Did You Think My Yuri Was Just for Show?



Neru Asakura

Illustration by

Minori Chigusa


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"I'm in love with you."
"It's true. I love you."
She was briefly surprised by her own words, spilling out unbidden in the middle of a live broadcast.
But only for a moment.
Strangely enough, she didn't falter at all.


No way, no way, no waaay! K-KARIN SAMAAAA?!
Karin Shotsuki
A new voice actress who just joined Suzune's company. Former center of the idol group DIAGONAL. Is her "yuri" just for show? Or is it something more?
Suzune Sengu
A popular voice actress. A huge fan of Karin Shotsuki. Her yuri is for real.
"This is Karin Shotsuki, who's joining our agency as of today."



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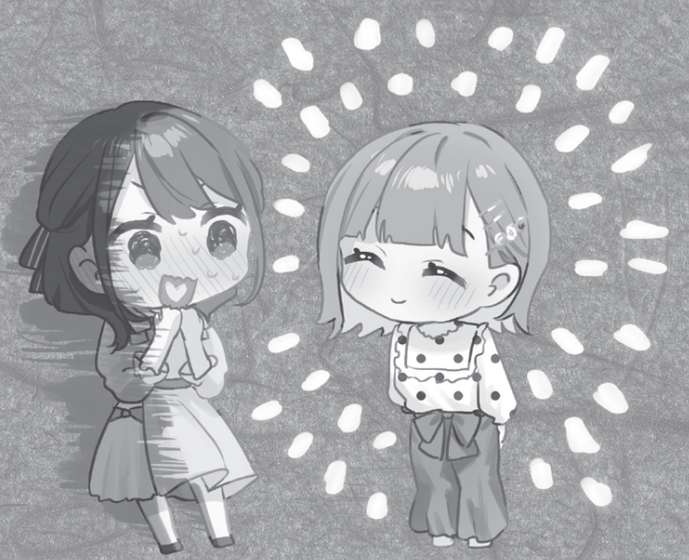
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❤ Prologue ❤

“…Because I love you.”

Suzune Sengu was briefly surprised by the words that sprang unbidden from her lips right in the middle of a live broadcast.

But that only lasted for a moment. Strangely enough, she didn’t falter in the slightest. The declaration was unexpected, yes, but she felt her resolve solidify as soon as she said it.

She’d always been like this.

People had often told her she was brave. When she stood up on stage, or in front of a microphone, she could switch gears instantly.

No, she wasn’t afraid at all.

On the other hand, the woman sitting across from her—Karin—was staring at Suzune in confusion.

Her eyes were wide and a little watery, her long lashes fluttering as she held back tears. The tip of her finger was still frozen on the tablet that sat nearby on the table.

But a little flush of pink was returning to her cheeks, though they had been so pale before.

That was all that mattered.

Through her in-ear monitor, Suzune could hear the people beyond the window of the recording booth flying into a panic, but she ignored them.

She had to make one thing clear—that Karin’s best ally was right here in the room with her.

“This isn’t just for show.”

Suzune gazed directly into Karin’s eyes and spoke, her words crystal-clear.

“I’m in love with you.”



"…I'm literally dying without my *oshiii*…"

In a private room at a bar near the studio, Suzune Sengu let out a long sigh of lament, as if her soul were leaving her body along with it.

Her fellow voice actress let out a sweet little laugh from the seat across from her.

"Aww, what? You still haven't gotten over that?"

Yuika Ayabuki covered her mouth politely with a lightly closed fist, her movements as elegant as her voice. She smiled affectionately at the young woman who was six years her junior as if she were a child. Even though Suzune was twenty-five years old already, it certainly was how she was acting.

"Is it really worth dwelling on it for so long?"

"Of course it is!"

Suzune dragged herself upright from the table, but her shoulders still sagged.

Why wouldn't she be depressed? Her favorite idol, her *oshi*, had graduated out of the blue. She'd lost a vital source of sustenance that got her through each day.

"But it's been six months already, hasn't it?"

"It's *only* been six months."

Suzune pursed her lips.

She couldn't help acting childish when it was just her and Yuika. And since Yuika was always happy to indulge her accordingly, it only encouraged Suzune all the more.

It was important to have someone who you could be fully comfortable around.

One day, on their way home from a wrap party for a certain project…

"Would you care to join me?"

Yuika had invited her out to drink and had brought her to a lovely bar where, much to Suzune's surprise, she'd abruptly and correctly guessed that Suzune—like her—leaned *that way*.

"Sometimes you can just tell, you know?"

When Yuika took her hand and whispered this in her ear, Suzune thought her heart might stop from sheer panic and confusion.

Yuika smoothly slid her arm around Suzune's waist and pressed a soft kiss against her cheek.

The bartender pretended not to notice.

For a moment, Suzune's heart wavered, but she managed to stop Yuika before the older woman's lips could draw closer to hers.

She stammered out that flirting for the yuri fans and such was fine, but she didn't want to go any further than that unless it was with someone she truly loved. To her surprise, Yuika was quick to accept the rejection with an easy *"Oh, what a shame."* They'd been closer than any ordinary colleagues ever since.

"We're both 'yuri' for real, hmm?" Yuika had said at the time.

What she meant was that their interest in each other wasn't just for show.

It was a common practice, a form of fan service sometimes known as "yuri bait," or in Japanese, "yuri business."

By showing off their close female friendships—saying "I love you," getting jealous of other female friends, and so on—female entertainers created an illusion of a romantic relationship to captivate fans, many of them male.

One such instance of this phenomenon had happened at the event earlier that day.

It was an anime DVD release event with a crowd of roughly three hundred. During the standing talk show segment on stage, the presenter asked the series's voice actresses what they had done for fun lately.

Suzune could tell what the presenter was getting at, so…

"The other day, Maria-chan and I went on a date at the aquarium!"

She very deliberately used the word "date."

It was common enough for girls to call it a "date" when they went out together with other girls, not just with a boy. Often, they

used this term to suggest they were especially close.

Maria Kagami was one of Suzune's frequent collaborators. Though she was at a different agency, the two women had started voice acting around the same time and were close enough friends that they exchanged messages and such. They also went out to eat together fairly frequently.

And, in this particular anime, their characters were basically in love.

"You know how much I love penguins, right?"

Maria was famous for her fondness of penguins, to the point where she was known to openly wonder aloud about the possibility of keeping one as a pet.

"Well, the city aquarium got some new penguins recently, so I invited Suzune out after a recording session to go meet them with me!"

"It's amazing how much Maria-chan knows about penguins. I could barely tell any of them apart."

"I mansplained it to her like any good boyfriend would!"

Maria puffed up her chest proudly, prompting a wave of laughter from the audience.

"I had sooo much fun!"

"Me, too!"

The two of them leaned in toward each other, practically making heart eyes.

"…Um, hello? And you didn't invite me?"

Just then, their fellow voice actress, Yuika, pounced on the subject.

"What, so the two of you went alone? When? Why? Wasn't I at that recording session, too? Why didn't you invite me?"

Yuika pressed closer to them, microphone in hand, while Suzune and Maria drew together and inched away from her nervously.

"I-I thought you had another session later that day, Yuika…"

"Well, I could've met up with you afterward, hmm? I bet you went out to eat after the aquarium anyway, right?"

"Ah… I didn't even think of that."

Yuika's eyebrows shot up at Suzune's answer.

Seeing her reaction, Suzune and Maria clung to each other tightly in an exaggerated show of fear. They pressed their cheeks

together, eliciting a little stir from the audience.

"All right, save your lovers' quarrels for the dressing room, please! Even if I personally would love to see more!"

Everyone laughed at the presenter's commentary, drawing the scene to a close.

After the event, Suzune searched up the reactions on social media and found plenty of the usual comments: *Yuri fans eating good again today!; Yui-yui is such a yuri fiend I can't even;* and so on. She was glad to see the fans were happy.

Since most female friends were perfectly comfortable with physical contact, she and her fellow voice actresses would sometimes hug or hold hands on stage. If she did anything of the sort with a male voice actor in this day and age, there would be a meltdown on social media, but it was never a problem when both parties were women.

Although that didn't entirely sit right with Suzune.

Even after their conversation about being "yuri for real," Yuika and Suzune had proactively put on yuri fan service whenever they were cast together. But when Yuika told her that she'd gotten a new girlfriend for the first time in months and they'd already started living together, Suzune was curious.

"Doesn't it bother your girlfriend?" she'd asked. *"The, um…yuri bait, I mean."*

"Well, it's just work." Yuika's response had been immediate. *"She knew I was an actress when we started dating, so she's accepted it. Oh, although I suppose I've stopped sleeping over at friends' houses, at least."*

Come to think of it, the two of them hadn't done a sleepover in a while.

Throwing slumber parties with female friends really was fun.

But to participate in them, Suzune would have to hide the fact she was into girls for real.

She and her friends were able to act openly with one another based on the premise there was nothing sexual going on. She didn't want them to think that she might be looking at them that way.

She couldn't speak for anyone else, but Suzune had never looked at her own friends like that. Sure, she might find them attractive at times, but that was different from ogling someone

with sexual fantasies in mind.

…But it was far too difficult to explain all that. She had tried before with friends outside the entertainment business, and it had only caused them to grow distant.

It was all too easy to tell when someone no longer trusted you.

So Suzune kept it a secret.

Still, Yuika was probably refraining from sleepovers out of consideration toward her girlfriend, not because of those other reasons.

Suzune figured she would be jealous, too, if she was Yuika's girlfriend. It wasn't a matter of truly suspecting her of cheating—it was just hard to imagine accepting her partner having sleepovers with someone else she might develop feelings for. No matter who it might be, the slight possibility was always there, after all.

"Why don't you just find someone new?"

Yuika tipped her glass of single malt whiskey as she quirked an eyebrow.

She was so grown-up.

Suzune was drinking a cocktail. Yuika had requested "something that would suit my friend here," and the bartender produced a somewhat sweet rum-based drink for her. She'd been so embarrassed, she'd already forgotten the name of the cocktail.

"It's not that easy, you know." Suzune heaved another soul-weary sigh. "I've never stanned anyone so hard before in my life."

"What was the group called again? 'DIAGONAL'?"

"That's right."

Female idol groups were as numerous and brilliant as the stars, even if they shone at different magnitudes. Among them, DIAGONAL was at least well-known enough that even people with no interest in idols had likely heard the name once or twice.

All their songs were composed by famous Vocaloid producers and set to energetic, cheerleading-like dance choreography. This combination set their performances apart from the rest.

And their undisputed leader, their center, was one Karin Shotsuki.

According to her official company profile, which no longer existed, she was twenty-two years old. Her height was 158

centimeters. No other physical measurements were listed. It only said that she'd gone from being a child star to an idol.

Unofficial sources claimed she was born and raised in Tokyo and had gone to a public high school. She had no driver's license. She refused to eat raw foods of any kind. No, not even fruit. The story went that she'd gotten food poisoning a long time ago, resulting in an intense aversion to raw food.

Karin Shotsuki had been the center of DIAGONAL for five years, from the group's inception.

Naturally, this meant that she had more song and dance parts than any of the other members. Surely, one would think, she would run out of stamina after leading five songs in a row, and yet she never let it show in the slightest.

In the documentary that came with the special fan club-exclusive album, she once collapsed in a heap after a concert, then noticed the camera and furiously waved it away.

Her intention was clear: She didn't want her fans to see her at anything less than her best. Suzune had been so moved, she'd nearly cried.

"She really was amazing… You have no idea…"

"You sort of sound like someone whose crush moved to another school."

Yuika's tone was teasing, but Suzune sat up straight.

"No, it's not like that," she insisted firmly. "My feelings for Karin Shotsuki aren't true romantic love. I just have a strong admiration for her high level of discipline and performance, that's all."

"Oh? But you have photos of her and such, don't you? Last I checked, photos don't sing or dance, now do they?"

"Buying merchandise is the duty of any fan who supports their *oshi*. It's basically a tax liability."

"A fandom tax, huh?"

"Exactly."

But of course, despite her immediate protests, that wasn't the whole story.

"…Okay, I absolutely adore her face, too, but still."

That was all part of being a fan.

Karin Shotsuki's eyes were especially incredible.

Not only were they enormous, but the dark parts of her pupils

held a hint of azure, glinting like obsidian. Her eyelashes were so long, you might be able to balance chopsticks on them. You could almost hear a little *whoosh* when they moved.

Also, her skin was so smooth and fair.

And maybe looking at the nape of her neck or the slight patterns of her veins made Suzune's heart pound a little.

These days, it was easy to pass off edited photos as the real thing, but that wasn't the case with Karin Shotsuki. Suzune knew, for sure, because she had gotten to shake her hand at a meet-and-greet event. Karin was just as good—no, even better—in real life.

Although Suzune already preferred 3D over 2D, it was only when she touched Karin's hand that she truly understood the power of the flesh. The hint of a sweet scent. The cool feeling of a palm. These things could only be experienced from a living, three-dimensional human being.

It was only thirty seconds, and it only happened the once. Yet even now, she could easily call to mind the scent, the sensations, all of it.

And best of all was Karin's voice.

Karin was on the baby-faced side, with soft, supple-looking lips, but the voice that spilled from them was truly incredible.

Due to her line of work, Suzune was very sensitive to people's voices.

And Karin Shotsuki's had real power. No matter how many times she went to see her perform, Suzune would feel her skin prickle when Karin's voice blew through the audience, giving her chills every time.

While the other girls' breathing grew ragged from their intense dancing, that was never the case with Karin. She could sing perfectly even through the most difficult of dance routines, as if nothing could ruffle her.

One day, she would be famous the world over. Suzune was sure of it.

…But that never came to pass.

Because Karin Shotsuki suddenly went away.

One day, out of nowhere, a social media post labeled Important Notice quickly dominated all of the trending topics, along with relevant keywords.

From the DIAGONAL official account:

As of today, Karin Shotsuki has graduated from DIAGONAL.

That was all it said.

As if that wasn't bad enough, her agency's website posted an update:

We regret to announce that our management contract with Karin Shotsuki ended yesterday. In addition, please note that we will no longer be accepting any messages or further contact regarding Karin Shotsuki.

All sorts of wild rumors circulated online: elopement, marriage, retirement, kidnapping, and even suicide.

Streamers and content creators jumped on this in droves and fanned the flames. One after another, they came forward claiming to be Karin's siblings, her parents, her lovers, all for the sake of racking up views. The result was utter chaos.

Suzune, too, jumped at any and all information she could find in hopes the truth was out there somewhere, but she wasn't able to glean anything for sure.

Everyone was dying to hear Karin Shotsuki reveal what happened in her own words.

But those words…never came.

She didn't use social media, and her profile had already been scrubbed from the DIAGONAL site.

There were scattered reports of sightings, but they were all baseless rumors.

And there was no criminal case involved. So when an even more scandalous incident involving a different idol came to light two weeks later, people promptly forgot all about Karin Shotsuki.

Everyone, it seemed, except Suzune.

She couldn't possibly forget. Almost every day, she would watch video archives of past DIAGONAL concerts, gaze at Karin's photobooks, and listen to the song that had become the idol's last single.

However, she didn't try to track her *oshi* down.

She quickly realized that no amount of sifting through information online would ever get her anywhere, and even if she did somehow find Karin, it was safe to assume she would never return to DIAGONAL.

All Suzune could do was relive the memories of her *oshi* to sustain herself.

But inevitably, she was going to grow dissatisfied with this, and after half a year, that was exactly what happened.

She hadn't gotten sick of Karin—that was impossible—but by now, she'd burned Karin's every video and photo into her memory and could picture them with her eyes closed, down to the finest details.

And yet her *oshi's* scent and her cool palm, memories she thought she'd carved into her heart for eternity, were slowly fading with each passing day. That hurt most of all.

"I wonder what Karin-sama is doing now…"

As Suzune groaned like she might sink to the center of the earth, Yuika smiled.

She wasn't making fun of Suzune, though.

It was just that *they* were each someone's *oshi*, too.

Unlike the old days, it was now fairly common for people to become fans of individual voice actors and actresses. Yuika, and Suzune, too, had more than a few devoted fans of their own.

It was hard to say whether that was a good thing for the craft as a whole, but either way, it was always nice to hear that someone loved your voice and performances.

"Haven't you ever had an *oshi* before, Yuika?"

At this, Yuika took another sip of whiskey and looked thoughtful.

"Hmmm… No, I don't think so. There are plenty of shows and things that I like, but I've never gotten obsessed with one specific character, and I'm not really interested in idols. Even when there's an actor who I like enough to see everything they're in, I don't buy merch or anything. And I don't need to know about their personal lives, so I don't watch interviews and such."

"Riiiight…"

I guess everyone enjoys different things in different ways, Suzune thought.

Suzune deeply respected Yuika as a colleague, and she checked out everything the more experienced voice actress appeared in, but that wasn't the same as an *oshi*.

Naturally, just because having someone to stan was completely essential to Suzune didn't mean it would be vital to someone else. If you weren't careful, a simple misinterpretation could lead to all-out war.

Suzune was glad she could talk to Yuika about these things without fear of being misunderstood.

As Suzune was reflecting on this, Yuika put down her glass and rested an elbow on the table, looking like she'd just remembered something.

"Did you hear? Apparently, we're getting a new girl."

Her eyes were narrowed.

"What? At this time of year?"

The voice acting agency they both belonged to, Earpo, held auditions once a year.

They mainly targeted rookies who were freshly graduated from specialty schools. Those who passed joined the agency on a trial basis; if they produced good results within two years, they received an official place on the roster.

While already-active voice actors occasionally transferred to Earpo from other agencies, they would still have to work as freelancers for a while, often becoming official around the same time as the other Earpo recruits.

If someone was officially joining without waiting for that time of year, they must be talented enough that the agency didn't want them getting snatched up by anyone else.

Since Earpo exclusively managed voice actors, they might very well hear rumors about talents transferring from one agency to another, but Suzune certainly hadn't heard anything.

"Do you have any info, Suzu?"

Suzune shook her head.

"Oh well. I wonder what the newbie's like."

"They could be a veteran who outranks all of us, you know…"

"Haha, don't scare me like that."

Yuika laughed, her eyes twinkling.

Voice acting was a competitive field. There was a limit on how many jobs the agency was offered, so the more popular you were, the better your chances of landing a gig. Even if it ultimately came down to your performance, the idea of getting knocked down a spot in the pecking order was a frightening one.

The only reason Yuika could laugh about it was because she had the skills and popularity to back it up.

And while Suzune wasn't quite on Yuika's level, she was still comfortably in demand.

She landed a few main roles every anime season, and there was no end to her game recording sessions. She even had a regular column in a voice acting magazine.

Even if someone who outranked her came into the mix, it probably wouldn't affect her situation all that much.

Suzune sipped her cocktail and put an end to that subject.

"By the way, Yuika, didn't you just go on a hot springs trip with your girlfriend? How was it? Tell me, tell me!"

She folded her arms on the table, leaning forward.

"What? You're sooo nosy, Suzu…"

Yuika raised her brows and shook her head in disbelief, though it was clear she wasn't actually annoyed.

Suzune loved hearing stories about Yuika's romantic escapades. Yuika was adorable when she was gushing about a girlfriend, and really, the palpable sense of love just warmed Suzune's heart.

"Oh, if you insist."

In spite of her feigned reluctance, Yuika's expression softened. Just seeing that look on her face made Suzune feel like she was in love right along with her friend.



Two days later, the message came summoning them to the office.

Suzune had just finished up the hot yoga class she attended once a week, taken a refreshing shower, and changed clothes. Then she'd checked her phone and saw a group email had gone out about thirty minutes prior.

Anyone who was available should stop by the office at two PM the next day, it said. Suzune just so happened to have an opening between two recording sessions around that time.

It was rare that the agency contacted the entire group. Usually, most people just had one-on-one exchanges with their managers.

The implication was clear: There must be a big announcement.

Maybe it's a huge project involving the entire company, Suzune mused. Although, there were worse possibilities that came to mind as well, of course.

For instance, it was possible Earpo could be ending their management operations entirely. Something like that had never occurred to her before, but as voice acting became a popular career path, some established production companies started managing voice actors, and other agencies were formed from the ground up. As these instances increased, so too did the number of companies ceasing operations due to competition.

Content creators weren't the only ones who had to earn profits or cease to exist. If voice actors failed to produce results, their contracts would eventually be dropped.

Every season, auditions were a trial by fire. First, there was the question of whether you would even make it through the agency's own screening to participate in the auditions, and even if you passed that hurdle, it didn't mean anything if you botched the audition.

Suzune would feel guilty whenever she thought about how

people must feel when they were dropped from the agency or when they couldn't even pass the review in the first place.

Yuika always reminded her that there was no use dwelling on that sort of thing; the industry was a meritocracy, after all. But it sounded like she was trying to reassure herself just as much as Suzune.

It was true, though. In the end, there was nothing else for it but to keep striving to improve, devoting yourself to the craft, and tackling each audition and role with everything you had.

It was with that spirit of devotion that Suzune finished a recording session for an upcoming anime in the morning, went alone to a nearby ramen place and ate a small *tori paitan* ramen (with delicious creamy chicken broth), and walked to Earpo's office, about two train stations away.

Suzune listened to a DIAGONAL song as she strolled, taking the opportunity to build stamina while also playing a walking-based app game.

It was a group song, but Karin Shotsuki had always been the center for as long as she'd been part of the group, so she had far more parts than any other member. Her voice thrummed through Suzune's body, piercing to her very core and filling her with strength.

She tried to absorb these traces of her far-too-absent *oshi* as she walked for about an hour, until she reached the office building where the agency was located.

Suzune produced a hand towel from her large tote bag and wiped away the slight sheen of sweat that had formed on her face.

Her feet hurt a little. Sneakers would have been more comfortable for walking, but Suzune liked flat heel pumps. Wearing them made her feel invincible.

Earpo rented the second to fifth floors of the ten-story office building, along with the basement.

The first floor was a convenience store. Suzune went through the side entrance and took the elevator to the fifth floor, where the reception was located. The basement was a studio, which could be used to record demos for auditions if the booth was open. Apparently, the agency received no small amount of jobs thanks to the convenience of not having to rent a studio,

especially for game or narration roles without many lines.

“Good moooorning!”

She gave a prompt, friendly greeting as she entered the office. This was indispensable, no matter how experienced a veteran you became. The entertainment business was governed strictly by manners and hierarchies. And it was one’s acting history that determined the pecking order. Popularity was secondary. Since people sometimes transferred, your amount of time at the agency had nothing to do with it.

Suzune had started as a child actress, so technically, she had twenty years of acting under her belt. That said, she hadn’t started doing it as a serious full-time career until she became a voice actress, leaving the actual length of her career closer to eight years. “Twenty years as an actress” was a good talking point for business or talk shows, but she wouldn’t pretend it made her more of a veteran than the others.

“Good morning,” came the chorus of replies from the staff and other agency talents.

Glancing around, Suzune spotted Yuika in the lounge that was freely available to use for breaks or quick meetings.

The agency’s voice actors didn’t have their own seats or desks. When they needed to fill out paperwork, they would use the lounge or borrow their manager’s desk.

All three tables in the lounge were crowded with voice actors. Suzune greeted them with more “good mornings” as she made her way to a chair next to Yuika.

“I wonder what this is all about?”

Suzune smoothed out the skirt of her sleeveless dress as she sat down.

There was a small insulated stainless-steel bottle on the table in front of Yuika. She kept it perpetually filled with Chinese herbal tea that was supposed to be good for the throat. Suzune had tried a sip of it once and had found it too bitter to bear.

“Sounds like the president wants to personally talk to us about something.”

It was impossible to tell from this information whether the news would be good or bad. But Suzune suspected that this was a bad sign more likely than not.

“You don’t think they’re going bankrupt or something, do

you?”

“I doubt it… Although, I guess I’ve never paid much attention to the company’s financial situation.”

“Me neither…”

While Suzune and Yuika were affiliated with the agency, they weren’t actually employees. Voice actors were ultimately self-employed.

The other voice actors around them seemed a little worried, too; nobody was having an especially lively conversation. It was unusually quiet, despite the fact there were two relatively major industry veterans present.

“Do you have work after this, Yuika?”

“Not exactly… I’m doing vocal training. I hear I might be getting a character song soon, so I’ve got to be prepared. What about you, Suzu?”

“I have one more recording session. It’s just a commercial for a mobile game, though.”

“Down here?”

Yuika pointed toward the basement studio.

“No, in Nishi-Shinjuku.”

“Ahh.”

It probably wouldn’t even take an hour.

The night before, Suzune had inspected the materials about the character she was playing. Since she’d been cast as the main character, she played the game, too.

She’d been participating in a lot of events related to games she had roles in lately. If she wasn’t actively playing the game, she wouldn’t be able to make engaging small talk about it.

Suzune didn’t want to disappoint the fans attending the events, so she managed to carve out time to play whenever she could. Some days, all she could do was log in, but still, she was keeping it up.

The problem, of course, was that all these games were fun and addicting—they were becoming a serious time sink.

Currently, she was playing eight different games. Even just logging in and completing the daily missions for each one took a considerable amount of time. She would try to squeeze them in during commutes and waiting periods.

The door to the meeting room opened with a *ker-clack*,

instantly drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

“Thank you for waiting.”

First to emerge was Youko Aoyama, the chief manager of the company. She had a powerful presence despite still being in her mid-forties; even older veteran voice actors straightened up a little in her company.

Naturally, Suzune and the others did just that. Everyone stood up and started to greet her respectfully, only to stop when she briskly held up her hand.

The president, Gorou Morisaki, appeared next. A rugby player since his college days, he was a bulky, muscular man in his fifties. Combined with his height of nearly 190 centimeters, he cut an intimidating figure—or he would have, if he wasn’t constantly smiling to offset that impression.

“Oho. Quite a gathering we’ve got here.”

A flash of white teeth gleamed when he smiled—*like an anime character*, Suzune always thought.

“We have a new player joining our team as of today, so we wanted to introduce you.”

Being very sports-minded, he referred to the company as a “team” and the affiliated voice actors as “players.”

The president stepped to one side, revealing a young woman in an oversized hoodie and gaucho pants. Suzune hadn’t even realized there was someone behind the massive man who led their company.

But the second she laid eyes on her…

HYAGH!

…a strange sound nearly escaped her throat.

An indescribable shiver ran from the tips of her toes to the top of her head, and she felt her hair stand on end. Her scalp seemed to strain at the seams.

No way, no way, no waaay!

She managed to restrain her well-trained vocal cords from letting out a strangled scream.

Her whole body broke into a profuse sweat. Her eyes hurt. Her chest ached. She felt like she could die—but no, she couldn’t! Not now!

AAAAAAAH!

The person standing behind the president…

The angel who had descended from the heavens into their office…

It was none other than…

K-KARIN-SAMAAAAAA?!

☆

“This is Karin Shotsuki, who’s joining our agency as of today.”

The president beamed with pride, like he was revealing a prized treasure.

There was no mistake—no doubt about it.

It’s really her…the real Karin-sama, in the flesh…!

Suzune trembled uncontrollably, bringing both hands to her chest. Her heart was pounding out of control. Her brain was on fire. She hoped blood wasn’t gushing out of her nose.

“I imagine many of you have heard of her?”

OF COURSE!

“The idol group she was a member of, DIAGONAL, has done songs for several anime.”

And they were all the best songs ever!

“Karin’s manager at her previous agency is an old friend of mine. We were discussing her future and after confirming a few things and, well, making a few calls, she’ll now be working with us. I hope you’ll all help show her the ropes of voice acting and being part of our team.”

Of course!

Suzune was practically hyperventilating.

Just leave it to me!

The president flashed his shiny white teeth again and shuffled off to one side.

“Go ahead and introduce yourself, Shotsuki-san.”

“All right.”

Karin Shotsuki nodded lightly and took a half step forward.

These slow, soft movements were at odds with the sharpness and strength Suzune knew so well. She’d never seen Karin move like this, even in behind-the-scenes videos.

Her expression was a little stiff, too; maybe she was nervous. There was a cloud dimming her usual bright, beaming smile.

She's like a little kitten coming to a new house for the first time! CUUUUTE!

If Yuika could hear Suzune's inner monologue, she would probably quip that Suzune thought anything Karin did was cute. Which was fine, since she would be correct.

I'm in the same room as my oshi*! Breathing the same air! I'm gonna die!*

Her withered fangirl heart was being steadily rehydrated. *I'm being fed so well I might not need to eat for three days*, she thought.

Karin Shotsuki looked around the room.

Our eyes met! ...Maybe.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. My name is Karin Shotsuki. I don't know up from down in the voice acting biz just yet, but I'll do everything I can to get better. I look forward to working with everyone and receiving any guidance you can offer."

She gave a deep bow.

Do we clap now?! Is it okay if I clap?!

Suzune's hands itched to come together. She looked around, but no one else seemed inclined to do so.

While the veterans were smiling warmly at Karin and murmuring welcomes, a few of the younger talents were furrowing their brows slightly.

Suzune wasn't oblivious enough to be the only one cheering in this situation.

But as a professional, she couldn't just say nothing, either. Manners are the cornerstone of society, after all. If someone greets you, it's only natural to greet them in return.

Suzune clutched her hands in front of her chest and cleared her throat.

Then, with the warmest welcome she could muster, she said...

"Pleased to meep you!"

I messed it uuuuup!

☆

Once introductions were over, Karin Shotsuki returned to the meeting room with the chief manager. Yuika still had time before

her vocal training, so Suzune grabbed her arm and dragged her to the café nearest to the office.

She simply had to talk to someone about it.

Suzune dove into a private booth, ordered two of the black teas of the day like usual, then threw herself over the table at Yuika.

“This isn’t a dream, is it?!”

She had to make sure. It was entirely possible she was so desperate for her *oshi* that she was finally starting to hallucinate.

“You’re wide awake and relatively sane,” Yuika assured her, rolling her eyes.

Suzune let out a sigh of relief.

So it *was* real, then. Karin Shotsuki’s slightly husky speaking voice, her presence, the fact that they were in the same room.

Her brain was still on fire. She could almost hear it sizzling.

“…Your *Nilgiri* tea, miss.”

It was only when the tea was placed in front of her that Suzune realized she was incredibly thirsty. She wrapped her hands around the mug and drank it straight.

The liquid was hot, but not so hot that it burned her throat. The proprietor of the café knew about Suzune and her colleagues’ line of work and always carefully controlled the temperature, so as not to risk causing any damage.

“…Ahhh.”

Suzune exhaled a tea-scented sigh and put the mug down on the saucer with a neat little *clink*.

“I can’t believe this is really happening… Miracles *do* exist…”

While Suzune had seen Karin in real life plenty of times, this occasion was very different.

This was her first time seeing Karin in plain clothes, not an idol outfit. She’d seen casual photos and such, yes, but she knew perfectly well that those weren’t quite the real thing.

But the Karin she’d seen today was the genuine article. The real Karin Shotsuki, not an idol at all.

And her tense, serious face had been absolutely adorable, too.

“I take it she’s the ‘*oshi*’ I’ve heard so much about?”

Yuika picked up the small pitcher that had come only with her tea, not Suzune’s, and poured the amber liquid into her mug. It was brandy. She always added it to her black tea, though only

enough to add a little fragrance.

"Yes, it's her! The one and only Karin Shotsuki! Isn't she the cutest?!"

Yuika chuckled, but she didn't actively agree.

That was fine, though.

You couldn't force your *oshi* on other people. Everyone's tastes were different, after all.

"I'm surprised, though. So she's shifting lanes from an idol to a voice actress…unless our agency is expanding its horizons, perhaps?" Yuika said.

"No, I don't think so. The president did say he wants us to 'show her the ropes of voice acting' and all."

"I guess that means she came here because she wants to become a voice actress, then. How's her acting anyway?"

Suzune cocked her head. "Karin-sama's never been in TV shows or movies before."

As much as she hated to admit it, DIAGONAL wasn't such a superstar idol group that they would get major offers like that. They had never had their own TV show, and the only commercials their songs appeared in were all anime-related.

While they had music videos, they mainly focused on the dance performances. Even when there were solo acting shots, there was no dialogue, since the song was playing over it.

"Hrmm…she's an unknown quantity, then."

"But the fact that they took her on at such a strange time of year must mean that they have high hopes for her, right?"

"They have high hopes for *something* about her anyway."

Yuika's pointed tone gave Suzune pause. "What do you mean?"

"Well, she's a relatively well-known idol…"

Yuika raised a finger.

"Good at singing and dancing…"

A second finger.

"And she already has a built-in fanbase."

A third.

"These are all pretty big advantages for a newcomer. I'm sure her reappearance will generate a lot of buzz, too."

Suzune opened her mouth to protest that it wasn't fair to put it like that, then shut it again.

Because Yuika was right.

These days, there was more to being a voice actress than just good acting.

That was only the bare minimum. Many job offers also came with the condition of musical performances. The amount of times you were obligated to show your face—doing photoshoots, appearing in online shows—was increasing, too.

Since Karin was already well-known as an idol, she would probably be requested by name for jobs like these. Some might even care more about her being a trending topic than her acting skills.

“B-but I’m sure Karin-sama can act, too! When she was an idol, she always worked harder than anyone to strive for perfection! She would never give any performance anything less than her best! I believe in her!”

Suzune clenched her fists, and Yuika chuckled.

“Okay, Suzu. That may very well be true. Just try not to get overexcited, okay? I’m sure some of our colleagues aren’t exactly thrilled about this development, even if they don’t let that show.”

She knew that, of course.

There was a limit to how many audition offers the agency received.

A new voice actress meant fewer chances for everyone else.

The world of entertainment was a meritocracy. You used your resume, popularity, and obviously acting skills to go after the jobs you wanted. Even your social media following could be weaponized to put yourself ahead of the pack.

Everyone was well aware of that.

But that didn’t make it feel any less personal. It was all too easy to get depressed when you flubbed an audition and sometimes even resent the person who landed the part.

“Does that include you, Yuika…?”

“Me?” Yuika blinked a few times, then laughed. “No, I couldn’t care less. Aside from character songs, I don’t do singing and dancing anyway, and as far as I could tell from her speaking voice, I doubt we’ll be competing for the same roles.”

She had a point there.

Yuika’s wheelhouse was primarily “adult woman” characters. So while she didn’t play many leading roles, she was indispensable for secondary characters.

Of course, it was entirely possible that Karin could act in a wide range of roles from children to adults. But Yuika's voice and acting were very unique.

She frequently dubbed main roles in foreign films, too. While dubbing generally didn't pay as much, it was a great way to establish an image for yourself, and you could even become the exclusive dub voice for a foreign actress.

Yuika might not stand out much, but she was one of the agency's top earners.

However, not all voice actresses were like her.

The relationship between the actors and the agency was ultimately a business transaction. In the end, a voice actor who didn't bring in a profit was dead weight as far as the agency was concerned. There were still labor costs involved in keeping someone on board. If the company felt it was unlikely that you would become profitable for them in the future, your contract wouldn't be renewed.

Of course, if a voice actor felt that the agency wasn't managing them the way they wanted, they could also break off the relationship, but that was much harder.

"What about you, Suzu? You don't see her as a threat?"

Yuika's smile took on a slightly twisted edge.

"You mean to *me*?"

Suzune hadn't even thought about it.

It was true, they might end up trying out for a lot of the same parts.

Right now, Suzune got multiple auditions for main roles every season. However, many of those clients might take an interest in Karin. It was in the agency's best interest to have more regular cast members, so they would be sure to give Karin a lion's share of those opportunities.

"I'll take that as a no."

Suzune blinked in surprise at the obvious amusement in Yuika's tone.

"I mean, come on. You're grinning like an idiot at the thought you might get to go to auditions together."

"A-am I really?"

Suzune quickly brought her hands to her cheeks, as if this would somehow help her visualize her own facial expression.

“What, are you that confident in your skills as a veteran?”

“No, not in the slightest. I still fail auditions all the time, for one thing.”

She only passed about ten percent of the auditions she got. Still, that was a roaring success as far as she was concerned. When she was starting out, she would sometimes go a whole season without landing a single minor role, never mind a leading one.

“I can’t waste time worrying about other people, that’s all. Besides, Karin-sama earned her advantages with hard work and determination.”

There was no point envying or resenting her for that.

“If only everyone could see things that way.”

Suzune knew exactly what Yuika meant.

They’d seen quite a few colleagues quit the agency over the years.

Some of them had even told Suzune to her face they would’ve done better if she wasn’t their competition, all while lamenting their own uselessness. Others went the freelance route, claiming that the company was holding them back.

It wasn’t as if Suzune was a jealousy-free person by nature, of course. She just made a point of reminding herself every day not to compare herself to others.

Hard work was the key. Except, there were times when it came down to other factors like luck or connections, things that no amount of effort could overcome. So Suzune understood why people wanted someone else to blame at times like those.

With her advantages, Karin Shotsuki was bound to be the target of that kind of envy. But surely, she’d already taken that into consideration.

She still chose this path, despite all the likely barriers. That was the kind of idol Karin Shotsuki was, after all.

“Karin-sama will be fine. I’m sure of it!” Suzune declared.

It just made her want to support her *oshi* all the more!



“Got a minute, Sengu?”

Suzune was dropping by the office to pick up a script when someone called her name. She looked up from the new script she had just started reading in the lounge and turned toward the source of the voice.

A tall, beautiful woman with auburn hair cut to medium length strode toward Suzune, her heels clacking briskly, and peered at the script in her hands.

Faintly, a sweet scent with a slight bitter edge tickled Suzune’s noise. It was her manager’s, Akane Miama. This perfume was a favorite of hers.

Suzune preferred her perfume with a lighter, less sweet scent; she was still using one she’d found in Taiwan when she’d gone there for an event.

Akane Miama had been managing her ever since Suzune joined Earpo. While she could be a little intense, Suzune had never once wished for any other manager.

“Took long enough to get that script.” Miama sighed and looked at Suzune. “They pull this every time, but come on—you’re recording the day after tomorrow… You got this?”

“It’s fine. I got a copy ahead of time, and I’m used to it by now anyway.”

“That scriptwriter is always rewriting things on the spot and getting the recording pushed back, too. It’s a real problem… although all we can really do is what we’re told.”

“Well, it’s the eighth episode already. This one’s an anime-only story, but I’ve got the character down by now, so I can handle it.”

“I didn’t doubt you for a second. Glad to hear it, though. Also, I wanted to ask you a little favor.”

“What is it?”

“You remember the new girl who just joined up?”

Suzune’s heart skipped a beat.

For a second, she thought it might leap right out of her throat.

Did she remember that her *oshi* was now her colleague?

How could she possibly forget?

But Yuika was the only one who knew that Suzune was a huge fan of Karin Shotsuki.

It wasn’t that she needed to hide it, but if that information got out, it would inevitably affect her work.

These days, going on radio shows was a big part of a voice actress’s job, and that meant talking about your personal life. Fandom was always a popular topic, be it idols, anime, or anything else.

But Suzune didn’t want to put her private hobby on display like that. She hated the thought of having her *oshi*, her oasis, become something that hosts joked around and teased her about.

Of course, there were also times when she wanted to talk about it.

That was when she’d confide in Yuika.

While Yuika didn’t know much about idols, she would always patiently hear Suzune out, which made Suzune want to babble to her even more. When she went overboard on the one-sided rambling, she generally made it up to Yuika by paying for dessert.

“Yes, I sort of remember,” Suzune responded.

She suspected that she couldn’t have sounded any less casual if she tried. Luckily, Miama didn’t seem to notice.

“Well, I’m going to be managing her. So we’re going to record her demo reel today, and I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind sitting in and observing her.”

“WHAT?!”

Suzune shot out of her seat before she could stop herself.

“Geez, what’s gotten into you?”

“Oh, sorry, it’s nothing…”

Suzune plastered a smile onto her face and sat back down rather stiffly.

Her body had reacted instinctively at the thought of getting to see Karin act.

Demo reels were basically a voice sample, although they usually involved several different situations, so they didn’t just

consist of one's natural speaking voice. Suzune was eager to hear what kind of voices Karin would create.

"But why me?"

"Hm? Because you just happened to be there? Thing is, I have a meeting with the chief manager after this. I'm sure she'd be fine on her own, but maybe you can give her some pointers if you notice anything."

"All right."

"Great, I appreciate it. She's already downstairs. Just go down and say hi, will you?"

Suzune nodded. Her manager patted her lightly on the shoulder, left the lounge, and disappeared into the meeting room.

What an incredible stroke of luck! To be honest, Suzune had been a bit stressed about the delayed script, but now that was all water under the bridge.

And the fact that her schedule happened to be open felt like nothing short of fate.

Suzune stashed the script into her tote, slipped the bag over her shoulder, and rose unsteadily to leave the room. She was about to have a close encounter with her *oshi*—just the thought made her instantly nervous.

Inside the elevator, she pressed the button for the basement floor. With a low groan, the elevator lurched into motion and descended until it reached the bottom. The door opened with a *ding*, and Suzune stepped out of the elevator.

The door to the basement studio led directly into a cramped waiting room, beyond which lay the recording booth. This consisted of a recording room and a control room. Generally, a mixer operated the equipment while up to two actors used the booth.

There was a monitor in the waiting room that showed what was happening inside the booth. As of now, only the mixer was present, with Karin nowhere to be seen.

Confused, Suzune put her tote bag down on a table and sat down where she could see the monitor.

Ah…!

Less than a minute later, the door opened, and her beloved *oshi* appeared!

Suzune's heart leapt painfully, accelerating to an alarmingly

fast drumbeat. Her heart wouldn't be pounding this fast even if she had just run a hundred-meter dash at full speed.

In the tiny room, Karin quickly noticed Suzune as well.

"Good morning!"

She straightened up, then smoothly bowed at a perfect right angle.

Suzune leapt to her feet as well…

"Ah, g-good morn—OUCH!"

…and promptly banged her knee on the leg of the table.

"A-are you all right?!"

Her *oshi* rushed toward her in alarm. That show of kindness alone was enough to heal the pain.

"I'm fine, I'm fine."

Suzune smiled despite the tears welling up in her eyes.

"Oh, sorry about this. I'll move it right now."

She quickly transferred her tote bag from the table to the floor. However, Karin didn't move to put her drink down.

"I'm sorry, you must be here for the booth, right?" she said, still standing. "Please, you go ahead."

Suzune stared blankly for a moment, then realized Karin had misunderstood.

"No, no. I'm not here to use a booth, not at all. Akane asked me to come observe your demo reel recording."

"Observe? You, Sengu-san?" A shadow of confusion passed over her flawless face.

"Erm, y-yes. Akane—I mean, Miama-san is my manager as well, and…huh?! Wait, you know who I am?!"

She said "Sengu-san," didn't she?!

Did Karin remember Suzune from her meet-and-greet? That would be a blessing as a fan, but as a professional, it would be somewhat embarrassing.

Karin nodded. "Yes, I tried to learn the names and faces of my future colleagues when I joined the agency."

Ooh, so that's why…

Suzune was a little disappointed to learn that she was not, in fact, special.

Still, she remembered doing the same thing when she first got started. Depending on the agency, there were certain rules and etiquette one had to follow. Learning your senior colleagues'

names and faces was a fundamental part of this.

She cleared her throat, recovering.

When Suzune really thought about it, Karin would probably find it difficult to navigate a workplace dynamic in which one of her senior colleagues was also a diehard fan of hers. It was probably for the best for Karin that she didn't remember.

"Miama-san has a meeting with the chief, so she asked me to come in her stead."

"Really? I'm sorry, I'm sure you must be busy…"

"Please don't worry about it. I just came by the office to pick up a script, and I don't have any work after this."

"Thank you… I'm so sorry for the trouble."

Karin bowed. Her short bob-cut hair shifted, sending a slight fragrance dancing through the air.

All this apologizing just made Suzune herself feel bad.

"It's no trouble at all, Shotsuki-san. If anything, watching other actresses at work is educational for me, too."

At this, Karin looked up at Suzune. Her long, fluttering eyelashes and big, round eyes made Suzune's heart stutter.

"…Um, could I ask you to speak more casually with me? Since I'm the newbie and all, it makes me a little anxious when you address me so formally…"

"I could never!" Suzune cried.

She didn't mean to say it out loud. The idea of speaking casually with her *oshi* was just so presumptuous…but if Karin Shotsuki herself said she would prefer it, Suzune would simply have to oblige.

"Err, yes, if you insis—I mean, yeah, sure."

"Much better!"

HNNNGH!

Karin's smile was so dazzling, Suzune thought she might go blind.

Just as the desire to somehow keep talking to Karin roared to life in her chest, the door to the booth opened, and the mixer peeked out.

"Ready whenever you are."

"Ah, thank you!" Karin sprang up, then beamed at Suzune. "Okay, here I go."

A smile that could light up a whole city block!

As warm waves of happiness enveloped her body, Suzune managed to give a little wave to see Karin off.

As the former idol walked into the booth with a polite greeting to the mixer, Suzune thought Karin cast a brief glimpse back at her.

It wasn't unlike feeling as though your *oshi* had locked eyes with you during a concert—and maybe, it was equally delusional. Either way, Suzune was delighted.

Aaah… She was sooo cute…!

Suzune slumped down into a chair.

The flat-screen monitor on the wall showed a live feed from the interior of the booth.

There was a table and two small chairs inside, with barely enough room for two people. On the table sat a microphone with a pop filter, a talkback switch with a cue light, and a pair of headphones.

Karin pulled out a notebook from the bag she'd left on the floor, tucked her hair behind her ears, and put on the headphones.

She skimmed over the words on the page, sat up straight, and took a deep breath.

Then she put her hand on the switch and spoke.

"I'm ready."

The moment Suzune heard that voice through the monitor, a switch flipped inside her as well. She was now seeing Karin as an actor at work, not as her beloved *oshi*.

This was the voice of a professional voice actress.

Suzune had always thought that Karin Shotsuki had the right kind of voice for this industry—at least, for an amateur. Becoming a pro would require a lot of work, even from that starting point.

But Karin's voice showed that she had clearly trained a great deal for this.

It was loud and clear but not overpowering, projected well and yet lingered somehow—a natural talent, to be sure, but natural talent alone wouldn't be enough to pull this off.

When Karin sat in front of the mic, it was clear from her first syllable that she'd thoroughly studied the fundamentals of voice acting.

Earpo didn't have any kind of training program.

Its voice actors and actresses were either already pros who had transferred from other agencies or newcomers who had passed an audition to join, like Yuika and Suzune.

Those who passed the auditions mostly had pro acting experience already, and many of them were graduates of specialty schools. And while Earpo did have the trial period system, they generally sought people who could immediately work in the field.

It was clear from her single spoken sentence that Karin hadn't been accepted on the basis of her popularity and high profile—the "advantages" Yuika mentioned—alone.

"My name is Karin Shotsuki."

Suzune gazed at the monitor, entranced by the sound of Karin's voice.

The format of demo reels varied from agency to agency. In Earpo's case, it usually started with an introduction, then a few different samples, then some narration.

"Since I had this recording session today, I thought I'd 'get in the zone!' by watching my horoscope on TV…but of course, I was dead last in the luck rankings! I swear, my sign always seems to be at the bottom, you know?"

While this might sound like pointless chatter, a voice actress's natural speaking voice was becoming more important these days, so Earpo also used samples of their talents just talking normally.

Usually, each sample was thirty seconds or less.

"We got it, thanks."

The audio from the control booth was also relayed through the monitor, which was useful when there were further instructions.

"Sample one, please."

Karin nodded and straightened up again.

"Oh my god, did you hear about the section manager? Rumor has it…"

Sample one was a realistic adult woman's voice. The setting in this case was probably an office. In just a few short lines, Karin's voice shifted from a light tone to one that was forceful and tense.

Whoa…

Suzune shivered. Her body had frozen in place.

She sometimes listened to *rakugo* and ghost stories as part of her research. There were moments when she got goosebumps,

not from any plot points so much as the way a single line was delivered.

This listening experience was much the same.

They finished recording the first sample quickly, then moved on to the second and third.

Sample two was probably a teenager. The pitch of Karin's voice was no higher, yet somehow the way she was talking conveyed a young student. Such incredible acting chops! Maybe she was really a former actress, and they just hadn't included that information in her profile during her time as an idol?

Sample three surprised Suzune even more. In samples one and two, there were enough traces of Karin Shotsuki's own voice that she was still identifiable. In sample three, however, her voice changed completely—while still managing to not sound forced at all.

This one seemed to be a character from a fantasy game-type scenario, likely drawing on recent trends. She invoked some kind of spell, speaking incredibly fast. But somehow, every word was still perfectly clear. What's more, it was practically a tongue-twister, the kind of sequence that most people would stumble over.

Incredible…

Suzune had to admit, she wouldn't have been able to do it. She wasn't bad at fast-talking lines; she could still recite the kabuki speech *"Uiro-uri,"* a common practice exercise, without slipping up. But this level was beyond her.

There was a brief pause, and then…

"Who the heck are you?"

This time, it was a young boy's voice. Karin was most likely aiming for middle school or so, right before puberty. Suzune was actually moved. It gave her goosebumps in a different way from just a few moments before.

When a voice actress played a young boy, she did sound boyish, but you could usually still tell somehow that it was a woman. Not so with Karin's portrayal. If you heard the voice without seeing her, you would probably think it really was a young boy speaking.

Oh my god, she's amazing!

Suzune had to resist the urge to applaud. She wanted to act

with Karin. Any role was fine, no matter the age or gender. It would definitely be fun no matter what.

“On to the narration now, please.”

At the mixer’s prompting, Karin said “okay” and launched into two different narrations.



The first she did in a cheerful yet oddly calming voice. It was styled after a voiceover for a show about cute animals, a surefire winner for a demo reel.

As for the second…

“A miraculous collaboration with a famous restaurant! The flavor of the future has arrived! Just one bite, and…”

Suzune whistled, impressed.

A commercial-based sample was unusual. Most people did something like a news segment spotlighting a local shopping district. It was usually a bright and happy voice, somewhat different from the first but still in the same category.

“All right, we’ve got it. Unless you have any concerns, that should do it for today.”

At the mixer’s words, Karin turned to face the camera.

“Um… Sengu-san, do you have any thoughts or anything?”

Who, me?!

Suzune was startled, even though that was the whole reason she was here in the first place. She wasn’t just watching to learn from a fellow voice actress. Suzune got up and opened the door to the booth.

“No notes,” she said.

The mixer nodded and conveyed this into the talkback mic.

“She says it’s all good. Nice work.”

Suzune closed the door behind her and returned to the table.

What a wonderful thing she’d gotten to hear.

It was always fun to watch someone else’s acting, even if they were just recording a demo reel. These reels were essentially a resume, summing up that person’s skills.

Anime roles were usually decided by auditions, but roles for games were frequently determined by nomination instead.

The main roles would all go to famous voice actors, of course, but since there were always a lot of characters to be voiced in games, newbies had a shot, too. These reels were often the deciding factor. As much as the agency could recommend specific talents, and often did, you wouldn’t get the role unless your demo reel matched what the casting directors had in mind.

Still, you had to be able to act consistently, or you’d cause problems, so you couldn’t just record tons of different samples. It was best to present a few of your best voices, for roles that were

in your wheelhouse.

Suzune specialized in teenaged characters of all kinds; from the serious types to the slackers, she'd played them all. That, and little girls. She had a hard time with young boys, so she didn't record those. While she wanted to try playing adult women, too, she hadn't gotten a chance yet—it didn't help that her voice was naturally on the high side.

"Thank you very much."

A few minutes later, Karin emerged from the booth, and Suzune couldn't stop herself from standing up to greet her.

Karin looked at her in surprise, clearly wondering why she was standing.

But Suzune was too excited to care.

"You were amazing!"

She blurted out her thoughts without a filter. She couldn't help it.

"Surely you've acted before—I mean, sorry, have you? You're so good at it!"

Karin blinked rapidly, clearly confused. Her cheeks took on a slight pink tint, and her eyes shifted. Was she embarrassed? If so, that was adorable, too.

"Especially the young boy! I love it when voice actresses play boy characters, but yours might be the best I've ever heard! You really nailed that angelic quality young boys have right before their voice changes!"

"Erm, th-thank you…"

At Karin's obvious bewilderment, Suzune finally caught herself.

O-oh no… I went into otaku mode there…

It was a typical nerd move to babble quickly in long, run-on sentences. At least, this time it was about voice acting and not idols.

"Done already, hmm?"

Fortunately, Miama entered the room just in time, inadvertently saving Suzune from herself.

"How was it? No issues?"

It took a moment for Suzune to realize she was the one being asked. "Not at all," she answered hastily. "No redos or anything—she was amazing."

“That’s high praise from you, Suzune. I’ll have to give it a listen later. Well, good work, you two. Since you’re both done for the day, why don’t you take some time to get to know each other?”

“Huh?!”

Suzune was so excited, she practically shrieked in response.

A part of her had been secretly hoping she and Karin might get to spend a little more time together, but she’d told herself that inviting her out of nowhere might be construed as harassment.

But if their shared manager suggested it, then it was a matter of business!

“Well…would you like to get tea or something, then?”

Suppressing her excitement, Suzune turned to Karin. The few seconds before her answer felt like several long minutes.

“Um…if it’s all right with you, Sengu-san.”

LET’S GOOOOO!

Suzune managed to keep her inner voice from clawing its way out of her throat in a scream and wrestled her lips into a straight line before they could form a grin. “Sure, why not,” she managed to respond, and off they went.

☆

“Um, could we maybe get drinks instead of tea?”

When Suzune fished for suggestions of where to go, she was startled by Karin’s response.

She hadn’t expected her to suggest alcohol, of all things.

Thinking about it, she realized it wasn’t strange in the slightest, since Karin was also over twenty years old. But in Suzune’s mind, idols and alcohol just didn’t mix.

Still, this was better than she could have hoped.

If they went out for pastries and tea (or perhaps coffee), they wouldn’t be able to spend much time there. Suzune was confident that she could happily spend anywhere from twelve to forty-eight hours with Karin if they were close, no matter when or where—but while Suzune knew Karin well, this was basically Karin’s first time meeting her.

But going for dinner and drinks could last at least two hours. Even if they didn’t end up having much to talk about, she could

spend more time with Karin, basking in her presence.

Suzune checked her phone.

It was 5:40 PM. A little early for dinner, maybe, but most places would at least be open by 6:00 PM.

“F-fine by me. Is there somewhere you’d like to go?”

“No, not particularly… I’m a just little hungry, is all. Would you mind picking a place, Sengu-san? I don’t know this area very well yet.”

Karin-sama is hungry! So cute!

“I-in that case, we could go to one of my favorite spots, if you don’t mind a little walk? They have private rooms, so if there are any open I could reserve one right now…”

“Thank you, that sounds great.”

“Okay, j-just a second, then…”

Suzune’s heart leapt as she tapped her smartphone screen. Her finger was shaking. The first place that came to mind was a Chinese restaurant that let you check for open rooms and make reservations right on their website.

Luckily, two rooms were open.

She quickly reserved one before it could get taken. Since she’d used this establishment’s website many times before, she didn’t even have to enter her contact information.

“I made the reservation. It’s a Chinese restaurant, if that’s okay? Is there anything you can’t eat?”

“No, I’m not picky. I can even eat pretty spicy food.”

Suzune almost exclaimed “Yes, I know!” but gulped it down just in time. She’d watched Karin take on a super-spicy food challenge on an online talk show.

When Suzune had first learned the nature of the show, she’d worried about what they might make her *oshi* do. But as contestants dropped out one after the other, Karin kept on eating. When she finally outlasted her final opponent, a comedian who’d been taunting her obnoxiously despite not even being particularly popular, Suzune cheered and whooped at her phone.

Even if the show might have been rigged, Karin’s determination was the real thing. Why else would she have kept eating until her lips were red and swollen?

“Shall we go, then?”

Desperately suppressing the urge to skip, Suzune turned

lightly on her heel and started walking.

Karin fell into step next to her. She was walking side-by-side with her *oshi*. Was this a dream? It was difficult to resist glancing over at her constantly. Difficult but wonderful.

But while her emotions were churning, there was one thing Suzune resolved never to do.

Namely: She wouldn't let Karin Shotsuki find out that she was a huge fan of hers.

After all, Karin wasn't an idol anymore.

Since she'd quit being an idol and entered the voice acting industry, it would undoubtedly bother her if people kept bringing up her past. While the agency would most likely use her past accomplishments to further her career, that didn't mean she would want her colleagues harping on about it.

It might be strange to never bring it up at all; Karin probably wouldn't mind if someone asked about her idol era out of simple curiosity. In fact, it might be more suspicious if Suzune avoided ever mentioning it. But surely, it was better to treat Karin as a fellow voice actress, no more and no less.

"Ah…" Realizing that she'd automatically started walking toward the restaurant, Suzune stopped. "Sorry, would you rather take a taxi? It's about a twenty-minute walk."

"No, that's completely fine. I'm wearing the right shoes for it today anyway."

Karin gave a dramatic step to show off her shoes, a pair of button boots with low heels. They were very cute, with a two-tone color scheme.

"Oh, good. I'm in the habit of walking anywhere that's a half hour or less, so sometimes people get mad at me for not warning them that it's such a long trek."

"Do they really? I do a lot of walking, too. Normally around ten thousand steps a day."

"Really? Same here!"

Suzune was delighted to find common ground. Sure, a taxi would have been easier, but then they would have to keep the driver in mind when choosing what to talk about. By contrast, walking to the restaurant would let them talk about anything without reservation.

The weather was nice and temperate. There was a pleasant

breeze. She had to treasure these twenty precious minutes of having her *oshi* all to herself.

Suzune racked her brains for a harmless topic to start out with and decided on their shared manager, Miama.

She had plenty of stories about her manager's exploits. No doubt it would make for a fun conversation.

☆

"Well, then…cheers."

Suzune picked up her slim glass, which was slick with condensation, and raised it in a toast. She wasn't sure what they were toasting to exactly, it just seemed like the thing to do.

"Cheers!"

Karin went along with it, mimicking the gesture. She was clearly used to these kinds of interactions.

They clinked their glasses together lightly, and Suzune took a sip of her drink. The frothy foam and tangy hops were a welcome refreshment. It was only recently that she'd learned to appreciate the taste of beer.

That being said, she still hadn't quite come around to Yuika's drinks of choice, like whiskey or brandy.

They ordered their food à la carte.

One of the restaurant's specialties was shrimp with mayonnaise. It was unique in that the shrimp came pin-straight, not curled up in a ball, making it easy to eat. It was seasoned just right, too, not overly sweet.

They each picked out a few other dishes.

Karin ordered *mapo* tofu, proving she really did have a strong spice tolerance. She also requested dim sum dishes like century eggs, turnip cakes, and square spring rolls.

Aaah, this really is a dream come true!

If you'd told Suzune a month ago that she would be sitting at a dinner table with her *oshi*, she never would have believed you. Surely, it would sound like a belated April Fool's joke or a prank on a hidden-camera TV show.

Wait…it's not *a prank, is it…?*

Suddenly nervous, Suzune went over everything that had

happened so far in her head and determined that there was nothing to worry about. She was the one who'd chosen this restaurant, and it was silly to think that she'd been set up in the first place.

The fact that her script arrived today and that Karin happened to be recording her demo reel at the same time was just a fortunate coincidence.

They talked about nothing in particular, from the freshness of the shrimp to which app games they played to how they incentivized walking ten thousand steps a day.

All the while, Suzune was on cloud nine.

Karin Shotsuki's face was adorable, of course, but Suzune loved her voice as well. Her tone was somewhat more relaxed now than it had been during meet-and-greets or bouts of MCing in between songs at concerts. She sounded so real and genuine.

Suzune had to fight to keep herself from grinning like a fool at the sheer luxury of it all.

After a while, when their second round of beers was brought in and they were left alone in the room again, Karin ventured a question.

"Um, so…be honest with me: How was it?"

Suzune knew what she was referring to right away. "The demo reel, you mean?"

"Right."

Ahh, that explains why she wanted to go for drinks, Suzune thought. It was scary to ask for someone's honest assessment of your work. A bit of liquid courage came in handy, both for asking the question and for hearing the answer.

"It was great."

Suzune wet her lips with a sip of beer and voiced her opinion truthfully. However, Karin's brows furrowed slightly. She was probably worried that Suzune was just being polite, which wasn't the case at all.

"Honestly, I was surprised. You've got the acting chops of someone with real experience. Especially that young boy voice! How in the world did you get it to sound like that? Also, have you done theater before?"

Karin's shoulders sagged in relief. Suzune's enthusiasm must have proven her every word was genuine.

“I’ve always had a knack for the ‘boy voice’ thing… I just never had a chance to show it off before. And I’ve studied acting, but I’ve never actually done it on a stage before.”

“Wow, really? When you said you studied, do you mean after you quit being an idol? …Ah, I’m sorry.”

It still wasn’t clear why Karin Shotsuki had suddenly graduated.

There were all kinds of theories online, but the truth was still shrouded in mystery. Suzune worried that it would be rude to touch on the subject when Karin hadn’t talked about it herself.

“Ah-ha-ha, it’s fine, really.”

Karin’s posture had relaxed a little, perhaps thanks to the beer. Her bangs fell over one eye, giving her a slightly sexy look.

I want to capture this moment for eternity!

Suzune’s fangirl urges threatened to take over for a moment, and she had to grab her own hand to stop it from reaching for her phone. Still, maybe they could take a selfie together later. That would be perfectly normal for a pair of work colleagues, right?

“I graduated from DIAGONAL because I wanted to become a voice actress.”

“What?! Wait, r-really?!”

This was news to Suzune, although in retrospect, it should have been obvious. But she never knew Karin had such aspirations. Suzune was sure she’d read every last interview and article about her *oshi*, and none of them had ever mentioned such a thing.

“In fact, the whole reason I signed with my old agency in the first place was to become a voice actress, not an idol. I only joined DIAGONAL because I was told it would be a newbie voice actress unit project.”

That was even more surprising. Suzune didn’t know this, either. If DIAGONAL ever mentioned any kind of connection to voice acting, surely she would have heard about it.

“But it was all a big lie. They tricked me on purpose, because they wanted to make me an idol so badly. I guess they figured that once I got started, it would work itself out.”

Karin pursed her lips and gave a little huff.

Was she angry or sulking? Either way, it was adorable.

Suzune couldn't help gazing at her, although she was still listening intently.

"I mean, I guess they were right about that. And I'm such an idiot, I just kept believing them when they made promises like 'soon' or 'someday'… Especially since I did get to do some anime-related work, albeit not as a voice actress."

Right, the theme songs…they were all certified bangers, too!

"But well, I figured it out eventually, didn't I? Like, 'Oh wait, I'm on the wrong path here.' I really did love all my fans and the other DIAGONAL members, though. So I decided to stick it out, at least until I could pull in enough of a crowd for a solo concert at a big venue. I figured I'd do whatever else I could in the meantime, so I asked a veteran actress at my agency to introduce me to a voice actress she knew, and then that person put me in touch with a different voice actress who gave me private lessons for a long while."

"Do you mind if I ask this voice actress's name…?"

"Sure." Karin gave the name readily. It was a seasoned voice actress whose work Suzune knew well. If she remembered correctly, that actress was a teacher at a specialty school, too.

Ahh, I get it. So the reason she seemed so comfortable in the booth was because she already knew what to do.

Still, Karin's networking skills were impressive. She'd managed to land private lessons with a seasoned veteran who even Suzune had never been in the studio with.

"Are you sure you don't mind telling me all this when we're still just getting to know each other, though? I mean, I know I'm the one who asked…"

"It's all right. I wanted you to know that I'm serious about this, that I didn't just get into voice acting on a random whim… Besides, Miama-san told me I should try and make some allies."

"And you chose…me? But why…?"

Suzune's heart stirred.

Could it be that Karin recognized her from the meet-and-greet after all? Part of her was hopeful that her *oshi* might remember her, while another part was worried about how it would affect their interactions from now on.

"Well, Miama-san said you're a good person."

"I—I see…"

Suzune didn’t know what else to say. She took a long sip of her beer to cover for the silence that followed.

She couldn’t help but wonder why Miama-san would say that about her.

Suzune knew she tended to try and look out for people, and she did like it when new voice actresses looked up to her. Still, it bothered her to think that her manager might think of her as a useful patsy.

“She said ‘If you’re honest and direct with Sengu-san, she’ll take you seriously,’ or something like that. That’s why I figured it was safe to be open about all this. Because I really am serious.”

Suzune turned bright red.

As if it wasn’t enough that her *oshi* was looking straight at her from such a short distance away, she was also embarrassed to have doubted Miama even for a moment.

“I’m not really all that, you know…”

She poked at a piece of shrimp. It had gotten a little cold, and the mayonnaise was starting to harden. She should have eaten it while it was still hot.

“Really?”

Karin tilted her head, then snatched up the shrimp and popped it into her mouth.

She swallowed, then giggled a little.

“Mm, yummy.”

☆

She’s such an angel…

After Suzune got home, took a bath, and changed into oversized sweats, she wrapped herself around a body pillow on her bed and blissfully thought back on the dreamlike time with her *oshi*.

They had ended up spending three whole hours together.

After finishing their second beers, they had moved on to Shaoxing wine and finally several cups of sweet-scented oolong tea.

Since Karin had received instruction from a seasoned pro, she seemed to understand the basics of the industry, at least in

theory.

They hadn't talked that much about work, but they hadn't delved too deeply into their personal lives, either. Instead, they spent most of the time chatting idly about trivial topics.

Even so, it was clear from their conversations that Karin was a diehard anime fan. She mentioned that she watched at least a few episodes of every new anime each season before deciding which to stick with, and she was very knowledgeable about the subject in general, too.

If anything, Suzune was the one who couldn't keep up with her. Ever since she'd started working as a voice actress, Suzune had lost the ability to watch anime purely for pleasure. Instead, she devoted more of her attention to idols and live-action TV dramas.

Watching Karin talk about it with such enthusiasm, Suzune felt an increasing desire to stop consuming anime from a professional standpoint. It was an occupational hazard that voice actors automatically paid more attention to the vocal performances than anything else.

Her conversation with Karin had been a truly wonderful experience…yet at the same time, she felt a little saddened by it, too.

The person in front of her was without a doubt Karin Shotsuki, the undisputed center of DIAGONAL. And yet, she wasn't the idol Suzune had obsessed over for so long.

The brilliance that made her shine like a supernova had settled into something calmer, and her all-out energy had been turned down a notch. She seemed like much more of an adult.

Her idol persona was just an act. Of course it was.

Suzune didn't think of this as a betrayal, and she didn't feel dismayed by it. If anything, she knew deep down it was better this way. Both for Suzune's work life and her personal life.

But still, it drove home the reality that her *oshi* really had graduated. As Karin had sampled Shaoxing wine and giggled, *"What a funny taste!"* she'd looked for all the world like a normal twenty-two-year-old woman.

The DIAGONAL merch decorating Suzune's room was still as dazzling as ever, but now it felt a little more bittersweet, a representation of something now lost.

Still, though… I'm glad she found a new path.

From Karin's perspective, she was finally returning to her original dream. Suzune, on the other hand, had been genuinely anxious about what Karin would do after moving on from life as an idol. While she never would have imagined the answer would be voice acting, it was clear that Karin was very serious about it.

Suzune's smartphone pinged, letting her know that she'd received a new message. When she looked at the lock screen, a popup notification informed her it was from none other than Karin.

Just like that, her excitement spiked.

Is this really happening?!

It was a thrill she never could have imagined just a few days ago.

After they'd finished eating, Karin had asked:

"Umm…would you mind if we exchanged contact info?"

As if she could possibly refuse. Suzune had whipped out her phone and pulled up the messaging app in a flash. They immediately formed a group chat for just the two of them. They even decided they would never let anyone else join it.

Now she opened the app and read the message.

Thanks again for today. It was really fun and super helpful, too. I hope we can go out to eat again sometime soon.

OMG YES PLEASE!

Suzune took a deep breath to calm herself, so as to not let her feelings get the best of her and answer with those exact words. That was a close one. If she'd responded so intensely, she would have come across as being way too eager. As the older and more experienced one, she had to play it cool.

I had a great time, too. Please feel free to contact me anytime if you have any questions. Yes, I'd be happy to go out to eat again.

"……"

She forced herself to wait a full minute before sending the response.

Okay, send!

The app showed her message being sent with a little animation. The "read" receipt appeared almost immediately.

That was fast!

If she didn't know any better, she'd think that Karin had been

waiting for her to respond. Rationally, she knew it was just that she must have been fooling around on her phone after initially messaging her.

But as she thought all this…

Yes, please! As long as you're not just saying that to be polite.

The response came instantly.

Of course not, silly.

This time, Suzune responded right away as well.

In seconds, there was another message.

Oh good. When's the next time you'll be at the office?

Most likely next week.

OK, let me know when you have a better idea of what day. I've got plenty of free time at the moment.

W-wow, she's really coming on strong…

Suzune was thrilled, of course, but she was also a little confused. Should they really become friends like this so quickly?

While Suzune knew all about Karin as an idol, she didn't think Karin knew much about her yet. Or was this just the normal attitude for youngsters these days?

In the meantime, another message came.

And you don't need to be so formal in messages, either. I'm the newbie, remember!

OK then…

As much as Suzune hesitated to be so bold with her *oshi*, she resolved to do her best to be informal without being too overly familiar, since that was what Karin wanted.

By the way, are you…

She's still going?! Kids these days are so forward, she thought. In the end, they wound up messaging each other back and forth for another two hours.

The next day, when Suzune flipped the pages of her script at the recording session, she found her thumb was a little sore.



“Sounds like Karin’s taken quite a liking to you, hmm?”

At the counter of their usual bar, Yuika rested her chin in her hands lazily with a glass of aged whiskey in front of her. There was a mischievous glint in her eyes as she smirked at Suzune.

Earlier that day, Suzune had participated in a recording session for the final episode of a seasonal, followed by a brief wrap party. Yuika was also there, having played a guest character, so they slipped out together as soon as the opportunity arose. Otherwise, they would have gotten stuck staying up all night with the rest of the party, as was so often the case.

“Ah-ha-ha, I guess so…”

Suzune hummed uncertainly as she stirred her glass of *umeshu* plum brandy on the rocks.

True enough, Suzune and Karin were exchanging messages almost every day, and Karin came running to see her whenever they were both at the office, flashing a smile bright enough to rival her idol days.

But they still hadn’t gone out to eat since that first time, and they weren’t spending any time together outside the office. That was mostly because Suzune’s schedule was always booked, though.

And while having pointless conversations with Karin every day was certainly fun, that was all it was. She had learned what makeup Karin wore, what clothing brands she liked, her favorite foods, and so on, but Karin never asked for, or gave out, any personal information. Karin frequently asked her questions about work, while Suzune never asked about her past as an idol.

“But it does feel a little bit strange at times.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know, she’s just moving so fast. She’s been coming on

strong since the first day we met. Maybe that's just her personality, but when we meet at the office, it's almost like…like she's *trying* to flaunt our friendship to everyone else…? Whenever I go in, she's almost always there."

Although Suzune was the one who shared her schedule when Karin asked for it.

"But I'm sure that's just a coincidence! Gosh, listen to me, getting all narcissistic!"

She took a big gulp of her drink.

Of course she didn't mind if Karin was cozying up to her—not at all. But in the back of her mind, she couldn't help but wonder, *Why me of all people?*

"No, I think you're probably right."

"Huh?"

"Well, since there are some people who aren't thrilled Karin joined our agency, maybe she's trying to show that she's close with you to keep them off her back."

"How would being close to *me* help her with that?"

"Well, you're one of Earpo's biggest earners. Maybe she's trying to imply, 'If you mess with me, I'm telling Suzu!' or something like that?"

"It's not like I could do anything about it, though…"

"That may be true, but the kind of person who'd try to screw with someone out of jealousy wouldn't realize that. They'll think twice because they themselves would go tattle to the higher-ups, and they assume you would, too."

The ice in Yuika's glass clinked as she shifted it in her hand.

"…Does that mean Karin-sama might be that kind of person, too?"

"In her case, she's probably just learned to protect herself from her experience in the idol business. Look out for number one and all that."

"So you're saying she might be using me, then."

"Would that bother you?"

"…No, not in the least."

Suzune shook her head firmly.

"If anything, I'd be honored. That means that I can help my *oshi* as she starts down a new path in life just by being friendly with her! I get it now. That explains why such a brilliant star

would be cozying up to the likes of me, too."

She nodded sagely. Her doubts had been dispelled, her worries melted away. Yuika was such a dependable friend.

Yuika herself, on the other hand, was staring at her with an eyebrow raised.

"You know…you're unbelievable sometimes."

"Hmm?"

Suzune blinked in confusion, and Yuika snorted a little.

"It's nothing, forget it. You're fine just the way you are. It's one of your best qualities, in fact."

"Um…thank you?"

Suzune didn't follow, but it sounded like Yuika might be complimenting her.

"So? What's the vibe with her?"

"The vibe? What do you mean…?"

Yuika's lips twitched into an amused grin. "I mean, you had this miraculous reunion with your beloved *oshi*, right? That doesn't feel like fate to you?"

"I mean, I'm certainly grateful to the gods and the universe in general. I was so starved for *oshi* content, and now I'm up to my ears in it. Literally drowning. I can't believe my luck right now… Maybe I'm going to die tomorrow?"

"I seriously doubt that."

Yuika laughed out loud.

"But that's not what I meant. She's not an idol anymore, remember?"

"Right…that's true."

Thinking about it too much sent a cold feeling spreading through Suzune's chest.

"Maybe you still think of her as your *oshi* and all that…"

Well, naturally. That would never change.

"…but what do you think of her as a *woman*, hmm?"

For a moment, Suzune didn't understand the question.

She just sat there blankly.

"It never even crossed your mind, did it?" Yuika snickered. "Since Karin's not an idol anymore, doesn't that mean she can date whoever she wants? This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance, if you ask me. Or do you really not have any romantic feelings for her at all?"

Suzune was shocked speechless.

Romance…with Karin-sama…?

Suzune had never even imagined it. She didn’t consider herself one of those fans who got too parasocial and obsessive, developing feelings for their favorite idol.



The main reason she supported Karin Shotsuki was because of her fantastic performances. But if that were the only reason, then she would no longer have any motive to support Karin now that she'd quit being an idol.

And of course, that wasn't true at all.

Just exchanging messages with Karin every day was enough to sustain Suzune emotionally. It filled her heart in a different way from gazing at photobooks or merchandise. Ever since Karin's graduation, Suzune could only wallow in nostalgia and despair when she looked at those things, but now she could enjoy them just like when Karin had still been active.

"B-but I'm her senior at work…"

She brought her glass to her lips and drank deeply. The cold *umeshu* did nothing to cool the burning in her throat.

Her heart was racing.

It truly hadn't occurred to her until Yuika pointed it out.

Now that Karin-sama was no longer an idol, how and why was Suzune still her biggest fan…?

☆

"This is what I had in mind for auditions for next season. What do you think?"

At the office, Suzune carefully inspected each of the materials Miama handed to her.

These days, there were more than fifty new animated shows coming out every season. Each required between one and five main cast members, which meant roughly a hundred people total, at least in theory. But since it wasn't unusual for one voice actor to play multiple leading roles, the actual number was much smaller.

On top of that, it wasn't as if one person could try out for every single new show. Some agencies might not even get contacted to put their talents in the running, and even if they did, there was a limit to how many people could audition from each agency for any given show. So there were several hurdles to clear, even before auditioning.

And since the office needed their voice actors to pass auditions

in order to make a profit, they would naturally give more chances to their most popular talents.

Consequently, the window of opportunity kept shrinking by the season.

Fortunately, Suzune was lucky enough to audition for around twenty shows each season. Even if she usually only got cast in three or four of those, that was still a fairly high success rate in the industry.

Once Suzune finished looking everything over, she nodded.

“Looks good to me. Please sign me up for all of them.”

“Got it. Also, you’ve got an offer for a film dubbing role. If you take the part, you’ll have to make an appearance at the premiere, though.”

“I’ll do it.”

She didn’t even look at the materials before accepting.

Truth be told, Suzune wasn’t a big fan of going to movie premieres. These days, it was becoming more popular to cast famous actors who didn’t specialize in voice acting for some dubbing roles. She didn’t know how to interact with these people on stage, and since most of the audience was there for the big-name celebrities, it felt like it didn’t really matter if she was there at all.

As far as she was concerned, it was a big waste of time.

Still, if she was being requested for a role by name, she couldn’t just turn it down. And Miama wouldn’t have brought it up to her if it wasn’t the right fit.

“Okay, then. I’ll go ahead with this and get a schedule to you soon.”

“That would be great, thank you.”

“I’m on it.” Her manager grinned, clapped Suzune lightly on the shoulder, and returned to her desk.

Suzune had a TV show narration to record after this. Instead of the convenience of the downstairs studio, she had to go to the TV station.

While it would be easier to take a taxi, she didn’t want to get caught in a traffic jam. She’d already needed to apologize profusely because of that very situation once before; she’d been using the train to get around ever since.

Suzune placed her materials into her tote bag and hoisted it

onto her shoulder.

"I'm heading out," she called as she left the office.

While she waited in the hallway for the elevator, she wondered how many auditions she might pass this time. Back when she was in middle school, she never would have imagined that she'd still basically be taking tests all the time at this age.

But every single time, she continued to feel as nervous as if it were an entrance exam.

She would be over the moon every time she passed and upset enough to cry whenever she failed. And unlike entrance exams, there was no telling when you'd get the results, which meant the waiting period was unbelievably stressful.

In some cases, you didn't even find out until the cast was publicly announced, making it all the more difficult to process. No matter how hard she tried not to think about it, the worry was there in the back of her mind, lurking like dust in a corner she'd neglected to clean.

The elevator arrived with a *ding*, and the door slid open.

"Ah…" Suzune murmured without thinking, then quickly added, "G-good morning!"

She quickly took a step back and ducked her head, her tote bag nearly slipping off her shoulder in her haste.

"…Good morning."

The other woman, who sounded rather dour as she responded, was Mami Gamikawa. She'd joined in the same year as Yuika, making her Suzune's senior at the agency.

To be honest, Suzune didn't like dealing with the woman very much. She was always on edge, and her every comment seemed pointed somehow. According to Yuika, she hadn't always been like this, but that didn't make Suzune feel any better, since she had never known Gamikawa any other way.

"Pardon me."

Suzune tried to shuffle past her.

"Hang on."

The other woman stopped her with a sharp tone.

At such close quarters, Suzune could hardly get away with pretending not to hear her, so she stopped and answered reluctantly. "Yes?" The elevator closed before her eyes, trundling back down with a faint whine.

There was no getting out of this now.

Sighing inwardly, Suzune turned to face Gamikawa.

“What is it?” she asked, putting on a smile.

“Come over here.” The woman strode over to a spot that was mostly out of sight of the office entrance, gesturing for her to follow.

Suzune complied, because she didn’t want to hang around in front of the elevator and get in other people’s way, but she was hoping to get this over with as quickly as possible. Though she still had a little time to spare, she was hoping to stop at a café and reread the script before entering the station.

As they stood in a corner where there used to be a smoking area, the walls stained slightly brown, Gamikawa glared at Suzune with a look of thinly-veiled disapproval.

“…Listen, I notice you’ve been very buddy-buddy with that ex-idol girl,” she said abruptly. “I’d drop her if I were you.”

Suzune was confused for a moment before she realized this was about Karin.

“You know she has a bad reputation, right? They say she pulled a lot of strings to get in here. And the higher-ups have squeezed her into an awful lot of auditions for next season, hmm? If you’re hanging around her all the time, people might think she’s using her connections to get you jobs, too, you know?”

That’s ridiculous, she thought but didn’t say aloud.

If Suzune argued back, this exchange would drag out even longer. The smart thing to do would be to take the high road and just laugh Gamikawa off…but really, she thought she might actually burst out laughing at the very idea.

Why in the world would her manager give her jobs just for being friendly with Karin?

Wait, is Karin-sama really that influential in the entertainment industry?

But she dismissed the thought as soon as it crossed her mind. Even if Karin may have used some connections to get into the agency, it was perfectly normal to ask your contacts for help when transferring to a new job, let alone a new industry. There was nothing unusual about getting introduced to a company by someone or other.

And while Suzune didn’t know how many auditions Karin was

going for this season, it would make perfect sense if the agency and producers alike wanted to take advantage of the buzz her history would produce. If they were really trying to shove her into roles, they would just cast her directly and skip the auditions altogether.

But when Suzune said as much, Gamikawa just laughed in her face.

“Don’t be an idiot. You and I both know those auditions will only be a formality—don’t try to pretend Karin’s going to win roles based on actual talent. Things get rigged like that all the time. And if you’re hanging around with her, people will think you’re getting roles handed to *you*, too. You do realize that, don’t you?”

ExCUSE me?!

That was the last straw.

It wasn’t the implied insult to her own character that set Suzune off. It was the insult to her *oshi* that did it.

How dare you.

You have no idea what a hard worker Karin Shotsuki really is.

Anyone who was a fan of Karin’s knew firsthand. She had given her all to being an idol, even if her dream was really to be a voice actress all along. That much was clear if you saw her perform, heard her sing. She never cut corners or slacked off.

“First of all—”

Just as Suzune was about to give Gamikawa a piece of her mind, the elevator arrived, and the door opened again.

“Oh, good morning!”

Karin-samaaaa!

Yes, it was her.

Today, she was wearing a printed sweatshirt with baggy pants, along with a newsboy cap with the brim tilted slightly over one eye. She had a drawstring bucket bag over her shoulder, and a cat-shaped earring dangled from one of her ears.

She’s sooo adorable, as always!

Karin flounced toward them cheerfully.

This time, Gamikawa didn’t even attempt to hide her disapproval.

“Good morning,” she muttered, slinking away without meeting Karin’s eyes. Then Gamikawa repeated the greeting far more

loudly and brightly as she entered the office.

Suzune slumped and let out a breath. Her tote bag nearly slid off her shoulder.

She'd missed her chance to get angry.

That exchange reminded her of her student days and not in a good way. There were always people who tried to get you on their side while claiming they were just looking out for you.

This was the first time she'd run into one since becoming a working adult. She'd always been self-employed, so she had to wonder if that sort of thing was common in the workplace as well.

I'll have to ask Miama-san.

An actor should always be motivated by curiosity, not petty grudges.

"Did something happen?"

Karin cast a glance at the retreating Gamikawa. Suzune shook her head.

"So…what brings you in today?"

When they exchanged messages in the morning, Karin didn't say anything about going into the office that day. Then again, neither did Suzune.

"Miama-san called me in about some auditions. What about you, Sengu-san?"

"The same."

"I see… Um, do you have any advice for me or anything?"

"Huh?"

"You know, about which roles I should pick, how to narrow it down and stuff."

You're kidding, right?

Suzune was astonished and a little alarmed by the difference in her perception of things. What if their manager thought her *oshi* was being arrogant?

"No, I never pick and choose. Usually, I accept all the audition offers I receive. Miama-san will listen if you have any dealbreakers, I suppose, but she'll only bring you offers that she's already vetted for you."

"Ooh…" Karin looked surprised.

Still, Suzune had to hand it to her. Karin must have real confidence in her career thus far if she was just assuming that

there would be multiple offers from the start.

But of course, that confidence was justified for Karin Shotsuki.

“…So it works like that in voice acting, too, huh…” Karin nodded. “All right, then that’s what I’ll do. If you trust Miama-san that much, I’m sure I have nothing to worry about.”

Her trust in Suzune felt almost unearned.

As happy as she was to have Karin counting on her, she was a little worried the woman might get herself into trouble if she was so trusting with just anyone.

Even within the entertainment industry, idols had to be even more careful. Suzune had assumed Karin must have a good handle on that already, since she’d managed to thrive in the idol world—but maybe she was wrong?

“Um, Sengu-san… If you have time later today, do you think we could meet up for tea or something…?”

“Aw, I’m sorry. I have to record a narration voiceover at a TV station after this.”

“Right, of course… Sorry, I should’ve known you’d be busy. Well, I’ll message you again tonight, okay? Good luck!”

“Sounds good! Thank you.”

Karin smiled back at Suzune, turned, and went into the office. Suzune headed back to the elevator and pressed the button.

She couldn’t remember when exactly they’d started exchanging messages every single day. It felt like it had just snuck up on her.

When the elevator arrived, Suzune stepped inside and turned around, only to see that Karin was still lingering by the entrance to the office, giving her a little wave.

Suzune waved back until the door closed completely.

She felt a little shy and awkward, in a way she hadn’t experienced in a very long time. But it wasn’t a bad feeling—not by a long shot.

5

As auditions drew closer, the office was bustling with activity.

Everyone wanted to record demos for self-tape auditions. Usually, you could just walk in and wait for a bit to get a chance to use the recording studio, but not so during this time of year.

The reservation sheet was always jam-packed, to the point where managers sometimes even got into fights about scheduling sessions. Not that they would do this in front of their talents, of course.

In self-tape auditions, you had to demonstrate your ability to act as the designated character with just a few short sample lines.

The only way to pull it off was to fully immerse yourself and internalize the role. If it was an adaptation of a preexisting work, you could just read that to prepare. In the case of an original story, however, your only option was to imagine the character from the limited information you were given.

Suzune always did this at the end of her day. That was also when she checked recorded footage and looked over scripts. She tried to relax as much as possible, turned her phone off, and sank into herself completely.

A major selling point of Suzune's apartment building was that the walls blocked all sound, even that of instruments and such. As long as she closed the doors and windows, she could speak or shout as loudly as she wanted, and she also wouldn't have to worry about outside noise. The rent was that much higher because of it, but it was a necessary expense.

She wasn't messaging with Karin quite as often these days, either. Although they still never missed a day, she couldn't spend hours just chatting back and forth anymore during this busy audition period.

Despite being a rookie voice actress, Karin herself had

received no fewer than twenty offers. She had been requested by name for five guest roles, and she was auditioning for fifteen main roles.

Those numbers weren't that far off from Suzune's own. It was very clear that the agency and production studios alike had high expectations for Karin.

At Earpo, three or four people typically auditioned for a single role.

Acting chops weren't the only thing that determined who passed the audition. There were plenty of other factors taken into account, such as a voice actor's ability to strike a balance with the rest of the cast, their understanding of the role, their popularity, and more.

So it was entirely possible that Karin would get chosen for a main role right out of the gate.

And Suzune's honest thoughts on this were simply…

Good luck, Karin-sama!

Perhaps some people might say Suzune could only think this way because she was bound to receive plenty of roles herself, but that wasn't the case. Any true fan always put their *oshi's* happiness above their own.

And in Suzune's heart, Karin was still her number one *oshi*, now and forever.

Even if she couldn't watch her put on new performances as an idol anymore, Suzune instead got to see Karin up close and personal. It gave her access to all-new content she never could have dreamed of experiencing in Karin's idol days, from what Karin looked like without makeup to what she wore outside work. Thanks to this constant supply, she was forming a more perfect picture of her beloved Karin.

Suzune felt blessed, as if she were getting to bear witness to the process of a goddess being reborn into human form.

Besides, she might still get to see Karin perform in an idol-like capacity, even if it wouldn't be quite the same.

Karin hadn't ruled out roles that involved musical performances, and she wasn't refusing to appear on camera in interviews and such. In this day and age, the line between voice actresses and general entertainers was becoming increasingly blurred, and new idol units formed out of anime projects one

after another. Maybe Karin could even end up being the center of a new unit one day.

Since Suzune didn't do musical performances herself, she wouldn't be in a unit with Karin. And that was fine. It only seemed proper for an *oshi* and her fan. Plus, Suzune wanted to watch Karin's performances from the audience anyway.

☆

"I passed!"

Suzune was walking to her next recording session when she received an excited phone call from Karin.

The breeze was beginning to take on a colder bite, and yellowing ginkgo leaves whirled around at her feet, dancing in the air.

"Congratulations!"

That being said, Karin had only passed the self-tape audition stage. There was still the final round to get through: studio auditions.

At the studio, you had to read the script in front of the directors, producers, and in the case of an adaptation, the creator of the original work. They would even give you directions during the audition. The degree of tension was on an entirely different level.

Still, Karin must have made it through plenty of nerve-wracking situations in her time as an idol. Surely she wouldn't get stage fright. Otherwise, how would she have performed in front of thousands of people?

"Which ones did you pass?"

"Let's see, um…"

Karin listed off seven titles, two of which Suzune had also passed for different roles.

"We'll be together for those studio auditions, then."

"That's right!"

Karin's voice was bursting with joy.

Suzune's eyes crinkled fondly as she looked back on the early days of her career. The first time she'd gotten word she passed an audition, she'd felt like she was walking on air. Her future had

seemed to spread out in front of her, bright and shining with possibilities, and she'd felt as if she could land any role in the world.

But in the end, she'd wound up flunking the studio auditions for that first role. When Miama told her she didn't make it, she'd spent the day cursing the cruelty of the world while busying herself at her part-time job.

"Erm…would you be willing to come with me to those auditions, by any chance?"

Karin's timid voice tickled Suzune's ears. It was like her own personal binaural ASMR session. She always enjoyed talking on the phone with Karin, of course. There were hardly any silences, to the point where it was hard to find the right time to end the call. Usually, Suzune was the one to finally hang up. She didn't want to take up too much of her *oshi's* time, after all.

"Hmm, I'm not sure… I think Miama-san will probably go with you."

Their manager wouldn't send a total newbie to an audition all alone. Even though the studio always gave their address, it was easy to get lost since they tended not to stand out much.

"Oh, right, of course…"

The anxiety in Karin's voice made Suzune's fangirl heart twinge. As much as she wished she could take Karin by the hand and bring her to the studio personally, it wouldn't be good to overstep.

"Let's go out to eat afterward, then!"

"Sure, as long as I'm free—I'll have to check my schedule."

"No problem!"

After her cheerful response, they chatted about nothing in particular for a while, only hanging up shortly before Suzune reached the studio. She put her phone in her bag, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly as she switched gears.

"Good moooorning!"

A proper greeting was a fundamental part of the job. It was how she switched into work mode.

☆

“Sengu, I’m so sorry!”

While Suzune was checking the schedule board at the office, Miama suddenly emerged from the meeting room and clapped her hands together in apology.

Wh-what’s going on?!

A dozen different worst-case scenarios popped into her mind at once, vying for her attention.

Had an audition offer got retracted? Had a live event she was supposed to appear in been called off? Had she somehow been canceled on social media even though she never used it? Or maybe…had they found out she was secretly a huge Karin stan?!

“It’s about tomorrow’s audition. I hate to do this to you, but is there any way you could go with Shotsuki?”

“Huh? What?”

This was so far from anything she’d imagined that her mind briefly went blank.

“The problem is, an unscheduled meeting suddenly came up that I absolutely can’t miss. I asked Kuruma to greet the studio on my behalf, but this is Shotsuki’s first audition ever, you know? You and Karin are the only two of my talents who are going to this audition, so you’re the only person I can ask to do this. Please!”

She clapped her hands together again, raising them in supplication.

Kuruma was another manager at the agency. Since a few of her talents were going to this audition, too, it worked out well enough for her to go along to the studio. Maybe she didn’t also want to be held responsible for a newbie who was under another manager, though.

“I’ve already given her a rundown of the basics, so all you have to do is go with her, really. And maybe look out for her in the unlikely event that anything goes wrong?”

“All right. I don’t mind.”

Suzune was more than happy to lend a hand to her *oshi*.

“Oh, thank you! I’ll treat you to a meal or something soon, I swear!”

…And so, on the day of the audition, Suzune found herself meeting up with Karin at the station closest to the studio.

The auditions weren’t until the evening. While Suzune would

normally just walk, she figured it was better to get a ride since she wasn't alone this time.

This was Karin's first audition, after all. It would be best to avoid using too much of her stamina before the time came.

Since the company didn't cover travel expenses, Suzune normally took a bus instead of a taxi if she needed to get a ride somewhere without a nearby train station. But again, Karin was with her today. Even if the former idol wore a mask, someone might recognize her. Since they both had distinct voices that carried well, the risk would be even higher if they were talking.

Suzune was waiting just outside the ticket barrier when someone suddenly smacked her shoulder. As she turned around with a start, she found Karin wearing a mask, her eyes twinkling.

"Good morning."

Karin was wearing a boat neck long-sleeved sweater with tight-fitting jeans. She had small studs in both ears that looked like diamonds.

It didn't look like her clothes would make any noise, which was good. When recording, it was important to choose clothes that wouldn't rustle or clink in the booth. Karin seemed to have grasped this point already.

"G'morning."

Suzune was wearing a khaki T-shirt dress with a belt and slip-on shoes.

"Well…it looks like you're not nervous at all, hmm?"

"It's the strangest thing. I thought I would be more on edge, but I surprised myself with how normal I feel. Maybe I'm just used to this."

"Did you do this kind of thing a lot before? Auditions and stuff, I mean."

They made conversation as they walked toward the taxi stand.

"Yes, quite a bit. We had auditions to choose the center for every song."

"Ooh, I see."

Truthfully, Suzune already knew this.

The process was included in a DIAGONAL documentary, and one time, the fans had even gotten to decide the center by vote. Obviously, Suzune had participated, and obviously, Karin had won by a landslide.

Out of the several taxis available, Suzune picked one with a female driver, and they got inside.

“If you could please take us to…”

She gave the name of the studio. The driver thanked her, punched the address into the navigator with practiced ease, and started driving.

The revving and lurching when the car first started always bothered Suzune a little.

“Miama-san must be a very busy woman,” Karin commented, placing a large quilted bag in her lap. “Do managers not normally come to things with you in the voice acting business?”

“Hmm…they’ll show up for radio shows and events and the like, but not usually for recording sessions, I suppose.”

That was how it was at Earpo, at least, though it might vary depending on the agency.

“Miama-san always comes to auditions, though. But apparently, she had a meeting today that she couldn’t get out of.”

“Yes, I heard. It actually feels like a stroke of good luck to me.”

“Why’s that? Does Miama-san still make you nervous? I know she’s intimidating.”

“No, not at all. But since she can’t make it, I get to tag along with you, Sengu-san. I feel much better having you at my side.”

MY HEAAART!

Those words nearly sent Suzune floating off to heaven. Her cheeks ached with the effort of keeping a delighted grin off her face.

Clearing her throat, she changed the subject for the sake of her emotional stability.

“Um, so, you’re trying out for a young boy role, right?”

“That’s right.”

There was confidence in Karin’s answer.

Having heard her record that voice in her demo reel, Suzune thought Karin had good reason to be sure of herself. Even though she hadn’t heard Karin act in this specific role yet, the character described didn’t seem so different from the boy she imagined from Karin’s sample. She might just land a regular role in her very first audition.

“You’re trying out for the heroine, right, Sengu-san? If we both pass the auditions, I bet we’ll have a lot of screen time together.

I'm so excited."

"Yes, it would certainly be great if things worked out so nicely…"

Karin looked at Suzune's awkward smile curiously.

"What's the matter? You don't feel confident about it?"

"Mm, I wouldn't say that exactly, but…"

As Suzune racked her brain for the best way to put it, the car took a bit of a hard turn, and Karin's upper arm bumped lightly against Suzune's.

Instead of pulling away immediately as Suzune expected, Karin kept leaning against Suzune.

Wh-wh-wh-what's happening?

It seemed rude for Suzune to be the one to pull away, as though rejecting Karin. And since she certainly had no problem with the contact, she didn't move. Even through the fabric of their clothes, she could feel Karin's body temperature, her slight warmth.

"Since my character is buddies with yours, maybe we could do a radio show together if we both get the parts. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Anime radio shows seem like a lot of fun."

Uh-oh. Suzune didn't dare turn her head. If she did, she would see her *oshi's* face practically right in front of her own. For that matter, what if Suzune was sweaty? Or smelly? She didn't think she was sweating, but now that she'd started worrying about it, she was starting to feel strangely hot. What should she do?

"Y-you've done radio shows before, right…?"

"Yes, DIAGONAL had a show with different members every week."

Suzune knew this, too, of course.

It was usually a two-person radio show, rotating between combinations of the five members. She remembered noticing Karin's vocal quality and control stood head and shoulders above the rest.

"It doesn't feel like I did it that often, since I only appeared on it about once a month. So I'd really like to try doing an anime radio show with you, Sengu-san."

Suzune stole a glance at Karin's face in profile.

Facing straight ahead, Karin was truly beautiful, even this close. Her cheeks looked smooth and free of pores, although she

probably had some makeup on to help with that. *So this is what it means to have "skin like porcelain,"* Suzune thought absently.

Karin's flawless face was definitely part of why Suzune was such a big fan. This was such a feast for the eyes, it was almost too sumptuous to bear. She felt like her heart might get sick from all the indulgence.

An unfamiliar scent wafted from Karin's hair. Conditioner, maybe? Or was she wearing perfume on the nape of her neck?

The faintly spicy undertones summoned up an image of camels crossing the desert. Not that it literally smelled like camels, of course. That would be gross.

Suzune mentally shook herself, trying to chase off these increasingly irrelevant thoughts and get back to…what was it again?

A radio show. Right.

Certainly, if they both passed their auditions, the dream Karin described could easily become reality. Every season, most new anime also produced a radio show with their cast members, mostly for promotional purposes.

The boy Karin was auditioning for was an electronic lifeform (whatever that was supposed to mean) who rescued the heroine Suzune was auditioning to play. He was an important character who appeared every few episodes. Surely that would at least justify a guest appearance on a radio show, if not necessarily a regular role.

"Y-yes, that would be fun, wouldn't it?"

Suzune managed to give a measured reply in spite of the delusional scenarios her mind was producing.

The car turned again, shifting Karin's body back to the other side.

She didn't move back toward Suzune.

Suzune couldn't help feel like her response had displeased Karin, even though she knew that probably wasn't the case. Still, she felt a little disappointed, especially as the warmth faded from her arm.

"You have reached your destination."

Just then, an announcement came from the navigation system, rescuing Suzune from her own thoughts. The voice sounded faintly familiar. Since voice actresses sometimes did jobs like

these, it could very well be someone she knew. Normally that might get her all excited or embarrassed but not today.

The taxi pulled up next to the guard rail and stopped, and Suzune checked the fare.

“With card, please,” she said. “And could I have a receipt?”

“Oh, wait, let me help, too…”

As Karin moved to produce her wallet, Suzune stopped her.

“Don’t worry about it. This way is faster anyway.”

It would probably be a long process to split the transaction and get two receipts.

“I can pay on the way home, then.”

With that, Karin tucked her wallet back into her quilted bag. Apparently, she’d already decided that they were going back together, too. Not that Suzune was complaining, naturally.

Suzune paid the fare, got a receipt, and the two of them exited the taxi. Outside, the breeze was a bit cooler than before.

In the middle of a quiet residential area, the studio looked like it could easily be just another home. Suzune and Karin walked inside.

“Good moooornig!”

☆

“Okay, that should do it. Good work.”

“Thank you very much.”

As she responded to the voice from the control booth, Suzune gathered her things and left the recording booth.

Immediately, a sigh escaped her lips.

Even after all this time, auditions were still nerve-wracking. She never got used to them. There was no telling what directions you might be given on the spot, and if you didn’t have the experience and instincts to react accordingly, it was all over.

“Sengu-san! Here you go.”

Karin trotted up to her and handed her a bottle of water.

“Thank you.”

Just as Suzune took the bottle, a voice from within the recording booth played over a speaker.

“We will now begin auditions for Kadoa Brook. Number one,

please come in.”

Karin glanced at Kuruma, the manager.

Two Earpo talents had been chosen for the studio auditions for Kadoa Brook.

“You go first, Shotsuki-san.”

“Okay!”

Her voice was brimming with eagerness.

Frankly, the eyes of the people watching Karin stride proudly into the booth weren’t exactly filled with warmth.

But everyone seemed interested, at least, because they all turned to watch the monitor on the wall of the waiting room.

The monitor was set up to relay sounds from within the recording booth. It didn’t include the control booth, since they probably had conversations they wouldn’t want the actors to hear.

“I’m Karin Shotsuki from Earpo. Thank you for having me!”

Karin spoke clearly and ducked her head in greeting.

“All right, please begin.”

Even though this was just what Karin was hearing in the booth coming through the monitor, not Suzune’s own audition, she automatically straightened up.

The anime director, sound director, producer, and the creator and editor of the original work were all in the control room.

They didn’t crack a smile, not even in front of a former idol.

The cue light in the recording booth blinked on.

“…‘How did you link up with me like that, huh?’”

Karin’s first audition had begun. At the sound of her voice, which was almost more convincing than that of an actual young boy, a stir ran through the waiting room.

I know, right? Isn’t she amazing?

Inwardly, Suzune was nodding smugly.

Kuruma must have heard the sample already; she didn’t seem surprised. But the others in the room couldn’t have heard it before, even if they were curious about Karin.

Her acting prowess was impressive, and she understood the character just as well as Suzune understood hers.

But for some reason…

“Sorry, could we get that line again with a different read?”

The request came from the sound director.

“Ah, sure.”

Karin was clearly confused for a moment. Suzune was, too. But it wasn’t that unusual for an actor’s interpretation to differ from that of a director. Karin quickly changed gears and began again.

“…‘How did you link up with me like that, huh?’”

Since you couldn’t change the line itself, you had to change other things to give a different interpretation of the character: the pitch of your voice, the speed of your delivery, your volume, the feelings behind the words, and so on.

Karin’s acting this time was excellent, too. Even with a different read of the line, her voice still sounded exactly like that of a young boy.

But still…it was the strangest thing. Suzune felt something amiss, although she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. A certain roughness to the read that she didn’t know how to put into words.

“‘Yeah, I’ve got this.’”

“Great, thank you. Just a moment, please.”

There was another long silence.

The directors and the others in the control booth were talking about something. Though about what, no one in the waiting room had any way of knowing.

And neither did Karin in the recording booth.

Times like these were truly stomachache-inducing. It didn’t necessarily mean you’d failed yet, but you couldn’t help wondering what they were saying about you on the other side. More than likely, you would never find out, not even after the fact.

A few minutes later, the sound director spoke into the talkback mic.

“…All right, that should do it. Thanks for coming in.”

“Thank you very much!”

Karin responded as brightly as ever, but the confidence was gone from her voice.

When she emerged from the recording booth, she headed straight for Suzune. Behind her, the other Earpo candidate entered the booth.

“Good work,” Suzune said.

Karin’s shoulders slumped. “That was so stressful…”

She let out a sigh, loosening her grip on the creased script.

"…Yuu Aoyama, from Earpo. Thank you very much."

Hearing the fresh voice from the monitor, Karin turned around to watch.

Suzune raised her head and focused on it as well.

She was hoping that this other voice actress's performance might explain the odd roughness she felt from Karin's. In the end, though, all she knew was that this girl's acting somehow sounded more like the anime voice acting she was used to hearing.

☆

"Aaargh, I was so nervous!"

In a private room at a pub, Karin took a long drink from a stein of draft beer, then set it down on the table with a heavy thud.

"Were you?"

Suzune smiled as she sprinkled some salt on the ginkgo nuts set out as an appetizer. Karin hadn't looked even remotely nervous, with that bold attitude of hers.

"I was, I swear. I'm just used to hiding it well and putting on a brave face."

She licked away the foam forming a moustache above her lips.

Suzune had an *umeshu* on the rocks, as usual. At this particular place, it was made with a sake base, giving it an unusual flavor. Normally plum brandy was made with a shochu base. The sake version seemed smoother, though it might just be that it was made with less sugar than usual.

At any rate, they ordered a few of the chef's recommended dishes, and each of them requested their own preferred dish as well. Suzune ordered fried oysters, which had just come into season, while Karin requested *karaage*.

After the audition, the plan was to report to Miama-san and make their way back. However, after speaking with Kuruma, leaving the studio, and catching a taxi, Karin had said she didn't want to go straight home. So they'd gone to one of Suzune's favorite *izakaya*.

While it was a little early for dinner, that meant they were able

to get the biggest room to themselves.

Glancing at her phone, Suzune saw a message from Miama:

If you can, please take Karin out for a meal and make sure she's doing okay! I promise I'll reimburse you later!

They hadn't planned on parting ways immediately anyway, so this was a perfect opportunity. Now they could drink on the company's dime.

What a luxury!

Maybe I'll order something fancy for a change.

"But I don't know… I had a pretty good feeling about it."

Karin had moved on from beer to a lemon highball and was now swaying very slightly as she spoke.

"Did you?"

"I think so. Why? Didn't you, Sengu-san?"

"Hmm… I'm not sure."

Suzune thought back on all her past auditions.

"I think I always have a good feeling, and at the same time, I never do."

"What does that even mean…?" Karin laughed shrilly.

"Maybe it's because this was your first audition, Shotsuki-san. When you've been doing this as long as I have, it's perfectly common to think you nailed an audition and not get the role, or to think you bombed only to land the role after all. So I do my best not to be too optimistic or pessimistic about it."

"Can you really control that?"

"I try, at least. But it's not like I don't get excited or disappointed anyway."

"Huh…" Karin took another long drink of her highball.

Still, Suzune did think there was a decent chance that Karin had passed the audition. Her young boy voice was practically unparalleled, and she'd taken direction well, too.

Of course, the decision was ultimately up to production. But considering Karin's name recognition and other factors, it wouldn't be surprising if she got the role.

"I need to use the bathroom… Be right baaack!"

Once they'd had a fair amount of food and drink, Karin got up from her cushion at the low table with a giggle. She seemed to be a bit tipsy again; her footsteps were unsteady, and there was a mischievous shade to her smile.

Left alone in the private room, Suzune took a deep, long breath.

Aaah, I can hardly stand it…

Even now that they'd had meals or tea together several times already, it still felt new and exhilarating every time.

It wasn't just the meal that felt like a luxury.

She almost pitied her past self, who had bought CDs to get handshake tickets worth mere seconds of her *oshi's* time.

But she had to keep this enjoyment a secret.

At this point, it was far too late to confess she was a fan of Karin's. If she did, it would seem like she'd tricked Karin somehow. At least, that was how it felt to Suzune now that she'd seen so much of Karin's real self, as opposed to the woman's idol persona.

Sometimes Suzune wondered if she should have just come out with it at the start, but if she'd done that, they might not have gotten as close as they were now.

Watching Karin up close like this, Suzune had noticed that Karin still acted differently around her fans. Even in the industry, there were people who said they followed her as an idol—and when they did, Karin always switched modes.

While voice actors always treated their fans with respect, just like any working adult would deal with customers, they were still always more or less their real selves.

Suzune didn't know many people who acted completely differently when they were on stage together at an event or the like, versus when they met outside of work.

It wasn't that Karin's approach was wrong. If anything, Suzune was impressed at what a professional she was. It really drove home how carefully polished her idol persona as Karin Shotsuki of DIAGONAL had been.

And since Suzune loved that side of her just as much, her current position was like getting to have her cake and eat it, too. It was just a bit of a shame that she couldn't tell Karin herself exactly how wonderful she was.

But that would probably just make her uncomfortable anyway.

"I'm baaaack!"

Karin's bouncy voice heralded her return. Instead of heading back to her seat on the other side of the table, for some reason,

she sat down diagonally to Suzune's side. She even moved her drink and chopsticks.

"Tee-hee…"

She was beaming, dazzlingly bright. And so close all of a sudden. Close enough that Suzune could probably reach out and touch her…which made her a little nervous.

"S-so, Shotsuki-san—"

Suzune tried to introduce a new topic to distract herself somehow.

"Karin."

Karin interrupted suddenly by saying her own name.

"Pardon?"

"You can just call me Karin. I'm younger and all, you know? In fact, I would prefer if you called me that. If you keep using my last name, it feels like we're still not very close friends, and that makes me sad. All the close friend groups at Earpo call each other by their first names or even nicknames, don't they?"

"I suppose so, but…"

"I mean, if you don't think you and I are close like that, then I'll drop it…"

"No, of course I do!" Suzune blurted.

Much louder than she intended.

But now what was she supposed to do? Suzune still thought of the idol version of her colleague as "Karin-sama," but she couldn't very well call her that out loud. Still, calling her by her first name alone was just too much.

"Um… Can I at least use *-chan*?"

"Absolutely." Karin grinned, as if to say *I dare you*. "Go ahead, try it."

"What?!"

"Come on, hurryyy."

Was she teasing Suzune? If so, that was fine, since it was utterly adorable.

"K-Karin-chan…?"

"Yes?"

"Karin-chan."

"Yes!"

Karin smiled broadly. At this close a distance, her mischievous grin was practically lethal. Suzune's heart was about to stop. Or

possibly explode.

“Can I call you by your first name, too, then?”

“Um…sure?”

“All right…Suzune?”

“Y-yes?”

“Yay! Now we’re even closer friends. I’m sooo happy.”

As Karin smiled, there was no hint she was saying it just for show. She seemed sincerely happy to be close with Suzune. Even if that was just a fangirlish delusion, Suzune didn’t care. It was an honor either way.

“Hey, Suzune.” Karin beckoned, flapping her hand. “Come closer.”

“What?”

Suzune slid over obediently, though she had no idea what for.

Then Karin moved closer, too, until they were almost touching at the corner of the table—in fact, their upper arms actually did touch.

Huh?! WHA?!

Suzune’s breath hitched.

When this had happened in the taxi, it was clearly just happenstance from the car taking a sharp turn, but there was no such excuse this time. It was fully intentional.

Maybe Karin was one of those girls who didn’t worry much about personal space? Suzune was thrilled, of course, but she also stiffened with surprise.



“Ahhh, that’s better.”

Karin let out a sweet sigh of contentment—at least, that was what it sounded like to Suzune.

“I like cuddling up to people, you see. Ah…but not just anyone, of course! Only girls, obviously. The other DIAGONAL members used to complain that I was too clingy.”

“I-is that right…”

This time, Suzune’s heart might actually explode for real.

“…but what do you think of her as a woman, hmm?”

Yuika’s slightly teasing words suddenly flashed through the back of Suzune’s mind, flustering her.

When Karin had been active as an idol, Suzune hadn’t viewed her in a romantic light.

She was a fan of her *oshi’s* performances above all else.

But that didn’t mean she had zero thoughts about her appearance, of course. She loved Karin’s face, too. Still, that was different from a romantic love.

Calm down, calm down…

Suzune chanted to herself, almost praying. The sense that her feelings of adoration might transform into something more scared her in a way she couldn’t describe, sending her into a panic.

From that moment until their last order, Suzune barely registered the taste of any of her food or drinks.

Karin went on chattering away cheerfully, and Suzune did her best to listen and nod along.

When they left the restaurant, they each took separate taxis home, where they exchanged a few short messages. Suzune washed off her makeup, took a bath, and slipped into the slightly cool sheets of her bed.

And all that time, the heat in her upper arm never faded. Not in the least.



Two weeks later, when Suzune went to pick up a script for a stage reading…

"Sengu, a word?"

Miama called her into the meeting room.

Given the time period, she knew it was probably about the results of her recent audition.

As soon as she sat down, Miama cut to the chase.

"Congratulations. You got the part."

"Thank you so much."

Suzune bowed so deeply her forehead almost hit the table.

…Phew.

She was happy, of course, but more than anything, she just felt relieved every time she landed a part. Maybe it was because she tended to fail more auditions than she passed each season.

Although it hadn't happened in a long while, she still clearly remembered the seasons when she hadn't passed a single audition, how she'd felt more fearful than frustrated. What if she never got a job again, and she wound up having to leave the agency?

She'd seen it happen to others, after all. And while some of them became freelancers or transferred to other agencies, there were just as many who left the industry altogether.

It felt something like having to start job hunting from scratch every new season—not that Suzune had much experience with this sort of thing, since she hadn't gone to college. When she'd watched a documentary about college grads searching for employment, she'd related to them deeply, so she figured it must be similar, at least on an emotional level.

And it happened four times a year. If you got hung up on every single failure, you wouldn't last long.

But it was different when you were just starting out.

Even Suzune had taken a while to recover when she'd failed her first audition.

That was why some agencies didn't even tell their talents when they'd failed.

But Earpo's policy was to tell their talents as soon as the results came in, no matter what they might be.

Unlike most other agencies, Earpo's managers usually asked the production side why their talents had failed the audition, too. While there were some cases where production wouldn't answer, more often than not, they would give a simple explanation.

Based on that, the manager and voice actor could talk strategy.

"So…"

Suzune's question was probably written all over her face. Miama nodded.

Karin's audition.

Usually, you wouldn't share another talent's results so freely.

But everyone at the agency knew that Suzune was close with Karin, and Miama had even asked Suzune to look after the new actress.

"Shotsuki didn't make the cut."

I see, Suzune thought. These things happened, of course… But while it was easy for her to say that after being in the business so long, she didn't know how Karin would take the news.

Karin had been an idol for a long time, too, of course. Surely, she had failed auditions before. Still, since Karin had seemed so confident about this role, Suzune couldn't help worrying about her reaction.

"I thought Shotsuki-san's young boy voice was very good."

"So did I. I'm sure the casting folks thought so when they heard her tape, too. But when they tested it out against the rest of the cast, they said hers stood out too much. Basically, the balance wasn't working."

She tapped her finger on the table.

"If anything, she's a little *too* good at it. It might have worked if there weren't any other young male roles, but since the others are all voice actresses doing young boys, I could see how hers wouldn't quite fit in. Shotsuki's young boy voice might be better suited for film dubbing than anime. I'll try promoting her in that

market next time.”

That direction might be more successful, true.

“Of course, I’ll keep pushing Shotsuki for anime roles as well. It’s her first time failing an audition, though, you know? Try to check on her if you can.”

“All right.”

Suzune already intended to do just that.

Since she and Karin weren’t actually employees, she technically had no obligation to do so, but you wouldn’t get by in this world if you were so detached and overly businesslike about these things. They were still colleagues at the same agency, and the industry was a team sport in many ways despite the competition, so emotions and relationships were highly valued.

All of this aside, Suzune was obviously willing to do whatever it took to support Karin. That was her duty as a fan.

However, she wasn’t going to approach Karin about this uninvited. Some people might prefer to deal with things like these on their own. If Karin wanted Suzune’s help anyway, she would surely contact her.

So Suzune decided to wait to hear from her for now.

☆

Suzune, are you free tonight?

Suzune was eating tempura udon for lunch before her afternoon recording session when she got a message from Karin.

This was her meal of choice when she wanted some extra motivation for a job; fried food was good for the throat, according to some. Supposedly, *tonkotsu* ramen was even better, but Suzune wouldn’t eat it because she didn’t like the smell of the pork bone broth.

Sure. I might get out a little late, though.

That’s all right. I’ll send you the restaurant address later. Take your time.

The response came right away.

Okay, she sent back, and resumed slurping up her udon.

It was obvious why Karin would want to meet today, of course. She must have gotten the results from Miama by now. She hadn’t

called or messaged Suzune for two days, so maybe that was when she had first found out.

Suzune had stopped herself from messaging Karin several times.

It would be impolite to admit that you knew the results of someone else's audition, and someone who'd failed wouldn't want to hear from someone who'd successfully landed a part. All Suzune could do was wait.

Still, she was glad to hear from Karin.

This had to mean she was ready to talk to someone about it. And if she'd chosen Suzune, then that was the highest honor.

Suddenly, Suzune wondered whether Karin was still in touch with the other members of DIAGONAL. Since they'd had a graduation concert for her and all, it didn't seem like they'd left on bad terms, but Suzune hadn't followed the rest of the group since Karin's departure.

By the time she finished her udon, Karin had sent her another message. It had a link to the place where she wanted to meet, leading to a review site.

Casual French dining…?

Suzune glanced down at her outfit, worried she was underdressed.

But she wouldn't have time to go home and change. Besides, even if she did, she had no idea what she *should* wear, since she'd never been to a fancy French restaurant before.

☆

Just as Suzune feared, her session ran late.

They were recording for a movie set to be released around New Year's, and the director was infamous for requesting lots of retakes, so she thought she knew what she was in for. Yet it still took longer than she expected.

Suzune turned down invitations to go out for drinks after the recording session, left the studio, and caught a taxi to take her straight to where Karin was waiting.

She decided to take a taxi because she rarely went to Roppongi and didn't know her way around. Fortunately, the driver knew

the lay of the land well and got her there quickly.

Paying the fare with her card, Suzune got a receipt and exited the taxi.

Roppongi at night was bustling with people in suits and even the occasional foreigner in casual wear. It was very different from the shopping districts Suzune knew.

Luckily, the taxi had dropped her off almost directly in front of the restaurant, so she didn't need to wander around. The door on the ground floor of the tall, slim building was without windows, revealing no glimpse of the interior. It took no small amount of courage to enter such an intimidating place.

Comparing the stylish signboard with the information on her phone, Suzune confirmed that this was definitely the place. She steeled herself and opened the door.

"Welcome."

A waiter appeared as if he'd been lying in wait (or should she call him a "garçon"?). Suzune thought she saw him cast a quick appraising glance from her head to her toes and back. She felt some of her nerve slipping away.

"Um, there should be a table under the name Shotsuki…"

"Yes, right this way."

The waiter turned on his heel as precisely as a machine and began walking briskly. Suzune followed, feeling increasingly nervous. The restaurant went quite far back inside, as if the small entrance had been an optical illusion. The waiter stopped at the end of the hallway and knocked on the last door.

"Your dining companion has arrived."

"Come in."

The sound of Karin's voice transformed the formal atmosphere into something far more familiar. The waiter opened the door for Suzune, then quickly pulled out a chair for her as she entered. He handed her a menu the moment she sat down.

"This is a bistro, so please order whatever you'd like," Karin said once this process was finished. "Dinner is on me today."

Suzune opened her mouth to protest, then gulped it down. Compared to the kind of prices she normally expected at a restaurant, the ones on this menu had an extra zero on the end. If she was going to pay for this herself, she'd be done after the first course. But she could hardly just order as much as she wanted on

Karin's dime, either.

Karin seemed to sense her hesitation. "Or if you wouldn't mind, you could leave the ordering to me?"

"Yes, please."

Suzune closed the menu and handed it back to the waiter.

Karin ordered with practiced ease when he came over to her side of the table. "This, this, and this. And one of these, too, please."

"Would you like some wine as well?"

"Just a glass that pairs well with the food for now, please. I'd like to enjoy a few different kinds."

"Of course."

Holding both menus, the waiter bowed and left the room.

As soon as the door closed, silence fell.

The fact that the normally chatty Karin was being so quiet was proof in itself that she'd taken an emotional blow. Suzune knew how she felt, having been down the same road herself. And yet, she didn't have the slightest idea of what to say to comfort her. She couldn't even remember what her old self would have wanted to hear back then.

Karin would have to overcome this herself. It came down to personal feelings, after all.

In the end, neither of them said a word until the first dish was brought in.

Suzune supposed it was what you would call an "hors d'oeuvre." She listened to the unfamiliar name of the dish and the explanation, and watched the white wine pour into her glass with a pleasant sound.

"Well, at any rate…cheers!"

Once the waiter left again, Karin raised her glass. Suzune responded in kind, and Karin promptly quaffed half her drink in one go. Suzune took a single sip of her own and found herself caught by surprise.

…Wow, that's good!

To be honest, she'd never been a big fan of wine, but now she realized maybe she'd just never had the real thing. It was refreshing and delicious, washing away the notion that she could ever have disliked wine.

"Come on, let's eat!"

Sounding a little frantic, Karin picked up her knife and fork. She used them as smoothly and skillfully as a seasoned surgeon, slicing up her food and gobbling it down. By comparison, Suzune felt as clumsy as a child who'd never held a knife before.

Still, no matter how you ate it, the food was downright delicious. They cleaned their plates in a flash, only for the next course to be promptly switched in, as if the waiter had been watching them.

Bread. Wine. Meat. Wine. Fish. Wine. Meat again. Wine. Fish again. Wine again.

It was delicious, but also very hectic. And since they weren't talking, the pace of their eating was even faster.

Suzune kept quiet as she followed Karin's lead.

This had to be a ritual for her. Perhaps she was swallowing her hard-to-accept feelings along with all the food and drink. But doing that alone would be depressing, so she wanted someone else to join her, no doubt. And it was a great honor for Suzune to have been chosen for the role.

As a fan, she felt nothing short of blessed to be of any help to her *oshi*.

Two hours later, a platter of various cheeses was brought to their table, signaling the end of the meal at last.

But apparently, the wine wasn't done yet. This time, instead of a glass, a decanter full of red wine was placed on the table.

Karin picked it up and proffered it to Suzune, who held up a hand to decline. She couldn't drink any more. Though she was off tomorrow, she was afraid she'd black out if she had another glass.

"Sooo, did you hear whyyyy they rejected meee?"

Speaking with a slightly slurred intonation, Karin poured a generous amount of rich red wine into her own empty glass.

"They said I'd *stand out* toooo much. Reallyyyy? What does that even meeean? Like, you're saying I'm toooo good?! I don't get iiit!"

She slammed the wine down in a continuous stream.

Suzune understood the feeling of not being satisfied with an explanation like that. Karin was definitely in a league of her own in terms of sheer talent.

"After Miama-san told me, I did some thinking. I wonder if… maybe your young boy voice is *too* realistic. It'd be odd to have

just one realistic-sounding character in an anime, right?”

Karin pursed her lips. “…I hate to admit it, but it kinda makes sense when you put it that way, Suzune. Doesn’t make me feel any better, though.”

“I think that’s all right, don’t you? It’s not like there’s any explanation that would make you feel better about a rejection, really.”

“You feel that way, too…?”

“Of course. Even though you fail more auditions than you pass in this line of work, you still wonder why you weren’t picked every single time. I think it’s easier to accept once you see the show air, though.”

“I dunno about thaaat…”

Karin slumped over the table, obviously still unconvinced.

“Dammiiit…”

She muttered a curse, then closed her eyes, hand still wrapped firmly around her glass. Suzune waited a while, assuming she was lost in thought, but Karin stayed slumped over.

…Did she fall asleep?

Suzune half-rose to peer at her.

Yep, she’s out, all right…

Her brow was furrowed even as she breathed steadily in her sleep.

Suzune had never seen anyone look so frustrated while unconscious. Of course, her *oshi* still managed to make even that expression look cute.

Still, she couldn’t just leave Karin like this.

She called over the waiter to pay the bill first, only to find it was already taken care of. The waiter handed back Karin’s card, which she’d evidently left with him at the beginning, and she asked him to call a taxi.

“Karin-chan, wake up. I got you a ride.”

Suzune shook her by the shoulders. Karin groaned, but her eyelids stayed firmly shut. Suzune awkwardly gathered Karin’s bag and jacket, put an arm around Karin’s waist and hoisted her upright, and shuffled out of the room.

“Thank you very much!”

As the waiter called after them, Suzune crammed Karin into the back seat of the waiting taxi.

“Karin-chan, where do you live? Can you tell the nice driver your address?”

No matter how hard Suzune tried, Karin’s responses came only in incoherent mumbles. Unfortunately, Suzune herself didn’t know where Karin lived.

“Oh, dear.” With an awkward scratch of the head, the driver looked to Suzune, questioning what to do.

Suzune had no idea, either.

But on further reflection, even if they did manage to make it to Karin’s house, there was no telling if she would be able to get out and make it inside on her own.

Not to mention the sheer amount of wine she’d consumed. She might start to feel sick any moment now. She could even get out of the taxi only to plop down and fall asleep on the sidewalk somewhere.

That was way too dangerous.

…I have no other choice.

Suzune gently pushed Karin further into the taxi and clambered in next to her.

“Take us to this address, please.”

She gave the taxi driver her own address.

☆

Once Suzune paid the fare and got out of the taxi with Karin in tow, she practically had to drag the girl into her apartment. It would have been even worse if Karin was completely passed out, but luckily, the woman could still walk a little, even in her half-conscious state.

It was a good thing the elevator was working. They shut it down for inspection every month for about two days. Carrying Karin up the stairs would have been tough.

When they reached Suzune’s door, she pulled her phone out of her bag and held out her smart key. Convenient as it was, it made her a little nervous sometimes that her door could be unlocked so easily.

Suzune opened the door, sat Karin down in the entryway, and carefully locked the door behind them. Karin had once been a

popular idol, after all. You couldn't be too careful.

But she also couldn't just carry Karin the rest of the way inside. Not yet.

Suzune's apartment had a kitchen and a small loft—and a bedroom that was overflowing with Karin merchandise. She had to gather it all up, quickly but carefully, and stash it away in the loft.

Suzune propped Karin up against the wall so that she wouldn't flop over, entered her bedroom, and closed the door.

It was time to put her precious *oshi* goods away, and fast.

She peeled the posters off the wall and rolled them up. CDs and concert merch got piled into one of the far-too-many shopping bags she had lying around, then put away in the loft. She turned the magazines and photo books around so their spines weren't facing out, then threw a towel over them for good measure. The framed autograph and photos all went into the loft as well.

Within about twenty minutes, she'd finally cleaned it all up. As a finishing touch, she removed the ladder that led up to the loft.

There. All done.

She hurried back to the entryway, where Karin was still sleeping exactly where she'd left her.

"Karin-chan, wake up. You should at least wash off your makeup."

"Make…up…"

Hearing this, Karin opened her eyes halfway. Suzune supported her as Karin stood up unsteadily, helping her along to the sink in the bathroom.

When Suzune produced the makeup remover, Karin automatically started to use it expertly despite her half-lucid state, so Suzune took the opportunity to go get some freshly washed and folded pajamas.

"Here, put these on, okay? Can you change clothes yourself?"

"Mmg…"

Taking this unconvincing response as a yes, Suzune left the bathroom and went to her bedroom to prepare the bed, of which there was—of course—only one.

She'd been hesitant to help Karin change.

Yes, they were both girls, but Suzune was aware that she was

“yuri for real.”

In other words, she was attracted to other women.

She wanted to see. To touch.

Those desires were there, like it or not.

Of course, it wasn’t as if she would harbor those thoughts for just anyone. But the person in her bathroom right now was her *oshi*. The person she adored most in the world.

If it was just fan service, she could brush off the guilt since it was part of her job. In private, though, it was another story. She couldn’t help feeling like she was deceiving someone if they did anything that might be perceived as “yuri,” even if it was something perfectly normal for female friends to do.

Yuika would probably say Suzune was worrying too much. But every woman knew the discomfort of being sexualized in some way. Suzune was afraid that she might be doing the same thing, intentionally or not.

When she went back to the bathroom, she discovered that Karin had finished changing clothes and had promptly fallen asleep with her head resting against the wall.

The jumpsuit and rib-knit sweater she’d been wearing were discarded on the floor.

Suzune was startled to find that her bra was cast off on top of them. It was white, with an adorable lace trim; when she picked it up, it was still warm to the touch. Doing her very best to ignore the way her heart rate sped up, Suzune placed the bra on top of the other folded clothes.

“Come on, stand up.”

Suzune tried to lift Karin, who groaned and rose reluctantly.

She brought her to the bedroom with staggering steps and laid her down in the bed. When Karin rolled onto her back, her breasts moved conspicuously, causing Suzune to quickly avert her eyes.

Feeling like she shouldn’t be there at all, Suzune grabbed her own change of clothes and fled to the bathroom.

There, she took off her clothes and tossed them into the laundry basket so she could take a shower.

“…but what do you think of her as a woman, hmm?”

Yuika’s words kept playing back incessantly in her mind. Suzune shook them off and stepped into the shower, washing

herself thoroughly and scrubbing her face clean of makeup.

Did she want to date Karin? …Ridiculous. Of course it would be a fan's wildest dream to be in a relationship with their *oshi*, but you'd have better luck trying to bag an oil baron.

Besides…as far as dating was concerned, it wasn't like Suzune had romantic feelings for Karin anyway.

They were fairly close, yes, and Suzune did think about Karin all the time…but it was the same way when Karin had been an idol. The only difference now was Suzune had more personal knowledge to fuel her thoughts, like, *I bet she'd like this meal* or *I wonder if she reads this manga?*

What does love even feel like, again…?

She couldn't remember.

Suzune had devoted herself purely to the fangirl lifestyle for the past several years, never feeling that spark in her personal life. While her heart had skipped a beat when Yuika had first flirted with her, it didn't turn into anything romantic.

What's the difference between liking someone as a friend and loving them…?

Lust, maybe?

But surely it couldn't be that simple, even if she suspected that love and lust were closely linked more often than not.

Suzune sighed as her thoughts and feelings kept running in circles.

No matter how many times she fell in love through the roles she played each season, she could never figure out how romance applied to her own life. Why could she understand her characters' hearts but not her own?

Suzune stepped out of the shower, dried herself off, and picked up the hairdryer without getting dressed. She turned on the switch and focused her attention on the whirring fan and the rush of hot air, trying to blow her thoughts away with it.

At times like these, the best thing to do was to clear your mind with routines.

She carefully dried her hair, did her skincare routine, and brushed her teeth. Then she put on a sleep bra and a matching set of sweats. At first, she thought about putting on cute pajamas for the following morning, but she decided it would seem like she was trying too hard.

Once Suzune drank some water in the kitchen and returned to her room, she found Karin asleep in the bed, facing the far wall.

Suzune turned off the light switch and slipped in beside her. Even with the lights off, the moonlight filtering in through the curtains set the room aglow with pale, cool light.

Although she'd also considered sleeping on the floor, spending the night on wooden flooring would be bad for her spine and overall health. She couldn't risk catching a cold and having to miss any recording sessions. Work had to be her top priority.

Her back looks so small…

Suzune gazed at her *oshi*—wearing Suzune's own pajamas, no less—and waited for sleep to come.

When Karin Shotsuki performed, she was larger than life. But when she was right before Suzune's eyes like this, she looked almost fragile.

Come to think of it, this was the first time anyone but Suzune's family had been in her room. Let alone sleeping in the same bed—she didn't do that even with her mother.

"Mm…"

Karin grumbled in her sleep and rolled over.

It was so sudden that all Suzune could do was lie there, frozen stiff.

Though Karin didn't latch onto her or anything, her face was right in front of Suzune's, so close that their noses were almost touching. Suzune hadn't been this close to another person's face in a very long time.

Her heart started racing immediately, only to quickly settle down when she saw the crease between Karin's brows, the tormented expression on her sleeping face.

I know how you feel…

Suzune hadn't been able to sleep the night after she failed her first audition, either. She'd been so frustrated, so discouraged, and she couldn't even talk to anyone about it. All she could do was wallow in misery.

And since she'd still been underage, she couldn't even drown her sorrows in alcohol like Karin had earlier.

The fact that Karin wasn't crying was honestly impressive.

"It's all right…"

Slowly, gently, Suzune brought her free hand to the small of

Karin's back. She pulled herself closer to the other girl and patted her softly, trying to comfort her.

With her face so close to Karin's hair, she could smell the lingering traces of her shampoo. Since Karin hadn't showered before bed, there was also the slight scent of that unique sweat that comes after drinking alcohol. Suzune didn't mind in the least.

It just meant that Karin Shotsuki was a real person in the flesh, here with her. Not an idol nor an illusion.

"It's okay, it's okay…"

Suzune continued gently patting Karin's back gently, until eventually she, too, drifted off to sleep, enveloped in Karin's warmth and soft scent.

☆

Suzune opened her heavy eyelids to the brightness and warmth of the morning sun streaming in through the curtains.

Her mind was hazy, still half-asleep.

She had never done well with mornings, but this one was particularly rough. She'd had too much to drink the night before. Despite her best efforts to restrain herself, she must have fallen into her companion's pace.

She sat up and found that Karin was already awake next to her.

"Good mor—"

The *ning* abruptly caught in her throat.

WHYYYY?!

Instantly, she was wide awake.

Because Karin was sitting cross-legged, reading something that was open in her lap: her own photobook.

But Suzune knew she'd hidden those—she glanced at her shelf and saw that it was still safely hidden. There was no sign that the towel covering it had been moved. She'd even tucked it under the books so it couldn't flap in the breeze.

Then where in the world did she find that? Or did Karin carry a copy of her own photobook around with her?

"…This is one of my photobooks, isn't it?" Karin asked.

As if any further confirmation was necessary. Suzune swallowed the urge to say, *Isn't it obvious?* At any rate, her asking this question removed any possibility that it was Karin's own copy. So where did it come from?

Ah…!

The answer came to her in a flash.

That's mine, all right.

Suzune possessed no fewer than three copies of Karin Shotsuki's photobook.

One signed special edition. One copy for preservation. And one copy for perusal.

The special edition was carefully packed away. The one on her shelf was still in the shrink wrap; just having an extra copy there made her feel happy and reassured. And the copy that she kept readily available so that she could admire it anytime, anywhere… was usually left on her bed.

That was the one Karin was looking at.

Suzune must have forgotten to hide it in her panic. It must have been shoved somewhere she wouldn't notice, like behind the mattress or under her pillow.

Karin raised her eyes from her own photo collection and looked at Suzune.

"…Suzune-san, are you a fan of mine?"

The question hit Suzune like a punch to the gut; she thought her heart might actually stop.

The impact made her feel dizzy. The room was suddenly much too hot.

Her brain went into overdrive, desperately searching for an excuse. Each idea that came to mind was worse than the last, and all of them were pathetically obvious.

But she had no choice. It was too late to come clean now. All she could do was pile more lies on top of the whole mess.

"N-no, it's just that, when I heard you were coming to our agency, I was wondering what you were like…and I went to a bookstore nearby where they just so happened to be selling that, is all…"



“But isn’t this…” Karin looked at the front page. “A first edition? They only printed two thousand copies for the first run, and it sold so fast that they announced another print run by the end of the first day. I mean, not to humblebrag.”

Suzune was aware.

She’d preordered that copy. In fact, her signed copy was a second edition. Since the first edition had sold out so quickly, DIAGONAL had held a singing event as a way of thanking the fans. Suzune had attended this, too, of course.

“W-well, that bookstore is really just a tiny little stationery shop! Isn’t that funny? They just happened to have an extra copy lying around, I guess! So that’s rare? Wowww, I had nooo idea…”

As acting went, this was far from her finest performance. She was so nervous, she couldn’t put any feeling into it at all.

“Uh-huh…” Karin closed the book.

Incidentally, it was specifically a Karin Shotsuki solo photobook, not a DIAGONAL group photobook. And it also just so happened to contain her first (and almost certainly her last) swimsuit photos…in a bikini…with a centerfold. Suzune could admire the swimsuit shots for hours—they were more beautiful than any masterpiece in a museum.

…Okay, well. This line of thought was not helping to slow her heartbeat in the least.

Did Karin buy her story? No, there was no way she would accept such a clumsily patched-together excuse. But Suzune couldn’t think of anything else.

“…Aww, too bad.” Karin put down the photobook and pouted a little. “I would’ve been sooo happy if you turned out to be a fan. What a shame.”

I’M YOUR NUMBER ONE FAAAAAN!

Suzune screamed inwardly.

For an instant, she wondered if it would be all right to confess…but what if Karin was just saying that to be nice?

If Suzune owned up to it, only for Karin to say something like *“Wait, are you serious…?”* and look creeped out, Suzune would never recover.

A single photobook was one thing, but Suzune also had her walls covered in posters that she admired every day, and she watched DIAGONAL’s concert videos nonstop. She was a hardcore

fan. Suzune didn't even want to think about how Karin would react to a colleague who had a mountain of her merchandise at home.

"Um…would you like to take a shower, maybe…?" Suzune delicately took back the photobook. "You fell asleep without one last night. Your clothes are folded up by the bathroom door."

"Thank you very much. I'll take you up on that, if you don't mind."

Karin put her hand on the sheets and ducked her head gratefully, then bounced out of bed and headed toward the door Suzune indicated. The bathroom was the first door when you stepped into the hallway from the bedroom, with the kitchen at the other end.

Suzune put the photobook away and padded into the kitchen, still in sweats. The wooden flooring felt cool on the soles of her bare feet. Before long, the weather would be cold enough that she'd have to wear warm socks at home. She should probably get her humidifier and oil heater out of storage soon.

For now, she decided to make breakfast. Her fridge contained most of a loaf of bread, as well as bacon, cheese, and an onion she'd sliced up in advance to eat in a salad.

I'll make hot sandwiches.

She made them often, since they were easy and filling.

Suzune took the hot sandwich maker down from the shelf. She'd bought it on impulse because of its cute mint green color, but it turned out to be quite practical, too.

There was barely any actual cooking involved. She put the bread on the bottom grill plate, arranged the ingredients on top, seasoned it with ketchup, salt and pepper, and so on, then topped each sandwich with a second piece of bread. After that, all she had to do was close the sandwich maker and flip a switch, and it would automatically grill them to perfection.

"Ooh, hot sandwiches!"

A freshly showered Karin appeared in the kitchen, pressing against Suzune's back, and peering over her shoulder.

Nngh…

Suzune nearly swooned at the sensation of her *oshi's* soft chest against her.

Despite her best efforts, it was hard not to react.

Suzune pushed down any rising urges and reached over to put beans into her automatic coffee maker, then stopped.

“Karin-chan, is coffee all right for you?”

“I’d love some.”

Her chin was still resting on Suzune’s shoulder, tickling her cheek. Her voice, which Suzune had always admired, was even clearer thanks to her extensive voice acting studies.

She also had a sweet, pleasant scent at the moment.

Even though Karin had used Suzune’s own body soap, and therefore should smell exactly the same, it was somehow different on Karin. Maybe it was mingling with her natural scent.

Her arms had also slipped somehow around Suzune’s waist; Karin was essentially hugging her from behind.

Karin definitely didn’t have a strong sense of personal space.

As happy as Suzune was to have her *oshi* cozying up to her, she wasn’t sure if her heart could take much more of this sheer delight. But she wasn’t going to shake her off, of course. She couldn’t imagine doing such a thing.

And so, they stayed snugly connected as Suzune finished preparing breakfast.

Karin only finally drew away after Suzune had poured the coffee into mugs and put the cut sandwiches onto plates to be served.

They each brought their own plates and mugs to the low table next to Suzune’s bed.

Then they got started on their breakfasts.

Suzune put on the radio so that the room wouldn’t be filled only with the sounds of chewing and clinking. She went with FM radio, since anime radio would just be distracting. Although what she really wanted to listen to was DIAGONAL, of course.

“Mmm, this is delicious…”

Karin murmured in contentment, much to Suzune’s relief. It didn’t look like she was just being polite. She was eating her food with genuine pleasure.

“You don’t have a hangover or anything?”

“Hrmm…” Karin prodded her temple. “No, I think I’m fine. Wow, I haven’t drunk such a stupid amount of alcohol in a looong time.”

“It’s dangerous to drink like that, you know…”

“I don’t do it normally, I swear. I only get that drunk in front of people I really trust to look after me, like my fellow members.”

Suzune’s heart soared.

Did that mean Karin thought of Suzune on the same level as the other DIAGONAL members? If so, she would be unbelievably happy.

“Are you sure you don’t need to check in with anyone? You didn’t make any calls last night. Won’t your family be worried?”

“Nah, it’s fine. I don’t live with my parents.”

“Really?”

As Suzune recalled, Karin was from Kanagawa.

“I live in Itabashi with my big sister these days. And she’s away on a business trip all week, so I basically live by myself right now—I don’t need permission to spend the night away from home.”

Karin made an “OK” sign with her fingers.

“I take it you live alone, too, Suzune-san,” she added, looking around the room, which was decidedly barren without the array of idol merch. “Your family is from Saitama, right?”

“Specifically Chichibu, yes. How did you know? It’s not on the agency’s website or anything.”

“Oh, really?”

Well, it wasn’t necessarily a secret or anything. Suzune supposed it must have come up by chance in a conversation with Miama or something like that.

“But isn’t the rent awfully high here? Especially with the soundproofing.”

“It’s not cheap. But it’s worth it, you know? It’s close to most major studios, and I can practice as loudly as I want.”

“Ooh…maybe I should move in here, too.”

Karin tapped the floor.

You mean, move in with ME?! Suzune tried to reign in the ridiculous fantasy that her *oshi* was suggesting they should live together.

“I just live in a regular apartment complex right now, so I can’t really go all-out when I practice. I tried it once and got a complaint from the management company.”

“Ahh…”

Suzune knew that struggle.

A voice actor’s volume was nothing to be sneezed at. They

weren't just loud—their voices were trained to carry clearly, including through ordinary walls and windows.

"So when you need to practice for real, do you go to karaoke?"

Karin nodded.

Karaoke places had all kinds of useful options these days, not just for singing. Many offered plans for anyone who needed to rent a party room, practice a musical instrument, or even just a quiet place to study.

"It's fine for now, but the rental fees will add up once I get busy with regular roles."

So she's still assuming she's going to get regular roles…

Suzune was surprised, then impressed by Karin's unwavering confidence.

It took no small amount of mental fortitude to remain self-assured so soon after failing one's first audition.

But maybe that was only natural. While she was still new to voice acting, Karin had been an idol for several years already.

Voice actors largely worked behind the scenes.

Though more and more jobs involved public-facing events these days, that was nothing compared to idols, who constantly had to stand on stage, front and center. Maybe this was the level of inner strength you needed to make it in a business like that.

After they finished their sandwiches and started sipping on their coffee with milk and sugar, Karin suddenly raised a new question.

"By the way, Suzune-san, do you have a boyfriend or anything?"

Suzune nearly spewed her coffee out in a spit-take.

"Wh-where'd that come from…?"

"Just a little girl talk. Miama-san didn't give me any rules on the subject when I joined, so I was just wondering what a voice actor's love life is like, I suppose."

"I guess it must be different for idols?"

"There's nothing officially in writing, but they did warn us against it. I guess when you're an idol, people still want to assume that you don't belong to any one person or something like that."

"I see…"

Miama never said much of anything to Suzune about her personal life. The only ground rules they had to follow were the

laws, obviously, and all the usual boundaries of what society generally deemed acceptable.

Any detailed regulations that existed were only those that related directly to the job. They didn't intrude on your personal life—as long as it wasn't affecting your performance anyway.

"So? Are you dating someone or not?"

She's really pushing this topic…

Suzune winced. Just when she thought she'd neatly wrapped up the subject, Karin had unwrapped it and dropped it right back in her lap.

"No, I'm not."

Between her work and her idol fandom, she was plenty content with her life. Besides, she'd never met anyone who seemed like "the one."

"I don't know about other voice actors, though."

She knew some people's relationship statuses, of course, but she didn't think it would be right to talk about that behind their backs.

"Mm-hmm…"

Karin pursed her lips, looking perhaps a little disappointed at the lack of gossip.

"Well, what about you, Karin-chan?"

"Nope, not at all. I never had time for that sort of thing. I spent all my spare time and money on taking lessons to become a voice actor."

"Gotcha."

That made perfect sense.

Voice acting was a skill-based profession. It wasn't enough to be able to act—the job demanded much more. Anyone could just talk into a microphone, but you needed to know the tricks of the trade: how to enunciate, how to change your voice, how to raise and lower it just right, and all kinds of other skills. Learning and mastering all these was no easy task.

Even though Karin's first audition had ended in failure, it was clear to Suzune that she had studied the techniques quite seriously.

No doubt, it was only a matter of time before her hard work was recognized.

"What are you doing today, Suzune-san?"

“Reading scripts…and maybe going to a massage if I can get an appointment.”

“But you don’t have anything booked, right?”

“No, not yet. I only got my recording schedule yesterday afternoon.”

“Let’s hang out, then! I still want to blow off some steam for at least a day, you know? Would you keep me company?”

“…Sure.”

Suzune thought it over for just a moment before agreeing. She could always read her scripts in the evening. More importantly, spending the day hanging out with her *oshi* was a dream, the likes of which she couldn’t even have imagined long ago.

“Where do you want to go, Karin?”

“Retail therapy, first and foremost. And then, there’s this café I really like, so maybe we could get some yummy sweets together?”

“All right.”

If it would make Karin feel better, Suzune wouldn’t hesitate to offer up her time. Not one bit.

☆

After breakfast, Suzune checked in with work and answered a few emails, and then she and Karin headed toward Karin’s first destination of choice: Omotesando.

Unlike Suzune, who rarely came here, Karin seemed very familiar with the area.

There were a fairly large number of people here even on a weekday afternoon, mostly very fashionable, classy-looking adult women. The overall vibe was quite different from Harajuku, even though it was only a short distance away.

Karin strode confidently into a designer brand store with a well-built male model out front and proceeded to grab anything and everything that caught her eye.

Suzune timidly followed behind and watched, nothing more. She didn’t even dare touch the clothes.

Some of them looked wonderful, of course, but she couldn’t buy them.

Even if she could technically afford them, she had nowhere to

wear such nice clothes anyway.

And at these prices, she certainly couldn't get away with calling it a business expense.

Generally, voice actors provided their own clothes. However, there were more opportunities to get reimbursed for outfits these days, as there were more in-person events.

Since the company knew their talents might have to make such appearances, it was easier to get not only clothes but also cosmetics, beauty treatments, *seitai* messages, and so on included in expenses. However, that didn't mean the company would pay for everything—it still came out of the money you earned. Since it was really just a little bit that would get returned to you later, you still had to be very careful about budgeting.

So as far as Suzune was concerned, this was a store for browsing, not buying.

Karin, on the other hand, left the store with three large shopping bags over her shoulder. When Suzune offered to carry at least one, Karin held back at first, then apologetically handed her the smallest bag.

It made Suzune happy, like a show of Karin's trust. Even if it was the smallest bag, it contained the most expensive item Karin had purchased.

As they walked, Suzune got the strange feeling people were looking at her. Or more specifically, at the bags she was carrying.

Mostly, though, they were looking at Karin, of course. Even if they didn't recognize her as Karin Shotsuki, her superstar aura was undeniable.

They caught a taxi and moved on to Asakusa.

Although the neighborhood didn't fit with Suzune's image of a trendy young woman like Karin, there was apparently a "hidden gem" sort of shop behind Asakusa Temple.

They got out of the taxi on a mostly empty backroad and followed an alley to the shop in question.

It certainly stood out a bit from the other buildings around it, design-wise. The railings on the second-floor balcony were stylishly wrought like a cage.

There was no signboard to speak of, either. You probably wouldn't realize it was a restaurant unless you were in the know.

"Hellooo!"

Karin opened the door with the confidence of a regular customer.

“Welcome.”

A slim waiter with a low voice strode over, his shoes clacking briskly, and took Karin’s bags for her as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

When he held out a hand to Suzune as well, she wondered for a moment what he wanted. Then she realized it was the shopping bag she was holding, and she hurriedly handed it over.

“Would you like your usual table?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Karin’s casual response was spoken like a true starlet, Suzune thought. Not in a bad way—she was genuinely impressed. As always, her *oshi* was on another level.

The waiter led Karin and Suzune to a private room on the second floor. It looked like a noble’s room that you might see in an isekai reincarnation series. The furnishings were so fancy, everything seemingly lined with gold.

They sat across from each other at a lone table by the window. The drinking water, presented in a pair of wine glasses, smelled faintly of mint when Suzune sipped hers. She was pleased to find it was room temperature.

“Your menus, madams.”

When Suzune opened the book-style menu, she found that there were no pictures, only a list of various kinds of pancakes. Their names were unfamiliar: Some listed what she assumed were fruits or maybe kinds of nuts, others described what must be some sort of sauce. Even with these educated guesses, she couldn’t imagine what any of them might taste like.

“The usual.”

Karin placed her order just like that, leaving Suzune scrambling to figure hers out quickly. But she couldn’t decide. How could she, when she didn’t know what any of the options meant? But she didn’t want to ask the waiter to explain every little thing, either.

“The monthly special is really good.”

“I’ll take that then, please!”

Suzune latched onto the life preserver that Karin had considerately thrown her way. She must have done so a little too

enthusiastically because Karin's eyes went slightly round, and she giggled a little.

How embarrassing.

Like a true professional, the waiter's expression didn't so much as flicker.

"Would you like the same drink as well?"

After a moment, Suzune realized this question was addressed to her and hastily nodded.

"Aah, that was so much fun!"

Once the waiter left the two of them alone in the room, Karin slumped down a little lazily.

"You sure bought an awful lot."

Suzune finally allowed herself to voice her honest opinion.

"It's been a really long time since I splurged like this. I've been scrimping and saving for sooo long, you know? I pretty much blew everything that was left in my bank account just now."

"Whaaat?!"

"Oh, my living expenses and such are in a different account, of course. That was all on my card for entertainment expenses."

Even then, Suzune was still surprised. If it was her, she'd be deep in regret when she got the card statement after a spending spree like that. No doubt she'd be cursing her past self for all that shopping.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

Karin leaned her elbows on the table and grinned mischievously.

"What? N-nooo…"

"Yeah, right. You totally do. But I've always wanted to go to that store, that's all."

"Huh? You're not a regular there?"

"Of course not! That was my first time."

Suzune widened her eyes, amazed at Karin's sheer nerve. From the confident way Karin had walked in and picked things out, anyone would have thought she shopped there all the time. Certainly, you wouldn't guess she'd never been before at all.

"Gosh, celebrities really are amazing…"

Karin snickered. "Oh, come on. You're a celebrity yourself, Suzune-san."

"I'm not so sure about that…"

Voice actress or not, Suzune couldn't imagine herself in the same category as an idol.

"So what about this place? Is it actually your first time here, too?"

"Oh, no, I come here all the time. Me and the other DIAGONAL members used to hang out here constantly. But I guess you're the first person I've brought here who's not a fellow member, Suzune-san."

Me? I'M the first?! It was probably just a casual comment from Karin's perspective, but to Suzune, it was nothing short of a blessing.

Eventually, two plates of truly incredible pancakes were brought to their table.

There were three pancakes on each plate, each of them about ten centimeters around and three centimeters thick. On top of that, they were lavishly loaded with whipped cream and all kinds of colorful sweets and fruits. There was also *anko*—red bean paste. Was that because this was in Asakusa, a very traditional part of Tokyo?

"This restaurant used to specialize in *wagashi*, in case you were wondering."

"Aah, that explains the red bean paste…" It was a common ingredient in *wagashi*, traditional Japanese confections.

The waiter smiled. "Our red bean paste isn't overly sweet. It pairs nicely with fruit."

With that, he took his leave.

Suzune hesitantly took a bite of the red bean paste along with a piece of fruit. Sure enough, the tartness of the fruit wonderfully complemented the gentle sweetness of the red bean paste.

Come to think of it, that might be why strawberry *daifuku* and other such fruit-based *wagashi* were so popular.

The syrup that came on the side had a woody scent and wasn't overly sweet, either. Suzune poured plenty of it over her pancakes, cut off a generous slice, and piled a little bit of everything on top before taking a big bite.

Ooh, that's delicious.

There were all kinds of flavor combinations to enjoy thanks to the variety of fruit.

It was a perfect match with the heavily bergamot-scented Earl

Grey tea.

As they ate, they chatted about all sorts of things.

Karin talked about her idol days. Suzune talked about her work as a voice actor. It was fun to learn more about worlds that were unfamiliar to one another.

And they talked plenty about their favorite anime, too.

Karin was truly a diehard anime fan. She was very knowledgeable about tons of series that Suzune had never seen.

In this case, that "knowledge" wasn't so much focused on the plot as the behind-the-scenes aspects of the show, such as the production companies and voice actors involved.

Suzune had never paid attention to things like production companies before she became part of the industry herself.

She wanted to know if Karin had watched shows Suzune had appeared in, but it seemed embarrassing to ask *"Did you see me?"* so she refrained from bringing it up.

Still, getting these personal moments with her *oshi* all to herself was such a treat. It felt like Suzune was the one getting rewarded, even though this outing was intended to cheer up Karin.

Even watching Karin eat pancakes was utterly precious.

But just as Suzune caught herself wishing that this moment could last forever…

"Heyooo!"

A cheerful voice burst in as the door opened with a bang, and Suzune nearly jumped out of her seat.

"Ugh…"

On the other side of the table, Karin let slip an unusually rude-sounding groan.

Standing in the entrance to their private room was a long-haired young woman clad in a ruffled peplum blouse diagonally divided into two different colors, a rainbowy tiered skirt, white stockings, and high-heeled, high-laced black boots. Completing the look was a heart-shaped eyepatch.

"I thought I'd find you here."

She giggled gleefully as she entered the room.

Suzune knew her well, though they'd never met. It was none other than Shiori Kasumi—a member of DIAGONAL.

"How did you know…?" Karin furrowed her brow.

“If you don’t want people to figure out where you are, you shouldn’t go around posting photos on social media.”

Shiori chortled, sounding like a cooing dove.

“Oh, hello there!” Turning to Suzune, she gave an exaggerated curtsy. “I’m Shiori Kasumi of DIAGONAL. Charmed, I’m sure. Thank you sooo much for looking after our dear Karin.”

“N-not at all… I’m Suzune Sengu, from Earpo. The pleasure’s all mine!”

She automatically responded with a businesslike introduction.

But how was she supposed to think straight?! This was Shiori Kasumi! The number two member of DIAGONAL! The group’s current center, in fact! She’d gotten her start as a model for teen magazines, and her somewhat unusual fashion sense had always made her popular with girls. She was also an excellent singer—the way she held high notes especially could give you goosebumps.

Even if Karin came out on top in overall performance power, there were a fair amount of songs with Shiori as the center, too. And while Suzune was a Karin stan first and foremost, she also loved DIAGONAL as a group and supported all its members. How could she possibly stay calm when faced with Shiori Kasumi in the flesh? Her thoughts and feelings were going into overdrive. And what was up with this outfit anyway?! Was it even legal to wear such a cute heart-shaped eyepatch?! A new song? Could it be the costume for a new song? No new songs or concerts had been announced since Karin-sama had graduated… Did this mean Suzune should get her hopes up? How could she not?!

“Um…hello? Are you still with us, missy?”

…Oh no! My brain went into mega-otaku mode there. Not good…

Suzune quickly clamped her half-gaping mouth shut and swallowed the saliva that threatened to escape it.

“Mm-*hmm…*” Shiori murmured appraisingly, as if Suzune’s reaction hadn’t escaped her piercing gaze. It felt like she’d seen right through Suzune, which made her a little nervous.

“Okay, enough already. What do you want?”

Karin glared at Shiori with obvious irritation.

The way she didn’t even attempt to hide her feelings just showed how comfortable she was with the other girl.

They had been paired up particularly often when they were

both in DIAGONAL. In the candids (or photos that were passed off as “candid,” anyway), they were regularly shown doing things together or getting cozy with one another.

Although Suzune didn’t know if this was true or just made-up, the story went that Shiori Kasumi had lived abroad for much of her childhood, and therefore was prone to frequent hugging and such. Those yuri-coded candid shots where Shiori was pressing her cheek against Karin’s, clinging to her arm, and so on—they were precious gifts Suzune had treasured at the time.

“Well, once I realized you were probably here, I thought I’d come see if I could get you to treat me to some pancakes…but alas, I didn’t realize you were on a date.”

A DATE!

Suzune’s excitement rocketed even higher upon hearing the word said out loud, confirming a secret speculation she’d been trying not to examine too closely. But then…

“Come on, it’s not like that.”

Her feelings simmered right back down when Karin denied it. *No, of course not.*

“Aww, don’t be shy.” Shiori Kasumi put a hand on her hip and grinned at Karin smugly. “Or have you not mentioned it yet? How you admired this lady so much you decided to become a voice actor yourself?”

Pardon?

Suzune couldn’t believe her ears. It didn’t make any sense. What was Shiori talking about? Of course this was the first she’d heard such a thing.

Wh-wh-what does that mean? Huh? Did Karin already know me beforehand?

“Stopppp!”

Karin leapt to her feet so fast, she nearly knocked her chair over. Her face was bright red. She hadn’t been this flushed even when she’d gotten fall-down drunk the night before.

“Whaaat? You really haven’t told her yet? I swear, for someone who’s so proactive, you sure drag your feet about the strangest things…”

“I’m just taking things at my own pace, okay?!”

“So, missy, you’re not going to believe this…”

“NOOOO!”

Suzune couldn’t say a word in the face of their exchange—they sounded like a comedy duo. You could tell that they’d spent a great deal of time together.



Shiori Kasumi smirked back at Karin. “Listen, I know you. You’re just going to keep putting it off and never actually tell her, aren’t you? Yeah, that’s what I thought. If you really want to be close with this nice lady, just be honest already.”

Karin fell into a sulky silence at this older sister–like lecture.

“So. Let me start over.”

Shiori Kasumi flashed a full-blast idol smile at Suzune, throwing her off guard, before she proceeded to drop a bombshell.

“Missy…you came to our meet-and-greet, didn’t you?”

Suzune almost screamed out loud at full voice-actor volume.

So she’d been found out?!

For how long?! From the very beginning?!

“Let me tell you, Karin just about lost her *mind*. She was like, ‘My *oshi*! My *oshi* is here!’ And you were in *her* line, no less.”

Shiori grinned broadly as Karin silently glared daggers at her. Oddly enough, her expression almost seemed more embarrassed than angry.

Suzune was so lost, she couldn’t even process the rest of the explanation. The words just washed right over her.

But in the midst of all that, she did catch one key phrase: the title of a certain anime. It was the first show Suzune had ever been a main cast member in, and it was a major turning point in her career as a voice actor.

The anime was an original story about the everyday lives of a group of middle school girls.

While the events it depicted might seem trivial to adults, they were of the utmost importance to a middle schooler. They took their time solving each problem, and some even unfolded without being resolved at all.

It didn’t offer any big answers. It was just a story that gently encouraged you to take a small step forward.

And though it never received a sequel, the first event she ever spoke at was great fun. Suzune also heard that the show was recently re-released as a Blu-ray box set, and that it was well-received.

“Wouldn’t you know it, our Karin saw that anime and decided she wanted to be a voice actor. Apparently, she was going through a lot at the time, and your performance saved her life, or

something like that?”

It had never occurred to Suzune that her acting might someday help anyone—let alone her *oshi*. She never would have even dreamed of it.

She was about to say that surely this was thanks to the story itself, not her performance. Then she swallowed those words.

Because she’d had an experience like that, too.

What moves your heart is the power of the story or the direction—but actors can bring that to the next level.

Suzune had once watched a foreign film that had been dubbed over by a different actor. The theatrical version had used big names purely for publicity, and it could hardly have been described as a masterpiece by any means.

When they released it on home video with a new dub by professional voice actors, the performance was so perfect that a viewer could have easily thought the foreign actors were actually speaking Japanese.

If Suzune’s performance had boosted the emotional impact of that anime, and in turn helped comfort Karin’s heart, then she shouldn’t deny that as an actress.

“But…you never…”

Why didn’t you tell me? Suzune’s question must have been written all over her face.

Karin sighed, then raised her head to look straight at Suzune resolutely. While her cheeks were still blazing red and her eyes were a little teary, her determination came through so strongly that Suzune was taken aback.

“Well…” Karin took a deep breath. “When we met at the office, you acted as if you’d never laid eyes on me before, remember? It was like you were saying, ‘I have no idea who you are, thank you very much.’ Honestly, I was in shock. I thought you’d already forgotten about me already, even though it hadn’t even been that long since I graduated. Or maybe you just came to our meet-and-greet on a whim in the first place…”

Ridiculous. If only she knew how many CDs Suzune bought to make sure she’d get a handshake ticket!

“But you came to the signing for my photobook, too, and I saw you at our concerts plenty of times, and our eyes even met, and you always waved back so excitedly when I waved at you… It

seemed like you really liked me, and then just dropped me like a rock as soon as I stopped being an idol? I was so depressed! After I joined Earpo just so I could act with you, too…”

Did you really?!

“I felt like an idiot for expecting you to jump for joy when you saw me at the office.”

But of course she couldn’t just do that at work in front of everyone. Suzune was a professional actress, after all. She’d put on a perfectly calm face on the outside, but what Karin didn’t know was that she’d been dancing and fist-pumping like crazy on the inside.

“But really, it should’ve been obvious. You liked Karin Shotsuki the idol, after all. Now that I’ve graduated, I’m just some random newbie voice actress to you.”

It was true, at least, that Suzune wasn’t a fan who wanted to marry her idol.

But she still loved Karin Shotsuki very much, even now. She still wanted to support her, just like always. And yet…now that Karin wasn’t an idol anymore, how could Suzune still be a fan in exactly the same way?

“So I thought I’d try to befriend you, and then eventually I’d say, *‘Hey, didn’t you come to my meet-and-greet?’* to try and jog your memory…” Karin glowered at Shiori. “But now you went and ruined it!”

“Oh, there’s no way she forgot you. Right? Wait, or did you seriously forget her?”

“OF COURSE NOT!”

Suzune refuted this about ten times louder than she’d intended. Karin’s eyes went round with surprise.

“I could never forget you… I only hid that I was a fangirl so that I wouldn’t get weird questions about it. Karin-sama was an oasis to me.”

“Whoa. Yeah, she’s a diehard fan, all right.”

Shiori Kasumi blinked at her.

You’re darn right I am. So what?

“If that became public knowledge, then it would just turn into fodder for talk shows and social media. I didn’t want that.”

The jig was up.

If Karin already knew that Suzune had gone to her fan

meeting, then there was no point hiding it any longer.

“Part of why I kept it from you, Karin, is just because it started out that way, but I was also worried that dragging up your past as an idol would bother you when you had just graduated and started down a new path.”

And there was one more reason, too.

It had only occurred to her after they became this close: If Suzune admitted she was Karin’s fan, then they might go back to being just an idol and a fan and nothing more.

But Suzune didn’t want bring this up, because even she wasn’t sure why the idea of that bothered her so much.

“Wow… So you knew all along, huh…” The tension left Suzune’s body all at once. “Then I shouldn’t have bothered working so hard to clean up last night!”

“Last night, hmm? Whatever do you mean?”

Shiori leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with interest.

“Karin-sama drank too much wine last night and spent the night at my place. Since it was so sudden, I had to rush around putting all my merch away, that’s all.”

“Huh? Is that what happened?” For some reason, Karin looked pleased. “When I woke up and looked around the room, I was so sad that I didn’t see any DIAGONAL merch. Then I found that photobook, so I decided to mess with you a teensy bit.”

That explained why she seemed to be enjoying herself a little at the time.

“Oh, I have merch, all right. Normally, my room is covered in DIAGONAL and Karin-sama merchandise. I even have three copies of that photobook—one for enjoyment, one for safekeeping, and one special signed copy.”

At this point, she didn’t even care anymore.

Suzune wasn’t ashamed of her fandom—she just didn’t want it to be turned into a novelty to joke about. Being ashamed of your fan activities was like being ashamed of your *oshi*, after all.

“Aww, thank you so much, missy.” Shiori Kasumi bowed her head politely. “If at all possible, I’d love for you to support the new DIAGONAL going forward, too…or is that too much to ask since you just stanned the one member?”

It was true that Suzune hadn’t actively sought out more information about DIAGONAL since Karin graduated. She

couldn't deny that the group had lost its luster without the star power of its undisputed leader, and they hadn't put out any new songs, either.

"We're going to be getting a new member soon and putting out a new song, so please do check it out if you're interested. There'll be a music video going up online, too."

"Really?" It was Karin who reacted first, looking sincerely excited. "I know it might be weird for me of all people to say this, but…congratulations."

"Thanks." Shiori smiled brightly, then her face softened into a gentle yet serious expression. "Listen, I'm sure you've been worried about us. But we're fine, don't worry. Besides, how big does your ego have to be for you think that our group wouldn't be able to survive without you? We're going onwards and upwards, believe me. So just focus on yourself."

"…Okay."

Karin nodded like a sheepish child.

"I mean, I think there are still some fans who haven't accepted your graduation, but I bet they'll change their tune when they see our brand-new performance. In fact, I'll make sure of it!"

"Oh, I don't doubt that for a second."

The pair exchanged earnest smiles, the kind that only two people who trusted each other completely can share.

"All right, I guess I should get out of your hair now. Wouldn't want to ruin your date."

"I told you, it's not a date!"

"Yeah, yeah. See you later, okay?"

Shiori Kasumi bent down a little and kissed Karin on the cheek.

BA-DUMP. Suzune's heart lurched.

Karin didn't seem bothered in the slightest. Suzune knew this, of course. Shiori had foreign sensibilities; a kiss was just a little greeting. She'd seen it in their so-called candid dressing room photos plenty of times.

"By the way, what happened to your eye?"

Karin pointed at her own eye on the side where Shiori was wearing an eyepatch.

"Oh, this? Just a fashion statement. The medical eyepatches weren't cute enough."

“Wow, okay then…”

“Let’s all get together sometime soon!”

With that, Shiori Kasumi left the room.

“Honestly…”

Despite Karin’s grumbling, her eyes were full of warmth and love for her former friend—no, clearly they were still just as friendly as before.

“I guess the cat’s out of the bag.”

Karin smiled shyly, her words referring both to Suzune’s secret and her own.

“Oh, but please don’t call me ‘Karin-sama,’ okay? It’s a little embarrassing, even for me.”

“Okay.”

It certainly would raise questions if anyone else heard it.

And yet…Suzune felt shaken up.

The image of that kiss had lodged itself deep in her chest.

Not long ago, she would have squeed with delight to see a scene like that in a photo, let alone right before her eyes. But for some reason, it left a cloud hanging over her mood now.

The pancake that had been so tall and fluffy on her plate was now sagging, completely deflated.

7

“Congratulations. You both got leading roles in *Cosmic Tales of the Paradise Whale*.”

Two weeks later, Suzune and Karin were called into the office. They met with Miama in the meeting room together, where they received this information. While it wasn’t that unusual to be told these results face-to-face, it was rare to have another person with you.

There was a moment of silence.

“YEEEEEESSSSS!”

Karin clenched both fists and threw them up toward the ceiling in a show of pure joy.

She had finally passed her first audition.

Despite all the initial offers she received, and after going on as many auditions as any other member of the agency, she had yet to land a single role. Consequently, even Suzune had heard whispers that Karin had only been hired due to her popularity and had no actual talent.

Mami Gamikawa had even gone so far as to say this quite openly, to the point that Yuika had scolded her in a mild, roundabout way. Gamikawa hadn’t seemed to realize her complaints could also be taken as criticism of the agency, even when Yuika had attempted to point this out as part of her gentle words of warning.

As for Gamikawa herself, she once again hadn’t landed a single regular role this season.

Suzune didn’t feel sorry for her in the least.

Animated shows are made by a team of people working together, so it was important to maintain a positive environment in the workplace. Suzune knew that all the etiquette and greetings were an important part of maintaining that, even if

they might seem excessive from an outsider's perspective.

Right now, Gamikawa wasn't respecting those rules. She was bringing tension and negativity to the office. And those feelings seeped into her auditions and poisoned the impression she made, to the point that they contributed to her failing to land any parts.

Gamikawa hadn't always been like this, at least according to Yuika. Her acting used to be well-received, and even if she rarely played main characters, she always had a few recurring roles each season. But that changed along with her attitude when she'd stopped passing auditions.

It was an opportunity to learn from someone else's mistakes, Suzune thought. This wasn't just someone else's problem—it could happen to anyone, even Suzune herself. Though she still didn't see herself taking on singing and dancing gigs, maybe she should reconsider the photobook offers she'd been receiving for a few years now.

Karin, on the other hand, shone as only her *oshi* could.

Her smile never wavered in the face of criticism or rumors. Even when the two went out to drink, she didn't utter a single complaint. In fact, when Suzune had gone into a rage about how the producers had no eye for talent, Karin had only chided her.

But now, all that was finally over.

A brand-new voice actress, landing a main character as her very first role…of course, there were probably other factors involved besides just Karin's acting chops, but that was quite often the case. Her fame was just one of her many hard-earned abilities.

"You did it, Karin-chan."

"So did you!"

They high-fived each other with both hands.

Even now that Karin knew she was a fan, Suzune was still calling her "Karin-chan." Her *oshi* had personally requested she refrain from using "-sama," after all.

"And there's more. I called you here together because you two have another offer on the table."

Suzune perked up.

Miama only used such roundabout language when there was good news.

"You've been asked to do a radio show together!"

A radio show!

Excitement crackled up Suzune's spine like lightning, giving her goosebumps all over. She loved anime radio jobs—they were a chance for fans to get to know people who were normally just behind the scenes.

Thus far, Suzune had only gotten occasional offers for radio shows related to anime. However, some of her voice acting seniors had radio shows that bore their own name, a few of which had even been running for over a decade.

She'd dreamed of doing something like that herself one day.

"It'll be about two cours, starting before the show begins airing and ending around the last episode. If it's well-received, it might lead to an offer for your own personal radio show, so be sure to give it all you've got."

Suzune and Karin exchanged glances, then exclaimed "Yes, ma'am!" so loudly, it must have echoed throughout the office.

☆

Cosmic Tales of the Paradise Whale was an adaptation of a science fiction manga.

The anime industry was in a transition period these days. The isekai boom had passed its peak, and everyone was searching for the next big gold mine. This resulted in a wide range of shows, from anime-original stories to science fiction, youth dramas, and romance.

While the manga was a cult favorite on social media and such, it wasn't wildly successful in the easy-to-understand terms of sales and circulation numbers.

But Suzune thought it was good for the industry for even lesser-known works to get anime adaptations, and as an actress, she enjoyed the challenge of working in a variety of genres.

The story followed an interstellar spacecraft known as the "Paradise Whale," which was transporting a group of high school students in cryosleep for a school trip. An accident left most of them dead; the sole survivors were a high school girl genius and a classmate whose head she somehow managed to preserve. Together, they traveled the stars.

Suzune's role was Dr. Brenda S. Miyuki, the high school girl and brilliant mad scientist. Karin was playing Haruka Amami, the girl who was left with only a head.

Both characters were designer babies with no parents (as all humans were in this world).

The goal of their journey was to find a laboratory that was supposed to be located somewhere in a giant spaceship the size of a continent, where they could restore Haruka's body. But in a world where everything was automated, that information had long since been lost, and they constantly ran into unexpected difficulties. Each time, Dr. Miyuki attached Haruka's head to a different body that only her friend could move.

While the story was science fiction with a hint of comedy, the pair were a popular yuri ship among many readers. The nature of the relationship between Dr. Miyuki and Haruka Amami, who had no choice but to depend on her for help most of the time (since she was only a head), simply hit different. When Suzune got the audition and read the manga for the first time, she wished she'd known about it sooner.

The idea that she was going to act in such a series with her favorite idol of all time brought her to the height of happiness.

The manga was still being serialized, with five volumes out thus far. Since it wasn't finished yet, the anime adaptation would probably only cover partway through the girls' journey. But if it got popular enough, they might get a second season and even a third.

The anime radio show was meant to help it reach that goal.

Still, there was very little information Suzune and Karin could share before the anime began airing, leaving them with little to do but "Casual Chat" segments about their personal lives and a "Fan Mail" segment that depended on letters being sent in from the listeners.

Since Suzune and Karin both had experience on radio shows, that was no problem. They'd even gotten a much sought-after veteran writer to work on their scripts.

The only surprise was that they weren't going to record video footage.

Suzune thought it was a major waste to have the beautiful Karin involved and *not* show her flawless face on camera, but

apparently, there were extenuating circumstances.

Each weekly episode would be thirty minutes long, and they planned to record two episodes at a time.

Every few episodes, they would have a live broadcast. To warm up for this, there was a planned “episode zero” livestream, which (unlike the rest of the episodes) would also include video.

However, this “episode zero” was really just a special event to reveal the anime adaptation. In addition to the two of them, it would also include the director, the editor of the manga, and a freelance announcer to serve as moderator.

Suzune was glad someone else would be in charge of the proceedings. She was certainly capable of moderating if she had to—she’d done it before, and all you really had to do was follow the script—but it was much less pressure if someone else was handling it for you.

An important part of moderating was to cover for the director and manga editor.

Even people in those positions who were good at talking tended to go off-topic, and it was a moderator’s job to tactfully guide them in the right direction. That said, it could be difficult to navigate that when you were an actor trying to keep a director in check, given that your positions of power were usually reversed.

And so, as the big day approached for episode zero of “PaRadio,” the special announcement of the *Cosmic Tales of the Paradise Whale* anime adaptation, Suzune felt nothing but excitement.

☆

On second thought, I’m feeling a lot *of things right now…*

It was nearly time for their segment, and Suzune had no idea what to do with the tangle of emotions inside her.

During the prep meeting two hours before the livestream began, when the writer Shakaishi had handed over the script and Suzune had read it for the first time, she’d felt her body temperature climbing rapidly.

After revealing basic information about the anime, introducing the cast, and explaining the original manga’s story

and setting, there was a series of variety show-like segments. One of them was titled “The Cast Tackles Scenes from the Manga!” Instead of just recording voiceovers, they were going to be physically acting out scenes from the original manga to the best of their abilities.

That in itself wasn’t the problem.

Suzune liked theater.

Even if she hadn’t done much of that kind of acting recently, she still wanted to stand on the stage again someday.

No, the problem was the specific scenes.

“Now then, on to the next segment!”

Yamamoto, the moderator, shouted the announcement with relish, and Suzune stiffened.

“We’re going to have our two main cast members pull a piece of paper out of this box and reenact whatever famous scene from the original manga is written on it!”

Yamamoto shook the black box, paper audibly rustling inside. It was full of folded-up instruction sheets. And all of the famous scenes that had been chosen…were yuri-like scenes between Dr. Miyuki and Haruka Amami.

“Who was it, huh? Who came up with this crazy idea? Because whoever it is…thank you, I owe you my life!”

There was a ripple of laughter from the staff.

While there was no live audience, a tablet on the table displayed the livestream, with comments appearing in real time.

> omg, are we gonna get THAT scene?

> how are they gonna deal with her just being a head?

> lolololololol

> let’s see some yuri action!

> YURI TIEM!

Lines of text flooded in, filling up the screen one after another.

They were right.

The scenes to be reenacted were all intimate ones that gave off vaguely yuri vibes. And since the two characters weren’t canonically in a relationship in the manga, that meant this could definitely be considered “yuri bait.”

“All right, here we go!”

Yamamoto read the piece of paper from the box.

“First up! A scene from volume two! Dr. Miyuki puts Haruka-

chan on her lap and brushes out her tangled hair after a reckless plan gone awry! Well then, let's get ready!"

At the announcer's prompting, Suzune and Karin walked around the table to come to the front.

An assistant quickly handed Karin a green poncho. She pulled it on over her head so that it covered her from the neck down like a full-body cape.

Since they were standing in front of a greenscreen, only Karin's head would show up on camera, the rest of her body blending into a composited background they couldn't see.

A chair was brought out, and Suzune sat on it.

She set her legs wide apart so that Karin could kneel between them, facing away from her. Since they were being filmed from the side, on-screen it would theoretically look like Karin's disembodied head was indeed sitting on Suzune's lap. It wasn't perfect, though, because the image hiding her body would look different from the floor.

"Okay, whenever you're ready!"

At this, Suzune took a deep breath and summoned up Dr. Miyuki.

"…Oh dear, what a mess. I suppose you can't even brush your hair on your own?"

"Of course not, I'm just a head!"

This pattern, with Dr. Miyuki messing around and Haruka complaining, was a staple of the series's comedy.

As Suzune pressed her knees a bit tightly against Karin's shoulders to ensure that it would look like she was just a head, she scooped up Karin's silky hair with her left hand and gently ran the brush through it.

The light lent a slight blue tint to Karin's spotlessly gorgeous hair. It was so smooth, it felt like she was brushing the air.

With each stroke, she felt a strange tenderness bubbling up inside her. *Maybe I do have a little bit of mommy energy—I mean, motherly instincts*, Suzune thought.

It wasn't often that you got a top-down look at somebody's head. Karin's hair whorl was more or less at the top of her head. It was faint, but lovely.

"You really are awfully needy, aren't you…"

"Yes! Because I'm a head!"

Another round of laughter.

Suzune felt like she could do this forever; it was not unlike petting a cat.

But Yamamoto mercilessly announced the end. “Perfect, thank you very much!”

At Suzune’s feet, Karin let out a long breath. She must have been nervous, too, especially with this being her first time appearing as a voice actress.

Suzune handed off the brush to the staff member who came flying onto the set. Looking at the monitor, she was relieved to see that the live comments were largely positive.

“Well, we’re short on time, so let’s go straight to the next one!”

Suzune stood next to Karin, who was still wearing the poncho, and they watched Yamamoto pull the second piece of paper from the box. It was a very surreal image when she glanced at their appearance on the monitor.

Karin was cute even just from the neck up, but the image of her disembodied head was still a little unsettling. Maybe it was too closely linked to the concept of death, since it was currently impossible to survive in such a state.

“All right! Now we’re talking! Volume one! The toothbrushing scene!”

Suzune’s heart thudded.

The viewers all *oohed* and *aahed* in the comments.

Even though she was just a head, it was important for Haruka’s mental health for her to keep eating food, which also meant that her teeth would need to be brushed—and, of course, she couldn’t do that herself. In this scene, Dr. Miyuki brushed Haruka’s teeth for her for the first time.

Suzune thought she felt a cold sweat dripping down her back.

Unlike the previous scene, this one required a difficult balance of emotions. After all, they would be much closer physically than any two people would normally be in everyday life. That was the only way to make it work.

Her heart was already warming up for a marathon sprint.

“Well then, let’s see it!”

The staff member handed Suzune a toothbrush, and she stood facing Karin.

Karin was on the left, Suzune on the right.

In the manga, the toothbrush was a wacky-looking tool, but for the sake of safety, they'd provided a regular one for this reenactment, since it was going into a real person's mouth.

BA-DUMP. BA-DUMP. Suzune could hear her every heartbeat, loud as a bass drum.

She took a deep breath, taking care that it wasn't loud enough to be heard on the mic. She pressed her left hand against Karin's cheek to make it look like she was really holding up a head.

Karin shivered ever so slightly.

"…Come on, open your mouth. How am I supposed to brush your teeth if it's closed?"

"Mmgh…"

Karin groaned with her mouth still shut. Then, putting on a look of resignation, she screwed her eyes shut and opened her mouth.

"Open wider. I can't see a thing like this."

"Dunlook."

Don't look, she mumbled, then opened her mouth wider anyway.

Trying to keep it that way, Suzune pressed Karin's lower lip down with her thumb.

It felt soft and supple, like a gummy candy, slightly slick due to her lipstick.

Karin's warm breath caressed Suzune's thumb.

She had never seen the inside of someone's mouth so closely before.

It was pinker than she expected, with a sort of glistening wetness.

When Suzune put the brush in, Karin slid her tongue to one side. Suzune scrubbed gently so as not to hurt her gums.

"Mmph!"

Karin let out a little noise.

This was part of the act. There was even a speech bubble in the manga. Suzune knew this, yet she still felt a jolt at the nape of her neck.

This was too much. Way too much. She was afraid it was going to awaken something in her.

Try as she might to tell herself to remain calm, there was a part of Suzune that twinged in protest. How could she possibly

not get worked up with her *oshi* in such a state right before her eyes?

Her stubborn insistence that they were just agency colleagues was threatening to throw itself right out the window.

I have to finish this up fast, she thought, even as she continued brushing her *oshi's* teeth.

Her face felt hot.

Saliva was building up in Karin's mouth, making a swishing noise. Suzune prayed that it wasn't getting picked up on the mic.

"…There, all done."

After a thorough brushing, Suzune withdrew the toothbrush from Karin's mouth.

Karin swallowed the accumulated spit, her throat bobbing. Her cheeks were faintly red, and she moved her closed lips as if she was applying lipstick.

Suzune kept gazing right at Karin, her hand still on the other girl's cheek. Her skin felt warm. If this were an isekai anime, the spot where they were touching might burst into flame.

"Great! Thank you verrry much!"

Relieved by Yamamoto's announcement, Suzune pulled her hand away. Karin cast her eyes downward for just a moment, her expression unreadable.

"Right then, on to the next scene!"

Suzune listened to the sound of the paper rustling around in the box, trying to reign in her runaway thoughts and feelings.

Focus on the job!

"Okay! Next up! Volume four, the ear-cleaning scene…!"

And so, the yuri business went on.

☆

"That was sooo nerve-racking!"

When they returned to the dressing room, Karin promptly flopped face-down across the table.

Suzune smiled. It was a feeling she both understood now and remembered feeling even more keenly back in the day.

During livestreams, there was always the fear of saying a taboo word or phrase, or touching on a topic that was banned by

the company or video platform. There were more of them than ever these days, requiring extra thought before and even as you spoke, which could be exhausting. Some of these forbidden phrases could require you to issue a formal apology, or in the worst-case scenario, could even cost you the job. You had to be very careful.

But still, livestreams were a lot of fun. They were as exhilarating as they were nerve-wracking. It felt like you were truly interacting with a live audience, especially when you could see the comments.

"You did great."

Suzune offered her a mineral water that was on the table.

"Thank you." Karin raised her head and accepted the bottle. She twisted off the cap, leaned back against the chair, and gulped the water down greedily.

It was hard not to stare as her exposed throat worked with every swallow. Something about that sort of sight just made Karin feel more real, somehow. It rendered her human, not just an idol to be worshiped.

"Aaah."

Karin let out a big breath and put the plastic bottle back on the table.

Suzune sat diagonally across from her. "Were you really that nervous?"

"Of course. When we did MC sections during concerts, we already knew exactly what we'd be talking about—there was hardly ever any ad-libbing. And sometimes, they asked us to do crazy things on variety shows, but if it crossed a line that you really weren't okay with, they would edit it out for you. But that moderator really came at us, even though we were doing it all live!"

Suzune laughed. "Well, Yamamoto's famous in this line of work. But that's what makes her so popular. And she has a good understanding of voice actors, so she won't mess with you in any ways that would really cross a line."

"Uh-huh…" Karin still didn't look convinced. "Is there anything that crosses the line for you, Suzune-san?"

"Personally, I don't do the *'please do XYZ character for us'* thing."

“Really? Doesn’t that come up often, though?”

“It does. But that’s the line for me. It seems like a gray area as far as usage rights, for one thing. Oh—but that doesn’t include if it’s an event or radio show for the series that character is from, of course. In that case, I’m not just appearing as Suzune Sengu, I’m also representing the character I play. So I’ll throw it in there even if no one asks me to do it.”

“I see… Good to know.” Karin nodded.

“So…how was the segment for you?”

Suzune braced herself even as she asked. That was probably Karin’s first time doing “yuri business,” and it was a pretty intense level to start at. They would never have a man and a woman do that sort of thing.

In a way, saying *“It’s fine if it’s between people of the same gender”* felt a bit like the management’s way of unconsciously rejecting people who were attracted to the same gender, people like Suzune. But those who accepted and affirmed her did so unconditionally, so she’d long since decided to call it even.

“Oh…well, my heart was racing, that’s for sure.”

“Do you want to turn down things like that in the future? If you tell Miama-san, she’ll take care of it for you, you know.”

Karin slowly shook her head. “No, it’s all right. I don’t know how it would be with anyone else, but it didn’t bother me doing it with you, Suzune-san. If anything, I had fun.”

“Are you sure? You’re not just saying that?”

“Of course I’m sure!” Karin laughed aloud. “Why are you so worried about me? Come on, that was, like, totally insane! Oh, I mean insane in a good way, you know?”

“Really?”

“Really. I don’t think I’ve had anyone clean my ears since I was a little kid. I made sure to clean them first just in case—they *were* fine, right?”

“Right. In fact, it was a little bit of a letdown. Doesn’t it feel satisfying when you pull out a really big chunk?”

“Oh my god, what?! I don’t want people seeing my earwax! And I brushed my teeth super thoroughly, too, and took breath mints and everything!”

“I could tell. It smelled very minty.”

“Please don’t try to smell my breath!”

Karin shrieked, turning bright red.

Suzune laughed, feeling relieved. As long as Karin wasn't uncomfortable with it, she could admit to herself that she'd enjoyed it immensely. It felt like she'd gotten to see another side of Karin Shotsuki as a flesh-and-blood human.

"I'm so glad my first time was with you, Suzune-san."

Karin smiled at her.

MARRY MEEEEE!

An enormous wave of emotion surged up all at once, swallowing Suzune whole. She hoped she would always be the only person Karin did "yuri business" with. Like it or not, she felt that way with all her heart.

She didn't want to see Karin do things like that with any other voice actress. She wanted to prevent it, if at all possible.

And if Karin said that she only wanted Suzune to do yuri business with her, too, then Suzune would gladly make a rule against fanservice flirting with anyone but Karin… But as soon as that thought went through her mind, she realized she was getting carried away.

Calm yourself, Suzune!

She wrestled her heart and mind back into submission. No good could come of bringing her fangirl feelings into her work. Yuri business was just part of an act. She couldn't let herself get confused.

And yet…

"Ooh, gimme those snackies!"

As her beloved *oshi* reached innocently for the *dorayaki* that had been left for them as refreshments, Suzune couldn't help but gaze at her fondly.

8

Karin Shotsuki's popularity paid off immediately and immensely.

Everyone from weekly magazines to sports newspapers ran headlines about how she'd been reborn as a voice actress, like a lost heroine come back to life. Miama said the agency had been getting nonstop calls and inquiries.

There were also far more interview requests than one would normally expect for an anime that had yet to start airing.

On top of that, most of these were from media outlets that had little to do with the world of anime and manga. Since they were clearly more interested in Karin herself, it was hard work coming up with conditions and guidelines for these interviews.

The agency finally proposed the following ground rules for interviews: The main goal must still be to promote the *Cosmic Tales of the Paradise Whale* anime. Thus, there would be no interviews that were only with Karin Shotsuki. The only way to speak to her was in a pair with Suzune Sengu. No questions about her personal life…and so on.

That was enough to narrow down the number of requests considerably. Some media outlets declared that there was no point unless it was one-on-one with Karin, while others simply stopped contacting the agency altogether. These places promptly went onto the agency's blacklist.

In the end, this mainly left anime, comic, and idol news sources, plus a few outliers like a science fiction news site. These were all places that seemed like they would promote *Paradise Whale* properly, even if they might still use Karin's name recognition to do it.

And since they hadn't even started recording yet, Suzune wound up attending plenty of interviews with Karin.

She didn't actually say much, though. In the end, they still

ended up talking about why Karin decided on voice acting as the next stage of her career.

“The truth is, it’s all because of my admiration for Suzune-san.”

That was always Karin’s answer. Naturally, she couldn’t come out and say, “I wanted to be a voice actress, but they made me be an idol,” so the story was tweaked a little when she talked about it to interviewers.

It went something like this: She had always loved anime, and when she was having a hard time as an idol, an anime starring Suzune was what got her through it.

“Does that mean you applied to the same agency as Sengu-san so you could work with her?”

“That’s right. And look at us now!”

This response sparked a bit of controversy online, prompting people to say she’d used connections to get into the industry.

Luckily, a voice actress from a different agency was kind enough to step in and say: *“Try listening to Karin’s demo reel on the agency’s homepage before you throw around accusations like that.”* With help from her and others, the matter blew over without turning into a full-on flame war.

Even then, a few stubborn jerks insisted that Earpo had forced the voice actress to say that, but Suzune suspected that most people accepted the truth once they heard Karin’s demo reel.

When Suzune would get questions about how she saw Karin as a new colleague and such, she would keep her answers simple and safe.

She never stated that Karin was actually her *oshi*.

While she had no doubt the press would have a field day if they knew that Karin and Suzune were both fans of each other before working together, Suzune still didn’t want to cheapen her fandom by incorporating it into her job. If that part of her life became work as well, she felt like she would lose the one precious and private thing that gave her energy to keep doing her best.

During their radio show that had now started airing, they talked quite a bit about their personal lives. This sort of chatting was the cornerstone of a radio program. Fans always enjoyed the rare chance to see a voice actor’s personality that was normally hidden behind the scenes.

Although Suzune never made any particularly strong request about it, Karin also refrained from giving any hints that Suzune was a fan of hers.

She kept this up even at the office, not just in front of the media.

One day after a radio recording session, when they went out for a meal together, Karin remarked that it was a secret just between the two of them. Suzune felt obligated to admit that Yuika alone out of all their colleagues was also in on the secret.

“Huh? What’s that all about?” For some reason, Karin seemed annoyed. “Why would you tell her that? If it’s a secret from everyone else at the agency, why does Ayabuki-san get to know? I don’t get it. What’s your relationship with her? Really? Tell me!”

Karin got strangely insistent about wanting to know why.

“She’s looked out for me since I first started voice acting.” Suzune did her best to smooth it over.

She couldn’t bring herself to confess that she and Yuika didn’t really keep secrets from each other because they were both “yuri for real.” There was no secret more personal than that. No matter how much “yuri business” they did together, even if Suzune was Karin’s number one fan, she couldn’t reveal that to her so easily.

This project was especially heavy on the yuri goggles. Given the contents of the anime and everything, the photos they took for interviews and articles involved far more yuri vibes than anything she’d ever worked on.

Holding hands. Putting their arms around each other. Pressing their cheeks together.

These yuri fanservice photos made the fans happy and brought more attention to the anime to boot. She and Karin were acting way too close even for two girls, but as far as Suzune was concerned, it was nothing but a win-win situation (even if she felt guilty about that at times).

Even in the radio show, which didn’t have video, every script involved getting jealous over anecdotes involving other voice actresses, declaring their love for each other, and so on. And every time, Suzune and Karin complied, acting out a close “gal pal” relationship.

And since Dr. Miyuki and Haruka Amami weren’t canonically in a relationship in the story, either, it was easy to play the roles

naturally.

Frankly, they would probably have had similar conversations even without the script. Karin had something of a jealous streak in real life, too, and Suzune found that just as adorable as everything else about her. Though obviously, they didn't actually declare their love for each other in real life.

Then one day, something she would never have expected happened in the most unlikely of places.

☆

That day, Suzune was participating in a recording session for a special unaired episode of a certain anime to be released in a Blu-ray box set. She played one of the main characters in the show, so she was naturally asked to come back for it.

Mami Gamikawa was also joining as a guest character, along with three other Earpo talents who would be doing background chatter.

Karin happened to be one of the three additional talents. The agency wanted her to get some in-studio experience before recording for *Paradise Whale* and had already sent her to observe recording sessions for several other shows.

It just so happened that this was the first time Suzune would be at a recording session with Karin present.

Oh wow… I'm kind of nervous.

Suzune hadn't expected acting in front of her beloved *oshi* would make her heart race so much.

Fans never got to watch voice actors record in person. Idols, on the other hand, specialized in performing in front of fans. Some voice actors might perform character songs in front of a crowd, but that was only for special events. It was here in the recording studio that Suzune did her most serious work.

She felt confident and embarrassed all at once.

Karin was most likely watching this from the monitor in the waiting room outside the booth. Now that Suzune knew that Karin was a fan of hers, too, she could feel the woman watching, even if she couldn't see her.

It might have been just her imagination, but she couldn't help

feeling antsy, squirming uncomfortably in her seat. The struggle was real.

Focus, focus…

Suzune took a deep breath. She had to concentrate on the work and nothing else.

While it had been a long while since she'd worked on this series, Suzune had still come prepared. She'd rewatched the anime, had examined the materials to remind herself of her character's personality and physique, and had fine-tuned her voice. She could do this.

"Scenes fourteen to twenty, starting now."

…Here we go.

At the sound director's voice over the speakers, all of the actors stood up.

There wasn't even a single rustle of clothes. Moving without making noise was one of a voice actor's many skills. They all chose their outfits based on maintaining that silence and removed any accessories.

By the time Suzune was standing in front of the row of microphones, all thoughts of Karin had completely vanished from her mind. To be precise, it was no longer Suzune Sengu who was standing there at all.

It was Abigail Ouse, her character in this anime.

She held the script in one hand, looking at both it and the monitor at the same time. She hadn't memorized the script. Aside from the nuances that might change based on the directions given in the studio, it wasn't unusual for the entire line to be changed as well.

"Go ahead, please."

The cue light blinked on.

"…Heeey! Wait a minute, Q!"

Suzune spoke not in her normal voice but in that of Abigail Ouse, the anime character, as she started off the scene.

☆

The recording itself took a little longer than usual due to some minor issues, although this was perfectly normal.

When Suzune and the rest of the main cast finished their parts, they left the recording booth and were replaced by a dozen or so voice actors to record the crowd chatter. Apart from Karin, the other talents from Earpo were all in their trial period, and the rest were trainees from other agencies or students from specialty schools.

"You were amazing, Suzune-san!" As they passed each other, Karin called out to her excitedly. "That was incredible to see! I knew watching a recording session live would be different from hearing you in the anime, but it was even better than I thought!"

This earnest praise made Suzune feel sheepish, especially since it was coming from none other than her favorite idol in the world.

"Th-thank you… I'm sure you'll be great, too, Karin-chan."

"Thanks!"

"Oh, just don't be *too* great, okay?"

"I know!"

The "walla"—background chatter that set the scene behind the main voice acting—wasn't supposed to stand out too much.

Instead of reading specific lines, it generally involved ad-libbing. That being said, even if you were just playing part of a crowd of onlookers or the like, it still required knowledge of the series and setting.

As part of a walla group, you had to think about what kind of role you might have in this world, what you were doing there in this particular scene, what sort of feelings you would have while speaking, and what you were going to say.

You couldn't just spout off whatever was at the top of your head.

Since Karin had asked her to wait there until she was done, Suzune watched Karin's group recording session on the monitor in the waiting room.

As always, Karin Shotsuki was in a league of her own. Her very existence stood out, even if she took care to ensure that her performance didn't. She was bold and confident, paying no attention to the way the rest of the group seemed to be keeping their distance a little.

Besides, once the recording started, no one paid any mind to Karin at all.

Her voice was clear even in the background chatter. Somehow, you could tell it was her if you were listening for her, yet her voice didn't stand out otherwise.

She's so talented…

Suzune was so busy being impressed, she didn't notice someone approaching her.

"Sengu."

Hearing her name, she looked up to find a woman in a black blouse and black high-waisted pants—Mami Gamikawa, in her typical monochrome getup.

Suzune hurried to her feet. She couldn't stay seated when her senior colleague was standing up. Especially in the case of Gamikawa, who was much stricter about these sorts of things than Yuika.

"Good work today."

Suzune was careful to make sure her tone didn't sound sarcastic. It was because of Gamikawa that the recording session had run long. Then again, Gamikawa didn't seem even remotely apologetic about it, so maybe she shouldn't have bothered worrying.

"You too."

She seemed oddly cheerful. It was rare to see Gamikawa happy about anything. Maybe she was satisfied with her performance?

On the monitor, the walla recording session was wrapping up. Though it was only one scene this time, it was still an important learning opportunity and a chance for the rookies to show their stuff to the production team. Of course they wouldn't want to miss it.

As the recording booth door opened, and the group began filing out, Gamikawa pressed on. "Listen, are you free after this? Would you join me for a little tea?"

Suzune was too surprised by the sudden invitation to answer right away. Gamikawa had never invited her out to tea before—far from it. Quite frankly, Suzune had always gotten the impression that Gamikawa didn't think very highly of her.

"I just want to talk to you about one quick thing. You don't mind, do you?"

It definitely didn't seem like "no" was an option here. If only she had work to use as an excuse, but alas, this recording session

was the last item on Suzune's schedule for today.

"All right. Then let's find someplace nearby and…"

"Oh, I've got a place picked out already. I'll call a taxi for us."

"Um, okay. Thank you…?"

Gamikawa pulled out her phone and started tapping on the screen.

What could she possibly want to talk about, though?

Hopefully she wasn't going to ask Suzune to introduce her to someone she'd worked with on another job. Suzune had decided not to do that kind of thing—it almost always led to trouble.

If someone on the production side asked her to recommend a voice actor who might be good at a certain kind of role, then obviously, she would suggest a colleague she trusted, but she would never try to bring it up of her own accord.

"…Not so fast, Suzune-san."

Gamikawa's hand froze when a new voice cut in decisively.

"What do you want, Shotsuki?"

Karin had emerged from the booth and approached them immediately, openly glaring at Gamikawa.

She was wearing a gray knit sweater-dress with an asymmetrical neckline today. It was a lovely sight to behold, accentuating her curves in all the right places.

"Pardon my intrusion, but Suzune-san and I already have plans after this."

Do we? Suzune searched her memory but came up empty.

"So what? I'm her senior, so an invitation from me takes priority, thank you very much."

"Maybe if it was just a casual hangout, but this is work-related."

"Is that true, Sengu?"

"Um…"

As much as Suzune wanted to go along with Karin's story and get out of this, she'd never been good at lying on the spot.

"You don't really have plans, do you? I made sure your schedule was open before I invited you out."

"It's a meeting," Karin declared before Suzune could respond. "To plan our next radio show."

"I wasn't asking *you*. Could you please pipe down for a minute? Mind your own business, hmm?"

The shade of anger in Gamikawa's voice chilled the room around them.

As other people looked over to see what was going on, Karin sighed and stepped closer, lowering her voice.

"…Look, I'm the one you have a problem with, right? Could you please not try to drag Sengu-san into it just because your little plan failed already?"

Plan? What plan?

"Excuse me? I don't know what you're talking about!" Gamikawa raised her voice shrilly, ignoring Karin's attempts to keep things between them. "What exactly are you implying here?!"

"Seriously, let's not do this here. We're in the studio, you know?"

"And so what if we are!"

A voice actor's full volume was as powerful as a clap of thunder. Gamikawa's angry shriek reverberated through the decidedly small waiting room.

"What's going on out here?!" Finally, Kuruma the manager came rushing over. "Is there a problem?!"

"No, it's noth—" Karin tried to settle things down.

"She just started picking a fight with me!" Gamikawa interrupted.

"Fine. We're going to the office right now, all of you. I can't have you making a scene at the studio."

Kuruma furiously ordered a taxi on her phone, then hurried over to the director who was peering in to see what the fuss was about and apologized profusely for the commotion.

Suzune's stomach twisted with nerves as she watched all this unfold. Meanwhile, Karin looked perfectly unruffled, and Gamikawa carried on behaving as if none of this was her fault, making no effort to hide her displeasure.

☆

When the entire Earpo group arrived at the office in two taxis, the other newbies from the walla group took their leave right away, while Suzune, Karin, and Gamikawa were dragged to the

meeting room and made to sit down with Suzune square in the middle.

Kuruma had the part-timer, Irie, call their manager Miama into the office. She showed up immediately, looking at Suzune and the others as if trying to piece together the situation from their expressions.



“They got into a little spat at the studio,” Kuruma explained shortly. “I thought we’d better get to the bottom of it.”

“Seriously?” Miama sat down next to Kuruma. “Out with it, then. What in the world is going on?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.” Gamikawa was the first to respond. “All I did was invite Sengu out for a little tea. Then Shotsuki suddenly barged in and started throwing false accusations at me.”

“Is that true, Shotsuki?”

“No. They weren’t false accusations.”

“Excuse me?! What else would you call it when you start spouting made-up nonsense about another person?!”

Karin didn’t answer.

Was this about the “plan” she’d quietly mentioned before?

“Shotsuki, what did you accuse Gamikawa of exactly?”

“……”

“Shotsuki?”

When the managers pressed her for answers, Karin heaved a sigh. “…A little while ago, Gamikawa-san tried to invite me out for tea, too. That’s how I knew she was up to something.”

“How do you figure?” Gamikawa’s voice rose in irritation. “Yes, I invited you to tea, but may I remind you that you suddenly ghosted on me partway through. I thought maybe you were just uncomfortable with the invitation, which is why I generously refrained from telling anyone else about your rude behavior. And this is how you thank me?”

“*Thank* you…? But that was all just to try to set me up in a fake scandal, wasn’t it?”

Gamikawa’s breath hitched audibly.

Both managers must have noticed it as well.

“What do you mean?” Kuruma prompted.

“I believe she was trying to take a photo of me with a man to try and fabricate a scandal.”

All eyes turned to Gamikawa.

“Wh-whaaat?! What kind of ridiculous story is that? Are you sick in the head or something? See, this is the problem with you idol types! How stupid can you get?!”

Ignoring Gamikawa’s howling, Karin went on calmly.

“First of all, she picked very strange seats for us. I sat down

where she told me to, which was at the counter by the window. Since it was on a side street, there wasn't a lot of foot traffic, but it still seemed like needlessly drawing attention to ourselves, you know? So I tried to suggest that we sit somewhere else, but Gamikawa-san just told me to hold that thought and wait there for a minute. Then she ran off, and I thought…is this what I think it is?"

"What are you talking about?!"

"…Gamikawa, be quiet for a minute. We'll hear you out afterward."

At Kuruma's warning, Gamikawa bit her lip and fell silent.

"You were saying?"

"Well, idols have to be hyperaware of this sort of thing. You have to be in order to protect yourself and your group, even if it means seeming paranoid or self-centered at times."

That must be hard…, Suzune thought, with both admiration and sympathy.

"So, I snuck away to a different seat, then stayed hidden to watch what happened next. Sure enough, this actor-looking guy walked into the café and headed straight for where I'd been sitting. I'm sure he was very confused to find I wasn't there. He pulled out his phone and typed something, and then Gamikawa-san came back right away. They argued for a minute, then went outside. Then I saw a man with a camera get out of a car parked on the street nearby, and I knew I'd hit the nail on the head. She was trying to get a photo making it look like I was on a date, probably either to sell it to a magazine or post it online somewhere."

"Yeah, right! You expect them to believe that? Do you have any proof?!"

You might as well have just admitted your own guilt, Suzune thought, though she kept it to herself.

If Suzune were in the same situation, would she have caught on so quickly?

Probably not, she suspected. It never would have even occurred to her that someone might try to do such a thing to her. Even if someone got a picture like that, surely it wouldn't be newsworthy enough to start a scandal.

"Yes. I do have proof."

Karin coolly took out her phone. She tapped the screen a few times and held it up in front of both managers.

“It’s a photo of the incident.”

Even from the side, Suzune could see what was shown in the picture. It was, indeed, a man with actor-like good looks. Karin swiped to the second picture, which showed him talking to Gamikawa. And the third picture showed both of them outside with a man holding a camera.

“I think this must be when they found out I never left the café. They didn’t come back after that.”

“This doesn’t prove—”

“One more thing.”

Karin raised her voice when Gamikawa tried to make an excuse.

“I recognize this cameraman, as it happens. He’s got a bit of a bad reputation in the idol industry, to the point where he’s banned from certain venues. And he’s always soliciting for scoops and information on social media, so I imagine that’s how they connected.”

“Is all of that true, Gamikawa?”

Kuruma’s voice was low, simmering with anger.

Gamikawa didn’t answer. Which was answer enough.

“But why…?”

She must have taken this question to mean *I don’t understand.* Suddenly, Gamikawa shot up out of her seat.

“Because she’s playing dirty to get jobs, that’s why!” She pointed at Karin over Suzune’s head as she shouted. “Isn’t this supposed to be a voice acting agency?! Just because she’s a former idol, this newbie waltzes in and gets auditions right off the bat, and then lands a leading role?! It doesn’t make sense!”

While Gamikawa raged, Kuruma remained perfectly calm.

“It makes perfect sense. Most of the auditions were at the request of the production companies, and Shotsuki earned that role fair and square on the strength of her acting skills. Did you even listen to her demo reel? I doubt you’d be making these claims if you’d heard it.”

“I don’t need to listen to that crap! Why would companies request some total rookie by name for their auditions when she just popped up out of nowhere?! It must be because she was an

idol, right?!”

“Most likely, yes.” Kuruma didn’t deny it. “If she’s right for the part, it’ll mean free publicity for their show, and it’s perfect for promotional purposes. But think about it, Gamikawa. Unlike dubbing foreign films, the rest of this industry revolves around auditions. Do you honestly believe that anyone would be cast in a leading role just because they might be good for publicity?”

Gamikawa didn’t respond.

“If you do, then you’re not taking the anime industry seriously enough. Maybe that’s the real reason you aren’t passing your auditions? You do realize that kind of thing shows through in your attitude, don’t you?”

“Kuruma.” Next to her, Miama’s voice was quiet but firm.

That last part was going too far. Even if it was true, it was best left unsaid in front of Gamikawa’s colleagues.

“…Gamikawa.” This time, Miama addressed her directly. “You’ve made your opinion of Shotsuki very clear. But why go after Sengu? You know as well as anyone here that she’s a first-class voice actress, don’t you?”

Gamikawa still didn’t answer.

“Did it bother you that she got so close with Shotsuki? You thought you’d try and set Sengu up for a scandal instead just to stick it to Shotsuki, is that it?”

Suzune was confused, though she maintained a straight face. Even if someone got a photo of her with a man, would that really be much of a scandal?

Karin was one thing, of course. But surely a random voice actress like herself having a boyfriend wouldn’t be much of a news story to anyone.

Of course, some people wrote gossipy articles about voice actors these days, but unless they were having an affair or something, it never amounted to much.

Suzune heard a dripping noise next to her and looked over to see large teardrops spilling onto the table. Gamikawa was hanging her head, tears streaming from her eyes.

“…*You’re* not the one who should be crying…,” Karin muttered.

She was absolutely right, of course.

But Suzune’s heart was bursting with the opposite kind of emotion. Far from wanting to cry, she could have gotten up and

danced for joy.

Karin Shotsuki is so darn cool!

That was her biggest takeaway.

Because Suzune had nearly walked right into a trap, and Karin had put herself at risk to save her.

Suzune had been completely unaware of what had happened between Gamikawa and Karin.

Most likely, Karin had kept it to herself to cover for Gamikawa. After all, Gamikawa's attempt had ended in failure, and there would surely be consequences for the woman if Karin reported it to the agency.

And that just made Karin even cooler!

But Gamikawa must have taken it the wrong way.

She must have assumed Karin hadn't reported her because she didn't dare—didn't have the proof or the nerve.

So she'd escalated things. She'd tried to hurt someone who was close to Karin instead. Even then, Karin tried to put a stop to it without tipping anyone off, but Gamikawa didn't even notice.

"I'm sorry," said Kuruma. "I'll take it from here."

Miama nodded and stood up. "Sengu, Shotsuki. You're free to go. Sorry for the trouble. Shotsuki, you have a narration gig in Akasaka after this, right? Try to put all this out of your mind for now. I'll come with you. Sengu, you're done for the day, aren't you?"

"I am."

"The higher-ups will handle this situation. Could I ask you to try not to tell anyone on the outside what happened here, please?"

In this case, "the outside" meant other agents. It was a request, one they could refuse if they wanted, but Suzune and Karin both nodded.

In the seat next to Suzune's, Mami Gamikawa went on silently shedding tears.

☆

"I don't think that's all there was to it…"

After hearing the whole story at their usual bar, Yuika let out a

sigh.

"Mami was probably trying to take you down too, Suzu."

"What? Why…?" Suzune stared at her, surprised.

"You know how harsh this industry can be, don't you? From what I heard, the agency told Mami recently that she might want to take a different path."

Suzune felt her throat tighten.

In this context, "a different path" was a polite way of asking someone to step down.

When their agency made this pronouncement to a talent, it meant they didn't want to manage you anymore, so you should think about going freelance, finding another agency…or quitting voice acting altogether.

"Mami hasn't landed a regular role in years, and she hasn't been getting much in the way of dubbing or narration gigs, either. She's had a part-time job for a while now."

"She has a second job…?"

"Mm-hmm. It's not that unusual, is it? I'm sure you know a few voice actors who have to work part-time to support themselves, too."

She was right.

Only a small number of voice actors earned enough to make a living off the craft alone. Most had other jobs while they pursued voice acting at the same time.

"There are only so many openings for each audition. I wonder if she thought that if she eliminated one of her top competitors, those openings would go to her instead…or then again, maybe not. It's a very slim possibility, and it probably wouldn't have worked out too well for her. But she must have been desperate enough to give in to the temptation regardless. I suppose that just goes to show how much she loves voice acting, though—"

"That doesn't make it right…"

"No, of course not. What she did was wrong. I think she's lucky Shotsuki didn't want to make it into a whole big thing. Now what Mami does next is up to her… I'm sure it'll be a hard pill to swallow, but I hope she finds a way to accept this and move forward. Not that I'm in any position to talk."

"Right…"

Suzune took a long drink of her *umeshu* on the rocks.

Quitting voice acting… Although the thought had never crossed her mind before, it was true you could only do this job as long as people still wanted you.

While Suzune was getting by fine for the time being, there were new up-and-comers debuting every season, and the job demanded more of them than ever. Maybe one day, refusing to do live singing and dancing performances would come back to bite her. But she also had to wonder if it was worth doing things you didn't want to do just to hang on to your place in the industry. Would she really be able to accept that?

At any rate, Suzune hoped she could quit someday while she was still in demand. Ideally, she would retire gracefully as an old lady before the roles ever dried up.

"But listen, Suzu. Shotsuki really seems to adore you, doesn't she?"

"What? Really? I'm not so sure…"

Suzune was startled to hear Karin's name come out of Yuika's mouth. She still hadn't forgotten the question her friend asked her not long ago: *"…but what do you think of her as a* woman*, hmm?"*

"Don't play coy with me now. I heard the two of you went to Chichibu on your own personal time, right? If that's not a date, I don't know what is. Ooh, wait, did you introduce her to your parents already?"

"Don't be ridiculous! It was just research, that's all. The anime we're in together has a Shinto shrine that's pretty similar to one there, so we were doing a little location scouting."

"And you didn't stop by your parents' place?"

"Definitely not!"

Yuika seemed downright determined to link Karin and Suzune romantically—though surely only for her own amusement over drinks, not in a serious effort to get them together.

"Aww, come on."

Yuika ordered a tequila shot, drained it immediately, and slammed the little glass down on the counter with a satisfying clunk. Suzune could never pull that off so smoothly.

"But it's not like you have absolutely zero romantic interest, riiight?"

"Well… No, of course not. I'm still as big a fan of hers as ever,

and she's even being affectionate with me, you know? For the first time, I feel like I kind of understand how those fans feel when they fall in love with their *oshis* for real."

"Aha. So you *are* in love."

"I didn't say that! It's strictly hypothetical, okay?! I'm just thinking, *So this is how people fall in love, or at least start to* think *they're in love with someone.* That doesn't mean it's what I'm doing myself!"

"If you say so, sweetie."

Yuika laughed. The heavy mood between them melted away with the ice in their drinks.

They were adults, after all.

If you worried about someone, no matter how genuine your feelings were, they'd pass with time…sad as that might be.

"Besides…if I fell in love with her for real, then I'm afraid I would want more than what we already have," Suzune admitted quietly. "I'd probably end up wishing she would spend even more time with me…and I don't want to do that to her. I can't get in Karin-sama's way just as she's finally landed her first main role."

"But what about when that's over? You'll be done with all of your recording by spring, right? Couldn't you just wait until after that to go for it?"

"It's not that simple!" Suzune huffed, glowering at Yuika a little. "I…I don't want to fall into a one-sided love with my *oshi*, all right…"

"But aren't you her *oshi*, too? She wouldn't be such a big fan of someone she doesn't like. There's a good chance it wouldn't be one-sided, if you ask me."

Yuika smiled slyly, as if savoring her drink. Suzune didn't respond.

She was obviously toying with her.

Really, it wasn't fair. What if that idea took root in Suzune's mind? She was having a hard enough time fighting against her own heart day in and day out, as they kept on doing yuri fanservice for the sake of the anime.

So she wished Yuika wouldn't give her such a delusional fantasy.

Suzune drank the rest of her drink and ordered another. All the while, she wished the alcohol would wash away her foolish

feelings and secret aspirations.

9

In December, there was a launch party for *Cosmic Tales of the Paradise Whale*.

Even without including the entire staff involved with the series, it still wound up being a gathering of around fifty people. Shironagasu-sensei, the manga's creator, also came to meet them all for the first time. Overall, Suzune felt like the party really strengthened the staff's bonds and motivation.

Shironagasu-sensei was a shy person and only gave the briefest of greetings, but it was still clear how happy the author was to get an anime adaptation. Whenever Suzune got a chance to meet the original creator like this, she always felt a heightened tension—*I have to make sure my performance lives up to this person's excitement.*

Karin, of course, went into business mode, blinding everyone in her radius with her brightest idol smile. Suzune suspected that this also helped to turn everyone's enthusiasm up by several notches.

Sometime after the party, she heard from Miama that Mami Gamikawa was leaving the company. She was evidently going to work freelance for a while.

Even if the managers hadn't asked her to refrain from saying too much to anyone about the incident, Suzune would never have spread that information around. The only person she'd told was Yuika, who wouldn't share it either.

Around the same time, two other voice actors left Earpo as well.

Gamikawa wasn't a special case. Every year, there were several people who either left the agency or quit voice acting altogether, each for their own reasons.

Every time she heard about one of these instances, Suzune

would think about how fortunate she was to be able to continue doing what she loved, what more she could do to keep improving as an actress, and the importance of approaching every episode with reverence and care.

And then, in the middle of those restless last weeks of the year, it finally came time to record the first episode of *Paradise Whale*.

Karin was more nervous than Suzune had ever seen her before—until the recording session started, upon which she carried herself with the confidence of a veteran, grabbing the directors' attention and setting a high bar for herself. This was probably why they ended up giving her directions for retakes on several lines, all of which she pulled off perfectly.

When Suzune looked back and saw the directors' expressions, she secretly thought to herself, *See?! Isn't my* oshi *amazing?!*

The recording for the second episode would take place early in the new year. That meant the only job related to *Paradise Whale* left to do this year was the live radio broadcast on Christmas Eve.

A few days before it, Karin had sent her a message.

What are you doing after we finish recording?

Nothing really, why?

You have no plans? On Christmas Eve?

Quiet, you.

Yuika said she had a Christmas Eve date and couldn't hang out, not even earlier in the day. Apparently, she and her girlfriend were going to be checking into a spa in the morning and spending the whole day getting beauty treatments together.

Being single is in right now.

Let's get dinner together, then.

When Suzune saw the message pop up on her screen, her heart nearly leapt up her throat and out of her mouth.

Did her *oshi* just invite her out on a Christmas date?! …Okay, maybe it wasn't a date exactly, but it was still the best present ever.

OK, fine.

She gave the most casual response she could muster. If she typed anything resembling her true feelings right now, it would probably come out incredibly creepy.

Great! I can pick a place for us this time, came Karin's response.

Dining out with my oshi*!*

Despite herself, Suzune was over the moon.

She even caught herself indulging in wild delusions like, *Maybe I really am going to end up dating my* oshi *someday?*

Even though she knew that couldn't possibly be the case, she could still barely sleep with excitement in the days leading up to Christmas Eve. She forced herself to correct this before it messed up her sleep schedule too much, restoring her regular rhythm and trying to prepare for the day as smoothly as possible.

Everything was going great.

Cosmic Tales of the Paradise Whale was getting a lot of buzz, thanks in no small part to one of its two leads being Karin Shotsuki, the former DIAGONAL idol who had just relaunched her career as a voice actress. Everyone on the team was doing their best to keep that momentum going into the spring season when the show would finally start airing.

And then, Christmas Eve arrived.

Suzune was in high spirits as she picked out clothes—*I'm getting dinner with Karin today! What outfit should I wear? What about my undies?*—when her phone vibrated.

It was a notification that she had a message from Yuika.

All it said was Are you okay? with a URL attached. Suzune opened the app and tapped on the link.

As soon as she saw the page load in, she stopped breathing.

Karin Shotsuki, former center of idol group DIAGONAL, is living with a man!

That was the huge headline splashed across the top of the article.

☆

Suzune froze, listening to the pounding of her heart. She didn't even have the courage to read the rest of the article. All she could do was stare numbly at the screen.

The world seemed to tilt sideways around her. Even though her heart was racing at an unbelievable speed, her body felt strangely cold. Yet at the same time, she felt like she was sweating profusely.

She had no idea why she was so shaken up over this. It was

about her *oshi*, yes, but not about Suzune herself. If anything, she didn't think she'd be this upset even if it *was* about her.

The obvious thing to do was to contact Karin right away and ask if she was all right. But she couldn't do it. Her finger wouldn't budge.

She was scared—scared to learn the truth. For reasons she couldn't quite put into words.

"Is this true?" Of course she couldn't just ask that. But if she sent a message now, it was bound to come up.

Even if Karin just answered *"I'm fine,"* or something like that, it would still tell Suzune that there was nothing she could do about it. And that scared her, too.

...Don't be such an idiot, me!

Suzune gripped her smartphone so tightly that her fingertips turned white.

This is no time to be worrying about things like that!

The warmth came back into her body, her blood rushing to her head and flushing her cheeks with shame.

I'm sure Karin-sama is the one who's scared more than anyone right now! What kind of fan fails to support her oshi *in an emergency situation?!*

Suzune kicked her own cowardice to the curb, opened the app, and sent a message.

Karin-chan, are you OK?

That was all. Short and to the point.

And Karin...didn't answer.

Even after Suzune stood there waiting for thirty minutes, an hour, there was no change on her screen. The message was never marked "read," although that didn't mean Karin hadn't seen it. Since it was such a short message, she could have read it in her notifications without opening the app.

Suzune didn't send another text. If Karin didn't respond to the first one, that meant she was too preoccupied at the moment, so Suzune didn't want to keep pushing.

Just then, Suzune's phone rang. It was so sudden that she nearly dropped it.

...But it wasn't from Karin.

It was Miama.

When she went to answer, she realized her throat was

parched.

I have to take care of my voice, she thought automatically. While this instinctive reaction was only proper for a professional voice actress, it made her a little sad that she couldn't just focus on worrying about Karin. No doubt Yuika would say that was just part of being an adult, though.

Her finger trembled as she answered the phone.

"…Hello?"

"Sengu, have you heard already?"

Suzune swallowed her saliva, trying to wet her throat. "…You mean the article about Shotsuki, right? Yes, I just found out."

It was only as she said this out loud that she realized for the first time: This could affect more than just Karin alone.

There was no telling what kind of effect it would have on *Cosmic Tales of the Paradise Whale*, or on their radio show.

Who was the man in question? If it was just a boyfriend, it wouldn't be such a big deal, but if he was a married man or something like that, there would be serious backlash. And if Karin was perceived as causing this kind of trouble, most production companies might not want to work with her for a while, if at all.

"For now, could you come to the office before you head over to the radio station? We just got hold of Shotsuki a few minutes ago, and she said she wanted you to be there when she explains the situation."

"Me? Why?"

"No idea. But she insisted on it."

"All right."

"Great. Get here at three PM, then."

"Okay," Suzune agreed and ended the call.

If nothing else, it was a relief that the agency was able to get in touch with Karin, at least.

Yet for some reason, a feeling of unease was brewing inside her, like gray clouds filling the sky just before a sudden downpour.

Had Karin asked her to be there because they were partners on the radio show? Or because she wanted to explain herself right away, to tell her why she'd kept her boyfriend a secret?

"…She doesn't owe me that."

Even so, she couldn't keep her feelings from twisting out of control.

Whether Karin had a boyfriend or not, it was no business of a mere voice acting colleague. She had no right to her *oshi's* personal life, she reminded herself.

Exactly—Karin was her *oshi*.

In this situation, it was only natural that she should prioritize communicating with her agency over a message from Suzune.

She'd let Karin's friendliness go to her head a little bit too much. Even now that she knew they were both fans of one another, there was still a line. It was Suzune's duty as a fan to keep from crossing it.

"…I'd better reread my script."

Suzune said this out loud and put down her phone.

She didn't read the article.

After all, in just a few short hours, she would know the truth. It would be silly to go out of her way to read the article before then. That was the only reason—she wasn't afraid to read it! Obviously!

Why would she be scared?

☆

When Suzune arrived at the agency's office, the phone was ringing off the hook like she'd never heard before. The secretary answered one call after another, seemingly unable to keep up.

"Excuse me, have you seen Miama-san?"

Holding the phone pinned between her jaw and shoulder, the secretary pointed at the meeting room.

"Thank you very much."

Suzune bowed deeply and headed over to the meeting room. She knocked on the door, which had a sign on it saying it was in use.

"Yes?" Miama's voice came from inside.

"It's Sengu," Suzune replied.

"Come in."

"Thank you." Suzune opened the door and found that Karin was already inside. As soon as she saw her *oshi's* face, Suzune's

heart jolted painfully.

“Good morning.”

With a standard greeting, Suzune sat down next to Karin like always.

Karin didn’t even glance in her direction, her chin held firm as she faced straight ahead.

Miama raised her eyebrows, looking bemused by Suzune’s seating choice. It was only then she realized that since she was also going to be receiving the explanation, it might have made more sense to sit across from Karin, instead of next to her. But it was too late now.

“Why did this story come out so suddenly?”

Before Miama could speak, Suzune blurted out a question of her own. She didn’t even feel guilty about the sharp edge undercutting her tone.

Normally, before an article was published on one of Earpo’s talents, the magazine would reach out for more information. At that point, the agency would contact the involved party for confirmation, and they would decide how to proceed.

While Suzune wasn’t directly involved in this case, she was still connected to the situation. It was unthinkable that she wouldn’t be informed before the article came out.

And yet, here they were.

“The article originated from a post on social media. It spread around quickly, and some online news sites picked it up.”

Miama showed Suzune the tablet. It displayed several photos, along with text dragging Karin’s name through the dirt.

As much as Suzune didn’t want to see this, she couldn’t keep turning a blind eye now that she’d come this far.

The photos showed Karin shopping with a man who she appeared friendly with, and a shot of their backs as they walked into an apartment building.

Suzune was in shock.

She couldn’t say why exactly, but it shocked her all the same.

She felt dizzy and on the verge of crying.

But it would be strange if she burst into tears in this situation, so she fought to hold them back. Before long, her emotions settled ever so slightly, and it was then that she noticed something else.

The text posted along with the images didn’t quite fit.

There was none of the typical “gotcha!” smugness of someone who’d captured a scandalous photo of a celebrity. Instead, most of the post was full of rage and resentment about Karin’s graduation from DIAGONAL.

“The person who posted this…”

It didn’t sound like they were a professional, not in the least.

“We think it’s probably a DIAGONAL fan, yes.”

Miama finished the thought when Suzune trailed off.

“But if they’ve found your home address—this *is* your home, right?”

Karin nodded.

“Ah.” Miama paused. “At any rate, it could be very dangerous if your home address has been leaked, so we’ll report this to the police and look into how to proceed from there.”

Miama withdrew the tablet and turned off the screen.

“Now, our agency generally doesn’t pry into our talents’ personal lives as long as it doesn’t affect their work… But in your case, Shotsuki, since we are capitalizing on your history as a former idol in some ways, we’re going to have to make a statement about this. So, what’s the story?”

Karin was silent, deep in thought.

“If you’re dating, then fine, we’ll just say you’re dating,” Miama went on. “If it’s an affair, that’s not going to look good, but we can still try and frame it as best we can. But first, we need you to tell us the truth.”

Suzune gulped. She didn’t want to hear it—but she had to listen anyway. That was what Karin wanted, after all.

Karin looked Miama straight in the eyes and spoke, loud and clear.

“…He’s not my boyfriend.”

OH THANK GODDDDDD!

Suzune was so profoundly relieved that even she didn’t know what to make of it. It was like she’d rocketed from hell straight to heaven, she thought to herself.

But of course, she’d suspected as much from the start. There was no way Karin would be dating someone like this. Maybe that was a rude way of looking at it, but either way, she was just so relieved.

“Really?”

“Yes. The man in the photos is my older sister’s boyfriend. The day these were taken, my sister texted me saying that she was going to be late. Since I was free, I went to pick her boyfriend up at the station, and we got groceries for dinner on the way home. That must have been when the photos were taken.”

“Your sister’s boyfriend?” Miama pressed for further confirmation.

“That’s right.” Karin nodded. “They’re actually getting married next month, so he’ll be my brother-in-law soon. He comes over once in a while to work on wedding planning and such. Usually, when he’s visiting, he makes dinner for us. I’ve already talked to them about this, and they gave me permission to officially state that he’s my sister’s fiancé, and they’re getting married soon.”

Miama looked hard at Karin, who returned her gaze unwaveringly.

The explanation made perfect sense to Suzune.

She already knew that Karin lived with her older sister. If that was her sister’s boyfriend—soon-to-be husband, in fact—then he must already be like family to her, which would explain the familiarity they seemed to share in the photos.

Of course. Karin had never mentioned anything about that sort of relationship, so this was the natural outcome of the would-be scandal.

“I see.” Miama nodded. “Then we’ll release a statement to that effect on our website and give the same explanation to the press. Do you still want to do today’s radio show? It might be rough, especially since it’s live and all… If it would be too hard on you emotionally, we could always have Sengu do this one alone.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?” Suzune asked. “You don’t have to force yourself.”

Karin shook her head. “Since we’re taking advantage of my background as an idol, I always knew a scandal was a possibility. This was certainly unexpected, and I’m furious that they dragged my sister into it…but still, I’m not going to run away.”

“All right. Go on, then.” Miama clapped briskly. “We’ll take care of things from here. Sengu, look after her, please. I wish I could come with you, but in this situation, I’m afraid we need all hands on deck here at the office.”

“Of course. You can count on me.”

Suzune pressed a hand to her chest. Karin looked at her, her expression suddenly anxious.

“I’m sorry, Suzune-san.”

“Don’t be sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong, Karin-chan. So let’s get out there and hold our heads up high.”

“Okay.”

Karin nodded earnestly.

Deep down, Suzune wondered if it would be best to take the day off instead. But if Karin said she wanted to do it, and that was what their manager was requesting, then Suzune couldn’t stop it.

All she could do was to have Karin Shotsuki’s back.

To support her *oshi*, no matter what.

After many years as Karin’s biggest fan, that was Suzune’s sole duty.

☆

By the time they reached the radio station, there was already an explanation posted on Earpo’s official website. In short, it stated that the man was Karin’s older sister’s boyfriend, that he and her sister were getting married soon, and that the agency intended to go to the police about the person who had tracked down Karin’s home address. It also added that Karin would not be returning to her home for some time.

She didn’t have much choice. It was only a matter of time before other people deduced her address from the photos, and some were bound to go there to try to get a look at her, no matter how much they were warned against it.

The radio staff hadn’t touched on any of those topics in the pre-show meeting, except to suggest that they were welcome to refrain from looking at hashtags or social media during the broadcast this time.

Normally, when Karin and Suzune did a live broadcast like this, they would browse their hashtags and read a few questions and comments from listeners. But no matter how many keywords you muted, a handful of nasty comments always found their way through.

“No, it’s all right.”

Karin refused to change the format this time. It was still an anime radio show, after all. No doubt she was determined to not allow her private life to effect it in any way.

Suzune understood how Karin felt. “PaRadio” wasn’t their own personal radio show, even if they did sometimes talk about their personal lives to add to the conversation. It was for fans looking forward to the anime, and Karin didn’t want to erase those fans’ voices.

Suzune wished they could get Miama’s opinion as well, but she wasn’t present for the broadcast today. She had to stay behind at the office to help the agency put out fires. Suzune and Karin were just going to have to get through this on their own.

“All right, then we’ll try and stay on top of it by muting any keywords that slip through our filters as we go. Hang in there, okay?”

At the scriptwriter’s words, Karin relaxed her expression just a little.

Once the meeting was over, the staff all left the room, leaving the two of them alone.

“I’m sorry,” Karin said quietly. “When I decided to graduate from DIAGONAL, I thought I was ready for whatever people were going to say about me…but I have to admit, this is still kind of scary.”

“You don’t need to apologize. None of this is your fault.”

“But it’s still causing extra trouble for the staff and our agency. I feel really bad.”

“Protecting their actors is part of the agency’s job. They’re just doing their duty as management. And the staff members here don’t *have* to do anything—they’re just being nice, you know? So just accept their kindness, okay?”

Suzune was aware that Karin probably knew all of this already.

Still, sometimes it was important to say it out loud anyway. Words really did have power. Words, and voices, gained strength and soul when they were spoken.

And a voice actor could harness that power. Otherwise, what would be the point?

“Would you mind…holding my hand…?”

Karin's voice trembled ever so slightly.

Suzune reached over and placed her hand on Karin's, which was resting on the woman's lap. Her hand felt very cold. Suzune wrapped her own around it, trying to warm her up, even just a little.

Karin kept staring straight ahead, without even looking at Suzune. Even under these circumstances, her face in profile was beautiful and brave.

"…Sengu-san, Shotsuki-san, we're ready when you are."

A staff member called to them from the other side of the door.

"…Let's go."

Determination flitted across Karin's face. She stood up, refusing to give in.

Suzune nodded and rose to her feet as well.

She didn't want to let go of Karin's hand, which was still as cold as ever, but her fingers slipped away before they left the room, the faint traces of warmth vanishing all at once.

☆

"PaRadio!"

As usual, the two of them announced the title in perfect unison, their voices always in harmony. Sitting across from Suzune at the table, Karin was wearing a bright expression.

They were alone in the recording booth as always, with the scriptwriter, director, and other staff members watching over them in the control room. Did they look a little more worried than usual, or was Suzune just overthinking it?

"Coming to you live! I'm Suzune Sengu, voice of Dr. Miyuki."

"And I'm Karin Shotsuki, voice of Haruka Amami."

"So we have a live 'PaRadio' episode tonight…and it's Christmas Eve, Karin-chan!"

"So it would seem. It doesn't really feel like Christmas in here, though."

"That's true. I was hoping they'd at least have a tree or something, but no, it's exactly the same as usual. I'm sort of sad now… Can't I get a little Christmas cheer?"

"What are you looking at me for? You didn't think I brought

you a present, did you?”

“Aww…”

Suzune’s heart twinged a little. Even knowing that Karin was in a tough situation right now, she couldn’t help having an automatic reaction.

I have a present for you though, Karin-sama! Just between us, not as part of the show.

She was planning on giving it to Karin when they went out to dinner later. She hoped it would comfort her a little.

“Anyway…” Karin changed the subject. “I came in a taxi today, and the Christmas lights were so pretty. Though they sure were shining on nothing but couples everywhere.”

Suzune was startled.

Did Karin really want to talk about that topic right here, right now?

Sure, talking about couples was a standard conversation around Christmas Eve. And it was true that the decorated areas she saw on the way here had been packed with couples.

Still…well, if Karin was determined to do this, Suzune shouldn’t hesitate.

But then—

“Next topic.”

The director spoke through their in-ear monitors.

That was that, then.

They cut the small talk short and moved on.

“All right. Well then, as usual, we’ll take a look at some posts in our hashtag now. Let me see…”

Suzune tapped on the tablet and pulled up the comments with the radio’s tag.

Her blood ran cold.

The comments flooding across the screen were a deluge of insults and attacks.

This had never happened before.

Usually, the people who contributed to their hashtag were all fans of the manga or of Suzune or Karin themselves, so the comments were always friendly and kind.

But not tonight.

What few positive posts existed were swallowed up by the vast flood of negativity: posts questioning the agency’s announcement,

posts mocking them, and even a few nasty jokes with sexual overtones.

“Wait, the filter’s not working!”

“What? Why?!”

Panicked voices rang out in the in-ear monitors.

Suzune tore her eyes away from the tablet and looked up at Karin.

The blood had drained from her face—she looked white as a sheet.

While she was still firmly keeping her expression neutral, her lips had turned purple, her long eyelashes fluttered, and her slender neck was trembling, like she could barely breathe.

When Karin had been in DIAGONAL, not one of the members had ever gotten got caught up in a scandal like this.

Neither had Suzune, of course.

But as a voice actor, she could instantly understand a character’s feelings and put herself in their shoes. That was the result of a heightened sense of empathy.

Which meant Suzune knew Karin’s feelings as clearly as if they were her own.

Karin must have felt like the whole world was turning against her.

Like she didn’t have a single ally left, no one to save her…that must be what Karin was thinking.

I have to talk about something, anything…!

At this rate, the live broadcast would be a public disaster.

But what could she do?

Just laugh it off and move on? Pretend all of this awful slander against Karin-chan—her *oshi*—never even happened?

As if I could possibly let that slide!

Suzune clenched her teeth.

But she couldn’t just start cursing out the commenters, either. That wouldn’t be professional. In which case, wasn’t the best course of action for Suzune to tell Karin that she would still be on her side no matter what?

But how?

She didn’t know. No matter how hard she wracked her brains, she couldn’t find the right words.

The light was fading from Karin’s eyes.

No, wait!

Suzune immediately gave chase. And so, the words that leapt out of Suzune's mouth were…

"…I love you."

Karin's eyes went wide, and the vanishing light returned ever so slightly.

In that instant, all the pieces fell into place, and Suzune finally understood her own feelings.

Ah, I get it now…

She'd already loved Karin for a very long time.

Suzune had just been putting on an act, pretending not to notice her feelings.

Her strange discomfort when the other DIAGONAL member had kissed Karin on the cheek, her distress when she'd seen the article about the scandal, and all the anger she felt now over these slanderous comments…they were all because she loved Karin.

Because she was in love with Karin—not just as her *oshi*, but as a woman!

"It's true. I love you."

Even though they were in the middle of a live broadcast, Suzune didn't falter at all. Now that she'd made her decision, it was just a matter of committing to it.

And she'd always been good at that.

People had often told her she was brave. When she stood up on stage, or in front of a microphone, she could switch gears instantly.

No, she wasn't afraid at all.

On the other hand, sitting across from her, Karin was staring at Suzune in confusion.

Her eyes were wide and a little watery, her long eyelashes fluttering as she held back tears. The tip of her finger was still frozen on the tablet that sat nearby on the table.

But a little flush of pink was returning to her cheeks, though they had been so pale before.

That was all that mattered.

Through her in-ear monitor, she could hear the people beyond the window of the recording booth flying into a panic, but Suzune ignored them.

She had to make one thing clear—that Karin's best ally was right here in the room with her.

"This isn't just for show."

Suzune gazed directly into Karin's eyes and spoke, her words crystal-clear.

"I'm in love with you."

For a moment, time stopped.

The comments ceased their endless flow, and she couldn't hear her in-ear monitor anymore.

A single tear trickled down Karin's cheek, and Suzune held her breath for an equally romantic response. Something like, *I love you, too.*

But the reaction that followed from Karin was quite the opposite.

Her perfect eyebrows rose sharply as if in anger, and her hand shot out to press down the mute switch on Suzune's mic, even as she spoke into her own.

"Slow down a minute, Sengu-san! If you don't read the comments, how will people know you're just reading a line someone requested?! Come on! Let's move on to a song already!"

Realizing that Karin had resumed the script, the staff went into a flurry of activity.

"When it comes to Christmas songs, this one's a classic! Have a listen!"

As soon as the intro started to play, Karin pressed her own mute switch as well, took out her in-ear monitor, stood up, and grabbed Suzune by the wrist.

"Excuse us! We'll be right back!"

Before anyone could protest, Karin dragged Suzune by the arm and fled from the booth.

☆

"…What was *that* all about?"

Karin shoved Suzune into a waiting room so brusquely that she nearly tripped and fell. Turning around, she saw that Karin was locking the door behind them.

Thank goodness.

The color had returned to Karin's face after its earlier deathly-pale state. She was obviously angry, but that was better than her being in despair.

"You 'love' me? It's 'not just an act'? This is a live broadcast, remember?! Do you realize how many people must have heard that?!"

"I do."

Now that Suzune was sure of her feelings, nothing could stop her.

"But I don't regret it at all. I wanted to tell you that you have someone who's on your side no matter what, and it looks like I got through to you. Oh, but it wasn't just a means to an end. I really do love you. Gosh, I never thought I'd turn into one of those fans who has feelings for their *oshi*, and now look at me…"

Suzune laughed a little too loudly.

Why was she in such high spirits? Maybe her feelings were getting detached from reality to help her escape the fact that she'd royally screwed things up.

"But you don't need to worry about it, okay? It's not like I want you to be my girlfriend or anything like that… Okay, no, yes it is. I do want that, I guess I just haven't quite wrapped my head around my own feelings just yet." Suzune smacked her hands together. "It's just a one-sided love! I don't mind that it's unrequited! Don't worry! I'll still do my job normally! So let's just keep going the same way as before, okay? Please?"

"Enough already…!"

As Suzune went on babbling, Karin practically tackled her with a sudden, fierce embrace.

"You don't get to decide if it's one-sided! My yuri was never just for show, either!"

She shouted it so loudly right next to Suzune's head that her ears rang. Karin's voice really was impressive.

"If you're an obsessed fan, then I've been one way longer than you! I can't believe you, Suzune-san! If that's how you really feel, you should've said so sooner! Ever since that article came out, I've been worried more than anything that you would get the wrong idea!"

"Um…does that mean that you didn't just ask for me to come to the office to hear your explanation because of the 'PaRadio'

thing?”

Even as they spoke, Karin kept on squeezing Suzune tightly. Between Karin’s unexpected arm strength and the scent of Karin’s hair, Suzune felt a little dizzy.

“Of course not! I just wanted to make sure you knew the truth as soon as humanly possible!”

“Ooh, I see…”

Suzune felt strangely relieved. And then, want began to bubble up inside her.

“So…can I…kiss you?”

The answer was immediate. “No way.”

Karin pulled away from Suzune, enough to look her square in the face.

“I don’t want our first time…to happen on a whim like that.”

Her face was crimson.

I didn’t know people could turn that shade of red. Suzune was delighted.

“All right, then…how about tonight, after dinner—”

“You’re not supposed to plan that kind of thing, at least not out loud!”

Karin yelled at her again.

But this time, she didn’t really say no. That was good enough for now.

“…Sengu-san! Shotsuki-san! Come back to the booth!”

They heard a staff member shouting for them outside the door.

“Are you okay now, Karin-chan?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Karin grinned broadly. Just knowing she’d put that smile on Karin’s face gave Suzune more than enough courage to face whatever awaited them next.

“…Sorry, sorryyyy!”

They opened the door and rushed out of the room.

☆

Somehow, the Christmas Eve live broadcast didn’t end up as a disaster.

Suzune and Karin got back just as the song ended, continued the radio show as if nothing had happened, and managed to get

through to the end without any issues.

For a little while, some people speculated online about the exchange before the song, but eventually, the conversation simmered down, and most concluded that it was just a misguided attempt at yuri fanservice.



Still, everyone who was there knew it had been some kind of incident.

“I am really, truly sorry!”

Afterward, Suzune apologized to the staff from the bottom of her heart. She honestly wanted to throw herself on the floor and beg forgiveness, but she figured that would just seem like she was joking around.

When she really thought about it, she obviously shouldn’t have said that during a live broadcast. But at the time, she truly couldn’t think of anything else. She was desperate to save Karin, and in the heat of the moment, confessing had seemed like the only way to do it. Suzune was more surprised than anyone she’d taken such decisive action.

“I’m so sorry!”

Karin apologized, too. Technically, she was the one who’d stopped the broadcast; Suzune didn’t really think Karin was to blame for any of it, but she appreciated the gesture.

Miama showed up as soon as she could and apologized even more than both of them combined. The sight made Suzune realize just how severely she had screwed things up, and she nearly burst into tears.

But the director was also apologetic. “No, it was our fault, too. I can’t believe we didn’t mute the keywords properly… I feel awful. We weren’t careful enough. All things considered, we definitely shouldn’t have tried to use the hashtag today.”

Suzune felt even more grateful and even more guilt.

The scariest part was afterward, when Miama very coolly reprimanded her. Until that moment, Suzune never knew that being spoken to calmly could be much more terrifying than being yelled at.

Given the circumstances, Miama ultimately let Suzune off the hook, but she made it very clear that there wouldn’t be a next time.

The person who posted the scandal online was eventually tracked down.

Although Suzune never learned the details of their discussion, the culprit deleted their account and wrote a letter of assurance.

Still, there was no recovering from the fact that Karin’s address had been doxed, so Karin wound up moving out. And

into the same apartment complex as Suzune.

She had her own apartment, but by this point, they were constantly visiting each other's homes.

"…And? What happened that night, on Christmas Eve? You went out for dinner, didn't you? How did things go after that?"

Yuika kept interrogating her, but Suzune always brushed it off with a serene smile.

That night was a treasure just for her.

But if there was one thing she could say for sure, it was this:

The "yuri" between Suzune Sengu and Karin Shotsuki was no longer just for show.

The End

♥ Afterword ♥

Hello, everyone! I know it's been a while. It's me, Neru Asakura!

After yet again keeping you waiting for more than a year, I've finally released my third book into the world!

Hooraaaay!

After my second book, I was given strict orders: No more naughty books! So I was basically forbidden from using my best and only skill…but then, I challenged myself to find a way to express the *moe* feelings burning inside me without that technique, and the result is in your very hands!

As you might have already gathered from my previous book, *You Like Me Way Better Than Him, Right?* I really love yuri. And the truth is, I like to see everyday flirting, where you can fantasize about a relationship, even more than I like characters getting down and dirty in the nude!

That might be why I've always admired things like "yuri business" between voice actresses, candid-style backstage photos of female idol groups, and so on.

Sadly, you don't see as much of it these days due to COVID-19. And since I missed it so much, I decided to write it for myself.

Hence, this book!

Of course, this is a work of fiction. The characters are purely my invention, with no relation to any real place, company, individual, group, agency, industry, and so on and so forth.

In fact, this story takes place in an alternate universe where COVID doesn't exist at all! Alternate universes…what a convenient concept.

In this world, yuri business is still going strong!

And so, please don't say things like "this detail isn't right" or anything like that! It's an alternate universe! In the Neru Asakuraverse, all those details are perfectly accurate!

Well, that’s all for now. I hope we’ll meet again in my next book!

Neru Asakura, end of the year 2022

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