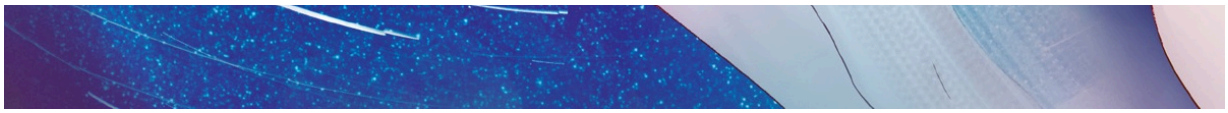
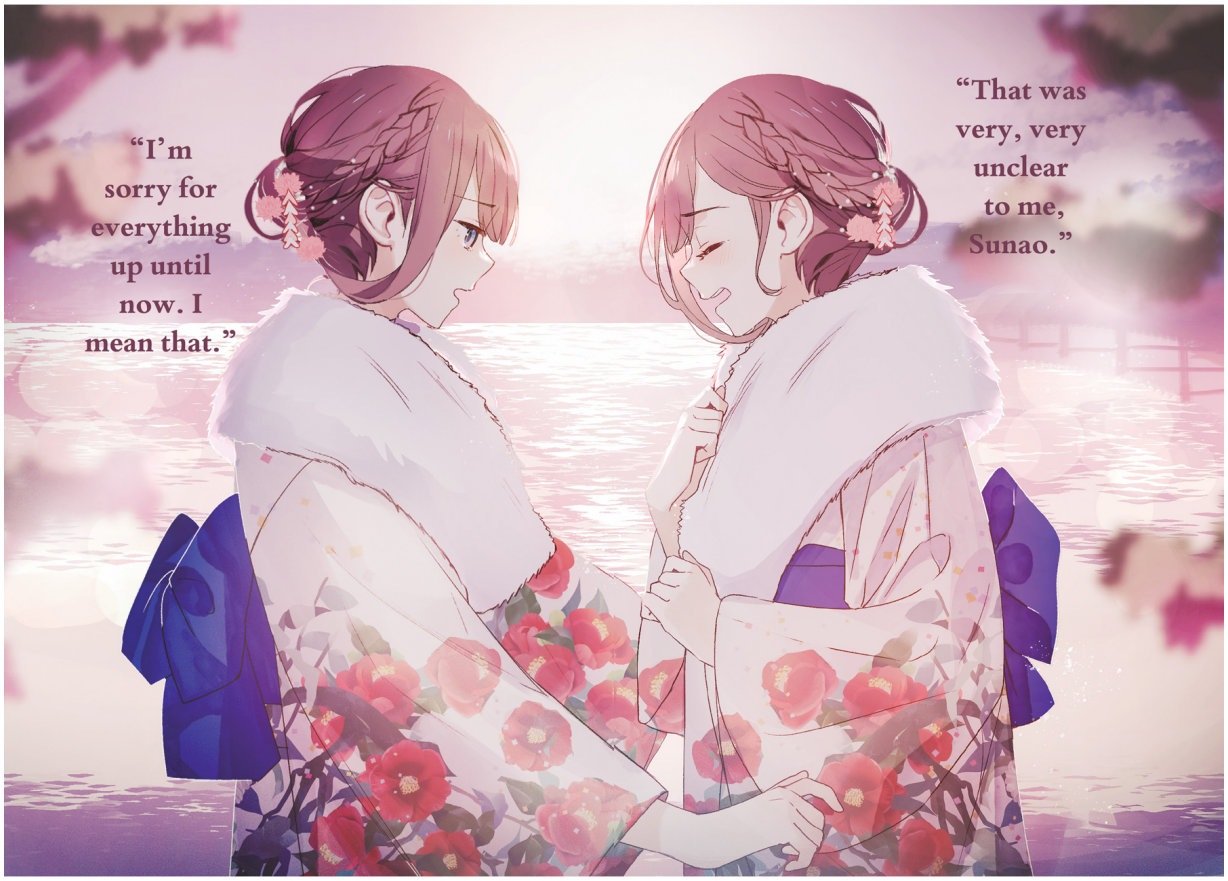

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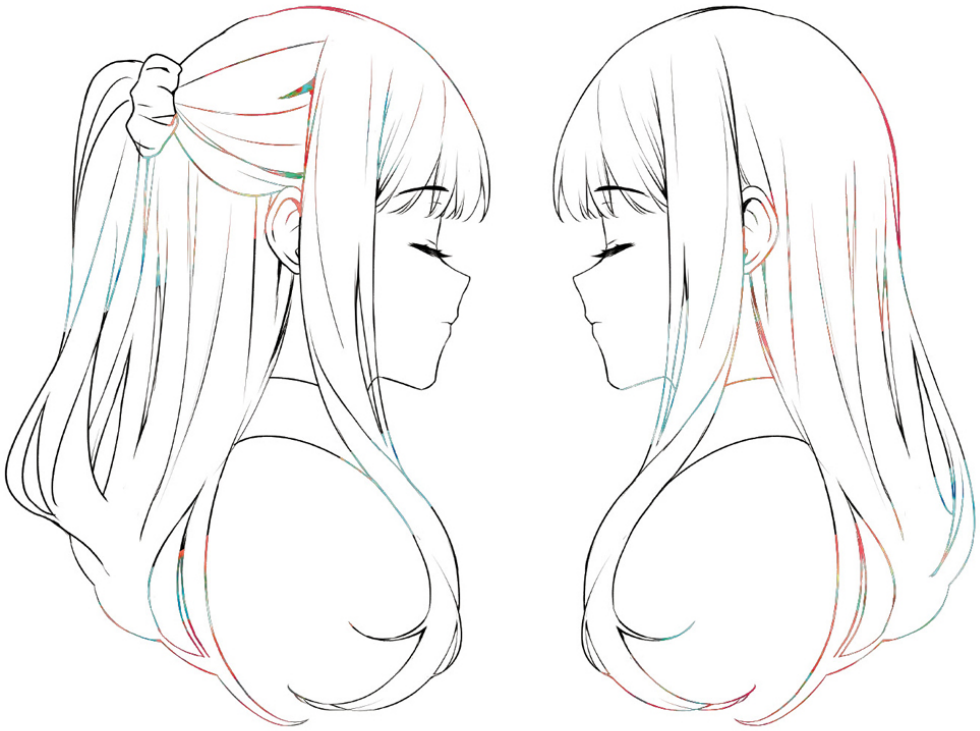

Even a Replica Can Fall in Love
Harunadon
Illustration by raemz




“Aikawa laughed! I made Aikawa break!”
Shuuya Sanada
Kozue Satou
Yoshii
Sunao Aikawa
Sunao’s School Trip


First
School Trip
“Help, Aki!
Take over!”


"I'm sorry for everything up until now. I mean that."
"That was very, very unclear to me, Sunao."



Even a Replica
Can Fall in Love



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Copyright

Even a Replica Can Fall in Love 3

HARUNADON

Translation by Andrew Cunningham
Cover art by raemz

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Act One

A Replica, Tumbling



The beginning of winter was there, at the tips of my outstretched thumbs.

I snapped my fingers, and a burst of white, icy air escaped, plunging me into a midwinter freeze. Icicle chandeliers hung from the rafters, and the floor was a skating rink. The bed became a frigid coffin—even a vampire just back from an all-nighter would be loath to lie on *that*.

I watched snow crystals fall as I let out a puff of white breath. My hands and toes were numb. I shivered. Snow was piling up on my head and shoulders, but I couldn't be bothered to brush it off. I was well on my way to becoming a snowman. If I fetched the red bucket from the garden shed and plopped it on my head, I'd cut a dashing figure.

…But that wintry wonderland was all a figment of my imagination. I was flesh and blood, sulking in one corner of Sunao's mildly warm room, sitting with my back against the wall.

My outstretched feet were bare. Sunao had summoned me that morning before putting her socks on. Otherwise, I'd be wearing some.

Shizuoka might be blessed with a warm climate, but it still got pretty cold in November. It rained last night, and today was especially chilly. But tomorrow would probably be sunny; no matter how cold it got, we almost never saw snow in the heart of the city. All we got was rain, and I could hear it pelting the windows.

I hadn't checked a weather app or watched the news, so I didn't actually know what it would be like tomorrow. It might be partly

sunny, rain cats and dogs, or turn stormy with thunder and lightning.

But since I wouldn't be leaving this room, I didn't need to know. Unless a meteor fell and landed on the roof, none of this cold drizzle would touch my skin.

I'm Sunao Aikawa's replica—her handy replacement. She'd let me have an ordinary high school life for a little while, but that had come to an abrupt end. Five days ago, on Friday, November 5, she'd started attending school herself, just as she'd said she would.

Things had gone back to the way they were before, except for one key difference: She'd started calling me out while she was at school.

On weekends, there was a chance I'd bump into her parents, so she didn't call for me then. But on weekdays, she'd leave me out from morning until evening. I felt like a dog left to guard the house, or a carved bear, or perhaps a bird trapped in a cage. Sunao had given me no directive. She'd call me out after donning her uniform, say good-bye, and then leave without another word. That was it.

A few minutes ago—or maybe an hour, or even longer—I'd heard the sound of the kickstand through the murmur of the rain. Then I'd seen someone in that cream-colored raincoat—though I could no longer tell if it was actually Sunao—ride off on that turquoise bike.

Once I'd watched this through the window, my one boring task for the day was complete.

If I got hungry, I'd go downstairs and boil water, put a pan on the stove, or zap something in the microwave. I'd eat overseasoned ramen, *yakisoba*, or pasta.

Today, I went with frozen *udon*. I microwaved it, mixed some *mentsuyu* soup base with water and poured that over the top, then slurped it up.

There was laundry hung up to dry in the combination living/dining room, and the smell of still-damp cloth clung to my nostrils. The simple flavor of the *udon* was far too basic to compete, and I didn't taste a thing.

I looked at the clock on the wall and saw it was just past three—the middle of sixth period.

With my meal over, I went upstairs and sat back against the wall in a daze.

Sometimes, I wondered if Sunao was purposely trying to torture me.

Stamp your feet, gnash your teeth, know that you're nothing but a replica!

Was that the message she meant to send? Or did she have something else in mind? I couldn't tell, and I was too depressed to think about it.

I'd felt this way ever since the day *she* disappeared.

"Ryou."

I spoke to the void, but it didn't answer back.

Five days ago, they'd held an assembly in the gym to say goodbye to the former student council president, Suzumi Mori. I'd seen it through Sunao's memories.

Lots and lots of people had lamented her untimely death.

Her friends cried and hugged one another, choking back sobs, sniffling, their voices full of sadness. All those sounds had pounded against Sunao's eardrums like raindrops. Little cards with somber messages, one from each student in the whole school, were collected in a white box like a bowl of tears.

Suzumi. Moririn. Mori. President Mori. Each drop had a different sound, each tinged with the grief echoing through the gym—but not one person called Ryou's name.

Ryou had been Suzumi's replica, and almost no one had any idea. They hadn't known before, and they would never find out. Even though she'd dazzled them all onstage during the Seiryou Festival.

I could feel heat behind my eyes. I was lying down, one cheek against the rug, and I felt a tear run down the bridge of my nose.

It passed between my cheek and brow, flowed into my ear hole, and was lost in my already wet hair. I shivered but couldn't bring myself to reach up and wipe it away.

A raspy voice escaped from between my teeth.

"Ryou, I'm not allowed to go to school anymore."

I'd likely never go again.

Had I dreamed the last month? Had I only imagined that I was at school every day, helping prepare for the festival, getting to know all those people, and laughing with them?

Had I only imagined meeting Ricchan again? Meeting Aki? Had I dreamed about performing in a play with Mochizuki and his friends? Now that I was shut out from the world beyond, locked in this prison cell, everything I'd treasured was vanishing like sea-foam.

Still lying on the thick rug, I pulled up my knees and turned myself into a ball. I was in the fetal position, as if trying to crawl back into a womb I'd never even been in.

I didn't have to worry about wrinkling this skirt or getting this uniform dirty. Sunao wouldn't care. The clothes I wore would vanish along with me.

I didn't have to do the shuttle run.

I didn't have to take difficult tests.

I didn't have to do anything anymore.

And part of me was relieved that I didn't have to go back to a school where Ryou no longer existed.

Aware of my conflicting feelings, I lay on the hard floor and screwed my eyes shut. That forced more tears out of my eyes, and they flowed down my face.

The rain kept falling.

For the first time, I felt like I understood why Sunao hadn't wanted to go to school.



I've never slept in the nurse's office.

I've gone there to have my measurements taken and after skinning my knee in gym class, but I've never had to borrow a bed.

Perhaps that's true of most people. But in my case, it's because I was at home in my own room, instead. If my head or stomach hurt, I wouldn't leave the house. I would just stay in bed.

But unlike other students, I didn't have to be marked absent for staying at home. I had someone to take my place, someone who'd go to school for me when I felt sick. I had another version of myself, who did whatever I said. That was the real reason I'd never slept in the nurse's office.

I knocked on the door, but no answer came. I knew the person I was searching for was at school, so I went ahead and stepped inside.

The hall was damp from the ongoing rain, and the toes of my slippers slipped a bit as I crossed the threshold. The smell of disinfectant hit my nose.

The nurse must have been stuck in a morning meeting; there was no one on duty. Ignoring this, I moved to the third and final bed.

"Sanada," I called, certain he was there.

I saw a shape stir through the white curtains—the only set drawn. They were closed tight, like a manifestation of their occupant's mental state.

Don't get close. Don't talk to me, he seemed to say, pushing others away.

"I know you're here," I said.

I watched as he gingerly parted the curtains. I was nervous, too, but I made sure not to show it. I knew he was struggling a lot more than I was.

I hadn't seen him since May. But there he was—Shuuya Sanada, sitting up in bed, wearing a white dress shirt.

He looked uneasy. Like me, he'd fled school and sought the comfort of his own room. And now that he'd left it, his skin was pale; he looked as guilty as he did uncomfortable.

"Aikawa… Morning."

We barely even knew each other, but when he peered through his bangs at me, I saw his shoulders relax a little.

He had short black hair and dark brown eyes with thick eyebrows and broad, manly shoulders. Despite this, he seemed to hunker down, as if trying to make sure no part of him slipped over the edge of the tiny bed beneath him.

I pulled over a plain folding chair and took a seat. He watched in a daze.

There was a stool by the bed, but it was occupied by a neatly folded blazer, with his backpack stacked on top. I glanced at them without paying much attention, then brushed my hair behind my ear, conscious of how the humidity affected it.

"It's been a while," I said. "But it feels strange to say that."

"…Yeah, since we've been talking on the phone," replied Sanada, managing a faint smile.

The expression was far more subdued than any I'd seen him make back when he was the star of the basketball team. If we'd been in the classroom, the laughter and commotion would have sent this flimsy smile rolling across the floor.

"They're picking groups for the school trip," I said.

"Oh."

The conversation died down almost immediately. We weren't meeting each other's eyes. In person, we couldn't talk like we did on the phone. Our words came out a few at a time, like raindrops blown against the window.

"My parents hadn't seen me in a while," he said. "They were concerned. Said I looked pale. Suggested I should stay home today."

"Well, that's what you've *been* doing."

Sanada had been holed up in his room for a long time. His family had only seen his replica—and that was who'd been coming to school, too.

I regretted the joke as soon as it crossed my lips. It felt like poking at a sore spot. I quickly stole a glance at his face, but his smile hadn't changed. It didn't look forced, either.

"Yeah," he said. "It felt so weird to hear, I had to laugh… I heard the festival was a mess."

"Did Aki fill you in?"

"Yeah, and my friends from the basketball team."

"Right," I said, letting the word roll around on my tongue.

At the after-party on the second day of the festival…something had happened.

I hadn't been there, and Nao hadn't told me the whole story. I'd only heard about it secondhand, but that was all it took to know the events had been a huge shock for everyone. No one knew what to make of it.

Someone had vanished into thin air. And now they were dead.

Just knowing a student at your school had passed away was shocking enough—especially if you knew her, or worse, had been friends with her.

Suzumi Mori had been student council president, so she was far more well-known than the average student. Even people at other schools knew her by reputation. She hadn't exactly been *famous*, but she'd possessed a friendly disposition, excellent grades, and dazzling beauty. Thanks to those three things, a lot of people had admired her.

She'd been in the middle of a speech when she'd vanished, leaving only her uniform and slippers behind. Every eye was on her, and yet she'd disappeared without a trace.

There'd been no school for the next two days—one was a holiday, and the other was a make-up day for the festival. And on November 4, the students had been informed of her death.

I was a year below her, but everyone seemed to think we'd been really close. Teachers offered words of encouragement, and several classmates came to talk to me. All I could do was nod evasively, and they all assumed I was just trying to hide my grief.

But that wasn't the case. I hadn't even known her.

She'd likely been a replica, attending school in place of the real former student council president. If the original dies, the replica

goes with her. And this replica had grown quite close to Nao.

I'd known Nao was cast in a play and that she was working with the Drama Club to ensure the Literature Club's survival. I'd seen posters for it on the walls on the first day of the Seiryou Festival, and Ricchan had filled me in when I stopped by the clubroom.

In hindsight, I recalled Nao nervously telling me something about flyers blowing in the wind. I hadn't thought much of it—I'd had other things on my mind. And that indifference had probably discouraged her from telling me about this new replica. I could imagine why.

But if I'd known about it in advance, would I have done anything differently? Would I have been able to help Nao with the pain of losing someone close? Could I have comforted her when she came home with red, teary eyes? No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't even begin to imagine myself doing that.

This morning, the school formally announced the cancellation of the Seiryou Festival Awards (previously postponed). Considering the shadow still cast over the student body, it was certain no one would be able to smile when the winners were announced and called to the stage to pull a prize from the raffle box. We'd all known the teachers would eventually make this decision.

This year's festival had ended without the usual parties or memorial photos. The shock and grief had spread through us like a pestilence, banishing all joy.

Even now, five days later, that dark cloud was still hovering over all our heads. I could sense it, but I felt somehow removed from it all, remote.

I knew this mood wouldn't last long.

Next week, the second-years had a school trip. It would last three days and two nights—a huge deal in any high schooler's life. The deceased was a third-year, and the second-years hadn't *really* known her. There was little reason for most of them to drag these feelings out.

Once they returned from the trip, they'd be totally over it. The first-years would follow suit, then the third-years, and the death of

their fellow student would soon be a thing of the past.

Some people might call that unjust or heartless. But there was nothing wrong with forgetting pain. Nothing.

While I was thinking all this, Sanada said nothing. He had his head down and his lips drawn tautly together. It was as though he was *enduring* something.

Concerned, I asked, "You okay there?"

It came out a little blunt. *This is why I'm bad at these things*, I thought. I was left unsure of what to say next, though Sanada seemed oblivious.

"Not…really," he rasped, tense.

He sounded pretty far from okay, but pointing that out would just be mean.

Shuuya Sanada had become a much weaker person than he'd ever seemed before May. Spending time away from people made you shrivel up and lose your confidence. Just getting to the nurse's office must have taken a lot out of him. Searching for a sympathetic word, I moved my lips, then gave up.

I wasn't good at being supportive. I'd just say something unpleasant and make everything harder for him. I was better off not saying anything at all. So I didn't—until the silence was broken by the door bursting open.

"'Sup! It's ya boy, Yoshii!"

I knew who it was instantly—the class clown. Frank and permanently upbeat, he had tons of friends—both boys and girls, and even students from other classes. Simply put, he was the sort of guy who got tons of chocolate on Valentine's Day and whooped it up but who never actually got asked out. You know the type.

Our eyes met, and Yoshii whistled. He produced a good sound, which made it extra aggravating.

"Figured you'd be here, Sanada," he said. "And my hunches are always right!"

"You could at least knock," I said. Sanada had flinched, so I spoke for him. Yoshii blinked at me.

“Hm, what? You’re sure in a mood today, Aikawa! Far cry from all those cute noises you made in the haunted house.”

“Don’t be a creep.”

“Oof! Haven’t lost your edge, I see!”

He made a show of rubbing his forearms, further annoying me.

He sat right in front of me in class, but I’d barely spoken to him. We’d passed more printouts back and forth than we’d exchanged words.

That had originally been the case for Nao as well. Following my lead, she didn’t actively speak up in class. But that hadn’t been an option during the run-up to the Seiryou Festival. I was aware she and Yoshii were friendly now, but that didn’t make things any easier for me.

How did I seem to him when I was *me* and not Nao? To be honest, I *really* didn’t want to find out.

He broke off his obnoxious teasing and turned his attention elsewhere. Rather than peer into the bed from behind me, he went around to the window side and jumped headfirst onto Sanada’s bed.

“Incoming!” he shouted. “Hey, these things are actually pretty comfy.”

Sanada had been gaping the entire time, and the sudden proximity rattled him even more. He was visibly shaking like a kitten abandoned in the rain, at a complete loss as to how to handle Yoshii’s behavior. The covers were thick enough that Yoshii didn’t seem to notice, however.

“Oh yeah,” said Yoshii. “Sanada, can I ask ya something?”

“Huh?”

At the sudden question, Sanada fixed his eyes on me with a silent plea. I considered helping him, then thought better of it.

“So, like…,” Yoshii began.

“Huh? What is it…?”

I knew why Sanada was frightened. He was scared of questions about why he wasn’t in class, why he was holed up in the nurse’s office, and so on.

Yoshii briefly glanced at me, then smirked.

"Say it isn't so," he whispered. "You and Aikawa weren't up to any hanky-panky in here, right?"

Though his voice was low, I was right there, and I heard every word. The joke was so infantile, I didn't even have it in me to get mad. I just rolled my eyes.

Sanada blinked, and Yoshii elbowed him in the shoulder.

"I mean, everyone knows you two are tight! We're besties, so you can't fool me!"

Just then, Yoshii paused his obnoxious banter and seemed to work something out.

"Wait, are you legit *sick*? Am I being a total jackass? Lemme make up for it by sharing your bed! I'll cuddle you to sleep!"

He was far too close for comfort, and Sanada wasn't sure how to take it at all. His head was down, but I could tell he was starting to put two and two together. I smiled. It seemed the truth was beginning to dawn on him, too.

Shuuya Sanada might have been holed up in his room. But that wasn't how anyone else saw it. They thought Shuuya had been out with a broken bone in May, then had come right back in mid-June, like nothing had happened. He'd even trounced the guy who broke his ankle in a basketball match. That was how it looked to the rest of the school.

Now that he'd figured that out, things would go a lot easier.

Sanada didn't need to be scared of anyone—he could simply act normal. No one was going to give him any funny looks.

"…Puh-*leez*," he said, making a face at Yoshii. "Nobody wants to share a bed with *you*."

It was a natural reaction. There was a slight tremor in his voice, but Yoshii didn't notice.

"Oh-ho!" he said, grinning. "That's more like it! You just playing hooky, then?"

At this point, the door burst open again.

"Heeey!"

I looked up and saw Kozue Satou, the president of Class 2-1. Her shoulder-length hair danced as she entered the room. When she saw her classmates inside, she frowned.

"I thought I heard your voice!" she declared. "I see Sanada's here, too. What are you two up to?"

"That's mean, Prez!" said Yoshii. "Don't leave Aikawa out!"

"Oh, hey. I didn't even see you there," she replied.

"Augh! So *I* was the invisible one?!" Yoshii made a dramatic show of wiping nonexistent tears from his eyes.

I raised a brow at Satou. "What brings you here?"

"We were deciding on groups for the trip. The boys sorted out okay, but the girls are still squabbling. Couldn't stand the heat, so I hopped out of the frying pan." Satou stuck out her tongue. "I was wondering if you were doing the same, Aikawa. Is that what brought you here?"

I shifted my gaze uncomfortably. The moment they'd started discussing groups in homeroom, I'd slipped out, claiming I wasn't feeling well. I'd just wanted an excuse to check up on Sanada, but my classmates didn't know that.

"I know the girls were struggling," said Yoshii, "but isn't it your job to sort that stuff out?"

"Well, the groups are mostly decided. The real nightmare is the room assignments. You've got groups of friends who promised to share already, right? So now they're teaming up and saying things like, 'Even if *she* comes up to you, just smile and act evasive. Don't commit to anything yet.'" Satou put on a soft, ingratiating voice.

Yoshii shuddered. "Yikes, horrifying."

"And our class is hardly the worst one."

I figured that was because Satou was in charge, but I didn't say that out loud. Even if I watched my tone, she'd probably take it as a dig.

Yoshii perched on the windowsill, chin in hand. "Huh… So the three of you haven't picked a group yet?" He looked at each of us in turn.

Having this called out was aggravating, but it was true. I couldn't deny the facts.

"You're in the same boat, Yoshii," Satou said.

"Yep." He nodded, like it was no big deal. This surprised me.

Yoshii glanced around, then clapped. "This must be a sign!" he declared. "Why don't the four of us team up?"

Caught off guard, I blinked three times.

For a moment, I thought he was just being a dumbass again—but the idea itself wasn't bad. The rules said groups should have four or five people and include both boys and girls. We just happened to check both those boxes.

I hadn't mentioned it to Sanada yet, but I'd been angling to get into a group with him. I was the one who'd pushed him to come back to school today, after all.

Since we were both officially in the Literature Club, it wouldn't seem weird, either. So before anyone could argue, I pounced on Yoshii's proposition.

"That could work," I said.

"Huh? Really?" It was his idea, yet my answer seemed to shock him.

"That works for me, too!" Satou said. "Then it's settled. The four of us are a team! Though I could've done without Yoshii."

"I'm sensing some hostility here!"

"What do you say, Sanada?" she asked, ignoring Yoshii's protests.

He nodded, caught up in the moment—and that was that.

"Can you make it to second period, Sanada? We've gotta pick a theme for where our group goes."

"What kind of theme?"

"Oh, you know. Handicrafts, traditional gardens, old-fashioned paintings, sweets that go with green tea…each group has to pick a focus. That theme is *meant* to decide where we go on day two."

Satou was used to giving such explanations, and she counted off the various options on her fingers as she went.





The first day of the trip, we had to stick with our class. But on the second day, we'd split into groups and explore our chosen theme. On the third day, we were free to do whatever we wanted.

"You put a lot of emphasis on 'meant,' huh, Prez?"

"I mean, you know how it actually works. Everyone picks a theme that matches where they already want to go. Just remember, each group's gotta do a presentation after getting back. If we half-ass it, there'll be hell to pay."

As Satou and Yoshii spoke, they headed out into the hall.

As I got up to follow, I heard Sanada whisper, "He did this."

"Who?" I asked.

As he put on his blazer, he answered in a voice much smaller than he was.

"Number Two. Aki…my replica." He wasn't looking at me. "I wasn't here, so I had my doubts. But he really did fill in for me."

I felt the same way. I hadn't made friends with Satou or Yoshii—that was all Nao. Sanada and I were just riding our replicas' coattails.

Sanada looked up, and his eyes met mine. I flinched and averted my gaze.

"I'm glad you brought me back here, Aikawa," he said. "Thank you."

"I—I didn't do anything."

I made a face. I really didn't deserve his thanks.

Sanada and I had both created replicas. I'd never had anyone else to talk to about that before. So when I was at home, I'd occasionally chat with him on the phone. It was the first time I'd ever been that close and personal with a boy, and it was kind of nice.

It was a little weird, timing-wise, to suggest that he come back right before the school trip, but that was exactly why I'd picked it. The second-year trip was just after the festival, while everyone was still excited. I thought it would be a lot easier to ease back in than it would be during a regular week.

The former student council president's unexpected death had thrown a wrench in that plan. That was probably part of why both Yoshii and Satou had sneaked out of class. It must have been hard for them to keep up with the hubbub and act like nothing was wrong.

Then again, Yoshii wasn't exactly delicate. Maybe he'd just noticed his new buddy, Sanada, wasn't around and had swung by to kill some time.

Sanada was back on his feet, his arms through the thick straps of his backpack. His right ankle was still bothering him a little, but he wasn't dragging it. Apparently, he'd spent the last month walking near his house during times when few people were around, and it seemed this rehab had paid off.

He bent his head slightly and scratched his cheek. It was hard to tell if he was bowing to me or just looking at the ground.

"Either way, I'm grateful," he said.

I figured further argument would be futile and settled for a slow nod.

I hadn't told him anything about *my* goals. Arguably, I was only using him. If he was thanking me for *that*, then he was just gullible. Briefly, I wondered if that was why that egomaniac Hayase had it in for him.

Forget the bad things. There's nothing wrong with forgetting.

But the worse something was, the harder it was to forget. I had a feeling those awful memories of Hayase would haunt Sanada forever, coming back at the strangest times.

And in that case, I *really* hadn't done anything to deserve his gratitude.

"Let's have fun on the trip. We're in the same group, after all."

"…Mm."

I nodded without turning around, already on my way out the open doors.

The school trip was next week. But what mattered to me would come right before that.

The bell rang, announcing the end of first period. I was getting worked up, and my first step into the hall sounded awfully loud.



On Friday, November 12, I once again saw Sunao off without a word.

I looked up and found the sky bright and sunny, in complete disregard of my mood. I watched Sunao leave through the window, then turned back to find her Japanese textbook lying on the desk.

"…Ack."

I mentally ran through her schedule. I was pretty sure she had Japanese class that day.

The textbook looked lonely, so I picked it up and moved toward the door. But running after her now wouldn't help. No matter how slowly Sunao was pedaling, my feet could never catch her. And we couldn't afford to have anyone see us together.

I gave up and flopped facedown on the rug, then started flipping through the textbook. The light from the window was more than enough to read by.

I checked Sunao's memories and realized they'd been reading "The Moon Over the Mountain."

This was a short story by Atsushi Nakajima set in Tang Dynasty China. A man named Li Zheng dreams of becoming a poet. Unable to achieve this, he becomes a tiger. The story narrates his encounter with his old friend Yuan Can, to whom he relates his story.

When I first read it, I wondered what it would be like to suddenly transform into a tiger—fear and excitement buffeting me in equal measure. Eventually, it occurred to me that if I became a tiger, that would mean Sunao had become a tiger first, and that made everything seem less scary.

As I remembered this, I followed Li Zheng's words to Yuan Can with my eyes. In no time at all, I'd finished "The Moon Over the

Mountain” and moved on to other stories and new adventures.

I enjoyed letting my whims carry me through pages we’d skipped in class.

The Japanese textbook was stuffed full of prose and poetry, tanka and haiku, and even critical essays. Stories were neatly lined up in little rows, pouncing out at me like a jack-in-the-box each time I turned a page, begging me to join them.

I ran my finger down a poem I’d never read before as words and phrases danced, so bright and beautiful that I let out an appreciative gasp. Each new page took me to another place, another time, and showed me its unique sights and sounds.

Lost in the stories, I heard a drawn-out *ding-dooong*.

Startled, I pulled my nose out of the textbook.

Who could that be? If it was Mom, she wouldn’t ring the doorbell. It could be a parcel delivery or maybe news from the neighborhood association.

I got up and left the room, then hustled down the stairs. I was almost at the bottom when I realized it was a weekday. There shouldn’t be anyone at home. When Sunao’s parents ordered deliveries, they always specified evenings or weekends. And the neighbors all knew that stopping by during the day would be a waste of time.

Figuring it must have been a door-to-door salesman, I moved down the hall to the entryway.

I was cautious enough not to open the door right away. I called through it, “Who’s there?”

“Me,” came the answer. It was only a single word, but I’d know that voice anywhere.

A whim struck me, and I said, “Is that the voice of my friend Li Zheng?” as if asking for a password.

The person beyond this door might be a stranger well-versed in the works of Atsushi Nakajima. Then my clever gambit would be meaningless.

But I knew *he'd* catch my drift. This boy might sit behind me in class, but I knew he often covertly read the other pages of the textbook, just as I did.

"Indeed, I am Li Zheng of Longxi," came the reply.

I opened the door.

As I'd suspected, I found not Li Zheng of Longxi but Aki of Yaizu.

He was in our school's winter uniform, and the sun behind him—without any window glass to block it—was astoundingly bright. I had to shield my eyes. The searing pain in the back of my corneas made me want to scrunch my face until it turned inside out.

"Aki? Shouldn't you be at school?"

"Shuuya's going, so I'm staying at home. Not sure if he'll keep it up, though." It had been several days since we'd seen each other, but he seemed to be taking it in stride. "I heard from Aikawa that she'd be the one going to school from now on and that you'd be at home alone. So I figured I'd come see you."

"…Oh."

Sunao and Sanada were going to school, and they were in the same group for the trip. I'd seen all that in her memories, but hearing it again directly from Aki made me visibly deflate.

Starting last summer, the two of them often spoke on the phone. I knew Sunao had talked Sanada into coming back to school after the Seiryou Festival. I remembered hearing Sunao's laughter through her door when I got home. On the other end of the line, Sanada had been laughing, too.

It wasn't just me. Aki probably wouldn't be going to school anymore, either.

And that might not be all. From now on, maybe we were no longer…

"Nao, do not forget Ritsuko of Ishida Road," said a familiar girl, popping her head out from behind Aki.

"…Ricchan!"

"Ciao, Nao. It's been far too long since my feet took me to Mochimune, much less to the Aikawa estate! I am awash in

nostalgia."

Ricchan had brought her usual good cheer along. I knew she was doing this for me. I tried to smile back, but I doubted it was very convincing.

"What brings you here?" I asked. "Aki's one thing, but shouldn't you be at school, Ricchan?"

I received no answer, and Aki got right down to business.

"Nao, let's hit up a hot spring," he said.

Completely lost, I blinked at him, my hand still on the door.

"A hot spring?" I asked.

Where'd that come from?

"Yes. It's cold out."

"It's very cold out!" Ricchan chimed in, making a show of shivering.

The skies were clear, and it was a nice, comfortable temperature. It was not especially chilly.

"Hmm."

I'd never been to a hot spring. But I didn't think going would cheer me up, so I hesitated.

"We're here, and you're coming!" said Ricchan. "I'll help you grab a change of clothes!"

"Uh, Ricchan?"

She shoved me roughly back into the house.

"Wow, everything's the same!" She looked around the front entrance, delighted. "My memory synapses are lighting up!"

She was right—not much had changed since the days when she used to come over all the time. Sunao's parents had remodeled the toilet, but otherwise, it was the same house Ricchan knew.

She pushed me all the way to the changing area outside the bathroom.

Sunao always kept her favorite clothes in her room, but she kept pajamas and house clothes in the closet by the changing room. Her underwear was there, too.

Ricchan grabbed a T-shirt with a cartoon character on it and a pair of shorts. She must have assumed I'd be overheated after getting out of the hot spring water.

I hesitated, then picked out some underwear. I chose well-used items Sunao was already considering throwing out.

"I think Sunao will be upset if I borrow her clothes without permission," I said, suggesting I'd rather avoid that fate.

But Ricchan didn't seem to understand. "Then I'll come get yelled at with you!"

The fact that she didn't try to assure me it would be fine proved how well she knew Sunao.

She put the clothes and a towel in a spa bag and headed back to the door. Aki had his back against the peeling fence, waiting for us.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yep. We're off!" exclaimed Ricchan.

I still wasn't committed, but in the end, I locked the door. Once that was taken care of, Aki took my right arm and Ricchan my left, and my thoughts briefly cut out.

"…Hm? What's this for?"

"You might try to run," Ricchan declared.

I couldn't refute her, so I said nothing.

We went out into the street and passed the red post office box.

Watched over by clear fall skies, the three of us moved along familiar streets. Aki and Ricchan refused to let go of me even when cars passed, so we had to shift into a perpendicular arrangement.

We must have looked like little kids—or maybe like two cops escorting a prisoner. If they both leaned all the way over, we'd be doing a cheerleading move.

I saw three cats sunning themselves in a vacant lot I was sure used to be something else. Mochimune was a port town and had quite a few cats wandering around.

Sparrows were chirping, out for an elegant stroll on the power lines. There was an unmanned stall by the road, with a single head of Chinese cabbage sitting unclaimed for 200 yen.

It was a peaceful morning. Each of us bowed, totally out of sync, to an old man with a cane. And as we did, I tightened my grip on their hands.

It felt like forever since I'd touched anyone or exchanged any words that meant anything. Over the last few days, all I'd touched were walls, rugs, doors, and noodles.

"What hot spring are we going to?"

Only then did my mind catch up enough to ask this key question.

We were headed away from the station, so I assumed no buses or trains were involved. I looked up at Aki, and he turned to meet my gaze.

"Mochimune Minato Hot Spring. Ever been?"

I shook my head. I knew they'd built the place a few years back, but I'd never gone.

"Sunao's mom said they'd have to go if our bath ever broke."

Fortunately, or rather, *unfortunately*, the bath was still working fine. It was within walking distance of home, yet nobody in the family had ever gone.

"What about you, Aki?"

"Yaizu people are all about the Kuroshio Hot Spring. Though these days, it's officially known as the Yaizu Hot Spring."

Apparently, he'd never been, either.

"Ricchan?" I said, turning to her.

"We said we'd go if our bath broke."

We all had fine, sturdy baths, it seemed.

We headed straight down the road through the residential area to the harbor. Then we turned right and walked along it, the smell of ocean and fish on the breeze.

"There it is," said Ricchan.

A black-walled building waited for us on the harbor grounds. Beneath its roof, we saw the symbol for hot water on a few fluttering banners.

"Apparently, this building used to be a tuna processing warehouse, so we may see some ghost tuna around," she explained.

"Are tuna known to haunt people?" I asked.

"I suppose one really only hears about human ghosts. I wonder why?"

As Ricchan hummed in thought, I looked around the parking lot. It was a weekday morning, yet almost every spot was full.

We made our way around it toward the entrance. Now that we'd arrived, Ricchan let go of my arm surprisingly easily.

"I've got to solve this ghost problem, so I'm headed back to school! I was only really here to get a look at Nao."

"Huh?!" I gaped at her. "You're not going in?"

She made a silly face. "Tragically, I'm a semi-serious student, and I can't have my parents asking, 'Where'd you go wrong, Ritsuko?!' If I grab a train and a bus, second period…is probably impossible, but I can at least be there for third period."

Aki and I, the resident unserious students, chose silence.

Ricchan really *had* come all this way just to see me. It was probably her first time skipping class. I suddenly felt guilty and grabbed her hand.

"Ricchan, you shouldn't have."

"Don't be like that! I'm the one who came charging in. It was a novel experience!" She winked at me, then her expression turned serious. "Nao, you look even worse than I feared. Let this spring warm you up again."

She patted my dry cheeks with both hands. Her little palms felt very comforting.

"Okay. I'll bathe enough for both of us," I said.

"That's the spirit!" She smiled slightly, staring up at me through the frames of her glasses. "Remember what I told you. I wasn't kidding. If you've got nowhere to go, you come to me. Do not go disappearing again."

I knew she meant what she said, and that made me feel even guiltier.

I was starting to confront things I hadn't yet taken notice of at the beach back in the summer, and Ricchan was sharp enough to

notice.

It must have taken courage to say all that again. But Ricchan didn't hesitate. She was my friend, and she was always worried about me.

"…Thanks, Ricchan."

All I could give her in return was words. But she flashed me a grin and nodded emphatically.

"Laters! Tell me how the spring was!"

We waved good-bye, and she trotted off toward the station.

After that, Aki and I made the plunge and headed into the building.

The Mochimune Minato Hot Spring exterior looked brand-new, and the interior was clean and tidy.

We left our shoes in the lockers provided and took the keys with us. I had locker number 52, and Aki had the one to the right: locker number 60.

Tickets were available from two push-button machines. We paid the standard weekday fare. We weren't on the committee or under twelve, so we took the 900-yen general admission. I took a 1,000-yen bill out of my pink wallet and fed it into the starving ticket machine.

My fortune was now 188,240 yen. I'd been doing my level best to get back to an even 190,000 but was constantly thwarted by my own desires. It was a battle without honor.

Tickets in hand, we moved to the front desk. The lady there, wearing a red T-shirt in lieu of a uniform, shot us a skeptical look. I wondered why, then gasped.

We were both in our school uniforms. It was a weekday morning. It was only natural to wonder why two students were here.

"Er, um…"

Silence would arouse suspicion. I needed a valid excuse, but my brain refused to come up with anything.

When I fell silent, Aki spoke up.

"It's Founder's Day, so there's no school."

Huh?

The lady nodded and handed us changing room keys attached to wristbands. She didn't seem inclined to pry any further.

Glancing briefly at the gift shop and cafeteria, we headed through the lavender curtains to the hot spring area.

The hall was lined with framed black-and-white photos of the Mochimune Beach teeming with swimmers and panoramic shots of the town. I wondered when they were taken.

Gazing at them, I asked my knowledgeable boyfriend, "So Surusei was founded today?"

"Probably not."

Whaaaat?

Apparently, Aki had been lying. I had to hand it to him—that had been audacious.

Once we'd looked at all the photos, two sets of curtains waited for us: red for women and blue for men.

"Let's meet up in the lounge once we're done," said Aki.

"Yeah. See you then."

I went left, and Aki went right.

There was no one in the changing room, but I could hear water running in the bathing area.

I found the locker with the same number as my key and put my things inside. Then I reached for my skirt—and discovered something appalling.

"…Augh!"

The fabric was all wrinkly. There was even dust on my hip!

I checked the changing room mirror and became even more shocked. Rolling around on the floor had really messed up my hair.

Now I knew why Aki and Ricchan had both seemed so worried. I was a disaster! They must have been horrified.

How mortifying. Red-faced from embarrassment, I got undressed and headed out of the changing room carrying only a white towel.

I glanced around, my heart racing—but the bathing area was very serene. The ceiling and upper walls were white, while the lower

walls were black. The lights cast a soft orange glow.

There was a sauna and three baths, including a cold water one. The carbonated water bath in the center looked quite popular; most people were using that one. There was also an outdoor bath.

After looking around, I grabbed a bucket and splashed water on myself. I wasn't just washing the grime off my body—this practice supposedly helped prime your body for the hot water, too.

I moved to the washing area and made sure my hair and body were thoroughly clean. Then I wrapped a towel around my long hair and rose to my feet.

I've gotta try the outdoor bath first! Nothing else will do!

I hyped myself up, but what I found outside wasn't much like the outdoor baths on TV, and there wasn't much of a view. Most of the sky was covered by the building's roof, and a wooden fence blocked most of the scenery.

My attention was immediately drawn by something called the "Fuji View Hut." It covered about a third of the bath, and it sounded like you could see Mount Fuji from inside.

The smell of cypress tickling my nose, I moved through the water to the hut's entrance.

The dimly lit interior felt like a secret hideout, and it made my heart dance. A window inside provided a great view of the harbor, and it was a clear day, so I could just make out Mount Fuji's fancy white hat.

Gazing out at the view, I settled in, my elbows on the rocks. The water was perfect—not too hot.

Now that I thought about it, this wasn't some secluded mountainside. We were right up against the city's harbor. Without the walls and roof, the bathers would be left totally exposed. They were necessary countermeasures.

But this hut made it feel like *I* was the one doing the peeping, and that thought made me giggle.

I was considering whether I could simply live in this hut forever, when I heard some people talking. I forgot my fleeting dream and

crawled out. I didn't want to monopolize the view, after all.

Next, I explored the interior baths, finally winding up in the carbonated water. Countless bubbles hugged my limbs.

"…So warm."

I stretched, and the bubbles fled. The water splashed and bubbles burst, and my smile grew wider and wider.

"Hot springs are amazing."

A gush of warm air escaped my lungs in a satisfied sigh. That was when I idly glanced at the clock.

It was ten past noon. I started to look away and then did a double take.

When Ricchan left, she'd said second period had already started, but she could still make it in time for third. Second period began at ten and third at eleven. Had I seriously lost myself in these waters for nearly two hours?

Aki and I had arranged a location to meet but not a time. We weren't used to splitting up, and we'd made a very basic error.

Was he already out? Or was he still soaking?

I considered this for a moment. I had a preconceived notion that girls always took more time in the bath than boys. Dad was a quick dipper, while Mom could stay in for a couple of hours. Once or twice, Sunao had even found her sound asleep in the water.

A minute later, I reached my conclusion: I shouldn't keep Aki waiting any longer. I'd wanted to roast myself in the hum of the infrared sauna, but there was no time for that.

I splashed my way to the edge of the bath and left the water.

I dried myself off, then entered the changing room. Two college-age women were sitting on chairs by the mirror, chatting. They curled their eyelashes while discussing where they'd eat lunch. It seemed they were planning to go to Hut Park Mochimune along the coast.

My body was still piping hot as I threw a shirt over my head. Just then, something fell to the floor: my light blue scrunchie.

I didn’t remember bringing it. Had Ricchan stuck it in with my change of clothes? It was a dramatic touch and very her.

I used a dryer on my hair, then loosely tied it up with the scrunchie.

My hair half-up, I inspected my reflection in the polished mirror. I was myself again, for the first time in a while.

I checked my appearance from every angle, nodded, then left the changing room, my bag much heavier.

I looked around the lounge but didn’t see Aki anywhere. He wasn’t in the gift shop or cafeteria, either.

Somehow, I’d managed to finish up first. I was relieved I hadn’t left him waiting. Then I heard footsteps rushing up behind me.

It was Aki, pushing through the curtains. He wore a brown shirt and black pants.

“Sorry. A local old-timer started bending my ear in the sauna.”

He must have found it hard to extract himself from a situation like that. I could picture it easily and started laughing.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I just got out myself.”

He looked relieved, but he’d been in such a rush, he’d barely dried his hair. His was fairly short, but leaving it wet was still risky. He could catch a cold like that.

I pulled a face towel out of my bag. “Aki, you’re dripping.”

I reached up and tried to dry him off. But he realized what I was up to and brushed me off, embarrassed.

“I’ll do it!” he insisted.

“Stand still.”

His brow furrowed—and my heart made a strange noise.

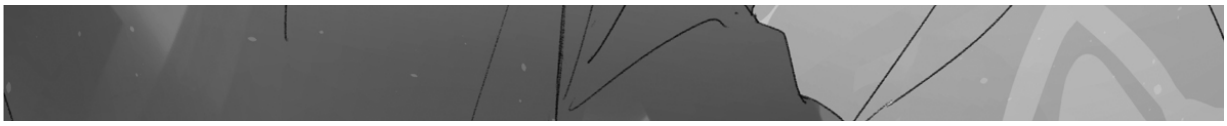
“…Nao? What’s wrong?” he asked, realizing I wasn’t moving.

The sight of his shiny, wet hair made my pulse quicken.

That was the only difference—his hair was just wet. That was all!

I told myself as much, but the change made him seem younger and somehow vulnerable. This was a sight only his family had seen before, but now I’d caught a glimpse, too.





But I couldn't tell *him* that. I roughly dried his hair and neck, trying to hide my consternation.

"Hey, ow!" he grumbled, then grabbed my wrists.

His big hands felt warm, and his whole body smelled just like mine did.

Our eyes met, and he made a face. "It's like we're living together."

"Oh? Y-yeah?" I stammered.

Without batting an eye, he added, "That was a real mom move just now."

"…That sounds like a bad thing," I huffed.

That wasn't the reaction I'd been hoping for. Realizing he'd upset me, Aki awkwardly changed the subject.

"It's noon. Are you hungry?"

I raised an eyebrow but followed along.

"A little."

I *was* pretty hungry.

I'd spent a few days shoveling food in my stomach only when it started growling at me, but this was nothing like that. I was feeling much better. The hot spring had warmed me up. Ricchan and Aki had pulled me out of my funk.

The cafeteria here was crowded, so we decided to eat elsewhere.

We went outside, and I noticed the stone walls by the entrance. When we came in, I hadn't seen them or the sign posted high up on the side saying there was a gray heron nest around.

The sign featured a very cute picture of the mother bird and her babies. The cafeteria inside the hot spring had been called the "Gray Heron Diner," probably because of this nest.

I hopped up and down a few times, hoping to catch a glimpse, but the grass was too tall, and I couldn't see anything.

"What?" asked Aki.

"It says there's a gray heron nest."

"Interesting."

"Can you see it, Aki?" I asked, still hopping.

He was taller than I was. He craned his neck, shielding his eyes with one hand.

"Not at all. Wanna swing around the other side?"

"Yeah!"

Looming over the walled-off section was a parking lot. We didn't want to startle the birds, so that seemed like a good place to stand and look.

"Where is this nest?" asked Aki.

"Good question." I couldn't see anything resembling one. While we looked, someone's stomach growled, and I put on a concerned look. "Aki, you're clearly starving. We'll have to find this heron some other day."

"That wasn't *my* stomach."

I pretended I hadn't heard that and led the way out of the parking lot.

"Where should we eat?" Aki asked.

"Good question. There's lots of restaurants around here."

Mochimune was still growing, and the number of restaurants was increasing along with the population. Sunao had been to these coastal shops and eaten *dango*, burgers, and gelato.

"What about Minato Yokocho?" he asked. "I've had my eye on it for a while."

This collection of restaurants was a gourmet highlight of the harbor area. A few years back, it had looked extremely retro, but after some renovations, it had turned into an upscale hot spot. And it was a short walk away, right under our noses.

"Let's go. But what are we eating?"

"I'm feeling fish."

"Ah," I said, deliberately sounding impressed. "That must be the Yaizu in you."

"More like I could smell fish from the hot spring."

"I could, too!"

While I was in the carbonated bath, a breeze had come in through the open windows, and for a moment, I'd smelled the

unmistakable aroma of fish.

Perhaps it was a conspiracy by the harbor authorities to trick bathers into eating seafood. We gave that some serious discussion as we made our way to Minato Yokocho. And once inside, we chose a seafood place called Jiromaru.

Through the windows, we could tell it was full—but a customer had just stood up to pay. We waited outside, looking around—the interior was just as stylish as we'd heard. There was a single red lantern hanging nearby. *Very cute.*

After a while, the server let us in and seated us at the counter along the window. We had a great view of the harbor, and it felt like we'd really lucked out.

"What do you want? I'm buying," said Aki, though he admitted he'd be using Shuuya's money.

"In that case, I'm going for broke!" I said, and we pored over a single menu together. "There's so many options!"

There were lots of rice bowls, as well as sushi, and even whitebait pizza! All the options were tempting.

Mochimune was one of the top spots in Japan for whitebait, and we had it a lot at home. Sunao preferred it boiled. I knew she liked to heap it on hot white rice with chopped scallions.

Thinking about whitebait gave me a craving for it. I'd barely ever eaten dinner, so whitebait was a rare treat.

"I'm going for the half-and-half bowl," I said.

It was half-raw and half-boiled, but all whitebait.

"That must be the Mochimune in you."

"What'll you have, Aki?"

"I'm going for the seafood bowl."

He pointed to the item at the top of the menu. It included raw and boiled whitebait but also *chutoro* and sakura shrimp. A heaping bowl of luxury.

The appetizer came out not even three minutes after we placed our orders: a dish of stewed pork and taro that melted on our

tongues. While we were savoring this, a waiter brought out our rice bowls and miso soup.

Aki's seafood bowl was very colorful, but my half-and-half wasn't all white, either. It had yellow rolled eggs and green chopped scallions, too! I thought it put up a good fight.

Both types of whitebait caught the sunlight from outside and glittered. It was a beautiful sight.

I poured a little soy sauce into a dipping dish and tapped a wad of raw whitebait into it on the way to my mouth. It was nice and squishy, and it felt good against my tongue.

"Yum!" I said, savoring the fresh flavor.

On my next bite, I included a few scallions with the raw whitebait. After that, I had a brief affair with the boiled stuff, then settled on having both kinds at once. I was living wild and free!

I was especially pleased with my wasabi–soy sauce combo. I mixed wasabi into the soy sauce, then dunked in some raw whitefish. The flavor became shockingly rich, and the faint bitterness of the raw fish was lost in the tingling spice of the wasabi.

Ginger was also good, but the wasabi was better. I got carried away and added too much, and my nose started to sting as tears formed in my eyes.

As I recovered with the gentle warmth of the miso soup, Aki whispered, "You're really something, Nao."

My eyes still wet from the wasabi, I shot him a dubious look. He glanced away and smeared some wasabi on a gleaming red fish.

"You're saving so much money," he continued.

"I'm just getting paid for doing household chores."

"But you're working for it. They're your earnings. That's way better than me. I'm just leeching off Shuuya."

Aki rarely brought Sanada up like this. Normally, he wouldn't broach the subject himself, and if someone else did, he'd simply act unconcerned.

I knew what had brought about this change. He must have been thinking about Shuuya Sanada this whole time, about how his

original was faring at school. I didn't have to ask why; I was doing the same thing.

"I'm not that impressive," I said. And before I knew it, the floodgates had opened. "I'm pathetic. I can't keep my head up. Sunao's going to school again, and I can't even bring myself to congratulate her."

"I'm the same," Aki said, nodding. I could hear how much he meant it in his voice.

We each sipped at our tea, almost in sync. I felt like we were both at a loss for what to say and were looking for the answer in that greenish liquid. Or maybe we just wanted to wash the words back down our throats.

There were voices all around us, but it felt like the two of us were somewhere else, apart from them.

"I think I'll get a job after high school," Aki said.

Hands still on my cup, I gaped at him. I had no clue where this declaration had come from.

"You're pretty bright, Nao. Are you gonna take an entrance exam?"

"I can't do that."

It wasn't a matter of whether I could pass the exam. I truly couldn't take one. You could search the whole of Japan, and you wouldn't find a single college that accepted replicas. Going abroad wouldn't help, either.

"If you go to college, I'll try to get in, too."

Aki's flight of fancy soared on. I gritted my teeth, and a scallion stuck in the back let out a squeak.

"You can't plan your future around something like that," I said.

"I think going to the same college as your girlfriend is pretty typical."

"…Replicas can't go to college," I said, but he didn't bat an eye.

"You never know. Ryou managed it through junior high."

There was a big difference between junior high, high school, and college. I wasn't certain, but I had a feeling college was in a totally

different league. I thought about saying as much, but I couldn't. I didn't want to.

I wanted to talk the way Aki was talking. I wanted to chat about tomorrow and beyond, about a future whose tail we'd yet to grasp, until both of us were out of words.

"Which college would be best?" I asked.

Aki smiled, seeing that I was finally on board. "University of Tokyo, maybe?"

"Just to say we took the test?"

"If we're going that far, we might as well give it our all."

I felt like it was probably a bit late for that.

But maybe it wasn't. We weren't eighteen yet. We were fresher than the whitebait in my bowl. Better late than never, as they say. Perhaps it was still too soon to give up. It certainly couldn't hurt to believe.

"What about a backup choice?" I asked. "Some place in Shizuoka Prefecture, maybe?"

"You're thinking small."

"If you dream too big, you'll be left up the creek without a paddle."

"Good point, Nao. I assume you'd be majoring in literature, right?"

"That sounds fun. I'd get to study everything anew! I'd really—"

The more we talked about impossible futures, the heavier the weight I felt on my chest.

A month from now, a year or three, maybe a decade—what would I be thinking about?

Would I even be capable of thinking? Would Aki be there with me?

"Thanks for the delicious meal!"

We put our hands together in front of the bowls. Not a kernel of rice was left in either of them.

We settled the tab and left the shop. Aki paid, as promised. This made me feel a little awkward, but it also made me happy.

"Hey," I said. "Do you mind if we go look at the water?"

"Sure."

We passed the hot spring again, then headed toward the water's edge. I took another look at the parking lot, unable to give up, but we never did find that heron's nest.

We moved through the tidewater control forest and were met by the open blue of the sky and sea.

I ran a few steps and used the momentum to get up on the levee. Aki put one foot on the side and followed me easily. By the time he'd straightened back up, I'd turned and was walking along the top toward Yaizu. My first few steps were a little unsteady, but I spread my arms, and that helped me keep my balance.

One, two. One, two.

The coastline was nearly a mile long from end to end.

"Careful, Nao."

Sunao and Ricchan had jumped off this levee on a dare when they were kids. But I had no plans to fall today.

"I'm *fine*," I insisted.

Aki seemed a bit dubious, but he didn't nag me any further.

In the distance, the cliffs were much higher and steeper. When I looked up, clouds were stretched across the sky, thinner than Saran Wrap. The sea was nearly indigo, but the waves turned white as they broke along the shore.

While I'd been holed up in the house, the seasons had continued their march toward winter. The sun was growing fainter and the days, shorter. Without me realizing it, the world had slipped into winter's pocket.

I'd been dreaming of wearing mittens when winter began in earnest. I'd wanted to see my breath turn white and touch the snowflakes in a flurry with my hand. I'd wanted to eat warm pizza buns or even just regular meat buns.

As I lost myself in these visions, a gust came in off the sea and tried to snatch my feet out from under me.

"Whoa!"

It caught me off guard, and I stumbled a bit.

"Careful!" Aki said, reaching out to catch me.

His arms pulled me close as another gust hit us.

"Whoa! Wah! Augh!"

In each other's arms, we fought together to stay put, spinning like the dancers in a windup box. After two turns, our efforts proved futile.

All too easily, our feet left the ground. For a moment, we floated. Every organ in our bodies rose up in the wrong direction. I heard a whooshing sound that made all the blood drain from my face, and my vision spun.

I felt a small blow to my face. Was that sand against my arms?

Sound slowly returned to the world. I could hear the surf, car engines, someone else's breathing. In the distance, I heard a shrill cry—a kite, not a heron.

…I'd screwed my eyes shut on instinct, and now I slowly opened them.

My eyes, nose, and mouth were pressed tight against Aki's chest. We'd fallen onto the beach in each other's arms.

The heat where our bodies touched didn't feel real. I was certain we must be flashing red, visible for miles.

Aki seemed to process the situation faster than I did, but he didn't stand up or take his hands from around my back. The reason why was clear from the way his body was shaking.

"My heart's about to explode," he said.

It was quite the exaggeration, but I'd fallen with him, and I understood what he meant. My heart had been about to explode, too, right up until a second ago. Blood was pumping through my body like crazy, and all my organs were working in overdrive. I could feel cold sweat gushing from my pores, with no sign of stopping.

How had Sunao and Ricchan ever jumped off something so high? Was it because they were young? Or was nothing scary when you were with your best friend?

"Sorry," I said.

"That wasn't on purpose, right?"

Still in his embrace, I shook my head. He couldn't see my face, but he could feel my hair move.

"Yeah, I figured."

Aki sounded relieved. He'd had to ask, though. I had a prior offense on record, and he was still nervous.

His hand patted my back, soothing me. It felt gentle and warm. *Pat pat, pat pat pat*. He repeated the motion in a steady rhythm, as though he was calming a fussy baby.

We both remembered how much I'd cried on this same beach. That was only a week ago. But the truth was, I couldn't believe a whole week had already passed.

"Aki, I…"

His short hair smelled like mint, just like mine—that shampoo from the hot spring that had made my eyes sting.

"I feel so lost." Saying it out loud seemed to make the emotion real. "I miss Ryou. I miss going to school. I don't know what Sunao's thinking, and that makes it all worse."

The loneliness I felt was very close to fear. Ryou's loss had frightened me. Not being at school was scary. Not knowing what Sunao wanted was terrifying.

I wasn't the original. Everything was scary to a replica.

"I'm pathetic, right?" I said, my voice turning nasal.

"Hardly. I feel the same way," Aki admitted. "I'm just as lost. Just as scared."

I nodded. I wasn't the only one suffering, trapped under a dark cloud. The time Aki and I had spent with Ryou was too recent, too vivid to be banished into the realm of memories.

But Aki and Ricchan had gotten their feet under them, whereas I'd failed. I'd needed them to drag me out into the sunlight again.

When I closed my eyes, I saw that stage in the gym. Ryou was there, smiling through her tears. I'd only just found her—and now she was gone, her memory the only thing left behind.

And I couldn't separate the sight of her disappearing from my own fate.

"I don't want to vanish like she did," Aki said. "That's too scary."

His arms tightened around me, insistent, as though they would never let me go.

I was sure Sunao and Sanada couldn't begin to imagine how we felt, no matter how hard they tried. They could never understand a fear this intense, this helpless.

We were two replicas, wavering on the edge. Standing atop the levee or lost out at sea—nothing could compare. Our entire realities could be rewritten by a single whim, and it scared us silly.

"I'm terrified," said Aki.

"Yeah. So am I."

Words had power. Saying something out loud meant it couldn't be taken back. But people couldn't survive without sharing their fears.

I pushed my head against Aki's chest as hard as I could. I was scared, and so was he, and we were sharing that pain. We were going halfsies on this uncontainable torment, trying to stop each other from shaking too hard and toppling this tower we'd made from words.

Just then, we heard a shrill noise from overhead.

Aki's shoulders jumped. Surprised, I turned over and saw a passing stranger whistling at us.

"Ah, youth!" he said, then gave us a thumbs-up.

We didn't have nearly enough life experience to simply nod back.

He cheerily wandered off, and I watched him go. Then I heard Aki whisper into my ear, "That's the dude from the sauna."

"You're kidding?!"

"We watched *Hirunandesu!* together. You know, the variety show that talks about food and fashion and so on. He said he wanted to try Taiwanese castella."

I couldn't have cared less.

"…*Snrk*. Heh-heh. Ah-ha-ha!"

I couldn't stop myself and burst out laughing. Aki joined me, and I thumped his chest.

What the heck is Taiwanese castella?

Once our laughter died down, I wiped my tears and finally sat up. We got a good look at our sorry condition, then laughed again.

"We just got out of the hot spring, and now we're covered in sand," I said.

"Seems so."

What a shame. Our trip to the bath wound up pointless.

But I knew that wasn't true. The hot water and seafood had warmed me to my core—enough that I was sweating. No matter how cold it was outside, I now wore an invisible veil that I was sure would prevent me from freezing.

Aki brushed the sand off his clothes and skin, then stretched.

"I just had a great idea," he said.

"Oh?"

"Let's take a school trip. Just the two of us."

My eyes sparkled.

On November 17, the second-years would embark on their school trip—their destination, Kyoto. But if Sunao and Sanada were going, then we would have to stay home. I'd thought no further on the subject, but Aki had shown me up. How had he managed to think of something so delightful?

"A three-day, two-night trip?" I asked.

My voice bounced. This was a vital detail. The originals' trip would last from the seventeenth to the nineteenth.

Aki started to nod, then stopped and scratched his cheek. I'd long since worked out that this gesture meant he was uncertain.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," he admitted. "Staying somewhere…might be too much."

"Why? I'd love to!" Perhaps I'd sounded a bit too eager. Fidgeting, I tried again. "I want to take a trip with you, Aki. And stay

the night! Is that so wrong?”

Nervous, I looked up at him through my lashes. Was I the only one excited about this idea?

If we were calling it a “school trip,” we couldn’t come back the same day. We had to stay the night somewhere and enjoy ourselves without worrying about the time.

“Well, I’m not saying it’s wrong, just…” He hesitated, so I leaned in.

“Then can we?”

“…Okay.”

Yes!

I managed to prevent myself from jumping for joy, but just barely.

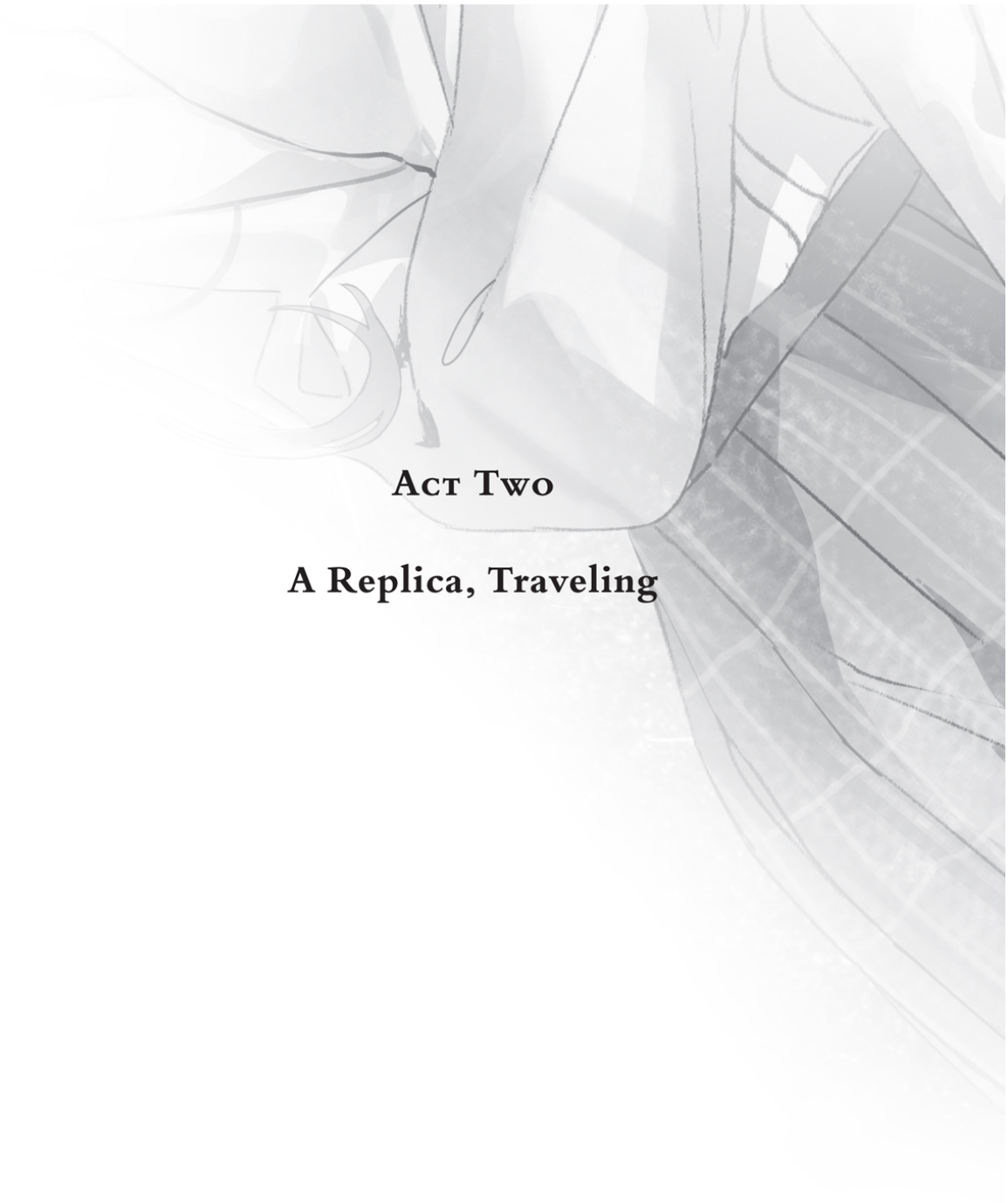
“In that case, I have a suggestion,” I said.

“Oh? Were you thinking Hawaii?”

Aki was full of jokes today. But I didn’t want to go abroad or even to Okinawa or Hokkaido. I didn’t want to go to Kyoto, either.

I had just one destination in mind.

“The Netherworld Ranch.”



Act Two

A Replica, Traveling



The morning of the school trip, we assembled at seven thirty AM near the taxi stands at the north side of Shizuoka Station.

I'd spent the previous night poring over the trip guide booklet as I packed a gray Boston bag and a navy shoulder bag bought just for this occasion. As I'd put each necessity into the bag, I'd checked off a box in the booklet.

Despite looking at my weather app, I still wasn't sure just how chilly Kyoto would be. My father swore the place was hellishly cold, so I heeded his warnings and brought a fall coat and some thicker undershirts.

During the summer, I always longed for winter, but when it finally arrived, I missed the warm weather. By then, my brain had already forgotten how much I'd suffered in the heat only a few months earlier.

My oversized bags were full of pockets, both inside and out. Midway through packing, I was already confused about where I'd stashed the tissues, bandages, or the first aid kit. I went to bed an hour early but fell asleep at roughly the same time.

My alarm went off at five thirty AM, but my eyes were already open.

Mom was shocked I'd managed to wake up on my own.

"So you *can* do it, if you try!" she said as I washed my face. It was a rather dubious compliment. Still, I almost never woke up before she left, so it felt novel.

"Did the results come in yet?" she asked.

"No. They might come in while I'm away."

Mom nodded. She was behind me at the sink, tapping a powder puff against her cheeks. She'd paid for it, so she was eager to hear how I'd done.

I'd bought some stuffed bread at the convenience store the night before and made quick work of it before carefully making myself presentable. Somehow, I always had nasty bedhead on days like this, and I was irritably forced to iron out the kinks. The time went by shockingly fast, and I was still glaring at the mirror an hour before we were supposed to meet up.

It was a ten-minute walk from our house to the nearest train stop, Mochimune Station. I hadn't run into any delays yet, but I planned to leave early, just to be safe.

I went upstairs briefly and called Nao out. I blinked once, and there she was, dressed just like I was. Her hair was already straightened, and I was momentarily jealous.

"I'm about to leave."

"Have fun, Sunao."

Unaware of my thoughts, Nao smiled for the first time in a while. I almost got lost staring at her and wound up leaving the room in an unnecessary huff. I bumped both bags against the wall and swore under my breath.

I hit the bathroom, said good-bye to my parents, then left.

I hadn't planned on calling Nao out while I was on the school trip. My parents would be gone during the day, but they'd come home after work. No matter how quiet Nao was, she had to eat and go to the bathroom, and that made noise.

But Nao said she and Aki were going on a trip together. All I knew was that they were headed to Fujinomiya.

On my way to the station, I got to thinking. What kind of high school girl goes on a weekend trip with her boyfriend?

I imagined them, two teenagers out on their own. Who knew what might happen? But when Nao told me about her plans, she looked delighted. I saw no trace of the gloom that had been

hovering over her all week. I felt like a hardheaded grown-up worrying and couldn't bring myself to say anything.

Come to think of it, the last time I'd so much as held a boy's hand was in fourth grade, on a field trip. I'd never really *wanted* a boyfriend, but knowing Nao was having a typical high school romance definitely got under my skin a little.

I didn't know how far they'd gone, but I had to hope Aki kept things age appropriate and controlled himself.

As I offered up a prayer that I was merely overthinking things, a shockingly cold gust of wind brushed against my cheeks and neck. It was already the height of winter.

I'd been ignoring the seasons so far, but whether I paid attention or not, summer followed spring, and fall gave way to winter. That was all the seasons had ever been to me.

But as I looked up now, the sky seemed so distant. I was blown away by the resilience of weeds growing through the cracks in the asphalt, and I heard the cry of a healthy baby from a house that had been a construction site the last time I was paying attention.

If I looked closely, the world was constantly changing hues and shades.

The leaves on the wisteria near Mochimune Station had certainly changed *their* colors. I bought some hot tea from the vending machine outside the gates. I'd been worried I was dawdling, but I still had plenty of time before the next train.

The platform was dominated by adults in suits on their way to work, but I also spotted a little boy wearing a cute private school uniform. I glanced around but didn't see anyone else dressed like me.

Very few students were commuting from Mochimune Station. I knew that, but it still made me nervous.

At times like this, I'd start to wonder if I'd accidentally come an hour early or if I'd shown up on the wrong day. Was I the only one who got scared like that?

I double-checked the guide booklet and my phone, making sure I had the right day and time. Then an announcement echoed through the station. *Train arriving on line three. Stay behind the yellow line.*

Queues started forming, and I stood at the end of one, squinting at the windows as the train raced by. I scanned them for anyone wearing my school's uniform, but I didn't have any luck.

The doors opened, and I gingerly stepped in. Once inside, I was relieved to find several familiar faces.

Most of the seats were filled, but it was only a seven-minute ride from here to Shizuoka Station. The doors closed with a hiss, and the train began to pull out. I set my Boston bag at my feet and grabbed a strap, unobtrusively scoping out the rest of the interior.

My eyes easily found the other Surusei uniforms, like they were soaked in some kind of special paint. They were mostly in groups of two or three, as if they'd arranged to meet up along the way.

Their voices were full of excitement for the trip ahead and bounced off the low ceiling, vibrating my eardrums.

"I've never been to Kyoto."

"I can't wait!"

"Do you know what you'll get for souvenirs?"

"I brought my Switch."

"I'm gonna ask her out while we're there!"

Their chatter was indistinguishable from that of little kids on a big day out. A wave of giddiness passed over my head, then dissipated. My hand tightened on the strap.

Glaring at the view outside, I told myself it would be okay. As sunlight streamed through the windows and pierced the back of my eyes, we left Abekawa and arrived at Shizuoka Station.

I checked my phone. It was seven thirty on the dot.

The doors opened, and droves of people rushed out—way more than at Abekawa. The wave pushed me along with it, and I chased the people in matching uniforms toward the north gates.

The second-years were already forming ranks near the taxi stands. These were nothing like the vague lines at Mochimune;

instead, we were arranged in alternating rows of boys and girls, split by classes, in order by seat number.

We were lined up just like at a school assembly, but everything felt somehow less formal. Everyone was chatting with those nearby, and that alone kept the volume fairly high.

Sunao Aikawa of Class 2-1 had a front row seat—no need to worm my way through the rows or to worry about my baggage. I just sat right down in the gap at the front.

If there was an Aiuchi, maybe I'd have been second—but my whole life, I'd never made it any farther down a list. I had no talents or hobbies—this was the one thing I was always first at, albeit through no effort of my own. It was hardly an achievement, however, so no one ever offered me any congratulations.

But being first in line carried responsibilities. You had to work. Cleaning rosters, classroom duties, answering questions in class—everything started with the person in seat number one. Occasionally, I'd have to play rock-paper-scissors with the person in the last seat. Names at the beginning or the end—those starting with *A* or with *Wa*—were at a marked disadvantage when it came to school activities.

Lots of girls were crouching in place like old-timey delinquents, not wanting to dirty their skirts. But I couldn't be bothered and sat on the ground, hugging my knees. I didn't want the back of my legs getting gross and sweaty.

The teachers in charge started calling out to everyone, asking for quiet. Then the class reps got up and approached the front of the lines.

Satou popped up in front of me, and our eyes met.

"Morning, Aikawa. How's it going?"

"Meh."

"Glad to hear it!"

I was pretty sure she was the only class rep who'd respond to "meh" positively.

"Okay, numbers!"

I inhaled as she spoke, then called out, "One!" I put my abs into it, trying to project.

Following me, other students numbered off like dominoes. *Two*, *three*, *four*, and so on. I let my shoulders relax, relieved the moment had passed.

Satou finished taking attendance. In the meantime, Ootsuka had gone around checking our health. Both reported back to our homeroom teacher.

Once all classes were accounted for, the principal stepped up to make a speech. Passersby gave us fond looks, some of them rather envious. But none of them stopped to watch.

The principal beamed at us, reporting that no one had missed the big day, and that this was the result of our daily diligence. The best thing about Surusei's principal was that he knew how to keep things brief. I couldn't think of anything bad to say about the man; I knew next to nothing about him beyond what we saw in these two-or three-minute formalities.

When he was done, the head teacher for our year rattled off a list of precautions. Then they had us stand up, starting with Class 5. We headed toward the Shinkansen platform.

Our seating assignments matched our class seats, and we'd be in the same car and seat on the way back, which kept things simple. This made it impossible to group up with friends, but that was likely the intent—teachers *hated* problems cropping up en route.

I got my Boston bag up on the overhead rack, and soon the Hikari train pulled out of Shizuoka, bound for Osaka Station. A teacher was already yelling at students for goofing around and bothering the other passengers.

Absently watching the scenery flow past the window, I thought: *Our school trip has finally begun.*



Two hours after Sunao left, I was standing on the platform at Mochimune Station.

By now, her parents were at work, and there was no risk of other students spotting me.

The air was chilly, but it was fine weather for a school trip. Then again, you could never trust the weather in the mountains. I'd made sure to keep a folding umbrella in the rucksack on my back.

I bought a ticket to Fujinomiya. It cost 990 yen for a one-way trip. It was by far the most expensive train ticket I'd ever purchased, and after stepping through the gates, I tucked it into the inner pocket of my rucksack, so as not to lose it.

The platform was fairly empty as a train pulled in from Yaizu. I braced myself and gazed at the cars as they came to a stop.

We were supposed to meet in the first car on the train leaving Mochimune at 8:50 AM. I didn't have a phone, so I was depending on Aki to be in the right car of the right train.

Please let him be there.

Fortunately, I found him right away.

Our eyes met before the door even opened. He was standing right in front of it—a simple way to ensure we found each other.

I made a wish for the doors to open, and then they did, as if doing a favor just for me.

"Aki!"

"Morning."

He waved. It had been five days since I'd last seen him, and that brief greeting did wonders to settle my jangly nerves.

It was just past rush hour, and only a few seats were occupied. Finding a bench for two by the door, we settled in. We were the only people here with rucksacks on our laps, and it felt like we matched.

Aki looked at me, smiled, and said, "You look good." I knew it took a lot of effort for him to voice such thoughts, and I wanted to return the favor.

"You're quite dashing yourself," I said.

"Dashing?"

“Hee-hee.”

Things like this were easier if I made a performance out of it.

Aki had suggested we dress comfortably, so I was wearing a white turtleneck sweater over khaki chinos, along with flat-soled sneakers. To ward off the cold, I had on a fleece-lined undershirt and several disposable body warmers. I’d gotten everything but the warmers from Sunao. Aki was wearing a gray hoodie and jeans.

Our outfits were simple, casual, everyday apparel. We truly looked like we were headed to a ranch.

Outside the windows, I watched an unbroken stream of houses fly by. Including changing trains, it would take us an hour to get to Fujinomiya Station, the closest stop to the ranch. From there, we’d have to take a bus. *Next stop, Shimizu Station, Shimizu Station…*

“Oh, right. Here, Aki.”

I pulled something out of my rucksack’s inner pocket.

I’d had a lot of time on my hands, twiddling my thumbs, waiting for this day to come. That had made the passage of time feel even slower—and gave me an idea.

“I made a guide booklet for our trip.”

“Did you, now?”

“I did!”

There was a printer in Dad’s study, but I’d made these by hand. I had time in spades, after all. I’d found some leftover craft paper, helped myself to some regular paper from the printer, and made two booklets.

The title was very basic: “School Trip Booklet.” I’d punched a hole in the top left and fancied it up a bit.

Having actual booklets made the upcoming trip feel more real, and the idea had left me giddily rolling around on the rug—but I wasn’t telling Aki that.

“Can I look?” he asked, taking one from me. I could hear the excitement in his voice.

“Of course!”

That’s what they were for, after all.

I'd based the layout on the booklet for Sunao's trip, though mine was far thinner than the blue one the school had passed out. On the first page, I'd made full use of both magic markers and ballpoint pens, doing a full rendition of our official slogan.

"'Make merry,'" Aki read aloud.

I winced, suddenly mortified. "I couldn't think of anything else."

"'Make merry.'"

"Next!"





I reached over and forcibly turned the page for him.

This contained our goals—namely, to learn about the Netherworld Ranch that Ryou had promised to show us and to experience the joys of Fujinomiya.

…And, of course, to make wonderful memories with our traveling partner.

"Memories."

"Y-yeah."

"Wonderful memories with me, huh?"

"Next!"

The schedule part was mostly blank. I'd only included the train and bus times, which Aki had looked up in advance. We hadn't yet figured out where we'd stay. Hotels required parental permission for high school students.

Naturally, Sunao Aikawa and Shuuya Sanada were on their school trip, so we couldn't exactly get their parents to write us permission slips.

Odds were high we'd wind up coming back home tonight. It was a shame, but that was life.

Aki was still reading the booklet, but one part in particular made him burst into laughter.

"This one page has so much writing on it!"

He was looking at the list of things we had to bring. I sighed dramatically.

"I wish I'd been able to get this to you ahead of time. I'm sure you forgot *something*."

I had checked my baggage thoroughly. Including lodging and travel fees, my budget was 50,000 yen. Snacks would weigh down my rucksack, so I'd planned to purchase them on location.

"Miss Travel Monitor," he said, "will you check my things?"

"I officially accept this solemn responsibility," I replied.

I started to take his bag, but he added, "I've got two days of underwear in there," and I hastily handed it back.

"You've turned red," he said. "Are you running a fever? Miss Travel Monitor, did you bring the proper medication?"

Knock that off!

Perhaps he'd gotten carried away due to the excitement. I pinched his arm. Sadly, there was too much fabric in the way, and all I got was sweatshirt.

Aki read the last page, then crooked his head.

"Unless I'm sorely mistaken, you've left four pages blank for a report on our experience."

"The rule is we can't go home until we've filled those up," I said sternly. I was sitting bolt upright—this was the one thing I refused to budge on.

Aki laughed, and I laughed with him.

Unlike the Kyoto trip, our plans weren't very elaborate. We'd set off to see the Netherworld Ranch and nothing else. We might well fill those pages talking about the ranch alone. Still, four felt like far too few.

"But this is a school trip. Shouldn't we at least leave our home prefecture?" I asked.

"Why?"

I squirmed a bit. "You know, it just…seems so small-scale."

This had occurred to me while I was making the booklets.

Even if I had a ticket that would take me anywhere I wanted to go, I'd probably still pick Fujinomiya. But what did Aki think? Maybe he'd wanted to go to Kyoto like our originals. Maybe he'd stifled his own desires to do what I wanted.

Kyoto, the old capital, was filled with tourist attractions and beautiful views. There were delicious foods and other wonders to be found on every corner. From what I'd seen on TV, it was clearly one of the top travel destinations in Japan.

"Can I be brutally honest with you?" he asked.

I braced myself, nodding.

"If I'm with you, Nao, I don't really care where we go." His smile was extra bashful. "And I'm also curious about Ryou's home."

"…Okay." I knew he meant it, so I nodded back.

"Though I'm a little jealous," he added. "You really like Ryou, huh?"

He rapped my shoulder, so I rapped him back a little harder.

The train was rocking, and we rocked with it. My half-up hair danced like we were on a swing meant for two—a simple, easygoing game that wouldn't even excite an elementary schooler.

My love for Ryou had a different shape than my love for Aki. My love for him didn't overlap with any other kind. Didn't he understand that?

And why did I find it so cute that he didn't?

Would I keep being reminded of how much I loved him with every new side he revealed? Would I wind up loving him so much, my heart would burst right out of my chest? I rather hoped he'd contain himself, for my sake.

Was Aki the same? Did he think I was cute? Was his heart about to burst?

I was busy praying he did, even if I knew it was a bit silly, when he let out a little yelp.

I jumped, scared he'd read my mind.

"Fuji Station's next," he said. "We change trains there."

"Huh? Already?"

We put our rucksacks on and scurried out.

At Fuji Station, we switched from the JR Tokaido Line to the Minobu Line. There was a train bound for Koufu waiting for us. After checking the electronic sign, I tilted my head curiously.

"It says 'one-man' on the sign," I said.

Usually these signs just said "local" for the train that stopped at every station. But here, it said "local one-man." I'd never seen that before.

Who was this man? Did he make all the rules? What if we said we wanted to get off at Fujinomiya, and he said no? Would we have to go all the way to Koufu?

"That's when a train doesn't have a conductor, just the driver," Aki explained, consulting his phone.

So the man was the driver, not some tyrant. *Whew!*

"For some stations, we'll need to push a button by the doors before they'll open," he said.

"Leave it to me! I'm good at pushing buttons."

I thumped my chest, and we got on board and settled into some teal seats.

Mount Fuji had followed us here from Mochimune and was very much making its presence felt. We could see the clouds around its peak and its rocky faces. It was beautiful.

Fuji Station had earned its name. Mount Fuji looked totally different now that we were in its namesake domain.

We stopped at several stations I'd never heard of, arriving at Fujinomiya twenty minutes later.

When it was time to disembark, a regular pushed the button, so the door opened without my help.

"You missed your chance to shine, Nao."

"I-I'll get it on the way back!" I raised my arm, emphasizing my reliability.

We'd picked Fujinomiya Station instead of Shin-Fuji, based on the number of buses. Aki said at this time of year, not many buses were headed to the ranch.

We went left through the station's north exit on the second floor and walked along a bridge. A nearby sign said the stairs to our left would take us down to the bus stop.

We still had fifteen minutes to wait, so there was no sign of our bus just yet.

As we made our way across the brick bridge, I glanced at the commuter map and froze. I'd seen our destination—but not the way I'd imagined it.

"They've got the word for *netherworld* in hiragana!"

What did *that* mean? Why not use the characters? Was this a ruse to lure unwary visitors into the netherworld? I put a hand to my

chin and considered the implications. But then Aki spilled the beans.

"It's called the 'Makaino Ranch,' but the *makaino* part doesn't mean 'netherworld.' It's actually the name of the owner. The real characters mean 'horse keeper.'"

I was flabbergasted. "So it's not related to the netherworld at all?!"

I had simply assumed Fujinomiya contained a gate to hell.

"The Makaino Ranch," I whispered the name to myself. The gates of hell slammed closed, leaving only the wind sweeping across the plains. I was mystified.

"Ryou should have said something," I muttered.

"I bet she thought your reaction was hilarious."

"You could have told me!"

"I also thought it was funny."

What a pack of jokers. Honestly! I puffed up my cheeks, trying to sulk, but in the end, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

Thinking about Ryou and saying her name still brought a pang to my heart. For a moment, I felt like I might cry. That would probably remain true no matter how much time passed. I'd never think of her and feel all right again.

But I wanted to talk about her sometimes, with someone—not every day, but on occasion. I wanted to remember what she'd said and the expressions on her face—to keep remembering in the years and decades to come.

We could have kicked back on the bench with the other people waiting, but while we were here, I wanted to check out the maps for the other routes.

The Fuji-Q bus we planned to take didn't just go to the Makaino Ranch. It also went to the Shiraito Falls, the Mochiya Fun Park, and the Fuji-Q Highland. It was a very handy lineup. I'd never been to any of those places, but seeing the name "Fuji-Q Highland" made me remember the haunted hospital, and I shivered.

I was surprised to find another route was for an overnight bus to the Kansai area. It stopped in Kyoto and Osaka. A single bus could

take us all the way to where Sunao was—it hardly seemed real!

What was she up to now? Had they made it to Kyoto? I hoped she wasn't feeling sick and that she hadn't forgotten anything.

I'd been intentionally avoiding her memories, but I probed them now. She was in a group with Sanada, Yoshii, and Satou. They'd all looked up places to go and had fun times planned.

My days preparing for the festival seemed so far away, almost like I'd imagined them. Deep down, I was waiting for Sunao to come to me for help again. When her stomach hurt, or when she just didn't feel like going to school, maybe she'd let me take her place once more.

"Nao?"

I was quiet for so long that Aki called my name. I'd been going down a spiral of selfishness, and I winced.

Pointing, I said, "Aki! The bus is coming!"

Every minute, every second, we were getting closer to the ranch. For now, I just wanted to enjoy our school trip for two.

Intermission

An Underclassman, Waiting

During the break after first period, Ritsuko sat in the classroom, her nose in a book.

It was the newest volume in a light novel series she liked. She'd started it the night before and was so eager to find out what happened next that she'd put a book cover on it and brought it to school. The break would only last ten minutes, but her eyes raced across each page, trying to get in as many words as possible.

Several other students were doing the same. The school offered some extra time in the morning for fall reading, and it had successfully instilled the habit in a few of Ritsuko's classmates.

But as she sank ever deeper into the exciting world of her book, Ritsuko was thinking about something else in the back of her mind.

According to Mr. Akai, there had been no more talk of disbanding the Literature Club. Ryou had promised she'd personally persuade the faculty—but then she'd up and vanished. Vice President Shun must have stepped in.

Then again, perhaps the school just had other things to worry about. Either way, Ritsuko wanted to say her thanks to Shun. She'd gone to his classroom, but it had turned out he was taking a week off. She didn't need to ask why, and that had left her feeling depressed.

She'd read lots of books where people died. It was just a fact of life in those stories. A character would go out in a blaze of glory, leaving a few memorable last words to those they were leaving behind. On occasion, Ritsuko had soaked in the tub at night, reflecting on those lines.

These days, grim settings were all the rage in light novels. The book she was currently reading was a dark fantasy, too. The protagonist had to endure a harsh reality, the loss of their loved ones, and various other struggles, and yet they still stood up and faced the future. Ritsuko felt herself drawn to such characters, and other people were probably the same. It brought tears to her eyes, but it also inspired her. It was *cool*.

The real world was no different. People died all the time. Though Ritsuko's family had been blessed with long lives, she'd still been to her share of funerals.

But Ryou was different. She was a replica—she hadn't died. She'd simply vanished from the face of the earth the moment Suzumi drew her last breath. It was as though she'd never even existed.

That was brutal and terrifying.

Ritsuko knew for a fact that Ryou had been human. Nao and Aki were human, too. They were no different from her—they laughed, they cried, they got mad.

She remembered how much fun their play had been. She could still recite her lines. Princess Kaguya's beauty was seared into her eyes—but the girl who'd played her was nowhere to be found.

Someone had taken a video of their performance of *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, New Adaptation*, and it had made the rounds in Ritsuko's class. It was a bit from early on in the play, with Ryou talking to Nao and Aki onstage. The video was titled "Must Watch! Ghost Sighting!" and had resulted in the faculty calling several students into the guidance office.

Ritsuko didn't tell Nao and Aki. She couldn't.

They must have felt Ryou's disappearance on a deeply personal level, and as painful as it was for Ritsuko, she knew it had hit them far harder.

Ritsuko had only let herself cry at home, in her room. She'd chosen to stay bright and upbeat around Nao and Aki, for the simple reason that her smile always cheered Nao up.

Ritsuko had only a few friends in her own year, and they were fellow nerds. They knew how into her book she was, and they were currently letting her be.

She liked her life, but sometimes, when she was with Nao, she wished she'd been born a year earlier.

"…No use wishing for the impossible."

Her whisper was lost in the bustle of the classroom.

Ideals were like a mirage. She finished chapter two, tore her eyes away from her book, and looked out the window.

"I wish I could have gone to Kyoto."

Kyoto was full of fuel for the nerdy soul: the shrine to Abe no Seimei, the famous *onmyouji* sorcerer; the headquarters of the Shinsengumi; and even displays of famous swords… Was there a nerd alive not drawn to at least one of those three things? Of course not.

Ritsuko's junior high trip had taken her to Kyoto and Nara, but she would have gone again in a heartbeat. There was so much to see, it would take days to get to all of it.

"I hope they bring me back something good."

The standard Kyoto gifts were sweets like *yatsuhashi* and *senju senbei*. But maybe those were too obvious. The only Fujinomiya food Ritsuko could think of was *yakisoba*, but the ranch likely had more to offer. They'd probably have milk, yogurt, cheese—the full range of dairy products. She didn't care what gifts they brought back, of course. She just wanted to hear all their exciting stories.

Ritsuko looked out at the clear skies of Shizuoka.

Kyoto and Fujinomiya—two trips to different destinations, but she hoped both would be blessed with nice weather and good times.

She turned to gaze into space.

"…When did I first realize?" she wondered aloud.

It was no recent development. She'd known there were two Sunaos, two personalities, for quite a while.

When they were kids, she and Sunao had met at the neighborhood association and hit it off immediately. Sunao had been

a bit of a birdbrain, but she was outgoing, kind, and even her angry face was cute. Everyone loved her.

She was a year older, but Ritsuko liked her right away. She'd followed her around saying, "Sunao-chan, Sunao-chan." Their families had been close right up until hers moved away.

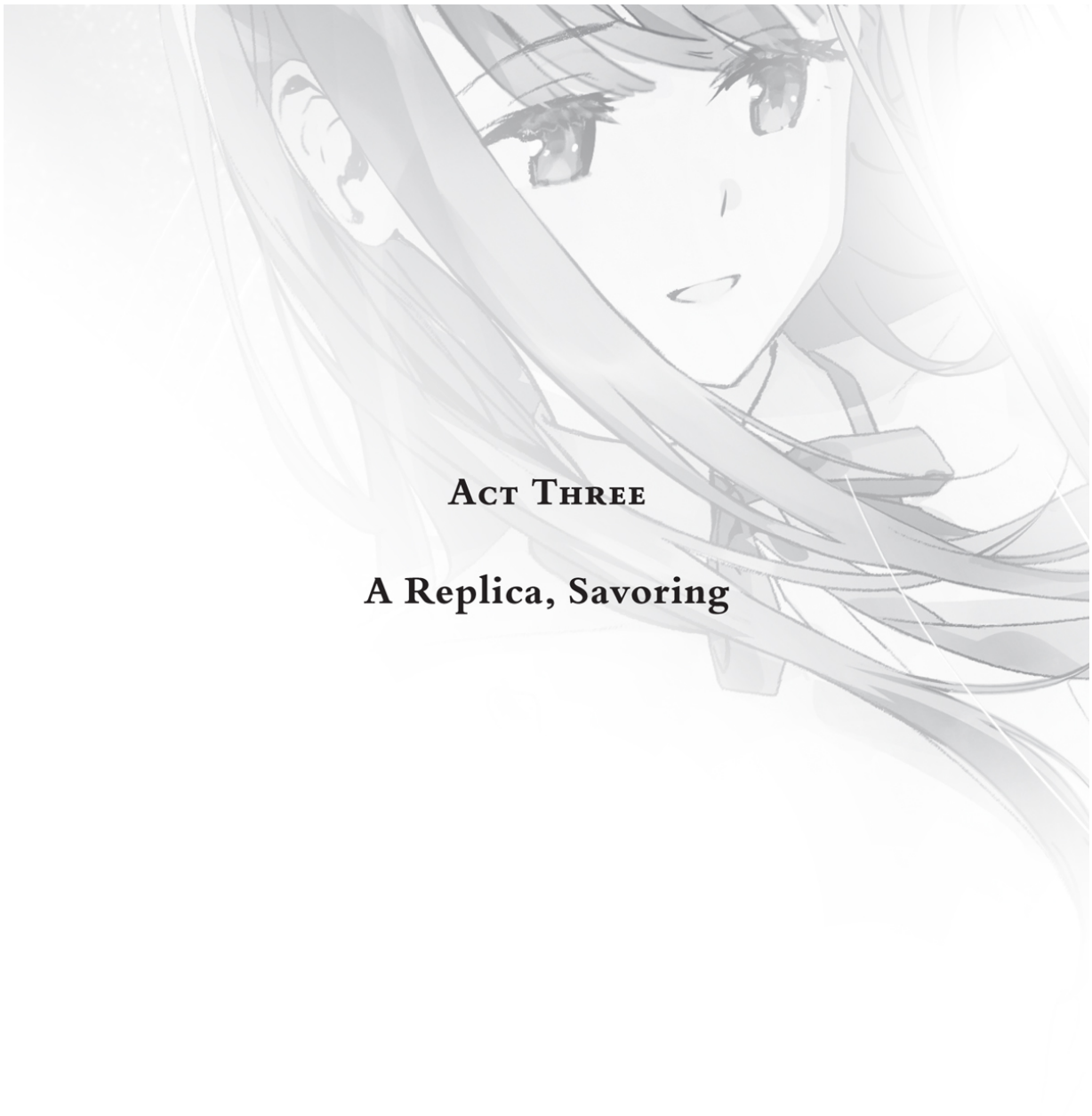
No, wait. Ritsuko frowned. "Didn't I originally call Sunao 'Nao-chan'?"

A strange feeling washed over her.

"…Hmm?"

She tilted her head quizzically. It felt like she was watching a mystery show and she'd almost figured out who the killer was, but not quite. She'd paid careful attention, gathered all the clues, and really *should* have solved it. But she'd missed something vital along the way, and now it was too late.

Ritsuko racked her brains a while longer, but then the bell rang and scattered her thoughts. The English teacher was in the room before the bell finished ringing, and, remembering it was her day to be called on, Ritsuko quickly got out her textbook.



Act Three

A Replica, Savoring



It was the first day of the school trip, and the students and teachers of Class 1 were lined up for a group photo outside the main gates of the Fushimi Inari-taisha (a shrine on the Important Cultural Properties list).

"Everyone, say cheese!" yelled the cheery man behind a tripod-mounted camera. He'd been on the field trip in July, too. Some students groaned at the cliché, but he took it all in stride and clicked the shutter. A lot of the photos he took would wind up in the school's yearbooks.

Today had an expected high of fourteen degrees Celsius, with a low of four. It was noon, but a chilly breeze was brushing the back of my neck.

There was a few seconds' pause while the photographer checked his work, and I looked up at the shrine's magnificent gate with a sigh.

We were in Kyoto—it would be harder to find a temple or shrine that *wasn't* magnificent. But even by Kyoto's standards, this was one of the biggest. It was the main center of worship for the fox god, Inari. Fame-wise, it was right up there with Kiyomizu-dera and Kinkaku-ji.

We'd been told in advance that it boasted the highest attendance figures in the country, and, as expected, the paths were absolutely packed. It looked like a solid 60 percent of the visitors were foreigners. I could tell some of them were speaking English, but there were plenty of languages flying around that I'd never heard

before. These mixed in with Japanese dialects I couldn't quite process, making me feel like a visitor in a far-off land.

To keep things manageable, they'd split us into three groups for the first day. Classes 2-1 and 2-2 were put on a bus headed to Fushimi Inari-taisha, Kiyomizu-dera, Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji, and finally Sanjusangen-do. Classes 3 and 4 were on another route, and Class 5 was on a third; only a few locations overlapped.

These schedules were laid out down to the minute. Once we got off the bus, we had thirty to fifty minutes to look around, then we were back on the bus and headed to our next destination. From there, it was rinse and repeat. This was obvious even from a cursory glance at the booklet we'd received from the trip committee.

All school trips worked like this. Everything was planned out in advance—which made it easy for people who hated making their own decisions.

Once the photos were taken, the students split up into packs of three to five, their excitement rising. We'd only just arrived in Kyoto; our trip was still at the beginning.

By the time we got to Ginkaku-ji, everyone would likely be worn out and past hiding it. Some students would nap on the bus. I was pretty sure I'd be one of them. I'd had to wake up early, so I was already tired—and I'd never been big on walking around.

Most of us felt like the trip would really start tomorrow, when we split into our groups. And the day after that, we would be free to do whatever we wanted.

My group had settled on a theme pretty quickly—a famous compendium of poems known as the *Hyakunin Isshu*. Satou had claimed that as long as we went to Arashiyama, we'd have it covered.

She was actually just trying to do a pilgrimage to locations from some anime she liked. "We have to hit Saga-Arashiyama!" she'd insisted, and she was super excited that our route took us to Kiyomizu-dera on the first day. Yoshii was easily convinced, too, since Arashiyama had been featured in a *Detective Conan* movie.

Sanada and I didn't voice any strong opinions. He seemed to be holding back and deferring to the others, but I simply didn't care and was letting the people who did have their way.

Old streets and historical sites were nice and all, but they didn't really grab me. The booklet claimed the goal of this trip was to help us connect to the history of the old capital and to develop an appreciation for Japanese culture, and so on. But I felt like the foreigners around us had a far deeper appreciation for all this traditional heritage than I ever would.

For the first day, we were allowed to move around with anyone we liked, as long as they were in our class, but our group ended up sticking together.

We walked up the wide gravelly path, four abreast. The shrine's main building was on that Important Cultural Property list, and we took a good look at it.

On my right, Satou sighed and said, "There's always one clown who just *has* to lie down for the group photo."

"Aw, were you jealous, Prez? You can join me next time!"

"But I refuse!"

She was talking about Yoshii, of course. He was always goofing around like that. Other students might have gotten a lecture, but when Yoshii did it, the rest of the class and even our teacher simply laughed it off.

Sanada was busy finding QR codes on the landmarks, scanning them and reading what came up. I took a peek and saw they led to an audio tour.

"Not gonna listen?" I asked.

"Figured I'd do that on the bus. Might help with the essay."

"Ugh! Don't remind me!" Yoshii wailed.

"That attitude will come back to haunt you," Sanada retorted, putting his phone away. "Don't come crying to me when we get home."

"Sanadaaaa! How can you abandon me like this?!"

Yoshii slipped behind him and started rubbing Sanada's shoulders. Planning our group activities had really brought the two of them together.

We kept walking as they horsed around, and soon, we could see bright red torii gates up ahead. Not just one, but a whole row of them, stretching all the way back. It was a magical sight.

Surrounding them were red maple leaves. I'd seen some on the way here, but the way the sunlight caught the leaves as they streamed through the gaps between the torii really made them sparkle.

"Wow!" Yoshii gasped, mouth agape. I realized I was making the same face, and I hastily pressed my lips together.

"Let's get a picture!" Satou said, pulling out her phone. There were shutter noises going off all around us. We crouched to get in frame with the leaves and a sign bearing the shrine's name.

Satou's phone screen showed all our faces awkwardly squeezed together. The boys might be chummy, but this wasn't a game of Othello, and two pieces of one color weren't going to automatically flip the rest of us. I, for one, wasn't black or white, and that was making things difficult for everyone.

Yoshii raised his voice against the bustle around us. "Make hearts below your chins!"

"Do we have to?"

"Argh, fine! Then peace signs! We're keeping other people waiting!"

I wasn't sure which we were doing, so I went for the heart.

The final photo had Yoshii at the top right and me at the lower left, both our hands forming hearts right below our faces—though Yoshii was also making a silly face. Sanada was at the top left and Satou on the lower right, and they were both throwing up peace signs. Sanada's expression was so blank, it looked like an ID photo. None of us matched. It was an awful picture.

There were a ton of strangers in the frame behind us, too. A little blond boy was in the corner, photobombing us, a shit-eating grin on

his face. Yoshii pointed at him and cackled. He'd laugh at just about anything.

People were piling up behind us, so we didn't stop to chat. Walking on, all I could see was Satou's back and a random couple next to her. I didn't know what was waiting up ahead.

"The thousand torii definitely feel magical," said Satou.

The round back of her head bobbed, as if bending in the light. Was she talking to me or to herself? I couldn't tell, so I just nodded and didn't say anything.

Torii after torii stretched out ahead. Were there really a thousand? How far did they go? I'd read up on this place beforehand and knew the path had an end, but part of me wanted to turn back without ever finding out for sure.

"Yeah, they really do," Yoshii said behind us, a beat too late. "It's kind of like…Pocky."

"…Huh? How so?" Satou turned around without breaking her stride, completely baffled by this comparison.

"Well, after a while, all these torii together started looking like backward Pocky to me. Like there's not enough chocolate coating, so the handle part is super long."

A chilly breeze slipped through the gaps in the gates.

"…That's sure one way to look at it."

"Only Yoshii would compare the thousand torii to Pocky."

Sanada and Satou both seemed weirdly impressed. Yoshii deliberately made his eyes glisten.

"How cruel! You're making fun of me!"

"Yeah, because you're being dumb."

"That's not fair! Now you're being rude!"

They bickered, but no one slowed down.

I listened to their chatter with one ear, keeping my eyes on the torii. I gulped; they were genuinely starting to look like giant Pocky stuck in the ground. And not just regular Pocky, but backward Pocky. Long handles, almost no chocolate—what a rip-off!

"Hee."

A wheeze escaped me. I quickly tried to pass it off as a cough.

"Wait, Aikawa, did you just laugh?"

Nothing got past Yoshii. The boy had sharp ears. He'd heard me.

He moved up in front of me, and I turned my head away. If I admitted that I'd laughed, he'd tease me for the rest of the trip. I was getting mad just thinking about it.

"I did not," I said.

"No, no, that was a laugh—I heard it!"

"I was *not* laughing."

No force on Earth would make me admit it. I took a firm stance and glared at him. But the longer I looked, the more my strength drained away, and I started giggling.

He could not have picked a worse comparison than "backward Pocky." He'd completely disrespected this important cultural property.

"Aikawa laughed! I made Aikawa break!"

"Don't act like Klara just stood up from her wheelchair!" I said, kicking his shin.

"Ow!"

He made a show of jumping around. Sanada and Satou were laughing now, too. I let my lips curl up just a little—nothing too obvious.

Our school trip had only just begun.



"The Netherworld!" I yelled, the second we got off the empty bus.

After a twenty-five-minute ride from Fujinomiya Station, we finally reached the long-anticipated Netherwor—er, Makaino Ranch.

The Asagiri Plateau where it was located was right up against the base of Mount Fuji, and quite chilly, but the air was nice and clear. The wind hit my cheeks, and I took a deep breath; it felt like it was purifying my lungs.

The ranch entrance was filled with temptations, but we made our way through and found the ticket machines, buying one for each of us.

The place covered quite a lot of land, and there was a big open space right inside the gate. I could see children running around on the grass and was struck by an urge to join them.

There were several buildings to the left, but we decided to head to the right first. There were more people that way, and more animal noises.

Our hunch proved accurate, and we soon saw some hutches up ahead. There were three goats tied up next to a stand with an angled roof.

"Goats!" I exclaimed.

Not wanting to startle them, I hunkered down as I approached.

"You are very worked up," said Aki.

"It's our school trip!" I said confidently, then embarrassment started to creep in, and I lowered my volume. "Goats…"

They were muscular, with straight hair, and each was a different size. They seemed completely uninterested in me, kneeling down with their rumps facing our direction. Their upturned tails were adorable.

Did they say *baaa*, or was that just sheep?

"Oh, you can walk a goat."

Aki was looking at a sign by the stand's counter.

Twenty minutes, goat feed included, and all for 300 yen. It was just past eleven, and they were open for business.

"Wanna try?" he asked.

I'd barely even walked a dog, so I leaped at the chance. "Yes, please!"

There was a young man at the counter, and we got his permission, each paying half the fee.

"Pick any goat you like," he said.

The goats tied up in front of the stand were available to walk. All the other goats were out working. All I could see were their butts—

but then one stood up and looked at us.

Our eyes met. It was a big white goat. There was a smirk in its eyes, and it sported a dignified beard. Words from a picture book called *Three Billy Goats Gruff* flooded into my mind.

Just then, along came the biggest of the billy goats Gruff.
Trip trap, trip trap.
The bridge groaned. Trip trap, trip trap.
The billy goat was so heavy, the whole bridge creaked and bent.

In the story, three goats of different sizes encounter a troll that lives beneath a bridge. All three goats are named Gruff. And the biggest billy goat Gruff trounces the troll.

"That one?" Aki asked, catching us staring.

"Yeah!"

The man stepped out from behind the counter. "That's Koyuki. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure!"

I was convinced this lady goat—Koyuki—and I were destined to be together. She seemed strict and stern but had a lovely Alpine name.

Seeing that I was determined, the man frowned.

"You're really sure?" he asked.

"Y-yes…"

Why was he double-checking? I was a little intimidated, but I nodded anyway.

"All right," he said. "This your first time on a goat walk?"

We both nodded.

"Then I'll let you in on a little secret."

…Hm?

"You will not be walking a goat. The goat will be walking you."

At that point, I realized that we might be somewhat out of our element.

"Let's go over the rules," the man began.

He explained everything to us; it was clear he did this a lot. Once he was done, he handed Aki the supplies, and I took Koyuki's leash.

The man had stressed the importance of keeping both hands on the leash. But I wasn't supposed to try to force the goat to go in any particular direction. If I wanted to lead her somewhere, it was best to toss a feed pellet in front of her nose. I made a mental checklist and went over it twice.

"Come back here in twenty minutes," said the man. "Now go have fun!"

"Will d—"

I didn't even manage to finish my response before my body lurched forward.

"Wh-whoa!"

Koyuki was pulling hard, and I staggered after her.

She seemed eager to get to a patch of flowers, so Aki hastily tossed a pellet in a different direction. Koyuki gobbled that down, then turned toward a new destination. I was already beside myself.

"Help, Aki! Take over!"

"It's been less than two minutes."

"Oh no!"

I'd been the one to suggest we trade off halfway, at the ten-minute mark. Those had been peaceful, innocent times. How little I'd known. Now I understood exactly what the man in the booth had meant—why he'd triple-checked that I was sure with such intensity.

I'd picked a regular little tyrant.

Such horse—I mean, goatpower! Each time she turned her head, I was dragged after her.

She was undoubtedly a queen of some repute in the goating world. She gobbled up fallen leaves in the blink of an eye, and the goats not currently on walks watched with evident fascination. When

she drew near, the others made way! She was a free spirit, heedless of all worldly cares.

"But she's so cute!" I shouted, stumbling along after her.

She did what she wanted without sparing a thought for anyone else—and that's what made her so lovable.

I wanted to brush her long goatee. I wanted to rub her bulging muscles. But she didn't give me a chance—Koyuki had places to be.

"A-Aki!" I shouted. "Poop! Poop's coming out!"

"Please specify you mean the goat!"

He moved to clean up after her. Apparently, goats just do their business wherever, and he'd been handed a broom and scoop to take care of the results. This was a key part of the goat-walking rules.

"Oh no, Aki! We've only got ten more minutes!"

"Let's head back."

We switched roles. I started leading Koyuki back the way we'd come. I waved a pellet in front of her, then tossed it ahead. I may have put too much strength into my throw, however. It flew way off track, and Koyuki ignored it.

"Nao, you suck."

"Sorry!"

"Nao, poop's coming out."

"'Please specify you mean the goat!'"

We laughed and shouted the whole way back, and by the time we made it to the stand, we were both exhausted. I felt like we'd just experienced some kind of Makaino Ranch initiation ritual. We'd learned that animals did *not* do what people wanted. They lived life on their own terms.

"But it was fun!" I said.

"Yeah, it was pretty enjoyable."

We'd been overwhelmed but had a good time anyway.

Koyuki was huffing, her sights set on her next victim as we waved good-bye.

"Where to next?" Aki asked.

"Ummm."

I was curious about the other animals, but I thought it best to find some food and recover our energy levels.

We came back to the entrance, and my eyes lit up.

"Let's make butter!"

The sign said it would take twenty minutes. We'd use fresh farm ingredients to make our own butter. The taste was probably on another level. You could also make cookies or sausages, and they had some petting events, all of which sounded wonderful. But the butter churning was next on the schedule.

The sign-up counter was at the café to the left of the entrance. For 500 yen, we took a participant's plate and moved into the Hands-on Hall.

The lady in charge of the butter making was waiting outside. We handed her our plates and went in.

It was an open-air tent with lots of tables and chairs. Each table had a plastic pot with a lid, a package of crackers, and a disposable ice-cream scoop. The pots were filled with white liquid—presumably cow's milk.

There were a dozen or so groups making butter, including us. I saw some college students as well as some families. Everyone was full of excitement.

At eleven on the dot, the lady in charge came inside. She introduced herself and beamed at us.

"First, who knows how we get milk? Raise your hands!"

"It comes in paper cartons!" a little boy shouted, not even raising his hand.

We all laughed, and she smiled, then crossed her arms. "*Bzzt!* Incorrect! Paper cartons don't fill themselves!"

She had a chart, and she walked us through it. Mother cows use a lot of blood to make nutritious milk for their calves. And we humans help ourselves to it. She reminded us to be grateful to the animals that make our food.

"In your pots is cream from the cows on our ranch."

At her signal, we all started shaking the pots, trying to make butter.

She told us that the butterfat in the milk was surrounded by membranes, and by breaking those down, the fat would form clusters of butter. And to break those membranes down, we had to shake our little pots.

These fit in the palms of our hands, and like everyone else, I started shaking. When my right arm got tired, I switched to my left and continued shaking away.

This went on for a long time with no apparent changes.

Would it really start to firm up? Just as I was beginning to have doubts, I heard a strange noise.

"Aki, your pot…"

"The noise is different, huh?"

Whatever was in his pot was thicker. You could tell from the sound; it was very different from mine.

The lady had been doing the rounds, and she paused to clap.

"Your boyfriend's very quick! It's whipped now, so it won't be long."

"Thanks," Aki said, bobbing his head.

I looked up wistfully and caught her eye. She smiled.

"Your girlfriend just needs to hang in there a little longer!"

Oh no. I've hung in so long already!

Despair overwhelmed me, but I didn't give in—I kept shaking!

I knew every pot here was the same. There was no way they'd given me water as some kind of mean trick. If I just kept shaking, mine would start to make the same noise!

I could hear the sounds all around me start to change, and I could feel the pressure mounting. Some kindergartners were whooping it up. They were all leaving me in the dust!

Panic drove me to send out a covert SOS.

"Aki, help!"

"Mm?"

He looked puzzled. His pot had changed again and was making a sloshing sound. I had to get there, too!

"I've shaken so much, but it isn't changing at all!"

My upper arms were dying—possibly the goat's fault.

"She's over there! No one's looking!" I said, trying to hand my pot to him. He had energy for days and one hand free. I'd had the bold idea of making him finish mine.

But he just looked at me, his face serious. He wasn't going to play along with my schemes.

"No cheating. Butter is best when you make it all on your own."

That was entirely fair.

"Ignore the lovebirds flirting over there!" said the lady. "If I give the go-ahead, you can open your pots and spread your butter on the crackers."

Everyone laughed. I turned beet red.

After various trials and tribulations, I successfully obtained the go-ahead a few minutes later. I could hear delighted voices all around us. Even Aki was saying, "God, that's good," and this proved very motivating.

When I opened my pot, I found almost-firm butter waiting.

"Wow, it's still very spreadable."

Nervously, I used the scoop to extract some fresh butter and dabbed it on a cracker. A moment later, it was in my mouth.

"Mmm!"

My eyebrows shot up.

So this was what people meant when they said something was "too good to describe." I felt certain that all the work my biceps had done had gone straight into this flavor. Savoring the taste, I polished off the cracker.

At the bottom of the pot was some highly nutritious buttermilk, and I tried that, too. It had a much richer flavor than ordinary milk—I really enjoyed it.

And so the delightful butter-making experience came to an end. The other participants headed out, smiling happily; we were the last

ones left.

Or so I thought, until I heard footsteps behind us. There was at least one other straggler.

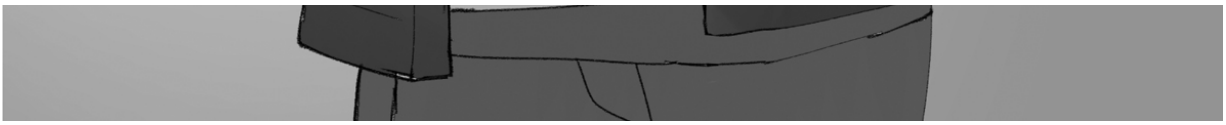
"Why are you here?" came a curt voice—and one I recognized.

Unable to believe my ears, I spun around. It was *him*.

"…Mochizuki?"

He was dressed in street clothes and holding an empty pot, frowning at us. He'd been here making butter, too!





But why?

As I gaped at him, Aki finished gathering up our trash and said, "We were making butter."

"I know that. But second-years are on their school trip right now."

"And ours took us to Fujinomiya."

"What kind of school trip stays in the same prefecture? You guys are supposed to be in Kyoto, like we were last year." Mochizuki narrowed his eyes and took a seat next to us.

"Well, what's *your* excuse? Playing hooky?"

Was it possible the third-years had some sort of work-study program?

"Basically," he said, "I've already locked down my college admission."

"…Oh?" That was news to us. "Since when?"

"Since before I even met you."

We'd had no idea.

"Wh-which college?"

He named one of the most famous private colleges in Shizuoka—everyone who lived here knew it.

This was too much information, and I couldn't keep up. My head was spinning. Aki looked equally rattled, but he stood up and bowed.

"It's a bit late, but congratulations."

I followed suit, echoing the last word.

"Uh, thanks," he replied.

"But you should have said something earlier," I added.

Mochizuki made a face. "It's not like we're at a prep school, but most of the third-years are stressed over exams right now. Boasting about how I've got my future sorted out would just rankle everyone. So I decided to keep it on the down-low."

I wasn't a third-year, but I could imagine what it was like. Whether they had entrance exams or job interviews ahead of them, it might be hard to hear that someone else had everything worked out.

"So what brings you to Fujinomiya?" I asked.

He'd admitted he was playing hooky, but we didn't know why he'd chosen this place to do it. I felt like he must have some motive.

He put his elbows on the table and thought for a moment. His gaze drifted up to the ceiling.

"I'm staying at the old lady's place."

"Your grandmother's house?"

"No. Ryou's."

He said it so easily, it took me a moment to process.

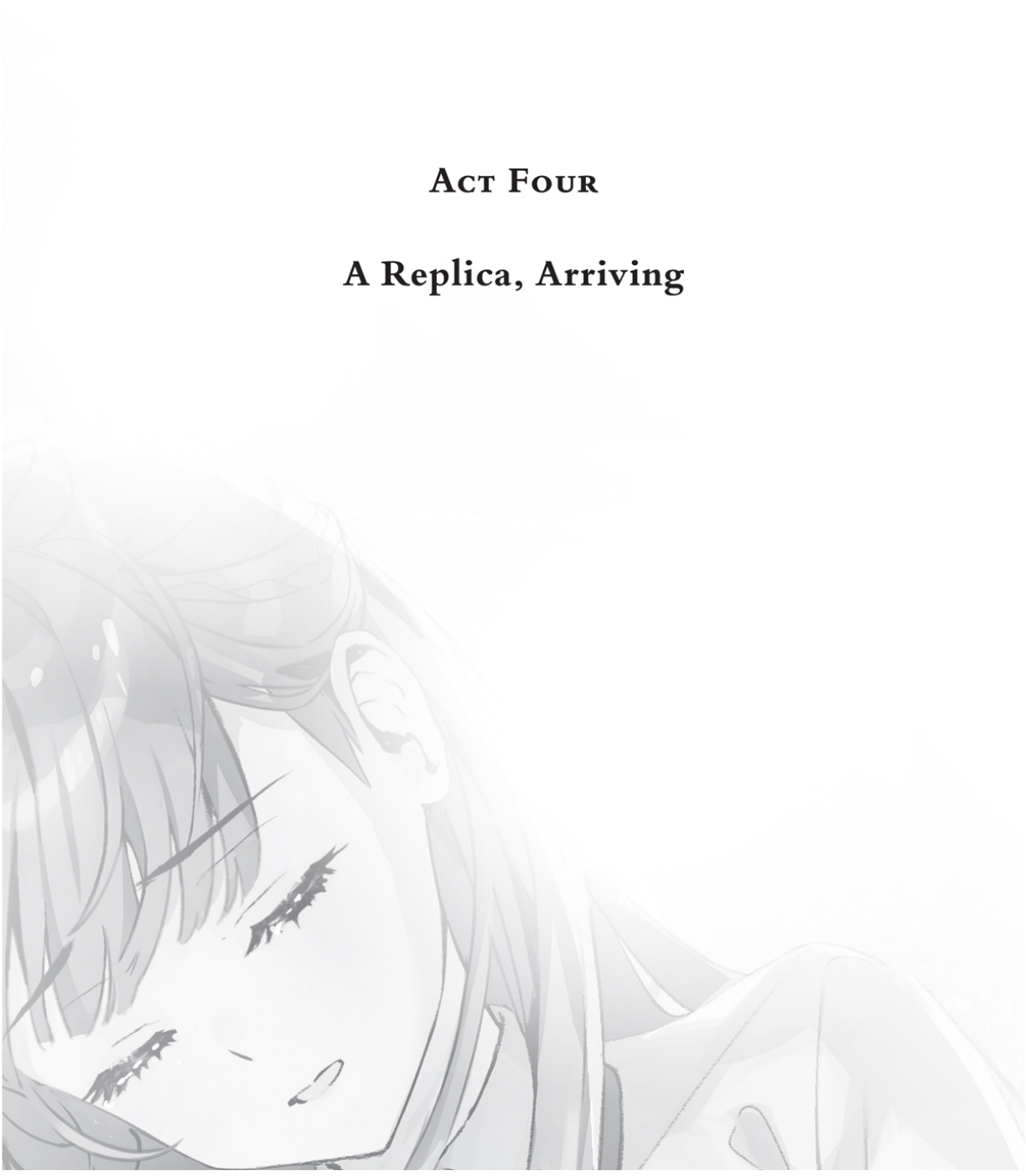
…Why was Ryou's name on Mochizuki's lips?

And why was he staying with her grandparents? Neither of us said anything, and he looked from Aki's face to mine.

"So if you two aren't on your school trip—does that mean you're doppelgängers?"

Act Four

A Replica, Arriving







We were walking along Sannenzaka, a historic stone-paved street, on our way to Kiyomizu-dera—the next stop on our tour after Fushimi Inari-taisha.

Yoshii had split off from our group and was scoping out the Jishu Shrine with another friend. He'd invited me to come along and try out the famous stones located there, said to help one's love succeed, but I'd declined. I wasn't particularly interested in romance, and I'd *just* tried wishing on a rock at Fushimi Inari-taisha.

There, once we'd gotten past the thousand torii, we'd found the inner shrine building. And to the right of that was the *omokaru ishi*—a pair of stone lanterns. You were supposed to make a wish, then lift one of the rocks set on top of the lanterns. If the rock was lighter than you expected, your wish would be granted; if it was heavier, then you needed to work harder to achieve what you wanted.

Since I had a clear goal I was working toward, I focused my mind on that and tried my hand at one of the rocks—but that cold, hard stone was incredibly heavy. I couldn't see how anyone could find them light. Was I the only one who felt that way? Evidence suggested otherwise: The other three members of our group struggled about as much as I had. I was *done* with rocks for the day.

The Kiyomizu stage was packed with visitors, likely lured here by the prospect of seeing the fall leaves from the famous vantage point. I felt as though I'd come all this way just to see the crowds, and my spirits sagged. But this place was on TV all the time for a reason, and the view picked me right back up. Satou got excited and took a bunch of photos.

Once we'd toured the main temple, we took a different route down Sannenzaka so we could scope out the souvenirs for sale. Satou claimed this area had the most shops, and she was right—we found everything from cute little ornaments and delicate crafts to pottery and some stuff I couldn't even identify. All the shops were crowded together, and there was no end of things to see.

"Oh, there you are!"

I was scoping out different types of raw *yatsuhashi* when Yoshii came pushing through the crowd, waving. Judging from the grin on his face, the Jishu Shrine stones must have worked out for him… Or so I thought, until he spoke.

"Look at what I bought!" he said, pulling something out from behind his back and flourishing it proudly.

The item was, by all accounts, a wooden sword.

"Yoshii…"

All three of us gave him a stern look.

Why did boys on school trips *always* have to buy wooden swords? They'd almost certainly never touch the thing again; it was a waste of their allowance.

"Huh? What? Why the awkward silence?" Yoshii asked, baffled.

"…Well, I guess I bought one myself once," Satou admitted. "But that was in elementary school."

It seemed she was in no position to criticize.

"You did?! Rockin' that Kendo Club action, huh?" Yoshii mimed sheathing his sword, then did a quick draw. "Rahhhh! Take that, Class Rep! Ichi no Hiken: Homura Dama!"

In response, Satou snatched a parasol out of her rucksack, using it like an imaginary sword.

"Heh… A layman like you isn't even worth my time. Ryutsuisen Zan!"

"Liar! You're going for the kill!"

Were they copying an anime? I didn't get their little performance at all.

"What about you, Aikawa?" Sanada asked. "What'd you buy?"

"Nothing yet. I don't want to carry it around the whole trip, so I figured I'd wait till the last day."

"Yeah… I'm mostly just making a mental list myself."

You *had* to buy something for your parents. My grandparents lived far enough away that I could probably skip them, but the spending money I'd brought came from my mother. I needed to bring back something to show my appreciation.

Eyes on some colorful chopstick holders, Sanada said, "This might sound weird."

"What?" I asked, looking at a different rack.

"I thought it was all over."

"What was?"

"My life."

The sounds around us faded away, and I slowly turned to look at Sanada, but he wasn't facing me.

"In hindsight, I don't know what I thought I'd do after getting revenge on Ha…yase. I was just being dumb." Sanada winced and made a show of shrugging. It hurt to watch.

According to Nao, Aki had described Sanada's state of mind as "becoming hollow inside." And he was still hollow. I could sense it.

"When Aki played Hayase and won, it felt so far away," he continued. "I wasn't happy about it; it didn't feel like it had anything to do with me. It sure didn't motivate me to come back to school."

I could hear Yoshii cackling, and it drowned out Sanada's last few words. It felt like there was a bottomless pit between the two of us inside the shop and the others outside.

"I was like a piece of paper, folded up and tucked away. I stayed in the corner of my room, taking up as little space as possible, waiting to fade out without anyone noticing."

I couldn't stop myself and asked, "Do you regret coming back?"

"I don't, no." Sanada turned toward me and flashed his teeth. It was a very boyish grin. "I'm glad I'm here right now. I swear. Both at school and on this trip."

When our eyes met, I finally realized something—he'd cut his hair before the trip. His bangs were shorter now, no longer casting a shadow over his smile.

Did he mean that? Or was he forcing the words out for my benefit? I couldn't tell, but I had to respond.

"I'm sure you'll find something fun."

I knew I couldn't promise that, and that knowledge stuck in my heart like a thorn. But I went on regardless. "There's lots of good times to be had out there… I know it."

Could Sanada tell? Did he realize that my whisper wasn't as much for him as it was for me, who was even hollower than he was?

He nodded slowly, his smile vanishing like a mirage.

"Yeah. For the two of us…" He trailed off there, but I knew what he'd almost said.

"…So what is a person supposed to bring back from Kyoto anyway?" I asked, changing the subject. It was pretty abrupt, and I lost him for a second, but he quickly caught my drift.

"Uh, knickknacks? Fans?"

Daily-use items or decorations could fail miserably if you failed to match the recipient's taste. Consumables were safer—or was I just taking the easy way out?

Ricchan would probably be excited no matter what I brought her. Picturing my younger friend's pleased face brought a smile to my lips.

Back in grade school, she'd collected *magatama* and displayed them in her room. Was she still doing that? If I found a nice one and brought that back for her, would it make her happy?

"Raw *yatsuhashi* is the obvious choice for food. Or maybe something with matcha in it…" Sanada was taking this seriously. "I guess I don't really know much about Kyoto cuisine."

"Me neither," I said. "I guess they're famous for tofu, right?"

"Oh, yeah. And *obanzai*."

"What's that?"

"It's like…a bunch of different side dishes."

"A buffet?"

"Um." This seemed to baffle him. "I'm not sure it's a buffet, exactly…"

I hadn't put much thought into my question, but now Sanada was really mulling it over. At that point, Yoshii came into the shop after us. I wasn't sure if he'd overheard our conversation and wanted to get in his two cents, or if he'd simply lost his match with Satou.

"All Shizuoka has is Mount Fuji, so don't go dissing Kyoto," he said. "The locals will stab you in the back with a folding fan." He was eating something from a little paper bag as he spoke.

"What's that, a croquette?" I asked.

"You can never eat too much on a school trip!"

He hadn't answered my question, but I knew what he meant.

"This is dangerous. Yoshii's gonna make me fat," Satou said, coming back with a croquette of her own. Yoshii's hunger had proved contagious.

The appetizing scent of deep-fried food was very tempting, but it wasn't even lunchtime yet. And if I ate anything here, I wouldn't be able to finish the lunch we'd get on the bus. I'd had a lot of experience with my stomach and knew how such things worked.

"Right, I'll just have to diet when we get back!" exclaimed Satou. "We've got that sports festival next month, too."

Oh, right, I forgot all about that.

My memory of the event from last year was hazy, but I knew why: I hadn't actually gone. Sunao Aikawa had officially been present and on the volleyball team. I'd done decently, too. Friends from other classes had told me as much.

"What are we doing this year?" I asked.

Satou seemed surprised I was interested, but she was happy to answer.

"The boys are doing soccer and basketball, while the girls have softball and dodgeball."

I considered this. Softball was a lost cause, which left me with dodgeball.

"You going for basketball, Sanada?" Yoshii asked.

I gulped. I had no time to worry about myself. The moment I heard the boys' events, I should have been thinking about Sanada.

Heedless of my anxiety, he crossed his arms. "Good question," he mused. "I hadn't thought about it yet."

He probably hadn't been briefed on the event yet, either. It was hard to respond to something you'd just learned about.

"Oh yeah? Me neither."

Yoshii didn't push any further, and the topic died there, to my quiet relief.

His croquette finished, Yoshii balled the paper bag up and threw it into a nearby bin. I could see the oil on his lips gleaming in the sunlight. Judging from his smile, he was about to make a suggestion.

"Aikawa, and you, too, Class Rep. What do you think about renting kimonos tomorrow?"

"Nope," I said instantly.

"Never. They're cold. And why are you acting like I'm an afterthought? Besides, I thought you were a maid man."

Even in the face of Satou's flurry of jabs, Yoshii didn't waver.

"Maids and kimonos are *both* rad. But fine, be that way. Sanada and I will do it alone."

"Wait. Me too?" Sanada blinked at the mention of his name.

Yoshii threw an arm over his shoulders. "You gotta! It'll be a lifelong memory! We don't have to stop at just the clothes, either. Let's get our hair done, too! 'This hair, this hair… It's for a wig!'"

"Is that a quote?" I asked.

"It's from the old lady in 'Rashomon'!"

Oh, we read that in class.

"She was pulling the hair from corpses, though," Satou pointed out.

Yoshii waved a hand dismissively. "Details, details… It's pointless to worry about them!"

This reminded me of something, and I glanced at our surroundings.

"Isn't 'Rashomon' set around here?" I asked. "The gate was in Kyoto, right? I'd like to go if we can."

"It no longer exists," said Satou. "Supposedly, it stood where Senbon Street is now; they've got a sign up."

"Doesn't *sen* mean 'one thousand'? Kyoto people seem to be obsessed with that number," said Yoshii.

"Uh, Yoshii, can you get off me?" asked Sanada. Yoshii still had him in an armlock.

I gave the boys a look. "This group is doomed already."

"We sure are," Satou said. Then she leaned closer and whispered, "We've been goners since 'backward Pocky.'"

"…*Snrk*."

I hadn't expected the callback, and I was unable to contain my snort.

Satou grinned triumphantly, then Yoshii piled on. Sanada appeared to be enjoying the moment, too.

I glanced around at their faces.

I didn't know what any of them were thinking…but I felt like I'd picked the right group.



Does that mean you're doppelgängers?

Mochizuki didn't wait for an answer.

"So are you headed back to Shizuoka tonight?" he asked.

Fujinomiya was in Shizuoka Prefecture, but he meant the city. In fact, there were a lot of people for whom Shizuoka just meant the area right around Shizuoka Station.

We told Mochizuki we'd planned to stay somewhere in the vicinity but didn't know where yet, and he rolled his eyes at us. "Then meet up in the parking lot at four," he said, before heading off.

"Meet up for what?" I asked.

"Dunno," replied Aki.

Mochizuki's explanation had been considerably lacking, but I thought it was safe to assume he was giving us time to discuss his first question. Ignoring him could have consequences, so we'd have to bear that in mind.

Feeling bewildered, we hit up the restaurant and partook of the buffet, frolicked with some roaming sheep, tried milking some cows, and bought some cheesecake for Ricchan.

As we did the rounds, we saw Mochizuki feeding some rabbits and guinea pigs. Like with the butter-making experience, he appeared to be enjoying the ranch on his own. I didn't mind this, of course, but he was radiating such a strong aura of "Don't talk to me" that each time our paths crossed, we were careful to head the opposite way. We wanted to "let sleeping dogs lie," as they say.

But when we saw him riding a horse, Aki secretly filmed it from a nearby patch of shade. He was really flirting with danger with that one.

Time passed, and soon it was four o'clock. We headed to the parking lot and found Mochizuki waiting near the sign for the ranch.

I gulped. We knew what we had to say. Aki and I had discussed it at length as we toured the ranch. There was no use hiding things now.

"Mochizuki, we…"

"Wait, Aikawa." He raised a hand and cut me off.

Was he not planning to finish our talk? As I wondered what was going on, a white vehicle pulled into the lot. The passenger window opened, and an old woman in a floral cardigan looked out.

"Sorry I'm late, Shun," she said.

"You're not late at all," Mochizuki replied.

Her hair was all white, and she had lots of wrinkles around her eyes. She seemed like a pleasant woman, and when she smiled at us, I couldn't help smiling back. She was that kind of elderly lady.

Given what Mochizuki had said earlier, could she be the woman who raised Ryou?

"Friends of yours?" she asked.

"Underclassmen Ryou and I acted with. In the play I mentioned."

"Oh! The old couple? Or Abe, Minister of the Right?"

"Abe's not here. And these two don't have a place to stay."

"Then they simply must stay with us!"

Only then did I realize what was happening.

Things were moving awfully fast, and before I knew it, we had lodgings for the night. We were grateful for the offer, but I felt sure we were imposing. And how should we act around Ryou's parents?

Confused, I tried to back out. "Er, but…"

"It's fine! Don't worry about a thing," said the woman. "It might be a bit cramped, but you can squeeze in the back."

I turned to Aki and found he'd already made peace with the idea. He bowed to the elderly woman like a proper grown-up.

"We appreciate your generous offer!" he said, then raised his head and whispered, "Let's go, Nao."

I didn't have any reason to object further.

We followed Mochizuki into the back of the car and found a stern, old man in the driver's seat.

He wore a navy blue polo shirt and had a white towel draped around his neck. We bobbed our heads at him in the rearview mirror, and he briefly raked us over with his sharp gaze.

Quickly, we introduced ourselves. Then Taeko, the woman in the passenger seat, told us that the elderly man was called Yutaka. He never said a word.

He seemed every bit as imposing as she was comforting. Both of them had tanned faces and hands and were likely in their early sixties.

The car had an unfamiliar smell to it, which made me nervous. I kept shifting my butt around on the seat, and Aki must have noticed, because he held my hand behind our rucksacks.

Mochizuki had told the elderly couple about *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, New Adaptation*, and they seemed comfortable around each other; he and Taeko filled the silence. Feeling the warmth of Aki's hand on mine, I settled for a few brief replies and spent the rest of the time looking at the view outside the window.

Milkland—another ranch you could visit—had lots of cows roaming around in the evening light. In the distance, the mountains were turning red, but all around us were fields. There was still a lot to discover in Fujinomiya.

We drove for maybe fifteen minutes before turning onto a narrow side road.

At the end was a single-story house with a two-car garage. The left side was empty, and the old man soon pulled our car into the space. There was a mini truck in the other spot, and the walls were lined with machines I couldn't identify.

We thanked the elderly couple, and Aki got out first. Outside the garage, we found ourselves face-to-face with an expanse of fields.

I gave them a good look over.

"Oh, this is where…"

In the light of the setting sun, the fields were neatly tended, green leaves dancing in the wind. But these were clearly not the same crops I'd seen in Ryou's picture.

"We harvested the corn in July," Yutaka said from behind me. "Those are fall potatoes and daikon radishes."

I turned around and found him smiling.

"We keep a field for the fun of it. Ryou's painting may have exaggerated the size."

The sight of his smile made everything feel real.

That's right. They're the ones from Ryou's painting—the people who brought her up. She was a bit forceful and a little prickly, but

she had the kindest heart around. It was Taeko and Yutaka who raised her to be that way.

I could hear water babbling; there must be a creek nearby. Listening to the sound, I took a few steps and savored the feel of the soil under my feet.

I was greeted by a sign with the name "Mori" written on it, in front of a nice, old Japanese-style home. Sunao's mom had grown up in a similar building, so it felt familiar.

Taeko slid open the front door, stepped inside, and turned on the lights. Sunlight had faded the walls of the entrance, but the couple had hung a painting there—the watercolor piece Ryou did for art class.

When she saw me looking at it, Taeko said, "The teachers brought it to the wake. And our son brought it to us."

"…Oh."

It wasn't the only painting, either. The entire hall was covered in Ryou's art.

A lot of the pieces were focused on the splendor of nature. One showed Mount Fuji in winter, another a magical waterfall, and yet another ordinary scene from some roadside—all vividly rendered in colored pencil or watercolor.





I saw a picture of cows munching on grass and sheep napping in the midday sun. Perhaps Ryou had carried her sketchbooks or set up a canvas at the ranch. Many of them were rougher and more amateurish than her recent work, and I felt the presence of her younger self inside them.

Several pieces had bits of paper glued to them—not just Ryou's name or the name of her school, but gold or silver stickers gleaming in the light, indicating that she'd won a prize. All of them were displayed as is, without frames or anything, and they felt like a part of the house itself.

I could feel Ryou's smile from all around me. She was too omnipresent to call what I felt mere "traces" of her. She was everywhere here, and I could barely breathe.

Her presence was so palpable that I felt as if she'd suddenly open the front door any second. Or that when I turned the corner, a door would slide open, and her dazzling grin would peek out. It was indescribably strange to walk down this hall, all of us knowing full well we'd never see her again.

"No oils, huh?" Aki muttered. I just nodded, but Taeko didn't let that pass.

"I always told Ryou we'd buy her any supplies she needed and that she ought to give it a try."

"And what did she say?"

"That she didn't know when her life would end, so she didn't want to paint anything so time-consuming."

That silenced us both. Taeko didn't even turn around to face us. She marched on, leading us past the walls and their pale-colored pictures.

The floor creaked beneath our feet as we walked. Sunao planned to visit Nijo Castle on the third day of her trip, and I imagined its famous nightingale floors chirping beneath her feet.

Taeko led us into the living room, which was connected to the dining area. Both were fairly cluttered in a way that felt lived-in.

There was a glass-topped table in the center of the living room with a remote control set on it. Two legless chairs were lined up on a rug featuring a design of rabbits running through a field. Above the TV, I spotted a calendar of the type you flipped every day, and there was a little altar against the wall near the windows. It would have been easy to mistake for a cute wooden box, but I knew what it was.

It had a little vase with red and pink cosmos in it, and I could see the ends of incense sticks peeking out of the ash in the burner.

There was no photo. I was slightly relieved. If I saw Ryou's face right now, I'd forget all about being in a stranger's house and cry my eyes out.

"Would you like to say a prayer?" Taeko suggested, her voice soft.

I slowly nodded. Mochizuki and Yutaka must have gone somewhere else—there was no sign of them.

I knelt down on the cushion in front of the altar, struck a match, and lit the candle I found there. Then I picked up a small rod and gently struck the altar's bell. My hands were still pressed together when the clear note died away.

Aki took my place, offering a prayer to the altar with no urn. The sweet scent of sandalwood wafted past us as the incense stick's smoke trail rose toward the ceiling, nowhere else to go.

"We'd have liked to make one by the side of the field…," Taeko began, then trailed off.

There was no law against making a grave in your garden, as long as you didn't bury any remains. But they must have been worried about what the neighbors would think. I could feel their frustration.

"Maybe this is just the ramblings of a daft old woman, but we thought of Ryou as our own daughter," she said, hovering near the altar. Her voice was too soft to affect the incense smoke's path. "We only had the one boy, and finally having a girl to raise—well, we really doted on her. But from the moment Ryou arrived, she never asked for anything. She always acted apologetic toward us. Even

when she was tiny, she seemed to think she didn't belong. It hurt to watch. And I wasn't sure what to do for her, either—that child who looked just like Suzumi."

Her brow furrowed in anguish—then a gentle smile crossed her face.

"Then Yutaka put a little seed in her tiny hand. A cherry tomato. Those are difficult to grow from the seed, but Ryou worked so hard. She started with a planter, then moved it to the field once it grew. She kept asking how much water to give it, if it needed fertilizer, how to protect it from storms, when we could eat the tomatoes, and so on. She started talking and smiling more often. That's when we began calling her 'Ryou.' The first time we said it, her cheeks turned bright red. She was so delighted to have a name of her own."

Taeko closed her eyes, remembering how they'd slowly become a family. I listened closely, not making a sound.

"She was such a good artist, wasn't she? We talked to the council and got her in the local elementary school, and her teachers were always telling her how talented she was. One day, it got dark, and she still hadn't come home. We had our neighbors help look for her, and we found her in a field not far away. She was sketching the fireflies. She said they were so pretty, she simply had to draw them. She was so happy, so adorable—neither of us had it in us to scold her."

A tear ran down Taeko's laugh lines. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed her cheeks but failed to catch all the tears. She was sad and in pain. She'd lost two granddaughters.

"I'm sorry, Ryou," she said. "I know you wouldn't want me to be so gloomy. At this rate, I'll make both Ryou and Suzumi sad."

What would Ryou say if she could see this? Maybe she'd be mad at me. She might put her hands on her hips and shout, *Nao, why are you making my mom cry?!* I wished she could.

"I miss you, Ryou. Suzumi," said Taeko. "I wish I could see you both again."

At that, I started silently sobbing, unable to stop myself. Taeko pulled me close and patted my head.

She and her husband smelled the same, just like their house and car—it was the warm scent of soil and sunshine.

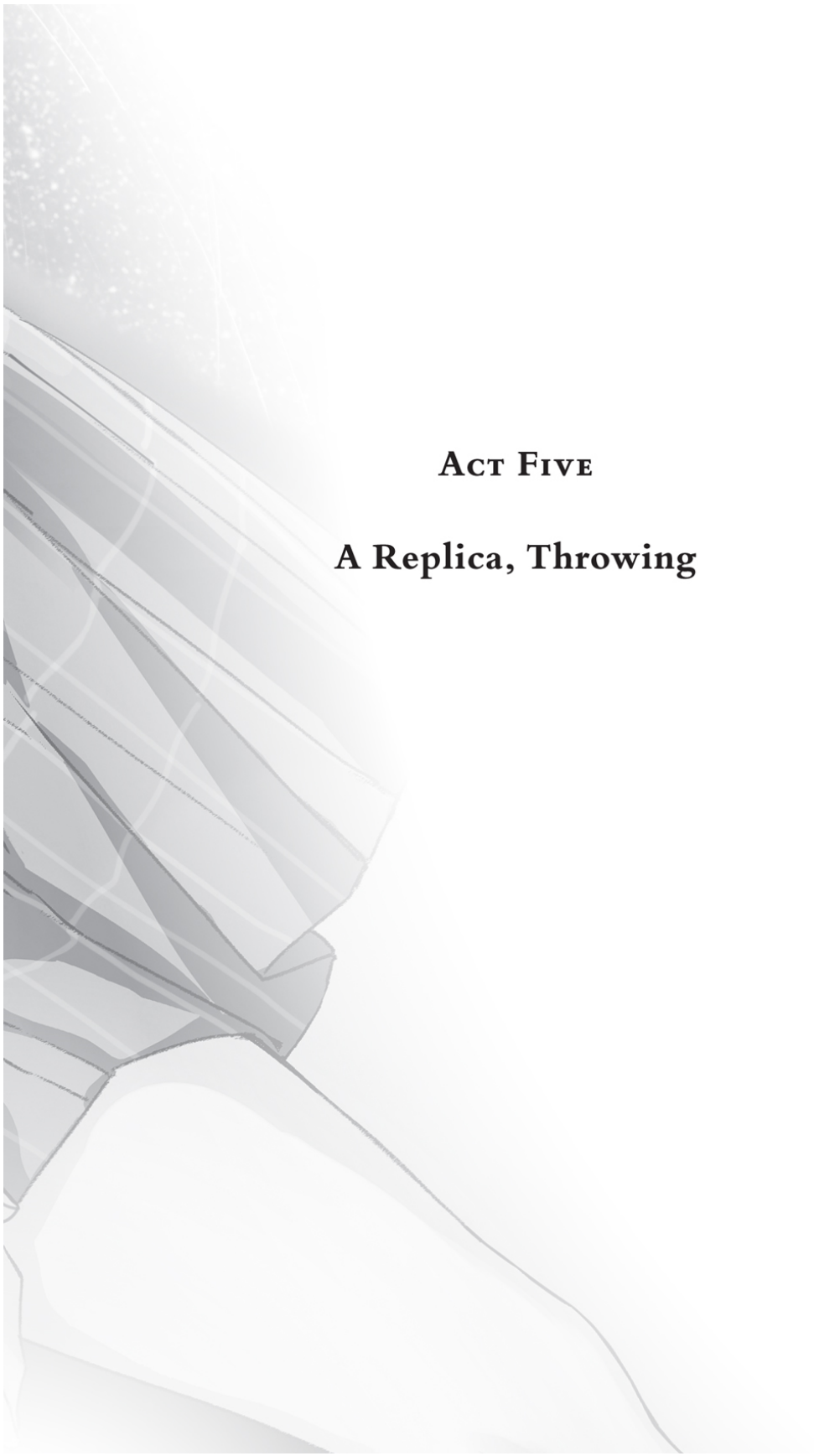
I was sure Ryou had smelled the same. She'd breathed in this scent, and it had embraced her. But by the time I met her, she'd been playing the role of Suzumi Mori for so long, it had faded away.

I called Ryou's name in my mind, and no answer came. Saying it aloud wouldn't make any difference. She'd vanished into thin air that day in the gym.

But it wasn't like she was nowhere to be found. She *hadn't* been forgotten.

She was here, sleeping, and I softly called to her:

You finally made it home, Ryou.



Act Five

A Replica, Throwing





I thought we'd be able to relax a bit once we arrived at the hotel, but my hopes were soon betrayed.

We went to our rooms, yet before we'd even finished unpacking, it was time for dinner. An hour later, we'd have to hit the baths, and each class was on a schedule. They were giving us thirty minutes, changing time included. We'd be very rushed, with hardly any time to wash off the day's grime and relax.

After that, though, all we had to do was get ready for bed. I had the spot by the window, and I lay back, finally letting the air at the bottom of my lungs escape.

I was sharing a twin room with Satou, but she was out at the group leader meeting. She was our class representative *and* our group leader, so she was always working. I had a lot of respect for her.

Someone once asked her why she'd volunteered for the role. She'd simply said it would look good on her college applications, but I was pretty sure that there was more to it.

I could hear girls laughing sporadically out in the hall and footsteps scurrying to and fro. They were probably running off to hang out in their friends' rooms. And not just girls' rooms, either—some of them were visiting boys. The teachers had their eyes peeled, and if they were caught, they'd be in for it. But that was none of my concern.

Alone in the room, I rolled over on my stomach and looked at photos on my phone. I scrolled through the album, kicking my legs back and forth.

"…Hee-hee."

Suddenly, my screen was full of Yoshii, mouth open wide as he pretended to eat one of the thousand torii, and I started giggling.

Every time I saw the idiotic image, I couldn't help but laugh. Yoshii's behavior was truly stupid, but…Sanada had laughed just as hard as I had. We'd had a lot of fun that day, and we were honestly glad we'd come along.

Maybe I should have engaged a little more with the field trip before summer vacation. Even a little shift in attitude might have made all the difference. Perhaps then those memories would have been bright and cheery—something to look fondly back on in years to come. It was too late to turn back the clock, but that made me wonder all the harder.

When my laughter subsided, I murmured, "Can't wait for tomorrow."

The words were too quiet to produce an echo. They fell and disappeared under the bed. My throat felt dry, so I rolled over.

It was 8:40 PM. The phone in my hand showed the time, so why had I checked the bedside clock? Was it just because seeing the digital display set into the wall reminded me I was on a field trip?

I heaved myself up and reached for my charcoal-gray sweatshirt. The air from the heater must have blown my disposable slippers away, but I caught up with them, shoved my phone in my pocket, grabbed my card key and wallet, and headed for the door.

I turned the cold knob, then listened for the sound of the autolock engaging before moving down the hall. The trip booklet contained a map of the hotel, so I knew where the vending machines were: just outside the door by the gift shop on the first floor.

The elevator was stuck on the tenth floor, so I took the stairs nearby. My thin-soled slippers flapped with each step. It was a childish noise, and I didn't care for it.

When I reached the first floor, I didn't see any other students—just a family with kids. It was a big hotel, and we didn't have the

place to ourselves.

I cut across the lobby and went out the double doors into a dark, little area, lit mainly by the flickering glow of the vending machines.

They were placed against the wall, and there was no one else around, only an empty wooden bench by the air conditioner condenser; the scent of cigarette smoke lingered in the vicinity.

What should I get? Water? Tea? They had fruit-flavored drinks, but those would only make me thirstier.

As I waffled, I felt a breeze. I looked toward it and saw the doors open again.

"Aikawa, got a moment?"

Three boys stood there, all from other classes. I didn't recognize them, but I'd never been good with faces.

I was already regretting leaving my room. *Too late for that now*, I told myself.

"…Sure."

The speaker's smile broadened, and the other two patted him on the shoulder encouragingly and whispered, "Go for it!" Then they headed back to the gift shop area. It was like a little play put on just to annoy me.

The remaining boy sat down at the edge of the bench. He looked my way, and I knew he wanted me to sit with him, but I didn't budge. My feet were rooted to the floor.

The cold Kyoto wind rushed past us, as if to emphasize the gulf between me and this boy. My spirits fell even further.

A request to talk on a school trip could mean only one thing.

Two days from now, we'd have free time, and people wanted a boyfriend or girlfriend to explore Kyoto with. They wanted to make some memories and brag about it to their classmates. I knew perfectly well how many students were into that crap.

"So?" I said, hoping I was wrong.

The boy shifted uncomfortably, but at my prompting, he seemed to make up his mind. He balled up his fists and said, "I'm in love with you. Will you go out with me?"

…Yeah, I thought so.

By the time we'd reached this foregone conclusion, the last traces of my good mood from that afternoon were gone, like sand slipping through my fingers.

I wanted to reach out and pluck up the grains, heedless of who saw me. If I acted fast enough, maybe I'd make it in time. Or was it already too late?

I could hear a car engine in the distance. Left behind in the darkness, I had to give the eyes boring into me an answer.

"I'm not interested in seeing anyone." My voice sounded like a sigh.

I'd been giving this same answer since junior high. It was pretty common for boys to ask me out. At first, I'd made the effort to apologize, but it took a lot of energy to say things I didn't mean.

I wasn't the least bit sorry. I was annoyed. I hated every second of this. But I knew being honest about that would make me into a villain. They'd probably make me into one when this was over, too.

The boy was stunned for a moment, but he didn't give up so easily.

"Does that mean…you're in love with someone else?"

"No."

"Then why not? Let's give it a shot. It's no big deal."

What was I supposed to say to that?

"Can we just not have this conversation? It's a waste of time," I said, turning my attention back to the vending machine.

Even if I didn't know this boy, I didn't want to see the shock on his face or see him turn red with anger or humiliation. Anything I saw would be shared with the other me.

The door opened, and his guardian angels emerged. They must have sensed the hostile vibe and come running.

I heard them whispering. I could only catch fragments of it. The boy who'd asked me out turned and walked away, intentionally hitting his heels hard against the floor. His friends didn't run after him. That was the difference between boys and girls.

One of the friends said, “Come on, Aikawa…”

My hackles went up immediately.

I’d seen the boy on the right before. I didn’t remember his first name, but we’d gone to the same elementary and junior high schools. Internally, I clamped my hands over my ears. I didn’t want to hear this. *Just turn and walk away.* That was how I’d protected myself in the past.

But another part of me thought I had to hear him out, that this was why I’d come here.

I was on this trip because I’d stopped running.

I wanted to run—but I stood my ground.

I was split into two parts, each trying to move in opposite directions, tearing my body in half and spraying red everywhere.

Covered in blood, I silently watched a pair of lips two meters away begin to move.

…The door opened.

Satou came out with a few coins in her hand. She saw me slumped on the bench and waved.

“Yo, Aikawa! I was wondering where you were.”

I didn’t answer. Satou paid this no mind and went to check on the vending machine’s offerings.

“You here to buy something?” she asked. “I just got out of the group leader meeting.”

She rolled her shoulders as though she was exhausted. But her profile looked way too upbeat for that to be true.

Had it been a few minutes or half an hour? I’d been frozen in time, and Satou had finally gotten me unstuck. Maybe that was why I told her the truth. Or maybe I just didn’t have the strength to hide it.

“Somebody asked me out.”

Satou whistled. “Sunao Aikawa, the belle of the school.”

Cackling, she dropped her coins in the machine. *Jingle jingle, clunk.* It spit out a little can, and she grabbed it. Then she sat down on the bench, leaving some space between us.

She'd gone with corn potage. The vending machine also sold green tea and matcha lattes—so this choice felt like a rejection of Kyoto's whole aesthetic.

Satou pulled the tab and used her fingers to dent the side of the can below the mouth. She noticed my puzzled look and acted sheepish.

"They said on TV that if you do this, you can get all the corn kernels out. I just remembered it, so I figured I'd give it a shot."

After blowing on it, Satou took a few sips of her corn potage.

"Don't answer this if you're not feeling up to it," she said.

"……"

I braced myself. I was certain she'd ask me who'd confessed.

"Did they say something else to you?"

But I was wrong. A very different question came through the steam wafting off her soup.

I didn't need to answer. But I felt a wave of heat rush up the back of my neck, like I'd stayed in the bath for too long.

I *wanted* to answer. I wanted to tell her—to tell someone. I wanted to share.

The unstoppable heat spread through me. I lowered my head and pushed my palms against my lap, digging the nails of my left hand into the back of my right.

It hurt, but the pain didn't feel real. Hoping my voice wouldn't shake, I opened my mouth just enough to speak.

Please. I don't care who, but someone, please listen.

"He said I don't have a kind bone in my body. Not the boy who asked me out—one of his friends."

"Damn."

Satou stuck out her tongue, her whole face scrunching up like she'd just bit into something foul. Her tongue was yellow from the soup.

"That's pathetic. Why should you be nice to some rando? And who brings a posse to ask a girl out? Does he take them to the bathroom, too?"

Satou unleashed a stream of jibes aimed at the absent boys. It should have felt good, but I couldn't agree with her.

I dug my nails further into my skin. That wasn't all of it.

"He said I used to be nicer."

"Hm? When was that?"

We'd gone to the same elementary school and junior high. I wasn't sure I'd gotten that across. And before Satou could say any more, a stream of other noises escaped my throat.

"I just… Why am I…so bad at everything?"

Putting myself down like that hurt. Saying it out loud just rubbed in how true it was. The words were like a brand upon my chest, a mark I'd never be free from.

That was why I did my best not to put things into words. I kept everything bottled up, hidden where nobody could see. Otherwise, I couldn't even stay standing.

"Aikawa, it's not worth worrying over." Satou laughed. She was making a show of it, trying to brush off the curse I'd just cast.

But I shook my head. "I can't seem to be nice to anyone!"

Before I knew it, I was yelling, leaning all the way forward, crushing my lungs. My head hurt, my eyes were on fire, and my voice was a screech, scarring the eardrums of anyone who heard it. My nails broke my skin, and ragged gasps escaped my clenched teeth.

I wasn't injured, so how could I hurt this much?

"I—I *want* to be nice! I want to be a kind, caring person! Like *she* is! I want to be like *her*!"

"'Like her'…?"

I knew I looked and sounded like a mess, but the words just wouldn't stop coming. I'd bottled it up for too long, and now it was all pouring out. I was shaking. The walls I'd built around me, my defenses, had reached their limit and were tumbling down.

I could see myself clutching my knees—how weak I looked. That was my real self, the one I didn't want anyone to catch a glimpse of.

"It…*always* hurts me, so why…am I so cold to everyone? I don't mean it. The words just…come flying out of me, and I can't stop them. I'm so bad at everything!"

I was always wrong.

I was wrong about everything, all the time.

I knew how messed up I was, but I couldn't do anything to fix it.

…Oh.

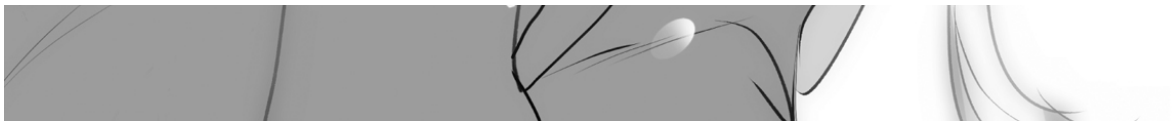
When had I first realized I was always alone, no matter who I was with?

It had started with my face.

Ever since I could remember, I'd been aware that my appearance caught people's attention. People on the street would point at me and say I was cute. Strangers would come up and try to take my picture. I was treated like an animal in a glass cage; no permission was required to photograph me.

I was born with pale, brownish hair—and I didn't hate that. My parents gave me my large pale eyes, my little button nose, my long limbs—and I couldn't bring myself to resent them. I wanted to treasure the things I had.





When I didn't like something, I said so.

When something felt wrong, I got mad.

I thought that was the right choice, but somewhere along the way, people started hesitantly suggesting otherwise or whispering behind my back.

****'s being awful again. She's scary. Why is she so harsh?* One person after another, using different words and phrases, but all agreeing I was cold and mean, driving me farther into the corner.

That boy had done the same thing. According to him, I wasn't just mean—I didn't have a kind bone in my body.

I had no human warmth. No capacity for consideration. No thought for how others felt. All of that was missing. Absent. Broken.

And that's why I couldn't tolerate someone who knew nothing about me acting like they were in love with me. Not when I didn't even love myself.

"I know why I'm like this… It's because I'm not real."

The wave of emotions subsided, leaving only emptiness. I was all worn out, but the inside of my head was radiating heat like it were boiling. I'd whispered those words, but it came out more like a groan, as though I was enduring a migraine.

"What do you mean, you're 'not real'?" Satou said pointedly.

One hand on my head, I gave her a searching look.

My hair was a mess, and it blocked most of my vision. But I could see Satou, one hand on the bench, leaning in and watching me intently. She was taking everything I said so seriously that I almost smiled.

I could tell her, but she'd never understand. She'd think I was nuts. Maybe she'd never speak to me again.

But I was past caring. It was too late for that. Nothing mattered anymore. And so I might as well tell her.

"…I can create an exact copy of myself. A replica."

I brushed back my hair and looked up. I could barely see the moon or stars in the Kyoto sky. There seemed to be a black veil

drawn across it all, trapping the heavens behind a layer of unfettered darkness.

"It started with a small problem. I had a fight with a younger friend, couldn't bring myself to apologize—and before I knew it, there she was. A girl with my face."

I remembered how my heart had leaped.

Nobody else could make a copy of themselves. Was I just that special? I felt like a character in a story. Maybe I had witch's blood flowing in my veins. It was so exciting.

"If I asked for help, she would appear out of nowhere. She was like my secret friend. We played a lot without my parents knowing. We split snacks between us. When we played rock-paper-scissors, our highest streak of ties was only twelve. But we both had a habit of starting with paper… I'd sometimes send her to school in my place, tricking my classmates for fun. We did a lot of that."

Satou wasn't reacting. Was she stunned by this wild fantasy of mine? I didn't care and kept going.

"When I was little, everyone called me Nao-chan. My family, Ricchan, my other friends. So I called my replica 'Nao,' too."

"Ricchan's…the first-year from the Literature Club, yeah? The one who played Abe?"

Satou answered her own question. She was listening, at least.

Ritsuko Hironaka became Ricchan. Sunao Aikawa became Nao-chan.

When we were little, we all shortened our friends' names. Nicknames were an ironclad rule, proof of friendship. Her family only ever called her Ritsuko—I was the first to call her Ricchan.

She was a cheerful kid with a heart of gold. Not big on studying, but curious and enthusiastic about the things that interested her. She knew so much.

I cared a lot about her.

"But one day, I realized that Ricchan had started calling me 'Sunao-chan.'"

I didn't notice at first.

It went right past me—but as time went by, it swept me away in a wave of panic and fear. I didn't believe it at first. I figured I had to be imagining things. I fought against the realization, but she kept calling me by the wrong name, day after day.

"Ricchan's always been perceptive. I think she figured out there were two of us early on. She started distinguishing between us, calling me 'Sunao-chan,' and my replica 'Nao-chan.'"

"Wow." Satou started to say something else, then changed her mind. Stone-faced, I jumped ahead of her.

"Funny, right? To Ricchan's eyes, *I* was the fake."

My replica was closer to the old Nao-chan, so she got to keep the name. The one who seemed different got a new name, "Sunao-chan."

When I worked that out, I wanted to disappear.

I didn't blame Ricchan, and I still couldn't hold it against her. But it hurt. It hit me hard. Alone in my bed, I'd cried about it over and over.

Why? What had I done wrong? Why did Ricchan think I was the imposter?

"You didn't tell your replica?" Satou asked.

"I tried. I said she couldn't be Nao, told her to give it back—but it didn't help."

She didn't even get what I was saying. She was born with everything I had and wasn't conscious of having taken anything away from me.

And my replica didn't share my feelings. From what she said, my experiences were like a movie to her. She was merely sitting in the audience, watching.

What did the protagonist feel? What had they almost said? Unless it was explicit, the audience was free to make their own interpretations.

Nao shared my memories, but things that left scars in my heart meant something entirely different to her. It took a lot of courage for

me to say she couldn't have my name—but it just came across like I was being mean.

I started retreating into a shell, saying less and less. In junior high, I started struggling to keep up with class. I'd gotten my first period in sixth grade and couldn't handle it—or anything else.

That was when Nao offered to help me study. I said no and told her to take the test for me instead.

Just as I'd expected, she filled the role of Sunao Aikawa perfectly. Part of me had hoped there'd be friction and conflicts, but she made school sound like a dream come true.

That summer, Ricchan moved. Her parents' jobs took them elsewhere. I missed her—but part of me was relieved. That was a turning point.

I decided to distance myself from Nao. Otherwise, I'd lose track of who I was. If I couldn't separate Nao from Sunao Aikawa, then I had to consciously diverge from her.

I started by hating studying and sports. I decided I liked Pretz better than Pocky.

It went beyond mere preferences—I even changed my demeanor at school. I started hanging out with the flashy girls in class, going to the bathroom with them, and spending time with them after school.

I was just one of that crowd—and that made things easier. It distanced me from the people I grew up with…and left me without a single friend I could open up to.

Surrounded with shallow relationships, I tried to change myself, to change everything I could think of. But the more I did that, the more I lost track of what I actually liked.

What kind of person *was* I?

When I looked in the mirror, all I saw was a hollow shell of the person Sunao Aikawa used to be.

"Okay," said Satou. "Guess I had the wrong idea about you."

Her soup must have gotten cold already, but she was still holding it in both hands. That proved just how focused she'd been on my

story.

"I picked up on it, you know. I wasn't *sure* until the festival."

This didn't come as much of a surprise.

"I watched you closely," she said, "and thought you just sucked at hiding it. But I got that part wrong. *You* never meant to hide it."

"Yeah, I didn't see the point."

Once Ricchan caught on, I didn't care who else found out. I told Nao not to get caught, but only because treating her like crap made me feel better.

That was the only thing that worked.

"So, Aikawa, you never tried to get rid of your replica?"

"I did. Countless times."

It was the obvious solution. If I didn't call for Nao, then she'd never appear again. No matter how much of a fake I was, I still held the reins.

Summer break was my longest attempt, but it hadn't been my first.

"I just couldn't. I always end up calling her back. I mean…*she's* the real Sunao Aikawa. She does everything better than I do."

No matter how much I tried to stop myself, before I knew it, I was calling to the void. I was scared of Nao, but I couldn't do without her.

I'd only been alive for sixteen years, but there seemed to be no end of hardship.

I knew the girls in my group thought I was just a pretty face. They'd taken me to mixers, telling me it would be just girls, and an hour in, they smiled at me and told me to leave—and only then did I figure it out.

A girl had cried and accused me of stealing the boy she liked, even though I had no idea what she was talking about. Everyone had taken her side, saying I'd done the same thing before. I didn't even know the boy in question. I'd probably never even spoken to him.

These things left me shattered. I couldn't pick myself up. I couldn't bear it. I couldn't live without Nao's help.

It felt weird to admit it, but I was pretty sure I was like a god to Nao.

She would always look right at me, nervous and stressed, her eyes wavering. Her whole body would be on pins and needles, determined to catch my every word and gesture. She was like a well-trained dog waiting for its owner's command.

It was impossible for a god and a mortal to understand each other. The weight of her expectations was crushing, but I did my level best to live up to her delusions, desperately clinging to them.

I'd often close my eyes or look out the window. I'd make sure never to say how I really felt. If I could keep her from seeing or hearing anything important, I wouldn't have to share it with her. I could keep her from finding out my secrets. That way, she'd never know I wasn't a god but just an imposter.

I started coughing. I'd talked too much. I'd stepped out of my room because I was thirsty, after all. How had I wound up breaking someone's heart and exposing the wounds on my own?

Feeling silly, I started to turn toward the vending machine. But just then, I felt a powerful gaze and reflexively flipped around to meet it.

Satou's eyes were boring into me. She was so intense that it scared me. It was a ferocious look.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Satou?"

She whispered something under her breath. I couldn't quite hear, but I sensed she was collecting her thoughts. Then she nodded.

"Okay, I get it, Aikawa. I think I do anyway."

Her voice was like water on the dry sand within me. Perhaps Satou had realized something even I couldn't. I began to hope against hope.

I wanted to know what she was thinking right away. But she put a hand to her chin, pausing dramatically, then looked over her shoulder.

"I suppose it's safe to assume you're more or less the same as Aikawa?"

I blinked. She was staring at the corner of the building. A tall shadow stepped out, hands raised.

"Is that you, Sanada?" I asked.

"…Sorry. I didn't mean to eavesdrop." He scratched his cheek, looking apologetic. He must have heard almost everything. "I'm surprised you spotted me, Satou."

"I'm in the Kendo Club," she replied. "We can sense harm coming."

"I don't mean you any harm."

"Oh, wait! Sanada, were you gonna ask Aikawa out, too?" she teased him mercilessly, and he threw up the white flag.

"No! I was just thirsty and came out the other door!"

He jerked his chin, but it was too dark to see. I'd left through the door by the gift shop, so he must have used the other exit.

"You want anything, Aikawa?" he asked. "I'm buying."

"Oh, me!" Satou cried, throwing up a hand. "I'm craving a white grape Qoo!"

"I didn't offer to treat you, but fine."

Sanada put some coins in the machine and pressed the same button three times.

He handed me the first of the small plastic bottles.

"Here."

I still hadn't said anything.

"…Thanks."

It didn't sit right, but I took the drink. It would serve as an apology for eavesdropping.

Sanada pulled the lever on the machine and collected his change. Eyes on his rounded back, I unscrewed the lid.

I hadn't realized how heated I'd gotten—the sweet chill of the fruit drink really hit the spot, and I downed half the bottle in one go.

Sanada sat down on the far end of the bench, with Satou between us. After taking a swig, Satou began speaking.

“So both of you can make replicas? Identical copies of yourselves?” she asked, confirming.

I nodded. Sanada hesitated but acknowledged it as well.

This was the first time anyone had asked me so directly. I was sure Sanada was the same.

People were way more preoccupied with their own problems than they realized. All they cared about were their own lives, grades, romances, and friends. Other people were just an extension of their daily lives.

But Satou had a keen eye, and she wasn’t locked into any specific group. She was good at taking in the big picture view of those around her. That was probably why she’d picked up on the discrepancies. And, unlike most, she lacked the common sense not to bring up what she’d noticed.

“Okay, that settles that,” she said. “You mind if I talk for a bit?”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. At a touch of my finger, the screen lit up. It was dim, set to nighttime mode. The time was 9:27 PM. We still had a solid twenty minutes before the lights-out roll call.

The bench felt cold, and my fingers and toes were numb. But I wanted to hear what she had to say.

“Go ahead.”

Sanada nodded, not objecting.

“Thanks,” Satou replied. Then she let out a long breath.

She leaned back against the bench and relaxed, tossing her tracksuit-clad legs out in front of her. The gesture felt like a ritual designed to soothe her jagged nerves.

“You remember the post-festival assembly in the gym? When President Moririn vanished into thin air, I remembered something. Back in junior high, there were two of me.”

I gaped at her. “…You mean…you have a replica, too?”

Satou shook her head, a look of resignation on her face. “Not anymore.”

I had no idea what she meant. *Not anymore?* If Nao vanished, I could always call her back. It had even worked when she’d died.

She'd just be there like nothing had happened, wearing my clothes.

"Say someone had a friend. Let's call her 'A.' And that friend was getting bullied in class."

Satou was clearly talking about herself. I knew that but said nothing. She kept her tone bright, and I just listened.

"Half of me wanted to help A, and the other half of me didn't dare. Sweeping in to save a friend is wonderful and all, but what if I wound up bullied and isolated, too? That's a fear anyone can relate to, I think."

Schools are often said to be societies of their own, like little nation-states. They were a unique space, where special, limited relationships formed. If you didn't fit into a clique, you were ostracized, an outcast. And what happened inside the school's walls usually stayed there.

"I was scared of that happening, but I still wanted to be there for A."

She held up her left and right index fingers. Two Satous, alike in every way, fighting each other.

"If I'd just gone with my gut and helped her… If I'd put all other concerns aside and sacrificed everything to save a friend… If I'd had that strength in me…"

The two Satous clashed, and blood sprayed. The one on the right staggered and stumbled off the stage, leaving her left index finger behind. Only one Kozue Satou remained.

"My replica stood up for A. She yelled, 'Bullying is wrong!' and got through to all the bullies. That Kozue Satou was a hero." Satou smiled. She'd packed a lot of sarcasm into the word *hero*. "And with her job done, she went away. The Kozue Satou left behind wasn't bullied, but just as she'd predicted, she became an outcast. Unable to make any real friends, she wound up drifting from group to group, never fully part of any of them. And that's it!"

It wasn't much of a happy ending, but she was clearly done.

"…Where'd your replica go?" I asked.

Had she simply disappeared without a word? Where was she now?

Satou shrugged theatrically. She might have simply been shivering from the cold.

"Beats me," she said. "All I know is—no matter how long I waited, she never came back to me."

A replica who didn't return. Something felt wrong about that. I shook my head to sort out my thoughts and bit my lip.

The key to Satou's story lay elsewhere. I couldn't just sit by and let it fade away.

"So, um…is a replica like your idealized self?" Sanada asked, stumbling over his words.

"I dunno," said Satou. "That doesn't sound quite right."

Listening to them, I thought it through myself.

"If you could just summon your ideal self, that would be like magic," Satou continued. "I mean, if there were still wizards and warlocks in the world, that would be pretty cool. I'd love to sling lightning and wield fire and ice."

"So then, what's your take on replicas, Satou?"

"Well, I think…they're like something incredibly close to your ideal self."

Sanada didn't get the difference, and Satou laughed, though I wasn't sure why.

Far too late, she took another sip from her can of corn potage. She'd left it sitting on one corner of the bench all this time.

Holding it up like a telescope, she peered in, then pumped a fist and showed it off. It was like a cave with no exit—and not a single piece of corn was left within. It felt like a magic trick.

"You call for help, and they show up out of nowhere. They're like TV heroes. 'Help us, Anpanman! Save us, Doraemon!'" Satou made it sound like a joke, but she wasn't kidding. Her eyes were serious. "We've still got some time left, and since we're here anyway—can we hear your story, Sanada?"

"Mine?"

"Well, yours and your replica's. Did he tell you anything about President Moririn? I'd love to know more about that."

She was acting like she was just curious, but it was clear she thought it would give me a hint or two. It was like she was waiting for me to reach a certain conclusion.

Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump.

From the left side of my chest, my heart was pounding.

I had a replica, and so did Sanada. Satou used to have one, too, and so did the former student council president.

Why had we all created them? Why were they different from their originals?

There must be a reason we looked the same but had different personalities. A reason for why the replicas could easily do what their originals couldn't.

Thoughts spun slowly through my throbbing head, but I was starting to see an answer. And as I arrived at it, I felt as if the floor beneath my feet were crumbling away.

If that were true, then it would mean replicas were……

"…And that's all I really know."

Sanada's tale ground to a halt. He shot Satou an anxious look, and she nodded several times.

"Very interesting. Thanks, Sanada."

"I'm glad you think so."

"And there's one other thing that's piqued my curiosity," she said, looking like a scientist—this was no longer *her* problem. "It's something I'd like to try out tomorrow, while we're with the group. I'll tell you why later."

Sanada looked slightly overwhelmed by her enthusiasm, but I was just worn out. Part of me wanted to drop the whole thing. My modest goal was fading into the background.

Perhaps that was the price I had to pay—for using a replica and for refusing to think about her or myself.

Satou was making our stagnated time speed back up again. Sanada and I were powerless to resist, because deep down, we both wanted to know more, too.

Tomorrow, I'd be forced to confront everything I'd been running from.

I'd have to stand face-to-face with *her*. There was no avoiding it.



"We've got rooms aplenty, so please stay the night. Shun's been here since yesterday."

Aki and I took Taeko up on her offer and decided to stay at the Mori residence. Our plans for a three-day, two-night school trip might actually work out.

For dinner, Taeko and Yutaka dropped a hot plate in the center of the dining table and made Fujinomiya *yakisoba*—or rather, a dish called *shigureyaki*, which was a combination of Fujinomiya *yakisoba* and *okonomiyaki*.

Fujinomiya *yakisoba* was a local dish that had been around for a while and had received its name as part of a town-wide revitalization campaign. When most people thought of B-tier Shizuoka gourmet food, they would probably think of this dish right alongside Hamamatsu gyoza.

What makes Fujinomiya *yakisoba* different from regular *yakisoba*, you ask? Well, it uses a special type of noodle, adds in pork cracklings, and is finished off with dashi powder. It's a lot like Shizuoka *oden*.

The chewy noodles were fun to eat, and the sauce was strongly flavored and went well with the cabbage and cracklings. The cracklings themselves were packed with umami and coated your tongue with oil.

It was one of those dishes where carbs teamed up with other carbs and somehow made the whole thing even tastier—a bit like

modanyaki or *Hiroshima-yaki*. Really, the name was the biggest difference.

Taeko also made some delicious steamed potatoes. They were straight from the couple's fall crop and loaded with melted butter, the flavor of happiness.

I forgot my manners and asked for seconds. We'd hit the buffet at the ranch and had crepes *and* ice cream, but one could never eat too much on a school trip.

After we finished, I was first in the bath.

Once we'd each had a turn, Taeko called out, "Come help me put the futons down!" and we responded with an enthusiastic "okaaay!"

We'd been watching TV in the living room, but that got us on our feet.

The bedroom we'd be using that night was right next to the living room.

It consisted of a set of two Japanese-style rooms with tatami floors, separated by sliding doors. According to Taeko, they often let guests sleep there. I mentally counted the tatami mats (which smelled amazing). There were six in the part next to the living room and eight in the part beyond the sliding doors. That was fourteen in total, making the space around twenty-four square meters.

The exterior shutters were closed, and there was a mosquito coil lit. Aki and I pulled futons and blankets from the top shelf of the closet, while Mochizuki took his from the lower shelf.

"Take that end, Aki," I said.

"Got it."

"On three! One, two…"

We pulled both ends, spreading the material out on the floor. I was starting to enjoy myself—it felt like a club excursion. Mochizuki had already done this the night before, and he was moving a lot faster than we were.

But soon, we'd gotten our futon laid out and had set two pillows next to each other. Job complete.

…Wait, something isn't right here.

We were clearly missing a futon. I swung around and reinspected the closet. But there was nothing hiding inside, not even a sleeping Doraemon.

"The closet's empty," I said, perplexed.

"…Sure looks that way," Aki agreed.

Were we being encouraged to share a futon? If that was the case, someone really should have mentioned earlier that there weren't enough to go around.

As we stood there awkwardly, Taeko poked her head in and put a hand to her cheek.

"Oh dear," she said. "Sorry. Guess we'll need another futon! I'll get one from the other closet."

We'd both turned bright red, and only now did we start breathing again. Mochizuki had been watching us with a smirk on his face.

"I knew you were dating. It's so obvious."

Minor incidents aside, our sleeping arrangements were complete.

Mochizuki had set his futon out in the six-mat area, while we'd set ours in the eight-mat one. Aki would be sleeping in the middle.

Already changed into the pajamas I'd brought, I knelt down on my futon and looked the boys over.

Aki was doing stretches. He said he always did them before bed. I could tell he was paying special attention to his right ankle. Mochizuki was lying on his back, tapping his phone.

I fidgeted, trying to find the right timing. My hair was dry, and my teeth were brushed. Everything was ready—so when should I say it? Now? Five seconds later?

"Ready for bed?" Mochizuki asked.

"Whaaat?!" I shrieked awkwardly. *The night's just getting started!*

"What was that for?" he asked, frowning.

There was no use dithering further. I raised a hand to the rafters and voiced my desire.

"I want to have a pillow fight!"

This was our school trip. And you *had* to have a pillow fight on a school trip. You'd keep it going till the teachers yelled at you, and

then, once the lights were out, you'd talk about who liked who and who you thought was dating who. You might even share secret plans to ask someone out before the trip was over.

Sunao never took part in such things. Throughout elementary and junior high, she always went right to sleep. But *I* wanted to do it. These things were a critical part of any coming-of-age story, and I wanted to try it all out for myself.

I was bursting with excitement, but Mochizuki—clearly not into the idea—jerked his chin at the pillows.

"We only have three," he said.

"Then you'll have to use these cushions, too," came a voice from above us.

Behind Mochizuki, the doors to the living room slid open—and a whole bunch of cushions tumbled in.

Were the cushions talking? No—I could see Yutaka's face peering over the pile.

"Wreak havoc!" he said with a grin. The door closed again.

Now we had permission from the homeowners themselves. I got to my feet, a smile spreading across my lips.

"You heard the man! Let's get this— *Mmph!*"

I was not allowed to finish.

A pillow hit me in the face, and I fell over backward onto my futon. Mochizuki had snatched up his pillow and had flung it right at me.

That was the first strike, and it was merciless. Aki felt the need to chastise my attacker.

"That was *not* a throw meant for a girl."

"She'll live. It's just a pillow."

He was loosening up his wrist and grinning—clearly motivated.

"A pillow with *beans* in it! That's gotta hurt."

While they were arguing, I sat up.

"See? She's fine!" said Mochizuki.

I sat with my head down and my legs apart, and I gingerly touched my nose.

“Mm? Something wrong, Aikawa?”

“…Sorry, anyone have a tissue? I think my nose is bleeding,” I said.

“Seriously?” I saw Mochizuki quiver. He hastily went to search his rucksack. “Uh, hang on, I should have some…”

“Gotcha!”

The moment his guard was down, I grabbed the pillow he’d thrown at me and flung it right back.

It was a beautiful, clean hit. I’d smacked him right upside the face.

Sadly, it failed to knock him out. The pillow slid down his shoulder onto the floor, and he turned back with an audible creak.

“You little… You tricked me?!”

“And another!” yelled Aki.

But his follow-up was nimbly dodged.

“Fine, be that way! This means war!” With that, Mochizuki grabbed a cushion from the heap at hand. “Rahhh!”

He spun a few times, before flinging the cushion like a boomerang. Aki caught it with his stomach and flung it right back, but Mochizuki had a pillow for a shield.

“Smooth.”

“I’m a third-year. Do you have any idea how many pillows I’ve thrown?”

Aki and Mochizuki’s furious exchange continued. I kept watch, carefully creeping over to the pile of cushions.

I took one in each hand and lashed out at Mochizuki from his blind spot. “Don’t forget about me!”

“Dual wielding?! Crap!”

But the cushions I held were too big! I threw them with all my might, but I didn’t have enough power to reach either boy, and both projectiles landed on the floor in between us. Now defenseless, I was struck by a pillow to my back.

From that point on, it was chaos. Cushions, pillows, and every combination of the two flew through the air. We’d crouch, grab

whatever was in reach, throw it every which way, dodge whatever was incoming, then rinse and repeat.

Sometimes it was two-on-one, but no alliance lasted long. In a pillow fight, you could only trust yourself.

And thus, in the end, there was no true victor.

Pillows and cushions dotted the tatami. The neatly spread futons were now a crumpled mess. None of us had the energy to stand. We were spread out on the floor, gasping for breath.

"Wow…I'm burning up…," I said, gasping, fanning myself with both hands. I was so overheated that the mild breeze didn't help at all.

I had my hair up, but the back of my neck was still a furnace. My heart was racing. Exhaustion could be pleasant, but I was well past that point. I bet my muscles would be sore in the morning. I hoped so.

"Pillow fights are so much fun!" I exclaimed.

"Satisfied?" Aki asked, and I beamed back at him.

"Totally! That was amazing."

"Nice. Let's clean up."

Mochizuki rolled his eyes at us and started piling the cushions to one side. He'd been more into our fight than anyone, and I made a sour face at him before I started to help clean up.

I'd wanted to keep playing, but it was now almost ten.

The old folks' bedroom was pretty far away, but we were still in the same house. It would be rude to keep making a bunch of noise. We turned out the lights, except for a small orange night-light. Then we lay down and said good night.

…I wasn't sleepy.

The excitement of the fight had gotten me all worked up. My adrenaline was pumping, and I was ready for action.

"Mochizuki," I said, "there's no way I can sleep like this."

"……"

"Mochizuki?"

I stopped talking and pricked up my ears. Listening closely, I could hear snoring. Apparently, Mochizuki was a snorer. I giggled.

"Are you asleep, Aki?" I whispered.

His futon shifted, and a moment later, two eyes turned my way. That alone was thrilling. I bet he had no clue how fast my heart was beating.

"I'm still up," he said.

He was no more able to sleep than I was.

Whispering in the dark felt kind of naughty, like we were breaking the rules.

"Hey, hey. Can I come over there?" I asked, pointing at Aki's futon.





“No way.” My accomplice shook his head. He didn’t even hesitate. “I’m not planning on touching you, but I’m only human. I’d rather not be tempted.”

He glanced over his shoulder, conscious of Mochizuki’s presence. When he turned back, Aki shot me an intense look.

“I want to take good care of you, Nao.”

It was a clear rejection. Meeting his gaze, I spoke my mind, too.

“But I want you to touch me.”

I’d meant to speak quietly, but I could hear my voice echoing. Though maybe it was just in my head.

Aki looked taken aback. Then he frowned, like I’d betrayed him somehow. “You really mean that?”

“Yeah,” I said, without a trace of hesitation. “If you hold my hand, I think I can fall asleep.”

I needed his help. If he wouldn’t hold hands, I would be in trouble. I needed to touch him! Nothing else mattered.

I put that wish into a look, and Aki turned so red, I could see his blush even with the lights out.

“Aki?”

He was acting odd. Did he have a fever?

Aki put a hand over his face and made several odd noises. I could see him glaring at me from between his fingers. He wasn’t the least bit intimidating.

“Absolutely not.”

“Aw! Why?”

Before I knew it, Aki had become Aki-adamant.

“Because I said so.”

“Tch!”

“You can’t convince me.”

I was getting nowhere. What had I done to make him so sulky?

Aki rolled over so his back was to me, and I gave him a dirty look. But in the end, I was forced to throw in the towel. I pulled the covers up against my chest and let out a piteous sigh.

I saw Aki's shoulders twitch in the dark. No matter how mad he was pretending to be, I could tell he was alert to my every move.

Making my voice sound like I was on the verge of tears, I said, "You really won't do it?"

"……"

There was a long silence. I was definitely getting to him. *Just one more push.*

"Aki."

If this didn't work, I would just have to sneak into his futon.

But as that thought crossed my mind, he finally gave in and held out his left hand.

Aki's hand was bony and angular, and it seemed to glow in the darkness. Delighted, I rolled over and moved closer, grasping it tight.

For a while, I played around with it, making it pat my head and touch my cheeks. Then I rubbed my cheek against it. If I were a kitten, I would have been purring.

I liked this new Aki, all palm and fingers.

"Please stop playing with my hand," he said stiffly, as if he were reading off a cue card.

His face was even redder now. Maybe I'd gone too far.

Contrite, I recalled my original purpose and tried to lock fingers with him.

"You guys sure love to flirt, huh?"

My heart leaped out of my chest.

Only one sliding door was closed, and Mochizuki's voice had come from beyond it.

I let go of Aki's hand and hid beneath the futon cover. Then, realizing it was far too late, I stuck my head back out.

"M-Mochizuki, weren't you asleep?"

"I was only pretending."

That's right—he's in the Drama Club! I thought. But I wasn't in a state of mind to be impressed.

I'd thought we were alone, and I'd totally taken advantage of my boyfriend's kind heart. I'd wound him up and had my way with him.

But knowing our senior was listening in the whole time changed everything.

"If we hit him with a pillow, maybe he'll get amnesia," I hissed, blushing furiously.

"No need for threats. Please, go on!" Mochizuki said, grinning mercilessly.

I seriously considered throwing my pillow at him.

"We're done!" I declared. "I'm going to sleep!"

"Then let's gossip," said Mochizuki. "Talking about love is part of the school trip experience, right?"

That put me on the spot. Gossip was right up there with pillow fights—a must for any school trip. And yet somehow, I wasn't feeling it.

"If you're trying to be considerate, don't. I'm made of sterner stuff."

I raised myself up enough to look over Aki at our senior.

Mochizuki had his hands folded behind his head. His eyes were open…but where was he looking? At the shadowy ceiling or somewhere else…?

"That's not true," I said. Maybe I should've kept my mouth shut. But I was bad at pretending not to notice. "No one could be *fine* after losing someone they love."

"If even you can see through my act, then I've got a long way to go."

He winced, and I heard him sigh in the darkness. It was time to finish the talk we'd started at the ranch.

"Awake or asleep…not that I've been doing much sleeping…I'm always thinking about Mori. How could I stop?" His voice was quiet, like he was purposely suppressing his emotions. Just a whisper in the night. "I have so many questions, so much I want to know. But Mori's mom was in no shape to talk at the wake… That was when her dad gave me a letter. One she'd written to me. It was from the day before she slipped into the coma."

I remembered seeing Mochizuki at school, clutching a pink envelope.

He'd carried around the letter, unable to find the courage to read it. He'd fretted over it for ages, sitting in the council room. Finally, he'd steeled his nerves and cracked it open.

The letter from Suzumi laid everything out for him. It explained how she'd made a doppelgänger as a kid and how that girl was now living with her grandparents in Fujinomiya. She'd said that her doppelgänger was a great artist and that she hoped to introduce her to him someday.

Mochizuki didn't mention it, but that wasn't the *real* point of the letter. Suzumi had written a second letter, addressed to Ryou, saying that Mochizuki had asked her out, and that she was ready to answer. But he didn't bring that up.

"I took it as a sign," he said. "The letter had an address in Fujinomiya written at the bottom, and I knew I had to go. In hindsight, maybe I was just running. I sure didn't want to be at school."

He'd told Suzumi's father he wanted to visit, and her father passed the request on to Taeko and Yutaka. Mochizuki had been the only nonfamily member at the wake, and the elderly couple remembered him. They readily agreed to let him stay.

He'd been at the ranch because Taeko suggested he see the sights. They'd had business to take care of that day and had dropped him off.

"I came here thinking I understood. The Mori I watched the fireworks with was the real one, and everything after summer vacation was her doppelgänger, Ryou, only pretending to be her. Looking back, there were plenty of tells, but I wasn't thinking straight. Nah, I'm just making excuses."

I could tell he was kicking himself. My vision was getting blurry.

"I'm sorry, Mochizuki." Maybe I was just trying to console myself, to make myself feel better. But I had to say something. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you."

If I'd said something to him earlier…maybe he could have seen Suzumi while she was still in bed at home. Even if she couldn't answer him, he could have at least touched her cheeks before they went cold.

But out of respect for Ryou's wishes, I'd said nothing. She was trying so hard to play her role for Suzumi's sake, and that felt like a reflection of my own choices.

But that didn't make it right to ignore Mochizuki's feelings.

"Don't apologize. I'm not blaming you for anything."

When I said nothing, he chuckled softly.

"So you two really did know everything, huh?"

"…Yeah, we did."

"I remember how you went off script during the play, Aikawa."

He started reciting my lines from memory.

You know that if you do this, we'll all forget you! You'll disappear from everyone's memories! Don't act like you're okay with that!

I'd forgotten I was acting and simply yelled out what I felt—and now Mochizuki's voice traced over my words.

"That really…hit me hard. I bet it got to the audience, too. It had nothing to do with your skill as an actress. That was pure emotion, and that was why it came across so clearly… When I thought about it later, I figured you must be the same as Ryou. Am I right?"

That ad-lib was only possible because I was a replica, too. I shared her problems—and that was why my words had reached her. That was no exaggeration, no conceit, just the truth.

"…Yes."

I didn't try to hide it. I gave him a brief rundown of how doppelgängers—or replicas—worked.

Mochizuki listened, fascinated. When I finished, Aki raised a hand, still lying down.

"How'd you know I was a replica, too?" he asked.

"Well, you're both skipping the school trip together and calling each other 'Aki' and 'Nao.'"

"So you weren't really *that* sure, huh?"

“Man, Aki. You’re way too particular, you know that?” He glared at Aki, then fell silent for a while. At last, he said, “I’ve been carrying some guilt around where you’re concerned.”

“Hmm?”

“Back in May, Mori called Hayase to the council room. She grilled him about roughing up his junior.”

I gulped. If this happened in May, then it was Suzumi, not Ryou. She’d taken her duties as student council president very seriously—and she wouldn’t have let those rumors go unaddressed.

“There were plenty of other nasty stories about Hayase,” Mochizuki continued, “so we had our faculty advisor present, just in case. But he didn’t let a single thing slip. Argued that these baseless rumors were hurting his reputation and demanded we put a stop to them.”

“Sounds just like him,” Aki said. He must have been consulting Sanada’s memories.

“Asking other students didn’t help. The other basketball team members held their tongues, fearing retribution. In the end, he just stopped coming to school one day. But that doesn’t change the fact that we failed to do anything.”

Mochizuki started to get up, but Aki waved him back down.

“It’s no use apologizing to *me*. Shuuya’s the one who got hurt.”

“…Oh, right.”

“But if you do run into Shuuya, don’t say anything. Hearing Hayase’s name might make him quit school again. I’m sure you know why.”

“Yeah, point taken.” Mochizuki nodded gravely.

He’d said he felt guilty, but he’d had plenty of opportunities to apologize during the run-up to the festival. The reason he hadn’t was that he was keeping a close eye on Aki’s state of mind, trying to gauge if the topic was safe to broach.

“Aki,” said Mochizuki, “you’re the one who challenged Hayase back in September, right?”

Students from all three years had gathered in the gym to watch that basketball game. I'd been too nervous to watch the crowd, but I imagined both Mochizuki and Ryou were there.

And if he felt frustrated and guilty, he'd have felt obligated to see the match through. He'd have watched it play out just like I did—albeit for very different reasons.

"It was me," Aki admitted.

"I thought so." Mochizuki nodded, as if it all added up. "That was only possible because it was you."

I blinked at his statement, and a question floated up in my mind, like a bubble… His next line made it pop.

"That made it even more obvious to me that I'll never have a replica of my own."

"Why do you think that?" I asked. I needed to know the basis for his confidence.

Mochizuki had admitted he didn't want to go to school. Wasn't that enough to create a replica? I'd certainly feared that might be the case.

"I am who I am," he said, not mincing words.

This cleared one thing up for me. Mochizuki was lying on his back, looking up—but his eyes had never been on the ceiling. He was looking past that obstruction, up at the night sky, like an actor imagining his stage.

The smile on his lips was not for show.

"I won't run away from anything," he said. "*I* loved Mori. *I* acted with Ryou. I don't want to share that with anyone else. Even if those memories hurt, even if this grief and pain are so strong, they make me *want* to run."

Lying there, he thumped his chest. The impact was so intense that I felt it echo in my own heart, despite the distance.

"These feelings are *mine*," he said. "I'm not passing them to anyone else—even another version of myself."

I let out a long breath. "…You're something else, Mochizuki."

He had real strength. He was determined to tough it out, and that was what made him so cool.

I turned my own eyes toward that unseeable sky. No matter how thickly the clouds covered it, the moon was up there. The stars were twinkling, singing their songs.

I was sure Mochizuki would keep acting on stages much bigger than the one at our gym or even at the city culture hall. Blinded by the spotlights, running around a cramped set, showered in the thunderous applause of his captivated audience.

He'd get there sooner than he thought; I could feel it.

"Nah, I'm not all that. But I *am* gonna be in the Kisaragi Exhibition in February." He grinned, holding up a single finger. "No other actors—I'm gonna do a one-man show! I'll ask the usual crew to back me up, but I'd love to have the two of you help out as well. Even if you just poke your heads in during rehearsals. And of course, you're welcome to come see the main performance."

Part of me wanted to help—but we had a good reason not to make any promises.

"We don't know if we'll ever be at school again," I said.

Mochizuki looked surprised. He put his hands on his head and mussed up his hair.

"I see. Well, if I were a rich man, I could take the two of you in, but— Nah, that makes you sound like stray cats or dogs. How tactless."

"Don't worry. You've always been tactless."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

He glared at me, but this truth was self-evident. Tactlessness was just part of who Shun Mochizuki was.

At that point, he let a yawn escape. Then Aki put a hand to his mouth, stifling a yawn of his own.

"Any replicas out there besides the two of you? And Ryou, of course."

"No clue." Aki shook his head.

Mochizuki just nodded. It seemed he'd suspected as much.

"There are eyewitness reports of doppelgängers the world over," he said casually. "Ryunosuke Akutagawa, *The Mermaid's Return*, et cetera. Think those are all talking about replicas?"

The Mermaid's Return was a true story, one of the most famous modern doppelgänger tales. In 1985, there was a boating accident in the north of Germany. A woman named Aloysia Jahn was left unconscious and in critical condition. While she lay in the hospital, Aloysia's boyfriend and a friend of his witnessed someone who looked just like her walking along the beach.

"They did a TV special about Aloysia over summer vacation," said Mochizuki.

"Oh? They did?"

It was the first I'd heard of it.

I'd missed the whole vacation. Sunao paid rapt attention to stories about UFO sightings but had no interest in *The Mermaid's Return* and wouldn't have flipped to that channel even if she'd seen the listing.

"They showed the first-ever interview with Aloysia's sister. Aloysia herself is still alive but declined to appear."

"Huh."

"And what the sister said really stuck with me. A few days before the accident, Aloysia had been feeling suicidal."

"'Suicidal'?!"

Mochizuki nodded, rubbing his eyes. He was clearly getting very sleepy.

"Aloysia *was* seeing a guy, but he was in love with someone else. He wanted to break up with her—and that was why she was talking about dying. According to the sister anyway. But after she woke up in the hospital, she no longer found the idea so appealing. The accident probably had something to do with that, of course…"

"…So it wasn't an accident but an attempted suicide?" Aki asked, his voice low.

I'd been thinking the same thing. Rattled, I turned this over in my mind. If she'd felt so cornered before the accident that she

generated a replica…

"Do you think Aloysia asked the replica to give her that last push?" I asked.

Please. Push me into the ocean. Help me.

Had she asked her replica to do something like that the moment she was born?

The blood drained from my face. I gulped, trying to picture it.

I couldn't. I couldn't even imagine it. I'd tried to drown myself once—to vanish into those inky waves, darker than the night itself. No force on Earth would ever make me push Sunao into the water.

But Ryou had said that replicas were made to do what their originals couldn't. That imperative warped our very nature.

Did that apply to Aloysia's replica, too? Or was it just crazy talk? The idea of obeying an order to push someone over the side of a boat seemed totally unthinkable.

I frowned.

But in that case, why do we…?

"Mochizuki."

"……"

"Mochizuki?"

I called out to him, wanting to confirm my suspicions—but only his breathing answered.

This was nothing like the phony snoring from earlier. Those sleepless nights had caught up with him.

I didn't want to disturb his rest, so I held my tongue.

I couldn't hear any insect sounds from outside. My cheeks and hands poked out of the covers, and the air felt bitingly cold on my skin.

That kept my mind alert.

Maybe my body wasn't used to this hard pillow. Maybe I was just uncomfortable sleeping in a stranger's house. Maybe it was the hint of fear smoldering in my heart.

As I followed this chain of thought, someone pulled at my legs, yelling *don't*.

Don't think about it. Stay oblivious.

Was that Sunao's voice, or was it someone else…?

"…Nao."

Aki reached a hand out to me, and I took it right away.

It didn't even take me a second to realize that both our hands were trembling. Even sharing our warmth failed to calm us down.

If only we could have blamed the cold.

I pulled Aki's hand to my forehead and closed my eyes in prayer.

My ear was pressed against the pillow, and I could hear my pulse racing. If my heart had moved all the way up there, what could fill the empty space in my chest?

I clung to Aki's hand for dear life. He alone filled this darkness. The two of us were alone in the void.

"Good night," came his voice from the other futon. It fluttered in my ears.

I didn't want to let that gentle vibration go. I realized I'd clenched my lips tight, and I pried them apart. Then I traced his precious, vital outline with my eyes and formed the same words with my own lips.

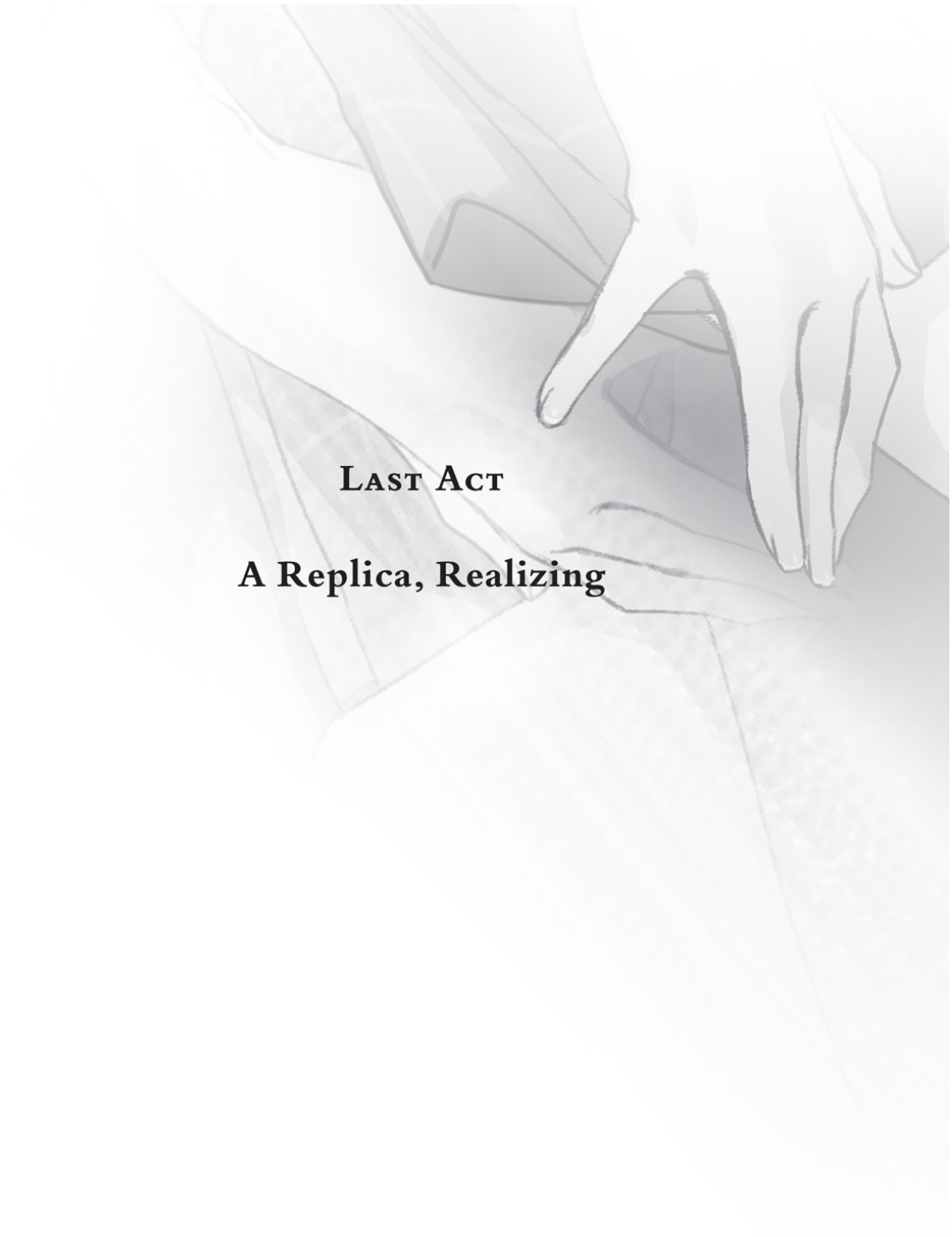
"Good night, Aki."

…Oh.

I was sure I'd never forget this moment. I would treasure it forever. I'd think of it fondly and carry it close to my chest. Even when I grew old—even if I never did.

Aki looked relieved, and I watched him close his eyes. Then I whispered a farewell to the darkness around us.

But I already knew. Even when my eyes were closed, the end drew ever nearer. No matter how small I made myself, my winter would come, and there would be no escaping it.



Last Act

A Replica, Realizing

The next morning, we woke up early, ate breakfast, and then went to help in the fields.

We planned to head back to Fujinomiya Station after gathering potatoes and weeding, but Taeko just smiled and told us to stay another night. In the afternoon, she drove us to Lake Tanuki and the Fujisan Hongu Sengen Taisha Shrine.

Before we knew it, it was the evening of our second day.

When we got back to the house, Yutaka left to collect some vegetables from a friend, while the four of us sat together in the living room, sipping tea.

At the center of the table were some *kusa daifuku* we'd bought at a mochi shop. I inhaled the pleasant scent of mugwort, then bit into the sweet.

Suddenly, Taeko spoke up. As if discussing the next day's weather, she said, "Nao, Aki, would you like to live here?"

It was the last thing I'd expected to hear.

We froze, and she shot us a rueful smile.

"I *am* sorry, but we overhead you talking last night."

"Oh…"

It was so quiet past those sliding doors that none of us had spared a thought about the elderly couple—but they'd been sitting in the living room the whole time.

Taeko cut her adorably tiny *kusa daifuku* into four pieces and ate them one at a time. Her expression seemed even kinder than it had the day before.

A gentle smile on her face, she spoke slowly, as if treasuring each word.

"Perhaps I'm just being nosy, but I can't leave you two alone. Yutaka agrees with me. We had Ryou here, so we know this—as long as you're alive, things work out."

As long as you're alive.

Taeko repeated the phrase, half to herself, a sheepish look on her face.

"I'm sure you have your own problems. It doesn't have to be right away. But…don't forget that the option is open to you."

"…Thank you, Taeko," I said softly. Aki bowed.

We didn't look at each other. Each of us took another *daifuku*. It had never occurred to us that we had choices.

If Aki and I let these two take us in, if we lived in this house… then all our days would be as nice as this one. We'd work in the fields and go out now and then. We'd eat together, say good night, go to bed—and look forward to tomorrow. That would become our new normal.

How nice it would be. What a happy life. Here was something I'd so often yearned for, suddenly so real, dangling before my very eyes.

Taeko used the arms of her legless chair to push herself upright.

"Not like you can live with your other selves," she muttered unhappily.

"…Huh?" Feeling like I'd woken from a dream, I blinked at her.

"I'm gonna run a little errand. Be back in half an hour."

Taeko hadn't heard me. Her smile stayed warm as she left. I watched her go, turning her words over in my mind.

What had she meant? Something felt terribly wrong. It was as though she knew something we didn't—something that had her *convinced*.

I heard a sound and jumped.

Aki pulled his phone from his pocket and frowned at it.

"It's Aikawa," he said.

Sunao?

Aki tapped the screen and put his phone on speaker.

"Hello?"

"…It's me."

The voice on the other end was definitely Sunao's. I could hear other voices behind her, but I couldn't make out any words.

Mochizuki had frozen with a *Lindera*-wood toothpick in his mouth. Her voice…though it was distorted by the phone's speaker, probably sounded just like mine. Even after he'd heard about originals and replicas, it must have surprised him.

I'd never actually seen Aki and Sanada together. Nor had they seen us.

For some reason, Taeko's words ran through my mind again.

Not like you can live with your other selves.

"Are you still in Fujinomiya? Is Nao with you?"

Aki looked at me. When I said nothing, he replied, "She is."

"We've…got something to discuss with you. Sanada…Aki, if you're with her, can we call you both out to Kyoto?"

Aki and I looked at each other.

This sounded urgent. Yet Sunao didn't sound flustered, so I wasn't sure. We had to assume something had come up that couldn't wait until they got back the following day.

And from the way Sunao was speaking, Sanada must have been with her.

"Hold on. I'll call you right back," Aki said, hanging up. "Nao, what do you think?"

Normally, I'd have nodded right away.

But now I said firmly, "I don't wanna go."

It wasn't like a replica to turn down a request from their original. If this was a test, I'd failed for sure.

But I didn't want to go to Kyoto. I wanted to stay here. I wanted to go on without ever finding out the bad news. Taeko had said we could.

I wordlessly pleaded my case, but there was no doubt in Aki's eyes. He wasn't throwing a childish tantrum like I was.

Still, I clung to hope. "Do you want to?" I asked.

"If Shuuya's calling for me, I want to answer. I'll go alone if I have to."

Aki made it sound so easy.

How could he make that choice? He must've shared my concerns. Why wasn't he hesitating? It frustrated me, but I'd known from the start how he'd react.

He was just as scared and anxious as I was, maybe even more—but he would never run away.

And that meant I had to get myself together, too. Deep down, I knew that if we didn't face this now, I'd regret it in the end.

"…Okay, I'll come with you."

Aki looked me in the eye. He was smart enough to know how reluctant I was. But I nodded reassuringly—and that convinced him.

Mochizuki had cleaned his plate, and now he put his hands together appreciatively.

"There you have it, Mochizuki," Aki said. "We're gonna pop over to Kyoto."

"…Uh, now?" He blinked at us, lost.

He'd heard the voice on the phone, but he hadn't been able to follow. I started explaining from the top.

"Aki and I are heading to Kyoto. That means our luggage and everything we're wearing will stay behind. I'd appreciate if you could put our clothes into a laundry basket."

"Please," Aki added, bowing.

Mochizuki rubbed his temples like he had a headache. "…Wait a second. What—?"

But I was way ahead of him. "I know what you're thinking. It's wrong for us to go to Kyoto without paying our way!"

"That's not what I was thinking at all! I don't work for the railway, you know."

Then what was it? I looked baffled, and his cheeks turned red.

"You don't get it? I'm a boy. I can't handle a girl's clothes and… underwear. That's immoral!"

I looked shocked, and Mochizuki turned to Aki.

"Aki, are you all right with this? Another man will be carrying your girlfriend's underwear. Accidents might happen! Unintended contact!"

"Huh." Aki's reaction was underwhelming. "But it's *you*, Mochizuki."

"Yeah. You don't count," I agreed.

Our senior sighed, deflated. "Should I take that to mean…that you trust me?"

We both nodded.

He shot us each a baleful glare but swallowed any further protests. "Okay, fine! I'll let Taeko and Yutaka know. So go on, get outta here."

"Thank you so much!"

"Will you be back soon?"

I hesitated. We'd given him a brief rundown on how replicas worked, but he clearly didn't have a full picture. He didn't have a replica of his own, so that was only natural.

"…We won't be back. Once we're called out in Kyoto, that's it. It's a one-way ticket."

He blinked. "Then what should I do with your stuff?"

"If you could take it back to Shizuoka…"

"On my own? Luggage for three?"

"Um. We'll get in touch once we've heard them out…"

He gaped at us for a moment. Was he bowled over by our lack of planning? But after a while, he scratched his head and grumbled, "Go get a basket from the changing room! At least that will minimize how long I have to touch your clothes."

"On it!"

I moved like the wind and was soon back with a basket.

Aki called Sunao, and she picked up before the first ring. She'd been waiting for us the whole time.

"Everyone agreed? You're good to go?"

"Yep, ready when you are," I said, leaning in.

Sunao took a breath…and then her voice echoed in my ears.

"Nao, vanish."

The next time she called me out, I was in Kyoto.

◇◇◇

"…Huh?"

The moment my eyes opened, I let out a squeak.

Sunao was right in front of me, but I only had eyes for the view: Thin clouds like shelves stretched across the evening sky. Below, the mountaintops were dyed a forlorn shade of red.

This was the Togetsu Bridge, built across the Katsura River, which flowed between Sagano and Arashiyama. We were standing on the bank of the river, with a view of the bridge and the mountains covered in fall colors.

From here, we could see crowds against the sunset, moving across the bridge. Foreign tourists in kimonos. Mothers chasing after rambunctious sons. Students on school trips, high-fiving one another.

That boy slowly riding a bike must live nearby. Buses and cars were going back and forth across the bridge, too. Togetsu Bridge might be a famous Arashiyama tourist attraction, but it was also a prime thoroughfare for local residents.

As I gazed at it, I started to shiver. The wind swept freely across this deserted bank; Kyoto was in a valley and much colder than I'd imagined. The early signs of winter were far more pronounced than anywhere in Shizuoka.

"Feeling the cold?" Sunao asked.

She'd backed down, ceding to the view. But this chill wasn't just because of the weather—it was a result of Sunao's attire.

She looked like an adorable snow rabbit. She was wearing a cream-colored kimono with a camellia pattern, paired with an

elegant navy blue obi. The simplicity of the kimono's pattern only enhanced the beauty of her face and posture.

Her long, glossy hair was done up at the back and braided to one side. I searched through her memories of the last few hours and discovered that an employee at a kimono rental shop had dressed her and done her hair.

I felt fur around my neck and realized that I was dressed the same. No wonder my hands and feet were so cold.

The *tabi* socks and zori sandals felt surprisingly comfortable. I was reminded of all that time we'd spent practicing for the play.

"I'm *fine*," I said, shaking my head. "I'm sure I'll adjust in a moment."

I had an undershirt on, and there were warmers tucked against my back and belly. I was prepared to face the elements.

Sunao nodded. Behind her, I could see Sanada and Aki.

They were both wearing dull, grayish-brown kimonos. Drab at a glance, but it made their orange sashes pop. They also had black haori jackets, which looked nice and warm.

Hesitantly, I looked Sanada over—not to state the obvious, but he looked exactly like Aki.

This was the first time he'd ever dismissed Aki—Aki's entire life had been one continuous summons. He'd once joked that he'd wind up pudgy if he were dismissed and called back, but I was relieved to see no such obvious difference. I wouldn't say my love for him would go cold because of a few extra pounds, but it would certainly be a shock to my system.

His figure and short-clipped nails had stayed the same, but there *was* one obvious change: the length of his hair.

Sanada must have had it cut recently. The basic style wasn't different, but Aki's bangs were marginally shorter than they'd been before. A few millimeters taken away from me—and I longed to reach out and touch them.

And yet seeing the two of them side by side, it was still obvious who was Aki and who was Sanada. Sanada was fidgeting nervously.

He kept glancing from Sunao to Aki, never looking at me.

Sunao turned to Sanada. "You still haven't…?"

"Huh?" Sanada blinked.

"All right, then," she said, as if she'd worked something out.

Having no idea what their exchange meant, I turned back to Sunao.

She was all dolled up, prettier than anyone else around.

"Sunao," I asked, "are you enjoying the trip?"

Part of me was hoping she'd do what she always did and say she was bored.

"I'm making the most of it. As you can see." She fluttered her kimono sleeves.

In her left hand was a white kiss lock purse with a *sankuzushi* pattern (squares of three lines in alternating directions). She hadn't had it when she'd left on the trip, so it must have been from the rental shop.

Unsure of what to say next, I chose to remain silent.

Sunao seemed different today. Maybe I was just rattled—but I couldn't seem to access any memories from before she went to the kimono shop.

"Why don't we have a seat?"

As if nothing was amiss, Sunao sat down on the steps of the bank.

Looking lost, Sanada took a seat himself, some distance away. Aki settled in next to him, and I wordlessly followed suit.

"There's a reason I called you out here," she continued. "There's something I want you to see, Nao."

"…Okay." I nodded, my voice almost a sigh. In truth, I didn't even want to nod.

I'd had a thought on my mind, and it wasn't new. It'd been rolling around inside me ever since the end of September.

What was Sunao trying to accomplish? One minute, she told me to fill in for her all month, and the next, she decided she didn't need my help anymore. I'd asked, but she wouldn't say why. I was left

spinning at the mercy of my original's whims, doing whatever she said.

Arguably, I was just lashing out. But I couldn't help it.

Oblivious to my frustrations, Sunao pulled out her phone. "I just got the results of the practice exam I took before the trip."

She held out her phone, so I took it.

I knew she'd taken this test at home the week before the trip. It wasn't mandatory, but her teacher had recommended that anyone hoping for higher education try it.

Sunao had talked to her mother, received permission, made it through the application process, and paid the fee.

She'd taken three subjects: English, Math, and Japanese. Each was scored out of one hundred points. She'd used a whole Sunday to take the test online.

On the phone screen was a plain button for checking the test results. All I had to do was tap it, and I'd know Sunao's scores.

But why was she showing this to me?

Confused, I looked at Sunao. She must have seen, but she kept her eyes locked on the current of the Katsura River, her thin brows furrowed. A few loose strands of her hair caught the evening light and glowed gold.

"I didn't want you knowing, Nao. So I didn't grade myself, and I haven't checked the results with my own eyes."

"You want me to see it first?"

"Yeah."

Well, now I *had* to look.

I hesitated a moment, but then I pushed the button. The screen turned white, and scores for all three subjects appeared. There was no need to scroll.

I said nothing, but Sunao didn't get annoyed.

"How'd I do?" she asked.

Making sure I got it right, I said, "Forty-four in English, fifty-two in Math, and sixty-two in Japanese."

Objectively speaking, they were thoroughly average scores. There were letter grades given on the right, and none of them were *A*s.

But I knew better.

Sunao didn't like to study. To get scores like this, she must have put in a *lot* of work.

The whole month I'd been going to school for her, she'd holed up in her room, studying all day long, asking me about anything she didn't get. She'd torn pages out of her notebooks when she got things wrong, tackling the same problems over and over.

I turned to her and saw a mix of relief and disappointment on her face. When she caught me looking, her expression shifted to pride.

She puffed up her chest, then looked uncomfortable—perhaps the chest strap of her kimono had dug in.

"See? I can do it if I try," she said. Then her gaze dropped, and she sighed. "…Though those aren't really scores worth bragging about. I'd hoped for better."

"That's not true." I leaned in, shaking my head.

No matter what anyone else said, I knew what she'd accomplished. I hadn't missed any of the blood, sweat, and tears she'd put into those results.

"Sunao, you never paid attention in class. You always used to stare out the window or play with your hair! Improving your scores this much in so little time is really impressive!"

This outburst just made her look grumpy.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

Of course it was, but Sunao didn't seem to buy it. I quickly gave up and changed the subject.

"Remember what I said the week after the Seiryou Festival?"

"…Yeah."

How could I forget those words she'd hit me with after I'd already cried myself dry?

She took my hand and stood up. She was standing tall and straight, and I couldn't take my eyes off her.

"I'm not going to run anymore," she said. "Not on test days, and no matter how bad I feel. I've made up my mind to live my own life."

This was the continuation of those words—what she'd actually meant. She was so nervous that her cheeks began to turn red.

"I put my all into that practice exam. I told a friend who couldn't bring himself to come to school that I'd be there for him. I went to school all week, threw myself into this trip, and saw all kinds of things over the last couple of days… Just like I know the old me would have."

Sunao was stumbling over her words. Sanada looked stunned—perhaps he was surprised she'd called him a friend.

She went on, her brow so tensed, it was painful to watch.

"From now on, no matter how much it hurts, no matter how much I don't want to, I'm not gonna push those things onto you, Nao. I was trying to prove that to you…but…"

Here she went limp and sighed.

There was sweat on her forehead, and her voice was shaking. It was hard to make out her words.

But her faltering confession had me on my feet and smiling. I couldn't help pulling a face. After all, she was just so…

"You're so hard to understand."

Sure, I was Sunao's replica. But how was I supposed to know how she felt deep down? How could I know what she was really after—the secrets she kept bottled up inside?

I'm just your replica.

"That was very, very unclear to me, Sunao."

Speaking made me want to cry.

She was so awkward, such a hassle. But that just made me love her all the more.

Sunao's eyes were wet with tears. I was sure my face matched hers.

"…I'm sorry, Nao. I'm so sorry."

Hesitantly, Sunao reached out her arms. I took them.

"I'm sorry for everything up until now. I mean that."

I let her sorrys wash over me like falling stars and fell into her embrace.

I hadn't understood her at all.

She was moving forward. Not to spite me. Not to torment me.

She was just being Sunao. Living her life. Figuring out her own terms and how to live on them. She was facing forward, shoulders squared, yelling, *Here I go!* She just wanted me to watch as she ran and plunged into the fray.

I'd read it all wrong. I'd underestimated her. I'd failed to see how much this meant.

Why hadn't I cheered her on? Why hadn't I given her my blessing? Not once had I ever told her to make it a good one, to break a leg.

And so I did it now.

"You worked so hard, Sunao."

"…Mm."

I felt her nod. She was embarrassed. I moved my hands to embrace her, but Aki's voice dragged me out of this dreamy comfort.

"Nao, your fingers…!" he rasped, scared.

My fingers? That sounded ominous, so I looked up.

My fingers were transparent.

The arms I'd tried to hug Sunao with were fading out. The effect was moving up my arms—I could see winter brush through them.

"What the…?" I muttered, but no one had an answer. Nobody knew what was happening.

I certainly didn't. I couldn't even scream. My body was disappearing, and all I could do was wonder why.

Unable to fight it, I simply stood there, melting into the air.

It didn't feel real, and maybe that was why I found it so beautiful. I stood enraptured as my fingers, wrists, arms, shoulders — "Nao!"

Aki yelled my name and grabbed me by my fading shoulders.

He pried me away from Sunao, yanking me back—the two of us fell over in the brush, and the blow brought me back to my senses.

Had I just…almost vanished?

My eyes went so wide, I thought they might pop out. I tried to raise my hands but couldn't. I wasn't fading anymore—it had stopped at my shoulders, but my missing arms weren't coming back.

"Er, um…ah…ahhh……"

"Nao, you're fine. Nao."

Unable to get up, I was panicking, my mouth flapping like I were a dying fish. Aki's hands clamped down on my shoulders.

"You're still here, Nao. You're okay. Calm down."

Aki must have been just as lost as I was. I could tell from the tears in his voice.

But his big, strong arms were around my shoulders. I could feel his hands. As long as I had those, I felt safe. In the dark ocean, in bed at night, they called out to me, keeping me here.

I groaned deep in my throat. Tears escaped my closed lids, but I focused behind them, pulling my fraying self together. Pulling all the broken pieces back into a pile and connecting them again.

I breathed, absorbing oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide. It was a natural process, but if I didn't make a conscious effort, I couldn't even do that.

"…Nao."

Had it been seconds or minutes?

Aki called my name again, and I opened my eyes, blurred with sweat or tears—I wasn't sure which.

I checked, and my hands were back. I opened and closed them. Pink nails winked back at me at my command. I blinked several times to make sure, but they didn't disappear again.

Could I trust my eyes, though? There was no proof that they hadn't disappeared, too.

"You…can see me?" I asked.

My throat was all clenched up, and I had to force out the question.

"I can see you."

"I'm still here?"

"You are. I can tell by looking."

Aki nodded so much, I got worried he'd hurt his neck.

With his help, I got back on my feet. Every bit of me was sweaty, but the air on the riverbank was too cold to convince myself it had all been a bad dream.

"…Why?" Sunao asked.

Sanada was helping her up, their pose like a reflection of our own.

"Why isn't anyone looking at us? Even though Nao almost disappeared…"

Unsure what she meant, I followed her gaze.

My ears caught the bustle of the crowds. Turning around, I could see a bunch of tourists on the path along the top of the bank.

Come to think of it, why had they called us out here, by the Togetsu Bridge, where everyone could see? Why not somewhere safer, like a hotel room or a karaoke booth?

Sunao and I had never been anywhere in public together. When we saw each other, we were almost always in her room. We'd been very careful not to let her family or any strangers catch sight of us side by side.

Someone I didn't know turned and looked our way. My heart leaped.

I was sure he was looking at Sunao and me. I was sure he'd know.

But my fears proved unfounded. No one who looked our way even stopped. They just moved on, chatting happily.

"…?"

I frowned. Something felt wrong.

Identical twins always got attention when they were out together. Two people of the same height with the same face would always draw gazes—especially if they were wearing the same clothes.

Sunao looked beautiful in her kimono, and lots of people turned to look, but none of them showed any extra curiosity.

No, that wasn't even the weird part. Not one of these passing strangers was looking at me or Aki.

"Aikawa, is she here?" came a voice from somewhere nearby. I jumped.

Satou was coming down the gravel path in her boots. She wore a vivid flower accessory in her short hair, and her kimono was a deep purple, with big plum blossoms on it. She looked incredibly regal.

Puzzled, Sunao nodded. Satou looked around, searching, then turned toward Sanada.

"Yours, too?"

Sanada exhaled, like he'd been waiting for someone to ask.

"He is. I called him out, but Aikawa didn't seem to notice, and I've been pretty confused."

"Huh? Where is he? I don't…" Sunao looked rattled. She tilted her head in confusion.

Their conversation wasn't adding up—and that told me a lot.

Actually, I'd worked it out a while back and just hadn't wanted to admit it. Before someone else could put a knife to my throat, I said it aloud.

"I'm not here."

Sunao and Aki both turned toward me. Sanada and Satou didn't react.

Praying my voice wouldn't quiver, I said it again.

"Right now, Aki and I don't exist. Sanada and Satou can't see me. Nobody else can."

I wasn't here. They couldn't see me.

Sunao's expression turned grim. "…What's going on?" she asked.

At that, Satou put her hands together and began talking quickly.

"Sorry! I'm the one who told Aikawa and Sanada to summon you where people could see. I kept the real reason secret, so don't blame them."

She was talking to us, but she was facing the wrong direction.

"Even though I used to have a replica myself, I found it hard to fully believe… No, maybe it's because I had one that I was so full of

doubt.”

Satou’s words dug up memories in my head. Not mine but Sunao’s, from her school trip.

I was remembering what she’d seen and heard—new discoveries, new theories she’d spoken of. The flood of memories almost drowned me, but I held on.

I tried to read through them, like I was turning pages. A thousand torii that looked like Pocky. A boy asking her out. Her eyes wet with tears. A can of corn potage.

“Was it just an imaginary friend? I wondered. A dissociative thing? There are lots of ways to describe what Aikawa and Sanada are experiencing, but none of them feel quite right.” Satou turned to Sunao. “Aikawa, have you read Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s *Spinning Gears*?”

“…No.”

“Mm, thought not.”

Satou nodded. Sunao looked upset, apparently taking this as an insult.

“But Nao from the Literature Club, the one who recommended *Run, Melos!* to me, probably has. Well?”

I slowly nodded, like a wind-up toy. Satou was still looking in every direction but mine. She was addressing a patch of empty air, her words reminding me of the story.

Akutagawa wrote *Spinning Gears* in his last year of life. The protagonist (modeled after Akutagawa himself) attends a wedding and hears a story of a ghost in a raincoat. After that, he keeps seeing men in raincoats, then hears that his brother-in-law perished wearing one and begins to fear it was a premonition of his own death…

Within the work, this ominous tale is told:

Fortunately, I had not personally seen this second me—what the Germans call a doppelgänger. But K had become an American movie

actor, and his wife saw me in the corridors of the Imperial Theater. (I remember my consternation when she later apologized for failing to say hello.) And a late, one-legged translator friend of mine saw me at a cigarette shop in Ginza.

"My point is that sightings of doppelgängers almost never include both the doppelgänger and their original. There are exceptions, but it's not like we can tell which stories are made-up."

We were all blinking at her.

Sanada spoke for us. "I mean, that makes sense. They know the real one shouldn't be where they've seen them, and that's why they suspect a doppelgänger."

"But if there's only one person there, then how does anyone know which one they saw? They only realize something is off a few days later when they speak to the real one."

"…Right."

"When your replicas were at school, you both stayed home, right?"

Satou's eyes never wavered, and it was starting to scare me.

Her gaze was pointed right at Sunao and Sanada. I couldn't imagine how tense they must have felt, and not just because they never wore kimonos. I could see their shoulders stiffening.

"Has anyone else ever seen you together? Observed you? I bet you've never gone anywhere together. You didn't want anyone you knew seeing you, after all."

If she was just talking off the cuff, that'd be one thing.

But Satou sounded assured, like she was going down a checklist of doubts. None of us could interrupt her.

"You said the four of you talked on the phone after the Hayase basketball duel. Aikawa and Sanada called from home, while Nao and Aki were in the gym. You all heard voices that sounded right—but you didn't actually *see* the person on the other end of the line."

No one had ever seen me and Sunao together. Borrowing Satou's turn of phrase, we had never been "observed" at the same time.

In September, Aki and I had gone to see a movie together. At the same time, Sunao and Ricchan had shared a meal. But the same principle applied there. Ricchan hadn't seen us side by side.

"But wait, what about the student council president? The thing Sanada told us about?" There was sweat on Sunao's brow, and she was glaring daggers at Satou. "Her mom flew into a panic after seeing two of her daughters, and her dad later sent one of them to his parents. Doesn't that mean her mom and dad could see them both at the same time?"

Her cheeks were turning red, and she was pressing this point like she was trying to defend me personally.

But Satou never wavered.

"President Moririn's story, yes? That felt wrong when I heard it. If you're holding a child's hand and a kid who looks like her shows up —would you panic so bad that you fainted?"

I'd never even questioned this, but now Satou was picking it apart.

"I mean, I haven't heard the mom's side of the story, so I can't rule that out completely. But given what we know, I think there's a simpler explanation. I think that in that moment, Moririn's mom couldn't see Ryou."

"What do you mean?" I whispered, but Satou couldn't hear me.

I forced my sluggish brain to consider things from the mom's perspective. A woman with a daughter named Suzumi. It was hard not to conflate her with Sunao's mom.

"The morning of the school play, five-year-old Moririn comes running up behind her mother and her replica, yelling, 'Sorry, my little doppelgänger. I'm going to school with Mommy. I'll play the evil stepmom in the play like I'm supposed to. You stay here at home.'"

The hand the mother was holding had vanished, and the daughter by her side had disappeared. And there was her real daughter, out of breath, talking to thin air.

How could she possibly understand? How could she comprehend what her daughter was so desperately saying?

Following her daughter's gaze, she found only her own fingers, still holding empty air, the warmth of a girl's little hand already fading.

What's wrong, Suzumi? Who's this doppelgänger? she asked, but her daughter just looked confused.

She's right next to you, Mommy. A girl who looks just like me. She's right there!

That must have spooked her. Had her daughter gone crazy? Was she seeing things? She was looking at nothing.

Sobbing, she'd called her husband and had him leave work.

He'd been confused, but his daughter was crying, so he'd pretended to believe her. *So she's just like you*, he'd said, nodding. Then he'd opened the door for the invisible girl to come inside. Carefully, he'd made up a story to convince her.

Suzumi, you and your doppelgänger can't live together. Let Daddy take care of her. She can stay at Grandma's house. Don't worry about a thing. You stay right here with Mommy. Okay?

The dad had driven away…and then he'd heard a sound go off in his car—the one that played when you didn't buckle your seat belt. The empty passenger seat now had a little girl just like his daughter sitting in it.

"…Of course, I'm speculating wildly. But I bet I'm not too far off the mark."

Both Suzumi and Ryou had been *five* at the time. It had been a confusing experience; they may not have fully grasped what was going on. Perhaps they'd even assumed Suzumi's mother had merely been pretending she couldn't see Ryou.

She'd treated Ryou like a monster and refused to even look at her. That was Ryou's take on it—but she'd missed the real reason: The mother simply couldn't perceive them both at the same time.

Perhaps you appeared from thin air that day to do just this.

That was what Suzumi's mother had said to Ryou when she visited Fujinomiya in August.

In hindsight, it was a strange turn of phrase. Ryou hadn't appeared from thin air—Suzumi had created her.

But Suzumi's mom saw things differently.

It was hard for a person to think of a being they couldn't see as human.

"…That's my take on things anyway," said Satou. "It makes total sense that the original can always see their replica and the other way around. Replicas can see each other because they exist on the same plane…or whatever you wanna call it. If the original isn't around, the replicas move up a layer, borrowing the original's body—or something like that."

No one else could perceive both the original and their replica at the same time. That was Satou's argument, and it should have come as a huge shock.

But instead, it explained so much.

Taeko had heard the full story from her son and knew how it worked. She knew from the start that there was no way Sunao and I could live together. That was why she'd suggested we stay with her.

The same thing had happened when Hayase pushed me onto the train tracks. No blood or body had remained behind, because the body I'd temporarily borrowed from Sunao had instantly been sent back to her room in Mochimune.

If nobody else could observe it, then no death had occurred. Even though I'd experienced it and felt such unbearable pain.

The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. It was so obvious that I'd been intentionally avoiding thinking about it.

There'd only ever been one Sunao Aikawa. And so the world around her and all the people in it could only see one of her at a time.

"……"

My mouth opened and closed. No words with any meaning emerged. Even if I did speak, only Sunao and Aki could hear me.

I looked at the ground. Pine trees, passing strangers, all casting elongated shadows that overlapped at my feet. The wind carried laughter to my ears.

I squinted hard, but neither Aki nor I had a shadow. No matter how hard Wendy tried to stitch them back on, we could never be like Peter Pan. Without bodies of our own, we couldn't cast any shadows.

As a leaden silence took hold, footsteps approached.

"What's up? All three of you are looking downright *gloomy*. Something going on?"

I called his name, "Yoshii…" But just as I thought, he didn't even look at me. I felt exhausted.

Satou frowned at him and tugged on the bright red sleeve of his kimono. "Yoshii, you come with me."

"Huh? Why? S-Sanada, you're not trying to get dibs on Aikawa, are you?!"

"Just move!" Satou insisted.

Yoshii let out a little shriek and jumped. Nobody laughed, and he looked put out. But in the end, he followed Satou away from the bank, leaving the four of us behind.

Sunao was standing bolt upright a little ways from Sanada, her face white as a sheet.

"Sorry. I didn't think it would be like this," she said.

I shook my head. She'd done nothing wrong. Nor had Satou—all she'd done was fill us in on how replicas worked.

I was the one at fault. I should be apologizing to Sunao, not the other way around.

"Sunao, *I'm* sorry."'

Each time she called me out, I got an update on her memories.

I knew everything she did—the things she'd realized from talking to Satou and Sanada. And they overlapped perfectly with what Aki

and I had learned from talking to Mochizuki the night before.

Other people couldn't perceive the original and their replica at the same time—but that wasn't the *only* thing that mattered here.

I forced a smile, making my voice sound cheery.

"Sunao," I said.

"…What?"

"I think I know where your missing kindness went."

I gently took her hand.

It was cold, but I was glad—even if no one else could see me, I could still touch her. I could still share my warmth.

With both hands, I pulled hers closer, placing it on my heart. Sunao flinched, surprised, but she didn't pull away.

"I took it, Sunao. It's right here."

An anguished light glimmered in her big round eyes, brighter than the reflections on the surface of the Katsura River.

"It's here inside me."

Last summer, the day I got back from the Nihondaira Zoo, she'd asked me to give it back. She'd been lost, her voice shaking.

I thought I hadn't taken anything from her. I'd been sure of it. I didn't have a thing to call my own. I'd been certain that was true.

But I'd been wrong.

Only Sunao remembered how I'd taken her nickname—how a vital emotion had vanished from her heart.





"I've stolen something irreplaceable from you, Sunao. Your name and your kindness."

Once I knew, it was that simple.

…I had a fight with a friend, and I couldn't admit I was wrong. I wanna say I'm sorry, but what if that doesn't work? I'm so scared to face her, I can't even leave my room.

…I'm too scared to go back to school. I can't believe my upperclassman hurt me like that. I keep sitting in the corner of my room, fantasizing about revenge—but I can't be the one to beat him up. I can't even look him in the eye.

…I don't want to be the mean, wicked stepmother in front of the boy I like. But if I can't be a cute princess, then I've gotta give a great performance to impress him. I've gotta be the best evil stepmother ever.

…I want to help my friend, but I have to protect myself. I don't want to get pushed around like her and become an outcast. But I can't just stand by while my friend gets hurt.

…My boyfriend abandoned me. I want to end my pointless life. I want to dive into the ocean and turn into foam, to end it all.

The day I was created, Sunao was sobbing, asking for help. She was begging for someone to save her.

She got so upset that she split off a piece of herself. Her desperate wish was granted in the worst way—that was what replicas were.

I patched things over with Ricchan because I was the *nice* Sunao.

Aki went to school with Hayase because he was the courageous part of Sanada.

Ryou nailed her role as Princess Kaguya because she was the artist inside Suzumi.

Satou's replica was able to save her classmate because she embodied her original's dedication to her friends.

And Aloysia's replica threw herself into the ocean because she was Aloysia's death wish.

People are often torn between two conflicting emotions. Imagine you'd promised to go hang out with a friend—but when you woke up, you weren't in the mood. If the urge to bail grows strong enough, the devil starts whispering in your ear, "Just cancel those plans at the last minute."

That was where we came from—not thin air. In moments like that, people had to cut out a piece of themselves—the part of them that wanted to run out and play. Leaving only the part that wasn't feeling like it behind.

Replicas stole an emotion from their originals at the moment of their creation. That was what drove them and allowed them to do what their originals couldn't.

Once, Sunao had warmth and kindness. When I appeared, I took those from her. Just as Aki had stolen Sanada's bravery.

And what was lost could not return. That gaping wound kept gushing blood, growing wider and wider, with no way to fill the gap.

Ryou had believed we were wrong from the start, fundamentally different from our originals. She'd been close to the mark but not quite right.

We hadn't grown away from our originals. Instead, it was our originals who gradually warped into something wrong.

Perhaps I'd been neither man nor beast but something else entirely. I'd probably known that at first but gradually forgotten it, convincing myself I'd always been as I was now.

I was like Li Zheng in "The Moon Over the Mountain," gradually forgetting how he'd once been human.

Sunao forgot kindness. Sanada forgot courage. And over time, their loss grew more pronounced, as if they'd never had those things at all.

I let go of Sunao's hand and turned to find the pedestrians on the bridge reduced to silhouettes against the oncoming dusk. It was a wondrous sight.

How many of those people really remembered how they'd changed? How many could say with any confidence that they were the same people as when they'd come into this world?

I wondered how many had left behind a replica and forgotten. Or were some of them replicas like I was, born from a single emotion?

"You didn't…steal it," Sunao said, sounding like she was kicking herself. "I forced it on you."

I shook my head. She squinted at the bridge beside me.

"…I've felt for a long time…that I was slowly forgetting how to be nice. That made me even more jealous of you, Nao. You're a kind soul who can open up to anybody. How many times did I think *you* should be Sunao Aikawa instead? And then my stomach or my head would start hurting, and I wouldn't feel like doing anything anymore. Gradually, I got used to being a failure."

If the little white pebble I saw sparkling in the river was Sunao's kindness, then I'd emerged from those waters with a pebble stuck in my throat.

It wasn't so easy to cough it back up. I sure couldn't do it.

This wasn't like Aloysia's case. Her replica had been born suicidal, and shortly after, she'd vanished into the ocean's depths.

When she returned from death's door, Aloysia must have forgotten her suicidal thoughts along with her replica. That was why *The Mermaid's Return* became a modern-day doppelgänger legend.

That meant I couldn't give Sunao back her kindness by doing the same thing. So what *should* I do?

I could only think of one approach. What I'd just experienced was a vital clue. It was hard to be sure, but I was convinced *that* was the

answer. In fact, I couldn't even bring myself to consider anything else.

"I think if I merge back into you, you'll recover what I stole."

She couldn't just send me away only to call me back later. That wasn't enough. She had to embrace me, welcome me back in.

Maybe it would take a while, but our souls would become one again. The kindness I'd stolen would flow back into Sunao, and she'd be her old self once more.

I knew everything now, and I was prepared to do my part. Sunao could order me to do so at any time. Especially now that she'd learned all this.

"Nao."

She called my name—the name that had once been hers.

"The choice is yours, Nao."

"…Huh?"

A gust of wind swept down from the Togetsu Bridge.

My hair was pinned up at the back and didn't budge, but my bangs were not so tightly secured. Yet I forgot to blink, my eyes fixed on Sunao.

A moment earlier, she'd looked so tense—but now she seemed at peace, smiling calmly into the sunset.

She was dazzlingly beautiful.

It was like the day she'd split that cream puff with me. She'd laughed when I got cream all over my lips. Right now, she had that same warmth I'd felt from little Sunao when she reached over and wiped it off for me.

She wasn't pushing her choice onto me. She wasn't forcing me to be the responsible one. She was respecting my desires and letting me make up my own mind.

I knew Sunao was trying to trace the outlines of a time long past, when she was nicer than anyone.

"I'll let you decide, Nao. Will you live as yourself? Or will you come back inside me?"

My throat quivered. All sorts of emotions welled up within, choking me. I was drowning in feelings I couldn't put into words. I pursed my lips, then caught my breath.

I breathed in, then out.

Sunao didn't try to rush me. She just waited. I had time to decide.

But my answer had always been the same.

I looked at Sunao and spoke.

"Sunao, I……"

AFTERWORD

What *are* replicas?

Volume 3 shines a spotlight on that mystery and offers some answers.

But personally, I've never thought of this as a mystery at all. Little flights of fancy and the unknown hidden in the mundane—I've always found such things enchanting. With *Even a Replica Can Fall in Love*, I felt it best to leave the answers to the readers' imaginations.

However, when we were discussing plans for the third volume, and I told my editor, "I've been *set* on this direction since the very out*set*," they seemed pretty surprised, and not just because my pun was so unfunny. That response helped decide what this volume would be about.

If you think of this series as one big mystery, then the first volume presents the problem, the second offers some obvious hints, and the third lays out the answers for you. Perhaps we should write, "All the foreshadowing pays off!" on the cover.

But there's no need to brace yourselves.

This is a story about the beginning of winter. We alternate between two big school trips that have a lot in common.

Nao and Sunao, Aki and Shuuya, Ricchan and Mochizuki all find their own ways to have fun and grow and confront their own worries and struggles.

Sometimes, they bottle things up. They're at an awkward age. Yet sometimes, they're awfully mature. I love them all, and I hope my readers feel the same way—if you do, I couldn't be happier.

Originally, I planned to make the Surusei students go to Okinawa, but my editor said that would feel "too much like spring break." Now that I've written the book, I'm very glad I switched to Kyoto. Okinawa is all blue skies, surf, and white sands. Yoshii would love it, but it wouldn't match Sunao's state of mind at all. Ha-ha-ha.

At the start of August, I went to Kyoto to do field research. It was nearly forty degrees Celsius! I had to keep telling myself, "It's winter… Imagine it's winter…" all the while sweating my way through the shrines and temples. (I had a blast, by the way.)

Now I've got some important news to share. Momose Hanada is doing a manga adaptation of this series, and the first volume just came out from Dengeki Comic Next.

Nao is adorable on every page. She's just the cutest! It's a low-key romcom with roller-coaster emotions. I hope you enjoy the manga experience, too.

Okay, let's move on to the formalities.

To my editor, I've made your life hell once again (especially regarding deadlines). I can't thank you enough for all your precise advice. I'm totally reliant on it.

To my illustrator, raemz, I love the way the stars reflect in the nighttime ocean on the cover! It really captures the shift in Nao and Sunao's relationship. The way it forms a pair with the first volume's cover is so beautiful and bittersweet, it took my breath away. I can't thank you enough for all your gorgeous art. (There are lots of other details to notice in the covers. See if you can spot them!)

And finally, my utmost gratitude to everyone who picked this book up.

Like I said, it was never a mystery to me what replicas were, and there's a good reason for that.

When I was a child, I sometimes felt as if I were missing something vital—something that everyone else had. That anxiety often crept up on me.

I was sure my fears would just go away once I grew up. But I'm afraid to say that age has come and gone without the situation improving.

Nao and Sunao both claim they're the fake. I've always wondered what "being real" even means. What do you think?

Whether you've felt like that or not…

I hope you'll come along with me and find out what Nao's answer is.

Harunadon, October 2023

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