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# PREFACE

Thank you for purchasing My Girlfriend Was Delivered by 2-Day Shipping!

As a bit of an introduction, my name is Josh (or J.J. as some have come to call me) and I am and have been a light novel author for several years now! This is the fourth “series” I’ve written so far! I use the term series loosely because this was a one-shot story that I decided to publish.

My other series include Final Hope, A.R. Dragonfly, and From Ashe which are a time travel murder mystery, a gaming-themed romance/life journey about overcoming social anxiety, and a slice-of-life drama about becoming an author, respectively.

As you can tell, I am mainly a slice-of-life author as I love the freedom and flexibility that the genre offers! Romance is my second favorite genre with rom-com being right up there as a sub-genre. This is the first time, though, that I tried my hand purely at a romantic comedy. I just had this concept stuck in my head and the more I began to toy around with it, I felt that it would make for a nice 1-volume story!

I hope you enjoy the story in the pages to come and I will see you on the other side in the Afterword!

# SHIPMENT 1

## *The Cutest Boy is Also the Loneliest*

It was a perfect Sunday afternoon. With a box cutter in hand, Daiki began to cut through the tape on a rather large box. He was careful not to cut deeply as he knew what awaited him inside... the object that would end his lonely life... or so he thought.

As soon as the last strip was cut, he went to grab the flaps when they suddenly blew open!! Packing peanuts flew through the air and all Daiki could do was stand there and stare at the sight before him. A girl around 5 feet, 7 inches in height with long flowing pink hair shot up out of the box. Her hair had two of its bangs dyed in a shade of light blue that matched the color of her eyes.

A bewildered look washed over Daiki's face. At that moment, it was as if time stood still. If this were a cheap rom-com anime, the whole screen would have frozen and turned to a shade of gray. For argument's sake, let's just say that it did. Oh, and let's throw in a voiceover for good measure.

*My name is Daiki Kenjimaru. You're probably wondering why a pink-haired girl just popped up out of a box, huh? It's a bit of a long story but I hope that you will indulge me for just a little while. First, some details.*

*I'm sixteen years old and I go to Kanagawa Regional High School where I am in my second year. Throughout my average school life, I have been told that I'm one of the cutest-looking boys at school and have the best manners. After all, my parents always taught me to be polite and respectful. I do my best every day to be kind to people and I try to help out in any way that I can. No matter what the problem is, I always try to find a solution just to see that person happy. Someone like me should be a top-tier catch but there's just one little problem...*

“No,” said one girl.

“Sorry, but I don't even want to be friends,” said another girl.

“I... uh... don't think so,” said another.

“Drop dead!!” said, yet, another girl.

*For some reason, no girl ever wants to date me and I don't know why. All I really want is to make one special girl happy because that would make me happy in return. In alchemy, they always talk about the law of equal exchange and I think there is no greater exchange between two people than love. For some reason, though, love doesn't seem to be in the cards for me.*

*All of this started for me when I was in middle school. Something happened and ever since then, it feels like I have been cursed but I never knew the reason. Instead, every girl I ask out ends up rejecting me harshly without even having the common courtesy to tell me why!*

*All of that changed, though. The Spring Break of my second year in high school was one that I will always remember and, yes, it has everything to do with that pink girl who popped up out of the box. I know you're curious about her but first, there were certain events that led up to that one. I kindly ask that you come with me on this journey.*



It was like any other Friday at Kanagawa Regional High School – with one exception – It was the Friday before Spring Break. While all of the other students were making plans with each other, Daiki, for the second year in a row, was left with quite a bit of free time and was doomed to spend another week-long break alone.

The mystery surrounding his misfortune haunted him day after day. After all, he had everything a girl could ever want, including money. Daiki came from a rich family where his parents co-owned several businesses. Unlike most wealthy parents in Japan, they were kind enough to allow Daiki to make his own choices and have the freedom they felt he deserved. Then again, they spent most of their time traveling all over Japan to attend to business matters so it was the least that they could do.

This meant that he grew up and matured a lot more quickly than most kids his age. The weight of responsibility was heavy but Daiki always faced those challenges head-on with a smile on his face. Becoming a responsible “adult” while still being a teenager was a valuable lesson that he felt would help prepare him for whatever life would eventually throw his way. That self-independence at such a young age should have been another high-quality point to attract a girl into his life, but nevertheless, it was just another factor that was ignored.

This Spring Break; however, Daiki had become determined to not spend it alone. He decided to make a list of all of the girls he was interested in but every single one of them shot him down in a soul-shattering fashion. With each rejection, his spirit leaked more and more from his body until it floated away, bags packed, waving goodbye in the process.

After experiencing this for years, Daiki acquired a rather unfortunate nickname – The Undatable One.

Oftentimes, he would daydream in class. Each time he did, it always ended with the same scene: “*Please date me,*” he would meekly say; however, a crowd of girls instantly scattered upon hearing those words, muttering short phrases of disgust in the process. This was followed by a massive boulder falling on his head with the word “REJECTION” painted on the side. At that point, he would snap out of it and sigh as even his own imagination betrayed him.

As if being rejected by nearly every girl in school wasn’t enough, another rumor began to circulate. Since it became common knowledge that no girl should ever date him, the girls began to feel that an ill omen would befall them should any of them make an attempt to. That omen often told of bad spirits that would come and haunt you should you accept his offer for a relationship, leading to a life of hardship and misery. It is quite amazing how things can spiral out of control due to the whim of one person’s imagination.

People have a limit of tolerance for various things. Daiki's limit was much higher than others but even he had a breaking point. He swore to himself that he would find a way to make this Spring Break different but the only challenge was finding someone he could talk to that didn't know about the rumors and at his school, the pickings were slim.

As he thought about it, a glimmer of hope popped into his mind.

The new transfer student!

She had moved to the Kanagawa region just one week ago and often kept to herself. The chances of her succumbing to the rumors were rather low as he had never seen her interact with anybody outside of a typical greeting. Every day during her short time at the school, she could be seen eating lunch alone. Daiki had also seen her come and go from school by herself as well.

In his mind, he felt that all she really needed was a friend and this opened up an opportunity to solve his problem. The best part was that this girl was also in his class so all he had to do was wait until the bell rang and then put his plan into action.

Many people are familiar with The Friday Crawl. On the last day of the workweek, one would spend the majority of their time staring at the clock, hoping for the seconds, minutes, and hours to tick by so that they could rush home and enjoy the weekend. Even though Daiki was still a student, that same painful, agonizing, slow passage of time struck him just the same as he was excited to execute his plan.

Despite how slow the time moved in these situations, it still moved at a constant pace and as a result, the final bell before Spring Break mercifully sounded. That simple sound that they had heard countless times before became the symbol of freedom for everyone in the classroom. One by one, Daiki's classmates stood and congregated into their little social groups.

"They have these amazing crepes on sale during Spring Break! I think they make them just for students because they know they will sell! It doesn't matter because they are so yummy! We should go try and get some!" said one girl to her group.

"I think I'll get my homework done first. This way, I can spend more time enjoying the break. I'd hate to have fun and then forget about the assignments. There's nothing worse than rushing to get work done," said a boy to his friend. "You're such a bookworm! You really need to just forget all that stuff and focus on having fun!" his friend replied.

It was your typical fare of banter; however, one conversation really stuck out and grabbed his attention.

"Hina! What are your plans for next week!?" said a girl to her friend. She wore the school uniform of a black sweater vest over a white dress shirt with a red plaid skirt. She had short black hair tied into twin tails with purple eyes.

"My boyfriend Riku and I are planning on going to the cultural festival," Hina replied. Hina wore the same uniform as her friend. She had light-brown hair that matched the color of her eyes.

"Can I come, too?" said Hina Sawamura's best friend Akari Chitose.

"I don't see why not. Hey... why don't we make it a double date? Maybe you can bring Daiki with you? I hear he's looking for a girlfriend," replied Hina with a sarcastic tone to her voice.

"Eh... Hina... why would you suggest something like that? After all... weren't you the one who told me... um... never mind." she said, her tone changing a bit to a more meek and timid inflection.

*Akari is usually pretty quiet. She seems a bit more lively today for some reason but the fact that I haven't even asked her out before and she's there indirectly rejecting me is kind of insulting...*

One-by-one, the students took their leave; however, Daiki had become so perturbed by that conversation, he spaced out and had forgotten why he had been staying behind, to begin with. He found himself alone in the classroom and that's when he remembered that he wanted to talk to the new transfer student. He shot up out of his chair and quickly grabbed all of his books, figuring that she had already left. He stuffed them into his backpack, not really paying much attention to his surroundings as he focused on rushing to catch up to her.

Once everything was in order, he slung the backpack over his shoulder and went to take a step forward; however, he noticed that he wasn't alone in the classroom. A few seats in front of him sat the girl that he had hoped to talk to.

Her name was Kairi Hayashi. Like Daiki, she was sixteen. She had long, flowing brown hair with very subtle highlights throughout. It gave her hair a nice two-toned sheen to it that really captivated your attention. Suddenly, she stood up out of her chair which put her around five feet, four inches tall. She brushed back her hair as she grabbed her book bag. She turned her head and suddenly, her dark amber-colored eyes met Daiki's. A small gasp escaped from her mouth as if she had been caught off guard.

That subtle look of surprise gave way to an attempt to form words. "Um... I... I thought I was alone. Sorry..." she muttered with a bit of a tremble in her voice.

*Oh my God! That's so cute!*

He did his best to put a warm smile on his face as he scratched the back of his head. "Haha, sorry if I startled you. I don't bite. I promise!"

Even with Daiki's words, Kairi was unsure of how to proceed. Realizing how awkward the situation was for her, Daiki continued to lead the conversation. "My name is Kenjimaru, Daiki. It's nice to meet you!"

"Ha-Hayashi, Kairi," she replied sheepishly as she looked away, her face becoming a bit flushed.

*Soooo cuuuuuuute!!!!* He couldn't let his emotions grip him too much. After all, this was just the beginning. He needed to remain calm and inviting so that Kairi wouldn't feel too uncomfortable. "You just moved here, right?"

"Mmm..." she replied with a slight nod.

"I grew up in this town so I don't really know what it's like to move somewhere. But, I'm sure if I had to go somewhere new, I would be a bit scared. I wouldn't know anybody and I would always wonder if other people liked me. I would also wonder if I could make any friends. It must be a lot of pressure to move to a new place."

Kairi opted not to respond verbally. She only nodded in agreement.

*Well, the first step to overcoming that would be to know if someone liked you and, right now, you're so adorable!*

There was a bit of an awkward pause. When he realized how lost in thought he was about to become, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Say, would you like to walk home together?" he said before a sudden jolt rattled his brain. He immediately went back to getting lost inside his head. *Why did I ask that!? Oh no! That must have been too much for her to handle!*

Daiki quickly waved his hands in front of him as if to convey that she shouldn't get the wrong idea. He quickly followed that up with an explanation. "Sorry! I just thought that with you being new here, maybe you could use a friend.

I thought maybe if we walked home, we could talk and I could tell you about the town or something!"

It appeared as if Kairi bought his quick thinking. Her eyes widened as if she couldn't believe that after a week of being ignored at school that someone would offer up their friendship to her. To her, Daiki seemed like a nice boy. He certainly had the looks and that alone made her heart beat just a little bit faster. The soft and warm tone of his voice reverberated throughout her mind and while she was nervous at first, there was just something about the way he sounded that soothed those nerves. She stood there unsure of what she should do and Daiki caught onto it rather quickly.

"Ah, maybe asking that was a bit too much? If you're more comfortable walking home by yourself, that's fine. I don't want to pressure you or anything," he said with a feeling of defeat. He excused himself, turned to leave, and was stopped when he heard Kairi's soft voice.

"Um... Kenjimaru-kun? I... I will walk home with you... if you want..."

Daiki froze. Many emotions had begun to run through his head. The moment he had waited for this whole time finally presented itself to him. If this played out, it would be the first real friend he had made since the rumors had begun to circulate. If he didn't have to turn and answer her, he would have pinched himself just to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

He turned to face her only to see that her cheeks had become flush with a lovely hue of rose. He couldn't help but be mesmerized by how cute she looked. "O-Okay!" he replied with a bit of excitement.

Kairi walked over and stood beside Daiki. The pause was brief and momentary. Once they were side-by-side, Daiki led the way out of the classroom and out into the hallway. Their class was on the second floor of the school so they had a bit to go before they would arrive at the main gate.

One would think that they would strike up a conversation; however, they remained completely silent. Daiki wasn't quite sure what to say. Even though he had taken the lead in their conversation, he had lost the ability to find anything of worth to say to her. Kairi wasn't any different, though. She, too, was in disbelief that a boy as cute as Daiki would take the time to offer his hand in friendship to her.

The only sounds that could be heard were the sounds of their footfalls as they made contact with the floor. Since the majority of the students had already left, their lone footsteps echoed throughout the empty halls. Their volume only increased as they walked down the stairs to the first floor.

With each step, Daiki had begun to grow nervous. As they approached the front gates of the school, his lips slowly parted and were about to speak when suddenly Kairi felt a sudden tug at her wrist. She was pulled away with force as a voice rang out. It was one that Daiki recognized from earlier.

"Hayashi-san! Are you okay!?"

Daiki turned around and saw that Hina and her friend Akari had intervened and positioned themselves in front of Kairi. Daiki's heart sank as he feared the worst.

"Sa-Sawamura-chan?" Kairi said with shock and confusion.

"You mustn't hang around him, Hayashi-san! Hasn't anyone told you!?"

"Told me what?"

“Daiki acts all sweet and innocent but he’s actually someone you need to avoid at all costs! Don’t let him try and sweet talk you. The next thing you know, you’ll just become some plaything to him!”

“Huh? But that’s not true—” Daiki tried to retaliate but Hina cut him off before he could make his case.

“Ignore him. He’s been trying to deny it all this time but he’s nothing more than a liar! He’s just trying to get you to fall for him and when you do, who knows what he has planned? No girl in this school is dumb enough to date him. Heck, most of the guys just use his kindness to their advantage. Every time somebody needs help, we all turn to Daiki because we know he’s just too gullible to resist. Plus, he needs to atone for the kind of person he is so we keep using him over and over but he doesn’t realize that it’s a debt that he will never be able to pay back!”

“D... Daiki...” muttered Kairi in disbelief.

“Hayashi-san. Please, let me explain!”

“Why?” interrupted Hina. “So you can fill her head with more lies? I’m willing to bet that you asked her to walk home with you! The two of you walking out of here side-by-side made it so obvious! That’s how it starts, Hayashi-san. Next thing you know, he’ll try to hold your hand, and then you’ll be his next victim!”

“V-Victim!? What are you talking about!?” asked Daiki, genuinely confused.

“Daiki is the kind of boy who deserves to be alone for the rest of his life! You’ve already made peace with it, haven’t you? Little Daiki Kenjimaru... the loneliest boy in all of Kanagawa! Although, I admit... even loneliness is too good for someone like you!”

“B-But...”

“You should run away while you can, Hayashi-san. Don’t worry, we’ll keep Daiki here so he won’t follow you.”

“H-Hayashi-san...” said Daiki with a pained expression on his face.

Daiki reached out with his arm. He hoped that maybe he could try to convince her but he didn’t get the chance. It wasn’t as if he would have gotten one anyway. With Hina standing right there, it would have been impossible for him to get a word in.

Kairi took a couple of steps backward before she turned and ran. With each footstep growing fainter and fainter, the smile on Hina’s face widened.

“She’s better off. We all are. Come Akari, let’s go.”

Akari, who had remained silent this entire time, walked away along with her. As they passed through the school gates, Daiki’s eyes began to well up with tears.

*This isn’t fair... All I wanted to do was make a friend. All I wanted was for my loneliness to end! Why? Why does this keep happening to me!? What did I do and why can’t anyone just tell me what I did!? How or why did these rumors even get started!? I was so close and yet...*

Daiki balled up his fists as he could no longer stop the tears from coming. Drop by drop they fell to the ground, staining the pavement. What Hina said didn’t make any sense to him whatsoever. Lost without an answer, Daiki did realize one thing. He had been doomed to spend another Spring Break by himself. With that realization in hand, he turned and walked through the school gates, his heart crushed once again.

Little did Daiki know that this weekend was about to change everything.

# SHIPMENT 2

## *All He Sought Was Companionship*

*So, as you can see, things are kind of rough in my life. I didn't know how that stupid rumor started but even when I find someone who has never heard of it before, it rears its ugly head. I'm usually a patient guy but everyone has their limits. I had just about reached mine.*

Just when Daiki thought that he had gained a friend and found a cure for his loneliness, the cruel hand of fate reared its ugly head once again and ruined everything. At least, that's what Daiki told himself as he walked home.

As he approached the front gate of his house, he paused. He looked up at the massive building that stood before him. It was two stories tall with enough square feet to comfortably house two whole families. Part of him felt it was such a waste to have a house that big when it was barely even used. Although, whenever his parents were home from their business trips, they did enjoy the comfort of a lavish lifestyle.

Despite that, his parents weren't as egotistical as one would think. They were the ones who taught Daiki about respect and kindness. His parents' teachings echoed through his mind but rather than fill him with comfort, they filled him with a terrible resolve. Daiki balled up his fists, his eyes still a bit moist from earlier. With a vicious swing of his foot, he kicked the front gate, its thin metal bars rattled vehemently as he cursed to himself.

"Dammit! What good is a big heart if I can't give it to anyone? All I've ever done was try to be helpful. I tried to be respectful and yet... because of some stupid rumor... a rumor that I know nothing about..." suddenly, the tears began to flow again as he pressed his forehead against the metal bars of the gate. "Why am I cursed like this?"

Daiki let out an exhaustive sigh before he opened the gate. He knew that it was no use standing out on the sidewalk moping about a situation he could not control. Once inside his house, he dropped his book bag in the foyer and took off his shoes. He didn't know what to do at first but soon decided that he would take some time and watch a bit of television as he thought that some entertainment would help take his mind off things. After all, he was on Spring Break now and had a full nine days to do whatever he wanted.

With a simple button press on the remote, the television came to life. He didn't watch much TV so he had no idea what channel it had been left on. When the picture was displayed, it showed some sort of infomercial. Daiki's mother constantly watched this channel and ended up buying whatever caught her eye. It was a habit that his father wished she would kick as he felt that she constantly spent money on such useless things. What made his father really annoyed was the fact that they were never home to use most of the junk she bought anyway.

The infomercial that was on ironically had a subject that struck near and dear to Daiki's heart. He tilted his head in confusion as if he felt that even the television was mocking him.

*"If you're lonely and are wanting to find the perfect companion for you, we have live girls just waiting to talk! Just dial 555..."*

"Is it really okay to be playing this kind of ad so early in the day?" Daiki wondered out loud. "Although..."

Daiki had begun to give this some serious thought. Even though he was sixteen and too young to have a credit card of his own, his parents always left him a spare one in case of emergencies. As long as there wasn't an exorbitant amount charged to it, his mother rarely even checked what was bought. Perhaps it wasn't the best idea to let a compulsive buyer handle the home's finances but they hadn't gone bankrupt yet so she must have been doing something right. Besides, most of the charges were from her anyway so it's not like she had any desire to look through and re-check the things she had already purchased. Perhaps for Daiki, that was both a blessing and a curse?

Daiki pulled the credit card out of his wallet and moved over to a small reclining chair to the right of the television which was his father's favorite place to sit. It was also convenient because he had an expensive-looking landline phone on a small end table right next to it. It was fashioned after those now antiquated rotary dial phones but it had a touchpad which created a nice hybrid design of old and modern.

Daiki picked up the phone and called the number that was permanently affixed to the lower third of the screen. His breathing began to get a bit heavy as nervousness settled in his chest. This was the first time he had ever called a service like this but after the day he had, just hearing a girl's voice would be undeniably welcomed right now.

After a few rings, there was the faint voice of a female operator on the other end. "Thank you for calling Heart Lines, your open path to finding the girl of your dreams! If you know your preferred girl's extension, enter it now to be placed in their queue, otherwise, please stay on the line as we transfer you to our automated system."

"Wow, they even have queues so you can get the same girl! That's impressive but I wonder just how long the hold times are for some of the more popular ones?"

After a few moments, the call kicked over to another messaging system, this time the lovely woman's voice was replaced by a man's that sounded a bit on the sketchy side.

"Welcome to Heart Lines. If you have a fantasy, we've got a girl to fulfill it. If you like role-playing, press one. If you like dirty talk, press two. If you like sweet or sassy, press three. For all others, press four."

Daiki didn't know what button to press. He thought that the options were pretty limited but that made him wonder if there were multiple choices per category. There was only one way to find out!

Daiki pressed three as he could use someone sweet to talk to. His emotions were damaged enough as they were so a comforting chat seemed like the safest and the least objectionable option.

Soon, the male voice was replaced by the original female voice that opened the call. Suddenly, he began to wonder just how professional this service truly was. "Please listen to the menu options carefully. Here is our list of sweet girls. For

Hana, press 1. For Karin, press 2. For Kana, press 3. For Mineko, press 4. Here is our list of sassy girls. For Sakura, press 5..."

Before the list of names could continue, Daiki pressed 3. He figured that since he didn't know any of these girls, one would be just as good as the other.

Shortly after he selected his option, the voice returned and this time, it was a completely different woman's voice. *Just how many people recorded these menus!?*

"As a reminder, ¥3900 will be charged to your credit card for the first minute. An additional ¥650 will be charged for each additional minute. A ¥650 connection fee will automatically be charged for placing your call in the queue. If you agree, press 1."

The prices seemed awfully steep. He had begun to think twice about calling this service; however, he had come this far so he decided to see it through. After all, he could just talk for a minute or two and spend about ¥5200 at most. With his mind decided, he pressed 1 to confirm. He was then asked to enter his credit card information. He did so and just like that, ¥650 was charged. There was no turning back now.

"Kana is currently assisting other callers. Please stay on the line and we will connect you when your call is at the front of the queue. Your position is 12. You will not be charged until your call is connected."

12 wasn't exactly a number that promoted much hope that Daiki would get through anytime soon; however, he was determined and decided to remain on hold.

After being serenaded by the same cheesy hold music and the constant reminders of what place he was in for a solid 90 minutes, he had finally reached the front of the queue! When he heard that he was the next caller in line, a feeling of elation washed over him as if his patience was about to be rewarded. Soon, it happened.

The phone rang.

\*CLICK\*

The call disconnected.

Daiki's left eye twitched uncontrollably. A stupefied look dominated his face. After all of that effort, his curse struck again in a form he could not have predicted. Slowly, he placed the receiver back onto the phone's base and continued to stare at the wall on the opposite side of the room. It was as if someone reached into his brain and unplugged it from its source of power.

"Eh heh heh... even with this, I can't..." he muttered.

Daiki slid down in the chair and let out an exhaustive sigh. All hope felt as if it had been lost. By now, the infomercial that led him down this perilous rabbit hole had finished and the station began to run through a series of commercials. As he sat there filled with self-pity, a particular ad caught his attention.

*"If you're feeling lonely, consider one of our companionship services! Whether you're a lonely man or woman, we have plenty of options for you to choose from! Browse the profiles of our clients, pick the one that suits you the most, tell us how you would like to spend your day, and we will handle all of the arrangements! Rates are affordable so call now and book the perfect companion today!"*

While many would think this to be an escort service, that was far from the reality of it. In Japan, they would often have services where people could rent a

companion for a few hours up to an entire day. These companions would accompany them to a movie, to dinner, to a park, or wherever the client wished to go. They would sit and listen to their sorrows or anything else deemed appropriate.

When Daiki heard that ad, he perked up. It wasn't as risqué as the phone service that shunned him; however, there was one drawback... He knew that addiction could play a factor. While he had the money, he knew that unless he kept renting one, the solution would only be temporary. He didn't need to turn his life into something that could pass as a cheap romance anime.

He pondered if there could be another way. The thought of renting someone turned his thoughts to mail-order brides; however, he realized that buying a human online wasn't exactly the most legal way to solve his problem. As he envisioned himself going to jail or getting stabbed in his sleep, another commercial aired... one that seemed more reasonable than trafficking humans.

*"Japan's technology is one of the most advanced in the world. Researchers and engineers have spent countless years developing the world's leading robotic technology. Now, that technology can be yours and it could help you cure your loneliness! Meet Reiko! An android companion that looks and feels like a real human being! With her advanced artificial intelligence, over time, she can learn your habits, your likes, and dislikes, and tailor her dialogue for realistic conversation! Don't delay! Call or visit our website to learn about this cutting-edge technology and how it can offer you a relationship beyond your expectations!"*

*An android!? Hmm... Mom and dad are rarely here. When they are, they usually stay downstairs and don't really pay my room a visit. I could just hide it in my closet when they're home. Plus, with it being an android, it'll be programmed to like me! This is it! This is the perfect solution!"*

Daiki decided that he had enough when it came to phone calls. He opted to give the website a look. His computer was upstairs in his bedroom so after he wrote down the address, he made the short trip up to the second floor.

When you walked in, the room opened up to the left. His bed was centered against the wall opposite the door but it ran along the wall rather than it sticking out. This was because Daiki had an unusual sleeping position where he loved to lay on his side with his back pressed against the wall. While Daiki wouldn't admit it, he did this because subconsciously, it simulated the feeling of someone else in bed with him. That simple contact was enough to allow him to pretend he wasn't lonely at night when the house was empty and quiet.

The rest of his room consisted of simple bookshelves with a few volumes of manga scattered about along with a small 32" television where the newest video game console, the PlayTerminal 5, had been hooked up to. Other than a closet and a small end table with an alarm clock, that about summed up Daiki's room with the exception of the one thing he came up here for... His computer.

On the left wall of his bedroom, there was a lone window in which a desk sat beneath it. Under the desk on a small stand was his computer. He pulled the rather cheap-looking office chair out from under the desk and took a seat. The computer wasn't a new model so it took a little bit for it to power on and become usable. While he was a gamer, he preferred to play on a console so he never felt that he needed the latest PC model.

As he waited, Daiki peered out of his window and noticed a few kids from his school walking by outside. They seemed pretty happy as they talked with each other. Daiki wondered where they were going all while feeling just a little bit jealous. Seeing that only hardened his resolve and steeled his determination to end his loneliness.

When the computer finished powering up, Daiki opened his browser and went to the website he saw in the commercial. Thanks to a sleek website design, he easily found their catalog of products and decided to give them a look over. Not wanting to spend a fortune, he filtered the products by cheapest to most expensive price, figuring that this would place the most affordable models at the top. When he saw the price tag on the first model, he pressed the filter again to change the order, thinking that it had arranged the models incorrectly. When he saw that the price skyrocketed, his jaw nearly hit the floor.

“The cheapest model is 65 million yen!?”

Daiki felt defeated. What would have been the perfect solution suddenly became far out of his reach. While, yes, he and his family had enough money to afford a luxury item such as that, he knew that if his mom saw a charge of that size on their credit card, she would instantly cancel her business trip, fly home, and beat the ever-living snot out of him. Just the potential lecture alone was enough to make him cringe. His father would probably give it to him worse and that sent an even colder shiver up the ladder of his spine.

Still, Daiki was determined. He knew deep down in his heart that this would be the ultimate solution to his problems and began to think if there could be a cheaper way. He thought long and hard about what to search for. He didn’t want to search “android” out of fear that he would just find similar products that would also be far out of his financial reach. That’s when he began to think of a search term that could produce android-like results but target a much lower-end product.

The proverbial lightbulb went on over his head. He typed in the term “realistic doll” into the search field and hit the enter key. The search results popped up and he clicked on the top one.

Within seconds, Daiki was brought to a colorful website with a rather large selection of different dolls that he could purchase. At first, he wondered why all of the dolls were naked but he figured that they displayed them that way so that you could see their body types more easily which he found convenient. As he scrolled through, he made sure to make note of each doll’s measurements, hairstyles, and other ‘customizable features.’

After searching for over an hour, Daiki was able to customize the girl of his dreams. Everything from her hairstyle, eye color, body shape, and more was carefully selected to give him the ideal image of a companion that he could be happy with. Before he added it to the cart, he leaned back in his chair to reflect on his choices.

“That was a lot of work! They sure make these androids super realistic! I mean, all of these are anatomically correct! I don’t understand why, though... maybe it’s just for realism? This one here even has the option for ‘touch-sensitive voice.’ It’ll even connect to the internet via WiFi and download new vocabulary so you can talk to it! I had no idea that lower-end android models were this sophisticated! Still, even with it being a lower-end model, the price tag is a bit

steep... 2.2 million yen is a bit much to spend on a fake girlfriend but... it's not like I'm going to get a real one anyway..."

The thought of his parents scolding him caused him to hesitate. It was still a rather large transaction that would stick out like a sore thumb. Suddenly, he felt the weight of his curse bearing down on him once again. The inevitable lecture, the lack of a way to explain what he had bought... all of it acted as a barrier that told him that he would be better off just forgetting this whole idea.

"This really is the perfect solution but... is it really worth the risk?" he contemplated. "It's not like there's another way. You know what? To heck with it all. Sorry, mom. Sorry, dad. I'll come up with something to explain this if it comes to it. I don't want to be alone anymore..."

After rationalizing the thought of spending that much on what he perceived to be an android when, in reality, it was a high-tech sex doll, he added it to the cart and was brought to the shipping options.

"Oh wow! They offer 2-Day shipping on this model... and it delivers on weekends! If I order this now, I can get it Sunday, and then I'll be able to spend my entire Spring Break with my new android girlfriend!"

The last thing that the website asked Daiki to do was give the "android" a name. When he thought about it, all he could think of was the commercial that led him down this journey. A few mouse clicks and keystrokes later and "Reiko" had been ordered. He received a confirmation email that stated that the doll would be arriving in discreet packaging for maximum privacy.

"Hmm... I guess they want to make sure that it's not super obvious that people are lonely. That's a thoughtful touch!"

That night, Daiki was too excited to sleep. That excitement; however, only lasted for so long and even though he made it to morning, his body gave out. This caused him to spend half of his Saturday asleep.

By the time he woke up, it was close to 1 PM. At first, he was confused as to why it was so late. Then, he remembered the excitement he felt knowing what was to come! From that moment on, all Daiki could think about was how tomorrow would be the day when his loneliness would finally come to an end!

# SHIPMENT 3

## *Sunday Deliveries Are the Best*

*Don't judge me. You'd spend 2.2 million yen on an android companion too if you were as lonely as I was. I mean... it's not like I tried. You saw what happened when I tried to make a friend the legitimate way. Now imagine that happening to you for the past couple of years. What would you do? Well... whatever. The solution to my problems was en route; however, I think got a little more than I bargained for.*

*Hang in there. That moment I left you on is about to arrive.*

The rest of Daiki's Saturday was about as uneventful as it could have been. Since he had already lost half of the day to sleep, he didn't see much point in doing anything of importance. He decided that the best course of action to help the time pass would be to do the Spring Break homework that his teacher had assigned. After all, tomorrow was the day that mattered most.

Even though he tried to lose himself in his homework, the thought of his new "android" companion occupied all of the space in his mind. He ended up checking the shipping status of his order in between his assignments.

When he got annoyed with constantly checking, he opted to sign up for notifications to both his cell phone and his email at every step of the delivery route. This made it much more convenient and getting a new notification equated to an innocent child's face lighting up in wonder on Christmas morning. With each new notification, his anticipation grew bigger and bigger.

Eventually, he finished his homework and was stuck with nothing to do. He decided to pass the remainder of the day by playing a game on his PlayTerminal 5. One of the games he was into was *Jangle and Clink: Rift Beyond*. He was close to beating it so he figured that would be the perfect thing to immerse himself in to help forget the slow passage of time. The trick worked as he ended up beating the game and by the time he did, the sun had set.

That night was more of the same; however, unlike last night, he had tried to force himself to sleep early knowing that if he overslept, he ran the risk of missing the delivery driver. As he realized that willing himself to sleep wasn't going to happen, Daiki went back downstairs and fixed himself some warm tea. He sat on the couch and let his body sink into it. As he sipped the tea, he closed his eyes and tried to relax. It turned out that was exactly what he needed because he dozed off soon after finishing his drink.

The morning came and he was on pins and needles. Daiki kept pacing back and forth in front of his front door as he impatiently waited for the delivery driver. In fact, he opted to skip taking a shower for fear that he would miss the delivery driver. He looked out the window often, checked the delivery tracker, etc. Every second that passed felt like a painful eternity to him. All he wanted was for his package to get dropped off so that he could set up and begin the A.I. learning of his new "android."

Finally, around 1 PM, there was a loud knock on the door. Daiki rushed to open it and there it was... a plain elongated brown box being propped up by a hand

truck. Daiki's new "android girlfriend" had officially arrived! He quickly signed for the package and the delivery man took his leave. When the door closed, his eyes turned into glowing stars! He rubbed his hands together and thought about the best way to approach opening the box. He felt it was best to lay it down and then cut it open.

He tipped the box over and it landed on the floor with a rather loud thud. A small "oomph" came from inside the box that caused Daiki's face to light up with joy!

"Wow! The voice module is working already! It can even detect small bumps like that! I haven't even opened this yet and I'm already impressed with it!"

Daiki grabbed a box cutter and began to cut the tape. As soon as the last strip was cut, he went to grab the flaps when they suddenly blew open!! Packing peanuts flew through the air and all Daiki could do was stand there and stare at the sight before him. Like before, everything froze in black and white as if a scene had been paused in a movie.

*I told you to hang in there, didn't I? Now you know how I got myself into this situation. All I can say is that I'm about to have the most interesting Spring Break of my life. Since we're done catching you up to speed, I'll step away and let you soak in the rest!*

Unpause.

The pink-haired girl was on full display in front of him. While it was a shocking reaction, Daiki still looked on with wonder and took in the rest of her attire. It consisted of a sassy white tank top with a black windbreaker jacket over top of it unzipped. The jacket had a pink stripe on the outside of each sleeve that started at the base of the cuff and went up to the base of the shoulder. She also wore an unbuttoned pair of light blue jean shorts that didn't leave a lot to the imagination... especially since they gave a slight hint of the pink panties that lay underneath. Her thighs were exposed; however, the rest of her legs were covered with black knee-high stockings.

Her attire was a big contrast to what Daiki typically wore around the house. Even when he was home, he was still a proper dresser. His sandy brown hair matched the color of his eyes. His outfit consisted of a white t-shirt with a buttoned light blue sweater vest over top. He wore khaki pants that were held up by a brown belt with a gold buckle.

When the girl stood up, she began gasping as if she hadn't experienced fresh air in a few days. Rather than be concerned for her well-being, Daiki became mesmerized by how cute his new "android" looked. He couldn't contain his excitement.

"WOW!! It looks so... realistic!!" he exclaimed as he practically hopped up and down, completely ignoring the fact that this girl looked nothing like the doll he had customized.

Daiki reached out and touched the girl. He felt just how soft and warm her skin was. As he rubbed her arm, she quickly retracted it and shot Daiki a disgusted look.

"What do you think you're doing you pervert!?" she exclaimed with a disgusted look on her face.

Daiki's eyes blinked a couple of times. Every ounce of excitement had been sucked out of his body. His mind went blank as if he couldn't believe what had just

happened. Soon, that look of confusion turned to a look of defeat and he dropped to his knees with an emphatic thump.

“This... This can’t be... my new android is programmed to reject me, too!”

“I’M NOT AN ANDROID, YOU IDIOT! I’M A REAL GIRL!”

“EEEEEEHHHHHHHHHHH!!!?”

“Are you telling me that you can’t tell the difference between a sex doll and a real girl!? Wow... not only are you desperate but it’s pretty obvious that you’re dumber than a box of dead, wet rats, too! Now I’m starting to see why you ordered a sex doll! Someone as pathetic as you probably can’t even land a real girlfriend!”

“S-Sex doll? No. I ordered an android companion!”

“The site you ordered me from was a sex doll website! They don’t sell androids. I should know. I had my eye on them for a while.”

“Eh? Do you mean to tell me you wanted a sex doll, too?”

“Pfft. Hell no! I noticed that the factory was close to where I lived and that their dolls were roughly the same size as my body. I decided to run away from home so I snuck into the factory and I guess the doll I tossed out of the box was your order. I stepped in, they sealed me up, and here I am.”

“This is a lot to take in...”

“Well, don’t worry. I’ll be taking my leave. I’m sure that you can just call the company and complain. They’ll probably give you your money back. Most companies tend to treat their customers like gold. So, if you put up a big enough stink, they’ll bend over backward to meet your demands and refund you. Oh, and by the way... there’s kind of a large bottle and a funnel in the box, too. You may want to dispose of them.”

“But... What are you going to do in the meantime?” Daiki asked, completely ignoring the warning about the bottle. “Don’t you have anywhere to go?”

“I don’t know, yet. I just wanted to get out of there. I didn’t have any real plans after the fact. I figured I would just wander around until I found a place to sleep or something. Maybe I’ll hole myself up in an internet cafe and read a bunch of manga. As long as I’m not bothering anyone, they’ll probably let me do whatever.”

When she said that, Daiki was filled with conflicting emotions. Here was a girl who ran away from home with nowhere to go. The thought of her just bouncing around from place to place caused him to feel for her situation. Suddenly, his face lit up. While it wasn’t exactly what he had planned, an opportunity presented itself to be the solution to his problem. Having a big heart and always wanting to be helpful, he made the girl an offer.

“Why don’t you live here?”

“What!? You want me to live with you!? You’re a pervert who ordered a sex doll! Who knows what I’ll end up having to do with you! Out of the question!”

“I didn’t know it was a sex doll!” he exclaimed before letting out a heavy sigh. “You see... I don’t have the best luck with girls and I don’t know why. I’m always nice to people and I try not to treat anyone badly... but after getting rejected so many times, rumors started going around and now nobody wants to date me. I got really lonely and thought that if I ordered an android companion, I wouldn’t be so lonely anymore. I’m just looking for someone to spend time with... that’s all.”

“I’ll have to admit... that’s kind of a sad story but how do I know you’re not saying that to try and seduce me?”

“If I try anything funny, you can leave immediately! I just want someone to keep me company! I swear that’s the truth!”

“What about your parents? Don’t you have to get their permission first? I can’t imagine that they are going to be okay if some random girl who popped out of a box just starts living here.”

“It won’t be a problem because they’re never home. They own so many businesses, they spend more time in random hotels around Japan than here. I only see them once a year during the Holidays. Outside of that, they’re gone and it’s just me.”

“Wow... you really are lonely, aren’tcha?”

“Yeah. I’m sure you can see my problem.”

The girl tapped her finger on her chin as if she were giving this some serious thought. After she weighed her options, she cracked a smirk.

“Fine! I’ll stay here and keep you company but just know that my parents might end up calling the authorities and a search will probably be conducted... although... you live far away from my hometown so it probably wouldn’t be a problem. They’ll start combing the local area for a while before they expand their radius. It’s almost like the danger circle in a battle royale video game! Once it gets close to you... just move further away from it!”

“R-right.”

“I guess you should give me the formal tour so I can get familiar with where I’m going to live.”

“Oh! Sure! Please, come with me, uh...”

“Kioshi, Miko. You can call me Miko if you want. I’m not big on formalities.”

“Ah, Miko, then. My name is Kenjimaru, Daiki. You can call me Daiki if you want.”

“OH MY GOD! Your name sounds like a radish! I’m going to call you Daikon-kun from now on!”

“Please don’t...”

Completely defeated, Daiki gave Miko a tour of his house. With it being so large, the tour took up quite a bit of time. To him, it was just home but Miko had never been in a house that big before. Just by stepping into a room, she was amazed by its sheer size. Curiosity got the better of her multiple times and Daiki had to politely request that she not touch anything that belonged to his father. Even though they spent most of the year traveling, his father cherished his possessions and always spent time with them whenever he was home. Should something of his break, that could bring about Armageddon!

Once everything was all said and done, Miko looked around and, once again, placed her finger on her chin. Before she could conclude, Daiki asked an all-important question.

“So... where do you want to sleep? We have a guest room that you can stay in. It’s upstairs next to mine. I just need to know where I should put out the futon we usually save for company.”

“Oh, I was just thinking about that! I decided that I’m going to be sleeping in your bed.”

“Oh, oka... EH!!!? Where am I going to sleep, then!?”

“In your bed, duh.”

“B-b-but that means we’ll be sleeping in the same bed together! I can’t do that! I promised that I wouldn’t do anything funny!”

“I know. That’s why I’m going to sleep in the same bed as you! Consider this a test of trust. If you’re true to your word and wish to keep your promise, then I have nothing to worry about, don’t I?”

“I guess that’s true but... that still doesn’t make it right.”

“Then it’s decided! I’ll sleep in your bed with you!”

Daiki’s Spring Break just took a wild turn. Even though he wished for companionship, this wasn’t what he had in mind. He never thought that a real, flesh-and-blood human being would be delivered to his doorstep. Even though she was rather forward, Daiki’s heart felt for her. He may not have understood the reasoning behind her running away from home, but he couldn’t just let her wander the streets alone. A girl her age could end up in all kinds of trouble and it would pain him to know that he enabled it by letting her leave.

Deep down, something began to stir inside Daiki. Perhaps it was his caring attitude, or perhaps it was the fact that no girl would ever date him, but just having a girl around the house, despite the circumstances surrounding it, felt a bit refreshing and exciting.

As he relished in those thoughts, Miko helped herself to the sofa in the living room. She was amazed at how large and how soft it was. She tested out its softness by bouncing up and down on the cushion several times. Daiki felt a bit embarrassed watching it as even though Miko, herself, looked to be the same age, she was already well-developed in the chest region, and with her bouncing up and down like that, it put on quite the show for him.

After she got it out of her system, she patted the cushion next to her to beckon him over. He was still trying to get the images of her chest out of his mind and was caught a bit off guard. He began to blush for the wrong reasons; however, Miko was quick to pick up on it.

“Aw... embarrassed to sit next to a girl? I don’t bite much, you know. Besides, It’s another test to make sure that you weren’t lying about not trying anything funny. Now come! Sit!”

Daiki made his way over and sat next to Miko. Suddenly, she leaned over and pressed her head against his shoulder. Daiki quickly looked around as if he were searching for anything to get him out of this situation. Sensing how tense he was, Miko looked up and blew softly into his ear.

Daiki had never jumped so high in his life! He quickly turned and pointed straight at Miko, practically shouting at the top of his lungs.

“W-WHAT ARE YOU DOING!? WHY DID YOU BLOW INTO MY EAR!?”

“I said it before you even sat down. This was a test and judging from your reaction, you passed. Any lecherous pervert would have taken me all for themselves right then and there. Instead, you jumped up and questioned me... like a cute little virgin! That brings up a question. Have you ever had sex, Daikon-kun?”

“Of course not! I can’t even get a girlfriend!”

"Wow... you didn't even waste any time answering me! Straight and to the point. I'm not going to lie... I kind of like that quality in a man. Hmm... maybe if you sit back down, I can solve another one of your problems... tee hee hee."

At that moment, Daiki began to second-guess his decision of letting Miko live there. She hadn't been there for more than an hour and she already claimed his bed and was trying to seduce him. Despite the bad feeling he was getting, his heart wouldn't allow him to throw her out onto the street with nowhere to go. Still, enough was enough and he wasn't going to allow himself to be teased any further.

"No. I said I would let you stay and I already promised that I wouldn't do anything to you. There's no need for you to test me so please stop teasing me like this."

"Oh? You have a backbone, too! I thought that you would be some kind of spineless main character from a cheap romance novel. You know the type... the kind where they get all nervous and get into compromising situations through no fault of their own! Somehow, they have infinite amounts of sweat but it seems that I don't have to worry about that with you!"

Miko was genuinely impressed with Daiki. Even though his voice was a bit on the timid side, the fact that he still put his foot down without hesitation struck the right chord inside of her.

"Fine. Fine," she continued. "I know I'm the houseguest here and I don't exactly have a place to go so... I'll ease up. I wouldn't want to get thrown out or anything. Still... if you don't mind, you can sit next to me. I promise I won't make it weird again."

Daiki took her word for it and sat back down. Despite what she had just said, he couldn't help but keep his guard up. It was obvious that Miko was quite forward and not afraid to say anything..., especially things that are too embarrassing to say normally. Daiki, on the other hand, never was the type to stand up for himself so when Miko began to judge him as a typical rom-com novel character, he wondered if she could see right through his act.

Not even he could believe that he said some of those things to her. While he wasn't intimidating, he never had the courage to stand up for himself. Even when he tried to defend himself against Hina's accusations, he couldn't bring his voice to a volume level high enough to get his point across. He wondered what it was about Miko that caused him to act so out of character.

When he shifted his thoughts to Miko, something popped up in his head. When it did, all he could do was twiddle his thumbs. Suddenly, the boy who stood up for himself quickly reverted back to his meek and timid true self. There was something on his mind but he wasn't sure if he should ask it. Fortunately for him, Miko noticed how uncomfortable he was and already pieced it together.

"So, there's something you want to ask me, isn't there?"

Daiki swallowed hard. He turned to face Miko, hoping that his question didn't offend her... but he had come this far. He wasn't about to let his nerves get the best of him now!



# SHIPMENT 4

## *The Days of the Past Are Not Always Better*

Even though Daiki had the desire to know, he still felt nervous asking Miko the question that weighed on his mind. His heart began to pound just a little bit louder, just a little bit faster; his brow became just a little bit wetter. He balled up his fists and prepared to part his lips; however, before he could mutter a single word, Miko interjected.

“Let me guess... You want to know why I ran away from home, huh?”

Daiki blinked a couple of times. Indeed, that was the question and not some deeply-rooted dark secret that he was hoping to dredge up. The question was, for all intents and purposes, very fair, and yet, he had a difficult time mustering up the courage to ask something so simple. Despite the rudimentary nature of his question, he looked surprised that she had been able to read his mind like that.

Then again, with his mannerisms, he wasn’t exactly trying hard to make it subtle. Plus, given the situation, it was the most predictable question that he would want to ask. As for why he wrestled with asking it, Daiki didn’t know how bad the situation was or how sensitive the topic could be but since he was going through the trouble of opening up his home to her, he felt that he should know the details.

“Uh... well... The thought did cross my mind. I was kind of nervous about asking you because of the way you brushed it off so easily earlier. I just thought it was something that you felt uncomfortable talking about. I didn’t want to pry but... at the same time...”

“You just had to know, huh?” asked Miko, as she finished his sentence for him. “Well, it’s only fair that I should tell you. I mean, you should have been balls-deep in a synthetic vagina about an hour ago and now you’re living with an unbelievably cute runaway girl who has done nothing but tease you this whole time. I suppose that I owe you one so I’ll spill the beans and tell you.”

“I mean... you don’t have to if you don’t want to. I don’t want you to think you need to tell me because you owe me or anything.”

“If I don’t have to then why even muster up the nerve to ask me? Could it be that you’re considering my feelings? From having a backbone to being thoughtful. Hoo boy! Did I luck out or what? Anyway...”

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Far to the north in Aomori, Japan, Miko was just your typical high school student. She wasn’t from a rich family but rather the opposite. She lived in a rather basic house with her parents who fought every day to make ends meet. While they always wanted the best for their daughter, they often went about handling it the wrong way.

One day, Miko returned home from school with her report card. When she showed it to her father, he instantly became disappointed. “You haven’t been studying, have you?” he bellowed with a disgruntled look on his face.

Those simple words were enough to draw her mother’s attention as well. Soon, Ichika joined in the conversation after taking a peek at her report card.

"Again, Miko? How many times do we have to go through this!?" she said with disappointment.

Miko sighed as she knew that there was no dancing around it. The proof was written right there in black and white. There was no way she could come up with an excuse that they would buy. She had no choice but to admit it.

"No," she admitted sheepishly.

"We've had this talk before," said her father Tetsuya. "I will not hear any excuses! Your grades continue to suffer despite our best efforts to drill the importance of a proper education into you! It is absolutely disgraceful to this family that you don't put forth the effort that we require from you! You need to consider your future more carefully! Yet... you squander this opportunity away and these pitiful grades are the proof! I will not tolerate this any further. Until your grades improve, you will not leave this house other than to go to school. You are to come straight home and if you are even a minute late, I will come find you and drag you back to this house! Do you understand!?"

"Yes, sir," she said with a dejected tone in her voice.

"Good!" said Ichika. "I completely agree with your father! We've worked very hard to raise you and we expect you to repay that by going to college and getting a good job! I want you to go to your room and study. The door will be kept open so that when we check in on you, we can see you working. You will do this every day until it's time for bed."

Miko sighed and retreated to her room where she took a seat on the edge of her bed. Ever since middle school, both of her parents had been this way. Her grades in elementary school were high enough to place her at the top of her class and that's when she was showered with praise; however, once middle school started, she began to see all of the other kids having fun and began to wonder why she couldn't have a life like that.

Soon, she began to skip studying to go out and play. She had made a couple of friends and that experience became akin to a drug. She wanted more and more of it and that's when her grades began to slip; however, rather than return to a studious path, she continued to disobey her parent's wishes. It was a common occurrence but each time she would raise her grades just high enough so that she could return to the life she enjoyed only to slip again.

The cycle repeated over the years and this caused her to hate school even more. It drove her to the point where she wished that she could just run away from it all. She desired a carefree life where she had more control over her future.

For some reason, her parents made it a point for her to get into a university. While they didn't expect her to aim as high as possible, they wanted her to get into one good enough for her to develop her skills and begin a lucrative career. Part of the issue was that they were very stubborn. They never explained why they wanted that for her and with them constantly harping at her, Miko never thought to open the lines of communication. It was just a never-ending dysfunctional cycle that wasn't getting them anywhere.

Perhaps if her parents had been more upfront with her over their reasoning from the beginning, it would have allowed her to understand where they were coming from, but instead, everyone's lack of communication had caused more damage than any of them had realized.

As Miko sat on her bed, her mind had been made up. She desired to end this cycle and break free from it. As immature as her decision was, one way or another, she was going to leave her home and live life the way that she wanted to. She knew that she couldn't just pack a bag and walk out, though. She needed to come up with a clever plan for her escape.

On the outskirts of town, there was a little forest that Aomori was named after. The forest contained a small hill that overlooked the base of a river that spilled into the ocean. Fishermen often used that hill as a landmark when returning to port after a long day's work; however, there was another thing of interest near that forest.

A factory.

She had seen semi-trucks and mail carriers come and go from that factory but she never knew what was produced there; however, her curiosity would soon pay off in spades. Until she could discern just what that factory produced, she elected to stick it in the back of her mind. Before she could truly weigh that as an option for escape, though, she needed to end her punishment so that she could have a bit more freedom moving around the area. That had to come first and foremost.

Over the next month, she studied hard and improved her grades. Even though her parents were skeptical, she made a promise to keep at it. Eventually, it got to the point where her grades were acceptable enough to where her father was satisfied; however, it didn't go without another lecture.

"It appears you have, once again, worked hard but I fear that we will be at these crossroads again. I've lifted your punishment before and you have betrayed my trust. What guarantee do I have that we will not end up here again in a week? A month? A semester?"

"I'm tired of this cycle, too. I give you my word that this will be the last time."

Her mother crossed her arms and gave her a rather stern look before she interjected. "I will see to it that you keep your word. If your grades slip again, I will not be as lenient as your father. You will be permanently grounded until you graduate high school. There will be no forgiveness or tolerance for your laziness. Are we clear!?"

"Yes, mama."

"Very well then. Against my better judgment, I will lift your restrictions. I suggest you do your best to remember the promise you are making here today," Ichika said.

She knew in the back of her mind that there wasn't going to be a next time. With her punishment lifted, she was free to begin the research for her plan and decided to take a walk to get some fresh air... at least, that's what she told her parents. In reality, she made the trip over to the factory to see just what kind of product they produced.

"Ew, GROSS! There's a bunch of naked dolls over here!" she exclaimed. "I bet only lonely men with too much expendable cash buy these disgusting things but... no. What am I thinking!? I can't hop into one of these boxes! I'll probably end up getting delivered to some perverted old man's house! What would they do if they saw a real girl instead of a doll!? Then again..."

Despite her concerns, she began to give it some serious thought. Even with the risks involved, being able to conveniently stow herself away in a box would be the ideal escape route. As long as she wasn't caught, she could be shipped virtually

anywhere. Plus, there wouldn't be much in the way of a so-called paper trail for anyone to follow.

"This could really work out but there are still risks," she muttered to herself. "What if the person I get delivered to calls the police? It's game over for me at that point. My best bet is that I get delivered at a time when nobody is home. Then, I can just break out of the box and run away! I'll only have to worry about a random person passing by seeing me. I could just cut a hole in the box to see if the coast is clear first, though, so that would eliminate that problem."

Miko rubbed her chin as she continued to give it some more thought.

"So, the biggest risk really is the person accepting the delivery. Wouldn't it be lucky if it just ended up being some lonely kid I could seduce? Then I could even get a place to stay, too! Yeah right... like that would actually happen. Most likely, I'll have to run, grab the nearest bus, and take it to the last town on its route. But still, even if I did that, the chances of me being dragged back home are really low."

After thinking it over, Miko decided on her method of escape. Anyone would have thought she was crazy for even attempting something such as this and, in reality, she was. That didn't stop her, though.

From here, she took notes on when the trucks came to make their deliveries and when the mail carriers came to make their pick-ups. There was some variance between each day but it was all within a general time frame. One thing she noticed was that there was a pattern to their operation. They would normally place open boxes near the loading bay, check the order sheet, then fill the boxes one by one. They would tape them up, slap a label on them, and leave them there for the carriers to pick up.

When she noticed that, she formulated her window of opportunity. The only thing left was to muster up the courage to execute her plan. She decided she would finish the week at school and, instead of going home, would go straight to the factory. By the time she normally got home, it was almost time for them to line up that day's orders. That Friday, she headed straight there as planned, bringing a few necessities and supplies with her. She waited for the right moment and saw the boxes being laid out. When the worker disappeared to grab another doll, she made her move. Miko ran to a box that was already filled and pulled out the doll that was inside.

"Ew... this thing feels a little too real! Welp... no use worrying about it now. Away you go!"

She heaved the doll over the edge of the loading dock and hopped in the box. Once inside, she covered herself with packing peanuts from head to toe. She laid there as still as possible when suddenly, her world grew really dark as the box was closed up. She heard the ripping of a tape gun on the outside and the next thing she knew, she was being tossed into the back of a truck and hauled off to wherever the label on the box would take her



"So as you can see... I ran away from home because I got sick and tired of being told who to be and what to do. My parents aren't rich or anything but they are very controlling. At times, I think they only care about what they want me to become instead of me as a person. They never consider my feelings and whenever I try to bring them up, they just scold me for talking back. It's as if my future was already determined and I'm helpless to do anything about it. I just got sick of it all so I ran away. It doesn't go any deeper than that, though. That's just how it went."

After hearing the story, Daiki had a question. "So, why didn't you call a taxi or something? Why did you stuff yourself into a sex doll box?"

"When it comes to missing people, the police will check everything. Lots of runaways take the train, take a taxi, etc. They will always look at public transportation records, surveillance footage, and things like that. All I needed to do was show up on some camera or receipt and they would have traced the route and found my destination. Remember when I said it was like the circle in a battle royale? That circle would have come for me a lot faster that way. I figured if I hijacked a box and mailed myself, it would increase my stealthiness... especially if the person I got mailed to took me in and promised not to ask for a refund!"

"I might be rich but 2.2 million yen is still a lot of money to lose. Besides, I haven't even figured out how I'm going to tell my parents about it when they see the charge on their credit card! So, you're not the only one taking a risk here."

"Yeah... that is a problem. I can't really pay you back with money but you said you were lonely, right?. I could pay you back by being your girlfriend if you want?"

"Now I know you're teasing me. I already know that having a girlfriend isn't meant for me. Besides, we just met. There isn't a good enough reason for you to even date somebody like me."

"It's true that we just met but... you have to look at it from my perspective. I got dropped on your doorstep. You took me in and you could have done any number of things to me. You could have trapped me in your house, had your way with me, kicked me out on the streets, called the police, etc. But you did none of that. You opened your home to me and gave me a place to stay. You put your trust in a complete and total stranger. That shows me that you care about me even though you know so little."

"I've always cared about people. That's why it's so baffling that no girl would ever want to date me. Anytime someone was in trouble, I did what I could to help them out. Although, I didn't get many thanks. After a while, I realized that people saw me as someone to use whenever they needed something. Even though I was aware of this, I couldn't say no. I guess I kept doing it because it helped me feel just a little less lonely."

"Wow... that's kind of sad. Still, if you're such a nice, good-looking guy... there has to be a reason why nobody wants to date you... hmm... all of a sudden, I think I just found a good way to pay you back!"

"Huh?"

"Nobody knows me around here, right? What if I snooped around town and tried to find out the reason behind your little curse?"

"Y-You'd do that for me!?"

"Sure! A girlfriend needs to support her boyfriend, after all!"

"I never agreed to be your boyfriend..."

"I know. I'm just teasing but... who knows? Maybe the next time I say it, I'll mean it. Just from our short time together, I know that any girl would be lucky to have you... even me."

Miko pinched Daiki on the cheek. Just the soft feeling of her fingertips gracing his face was enough to make him blush. However, Miko wasn't ready to dart out into the streets and start asking people questions.

"Say, before I go snooping around, any good spy needs to survey the area so that they can plan their attack. How about you and me go out on a date?"

"A D-D-D-Date!!!?"

"Yes, a D-D-D-Date! Just me and my little radish boy wandering the town as you give me the grand ol' tour! Just think of it as showing me around your house... only much bigger and more tiresome! Come on! Let's go!"

"Wait, you want to go right now!?"

"Why not? No time like the present to get acquainted with my new hometown! Besides, we can't really do it during the week since you'll be in school."

"Actually, I'm on Spring Break so I don't have school this whole week."

"WOW! Did I luck out or what!? My Spring Break wasn't supposed to be for another three weeks! Kanagawa kids have it good! That means we can do a lot of fun things together! I bet you never had much of a Spring Break before, huh?!"

"Nope. I can't even remember the last time I had a fun Spring Break. With my parents never around, I usually kept to myself here in the house. I would play video games, read manga, or tidy up the place and keep it presentable. Everyone I knew would be out doing a bunch of fun things but I was never invited to any of them. That's pretty much been my life ever since middle school."

"Well, this year is going to be different! Just leave everything to me and I'll make sure that this is a Spring Break you'll never forget!"

Miko added a sly wink at the end of that proclamation which caused Daiki to blush again. When she saw his reaction, she couldn't help but laugh.

"Stop thinking perverted thoughts! I need you to focus for a minute. Since we have all this time to do whatever we want, I need you to think of some places we can go for fun!"

With Kanagawa being the capital of the Ishikawa Prefecture, it served as a major tourist attraction. That meant that there were plenty of things to do in the town but not all of them appealed to teenagers. Daiki tried to think of what some of the other students at school talked about when it came to their Spring Break plans and that's when a few ideas popped into his head.

"Well, there's an arcade not too far from here. Of course, we have a giant shopping mall we could visit. The town is bordered by the Sea of Japan so we could go to the beach..."

"...so you could see me in a bikini, eh?" interrupted Miko.

Daiki nervously waved his hands in front of him as if to say that she got the wrong impression. Miko couldn't help but laugh at how cute he looked with his reaction just now.

"You're teasing me again, aren't you?"

"That part should have been obvious."

Daiki cleared his throat and continued. "There's also going to be a cultural festival with fireworks. They have one each year around this time. Probably

because they know everyone is out of school so local food shops make a killing there.”

“Well, back in my town, we didn’t really have much of that so, why don’t we indulge ourselves and just do all of that?”

“Wait... you want to do everything!?”

“Yeah! This way, I can get a good sense of the town and once I’ve seen the sights and gathered my intel, I can snoop around and see if I can get the inside scoop on your little curse! Sound like a plan?”

It was a sound plan but he didn’t understand why Miko needed to see the whole town first. However, he wondered if it really mattered at this point. He had a golden opportunity right in front of him to have a real Spring Break for once in his life. There was no way that he could have refused such a tempting offer.

“Yeah! Let’s do all of it, then!”

“Perfect! Me and my little radish will paint this town red!”

“Please stop calling me a radish!!”

“You get even cuter when you’re angry, you know that?”

Daiki sighed in defeat. He knew no matter what, his new nickname would stick with him from here on out. The more he thought about it, though, the more he found it rather cute. After all, ‘radish’ was a much better nickname than what his classmates had called him!

*Radish it is, then...*

With their plans settled, the only thing to decide on was which to do first. Given how things just played out, it became pretty obvious where they were headed.



# SHIPMENT 5

## *Of Course, They Chose to Go to the Beach*

Daiki's Spring Break had become very eventful in such a short amount of time. It felt as if someone had snapped their fingers and caused his world to turn upside down. In just the span of 48 hours, he went from obviously buying a sex doll to taking in a runaway girl to possibly having the first real Spring Break in years. However, even with a list of plans in mind, they needed to decide which one to tackle first. In what had become a trademarked gesture for her, Miko placed her finger on her chin and pondered the options but, this time, it was Daiki that spoke up and offered a suggestion.

“Why don’t we head to the beach first?”

“Hmm??? So, you really DO want to see me in a bikini, eh? You’re bolder than I thought you were!”

“N-No!! It’s not that, I swear!” he exclaimed while waving his hands in front of him, sweating nervously. “It’s just that the cultural festival starts tomorrow and runs all week so it’s not like we can do that first. Plus, it’s a bit warm for a spring day so while the ocean itself might be on the cool side, the sand won’t be burning hot. It would be rather comfortable. If we get there around dinnertime, we can even watch the sunset over the sea!”

Miko raised an eyebrow at that last remark, and a grin formed on her face. “So that’s your true goal, eh? You’re hoping to see a pretty sunset with an even prettier girl! Are you trying to set the mood for a wet, juicy kiss?”

“Eh!?” Daiki squeaked as his face turned bright red. “N-N-No! I’m not thinking anything like that! I just thought it would be a nice way to kick things off, that’s all!”

“Mmm-hmm... I bet!” Miko replied with a wink. “It is a good suggestion though so let’s do it! After being in that stuffy box for over a day, it would be nice to soak in some sun and breathe in some fresh ocean air!”

Despite all of their enthusiasm, neither of them budged from their spots because a sudden realization had settled in.

“So... how are we going to get there?” asked Miko.

“I, um, haven’t thought of that, to be honest. I don’t have a driver’s license and even if I did, I don’t have a car. I’ve only walked to school and back and since a lot of the stores around here are so close, I usually just walk to one whenever I need something.”

“So, um... how far is the beach from here anyway?”

“We could walk but we wouldn’t arrive there until after sunset. The beach is on the other side of the city from where we are.”

“Aren’t you loaded? Can’t we just call a cab service?”

“I suppose we could. During the day, the fares are pretty reasonable but once it gets late they increase their fares by 20%. Not that money is a problem, it’s just up to you how long you want to stay. After all, I’m sure you’re pretty tired after everything that happened.”

"Oh, trust me, Daikon-kun. I have *plenty* of energy to spare! Either way, though, that seems pretty doable but there's also one teensy weensy other problem," Miko said with a slight pause. "I kind of packed light on my little trip and what you see is what you get with me. I don't think any beachgoers are going to want to see me parade around in my bra and panties... well... maybe one of them if you get my drift."

Her lack of a suitcase and personal belongings was certainly an issue. Daiki had plenty of swim trunks that he could lend her but he had no tops for obvious reasons. Even with the ocean temperatures on the cool side, they were still bearable enough to swim in so if Miko wanted to go swimming, she wouldn't exactly be able to take her shirt off. This posed a bit of a problem but with Daiki not having to worry about money, it was a problem that could easily be solved.

"That's fine. We can just go down to one of the clothing stores and pick up a swimsuit for you. While we're there, we could also get you a week's worth of clothes! This way you can have different things to wear!"

"You'd really do that for me?"

"It's not like we have a choice. Do you honestly plan to wear the same stuff every day? What happens when you have to wash them? Are you just going to walk around the house naked?"

"What's wrong with that? Are you telling me that your hormones are broken and that you wouldn't enjoy seeing a beautiful girl walk around your house in her birthday suit?"

The mental image was enough to cause Daiki to sweat just a little bit. To say that he got a bit hot under the collar would be an understatement. Just before his mind ran away with lewd thoughts, Miko gave him a light karate chop on the forehead to snap him out of his little daydream.

"If you're done undressing me in your mind, I'll take you up on your offer. I'm sure you already know that I don't have money to pay you back but..." Miko leaned in close to Daiki and wrapped her arm around his neck. Slowly, she brought her lips up to his ear and whispered softly, "...I can find other ways to pay you back." Upon finishing that, she stuck her tongue out and gave his ear a gentle lap.

Daiki recoiled in shock. He went from beet red to as white as a ghost on a dime. Miko couldn't help but burst out into laughter at his reaction. She laughed so hard she even gave her knee a slap followed by a cute little snort.

"Oh my God... your face!!" she exclaimed in between giggles. "I meant that I could do the dishes, clean the house, mow the lawn... stuff like that but you thought..." Miko couldn't finish that sentence as she had become overrun with laughter.

"It's your fault for making me think that way!!" he shouted in protest.

Daiki wasn't used to having friends, much less female friends that had no shame. With as much as Miko had teased him so far, he had a sinking feeling that this was something he would have to get used to. On the bright side, someone as carefree and sassy as her could make life a bit more interesting. Even though he was thoroughly embarrassed, deep down, there was a little part of him that oddly enjoyed it.

As he realized that daylight was burning by the second, he cleared his throat. "So, I guess we should go before it gets too late."

Miko agreed. "Yeah! Let's go pick out the skimpiest and sexiest swimsuit in all of Kanagawa!"

Daiki let out a sigh as he expected nothing less from Miko at this point. The other thing that weighed on his mind was the fact that he would have to pay for her clothes with his parent's credit card. He had already charged ¥2.2 million for what he thought was an android companion and now he was going to be adding women's clothing to it, too. He had no idea just how in the world he was going to explain these charges to his mother. Like before, there was no use worrying about it now. He was just going to have to figure something out eventually.



It only took about ten minutes by foot to reach the shopping district of Kanagawa. Most of that time had been spent waiting for the crosswalk signals to turn green. On their way there, Miko took in the sights, making mental notes of where things were just in case she needed it. Nevertheless, they arrived at a clothing shop and as luck would have it, they were having a Spring Break sale on all of the popular brands. It didn't take a rocket surgeon to figure out the marketing strategy of all of the local businesses. It was a good strategy, after all.

Since the main goal was to go to the beach, they headed straight for the swimsuit section. Daiki looked around nervously to make sure that nobody was looking at him. Being in the women's area of a swimsuit section as a boy wasn't the most endearing trait. He felt extremely embarrassed as he stood there next to Miko while she grabbed a couple of the most revealing swimsuits that they had.

"So, Daiki. What do you like most? Black or white?" she asked as she held up two different designs, each of which would leave absolutely nothing to the imagination.

Daiki turned as pale as a ghost. He knew that Miko would probably go for something revealing but when she saw what she had held up, his mind nearly short-circuited. "W-w-whatever one l-looks g-good to you..."

"Well, I see that just holding them up isn't going to get me the clear-cut answer that I want. Perhaps if you had a visual aid, it would speed things along! Come on!"

Before he could protest, Miko grabbed Daiki by the wrist and led him over to the changing room area. She pulled back the curtain and stepped inside. Before she closed it, she turned and gave Daiki a wink. "You have permission to peek if you want."

Daiki had become a bit paranoid as the curtain closed. Even with the offer, there was no way he was going to be caught peeping into a girl's dressing room in the middle of a public store. Thankfully, it didn't take long for Miko to change. In just mere moments, the curtain flew open, and there she was, nothing but skin from head to toe except for her minuscule black top which barely covered anything, and her matching bottom which was cut so low, it was a dead giveaway that she liked to keep things very smooth down there.

Daiki instantly covered his nose as he felt as if a small trickle had escaped his nostril. "Kch... I... uh... Guh... um... Kch..." were the only noises that could escape his mouth.

"So, what you're trying to say is that this is a one-and-done decision! Perfect! I'll get this one!"

"N-N-No! P-Please get s-s-something a l-l-little l-l-less...um... uh... a little more... you know..."

"Nope! I'm getting this one and you can't stop me!" she said before she stuck out her tongue at him.

Once she changed back, Daiki calmed down but he was still a bit flustered over what he had just seen. Drawing attention to herself given the situation she was in wasn't the best course of action but Daiki was more nervous about being seen with her at the beach than anything. With the rumors flying around about him, the last thing he wanted was to be spotted by someone from his school with a girl dressed in a bikini like that; however, with Miko determined as ever to buy it, there was really nothing he could do about it.

Next, they moved over to where the everyday attire section was. They ended up picking out some shirts and pants for her to wear around the house. Thankfully, none of them came even close to the bikini she had picked out for the beach. She picked out some new underwear too but this time, Daiki opted to go browse some clothes on the other side of the store while she did that. He felt that one nosebleed was enough for today.

Once they had everything, Daiki paid for her new clothes and they were almost set to head to the beach.

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After a quick stop back home to pick up a few items, they arrived at the beach via taxi. For a Sunday, the beach was surprisingly empty. There were some people scattered about but with the beginning of Spring Break, he figured that it would be more crowded than it was; however, he also saw this as a blessing of sorts as the chances of running into anyone from his school were quite low. At least he didn't have to worry about subjecting Miko to any of the rumors. Even if she already knew about them, he would rather that she didn't have to witness it first-hand.

Miko, on the other hand, didn't really waste much time pondering the number of people or the lack thereof. Instead, she spied a long stretch of beach with nobody around and suggested that they set up their stuff there. Before Daiki could even answer, she had already taken off running only to look back and beckon him to follow her.

Miko picked out a nice spot by a rather large piece of driftwood that was stuck in the sand. Daiki laid out the blankets and went to turn to grab the umbrellas when he stumbled back and fell to his seat at the sight before him. By the time he had finished the second blanket, Miko had already stripped down to her newly-purchased bikini and Daiki had nearly gotten a face-full of her chest.



Miko let out a giggle before offering her hand but in order to do so, she had to bend over which meant that the tiny little strings and triangular coverings couldn't withstand the force of gravity. There they dangled right in front of his eyes with a slight jiggle that mesmerized him. The best part of it all was that Miko knew exactly what she was doing.

"You going to take my hand or just continue to stare hypnotically at my chest?" she asked. "Don't get me wrong, I don't mind putting on a show for you, hee hee..."

Daiki closed his eyes as he let out an annoyed sigh. He slowly reached out for her hand but before he could even grasp it, she snatched him by the wrist and gave it a yank. Daiki rode the momentum and hopped back up to his feet.

"Now that I've gotten you up in more ways than one, let's take care of something first! I need your help and I'm more than sure you're going to enjoy assisting me!"

"W-What do you need help with?"

"I need you to get me moist, Daikon-kun!"

By now, one would think that anything Miko said shouldn't be taken literally but it still didn't stop Daiki's heart from nearly stopping. Miko grinned as she held up a bottle of suntan lotion.

"O-Oh... Th-That's what you meant..."

"Of course! What did you think I meant? I can't exactly get my back so if you can put your hands all over me and grease me up, I can do the same for you. Wouldn't want to start off Spring Break with a sunburn, now would we?"

Miko turned around and exposed her back to him. Her bikini was so skimpy that any black lace didn't matter. Every soft hair, every pore, every curve; all of it was on full display. Daiki gulped hard as he placed a dollop of lotion on the palm of his hand. Shaking, he slowly inched closer until his hand pressed against her back. As he began to rub the lotion into her skin, he couldn't help but notice just how soft and smooth it felt.

His cheeks turned a nice shade of crimson as he continued to work in the lotion. Miko decided to give him a tease by letting out a few soft moans as his hands caressed her skin. That only made him more nervous but as he finished up the entirety of her back, she peered over her shoulder with a sly look.

"Mind getting the ol' cheeks, too?" she said as she gave her butt a slight wiggle.

Daiki froze so hard, he dropped the bottle of lotion in the sand, his hands trembling as his brain had completely short-circuited. Miko let out a faint little laugh as she turned and picked up the bottle.

"Guess I can't get a freebie today. It's fine, I'll get it myself. Now turn around and I'll return the favor."

Daiki breathed out a sigh of relief and did just that. Miko lathered up her hands and leaned in close. Daiki felt her press her body up against his as she whispered "moan for me" into his ear. She then began to rub the lotion in but she wasn't as quick about it as he was. Her movements were very slow as she took her time to feel every inch of his back. In fact, rather than pressing her hand into his back to rub the lotion in, she opted to rub it in with just her thumb.

Slowly, she made her way from top to bottom. Once every inch of his back was covered, she grabbed his waistband and pulled it out, taking a peek at what was inside. Before Daiki could react to what she was doing, she let it go causing it to snap against his back.

"Good butt," she remarked.

While Daiki couldn't believe that she freely took a peek at him, Miko headed right for the water without any hesitation. That's when he got to see Miko's

backside in motion for the first time. His jaw practically fell open as he watched her bounce away, each cheek rippling in a hypnotic fashion with every step.

Right before the water's edge, she stopped and looked back with a grin on her face. "Boy meets world, let's go!" she called out.

Daiki snapped out of it and headed toward the water. "Let's go in together!" she suggested with excitement.

Once again, Miko didn't wait for Daiki to answer. She wrapped her arm around him and tossed him right into the ocean! There was nothing "together" about that; however, she did follow him right after. Daiki had been taken by surprise so his natural reaction was to get his footing and stand as quickly as possible so that he wouldn't accidentally inhale any seawater. As he broke the plane of the ocean's surface, it was as if time had entered slow motion for Miko.

As he rose up, tiny globules of water flew into the air and scattered, glistening in the lukewarm afternoon sun. Daiki's body wasn't exactly chiseled out of stone but it had a nice toned shape to it. While it wasn't much, he made do with the default settings his body came with. Despite that, it was enough to catch Miko's eye as it glistened with seawater like a majestic porpoise emerging from the depths.

Slowly, Miko's eyes slowly drifted downward, the smile on her face becoming wider and wider. Once Daiki found his footing and stood up, he noticed Miko wasn't exactly making eye contact at a reasonable level.

"Heh... Heh..." she muttered.

Her reaction was enough to arouse some suspicion. Daiki slowly looked down to see what she had been staring at. One could almost hear the audible sound of a baby elephant trumpeting in the distance. Miko placed her finger on her chin as if to process what was beheld in front of her which didn't help matters at all. If Daiki's body could have turned red from head to toe, it would have in that instant. To add insult to injury, his swim trunks casually floated by between himself and Miko which painted the full picture of what happened.

"EEEHHHH!!!!??" he exclaimed as he swiped his trunks and immediately sat down in the water. He quickly placed them back on but despite everything being covered, he felt too embarrassed to stand up again. The only saving grace for him was that Miko was the only one around to witness that embarrassing situation.

"Here I was, trying to be bold by exposing as much of my body as possible but I see that you were determined to outdo me!" exclaimed Miko with not a shred of disappointment in her voice.

"P-Please don't..."

"Aw, have more confidence! It was... impressive! I was right to nickname you Daikon-kun!"

Daiki grumbled as he sank further into the water until his mouth became submerged. From there, nothing but bubbles rose up to the surface as he cursed to himself. Miko laughed at how embarrassed he was before she swiped her hand and splashed him in the face with some water.

"C'mon! No need to sulk over me seeing your cute little dangly bits. Just think of it this way... if your trunks fall off again, they're old news! Been there, done that! So, you might as well forget about it and have some fun!" she said as she splashed him again.

Miko was doing her best to make him feel comfortable about the situation and it kind of worked. He slowly stood up making fully sure that his trunks stayed

on this time. As he stood, Miko splashed him for the third time. That's when Daiki grinned and swiped his hand, splashing her back.

"That's the spirit! Get me as wet as you can!"

"Eh heh..." he muttered as he wished that she had chosen better phrasing for that but if she had, she wouldn't be Miko.

Once they were tired of playing around in the water, they headed back to shore to dry off. There was a small vendor selling flavored ice nearby. It would be a bit of a walk from where they were but Daiki asked if Miko wanted some anyway. She took him up on the offer so they went over and grabbed a couple of them. He bought the lemon flavor for himself while Miko desired strawberry.

With their refreshments in hand, they each took a towel back at their little camp and sat there, letting the coolness of their treats soothe their bodies as the spring breeze dried them off. Once they were finished, Daiki laid back and closed his eyes when he suddenly felt Miko's hand grasp his. When he looked over, he noticed Miko staring at him with a warm smile on her face.

"Thank you for everything. It's hard to imagine that I've only known you for a couple of hours. This has been pretty wild for the two of us but I don't think you realize just how much this day has meant to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I took a huge gamble by running away from home. Any number of things could have happened to me, and yet, I landed on the doorstep of a cute-looking boy with a big heart. As I said before, you could have taken advantage of me but, instead, you opened your home up to me, bought me clothes, and took me here where I'm having a lot of fun. I wouldn't have been able to do any of this had I stayed and not run away. So, I just wanted to thank you. For the first time in my life... I truly feel free."

"That may be so but aren't you worried about all the stress you're putting on your parents by doing this?"

"Yes and no. I'm sure they're worried about me. I can safely bet that they're both furious right now more than anything. But at the same time, I think they kind of deserve it. I know that's a terrible thing to say but it's just how I feel. My life felt very drone-like. It was as if everything had been laid out for me and I was just supposed to follow some predetermined line to whatever goal they had in mind. I just wanted to enjoy my teenage years. I have my whole life ahead of me but sometimes I don't think they realized or even thought about that."

"Miko... um... there's something I want to ask you."

"I can probably guess. You're wondering if I'm planning on going back home and, if so, when, right?"

"Y-yeah..."

"If I'm being completely honest, I'm sure a day will come when I'll have to face the music but I want that day to be a day that I choose. I want it to be on my terms. I'm not naive enough to think that I can run away and stay gone forever. I just needed to get out of there and felt that there was no other solution. For now, I just want to enjoy myself... even if it ends up being for just a little bit. Why do you ask? Are you already tired of me and want me gone?"

"No. But, like you, I know this can't last forever. While I'm happy to help you, I also worry about your parents. I'm sure they have a reason why they treated you like that. Have you ever thought of asking them to explain themselves to you?"

"I never felt like it, to be honest. We would always end up in arguments and I got so angry that I didn't really care about what they had to say. They just pushed me and pushed me until I decided that I didn't want to be pushed anymore and, well, I guess you know the rest."

As sassy and outgoing as Miko was, there was still a real-life teenage girl underneath it all complete with her own set of worries. All Miko wanted was to know what it felt like to be free and have a bit of fun... something that every teenager desired. It didn't get much simpler than that.

As the two of them laid there, the sun began to curve down beneath the ocean waves. It ignited the sky in brilliant colors of amber and orange. The clouds themselves looked as if they glowed with smoldering embers against a sky whose gradient went from dark blue to a deep orange at the horizon. All of which were reflected on the ocean's surface. Mother nature had painted a masterpiece just for them that day.

After the sun had set, they decided to pack it up and head back home. After their talk, things got a bit quiet between the two of them. All the joking had stopped but it wasn't because things had gotten awkward. One could say that they were both content with the way things turned out and just enjoying each other's company in silence felt right.

It may have been one of the wildest 24 hours of Daiki's life but it was a day he, certainly, would not forget.



# SHIPMENT 6

## *The Morning After is Pretty Sweet, Too*

Their time at the beach had come to an end. By the time they had returned, the sun had completely set and had given way to a clear night sky. They each took a quick shower to wash the salt water and sand off of them before they slipped into some more comfortable clothes.

Even though the evening was still young, the giant yawn that Miko had let out said that she had experienced enough excitement for one day. Figuring that she would just plop down on the couch to relax, Daiki headed in that direction hoping that she would follow. Those hopes were lost when he felt a tug on his shirt.

“Say. Want to turn in early tonight?” asked Miko.

“Do you mean... as in... go to bed?”

“Yeah. it’s been a long day... or weekend, in my case. I might be spunky but I’m not full of infinite energy, you know.”

He wasn’t exactly sure if he was ready to spend a night in bed alone with a girl, especially one as cute as Miko.

“So, you ready or not?” she asked impatiently.

Daiki swallowed hard as he tried to calm his nerves. He remembered how he had put his foot down earlier and knew that in order to have some peace of mind, he was going to have to do it again. “Miko, I’m sorry, but... can you take the guest room?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Daiki blinked. “Wait. Are you sure? You said earlier that you wanted to sleep in my bed!”

“I was being serious when I said that but only because I needed to test whether or not I could trust you. I think you proved it enough after today so, I’ll just take the guest room. After all, it’s not every day you get to see a piece of driftwood in the ocean! I figured that I could cut you *some* slack, tee hee.”

Daiki let out a sigh of relief. Some would call him a fool for throwing away a golden opportunity such as this. Still, he was a bit shocked that Miko accepted his proposal so quickly.

He led Miko upstairs. Daiki entered the guest room and pulled out a futon that was stored in the closet. He laid it out on the floor and made sure she had enough pillows and blankets to go with it. When it was all said and done, he brushed his hands together and felt Miko’s arms wrap around his waist as she hugged him from behind.

“Don’t worry. Just my way of saying thanks... as if I didn’t say it enough already today, haha.”

Daiki smiled as Miko let go of her grip. She laid down on the futon and wished Daiki a good night. He headed to his room where he closed the door and climbed into bed. Normally, he would press his back against the wall but the lingering feeling of Miko’s hug changed that. He laid there on his left side facing the wall, staring at it in contemplation.

*Of all of the random things to happen to me, who would have ever guessed things would end up like this? I still don't know how to process any of this but, I'm kind of glad it happened. Even if it can't last forever... I have to admit that today made me very happy. Miko is a bit of a handful but I can tell she's harmless. Our situations are different but they really are the same, aren't they? We both just want to escape from a reality that we'd rather not be in. Even if it's just for a little while... please let me continue to escape with you, Miko...*

Daiki closed his eyes and soon found himself drifting off to sleep.

Meanwhile, in the guest room, Miko tossed and turned in her futon but she just couldn't find a comfortable position. She sat up and looked around as she waited for her eyes to adjust. Once they did, she looked around the room and began to take stock of her surroundings. Like Daiki's, there wasn't much to it but it wasn't the lack of physical possessions in the room that bothered her. For some reason, she felt empty. As she pondered that feeling, she grabbed a few strands of her long, pink hair and began to twirl it with her fingers.

*Why am I feeling like this? I sleep all by myself at home all the time! Still... This feels different. Is it because I'm in someone else's house? Is it the change in scenery? Why do I feel so alone? Miko tilted her head down and rubbed her chin. No... that can't be it. There has to be something else. I wonder if it's because...*

Suddenly, she paused as her eyes widened. She quickly placed her hands on the side of her head and shook it as if to knock the thoughts out of it. It didn't work.

*That can't be it. We just met! There's no way something like that happens THAT fast... does it? I don't even know everything about him yet... Is it because of his kindness? His looks? That light tone in his voice? What is it about him?"*

Miko pulled the covers off of her completely and stood. She took a deep breath as if she were mentally preparing herself. *There's only one way to know for sure...*

Soon after, the door to Daiki's room opened. Miko tried to be quiet; however, Daiki had not yet fallen asleep fully. The noise of his door opening caused his eyes to snap open. The next thing he knew, he felt the weight of Miko's body on the mattress next to him.

Miko pulled the covers over herself, sealing the two of them underneath. She pressed her back up against Daiki's which created a familiar, yet, not-so-familiar feeling. The feeling of Miko's body heat felt both nice and relaxing but also unnerving since he had no idea what was happening. Since he had no idea how to react, Daiki just laid there, eyes wide open and staring at the wall. Soon, that changed when Miko turned over and pressed herself up against his body. He was very aware of what part of her was making contact with his shoulder blades.

*S-So soft... No! I can't think that! I made a promise! Besides, why is she in here with me!?*

Things escalated, even more, when Miko wrapped her arm around his waist and gave him a bit of a squeeze. Her soft hand against his stomach was enough to cause his mind to race out of control. He then felt a tug on his waist as she pulled him in towards her body even more.

Suddenly, he felt her move as if she were attempting to climb on top of him, her lips drawing closer and closer to his neck and then up to his ear. He could feel the heat from her breath slowly pulsating against his earlobe. Just when he couldn't take it anymore, everything faded in an instant when she spoke softly.

“Say, Daiki...”

“Y-yeah...? “

“Is me being in here bothering you?”

“N-not really. It’s fine,” he lied.

“I see. I like sleeping on my left side. Is it okay if I stay like this throughout the night?”

“W-what? You mean c-clinging onto me?”

“Yeah! What’s wrong with that?”

The tone in her voice was a bit more serious and it didn’t seem as if she were teasing him. However, he couldn’t be a hundred percent sure about it. He had to know.

“You’re just teasing me, aren’t you?” he asked, hoping that he could hide his nervousness.

“Perhaps... but I’m doing it for a reason.”

“What reason?”

“That’s a secret for now. So, can I stay like this or not?”

“D-do as you like...”

“Sweet! Goodnight, Daikon-kun, hehe.”

Daiki sighed as he knew that he was never going to escape that nickname with her. “Mmm... goodnight.”

Miko pressed herself up against Daiki’s back. With her arm wrapped around him tightly, she soon fell asleep. Since the situation couldn’t be helped, he closed his eyes and let the warmth of Miko’s body wash over him. Even her tiny breaths against the nape of his neck began to soothe him. To be embraced in this way felt rather good. Instead of overthinking it, he simply closed his eyes as a faint smile formed on his face.



The next morning, Daiki woke up and discovered that he was in bed all alone. Even though he was well aware of the events that happened last night, part of him in his groggy state wondered if it was just a dream. He turned over and placed his hand on the side of the bed Miko slept in and noticed that it was rather cool to the touch as if nobody had been there.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, taking in the sights of his room. Everything seemed just the way it was the last time he had gone to bed which led his mind further down the rabbit hole. He swung his legs over and planted them firmly on the floor; however, something felt a bit off. When he looked down, his face turned bright red with embarrassment as he saw that he had stepped on the top of Miko’s bra!

*It-It wasn’t just a dream!? I really did sleep with Miko last night!?*

As his senses sharpened, he could smell something heavenly wafting through the air. He made his way downstairs to see that Miko was in the kitchen cooking him a rather large breakfast. She wore a white apron that belonged to his mother but she looked absolutely adorable in it. Daiki couldn’t help but just stand there as he took in the sight of it all.

When she spied him looking on, she cracked one of the cutest smiles and welcomed him.

“Good morning, my little Daikon-kun! Breakfast is almost ready so have a seat and I’ll serve you up something good!”

Daiki took a seat at his dining room table. The right side of his house was a wide-open kitchen/dining room combo with a ceiling that stretched all the way up to the second floor. A small single step was the only thing that separated the dining area from the kitchen. There was a small balcony that overlooked it all on the second floor with an expensive-looking chandelier that hung over the table. It was definitely a dining area fit for a wealthy owner for sure. As he sat there, he began to get lost in his thoughts.

*Is this what it's like to have a girlfriend? I've never really known what it was like to wake up to a cute girl, let alone have one cook me breakfast. It feels... nice.*

As he thought that, Miko set down a plate of fish that came complete with pickled vegetables. Next were two bowls... one for the rice and one for the miso soup. She laid out a serving for herself and took a seat across the table from him so that she could watch him enjoy every bite first-hand. She placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her hands. She looked on with intent as Daiki picked up a pair of disposable chopsticks. That's when he noticed her stare and became a bit embarrassed.

“Go on. It’s not poisoned. Well, I might have slipped in an aphrodisiac, but you’ll only know once you take a bite,” she said with a sly wink.

Daiki laughed nervously; however, he knew that she was just teasing him. He pulled away some of the fish meat with his chopsticks and added some of the pickled vegetables to it. One bite caused his eyes to turn into sparkling stars.

“This is delicious!” he exclaimed.

“I’m glad you like it! I put a lot of effort into it. It’s just another way for me to thank you.”

Just hearing that made Daiki smile. After they finished breakfast, the agenda of what to do for the day came up.

“So, going to the beach is now off the checklist. What kind of Spring Break memory can I help create for you next?”

“Well, the cultural festival is running all week. We can go check that out if you want?”

“Yeah, that’s kind of a given but... I think I’d like to go check that out at night. There’s just something magical about walking through all of the food stalls and seeing everything lit up against a dark background. Plus, just imagine... With it being springtime, the night air will be a lot cooler so think of how awesome it would feel to have that cool breeze caress you and then have it replaced by the heat from the nearby food stalls!”

Sometimes, it’s the little things in life like that which can make or break an experience. Daiki was impressed that Miko thought about details as intricate as those. It certainly wasn’t something he would have thought of but with the way she described the atmosphere and her choice of words, he began to wonder if there was some kind of hidden meaning behind it.

“We can go tonight then but what should we do before that? We have an entire day to kill.”

“Honestly? I wouldn’t mind just staying in and relaxing. Even though I did get a good night’s sleep, I’m still pretty exhausted. Spending some time being lazy wouldn’t kill us before we go out and expend some more energy at a festival.”

“That’s true but... there really isn’t much to do around the house, though.”

“Well, what do you do when you’re home alone?”

“I usually read manga or play video games.”

“Hmm,” said Miko as she placed her finger on her chin. “Come to think of it. When I woke up, I saw that you have the latest PlayTerminal 5. I’ve always wanted one but they’re so damn hard to come by. Plus, there was no way my parents would ever buy me one with the grades I’ve been getting so... all I could do was look up people on Twinge and play the latest games vicariously through them.”

“My dad has connections so he was able to get me one for Christmas last year. He let me pick out a few games to go with it. My favorite is Jangle and Clink: Rift Beyond. It’s like playing an action movie but you control the action scenes!”

“I’ve seen one online streamer play it. It looked really fun! I’d love to give it a try!”

Miko didn’t have to say another word. They cleaned off the dining room table and headed back up to Daiki’s room. As soon as they entered, Daiki took immediate notice of the bra still laying on the floor at the foot of his bed... as did Miko. She casually bent down and picked it up.

“Ah, there’s where I left it. I thought I had brought it into the shower with me but I must have dropped it. I figured I would just look for it later as I wanted to make sure breakfast was ready by the time you got up. Now that I have it, it’s time to secure the girls!”

“W-wait! You’re going to put it on right here in front of me!?”

“Yup! Feel free to look as much as you want. After all, it’s only fair you get to see a bit of me since I saw a LOT of you yesterday, tee hee.”

Despite permission to do so. Daiki shut his eyes and brought his hands up to cover them.

Miko let out a sigh. “Suit yourself, then. You could stand to be more adventurous, you know.”

Miko took her shirt off and then slipped her bra on. She kept checking to see if Daiki would peek almost as if she were hoping for him to do so. One quick click later and her bra was hooked. She put her shirt back on and leaned in close to Daiki’s face.

“Okay. You can uncover your eyes now. I promise I’m decent.”

Daiki uncovered his eyes and was startled to see Miko so up close and personal. He let out a little yelp as he darted backward and bumped into his bed, falling into a seated position on it. Miko couldn’t help but laugh at his reaction.

“You’re too cute sometimes, you know? Still, I wish you would have peeked... or did you?”

“N-No! Of course not! I... I saw enough of it yesterday...”

“Oh ho? So, you did enjoy the view at the beach, eh?”

“It’s not like I could help it! You were practically wearing nothing!”

“I know! I looked good, didn’t I?”

Daiki turned his head, obviously embarrassed. There was no way he was going to answer that question and Miko knew it. Still, she giggled at how

uncomfortable she made him feel and turned her attention to the PlayTerminal 5.  
“Hmm... how do I...?”

“Oh, it’s the button on the bottom.”

Miko pressed it while Daiki got up and turned the TV on. After it made its familiar beep, the system booted up. Since Jangle and Clink was the last game he played, the disc was still inside and ready to go but thanks to the ability to pick up where you left off, it dropped Miko right into the final level.

“Oh. You’ll probably want to go back to the home screen and start a new file.”

“Hmm... how do I do that?”

“Here... I’ll show you.”

Daiki scooted closer to Miko and wrapped his arms around her so that he could easily grip both sides of the controller. When it came to video games, Daiki was quite serious so he wasn’t immediately aware of what he was doing. He was more concerned with helping Miko navigate the system’s menus.

“So, you just press the PlayTerminal icon button and then click this one to exit the software. When you start it again, you’ll be...”

As Daiki said that, he looked up and noticed just how close he was to Miko’s face. He could clearly see every pore in her skin. Conversely, Miko could do the same and the two of them instantly turned red in the face. Daiki scooted backward, putting some room between them.

“...a-at t-t-the title screen... and... you c-can s-start a n-new file...”

Daiki scratched the side of his cheek while Miko turned her head toward the television and followed his instructions. “R-right...” she muttered. With a couple of button presses, she started a new game and began to get immersed in it.

*We were so close and yet... she didn’t say anything! In fact, she looked embarrassed. I thought for sure she would have teased me again but... why didn’t she?*

About an hour went by as Miko played the game. It was a rough start but she soon got accustomed to the controls. However, just when she got used to the game, the difficulty began to ramp up and she started to struggle a bit. Daiki tried to offer her some pointers but he soon learned that she was just as intense about gaming as he was. She practically swatted him away as she gritted her teeth, showing her determination. It got to the point where he had to just sit back and observe as trying to get involved could become hazardous to his health!

With a fire in her eyes, Miko pressed forward through the game. Enemy after enemy fell victim to her wrath as Daiki became more and more impressed with her gaming skills. Soon, he began to watch Miko more than the screen. Every little jolt of her body, the subtle noises she made when she was in a tough fight, the flare of her nostrils, the gritting of her teeth, the pure concentration... all of it looked magical in the rays of the morning sun that came in through his window.

As the hours passed, Daiki’s stomach began to rumble. He tried to ask her if she wanted to take a break and get something to eat; however, she had become too engrossed in the game to even hear a word he said. Knowing what it was like to be in the zone while gaming, he knew that getting through to her would be futile. He figured that he would just silently excuse himself and head back down to the kitchen and fix her something to eat.

He rummaged through the fridge and thought that some simple turkey sandwiches would do the trick. To make them a bit more special, he decided to toast the bread. They weren't as fancy as the breakfast Miko cooked this morning but he figured that with the state she was in, something light and quick would work just fine and guarantee minimal downtime from playing. Just as he was about to put the finishing touches on them, he heard a noise come from behind him. When he looked to see what it was, he noticed that the handle to the front door had turned and soon, the door itself had opened.

The one thing that he didn't expect to happen happened.

His parents came home.

# SHIPMENT 7

## *Well, That Was Certainly Unexpected*

Daiki had become frozen at the sight of his parents. For the past few years, his parents had been on the road traveling from business to business, making sure that everything was in order. They only came home for the Holidays, and because of such, it became a tradition for them to catch up with him. They would review his grades, inspect the house, and make sure he had everything that he needed. While they put work first, they did love their son with all of their heart and did everything they could to make sure he could lead a fulfilling life.

When Daiki saw them walk through the front door, he didn't know how to react. Under any other circumstance, he would have been elated to see them and would have welcomed them home with open arms but in this particular instance, he realized that there was a 16-year-old runaway girl upstairs completely engrossed in a video game and unaware of what was happening.

As she stepped in first, his mother Rei noticed his expression. She was dressed head to toe in a black business suit with a white dress shirt underneath. She had black hair that stopped right at her shoulders with her bangs styled to the left. "Look, dear. Daiki is surprised to see us home!"

"Indeed, he is," replied his father Kota who was dressed more plainly in a white business shirt and black business slacks. He also sported a pair of thin, rectangular glasses and had the same color hair as Daiki in an executive cut. "You can't really blame him, though. This is quite the rare occasion."

"W-Welcome home," Daiki said meekly.

What was conspicuous was that he was holding two separate paper plates with a sandwich he had made for himself and Miko on each one. A detail like that couldn't easily be hidden. He swallowed hard when his father immediately took notice of it.

"Two plates? Do you have a guest, Daiki?"

He could have easily said 'yes' and then tried to pass Miko off as a friend from school but exposing her to his parents could risk putting her in danger. They traveled all over Japan and if they happened to go to a region where a missing person's report had been broadcasted, it could spell disaster for her. He had to think quickly to try and explain the need for two plates.

"No. I was really hungry so I made myself two sandwiches but the paper plates were too thin so I was going to put them together. I kind of zoned out and put a sandwich on each one by accident."

"Well, you better do it quickly. One of the plates is already buckling," his father said.

Daiki's nerves caused him to grip a plate a little too hard and it caused it to fold. While it was a dumb luck accident, it added authenticity to his lie. He immediately fixed it while breathing a slight sigh of relief that his father bought such a ridiculous excuse.

"What are you guys doing home?" he asked.

"Well," said his mother. "We have a client that's interested in selling their business to us here in Kanagawa and they invited us to a dinner party tonight to discuss the details. They're also taking us on their yacht as part of some business formalities. It's been a business that we've had our eye on for a while, too. The good news is that if we can secure their business then we can feel a bit more comfortable with a decision that we made."

"A decision?"

"Yes," replied Kota. "The reason why we've been traveling so much is that we were also looking for potential buyers for a lot of our businesses. I'm happy to say that out of the five that we own, we have all but closed on four. Should we secure this local business, we can push these deals forward and all should close sometime near the end of the year. With the money that we'll be making from those sales, we will be hiring managers to run the remaining company and then have them report to us weekly via online meetings."

"In other words, Daiki, we're working on being home a lot more often," said Rei. "I know it hasn't been easy with us gone all of the time. I wish we could have done this sooner but these things take time. Soon, though, we're going to fix this and make up for lost time!"

Miko had luckily made it to a lull in the game and heard voices coming from downstairs. That's when she realized that someone else was in the house with Daiki. She began to panic as there really was nowhere to hide. She could head for the closet but to do so, she would have to cross in front of his doorway. The only other option would be to squeeze herself underneath his bed.

She decided the closet would be the best hiding spot but she needed to make sure she could get there first. She turned the console and television off and laid low on the ground. Next, she shimmied her way over to where she could see out of the doorway. She slowly poked her head out and noticed a man and a woman talking to Daiki and not really looking in her direction.

She took this opportunity to roll along the floor to remain as low as possible. When she was on the other side of the door and out of sight, she slipped into the closet; however, it was a bit cramped in there and her quick thinking didn't allow her to get into a comfortable position. She tried to shift but when she did, she bumped into something and caused it to fall over. Both Rei and Kota looked up at the second floor in the direction of Daiki's room and became suspicious as the noise was loud enough to be heard downstairs.

"I thought you said you didn't have any company?" asked his father.

"I don't," Daiki said, beginning to sweat a bit.

"You're not lying to us, are you?" asked Rei.

"No! I swear!"

"Son... you know how much I hate dishonesty. First, you have two sandwiches and now we clearly heard something up in your room. You're making it very hard for us to believe you."

Daiki began to walk toward the staircase. "Fine. Come with me and I'll prove that I'm telling the truth."

Rei and Kota followed closely behind. As Daiki made his way up the stairs, his heart had begun to race so high, that he could have been a candidate to be diagnosed with tachycardia. Once they reached the top, Daiki immediately looked at where Miko had been sitting, hoping and praying that she wasn't there playing

Jangle and Clink. Daiki breathed a sigh of relief as Miko was nowhere to be found. His father took around the room and became a bit miffed at what he saw.

“Son... I know that you’re home alone but we expect you to have a bit more respect for your room. Your bed is unmade, your game system’s controller is just lying on the floor, and there are clothes everywhere instead of the laundry basket... this is a disaster.”

As soon as he said that, there was another noise that came from the closet. Even though Miko had remained still, whatever she knocked over hadn’t fallen all the way. At the worst possible timing ever, it decided to topple some more and make a noise. Miko silently cursed whatever it was that fell as she quickly looked around to see if she could find a way out of this.

“Daiki. Who is in the closet?” asked his father.

“Nobody...”

“Daiki, we’ve played along with this charade long enough. You’ve been acting suspiciously this entire time. Tell me the truth. Who is in your closet?”

“Nobody is in there, I promise!”

“Well, I’m about to find out if you’re lying or not.”

Miko had to think fast. Her time to search for an answer was over. She frantically looked around and then saw something that could buy her a way out of this. She reached up to the shelf above her and right when Kota opened the door, she made a swiping motion with her arm. Suddenly, volume after volume of manga fell and spilled out right at Kota’s feet. Miko took the opportunity to press herself as far back into the corner of the closet as possible, hoping that the sound of the manga falling would mask her movements. Luckily enough, it did.

“I guess the noise was my manga collection falling over,” said Daiki hoping that his father wouldn’t stick his head in further.

“We really need to have a talk about things, Daiki. This is not what I expect from you when we come home. You can’t just haphazardly stuff things into a closet like this. I could have been hurt had I not been standing further back.”

“Sorry, dad.”

Kota narrowed his eyes before turning to face his son. He looked at him for a moment as if he wanted to say something but was hesitant to do so. Suddenly, he closed his eyes and let out a heavy sigh.

“I’ll let it go this time but I want you to spend the rest of the afternoon cleaning this room. No excuses. You are to pick up this mess and stack your books properly. Then these clothes need to be put into a hamper, your bed needs to be made, your game system needs to be neatly stowed away, and while you’re at it, you might as well dust and wipe everything down. I’ll be back up here before we head out to inspect it.”

“Yes, sir. Understood.”

Kota and Rei took their leave and closed the door behind them. As they made their way down the stairs, Rei nudged Kota in the arm, grabbing his attention.

“Don’t you think it’s cute that our son was trying his hardest to hide his girlfriend from us?”

“I don’t think it’s cute at all. Besides, I already caught a glimpse of her when the manga fell over so I know he’s lying. I don’t understand why he just doesn’t tell us. We’re his parents after all. Does he not think we would approve?”

"It might just be an awkward time for him. Besides, as hard as he tried, he forgot something rather important," said Rei as she pointed towards the guest bedroom where the futon Daiki had laid out for Miko was still there. Kota pinched the bridge of his nose as he let out another sigh.

"I wanted to say something but I could tell this situation was awkward enough for him. Maybe I made the wrong decision to let it slide. Should I go back and confront him?"

"Leave him be. It's obvious that he's not ready for us to meet her, otherwise, he wouldn't have gone through the trouble of trying to hide her from us. I'm sure when he's ready, he'll do the proper introductions. He's probably doing a lot of thinking right now. In these times, it's best to give him his privacy and let him figure things out for himself."

"You may be right but it still doesn't sit well with me that he's hiding it from us. I expect our son to be more honest than that. We didn't raise him to be this way!"

"Come on, what did you expect? The truth is we've hardly raised him at all! We're never home and yes, we are trying to fix that, but what did you think Daiki was going to do while we were gone? Living alone at his age must be very hard on him. Could you only imagine just how lonely you would be if you were in his shoes? Just be happy that he has someone to keep him company."

Kota nodded as he knew that his wife was right. He caved and continued downstairs where he retired to his den for now. Meanwhile, Rei decided to relax. She took a seat on the couch and flipped the television on, surprised to see that it was still on her favorite channel. As she sat there, an infomercial played that caught her attention.

"Hmm... I don't have one of those yet!"

Back upstairs, Miko slowly poked her head out of the closet to see if the coast was clear. Daiki motioned to her to come out so she tiptoed out from the rubble of manga, a bit nervous.

"That was close! I was afraid you were too zoned out to realize what was going on."

"I heard you talking to someone downstairs. I quickly shut everything off and hid in the closet. I was pretty relieved to see that it was just your parents. At first, when I heard voices I thought that... well... I mean, you don't seem like the person to but..."

"You thought I was bringing the police up here to take you away?" he asked as all Miko could do was nod in response.

"I wouldn't do that to you. I'm just glad you picked up on things but it looks like you're going to have to be as quiet as possible for a while. My parents will be leaving in a few hours to go to a dinner party so if you stay in here while I clean up, it shouldn't be a problem. You heard what my dad said so when you hear him coming up, just hide somewhere until he's done inspecting. I'd hate to suggest it but maybe hide under the bed as he's going to check the closet."

Miko nodded as she began to pick up the volumes of manga she knocked over. She felt guilty about causing such a mess so she wanted to help clean it up in any way that she could. She did an incredible job of piling them up by series and then putting them back on the shelf in alphabetical order.

Meanwhile, Daiki tossed his clothes into a laundry basket. He made his bed and put his PlayTerminal controller away. All that was left was to dust and wipe everything down. Daiki told her to stay out of sight as he headed for a cleaning closet on the top floor. He grabbed a rag and some cleaner and headed back in but Miko snatched them from his hands.

“I’ll take care of this. Besides, I’m still earning my keep here.”

Daiki nodded as Miko went straight to work. As he watched, he began to feel guilty having her do all of the work so they ended up splitting the duties. Daiki dusted while Miko wiped everything down. By the time they were done, everything smelled fresh with a hint of lemon. If the room could sparkle like a diamond spinning in a display case, it would have. Daiki had never seen his room that clean before and was mightily impressed at what they accomplished with a little teamwork.

By the time they finished, there was about an hour left until dinner. He didn’t know what to do and neither did Miko. She took a seat on the edge of the bed and patted the spot next to her. A bit embarrassed, he sat down and that’s when she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Say, Daiki... if I ran away, what would you do?”

“Huh? Run away?”

“Yeah... with your parents being back, I can’t stay here anymore. You can’t hide me forever, so... maybe it’s time I get out of here?”

“You don’t have to leave, Miko. After dinner, they are going on a yacht. Once they’re done with that, they’re going to be getting on another plane and heading off to their next business appointment. Once they leave, they’ll be gone again for a while.”

“Daiki... you know that sooner or later, I’m going to have to, right? The circle will eventually find me and if it doesn’t, what’s stopping your parents from making another surprise return home? Next time, we might not be so lucky.”

“I don’t want to think about that. Not after you became the best... er, never mind.”

“Hmm? What were you going to say?”

“I-It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it. I was just going to say something dumb, that’s all.”

“I see. You know, Daiki... it’s okay to be an idiot once in a while.”

As Miko said that, they heard footsteps coming up the stairs. He thought that they would have had more time but that wasn’t the case. Miko quickly got down on the floor and shimmied underneath the bed, going as far back as she could.

Daiki stood up and smoothed out the top sheets to make it look as if he had just finished tidying up. That’s when the door to his room opened and his father stepped inside. He slowly looked around and saw just how clean everything looked. He walked over and opened the closet to see that everything was in order with immaculate detail. Satisfied, he closed the door and gave the room another good once over as if he were looking for something. When he didn’t find it, he gave Daiki a pat on the back.

“Good job cleaning up. The next time we’re home, I expect to walk in here and find the room in the same condition.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your mother and I are heading out early. I don’t know when we’ll be back again but next time, we’ll be sure to call ahead so we don’t surprise you. Even though it was brief, it was good seeing you.”

Kota gave Daiki a big hug before reminding him to behave. With that, he closed the door and took his leave. When the coast was clear, Miko shimmed out from underneath his bed and patted herself down as there were some clumps of dust stuck to her clothes.

“I think I missed a few spots...” she said as she shot Daiki a sly look.  
“Look, Daikon-kun. I’m all dirty now. Would you like to wipe me down?”

“Must you always tease me like that, Miko?”

“Yep!”

Daiki let out a huge sigh. Little did he know his father was still on the other side of the door as he had feigned going downstairs. He heard every word Miko had just said. While he was a bit miffed that Daiki lied to him, he realized that what Rei had said was true. With them not being around, this was the best-case scenario for his son. That’s when he swallowed his pride and decided to leave things be.

“Take care of my son, Miko,” he muttered under his breath.

Kota did his best to quietly tiptoe down the stairs so as to not alert them that he had been still nearby. Soon, he rejoined Rei in the foyer. “Her name is Miko,” he said.

“That’s a cute name.”

“She really seems to like him. You’re right. I think he’s going to be just fine.”

“A woman’s intuition is never wrong. Just keep that in mind for yourself. Also, thank you. I know it must have taken a lot to overlook all of this. Perhaps next time, we can meet her properly and get the full story?”

Kota simply nodded in agreement. While he did overlook it, part of him still wanted answers but with Rei so firmly standing her ground on this, he knew it would be futile to try. With that, the two of them headed out with Rei doing her best to close the door gently behind her.

Back in Daiki’s bedroom, Miko brought up a good point. “You know, it’s not too late. We can still go to the cultural festival if you feel up to it?”

“Yeah... We should go. We can skip dinner and just eat food there and... oops.”

“Oops?”

“I made lunch for us but I completely forgot it downstairs. It’s been sitting on the kitchen counter this whole time.”

“That’s fine. Just leave it be. It’ll mean being a bit hungrier but that’ll just be our excuse to pig out on festival food! I can’t wait for the takoyaki, yakisoba noodles, okonomiyaki, and yakitori... ooh what else... crepes! There has to be a crepe stand there, right!? Maybe some Karaage... oooh! Ice cream! They always have ice cream! Maybe a crepe filled with ice cream!? The best of both worlds and... um... I just made myself super hungry, hehe...”

“It’s close to dinnertime anyway so we could head there now if you want?”

“Nah, it’ll ruin the nighttime magic, remember? We have to go when it’s dark and cool out! The atmosphere is just as important as anything else!”

“Then at least let’s go downstairs and eat the sandwiches I made.”

“Yeah... Now that I talked about food, I don’t think I’m going to last until tonight.”

Daiki didn’t see the sandwiches he had made and instinctively checked the fridge. He figured his mother had put them in there to keep them fresh after he didn’t come back downstairs. After all, she had a thing about wasting food. Even if there were just a couple of spoonfuls of something left, she would stow them in a container and keep them in the fridge. Growing up, she was taught to never waste food which meant those lessons were drilled into Daiki’s head, too.

After eating, they spent the rest of the day lounging around the house. Miko got back into Jangle and Clink and ended up beating the game. When the sun had begun to set, they figured that it was time to head out.

With the weather being cool, Daiki grabbed his jacket and realized that Miko didn’t have one for herself. He found a spare in his closet and, as he expected, it looked good on her. It was a dark maroon jacket with white trim but it really helped bring out the pink color of her hair. He blushed a bit as he took in how cute she looked. Of course, Miko didn’t help matters much as she modeled it in front of him.

With everything and everyone set to go, the next stop was the Spring Break Cultural Festival of Kanagawa!

# SHIPMENT 8

## *Yes, They Went to the Cultural Festival, Too*

The air was clear and crisp which accented the dusk sky left behind by a not-quite-yet fully set sun. As they approached the festival grounds, the smell of food filled Miko's nostrils and tantalized her senses. She, once again, went on a rant about the different kinds of food she wanted to eat and with them having skipped dinner, Daiki knew that his wallet probably wouldn't survive the evening. While he did have money, he never carried around a lot of cash, just some spare money for emergencies. Seeing the lustful look in Miko's eyes as she scanned the food stalls, he wondered if this counted as some variation of an emergency.

While tonight wasn't anything that had been made official, Daiki realized that this was the first date he had ever been on. That realization made him a bit nervous as he knew Miko had been looking forward to this and he wanted to try and make the most of it. After all, he didn't know how long Miko would be staying with him so he felt determined to turn a rare opportunity like this into a lasting memory that could hold on to and cherish. He resolved to do just that even if that meant spending whatever money he brought with him just to see her smile.

Miko looked around for the first food stall she wanted to tackle as they entered the festival grounds. Like a reticle bouncing around a video game screen, it zeroed in on a stall and locked on!

### **Target Acquired!**

This stall happened to be serving karaage in skewer form. Noticing her laser-focused stare, Daiki cracked a smile since karaage was one of his favorite foods! Without even asking, he headed straight for the stall which caused Miko to get a little excited. Not only was she happy that she was getting karaage but she was also happy to know that Daiki had been paying attention to her.

He figured that he would get one for himself, too. After paying for a couple of skewers, he made his way back with a bright smile on his face, knowing that he did a good job. That's when the proverbial massive sweatdrop fell over his head as Miko snatched them out of his hands, thinking that they were both for her. Daiki just stood there with his eyes closed, still wearing that smile as a slight gust of wind howled, blowing his hair temporarily to one side. He wanted to speak up and say something but, in the end, if putting away two friend chicken skewers made her happy, then so be it.

"Mmm... theesh are sho good," she said with a mouthful.

### ***Sure... rub it in...***

He did his best to smile all while watching the one he bought for himself make the one-way trip to becoming a resident of Miko's stomach.

After she polished off both skewers, she spied a mini-game where you used an air rifle to shoot a cork at a prize. Miko scanned the prizes as one of them caused her eye to transform into sparkling stars! There was a cute gray and white wolf pup plushie sitting there on the third row and her face became filled with determination to win it! Again, Daiki read the room and headed for the stall where he handed over the money for five corks. Miko picked up the rifle with a gleam in her eye and

aimed right for the wolf. She pulled the trigger and it missed completely. Shrugging it off, she loaded the second cork and that, too, missed. So did shots three, four, and five.

Defeated, Miko put the gun down and rubbed the back of her head in embarrassment. "I guess I'm only good with a gun if I have a controller in my hands, hehe."

At that moment, Daiki felt a sense of gaming superiority and decided to use his skills to try and win the stuffed animal for her, figuring that this would be a good chance to impress her.

"Don't worry, I'll get it for you!" he said with a bit of bravado and confidence.

Daiki paid for another five corks and loaded the first one. He took aim and made sure to steady himself so that it would be guaranteed to be a direct hit on the first shot! With a squeeze of the trigger, it became apparent that he didn't load the cork in all the way because the air pushed it out, and fell limply to the ground.

Miko peered over the counter and stared at the cork as it gently rolled to a stop in a sad and pathetic fashion. Daiki rubbed the back of his head as he lightly laughed with embarrassment.

"I guess the cork was too loose. This time for sure, though!" he said trying to sound a bit more confident; however, this time that confidence was for himself.

After making sure that the cork was firmly seated into the end of the rifle, he took aim and fired but the cork whizzed right past the ear of the wolf and bounced off the backboard behind it. Daiki had no idea what had happened as he was as steady as could be. He had the wolf's forehead directly in his sight and with his posture, it should have been a direct hit between the eyes.

Figuring that he may have flinched from the recoil and didn't realize it, he loaded another cork into the barrel and took aim. This time, he spread his legs apart and planted his feet firmly on the ground. He leaned as hard as he could into the counter so that he formed a solid, unmovable base to reduce the effects of the recoil. He looked down the sights of the barrel and lined up his shot with the wolf's forehead once again. With a squeeze of the trigger, the same result happened with the cork missing to the left.

*There's no way that I should have missed it! My body didn't even jolt from the recoil! That should have been a direct hit down the middle! That could only mean one thing... This game is rigged!*

"Excuse me, sir? May I have another rifle? I think this one might be faulty."

"Sorry, kid. But the rifle you have is the one you have to use. We don't allow them to be swapped out."

*That settles it! This game is rigged but now that I know that, I can use that to my advantage! If I aimed straight and the cork veered left, that means that the end of the barrel probably has a slight bend in it. Of course, it would appear normal from the outside because the bend is on the inside where nobody would look. However, if it were truly bent, then that would mean you would see from the outside as well. This tells me that there is probably a small lump of metal on the inside that's causing the trajectory to change. All I have to do is aim to the right a little bit and that should do the trick but... I can't make it obvious that I figured it out. I have two shots left so I'll make the next one miss on purpose!*

Sure enough, Daiki aimed straight again and the cork veered to the left. Miko was starting to get nervous as she knew that Daiki only had one shot left.

*I wasted that shot just now because I needed to confirm the angle and curvature of the cork after it was fired. While the last three shots had a little variance to them, they all fell within the five to six-degree range. It's very slight but just enough to make you miss it if you were to aim dead on! That means if I turn the barrel about five degrees to the right, I'll land it for sure!*

With that in mind, Daiki took aim down the center again. The clerk behind the counter grinned because he knew that Daiki wouldn't hit the prize doing the same thing over and over again. Suddenly, right when Daiki was about to pull the trigger, he aimed slightly right which caused the clerk's face to go from a sneer to a look of shock. Daiki squeezed the trigger and just as he predicted, the cork veered right and struck the wolf plushie right between the eyes; however, it refused to fall over. In fact, it didn't even budge!"

"Hey, what gives?" exclaimed Miko. "He hit that thing dead on with full force and it didn't even move! What kind of rigged crap is this!?"

Miko raised her voice on purpose so that others around them looked on. Realizing that his scam was about to be revealed, the clerk nervously put his hands up and tried to talk his way out of it.

"I probably set up the toy incorrectly. I'm very sorry this happened! Since he hit the target, I will count that as it being knocked over and reward you with the prize! I'll take better care to make sure this mistake doesn't happen again!"

He quickly grabbed the stuffed wolf; however, the bottom of it tore open when he pulled it off the shelf. It revealed that it was hooked into the shelf so that there was no way it would have ever fallen over, even if hit dead on. By now, everyone saw what was happening and even a few people who had played the game before came over to voice their complaints. Daiki suggested that they leave amongst the confusion as the situation had become a bit too out of hand.

As they walked away, Miko folded her arms and cracked a cocky grin. "Looks like he won't be scamming anyone else now!" She followed that up with a slight laugh and looked at Daiki. "You knew something was up, too, didn't you?"

"Yeah. When three shots in a row missed, I knew it was rigged. That's why with my last shot, I moved the barrel to the right after already having calculated the angle in my head but even that didn't matter. Even though it was rigged, I still feel bad because I know you wanted that wolf."

"Hey! The important thing is you tried and, in the end, we exposed that jerk and now nobody else will have to get robbed of their money so it's still a win in the end! But... if you REALLY want to make it up, I could go for some ice cream!"

Daiki nodded in agreement and they spent some time wandering around looking for an ice cream stall. Eventually, they came across one, and Daiki, once again, bought two of them. This time, he made sure to hold onto his for dear life in case Miko tried to snatch it away. They wandered around until they found a bench to sit down at. By this time, the dusk sky had faded away and had been replaced by a dark night sky filled with an ocean of stars. Miko stared up at them in wonder, letting out a small, yet, satisfied sigh.

"Is this your first time seeing the stars?"

"Yes and no. I've seen them before in Aomori but this is the first time I really got to sit next to someone and enjoy them like this. I know that they are still

the same stars but sitting here next to you just makes them seem just a little bit brighter.”

Daiki blushed when she said that but as soon as she did, she realized what she had said and quickly snapped out of it.

“So! What’s next on the festival list?”

“Well, they are going to bring the Mikoshi through here soon so we can watch that! The bearers usually wear a Hanten while carrying the shrine on their shoulders. They say that as it passes, God will hear the prayers and wishes of the people. People will usually pray for a good harvest or to be purified. When it comes, we should make a wish, too!”

“Okay!”

By the time they finished their ice cream people started to gather as the time drew near. It wasn’t long after that when the Mikoshi was brought through. There was a path wider than others that ran through the festival and that was the route that the bearers would carry the miniature shrine. People lined up on either side of the pathway and began to pray as the Mikoshi passed them. As it passed, they closed their eyes and silently made their wishes. After it passed, Miko opened her eyes and looked at Daiki who still had his shut. She could see his mouth moving which meant that he was still making his wish.

A moment later, he opened his eyes and noticed Miko staring at him. The look on her face wasn’t typical. Usually, she would have a sneer or a sassy look to her but this time, she looked a bit infatuated with him. Realizing that she had been caught, she quickly put on a grin.

“That was a pretty big wish! Mind sharing what it was about?”

“You’re not supposed to say what you wished for. If you do, then chances are that it won’t come true.”

“Oh? That means you wished to see me in my bikini again, didn’t you? You don’t need to wish for something like that! You just have to ask and I’ll wear it for you! Or... Hmm... Maybe it’s not the bikini? Maybe you want me to wear my birthday suit? Hee hee...”

“N-No! Nothing like that! I swear!” he protested as he frantically waved his hands in front of him.

“Sure, sure. I believe you,” she said with a sly wink.

“Please don’t tease me. I really didn’t make a wish for something as perverted as that. I just wanted to wish for something that would make me really happy...”

As he tried to finish what he was saying, he caught himself thinking about what he had wished for and it caused a small tear to form in his eye. Miko caught sight of it but before it could escape, Daiki perked right up and offered up another suggestion. “Say, want to try out another mini-game? I thought I saw a senbonbiki back there. At least with a prize attached to a string, you’re guaranteed to win something!”

“Sure! Let’s do it! I feel after getting scammed we are owed something at this point!”

They headed across the main path and back down the one that they came from. The senbonbiki stall wasn’t too far away; however as the two of them approached it, Daiki let out a high-pitched “EEP!” and ducked between two stalls. Miko stopped and noticed that Daiki had taken cover and became a bit baffled. He

waved her to come over as quickly as she could. After taking cover with him, she had to know what was going on.

“Why are you hiding all of a sudden?”

“Hina and her friend Akari are at the senbonbiki stall! I can’t let them see me!”

“Why? Is she a classmate of yours?”

“Yeah. Not only is Hina one of the people who believes the rumors about me, but she also helps spread them. If they saw me with you, they would probably cause a huge scene and embarrass me. I don’t really want anything to ruin this night since you were looking forward to it.”

“But... that’s still not fair! I don’t know what these rumors are but you’ve been one of the kindest people I have ever met in my entire life, Daiki! It’s obvious that they’re not true so it’s not like I would believe a word she has to say!” She placed her finger on her chin and came up with an idea. “Say, want me to go over there and knock her lights out while you stay hidden!? That way, all the heat will be on me and nobody will know you sent me!”

*Eh heh... that’s a little extreme...*

Daiki as he rubbed the back of his head. “Are you sure it’s a good idea for a runaway girl to get into a fight in the middle of a festival? That’s not the kind of attention you should be drawing to yourself.”

“Yeah... you’re right,” she said in a dejected tone. “Still, you shouldn’t have to live your life like this, you know!”

“I know. It’s just that... It’s been like this for years. I’ve tried to get to the bottom of it but nobody would ever listen to me. They would always interrupt me before I could explain or ask questions. That’s why I’ve been nicknamed The Undateable One by everyone at school. Once a girl finds out about the rumors, I don’t even stand a chance. Heck, forget a girlfriend, I don’t even have a regular friend to hang out with.”

“What are you talking about!? Am I not your friend? I mean... sure... I’ve known you for all of a day but... you’re already cooler than any friend I’ve ever had back in Aomori! Plus, we slept together! That’s gotta count for something, tee hee!”

Daiki internally facepalmed that she would say that out in the open where anyone passing by could have heard her. Shaking it off, he poked his head around the corner of the stall and noticed that Hina and Akari weren’t there anymore.

“Looks like they’re gone. We can go use the senbonbiki now.”

As Daiki stepped out into the pathway, a shrill voice called out behind him. “Kenjimaru-kun?”

He turned around and both Hina and Akari were standing there with Hina’s boyfriend Riku. Riku was a bit taller than Hina with short, yet slightly messy, blonde hair and amber-colored eyes. He wasn’t really a sharp dresser as he just wore light blue jeans and a plain white t-shirt. He only cared about his appearance whenever he had to wear his school uniform. Outside of that, he was kind of a slob. Hina grimaced at the sight of him as she knew that she was about to have some fun.

“Look, guys! Daiki is here at the festival all by himself!”

“Maybe we can ask him to do us another favor?” suggested Riku. “I heard he’ll scamper around and do whatever you ask!”

"Let's not bother him with favors. After all, the poor little boy can't even get a date for the festival! Isn't that just pitiful? It's not like he deserves one anyway, right? Are you enjoying the festival all by your lonesome self?"

As Miko overheard every word being said, an intense rage began to burn up inside of her. She balled her fists and was ready to explode; however, right when she was about to dart out, she saw Daiki motioning with his hand to stay put.

"Can you imagine if someone was stupid enough to date this guy? I can just picture him taking her to different games, trying his hardest to win her a prize with hope in his eyes. Then again, the true prize would be for you to drag her back to your place, wouldn't it, Daiki? Maybe that's why you're here? Trying to find someone that doesn't go to our school so you can lure them back home with you? How low can you actually sink?"

Daiki hung his head low. He knew speaking up against Hina was futile. After all, she had never given him a chance to explain himself before, why would she now?

"Not going to say anything for yourself? So, not only are you loathsome but you're also spineless and pathetic, too! Come on, guys. We've wasted enough time on this. Besides, you can tell he just wants to be left alone. After all, it's the life he's known for so long, I bet being alone is the only thing that makes him feel normal!"

Riku and Hina had a good laugh as they turned and walked away; however, Akari hesitated for a moment before catching up to them. That slight hesitation went unnoticed as Daiki was too busy gritting his teeth.

Once the coast was clear, Miko came out and placed her hand on his shoulder. "Daiki... I'm sorry. You shouldn't..."

"F-Forget it..."

"Daiki?"

By this time, he couldn't hold back his emotions any longer. Tears began to stream down his face, staining the ground beneath him. With a look of pain and agony, he simply turned around and began to walk away. Miko darted forward to catch up to him, hoping that he would say something. When he didn't, she tried to strike up a conversation.

"Say, do you still want to go play a game or something? Might help you unwind a little—"

"I just want to go home..."

As Daiki continued to walk away, Miko turned her head around and saw Hina, Akari, and Riku way off in the distance. Her eyes burned with an intense inferno as she gritted her teeth. Out of respect for Daiki, she wouldn't do anything to draw attention to herself but for hurting him like that, she knew that there was no way she would ever let this go unanswered!



# SHIPMENT 9

## *Shhh, It's Secret... Until Now*

After they returned from the festival, Miko felt a bit out of place in the midst of the silence of the journey home. Even when the front door closed, there wasn't much to be said. Everything that had transpired spoke for itself. She would have hoped that Daiki would open up and talk about what happened but instead, he wasted no time heading for the stairs. Before he could climb a single step, Miko called out to him, hoping that she could do something to cheer him up.

"Say, want me to change into my bikini and spoon you again tonight? Maybe the warm, soft touch of a cute girl will lift your spirits, eh?"

She tried to sound as playful and exaggerated as possible; however, he wasn't in the mood to talk. At that point, he just wanted to go to bed and curl up underneath his covers.

"I... just want to sleep alone tonight. You can take the guest bedroom if you want."

"Oh... okay?" she said with a slight hint of a hurtful tone in her voice. While she wanted nothing more than to comfort him, she realized that it was probably best to give him a bit of space for tonight. "Well... g-goodnight, Daiki."

Without saying a word, Daiki headed upstairs and closed the door to his room. Miko knew that he wasn't pushing her away on purpose, though. This was all Hina's fault and the fact that she put him into this state ate away at her. It bothered her so much that she wasn't able to get a good night's rest. She tossed and turned and did her best to fall asleep but all she could see in her mind was that scene replaying over and over again. The more she experienced that, the angrier she got. Seeing things for herself put things into perspective. That's when she made the decision that tomorrow she would try and put an end to all of this once and for all.

Come morning, Miko got up and headed downstairs. She figured that she would make Daiki a big breakfast to help cheer him up but when she arrived, he was already sitting at the dining room table with a half-empty glass of orange juice in front of him. The condensation on the glass and the small puddle of water it sat in suggested that he had been there for quite some time.

"H-hey, Daiki. You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep so I figured I would come down and have something to drink. I guess I let time slip away because that was four hours ago."

"It's only 7 AM. You mean to tell me you've been down here since three in the morning!?"

"Mmm..." he muttered with a slight nod.

"You're still letting what that girl said get to you? Speaking of which, you just stood there and took it. You showed me before that you have a backbone so why didn't you show it there, too?"

"When I put my foot down with you it was uncharacteristic of me. I don't like raising my voice to others. Yelling and shouting never solved anything. It only further creates more conflict. Besides, even if I did, it wouldn't have done anything. I tried standing up to her before but she never let me get a word in. She would just

talk over me and harass me some more. I felt that if I just stood there and took it, it would be the fastest way to get it over with.”

“You’re such a nice guy, Daiki but I wonder if you’re too nice for your own good. You have to learn to stand up for yourself. You don’t like to shout but I bet that if you did, it would have shocked Hina and made her listen. She probably expected you to stand there and say nothing and you just gave her what she wanted.”

“I already know I’m pathetic, Miko.”

“You’re not pathetic, you’re just a pacifist and sometimes it’s hard for a pacifist to stand up for themselves. I get it. Besides, It’s painfully obvious that this isn’t some curse. Hina’s going around and deliberately making life hard for you! There has to be a reason behind it all.”

“Even I know that much. At first, it seemed like a bunch of dumb rumors but over the years, Hina has been the one to keep spreading them. I don’t know what her reason is for it, though and since she won’t tell me, I’ve just been left in the dark this whole time.”

“Do you think that if you had known the reason sooner you could have done something to clear your name?”

“Who knows? You saw what happened to me.”

“Well, you know what they say... It’s never too late. That’s why I decided something last night.”

“Huh?”

“I said that I needed to do a little recon first, right? Well, I think I’ve done enough of it. I think it’s time I head out and try to uncover this little rumor that’s been going around about you! Even if you think nothing can be done, you don’t really know until you try! Before we get to that point, we need to know what we’re up against, so that’s what I’m going to do today!”

When she said that, Daiki’s face seemed to show some signs of hope. On the other hand, he was a bit conflicted.

“You sure that you want to do that?”

“Sure! A girlfriend needs to support her boyfriend, after all!”

“I never agreed to be your boyfriend...” he said, a bit annoyed.

“I know. I’m just teasing but... who knows?”

Miko pinched Daiki on the cheek before she headed out, hoping that saying something like that would cheer him up. She promised to be back soon as she stepped out to see if she could gather any information.

When the door closed, he thought about Miko’s words. He began to wonder if it were truly possible that he could learn the source of the rumors. As he thought about that, Miko’s words when she called him her boyfriend crept in. As quickly as that thought popped into his head, he dispelled it by laughing to himself.

“Heh... there’s no way she could be serious. With my life the way it is, it’s probably too good to be true. I am ‘The Undatable One’ after all. Maybe Hina was right... maybe I’m meant to be alone for the rest of my life...”

It was apparent that Hina’s words had really rattled Daiki to his core. Even after everything he and Miko had been through so far, those seeds of doubt had been planted. After all, Miko herself said that she would probably have to go back on the run at some point. With that realization, he questioned what the point of

everything was. He instinctively took a sip of his orange juice forgetting that it had been sitting there with him on the table for the last four hours.

*Yech... warm...*



Meanwhile, Miko walked the streets looking for places where kids her age would normally hang out. She tried the local park but it was filled with small kids playing along with their parents. Next, she headed in the opposite direction and tried the shopping center where Daiki had bought her clothes for her. While there were a couple of people there, none of them looked to be around her age. Not knowing the town all too well, she had no clue where to go after that.

Hmph... some recon I did. I only hit up two places and I'm all out of options! Heh, I guess I shouldn't have talked up such a big game without being truly prepared. Oh well, it's not like I can go back now. Think, Miko, think! Where would a bunch of rumor-spreading dimwits be hanging out?

She continued to ponder a good place to check while walking in a straight line. About a mile down the road, she saw a place that might work. It was a place called A-Game: a small, local arcade that looked like a slice of life straight out of the 90s. In this day and age, seeing an arcade in and of itself was a rarity. To see one housing cabinets of games from the last golden age of gaming was truly a sight to behold. Being a gamer herself, Miko's face lit up as she believed to have found the Holy Grail itself. It took a couple of pats on her cheeks to refocus and remind herself why she was there.

Miko popped in and poked her head around. As she surveyed the area, all she saw were kids in their early teens popping quarters into the machines without hesitation. A sly grin washed over her face as she knew that she had hit the motherlode.

“Jackpot...” she muttered silently to herself.

Miko walked around until she came across a group of girls sitting at the food station. They looked to be ordering some drinks when she decided to stroll up to them and prod them for information.

“Hey... sorry to bother you but I just got into town and I’m wondering if you could help me?”

“Sure!” replied one of the girls.

“I’m looking for a boy named Daiki Kenjimaru. I heard that he lives in this town. Have you heard of him by any chance?”

“Hmm... the name doesn’t ring a bell, sorry,” replied the girl.

“Nope. Can’t say that I have,” said the one to her left.

“I don’t know much about him but if you ask that girl over there by the fighting game cabinets, she might be able to tell you more. Her name is Saki Mizuhara and she goes to the same school.”

“Mizuhara-chan, eh? Thank you! I appreciate it! Sorry for troubling you!”

Miko excused herself and headed straight for the girl that was pointed out to her. Saki was a little taller than average for a girl her age. She had long, dark purple hair and very fair skin... almost like powder. She wore a black t-shirt, dark blue jeans, and a black baseball cap which was worn backward for style. She had deep purple eyes which connected with Miko’s as she approached.

“Excuse me, Mizuhara-chan?”

“Um... yes? Can I help you?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you but I just came into town and I’m looking for someone. Some girls said you might be able to help me.”

“Sure. I’ll do what I can to help. Who are you looking for?”

“Some boy named Daiki Kenjimaru.”

“Oh. Him. May I ask why you’re looking for Kenjimaru-kun?”

“I’m the daughter of one of his mom’s long-time friends. My family is in town and since I haven’t seen Daiki in over ten years, I thought it would be nice to surprise him but... I kind of forgot where he lived. Being so young, you don’t really remember things such as directions, haha. I just remember it being a big house somewhere.”

“Ah. I thought that maybe you were just another one of the girls Daiki keeps bringing over to his house to seduce.”

“Huh? Daiki seduces girls?”

“Yeah. It happened a couple of years ago in middle school. A girl claimed that when she went over to his house to return something, he was lying on the floor on top of another girl. The girl didn’t look as if she didn’t want to be there, either. Ever since then, we were told to stay away from him otherwise we’d get seduced, too.”

“Are you sure it just wasn’t some misunderstanding? I’ve never known him to be the kind of person to do something like that. He was always such a sweet friend to me.”

“There was no misunderstanding. A little while after that happened, photos began to circulate of the incident. Daiki was caught red-handed and since then, everybody kept their distance from him. He tried to make it up to everyone by pretending to be this nice guy but people just started taking advantage of his kindness because he just seemed so desperate to try and clear his name but we all knew better.”

*This smells like a setup! Poor Daiki!*

“I... I see. I never thought Daiki could be like that. Even if he did turn out that way, I still want to see him. Do you happen to know where he lives?”

“Even though I think it’s foolish for you to do so... yeah, I know where he lives. It’s about a couple of miles up the road. Just head north until you get to the gas station. Turn left and his house is a little bit down the way on the left. It’s a pretty big house as you said. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks. I’ll be sure to question him when I see him and give him a proper scolding for being such a lech!”

“Just be careful and make sure he doesn’t make a move on you, too.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I can handle myself,” she said as she cracked her knuckles.

Miko thanked Saki and left the arcade. She could barely contain her anger as she knew that there was no way Daiki did anything like that.

*If he were the kind of person that Saki said he was, he would have made a move on me by now. Besides, why would Daiki let me leave and go learn about what he had done if it were true? Nothing seems to add up! It’s so obvious that Daiki was set up for some reason and I bet you that Hina girl knows exactly what that reason is!*

When she returned to the house, she marched up the pathway and went to open the door but found it locked. It was at that moment that she realized that she wasn't as free to come and go as she pleased. After all, she was used to just walking up to her own house and heading straight in. It was almost as if it were second nature for her to expect the door to be unlocked. She shook off her stupidity and knocked. A few moments later, Daiki answered the door.

"Miko? That didn't take long. Does that mean...?"

"I said I was going out to gather information, didn't I? There's only one reason why I would be back this early!"

"Wait. You're telling me that you found something?"

"Sure did! Does a girl by the name of Saki Mizuhara ring a bell?"

"Yeah... Saki was the first girl I asked out and got instantly rejected by."

His face changed from a look of hope to that of a frown as he remembered the look of fear in her eyes when he asked her. All he knew was that after that rejection, everyone else he had ever asked out acted the same way.

"I see. She told me an interesting story. Let's reenact it to see if it rings a bell!"

"Eh?" he squeaked.

Miko grabbed Daiki by the arm and pulled him down on top of her as she fell to the floor. Daiki's face turned red with embarrassment as she laid there underneath him. Miko then pretended to be scared as she looked up at Daiki.

"Does any of this ring a bell?"

"H... How did she know about this...?"

"Wait. So, what you're saying is that this happened!? You invited girls over to your house to seduce them!?"

"What!? No... Wait... THAT'S the rumor that's been spreading about me!?"

"Yeppers."

"I wasn't trying to seduce her. A couple of years ago, my parents bought this exquisite rug; however, it wasn't the kind of rug that liked to stay flat. Whenever someone would walk on it, it would bunch up. My father was in town and made arrangements for me to keep the daughter of one of his clients company during their business meeting. Of course, I wanted to help so I didn't refuse. When she came in, I asked her if she wanted something to drink. She turned around to answer me and the rug bunched up and she fell. I rushed over to see if she was okay and I ended up tripping, too. At that moment, one of my classmates just happened to stop by because I forgot my textbook in the classroom. She came to return it and saw the two of us. Before I could get a good look at her or even say anything, she ran away."

Miko quickly recalled a couple of days ago when she first met Daiki. She remembered mistaking him for a spineless main character from a cheap romance novel that would end up getting himself into compromising situations through no fault of their own. She felt strangely embarrassed that she was actually right on the money with that thought. She decided to put that thought away for now.

"So... that was the catalyst, eh?"

"Yeah, but I didn't think much of it because nothing happened right away. Everything went on as normal for a couple of months until I worked up the nerve to

ask Saki out. That's when she flat-out rejected me. I guess during that time, the rumors were starting to spread without me even knowing it."

"Hmm... so that misunderstanding ended up becoming a rumor and because of that, no girl would ever date you because they were scared that you would try to seduce them."

"It all makes sense now. This whole time because of some stupid rug, I've been forced to be lonely. It's not fair when you think about it... but... what can I do? What's done is done and besides... I'm used to being alone now. It's not as bad as you would think."

Miko shoved Daiki off of her and then slapped him across the face. Stunned, Daiki knelt there holding his face not knowing what just happened.

"Used to it!? Is sitting alone at the dining room table at 3 AM used to it!? Is letting a girl like Hina run you down like that over something that's not even true used to it!? If you're so used to it then why did you walk away from the festival last night in tears!? There's no way that you're used to it... you're just lying to yourself and what's worse... you're lying to me!!"

As Daiki stared into Miko's burning eyes, he realized that she was right. If he were truly okay with his loneliness, he would have never tried to accidentally order a sex doll and he would have never met Miko. The depression he felt from Hina's words last night caused him to blurt out an excuse so he could, once again, run away from the situation. In the meantime, Miko realized what she had done and her look of anger changed to one of sorrow.

"I... I'm sorry, Daiki. I didn't mean to hit you. I admit that this whole situation has me boiling... and what's funny is that it's not even happening to me."

"No, I'm the one that's sorry. You're right. I'm not okay with it. I want my loneliness to end more than anything in the world. All I'm doing is running away from the problem and I shouldn't. You were right to hit me. I deserved it."

Hearing those words, Miko found herself relating to Daiki. Even though their paths were much different, she realized that they both had been forced into a life that they had no intention of living, and that caused Miko to sympathize with him. They both had their own set of problems and they both ran away from them in one form or another.

She didn't exactly know what came over her but she helped him up to his feet and embraced him in a hug before planting a quick kiss on his cheek.

Surprised, Daiki took a step back and quivered just a bit.

"W-what are you doing!?"

"Giving you something that you actually deserve. Plus, think of it as an apology for slapping you. To think that you ended up alone because of one dumb misunderstanding, makes my blood boil! Had you moved away to another town... you'd probably be with some lucky girl having the time of your life but because you're forced to live here... you're stuck in the town that only knows you as some perverted seducer. It's not fair. It kind of makes you want to..."

"... run away?" said Daiki, finishing her sentence for her.

"...yeah."

At that moment, he came to the same realization as Miko did just a brief moment ago. Realizing where Miko was coming from and then applying it to his own life, he began to understand her just a little bit more. He began to get lost in thought over something before Miko brought him back down to Earth.

"Hmm? Did I lose you? What are you thinking about? Was it that kiss I gave you just now? Are you thinking about how you might want another?"

"Eh!!!? N-no! Nothing like that, I swear! I was just thinking that... well... It's nice to have someone that I can relate to. And... someone that I can call a friend... maybe... unless you don't think of us that way."

Miko burst out into laughter. Daiki didn't know whether or not to laugh with her or feel embarrassed. As he stood there, Miko looked at him, wiping a tear from her eye from laughing so hard.

"Do you need me to spell it out for you!? Of course, I think of us as friends! How could I not consider you one after you took me in like this? If I didn't think of you that way, I wouldn't have gone out to dig for information... and I certainly wouldn't have given you your first kiss!"

"Eh!!!? How did you know that was my first!!?

"Oh, a girl knows! Your reaction was a pretty dead giveaway. Most guys who have been kissed before would have taken advantage of that situation or they would have passed it off as no big deal. Who knows? If you had more experience maybe we'd be lip-locked right now! Plus, with the circumstances surrounding your unfortunate situation, I can't imagine any girl getting far enough with you to receive a kiss so... there's that, too."

"Am I that easy to read?"

"Let's just say it's like I'm reading a book for the fifteenth time even though it's the first time I ever picked it up."

"Ouch..."

"Nah... don't feel bad. Every boy has to start somewhere!"

Hearing her say that didn't exactly calm him down. He still felt a bit embarrassed over his inexperience. There wasn't much he could do about it now so he just rolled with it. While it was nice to see Daiki cheering up, Miko still wasn't satisfied.

Now that I'm more than positive that this Hina girl is the obvious key to the full picture, the question that remains is how to find her and how to get that information out of her. At least this is a start. Just give me some more time, Daiki. I promise I'll figure this out for you! I'll be the one to end your loneliness!



# SHIPMENT 10

## *Setting the Stage for Fireworks*

Now that Daiki knew what the rumors were, it felt as if a little bit of that weight had been lifted off of his shoulders, although the weight wouldn't truly come off until he dispelled the rumors completely. While that lifted his spirits, Miko's had begun to burn with determination and the gleam in her eye caught Daiki's attention.

"Miko?"

"Huh?"

"You were spacing out. Is everything okay?"

"Y-Yeah! Everything's fine. I was, um, just wondering something. Do you think that you would be up for going back to the festival tonight?"

Daiki knew that their time at the festival was ruined thanks to the confrontation with Hina. Still, he wasn't sure if he wanted to go back so soon, especially after the festival had become a subconscious symbol of that experience. He winced a little bit at the thought since he was afraid that they might run into Hina and her friends again and he would much rather avoid that. When Daiki remained silent, Miko decided to try and sweet talk him into going.

"You know, after we got home last night, I was lying there on my futon and I could have sworn that I heard some fireworks going off in the distance. Maybe we can go tonight and watch them together?"

"I guess we could do that but... I don't know..."

"Aw, come on! We don't have to walk around or play any games. We can just go right before the fireworks get lit and watch them! Think of it as us picking up where we left off last night. Maybe it'll help take your mind off of things? Besides, I'm giving you a golden opportunity to watch some pretty exploding colors with a really cute girl! Can you picture each explosion reflecting in my eyes? Of course, that would mean you'd have to be staring deeply into them... if you get my drift."

Daiki knew that she was trying to perk him up with her sassy attitude but, deep down, that situation didn't seem like a bad idea. Although it wasn't an overly enthusiastic reply, he caved in.

"Okay..."

"Great! Well... I hope you have something to do to kill time because I'm going out for a walk."

"Okay...wait... what? What do you mean you're going for a walk?"

"You know. People sometimes go outside and put one foot in front of the other to create a forward motion. It's known as walking and I feel like doing that."

"But why?"

"I can't keep myself cooped up in your house forever! A girl needs to go out and get her exercise too, you know!"

"This sounds selfish of me but I don't like the idea of you going outside too much. What if someone sees you and knows that you ran away from home? What if they call the police? What if you... um..."

“What if I never come back?”

Daiki’s eyes widened as she hit the nail right on the head. He began to think that she was right about being able to easily be read like a book. “...yeah...” he replied sheepishly.

“Awww... that’s so cute! You’re worried about me! Trust me! I’m a big girl and know how to take care of myself. If I get into any trouble, I’ll just find a way to hide until the heat dies down, and then I’ll foolishly lead the cops right back here to your front door! Pinkie promise!”

Miko actually stuck out her pinkie. Daiki sighed, yet, refused to make the promise as having the police led to his house was the last thing he wanted on a Tuesday morning. Miko gave him another pinch on the cheek for being so thoughtful and promised that she shouldn’t be too long. With that, she headed out while Daiki couldn’t help but worry.

◆ ◆ ◆

Miko had claimed she was going for a walk; however, the reality of things was that she was going headhunting. After her successful attempt at gathering information, she decided to head back to the arcade to see if she could dig up something else. As luck would have it, Saki was still there at the fighting game cabinets. She casually strolled over and leaned against it which grabbed her attention.

“Oh! You’re back?”

“Yep! I found Daiki’s house. Thanks for helping me out earlier. Don’t worry, the little pervert didn’t lay a finger on me. He was quite happy to see me, though. He’s grown up so much since the last time I’ve seen him. It’s kind of hard to imagine him being the kind of guy that would seduce a girl, though. Since I had my suspicions, I questioned him about the whole thing and he explained in detail what really happened. I just came back here to tell you that you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah... this whole time you bought into a fabricated story about a misunderstanding. Since you’re here at the arcade, I assume you’re a gamer. In that sense, you must like anime and manga, too, right?”

“That’s profiling!!”

“But am I wrong?”

“.....no.”

“Well, have you ever seen a comedy show where the guy accidentally ends up in situations with a girl and then someone comes along and it’s all just a big misunderstanding but the guy gets blamed anyway? Well... Daiki is a bit of a klutz and that’s exactly what happened to him but someone just so happened to see it and blew it all out of proportion. Now, he’s had to suffer this entire time! In fact, he even told me that he asked you out and you turned him down because of that stupid rumor.”

“I... I thought it was true, okay!? You’re a girl! You should know how boys can take advantage of us! How was I supposed to know it was all just an accident!? Of course, I turned him down! What girl wouldn’t!?”

“Me. That’s who.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t worry about that. Since you were so helpful with providing information before, I’m sure you wouldn’t mind helping me with something else. I mean you must feel guilty for helping drive Daiki into a lonely corner and would like to help right the wrongs done to him... or am I mistaken about the kind of person you are?”

As Miko said that, she leaned in with a fierce look in her eyes. Saki immediately tensed up and began to sweat nervously.

“S-Sure!! I’ll h-help!”

“Great!! First off, you can start by telling me who you heard this rumor from.”

“A girl in Daiki’s class... Hina Sawamura.”

“Hmph... not like that was painfully obvious or anything,” she muttered under her breath. “And where can I usually find this Sawamura-san?”

“I don’t know where she would be but... all I can tell you is that she usually loves hanging out at a strip mall about three blocks east from here. They have a store there where she usually buys all of her clothes along with a local food shack. She’s always hanging around there with her friends. I can’t guarantee she will always be there but that’s probably the best place to find her.”

“Thanks! If you’ll excuse me, I need to go fishing.”

“Fishing?”

“Yep. I need to catch a really big bitch. Thanks for the information. I’m also sure that you wouldn’t mind paying Daiki a visit and offering up your personal apologies for misjudging him. It would be amazing to hear how the first girl he had a crush on paid him a visit before I got back! I’m sure it will make his day.” Miko leaned in again, practically forcing Saki to press her back up against the arcade cabinet.

“R-R-Right...”

“Have fun with that!” she exclaimed after she booped Saki in the nose with her index finger.

Miko exited the arcade. She now had a new destination. First, she got her bearings and then headed east. Sure enough, about three blocks later, there was a small strip mall on the left-hand side of the street. There was a clothing shop, a burger joint, a knick-knack store, and a small outdoor rest area with a few tables. The place looked pretty well-kept, all things considered. The only problem was that Saki was right that Hina wouldn’t always be there. In fact, nobody was there as the place looked deserted!

Miko decided to give it a few and sat down at one of the tables. It was at this moment she wished that she had brought her cellphone with her but since people could be located through the phone’s GPS capabilities, she knew that she would have to leave it behind in Aomori.

*Ugh... is this how people passed the time before the advancement of technology? This is so freakin’ boring!*

An hour passed and Miko was about ready to die from said boredom. A few people came and went but none of them looked like the girl she saw at the festival last night. She did promise Daiki that she wouldn’t be out for long so she decided to give up for now. After all, she now had a convenient place to target whenever she wanted to look for Hina.

She got up and walked away and when she was about a quarter of a block removed, she heard a faint voice from behind her.

“Yes! They still have these cute jeans on sale!”

*Nah... I'm not that lucky. Probably just another rando from the town. Wouldn't hurt to check it out, though.*

Miko stopped and headed back. As she neared the plaza, she hid behind a corner and poked her head out, gazing over at the clothing store. Sure enough, there was Hina along with her friend Akari. Miko couldn't believe that all she had to do was sit there a little bit longer. Then again, getting the jump on them from behind rather than being in plain sight did prove to be far more advantageous for her. When she realized that, she cracked a sly grin.

*Checkmate, Bitch!*

Miko casually walked up to Hina and stood behind her. She was unaware that Miko was there with a raging fire burning in her eyes; however, that all changed when she felt a slight tap on her shoulder. When Hina turned around...

**\*WHAM!\***

**\*THUD!\***

Miko had laid in a punch so heavy that it knocked Hina down to the ground. Akari took a couple of steps back in fear as Miko stood over her friend. Miko slowly turned her head and stared a hole right through her. Akari took another step back and felt her back press up against the side of the store. Paralyzed with fear, her legs wouldn't allow her to run away. Thankfully, Miko had no real business with her.

“Don't go anywhere, you may want to hear this.”

Akari simply stood there shaking nervously as Miko grabbed Hina by the shirt and pulled her up to her feet. Still dazed, Hina could only stare into those fiery eyes and quiver with fear.

“Do you know what it's like to have your life stolen away from you? To be driven into a corner so dark, so lonely, that you somehow think that you deserved it? I bet you don't. Running around here with your friends all the time, buying up clothes, being accepted among your peers. Sounds like quite an easy life! It must be so nice to be able to just walk through life without many problems, huh? If only others could live that same kind of life then things would be great in this world, wouldn't you agree?”

“W-w-what??”

“You know what I'm talking about... or more specifically... you know WHO I'm talking about. The innocent boy who wanted nothing more than to give his heart to someone. The boy who cared more about others than himself. The boy whose life you are working so hard to destroy because you're dumb and gullible enough to not only believe but to help spread a vicious rumor.”

“W-wait. K-Kenjimaru-kun!?”

“That's right. I now know the truth and you're going to tell me why you did it. Why did you ruin that poor boy's life? And... if I were you... I would choose my words very carefully because I'm like a lit stick of dynamite and I'm just about at the end of my fuse.”

Hina gulped hard while Akari could only stand back and watch. The sweat began to pile up on her forehead, and her knees became weak. Still, the pounding pain in her head from getting punched didn't want to subside. She knew that she

was in an inescapable position. Still, something was holding her back... until Akari spoke up.

“Please... stop... it’s all my fault.”

“Ha?” said Miko, a bit confused.

“I... was the one who returned Daiki’s textbook and saw him on top of that girl. I’m the one who took the picture.”

“Then you’re the one who spread the rumors?”

“No... Hina took the photo and spread the rumors herself.”

Miko turned her attention back to Hina. By this time, she had collected her thoughts and like anyone in this situation, she decided to try and turn the tables by playing the victim.

“What was I supposed to do!? Akari showed me the photographic proof of what Daiki did! It was right there on her phone! If he did that to a random girl, what would he do to any of us?! I was just trying to protect everyone!”

“Protect everyone? Don’t give me that crap! You’re telling me that neither one of you thought that it could have just been a misunderstanding? Did you ever once consider just ASKING him about it? All you had to do was let him explain and you would have seen that he wasn’t trying to seduce her! For your information, they tripped over a rug and just happened to be in that position when Akari stopped by. He wasn’t doing anything to her and yet... you knew nothing this whole time!”

Miko tightened her grip and leaned in further, practically coming nose-to-nose with her.

“Then last night. I was there at the festival. I heard the things you said to him. I witnessed firsthand the pain he felt from that. Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t repay that pain tenfold to you right now!”

“I-I’m sorry! Please! Just let me go! I promise I’ll do whatever I can to make this right!”

“Under any other circumstance... I wouldn’t let you go just on that B.S. promise but... I know you’re going to keep it and do you want to know why? It’s because I now know who you are, what school you go to, and where I can find you. If you don’t fix this, I promise that it will be the end of you. Got it?”

Hina nervously shook her head ‘yes’ and Miko let her go. That’s when she turned her attention to Akari. “And you... who started all of this. You’re going to help her, otherwise, you’re going to share her fate.”

Akari nervously nodded as well. Now that Hina was free from her grip, the two of them ran away. Once they were out of sight, Miko let out a heavy sigh and became so weak-kneed that she almost collapsed there on the spot.

“Damn... it’s a good thing they bought my bluff. I’ve never been in a fight before in my life! But still... I really hope this helps you out, Daiki!”

Miko collected herself and headed back to his house. When she got back, Daiki told her about Saki stopping by out of the blue and offering up a heartfelt apology. Miko played it off as if she knew nothing about it. She simply explained that she took a long walk around the city to familiarize herself with her new home. Being a bit on the gullible side, Daiki bought her story even if Saki randomly showing up was a bit odd.



With the day's business handled, they relaxed until the evening. Once night fell, they headed back to the cultural festival; however, they didn't go inside. Since they were only there to watch the fireworks, Daiki said that he knew of a good spot not too far away.

The festival wasn't in the main city itself but rather on the outskirts. Nearby, there was a path that led to the top of a steep hill where an old abandoned shrine stood. There, it provided a great view of the fireworks and it had the added benefit of not many people going there to watch them since the climb was brutal and it was a bit out of the way from the festival grounds.

Even though the climb showed just how out of shape Daiki was, they eventually made it to the top. As he expected, they were the only ones there. Daiki plopped himself down on a stone bench that overlooked a steep hill with a clearing. You could see the city lights glowing below and the stars twinkling above. As Daiki tried to catch his breath, Miko plopped down next to him and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Say, Daiki. What would you do if your life suddenly returned to normal?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Like... say you were to go back to school and that little rumor of yours was gone and all of the girls began to trust you again. What would you do?"

"I... don't really know what I would do. Why? Do you know something?"

"It's just that... the girl you confessed to suddenly showed up and apologized to you, right? Usually, people don't instantly feel guilty after years of believing a rumor. I just wonder if something happened?"

"Miko... I'm not stupid. You told me earlier today that you knew nothing about it but that's not the truth, is it? Where did you go on your walk?"

Miko knew that she couldn't keep it from Daiki much longer. She explained everything that she did and why she did it. She explained how she felt after hearing Hina talk to him last night and how she couldn't stand to let someone like him suffer any longer. She apologized to Daiki for causing a scene as she knew the risks but still... Those risks were worth making sure that he was taken care of. She couldn't stand to see someone like him continue down this path of loneliness.

When Daiki heard everything, he didn't know how to feel. On the one hand, he was filled with intense gratification that someone would go out of their way and do something like that for him, but at the same time, he felt deep remorse for Hina, Saki, and Akari since Miko went a bit too far with her actions. Before Daiki had time to answer, an explosion went off in the distance as their faces lit up with a myriad of colors.

One by one, the fireworks exploded in a brilliant display. As the explosions reflected in the pools of their eyes, Daiki had only one question for Miko.

"To go so far for someone like me... for someone you just met... for someone that..." Daiki paused as he got a little choked up. "...will eventually leave me behind... why?"

The last part of that question was like a dagger through Miko's heart because she knew that it was true. She couldn't stay living with him forever. Sooner or later, she would either get caught or have to go on the run again. This whole situation was only temporary. Despite the way things were, she only had one answer to give him.

“Because...” she said before she turned her head towards him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned in, catching Daiki completely off guard. Soon, her lips were about to press up against his when she flicked him on the forehead. “Because you’re just too sweet to not help, tee hee.”

Daiki turned red with embarrassment; however, thanks to the night sky and the fireworks, no one would have ever known that. Still, his heart fluttered as he looked into Miko’s cute face with each firework reflecting off of the irises of her eyes. At that moment, something came over Daiki... something he couldn’t control.

Daiki leaned in and kissed Miko which caught her by complete surprise. The only thing was... Miko wasn’t exactly fighting it.

While their first night at the cultural festival ended in disaster, their second night ended like a dream come true.



# SHIPMENT 11

## *Perhaps It Was A Domino Effect After All*

Fireworks often leave a lasting impression on those who view them but they can also spark a moment that engraves itself on one's mind and heart. The kiss that was shared was quite impulsive on Daiki's part. He didn't quite understand why he did it; he just knew that it felt like the right thing to do at that given moment.

As they walked back home, he could still feel the soft touch of her lips as he replayed the situation over and over in his head. He wondered what drove him to make such a bold move. This made the walk home rather silent as Miko, too, had been left wondering the same thing. Even though they walked side-by-side, neither one of them could bring themselves to lock eyes with the other. All they had with them at that moment were their thoughts.

For Daiki, he wasn't completely sure if he was falling in love with Miko. Even though the feelings were there, the fact that he had spent so many years alone made him wonder if those feelings were truly real or if they were just the result of finally knowing what it was like to not be lonely. If it was the latter, did that cause him to read the signals incorrectly? It was a possibility that just being around someone who accepted him caused such relief that he mistook happiness for love and that was the struggle he was trying to get through.

For Miko, it was quite the opposite. After being unexpectedly taken in by Daiki, she had no idea what to expect. At first, she teased him because it was a mixture of her personality as well as her way of keeping her guard up. While it had only been less than a week, she got to know Daiki more than she thought she would have. Now, she wondered if her teasing had become a mask for her real feelings. Was it even possible to fall in love with someone only after a couple of days? While love at first sight exists in the world, was that truly what was happening here?

Before they knew it, they found themselves outside the front gate. Daiki had almost walked completely past it before he realized just where he was. Shaking it off, he turned around and rubbed the back of his head which made Miko raise an eyebrow. Despite the mishap, he still opted to stay silent as he opened the gate. After they went inside, they headed upstairs as the day was getting late. Figuring that sleeping together again would be too awkward after their kiss, Miko headed straight for the guest bedroom; however, before she entered, Daiki called out to her.

“Hey! Um... Miko... If you want... um... never mind...”

“I DO!” she proclaimed.

“Do what?”

“Share a bed with you again!”

“Oh! I... um... wasn’t going to suggest that. I was going to see if you wanted to talk about what happened?”

“Oh...” she said with heavy disappointment. “I see... maybe tomorrow. I’d like to sleep on it.”

“Okay... Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Miko internally facepalmed as she closed the door behind her. She let out a heavy sigh as she pressed her back against it.

“Talk about it, huh? Of course, that’s what you meant, haha. Still... Why did I jump to that conclusion so quickly? Well, it’s obvious so I don’t even know why I’m asking that, it’s just that...”

Miko reached up and touched her lips. She closed her eyes as she could still feel Daiki’s lingering presence on them. Suddenly, her eyes snapped open and she shook her head to knock the thoughts out of it. Filled with a cyclone of mixed emotions, she faceplanted onto her futon with an emphatic oomph. She suddenly realized that they didn’t have much padding. Despite that, she let out a muffled groan and muttered to herself as she buried her face in the pillow.

“Stupid Daiki! Why did you have to go and kiss me like that!? It totally took me by surprise! I know kissing with fireworks going off in the background is so typical and cliche but... it just felt... right.” Miko paused for a second before she turned her head, a small tear escaped from the corner of her eye. “I wished that it wouldn’t have ended. I’m sorry, Daiki. For so many reasons, I can’t admit it to you... but... I love you.”

Miko gripped her pillow with her hand as she muttered those three sacred words. Meanwhile, in Daiki’s room, he laid there in bed wide awake as he stared up at the ceiling. A ceiling fan spun at low speed and he watched it twirl around and around.

“Why did I kiss Miko tonight? I will admit... the sensation of her soft lips against mine felt really good. I never imagined kissing a girl would be so amazing. I didn’t want to let go but why did I do it in the first place? Was I truly just overexcited that I shared a special moment with a girl for once? I know that I’ve been lonely this whole time but was I so lonely that instincts and desires just took over or... do I actually love Miko?”

Daiki shook his head as if that last question was too unbelievable. He laughed to himself before letting out a disappointing exhale.

“Who am I kidding? Even if I did, it wouldn’t work out anyway. Sooner or later, she’s going to leave and I’ll go right back to my normal, lonely life. Still... it isn’t fair...”

Like Miko, he turned to his side and began to shed a tear or two. Two trains of thought for two different people with one singular result... their thoughts and their tears carried them to sleep.

The next morning, both woke up one after the other. Daiki stumbled out of bed around 8 while Miko followed suit a few moments later when she heard him moving around downstairs. Daiki headed downstairs first and decided to make some breakfast but he wasn’t sure what he was in the mood for. Shortly, Miko joined him; however, it wasn’t like the previous mornings when they were happy to see each other. There was a certain tenseness between them as if neither one knew what to say to the other. That tenseness was coupled with a hint of embarrassment and it presented the perfect recipe for awkwardness. Despite that, they couldn’t just let the silence pile up.

“M-Morning,” said Daiki.

“Yo...”

“Can I make you something to eat?”

“I-If you want, sure.”

"What do you feel like having?" he asked, hoping that it would solve his indecision.

"I dunno. Whatever you make will be fine."

So much for that plan. Rather than think about what he wanted to eat, he decided to think about what Miko would like instead. As he wracked his brain, the proverbial lightbulb went on over his head and he came up with an idea... an idea that could both satisfy her stomach as well as open up the lines of communication. After all, eating tasty food is a great way to ease into a tense conversation.

Daiki got to work on whipping up something his mother taught him how to cook... some souffle pancakes! They were a delicacy in Japan and with them being sweet, they were sure to put both of them into a better mood, thus increasing his chances to talk about what had happened between them last night.

Just the smell of the pancakes cooking was enough to pique Miko's curiosity. As he was going back and forth for ingredients, he snuck a peek at her face and he could clearly see that his idea was already starting to take effect. This only helped boost his confidence so he decided to make sure that these ended up as the best souffle pancakes he had ever made!

When they were done, he stacked a few of them on a plate and presented them to Miko. Upon the plate being set down, the pancakes exhibited the perfect jiggle that you would expect of them. Miko's eyes widened as a bit of drool escaped from the corner of her mouth. She couldn't wait to dig in and wasted no time in doing so. Upon the first bite, her face seemed as if it were glowing with sparkles and stars.

"THESE ARE SOOOO GOOOOOD!!!!!" she swooned. "Where did you learn to cook like this!?"

"My mom taught me this recipe. Whenever I was feeling down, she would make them for me. I came to love them so much that, one day, I asked how to make them, and, well, the rest is history."

"Your mom taught you well! I could eat these all day long! Say... if you made me big and fat, would you still hang out with me?" she asked as she inhaled another massive forkful.

Daiki cracked up a bit. That little sassy remark was the thing he needed to break the tension on his end. "Of course!" he said in between chuckles.

As she cleaned her plate in near-record time, he felt that this was the perfect opportunity. With her having a good time, he felt that he could easily bring up the infamous kiss with her. That's when he decided to just go for it.

"Say, Miko. About last night..."

As Daiki said that, he was abruptly interrupted by the sound of his doorbell. He wasn't expecting any company and had it been his parents, they would have just unlocked the door and walked in. That's when a cold shiver was sent through his spine as the possibility set in.

*Wait... could it be the police!? Did they find out where Miko had gone and they're here to pick her up!?*

"Miko... hide..." he said with a bit of panic in his voice.

Realizing what Daiki was getting at, Miko darted behind the kitchen counter and sat against it out of sight. Once Daiki saw that she was hidden, he unlocked the front door and slowly opened it; however, it wasn't the police on the other side...

...It was Akari!

“Kenjimaru-kun? Um... I’m really sorry to come over unannounced but... is it possible that I can come in? I would like to talk to you.”

“Um... sure?” Daiki said, thoroughly confused.

“Thanks, but... I should tell you that I didn’t come alone...”

Daiki looked a bit puzzled, then suddenly, Akari stepped aside as another girl stepped into view. Daiki’s eyes widened as he remembered her clearly. That shy look, the soft tone in her voice when he first talked to her, all of it came rushing back to him in that instant.

“H-Hayashi-san!?”

Kairi Hayashi, the transfer student in Daiki’s class, had accompanied Akari. Kairi simply nodded ‘yes’ in response, opting not to say much.

“I asked her to come with me. She has something she wants to say, too.”

“I see. Then, come on in.”

Akari and Kairi accepted Daiki’s offer and stepped inside. Akari took a look around and noticed just how big Daiki’s house truly was. Miko poked her head out slightly to get a look at who came over. She instantly recognized Akari from their scuffle but she had no clue who the other girl was. She honed her ears and tried to listen in as they took their seats in the living room. Akari and Kairi sat on the couch while Daiki opted to stand before them. Akari took a deep breath before she spoke up.

“We came over here because we wanted to apologize to you. The truth is... I’m the one who returned your notebook that day. I took the photo of you and that girl BUT... I’m not the one who started the rumors! That was Hina... I never meant for it to get this out of control but by the time it had... I... I just went along with it because Hina is my best friend! I felt like I had to be there for her! I knew it was wrong but, I just couldn’t... and then you tried to befriend Kairi and we ruined that, too. I know it might not mean much to you but I wanted to say that I’m truly very sorry for everything!!”

Despite Akari trying to be as genuine as possible, Daiki gritted his teeth. The reason for his loneliness was sitting right there in front of him. His blood began to boil and he wanted to unleash his emotions in a fit of rage! Just when he was about to let loose years’ worth of pent-up emotions, he closed his eyes and let out a giant sigh.

“It’s been three years since that incident, Chitose-san. Three years since your photograph caused a misunderstanding that practically ruined my life. I hope you understand how hard it has been for me. To go through, what most people say are the best years of your life without any friends, without anyone to fall in love with, without any companionship whatsoever, can you imagine what that has been like for me?”

When Daiki said that, he didn’t come off as angry. Instead, there were obvious hints of pain in his voice. As Miko listened in, a lump formed in her throat as if she were sharing Daiki’s pain. He withheld his emotions as much as possible out of respect for the fact that Akari and Kairi had taken it upon themselves to come here and make things right. Plus, after doing so much to try and befriend Kairi last week, he didn’t want to come off negatively to her since she didn’t really do anything wrong.

“I’ve never been without friends before, Kenjimaru-kun so... no... I admit that I don’t know what it’s like; however, it doesn’t mean that I don’t understand what Hina and I put you through.”

“But why now? Why did you wait so long to apologize?”

“I was scared that if I apologized to you that Hina wouldn’t be my friend anymore. After I showed her the photo, it was as if something changed in her.”

“Something changed?”

Akari let out a nervous sigh. She knew by telling him this that it would be a betrayal of Hina’s confidentiality but she had come this far so there was no point in holding anything back now.

“The truth, Kenjimaru-kun... is that Hina had a huge crush on you in middle school. When she saw that photo, it was as if her world had been shattered. She no longer liked you. Instead, she hated you. She really thought that you were some lecherous scumbag and made it her mission to make sure nobody would have a chance with you. She figured that if she couldn’t have you then nobody should.”

Daiki couldn’t believe what he was hearing and neither could Miko. She balled up her fists and wished that she had punched Hina more than once. She even thought about exploding out of the kitchen and confronting Akari herself but she knew that would just be opening up Pandora’s Box. While Akari and Hina suspected that she knew Daiki, they had no idea that she was living with him. She needed to keep that a secret for now.

“This whole time I’ve been made to feel this way because she had her feelings crushed over a misunderstanding!?” Daiki said, doing his best to remain calm but it was becoming apparent that his emotions were starting to seep through. “You didn’t do anything about it!? It never occurred to you that it was just an accident!?”

“I didn’t know any better!! I really didn’t!!”, said Akari as she clearly showed how nervous and frantic she was becoming. “I showed the photo to Hina because I didn’t know what to think when I saw it! I knew that she liked you so I thought she had a right to know! I didn’t know she would react that way! I didn’t know that she would try and shut you down like that! I... I just didn’t know!!”

At this point, Daiki’s emotions had boiled over and he was on the verge of screaming at her but, instead, he closed his eyes and he took another deep breath because he knew that sinking that low would be selfish. It would only make him feel good and that feeling would be temporary. Once he let everything out, how would he feel then? What would his emotions be like in the aftermath? His heart was too big to become that monster... especially in front of Kairi who continued to sit there looking a bit nervous that things were beginning to escalate. That’s when Daiki took another deep breath and tried to calm himself.

“Chitose-san. I asked you why you waited so long to apologize and you told me that you were afraid of Sawamura-san... but... you still came here. Is there some other reason you’re not telling me?”

“Hina and I went to our favorite store. It’s not too far from here. When we got there... this girl came up to Hina and punched her right in the face. I was so scared at first but after hearing that girl’s words, I knew that I had to try and fix things. Besides, since that incident, I haven’t seen Hina at all. She won’t answer her phone, she won’t text me back... she’s gone completely silent. I figured if there was a chance for me to come apologize to you... it was now. I know that you can’t

easily forgive me but... is there a chance... even a very small one... that we can start over?

Kairi, who had remained quiet this whole time, looked up at Daiki and broke that silence with her soft and gentle voice.

"I'm sorry I believed that, Kenjimaru-kun. Being new, I didn't know what to think. I... I w-would r-really like t-to be your f-friend, too..."

It was obvious Kairi was very nervous. Just hearing her words caused Daiki's big heart to shine through. Before he could answer though, he gave it some thought.

*First Saki and now Akari and Kairi. All of them came to apologize after Miko went for her walk. Sure, her methods were a little harsh... and violent... but why were you trying to dispel the rumors on your own? I get that she feels that she owes me for taking me in but... could she be doing this because...?*

Daiki realized that he was taking too long to answer. He looked at Kairi and saw that her eyes were filled with genuine hope. Akari's were no different. They really did want a chance to start over with him. When he realized that, he cracked a faint smile because his suspicions over Miko's actions seemed more and more plausible.

"It's... not going to be easy for me. I haven't been able to put my trust in someone for a very long time. If you truly want to start over, I'll give you that chance but you're going to have to be patient with me. If that's okay, then I'll accept your apology."

"Thank you!! I know it won't be easy to trust me after everything I've done but I promise that I will try and make it up to you!"

"M-Me, too!" added Kairi.

"Not that I doubt you but how do you plan to do that?"

"When school starts back up, I'll explain things to as many people as possible. I don't care what others will say about me by doing that... not even Hina or Riku. I just want to help you end it all. That's how I'll get you to trust me!"

Because of Miko's actions, a domino effect had begun. Daiki couldn't believe that the curse that had haunted him could finally be coming to an end! Even though his hopes were raised, part of him felt that this was too good to be true. He knew that he couldn't always feel this way, though. He decided to put his faith in his heart that this was, indeed, his ticket out of this.

"Very well. If you're willing to do that then I hope you give it your all."

"I will!"

Feeling that they had overstayed their welcome, Akari and Kairi stood up and respectfully bowed in front of Daiki. They excused themselves and took their leave. Once they were gone, Miko closed her eyes and cracked a smile before standing back up. She shot Daiki a really sly look as she placed her hands on her hips.

"Welp... looks like you got yourself a couple of girlfriends!  
Congratulations! Guess you don't need me in your hair anymore, right?"

While she had said that in her typical snarky tone to show that she was kidding, just hearing those words felt like a dagger through his heart. Daiki balled up his hands into fists and suddenly, all of that pent-up emotion he had withheld inside him came gushing out.

"H... HOW COULD YOU EVEN SAY THAT!!??"

Miko's face went from sassy to shocked in a heartbeat. She even took a step back as she had never heard Daiki scream at the top of his lungs like that before. Her bottom lip began to quiver for a moment as she had no idea how to respond to that. Without even thinking, words began to just fall out of her mouth.

"Daiki? Surely you don't really think..." She couldn't bring herself to finish that sentence because as she said it, she saw that tears began to stream down his face. "D...Daiki?"

"Is that what your plan was this whole time?" he said through pain and gritted teeth.

"My... plan?"

"You told me that you went out for a walk but you planned to dispel the rumor on your own but what you're not telling me is that you didn't do it to make me happy... but to make sure that I wasn't lonely when you eventually leave me! You were just making preparations for that, weren't you!?"

As much as it pained Miko to hear that, there was some truth in it. It wasn't like she tried to hide it. Perhaps that's how it was at first but after the kiss between them last night... her hesitation now lay in the fact that there was no point in falling in love with someone she couldn't permanently be with. She just didn't want Daiki to figure it out until after she was gone because she didn't know if her heart could take it had he known beforehand. Unfortunately, he figured it out.

"I never lied to you, Daiki. I did it because I wanted to thank you. If you're smart enough to figure it out, then you must be smart enough to understand what it means for me to keep living here. Eventually... it'll have to end. I... just wanted to find a way to make you happy after I'm gone."

Miko's intentions were pure; however, until Daiki kissed her last night, she had no idea what his true feelings were.

"And what makes you think I would be happy when you're gone!?" he said as his tears refused to stop.

Miko raised an eyebrow when he said that. Just as much as she wasn't prepared for him to say that what came next was even more unexpected.

"Even if the rumors got dispelled and I could choose any girl at school to give my heart to, why do you think I would want to do that!? Don't you understand!!? I'VE ALREADY CHOSEN THE ONE I WANT TO GIVE MY HEART TO!!"

Daiki couldn't bear to have this conversation anymore. He ran upstairs and shut the door to his room.

"Daiki..." she muttered as she covered her mouth and began to cry as well.

Miko thought that she was doing the right thing. She thought that she had found a way to ease Daiki's pain and end the one thing he wanted gone the most... his loneliness.

What she didn't fully realize until now was that she, herself, had already ended it just by being there.



# SHIPMENT 12

## *I Hear the Mall is a Great Place to Win a Prize*

*"I'VE ALREADY CHOSEN THE ONE I WANT TO GIVE MY HEART TO!!"*

Those words reverberated through Miko's soul. As she covered her mouth in shock, all she could think of was how she felt about Daiki and how she questioned if those feelings were genuine or not. She suddenly felt as if her inconclusiveness was unfair as he had made it perfectly clear what his feelings were for her. The only issue was that she knew that she would, one day, have to leave, and now, knowing how Daiki felt, it made that realization that much more painful.

Miko didn't know what to do at that point. She knew that she couldn't just leave things as they were; however, she wasn't exactly sure how to go about smoothing things over. Going upstairs at this point in time wouldn't do her any good. So much was running through her head, that she had no idea what she should say or how she should react. For now, she decided that she was going to take a walk to get some fresh air, hoping that it would clear her mind and help her find a way to answer him.

As she left, the light breeze of a cool late morning spring day splashed against her face. She didn't understand why but that particular sensation instantly reminded her of Aomori. She closed her eyes and could practically experience the breeze blowing through the trees, the smell of the water coming off the lake, and the feel of the grass and dirt beneath her shoes. All of those memories hit her at once. As she reflected upon her hometown, her mind began to process things.

*I ran away from home because I didn't want my life dictated to me. I wanted the freedom to walk my own path and because of that, I met Daiki. I fully expected to pop out of that box and run for my life. I thought I was going to have to catch the first bus I saw and skip town while the police gave chase. Instead, I ended up with a boy that has done everything he could to shield me and make me feel at home...*

As if her feet began to move on their own, Miko took a few steps forward and as she walked toward the front gate, her mind continued to think things through. *I realize that I was setting him up for a life without me. I know this can't last forever but I really do want it to last as long as possible. I... I just wanted to see Daiki happy because the poor guy deserves it. But now... making him happy hurts so much...*

After a few more steps, Miko found herself at the front gate. She reached out to unlatch it but she couldn't bring herself to do so.

*What is this hesitation for? All I'm doing is going out for a walk. It's not like I'm actually leaving so why can't I take another step forward? Her hand gripped the gate and began to tremble. Because... deep down, I don't want to leave this place. Because... because... I love Daiki!!*

Miko turned around and went to take a step back toward the house. At that moment, she wanted to rush back inside and tell Daiki that she felt the same way; however, she hesitated.

*Why can't I move? I want to tell him that I love him but... why can't I just do it? No... There's no reason for me to ask myself those questions when I already know the answer. No matter how much I love him, in the end, I know I can't return his feelings. I need to eventually face the consequences of my actions... that's what hurts the most but... but... even knowing that why can't I move forward? I just need to tell him, right? So why can't I?*

Miko couldn't stand it anymore and she began to tear up. She balled up her fist and gritted her teeth as a proverbial fire began to burn in her eyes.

*To hell with it all! I want to be with Daiki! I always want to be by his side!  
To hell with everything else!!*

She ran back inside and darted upstairs where she flung Daiki's door open. There he sat on the edge of his bed looking down at the floor. When he looked up, Miko saw tears streaming down his face. She knew precisely why he was crying and she couldn't stand to see it for a second more. She lunged in and embraced him in a hug, knocking him backward onto his bed.

Surprised, he looked up at Miko who, too, had tears streaming down her face. Without saying a word, she leaned in and kissed him on the lips. His eyes widened with shock at first but the more she pressed against him, the more he desired for her to continue. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back, losing himself completely in the moment. It was a moment he didn't want to end but, eventually, it did.

When Miko pulled away, she stared deep into his light brown eyes, cracking a faint smile. "If you've decided to give your heart... I'll gladly take it..."

Daiki couldn't find the words to respond. At that moment, he realized that he just received the one thing he had dreamed of for three long years... a girlfriend... or so he thought.

"...is what I would love nothing more in the world to say but..." she said, hesitating a bit as if she were trying her hardest to suppress her true feelings and desires. "I'm sorry, Daiki. Even though I want to take your heart, you know and I know that I can't keep it."

Miko ran her fingers through his hair, caressing his head. It pained her to say that but it was reality, after all.

"All I wanted to do was to help you but... I didn't realize the full gravity of what I was doing. When I heard Hina run you down at the festival, all I could think about was making things right. Yes, I was also thinking about the future. I was thinking about how, one day, I would be gone. I just wanted to find a way to end your suffering... just like you tried to end mine by taking me in. But... this is reality. Sometimes, reality hurts. I don't mean for it to hurt but... what am I supposed to do? Truth be told, I want nothing more than to change that reality... to stay here forever but... let's be honest. Those are just childish wishes... impulsive thinking. It's what I do best, after all."

What hurt Daiki the most was that he knew she was right. Even if it were just a few days, this was the happiest he had been in years. Like Miko, he wanted nothing more than to change reality but he knew that he couldn't and neither could she.

“What you’re saying is that the only thing we can do is make the best of the time we have together, huh?”

“Yeah...”

Miko pulled herself off of Daiki and took a seat next to him. He sat up and glanced over at her, taking notice of the sun illuminating her face through the window. Just seeing her in that golden light made him smile. Knowing that spending whatever time they had left together was their only option, he felt that there was no need to sit there and steep in their emotions. If they were going to make the most of the rest of Spring Break, sitting in a room moping wasn’t the answer.

“So... Do you want to do anything today?” asked Daiki in hopes that maybe they could get back on track.

“Like what?”

“They have an arcade at the mall. It’s much bigger than the one down the road and it has a lot of cool retro cabinets plus some cool remakes of older games. Maybe we can go and play a few of them? At this point, it’ll do us some good to get out of the house for a bit, and taking some of our frustrations out on poor, unsuspecting video games could be just what we need.”

“Haha, I guess we could.”

Daiki was glad his little quip made Miko feel a little bit better. He felt that there was no time like the present to head out so he stood up and grabbed his spring jacket. As he put it on, Miko came up behind him and embraced him in a hug. She placed her head between his shoulder blades and muttered softly. “Let’s make the most of whatever time we have left.”

“Mmm...” he responded.



The mall was a bit further away from the plaza where Miko had confronted Hina. It took them around twenty minutes to get there on foot.

When they arrived, Miko’s eyes widened as she had never seen a mall this exquisite back home in Aomori. The entrance sprawled out in front of them with its white, black, and gold-themed colors. Before them was a giant food court with vendors selling anything and everything one could imagine. The sheer force of the aromas that emanated from there was the first thing that hit you when you stepped inside. A small drop of drool tried to escape out of the corner of Miko’s mouth but she sucked it back in just before gravity could claim it.

Beyond that were escalators that took you to the second and third tiers, each with its own balconies so that shoppers could view any store from any height.

To the left and right of the food court were long hallways lined with stores on either side. The upper floors of the mall mimicked the same layout. At the end of the left hall on the first floor was a movie theater complex. At the end of the right was a huge department store that took up all three floors by itself. They sold everything you could imagine there for home furnishings; however, they were mainly all popular name brands so their prices were quite expensive.

On the second floor at the end of the left hall was the retro arcade that Daiki had spoken of. Once they took the ride up to the second floor and stepped foot inside, Miko looked around in amazement at the sheer size of the place. Everything

from old-school fighting games, 2D platformers, shoot ‘em ups, and everything else in between was there just waiting to be played. Miko had never seen so many retro cabinets in her life and felt like a kid in a candy store. She didn’t know where to start as her eyes darted indecisively. Daiki took notice of this and tapped her on the shoulder, pointing to a certain cabinet that just so happened to be one of his favorites.

“How about this one?”

Daiki picked out a cabinet for Ultra Super Street Brawler II Turbo: Hyper Fighting Championship Edition HD Remix. While it wasn’t an authentic version of the classic title, it did feature bright and colorful characters redesigned to look more modern but that’s where the newness stopped. The game felt and played just as the original did.

“So, you’re saying you want to release your frustrations by displaying a high level of digital testosterone?”

“Can you think of a better way?”

“Yeah, I can... but I stopped myself when I was laying on top of you.”

Daiki froze as his face became as red as a maraschino cherry. Miko giggled before she slapped him on the back to bring him back to reality.

“Just kidding! Come on. Less daydreaming about me in a beach bikini and more button-mashing!!”

Daiki shook his head as the two approached the cabinet. He popped in a quarter for both player slots and shot Miko a snarky grin.

“I’ll let you pick first. It’s not going to matter, though!”

“Oh? Are you sure about that?”

Miko quickly navigated to her choice of character. Once she locked in her selection, Daiki was a bit surprised that she picked the worst character in the game, Chester. His moveset required a lot of complicated inputs from half and three-quarters circles plus a combination of punch or kick buttons pressed simultaneously. The character was more powerful the higher a player’s skill level was. Daiki smirked as he knew that there was no way she could master a character like that out of the gate.

Daiki made his selection, picking the quicker, more agile character Dega. Next, he hit the random button on the stage selection screen as the background didn’t matter. Once the countdown reached zero, the fight was on. Several seconds later...

“PERFECT” exclaimed the game.

Daiki had been destroyed.

“PERFECT” it repeated after the second round.

Daiki stood there as his soul packed its bags and began to leak from his mouth. He slowly turned his head to look at Miko who wore the biggest grin on her face.

“What was that about who I picked not mattering? Hmmm???”

“H-How!?”

“I probably should have told you that they had this cabinet in Aomori, too. Whenever I got my grades up and wasn’t grounded, I would kill time at our local arcade. Mine wasn’t as big as this one, though. It was just a small mom-and-pop shop that had a few cabinets in the back of their general store. All of the kids went there to kill time after school. It worked out for them because they would usually

buy drinks and snacks, too. If you added that to the quarters dropped into the machine, that old couple made quite a killing off us kids, haha.”

“Is there anything here you haven’t played?” asked Daiki hoping that he could find something that would make them more evenly matched.

“Hmmm... this is a modern take on an older game and the shop back home usually had more modern cabinets, too. So, any of the older retro games would be a safe bet,” she said as she looked around. It didn’t take her long to find something. “I see this place has Road Burner II over there so I’d like to try that one! Sounds like I could use it for practice when it comes to things like rubber and friction”

*Phrasing, Miko!! PHRASING!!*

Daiki cleared his throat. “I haven’t played that one either. I’m not usually into racing games but I’d be willing to play it, too. Who knows? Might end up being fun!”

“Well, there’s no time like the present! Let’s go do it!”

*AGAIN! PHRASING!!*

The game was pretty straightforward. There were two screens and if you went head-to-head, you had a track all to yourself to try and get the fastest time in. Once both racers finished, it would compare times and declare a winner. Miko and Daiki played several rounds and it was evenly split 2-2. Not wanting to end things in a tie, Miko decided to challenge him once again, this time, with the stakes raised.

“Let’s make this last round interesting. If I win, then tomorrow, you have to take me to a place that I want to go to, no matter where it is.”

“Um... does ‘no matter where it is’ mean someplace that’s not Kanagawa?”

“Maybe. You won’t know unless I win.”

Daiki swallowed hard. With the way she phrased that, he wondered if this was her way of saying goodbye. With everything that had happened this morning, perhaps coming here gave her enough time to think about things. One thing was evident, though. There was no way she was going to reveal her intentions; however, there was a way out and that was beating her right here and now.

“Um... what do I get if I win?”

Miko placed her finger on her chin in contemplation. That’s when a sly look came over her face. She leaned in and whispered something into Daiki’s ear. Upon hearing it, his face became bright red with embarrassment.

“Oh and...” she said before she continued whispering something.

Whatever she said, Daiki was sure rattled by it. He swallowed hard as he began to sweat a bit. Miko giggled and gripped the steering wheel. She looked over at Daiki and asked if he was ready. He took a deep breath as his look of shock turned into one of burning determination.

“Yeah. I’m going to win, you know!”

“After what I said, I bet you want to more than anything! Let’s go, tiger... rawr!”

Daiki gripped his steering wheel hard and watched the timer tick down.

3...

2...

1...

*GO!*

Daiki slammed his foot on the pedal at just the right moment. Doing so gave you a slight turbo boost out of the gate. He didn’t expect that to happen and thought

that maybe it was a sign that the God of Fortune was on his side! Daiki knew the course by now having run it four times during this head-to-head battle. He knew when and where to turn, when to brake, when to speed up, etc. By the time he crossed the finish line for the first lap, it showed a new record versus his previous tries. He grinned as he knew that he was making great time and continued to press forward.

The second lap also netted him a new record and his confidence level grew. As he entered the final lap, he could hear Miko slamming her foot on her own pedals while vigorously turning the steering wheel. They were both in the zone and were battling with some personal high stakes on the line. Daiki saw the finish line and pressed the pedal as far into the cabinet as it would go. Even if it wouldn't budge anymore, he continued to apply pressure hoping that it would make him go as fast as possible.

He crossed the line and posted, not only, his best record, but he achieved a speed that landed him at number two on the leaderboards! He knew for sure that he had won and when he looked over, he saw Miko sitting there, leaning forward looking at him with a sly look on her face. Given what she had whispered into his ear, he figured that she knew what was going to eventually happen. That's when she giggled and asked a question that caused the soul to leak from his body once again.

“What took you so long?”

“H-Huh!?”

Daiki looked back at his screen and spied the #1 entry on the leaderboard. There it was in golden letters: “Miko.”

“W-What!!!? HOW!? I posted such good times!”

“You did; however, as we were racing, I’m shocked that you didn’t see it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Halfway through the course, there was a slightly off-color section of dirt. If you turned there, it was a secret shortcut that took you to the other side of the track by the finish line. It shaved nearly 20 seconds off of each lap.”

“THAT’S CHEATING!”

“How is it cheating if it’s in the game?”

At that moment, Daiki’s heart sank. He had lost to Miko fair and square. They never laid down any ground rules when it came to shortcuts and, truth be told, he didn’t even notice it at all. Miko simply had better perception skills and used that to her advantage. Still, it seemed a bit underhanded to make a wager like that knowing full well that she would win. Then again, given what Daiki’s prize would have been, it kind of made sense.

“So... I guess this means it’s goodbye, huh?”

“Daiki. I told you that this wasn’t going to last forever, didn’t I?” she said as he closed his eyes. He knew that if she had won that this would have been the outcome. There was nothing for him to do now but to face the fact that Miko was going to leave. He nodded as if he accepted his fate and waited to hear the painful words that came next. “But... you also said that we need to make the most of our time together... so that’s why tomorrow, you’re going to take me to the park.”

“Wait. What?”

“Yep! Just you and me!”

“So... you’re not running away?”

"Nope! I'm having the time of my life right now! Plus, it's Spring Break, remember? Aren't you having fun, too?"

All of the fear he had felt suddenly washed away. Sure, the inevitable would come but he was completely relieved that it wasn't the time for that now. He cracked a smile and nodded in agreement. Then, what Miko said next knocked the air right out of him in a good way.

"Sorry for deceiving you. As punishment, I'll grant you your prize, too... BUT... only after we get back from the park tomorrow. There's... something I want to talk to you about."

While Daiki grew nervous over whether or not he could deliver when it came to his prize, he also wondered what it was that Miko wanted to say to him.

Later that evening, on the other side of town, Hina spent the night inside her house, laying on her bed. Her phone lay on a small end table next to her. It would occasionally light up with a new message notification but as soon as it did, she would just swipe it away. It was obvious that she had put her phone on silent which was why Akari couldn't get in contact with her; however, the messages weren't from just Akari, they were from her boyfriend Riku, too. She had refused to answer anything from either of them.

Despite the warning that Miko had given her the other day, she was still fuming over it. She had only predictably agreed to dispel the rumors to get out of that situation as soon as possible. As a person who didn't easily let things go, her mind was already churning to discover a way to get back at Miko for what she had done. The only problem was that it was the first time she had seen Miko before and had no idea where to start looking for her. She knew that she didn't go to their school as someone like that would have stuck out like a sore thumb. She drew the conclusion that she must be someone from out of town that knew Daiki. Perhaps a friend or a relative?

All of the possibilities only agitated her further. Giving up, she figured that she would just sleep on it. As she laid there, those nagging thoughts refused to settle down. She tossed and turned to where no position felt comfortable to her. Soon, the energy she exerted caused her to sweat, and that, in turn, only angered her more. Suddenly, she sat up in bed and pounded the mattress with her fist.

"UGH! THAT LITTLE BITCH!" she yelled.

Knowing that sleep was futile, she violently flung the covers off of her and headed out to her living room where she sat down on her couch and turned the television on. She was flipping through the channels to find something that would distract her when something caught her attention. It was a news broadcast but it wasn't what the anchor was saying... at least not at first... it had something to do with a picture that was on the screen.

*"Authorities are searching for a missing 16-year-old girl. She was last seen in Aomori last Friday; however, it is believed that she could have traveled well beyond the city. As a result, we are broadcasting this in hopes that anyone recognizes her. If you do, please contact your local authorities to provide any information that you can."*

When they showed a photo of the missing girl, Hina's face twisted into a sinister and sadistic smile. Suddenly, she found a way to eliminate her little problem.



# SHIPMENT 13

## *A Springtime Stroll Through the Park*

The next morning, Miko got up extra early. As she passed Daiki's room, she could hear him still sleeping. She tiptoed downstairs so as to not wake him and stepped outside to breathe in the cool morning air. Plus, she wanted to check the weather to see how the day was shaping up for today was set to be a special day. There weren't many clouds in the sky which told her that there wasn't much of a chance for rain to spoil her plans.

*Perfecto! Even the weather gods are on my side!!*

Of course, Miko could have turned on the television to check the weather report but she wasn't sure if the noise from the television would wake Daiki up. In the end, it didn't matter because as she stood there, she heard the light thumping of footsteps coming down the stairs behind her. When she turned around, she saw Daiki standing there in his t-shirt and boxers, rubbing the sleepies out of his eyes. Apparently, she wasn't as stealthy as she thought she was.

"Miko?"

"Morning, Daiki! I was just getting some fresh air. I guess you could say I'm a bit excited about going to the park today."

Daiki remembered that there was something that she wanted to tell him while they were there. That had to be the only reason why she was excited. After all, it was just a park. There wasn't really anything of real interest there. Sure, it had a fountain in the center along with some benches that you could sit at but it was mainly a place where old people went to kill some time and talk amongst themselves.

As Miko giggled at the thought of going, Daiki suggested that they eat breakfast first. Plus, neither of them had a chance to even take a shower yet.

Daiki cooked up some natto with a seaweed salad along with a bowl of steamed rice. While it wasn't as fun or as sweet as his souffle pancakes, it did the trick. Miko took her shower as Daiki prepared breakfast and as soon as she got out, she headed straight for the table and packed her food away with vigor. While Daiki had already eaten his in the meantime, it didn't stop him from staring in amazement at how Miko suddenly transformed herself into a human vacuum. Even though it was like a train wreck that you couldn't walk away from, he decided that while she scarfed down her breakfast, he would go take his shower. When he got out, Miko was already standing by the door waiting for him as he pretty much expected.

"You sure are eager to go, aren't you?" he said.

"Yep!" she replied, eyes bright with excitement. "After all, the park has a great view and it's pretty relaxing there. Plus, as you know, there's something I'd like to ask you once we get there!"

"I don't mean to sound negative but... why the park? Why don't you just ask me here?"

"Hmm... nope! It has to be at the park! There's a pretty good reason for it!"

"Okay..." he said as he knew by now that once Miko set her mind on something, she wasn't going to let it go. "If you're ready, I guess we could head there right..."

Before Daiki could even finish that sentence, Miko opened the door and headed out. "...now," he said, actually finishing the sentence. When he didn't budge, Miko looked back and waved for him to join her. After letting out a bit of a sigh, Daiki did a quick check to make sure he had his keys and joined her by the front gate.



The park was right up the road from Daiki's house. It was located in the opposite direction from the local arcade where Miko used to fish for information. One had to climb a small hill to get there which was fine for cool spring morning weather but it was a pain during the winter as many had succumbed to the much-dreaded black ice. This made the park pretty popular at this time of year amongst the more casual residents of Kanagawa. In the wintertime, not so much which caused the park to not see much use.

For that time of the morning, the park wasn't particularly crowded. It wasn't a popular hangout spot for teenagers so most people spent their Spring Break elsewhere. As they surveyed the area, they spied the occasional jogger running around, and a woman walking her dog, but what had caught Miko's eye was that there was a lone elderly couple sitting on one of the park's benches. One would think that they would be reminiscing about the good old days; however, the woman just sat there quietly while her husband slept on her shoulder.

"Aw, isn't that cute, Daiki? Those are relationship goals right there!"

"Must be nice to still be in love at that age, huh?"

"Yeah. Once you find someone that you want to spend the rest of your life with, things like age no longer matter. As long as you love them, you'll do anything to be with them."

Daiki raised an eyebrow when Miko said that. He wondered just what she meant by that and if it had anything to do with why she brought him here. Miko spied an open bench and led Daiki over to it. She sat down and patted the seat next to her. After he sat, a huge smile came over her face.

"Say, Daiki. I just wanted to thank you for allowing me to spend all this time with you. I know our meeting was really... well... unorthodox but you put your trust and faith in me, gave me a place to stay, and looked out for me. I feel really lucky to have met someone like you."

"It's been fun for me, too. After spending so many Spring Breaks alone, this was something I would have never expected to happen to me. The beach... the cultural festival... the fireworks... the mall... and now the park. I've gone to so many places in one week. Heck, I haven't gone to this many places in a month before... at least, not for recreation. I only left my house out of necessity because... well... there was just no point in me leaving. You showed me that I can actually let loose and have fun but that's just it... I only had fun because of you."

Miko blushed when she said that. That's when things turned a bit sentimental for her. "I'm not going to lie, Daiki. Being with you this week was one of the best weeks of my life... all things considered. Although, since I'm not lying,

I do have to say that I've been thinking about my parents back in Aomori. This might make me sound like a monster but I don't regret what I did... not one bit."

"Miko. You may not like what they did to you but... they are still your parents. They may have been tough on you but that's only because they love you. You said that they never explained to you why they were so tough, though. I know the lines of communication between you and them weren't great but don't you think it was a little bit your fault for not trying harder to understand their point of view?"

"I suppose you want to lecture me now, too?"

"No, I don't. I'm just trying to rationalize things. They just sound like parents who wanted the best for you but just couldn't find the right way to show it. I can understand not wanting to have your life dictated for you but running away was a little extreme. I never wanted to tell you that because I enjoyed my time with you so much. You changed my life and because of you, Akari is going to try and set the record straight at school. It's quite possible that when things start back up on Monday, I'll have a brand-new life waiting for me and it's all thanks to you."

"Daiki... You should know by now that I know how to read between the lines. Are you trying to tell me that I should go back home and straighten things out with my parents?"

"Yes and no. Part of me wants you to be happy back home. You belong in Aomori. That's where your family is. That's where your friends are. Just like me, you deserve to have a change in your life that makes it better. But, at the same time, I'm selfish because I want you to stay in my life. I want to keep doing things with you. I want to keep spending time with you. You're the first real friend I've had in such a long time. I don't want to let you go!"

Miko could tell Daiki was conflicted over the whole situation. She understood how he felt because, she herself, had made a decision. However, that changed because Daiki's words struck a chord with her and really made her think. As she processed everything that he said, she began to wonder if there was a way to have the best of both worlds.

Things became a bit silent between them. The cool morning air seemed a bit heavier all of a sudden. Without warning, Miko stood up and began to walk away. Daiki looked on in confusion as she strolled over to the park's edge. There was an iron fence there that was at the top of a hill. Much like the shrine they visited to watch the fireworks, this one gave a great view of the town, even if the elevation was quite lower. Curious as to what Miko was doing, Daiki walked over and joined her at her side.

"It's still a nice view, huh?" she asked.

"Yeah..."

"Even if it has been a short time, I felt that this town had been growing on me. It's pretty different from Aomori. Aomori does have its urban side to it but there are more rural areas out there steeped in history. I guess quaint is the word I would choose to describe it. Kanagawa is more interesting, though. I feel that there's more to do here. Truth be told, I don't really want to leave but as you said, my home is in Aomori."

"So, that means you've decided, then?"

"It's not what I had originally decided but I did decide something else. At first, I was going to bring you here and ask you a certain question in hopes that it

would allow me to continue living here... but now... I want to ask you that same question with a different goal in mind. Well, maybe I shouldn't say goal... maybe I should say... to make a promise with you here and now."

"A promise?"

"Yeah... After what you said about trying to reconcile with my parents, it confirmed what I had known all along but didn't want to admit. Daiki... I'm just a selfish childish fool. Even before I hopped into that box and shipped myself to your door, I knew I was an idiot for doing it. I knew the kind of trouble that I was going to cause, the heartache I was going to give my parents, and the uncertain future that I had painted for myself, and yet... I still went through with it."

Miko let out a bit of a sigh before she continued. "Sometimes you have to take chances in life. You'll never know how things will end up if you don't. Sometimes a chance will cause you to fall flat on your face. It will drag you into the deepest depths of despair and make you regret ever having taken that chance. Then, there are times when you take a chance and you meet someone like a Daiki Kenjimaru and it ends up being one of the greatest things to ever happen in your life."

"M-Miko?"

"The whole reason why I brought you here was that I had made another stupid, childish decision. I was going to use the park as a really dumb dad joke and ask you if I could park my butt at your house and not return home to Aomori. Even though I knew that was wrong, deep down, I felt it was the right decision. Besides, I know it's what you would have wanted, too. I even thought about just having you tell your parents everything in hopes that they would agree to take me in. But, let's be honest, Daiki... none of that would have really worked, huh? I was just letting my emotions get the best of me."

"...and you also knew that because of my heart, you knew that I would have tried to find a way to make it work."

"Yeah. In the end, I was going to take advantage of your kindness for my own selfish desires but, honestly? Would that make me any better than those who have used you over the years? It's funny... love really makes you think about doing really stupid things. In the end, though... you're right. That's why I decided just now to reach a compromise... not with you but with myself. I really think that this is the better option, even if it hurts. That's why I..."

Before she could continue, they heard the sound of footsteps coming up behind them. When they turned around, their eyes widened as a look of fear washed over Miko's face. Two men approached them as they double-checked a photo on their cell phones. After confirming it, they stood in front of Miko and called out to her.

"Excuse me, are you Rin Iwasaki?"

"Uh... no? I'm afraid that you've got the wrong person! My name is Miko Kioshi."

"So, you're saying that this isn't you?"

The man turned his phone around and showed Miko the photo that was on it. Despite the hair color not matching, the photo was the spitting image of her. She began to tense up and sweat nervously as she knew that this was probably the end of the line for her.

"Well? Is this your photo or not?" barked the officer.

Daiki couldn't believe what was happening. Slowly, Miko turned her head and faced him as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Daiki... I think this is where we say goodbye..."

Miko went to take off running but one of the officers tackled her to the ground. She hit the ground hard but didn't give up. She continued to squirm in an attempt to get away but she soon found herself completely overpowered.

A heroic emotion flowed through Daiki at that moment. He knew that Miko would eventually have to return home but even so... he didn't want things to end here and not in this way! After the talk they had, he sensed that Miko found a way to return home on her own terms and he was determined to see it through! He charged forward and went to step in; however, the other officer stood in front of him and pulled out a badge, blocking his path.

"Don't interfere, kid. Authorities have been searching for Ms. Iwasaki for nearly a week. Last night, we received an anonymous tip that said she might have ended up here in Kanagawa. We just happened to be on patrol in the area when we saw a girl that matched the description. I'm sorry but I'm afraid we're going to have to take her with us."

"No! Don't take Miko! She doesn't want to go back home! She hates her parents and wants to live her own life!" yelled Daiki in protest.

"Even if that's true, she's not old enough to make that decision on her own. I'm sorry, she needs to go back."

"Miko..."

Miko looked up at Daiki who felt completely powerless to do anything. As she stared at him, the officer that pinned her down began to slap a pair of handcuffs on her. Even though she had tears in her eyes, she cracked a smile and tried to give him some of her patented wit but she, too, was too emotional to even find the right words. She could only say one thing.



"I'm sorry, Daiki. But, it's true. My name is really Rin Iwasaki. I'm so sorry that I lied to you. I hope you can forgive me."

"I don't care what your name is! You'll always be Miko to me! If I have to, I'll use my parents' money to find you!"

"Silly... I know where you live. I'll just write you a letter when I get back home! I promise!"

After Miko... or Rin as it would seem... calmed down, the officer stood her up and escorted her away. Daiki could only watch until she was taken out of sight. With that, the only friend he had made in years was gone.

On the other side of town, Hina sat in her apartment when her phone rang. When she picked it up, it was the Kanagawa police department on the other end of the line.

"Ms. Sawamura? I just wanted to call and thank you for your anonymous tip. Your information led to us finding the runaway girl. As a thank you for your cooperation, we want to know if you would like to accept a reward for your assistance?"

"No, thank you. Just doing my part is a reward in and of itself. I'm quite satisfied with just being able to help out. I'm glad that you were able to find her, though. Her parents must have been really worried about her."

"I'm sure they are. They can sleep easy tonight knowing that their daughter is safe and sound and headed back home. Once again, thank you for your assistance, Ms. Sawamura. Have a pleasant evening."

The phone clicked off on the other end. As Hina hung up, a sadistic grin came over her face.

"Poor little Daiki. Did I take away your little friend? Now, you're all alone again... just as you should be!"

Hina laughed to herself as she showed zero remorse for what she had done.

Back at Daiki's house, he was questioned by the police officer who had held him back from helping Miko. He explained everything to the officer about how she ran away, how she got to his house, and that he was helping her stay there.

"Mr. Kenjimaru, please understand that while there is no such act, law, or ordinance that criminalizes a runaway child, you can still be subject to arrest. Housing a youth of 20 years of age or younger in your house could allow us to charge you with kidnapping... even if the youth asked to stay at your house of their own free will. Do you understand the legal consequences of your actions?"

"Y-yes... I do. It's just that... I've always wanted to help people. It's just the kind of person that I am. When she had nowhere to go... I just couldn't let her wander the streets like that. I felt like I had to do something."

"Mr. Kenjimaru, that is a commendable mindset but when something like that happens, the only correct solution is to call the police and let us handle it. Even though you took good care of her, and that was quite obvious from the fact that she didn't seem to want to leave, there's still the matter of whether or not to charge you with kidnapping."

"I... I understand..."

The officer stood there and took a good look at Daiki. Here was just a young kid who wanted to help someone in need. There was no malicious intent behind his actions but still, he had to render a fair decision.

"As I said, there is no law that criminalizes a youth for running away and I said you COULD be arrested for kidnapping. I never said that you were going to be. Normally, if the person who took in a runaway was much older, we would have to look into the situation a bit more deeply. More often than not, the runaway, especially if it's a girl, could end up exploited by someone's twisted desires but... it is my judgment that you had no such intent to do something like that."

Daiki's eyes widened as the officer cracked a smile.

"We will overlook it this time. Still, I will have to file a report and your name will be recorded; however, the official decision is that we feel an arrest is not necessary as no kidnapping had taken place. Don't think that this gives you free will to do this again, though. Consider this a warning and a lesson to be learned. Situations like this are quite rare but in the event that it happens again, you must make the right decision. Do you understand?"

"Yes, officer. Thank you."

"Enjoy the rest of your Spring Break."

The officer turned and left his house. As the door closed, Daiki looked around. He spied the two plates in the sink along with the rest of the dishes. From there, he walked upstairs and saw all of Miko's belongings in the guest room along with some of the clothes that he had bought for her.

It had finally hit him that she was gone and not coming back. Daiki fell to his knees and broke down into tears as the one thing Miko had taken away had returned in the most unwanted way.

Daiki was lonely once again.

# SHIPMENT 14

## *It Was as if Last Week Never Happened*

It was less than a week ago when a lone package showed up on Daiki's doorstep. He believed that he had ordered an android companion but it was, instead, an unintentional order for a realistic sex doll. When that package arrived; however, there was a real girl inside that had changed his life. For the first time in years, through a stroke of very dumb luck, Daiki Kenjimaru circumvented the curse that had left him lonely and in a state of desperation. From the very first day that Miko arrived, he had more fun than he had ever had before in his entire life; however, it would end up being short-lived.

Not even a full week through his Spring Break, Miko... or Rin Iwasaki as it had been revealed... had been arrested and sent back home to Aomori. Needless to say, this left Daiki in a depressed state for the remainder of the week. It wasn't a secret that something like this could have happened, though. Whether the police found her or she left on her own terms, it was inevitable that things would have to come to an end.

For Daiki, though, he didn't want to believe reality. He wished deep down inside that he could spend every day of his life going forward with her. Even when the inevitable happened, he couldn't accept it. Things felt too surreal. The house felt too quiet. All that was left of their time together were the belongings that he bought her and the memories that they shared together.

Soon, Monday came and it was time for Daiki to return to school. It took a herculean effort to pull himself out of bed that morning. If it wasn't for his alarm clock constantly screeching, he probably would have fallen back to sleep for the rest of the day. That screeching was a stark reminder that life had to continue. There was only one way to do that so he willed himself back to the world of the living and got ready.

As he went downstairs for breakfast, he instinctively grabbed two plates from the cabinets. He had also done this every morning since Miko left. He didn't do it out of habit, though. There was this deep feeling residing within his body that she would walk down the stairs at any moment to eat with him. And just like every day when he grabbed that second plate, he sighed as reality kicked in and he acknowledged the fact that she wasn't going to show up.

He fixed himself a quick breakfast by reheating some leftover natto in the microwave and picked at it with his chopsticks at the dining room table. He hadn't had much of an appetite as of late but he did his best to force himself to clean his plate every time. This morning was no different as he ate his breakfast in silence. Once the dishes were put away, it was time to head back to school.

Daiki arrived at his classroom with little to no fanfare. After all, it was quite normal for his classmates to never pay attention to him, let alone say anything. Daiki took his seat when he noticed something rather peculiar. Hina entered the classroom and made eye contact with him. She cracked a shit-eating grin before

taking her seat and while that was something she had done before, what was odd was that Akari was missing.

Every day, Hina and Akari would arrive together. At one point, he thought that the two of them were completely inseparable; however, that wasn't the case this time. He remembered when Akari and Kairi stopped by his house and apologized to him in person. It was right after Saki had done the same thing. He wondered if by doing so, Akari decided to distance herself away from Hina. Whatever the case may be, Hina didn't seem all too upset over it as she continued to stare at him, grinning. Daiki did his best to ignore it but he could see that sneer in his peripheral vision and it started to bug him.

*What the hell is she smiling at me for!? This is starting to get a little creepy.*

The class was about ready to start and that's when Akari finally showed up with Kairi by her side. It wasn't like her to just beat the bell but when she took her seat, she noticed that Hina greeted her but she didn't return the greeting at all. Meanwhile, Kairi took her seat in front of Daiki. She turned and quickly said good morning to him with a mixture of excitement and shyness. Daiki returned the greeting but something felt a bit different about it this time around.

*The last time I was in this classroom and spoke to Kairi, I thought she was incredibly cute. My heart raced with excitement because I got to talk to a girl without having them run away or scold me for being something I'm not. Now... I don't feel anything at all. Sure, I'm happy to have Kairi as a friend now but... does it really matter if my heart belongs to someone else? Will I ever see her again?*

Right as their teacher began his welcome back message, Akari quickly turned her attention to Daiki and shot him a faint little smile. It was enough to snap him out of his thoughts and take notice of it. He had no idea what to make of that but, for now, he would simply pay attention to the day's lessons and try to figure it out later.

The morning's lessons passed by rather slowly. Daiki found it incredibly hard to concentrate as he would often drift off into a daydream. His plan of paying attention failed when he couldn't stop wondering what Miko was doing right now. He also wondered just how bad her interaction was with her parents when she was finally returned to them. Just from how she described them, he could only imagine the kind of verbal lashing that they had given her.

No doubt, with it being a Monday, they had probably sent Miko back to school which meant that she was in her own classroom learning her own lessons right now. He even wondered if the lessons she was learning were the same as his. She was the only thing he could think about as he sat there and pretended to pay attention. Thankfully, his teacher didn't call on him to answer any questions which allowed him to continue to think about Miko.

When the lunch bell rang, Daiki didn't feel like sticking around. He left his bag in the classroom and headed down to the cafeteria where he planned to buy something to eat. The line was rather long which caused him to drift off and daydream some more. It got to the point where the student behind him had to tap him on the shoulder to get his attention. After a quick apology, he went up to the counter and ordered Lunch Set A consisting of a turkey sandwich, an apple, a bag of seaweed chips, and a drink.

He paid for the meal properly and then headed up to the school's roof as he had no intention of eating in the cafeteria. It wasn't the first time Daiki ate lunch up there, though. He would often frequent it even though other students shared the same idea. None of them seemed to bother him, though. He would always pick out a nice place in the shade and eat his lunch alone in peace. Akari, Hina, and her boyfriend Riku would often spend lunch together elsewhere so he never had to worry about interacting with them; however, today would be different.

As Daiki sat there, he heard a pair of footsteps approach him to his left. When he looked over, he saw both Akari and Riku standing there. Daiki was a bit surprised to see Akari but even more surprised to see Riku.

"Is it okay if we join you, Kenjimaru-kun?" asked Riku.

The tone of his voice was different as he seemed rather humble in his words. Daiki wasn't sure whether to grant him permission or not but... since he came with Akari, he wondered if this was part of her promise of dispelling the rumors about him. Still, he was a bit hesitant to outright trust him.

"Do what you want..." he muttered in a dejected tone.

Akari took a seat to the left of Daiki while Riku sat to his right. It wouldn't be easy for him to escape now so he just braced himself for what he presumed to be an incoming verbal lashing.

"Kenjimaru-kun... Akari told me everything about what happened," said Riku. "I... wanted to come see you and apologize in person. It was wrong of me to believe what Hina had said about you. I hope that you can forgive me."

Daiki turned and faced Riku with a shocked expression. He had braced himself for nothing. Riku's intentions were pure and his look of sorrow said it all. While he knew that Akari had promised to help dispel the rumors, the frame of mind he was in planted those seeds of doubt... seeds that had been planted many times before. Despite everything, he still wore a blank expression as if he didn't know how to respond.

"I hope that apology is good enough. I admit that one of my faults is trying to make my words seem genuine. I really am sorry, though. I know just saying that can't erase years worth of bullying but... I hope we can start over and be friends?"

Riku extended his hand but something felt off. Daiki just couldn't bring himself to believe him. Akari could sense his hesitation and chimed in.

"Kenjimaru-kun... as Riku said, I told him everything from how the photo I took of you led to a huge misunderstanding to the girl that came and threatened us. We both spread the rumors for so long that... we just felt that there was no turning back but after I apologized to you and you gave me a second chance, I realized that I was wrong in thinking that. There is always room for a second chance and when Riku realized that, he wanted to try, too!"

"Mmm..." added Riku. "Akari did teach me that it's never too late. Although, she also told me to prepare for the possibility that you may never forgive me. I really am prepared for that if that is your decision but... to prove to you that I'm completely serious with my apology, I also want to tell you that I broke up with Hina. I'm no longer dating her."

"Wait... what?" replied Daiki in shock.

"Akari told me everything before she went to your house to apologize to you. That's when I made the decision that it was best if I distanced myself from her."

"So, Akari... when you said that you couldn't reach Hina..."

"Yeah," replied Akari. "I suspect that the breakup hit her hard. That's probably why she wasn't answering her phone or her texts."

"I don't think she's taking it too hard, though..." said Daiki.

"What do you mean?" asked Riku.

"When she arrived at class this morning, she looked at me as if she either knew something or she was up to something. She didn't give off a look as if she were hurting from any of this. If Riku broke up with her and you were not hanging around her anymore, you would think that she would have looked sadder or even more annoyed to see me. That wasn't the case at all!"

"Want me to look into it? I may have stopped hanging around her but I never officially broke it off as friends with her."

"I don't want to put you into an uncomfortable situation, Chitose-san..."

"Akari. You can call me Akari, Kenjimaru-kun..." she interrupted.

"And you can just call me Riku, too, if you want. Giving you permission to use my first name without an honorific is the very least I can do to start making things up to you."

"Thanks, guys... That means a lot. What do we want to do about this then? I wouldn't want Akari to bear this alone. Maybe we should just confront Hina together?"

"We can do it after school at the front gate if you want," suggested Riku.

"Yeah. Let's do that. We need to get to the bottom of this. If she really is up to something, it might interfere with my plans to dispel the rumors," added Akari.

With the plan set, Daiki finished his lunch. Riku and Akari spent that extra time talking to him. Instead of discussing the past, they asked him questions about what kind of person he truly was. They had learned so much about him that it only added to their guilt for all the years they had bullied him. Together, they made a new promise to Daiki... to not only confront Hina but also make sure that everyone else who believed the rumor knew the truth behind everything. With Riku now joining Akari in her efforts, the rumor was sure to be dispelled twice as fast.



After lunch ended, Riku headed back to his classroom while Daiki and Akari headed back to theirs together. Perhaps that was a mistake. When they walked in together, Hina nearly shot up out of her chair. If it weren't for the other students around her, she would have done so. It took every bit of effort to hold back her reaction but that look that she gave Daiki this morning had now turned its gaze to Akari. What Hina didn't expect, though, was that Akari gave it right back to her. Hina went from being severely annoyed to puzzled in an instant. She had never seen Akari glare at her like that before. Although she wanted to know more, she would have to wait as making a scene in the middle of class wouldn't benefit anyone.

The afternoon's lessons passed by much like the morning's. The difference was that Daiki could sense the tenseness in the air as Akari and Hina sat next to each other in adjacent rows. Neither one of them looked at nor acknowledged the other throughout the afternoon.

When the final bell rang for the day, Akari was the first one to get up from her seat. She simply turned her head to Hina and muttered the words “Front Gate” to her. Akari then left the classroom without saying anything else. Hina seemed a bit bothered by everything and turned her head toward Daiki as she had a suspicion that he was the one behind this. Rather than follow everyone out of the classroom, she got up and headed right for his desk.

“What did you do to my best friend, huh? Did you use your lecherous persuasion to try and lure her away...”

Daiki slammed his hand down on his desk which stunned Hina. Kairi who had remained behind as per usual was also shocked by the situation. He looked her right in the eyes and repeated the same words Akari had said earlier. “Front Gate.”

Confused, Hina took a step back. Daiki grabbed his belongings and went to take his leave when he heard a faint “Kenjimaru-kun?” emanate from beside him. Kairi looked on as if she had no idea what was happening.

“Ah, Hayashi-san. Don’t worry. Everything is going to be fine! I promise!” He gave her a smile before he exited the classroom. Hina wanted to question Kairi but it was obvious that she didn’t know what was going on either. She decided to ignore Kairi for now as she was curious as to what Daiki and Akari wanted with her at the front gate. She began to pack up her things but took her time in doing so as she tried to think of a reason why they were so adamant about that location.

Soon, they all arrived at the front gate but Hina was nowhere to be seen. It wasn’t until about five minutes after Daiki, Riku, and Akari had arrived, that Hina walked out of the front doors of the school, her bookbag slung over her shoulder. By now, the majority of the students had already left, leaving them alone to handle their business. When Hina saw the three of them standing there, she became furious that her best friend and, now, ex-boyfriend stood there in unison against her. She strolled up and wasted no time in trying to get to the bottom of this.

“Just what is the meaning behind all of this!? Are the two of you standing alongside Kenjimaru-kun now? Don’t you know what kind of person he truly is!? Are you telling me that you would rather associate yourselves with scum like him rather than...”

“ENOUGH!” yelled Riku, his voice reverberating through her body, rattling her to her very core. “We’ve heard enough of it, Hina. Akari told me everything... including the fact that you used to have a crush on Kenjimaru-san back in middle school. Everything changed the day Akari showed you that photo, didn’t it?”

“W-What!? ME!? HAVE A CRUSH ON THIS T-THING!? What in the hell are you even talking about, Riku!? Is this why you broke up with me? You believed some lie that you were told!?”

“You’re the one that’s lying, Hina,” said Akari. “You confessed to me that you had a crush on Daiki long before I took that photo. In fact, Daiki doesn’t know the full details so now I will reveal the missing piece of the puzzle to all of you.”

Everyone, including Daiki, had varying degrees of reaction to that statement. Daiki was a bit surprised but intrigued, Riku was simply interested in what she had to say but Hina had a petrified look on her face.

“When Daiki forgot his notebook that day... you were the one who asked me to bring it to his house. I remember the words you told me before I left. You asked me to find out if Daiki liked you so that you could find a time to confess to

him. You were always so afraid of whether or not he noticed you that you couldn't muster up the courage to return the notebook yourself. You were too scared to look your crush in the eyes. That's why you sent me instead."

Akari paused for a moment before she continued. "I believed you back then. I thought that the two of you would have made a perfect couple so when I saw the aftermath of what was just a misunderstanding, I took that picture to show you because I actually felt bad for you. That's when everything changed with you, didn't it, Hina?" From that day forward, you made sure that everyone around the school thought of Daiki as some lecherous scumbag when, in reality, you just couldn't handle seeking the truth. You only saw your ideal boyfriend for something that he wasn't and you couldn't handle it."

Daiki was stunned when Akari previously told him that Hina used to have a crush on him but to find out that she sent Akari to his house in her place that day put everything into perspective. After that final piece of the puzzle was revealed, it cast a spotlight on Hina; however, she couldn't bring herself to say a single word.

"So, in summary... What Akari is saying is that you saw the person you loved in a situation and it made you think that he betrayed you so the solution you came up with was to damage his reputation so much that no girl would ever want to date him. Is that what I'm understanding?" asked Riku.

Hina looked as if she were backed into a corner. Her silence spoke more than words ever could. When Daiki realized that this was what happened, that this was the root of his problems, he couldn't help but remember something that was said the day Miko had been arrested.

"H-Hina... when Miko was arrested, one of the officers said that they received an anonymous tip..."

"Huh? Who's Miko?" asked Akari.

"Miko was the girl that confronted you and Hina that day. Since we're being truthful, there's something I need to tell you, too. Miko was a runaway from Aomori. It's a wild story but, to summarize, she ended up at my house. I couldn't just let her wander the streets so I did what I thought was right and took her in. I was so desperate to end the loneliness caused by Hina for so many years... that I resorted to taking in a runaway just so I could feel the warmth of companionship for once in my life... but something happened... during the time I spent with Miko... I fell in love with her! She did her best to erase my loneliness including confronting you so that this stupid rumor would end!! Hina... YOU'RE THE ONE WHO TOOK MIKO AWAY FROM ME, WEREN'T YOU!?"

Normally, one would look at the fire in Daiki's eyes and cower in fear; however, not Hina. Once she knew that the truth had been revealed, she cracked a sinister grin.

"Oh, she was living with you, huh? I, honestly, didn't know that much. Whether you want to believe it or not, it's the truth. All I understood was that girl knew you somehow because she confronted us on your behalf. Needless to say, ever since that day, things began to crumble. My spineless boyfriend decided he didn't want me anymore and my plans of having a Spring Break full of memories disappeared right before my eyes. Then, just by chance, I happened to see a news report about a missing girl. As luck would have it, the report was about your precious Miko so... I did what any model citizen of Kanagawa would do... I called the police and alerted them that she was in the area."

Hina began to laugh maniacally as she looked at Daiki. "To think... this whole time she was your precious little love interest? That just makes my actions much more rewarding because, you see, Daiki... what Akari said was true! I used to have a crush on you and Riku's right... I wanted to make sure that nobody in this world liked you for what you did to me. To think that I inadvertently caused someone I didn't even know to leave you behind, too? I have to say... sometimes this world truly is filled with happy accidents... and then, sometimes it's filled with just accidents like you, Daiki!"

Hina continued to laugh when suddenly...

**\*SMACK!!!\***

Akari stepped in and hauled off, striking Hina with a massive slap across her face. The impact was so hard that it knocked Hina to the ground, the imprint of Akari's hand staining her face with a bright red color. Hina looked up at Akari with tears in her eyes... not from sorrow or sadness, but involuntary tears that were forced from the stinging pain the left side of her face was in.

"It's over, Hina. We've heard enough. From this day forward, we're no longer friends."

"I was right to break up with you. What man could ever love a conniving, backstabbing bitch like you," added Riku.

Hina gritted her teeth in anger and attempted to get back up; however, she stopped when Daiki walked up and stood over her. He looked down at Hina with a look of disgust and anger. Being the kind-hearted person that he was, he couldn't bring himself to say anything to add further insult to injury. Instead, he looked at her and decided to say only one thing.

"I'm sorry you turned out this way, Hina. Things could have been different but you chose this path. I've forgiven Akari, Kairi, and Riku and I'm happy to start over as friends with them. You, on the other hand, will never get that chance with me."

Daiki turned and walked away. Soon, Akari and Riku followed suit. Hina sat there on the concrete staring at their backs as they walked off. It was the only thing that she could do. With just one confrontation, the tables had completely turned in Daiki's life. No longer would he have to worry about being lonely or ridiculed at school; however, despite being fulfilled with his curse being lifted, there was still an empty hole in his heart... a hole that only one person could fill.

# SHIPMENT 15

## *A Graduation Letter*

So much had happened after his fateful confrontation with Hina in front of the school gates with Akari and Riku. Since then, he had begun a new chapter of his life... a chapter that he had never thought to be possible before this. He had spent many days after school hanging out with Akari, Kairi, and Riku. Even Saki slowly warmed up to Daiki and ended up becoming his friend as well.

As for Hina, she ended up getting a taste of her own medicine. Akari and Riku worked hard to dispel the rumors about Daiki. Kairi even began to overcome her shyness and helped out when and where she could. Soon, Daiki was no longer known as "The Undateable One." In fact, Daiki had become quite popular amongst the girls at school, some of whom even tried to confess to him. Despite that, Daiki ended up turning them all down decisively.

There was only one girl planted in Daiki's heart and that was Miko. Despite the new friends he made, he waited patiently every single day for Miko to write him a letter as she promised she would but that letter never came. Over time, he began to lose hope, and slowly, the love that he had for her slipped away bit by bit. Although the pain in his heart caused by her not being there subsided, she never left his heart completely. He simply had lowered his expectations.

In the same year Miko left, Daiki had a birthday in the summer when he turned 17. Riku, Akari, Kairi, and Saki all attended a small party at his house where he received a tremendous surprise: the return of his parents!

As they had mentioned, they were traveling around Japan, closing deals to sell off their businesses all while making the transition to operating locally. Their goal was to be closer to home and more involved in Daiki's life. By the time his birthday rolled around, they had closed the deal on all of the businesses they wanted to sell. While they would still have to travel to finish up some of the deals, they promised that they would be home more often from now on.

Daiki began to have a sense of fulfillment in his life. He no longer had to worry about coming home to an empty house. He no longer had to worry about spending his free time in his room playing video games and reading manga. He could now enjoy the rest of his time in high school feeling included rather than as an outcast.

This new life was the cause of his fading love for Miko. Still, even though he had come to terms with everything, he often wondered how she was doing. The fact that she hadn't written to him as promised still weighed in the back of his mind. He wondered if maybe she was forbidden to since he could have technically been labeled a kidnapper as the officer explained or, perhaps, Miko herself felt that Daiki was better off not keeping in contact with her. He really hoped that it wasn't the latter as she had such a profound impact on his life just as much as he had on hers.

If that truly was the case, then why did they confess their love for one another? Was it simply an impulse? Could their time apart make them come to the realization that it was just some silly fantasy that wouldn't work out? There were

too many questions and over time, Daiki felt it was best to not even bother answering them unless he wanted to drive himself to a point of obsession or insanity. After all, he had a new life he needed to focus on now.

Daiki's senior year was much the same. By the time Spring Break rolled around again, he had been surrounded by so many great friends that Miko was no longer at the forefront of his mind... at least at first. As he had one of the greatest Spring Breaks of his life, those memories of her came flooding back. He remembered spending time at the beach with her, at the cultural festival, at the mall, and, for better or for worse, at the park. There were brief moments when he had been caught lost in thought but his friends helped bring him back to reality. Daiki was making brand-new memories, ones that had become equally as important to him as the ones he made with Miko.

Once Spring Break ended, the next step was preparing for graduation. Daiki's good grades had earned him honors along with his diploma. Being able to graduate alongside friends was one of the best experiences he had in his life thus far; however, much like with Miko, he knew that his friendships were only temporary.

Akari had already decided which university she wanted to attend, as did Riku and Saki. Kairi was staying in Kanagawa as she revealed that she wanted to help her parents run a small shop that sold all sorts of cakes and pastries. In fact, Kairi even had her parents make Daiki's cake for his 17th birthday. Sometimes after school, they would pay the shop a visit and despite offering to pay properly, Kairi's parents were just so thrilled that she had made friends, that they would treat them whenever they stopped by.

Daiki was now faced with the reality that they would be drifting apart. Of course, this was par for the course when it came to high school students. While friendships do last and persist, it wasn't uncommon for kids to go their separate ways as they had their own lives to shape as they entered adulthood.

Daiki didn't know what he wanted to do with his life just yet. After all, it was only a little over a year ago that things had returned to normal for him. He had spent all of his time trying to just live a normal school life that he had never given much thought about his future; however, perhaps it was luck or fate but he did have a safety net that he never considered.

The day after graduation, Daiki woke up and found a huge breakfast waiting for him downstairs. His mother, Rei, had begun to set the table with what appeared to be a feast. Daiki's eyes nearly popped out of his head with how much food had been placed in front of him. As he began to dig in, his father Kota, offered a few words.

"This breakfast is to celebrate your graduation from high school. Congratulations, son!"

"Yes, congratulations, Daiki!" his mother added.

"Thanks!"

"I know you haven't given much thought to what you want to do with your life yet but I have a proposition for you. The business we picked up here in Kanagawa has room for you if you want. I can teach you the ropes and train you in the art of management all while I have you perform a role similar to a paid

internship. That way you'll have a job and, plus, you can carry on the business long after we're gone. Would that be something you would be interested in?"

At that point, Daiki didn't really have to think much to make up his mind. Without a plan in mind or a college picked out, being offered a job by his father would have been the easiest way out. Figuring that he had nothing to lose, he accepted his father's offer.

"Great!! Besides, I think this will also serve as a great building block for your future. Speaking of which... your mother and I got you a very special graduation present. It arrived yesterday while you were at your ceremony. It's rather big so I have it propped up on a cart in my den. One moment and I'll go get it."

Daiki wasn't sure what to make of that statement. Knowing his parents' spending habits, it had to be something expensive. Soon, his father returned with a rather large, elongated box on a hand truck. He did his best to lay the box down gently as the words "Fragile, Handle with Care" were taped on the outside of it. Whatever was inside, Daiki knew that it was delicate and to be properly handled.

His father handed him a box cutter but before Daiki made a move, he said something rather peculiar.

"Say, Rei? Want to head out and grab something to eat? I have a sneaky suspicion that our son is going to want to enjoy his gift all by himself."

"I think so, too. I mean, it's not like we spent 2.2 million yen on it but I'm sure it's something else that he could enjoy by himself."

When Rei said that, Daiki tensed up. He had forgotten all about the doll he mistakenly ordered and that he still needed a way to pay all of that money back. It also made him curious as to why his parents waited a year and a half to bring it up.

"Y-Y-You s-saw the transaction?"

"It was 2.2 million yen, Daiki. How could I not?"

"Why didn't you say anything, then?"

"Hmm... I wonder. We'll talk about that later. For now, just enjoy the gift that we got you. We'll just get your thoughts on it when we get back."

Kota and Rei took their leave. After the door closed, Daiki tried to figure out why they would mention the doll now and why they had to leave in order for him to open his gift. That's when he gasped and snapped his head back towards the box.

"No... it can't be..."

Suddenly, Daiki's eyes snapped open and he couldn't believe it. Before he could even insert the knife, a fist punched its way through the tape and a girl, now with long black hair and blue eyes burst out of the box! Sure, she had looked a little older but there was no mistaking it! Daiki stumbled back and nearly fell on his seat as she stood there before him.



“M-MIKO!?”

“In the flesh! Like my new look? I felt that pink and blue just didn’t suit me anymore!”

“H-HOW!? You didn’t run away again, did you?”

“Nope!”

“Then... just...”

“Haha, calm down. Let me explain!! When I got back home, I got into a huge argument with my parents. I let them have it and made them realize that they were the reason that I ran away in the first place. I even threatened to do it again if they continued to pressure me as they did. That’s when we struck a deal! If I could prove my academic excellence, they would allow me to do whatever I wanted with my life! So, I studied hard, went to cram school, and even went to summer school for extra credits! I earned enough of them that I ended up graduating with honors! Since I’m out of high school, my parents lived up to their end of the bargain and let me do what I wanted. I told them I was moving out and there was only one place I could think of to go!”

Daiki began to burst into tears. He couldn’t believe that this was happening to him. He had always thought that Miko had abandoned him but she had actually been planning to come back this entire time. Still, things didn’t fully add up. That’s when Miko continued her explanation.

“The day I got arrested, I told you that I was going to write you a letter. After talking with my parents, I began to write one out to you but... I knew that it would put a burden on you. Instead of having you explain everything to your mom and dad, I decided to rewrite the letter and address it to them instead. I told them everything that happened, sparing no detail. That’s when I asked them permission to move in and live here.”

“And they just agreed?”

“Not at first. They came to Aomori and visited my parents. It wasn’t a pleasant conversation but I remembered what you told me about standing up to them. I had already done it once when I was sent back so I grew a spine and made my case. After all, we had a deal that if I graduated, I could do whatever I wanted with my life. I put my foot down and got my parents to agree. Your parents saw just how determined I was and accepted me as well. They promised to take good care of me and it was settled. All I had to do was wait until I graduated and I would be allowed to come live with you! Isn’t that great!?”

Daiki was still at a loss for words. “Is... is this happening!?” he asked in disbelief.

“You bet it is! The movers will be here tomorrow with all of my stuff! So, even if you say no, you’re still stuck with me!”

“You actually think I’m going to say no?”

“Of course, not! I know that there’s no way you can say no to me! Oh... about me popping out of the box and all that... don’t worry, I didn’t mail myself to your house this time. After being stuck in a stuffy box last time, I didn’t want to go through that again. I took a train and your parents arranged to have me picked up while you were at your graduation ceremony. I hid in your den this whole time and jumped into the box before you got up! I figured that since we met that way, it would be quite fitting for us to reunite that way, too! Although, I wonder if I should have mailed myself. Do you know how hard it is to live in the same house as you while keeping as quiet as possible? I wanted to go up to your room so badly last night but I knew that it would have ruined the surprise. The wait was worth it, though!”

“Miko...”

“Hmm?”

Daiki lunged in and embraced her in a hug, squeezing her tightly. As he did so, she had to fight back tears of happiness. Daiki, on the other hand, could no longer control himself and let all of his emotions out.

“I missed you so much. I have so much to tell you but for now, I just want to stay like this. I never forgot you. I always thought about you but... I admit... I began to give up hope. I thought that you decided to just forget about me and move on with your life. You have no idea how happy I am right now!”

When she heard that, Miko had lost it herself. She buried her face into his shoulder and cried but they were tears of happiness.

“You don’t have to worry, Daiki. I’m home now, okay? I’m home...”

Despite the warm moment, Daiki couldn’t let go. He continued to hold her in his arms to the point where the hug was getting uncomfortably long. Sure, he was beyond happy to see her but there was still some unfinished business to attend to.

“Okay! Okay! I get it! It’s been a year and a half and you’re happy to see me! God, for a boyfriend, you sure are clingy as hell!”

“I don’t care. I don’t ever want to let you go ever again!”

“Daiki... You realized what I called you, right?

“Yes.”

“And you’re not going to try and refute it?”

“Why would I? I’ve missed you so much, Miko. So much so that it made me realize something... I love you. I love you with all of my heart.”

“Daiki...”

Daiki pulled back a bit and kissed her. All she could do was close her eyes and kiss him back. At that moment, the two of them felt more connected than ever before. Everything in the world just felt right.

Despite that, there was something that was still bothering Miko and it had nothing to do with their newfound relationship. She needed to set the record straight.

“Daiki... um... you keep calling me Miko but I’m sure you know that it’s not my real name. I’m Rin Iwasaki and...”

“... and as I told you before... I don’t care. You’ll always be Miko to me.”

It was true. They had built their relationship around the fact that she identified herself as Miko Kioshi. Because as such, she would always be Miko to him. That was a two-way street and Miko decided to let him know that.

“And you’ll always be my little Daikon-kun.”

After the two of them shared a laugh, they kissed again.

Daiki no longer had to worry about what the future held because he was holding it in his arms. Nothing in the world mattered to him anymore... not the friends he made that were now drifting away nor the new job he was going to start under his father. All he wanted, all he cared about had come back to him.

That summer, Daiki began work at his father’s company. His mother decided that Daiki would work for free until he earned the equivalent of 2.2 million yen to pay back his debt. He started off pushing papers all while learning the nuances of the business. It was a lot of information to take in but he rose to the challenge and did his best to learn as much as he could.

Meanwhile, Miko knew that she couldn't just freeload so she ended up getting herself a part-time job working alongside Kairi at her parents' bakery. She was introduced to Kairi through Daiki and it couldn't have come at a better time. With Kairi helping out, she discovered that her parents were looking to retire and wanted to leave the shop in her hands. With Miko on board, it made splitting up the duties a lot easier. Plus, it gave Daiki another reason to stop by there in his free time.

Before Riku, Saki, and Akari moved away to attend their colleges in the fall, they decided to get together one last time. This time, Miko was there with them and they all shared stories of what life had become once the rumors were dispelled. Knowing that she was the catalyst behind everything filled her with a sense of warmth and pride. All of the work she had put into making sure that Daiki had a better life once she was gone had paid off. It was great to see him with friends that he could trust.

Once they said their goodbyes, Miko and Daiki decided to walk home together, the sun had just begun to set, turning the sky into a beautiful array of oranges and purples. The stars had begun to peek through, decorating the sky as if it were covered in glitter. Miko gazed up as a smile came over her. She reached over and interlaced her fingers with Daiki's. The warmth of her hand caused him to blush just a little bit. She gazed over and took notice of the slight hint of red in his cheeks. Normally, she would say something to tease him but this time, she just wanted to enjoy the moment.

Eventually, they made it back to the front gate of their house. When they arrived, there was a girl standing outside. Her hair was a bit longer but there was no mistaking it...

"Hina... What are you doing here?" asked Daiki.

"I came to tell you that I'm moving. You won't have to worry about me anymore."

"Is that all you came to say?"

"No; however, it doesn't matter. You wouldn't accept it anyway."

"You're right... I wouldn't. As I told you that day at the school gates, you will never get that chance with me. I still stand by those words today."

"I know you do. Still... I felt as if I had to come here and tell you. I took away so much from you and, yet, in the end... you got it all back and then some. Now, I'm the one without any friends. Karma and all that, I guess."

"Did you come here seeking pity from me?"

"Honestly? I'm not sure what I should expect outside of you saying good riddance. Maybe I came here because I felt the need to hear it from your mouth. Guess I'm not even worth that much, huh?"

"Couldn't tell you. I'm not the one responsible for measuring your worth. Only you can determine that for yourself."

"Right. Well... I came and said what I wanted to say. I know you might expect me to say something like this but despite the way it sounds, I mean it in a completely different way and that is I hope that I never see you again. Goodbye, Daiki Kenjimaru."

Hina stuck her hands in her pockets and walked away, a single tear rolling down her cheek. She reaped what she had sown and now must face the challenge of starting over from scratch. Daiki stood there and pondered what Hina had just said.

As he thought about it, he realized exactly what she meant by those words. As he stood there in thought, Miko nudged him on the shoulder.

“Daiki?”

“Sorry. I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

“What Hina said.”

“It was kind of rude, wasn’t it?”

“If you took it at face value, yes. But as she said, she meant it in a different light. Call me crazy but I understand what she meant. Let’s just say it’s the only way she could accept moving on into the future.”

“Oddly, I kind of get it. Kind of like how I wanted to never see you lonely ever again... hence why I came back.”

“Mmm...” he muttered in agreement.

Miko interlaced her arm with his. She nudged up against him and turned her gaze back toward the sky.

“Say, Daiki. What do you think the future holds for us?”

“I don’t know. I just know that as long as you’re with me, it doesn’t matter what the future brings.”

Miko warmly smiled. With Miko by his side, he knew that he would never be lonely again.

A new life for the two of them had officially begun!

# AFTERWORD

You made it to the back of the book! Congratulations!

I sincerely hope that you enjoyed the story! A fun little fact is that this book started off as an 8,000-word short story in my third series From Ashe. That series is about a girl who wants to become a published author so I used that series as an excuse to write short sample chapters of all of these light novel ideas that I have in my head and passed it off as her writing! You really should check it out!

A lot of people loved the concept that I came up with and that is what inspired me to flesh this out into a full-length light novel!

The idea for this series came from the fact that so many books in Japan are coming up with longer and longer titles. I wanted to poke fun at that but most of those titles are from the isekai genre. There are a few here and there in other genres but it is a growing popular trend so I decided “why not”?

When you look at a lot of series out there, it introduces a crazy premise before it settles into an average story but when you read it, it still comes off as something memorable and, sometimes, charming. That was the goal that I wanted to achieve here with MyGF!

I first asked myself, “how would a girl get mailed to someone’s doorstep?” Of course, the whole mail order bride concept could have been used but I feel that’s the typical go-to route. I wanted something a little more unique.

That’s when I decided to take an average, yet daring, girl and have her willingly decide to mail herself to get away from her parents and the only thing I know of that a human body can fit into is a box for a sex doll. Now, all I needed was a main character who needed a reason to order a sex doll and that’s how Daiki was born!

His loneliness, coupled with a bit of stupidity, led to him ordering a sex doll (he actually thought it was a lower-end, yet, sophisticated android companion!). Now, we have the crazy set-up that seems wild and too far fetched that most comedy series will hit you with! After that, it was make it a tale about a boy overcoming his loneliness and finding love for the first time through this highly unlikely opportunity!

From there, it was finding things for them to do so I came up with a list and then said “why not just do all of them?” I even reflected that in the story when Miko made the very same suggestion!

And the rest was history! Hopefully, you found entertainment in the story! Whether you did or didn’t, you still have my gratitude for picking up the book and giving it a read! I hope to speak with you again in my other series!

# BONUS: BIOGRAPHIES

## *DAIKI KENJIMARU*

HEIGHT: 5'9"

WEIGHT: 140 LBS

AGE: 16

### BIOGRAPHY

DAIKI IS THE CUTEST BOY AT SCHOOL BUT DUE TO A RUMOR, NO GIRL WANTS TO DATE HIM. HE ONLY WISHES TO CURE HIS LONELINESS WHICH HAS PERSISTED FOR YEARS. OUT OF DESPERATION, HE MISTAKENLY ORDERS A SEX DOLL WHEN HE THOUGHT IT WAS AN ANDROID COMPANION!



### *MIKO KIOSHI*

HEIGHT: 5'7"

WEIGHT: 110 LBS

AGE: 16

#### BIOGRAPHY

SICK OF DEALING WITH HER OVERBEARING PARENTS, MIKO RUNS AWAY BY HIJACKING A BOX MEANT FOR A SEX DOLL AND MAILING HERSELF TO DAIKI'S DOORSTEP! A TOMBOY THROUGH AND THROUGH, MIKO HAS NO ISSUE WITH TEASING DAIKI BUT CAN SHE BE THE ONE TO TRULY END HIS LONELINESS?



*HINA SAWAMURA*

HEIGHT: 5'7"  
WEIGHT: 115 LBS  
AGE: 16

## BIOGRAPHY

HINA IS A CLASSMATE OF DAIKI'S. FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON, SHE HAS A BURNING HATRED FOR HIM. SHE FULLY BELIEVES THE RUMORS ABOUT DAIKI AND WILL DO ANYTHING TO MAKE SURE OTHERS SHARE HER BELIEFS.



## *AKARI CHITOSE*

HEIGHT: 5'6"

WEIGHT: 110 LBS

AGE: 16

### BIOGRAPHY

AKARI IS HINA'S CHILDHOOD FRIEND. THERE ARE CERTAIN TIMES WHEN SHE CAN BE OUTSPOKEN; HOWEVER, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT SHE WILL BE RATHER TIMID AND RESERVED. SHE BELIEVES THE RUMORS ABOUT DAIKI MAINLY BECAUSE OF HINA'S INFLUENCE.



*RIKU KOBAYASHI*

HEIGHT: 6'0"  
WEIGHT: 135 LBS  
AGE: 16

## BIOGRAPHY

RIKU IS HINA'S BOYFRIEND AND ALSO HATES DAIKI WITH A PASSION. HE BELIEVES THE RUMORS BUT EVEN GOES SO FAR AS TO ABUSE DAIKI'S KINDNESS, OFTEN CALLING UPON HIM FOR FAVORS.



## *KAIRI HAYASHI*

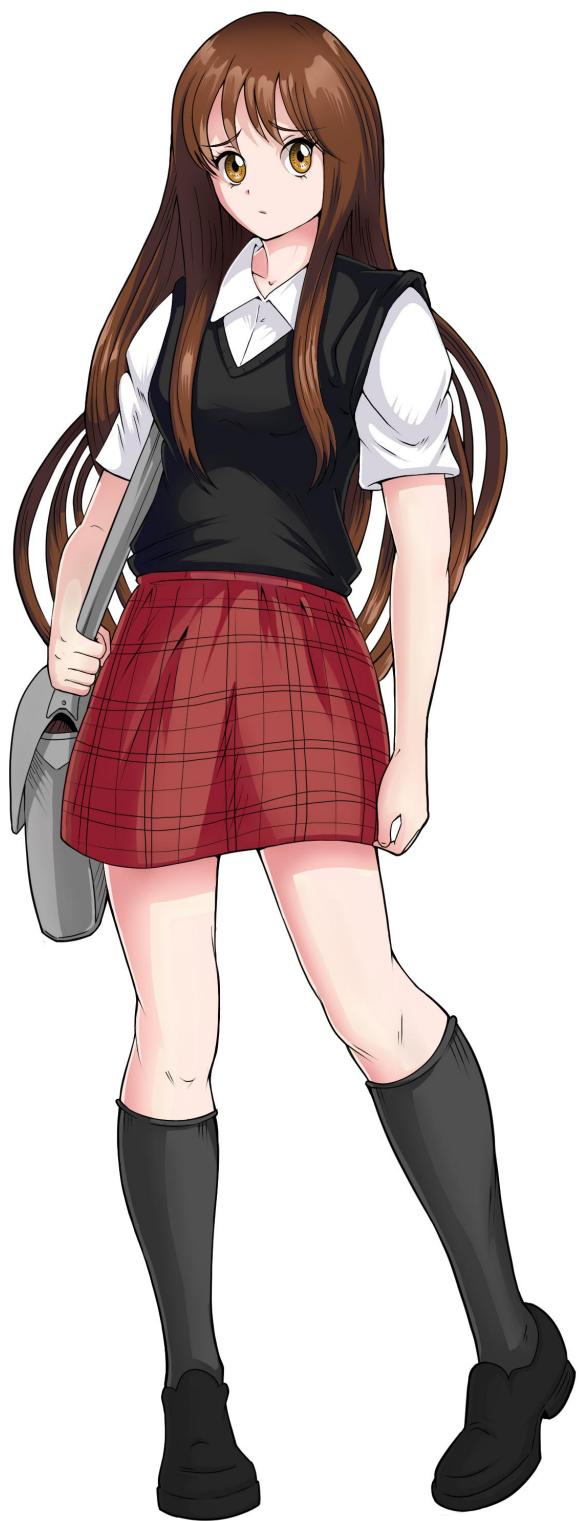
HEIGHT: 5'4"

WEIGHT: 105 LBS

AGE: 16

### BIOGRAPHY

KAIRI IS A TRANSFER STUDENT THAT DOES NOT YET KNOW THE RUMORS ABOUT DAIKI. SHE IS VERY TIMID AND SHY, OFTEN SEEN COMING AND LEAVING SCHOOL ALONE.



*SAKI MIZUHARA*

HEIGHT: 5'8"  
WEIGHT: 135 LBS  
AGE: 16

## BIOGRAPHY

SAKI IS THE FIRST GIRL DAIKI ASKED OUT AND GOT REJECTED BY. SAKI WOULD HAVE SAID 'YES' HAD SHE NOT COME IN CONTACT WITH THE RUMORS ABOUT HIM. AN AVID GAMER THAT LOVES TO HANG AROUND ARCADES, SHE DOES HER BEST TO STAY AWAY FROM DAIKI.



*KOTA KENJIMARU*

HEIGHT: 6'3"  
WEIGHT: 205 LBS  
AGE: 42

## BIOGRAPHY

KOTA IS DAIKI'S FATHER. HE IS THE CEO AND OWNER OF A GROUP OF BUSINESSES ALL THROUGHOUT JAPAN. HE AND HIS WIFE SPEND THE MAJORITY OF THEIR TIME TRAVELING. WHEN HE VISITS HOME, HE MAKES IT A POINT TO SPEND AS MUCH TIME WITH DAIKI AS POSSIBLE.



*REI KENJIMARU*

HEIGHT: 5'11"  
WEIGHT: 135 LBS  
AGE: 39

## BIOGRAPHY

REI IS DAIKI'S MOTHER. SHE ACCOMPANIES KOTA ON HIS BUSINESS TRIPS AS SHE SERVES AS THE VICE PRESIDENT OF THE COMPANIES THEY OWN. REI HAS A HABIT OF WASTING MONEY ON ITEMS OFTEN SEEN ON TV INFORMERCIALS, MUCH TO KOTA'S CHAGRIN.



