.”

“Ouch...”

Even when Ozu had girls throwing themselves at him at every turn, he never failed to completely crush them. Though I guess in this particular case the police were the right choice. That, or the hospital.

“It made sense to me, y’know? I told her the police could probably help find her brother, but then she cheersed it before we even got there.”

“Damn, that means she could still be out there. She reminds me of that other girl, actually. The older one who asked you to be her younger brother.”

“Oh yeah. I took her to the cops too. Y’know, I get these kinda girls mistaking me for their brother all the time. Maybe one of my parents is living a double life or something.”

“I mean, that would explain how you ended up with a sister like Iroha.”

Ozu was handsome enough to turn every single head as he walked by. Getting hit on was not a rare experience for him. Though the girls who did go up to him were always weirdos who acted like they were straight out of a visual novel, so it was no wonder he often complained about them. That didn’t stop even more from coming out of the woodwork, though.

“Kay, I’ve gone through the scripts now too.” Ozu gave a satisfied nod.

“That was fast!”

He must’ve been looking at them while we were talking.

“These are great. All super in-character,” he said.

“Glad to hear it.”

“Still, I didn’t think you’d have it in you to write such an effeminate guy like this.”

“Thanks, but you don’t have to comment on it.”

Having someone else look over something I wrote made me really self-conscious, like they were reading my thoughts directly. I would never be as confident as Makigai Namako-sensei, who could just write whatever he wanted and enjoyed without inhibition. I guess you could say confidence was what he really had going for him.

“Anyway, these are super good. The lines are perfect, and they match the character designs well. You really *can* do anything, huh, Aki?”

“Maybe, but not well. If I had any real talent, I’d be specializing in something instead of just picking up the loose ends. If Makigai Namako-sensei had the time, I’m sure he’d be able to come up with way better lines than these.”

“Filling in for other people *is* a talent, y’know.”

“Listen, if I was as great as you think I am, I could make this game by myself.”

“Man, why’d you always have to be so modest?”

Even as we bantered, neither of us stopped in our work. As he checked the voiced lines, Ozu input them into a screenwriting software so they could be recorded later. It was a homebrew program. It made the lines easy to read for the voice actress while leaving enough space for notes, and assigned each line a file number so the sound engineer could manage the recordings better.

Otoi-san was the one who requested the file-numbering system, saying the program was too difficult to work with before. She demanded very kindly that we change it, or she’d kill us. Nowadays, she only got mad and made death threats whenever we asked for her help when she was otherwise occupied. I liked to see that as an improvement.

Ozu and I continued to work at a steady pace, and soon the break after third period was over. After taking so much time off yesterday, I was worried about how much catching up I needed to do, but it wasn’t that bad in the end. In fact, it was a little easier because I managed to rest my overworked brain for a bit. Iroha would be able to record the new lines as soon as this afternoon. I opened up LIME and shot both her and Otoi-san a message.

AKI: Sorry for the short notice, but do you guys think you could do the new voiced lines for me after school today?

Iroha: Uh, I dunno. I’m not really feeling it. But if you got down on your knees and begged to hear my beautiful voice, I might consider it.

Her reply angered me, so I ignored it for the time being.

Otoi: 20 Suckies.

It didn’t take Otoi-san long to reply either. I should probably explain. Suckies were an American candy that Otoi-san particularly liked. They were a famous brand of lollipop with a super loud and annoying commercial. Otoi-san worked for candy, not cash.

AKI: That’s a lot of sugar. Do you want diabetes?

Otoi: Don’t say that.

AKI: I’m just worried about your health.

Otoi: Doesn’t matter. Can you get me the 20 Suckies or not?

AKI: Okay...

Otoi: Nice one. See you in the studio!

And so our negotiations were complete. She had me in the first half when she suddenly got mad, but luckily nothing came of it. Though Otoi-san got offended about random things pretty easily, she was much more mature than Mashiro or Iroha, and could get over it very quickly. This time, it was the mention of “diabetes” that set her off. Last time it was because I asked her for some “water-splashing” sound effects. I still couldn’t tell you what about that made her mad, especially since when I asked for sounds of people “walking underwater” she was totally fine with it.

Anyway, it was all solved when I asked her just to tell me outright if I said something that offended her, so we could just fix things there and then. A simple “don’t say that,” or “don’t bring that up,” was enough to get the message across.

“Diabetes...”

I had a list on my phone of topics or words to avoid around her. Here they were so far:

Water-splashing sound effects

“Deal with it.”

Swans

“Just leave it alone.”

(Water) Leaks

Anything overly poetic

Diabetes

There was no pattern to these things whatsoever, but that didn’t stop me frowning at them and trying to work them out from time to time, like I did now.

Just then, my phone buzzed. It was Iroha.

Iroha: Don’t just leave me on read!

Iroha: You don’t wanna hear my heavenly voice?!

Iroha: Look, just apologize and I won’t stay mad. Then you can beg me to do the lines today!

Apparently, Iroha didn’t like being ignored. Who’da thunk it?

At least she was being her usual self over LIME, and not doing her whole perfect-honor-student shtick. It was a relief, to be honest, and it was with a peaceful sigh that I left her on read once again. Ignoring her was the best way to deal with her when she went on one of her spamming sprees. As usual, it didn’t take long for her to message me again.

Iroha: Okay, fine! I'll come do your dumb recording!

It went just as smoothly as I thought. Though Iroha took every opportunity she could to get on my nerves, at least she was serious when it came to her work. Even if I ignored her or sent her reams of abuse, she would never skip out on a recording if she could help it. I could almost see her growling and grinding her teeth at her phone.

The thought made me smile. That'd teach her for being so weird lately.

AKI: Thanks. Looking forward to your take on these characters.

My reply was short, sweet, and topped with just a sprinkling of motivation. Iroha replied by sending me a sticker of a grumpy anime character. That was fine by me, since we had all our players for the recording session now.

Fourth period eventually came to an end, signaling the start of lunchtime. Since it was on my to-do list anyway, I quickly glanced at the desk next to mine to see if Mashiro might miraculously be in the mood to chat.

She was scowling at her phone, typing something with lightning-fast movements. It was clear that she didn't want to be disturbed. She was curled over her desk like a prickly hedgehog, and not even our classmates had the guts to approach her. Mashiro must've been talking to someone on LIME— whoever it was, it looked like they were about to get an essay. Oh, but wait. Mashiro liked writing stories, right? That'd make more sense. I decided not to get in her way.

I'd planned to reply to her confession in person, but if she kept this up, texting her over LIME instead became a very real consideration. In any case, I wasn't planning on tackling it today, so I shoved it back to the bottom of my list.

The next problem was Makigai Namako-sensei's scenarios. I asked him to redo them over LIME yesterday, but it kinda felt like he didn't get it. It was like I could see him now, hunched over his laptop as he wrote sheet after sheet of diabetic fluff for the sake of what he seemed to consider "justice."

If only I knew where he lived, I could go in there and physically restrain him from writing anything else, but I didn't know. I just wanted to get him to write the horribly dark stuff he used to be so good at, without having to have a bunch of awkward conversations with him on LIME. The last thing I wanted was for him to be all demotivated.

I stepped out of the classroom, ready to go and have my usual lonely

lunch of bread.

“Ooboshi-kun.”

I was stopped by Kageishi-sensei, who seemed to be waiting for me outside the classroom. Right now, she was dressed like every single teacher you’ve ever seen in a stock photo.

“Is something wrong? I thought you weren’t teaching us today.”

“I wanted to ask whether you were feeling better.”

“What? Oh. Oh, yeah. I had a good sleep last night, so I’m basically back to normal.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Let’s go, then.”

“Go where?” I asked to Sumire’s back, which was already clacking away.

She turned around, setting her sharp gaze on me. “Don’t ask. Follow. You made me a promise, right?”

“A promise? ...Oh!”

She did say something like that, didn’t she? That she wanted a reward for finishing up her deadlines early. Kind of cheeky, seeing how this was the first deadline she ever actually kept, but whatever this request was, it must’ve meant a lot to her if she was willing to break such a longstanding tradition.

“Got it. But this better be good.”

“It is. It’s...”

We were speaking quietly, ignoring the whisperings of the students around us wondering just who this nameless guy was with the scariest teacher in the school. Sumire’s gaze softened under her carefully made-up eyelids.

She sighed. “It’s about my future.”

The fourth floor of our science and arts block was known as No-Man’s Land. The first three floors were filled with labs, records rooms, music and crafts rooms, as well as computer rooms, and a library. The fourth floor, however, was totally empty. It was a place of chaos and confusion, unbound by rules and social norms. None of the classrooms were in use. Instead, it was a dumping ground for unused tables, chairs, and an assortment of all sorts of things, courtesy of every other floor. On top of that, the students adopted an attitude of “it’s a junk heap anyway, so who cares,” leading them to throw their empty cans and candy wrappers all over the place up here.

It got so bad that the principal eventually lost his temper, and now it was a no-go zone for students.

But, well, Sumire was leading me directly into this hellhole. We stepped over the yellow tape that cordoned off the stairs, and I could feel my heart thumping with a delicious guilt as we climbed the stairs.

It was like we were entering a whole new world. Why would she even take me here? If she wanted to talk privately, she could've just called me to the counseling office like always; though I guess this place was even more out of the way than that.

Once we were in the hallway, Sumire finally stopped and opened one of the windows.

“Come on, start rallying!” A peppy female voice came floating up through the crack in the window.

From the sounds of it, the tennis court was right behind this building. The girls’ tennis team had to be pretty eager if they were starting practice the moment lunchtime began. I looked down at them, watching as their lives played out completely opposite to ours.

“Ooboshi-kun,” Sumire began, a serious tone to her voice. “You can see those young girls down there making the most of their youth, can’t you?”

“Yeah. So?”

“I wonder if you can try putting yourself in their shoes for a second. Imagine giving up your entire precious lunchtime and devoting it all to excelling at tennis.”

“Yeah. Our girls’ tennis club is one of the best around.”

“Maybe so, but even then there’s only a slim chance that any of them will go on to play professionally. The rest of them might achieve glory at an inter-high tournament or something, but that will be it. How much is that worth, really? Don’t you think it’s a bit of a waste of time?”

“Depends on the person, I guess. You’d never catch me joining a sports club, though. Not in a million years.”

If someone chose to devote their entire life to a single sport, then maybe they could end up becoming a professional. But that was for people who were naturally sporty and suited for that kind of thing. I wasn’t, and so there really wasn’t any point in me joining a club like that. Even if I gave it my all, I could already see myself hitting my limit pretty quickly, making the entire idea completely inefficient and pointless.

Sumire nodded when she heard my dismissive response. “That’s right. I’m exactly the same.”

“Look, I don’t really get where you’re going with this. Mind getting to the point?”

“One of the other teachers has gone on maternity leave.”

“Right...”

She sure was taking her sweet time to explain what the heck she wanted with me.

“I’m happy for her, of course, in a way... But you see, everything in this world is set to a certain equilibrium. It’s like how you can’t just create energy from nothing. The same applies to happiness. The level of happiness in the world is constant. When one person is happy, someone else has to become unhappy to compensate.”

“Uh, I guess you could see things that way. So is this philosophy lesson over yet?”

“Let me be frank.”

“Oh good, I was waiting for that.”

The next second, Sumire was on her hands and knees with her forehead plastered to the floor.

“Please help out the drama club!”

There was silence. An empty packet of potato chips tumbled by.

Come again?

“Where did that even come from? Were you just trying to waste my time? Or were you trying to make me mad with all that waffle?”

“Eeeek! Ow! Ow! Stop jabbing your toe into my pressure point! Aaaaaah!”

I stuck my foot into the point just above her tailbone, causing her to flop to the ground with her eyes rolled back and her tongue lolling out. She began to twitch on the floor.

“Y-You brat! D-Do you like making me kneel in fr-front of you like this?!?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way. I simply struck a channeling point that’ll fix your messed up pelvis, since you’ve been ruining it by hunching over a desk and chugging down alcohol all the time. Anyway, why didn’t you just tell me what you wanted from the start? What was the point of all that deep stuff?”

“I-It was important! Ngh! I swear!”

“All right, then tell me how!”

“D-Don’t shout! Please! I was gonna tell you right now!” Sumire whimpered, her eyes watering. “Wh-Why do you always jump to conclusions like that? I bet you also finish too quick in bed! You know girls hate that? Well, I mean, it’s cute when it’s a shota, but...”

“That’s not the only pressure point I know how to hit.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, sorry, sorry! I swear I’ll explain everything right now!”

I snapped my fingers and glared at her, which she responded to by kneeling upright. To think this was the same woman who could so easily command a full class of forty students.

“Okay, okay, so let me explain everything in order. You know that I’m the advisor of the drama club right, Akiteru-sama?”

“Yeah, but only because you announced it in homeroom the other day. You didn’t strike me as the club advisor sort.”

“Right. I’ve never really spoken about it to you or the Alliance before.” Sumire sighed before continuing. “Anyway, our club is in danger of disbanding.”

“Disbanding?”

“Uh-huh. If we don’t make it through to the prefecturals for the National Drama Fair, the club is toast. It was an ultimatum from the principal himself!”

“That sounds pretty sudden. What, is he trying to cull some of the clubs or something?”

“We don’t have many members, and we’ve never really achieved much. I think it’s because they don’t want to waste any more of the school’s budget on a small-time club like ours.”

“What happened to your so-called ‘Generation of Miracles’?” I suddenly remembered the term she used back when she was speaking about it in class.

Her lip curled menacingly. “That was a lie.”

“Ugh. At least show some remorse!”

“Well, it wasn’t strictly a lie. My members certainly have enough talent to deserve that title...”

“What kind of talent are we talking about here?”

“That’s not important. Long story short, the drama club’s in danger of

getting disbanded.”

Way to dodge the question. Though the quicker we could wrap things up here, the better.

“I mean, does it really matter if it does?”

Sumire and the rest of the Alliance (excluding our scenario writer) met up once a week for a small gathering. And yet, not once had I ever heard her talking about this drama club of hers, so she can’t have been that attached to it.

“You’ll have way more free time if the club disbands too.”

It was common to read stories online of teachers cracking under the immense pressure advising put them under. Not only did they have their regular teaching jobs, but they had to show up on weekends to help lead the club activities too. They had to put in all these extra hours, but were barely compensated for it. You could say all you wanted about it being a wonderful thing to do for the students, but personally I called it slave labor.

In Sumire’s case, she was already working two jobs as a teacher and an artist. To top it off, she advised a club as well. That she had any free time at all was already a kind of miracle. It was enough to make me consider being a bit more lenient with her deadlines.

“No. I can’t let the club fail.” Sumire shook her head, her brow furrowed. “This school has a pain-in-the-ass rule that every teacher has to be a club advisor. If the drama club goes under, things are gonna get really ugly for me.”

“That does sound like a pain in the ass, but what do you mean by ‘ugly’?”

“Right now, Midori-chan is head of the drama club.”

“Midori-chan?”

“You know? My sister! Kageishi Midori.”

“Kageishi...Midori?”

It rang a vague bell. It made sense I would’ve heard the name before if she was Sumire’s sister, but somehow I felt like I’d heard it somewhere else.

“She’s the bestest sister I could ask for! But I’m not gonna let you have her, okay?”

“I don’t want her.”

Now that she mentioned it, I barely knew anything at all about Sumire’s homelife. All I knew was that her family was made up of stubborn teachers. That was why she had to shove her dream of becoming an artist aside and

find a career in education. I never imagined that her younger sister would be at the same school as a student, though.

Wonder what she's like...

"Midori-chan's super-duper funny! But she's also super-duper serious!"

"Right..."

"And she's such a good girl too, always doing what her gorgeous sister asks of her!"

"Right...?"

"She leads all the sessions and does all the odd jobs for me too! Basically, she does all the advising work so that I don't have to!"

"Oh, I get it. So she plays advisor and you play pretend."

Okay, forget anything I said about being lenient with Sumire's deadlines. I could still remember her speaking about the club so proudly during homeroom. Maybe acting suited her after all.

"It's not like you care though, right? Thanks to her, I've got the time to do all the art for *Koyagi*."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Aah, it really is the perfect arrangement!" Sumire clasped her hands together. Her eyes shone briefly before immediately darkening once more.

"But if the drama club disbands...my fate is sealed."

"Hmm? Oh, right."

I looked in the direction Sumire's finger was pointing. There, outside the window, was the tennis court, filled with lively girls and the sounds of bouncing tennis balls. So that was where she'd end up.

"So what you're saying is that the teacher who went on maternity leave used to advise for the tennis club, and if the drama club disbands, you'll have to take her place?"

"That's right! I hate tennis!" Finally, her strict facade was completely broken. She was clinging to me now, tears and snot, and a mysterious sweat running down her face. "Our girls' tennis club is one of the best around! Their training sessions go on forever, and they're always practicing basically 24/7! Midori-chan won't be there either, so I can't slack off, and I won't have time to draw anything anymore!"



“Yeah, this is a bit of a doozy. Are you even good enough at tennis to instruct them? Especially when they’re so elite?”

“Of course not! For my whole school life, I was always in the culture clubs!”

“Makes sense. You’re an artist, after all.”

“And, and, all I ever got in P.E. was a D!”

“Oh, you poor soul. Anyway, I get it: you’re not cut out for the tennis club. So why does whoever’s in charge of this kinda thing think it’s a good idea to make *you* the advisor?”

Sumire froze at what I thought was quite a reasonable question. Sweat continued to pour down her forehead as her eyes darted this way and that. I didn’t need a lie detector to work out this was something she really, *really* didn’t want to tell me.

“Wait. Don’t tell me you—”

“I-It’s not my fault!” Sumire wailed, grinding her face into me and covering me with snot. “I-I didn’t know what I was saying! The principal just came up to me and said I looked like I was good at sports! And I told him ‘yes sir, this is the kind of body that can’t lose even against the strongest athletes!’”

“What the hell kinda way is that to speak to your boss?! Ugh! You’re such a clown!”

“But I gotta pretend to be good at sports or all the other teachers’ll think I’m a nerd and bully me in the faculty office! If the vice principal catches word of it, he might use his authority to fire me!”

“You’re overreacting. This is real life, not one of your weird mangas. Well, I mean, maybe that kinda stuff happens in other schools, but you know when to keep your mouth shut so... Well, most of the time, I guess...” My voice trailed off. Sure, I would’ve liked to believe her fears were all fantasy, but I was just a high schooler. The real world might have been much scarier than I thought. “Ugh. You know, this is what happens when you try to be someone you’re not.”

Sumire sniffled like a toddler in response.

I sure hope she had some kind of contingency plan in case any other students happen to wander up here.

“Okay, I get what you’re saying. If the drama club disbands, it’ll be bad for the Alliance too. I dunno what you’re expecting me to do about it, though.

Isn't this a problem only the members can solve?"

"Please! You know I kept to my deadline just for this, right?!"

"You should be keeping to your deadlines anyway!"

"If you don't help me, it's practically guaranteed I'm gonna end up the tennis club advisor! If that happens, you can kiss my punctuality goodbye!"

"What punctuality?"

"Just, please, can you come and see one of our lunchtime practices? Then you'll know what I'm talking about!" Sumire's arms were wrapped tightly around mine now, and it was clear she wasn't planning to let go without a "yes."

I'm ashamed to say that the soft sensation of her adult body and its heat sent a thrill racing through me. It was just for a second, though. For someone with such a hot body, she sure wasn't able to keep me interested even when she was clinging to me like this.

I sighed as I attempted to tear myself away from her. "Fine!"

"Yes! My lord!" Sumire hopped up and down excitedly, like I was a parent who just gave in to her pestering for the latest game console.

"So where does this club of yours practice, then?" I asked reluctantly.

"Over there."

"Huh?"

Sumire pointed down the hallway, which was blocked off by piles of tables and chairs. On closer look, I could see a tiny gap between the piles, enough for somebody to squeeze through.

"We practice in an unused classroom right at the end of this corridor. No one ever goes there, because it's supposed to be haunted, but it's the perfect space for us!"

"Y'know, I'd say you and Murasaki Shikibu-sensei are a pretty good match for each other."

"Look, I don't care if you're my best friend or the pope, never say that again."

"Yeah, my bad, I guess it was kinda mean. Sorry!"

Chapter 5: My Teacher's Sister Has It In for the Art of Drama

The area behind the pile of junk in No-Man's Land was a paradise. The polished floors shone in the sunlight that filtered in through the windows, the tables and chairs were lined up neatly at one end of the corridor, and there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen anywhere, let alone any trash. It was the complete opposite of what the rumors said the fourth floor was like, and I'd even go so far as to say it was cleaner even than our classroom entrances. Whoever took care of this place was real serious about it.

As I followed Sumire through the corridor, I heard a girl's voice from one of the classrooms.

"...ext...ere...and...ext!"

"So the club really does practice up here?" I caught myself murmuring.

"We can't take the gymnasium or the field, since that's where the sports clubs are, and the band has the inner courtyard. With a club as obscure and puny as ours, it was all I could do to get us an empty classroom to use. The principal didn't wanna give us anything up here, but thanks to Midori-chan's good grades, he finally gave in."

"So you even used her just to get a place to practice? You really are useless, aren't you?"

"No I'm not! I'm always signing off on stuff!"

"Stuff you don't even read, right? You realize how pathetic you sound?"

Eventually we made it to the furthest classroom in the corridor. The door was closed, but voices were audible from inside. This had to be the drama club room. Sumire slid the door open as quietly as possible. I frowned at her questioningly, wondering why we had to keep it down, but she simply put a finger to her lips in response. Apparently she just wanted me to look in without saying anything.

Isn't this kinda rude?

Though I guess if they knew I was here, they might start acting

unnaturally. For now, I decided to go along with it, and peered on inside.

The room was packed with all sorts of apparatus, and desks and tables lined the walls, covered in even more stuff. There were six members in the room. It was a small membership for a club like this, but even then the classroom seemed a little cramped for any sort of acting.

“Okay! Next!” the girl in charge shouted.

The club continued its practice completely unaware of our presence. At the girl’s command, the members opened their mouths and began to recite some lines rapidly. They must have been practicing their articulation. Once they were done, they threw themselves on the floor and took several deep breaths.

So now they’re practicing their breathing?

At first, the image of everyone on the floor like that threw me off, but I soon understood. Just like the hallway outside, this classroom was completely free of trash. It was a good thing too; otherwise I’d fear for the state of their uniforms.

“Okay, next! Time is money, so let’s get a move on!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The moment they were done with their breathing exercises, the leader shot to her feet and gave the next command without a second’s delay. The other members followed her lead perfectly. It was more like a military training camp than a school club. They even called her “ma’am.” Guess that made her the drill sergeant. Definitely looked the part.

She had a sharp, serious gaze, and her lips were pressed together in a straight line. Every last strand of her softly-colored hair was pulled back into a ponytail. I looked over her uniform for any kind of crease, but nada. Her blouse was buttoned up right to the top, and her skirt fell to just above her knees; unlike many other girls, she didn’t flout the rules by rolling it up.

Though she was around average height for a high schooler, her perfect posture made her look just a little taller. Her entire appearance gave off one single message:

“No fun allowed.”

It was clear to me, as it would be to anyone, that this girl had never broken a rule in her life. If Sumire was the Venomous Queen, this girl was the Pious Queen.

“That’s Midori-chan, my sister,” Sumire whispered, pointing at her.

“Ah!” Suddenly, I realized who she was.

She was the top student in our grade. Our school was a pretty prestigious one when it came to grades, but this girl was already at the top when she joined, making her the representative for our year who gave the address at our entrance ceremony. I remember being heartily impressed by her for achieving what I couldn’t, but apart from that I mostly forgot about her. Even now in our second year of high school, she never failed to get a perfect score on every test. Calling her a genius would be an understatement.

So she was a Kageishi too. I never really picked up on her surname, and to me, Sumire was mostly “Murasaki Shikibu-sensei,” so the connection never clicked.

“Ah, now it makes sense. It’s no wonder the principal let you use this abandoned floor with grades like hers.”

“That’s right. There’s no doubt she’ll be going to one of the top schools in the country after graduation. The teachers here really don’t wanna get on her bad side.”

“And she’s leading *and* effectively advising this club all while keeping a perfect report card?”

“Yup. She’s the perfect little honor student, and she likes to keep it that way,” Sumire added with a tiny hint of scorn.

“Let me guess. She’s also responsible for the tidiness here?”

“Bingo.”

“Impressive. Just checking, but you’re positive you two are related?”

“My childhood wasn’t a lie!!”

Who could blame me for doubting that?

Midori cleaned up this barren No-Man’s Land, led her club with perfect discipline, and was clearly the type who hated wasting a single second. It was no wonder she was so well-liked. Plus, she was quite pretty too; frustratingly, she seemed to have it all. The hard expression on her face gave her an air of aloofness, but with just a touch of make-up, I could easily see her becoming an idol or an actress. The more I watched her, the less I believed she was really related to Sumire.

“Y’know, I don’t think I’ve seen her since our entrance ceremony. Isn’t she supposed to be famous?”

“She’s in a special advanced class. Putting her with the rest of you would be a waste of time.”

“Oh, right. Makes sense.”

I studied Midori’s face closely. If I squinted really hard, I could maybe see a resemblance to Sumire. To be honest, I was sort of confused. When Sumire was wailing about the club before, I was expecting this place to be full of airheads who didn’t know their Shakespeare from their Tennessee Williams, but actually they seemed to be doing fine. Not that I knew what a good drama club was supposed to look like, but surely it was something similar to this. Midori was doing a great job of leading them too. What exactly was Sumire worried about?

“Okay, everyone, that’s our preliminary exercises done! It’s time to move onto practicing for the real performance!”

The members began to take their places, and it was clear that everyone—the actors, the stagehands, and the sound director—knew exactly what they were doing. As for Midori, it looked like she was taking the main role. She was standing in the middle of the tiny classroom, thrown into darkness by the blackout curtains drawn across the windows.

She was standing as bold and still as a statue, with not a limb or hair or even cell out of place. Her intense passion for acting seemed to emanate out from her, raising the tension in the room a good few notches. Midori’s face was perfectly composed as she waited for the performance to begin. She truly looked like a professional.

“We’re on in ten!”

It was almost time. One of the other members began to count down. When they got to three, Midori took a deep breath.

“O. Romeo. Death. Should. Not. Have. Taken. Thee.”

Wait...

Her name was Midori, right? Not Siri or Alexa or something? Her voice was as robotic as the text-to-voice function on my computer. I even checked my phone to make sure I hadn’t pressed anything weird, but it really was Midori who’d spoken.

Her eyes suddenly widened, as though she had just realized how abysmal her performance was. The self-awareness was a good sign. Maybe she wasn’t quite in character yet. I remember Iroha telling me once that the first line of a song is always the hardest at karaoke.

This was fine. It wasn’t like it was the actual performance yet. She could just start over. Midori proceeded to stand up straighter, an exaggerated and

pained expression on her face as she began her lines again in a high-pitched voice.

“Ormeodatshoudnoavetaentee.”

Huh?

What did she just say? Her line was spoken so “fluently” that it smushed together and became completely incomprehensible. It almost sounded like a completely different language; Klingon, if I had to guess. I supposed foreign, or even fictitious, language performances were gaining popularity in the more pretentious pockets of the theater world. Hopefully, that was what this was. Hopefully...

Of course, once Midori finished reciting her line, the sound director inserted a well-timed bang of the tambourine. You know, just like the one in every performance of Romeo and Juliet. Yep. Totally.

Next, the stage lighting in the ceiling came on, illuminating Midori beneath it. Naturally, it was a vivid purple color, allowing the heroine to deliver her next line with a heartbroken flush to her cheeks.

“Acupcosednytrlovhans!”

...Okay, wow, what a delivery.

Midori continued to deliver her lines at a breakneck pace, interspersed with mysterious bangs and clangs very kindly added by the sound effects team. I wasn’t sure what I was watching, but it was probably more or less what you’d see on a tour through hell.

I had several questions, but eventually, Midori seemed to notice her lines were unintelligible and slowed down.

“The. Universe. Is. Constantly. Expanding.”

That was better. Right?

Even though it was possible to understand her lines now, that didn’t mean they made any sense. I didn’t realize Romeo and Juliet was a space opera. If this was the quality of the script, then her garbled lines might actually have been preferable.

From what I picked up from the other girls’ lines, this was a play filled with random terms like “the secrets of space,” “parallel worlds,” “Schrödinger’s cat,” “philosopher’s stone,” and a whole bunch of other nonsense crammed in there. Maybe they sought to elevate the production, but it was elevating in the opposite direction.

“Sensei...” I turned to Sumire. “What are we watching?”

“You get it now, right?” Sumire smiled at me sagely.

“This is...”

“I know.”

It was only getting worse with each passing second. The levels of cringe were reaching critical mass. Midori kept switching between her robot and alien modes, and interpreting what was going on was near impossible. As far as I could tell, the evil sky god who studied ninjutsu in India and ruled a city deep underground was finally sealed away by the power of science. Got it? No, me neither.

“Praise. Be. To. The. Expanse. Of. Space.”

And with that, the play was over. The members took their bows to the invisible audience, basking in the silent applause. It wasn’t until the stagehands opened up the curtains to let the sunlight in that Midori slowly raised her head. She put a thoughtful finger to her lips, the displeasure clear on her face.

“Eight out of ten.”

“How is it not zero?! ”

Oops. I accidentally said that out loud, didn’t I?

Midori turned to look in my direction. Our eyes met.

“Who are you, and what right do you have to make such a judgment?! ”

Midori glared as she sauntered over to us.

“Sorry, couldn’t help it. Eight out of ten is way too generous for...whatever that was. I’d rather go see the Christmas pageant down at the elementary school.”

“I-I beg your pardon?! It wasn’t *that* bad! Although it is true that our progress has been slightly stalled as of late...”

“*Slightly.*”

Right off the top of my head, I could already think of more than five areas they needed to improve in.

“Who do you think you are?” Midori growled. Suddenly, her expression brightened. “Sumi— Kageishi-sensei! You’re here!”

“That’s right. I came to make sure you were all keeping up with practice.”

Calling her “Kageishi-sensei” suggested to me that Midori liked to keep things formal with her sister when they were at school. Given her personality, it wasn’t surprising. Sumire herself had reverted back into glamorous teacher mode.

“Kageishi-sensei!” the other club members cried, gathering around her. They seemed pretty fond of their phantom advisor.

“I’m so glad you’ve been coming to see the club more often, Su—ma’am! It has done wonders for our motivation! Right, everybody?”

“Yeah!” the other members chimed in, their voices giddy with excitement.

Despite the thick tension in the air during the performance, the room was now awash with giggles and rainbows. At least they knew how to relax when they needed to...

Midori was particularly restless as she fawned over her sister. The ponytail atop her head was wagging like a dog’s tail.

“As you know, I place great importance on a club’s ability to be independent. However, it isn’t long until the competition, and I want to put in as much effort as all of you. As your advisor, it’s my responsibility to ensure we seize victory.”

“Kageishi-sensei!”

“Thank you so much!”

“You’re the best advisor ever!”

The club members were looking up at Sumire with tears shining in their eyes. I felt like I was witnessing the birth of some kind of cult.

Jokes aside, there was one thing I knew for sure. The drama club sincerely admired Sumire, and also, they had zero knowledge of her true nature. That seemed to go for her sister as well. Their eyes were full of admiration; anyone who knew the true Sumire could never look at her that way.

“If I may ask, Kageishi-sensei, who is this Peeping Tom you’ve brought with you?” Midori asked, glaring at me with eyes full of hatred.

“Peeping Tom” was going a bit far. Aside from the fact she was implying I was some sort of pervert, I had done nothing but give my opinion on the performance, and I had definitely seen enough to do so. I doubted she had ever sat down and watched a recording of what I just saw, or she might be singing a different tune.

“This is Ooboshi Akiteru-kun, a second-year. I wanted to give him a sample of what the drama club is all about.”

“A sample? That reminds me, you did say we should take on some more members for the upcoming competition. Is he hoping to join? I know I’ve already told you, but the six of us are already at the top of our game. We don’t need—”

“No, he’s not joining.” Sumire shook her head. The serious glint in her eye alerted me to what she was up to. So that was what she wanted in return for meeting her deadline. “He is going to be your director, and a prodigious one at that. He is the one who will be leading this drama club to victory.”

“Our...director?”

Prodigious? Did Sumire not realize I didn’t know the first thing about acting?

“A-Are you saying this guy is a theater expert? Pardon me, but he looks completely average in every way and from every angle.”

“At least I’m not a bitch...” I muttered under my breath.

I had her pegged as somebody super serious, but I didn’t realise she was also super rude. Was this really how she spoke about somebody she just met? I was used to being belittled by Iroha, but Midori’s attitude, and the fact that she was more or less a stranger, meant I barely had time to retort.

“Calm down, Midori, and listen closely. I know he looks totally average, not to mention like a hardcore sadist who doesn’t know the meaning of the word ‘mercy,’ but—”

“Says the one openly insulting me right where I stand.”

“—he’s an incredibly talented director. I truly believe he’ll be able to take your performance to the next level,” Sumire said earnestly.

Midori withdrew slightly at Sumire’s tone. She shot me several glances, and it was clear she wasn’t sure whether she could trust me or not.

“If that’s your honest opinion on the matter, Su— Kageishi-sensei, then I suppose we can trust him. Nevertheless, he is still a student. Does he have any actual directing experience?”

“Good question.” Sumire raised her finger in the air, ready to explain, before freezing on the spot.

The room fell into silence. The only clue that time was still passing was the ticking of the clock on the wall.

She had backed herself into a corner. My role as the producer of Koyagi and the leader of the 05th Floor Alliance was something that only a select few knew about, and even fewer of those people attended our school. If people knew, it would only attract unwanted attention, and so I’d rather Sumire didn’t spill the beans to the drama club.

Sumire was on the same page as me with this one too. If she let it slip about me and *Koyagi*, it might lead Midori to her sister’s hidden identity:

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, master illustrator. I'm sure I wasn't the only one here who could see the cold sheen of sweat glistening on her forehead right now.

Good luck getting out of this one, Sensei.

“He...”

“He?”

“He's directed several major Hollywood blockbusters!”

“What?!” Both Midori and I gawked at her.

Hollywood? *Hollywood*?! Were there even any Japanese directors who had broken into Hollywood movies? You'd have to have an IQ of minus a million to believe such a bald-faced lie!

“Hollywood!” Midori's eyes sparkled. “Are you some kind of genius, Ooboshi-kun?!”

I wasn't sure whether to be impressed or concerned that a girl with a minus-a-million IQ was top of our year.

“Well, you know. I wouldn't go *that* far. Though I do think I could give you guys a few pointers here and there.” I could do nothing but go along with it at this point.

The rest of the club's members started squealing and gathering around me.

“Hollywood means you're really talented, right?!”

“Of course he's talented! Kageishi-sensei was the one who picked him out for us!”

“You know, his face is so average that I'd be surprised if he *wasn't* hiding something like that!”

“Yeah! He's not much of a looker, so of course he's got something to fall back on!”

The girls prattled on as they swarmed me. This thought's been on my mind for a long time, but aren't the generic mooks in this school kind of...stupid? Maybe that was why no one had found out about Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's true identity in all these years.

“This is great, Midori-san! With this guy, maybe we can even make the nationals!”

Unlike the gaggle of girls around me, Midori was visibly displeased.

“Okay, so perhaps he does have experience, but that doesn't excuse what he said about us just now! Also, Su— Kageishi-sensei, if I may ask: how exactly

do you know him?”

“Huh?”

Why did she care?

The next moment I was faced with Midori’s fingertip.

“Don’t tell me the two of you are sl-sl-sleeping together?!”

“Why the hell would you think that?!”

“You’re a mega-rich Hollywood director! I know what your type is like!

You do all sorts of things to land yourselves a gig! But if you dare lay a finger on Sumire, you’ll have me to answer to!”

On behalf of all Hollywood directors everywhere, I was utterly shocked by her baseless assertions.

Midori glared at me, her outstretched finger trembling, and her cheeks flushed with rage.

I sighed. “No, we’re not sleeping together. There’s no way I’d even be attracted to some...thing like her.”

“Of course there is! My sister is incredibly sexy! Have you even *seen* those boobs? And her slender legs?!”

I could accept that Sumire had a nice body. It’s just that her personality came packaged with the deal. And that’s what put her at the very top of my list of “girls I don’t want touching me.”

I also noticed that Midori had cracked and was now calling Sumire by her first name. It looked like both of them were liable to show their true colors when they got overexcited.

“Look. First off, you’ve hurled baseless accusations at me. Second, I’d never use Kageishi-sensei just to find work. You get nothing. Good day, sir.”

“Huh?!” Sumire hurriedly grabbed me by the shoulder as I tried to leave. She brought her lips to my ear and whispered, “Where are you going? I thought you were gonna help me out here!”

“I’m fine giving them a few tips, but I never agreed to be their director. Their leader doesn’t even want my help, so what makes you think they’ll listen to anything I say?”

“Just hold on a second! I can convince her!”

“Look, even if I gave them all the advice in the world, there’s no saving what we just witnessed.”

There were way too many problems with this club.

The actors didn’t have a lick of talent.

The scriptwriters didn't have a lick of talent.

The stagehands didn't have a lick of talent.

The sound people didn't have a lick of talent.

You didn't need to be a Hollywood director to realize this club was doomed. Forget a director, they needed a brain surgeon.

"Can't you put your experience from directing the Alliance to use? I mean, you've already got experience working with writers, actors, and sound engineers."

"Maybe, but I can't teach them proper stage acting. I don't know the first thing about it."

"Yeah, I know, but..."

Even if I didn't have any personal acting experience, I could always ask Iroha to help me out. The problem was, Sumire didn't know that Iroha was the voice actress for *Koyagi*. Not to mention she was a voice actress—stage acting required a different set of skills. Getting her involved was totally out of the question.

"Could we just pretend this never happened? I've already got my hands full with all the other stuff going on with the Alliance right now; I don't have time for this."

"Don't say that! This is serious! Are you saying you don't care if I never have time to draw for you ever again?!"

"Of course I care! Just do your drawings while you watch them practice or something. It's called multitasking."

"That's impossible!"

"Listen, this is your problem, so please just try and solve it by yourself first, okay? I'll see you later."

"No! Please, wait!"

I left the classroom, leaving a tear-stricken Sumire behind me.

"Don't worry, Sumire!" I heard Midori's voice from behind me. "We'll win those prizes by ourselves! You'll see!"

"M-Mm..." Sumire replied with a soulless hum.

"Ugh. They really put the drama in drama club," I muttered.

I really didn't have time for this nonsense. I had to deal with Iroha, Mashiro, and Makigai Namako-sensei's stuff first.

...

Wait a second. Drama...

As I watched Midori's catastrophic performance, for some reason I kept seeing Iroha's face in a corner of my mind. Seeing someone so abysmally talentless gave me a new appreciation for just how versatile of an actress Iroha was, especially considering they were similar in age. Was there a chance Iroha could excel at stage acting too?

No, I was getting ahead of myself. There was no way she would be allowed to take the stage, no way she would ever see her name in lights. And that fact irritated me to no end.

"What a waste," I muttered to myself, bathed in the grunts of the tennis club as they practiced outside.

"So, Aki, I heard you've bumped into another girl."

"Sumire-sensei's sister? That wasn't a big deal, really."

"Huh. From what I heard, she'd be a perfect match for you. She's serious, methodical, and real fussy about wasting time."

"Okay, but you left out the part where she hates my guts. You know, like most girls. Plus, there's one more thing."

"Oh?"

"She seems to think that all men are heartless pigs. Y'know, one of those people who thinks putting a guy in a room with a girl means they're instantly doing it."

"No way. She probably just sensed that you and Sumire-sensei were super close."

"Super close to killing each other. Anyway..."

"Anyway?"

"The problem with Midori is that she's too much of a neat-freak. Like she has it in for every last speck of dust."

Interlude: Iroha and Mashiro 2

AKI: Thanks. Looking forward to your take on these characters.

I was by the shoe racks just as school ended, reading Senpai's message. Couldn't help but sigh.

"Dumbass," I muttered under my breath.

We were going to go record the new character lines at Otoi-san's private studio. 'Cause he was scared we'd otherwise draw too much attention, Senpai had us meet up at one of the quieter neighborhood parks instead of at school. I thought about skipping this one, but changed my mind right away. Of course I wanted to go. I loved voice acting!

What I didn't love was Senpai's stupidity. He didn't take my words at face value, and he didn't even *try* to take 'em seriously. Though I guess that's kinda my fault for not doubling down and telling him I meant it. Woulda been nice if he thought about them, though, even if only for a few seconds.

Everything I needed to know was in this stupid message he sent me. He only took me seriously when it came to work. Anytime else, he just thought I was "messing around," or "teasing him."

The only places I could really be myself were at Senpai's place and that tiny recording booth. That was why I was so attached to him, even when Mashiro-senpai's stupid "perfect little lady" act got to me so much!

What really pissed me off was how I got so stupidly jealous, like any ordinary girl. As if I really was the perfect little honor student I pretended to be. Up till now, I always kept a comfortable distance from Senpai. It worked because no one else was after his affections—until now.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"I-Iroha-chan? What's wrong?"

"Huh?!"

A voice suddenly called from behind me as I groaned in despair by the school gates. A stupidly sweet, adorable voice.

"Mashiro-senpai? What are you doing here?"

"U-Um, going home?"

“Oh, um, sure, yeah. Sorry. My class just got let out late today, so I thought everyone else’d be gone by now.”

“Right. Well, I just stopped by the library.” Mashiro-senpai opened up her handbag to show me the contents. It was packed with books with cute, bright covers.

“What are these, girly romance novels? They look so cute!”

“Y-Yeah. They were popular some years back, but they’re still making more.”

“I didn’t know you were into this kinda stuff. I thought you’d hate this ooey-gooey fluff.”

“Well, yeah, to be honest, I used to. I thought I’d take a look though. You know, for science.”

“Science?”

“U-Uh, just kidding. Forget I said anything.” Mashiro-senpai waved a dismissive hand in front of her face.

She was clearly hiding something. So she could be sneaky, despite her cute face. I really couldn’t let my guard down around her. I wasn’t about to press her to come out with it, though; that’d just be insensitive. She wasn’t like Senpai. I couldn’t just push and push and get on her nerves until she was forced to tell me what was up. I really was able to act differently around him. Even with someone like Mashiro-senpai, who was my friend, I had to hold myself back.

“A-Anyway, Iroha-chan, since you’re here... You wanna walk home together?”

“Huh? Oh...”

What now?

“Sorry, I’ve got a date with Senpai!”

I couldn’t tell her that. It’d be an outright declaration of war. I couldn’t tell her what I was really doing either. Not even Ozuma or Sumire-chan-sensei knew about my voice acting work. It was a secret between Otoi-san, Senpai, and me. I wanted to keep it that way too, ’cause if my mom found out, I was toast.

Well, I would’ve been okay telling the rest of the Alliance at least, but Senpai warned me not to. Even if we both trusted them, there was a chance they could let it slip by accident. Keeping it completely need-to-know was the best way to avoid any bad blood or suspicion.

“Oh... Sorry! I actually have work after this.”

“Work? You have a part-time job, Iroha-chan?”

“Yup! Don’t tell anyone, though! It’s not the kinda job I can be open about, if ya know what I mean!”

“I...I don’t.”

“It’s the kinda job where I use my mouth a lot.” I winked at her, miming holding an especially thick microphone in front of my face.

I wasn’t lying, though I might have manipulated my intonation just a tiiiny bit to make it sound erotic.

“Y-Your m-mouth... Aaah!”

I could practically see the steam whooshing out of her head as she misinterpreted my words.

“Hey, you’re thinkin’ something dirty, right? C’mom, Mashiro-senpai, you know I’m a super good girl, right? It’s not what you think. You can even come and see for yourself if you want!”

“N-No, it’s okay! Um, I’m busy with my own stuff, so...”

“Aww, that’s too bad!”

Whew. Just as planned. I might’ve just ruined my reputation, but I guess that was just a sacrifice I had to make. I knew Mashiro-senpai well enough now to know that if there was even a hint of anything dirty in the conversation, she’d quickly try and shut it down.

“I-I’m sorry for taking up your time when you’re so busy, so, um, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure thing! Bye-bye!”

Keeping her burning face glued to the ground, Mashiro-senpai gave me a wave and scurried away. I waved at her retreating back, though inside I was grumbling. It was just like Beauty and the Bitch—with me being the bitch, of course. To be honest, I was surprised there were still girls as pure as her out there, getting flustered at the very idea that some people wanted to get naked with each other.

I sighed. Real talk, I was jealous of her. She could be completely honest with Senpai whenever she wanted, work or no work.

Speaking of work, it was time to head out to my one other sanctuary. The one place apart from Senpai’s room where I could let myself go.

Now, how should I act around him?

Chapter 6: My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Her True Self

You never know what you've got till it's gone.

Your classmates after graduation, your parents after you move out... Life's full of so many changes, and it's only when you end up alone that you'll realize that all these people who you took for granted before are so precious to you.

That was why so many people went around telling you to treasure those around you, and to be grateful for what you have.

But consider this.

Does that sense of loss necessarily stem from losing something important to you? If those people and things really were so precious, why would you let them go like that? If you didn't think they were important at the time, why would losing them make them important?

As far as I'm concerned, the increased sense of value attached to these things after they're gone simply stems from a psychological error.

The principle of inertia applies to society as well. If something has stopped, it's difficult to get it to move. If something is moving, it's hard to get it to stop. This all sounds very technical, but it applies to human minds too.

Once someone starts getting mad, it's a real chore to snap them out of it; likewise, if they suddenly decide you're to be the object of their affection. Once your life gets stuck in a pattern, you're subconsciously apt to follow it and stick to the routine you know.

So what would happen if your routine suddenly comes to a complete halt because of forces outside of your control? It's the same as inertia. Apply the brakes to a moving vehicle, and anything riding it will be flung forward.

Coming back to loss, it's natural that anything that disappears suddenly like that is going to leave you feeling off-kilter, but that has nothing to do with its value. It's this sense of confusion which leads people to conclude that

“you never know what you have till it’s gone.” They feel confused, and so they think it must have been important; but it wasn’t.

What I mean to say, is that I never valued Iroha’s bullying whatsoever! I was only feeling weird about it because of this whole inertia thing. That’s all it was.

“Is something the matter, Ooboshi-senpai? Your arm is trembling.”

“I’m fine.”

School was done for the day. As we promised over LIME, Iroha and I met up in a quiet park a few blocks away from our school. We were on our way to Otoi-san’s house to record the new character lines. She had a small studio there which she very kindly allowed us to use. I had already procured the meager offering of twenty Suckies that we would set before her feet in gratitude.

That was all well and good, but there was an extremely awkward tension in the air. Iroha had been smiling sweetly all this time, and not once had she broken out of her Little Miss Perfect Honor Student character. There was no one else around, and yet she hadn’t shot a single insult or innuendo my way.

Ngh! I can’t take this anymore!

“Iroha!”

“Yes, Ooboshi-senpai?” Iroha turned to look at me, her long hair swaying lightly. I could smell the sweet scent of flowers coming from her. She held back her locks with a hand and tilted her head at me questioningly, and I could practically see the country fields spreading out behind her.

It was like every one of her movements was calculated to be as graceful as possible, not to mention the wind seemed to be blowing at just the right speed through her hair.

“When are you planning on dropping the goody-two-shoes act?”

“Why, whatever do you mean? I am simply being myself—the same girl I have always been.”

“Stop it. Where’s the shit-eating grin? The stupid comments? The nonsensical insults?”

“I would never behave in such an uncouth manner!”

“Really, you don’t have to force yourself to keep up this act.”

“You are being awfully stubborn. As you know, I am always willing to respond to your requests as best I can, but asking me to treat you unkindly is simply too much!”

“I seriously can’t deal with this! Stop being so...unannoying! It’s really annoying!”

“I am the one starting to lose patience. I am meek and proper, and yet you are complaining that a girl like me wants to spend her time with you?”

“I’m not complaining at all! I’m over the moon, dammit!”

“Well, that settles that. Please try not to confuse me in future.” Iroha finished her tirade with a small huff.

What a dumb argument. I already lost my train of thought about halfway through. It was clear to me, though, that Iroha intended to keep up this act no matter what. Even the way she was pouting right now was more in line with “disgruntled honor student” than her usual self.

It was weirding me out, especially since I’d been wishing for ages that she’d be a little more...normal. Now that she was, I felt nothing but irritation. It felt like whatever grounded me to reality was slowly letting go.

We eventually arrived at Otoi-san’s studio. Her detached house was nestled away in a quiet neighborhood. Walking there from our school took about seven minutes. We walked straight through the gates with the family’s nameplate on them, and strode through her spacious garden towards the shed that sat a short distance away from the house. Since we were regular visitors, we didn’t need to ring the doorbell; we had a free pass to go right on through.

Inside the shed, there was a set of stairs leading to a basement. We made our way down those gloomy, deathly-silent steps to find a full-blown, fully decked-out recording studio at the bottom. The first thing we saw was the control room, packed with various recording equipment, speakers, and amps. The recording booth was behind a layer of soundproof glass, complete with chairs, a table, and a microphone.

The door on the opposite side of the room led to a bathroom and a boiler, so you could say this studio had everything its occupants might ever need.

The entire place was soundproofed from top to bottom, so there was no risk of the neighbors calling the police on us when things got too loud. It was this secret sanctuary where Iroha was allowed to work her magic.

“Hey, guys. Glad you made it.” The girl in the control room was leaning back on her chair in the middle of the control room. “Thought I told ya to give me a proper heads-up next time, eh? You’re a real pain in the ass sometimes. But whatever, we’re here now.”

“Sorry. It’s a real help though, Otoi-san.”

This was Otoi-san. She was in charge of all the sound production for the 05th Floor Alliance. Her shoulder-length hair was an almost-blinding shade of red and about as neat as the raging flames it resembled. Her uniform was disheveled and worn crudely not as an act of rebellion, but simply because it was more comfortable that way. With the way the buttons on her blouse were done up (or in some cases not), there were flashes of what lay underneath, and it was hard to know where to look. Otoi-san herself didn't seem to care, though.

The way she slouched in her chair and the way she hardly seemed bothered to keep her eyes open gave off the distinct impression that she drifted through life in a haze of apathy. She was in the same grade as me, and up until last year, we were in the same class too. The broadcasting club had high hopes for her to become the next president, but at the start of the year, she left a note in the clubroom saying she was "bored with it," and never returned. Instead, she spent her time working on and in the studio at her house.

I heard that she had some pretty big names from the music and voice acting industries stopping by to record in here, but I didn't know anything concrete. Otoi-san wasn't the type to talk about herself, and I wasn't the type to pry.

We didn't interact with each other more than was absolutely necessary, and neither of us felt the need to be superficially friendly. Our relationship was strictly professional.

I bet you're probably wondering what her first name is. Well, it's—

Wait, never mind. I'd rather not get my face kicked in.

In terms of personality, as you might've guessed, she did everything whenever she pleased, however she pleased.

"You got the goods?" she asked.

"Here you go. Twenty Suckies."

"Nice, looks good. Keep on bringin' the goods, an' this place's yours as much as y'like."

To say Otoi-san had *a* sweet tooth was an understatement. She had a mouthful of sweet teeth. She was known to leave school early just because she ran out of candy.

She opened the bag I passed her immediately, and stuck one of the Suckies straight into her mouth.

“Whabbout the tip?” she asked around the lollipop.

I knew this was coming. The tip was the most important part of dealing with Otoi-san, more so than the base price of, in this case, twenty Suckies, which was nothing but a prerequisite to the real transaction.

Otoi-san wasn’t part of the Alliance; she was more like a mercenary who we contracted from time to time, but crucially, she kept Iroha’s true identity a secret. I never expected her to keep such a huge secret for free.

“This is a brand new cake from *Meifuudou*. What do you think?”

“*Meifuudou*, huh?”

Each job she undertook for us required a tip in the form of a fancy cake or pastry. Must be nice paying someone in sweets instead of actual money, right?

Unfortunately, that’s dead wrong. Otoi-san’s family was insanely rich, and this audio work was nothing but a hobby for her. That was why she never accepted cash payments. Since it was a hobby, there was a complete lack of obligation on her end. If she didn’t feel like it on a particular day, she would simply tell us and that would be that. However, this work was important for us, and after being snubbed a few too many times, we came up with a deal: each time we wanted her help, we would bring her one fancy sweet on top of her usual fee.

Otoi-san was hard to impress. There were several times when I brought her a cake, and she sent us home because she didn’t like it. I could spend ages at the cake store, trying to pick out the treat with the greatest chance of success.

“Hm... Yeah, this one looks good. You’re on for today.”

Yes!

I gave an internal fist pump. Thank God she accepted. After everything that was going on around me, being refused at this point might have been the final nail in my coffin.

“Y’know, Otoi-san, it might be easier if you told me what sort of cake you wanted beforehand. It’d be way more efficient than me having to guess each time.”

“Ugh. Nah, havin’ to think about it would be too much effort. I’d hafta go and see what’s on offer every time they open up a new store too. Just pick out somethin’ tasty each time and we’re good.”

Thought so. I only went along with the whole cake roulette thing because

I knew she wasn't capable of making things easy for me. Guess that'd be more sweets research for homework.

For a subset of foods I never ate myself, I sure was learning a lot about it. By the way, there was a new crème brûlée parfait at that place down behind the station, which was the perfect blend of sweet and—

Wait, never mind that now.

"I'm going into the booth now. Have you got the script for me, Senpai?" Iroha asked.

"Ah. Here." I took the printed script from my bag and handed it to her, after which she made her way into the booth ever so gracefully.

"Aight, lemme just set this up." Otoi-san stood up and moved her hands smoothly over the recording equipment in front of her.

Unlike her words, her movements were swift and precise. Even the sleepy look in her eyes cleared as she focused on the machines in front of her. This was precisely why I chose her as our sound engineer. From the outside, it looked like she cared about nothing at all, but when it came to sound, she cared immensely, and her work was scrupulous to the highest degree. She never compromised, and her results were consistently more than perfect. It was enough to make the hours I spent researching cakes seem trivial.

Otoi-san glanced through the window into the recording booth as she worked. She let out an exasperated sigh as she watched Iroha read through the lines, her gaze sharp.

"Y'know, you always have crazy-high expectations, Aki."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Most directors'd give their actors the script days in advance. Making 'em do the recordings without any practice'd piss off the pros."

"I guess that's a fair comment, but...Iroha's different."

I had good reason for keeping the script from Iroha until the very last second. Her mother hated show business and everything associated with it with a burning passion. If Iroha left the script lying around the house and her mother found it, it would all be over for us. It simply wouldn't be worth the risk, but unfortunately it meant she didn't have the opportunity to practice beforehand.

"Since you don't let her practice though, you've basically turned her into a beast."

"Five minutes, right?"

“Yep. That’s all she needs to read the whole thing and get perfectly into character.”

“It’s true what they say about limitations building character, huh?”

I suddenly heard whistling from inside the booth. I looked up, and it seemed Iroha had finished going through the script. Iroha was ready to go and, glancing to my side, I could see that Otoi-san was too.

“Let’s get started. Ready, Kohinata?” Otoi-san asked into the microphone connected to the booth.

“I am ready! I shall do my best to give a good performance for you too, Senpai!”

Ah, so even here she was keeping up that attitude. When was she gonna drop it already?

“Here goes. Three, two, one...” At the end of the countdown, Otoi-san pressed the cue button on the console.

Iroha’s face set into a serious frown as she prepared to act. Today, she was reading the lines I wrote during break for our five new characters. They were all eccentric characters, from the overly clingy girl to the Mohican head. Varied as they were, I wasn’t worried about Iroha’s ability to pull it all off. She had already voiced all the other *Koyagi* characters perfectly, regardless of age or gender.

First up, was the tough delinquent with the mohawk.

“Hey, fuckwit! This is my turf! Hyaahaaaaah!”

“Huh?”

“I got fists o’ steel and the fires of hell burnin’ in my soul! I got pride bigger than the entire world and the most dazzling looks for miles! Ya hear?!”

“Wh...”

“If ya want me to kick the shit outta ya, be my guest! My chainsaw’s buzzin’ for action!”

The lines came out clear, fluent, and crisp. In fact, they were too clear, too clean, and, above all, graceful and ladylike. Otoi-san raised her eyebrows in surprise. I was left utterly speechless. She quickly turned off the recording.

“Kohinata. Question.”

“Yes? What is the matter?”

“Why’s this delinquent talkin’ like a princess?”

If you hadn’t guessed it by now, Iroha was delivering her lines in her

honor-student voice. This mohawk guy had to be the most adorable villain on the block if *that* was what he sounded like.

“Oh? Is there something wrong with that?” Iroha asked, her face a perfect picture of (fake) confusion.

“Uh... We’ll come back to this one,” Otoi-san decided after a moment’s pause. “Move on to the next character.”

Iroha nodded and began with the clingy younger sister, followed by the elderly lady, and so on. She read them all in the same innocent girly tones. Once Iroha was through, Otoi-san crushed the lollipop in her mouth with an audible crunch. She leaned back in her chair, which creaked underneath her, and turned to me.

“The hell is she playin’ at?” she asked under her breath so Iroha wouldn’t hear.

“I don’t know... She’s actually really talented, but...”

“Uh, yeah, duh. Ugh, what a drag.” Having destroyed the previous Suckie, Otoi-san thrust a new one into her mouth and leaned forward. “Hey, Kohinata. D’you really think you’re doin’ a good job right now?”

She was keeping her tone flat to try and hide her irritation.

“Of course I am! I know my producer better than anyone, and he *loves* it when I perform like this! I know that it is *exactly* what he wants!” Though Iroha was responding in her usual good-girl tones, her voice held the tiniest hint of sarcasm.

I couldn’t believe she was even taking this nonsense into the recording booth with her.

“What, y’mean, you *asked* her t’perform like this, Aki?” Otoi-san lowered her voice and narrowed her eyes at me. “If you wanna use my studio to record this kinda garbage, get out, right now.”

“I swear on my life she’s lying.” I turned to the booth. “Stop messing around, Iroha.”

I heard Iroha gasp slightly at the sharp tone in my voice. On the other side of the glass, uncertainty clouded over her features.

I was seriously mad at her this time. I know I pissed her off somehow, and I was willing to take full responsibility for it. I was even willing to overlook the fact that she was getting on Otoi-san’s nerves too.

But I couldn’t forgive her for bringing that into her work. This was supposed to be her dream, and she was spitting in its face.

“Iroha,” I began, “I’m—”

“Sec.”

Just as I was ready to make my fury known, something was thrust into my mouth. It was hard and round, and the next moment sweetness spread over my tongue. It was the very Suckie that Otoi-san had had in her mouth seconds prior. After a quick glance at me, she turned to the booth.

“Aight. I’m closin’ shop for the day. We’ll pick things back up when everyone’s chilled out a bit.”

“Okay...” Iroha replied weakly.

The next moment, she flung open the door to the booth and raced away up the stairs without even stopping by the control room.

“What a pain in the ass,” Otoi-san muttered as she watched Iroha’s retreating back.

I knew she didn’t mean us.

“Thanks, Otoi-san. And...I’m sorry it ended up like this.”

If it weren’t for her intervention, I might have made a fatal mistake. I might’ve said something to Iroha that I could never undo. That she had to plug my mouth with a lollipop was pretty embarrassing, like she was letting me know just how inexperienced I was. I could only agree, given how I nearly acted on my anger.

“So, what’s the deal?” Otoi-san asked. “Since I just gave you an indirect kiss, I think I deserve to know.”

“R-Right...” I slumped my shoulders like a kid in trouble as I sucked on the candy in my mouth.

Technically, this was an indirect kiss. Now that I realized it, my heart started to pound. At the same time, the depths of my mind were unusually clear. I wasn’t stupid enough to get so excited over another girl’s saliva in my mouth considering what happened. Though maybe things’d be easier if I was.

I straightened up in my seat and turned to look Otoi-san in the eye. I’d tell her everything. About Mashiro’s confession too. Everything.

“Sure sounds like a pain in the ass.”

I started my story way back when Tsukinomori-san asked me to be Mashiro’s fake boyfriend. I told her about Mashiro’s confession, and how she

wasn't letting me give my response. About how I tried to ask Iroha for advice, only to have her switch into permanent honor-student mode for whatever reason.

"Once I was done, Otoi-san let out a sigh. "Well, aren't you Mr. Popular?"

"What? No way. Maybe if I was, I'd know what to do about this mess. Honestly, I've never experienced anything like this before, and I haven't got a clue how I'm supposed to deal with it."

"That's pretty rare for you, huh? Cracks me up."

"C'mon. You're the one who's always walking around in a daze."

"Yeah, that's why it's funny you get some of that now too." Otoi-san pulled the Suckie from her mouth and began to wave it around like a conductor's baton. Her face didn't even twitch, so I couldn't tell if she was joking or serious. "Welp, sorry to say, but I'm no expert on love. Can't read minds either, so can't tell ya what's on Kohinata's. But if all this crap ends up crushing her talents, I ain't forgiving you."

An uncharacteristic fierceness flared in her final words, and I felt myself automatically sitting up straighter.

"You know I can't take my eyes off her, right?" Otoi-san continued.

"Yeah, 'cause of her talent."

That was exactly why Otoi-san was so willing to protect Iroha's secret and lend us her studio.

"I love music, 'n' I love playin' with sound. I know it sounds a little stuck-up to say it, but I think I've got a good ear for that kinda thing too. But that doesn't mean I got the talent to be a singer or a pianist or anythin'. I'm not good at the whole...showmanship thing. And it's 'cause I've got a good ear that I can say that."

I understood fully; I was the same, after all. It was like my only talent was recognizing that I had none.

"That's why I put myself in a supportin' role. I wanna help those who actually have talent. Make that actress who's one-in-million into one-in-a-billion. You know who I'm talkin' 'bout, yeah?"

"Iroha."

"Yup. Most people, y'just give 'em some training and their actin' and vocal range gets better. But she's like...I dunno, it's like she's not even human."

"Yeah, I know."

You often heard about first-rate actors literally becoming their character. In some ways, you could compare it to spirit channeling, where the souls of the departed inhabited the bodies of those calling on them.

What I mean to say is that it's more than acting. It was like you were a living, breathing vessel for this person from another world who was talking through you. Kohinata Iroha was such a natural, that she hosted all these characters as though it was the easiest thing in the world.

"She has so much talent, I wouldn't mind dedicatin' the whole rest of my high school life to helpin' her realize it. Y'know if I didn't feel that way, I'd be chargin' ya more than just candy to use this set-up of mine."

Both of us were completely entranced by Iroha's talent, and wanted to support her in any way we could.

"If you're gonna let this whole confession shit or whatever get in the way of her talents, I'll hate you for the rest of my life. Got it?"

Her words struck me to my core. Confession "shit." She was right. This was pointless, worthless. This was the kinda thing everyone else in class got worked up about. Mostly because they were too busy "celebrating youth" to plan ahead. I'd always looked down on them; I wasn't about to *join* 'em.

"So, this Mashiro chick cute or what?"

"Uh, I guess so. When she wants to be. Maybe?"

"Oh, okay, now I know she's gotta be. You were always all, 'I don't care about girls and romance and stuff.' But that just took you five seconds, an' you're gettin' all worked up. Dead-ringer for 'Aki thinks she's cute.'"

"You weren't listening, were you? I'm supposed to be fake dating this girl for my future boss, so it's not like I can just give a straight answer. Besides, I have to think about my relation to everyone around me. The 05th Floor Alliance could lose all motivation if I don't. Of course this stuff worries me."

"Sounds to me like you're just makin' excuses. Any evidence t'back up your claims?"

"Uh..."

"Looks like your brain's startin' to fry. C'mere."

Otoi-san beckoned to me, and I had no choice but to follow. The next thing I knew, she reached out and grabbed the back of my head, pulling me in.

"H-Hey, w-wait! Whaddya—?!" I flailed frantically as I found my face being pressed into something soft.

A gentle, milky fragrance flowed through my nose. Her body was far hotter than I imagined, given how little she moved.

But why was Otoi-san suddenly holding me to her chest like this? My flustered brain could barely reach for the pieces to put them together.



“Most people waste their teenage years on stupid, pointless stuff. Romance is dumb and a waste of time. That’s what you think, right? ’Cause I totally agree.”

“R-Right. Which is why you and I are so successful.”

“But just listen. You can hear my heartbeat right now, can’t you?”

“Huh?”

It was only now that I picked up on it: the steady, rhythmic beating of her heart.

“Super fast, right?”

“Why? Are you nervous? I didn’t think you were capable of being anxious.”

“Look, even people like you and me can get flustered when this sorta thing happens, right? Though I’m pretty good at hidin’ it.”

With that, she let go of me. I looked up at her face, but there wasn’t a hint of tension in her expression. Her skin did seem a little pink, but I only noticed because I was looking for it.

“I bet you’re feelin’ it too, right?”

“Huh?”

“Y’don’t wanna waste your time on this sorta stuff, but when it happens, well. Humans have instincts like any other animal.”

“So, you mean...Mashiro’s confession really did affect me? And when I’m with Iroha...”

“Yeah. Probably.” Otoi-san turned to trace her fingers over a photo frame that sat atop the console in front of us. Her eyes softened. “And that was why her passion had such an effect on you, I reckon.”

That photo was from last year. It was a photo of Iroha, Otoi-san, and me, with the girls looking just a tiny bit younger than they did now. We were inside the recording booth. Iroha had her hands up in a peace sign, her eyes brimming with excitement. I stood to one side of her looking like a disgruntled parent while Otoi-san yawned on the other. We took it with a selfie stick to commemorate our first recording. It was strange to think that Iroha was still in junior high school back then.

I remember spending ages trying to convince her to come to the studio, and even when I managed, she grumbled the whole way here. I remember how excited she got seeing all the equipment, and hearing her own voice playback in such high quality. It was the first time I’d ever seen her smiling

from the very bottom of her heart.

“Her passion...”

Otoi-san might have been on to something. While I had been planning to reply to Mashiro’s confession with a calm and level head, deep down there was a part of me that was incredibly happy to be confessed to. Telling myself I couldn’t do anything because she’d only talk to me via LIME was just an excuse. There were tons of ways I could get her to listen to me.

I should have taken the most efficient option open to me, but I didn’t. I didn’t even try. I was too focused on making sure no one got hurt—myself included. By doing that, I forgot everything I decided when the Alliance was formed: that I didn’t mind if people hated me; I was willing to bet my time, and even my entire life, on the talents of this small group of people.

“Thanks, Otoi-san. You helped me remember what’s most important to me.”

“That’s what I like t’hear. Guess you’re feelin’ pretty confident about talkin’ to her now, right?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna fix this.”

With my mind cleared of fog, my thoughts were starting to come together. All the troubles I was facing right now were connected by a single thread. The solution was simple, and right now I was kicking myself for not thinking of it earlier.

“I’ll be off then. Sorry for the trouble.”

“It’s fine. Doesn’t mean I’m givin’ you this session for free, though.” Otoi-san waved at me.

“Talk about a one-track mind...”

I let out a good-humored sigh before leaving the studio behind. On my way up the stairs, I sent a quick LIME message. This was step one.

AKI: Let’s get something to eat tonight. I’ll message you the time and place in a bit. I’ll give you my response to your confession there, Mashiro.

And...send.

If she accepted, great. If not, it didn’t matter. If she tried to avoid me, I’d find some other way to force her to face me. I didn’t value the feelings of others. All I valued was efficiency. Efficiency for myself. Wondering what other people thought or felt didn’t come into it.

Silence.

“You’re...not gonna say anything?”

“This is too important. Anything I say runs the risk of messing it up.

Whatever happens, Aki, just know that I respect your decision.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Chapter 7: My Fake Girlfriend Has It In for My Response to Her Confession

Our town had a train station. Over the years, the area around it had changed. There were brand-new high-rise buildings, huge offices, expensive stores, and restaurants. This place seemed to be on a constant upward trajectory, offering ever more attractions, and the atmosphere changed completely when night fell.

By day, it was filled with kids coming here to hang out after school, go on dates, and whatever else it is that school kids do. But by night, it underwent a total transformation: it became a watering hole for society's most fashionable members. A gentle, snazzy evening, with suave men in overly-expensive suits and snooty women clinking wine glasses.

The tall, 48-story building that looked over both of these scenes on a daily basis was called the Midnight Tower, and it was this building that most people used as a landmark for the station.

There I was, in a fancy restaurant on the Midnight Tower's thirtieth floor, looking over the city lights through the window. It was 8 p.m. I wore the Amani suit I had for just such an occasion, and waited for Mashiro to arrive.

My faint reflection in the window almost caused me to crack a smile. How often did you see a high schooler dressed like this? Still, even somebody as averagely average as me could look good if I dressed up right—and sure enough, I didn't look too bad. I booked this place pretending to be an adult, and I doubted I was about to get found out looking like this.

I was sitting there minding my own business when an older man approached me: the waiter.

"I believe your guest has arrived, sir."

"Thank you. Hi, Mashiro. That suits you." I smiled at the girl shrinking back behind the waiter.

She was wearing a cool blue dress. The thin belt around her waist was adorned with an unassuming golden clasp. Her outfit was flashy but not

gaudy. Though the dress was a little open at the top, revealing her pale white skin, it gave off an air of delicacy rather than obscenity.

Her hair was done up, her lips painted, and her make-up perfect. This was clearly Mashiro at her very best.

With a bright-red face, Mashiro sat down stiffly in the chair the waiter pulled out for her. The way her arms and legs moved perfectly in sync with one another was almost robotic, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"D-Don't laugh at me."

"You look so nervous that it's kinda funny."

"Shut up. It's your fault for booking this stupidly fancy place."

"What? You don't like it?"

"No, I do, but...I feel like I'm not old enough to be here."

"No, see, whether you belong here or not is something you get to decide for yourself."

"Still, it looks really expensive... You know Dad would pay if I asked him, right?"

"What kinda guy would ask his date's dad to foot the bill? No way."

I could hear him now, scolding me for knowing nothing about how to treat a lady in that smooth voice of his. Besides, if he found out I was on an actual *date* with his daughter, I probably wouldn't live to see next week.

"Don't worry about the bill. I'll use the Alliance's budget."

"The budget?"

"That's right. The Alliance is doing pretty well now, moneywise. I wouldn't use the money for personal stuff, but if it benefits the team, I'm all for spending it."

"But I'm, I mean, I don't help with your game stuff, right?" Mashiro asked, looking at me particularly intently.

"Right. I can't tell you everything just yet, but eating out here tonight *has* got something to do with the Alliance and its activities."

"Huh?"

"Don't worry about it. Just enjoy your food."

"O-Okay. Um, where are the menus?"

"There aren't any. It's a set three-course meal."

"O-Oh."

Despite her father's wealth, it looked like Mashiro wasn't used to these sorts of fancy restaurants. She was fidgeting, her eyes darting all over the

place.

That wasn't to say I was used to them, of course. I had come here before though, and that was to get Sumire on my side. I failed back then, but it prepared me for this time. I couldn't just blackmail her into joining us, so for good measure, I invited her out here to try and butter her up. It ended up being a total waste of time, but I don't really want to go into that now.

It's kinda rude to be thinking about other women when you're on a date too.

"Is this what you meant when you told me on LIME you were gonna 'dress to impress'?" I said the first thing that came to my head when I looked at Mashiro.

She fidgeted bashfully some more before giving me a nod.

"Do you not, um, like it?" she asked, looking up at me anxiously.

"It's cute."

"What?"

"Nothing. Don't worry; it's very stylish. And it suits this place too."

"Th-Thanks..."

I needed to put my filter back on. It was probably because Otoi-san grilled me earlier on whether Mashiro was cute or not. She looked cute, of course, but there was more to it than that. It was heartwarming how hard she tried to dress herself up when she was naturally withdrawn and asocial.

And to think, this adorable girl had declared her love for me. It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, a pure stroke of luck I might never encounter again.

I noticed Mashiro looking around the place thoughtfully.

"Something the matter?"

"There are a lot of...grown-up couples here."

"Well, yeah, this *is* the sort of place couples go to. This is where you go to have a good talk with your significant other."

"O-Oh."

Mashiro had been charmed by the magic of this place without even realizing it. The prickly reception I got in the classroom was nowhere to be seen now.

"Does that put you off? I guess it would..."

I remembered back when she was watching that shark movie, and the satisfied glint she had in her eye when the popular kids got eaten. I got the

impression that she hated couples and everyone whose life seemed to be going swimmingly.

Maybe I should've picked somewhere a little more casual...

But Mashiro shook her head, a small smile rising to her lips. “Seeing couples doesn’t make me mad...anymore.”

“You really used to hate them though, right?”

“Well, they always looked so happy, and it was like they were trying to rub it in everyone’s faces. Like they were laughing at me for being all by myself.”

“Talk about a victim complex...but yeah, I get what you’re saying.”

“But I understand now. Those happy couples weren’t laughing at me. In fact, they didn’t care about anyone else at all. I get that, now that I’m in love too...”

I could feel my chest tightening as Mashiro mumbled away. She was so sweet that I just wanted to run over there and give her a hug.

It really did feel like we were on a date. I was pondering this when the waiter came over with our drinks. He poured a red liquid into our glasses.

Mashiro’s eyes widened. “W-Wine? I’m... Um, I’m not...”

“Non-alcoholic. It’s this place’s specialty.”

“Y-You mean...”

“Grape juice, essentially.” I smiled and raised my glass.

Relieved, Mashiro wrapped her hand around her own glass and lifted it to meet mine. She tried to hold it like she was used to it, but it was kinda clear this was new to her. I didn’t feel the need to correct her, though.

“Cheers.”

“Ch-Cheers...”

We clinked glasses.

“Mm... This is good!”

“I told you. This isn’t like the stuff you find in stores.”

The moment she took a sip, Mashiro seemed to relax. The familiar taste of the juice must have put her at ease, even in our high-class surroundings. I couldn’t have asked for a smoother start.

“Thank you for waiting. I have the clam cocktail here.”

Time for our starter: clams arranged artistically in a little glass. It was pretty cute.

“Ahh! They’re so cute! Look! Clams!”

“I thought you’d like it, since you love seafood so much.”

Seafood was a staple of French cuisine, and this restaurant in particular served a lot of fish.

“I didn’t just choose this place because it was fancy, y’know.”

“Thank you, Aki!” Mashiro giggled in delight.

Looks like I made the right choice.

And so, we started enjoying our food. It was a wonderful time. Each dish was arranged beautifully, and we took pictures on our phones and shared our thoughts on the flavors. We were acting like a real couple.

Our fake relationship was borne of selfishness and convenience. It was all so that we could both get what we wanted. With Mashiro’s confession, the relationship had the potential to move on to the next level. Depending on my response, everything could change.

If this were an anime, a movie, or indeed a light novel, it would be natural to assume the protagonist wouldn’t decide on any one girl. He’d pretend not to hear their confession, or play dumb and ignore everything until the next plot point came along. I get that from an emotional perspective; this was the kind of thing that could drastically alter your relationship, or even destroy it. And that was scary.

Things would be different if these protagonists prioritized an efficient lifestyle above all else. They were afraid of change. So was I, which was why I had put this off for so long. I told myself I had to respond to Mashiro’s confession, but I was honestly a little relieved when she kept avoiding me. If I couldn’t respond, nothing would change.

I know that was a stupid attitude to have, though. By ignoring the whole thing entirely, I was losing something important. Any sort of god looking down on the situation would probably lump me in with those indecisive protagonists.

But whoever this god was, they didn’t need to worry any longer. I wasn’t going to ignore what was in front of me anymore. I was going to answer Mashiro’s confession right then and there. I already knew what I was going to say.

“Hey, Mashiro?”

“Mm? What is it, Aki?”

“I wanted to give my reply to your confession. That’s why I invited you here.”

“Yeah...”

I looked her in the eye, but she avoided my gaze. She put down her knife and fork, which caused the grape juice in her glass to quiver slightly.

“Dinner was lovely. Thank you for taking me here.”

“I’m just glad you liked it. Mashiro, I—”

“It’s fine. I don’t need to hear your reply.” Mashiro’s voice was firm as she interrupted me.

Don’t worry; I planned for this. She had been avoiding me, after all, so I thought she might chicken out here.

“I’m doing this now. Hearing your confession forced me to face my own feelings. If I can’t tell you now, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.”

“I thought you might insist, because you’re stubborn. But you’ve got it all wrong.”

“Oh?”

“You’re about to turn me down, aren’t you?”

I gawked at her. She was totally right.

I spent my whole life avoiding romance and typical teenage nonsense. Then I met Ozu and his incredible talent. Sumire and then Iroha came along, and I decided I’d form the Alliance. Just to give them a place where their talents were put to good use.

That was my goal, and to achieve it with maximum efficiency, I decided to shun everything else. That included all the things my peers treasured and cherished. That’s why, thus far, I’d avoided things like confessions. Not having any experience with them came back to bite me in the ass here, though. After speaking with Iroha and Otoi-san about it, I came to a single conclusion: I couldn’t accept Mashiro’s confession.

“So uh, what makes you think I’m turning you down?”

“Because you’re too nice. You took me to this wonderful restaurant, and I’m going to remember this for a long time. But the moment you told me where we were meeting, I knew you were going to reject me.”

“No, *you’ve* got it wrong. If I made you mad and our fake relationship broke down, Tsukinomori-san would have no reason to help us out anymore. I only treated you to a nice dinner to keep you happy because it was in the best interests of the Alliance. There’s no way you can call this ‘being nice.’”

“Aki, you really don’t understand how much I love you, do you? I’m not going to fall for that. I know you’re doing this because you’re nice, and you

can't convince me otherwise.”

“Mashiro...”

“It makes sense, anyway. Iroha-chan is lovely, but you never fell for her, so it was silly to think I could just drop in and everything'd change.” Mashiro spoke quickly, eyes on her lap. Her voice was trembling, but because of the low lighting, I had no idea what expression she was making. “I get it. I got all excited about falling in love with you, but your main concern is the Alliance. I never thought you'd be interested in dating me, but...”

Mashiro was trembling now as she gripped at her wine glass. But her voice was firm as she continued.

“I wanted to move forward. I wanted you to know how I felt. That was the only reason I confessed,” Mashiro said hoarsely. “I’ve spent my whole life running away from things. I didn’t want to run away again, just when I was about to change. I had to keep moving.”

This. This was how she really felt. All this time, this mermaid had been shut up in her tiny clam in the ocean that was her room, afraid of anything that might hurt her. And yet, she had gathered all her courage to confess to me.

Now, I was going to hurt her again by rejecting her.

“But I’m happy with just this. I told you how I felt. I tried, and that’s enough for me.” Mashiro beamed at me.

I thought for sure she was crying before—but it was the complete opposite. Mashiro switched schools because she wanted to become stronger, and although she had her ups and downs, she had managed it. She’d grown. That was why she could give me such a determined smile right now.

“I didn’t need a response to my confession. You just needed to acknowledge it. That’s all.”

Now it was like I was the one getting rejected. This was the cumulation of all the days she spent treating me coldly. A final strike.

“I don’t know how many months or years it’s gonna take, but I’ll make sure you fall in love with me one day. You’ll fall in love so hard, you won’t be able to bear it. Next time, you’ll be the one confessing to me.”

“That...might not happen, you know? It’ll be more efficient for you to forget about me and find someone else.”

“Pfft. That’s not efficient at all.”

“Huh?”

“Efficiency is all about attaining your goal in the shortest time possible, right? My goal isn’t ‘get a boyfriend.’ It’s ‘make Aki my boyfriend.’ The most efficient way to do that is not to give up.”

“All I care about is the Alliance, and I don’t know when I’ll even have the time to think about anything else. At the very least, it won’t be before graduation. And after that, who knows where you’ll—”

“I know where I’ll be.”

“What?”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen with the Alliance either. But as long as you don’t give up on it, I’ll be with you. I’ll be with you until the very end.”

“Okay, but...”

What was she talking about? We might end up in completely different places after graduation. Maybe she meant that, because we were cousins, or because her dad owned Honeyplace Works, she’d never be too far away. But even then, there was no guarantee we’d cross paths that often, if at all. Those weren’t great prospects to start a relationship with, so why did she sound so confident?

I wasn’t able to answer that question before Mashiro stood up.

“Thank you. It was a lovely dinner, and you helped me come to terms with what I should do. I’ll do whatever I can to help out the Alliance. And I’ll do whatever I can to make you fall for me.” Though her words burned passionately, Mashiro’s bow was meek and polite. “I’m heading home. I know this might be awkward for you, but...”

She took a deep breath.

“I’m going to be as annoyingly clingy as possible from tomorrow on! Brace yourself, AKI!” Mashiro smirked, then spun around and raced away.

Problem...solved? I wasn’t sure, but it wasn’t like I’d be able to control her feelings in any case.

Mashiro was in love with me, but I wasn’t in love with Mashiro. I guess all that was left was to pick up where we left off with that knowledge in mind. The emphasis she put on my name with her parting words was weirdly robotic for some reason too. It reminded me of someone, but even after giving it a few moments’ thought, I couldn’t work out who.

Anyway, that was Mashiro dealt with.

I’m coming for you now, Iroha.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: I heard Mashiro-chan and Aki went out for dinner.

OZ: Yeah, he said he had something important to tell her.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: Iroha-chan's been acting weird too. Wonder what's going on.

OZ: Puberty, teenage romance, yada yada...something along those lines.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: Figures. I just hope everyone can find happiness <3

OZ: Same. Too bad bigamy is illegal.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: Yeah. Love triangles always leave at least one in tears.

OZ: At least we get to sit back and watch with our popcorn. Good luck, Aki.

Chapter 8: I Want to Apologize to My Friend's Little Sister

“Over here. Mom and Dad are out on night shift right now.”

It was midnight, and Ozu was helping me sneak into his family’s apartment. Well, to be honest, it sounds like a bigger deal than it was. I just checked with him over LIME that his parents were out, and now we were being as quiet as possible so that Iroha wouldn’t hear us.

“This is Iroha’s room.”

“Got it. Thanks, Ozu. Are you sure you should be letting your sister see a guy so late at night, though?”

“I couldn’t give two hoots about what she does. Don’t take me for one of those creepy older-brother types. I just wanna know what your kids are gonna look like.”

“There are apps for that kinda thing already. Why don’t you get yourself a real hobby?”

“I’ve been trying to for years... Anyway, good luck.”

And with that, Ozu disappeared into his own room.

I knocked on Iroha’s door. Best to start off simple.

I waited, but there was no response.

“Hey, Iroha! You’re awake, right? Come out here. I wanna talk.”

Silence.

I knocked again. And again. And again, and again, and again, and again...

“There’s no way you’re asleep this early! I know you’re awake! Come on!”

“Fine! I’m awake! Whaddya want this late at night?!”

Finally.

“I wanna talk about what happened at the studio. Could you open the door?”

“What? You broke in to lecture me?”

“I’m not here to lecture you. I’m here to apologize.”

“Why? I wasn’t mad or anything. You have it backwards, *I’m* the one who messed up the recording.”

“Well, I...I guess I was a little mad. I blamed you for it instead of realizing my own failings. That’s why I’m here to apologize now.”

“You don’t hafta apologize. I don’t wanna see you now either, so please leave.”

“I don’t care how you feel. Just listen to me.”

“N-O! You’re gonna try and get me to act differently around you or something, right? I already know you fancy yourself a smooth talker! So I ain’t opening this door!”

“Do it, or I’m kicking it down!”

“Yeah right! This ain’t a movie! Scram, Karate Kid!”

“You think I can’t?”

“You think you *can*?! Go ahead and try then! I’ll be laughing when you fail!”

“Don’t regret this.”

“Huh?”

I mean, she did just tell me to try, right?

I ignored Iroha’s uneasy silence, stepped back from the door, and took a deep breath to prepare myself.

Focus...

I stared at the lock under the metallic doorknob with every last drop of concentration I had.

“These Japanese companies sure are kind, huh? Thanks, fellas.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“Construction companies have a lot of freedom these days. In the materials they use, their methods, where they’re careful, and where they cut corners. All they need to worry about otherwise is keeping to the basic building regulation standards.”

“Uh, since when did this become a builder’s meeting?!”

“A lot of stuff nowadays is built with health and safety in mind. You know ‘just in case,’ even if the risk is low, and even if it’s not legally required.”

My eyes flew open, and I delivered a perfect-form kick to the lock on Iroha’s door. The kick I used was a staple of *Nippon Kempo*, a simple yet effective martial art. I learned a thing or two about it by watching and

copying videos on the internet.

The door crashed open more easily than I was expecting. Iroha's face appeared behind it, white as a sheet.

"Doors inside apartments are pretty easy to open with a bit of force or trickery. It's not just in manga that you can kick 'em open, y'know."

Iroha was sitting there in her pajamas and holding onto a pillow that I think was supposed to be some kind of cute mascot. I got to my knees in front of her and placed down a roll of notes on the floor to pay for the broken door. I then slammed my forehead into the ground.

"You're not getting away from me anymore, Iroha. You're gonna sit here and listen to every word I say."

I then began my apology.

"Fine. But you didn't hafta kick my door in!"

"Hey, at least I announced myself before doing it, *Iroha*."

"Hello? That's pretty lofty talk coming from someone who's *supposed* to be apologizing!"

"Doesn't mean I'm about to let you get away with being a hypocrite. That's just how I roll."

"Well maybe you should stop rolling..." Iroha sighed and sat down on her bed.

The scene was like this: there was the stunning high schooler, looking down at me from on high, and me, the average Joe, bowing in front of her on the floor. Sounds kinky, right?

It wasn't though. I was apologizing, *not* submitting myself to her. This was a negotiation. I was here to persuade her to work in the best interests of the 05th Floor Alliance and the path I believed in.

"First, I should catch you up. I just came back from rejecting Mashiro."

"O-Ooooh? Hmm... Why did ya do that? You probably just missed your one and only chance to get laid."

"I was always going to refuse her. I've never really put much thought into romance, but at the very least, I've never seen Mashiro in that way. I guess I *was* happy that she confessed, though. Even if I didn't realize it at first."

"Happy, huh? I get that, though. Mashiro-senpai *is* pretty cute."

“Yeah. That’s why I let things go on as they were without having a chance to reject her. I was probably enjoying it deep down. Never thought I’d see the day when such basic pleasures would sway me, but there you go. Even though I promised I would dedicate everything I had to the Alliance, I still got sidetracked. That’s why you got mad, right?”

Iroha didn’t respond. The look on her face was pretty serious, almost as if she was in honor-student mode. I wondered whether my words were truly resonating with her or not. Not that it mattered. I just had to keep talking.

“I decided long ago that I wasn’t going to bother with ‘making the most of my teenage years,’ or getting caught up in romance. So please, give me another chance. As producer, I’ll do anything for you, and anything for the Alliance! Iroha...” I looked up.

Then, I got to my feet and approached her.

“Huh?”

I wrapped my arms around the back of Iroha’s delicate neck. I then placed her headphones around it.

“So please don’t feel like you need to lie to me. Be honest if there’s something bothering you.”

These headphones were the symbol of her voice-acting activities. Her long hair fluffed out over them. She only wore them in my room, when she was in full-on “Annoy Aki” mode. When she wore them, she didn’t have to worry about what other people thought, or restrain herself. She could be as loud, annoying, and selectively naive as she wanted.

Iroha let out a long sigh. And then...

She grinned.

“You kinda got it, Senpai. Kinda.”

“Kinda?”

“Sure, I was kinda confused when it looked like you were focusin’ on other stuff instead of the Alliance. But that’s not something that’d really make me mad, ’cause I’m pretty chill about that sorta thing. Unlike you. I’m just your regular high school girl, y’know?” Iroha shifted backwards on the bed and brought her knees up to her chest. She looked away and added under her breath, “And that means...I get jealous.”

Jealous? Iroha got jealous? She was always so cheerful, though. What did she have to be jealous about?

“The only people you hang out with are from the Alliance, and even then,

Ozuma's the only one you really call a friend. You hold everyone else at arm's length. The only time you really take us seriously is when it has to do with work."

"Well... Yeah, that's because I promised. I—"

"You said you'd find the best path for the Alliance to succeed, and then set us on it. You also said that we shouldn't expect anything else from you."

That was the promise I made to the 05th Floor Alliance right at the very start. No, "promise" was too grand a word. It was a guarantee. A guarantee I gave them, because I was afraid of hurting them. If they expected any compassion from me, they were bound to be disappointed; high hopes breed deep lows. I only valued efficiency.

Back in elementary school, I was criticized by the others when I said we shouldn't pass to the one kid who was bad at soccer. Just like back then, my way of life had the potential to hurt people. And, just like with all things, the more you get your hopes up, the more the betrayal hurts. That was why I decided not to get any closer than was necessary to the Alliance members.

If I lost the ability to make efficient decisions, I was endangering the Alliance's future. Likewise if my decisions ended up hurting somebody beyond healing. My job was to keep everything in perfect balance. The moment I messed up, everything could come crashing down like a house of cards. It was such a delicate balance, that I had to be ruthless. The Alliance weren't my friends; they were more like a loosely-banded gang of pirates that I needed to take care of and bring to safety.

And yet...

"You were getting close to Mashiro-senpai, who isn't an Alliance member. You took her confession seriously, even though it had nothing to do with our game. You always said it was necessary to keep others at a distance, but apparently that didn't apply to her. It kinda rubbed me the wrong way, to be honest."

"Well, the whole thing with Mashiro is complicated. I know she's not in the Alliance, but she requires the same amount of care. If I can't do a good job as her fake boyfriend, our dream is finished."

"That's not all though, right?"

Right. I knew I was treating her with kid gloves, which is why I went to sort out her confession the moment I realized. I nearly forgot what my original goal in all of this was.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s not really your fault. I mean, she practically threw herself at you. I know there wasn’t an easy way out of it for you.”

“Iroha...”

Iroha’s pout fell into a frustrated frown, and she shook her head as if to clear it. “That’s why I was jealous! It wasn’t fair how you were taking her seriously even though she wasn’t in the Alliance. That’s why I messed up at the recording. I wanted to know how you’d react if I stopped taking it seriously! I’m sorry!”

Iroha bounced up on the bed before plastering her forehead onto the mattress. I could tell that she had just unloaded everything from her chest in one fell swoop.

“You were jealous, huh? That’s...kind of a surprise, to be honest.”

Jealousy was usually the sort of thing you’d expect from a girl whose crush was about to go out with someone else. But Iroha was a hundred percent herself with me. And since she devoted herself to getting on my nerves, I never thought she’d ever have any romantic interest in me.

If there was one thing I learned from the whole thing with Mashiro, it was that I didn’t understand girls as well as I thought I did.

Did this mean Iroha liked me?

The tiny thought cropped up in a corner of my mind, and for the first time, I was prepared to give it some credence. If that was the case, I owed Iroha a response too, just like I did Mashiro.

There were all sorts of things I could say. It wasn’t the right time. I wasn’t interested in romance right now. All I cared about was being your director. I had to say something.

“Let me just get something straight. That jealousy...it’s got nothing to do with any sort of...romantic feelings towards me, right?”

I scratched my cheek awkwardly, not able to look at her directly. Asking her straight-out like this was difficult. Iroha was right about one thing at least: I had *no* experience whatsoever with girls.

Iroha raised her head and looked at my face evenly. What was going through her head right now? Her large, cat-like eyes seemed to pierce right through me to the very depths of my soul. I caught her gaze, and the silence continued.

You know, I never noticed before because I was too distracted by her shenanigans, but looking at her head-on like this I noticed how long her

eyelashes were, that her face was actually quite pretty, and...

Wait, what am I thinking? Am I stupid? Who cares what she looks like?! This totally isn't the time! Besides, I don't care about this kinda stuff, remember? Remember?!

“Pfft...”

“Huh?”

While I was in the middle of departing that terrible train of thought, Iroha yanked me out with a single, tiny sound.

The next moment, she burst out laughing.

“I didn’t think you could say something so adorable, Senpai!” she gasped between laughs.

Iroha was holding her stomach and rolling around the bed, laughing like an absolute madman. In one hand, she held her phone.

“Wh-What... Don’t tell me... Why’re you holding your phone?!”

Iroha tapped the screen.

“Let me just get something straight. That jealousy...it’s got nothing to do with any sort of...romantic feelings towards me, right?”

“Seriously?! You were worried I was jealous because I’m *in love* with you?! Does it keep ya up at night? Are you sure *you’re* not the one in love?!”

“I...I’m not! I thought, if that was why, that I should straighten things out, so I asked just in—”

“Let me just get something straight. That jealousy...it’s got nothing to do with any sort of...romantic feelings towards me, right?”

“Stop it! Gaaaaah!”

It was unbearable. My voice had a deep, serious tone to it, and the cringe was enough to make me want to rip my own skin off.

“You know jealousy doesn’t have to be romantic, right? You can be just as jealous when your best friend gets a new buddy. Not even just that! You can be jealous of your teachers, your parents, anyone! I guess you wouldn’t get it though, since you don’t have any friends! Sorry, didn’t mean to hit a nerve!”

Iroha slapped my back repeatedly, while every time she opened her mouth, she pressed just the right buttons in exactly the wrong order. This was Iroha at her most annoying. It was like she’d been saving all of this up the whole time she was in honor-student mode.



“L-Look, I was trying to be serious!”

“Yeah, but I bet you’re regrettin’ it now, huh?! I can’t believe you asked me outright like that!”

“Stop laughing! Or at least keep your voice down!”

“No can do! I’ve never seen ya get so flustered, so I’m not lettin’ up now!”

“You know what’s gonna happen if you let anyone else hear that recording, right?”

“No, I don’t! What? You gonna have to *punish* me like in some porn video?”

“No way, dumbass! Who in the world would even wanna touch—”

“Let me just get something straight. That jealousy...it’s got nothing to do with any sort of...romantic feelings towards me, right?”

“Aaaaah! S-Stop it! Stop playing it whenever you can’t think of a comeback!”

“Man, I think this could keep me entertained for at least a month!” Iroha chortled.

“Goddammit!”

“Well, since I’ve got this, I guess I’ll forgive you for all the stuff that’s gone on recently. Damn, never in a million years did I think I’d get my hands on something like this. Maybe I’ll act out more often!” Iroha prodded my cheek repeatedly, laughing with glee.

And here I was thinking she was depressed or something. I should’ve known better than to think she could possibly have feelings for me.

Maybe this was for the best, though. If she came out with a confession, I’d just have to reject her like I rejected Mashiro. At least this way, it was easier to return my focus to the Alliance.

But wait. What if Iroha did like me, and she was just pretending not to so that things were easier for—

Nah. She wasn’t the type to plan ahead like that.

“Congratulations, *Shinji*, you got the old Iroha back! That’s what you wanted, right? You didn’t just come here to ask me that embarrassing question of yours, right?” Iroha grinned.

“No, I didn’t. How d’you know?”

“Cause I know you! I mean, it’s the dead of night, and you even kicked my door in! This was about more than gettin’ me to behave in the recording

booth again, right? I mean, it'd make sense, since you're all about efficiency.”

“Yep, you got it in one.”

Getting Iroha back to her old self wasn't my only objective here. As I reminded myself today, the only thing I cared about—the only thing I acted for—was the Alliance. That was why I rejected Makigai Namako-sensei's fluffy scripts, why I agreed to help Sumire with the drama club, why I was so intent on fixing all of the Alliance's problems. Responding to Mashiro's confession and fixing Iroha's foul mood were just the beginning.

I had a plan right now that would solve every last one of our problems in one fell swoop. That was why I came here.

“Iroha. I need to talk to you—to the whole Alliance—about something very important...”

**AKI**

AKI

I got a favor to ask everyone.

**Makigai Namako**

What's up?

OZ

OZ

Happy to help, as long as it's nothing outrageous.

AKI

AKI

I need you guys to help me out of a small jam I'm in...

**Murasaki Shikibu-sensei**

I'd love to help, but I've got literally zero free time right now.

AKI

AKI

I want you guys to help our school's drama club.

**Murasaki Shikibu-sensei**

JK I'm in

**Makigai Namako**

That U-turn gave me whiplash.

**Murasaki Shikibu-sensei**

You could say my hands are tied!

**Makigai Namako**

Drama, though? Can't say I know much about it...

AKI

AKI

Well, you're the first person I wanted to ask for help.

**Makigai Namako**

Me?

AKI

AKI

Remember those short scenarios you wrote for Koyagi?

**Makigai Namako**

Oh, yeah. You mean the super-good ones? You could really feel the love, huh?

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 AKI

I was just wondering if you'd let me edit them and use them as scripts for the drama club.



Makigai Namako

Huh?

 AKI

For it to work, I'd need you to write up some new scenarios for the game, though, as long as that's okay with you.



Makigai Namako

Huuuh?

 AKI

I know it's a big ask, but I'm really dying to use your stories!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Please say yes!

 OZ

If there's something I can do to help, let me know.



Makigai Namako

Hm...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Please! I'll do anything! Please help! I'll do aaaaaanything! Want nudes?! I'll give you nudes!

 AKI

How about keeping quiet, for a start?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Yes sir...



Makigai Namako

Do you HAVE to use my stories?

 AKI

Yes.



Makigai Namako

You really want them THAT badly? MY stories?

 AKI

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Makigai Namako

And do you love me?



AKI

More than anything else in the universe.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

YAOI ALERT, YAOI ALERT, A WILD AKI x NAMA APPEARED!!!



AKI

Last warning.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Sorry!! I swear I won't say anything else!!



Makigai Namako

lmao



Makigai Namako

Well if you love 'em that much, they're yours. I'll write some new stuff.



AKI

Thank you so much!



Makigai Namako

Anything for love!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

Yesssss! I win!!! Part Three is over!!!!



Makigai Namako

You sure about that?



OZ

lol



Makigai Namako

So why'd you send this to the group?



AKI

Well



AKI

124

I wanted everyone's help on this

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Chapter 9: I Have a Plan to Improve the Drama Club

The next day after school I was on the fourth floor of the arts and science block: No-Man's Land. I headed to the empty classroom the drama club used for rehearsal with Ozu and Otoi-san in tow. Sumire had gone on ahead to discuss what would be happening with them, while Iroha was on standby in a different classroom.

"So our mission is to make sure this talentless drama club gets results at the upcomin' Fair, huh? Man, Aki, you sure know how to keep things fun."

"And he springs it on you outta nowhere," Ozu added. "That's part of what makes it so fun, though."

"The future of the Alliance hinges on this, so I need all hands on deck."

"You already gave me my castella, so I'm happy to do whatever ya want." Otoi-san held her school bag over her sagging shoulder, and the small bag holding the castella cake swung along in the other. "Plus, it does sound kinda interestin'. I'm not gonna let 'em suck, so be prepared, yeah?" She moved the Sucky in her mouth so that its tip pointed at me challengingly.

I nodded in response. "I know. I don't want you going easy on them."

With that, I led them into the room at the end of the hallway.

"There he is! The world's most inhumane director!" a girl growled.

The next moment, she was swinging a blunt object towards my head. I launched myself forward, ready to punch this girl in the face. Yet at the last moment, I realized I knew her, and instead of throwing a punch, I poked her on the forehead.



“Eeep!”

The girl—Kageishi Midori—let out a high-pitched scream and bent backwards before falling spectacularly onto her butt.

I picked up the weapon that’d slipped from her hand and let out an exasperated sigh. “A foam hammer, huh? This one of your props?”

“What do you think you’re doing?! Be a good evil-doer and get vanquished!”

“Hey, that was justified self-defense. One moment I’m opening a door, the next I’m being brutally attacked.”

“I didn’t expect you to react so quickly! Are you in a martial arts club or something?”

“I do a little self-study in stuff like Aikido so I can protect myself from lunatics. I don’t think my reaction time was that impressive. It’s probably average compared to other learners.”

“I think your idea of average is a little skewed.”

The two biggest dangers in life are unforeseen accidents, and unlucky incidents. If you’ve ever played the Game of Life, you’ll understand; sometimes, bad stuff randomly happens, just because fate decided to spin some multicolored wheel. It all results in wasted time at best and major disadvantages at worst. I don’t know about you, but that kind of thing pisses me off majorly.

You know what’s the worst way to waste your time? Getting caught up in an accident. That’s why, whenever I go out, I tell myself that every car is out to run me down, and that every pedestrian is on the verge of pulling out a knife and game-ending me. That’s why I decided to learn basic self-defense —just in case one of these scenarios might *actually* happen.

When I said basic, though, I meant basic. Any actual martial artist could probably beat me in ten seconds flat.

“I also think that attacking me like that was extreme to say the least. Not that I was expecting you to take news of my arrival sitting down.”

“O-Of course we wouldn’t! I mean, Su—Kageishi-sensei just sprang on us how you’d be taking over *everything*.”

I shifted my gaze away from Midori on the floor and looked up towards the window, where Sumire was leaning against the wall. She had her arms folded, and had a completely composed expression. Our eyes met, and she gave me a nod cooler than any secret agent.

At the same time, I felt my phone vibrate. I opened up LIME.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: I couldn't persuade her completely! GLHF!

I responded with a fluent flick of my fingers.

“Thanks for nothing.”

Maybe that was a little harsh. Looking more closely, it was only Midori who seemed to object to the Alliance taking over the drama club. The other members look perfectly fine with it; she was the only one with a frown on her face.

“There has to be something going on behind the scenes! Kageishi-sensei always said she wanted to let us develop our independence, so why has she called you in?”

“You’re making this sound like it’s some kind of conspiracy.”

“It’s worse than that! I bet you...you forced yourself onto Kageishi-sensei, and now you’re forcing yourself onto the drama club, you pig!”

“Does this nose look like a snout to you?”

“You’re one of those big-shot Hollywood directors, right? A household name?! There’s no way you’re innocent! I know about this kind of stuff! It’s just like in those manga where there’s a failing businessman but then he turns things around by sleeping with a woman!”

“Okay, but this is real life.”

I thought she was supposed to be the smart sister, but apparently that was just book smarts. Didn’t look like she could tell fact from fantasy. Well, that seemed to run in the family, at least.

“Listen, I didn’t do anything to your advisor. What would I want with a small-time drama club like yours anyway? Doesn’t hurt to use common sense once in a while, you know.”

“Common sense? Wait, does that mean you’re going to make us all your s-s-sex slaves?!?”

“Why, do you want me to?”

“N-N-No! I-I-I’m not a pervert!”

“You jump to conclusions like it’s hopscotch. Kageishi-sensei just figured you guys could use some help for the upcoming Fair. Are you saying you don’t trust her judgment?”

“B-But...you know...we’ve been working really hard all this time. All by ourselves too.” Midori looked at the floor forlornly as she thought about her next words. “We can’t just hand everything over to someone who just

showed up out of the blue.”

From her point of view, it probably felt like they were being invaded. Even if she knew they needed outsider input to figure out their weaknesses, there was probably an emotional part of her that was trying to reject us.

It wasn’t too different from what happened with the Alliance recently, which was why I understood how she felt. Mashiro entered our safe little haven, and inadvertently threatened to break us apart. Once we overcame her arrival, I was able to remember my principles, and even discovered new ways in which we could grow stronger. Even if they didn’t like me, if the drama club allowed me to take over, who knew what endless possibilities were waiting for them on the other side?

It was time for me to do a little acting of my own. If I wanted Kageishi Midori on my side, I’d have to get down right to her core.

“I get it. I only watched a tiny fraction of your practice, but even I could tell how much effort you guys have been putting in.”

“What?” Midori’s eyes widened at my gentle tone of voice.

I had been so harsh on her moments before, but now I was being kind, understanding, and empathetic. The difference probably made me seem even nicer than I was actually being. I guess you *could* technically call it emotional manipulation, but it was all for the greater good. Remember, my goal is always efficiency, not virtue.

“But it’s exactly because I know how hard you guys work that I want to help.”

“Ooboshi-kun...”

“I’ve seen your potential firsthand. I really think you could go a long way.”

It would have to be a very, *very* long way if they wanted any chance of winning any competition. Hopefully she just took my words at face value and mistook them for praise.

“Look, you guys practice all by yourselves up here in this wasteland with no input from your advisor at all, and you give up your lunchtimes to do it. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen such a hardworking group of people.”

Midori looked at the floor, her cheeks flushed red.

“But,” I continued, “working hard won’t get you what you want if you head in the wrong direction. It’s like math, really. Imagine your hard work’s a times-ten multiplier. Except it’s negative ten. No matter what positive value

you multiply, it'll always end up a negative result.”

I wasn't even making stuff up at this point. They really *did* work hard. All I had to do was set them on the right track.

“You guys have the power to be the greatest drama club at the Fair. All you need to do is focus your efforts in the right areas!” With each word, my tone became more and more passionate and decisive.

I made my whole speech while keeping an eye on Midori's breathing to make sure she couldn't interrupt. She was still staring at me in shock when I said my final sentence.

“If this club doesn't get results at the Fair, it will be disbanded. And right now, *that's* the direction you're heading in.”

“But... But we...” Unable to come up with a counterargument, Midori averted her gaze again.

I knew she wouldn't be able to argue with me. She was the leader of the club. She should know more than anyone that they weren't in the business of winning prizes.

“I can help you avoid that fate. If you want to survive, let me help you. If you want to crash and burn, turn me away. The choice is yours.”

Still sitting on the floor, Midori stretched her hand out towards me. For a moment, she let it hover in the air, before turning to her fellow club members for support.

“Midori-san...” They were looking at her with anxiety in their eyes.

Those voices rousing her, Midori looked up at me with fire in her gaze. “I understand what you're saying, but I still can't just hand everything over to you without a second thought.”

“I get that, which is why I'm not suggesting we take over absolutely *everything*. We're not here to take the leading role. We're here to support you so that you can aim even higher.”

“Support us?”

“Like I said, you've got diligence, but you're using it wrong. We've come to correct that.”

“But...”

Midori still seemed plagued with indecision. It was time to play my final hand. I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, but I was out of options at this point.

“If you refuse me because you think I'm some pig who's sulling your

sister, well, you're wrong about that.”

“A-And you think I'm going to believe you just because you said so?! I already know men are liars driven by lust!”

“That's why I brought evidence. Right, Ozu?” I asked him over my shoulder.

Ozu grinned. We'd prepared for this, and he knew exactly what I was talking about.

“That's right. Aki only has one special someone, and that special someone is me!”

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“W-Wait, you mean—Hold on, what the heck was that roar? It sounded like a dinosaur or something!”

“O-Oh, my! It looks like a student has decided to streak incredibly loudly in the courtyard! I shall be scolding them later,” Sumire replied, opening the window and leaning out of it very deliberately.

Thank you, anonymous streaker. You saved the entire drama club and her sister from witnessing Sumire's full-blown yaoi fangirl mode. To this very day, the perpetrator has not been identified.

“O-O-Ooboshi-kun! D-Do you mean to say... Um...”

“I'm Kohinata Ozuma, Aki's one and only. Nice to meet you, Kageishi-san.”

“Kohinata-kun and Ooboshi-kun...a-are you two...in *that* kind of relationship?!?” Midori babbled, her face bright red and her lips trembling as she spoke.

Technically, we weren't lying. Ozu *was* my “one and only”...friend. We just decided not to specify that part. *She* was the one spicing things up with that rotten imagination of hers.

“Do you believe me now?”

“Oh, um, er, well...” Midori pressed her hands to her burning cheeks. “O-Okay, I believe you! I-I mean you can love whoever you want! It's not my place to judge, right?!?”

She really was Sumire's sister. Even if she didn't realize it, it was clear that the idea of me being in a relationship with Ozu had sent her heart rate sky-rocketing by the way she was clutching at her chest right now.

Like I said before, this was a last resort to get Midori to accept the drama club's new regime. I just hoped there wouldn't be any weird rumors flying

around after this. That being said, having her believe I was hooking up with Sumire was about a hundred times more humiliating *and* infuriating.

“And you see now that I’m not doing anything sketchy with Kageishi-sensei, right?”

“Yes...”

I let out an internal sigh of relief. “Okay, then. Now, if you don’t want us helping out the club, you’re free to refuse us. Just listen to what I have to say first.”

Midori closed her eyes thoughtfully and for a while, she remained silent. Once we decided to help the drama club, Sumire filled us in on some of the smaller details. The club was tiny, and was barely allocated a budget, or even a place to practice. Midori was the sole reason it was still running. It wasn’t just about her netting them an empty classroom, but her leadership skills which kept up morale in the club. If there was one thing she was serious about, it was the drama club.

It was no wonder then, that she was so opposed to us when we showed up out of nowhere. It must have been frustrating, to put it mildly.

“Very well. I shall hear you out.” Despite those frustrations, Midori nodded. “Is anyone opposed?”

“If you’re okay with it, Midori-san, then we are too! We don’t want to disband either!”

“Thank you.” Midori turned back to me and glared. “Just bear in mind that I’m ready to refuse you at any time!”

“Sure, I have no problem with that.”

Midori took my outstretched hand and got to her feet. Negotiations were complete. Once we told her our plan, it would be up to her, as the club leader, to accept it. If she did that, then none of her members could complain. I just hoped that she would.

“I knew you could do it, Aki. No one can win ‘em over like you!”

“Thanks. Would’ve been easier if she was just a touch less stubborn.”

“I get you. Guess we have some explaining to do if this somehow makes it to poor Iroha, huh?”

“What?” Midori’s question went unanswered, and she quickly moved on to the next. “Are those two students behind you a part of this too?”

“Yup. They’ll help me help you.”

I briefly introduced the other two: Ozu, our programmer; and Otoi-san,

our sound engineer.

“Are they close to Sumi—I mean, Kageishi-sensei too?”

“I guess you could say that. Ozu talks to her a lot, at least.”

Well, technically he didn’t speak to “Kageishi-sensei” so much as “Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.” Again, *technically* it wasn’t a lie.

Midori’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, as though she wasn’t sure whether to believe us or not. Strictly speaking, Ozu mainly spoke to Sumire to back me up when I was nagging her for her drawings.

Sumire, meanwhile, was studying us with a flicker of doubt on her otherwise composed face. Her sister’s accusations of my relationship with her were probably going right over her head, probably because nothing like that had ever happened between us.

Wait...wasn’t there that time she asked me to take my underwear off for her? Ah, maybe there *was* suspicion to be cast. On her though, not me.

“Are you *sure* you’re not hiding anything?” Midori pressed.

“Nothing at all.” Before she could think too hard about it, I launched into my explanation. “Let me outline how exactly we want to help the club. These are the problems you guys are facing right now...”

The club members cleared the space in front of the blackboard so that I could write on it. Broadly speaking, there were four main issues plaguing the club. The actors’ “skills,” the script, the stage direction, and the sound direction. All of these would need to be tackled if the club wanted to stand a chance of achieving anything at the upcoming Fair.

“Leaving aside the acting for now, I’d like to present my plan for dealing with the other three categories.”

My plan went like this:

Improve the script -> Use Makigai Namako-sensei’s rejected scenarios.

Improve the stage -> Make use of one of Ozu’s programs, which would enhance the props and backdrop we had. We would also have Murasaki Shikibu-sensei creating the backdrops for us.

Improve the sound -> Have Otoi-san supervise the sound direction.

This was the plan in its simplest form. For the script, we would throw out the “science”-fiction trash and replace it with the scenarios Makigai Namako-sensei gave us for *Koyagi*, rewritten as a screenplay. Sumire and Ozu would work on the stage direction and backdrop while Otoi-san would be in charge of sound. Since we couldn’t have Sumire’s secret identity come out, I would

just say that we had a remote artist, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, helping with the backdrops for us from afar.

We'd be aiming for a prize in the upcoming summer Fair First, we had to get the performance up to an average level. Then we could work on turning it into something the judges would actually like.

"Wow. You're giving this presentation like it's some kind of business meeting."

"Yeah! I mean, he's not a big-shot Hollywood director for nothing, right?"

The club members seemed impressed with my plan. Well, all except one of them...

"I understand the need for a change in stage and sound direction, but why should we have to use a brand new script?!" Midori launched herself to her feet, slamming the desk in front of her. "You really think your new screenplay can outshine what we have already?"

"See for yourself. I have it here with me, so feel free to skim it and let me know your thoughts." I pulled out the printed copies of Makigai Namako-sensei's scenario and handed them around the room.

Sickly-sweet and luridly fluffy as they were, they were still penned by a pro. Plus, they were a million times better than...whatever I witnessed at the club the other day. Midori flipped through the pages with a grim look on her face, but soon her entire body was trembling. Eventually, she made it to the end...and the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Wh-Who knew there was l-love as pure as this!" The other club members were sobbing as earnestly as Midori. They began to discuss the script among themselves. "I'd love to use this script! I can't think of anything better for the club!"

Hook, line, and sinker.

"Whoa..."

I knew this was better than what they had before (heck, *anything* would be better than what they had before), but I wasn't expecting this kind of reaction. Was this the kinda stuff that modern high school girls were into? Couldn't they see how horribly over-the-top it was? Ozu and Otoi-san barely raised an eyebrow when they finished reading it, so it can't just have been me.

Sumire looked seriously concerned about her younger sister's tastes right now, but as long as they were happy to use this as the new script, that was all

that mattered.

“Yes, this scenario is really quite something. I would love to use it.”
Midori looked behind her. “But...”

“We’re in charge of the stage direction,” one of the girls explained.
“Changing the script all of a sudden is kind of a big ask for us...”

Most of the props the club already had were suitable only for science-fiction scripts. Changing the genre now meant making a whole bunch of new props.

“If the props are small, that’s fine, but honestly, we don’t have the time or the budget to make anything huge, and that’s before starting on the backdrops...”

I’m sure I don’t need to tell you I was already prepared for that.

“Ozu will take care of all of that. We already discussed this before, right, Ozu?”

“As long as you guys are okay with projections and A.R. for your backdrops, we should be good. It’ll only take me three days to put it all together, just gotta forget about sleep.”

“So we’re fine for backdrops. We can sort out the bigger props later. Could we leave the smaller stuff to you for the time being?”

“Of course! We’ll make the best props you’ve ever seen!”

That was the stage direction sorted. As for sound...

“You guys got any videos of the stuff you’ve done before?” Otoi-san asked.

“We have archives from last year.”

“Great, lemme see ‘em.”

Looks like Otoi-san was taking care of it by herself.

“Now, as for the acting...”

“You can’t ‘fix’ acting by flipping a switch or writing a program,” Midori said. “Unless you have something big up your sleeve.”

“Don’t underestimate me.”

I opened up LIME to find that Iroha had already sent me a message to let me know she was ready.

Perfect timing.

“I want every actor here to come take a lesson with a special advisor in a different classroom.”

“A special advisor, you say? Well, they had better be good if they want *us*

to learn anything.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure she can teach you a thing or two. You’ll understand when you meet her.”

There was no way they’d be dissatisfied. She was the best actor I’d ever seen, after all.

We moved to the next-door classroom. There was a blackout curtain hung up around the whole room.

“I didn’t even notice this being set up here,” Midori breathed, as surprised as the other two actors next to her.

I arranged with Sumire in advance so that the school would give permission for the drama club to have this room today. I set up the blackout curtain during lunch, trying to be discreet about it. According to Sumire, the paperwork for booking a room was a pain, but apparently she “threatened” them a little and it was magically processed much quicker. It was the first time her “Venomous Queen” persona actually worked in my favor.

“I see you’ve made it.” A voice spoke to us from within the darkness.

There, in the middle of the room, stood a mysterious person donning a newsboy hat and sunglasses like they were straight out of Hollywood.

Okay, I’ll cut the dramatics. You and I both know it was Iroha.

“Here she is. Your special advisor.”

“Huh? Who exactly is she?”

“Unfortunately, she needs to keep her identity a secret. I can guarantee you that she’s a stellar actor, though.”

“Just call me ‘Sarge.’”

Iroha’s mother strictly forbade her from having anything to do with the performing arts, so Iroha had to disguise herself to keep these sorts of activities well hidden.

“She looks rather...suspicious. Are you sure about this?” Midori said.

“You’re Midori-san, right? Shouldn’t you be more worried about how well I can act instead of who I am?”

“I suppose so. Well then, why don’t you give us a taste?” There was a spark of challenge in Midori’s voice as the two stared each other down.

I felt no need to intervene at all. Iroha was totally up to the task.

And so, Iroha began her special workshop. I'd left the contents of the workshop entirely up to her.

"First, I want you to read through the scripts you've been given today and decide who's going to take each role. Then, I want you guys to act out the opening scene for me."

The three actors began to follow her instructions. There weren't too many characters in this script. Most of it was the main hero and heroine.

"You should be the hero, Midori-san!"

"Me? Are you sure?"

"Of course! Neither of us are nearly as good as you!"

"Yup!"

Once Midori was cast as the main hero, the other two girls wasted no time in divvying up the remaining roles. The heroine would be played by Yamada, a girl who was as plain as her name suggested.

"Great! Now let me see the opening scene!" Iroha said excitedly.

The actors got into position. I opened up my copy of the script so I could follow along. The opening scene consisted of the main hero literally bumping into the heroine at school. It was as unoriginal as white bread, and was contrived simply to have a reason for the two to talk to each other.

After that, though, the heroine took courage from the encounter and finally started to open up to the world again, so I guess that kind of made up for it.

"Three, two, one, action!"

Here we go.

Midori walked on "stage" from one end of the classroom.

"Man. I. am. gonna. be. late. I. gotta. hurry."

"Cut!" Iroha yelled the second Midori finished her first line. "What the heck was that?! You're supposed to be a guy who's late for class! How come you're running like a robot and reading each line like you're Microsoft Sam? Are you even taking this seriously?"

"I take *everything* seriously!" Midori objected. "And I was running like a human being!"

"Really? I've never seen anyone run like that, especially when they're in a hurry."

Me neither, for what it's worth. Midori's movements suggested she was

wandering around Oz looking for a heart instead of trying to make it to homeroom in time. For a second, I thought she might be playing some robot from one of the science-fiction scripts they had by accident.

“Anyway. Just keep going for now,” Iroha said reluctantly.

The hero ran around a corner and bumped into our heroine.

“Eek!” Yamada-san squealed.

“Oof,” Midori beeped.

Iroha’s eyebrows were twitching in frustration, but for the time being she let them continue.

“Reaouka?”

“Y-Yeah... I’m fine...”

“MagdIsrryharuryyty—”

“Cut!”

Apparently, Iroha couldn’t take it anymore.

“Hey! Why do you keep stopping us?” Midori demanded.

“It should be obvious! Yamada-san, you’re fine. Midori-san, you’re supposed to be speaking Japanese!”

“You said I was being too robotic, so I decided to focus on my enunciation!”

“That’s ‘focusing on enunciation’? You spat out those lines so fast they broke the freakin’ sound barrier!”

The girls glared at each other. The other two club members were grimacing.

“Look, I’m doing everything properly. I don’t understand what you’re complaining about.”

“Nnngh! All right. I’ll play the hero for a bit so you can see how it’s done. Just watch carefully, okay?”

Iroha took up her position and the scene began again. She started running lightly towards the center of the room.

“Man, I’m gonna be late! I gotta hurry!”

It was the simplest scene imaginable, but Iroha looked so genuinely worried about being late that it was making *me* nervous. If I closed my eyes, I wouldn’t be able to tell her voice from any of the boys in my class. She even ran like a boy. The entire scene finished without a hitch.

“Well?” Iroha asked, patting down her disheveled hair.

“W-Wow...” Midori was trembling. “It was so perfect, even though it was

such a short scene! The way you spoke, your tone, your breathing, your movements... It was like you *were* your character! I understand now why you were criticizing my acting so much.”

“Glad to hear it. Try not to get too impatient when you’re reading your lines. Really think about who your character is in the moment. Why don’t you give it another go?”

“Okay!”

Midori’s earlier hostility was nowhere to be seen. This was the true power of Iroha’s acting ability. Taking her position once again, Midori started the scene over. Things were looking up.

“Man. I. Am. Gonna. Be. Late. I. Gotta. Hurry.”

“Gaaaaaaah!”

Never mind.

This is gonna be a looong day...

The workshop took up the rest of the day. Meanwhile, we were also working on everything else.

“You can’t just blare the music at max volume outta nowhere. Gotta fade it in, y’know, as the scene develops. Also gotta make sure you bring it in at the right time, yeah?”

“O-Okay! Thank you!”

“I get you’re not used to doin’ things like this yet, but I’m not about t’settle for crappy sound direction.”

“I understand!”

“What about this part here, Otoi-san?”

Otoi-san’s guidance was harsh, but it seemed to be working. It didn’t look like I would need to intervene here either. Meanwhile, the stage direction team was busy making props. They were doing fine too; Makigai Namako-sensei’s script didn’t have anything that was too difficult to make. Ozu had already gone home to get started on solving the problem of the bigger props.

“What. Should. We. Do?”

“It’s ‘*What should we do?*’! Aaargh!”

The acting side was making progress too. At a snail’s pace, sure, but it was progress.

“Let’s leave it here for today.”

The bell rang. Time for clubs to wrap up and go home.

“Still got a lotta work to do...” Otoi-san muttered.

Iroha, meanwhile, looked like a heaving mess. Her hair stuck out everywhere, and her breathing was heavy. The club members looked cheerful, though, encouraged by the progress they’d made.

“What did you think?” I asked Midori as things wrapped up.

She nodded at me. “Your special advisor is an amazing actor, and her teaching methods are very easy to follow. I think everyone else is happy too.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“I don’t like to admit this, but I realized just how much we were lacking as a club after what you taught us today.” Midori paused. “So, please...I would be very grateful if you could stay and help us win a prize at the Fair.”

She bowed, and the club members behind her follow suit.

“I’d be glad to.”

And that was how the 05th Floor Alliance (and friends) got involved in giving lessons to the drama club.

One week passed, and then another. The drama club practiced together after school every single day, and we joined them. Midori still seemed to be having trouble, though, despite her fantastic teacher.

“Please. Don’t. Lie. To. Yourself. About. How. You. Feel.”

“Gaaaaaaaah! I’m *not* lying! This is terrible!”

I heard a lot of “gaaah”s and “goooorgh”s from Iroha these days. It would still be some time before Midori was up to scratch. However, the other groups were making fine progress.

“How’s this, Otoi-san?”

“Sokay.”

“Really?!”

“Don’t get ahead of yerself, yeah? It’s a li’l better than before, but you ain’t ready for the big leagues just yet.”

“Right!”

Thanks to Otoi-san, the sound direction was going swimmingly.

“I’ve gotten pretty good at using Ozu-san’s staging program!”

Almost all of the smaller props were finished, and Ozu’s quasi A.R. program (which he called “Backdrop Creator”) was complete. With a setup of

several transparent monitors, it could create backgrounds that looked incredibly realistic. It had been so long since I'd seen the full extent of what Ozu could do that I was utterly amazed. There was no need to worry about stage direction anymore.

To be honest, there wasn't much *I* could do about anything at this point. Iroha, Otoi-san, and Ozu were the experts, and I was already done delegating tasks to them. I left the scheduling and stuff to Midori, which made things easier for everyone. I tried lecturing her on efficient use of time several times, but she was surprisingly good at time management.

She also took care of procuring the needed stage equipment. Somehow, she even managed to get a hold of just the right props that Makigai Namako-sensei's script called for. It made sense now how she had been able to keep the drama club going by herself for so long.

All that was left for me to do was to keep out of the way and just observe.

"Midori-san, are you trying to put on the perfect performance right from the start?"

"Yes, I am. Is that an issue?"

"It sure is. Before trying to get everything perfect, you need to familiarize yourself with each line, one by one. I think you're getting too tense by trying to get it right every single time."

Midori was by far our biggest problem, but Iroha was tackling it very nicely indeed. It wasn't just Midori either: she was directing all the actors fantastically. Looking at her now, I couldn't even see a shadow of her usual pesky self. She looked more like a teacher, and a good one at that. I couldn't help but wish she'd be like this more often.

"Hm?"

My gaze wandered into a corner of the room, where I spotted one of the club members gasping for breath. It was the girl who played the heroine. I racked my memory for her name.

"Are you all right, uh, Yamanaka-san?"

"Oh, Ooboshi-san. Um, my name is Yamada."

"O-Oh, right. Sorry."

Oh yeah. Yamada. Yamada-san.

Anyway.

"You look kinda pale. Maybe you should take a break."

"I'm fine. I can keep going."

“Don’t push yourself. If you practice when you’re so out of it, you won’t gain anything.”

Yamada-san shook her head. “Thanks for worrying about me, but I promise I’m fine. I’m just a little tired, that’s all.”

I paused, unsure of how to respond.

“You know, I never missed a session before you guys showed up, and this is the first time I’ve felt like we’re getting somewhere. So I want to keep going.”

Her work ethic was admirable.

“All right. Just make sure you stop if it gets too much, okay?”

“Will do!”

And with that, our heroine Yamada-san returned to practice. Even if she said she was fine, it was a little worrying. I didn’t want to force her to sit the rest of the session out in case it leeched her motivation. At the same time, I knew that motivation was a hell of a drug. When you got too into something, it was easy to ignore the bad things, and sometimes things could end up horribly wrong.

I decided to mention what happened with Yamada-san to Midori later. Whatever happened, it’d be fine. I did have a few back-up plans up my sleeve, after all.

Just then, I felt a pair of eyes staring at me. I looked up at the classroom door and noticed a figure peering through the crack. It had silvery-blonde hair and...well, there’s no point finishing that description, because as you’ve probably already guessed, it was Mashiro.

Not again...

I sighed, got up, and headed into the corridor.

“This is starting to become a daily thing. You don’t have to wait for me, y’know? You can just go home.”

“I’m not waiting for you.” Mashiro instantly looked away, but there was a gentle note to her tone.

It had been a while since I rejected her, and she promised to make me fall in love with her. After that, she treated me pretty coldly, just like before. Recently, though, it was like she broke through her embarrassment and now she approached me to talk as much as possible. It wasn’t just that, though...

“Here. I made you a tuna sandwich.”

“O-Oh. Thanks.”

“Y-You’ve been working too hard on this thing and not taking care of yourself. B-Be more careful, okay?”

“R-Right...”

Mashiro was totally acting like she was my girlfriend.

“Listen, you don’t wanna be too obvious about this kinda thing, or people are gonna get the wrong idea. We’re not really dating, you know.”

“Um, did you forget or something?” Mashiro blinked up at me. A small, smug smile appeared on her lips. “We *are* dating. At school that is.”

Oh, right. My deal with Tsukinomori-san. In exchange for a place at Honeyplace Works for my team, I had to pretend to be Mashiro’s boyfriend and keep the riff-raff away from her, right up until graduation.

It was kind of funny how I started off being the one to try and play the part, but right now the tables were turned.

Mashiro was using the deal to her advantage!

“A-And I wasn’t joking either. I *am* gonna make you fall in love with me. Even if I have to use our fake relationship to do it.”

Even when people were on the offensive, their personalities didn’t change. Mashiro’s voice trailed off as she spoke, and her cheeks glowed red.

“I-I can’t deal with it anymore! Dieinafirebye!”

“Uh. Bye.”

Mashiro ran away with her gaze planted firmly on the floor. What a way to see someone off.

She could only hold her nerve around me like that for about three minutes maximum. It was like a time-limited buff. I wanted to tell her as much, but I’d probably end up crushing the confidence she worked so hard to build up.

I watched Mashiro start to weave her way through the piles of chairs and tables, when suddenly she stopped, turned around, and scampered back towards me.

She stood on tip-toes and whispered in my ear, “I can’t wait to see the play.”

“R-Right.”

Then she forced her head down again, turned, and scurried away. I watched her fight through the debris again, a mysterious uneasiness rising in my stomach. I was never good at figuring out my emotions. How *did* I feel about Mashiro?

I was in a fix. I thought I put an end to everything when I rejected her, but

I guess human emotions are more complex than that. The best thing for now, I reasoned, was not to think too hard about it. I had to deal with the drama club first and foremost. My only goal should be to protect the Alliance and lead it towards the future.

“I can’t wait to see what Tsukinomori-san comes up with next. How long till you fall for her, huh?”

“Glad you’re having fun...”

Chapter 10: My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Everybody

July.

Thanks to Sumire's special negotiating (threatening) tactics, the drama club got permission several times to rehearse on the stage in the gymnasium after school. The drama club was looking better than ever, and even Midori made a big improvement. The play was really starting to come together. We might not win, but at this rate we should be able to get a prize and walk away with our heads held high.

“Who hurt you?! I'll punch the lights outta him!'... How was that?”

“That was amazing, Midori-san!”

“I thought so!” Midori laughed and celebrated with her clubmates.

I knew exactly how she felt. There was no better feeling than working towards a goal with everyone and seeing that goal get closer bit by bit. Even when practice was over, they talked about how far they'd come and what they were going to work on next. It was great to see their determination rising.

“We couldn't have come this far without our Sarge!”

“Thank you so much, Sarge! I can't wait to do it again tomorrow!”

“Good job you guys. Let's give it our all! It's not long till the Fair now!”

They had started off shooting us wary, suspicious glares, but now that they'd warmed up to us, they hung to our every word.

But it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows.

When Iroha watched the club members, there was a sadness in her expression, and it was starting to bug me.

I was home from school. Just as I was about to go into my bedroom, Iroha slipped past me and went in first. She pulled off her socks and threw them to

one side before flopping down onto my bed.

“Man, I’m beat.”

“Why don’t you go sleep in your own bed, then?”

“I dunno. I’ve been sleeping in the same bed for years, so I’m getting kinda sick of it. To be honest, I’m thinking of claiming this one permanently soon,” Iroha mumbled, rolling over and over on *my* mattress.

Somehow, I couldn’t even get a glimpse of what was under her way-too-short skirt. Not that I wanted to, but there was a small, curious part of me that wondered how she was commanding the laws of physics to pull off something like that.

Come to think of it, they always have these shots in anime and manga where you should be able to see *something*. But then you can’t, so they don’t have to raise the age rating. I always thought it was some kind of technical sorcery, but maybe it was more realistic than I’d realized.

“Whaddya lookin’ at, Senpai? Why’re you trying to look up my skirt? Y’know, I might just show you if you go like: ‘Hi, my name is Akiteru and I’m a massive perv who wants to see my friend’s sister’s underwear. Please show me, oh Iroha-sama.’”

“I don’t give a hoot about your underwear, dumbass.”

“Ha ha! I know you do! I mean, you’re a boy too, right? And—Hey! Quit sprayin’ that air freshener at me! It’s not fair!”

“Don’t mind me, I’m just trying to make my bed smell nice. If you don’t like it, you’re welcome to get the hell out.”

Iroha glared at me as I used my position of actual tenant to my advantage. As long as we weren’t talking about her underwear anymore, who cares? I prepared physically and mentally myself for whatever nonsense she was going to come out with next.

“All right, fine! I get it!” Iroha sat up huffily and started picking up her socks.

I frowned. Why wasn’t she fighting back?

“Are you...planning something?”

“Seriously? I’m just respecting your feelings, and now you’re complaining? Hey, *you’re* the one that has it in for *me!*” Her comeback was swift, but lacked its usual sharpness. “You look tired anyway, so I’ll get outta your hair.”

I paused. “Did something happen?”

“Huh?” Iroha froze inches away from my bedroom door and turned around.

“I mean, you were looking kinda...out of it at practice today.”

“Was it really that obvious?”

“Well, you’re being your usual annoying self, but it’s missing something today. It’s like your levels of peskiness have halved.”

“So that’s how you work out how I’m feelin’, huh? You really need to start seeing me for something other than how annoying I am.” She slapped me lightly on the cheek, but even that didn’t hurt like it usually did. “You can be pretty sharp, y’know. At the worst possible times.”

Iroha started twiddling a strand of golden hair between her fingers, then let out an amused sigh.

“Well, y’know mom doesn’t let me get involved in anything like acting.”

I knew that very well. Iroha had been kept away from anything entertainment-related from a young age. Her family didn’t even own a television and they weren’t even allowed to talk about stuff like that.

Those strict rules were in place for her even now, which was why her voice acting work for the Alliance had to be kept a total secret. Otoi-san and I were the only ones who knew, and the only reason Otoi-san was in on it was because she had to be to carry out the recordings. Otoi-san herself was under a powerful NDA (read: we were bribing her with sweets) to make sure no one ever found out.

“Well, because of that, I’m kinda jealous of the drama club. They get to be out there, acting with their friends in front of the whole world, y’know... Don’t get me wrong, I love doing the voice work for *Koyagi*, and I’m learning so much from it too. But then I just got to thinking that I’ll never actually see my name in any credits, no matter how far I go.” Iroha plopped herself back down on the bed and stared wistfully at the ceiling.

Koyagi fans had dubbed her voices as the “Phantom Voice Troupe.” There were rumors flying around for ages about the voice acting, since not one of the actors was ever named, but eventually that nickname started spreading and the rumors settled down. Of course, you usually need more than one person to start a troupe, but the fact that we only had one voice actor was completely unknown.

“I just want people to know I exist! That I’m the one doing this work! It’s like I can’t even be proud of what I do...” A sad smile rose to her lips. “I

can't even be a proper member of the Alliance like this."

I knew exactly what she meant. With me, Iroha was a hundred percent herself. Maybe even two-hundred percent. Considering her circumstances, it made perfect sense. She couldn't be this open with anybody else. Humans were creatures who naturally craved validation. Present company included.

The only reason I didn't go after more praise than necessary was because I was afraid of getting big-headed and damaging people's trust in me. It'd also lead to wasted time, and together those two things would completely crush my efficiency.

Now, I had nothing to brag about. Iroha, on the other hand, was in possession of a rare talent which she was forced to hide for no good reason. I could well imagine how frustrating that must be for her. Talk about inefficiency.

Watching Iroha teach the drama club these past few weeks had given me a new appreciation for her talents. It wasn't just her voice acting skills. She knew how to manipulate every facial muscle, use every tiny movement...she perfectly controlled everything at her disposal to put on an incredible performance. If only she was allowed to be open about her talents, I wouldn't be surprised to see her on the big stage or in the movies.

But she wasn't. And it was infuriating.

"Iroha, one day I'm gonna get you on that stage. Maybe we could get *Koyagi* turned into a stage play or something, and you could be in that."

"What? But..."

"You know what the whole point of the Alliance is, don't you? It's to give you all a space where you can put your talents to use to your heart's content," I said. "Look, I've got zero acting skills. All I can do is encourage other people to put their talents to use, and I've seen just how talented you are over these past few weeks. It's made me think there's a lot more you could do than just voice acting, and that you have way more potential than I'd considered."

"Uh... So am I gonna have any free time at all, or...?"

"I'm gonna work you to the bone. If you can't take it, then you can leave whenever you want."

"Hey, be careful or one of us is gonna snap and start vague-posting about the Alliance online. You don't wanna get canceled, right?"

I never claimed to be a good person. Compared to the rest of the society, I intended for the 05th Floor Alliance to be utterly ruthless towards its

members. I wasn't even a good leader, strictly speaking. I just knew how to take advantage of people's kindness. Once I was in that position, I was going to milk them for all they were worth and get them the results they were hoping for.

"If you want to act properly, I'll make it happen. Make sure you're prepared," I warned her.

Iroha broke into a smile before giving me a hearty salute. "Yessir!"

The wistfulness in her expression had completely vanished. Things were looking up, but if she continued on this path, it meant she would have to confront her mother one day. That day might be soon if we weren't careful. I'd have to prepare myself for that too. For now, though, we were probably good to finish up things with the drama club.

"It's not long till the Fair, Iroha. We can't let up now, okay?"

"I know! Don't worry, you can count on your super-charismatic special advisor for this one!" Iroha pumped a confident fist in the air. "I'm gonna make sure they succeed no matter what! For the sake of my dreams!"

You know how when things are going too well, something's always gotta come in and ruin it? Maybe if I had my guard up, I would've noticed it sooner...

Time passed, and soon enough it was the day before the Fair. The school day was over, and the drama club, the 05th Floor Alliance, and its helpers were gathered in the gymnasium for a last-minute rehearsal. I thought back to when we first started and how awful everything was. But now...

"Y'know, I think tomorrow's gonna go pretty well for them," Ozu said.

"Least it's not gonna be a public embarrassment anymore. Taught 'em all I could, so it's up to them now," Otoi-san said.

"D-Don't smile yet... C'mon, Sumire... Don't... laugh..." Sumire was huddled up and trembling in a corner, trying not to celebrate the club's success too early.

At this rate she's gonna jinx it!

Not that I didn't understand her relief. With the play as it was now, I could see them doing quite well in tomorrow's Fair. Sure, the script was still jam-packed with unicorns and rainbows, but it wasn't like we were hitting Broadway. Thanks to Ozu's program, the whole set looked nice and realistic. Otoi-san's direction meant the sound was pitch-perfect too.

And, the cherry on top:

“Well, wanna come with me?”

Midori’s acting. Despite my lack of acting knowledge, even I could see how far she had come from the soulless robot she used to be. The other actors had improved a whole lot too.

AKI: They’re doing really well.

Iroha: ikr? They did have a great teacher, after all ;)

Iroha: C’mom, tell me how great I am! You can buy me some treats and stuff if you want too!

AKI: Well now I won’t.

Iroha and I were messaging each other on LIME while she was watching the rehearsal from behind the stage. Otoi-san was the only one who knew she was involved with the Alliance. That was why she was hiding away.

Anyway, the point was that even Iroha was impressed with their performance. The club put on a good performance for their dress rehearsal.

“That’s the end of the rehearsal! Thank you very much for watching!”

With Midori’s words, every club member bowed, and then it was over. We all clapped for the smiling girls on the stage.

“I knew I was right in asking you for help, Ooboshi-kun. The club was beyond saving, and yet you somehow managed it,” Sumire said to me.

“I didn’t do anything. It’s thanks to everyone’s talents and efforts.”

“With a performance like this, I don’t think disbandment is on the cards anymore. Thank you, honestly.”

“You don’t need to. On the other hand, it might be nice to have a few more illustrations in on time.”

“O-Oh, I see. Yes, hopefully that will happen...”

“Plus, it’s too early to be celebrating. They’re much better than they were, but winning a prize tomorrow still isn’t a sure thing. So keep drawing, okay? And keep sticking to those deadlines.”

“You kind of lost me in the second half there.”

“It’s a little thing called karma. Work hard, do good, stick to deadlines, and you get rewarded.”

“Oh! That reminds me! We’ve got a prep meeting tonight for tomorrow’s Fair! Make sure you all show up, okay? But in the meantime I need to go and set up!”

Sumire threw out her excuse and raced away, apparently done talking

with me. Maybe I was stupid to get my hopes up over a single deadline. I cracked my knuckles, ready to put her in her place the next time we were alone.

“A prep meeting, huh?” Ozu said. “I know she said she wanted us there, but we’re not technically part of the club...”

“It’s kinda late to be worrying about that now.”

Besides, I expected this “meeting” would just be Midori throwing out a pep talk while we ate snacks and drank orange juice.

“True. Guess I’ll show up, then.”

“Go ahead. I’m gonna help clean up here.”

“What, you think I’d leave you to do that by yourself?”

“Hey, you made that program and everything, while I’ve just been watching this whole time. Let me take care of the small stuff, yeah?”

“Sellin’ yourself short as usual, I see.”

“C’mon, get outta here.” I pushed Ozu away to make sure he really went.

Otoi-san was already long gone. I could well imagine she decided cleaning up was none of her business and considered her job to be over.

“Ooboshi-kun, have you got a moment?” Midori called out as I made to fold up some chairs.

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to thank you.”

“Huh?”

“We only made it this far because you took the time to help us. When you first showed up I thought you were full of it, and didn’t want you anywhere near the club. But now, I’m glad you came. So—”

“Hold on.” I held up a hand. “The reason you came this far was because you all put in the work. Don’t forget that.”

“All right...”

“Plus, I barely did anything. The real heroes here were Sarge, Ozu, and Otoi-san. You should thank them instead of me. The Fair’s not till tomorrow anyway, so you should save it for when it’s over.”

“That makes sense... Okay! For now, I’ll focus on tomorrow!”

“Great! You can count on us to be there.”

Suddenly, Midori’s expression darkened. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about you and Su—Kageishi-sensei, though!”

“What?! We’ve been over that like a billion times!”

“I’m not just going to take your word for it! Sumire’s so cool and beautiful, I bet the men are all over her!”

“I guess that’s one way of looking at it.”

She finally called her Sumire outright. Not that that was what I took issue with.

“Also...”

“Also?”

“Also, nothing! Just keep your hands off my sister!” Midori thrust her finger into my face before beating a hasty retreat.

What was it with girls and running away from me lately?

“Guess being weird runs in the family after all,” I sighed.

“Y’know, Kageishi-san’s face was bright red when she ran away from you just now. Did you pull another one of those dense-protagonist moves on her?” Ozu said the moment I stepped foot in the drama club’s usual room.

“The heck are you talking about? She was probably just excited for this prep meeting.”

“Oh yeah, nothing more exciting than a meeting. Ah, that reminds me. How’ve things been with Iroha lately? Did you work out whatever problem you two had?”

“I did. Thanks for helping me out. Turns out it wasn’t really a big deal, though. She’s back to her old breaking-and-entering ways now too.”

“As long as my sister’s happy, I’m happy. What about Tsukinomori-san, then? She’s been pretty lively lately...”

“I-I already told you, that’s because she’s making sure people know we’re ‘dating.’ It’s just an act.”

It was technically true, right? Anyway, she was trying her best, and I wasn’t mean enough to tell Ozu that she was actually crushing on me.

“Oh, right. Welp, love triangles can be super entertaining, as long as you’re not in one.”

“Maybe you should focus on enjoying your own life.”

“Hey, at least lemme reap some of the benefits from being your one and only friend.”

I could only groan in response.

Just then, the door flung open and one of the club members rushed inside.

“Bad news!”

“What is it?”

“Yamada-chan collapsed on her way up here!”

“What?!” Sumire leaped to her feet.

Yamada, the girl who played the main heroine.

“I took her to the nurse’s office. Her temperature’s through the roof! The nurse called her parents to take her to the doctor’s, but...” The girl averted her gaze and bit her lip. “The nurse also said that she probably wouldn’t be able to take part in the Fair tomorrow.”

“Oh no!” Midori gasped, her face pale.

I remembered Yamada-san had looked a little out of it a few days back. I let her go back to practice because she wanted to, but afterward I spoke with Midori and we both agreed to keep a close eye on her, but she seemed totally fine after that. It was possible that the relief of knowing how far they’d come at rehearsal today overwhelmed her, and the exhaustion hit her all at once.

“I knew I should’ve kept a better eye on her. Dammit!” I balled my hands and clicked my tongue in frustration.

My one job was to lead and take care of everyone, and yet I let one of our main characters collapse the day before the performance!

“No, Ooboshi-kun... It’s my responsibility to make sure my members are in good shape. I already knew Yamada-chan has a tendency to push herself too far. This is all my fault!”

“We don’t need to argue about who’s to blame. We need to be focusing on the Fair right now,” Sumire reminded us sharply.

Her face was set into a steely frown as she put a thoughtful finger to her lips. Much as she messed around, there was no denying the fact that she cared for her students. Staying calm and coming up with solutions in a crisis was one way she showed it.

Not to mention that she was completely right. It didn’t matter whose fault it was at this point. I was worried about Yamada-san too, but she was already in good hands and being taken care of. Our priority right now had to be figuring out what we were going to do tomorrow—in other words, who was going to fill the role of the heroine.

“Is there anybody here who could take on Yamada-chan’s role?” Midori asked the rest of her anxious club members.

“Well... We’d only have one night to get ready...”

“I don’t think that’s enough time to learn all her lines...”

The club members shuffled nervously, their gazes fixed on the floor.

“Please, everyone... At this rate, we won’t even be able to participate tomorrow! And if we can’t do that, we’re certain to be disbanded! We’ve worked so hard too, and we’ll be throwing it all away! Doesn’t that frustrate you?” Midori’s voice grew hoarse.

She waited, but still nobody raised their hand. The other members shrunk back under her gaze. I knew what was going on; they’d come so far that they couldn’t do any more. If this was the same drama club I walked into all those weeks ago, I was sure someone would be volunteering themselves now. But things had changed.

They had seen just how well Midori and Yamada-san pulled off their roles after weeks of intense practice, and they knew that their own efforts couldn’t come anywhere close, especially after only a single night of preparation.

The silence was thick in the air, and soon Midori started to tremble.

“But...we’ve worked so hard... We can’t...”

It was then that a thought struck me. Back when I first noticed Yamada-san’s exhaustion, I reckoned there was a twenty-percent chance that things might end up like this. It wasn’t just Yamada-san either. There was always a risk that something might happen to one of the actors and leave them unable to perform in the actual Fair.

That was why I already had a plan. I couldn’t pull it off alone, though. This performance was make or break for the drama club, and for this plan to work, I needed somebody else to put everything on the line too.

“Sounds like you guys could do with some help!”

Just then, the door was flung open and somebody came into the classroom. They were wearing a newsboy hat pulled down over their face with a pair of sunglasses covering their eyes. You couldn’t get more suspicious.

Midori’s eyes widened. “Sarge?!”

“Iroha!” I said under my breath, too quietly for anyone to hear.

Are you sure about this?

Did this mean she was ready to risk it all? Sumire and Ozu were gaping at her. Though they couldn’t see her face, they must have realized who she was by her entrance. Otoi-san was simply blinking slowly, rolling a lollipop

around in her mouth.

Their surprise was understandable. Iroha's only place in the Alliance had been to join our parties, and even that was just because she was Ozu's sister. But there she was, as if she were the glue keeping everything from falling apart.

"I'll take the heroine's role!" Iroha declared, pulling off her hat and glasses and casting them aside.

Her silky hair flowed dramatically behind her, and while her smile was smug, I caught a hint of apprehension in her eyes.



“With me on your side, you’ll be looking at Oscars tomorrow, guys!”
Kohinata Iroha grinned.

“Wait... You’re Kohinata-san from the first year, aren’t you?”
“Isn’t she supposed to be really quiet and polite? Wait, does this mean Sarge was...Kohinata-san?!”

There was a ripple of confusion among the club members.

“Iroha?” Ozu gawked.

We had tried our hardest to keep Ozu from ever finding out Iroha’s secret. Not that we were worried he’d spill the beans, but he lived under the same roof as their mother. The risk of an accidental leak was just too great.

By revealing her identity here, Iroha was saying she was ready to risk her mom finding out about her activities. She went all-in and every chip was now on the table.

Iroha was the one who wanted it to be a secret from the Alliance in the first place. I was simply doing as she asked. Iroha didn’t have the confidence to face her mom and convince her of what she wanted for her future. She didn’t have the courage to fight. It was probably because of all the time Iroha spent working with the drama club that she realized she wanted to make a real move towards a future that she was so passionate about—and this was the first step.

If this is what you want, Iroha, then I’m with you all the way! No matter who tries to bar your path, I won’t stop until they accept your dreams.

“I already know all the lines from teaching you guys this whole time. Filling the heroine’s role’ll be no problem!”

“Are you sure?” Midori asked. “You’re not even in the drama club, so you shouldn’t feel obligated to help us.”

Iroha had already done so much for the club that Midori probably felt bad for her to take this on as well.

But Iroha just laughed. “Course I’m sure! I’m not about to let you guys throw all your efforts away!”

“You really are different from what I’ve heard... Though it’s sort of interesting to find out this is who Sarge really was the whole time.”

“Don’t worry that pretty little head of yours! This isn’t just about you guys either. I’ve got dreams ridin’ on this too!”

“Dreams?”

“You know it! Now, are you gonna lemme help or not?”

Iroha was in full pest mode. Except for once, it wasn't just me here. Behind that cheeky grin of hers burned the fires of determination.

Midori gave a confident, decisive nod. "Please, Kohinata-san... No, Sarge! Please help us out!"

"Got it! I'll put as much work into this performance as Yamada-chan put into all her practice!"

And that was how the drama club regained their shattered hopes when Iroha joined their side.

"I can't believe you guys have been keeping this a secret from me for so long."

"Sorry about that."

"No, I get it, what with our mom and all... Lemme guess. Iroha does work for the Alliance too, right?"

"She does, yeah. I guess there's no point hiding it anymore."

"Right. I always knew you were important to her, but I didn't realize how far it went."

"C'mon, you're overreacting."

"I'm not. You really are the only one for her, and you guys just proved it."

Chapter 11: My Friend's Little Sister and I Live in Our Own World

It's a common saying that the journey is more important than the destination, but I don't like that idea at all. As far as I'm concerned, that's just a lame excuse to hide your failures under. "We failed, but it's fine because we tried our best." What nonsense. The only way to get anywhere in society is with results.

"I tried my best" isn't a substitute for good grades and a degree when companies look for new hires.

I'm not saying that the process isn't important, I'm just saying that the results heavily outweigh everything you did to get there. Doesn't matter how far you got trying to swim across the ocean. If you drowned before you reached the shore, you were dead, end of.

Results. Results matter most. The drama club's predicament was a perfect example. They put in a ton of effort, but if they didn't win a prize, they would end up disbanded. A prize was the only outcome the school would accept.

The first round of the National Drama Fair was the regionals, followed by the prefecturals for the groups which succeeded. The school agreed that if the drama club could make it to the prefecturals, it would not be disbanded.

That was why they *were* going to make it through. I could guarantee it. Why? Because the people whose opinions I trusted more than anybody else's had told me their performance was good. The reason I trusted their opinions was because they were a thousand times more talented than I was. Our drama club was strong enough to beat out the competition.

Results were everything, and that was why I picked the helpers from the Alliance (and company) who would get the club those results. With Iroha stepping in as the heroine, the club was back on course to get the prize they needed.

As long as nothing else happened, that was...

The day of the performance was upon us. Groups of students in a myriad of uniforms were crowded around outside the arts center. Every drama club in our district was gathered together here, and it was a sight to behold. These young people had dedicated their teenage years to the pursuit of acting.

The sky was unfortunately overcast. It wasn't raining yet, but thunder was rumbling in the distance, ready to unleash the storm. According to the weather forecast, we were due for thunderstorms and heavy winds, but they were supposed to pass on fairly quickly, so the Fair went ahead as planned.

We were meeting at the arts center instead of at our school. The place was around six stations away from the stop closest to the school, and we thought it best to avoid taking the train such a long way with a large group.

I arrived early to help the drama club with their preparations. Ozu's program was set up and ready to go, and we had all the props and items we needed. At this point, there was nothing left for me to do.

"Thank you so much for your help, Ooboshi-san!"

"It was nothing. Do your best, guys."

I returned to the dressing room. Each club was given a room of their own, complete with a dresser for the actors to get ready for their performances. When I walked in, Iroha was having a staring contest with her reflection in the mirror. She turned around when she spotted me.

"How's my make-up, Senpai? Is it perfect? Do I look so cute that you just wanna sweep me off my feet?"

"I don't know about that, but show me."

I wasn't really in the mood for her antics, but I checked over her face as requested. It looked fine to me. In fact, I wouldn't be able to tell her apart from a real-live Hollywood actress. I didn't realize how good Iroha could look when she actually put the effort in. Although, I already knew she was pretty...but don't you dare tell her I said that.

With a combination of sophistication and a slightly magical touch, Iroha looked like a princess from a fairytale—which was just the look I had in mind for the heroine in the script. Despite how impressed I was, I simply said:

"Looks fine to me."

Iroha's eyes narrowed in a heartbeat. "Right, you lose. That was awful. Is

that reaaally how you're gonna compliment your crush, after she put in so much effort to look good for you? This is why you'll never get laid."

"I didn't realize it was a win-or-lose thing. Also, you're not my crush."

"Maybe, but the part about you never getting laid is still true! I mean, you're gettin' all flustered and turned on just for being here in a room with just the two of us, right? It's not *hard* to tell." Iroha cackled.

Speaking of "just the two of us," that was the only reason she was behaving like this now. She needed to be more careful too. If I weren't so thick-skinned, that "never getting laid" shtick might really start to hurt.

"You're wrong, Iroha."

"Huh?"

"I'm not a virgin."

"What?"

The eyeliner pencil in Iroha's hand slipped between her fingers, and I quickly caught it in midair.

"Hey, be careful!"

Iroha was staring at me wide-eyed, her lips quivering.

"Y-You're kidding...right?" she asked hoarsely. "I mean, you're so stubborn and got this weird efficiency obsession, and you're super dense, and, and... There's no way a loner like you..."

"I hope the competition judges today aren't as harsh as you are."

I didn't get where all these insults were coming from. Was it really that hard to believe I wasn't a virgin?

"I'm not a virgin," I repeated, "if you're using the entomological definition of a female insect that produces eggs without being fertilized."

"The *hell*?! What kind of stupid nerd joke is that?! Ugh! It's too early for this shit! Forget what I said before, you and your stupid *insect* jokes are the reason you're never getting laid, you dumbass virgin!"

"I told you, I'm not a virgin. Or are you maybe referring to virgin olive oil this time? Well, sorry to disappoint, but I don't go great with salad, and I'm not from the Mediterranean either."

"The joke wasn't funny before and now you're killing it even more! I'm gonna call you a virgin as many times as it takes for you to break! I'll keep count too! Virgin, virgin, virgin,
virginvirginvirginvirginvirginvirginvirginvirginvirgin..."

"Oh my God! Shut up or I'm gonna make sure you can never say the word

‘virgin’ again, virgin!”

“Whoa! Only twelve times! That’s a record!”

At this rate, I was going to end up with a headache before lunchtime. In the first place, I was surprised she didn’t seem nervous in the least. She must have nerves of steel, but then I kind of knew that already.

“Hey, Iroha?”

“What is it, Virgin-senpai? Uh, I mean...just Senpai.”

I controlled the split-second urge to punch her in the face. What I was about to ask her was serious, after all.

“Are you really sure about this?”

The shit-eating grin on her face disappeared in an instant. “I’m sure.”

“And you’re okay with Ozu knowing about you now?”

After Iroha revealed herself yesterday, we explained everything to Ozu and Sumire. Only problem was, Ozu didn’t give much of a reaction, which I guess was fair enough. It probably gave him a lot to think about.

“I’m glad he knows.”

But if Iroha was happy with her decision, that was all that mattered.

“I knew I’d have to tell him eventually, and...” Iroha broke into a smile. “I know I can count on you to smooth things over.”

I couldn’t help but smile in the face of her outspoken trust. “You sure can. I need you two to be able to keep working with me, after all. Remember, I’m gonna work every last Alliance member down to the bone.”

“Careful, or we’re gonna have to report you.”

“Try it. As long as you guys all love what you do, I’m not worried about that kinda thing at all.” I grinned at her.

Just then, there was a commotion outside the door.

“Huh? Is that someone coming to arrest you for breaching labor laws?”

“Very funny. I just hope it’s nothing bad...”

I stepped out of the room to check, not hopeful in the least.

I ran into Sumire right outside the dressing room. She wore the same cool expression she always did in teacher mode, and there was a dark aura rolling off her. If I didn’t know her as well as I did, I might not have recognized it as an aura of total despair. She did a good job at hiding it with that face of hers,

though.

“Midori said she’s not gonna make it,” Sumire said immediately.

“She’s what?” I frowned.

Sumire started to explain. Midori had left the house with plenty of time to make it to the arts center. On the way, though, she ran into a series of pregnant women who were going into labor and they had asked her to call an ambulance for them.

She would have made it even then, if not for lightning striking one of the buildings near the train line and setting it on fire, causing delays. The roads were so packed that she couldn’t even hail a taxi. As the rain started to fall in sheets and the wind blew stronger than ever, she started running as fast as she could, but by now, there was no way she would make it for the start of the Fair.

Everything that could have gone wrong did. Those kinds of things—the pregnant women, the rain storm, the lightning strikes—were all things that you saw time and time again in fiction. But this was real life, and for some reason, they were all targeting the same girl.

“I’m sorry, Sumire... I’m sorry, everyone.”

Sumire showed me the text from her sister. Even those few words were enough to tell me how disappointed Midori was. She practiced so hard for so long, and she improved so much...

She took this more seriously than anybody else, and there was no way she would ever be late to the actual performance. Even so, a series of stupidly rare coincidences now stood in her way. Bad luck. There was nothing worse than bad luck.

“Midori-san won’t make it?” one of the club members asked.

“But the Fair’s about to start! What do we do?”

“What *can* we do? We can’t perform without Midori-san! None of us know the hero’s lines!”

Iroha could probably recite them by heart, which would be great if she wasn’t already filling in for the heroine. The same heavy despair as yesterday was descending on the drama club once more. Even the 05th Floor Alliance members (and company) were frowning.

“No... I can’t lose...the drama club... I...I hate...tennis...” Sumire’s eyes were stretched open wide as she muttered madly under her breath, somehow still keeping her expression cool. Suddenly, a serious glint appeared in those

eyes. “Midori-chan... You worked so hard... This is all so unfair!”

I couldn’t blame her for being so distraught. This was her sister we were talking about. Not only that, but as a Kageishi, Sumire was forced to be a teacher. If her sister was going to suffer the same fate, this might be the last chance she ever got to perform. If the club was disbanded, she would never get to act again. For Sumire, that just made the whole thing even worse.

“This is bad.” Ozu had a grim expression.

“You got that right. Who would even imagine Kageishi-san of all people would ever be late to something?”

She was such a perfect student that the thought never even crossed my mind. I had no backup plan this time.

Think!

Could we send a car for her? That wouldn’t work. There was too much traffic out there. What about a bicycle? Nope. I left mine at home, and even if we borrowed somebody else’s, there was no guarantee she would make it here in time.

Otoi-san was leaning back against the wall, studying me thoughtfully as she loudly rolled a candy around in her mouth.

“Senpai...” Iroha was staring at me pleadingly.

Think. Think. Think!

We needed somebody who knew all of the lines by heart, and who could give a half-decent performance at least. I suddenly thought to see if we could get Makigai Namako-sensei to show up. He wrote it, so surely he was more familiar with the script than anybody. But that was a no-go. He lived too far away. Besides, he wasn’t even a student. Bringing in an outsider, especially one who was clearly too old to be in school, might get us disqualified.

Who else was left?

Wait...

“Sensei, can I borrow your phone to speak to Kageishi-san?” I asked.

“O-Okay.”

Despite her confusion, Sumire started pressing some numbers on her phone. When it started ringing, she passed it to me. The moment it connected, I heard sobs coming from the other end of the line.

“I’m sorry... After everybody worked so hard, I...I...I’ve ruined everything!”

“It’s me. Do you think you can make it?”

“Ooboshi-kun! I’m...I’m sorry. I...I don’t think... I don’t think I can...”

“All right.”

“I’m really sorry, Ooboshi-kun... You taught me so much, and now it’s all gone to waste!”

“Don’t beat yourself up. All of this was just bad luck.”

“No, it wasn’t... This always happens. I always just act on emotion without thinking anything through properly. It’s led me to failure more times than I can count. You understand, don’t you? I wish I could just be efficient like you. I mean, remember when you first showed up, and I got so mad that I didn’t want to accept your help?”

“Even though I knew right from the start that we needed you. I just couldn’t bring myself to say yes. Today too, I saw some people who needed help, and I put them ahead of myself. If only I pretended not to see them... If only I put myself first... That would have been the most efficient course of action, and now we wouldn’t be in this mess!” Midori started to sob.

“I think you’re mistaken.”

“What?”

“You’ve done nothing wrong. Not as a human being, and not from an efficiency standpoint either.”

“But, I—”

“When I talk about efficiency, I basically mean you should take the shortest route to making yourself happy. Think about how hard you’d regret leaving those pregnant mothers behind. It’s because you are who you are that the drama club has stuck with you all this time. Be proud of yourself. You *did* take the most efficient course of action according to how you’ve chosen to live your life.”

“Ooboshi-kun... But what about the rest of the club members who worked so hard? They came to practice every single time, even on weekends, and they carried on practicing at home. I’m supposed to be their leader! And I just threw all their hard work back in their faces! They should hate me for that!”

Results. Results were all that mattered. It didn’t matter how hard the club worked. Without their prize, it was useless.

“Listen. Are you willing to do anything to make this performance a success?”

“Of course I am!”

“Even if you can’t be here?”

“Yes! Even then!” Midori didn’t even hesitate. “I know I worked hard, and it hurts knowing I won’t be standing on that stage. But what’s worse is that everyone’s losing this opportunity because of me!”

“That’s just what I wanted to hear. I’ve got a plan.”

“A plan?”

I cleared my throat and spoke clearly so that everyone—Midori, the drama club, and the 05th Floor Alliance (and company)—would hear what I had to say.

“I’ll play the hero.”

“What?” The drama club members stared at me.

I expected that reaction. I must have sounded insane. But if we didn’t get the results we needed here, it would make the weeks of practice utterly meaningless. I hated wasting time more than anything else, and I wasn’t about to stand back and do nothing.

“But, Ooboshi-san,” one of the girls protested. “Do you even know the lines?”

“Every last one.”

I was the one who rewrote Makigai Namako-sensei’s scenario into a screenplay. I couldn’t compare to him when it came to creating a story out of nothing, but transforming a scenario into a collection of spoken lines was something I could manage. Makigai Namako-sensei had his real job to worry about, and so I took on the job of putting the script together.

“*But what about your acting ability?*” I hear you think (I have good ears).

“I’ve been watching you guys practice all this time. I was there when you read through the script. At the very least, I understand the basics, though I don’t expect my skills will be much more than average, so don’t get your hopes up.”

“Y’know, I never even thought of you taking the hero’s role, but it might actually suit you!”

“Yup. Average means not sucking, at least.”

“As the club’s advisor, you have my support, Ooboshi Akiteru-kun!”

It sounded like Ozu, Otoi-san, and Sumire were all rooting for me. I turned to Iroha, who had a confident grin on her face.

“I know you can do this, Senpai! As this club’s super-special advisor, I can guarantee you’ll do a good job!”

I had Iroha’s support too.

The club members looked at each other and nodded. It was clear by now how much they trusted their mentors.

“The rest of the club are in agreement. What about you?” I asked Midori down the phone.

As club leader, she had the final say—and I wanted her to know that I respected that.

“Please, Ooboshi-kun! Help us win a prize!”

The opening address was over, and now the other schools were starting to perform. It wouldn’t be long before we were due to take the stage.

“How’s the size, Senpai?”

We only had one costume for the hero and of course, it was made to fit Midori.

“I won’t lie; it’s kinda tight around the arms and shoulders.”

I managed to slip my arms through carefully, but I was worried I was going to tear through the fabric at any time. *If only I didn’t work out so much!*

“How about the chest?”

“It’s...not too bad. I guess Midori bound her chest when she was wearing it.”

“Ooh, d’ya think so? I mean, you got pretty big tiddies for a guy, you know.”

“The term you’re looking for is ‘pecs.’”

Well, I was able to get into the costume. The tiny wireless microphone on the chest area was also working perfectly. I replayed the entire script in my head, and was satisfied to find I could remember from start to finish. So far, at least, we were set to go.

“Damn, you really do look different when you’re all made up,” Iroha said, peering closely at my face.

As I was taking on the leading role, it was only natural that I was subjected to some make-up. The other club members did it for me and it was like everything about my face had changed. It was almost scary, in a way.

“It looks pretty good, actually!”

“You sure?”

“Of course! Hey, maybe you should wear make-up every day from now

on!"

"No thanks. Too much of a time sink."

"Huh? No it's not! Girls do it every single morning, y'know! Though I guess your skin is so lovely and clear anyway, you don't really need it."

"You're up next! Please get ready!" one of the organizers told us.

It was our turn next. The other club members exchanged nervous glances. We were already waiting behind the curtain. I peered through the gap between them. The audience was packed with people. The snooty faces in the front row with their arms folded were probably the judges. Seeing all these people, it suddenly hit me hard that we were about to perform. I swallowed nervously.

"You don't gotta worry about a thing, Senpai!" Iroha said with a mischievous smile. "I won't let our adorable little hero flail! If you mess up, I'll pick up the slack!"

I could already feel myself relaxing.

"Hey, I'm the hero. I'm the one who's supposed to be looking out for you, even if you're not adorable in the least."

With that, we took our positions.

The curtains began to open.

A buzzer sounded. I watched the curtains rise from a seat in the corner. The entire place went dark, and the chattering audience fell still and silent. Next, there was the sound of rustling leaves and forest trees. Those sounds grew gradually louder along with the beating of my heart.

This was the story I wrote, and now it was being performed on stage. All the scenarios I wrote for the Alliance's game were performed by a mysterious group of voice actors, but this was the first time anything was being performed in front of my eyes. Not only that, but this scenario was one I wrote in direct response to my feelings towards Aki. This scenario came straight from my heart. I was prouder of it than anything else I'd ever written.

I heard that Iroha-chan had to take over the heroine's role at the last minute. I thought back to when she switched into delinquent mode to get rid of those bullies at the mall. If that was anything to go by, she could pull this off easily.

I was both impressed and a little curious. Iroha-chan was an ordinary high school girl and, as far as I knew, she never had any acting lessons—yet her performance was nothing short of amazing. It made me realize that I didn't actually know anything about her, apart from the fact that she had a habit of getting on Aki's nerves. Who exactly was she?

“This is the story of a meeting. A heart-wrenching meeting of two lovers who are destined to be torn apart by the cruelty of fate. Oh, if only their days of bliss could last forever!” a girl cried out, heartbreak reverberating in every syllable.

That's Iroha-chan, isn't it?

Wow. If I hadn't already known she'd be in it, I probably wouldn't have recognized her voice. I couldn't even bring myself to believe this was a performance. She had the heroine's voice down perfectly.

The stage lit up ever so slightly. A cityscape appeared on the backdrop, causing the audience to gasp. It was obviously nothing more than a CG image projection, but it almost looked *too* realistic.

A single girl walked across the city—I mean, the stage. It was Iroha.

“Wow...” I gasped. She was so pretty, I couldn't help but let my voice out. *Hopefully no one heard me...*

Iroha-chan was wearing a pure-white dress that was at odds with the city backdrop. She looked like a fairytale princess, naive and innocent, but weak. A girl who needed hand-holding to get anywhere.

The heroine was the exact opposite of Iroha. Of course she was; she was modeled after me. But Iroha took on that role so well, you would think she was the main character of my story all along.

“Dammit! I'm late!”

“Huh?”

I accidentally let my voice out again. This time though, I really couldn't help it. I mean...

What is Aki doing up there?

I thought the drama club president was supposed to be playing the hero. That's what I heard, at least. Did something happen to her? Something that meant Aki needed to take over?

Thinking about it, though, I didn't mind *too* much. I could already feel my cheeks going red. Everything I had went into this story. All the hero's lines were written with my beloved Aki in mind, and in his voice. Right now, he

was turning that idealistic image I had of him into reality. Even if his partner was Iroha-chan instead of me.

The play went better than I expected. The hero and heroine bumped into each other in the middle of the city. They then got closer step by step, at first teasing each other and getting into arguments, but eventually their bond became something irreplaceable. It was cliché and overly sappy, but that was just the kind of thing high school girls loved. The story I wrote was adapted by somebody else, and now I was watching it from a more objective perspective. That was when I noticed something.

Isn't this...really cringey?

It was like the characters' heads were filled with fluff. Too many of the lines were coated with extra thick layers of syrup. No matter how much the actors, the stage directors, and the sound directors worked to cover it up, the script was total trash.

Did I really write this? Now that I thought about it, Aki rejected it when I first showed him, didn't he? I was thinking it might be cringey now because it was adapted for stage, but...what if it was my scenario that was bad in the first place?

*AAAAAAAAAAAAA
AAAAAHHHHH!*

My face was burning. This embarrassment was unbearable!

Why did I write this?! Why?! I can't believe I sent it to Aki! And he read it!

If I wasn't in public, I would've launched myself onto the floor and curled up into a ball of cringe by now.

Ugh. I guess I should leave the freaking out for later.

I turned my focus back to the play. Let's disregard the script for a moment. The play was impressive on many levels, but the acting was especially good. Aki was always talking about how average he was, and right now, he was playing the most average of average protagonists perfectly.

Objectively speaking, I had no complaints. The way he spoke with Iroha-chan made it seem like I was witnessing a real conversation and not a play.

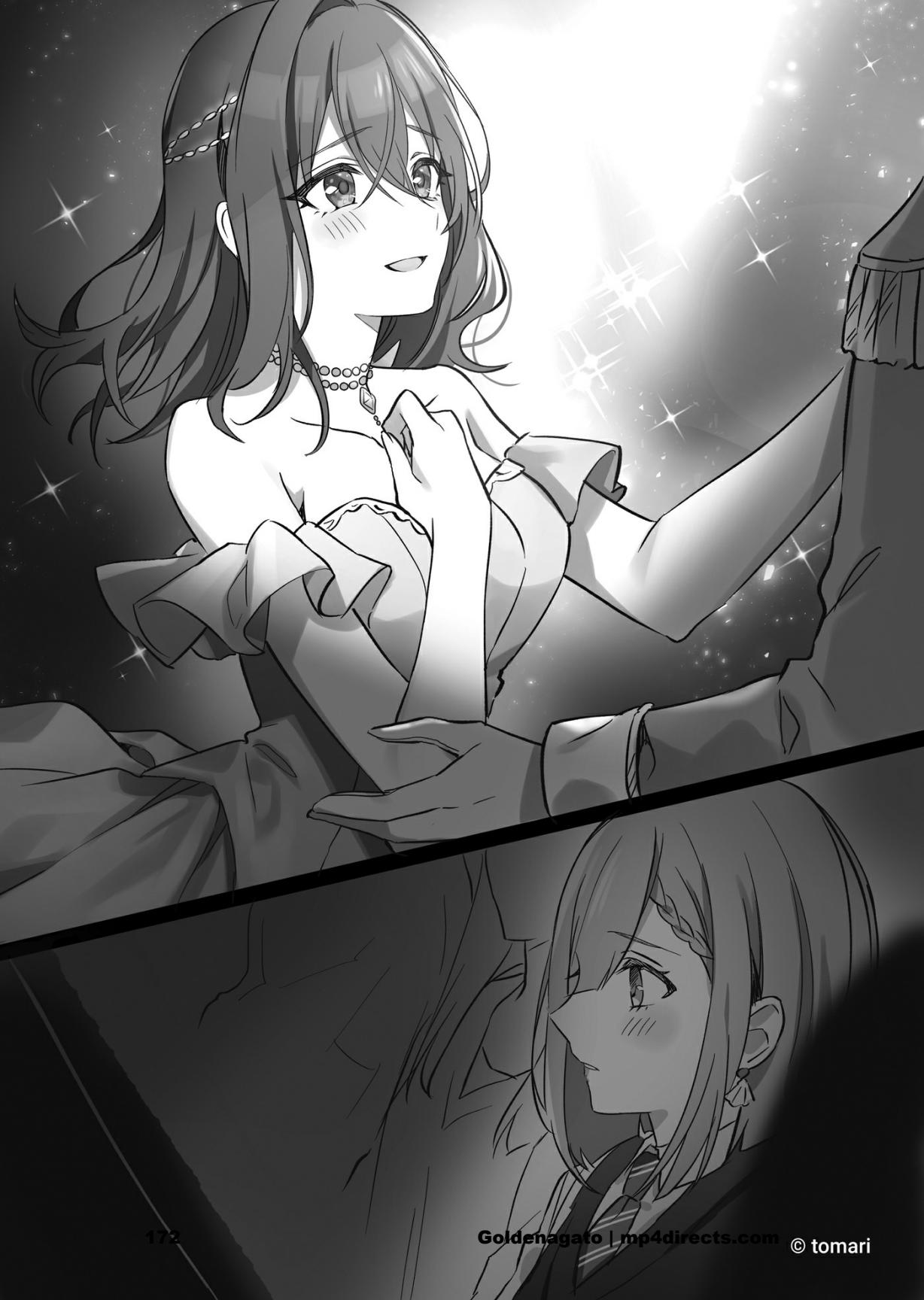
What was it about those two? Their chemistry was more than just them being in-character or acting well. It was like they were born to act in this play and portray these characters. Like they were partners who had practiced together for years.

“Thank you for finding the real me. Thank you for freeing me from the darkness of my cage.”

I gasped.

That look on Iroha-chan’s face when she delivered that line. Any girl would know it. Or maybe I just recognized it because I was in love with him too. I always believed Aki and Iroha-chan when they told me there was nothing between them. I was just overthinking things. As usual. Right?

“Please, stay with me forever. It’s because you’re always by my side that I can be myself.” Iroha’s voice was thick with tears as she looked Aki right in the eye. “Hold on to me, so that I don’t lose sight of my heart again...Senpai.”



Were these Iroha-chan's acting skills? Or was it real?

Iroha-chan? Is that the heroine speaking? Or you?

I felt my chest tighten. Iroha-chan was the first friend I made when I transferred schools. Aki was the man I loved so much that I declared I wouldn't give up on him, even though he turned me down. I didn't know how he felt. Even during the play, I couldn't catch a glimpse of how he really felt about Iroha-chan.

The happiness in Iroha-chan's tone right now was a dead giveaway for how she felt. She was filled with bliss at the thought of having a happily-ever-after with Aki. She was my friend. If she was happy, I was happy. At the same time, the thought that Aki was the source of that happiness almost made me feel sick.

Am I supposed to be happy for her...or sad for myself?

The play came to an end. Iroha-chan and Aki held hands and gave a bow to a standing ovation. The cheers and the applause were clamorous, but I couldn't hear them.

OZ: They were great out there, right? I never knew Iroha was so talented!

Otoi: Yeah, it was okay.

OZ: You knew about her acting skills, right? You sure did a good job of keeping your mouth shut.

Otoi: You mad?

OZ: No, I'm grateful. You brought Aki and Iroha closer together.

Otoi: k.

OZ: You could see on Iroha's face how much she likes him. Well, I could, but I bet you Aki didn't notice.

Otoi: Aki wouldn't notice if she ran him over in a truck.

OZ: Maybe we should lock them in a room and tell them they're not allowed out till they kiss.

Otoi: lol

OZ: Might be hard in real life. But maybe I could develop some kind of program...

Epilogue 1: Meeting with the CEO

Life is like a video game. Boss fights and difficult dungeon crawls often come with rewards. Something good happens. Even if life doesn't always go as well as a video game, hard work is often rewarded with something good. So when Tsukinomori-san invited me to dinner with him, I expected some good news about the 05th Floor Alliance's future.

Our performance in the first round of the National Drama Fair had come and gone, and it was now evening. The drama club and Alliance members had looked forward to throwing an after-party, but I excused myself the moment the CEO contacted me. Iroha told me I was being a wet blanket (in stronger terms), but what could I do? You could invite me to the best party in the world, but if the CEO of Honeyplace Works says he wants to talk to me, I'm there.

I ran for the restaurant, knowing now exactly how my dad felt when he had to put work above family. We'd agreed to meet at a classy hot-plate place that specialized in fine meats.

"There should be a booking under Tsukinomori from Honeyplace Works," I said when I arrived.

"Ah, yes. There's already somebody here for that booking. Please follow me." The greeter walked me through the restaurant, which was themed after a Japanese garden. There were bamboo ornaments, hanging lanterns, and those water fountains with the donking bamboo.

"This way, sir."

"Thank you."

The attendant slid open a thin door for me and I stepped into a private room.

"Hey there, Akiteru-kun! Sorry for the short notice!"

There he was: the handsome middle-aged man who held all my hopes and dreams in his hands. One of those hands was giving me a friendly wave. He had a classy mustache, and though his outfit looked simple to start with, anybody in the know would recognize just how much that suit of his cost.

This was Tsukinomori Makoto-san: my uncle, and Mashiro's dad. He was also one of Japan's foremost CEOs, the president of Honeyplace Works, a huge entertainment enterprise. I looked as humble as I could as I took a seat opposite him.

"Not at all. Us high schoolers have plenty of time on our hands. So what did you want to speak to me about?"

"Nothing in particular, my boy, just wondering how things were going with Mashiro."

"Wh-Which 'things' do-do-do you mean?"

Dammit!

He caught me totally off guard and I gave my response with all the grace of a reversing dump truck without any tires on. I mean, you'd be the same, right? I thought I sorted out the whole Mashiro situation, not to mention the whole drama club thing literally today, so my guard was at an all-time low when he sprung that complicated topic on me.

"I'm talking about your fake relationship, of course! You're not about to tell me you guys are going at it for real, are you?"

"O-Of course not! Do I look like the kind of guy who's got time to waste on love?"

"Maybe not, but everyone has desires. If Mashiro jumped at you, you wouldn't be able to resist, right?"

"I-I totally would!"

"What?! Are you saying my daughter has no sex appeal?!"

"Well, what do you want me to say?!"

If he was going to get this wound up about it, I might as well spill everything.

"Right, truth is, Mashiro fell in love with me and then a load of stuff happened and I ended up taking her out to dinner at a high-class restaurant so I could reject her. But then she said she wasn't going to give up and now she's trying to make me fall for her at every turn and—"

Well, it'd probably be difficult to finish that story with my uncle's hands on my throat.

Okay, calm down. Remember, you're here to kiss this guy's ass...

"Well, it's going fine right now. Mashiro's even made herself a friend, and she looks like she's enjoying every day."

"Thought so. Sometimes she'll call me or send me a text, so I know how

happy she is. Haven't heard her that happy in a while, to be honest. I'm really glad now that she transferred and...I'm grateful to you, Akiteru-kun."

"Oh, no! I haven't done anything, really."

"Come now, no need to be modest! I respect your work ethic, plus all the work you do with your Alliance buddies. Every day you guys give me more and more reason to support you, which makes things a whole lot easier on my end. I even saw what you did at the Fair!"

"You know about that?"

I never mentioned the drama club to him at all. It had nothing to do with game development, so I didn't think it was necessary to tell him about it.

"Mashiro told me. Said you got up on stage yourself in the end. I'm sure you were great!"

"That was only because our main actor got held up and couldn't make it, so I had to step in. It was nothing, really."

"Filling in for other people is not 'nothing,' though I guess you won't believe me when I say that. Y'know, taking compliments is also a skill!"

"Then it's a skill I've yet to learn."

"Mashiro sent me some snaps too. You look pretty good in them! Wanna see?"

"No, thank you! I can't stand that sort of thing," I said quickly, seeing the grin on Tsukinomori-san's face as he tried to show me his phone.

I didn't even know Mashiro was taking pictures. She must've put the shutter sound on silent. Still, didn't she know it was rude to snap photos during a performance? If not, I'd have to tell her.

"So then...you called me here just to poke fun at me for going on stage?" I frowned. Hopefully that didn't come out too grumpy.

Tsukinomori-san's grin widened. "Of course not! I actually have someone I wanna introduce you to!"

"Huh?"

"Yep. Listen, you're a great director—or should I say, manager? I know you've got a great future ahead of you."

"You're...exaggerating."

"Of course, that doesn't mean I'm gonna put you on a triple-A project right outta high school. That'll depend on your choices and how much work you put in. But, if you take this time to deepen your connections with the right people, learn what makes 'em tick, I'm sure you'll be standing

shoulder-to-shoulder with us in no time.”

“I’ll look forward to it. So, who do you want to introduce me to?”

“The CEO of Tenchido, of course. You’ve heard of ‘em, right?”

“Tenchido?!” My voice cracked.

Tenchido was a world-famous games company headquartered in Kyoto. They dominated a huge share of the market with a wide catalog of games, popular among all ages. Their I.P.s were also well-loved worldwide, and they were a giant both in the hardware and the software market. Tenchido in the west of Japan, and Honeyplace Works in the east... That’s what many gamers saw as the two giant halves of Japan’s entertainment industry.

“I’ve heard of them. Tenchido was slow on the uptake when smartphones came into wider use, and Honeyplace Works was way ahead for a while, but then the new CEO made a ton of sweeping changes and they got back in the game.”

The CEO was famous. Famous for never once accepting an interview, and never once being seen in public. Famous for being totally unknown. Some said the CEO didn’t actually exist, and was a character made up by a group of overseas consultants. Others said Tenchido called down the spirit of a deceased Silicon Valley hero, one that pioneered the spread of smartphones.

Those were some of the saner theories circulating too.

“And we’re meeting here?”

“Yup. Oh, speak of the devil.”

I gasped, hearing footsteps coming from the other side of the sliding door. I instantly sat up a few degrees straighter. This CEO was in the same league as Tsukinomori-san; to say I was nervous was an understatement. Messing up in front of Tsukinomori-san was fine, since he was my uncle. But this CEO was a whole different ballpark. Forget just *kissing asses* here, I’d *make out* with it if I had to!

“Sorry to keep you waiting! Oh, how embarrassing! Tee hee! After you set up this very special meeting with such a young, sweetheart director.”

“Huh?” I stiffened with shock as I saw the head of Tenchido come into view.

She stared at my face, her huge eyes blinking with curiosity. She looked just as surprised to see me as I was her.

“This is Amachi Otoha-san, head of Tenchido. Amachi-san, this is my nephew, Ooboshi Akiteru-kun, and...you both look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Oh, goodness me! Oh, goodness, goodness me! Oh my!”

“Hm? Amachi-san? Do you maybe...wait, let's not go there. I understand my nephew is just as charming as me, even if he might not be aware of it yet, but you are a married woman, and he's a high school student. Let's leave it right there, okay?”

Way to make things even more awkward.

As if he would know, anyway. I just... Why was *she* here?!

“Now, now, Tsukinomori-san! You know that sexual harassment is a big no-no!” Amachi-san raised a finger and wagged it at Tsukinomori-san like he was a naughty toddler.

The word “goddess” fit her like a glove. Her golden hair was perfectly braided and tied into a single plait that fell over her chest. She was wearing a woolen jacket paired with a long skirt. She looked more the part of a housewife going out on the weekend than the brilliant CEO of a multi-billion yen company.

“Oh, but this *is* a surprise. I was so looking forward to meeting somebody new, and then it turns out he's my next-door neighbor!”

“I didn't expect to see you here either, Kohinata-san.”

The CEO of Tenchido, Amachi Otoha. In other words, the woman I often met around my apartment block: Ozu and Iroha's mother.

“I never expected you two would know each other! Small world, eh?”

“It certainly is! Tee hee!”

To any waitress walking in, we probably looked like we were having a peaceful meal together. Tsukinomori-san and Amachi-san were heartily dipping their Hida beef into the boiling broth, talking and laughing together like old friends. I, meanwhile, was sitting there in a cold sweat.

My brain was completely frazzled. Iroha took a huge risk when she stepped on stage today. And now, I was having dinner with her mom. It couldn't be coincidence, right? I couldn't shake the feeling that her mom caught wind of it somewhere and was here to investigate. The worry made the beef on my plate taste like a clump of grease.

“What's the matter, Akiteru-kun? You can eat as much as you want! Meat's important to get the ol' testosterone flowing!”

“Oh, um. Thank you...”

“Please don’t mind my nephew. He’s not used to these kinds of meetings yet. Don’t hold it against him.”

“Tee hee! Don’t worry, it’s cute! Shall I feed you, sweetie?”

“U-Um, no, thank you...”

I wanted to tell her not to treat me like a kid, but I held my tongue. I never knew she could be so coddling. Thinking back, Iroha did mention she hated being treated like a kid, precisely because her mom used to smother her. I suddenly understood where she was coming from.

“No need to be shy! Ozuma and Iroha tell me you’re always doing so much for them! This is the least I can do!”

“Uh, um... Please just put it here...”

I suppressed the urge to bite her fingers, took a small bowl, and held it out to her as she offered me the thin strip of meat. Kohinata-san pouted as she dropped the meat into my bowl of ponzu.

“Still, I never imagined the head of the 05th Floor Alliance would be such a cutie! Life is full of surprises, don’t you think?”

“Wh-What? You know... You know about the Alliance?”

“Everybody knows! In my line of work, at least!”

This was getting worse by the second. This was the same mother who took everything entertainment and show business-related away from Iroha and Ozu’s lives. To think she was one of the biggest names in the very industry she sheltered them from... It was almost funny, except it wasn’t.

We’d been absolutely sure their mother’d never find out about the Alliance till we’d be making headlines on the news. Since she hated stuff like that so much, there was just no way she’d find out about some small indie developer for a mobile game.

But just now, Iroha’s mother had come in like a wrecking ball and smashed that idea to bits.

Hang on, though. Iroha and Ozu never mentioned their mom was Tenchido’s president. Were they keeping it a secret? Somehow, I didn’t think so; keeping it under wraps wouldn’t make any sense.

“I didn’t know you worked at Tenchido...and my uncle introduced you as Amachi-san, rather than Kohinata-san, right?”

“I work under my maiden name, sweetheart! I was already well known under the name ‘Amachi,’ so it didn’t make any sense to change it. Forcing

everyone around me to memorize a whole new surname seemed awfully inefficient!"

"I can well understand that."

"I'm not surprised it's news to you either! I haven't told either of my children!"

"You...haven't told them?"

"That's right! I wouldn't want to bring my boring, stuffy old job home with me. That's why I'm living all the way out here in Kanto while the HQ is in Kyoto! Moving is such a hassle anyway! At home, I just wanna be a normal mommy. I don't do media appearances, and never told my kids my maiden name, so they shouldn't be finding out about me anytime soon!"

There was a peculiar light in Amachi-san's eyes as she spoke, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. I got the sense that it had something to do with why her children were shielded from the entertainment industry, though. I decided to press her a little.

"You think your job is 'boring' and 'stuffy'?"

"Absolutely. We just fling products onto the market and make exactly as much as we've projected. It never ends, and it's awfully dull."

"Now that's what I call a shrewd businesswoman! Of course, if you weren't, you wouldn't have been able to save that sinking ship of a company. You pushed through reforms, and used tricks those old industry dogs'd never be able to learn."

"Tee hee! And don't the creators hate me for it!"

Right! This was Iroha and Ozu's mom we were talking about. Seeing the calm smile on her face, I finally understood. She hated the entertainment industry and the performing arts. In return, she was hated by the entire industry—but it didn't bother her in the slightest, because she had no love for her work.

"Amachi-san is a master at finding and eliminating inefficiencies. You get it, right, Akiteru-kun? There is a lot you can learn by listening to her."

I didn't know what to say. I knew my uncle probably meant well. I was sure he organized this meeting for the benefit of my future. A dinner with the two leading figures in Japanese entertainment from both sides of the country. Anybody who wanted to involve themselves in the industry would kill for an opportunity like this. I was nothing if not grateful to my uncle for handing it to me.

“I understand what you’re saying, but I don’t think Kohinata-san—I mean, Amachi-san—and I are all that similar deep down.”

“Oh?”

“I love everyone in the 05th Floor Alliance. I love the product they’ve worked so hard on from the bottom of my heart. I don’t just want it to sell; I want it to be a good product. If I was in it for the money, I’d go into law or medicine or something.”

“Goodness me!” Amachi-san’s eyes narrowed curiously and she gazed at my face. “Who exactly are these Alliance members you love so dearly, Ooboshi-kun? I’d love to know!”

It was like staring into the eyes of Medusa. An icy claw gripped my heart. There was suspicion in her gaze. I had no idea how much she already knew, but she definitely had at least an inkling of *something*. A cold sweat ran down my back. My heart pounded. Should I expose Ozu and Iroha here in some kind of declaration of war?

No, it was too soon. There’s a time and place for everything. Now was not that time, and here was not that place. We’d reveal everything only once we were sure Ozu and Iroha could escape their mother’s orbit (with or without my help).

But if I spilled the beans now, I’d be throwing away everything. Caution was the better part of valor. The cogs in my head whirred as I tried to come up with a way out.

“Ah! The pot’s boiling over! Sorry, folks! Looks like I put the heat on too high!” Tsukinomori-san quickly reached for the knob to turn the heat down. “Gaaaah! Ouch! L-Look, Amachi-san! My finger’s burning up!”

“Oh, goodness me, what a fright you gave me! Why don’t you douse it in water?”

“I’ve got it! Why don’t you take a swig of water and suck on my finger? I’m sure that’ll patch it right up!”

“Are you sure you burned yourself, because you seem awfully cheerful...”

“Aaaaaaaah! Not the teapot! Ouch! Aaaah! Y-You’re such a marvelous sadist, Amachi-san!”

I let out a silent sigh of relief. I knew there was nothing wrong with the temperature the burner was set at; my uncle just sensed I was in trouble and gave me an out. Even though he liked to mess around, he was good at looking after those under his care, just like a CEO should be.

He blew on his finger to cool it off before pausing suddenly and taking out his phone.

“Now, I know my nephew might be a little cheeky, but you can’t deny his talent. Take a look at this!”

“Oh? Let me see.”

“This is a photo of Akiteru-kun my daughter took. He was helping out the drama club and even got on stage to fill in for one of the actors today! You wouldn’t expect an ordinary high schooler to be involved in game development, would you? Well, how about being a talented actor on top of that? It’s like my nephew can do anything!”

Amachi-san frowned at the screen.

Shit!

My uncle clearly decided that showing her that photo was the best way to clear the awkward air, but he didn’t know anything about the situation in the Kohinata household. It was too late. That was the photo from before, right? Even though I never saw it, it likely showed Iroha and me performing together in the Fair.

I held my breath as I watched Amachi-san stare at the photo in silence. Her eyes widened steadily and her expression transformed. It was all over. Time for damage control. I mentally went over every question she could fire at me, and every defense in my arsenal. I just needed to pick the right one. Anything to—

“My, this has to be the most adorable photograph I’ve ever seen!” Amachi clutched the phone to her chest.

...

What?

Her unexpected reaction threw a wrench between the gears in my head.

“Oh, you like it that much? Of course, I’m very proud of my nephew, but even I don’t think it’s *that* good!”

“Oh, sweetie, of course I’m not talking about your nephew! I meant the girl who took the photo!”

“What? Mashiro?”

“That’s right! Did you even look at this, Tsukinomori-san?” Amachi-san turned the phone towards us.

The photo was a close-up of me (and only me) on the stage.

“She’s so taken with Ooboshi-kun that she completely ignored the other

actors! I bet she took a billion photos trying to get the best angle she could! This was obviously the best one! It's just so perfect! I bet she's so super-duper in love with him! It's just adorable!"

"I...I see."

All the tension in my body drained and I almost fell out of my chair. I worked myself up for nothing. But seriously, who takes a photo of just one actor?!

"Your girl took this photo, right, Tsukinomori-san? Hey, maybe your nephew's turning into a real ladies' man!"

"O-Oh, no!" I quickly cut in. "I mean, there's nothing between Mashiro and me."

"Getting flustered are we, sweetie? Look at that bright red face! Aah, my heart can barely take it!" Amachi-san squealed, poking at my face.

She was so damn...*annoying*!

"Anything you'd like to share with the class, Akiteru-kun?"

"No! There's nothing between us! Now put down that steak knife!"

"You can't fool me! Don't tell me...you and Mashiro are having the time of your lives sharing in the joy of springtime love! It's... That's... I'm... I'm so *jealous*! Aaaaaaaaaaaah!" Tsukinomori-san was biting his bottom lip so hard he was drawing blood.

"Tee hee! Oh, don't make a fuss, Tsukinomori-san! High school is the perfect time to mess around!" Amachi-san leaned over to give him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "High school is about living your best life, and that includes romance! I wish you and Mashiro-chan a very happy future together, Ooboshi-kun!"

She smiled sweetly at me.

"Uh, thanks. Though I mean it when I say there's nothing between us..." I mumbled, knowing if I insisted any harder she would take it as proof to the contrary.

I didn't have a good read on Amachi-san yet, but at least Iroha's acting was still a secret. I spent the rest of the evening hanging out with those drunken adults right up until closing time.

Epilogue 2: Celebration and Thanks

“To the success of the drama club!” Murasaki Shikibu-sensei called out.

“To the success of the drama club!” came the response.

Everyone clinked their glasses together. This Friday night, we were celebrating the drama club’s victory at the regional qualifiers for the National Fair a few days earlier. As usual, the festivities were held in my apartment, and the table was crammed full of drinks, takeout food, and a bunch of home-made dishes including Iroha’s salmon carpaccio. The guest list was made up of the 05th Floor Alliance, Otoi-san, Mashiro, and of course the drama club and its leader.

As usual, Makigai Namako-sensei wasn’t there, but we had a voice call open with him and he was responding to stuff via text. Usually he was okay talking, but for some reason he insisted that he was only going to text this time around. Come to think of it, we were calling less and less nowadays. Maybe he got a girlfriend and she moved in with him or something. It’d explain the diabetic fluff he sent earlier.

“Are you sure it’s all right for me to be here, considering I didn’t take part in the actual fair?” Midori had asked timidly at the start of the party.

“Then I shouldn’t be here either,” Mashiro said. “There are so many people I don’t know...”

“You don’t need to worry about a thing, Midori-san! Just make yourself at home! Hey, who’s got the tomato juice?!” Iroha exclaimed, holding up her empty glass.

Both Mashiro’s sympathy and Iroha’s casual attitude helped Midori to settle in a little more, even if their methods were slightly unconventional.

“Heey, Ooboshi-kunnngh!”

“Huh?”

“We did it! Long live the drama cluuuub! I’m freeeeeeeee! Gimme me more scotch!”

“Listen, Sumi—Murasaki Shikibu-sensei! You’re being way too obnoxious! Anyway, here, have some more whiskey.”

“Heeey, Machiro-shan! You’re lookin’ kinda tense! Have some more to drink!”

“Leave me alone...”

“Ouch! My heeeeaaaart!”

“Who even is this drunkard?” Midori scoffed, glaring at Sumire.

That’s your sister, I wanted to say, but didn’t. This was basically our usual 05th Floor Alliance meeting with Otoi-san (who normally never showed up), Midori, and the drama club, but there was one thing I totally overlooked.

There was a super-high chance that Sumire’s secret identity was going to be found out. I only just thought of it when I was showing Midori and the others to my door. Alas, Sumire had already downed three bottles of beer and was completely smashed.

Luckily, she was so unlike the regular Sumire in both outfit and behavior, that not even her own sister recognized her.

“Y’know, I’ve been super stressed worrying ’bout the drama club this whole tiiime. It was hell ’cause I’m not even allowed to drink at worrrrk! Damn, I love drinking so damn damn much! More beer! C’mon!”

“Nope, we’re out. Now what, huh?”

“It’s wine time! Pass me summa that cheese too!”

“Looks like your crazy train is going off the rails. Ah, well. Here ya go!”

Iroha was right. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei cared more about having a good time than keeping up pretenses. Though I guess the drunker she got, the less teacher-like she became, so maybe it was a good thing.

“Who even is she?”

“Hey, she helped out the drama club too, even if you didn’t see her. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei here did the art for Ozu’s backdrop program.”

“O-Oh. I suppose I’ll have to thank—wait, no! Forget that for a second!” Midori shook her head, clearly struggling to detangle her priorities.

Even if Murasaki Shikibu-sensei had helped the drama club, right now her actions were morally reprehensible, and I doubted Midori’s overly serious nature would allow for that.

“There are minors here! And she’s just put her alcohol out all over the table! She even tried to get Tsukinomori-san to drink some of it! I’m not sure I’m happy having her here!”

“Come on, everyone here is sensible enough to refuse, no matter how hard

she pushes it.”

“I just, I’ve never met such an irresponsible adult! If Sumire were here, she’d give her a lecture to end all lectures!”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

If I told Midori the truth, I bet she’d go into shock. Naturally, I wasn’t keen on making that happen.

We had an excuse for why Kageishi-sensei wasn’t here, by the way. She simply wasn’t interested in “frivolous activities” like parties. I thought it was pretty clever myself. It was also a good way to let Murasaki Shikibu-sensei attend without making Kageishi-sensei’s absence seem suspect.

“Anyway, you put on a great show, Aki. I mean, I knew you could pull it off, but I never imagined your acting would be *that* good. You really can do anything, huh?”

“Quit it, Ozu. It was dumb luck! I only knew the script because I went over it a million times, and I only knew kinda how to act because I watched these guys practice every single day.”

“Watching someone act for ages doesn’t mean you’re naturally gonna know how to do it. You really *are* talented.”

We only just managed to get through to the prefecturals because I stepped in as the hero. If Midori was there like she was supposed to be, I was sure the drama club could do even better.

“Yo, Aki. Your modesty’s a pain in the ass, y’know?”

“Yeah. Tell him, Otoi-san.”

“I’m not trying to be annoying, just honest.”

“Hey, you were a total amateur, but your play won a prize, right? At least be a li’l proud of yourself, yeah? Everyone else did good too. Hey, this is delicious.” Otoi-san munched on one of the desserts we had.

She tended to lead with criticism, so to hear her praise me instead was kind of surprising.

“Without the Alliance’s help, we wouldn’t have made it. Thank you so much!” Midori spoke up.

“Thank you!” the club members next to her echoed.

“Also, I wanted to apologize both to you, Ooboshi-kun, and you, Kohinata-san. If it weren’t for me, you two wouldn’t have been forced to take the stage.”

“I loved it, to be honest. It was so much fun performing on a huge stage

like that!"

"Yeah, it was a good experience, so don't worry about it too much."

In the first place, it wasn't like I lent a hand with good intentions. It was purely to stop Sumire from being transferred to the girls' tennis club. She barely knew how to keep to a deadline in the first place, and I could only see that getting worse if she was involved in a club which actually expected her to do something. That wasn't the only benefit that came out of this whole ordeal, though.

"Thank you so much. I mean it! Now we'll go ahead and win the prefecturals by ourselves! We won't waste this chance you've given us. I want to push the club and take this as far as we can go!" Midori clenched her fists with determination, and the other club members cheered.

It was heartwarming. The Alliance members gave them an encouraging nod. I was confident they had a bright future ahead of them, and they would be able to get there all by themselves.

"Oh, that reminds me! I'd like to thank Makigai Namako-sensei for the script as well!" Midori said.

"Right. He's not actually here, but he *is* listening in." I opened up the Alliance group chat and turned the screen to Midori.

Makigai Namako: No need to thank me. It was a great play.

"No, we really *are* grateful! It was the first time I've ever read such wonderful, pure romance!" Midori's eyes sparkled with the luster of a child meeting her idol.

Maybe he *could* become her idol if he scrapped his usual genres and stuck to fluffy romance. Though I really hoped he wouldn't.

Makigai Namako: Really? The acting was great, but honestly, I wasn't sure about the script after all that. I wish I could go back and change it...

This was what I meant when I said there were other benefits.

"Thank you so much for coming to see it, Makigai Namako-sensei!"

Makigai Namako: I'm glad I did. Everyone's acting was great. Yes, the acting was good.

I asked Makigai Namako-sensei to show up and watch his story in action. It was all part of my plan to shake some sense into him and bring back the writer we all knew and loved. It was human nature to be overly critical or proud of something you created. Either it was the best thing in the world, or it was total trash and should be burned immediately.

The best reality check was to take someone's work and show it to them from a different perspective. Some people would then double down and say it was only bad because someone else was performing or reading it. Fortunately, Makigai Namako-sensei was one of the sensible ones. He sent me a message on LIME after the play.

Makigai Namako: Sorry. I'm sorry for sending you such a cringey pile of trash. I'll rewrite the Koyagi scenario so that it's something that actually fits the game.

I couldn't have asked for a better outcome. The future of *Koyagi: When They Cry* was saved. It was a shame he didn't stick around to meet us after the play, though I guess he was busy with the scenario rewrites as well as his actual writing job. Not that it was in his nature to be overly social.

For a while now, Makigai Namako-sensei had been speaking to the drama club over LIME.

"C'mon, Mashiro-senpai, you've been on your phone for ages! Whaddya doin'? Writing a post? Hey, gimme your social media names!" Iroha whined.

Mashiro, who was in the corner on her phone, quickly held it to her chest as Iroha approached.

"H-Hey! This is private!"

"Huh? I thought we were friends! Oh, hey, didya come see the play today? What did ya think?"

"You were there, weren't you? I saw you in the audience!" Midori said.

"Oh? Um, yeah, I was there. I mean, uh, sure, yeah, the play was good, I guess. The script was kinda... Yeah..." Mashiro mumbled.

"What?! You didn't like the script?" Midori gasped. "I thought it was great!"

"It was, uh, a bit over-the-top. It made me cringe a little..."

"You know Makigai Namako-sensei can hear you, right?"

Mashiro made a noncommittal squeak. She quickly spun back round into the corner and started typing on her phone again. I glanced at her phone and suddenly noticed the case was different than usual. Did she get a new one? I recognized the familiar LIME UI on the screen too, so I guess she was talking to someone.

Makigai Namako: No, Mashiro's right. I dunno what was wrong with me when I wrote that scenario. Just...please forget about it.

"Wait, does that mean we've got the old Makigai Namako-sensei back?"

“Looks like it. Funny, I still remember him going on about the power of love and stuff.”

Makigai Namako: Bring that up again, and you can kiss your scripts goodbye!

“Sorry! Please don’t leave us! We’ll stop talking about this now, okay, guys? Guys?!”

“Aha ha! You should look in the mirror, Senpai! Your face is hilarious! What, you got abandonment issues?”

And so, the party continued full of fun and laughter. We had a ton of close calls over the past few weeks, but I was glad that it ended in success for everyone involved.

I sighed as I took the empty plates to the kitchen. Ozu, Mashiro, Otoi-san, and Midori were sitting around the mahjong table having a blast. I didn’t like the looks in those seasoned players’ eyes when they convinced Midori, a total mahjong virgin, to join them.

It was already past nine in the evening, and Midori had said she wanted to go home a while ago (as any good student should). However, we convinced her to stay against her better judgment. I felt guilty leading her astray like that, but one night of fun couldn’t hurt her, right?

I was listening to their shouts and cries as they played while doing the dishes, when I felt something (or someone) slink up beside me.

“Howdy, Senpai! Nice party! I’m here to help you with the dishes!”

It was Iroha.

“Hey. How’s the mahjong looking?”

“Everyone’s out for blood, and Midori-san’s getting thrashed. She totally looked like she was gonna cry!”

“Weren’t they supposed to be teaching her how to play?”

“Midori-san had Murasaki Shikibu-sensei with her to help out, but she disappeared, like, halfway through. Said she had an important call and went out on the balcony to take it. I never saw her sober up so fast!”

“Huh.”

Who was calling her at this hour? Teachers must have it harder than I thought. I just hoped it wasn’t anything that would get in the way of her work

on *Koyagi*. Speaking of...

“Hey, Iroha. Has your mom said anything interesting to you lately?”

“Interesting? Not really. Why d’you ask?”

“I was worried she might’ve found out about your acting in the Fair.”

“Talk about paranoid! Mom doesn’t pay any attention to stuff like that, so I don’t think she’ll find out.”

“I sure hope not.”

I thought back to the look on Amachi Otoha’s face when we met the other day. CEOs could be crafty devils, and I was worried she might have started an “investigation” at their home. Fortunately, it looked like we were in the clear.

I was still trying to figure out whether I should tell Iroha and Ozu about their mom’s job. No doubt they’d just get unnecessarily anxious if I told them their mother was the head of one of Japan’s entertainment giants, and that I spoke with her. If they started to doubt their own paths in life, that might be enough to make them pull the brakes. For the Alliance, I couldn’t let that happen.

“Speaking of the play, you were great for a first-timer!” Iroha cut in as she scrubbed a plate. “Those pick-up lines you whispered in my ear really got my heart racing!”

“Shut up. Those cringey lines keep me up at night.”

“Really? You know you say that kinda stuff in real life too, right? I mean, not all the time, but...”

“You’re kidding.”

“Oh, and you’re super dense about it too, just like the hero! Remember when he’s all like, ‘Wait...WHAT?!’? That’s you!”

“Careful, or I’ll smash this plate over your head.”

It was like she was trying to get on my nerves even more than usual today.

“So, how’s it feel to lose your acting virginity?”

“Not bad. I dunno if I’d want to do it again, but it was fun to try something new.”

Iroha nodded enthusiastically. “I loved it. It was the first time I’ve ever acted properly on a stage.”

“Oh, right. I’m glad you had fun.”

“I sure did! Oh, and you know when Midori-san said she couldn’t make it? I wasn’t actually that scared.”

I put the plate in my hand down and looked at Iroha. She was concentrating on the dishes with a small smile on her face.

“I knew that you’d be able to make it work no matter what happened,” she explained quietly.

I swallowed. For a split second, it felt like my heart leaped at the sight of her tiny smile.

“I’ll help too.”

At that moment, Mashiro appeared out of nowhere and slipped between us.

“O-Oh, hey. Thanks, Mashiro.”

Her appearance brought me back to my senses. I was almost tripped up by something horrific. That was what it felt like, anyway. Thank God Mashiro showed up when she did.

“You done with mahjong?” I asked.

“One of the drama club girls took my place. Yamada, I think? I couldn’t let Iroha-chan have you to herself.” There was a small pout on Mashiro’s lips as she helped us wash up, standing close enough to me so that our shoulders were brushing.

“Oh, so it’s a competition now?”

Mashiro was standing on my left, between Iroha and me. Iroha darted around to my right side and began to lather up some dishes. Doing the dishes with these two crashing into me from either side wasn’t the easiest thing I’d ever done.

What was Mashiro doing? Was this her way of trying to get me to fall for her? Or was she jealous of me literally just talking to Iroha?

In that case, why was Iroha getting riled up too? Oh, right! Her competitive nature. Of course!

So there we were, the three of us squeezed together in front of the sink, when...

“Akiteru-sama...”

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei showed up. She staggered towards us through the living room, her long bangs hung over her face. She looked just like one of those ghosts from a horror movie.

“What’s up, Murasaki Shikibu-sen...SEI?!”

She started to fall and I darted forward just in time to catch her. Bubbles from the dish soap flew over my jersey, but I didn’t have time to worry about

that. Her body was trembling.

“What’s wrong? Alcohol poisoning? I can call an ambulance!”

“Please...” she breathed.

I paused. Given how much she drank, I wouldn’t be surprised if she’d actually poisoned herself, but the tone in her voice made me think she was acting this way for a different reason. She was definitely fully conscious too. There was...determination in her voice.

A chill ran down my spine. I’d never seen Sumire looking so vulnerable. None of her personas were.

“Please...” She was slipping further down my body towards the floor.

When she reached it, she kneeled down, and put her head on it. It was a pose I’d seen hundreds of times, but never with such heartfelt pleading behind it.

She opened her mouth and spoke. Even the sound of two separate plates dropping to the floor and smashing behind me sounded dull to my mind.

“Please...marry me.”



Afterword

Hello, readers. Thanks for your continued support. I am mikawaghost, the author whose trash somehow got picked up and published by GA Bunko. Thank you so much for your purchase of *My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me! Volume 2!*

I'm so grateful for the huge reception for volume 1. They even told me they would have to print more copies on the very first day it went on sale! I've never had that happen to me before. I can't share specific numbers with you, so it might not sound that impressive, but let's just say that the reprints number twice as much as the bigger reprints my previous works had. I'm incredibly grateful, but also kind of overwhelmed...

Oh, and you might already know this, but they've turned the series into a manga too! You can't imagine how happy that makes me! It's all thanks to you guys for buying the first volume. Thank you so much!

I'm about to start talking about the contents of volume 2, so if you haven't read it yet, stay away from this section until you're done! I know it's tempting, but just close up the book and go back to the first page. Not that I'm planning to reveal any major spoilers, but just in case.

Ready?

If you're reading this, I'm assuming you've read the entire book now, okay?

Here goes.

There's a scene in this volume where Aki spends an evening in a fancy French restaurant with someone. It's the kind of place where only couples in a serious relationship would go, and there Aki and his date have a lovely dinner together. It's not the sort of place either of them belong, but the sense of maturity around that particular scene is what makes it so important.

When I sat down to write that scene, I ran into a problem.

“Hey, wait... I’ve never been to a fancy French restaurant!”

I had no idea where to even find one, let alone what they were like, what they served, or what sort of etiquette was expected. Sure, I knew about them from the internet and other books and stuff, but without having any actual experience, my descriptions seemed kind of empty and bland.

I decided to fix that. To go and experience for myself what was in store for Akiteru and his date. So I went. To a fancy French restaurant. All by myself.

I enjoyed my full course meal alone, telling myself constantly that there was definitely somebody sitting across from me, and that no one could convince me otherwise. I ate everything on my plate, even under the occasional pitiful glances I got from other diners. I didn’t realize I was *required* to have a date at these kinds of places.

I often go out to eat alone. I go to karaoke alone a lot, and I even work alone, so I’m pretty used to being by myself in public. But somehow, in that restaurant, I felt a ton more self-conscious. If it wasn’t for the waiter who showed me to a table right in the corner which was relatively hidden, I probably would’ve lost my nerve and left. So thank you, mysterious waiter. Without you, I couldn’t have written volume 2.

I told myself I really ought to find somebody to go to these places with the next time I was required to go above and beyond for my work.

Huh?

I’m not crying!

You’re crying!

Anyway, time for the thanks!

First, to Tomari-sensei, who does the illustrations. Thank you so much for all the amazing pieces you drew up for volume 2! Your Midori and Otoi-san came out even cuter and more perfect than I could ever have imagined by myself! A character is defined as much by the story as the illustrations, so I’m going to work as hard as I can so that the writing somehow matches up to your godlike drawings. I can’t wait to work on future volumes with you, and I hope you feel the same! Let’s have a blast with it!

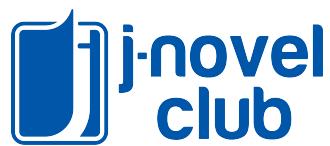
To my head editor, Nuru-san. I can’t count the number of times you’ve helped me out, and I’m really grateful. Your impressions as a reader and suggestions for what to add were invaluable. With your help, I’d like to make future volumes even better!

Next, I'd like to thank those in the business who were as overjoyed with the success of *ImoUza* as I was: the GA Bunko employees I spoke with over Twitter, those who went all out with the advertising from the sales department, the sales staff in book stores who raved about it to the customers, and everybody else who was involved in the publication of volume 2. Thank you! I can't thank you enough for being involved in the series' success.

Thank you to everyone who bought and/or read this book. Thank you so, so much. I'm going to keep writing the best I can to meet your expectations, so I hope that you'll keep supporting *ImoUza* as you have been.

What do you think'll happen in volume 3? There's only one way to find out, right? (And I don't mean you should Google it!) I hope you're looking forward to it, anyway.

That's all from me,
mikawaghost



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