
OSHI NO KO
B Komachi Ai
Volume 1
~ Spica the First Star ~
Aka Akasaka
Mengo Yokoyari
Written by Hajime Tanaka
Sarina Tendouji
Goro Amamiya




OSHI
NO
KO
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Volume 1

～Spica the First Star～

Aka Akasaka × Mengo Yokoyari

Written by Hajime Tanaka

YEN ON


New York

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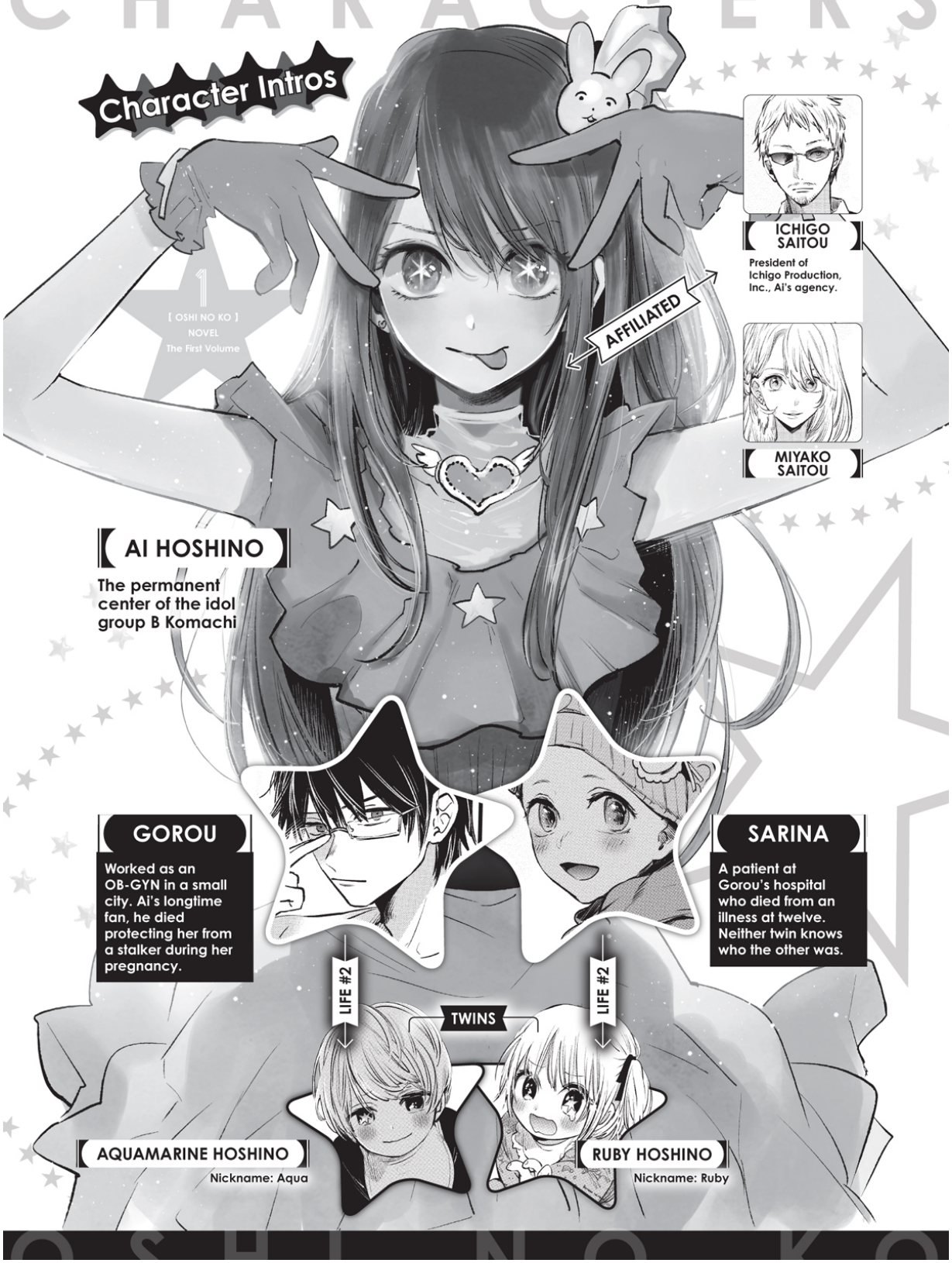
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NOVEL
The First Volume

【 AI HOSHINO 】
The permanent center of the idol group B Komachi

【 ICHIGO SAITOU 】
President of Ichigo Production, Inc., Ai's agency.

AFFILIATED

【 MIYAKO SAITOU 】

GOROU
Worked as an OB-GYN in a small city. Ai's longtime fan, he died protecting her from a stalker during her pregnancy.

SARINA
A patient at Gorou's hospital who died from an illness at twelve. Neither twin knows who the other was.

LIFE #2

TWINS

LIFE #2

【 AQUAMARINE HOSHINO 】
Nickname: Aqua

【 RUBY HOSHINO 】
Nickname: Ruby



CHAPTER 1

【OSHI NO KO】

SPICA THE FIRST STAR

"—So by the way, I'm done being an idol."

Ai Hoshino said the words with her very best smile.

It was uncomfortable when the mood got heavy during conversations like this, so she kept her tone as light as she could. She made her announcement as casually as she would have said, *I'm on a diet, so I'm cutting out snacks*, or *I don't feel like going to school today, so I'm skipping*. Getting this over with peacefully and amicably was best.

It didn't work as well as she'd hoped, though. The person she was talking to looked extremely rattled.

"Whoa-whoa-whoa, hang on a second!"

The man shouting was the president of her entertainment agency, Ichigo Production. His name was, uh…Satou, or Itou, or something like that. Probably.

The president stared at Ai, his mouth open so wide that it seemed as if his lower jaw might fall off. "You're quitting? Did you just say you aren't going to be an idol anymore? Seriously?"

They were in the agency's meeting room. Technically, that was just what they called the ten-square-meter storeroom that also served as a reception room, a place to store props, and the president's smoking booth. That was pretty normal at small agencies.

Ai had come to the meeting room after her three-hour evening dance lessons, so she was still in her aerobics clothes. She'd sneaked over here alone while the other members were changing.

Her reason? To inform the president she was leaving her idol group, B Komachi.

"What do they call it, 'graduating'? It seemed like it was about time."

The president's eyes were riveted on hers. He was stunned. The look that pierced her through his sunglasses seemed to say *What is this idiot talking about?*

"'About time'? Kid, you've only been an idol for three months. It's way too early for this."

"There's no rule that says you're not allowed to graduate after three months, is there?"

"Well, no, but…" The president's eyebrows drew together. "You're kidding, right? Come on, tell me you're pulling my leg."

"No, I'm not joking. I've already made up my mind," Ai said bluntly.

The president looked troubled.

Most adults made this face when they were dealing with a problem child. It was an expression Ai was used to seeing by now; the staff at the children's home and her teachers at school had all done the same thing. Those were the eyes of someone looking at a kid who was a handful.

The president sighed. "Why, exactly? Ai, you're B Komachi's center. You get the most camera time and the biggest parts in every song. What aren't you happy with?"

Behind the president was a whiteboard they used for meetings. A flyer advertising a show they'd performed last week in Shimokitazawa was stuck to it with magnets. It featured a photo of B Komachi, along with pictures of the two other indie idol groups who'd performed there.

Ai was in the most prominent position of the B Komachi photo. She had her head tilted to the side and was making a heart with her hands, striking a cutesy pose. *That really does make me look a little dumb*, she thought, though it was too late to do anything about it now.

Granted, since she was quitting, it didn't even matter anymore.

"I'm not particularly unhappy about anything." Ai shrugged. "Can't I quit just because I want to?"

"No. Obviously," the president griped. "B Komachi's finally hitting its stride. People still treat you girls as indie idols, but your shows fill up venues pretty good. Your audience and the staff here are expecting great things from the group. So what do you think would happen if you, the center, suddenly left? All our work will go up in smoke."

Ai let the president's lecture go in one ear and out the other. She didn't need anyone to tell her what the group's current situation was.

B Komachi was an idol group made up of newcomers. It was only three months old and currently had seven members, including Ai. All the girls were in their early teens.

The other members were middle school models who'd already been affiliated with Ichigo Pro. Ai was the only exception. Until just last year, there had been nothing connecting her to the entertainment industry.

…And that was the problem.

"The thing is, I didn't get into B Komachi the way the other girls did, you know?"

"Yeah." The president nodded. "I scouted you myself when you were wandering around town. I saw something in you that shined bright."

He'd sensed talent in her. Ai didn't hate hearing that.

"Right. That's because I *am* ridiculously cute. You were absolutely, one hundred percent right about that."

"You're just one big ball of confidence, aren't you? Not that that's a bad thing," the president said, sounding a little exasperated.

"Mm-hmm, sure am," Ai said with a nod. "And I got picked to be center out of nowhere. You've got a good eye, President."

"Gee, thanks."

"But it sort of seems like they're not happy with that."

"Who?"

"The rest of B Komachi."

For some reason, a newcomer with zero experience in the entertainment industry had been selected as the center, just like that. Nothing could have irritated the other founding members more than some amateur waltzing in and stealing the best spot.

"Did something happen between you and the others?" the president asked.

"Yeah, you could say that," Ai said, although she didn't give any details. "I think the group's atmosphere will improve if I'm not in it."

"Hmm," the president murmured. "True, they have seemed a little

touchy ever since you became center."

"'A little touchy'? More like super unfriendly."

It had been a month since Ai's position as center had become permanent, and the harassment from the other members was getting worse.

In the dressing room, they were constantly saying nasty things about her and *tsk*ing disgustedly in her general direction. They'd also posted unpleasant stuff about her on unofficial B Komachi fan sites, saying things like "Ai is completely oblivious" and "A girl who's nothing but a pretty face isn't idol material."

The posts were anonymous, of course, so nobody could take the writers to task for what they'd said. Some of what they wrote was clearly stuff only insiders would know, though, so it was definitely the work of someone in the group. Ai was surprised by the lengths they'd gone to.

Her fellow members had also messed with her costumes and props. The ribbons Ai used onstage and her shoes were constantly disappearing, and one time she'd even found her costume balled up in a garbage can the day before a show. That sort of persistent needling had taken its toll.

"To me, it just feels like 'Really? *Again?*' This sort of thing happened fairly often at school and the children's home."

Ai had learned two things during her twelve years on this planet.

One was that, in many ways, she wasn't "normal." Her looks, how she thought about things, how she'd grown up, the way she lived—all those things differed greatly from other kids her age, to the point that she was used to other people acting as if she creeped them out.

The other thing was that "normal" people just couldn't accept those who weren't like them. They would attack anyone who strayed from their definition of normalcy, desperately driving them away in order to protect their "normal" world. It was like that fairy tale where ducks had chased a duckling out of the flock just because its feathers were a different color. Maybe it was a basic instinct that all creatures were born with.

In other words, Ai stood out no matter what group she was a part of. It had been that way at school, at the children's home, and in B

Komachi. To everybody "normal," she was a duckling with feathers of the wrong color.

There was nothing she could do to avoid that. The only way to improve the situation was to chase that odd duckling away.

"So you're leaving because the members of B Komachi are unfriendly?"

Ai nodded. "That's right. Remember what you told me once, President? That it was okay to say 'I love you' even if it was a lie? Because while I was saying it, that lie might turn into the truth."

"I did say that, yeah." The president nodded. It was something he'd told Ai when he scouted her.

Maybe she'd never loved anyone, and maybe she'd never been loved, but that didn't mean she couldn't scream and shout about love. Ai had been curious about whether she could really do a thing like that, which was why she'd taken him up on his invitation. It was still a fresh memory for her.

"But look, the exact opposite happened."

"How so?"

"The harder I try, the more annoyed the other B Komachi members seem to get. It's like, instead of loving everybody, I'm spreading hatred. I just don't think it should be like this."

Some of the members of B Komachi harassed Ai every single day. Even if she *was* used to it, it wasn't a good feeling having people act so openly hostile toward her.

When they posted spiteful things about her online, she lost any motivation she had been holding onto. When her belongings got destroyed, she couldn't help but sigh more often.

It's important to smile when you're an idol, but under the circumstances, it was only natural that Ai found it impossible to smile. When she had to fake it for the camera, she just felt ridiculous.

Why did I even become an idol in the first place? she'd wonder.

"Well, I get what you're trying to say, but…" The president looked troubled. Picking up a half-smoked cigarette from the rim of the ashtray, he took a drag on it, then exhaled a puff of smoke. "It's too soon to give up yet. Maybe you're working hard and not getting the

results you want, but that's a pretty common thing in life."

"You just say that because you're the type of guy who never has anything work out, President…"

The man had a violent coughing fit when Ai made that remark. Apparently, that lungful of smoke had come back up the wrong way.

"H-hang on a minute. Don't you think that was a pretty nasty way to put it?"

"Well, your life really doesn't look like it's going too well."

"Kid, what the heck are you—?"

"You're drowning in debt, and this agency doesn't seem to be doing so great either… On top of that, you were trying to drown your troubles at a hostess club and started really bothering one of the girls, and they banned you, didn't they?"

"I mean, yeah, but! You're not wrong… Still! Who told you about that anyway?!"

"Miyako."

Miyako was a staff member with Ichigo Pro. She was a pretty, refined woman with an incredible figure who'd apparently once worked as a race queen and promotional model. Even though Ai wasn't particularly close with her, Miyako was one of the few people at the agency she could have a proper conversation with.

Ai gazed steadily into the president's sunglasses. "Listen, President, I'm sure you're going through a lot right now, but cheer up, okay?"

"Hey, quit it! Don't give me that pitying look! You're gonna make me sad for real!" The president clutched his head and let out a sigh. "I swear… You just completely ignore everyone around you and say whatever you want. You're really something, you know that?"

"I am? Thanks," Ai said with a smile.

The president grimaced. "That wasn't a compliment! …I'm starting to see why the other members are so hard on you. I don't hate this side of you…but I bet some people just can't stand it."

"You think so?" Ai was only being honest about her thoughts and feelings. She wasn't trying to get people to either like her or hate her. "Hmm. If I'm ruining the mood, I really do think it'd be better if I wasn't here."

“Nah, I’m not saying it’s all your fault. The ones who are jealous are a big part of the problem.” The president stubbed his spent butt in the ashtray, then wearily took a fresh cigarette out of his jacket pocket and lit it. “Well, it’s like that everywhere in this industry, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s a hurricane of envy and harassment. It’s the same everywhere—from little agencies like ours to the heavyweights that appear in the annual New Year’s music special. The nature of idols doesn’t change.”

“Their ‘nature’?”

“They get annoyed when someone else stands out more than them, and they end up wanting to drag that girl down. You know how it goes. The nail that sticks up gets hammered down. Groups may claim that all their members get along great, but you’ll never find a group actually like that. That’s because idols have a constant hunger for approval,” the president muttered.

This was something Ai had come to understand well over the past few months: Idols were nowhere near as glamorous as they appeared to be.

The president looked conflicted. “It even happens in major groups sometimes. When a member at the height of her popularity suddenly announces she’s retiring, if you look at what actually happened, there was usually some seriously horrific bullying going on. It’s real common in this industry.”

“Oh yeah, those sorts of stories get kicked around in weekly gossip magazines for ages afterward.”

The president ground out his cigarette in the ashtray, a rather cold expression on his face. “In the shadow of every successful idol are hundreds, sometimes thousands, of losers. That’s the sort of world this is. Everyone’s desperate to survive. Kids are exposed to harsh competition, their hearts get worn down, and as a result, some of them do whatever it takes to sabotage others. Even you must know how that feels.”

“Hmm.” Ai cocked her head. As far as she was concerned, singing onstage was only a job. Making audiences happy and having people

say she was cute were just facets of it. As a result, she didn't particularly care who B Komachi's center was or who was the most popular.

"If one of the other girls was more popular than me, I don't think I'd want to drag her down."

The president's eyes widened. "Oh yeah?" he asked, sounding mystified. "Why not?"

"Because when it comes down to it, being popular with fans is just based on other people's opinions. I don't think that sort of thing matters."

"What do you mean, you don't think it matters?"

"Even if other people praise you or put you down, you're still *you*, right? Whether your position onstage is center or way off on the edge, it doesn't change what you're supposed to do as an idol."

"Ah…" The president looked troubled. "I see. So it's like that, huh? That's a problem."

"What is?"

"How invested you are in this compared to the others. You really are different, for better and for worse."

Different. Ai was used to hearing that.

In the end, that was probably the cause of all this. She wasn't "normal." She was oblivious to the people around her. That was why she couldn't understand them. She didn't get what "normal" was for idols…or for humans in general.

"It's like, after going through all sorts of things in my head, I kind of think, 'Actually, maybe I'm not cut out for being an idol.'"

"I'm telling you, that's not true," the president said, shaking his head. "Listen. Ai. Would you rethink this? Please?" He put his hands together in front of his face and bowed his head low, as if he were praying. "The group's just finished a new song. The next show's already scheduled. You're the center, so if you drop out now, both B Komachi and I are finished."

"Mm. I kind of doubt that." Ai tilted her head. "If I left, couldn't you just make one of the other members the center or find a new girl?"

The world was lousy with idols. Many of them had to be better

singers and dancers than Ai was, and they'd probably be better at getting along with other people, too. The president wouldn't have trouble finding a replacement.

"No matter who it was, I doubt things would get any worse than they are now."

"That's not…," the president started, but he quickly fell silent. Somewhere in his heart, he may also have been thinking that B Komachi's atmosphere might improve if they changed the center.

He was probably right to think that way. Any sane person would.

Ai gave him a bright, encouraging smile. "You want B Komachi to do well, don't you?"

"Of course I do. Just how much do you think I've invested in training you kids?"

"Then there's no need to hesitate, is there?"

"Yeesh." The president scratched the back of his head. Reaching into the inner pocket of his jacket, he pulled out his pack of cigarettes again, but it was empty. He squeezed it in his fist, crushing it out of irritation, then abruptly asked, "What are you going to do, then?"

Ai's eyes widened. "Huh? Me? What?"

"I'm asking what you're going to do once you quit being an idol. Are you saying you'll go back to being a normal girl?"

A "normal girl," Ai mused. *If I really* was *normal, I probably wouldn't have considered quitting in the first place. That's kind of ironic.*

"I don't think not being an idol is going to change much. It's not like I'm a celebrity or something."

B Komachi was still only an indie idol group. They were affiliated with an agency, but other than that, they weren't really any different from ordinary people.

The number of people who came to see their shows had grown some, but it wasn't as if they were making TV appearances, and their CDs weren't on the Oricon charts. They had an internet radio program, and that was about it.

If an idol from a minor indie group graduated, the world would barely even notice. It would be one thing if a nationally popular idol

left the industry, but Ai was just one of the hundreds of idols in this country who didn't sell. She'd disappear quietly, without anyone knowing. Nobody would even discuss it online.

Ai folded her arms. "But let's see… Once I leave the agency, I might take going to school a bit more seriously. With my brain, I doubt I'll be able to make it to high school…so it might be nice to just enjoy student life while I'm in middle school."

"I see." The president nodded solemnly, then fixed his gaze on Ai's. "So your mind's made up?"

"Yep."

"I guess that's that, then." He heaved a deep sigh. "Go make the most of student life or whatever else you want to do."

"You mean you're letting me quit?"

"No matter what I say, it's not like you'd listen anyway."

"Oh wow, President, you totally get me."

The man grimaced. "Not because I want to."

Ai had only known this man for half a year or so, but apparently he'd gotten a good handle on her personality. Even though she'd never managed to remember his name.

"Okay, well, that's how it is, then."

Ai started to get up, but just as she did, the president let out a gasp as if he'd just remembered something.

"Ah! No, hang on a sec."

"Huh?"

"Before you quit, I have one more job for you."

"A job?" Ai looked puzzled. What was this about?

"Come hang out with me for a bit this Sunday. There's one last thing I want you to do."



Rows of skyscrapers stretched as far as the eye could see, and store windows glittered in the summer sunlight. It was a weekend afternoon, and Ginza was crowded.

As soon as the signal changed, a huge mass of people began to stream past Ai. It reminded her of a school of fish swimming through a tropical ocean that she'd seen on TV long ago. Lots of little fish had grouped together to stand up to a big fish. Apparently, it was a type of defensive mechanism.

So both fish and people group together on instinct, huh?

As Ai was pondering over that, the president glanced over at her. "What's the matter? You look sort of glum. Was Italian food not your thing?"

"No, it's not that," Ai told him as they crossed the crosswalk.

It had been five days since she'd told the president she was quitting. Ai had kept going to her usual singing lessons and participating in online Polaroid photo ops out of habit, and before she knew it, it was Sunday.

The president had brought her downtown for her final job. Instead of taking her straight there, though, he'd treated her to lunch first. They'd gone to a family-style Italian restaurant right next to Ginza Station—one of a chain of restaurants with locations all over the country. It was casual and easy on the wallet, the sort of place where students could just pay a small fee for free refills and hang out for hours.

"Oh, I know." The president frowned. "Were you unhappy with the three-hundred-yen doria? When entertainment agency presidents take people out to eat, they don't normally pick family restaurants, do they?"

"No, that's not it at all. I like doria. Besides, I know you and the agency are poor."

"Boy, you sure don't pull any punches. You're not wrong, though," he said with an awkward laugh.

The president was dressed plainly in a white business shirt and navy-blue slacks and wore a no-name-brand watch. His beloved sunglasses were apparently a foreign import, but everything else he had was simple and cheap. He was the last person anyone would think of if they were asked to picture someone in the entertainment industry or the president of an agency. As he himself had said, it all just went to show how financially troubled he was.

Shoulders slumping, the president sighed and shook his head. "Personally, I'd rather feed you sushi or eel. I'd order some stupid-expensive shochu… But listen, the world's tough on underdogs."

"Well, if B Komachi's popularity keeps growing, you'll end up filthy rich, won't you? I bet you'll be able to guzzle down shochu like it was juice."

"I hope you're right about that." The president shot Ai a cold, resentful look. "The thing is, B Komachi's top moneymaker said she's pulling out, so my life plan's got some ugly storm clouds hanging over it."

Ai suspected they'd wind up rehashing that tiresome conversation if she let the president talk about being poor any longer, so she smoothly changed the subject. "So, President, what's this job? There's more to it than eating lunch, right?"

"Right. The main thing's coming up next." The president threaded his way through the crowd, walking past the enormous Nishiginza department store toward a street of small boutiques.

How far was he planning to go? Ai could see a heat haze shimmering over the asphalt just down the street. There wasn't much greenery in town, so summers in central Tokyo were stupidly hot. She didn't want to walk for very long if she could help it.

Ai fanned herself with her hand. "How far are we going?"

"Not far. Just tough it out a little longer."

"Okaaay," Ai said meekly. She owed the president for taking care of her all this time. This was her last job, so she could put up with some discomfort.

As they walked down a wide Ginza street, Ai could feel passersby stealing glances at her. She heard people murmur things like "That girl was insanely cute" and "I wonder if she's in show business."

"It sure is a waste," the president said abruptly.

"Huh? What is?"

"Well, *you*. You're able to grab all this attention just by walking down the street. It seems like a shame to let you quit being an idol."

"That's 'cause I'm cute," Ai said offhandedly.

The president gave an irritated *tsk*. "You got that right. It's *because* you're cute that this is so frustrating."

“Those people didn’t seem to know anything about B Komachi, though. In the end, am I just not that popular?”

From what she heard, top-class entertainers had to wear disguises even if they were just stepping out for a bit. That was particularly true now that the internet was everywhere. Someone could whip out their phone, take a snapshot of an entertainer’s private life, and share it with countless people in the blink of an eye.

Members of indie idol groups like B Komachi didn’t need to worry about things like that, though. There weren’t too many people who wanted to know about their private lives in the first place, and if the demand wasn’t there, no one would put it on the internet. Compared to big shots in the entertainment industry, their world was pretty tranquil.

All of this meant that Ai’s agency hadn’t made her wear a disguise, so she was able to just walk around town like normal. It was nice not to have to bother with things like that.

The president snorted. “Nah. It’s because you’re still just indie. Of course you’re not well-known. You’ve got a lot of people cheering you on, though.”

“That’s true. When I look online, the response seems pretty decent.”

Even Ai looked herself up to see what people were saying about her. Fan opinion dictated her worth as an idol, so in a manner of speaking, keeping tabs on it was part of the job.

“That said,” she continued, “it’s only ever been decent. My name’s never been trending, and neither has B Komachi’s.”

“Sure, in terms of numbers, you don’t have the type of fan base a top-class idol would. But there’s definitely a core group that likes you from the bottom of their hearts.”

“They like me ‘from the bottom of their hearts’? What do you mean?”

“You know, the fan letters. You get quite a few of them whenever you do a show, right?”

Where was he going with this? The president seemed to realize that it wasn’t clicking for Ai, so he went on. “It’s easy to say ‘I like her’ online, but fan letters are different. People who take time out of

their day to write letters and send them in are pretty hardcore fans."

"Oh, right. That makes sense."

"There are always a lot addressed to you. I see quite a few repeat senders' names, too, which means you've got a rock-solid fan base."

"Huh. How about that."

"What do you mean 'How about that'? This isn't news, right? I hand you those letters after every show."

"Oh… Yeah. I guess you do."

Ai had completely forgotten about her fan letters until the president brought them up. She shoved them all into her locker at the agency with other miscellaneous papers.

The president fixed his gaze on Ai, a somewhat appalled expression on his face. "What, you haven't read them? You seriously don't care about this stuff, do you?"

"I just don't really like reading letters."

"Why not?"

"Mm. I dunno." She gave a little shrug, ducking the question.

There actually was a reason Ai wasn't great with letters. It had happened when she was very young, just after she'd been separated from her mother and put in the children's home.

Back then, Ai had been eagerly looking forward to hearing from her mom. The woman might have been frequently violent toward her, but she was still her mother. Her flesh and blood. Even if something kept her from coming to get Ai, she was sure to send news of some sort. That thought kept the young girl staring at the mailbox all day long.

In the end, however, the only letter Ai got was from a lawyer who claimed to represent her mother. It arrived during her first winter at the children's home, and it said that Ai's mother had disappeared after the police released her and no one knew where she'd gone.

Mom abandoned me…

Ai had learned this cruel truth in a letter.

Her mother had probably always hated her. There was no place in her life for a daughter who wasn't "normal" and couldn't pick up on social cues.

Ai had stopped staring at the mailbox after that. She'd started to hate the very sight of letters and came to feel like opening one would inevitably reveal bad news.

"Well, it's not that big a deal." Maybe the president had noticed something in Ai's face, because it seemed like he had no intention of continuing the fan letter conversation. He wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand and looked around. "I'm getting thirsty. I'll grab you something from the vending machine. How about an oolong tea?"

"Oh, sure. Thanks," Ai said, giving him a bright smile.

The president's actually pretty good at reading people's moods, she thought, genuinely impressed. *The complete opposite of me…*



"Here we are."

After walking through Ginza for a little while, the president had stopped in front of an enormous seven-story building. All four of its sides were made of glass, and each floor seemed to be occupied by a variety of luxury fashion stores. The floor guide beside the entrance listed the names of brands like Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Prada… Apparently, the building was a large, open complex of boutiques.

"This is the job site?" Ai asked.

"Yeah, something like that."

Ai was perplexed, but the president just pulled open one of the glass doors and walked right in. He moved confidently, as if he was familiar with the place.

Ai followed him inside. The chilly air-conditioned space was like an oasis in the desert. She gave a sigh of relief, feeling refreshed.

The interior was incredibly chic. The walls and floor were all done in black and white, and such meticulous thought had been put into the decoration that each shop felt more like an aesthetic lounge than an apparel boutique. The garments that hung on the wavy, arched

racks struck an exquisite balance between eccentricity and style, asserting themselves as the cutting edge of fashion.

Ai bought most of her clothes at stores that focused on affordability, so these boutiques were a whole new world for her. What exactly did they want her to do in a place like this? She had no idea; for now, all Ai could do was follow along.

The two of them rode the escalator to an upper floor, where the president took Ai to a shop that sold fashion for teenage girls. These clothes were clearly out of the ordinary as well. Both the designs and the prices were startling.

"Um," Ai said, tilting her head. "Is this a modeling job?"

"Nope. Heck, modeling gigs for brands like these wouldn't go to idols from an indie group like B Komachi."

"I guess not, huh?"

Fashion models had to be people who consumers aspired to be. They needed to create the urge to buy clothes by making them say "I want to wear what she's wearing."

Looking at it that way, being fashion models was too much responsibility for an indie idol group that was only a few months old. To do something like that, they'd have to be famous enough to have at least two or three regular spots on TV—or so she'd been told at the agency.

"That said," the president went on, "if you keep selling like this, I bet we'll be able to market you as models before too long. Especially you, Ai. With your looks—"

"Oh, you don't have to go into all that. I'm retiring."

"Yeesh. Could you be any colder?" The president frowned, as if disappointed.

Making that face at me isn't going to help, Ai thought. She had no intention of changing her mind.

"Anyway, President, why did you bring me here?"

"Well, to shop, obviously."

"To shop? Are you going to buy something?"

"That's right," the president said with a nod.

What is even happening?

"But this shop is for girls. I don't think they'll have anything for an

old man like you who's got one foot firmly planted in 'middle-aged.'"

"Okay, rude. I'm still closer to being a young guy than an old man."

Saying that automatically makes you an old man, Ai thought, but she decided not to point it out.

"Oh, don't tell me… Is this a present for your girlfriend? You sure like them young, President." He must have been dating someone younger and needed a girl's perspective to pick out a gift. That would make sense why he'd brought Ai along. "Well, outsiders may not have the right to comment, but listen: Be careful when you mess around with minors, President. These days, they'll lock you up for real."

"Kid, what are you talking about? We're buying clothes for you."

"Huh?" Ai couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "For *me*? What do you mean?"

Ignoring her bewilderment, the president called out to a nearby sales associate. "Pick out a full outfit for this girl, would you?"

"Of course," the saleswoman responded cheerfully. She had streaked hair with underlights and was wearing a knit dress in shocking pink. Even the staff here were stylish.

When the woman looked Ai in the face, her eyes widened. "Wow. You're such a cutie, aren't you? Out shopping with your daddy?"

"Um, more like…" She glanced at the president.

He nodded, looking nonchalant. "I'm her father." He probably hadn't wanted to bother trying to explain the situation.

"Something like that," Ai said, going along with it. She tugged on the president's sleeve and whispered, "…So why are we buying me clothes? This is the job?"

"Yeah, that's right. It's been bugging me for a while."

"What has?"

"Whenever you wear your own clothes, you look like you're from the boonies. At least when you're walking around town, I want you to wear something a little better."

"Something 'better'?" Ai started to argue, but then she saw something out of the corner of her eye that shut her up. She'd caught her incredibly drab reflection in the mirror on the dressing

room door.

She was wearing a plain T-shirt underneath a light summer hoodie she'd bought in the bargain bin of a neighborhood clothes store for 1,980 yen. Her jeans were pretty old, too, with holes in the knees. They weren't due to intentional distressing, though, simply wear and tear.

The president had a point. Nobody would have said she looked stylish, and if someone called her a country bumpkin, she couldn't really blame them. It had never bothered Ai much, but there probably weren't too many girls who walked around downtown Tokyo dressed like she was.

"See?" The president smiled at her. "You're a teenage girl before you're an idol. It's fine to be a little more fashion-conscious. Take your time picking something out." And with that, he left the girls' clothing department, probably heading outside for a smoke.

The saleswoman smiled at Ai. "Your daddy seems like a nice guy."

"Huh…" was the only response Ai could come up with. *Had* that been "nice"?

The president was probably trying to bribe her with presents. Was he buying her expensive gifts to make it harder for her to leave the agency?

He can try, but it's pointless, Ai thought. Her desire to quit hadn't wavered in the slightest.

Oblivious to what was going through Ai's mind, the woman continued her cheerful sales talk. "Let's see… A more girly style might suit your slim, petite build. Would you like to try a frilly blouse? Oh, but going all the way to the opposite end of the spectrum and trying some streetwear would also look really cool. Oversized clothes would make a great contrast with your build."

Frankly, Ai would have liked to say she wasn't particularly interested in either, but if this was a job, she didn't really have a choice. She'd just go along with whatever the woman said, then head home as soon as possible.

"I'll go with whatever you recommend," Ai said, smiling at her.

If there was one thing she was good at, it was faking a smile.



For close to an hour after that, Ai was held captive in a dressing room. The woman made her try on all sorts of clothes, one after another after another. Blouses and overalls. Camisoles and flared skirts. Polished, mature styles and flirty, feminine fashion. Office wear and comfy casual—everything she could get her hands on.

Ai felt as if she'd tried on every piece of clothing on this floor of the building. In fact, she thought the woman might be bringing her clothing from other floors, too. It was that intense.

According to the sales associate, she was so cute it made her want to dress Ai up in all sorts of outfits. While she was glad the woman was having fun, Ai wasn't a fan of it at all. She thought this must be what it felt like to be a dress-up doll.

"We've tried everything, but this dress really is the best one."

In the end, they settled on a cute white dress with polka dots. A big ribbon held together the open back, and the design was rather fancy. It wouldn't have looked out of place at a B Komachi event. *Come to think of it, I've never worn clothes this cute just to go out*, Ai thought.

The saleswoman kept nodding in satisfaction, seemingly confident in her choice. "That looks amazing on you. You could be an idol."

"An idol, huh…?" Hearing that made Ai feel weirdly conflicted. She gave the woman a polite smile and said, "Thank you very much," then left the dressing room.

Now that she thought about it, the president wasn't back yet. How should she pay for these clothes?

As Ai was looking around, she suddenly spotted a couple of familiar faces.

"Hey, it's Ai."

"That's unusual. Fancy meeting you here."

Two girls Ai's age were coming down the escalator. They were both B Komachi members. One girl had long brown hair and almond-shaped eyes, while the other had a round face and bobbed hair.

Their names were… She couldn't remember.

The two of them must have come here to shop together. It was a crazy coincidence, though not one Ai was happy about. She didn't really want to see either of them.

Ai let out an "Um…," unsure of how to respond, but the girl with the almond eyes beat her to it.

"We saw President Saitou up in the smoking area a minute ago. What, did you two come here together?"

Ah. So these two smelled faintly like cigarette smoke because they were on their way back from the smoking area? That was a pretty daring place for idols to frequent.

Ai nodded. "Uh-huh."

The round-faced girl narrowed her eyes. "Oh? Going places together on a Sunday… That sounds kinda suspicious, doesn't it?"

"Is this a date? What, are you flirting with the president?" Almond Eyes scowled openly.

Here we go again. Ai sighed quietly. Ever since she'd been chosen as B Komachi's center, this sort of thing happened all the time. These girls picked fights with her at every opportunity.

Ai answered as calmly as possible, taking care not to let her irritation show on her face. "No. It's for work."

"But your plan is to have him buy you that outfit, right?" Ai was still wearing the dress she'd been trying on, and Round Face gave it a long, hard look. "Must be nice. That's expensive, isn't it?"

"Maybe. I don't really know," Ai replied.

Round Face smirked. "You're real good at getting people to give you things, aren't you, Ai? It's not just the center position; you even get presents like that."

"Sleeping your way to success, huh? That's so messed up. Seriously, gross." Almond Eyes snickered.

Their words were filled with a desire to drag Ai down however they could, each one a blade hurled with pure malice. They both really hated her.

"Like, normally, it's unthinkable for some total nobody to take the center spot. Clearly you must be doing some real nasty stuff behind the scenes."

"Kyun-pan and Nino were also saying how much they hate you and that the ones who *actually* put in the work think girls like you should be fired."

"Total nobody." "They hate you." "You should be fired." Words like that didn't hurt Ai much anymore.

After all, she wasn't "normal." That was why she couldn't love anybody and why nobody loved her.

Even her own mother had abandoned her.

Even her groupmates hated her.

As far as the world was concerned, Ai Hoshino was an irredeemable nuisance.

It was just as she'd thought: She shouldn't have become an idol. She believed that from the bottom of her heart.

Almond Eyes gave Ai a fierce glare. "Listen, you. You *do* realize you're causing trouble for everybody, right? And that you're the reason why the mood in B Komachi is so rotten."

"Yeah," Round Face chimed in. "You think the rest of us are just your accessories, don't you? You're a terrible person."

"I've…never thought of you like that," Ai said. She meant it. B Komachi was an idol group. None of their songs or dances would work unless all seven of them were there.

But it didn't look like the two girls were going to just accept what she said.

"Ha-ha! So you mean we're not even on your radar?"

"You're actually the worst! Even an apology wouldn't be enough to satisfy anybody at this point."

"Oh, hey, then let's have her apologize at the next show. She'll get down on her knees in front of us and the fans and say, 'Please forgive me and my big fat, swollen head.'"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! That's hilarious! Why don't we make that her graduation show? We'll send her off with a smile."

They squealed and giggled, clearly enjoying themselves.

Their smiles were so full of joy. These had to be their genuine selves. Ai thought the expressions they wore now, while they were heaping abuse on her, looked happier than the ones they wore onstage.

Meanwhile, as she gazed at those warped smiles, she felt her heart getting colder and colder. These girls wanted to be happy as idols, and Ai would be in their way no matter what she did.

She would have liked to get along with them if possible. As an idol, she'd always wanted to shout out "I love you" to their fans with the rest of her group—but that was probably never going to happen.

If she quit, it would solve everything. That was an undeniable fact.

Actually, that might be true outside of work as well. Maybe everyone would be happier if she disappeared from the world.

After all, no matter where she went, nobody wanted her.

As Ai was thinking these things…

"Huh?"

A large drop of water seeped out of the corner of her eye.

That single warm bead trickled down her cheek and fell to the floor at her feet.

Was it…a tear? She hadn't thought the girls' words had hurt at all, but for some reason, the tears just kept coming.

It hurt and made her sad to be disliked, but she should have been used to it. Where were these tears coming from? Ai didn't really understand what she was feeling.

Almond Eyes snorted. "Oh, come on. What's with this girl? She's crying."

"Does she think we'll forgive her if she cries? You really want to make us look like the bad guys, huh? I swear, you make me sick."

"She probably thinks somebody will come rescue her if she cries. You're always looking down on other people, so just—"

Almond Eyes had started closing in on Ai, when…

"Hey, you two! Enough!" a stern voice called from the escalator. "That's no way to talk to a member of your own group!"

Almond Eyes and Round Face both flinched, then tensed up.

The president was striding toward them, shoulders squared. He must have heard what they were saying. Unusually, he was scowling. "You're idols! You'll make your fans sad if you fight like that in public!"

The pair recoiled at the president's anger. Ai's eyes widened, too;

she'd never seen him shout like that before.

They didn't like being lectured without getting a chance to explain their side of it, though. Almond Eyes belligerently stared back at the president. "…I seriously doubt the fans will ever find out. It's not like we're constantly being followed around by the media."

"Yeah," Round Face chimed in. "And besides, it's a fact that Ai's a little cheater. She's a sneak who got to be the center by sucking up to you."

"Don't be ridiculous," the president snapped. "I made Ai the center because she's got the most talent as an idol. After shows, it's her name that comes up the most on online chat forums."

His bluntness made both girls scowl.

"Um, you say she's got the most talent, but you just mean she's got a pretty face," Almond Eyes said. "You're playing favorites because of her looks, President."

"Boy, it must be nice to be cute. You don't have to do anything, and you still stand out." Round Face gave Ai a hostile glare. It was a twisted expression that reflected her jealousy and inferiority complex—the furthest thing from "cute."

Still, there was nothing Ai could do. Apologizing would only make the other girls feel even more entitled.

The president sighed. "Listen… You say Ai doesn't do anything? You two are up there onstage with her, but I guess you haven't been paying attention."

Almond Eyes and Round Face both frowned. "Huh?"

The president glanced at Ai, then continued. "Before every show, she checks out the entire venue and makes suggestions to management. She's so picky about stuff like camera angles and light levels that it's basically nagging. After that, she often tinkers with the props and costumes herself. She even checks to see how the other members are doing that day and makes small adjustments to the choreography. In short," he said, driving his point home, "Ai does everything she can to make your group look cute."

Almond Eyes and Round Face looked taken aback.

Ai was startled, too. He'd been watching their shows more carefully than she'd thought.

Ai had assumed the president's job was just to secure a stage for their shows, negotiate with the groups that were appearing with them, and handle the agency's relationship with other businesses. Anything to do with the performance was generally left to the staff who ran the venue.

Honestly, until just now, even Ai had assumed he wasn't interested in minor details like that. Yet the president had been watching her, and she hadn't even noticed. She couldn't hide her surprise.

"No one else in B Komachi puts in that kind of effort. She's the perfect choice for center. If you want that position, you two will also need to show that kind of talent."

The girls didn't seem happy with the president's blunt declaration.

Almond Eyes snorted. "B-but even if she is talented, openly favoring her like that is seriously annoying. I mean, you're personally buying her presents? Come on."

Round Face agreed. "Yeah. It's real demoralizing."

The president sighed and pushed his sunglasses up his nose. "That's not a present. It's compensation."

"Compensation?" Ai echoed. What was he talking about?

"Somebody messed with your regular clothes in the dressing room last week, didn't they? They got slashed up."

"Oh yeah," Ai said, remembering. "That did happen…"

She'd gone to the dressing room after their dance lessons to find her favorite summer hoodie brutally cut to ribbons. Someone had enthusiastically taken a pair of scissors to it, leaving it in worse condition than even a worn-out rag. In the end, she'd had to wear her practice outfit home that day.

That had only been a little worse than the usual harassment, and it wasn't the first time they'd gone after her personal belongings. The hoodie had been old and sort of dingy anyway, so Ai hadn't cared all that much.

It seemed like the president had a problem with it, though.

"If that sort of thing got out, the agency would be blamed for not managing you properly. Of course it warrants an apology."

"Oh, that's what you mean by compensation." Ai looked down at

the dress the saleswoman had picked out. It seemed pretty expensive as a replacement for a hoodie she'd bought secondhand. This was the definition of throwing a sprat to catch a whale.

"The hoodie didn't matter all that much… You're overthinking this, President."

"I need to make sure I handle something like that properly. This industry may be littered with lies and fraud, but I think it's important to show a little sincerity… Don't you think?" His gaze went to Almond Eyes and Round Face. "Don't rely on cheating to get you anywhere, you two. If you want the center position, compete for it fair and square as idols."

It was a completely natural argument for the president of an agency to make, and it left the girls with no way to respond. They exchanged awkward looks.

"I have no clue what you're talking about. I can't deal with this."

"Let's just go."

With that, the pair hurried off toward the elevators. They'd been spoiling for a fight just a few minutes ago, yet now they didn't even look at Ai.

You know… Ai wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. *By acting like that, they practically confessed to being the ones responsible for the hoodie incident.*

"So they're great with insults but bad at lying, huh? They'll probably have a hard time making it as idols," the president murmured, watching the girls leave. "Sorry. I'll make sure they take responsibility later."

"Mm. Well, it doesn't really matter." Ai looked up at the president.

He frowned. "What?"

"Nothing. I think I was just a little startled."

"Startled? By what?"

"You pay more attention than I thought you did. I figured you for the type of guy who doesn't really care if his idols fight amongst themselves."

"Of course I care." The president grimaced. "Seriously, kid, what do I look like to you anyway?"

"A sketchy playboy."

"Wow, you didn't waste any time telling me how you really feel! Thank you *very much* for that!" The president snorted. "Well, you know. Both you and B Komachi are important to me."

"We are your source of income, after all." Although Ai did think it might be a little spiteful of her, once again, she told him what she really thought.

In an admirable display of honesty, the president nodded. "Yeah, that's true. If it weren't for you kids, I'd have a hard time keeping food on the table. I'm not denying that. But," he added, "that's not all."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure how to put it." The president gazed up at the ceiling, scratching his cheek. "Your shows have started pulling in bigger audiences lately. Your songs are all starting to sell a bit. Watching that happen is… Well, it's sort of like you've given me a dream."

"A dream?"

Ai hadn't been expecting anything that romantic.

She'd assumed the president was a realist, the type of guy who thought it was fine to do anything as long as it sold. Someone who didn't care about things like dreams.

The president mischievously put a finger to his lips. "Don't tell anyone else I said this. At first, the group was crap at both singing and dancing, but your sweat and tears are gradually turning you girls into real idols. That sort of thing gets me fired up. It's genuine drama, the kind you can't get in manga or movies. Cheering you on as you race toward stardom makes me feel so alive."

"Just cheering us on does? It makes you feel alive?" Ai asked.

The president nodded emphatically. "Yeah, it does." He'd said it so decisively that Ai realized her mouth was hanging open slightly. "I mean, come on. With my help, the legend of B Komachi is coming together. Nothing's more fun than that. It's 'the joy of fandom,' plain and simple."

"'The joy of fandom'…? I don't really understand," Ai said, tilting her head.

"Huh?" The president looked surprised. "Really? You seriously

don’t get it at all?”

“Mm… When I look at comments online, people sometimes post things like ‘I’m Ai’s biggest fan,’ but to be honest, there’s a lot I don’t get about what makes people want to do that.” Ai had been cheered on by other people, but she’d never cheered anyone on herself. She’d never even wanted to. “You can talk somebody up to other people and cheer them on for all you’re worth, but in the end, I don’t think you get anything out of it… I just don’t know why they’d want to do something like that.”

The president crossed his arms and looked up at the ceiling. “Ah… I see. So we’re starting from there, huh?”

“I mean, maybe I just don’t understand because I’m weird.”

“Nah, it’s not that. I wouldn’t say you’re weird. I bet there are a lot of people on the planet who think the way you do. How do I explain it…?” The president put a hand to his chin, thinking. He fell silent, and it was a full five seconds before he spoke again. “Let’s see. The word *fan* is short for *fanatic*, you know. Basically, it means you’re so head over heels for whoever it is you’re supporting that you’ll do whatever it takes to recommend them to other people.”

“‘Head over heels,’ huh?”

“That’s right,” the president said. He looked more serious than Ai had ever seen him. “In this day and age, when the internet is king, recommending things to strangers is surprisingly hard. People cut you down with ‘That’s not my thing’ all the time. If you’re real unlucky, they might treat you like a weirdo and tear you a new one.”

Ai knew what the president meant. In a digital society, everyone was constantly connected. Saying anything at all could attract criticism from one person or another, so it took a great deal of courage for anyone to publicly say they liked this or that.

The president went on. “Fans get over that fear so they can recommend what they like to other people. It’s an absolute form of love, a feeling that makes you shout ‘I don’t care what anyone else thinks! I’m crazy about this!’ That’s what it means to be a fan.”

“Huh…” Ai nodded thoughtfully in response to the president’s extremely enthusiastic explanation. “Being a fan is really that overblown?”

"It ain't overblown at all. When your love for something hits the top of the meter and breaks it, you can sacrifice anything and have no regrets. Calculations about profit and loss don't mean a thing to you anymore."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm offering up my life to you kids, and not just because it's my job. Watching over you is what makes my life worth living. If it's for you, no matter how much debt I run up, it's a small price to pay." Behind his sunglasses, the president's eyes twinkled as he smiled. "In a sense, I guess you'd also call that a type of love. The joy of fandom is the joy of loving somebody."

"'The joy of loving somebody'…" It felt like a revelation to Ai. All this time, she'd never thought about how the president felt about B Komachi.

"In other words, uh…" The president's cheeks had gone red. "I'm saying I'm an enormous fan of you girls. Whenever I've got a spare moment, I find myself thinking of ways to help B Komachi get even a little more popular."

"You do?"

"Yeah." He nodded, looking a little embarrassed. "Just the other day, I pulled an all-nighter to make this." He reached into his pocket and took out something that gleamed brightly. It was a palm-sized piece of acrylic that had been turned into what looked like a keychain.

When Ai saw it, her eyes widened. "Is that…?"

The keychain had a cute caricaturized drawing of a smiling Ai printed on it, as well as a message so jam-packed with love it set her teeth on edge.

"'Ai's My Fave Forever!!!'…?"

When she read the message out loud, it made her crack up.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What the heck?! This is hilarious, President!"

"Hey, don't make fun of it. I put everything I had into that."

"Oh, no, I'm not making fun of it. Your enthusiasm came through loud and clear," she said, trying to fight back her laughter.

The president grimaced. "I dunno if I buy that."

Ai took another good look at the keychain in the president's hand.

The drawing was extremely cute, and anyone could tell at a glance that it was her. Fans would probably be delighted if they handed these out at events.

"This must have been a lot of work to make."

"Well, yeah. Still, I had so much fun with it that I forgot about the time."

Apparently, the president had been fairly exacting when he'd commissioned the drawing and had the acrylic processed. It was the first time he'd ever planned merch like this, and he'd struggled and sweated over it for weeks.

Something like this wouldn't have been possible without a deep affection for B Komachi. The care he'd put into it really moved Ai.

"This is another expression of my love for B Komachi… Though that's a pretty embarrassing way to put it." The president awkwardly shoved the keychain back into his pocket.

"The joy of fandom is the joy of loving somebody." For some strange reason, the president's words had left a deep impression on Ai.

There were people in the world who loved someone or something so enthusiastically that they weren't afraid of making sacrifices or being told they were wrong. That was how strong an impulse the desire to cheer somebody on was. As things stood, Ai couldn't even imagine it.

"Okay, that makes sense… No wonder I don't get it."

Ai had never loved anybody, and she'd never been loved. There was no way she could wrap her head around the joy of loving somebody.

"I knew it. I'm really not cut out to be an idol. I can't even begin to understand your feelings or those of the fans."

"Nah, I don't think that matters."

"Huh?" Ai cocked her head.

The president gave a sudden little smile. "Idols don't need to understand that right from the start. If you don't get it, then you can learn bit by bit."

"You can…learn?"

"You became an idol because you wanted to love somebody,

right? Fans cheering a person on is just another form of love. I think that'll be a good lesson for you."

Learn from her fans? The idea caught Ai by surprise.

Fans were just strangers. Customers. People who shelled out money for idols when they sang and danced. Or that was how Ai had always thought of them.

It might have been shallow of her to think that way. She was especially aware of that after seeing the keychain the president had poured his love into making. There seemed to be something unfathomable about the power that came from being a fan.

The corners of the president's eyes crinkled behind his sunglasses. "If you're going to quit anyway, why not hear the fans' heartfelt voices before you go?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said, the fan letters. Remember?"

"Oh!" Ai thought back to all the letters she'd carelessly shoved into her locker. The feelings the fans had directed toward her.

Would she find the answer she was searching for among them?



Dear Ai,

Your shows always cheer me up! The dance you did today was soooo cool! When you got to the chorus, you looked right at me and smiled, and I was completely over the moon! It blew away all my pent-up fatigue from work! I can't wait to see you again!

Ai,

I listened to your new song. It was so great with that fast tempo! I feel so energized hearing your voice, so I listen to you every morning on my way to school to psych myself up. I don't think I could even go to school without it anymore. I'm looking forward to your next new release.

P.S. When you were talking about kiritanpo *dumplings on the radio the other day, you kept saying "kiriponta" instead, and it was way cute. (LOL)*

Hello, Ai.

I always listen to your live streams. B Komachi's songs and dialogue really help me unwind. I've got a job at a shitty company that works me into the ground for peanuts, and I feel like I want to die on a daily basis, but I think the reason I'm not dead yet is because I look forward to seeing you during your streams every week. I'm not even kidding. You're the hope that's keeping me alive, Ai!

Ai was sitting in front of her locker at the agency with her fan letters. She read each one carefully and earnestly, as if engraving it into her heart.

The next thing she knew, it was evening. The low sun streamed in through the windows, dyeing the walls and floor of the locker room orange.

Ai had never read so much at once before, but strangely, she didn't feel worn out. The energy in those letters was what kept her going. She'd lost track of how many she'd read by now.

As Ai opened another envelope, she let out an emotional sigh. "This is seriously amazing."

It was just as the president had said: Every one of the letters conveyed an extraordinary enthusiasm. They were all obviously made with so much care as well, which fascinated Ai. Some were written on cute stationery, while others came enclosed with tiny stuffed animals. Several times, she was startled by long letters that covered ten whole sheets of paper.

"Everyone likes me way too much."

If she was being honest, even looking at the letters made her feel uncomfortable. She'd only gone to the trouble of opening and reading them because of what the president had said. Ai wanted to see for herself how much enthusiasm there was behind a fan's

devotion, and her curiosity had won out over her discomfort.

She had vividly experienced that enthusiasm for herself now. Her fans' handwritten letters had stirred her heart more than any online comment ever had.

Ai's chest grew tight with surprise and happiness. Those feelings had blown away all the nasty things her two groupmates had said to her that afternoon.

B Komachi's songs helped me study hard for my exams!

I started taking dance lessons because I want to be like you, Ai!

Letters like that made her think being a fan sounded like a lot of fun. In fact, the fans might be enjoying life a whole lot more than the idols did.

Supporting somebody. Loving somebody. The people who'd written these letters were able to do both of those things in the truest sense of the word, and Ai found herself genuinely jealous.

If she kept interacting with people like that, could she become like them someday?

Ai kept on reading silently.



Three days later, Ai was back in the Ichigo Pro meeting room.

"Would you take a look at this for me?" she asked, holding out several sheets of notebook paper. It was something she'd written up after their shopping trip to Ginza the other day.

The president skimmed the pages, then frowned. "Hmmmm? Dance choreography, camera blocking…even costume proposals. What the heck is this?"

"B Komachi's doing a show to reveal our new song soon, right? I came up with a production plan for it."

The group always performed their new songs at the very beginning of a show. Ai had written out a list of ideas she'd thought of for that performance.

The president looked bewildered. "Uh… I don't really get it." He

scratched his temple. “It’s all handwritten, and it’s sort of scatter-brained and hard to follow. It feels like you just wrote down whatever you were thinking.”

“Mm-hmm, that’s pretty much what I did. I just had all these ideas.” Ai puffed out her chest proudly. She’d never put together something like this before. Even if she hadn’t managed to do it well, who would care?

The president looked from the sheaf of papers to her face and back. “Content aside, I’ve got one question about this.”

“Go for it.”

“Well, uh, didn’t you say you weren’t going to be an idol anymore?”

“Yeah, I said that.”

“So why are you submitting show proposals? That’s not something someone who’s quitting does. And you seem really into this. It doesn’t make any sense.” The president looked completely perplexed.

That was probably to be expected, though. Just three days ago, even Ai hadn’t dreamed she’d be doing this.

“Let’s put the thing about me quitting on hold for a bit.”

“How come?”

“There’s something I’d like to do for a little longer.” Ai beamed at the president.

“Huh?” His mouth was hanging open. That was pretty much the response she’d been expecting. The president was a predictable guy.

“About that, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you worry.” Ai bowed her head to him. In this industry, it was important to show at least a little sincerity. The president had said so himself.

“Uh… Right. Well, you know. That’s, uh… I’m not sure whether to be relieved or suspicious.” The president looked conflicted, with deep frown lines creasing his brow. “That’s fine by me, though. Nothing could be better than you staying with B Komachi. You’re the only one who can be center.”

“I am, aren’t I?” Ai said with a nod. “I really am the most charismatic member.”

“Your ego’s showing again.”

"Well, it's a fact."

"Ha-ha!" The president's expression softened. "So what changed your mind? Was it my passion for B Komachi?"

"Nope, not that," Ai said, shaking her head.

The president's shoulders slumped. "Oh, it wasn't?" He seemed a little bummed, which Ai found amusing.

"Actually, ever since then, I've been—"

But just as Ai started to explain, they heard voices outside the door.

"Excuse us."

Two group members entered: Almond Eyes and Round Face. Neither of them had expected Ai to be there, and when they saw her, they scowled.

Silence fell for a full three seconds. Then, sounding a little awkward, Almond Eyes spoke up. "Listen, about the other day. We overdid it a bit…"

"Oh, that's fine. Don't worry about it," Ai replied.

"Huh?" Almond Eyes and Round Face both looked mystified. So did the president.

Ai had expected that reaction, too. She smiled at them. "More importantly, I've got some ideas for the next new release show."

"The show? What sort of ideas?"

"I was just talking them over with the president. You two are going to have a lot more time in the spotlight, so look forward to that."

Round Face tilted her head. "What's going on? I thought you hated us, Ai."

"No. I don't hate you. After all, B Komachi is all of us."

"Huh…"

"Actually, maybe I should be the one apologizing. I got carried away over being the center, and I feel like I kept hogging all the attention… Nobody likes that sort of thing, do they?"

Almond Eyes and Round Face exchanged bewildered glances. Their thoughts were written all across their faces:

What's with this girl, suddenly changing her tune out of nowhere?

Yeah, it kind of creeps me out.

However, Ai didn't let it bother her. "So," she said with a broad smile, "let's just forget everything that's happened and start over."

Almond Eyes seemed a little conflicted. "Um, sure. I mean, as long as you're okay with that…"

The girls looked at Ai as if they were trying to figure out her real motives. They probably had no intention of actually turning over a new page but were just trying to keep things peaceful in front of the president.

Needless to say, Ai didn't genuinely want to be their friend, either. What they thought of her didn't matter, and she didn't even mind if they kept harassing her in secret. As long as they did their best to avoid making trouble as fellow members of B Komachi, then that was enough.

To that end, Ai would wear a mask. The mask of a sensible, "normal" girl.

"Great. In that case, here." Ai showed the papers to the other girls and gave them a brief rundown of her proposal.

They both stayed quiet, only nodding to show they were listening, and didn't object to Ai's ideas. That increased spotlight time must have been effective.

Once she'd finished her explanation, Almond Eyes and Round Face nodded.

"Okay. Got it."

"We'll go over the details after lessons."

"Right. I'm looking forward to it."

Ai smiled at them, and the corners of both girls' lips curved up just a little, into a pair of incredibly awkward smiles. Even so, Ai had a feeling that these were the kindest expressions the girls had ever shown her.

After excusing themselves to go get changed, the girls turned and left the meeting room.

The president watched them go, then quietly spoke up. "Hey, Ai. What was that?"

"I guess you'd call it…B Komachi members bonding? Reaffirming our friendship?" she said with a smile.

"Huhn?" The president looked entirely unconvinced.

Of course, Ai didn't feel anything like friendship toward those two girls. She'd apologized to them, but she hadn't really meant it.

Audiences weren't the only ones idols' lies deceived; the lies worked just as well on group members. This had just been the easiest way to match the girls' idea of "normal."

After all, using those two was the shortest route to Ai's goal.

"A minute ago, I said I'd found something I wanted to do, right?"

"Yeah. So what is it?" the president asked, looking puzzled.

"I want to cheer on all of Japan, as an idol."

"All of Japan?" The president's eyes bulged beneath his sunglasses. Ai could imagine what he was probably thinking: *That's crazy talk coming from an indie idol.*

"On Sunday, you told me about those fan letters, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Since then, I've been reading through them. All the ones that had piled up in my locker… And it surprised me a little. Everyone's just overflowing with love. It made me realize that more people love me than I thought."

Ai had always assumed that since she wasn't "normal," people didn't love her. She was beginning to think she'd been wrong about that, though. Those fan letters had told her there were people who loved even someone like her from the bottom of their hearts.

"So I decided I wanted to be like that, too."

"Like what?"

"I want to love people and mean it. I want to become the sort of person who can be someone's fan. 'Cause, I mean, I'm hopelessly lacking in that department." Ai laughed in spite of herself. "Saying things like that straight out is pretty embarrassing, huh?"

Love for one's neighbors. Love for one's family. Love for one's partner. Love for idols. There were so many different types of love, and right now, even if Ai was flattering herself, she couldn't claim to understand them all.

That was why Ai thought she needed to face her fans. Understanding how to root for someone might teach her how to love someone. If she did that, maybe she could be reborn as a decent human being.

"So to start with, I thought I'd try being on the side of the fans."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I want to cheer for all my fans, too, instead of just having people cheer for me."

Every one of those fan letters in her locker had held glimpses of a person's life. There had been people who were studying hard or giving their all at work. Others had been dealing with family problems, and a few were standing up against some pretty intense bullying.

Everyone in the world had some sort of difficulty in their life. That was something Ai hadn't truly grasped until just now.

She would begin her search for how to cheer someone on by supporting all of her fans. And if that helped cheer them up, too, she'd be killing two birds with one stone.

"Oh, I see." The president looked down at the sheets of notepaper Ai had brought him. "So that's what's behind this plan, huh? Come to think of it, the new song *was* supposed to be an energetic hype anthem."

"That's right. The basic idea is 'B Komachi will cheer you on with everything we've got!'" Ai said, smiling brightly.

For the past several days, all she'd been thinking about was what she could do for the people who came to see their show. She felt as if that was the most fun she'd had since joining B Komachi. The president's "joy of fandom" might be a genuine thing.

"Lots of the letters mentioned people listening to our songs to cheer themselves up. I'm hoping this new song will help people feel better when they're hurting and encourage them when they're feeling sad."

"Yeah. That's a good thought." The president smiled a little, nodding. He set his cigarette on the ashtray, exhaling a contented puff of smoke. "Idols have more power than you think. For some people, hearing your song might just change their whole life."

"You think?"

"Yeah. It happened to me. Back when I was in college and job hunting wasn't going so well, this one idol song saved me. Idols have a magic power that can completely transform the way people

live. When you think about that, it's pretty incredible."

Changing someone's life, just by singing and dancing. It really *was* incredible. Even calling it a miracle of sorts wouldn't be overexaggerating.

"So basically, President, you're saying I'm a god… Or I guess I'd be a goddess, huh? An absolute, divine being who's beautiful and wields the power of song and dance."

"Hang on, I didn't say anything *like* that!"

"As a matter of fact, it's clear that my fans are crazy about me. If I keep this up, I bet I could start my own religion. They'll worship me as Lady Ai, goddess incarnate."

The president looked a little appalled. "Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned those fan letters," he said, giving her a wry smile. "Well, anyway, I'm glad you've managed to put your doubts to rest. It looks like you've cleared up the problems with the other members, too."

"Yeah. None of it seems to matter anymore."

As long as she was part of B Komachi, harassment like that was bound to happen again. But right now, Ai was too excited to care.

Being supported by her fans made her happy. And she was sure she'd enjoy cheering them on as well. It was a win-win situation. What Ai planned to do would make both her and the world happier.

"I've decided I'll cheer for everyone. Kids, adults, and the elderly. People who are happy and people who aren't. Everybody. Of course, that includes the other members of B Komachi as well."

She'd never resented the other girls in the first place. If they wanted to harass her, they were welcome to do that until they'd had enough.

Ai would be their fan. If it was vocal assignments they wanted, she'd hand them over. If they wanted to stand out onstage, she'd give them all the support they needed. As long as those girls were happy, then as their fan, she'd also be able to enjoy herself.

"I think everybody should be happy. Because all of Japan is my *oshi*. My fave."

"So you're going to cheer on everyone in the country, young and old, men and women, even the people you don't get along with? You

sure don’t think small, do you?”

“President, you know what I’m like. Ai Hoshino is a greedy girl.”

The president chuckled. “Yeah, that’s right. You’re not normal—you’re a natural-born idol.”

CHAPTER 2

【OSHI NO KO】

SPICA THE FIRST STAR

Diiing. The elevator doors opened with a cute little chime, letting in the lively hum of human chatter intermingled with an electronic voice announcement.

"—Number thirty. If you have ticket number thirty, please come to the payment counter."

The first floor was the entrance to the hospital. Patients sat in the rows of seats in front of the reception desk, waiting to be called. The hospital was as busy as ever; about 80 percent of the chairs were full. That was practically inevitable, though, since it was the only general hospital in the area.

It was a good opportunity in a way, having all these eyes around. After all, the best place to hide a tree was in a forest. In a crowd, she wouldn't have to worry as much about getting busted.

Exhaling quietly, she gripped the handrims of her wheelchair, then pushed them sharply, propelling herself forward. She moved as quickly as she could, but not so fast that the people around her would get suspicious.

She rolled past the reception counter, maintaining her nonchalant expression, taking care to make the backpack in her lap seem as unobtrusive as possible.

The wheelchair was old, and it rattled with every push. That was rough on the nerves.

She stealthily turned into the corridor that led to the hospital's back door. As she was rolling along, holding her breath, she spotted a large woman walking up the hall toward her.

"Oh, Sarina. What's the matter?"

Her heart gave a guilty jump. Cold sweat dripped down her back.

She knew this nurse. The woman was around forty with a plump, matronly look. She liked chatting and always had something fun to talk about, like the tastiest new products at the hospital store or the silly mistakes new nurses had made.

However, right now, even just speaking to the woman made

Sarina tense up. She wanted to get out of here, fast.

"Um, I…I'm a little thirsty. I was going to go buy some juice."

"Oh, is that right? Well, nobody could blame you in this heat." The nurse didn't seem to doubt her in the slightest. The woman's eyes skimmed over the clipboard she was holding as she waved to Sarina. "You've got an IV infusion at one this afternoon, so just make sure you're back in your room by then."

"I will," Sarina said as brightly as possible.

Be back in her room by one. Considering what she was about to attempt, that was definitely *not* going to happen.

She felt a pang of conscience lying to this kind nurse, but sometimes these things had to be done. Right now, there was something even more important than an IV on her agenda.

Sarina sneaked down the narrow hallway toward the back door. It was just as she'd thought; there weren't many people to see her in the corridor that led past the medication and storage rooms. She'd probably be able to slip out of the hospital safely this way.

"…Yesss. I made it." Sarina reached out toward the doorknob, turned it, and pushed the back door open.

Bright sunlight lanced in through the gap, causing her to squint. Mild, humid summer air enfolded her. It smelled like the forest.

Now that she thought about it, she hadn't been outside in a while. About a month, maybe. It felt somehow refreshing being in a world without air-conditioning.

Sarina gave a little sigh of relief. "That was close, but it all worked out in the end."

She clutched her chair's handrims. Now, finally, she'd escape this prison they called a hospital.

"Not much farther to go now! Wait for me, Ai!"

Freedom, here I come.

Elated, Sarina pushed herself forward, but—

"…Huh?"

No matter how hard she pushed on the handrims, the wheelchair wouldn't budge. The wheels weren't turning. What was going on? Had she gotten stuck on something?

She looked over her shoulder.

A man she didn't know was standing right behind her chair, gazing down at her.

"What are you doing?"

"—Gyeeeaaaaagh!"

Sarina let out a weird shriek. She hadn't expected anyone to be standing so close to her.

"Man, that was loud. Don't scare me like that."

The young man was wearing a white lab coat. Her voice must have seriously startled him, because his face was scrunched up in a grimace.

He was tall and slim, and the square frames of his glasses looked good with his clean-cut features. There was nothing eye-catching about him, but he seemed intelligent and well brought up. She thought he'd probably fall into the category of handsome.

Sarina didn't recognize him, but considering the coat he was wearing, it seemed likely that he worked at the hospital. He looked fairly young to be a doctor, probably only in his mid-twenties.

When she looked at the name tag on his coat, it said *Gorou Amamiya, Intern*.

"Um… 'Intern'?"

"It's basically a doctor in training. I started my residency here this year."

"Oh wow," Sarina responded, nodding slightly. Even though this man was just out of med school, it seemed like he was still only partway through his studies. "Becoming a doctor sounds like a lot of work." It was a noncommittal remark to end the conversation, and she turned to face forward, saying, "Well, I better get going." She didn't have time for a friendly chat with a doctor in training right now.

Her chair still wouldn't budge, though.

Behind her, Gorou the intern sighed. "Come on, seriously? You're trying to go outside in your wheelchair? You know that's not okay." Apparently, he was what was blocking her escape, and he had a firm grip on the handles of her chair. "You're an inpatient here, right? I can't just turn a blind eye while you try to escape."

"I-I'm not escaping." Sarina forced a smile. "See that? I was just

headed over there to buy a drink."

"There are vending machines in the hospital, too. Why would you have to go outside?"

"Ummm, well… I wanted to get a little fresh air for a change."

"You could just go to the observation deck on the roof for that. You wouldn't even need your doctor's permission."

"The thing is…the roof was kind of crowded, so I didn't have much choice."

"Hmm," the intern muttered, sounding suspicious. His eyes went to the backpack on Sarina's lap. "What's that big bag for, then? You need all that just to get a breath of fresh air outside?"

"This is, uh…"

"No matter how objectively I try to look at this, you're clearly gearing up for an outing."

He'd used logic to completely cut her down, and Sarina let out a groan.

He must have guessed from the start that she was trying to make a break for it. Cheap tricks weren't going to work on him.

"By the way, oh, um…should I call you Amamiya-sensei? Or Gorou-sensei?"

"Whatever's fine," the intern said, as if he wasn't particularly interested. He had such a brusque attitude. Sarina's intuition told her he was probably more of a sadist than a masochist.

"Gorou-sensei, then. What were you doing out here, Sensei?"

"Me? Oh. Skipping work," he told her without so much as a blush.

Sarina hadn't been expecting that. "Skipping work?" she responded inadvertently.

"Whenever the hospital director sees me, he launches into these long, pointless stories, so I skipped out on my training. I thought it was pretty unlikely for him to find me if I was hiding out here."

"You're hiding…? Is it okay for you to do something like that?"

"No, it's really not. But sometimes you just need to blow off a little steam." Gorou's expression softened. At first, she'd thought he was uptight, but he might be easy to talk to after all.

"Oh, absolutely. Blowing off steam is so important. That's true for everybody, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I'd say so."

"In that case, it must be okay for me to blow off steam outside."

"Huh?" Gorou frowned. "No, of course it's not."

"Oh, come on, it totally is. It's unfair to say it's okay for you but not for me."

"It is not unfair. If they find out I let you go, I'll get lectured by the director." Gorou shook his head as if he thoroughly hated that idea. He must really not get along with the director. "Regardless, if you want to go out, you'll need to follow proper protocol. Either get permission from your attending physician or hurry up and get better. Those are your only options."

"Geez. The whole problem here is that I can't do that, okay?"

"Then just tough it out. At least that way, you won't cause me any problems."

Sarina puffed out her cheeks. She was bad at dealing with argumentative people. If this was how things were going to be, she'd just have to force her way through. She clasped her hands in front of her chest and bowed her head. "Come on, Sensei, please! Let me go, just this once! I'll never ask you for anything ever again! I'll do anything to pay you back!"

"Anything? Like what?"

"Um… You know. I could be your girlfriend. Or something."

For a second, Gorou looked stunned, but then he immediately responded with "No thanks." There was zero hesitation in his tone, and he said it completely straight-faced.

His reply inflicted a grievous wound on Sarina's pride. "Wait-wait-wait, what?! 'No thanks'?! You could at least consider it a little, okay?! Or at least act like you're thinking about it?!"

"Well, I mean, you're clearly a kid."

"I—I am not."

"How old are you, then?"

"Twelve."

Gorou gently shook his head. From his expression, it didn't even seem like he thought that dignified a response. "By the way, where were you planning to go once you got out of here?"

"Um…" Sarina looked up at the sky. How should she answer that

one? “Somewhere…kind of far.”

“Somewhere far away? Don’t tell me you were planning to go into town.”

The hospital stood on top of a hill in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing around it but forest and ravines and a single narrow, poor excuse for a road that led to the town.

That only made sense, though, considering the hospital’s slogan was “Providing the very best treatment in the quiet natural environment of Takachiho.” Sarina had heard a nurse say so once.

It was, in fact, quiet, and the air was clear, making it a terrific place to rest and recover.

In terms of access to downtown, though, it couldn’t have been worse. You needed a car just to go on a quick shopping run.

For wheelchair users like Sarina, it was as inconvenient as possible. In a sense, it was a natural prison.

Gorou went on, sounding exasperated. “Don’t tell me you were planning to take that wheelchair down the highway. Do you have any idea how many hours it would take to get to the station in Takachiho? That’s reckless in the extreme.”

“Oh, no, the station wasn’t my goal.”

“So what was, then?”

“Well…Tokyo.”

Gorou’s eyes widened. “What? *Tokyo…?* No matter how you look at it, that’s just crazy.” His mouth hung wide open. He seemed stunned. For someone who looked so calm and composed, this intern was surprisingly expressive.

Sarina tilted her head slightly. “Tee-hee?”



“—So, uh… What?”

Gorou’s face was grim.

They were in Room 201 of the inpatient wing. Sarina’s hospital room.

In the end, her escape had been foiled. Gorou had firmly held on to the handles of the wheelchair and forcibly returned her to her room.

Sarina was currently sitting on the bed she'd become very familiar with, getting cross-examined by Gorou.

"So, Sarina, you're saying you were, uh…trying to get to Tokyo to see an idol concert?"

"That's right," she said proudly. "Once I got to the station in Takachiho, I could take a bus to the airport. Then I'd just hop on a plane and zip over to Tokyo."

"Uh, it's a bit harder than just zipping over there." Gorou looked dumbfounded. "Going to Tokyo in a wheelchair is a lot easier said than done. And doing it alone…? It doesn't get much more reckless than that."

"Oh, I'm not so sure. I don't think we can really know unless I try."

"All else aside, you're ill. You'd literally be risking your life. It's that dangerous. You want to see the show that badly? Is this A Komachi idol group really—?"

"Wrong! It's B Komachi, not A Komachi! I've told you a zillion times already!"

Even when Sarina yelled, Gorou just nodded and let it pass with a brief "Oh yeah, right." He'd been like this the whole time. No matter how enthusiastically Sarina talked about wanting to go to Tokyo, Gorou just didn't get it.

Sarina pouted. "They're doing a show to reveal a new song tomorrow. They haven't had one of those in ages. I wanted to see it in person, no matter what."

"Then why not just ask your doctor for permission to stay out overnight? Then you can call your parents and have them come pick you up or something. There are all sorts of ways to do it."

"I already tried that, obviously. If I'd been able to just get permission, I wouldn't have thought about making a break for it."

"They told you you're on bed rest, right? You should behave and listen to your doctor about that sort of stuff."

"Nooo! I'd do anything to go to the live performance."

Gorou gave a weary shrug, the exhaustion showing on his face. "I don't really get any of this, but if you want to see idols, couldn't you just watch them on TV? This, uh…B Komachi, wasn't it? Aren't they on any music programs?"

"If they were, this wouldn't be half as hard." Sarina sighed. This intern didn't seem to know much about the world of idols. She'd have to teach him properly. "Sensei, the thing is, B Komachi is an indie idol group."

"Indie?"

"Idols who aren't in the media much. Mostly they just perform live shows."

"Hmm," murmured Gorou, as if he wasn't really paying attention. "In other words, they're not that popular."

"It's not that they're not popular. They're just not popular *yet*!"

"Which means they're not popular now, right?"

"Honestly! If you talk like that, you'll have B Komachi fans all around the world yelling at you!"

As a matter of fact, although the indie idol world was teeming with rivals, B Komachi was rapidly distinguishing itself. Most of their shows were still in small Tokyo venues, but Sarina's instincts told her that one day, they were bound to be known nationwide. "More than anything else, the amazing thing about B Komachi is how fresh they feel! All the members are in middle school, and their singing and dancing just screams that they'll be future stars! Since they've got so much potential, they improve like crazy with each new release. It's almost like you can follow their growth in real time! Seriously, whenever they release a new song, it feels like they turn up the voltage to another level, so just seeing footage from their shows gets me all worked up and makes me go 'Raaaaaaaaaaaaaah!' every single time!"

Despite Sarina's enthusiasm, Gorou didn't seem to get it. His only response was a clearly apathetic "Huh."

A life lived without knowing B Komachi was a tragedy. She was going to have to start getting a bit more serious about her proselytizing. "Their center, Ai, is especially amazing! She's good at singing and dancing, too, but her smile always shines so bright. I

think she's probably the cutest girl I've ever seen! She seems so incredibly grown up that it's hard to believe we're the same age… The other girls are all former models, but even they don't overshadow her—if anything, it's more like she's so super gorgeous, they can't hold a candle to her! Ai's going to go big for sure! I mean it! You can take that to the bank!" Sarina reached over to the bedside table and picked up a DVD case. It was B Komachi's debut concert. "Here, Sensei, look! Ai's the girl in the middle! She's so adorable it hurts, right?!"

A girl in a crimson idol outfit stood right in the center of the DVD cover. Her black hair streamed down her back. Her eyes sparkled like jewels. Her self-confident smile shone brighter than the sun. Even compared to the other members of B Komachi, she was unarguably, overwhelmingly cute.

Of all the girls Sarina had ever laid eyes on, it was safe to say that Ai from B Komachi was the cutest.

"Hmm. Ai, huh?" Gorou's response wasn't promising, though. He'd only glanced at the cover, and it hadn't seemed to faze him. "Well, I do think she's cute, but…"

His response sounded sort of forced, and Sarina couldn't help but feel a little offended. "…But? But *what*?"

"Her expression looks a little stiff, I guess you'd say. It feels like there's something behind it. As if she's forcing herself to wear this mask as an idol to protect herself."

Gorou's casual remark startled Sarina a little. It was something she'd also sensed faintly every time she looked at Ai. His observational skills were pretty impressive if he'd noticed that at first glance.

"Well, I think idols probably have it rough. I bet even Ai's got troubles," Sarina said.

"You reckon that's what it is?"

"Uh-huh. I'm sure. And even then, she never, ever stops smiling. That's exactly what makes her so amazing."

Sarina had pointed out Ai's charms, but it seemed she still wasn't getting through to Gorou. No matter how passionately she spoke about the idol, it just went in one ear and out the other. Did he think

this was all just some sort of childish nonsense? That didn't sit right with her…

"Besides," Gorou went on, "idols' faces probably get digitally edited, so you don't know whether she's actually cute."

Now *that* was a glaring insult. "They do not!" Sarina yelled angrily. "Ai's cuteness is one hundred percent pure and natural!! She's a goddess who's come down to Earth! I'm telling you, there is absolutely no need for touch-ups!"

"You seem really confident, but have you ever actually seen this girl in real life, Sarina?"

There wasn't much she could do to refute that, so Sarina just lowered her voice. "I mean…I haven't gotten a proper look at her, but still." After all, she was sick and couldn't really go out much.

Sarina had actually been taken to a B Komachi show once. It had been back at the end of June, when her condition had been better.

She'd started feeling bad on the way there, though. They'd made it to the venue, but Sarina hadn't been well enough to attend the show, and the doctors had sent her right back to the hospital.

All she'd managed to come away with that day was one prize from a merch *gacha* machine. In the end, she hadn't gotten to see Ai in person. By now, it had become a bitter memory.

"I don't need to see her to know. Ai's the cutest girl in the universe. If you watched her movies, Sensei, they'd knock you right on your butt."

"I'm not so sure about that." Frowning, Gorou pushed his glasses up his nose. His eyes were on the DVD case in Sarina's hands. "I don't really understand what's cute about idols to begin with. Frankly, I don't get what's so fun about watching girls sing and dance."

"Huh? You don't get it? Like, actually?"

"Well, idols are basically just peppy young girls singing overly energetic songs. If you're going to spend time and money on entertainment like that, I think reading a novel would be better."

Gorou's views on idols made Sarina clutch her head. "Yikes… Sensei, that's awful. I mean, like, *seriously* awful."

"What's so awful about it?"

"Your emotions are all dried up and dead."

"Huh?" Gorou cocked his head, perplexed. Apparently, he hadn't noticed it himself. She'd really have to spell it out for him.

"In this day and age, even dogs dance to idol songs; I saw it on a funny video show on TV a while back. That means dogs are more emotionally sensitive than you are, Sensei."

Sarina's blunt comment seemed to get under Gorou's skin. His eyes narrowed behind his glasses. "Excuse me? *Who* are you calling less sensitive than a dog? …If you ask me, the people who go crazy for idols are weirder."

"What do you mean, weirder?"

"For better and for worse, idols are all about their appearance. There isn't a shred of actual art in their songs. That's been particularly true in recent years. They make their money by fawning over fans through meet-and-greet events and things. You could even call it blasphemy against musical culture."

"Ooooh, listen to you, talking like you're some kind of expert. I bet you don't even know any idol songs," Sarina said, egging him on.

Gorou pressed his lips together with a huff. Apparently, she'd hit the nail on the head. "You're not wrong… I've never really sat down and listened to one. But only because I never even considered listening to rubbish like that."

Ah, I see. That made sense to her. Bit by bit, Sarina was starting to understand this intern Gorou Amamiya.

As far as Sarina could see, he was the type of bigheaded person who only knew a very narrow world. Lots of doctors and intellectuals were like that. Since they believed so strongly in their own superiority, they didn't spare a thought for parts of the world they didn't already know.

For people like that, the most efficient approach was firsthand experience.

"Okay, I know." Sarina handed the DVD case to Gorou. "Here. I'll let you borrow you this, so make sure you watch it."

"Huh? I mean, you can say that…but honestly, I really don't think I'll be bothered."

Gorou sounded reluctant, but Sarina pressed him. "Please. If you

watch that, I won't tell the director you were skipping work."

The word *director* made Gorou wince. "Sarina. You're quite the strategist."

"You don't need to worry. They're good songs, I swear. They'll make you get all emotional."

"I seriously doubt that," Gorou said, his eyes lowering to the DVD case. He stared at Ai's million-dollar smile with complete disinterest. Clearly, he didn't get how amazing she was.

Sarina was a little curious about how a hardhead like this would react when he heard Ai sing. "If Ai's songs really don't move you one bit when you hear them, I'll get down on my hands and knees and apologize."

"Then that's pretty much set in stone." Reluctantly, Gorou slipped the DVD case into the pocket of his lab coat.

Yesssss! Sarina mentally pumped her fist. The first stage of her proselytizing had been a success. Now she just had to wait for his reaction.

Today's escape plan might have failed, but she'd found something new to look forward to. What would Gorou think after he heard Ai sing?

If all went well and he turned into a raging B Komachi fan, then Sarina would benefit as well. Next time she desperately wanted to escape from the hospital, it would be reassuring to have his help.

Being a fan inside a hospital was tough, and there were all sorts of limitations. She'd been thinking for a while now that she needed a collaborator.

If I manage to get that intern on my team, being a fan here will become so much easier.

Sarina's heart was bursting with a type of excitement she'd never felt before.



Gorou's next visit to Sarina's hospital room happened even more

quickly than she'd expected.

Outside the window, clouds towered in the evening sky, and the cicadas droned on in an endless chorus. It was a week after she'd loaned him the DVD.

"Their singing skills were puerile, and frankly, the songs themselves had no depth."

Gorou was sitting arrogantly on a stool beside her bed, giving his haughty evaluation with a snooty expression on his face.

"I mean, 'Idols for You, the Sign Is B'? …What was that? What message were they trying to convey to their listeners? Who could even tell? To me, it made me feel like 'Yeah, this is about what I expected from idol songs.'"

If he'd posted that online, he would have instantly made himself a bullseye for flaming. Forget B Komachi fans—a comment like that was liable to make an enemy of the entire idol industry.

However, hearing it didn't upset Sarina all that much. Although he continued speaking smugly, Gorou's expressions were surprisingly animated.

"That said, I suppose it did make me feel strange."

"Strange how?" Sarina asked, cocking her head.

Gorou mirrored her reaction. "It's not a feeling I've ever had before, so it's hard to describe, but… Um, how should I put it? That girl, the main vocal, when I saw her smile, it sort of made me feel like I was being shaken to my very core."

"Ahhh, yeah, I totally get that," Sarina said, nodding emphatically. "There's a power to Ai's smile. Once you see it, you'll never forget it."

"A power?"

"Yep. I think that sparkling gaze of hers has magic in it that captivates anyone who sees her. It means you've fallen under her spell, too, Sensei, no matter what you say."

Gorou frowned, crossing his arms pensively. "Hmm. I didn't fall under her spell…or I don't think I did anyway. Although I will admit that video felt strangely addictive."

"So basically, you're saying you fell for her."

"No, wait, Sarina. Don't jump to conclusions." But even as he spoke, Gorou looked mystified. He definitely seemed to be showing

an interest in B Komachi. Sarina thought that was a good sign.

Gorou adjusted his glasses. "Well, regardless," he said, as if trying to cover for himself, "I can't say I've managed to come to any significant conclusions just by observing a couple of music videos. I'll need to conduct further research. I don't deny that."

"Um… In other words, you want to listen to more B Komachi songs?"

"Put simply, yes."

"Well, geez, you could've just said that." A giggle escaped her. This intern was kind of entertaining.

Sarina reached over to her bedside table and took several DVD cases out of the drawer. All four were recordings of B Komachi shows that she'd managed to snag online.

"Here, Sensei. Have fun."

"Don't get the wrong idea," Gorou said, even as he took the DVDs. "I won't be viewing these for pleasure. It's simply to verify how Ai's performances affect the human psyche." He went on, saying things like "I might be able to apply it to my clinical practice." It was funny the way he sounded like he was making excuses for watching them.

Maybe he was reluctant to change his tune so quickly after talking all that smack about idol songs the other day. He really did have a difficult personality.

"Oh, right," Sarina said. "Since you're borrowing those, take Ai's Talk Masterpiece Collection, too."

"Her 'Talk Masterpiece Collection'?"

"It's clips of Ai's funny chat segments I cut together from their official net radio show. There's two hours' worth on a USB." Sarina opened the drawer again, this time taking out a USB drive. It was something she'd poured a ton of time and effort into making.

When she handed it to Gorou, his eyebrows drew together. "Seriously? Two hours is quite a lot. It's as long as a movie… You put this together yourself?"

"Yup! It's completely hilarious, so that two hours will just fly by."

"Really? A show is one thing, but I seriously doubt I'll find it entertaining just listening to an idol talk." Gorou was as critical as

ever, just as she'd expected.

Sarina wagged her index finger from side to side. "*Tsk-tsk-tsk.* You don't get it, Sensei. For idols, a conversation is just another stage to perform on. Ai's cuteness is super concentrated in her casual dialogue."

"Hmm… Well, I'll give it a listen if I have time." Gorou slipped the USB stick into his coat pocket. Ever so gradually, his resistance to Sarina's recommendations seemed to be lowering.

This was good. The DVDs of their shows already had a grip on Gorou's heart, so if he completed Ai's Talk Masterpiece Collection, there was a chance he'd pitch head over heels into full-blown obsession.

Sarina couldn't help but chuckle. Her plan to convert more followers to the church of Ai was going even more smoothly than she'd anticipated.

"Come back soon, Sensei."



"—Ai sure is formidable," Gorou said the second he walked into Sarina's hospital room. He looked serious.

It had only been three days since his last visit. He was carrying a plastic bag with a bread roll and a milk, and he sat down on the stool by her bed as if the spot belonged to him. Apparently, he was planning to have his lunch here.

"The episode when they all went to try the new orange desserts left me stunned. That bit where she said, dead serious, 'Oh, hey, these taste like tangerine!' Could she be any more of a natural-born comedian?"

"Right? And everyone else was completely taken aback. They were all like, 'Ob-vi-ous-ly!'"

"When they were planning to showcase the *onsen*, she mistook the garden pond in the hotel for the hot spring. Then she said she'd seen a black cat by the road, but when she ran up to it, it turned out

to be a black garbage bag. And she did that exact same thing twice… All the clips were full of completely unhinged moments. It makes you wonder how she manages in everyday life."

It seemed that Gorou hadn't just watched the DVDs—he'd also listened to the Talk Masterpiece Collection. He was surprisingly thorough.

Munching on his roll, he went on impassively. "The truly terrifying thing is the way she's aware of her innate comedic skill and uses it cleverly, as a weapon. She's never pushy, and she doesn't talk over the other members. She goes with the flow of the conversation around her and injects comments that are exquisitely off the mark. If I had to describe it, she basically delivers offbeat comments with timing that perfectly matches the beat of the conversation."

"Exactly, Sensei! That's what I thought, too!" Sarina said, nodding vigorously. "She was always funny, but I think it was probably around this summer? Anyway, recently, her timing has gotten really, really good."

"Absolutely." Gorou adjusted his glasses, looking rather proud. "I'd bet Ai isn't planning that out, either. She instinctively picks up the flow of the conversation, then reacts to it in an extremely natural way. It's clearly a talent she was born with."

Gorou was openly praising Ai, but Sarina felt as if she were the one being complimented. She was really happy about it.

"I'm not familiar with the idol industry, so I don't know for sure, but I doubt there are any other twelve-year-olds around who could pull that off."

"You said it. Ai's a genius. I'm glad you see it, too, Sensei."

"Whether I'm her fan is a different matter entirely. Still, that girl's definitely special."

Gorou had admitted that Ai was exceptional. That already felt like enough of an achievement to Sarina.

"So you're saying you enjoyed both the DVDs and the Talk Masterpiece Collection?"

"Well… They weren't bad. It was a decent way to kill time." Gorou averted his eyes a little awkwardly. The way he'd put it was arrogant, but from his attitude, it was clear he'd found them more

satisfying than he'd imagined.

Sarina couldn't keep the grin off her face. "You're funny, Sensei."

"Huh? What's funny?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

Come to think of it, Sarina didn't think she'd ever spent this much time discussing a single topic with somebody else before. She didn't get any visitors, and the doctors and nurses only saw her as another patient, so she hadn't really been able to talk about her hobbies.

Gorou was different, though. He took their conversations seriously, and he really went through the B Komachi media she gave him.

He's nice, Sarina thought earnestly.

She was looking up at him steadily, and Gorou tilted his head. "Hmm? What? You won't make me a B Komachi believer just by gazing at me like that."

"Oh, I don't know. I wonder how long you'll be able to keep saying that. Eh-heh-heh." Sarina smiled at him.

For some reason, spreading the good word of fandom to Sensei was extremely fun. Her illness made her body feel heavy, but strangely, it seemed lighter these days.

In hindsight, that was probably when it began.

When Gorou became more special than anybody else to Sarina.



After that, Gorou started visiting Sarina's hospital room frequently.

On some days, he'd give his review of the CDs she'd loaned him; on others, they'd play a DVD of one of B Komachi's shows and he'd share his personal observations on Ai's dances.

"It's just as you said, Sarina: Mei-Mei has better dance technique. Still, there's something in Ai's dancing that transcends simple skill or lack thereof."

"Oh, you think so, too, Sensei?!" She smiled at Gorou, who was

watching the DVD beside her.

As she talked with him, Sarina had come to understand something: This intern was argumentative and a bit of a pain, but he was incredibly observant. He'd picked up on more of Ai's virtues than Sarina had ever imagined he would.

"Yeah, see, right there. That turn." Gorou hit a button on the remote, pausing the DVD. On the screen, Ai was frozen with her arms wide, a bright smile on her face.

Even frozen in time, she looks as pretty as a picture, thought Sarina. Somebody could make a bronze statue of her like that, and it would be a work of art. They'd call it *The Vibrant Angel* or something.

Gorou was staring fixedly at the still image of Ai. "See that? It looks like there's a strong core running from the trunk of her body all the way to her fingertips."

"Hmm-hmm."

"She's moving as if she has a perfect understanding of what she needs to express. She probably sees both song and dance as two parts of the same form of acting."

"I see. Acting, huh…?"

The things Gorou pointed out often caught her by surprise. He noticed different things.

Sarina couldn't help but empathize when she saw Ai dance. Watching her dance to a song about first love made her own heart beat faster, while breakup songs made her terribly sad. It really was similar to the way she felt watching dramas on TV.

"Yeah. Ai probably has a genius for acting. Since she plays parts that suit whatever situation she's in, she's able to immediately adapt to all sorts of scenarios. That ability is even more impressive than her looks."

There was a certain enthusiasm in Gorou's tone as he spoke about Ai. Just hearing it made Sarina happy.

"I've said this before," he went on, "but she has a sort of idol mask. There was a slight edge to her smile when their debut single came out, but as time passed, it grew more and more natural. It feels as if she's genuinely made that mask her own lately."

"That's so true! Ai's really expressive. In their music videos, she laughs, cries, gets mad… It feels like she can do anything."

Ai was an expert liar. She was probably dealing with all sorts of difficulties behind the scenes, but you never even caught a hint of them in front of the camera. That was incredible.

Sarina secretly wanted to be like that.

She wanted to keep smiling forever, no matter what painful things were lying in wait for her. She didn't want to make the people who were important to her sad. She wanted to be good at acting, like Ai.

As she was thinking about that, a realization struck her. "Oh! Then do you think Ai could be in plays and things, as well as being an idol?"

"An actress, huh? Yeah, I think that's definitely possible." Gorou crossed his arms, apparently thinking hard. "She's only twelve, so considering how much room she has to grow, she could even aim for an Academy Award."

"Wow! That's Ai for you!" Sarina clapped her hands. "Oh… But I've been her fan since her debut, so I want her to keep working hard as part of B Komachi, too… That's a tough one."

"She may be able to handle being both an actress and an idol. I think she has that kind of potential." Gorou gave a big, decisive nod. His desire to watch over Ai as she grew was written all over his face.

He felt just like Sarina did, and that made her happier than anything. "You know, the way you're talking, Sensei, Ai's totally taken you captive, too, hasn't she?"

"Oh, uh…" Gorou shook his head awkwardly. "I'm just speaking from a neutral standpoint. These are nothing more than objective observations. After all, I'm not interested in idols."

"You're not interested…*but*?"

"There's no *but*. That's it. I'm really not interested."

"I see… I guess that's how it'll have to be. In that case, you don't care that there's another new B Komachi single coming out next month, right?"

"Huh? No way, for real?" Gorou's eyes widened behind his glasses.

Boy, is he easy to read, Sarina thought. That had been a textbook

tsundere move. This intern was a whole lot of fun to play with.

By now, Sarina treasured Gorou's visits to her hospital room more than anything.



"Ever since the day I met youuu. ♪ You've been on my miiind. ♪

"Your awkward, blushing SMIIIIIILES! ♪ Make my heart race all the TIIIIIIME! ♪"

Fists clenched, Gorou enthusiastically belted out the lyrics. He was singing the B-side track from B Komachi's second single, "First Love ☆ Memory." He'd gotten really fired up, leaving the collar of his lab coat drenched in sweat.

Sarina's hospital room had become an impromptu live music club.

Their backing music came from the phone she'd set by her pillow. The mic was a bottle of antiseptic. The color film they'd stuck over her bedside lamp gave the room a psychedelic atmosphere.

"What could happen, even I don't knooow. ♪ But my heart keeps racing, it just won't slooow. ♪

"I spend way too LOOOOOONG! ♪ Looking in the MIRROOOOOOR! ♪ Making sure I look PERFEEEEEECT! Before going to SEE YOOOOOOU! ♪"

Gorou launched into Ai's dance from the music video, waving his hands and wiggling his hips, then twirling so that his white coat flared out. Sarina would have expected no less from somebody who'd watched the video with her every single day. His timing was perfect. The routine was so sharp it made her shriek with laughter.

"The miracle of FIRST LOOOVE! ♪ I can't stop these feelings, they're about to EXPL—"

Gorou had just launched into the chorus when the door burst open.

"Hey! Quiet down in here!"

"Whoa!" Sarina hurriedly shut her mouth.

The suddenness of it seemed to have startled Gorou, too. He'd

frozen up with his right hand pointing toward the ceiling, as still as a statue.

"That singing echoed all the way down the hall! Good grief, can't you two tell the difference between a hospital room and a karaoke lounge?!"

The man who'd stalked into the room shouting angrily was Sarina's attending physician, Dr. Toudou. At around fifty years old, his hairline was receding pretty dramatically, and blue veins stood out on his expansive forehead. The doctor looked like a hardnose, and it turned out he was, in fact, serious to a fault and a stickler for rules—both of which made Sarina rather uncomfortable around him.

That said, they really might have gotten too carried away this time. Pretending to put on a show as idols in her hospital room must have been a breach of etiquette.

"Um, I, uh… I'm sorry," Sarina apologized meekly.

"Just be careful," Dr. Toudou said with an exasperated sigh.

He'd been surprisingly subdued in his reproach. Sarina had expected to get more of a scolding than that. Apparently, the brunt of his anger was focused on Gorou today.

Dr. Toudou turned his stern gaze on the intern. "I swear, Amamiya. The director was grumbling that you'd been neglecting your clinical practice lately, so I wondered what you were up to. And it turns out you're jumping around like a fool in front of a patient… What are you thinking? Is this some kind of joke?"

"Ha-ha-ha. No, sir, of course it isn't a joke. I'm quite serious." Gorou didn't seem the least bit embarrassed. Undaunted, he faced Dr. Toudou, still holding the antiseptic-bottle mic. "Sarina here is helping me perform a clinical study."

"A clinical study?"

"I'm researching the medical effects of idol songs. As I'm sure you know, Sensei, beautiful music reduces stress. My theory is that those effects can be heightened by singing and dancing to the music, instead of simply listening to it."

"Are you nuts?"

"Singing causes the secretion of serotonin, improving both mental and physical health. That's been medically verified already. Don't you

think it would be several times more effective if the song was by an idol the patient liked? I call it the Fan Activity Theory of Health."

"The Fan Activity Theory of Health… You're serious?"

"Yes, I am. If you cheer someone on, it also makes you happy. I'm certain my theory is correct. Once I've written up this clinical study into a research paper, I intend to present it at an academic conference," Gorou told Dr. Toudou, completely serious.

Inwardly, Sarina was desperately fighting back laughter. This intern had a real talent for coming up with excuses on the fly. He'd said Ai had a genius for acting, but Sarina felt like he'd give her a run for her money.

"Isn't that right, Sarina?" Gorou asked, glancing at her. Going along with his story seemed like the best move.

"Uh-huh, that's right," she agreed with a nod. "It's a clinical study. It's not Sensei's fault."

"It's not his fault? Now, see here…" Dr. Toudou scowled at Gorou. He was clearly thinking, *What are you making a child say?*

Sarina couldn't let Gorou take all the blame for this, though.

"It's okay," she said, backing him up. "It's been a long time since I laughed this much. I think the experiment was a huge success."

"That's not the issue here," Dr. Toudou retorted, but then he fell silent. It seemed like Sarina and Gorou conspiring together had left him completely fed up.

He sighed, the frown still on his face. "Well, never mind. I'm not saying that Amamiya's theory is correct, but the fact is that your recent test results haven't been too bad. As your attending physician, I'm pleased to see you have this much energy."

"Oh, absolutely," Sarina said, nodding emphatically. "I've been thinking I was feeling pretty good."

Dr. Toudou gave a resigned shrug. "Make sure not to bother the other patients, at least."

"We won't," Sarina and Gorou replied in harmony.

With one last sigh, Sarina's doctor turned on his heel and strode out of the room without another word.

Once they were sure his footsteps were receding down the hall, Sarina and Gorou exchanged a look.

"Ah-ha-ha. We got completely chewed out."

"We sure did." Gorou's expression softened.

Laughing together like this was kind of nice. It felt like they were siblings acting up and getting yelled at by their parents. *Is this what it would be like if I had a big brother?* Sarina wondered, looking up at Gorou.

"It's because you were singing so loud, Sensei."

"Well, you kept veering way off-key. I bet that made us stand out for the wrong reasons."

"Huh? Is my singing that bad?"

"If it's a straight choice between good and bad, you were definitely bad. To be honest, you're tone-deaf," Gorou said bluntly.

"That's so mean," Sarina said, puffing out her cheeks. "You shouldn't talk that way to your fave."

"My fave?"

"Remember? You said if I became an idol, you'd be my fan."

"Did I say that?" Gorou seemed perplexed, but Sarina hadn't forgotten. He'd said it when he'd visited her room the other day.

"Once you're discharged, go be an idol. If you do, I'll be your fan."

It had probably been a throwaway comment as far as he was concerned, but his words had grabbed Sarina's heart and held on tight.

She'd never seriously thought about becoming an idol before. After all, she'd been in and out of the hospital for as far long as she could remember. She'd assumed she was going to live her whole life in a hospital and that she'd die in one, too. She'd never given a passing thought to what she'd do after being discharged.

A girl like her, becoming an idol… The moment she'd fantasized about standing on a stage like Ai, her mind had lit up in all the colors of the rainbow.

She knew that dream wouldn't come true, of course. But Gorou had shown her she was still free to dream about it.

Sarina had been genuinely happy about that.

Happy enough to make her fall in love.

However, either he really didn't remember, or he was pretending

he didn't. Gorou laughed evasively. "Well, if you're going to debut as an idol, you're definitely going to need singing lessons."

Setting the bottle of antiseptic on the table, Gorou took a seat on the bedside stool. By now, that stool was basically reserved for him.

"Dance lessons, too, I guess. And more idols are appearing on variety shows these days, so you'll have to polish up your conversational skills as well."

"True. I should probably also practice my signature."

"Is your signature really going to matter that much?"

"Oh, absolutely. What if somebody asks me for it on the street out of nowhere? Agh, there's so much to do!" Sarina tipped her head back, looking up at the ceiling.

Talking about her dream with Gorou like this was a whole lot of fun. It made her feel as if it might actually happen someday.

"You're still young, Sarina. I'm sure you'll be able to do it."

"Yeah." She smiled back at him.

She was sure she didn't have nearly enough time left. It would be tactless to point out something like that, though, so instead she kept on joking. "Oh, and also, I'll need to give some serious thought to our marriage."

"That again?" Gorou said, a wry smile crossing his face. "I said I'd think about it when you turned sixteen."

"That'll happen before you know it. There's all sorts of things we'll need to decide before the wedding, like where to hold the ceremony, where to go for our honeymoon, how many children we want…"

"Doesn't getting your parents to sign off on it come first?"

Gorou was right. In a normal family, kids probably did need their parents' blessing to get married.

However, the Tendouji family wasn't like that.

"I don't think they'll care. They believe in hands-off parenting," Sarina told him.

"Really?" Gorou cocked his head.

"Yeah." Sarina nodded. "They're not really the type to worry about their daughter."

"Now you mention it, I never see your parents. It feels like they

don’t ever come to visit you.”

“They don’t, really. They’re both in Tokyo. They say they’re really busy with work, so they can’t make it down here very often.”

Sarina’s grandparents, who lived in Takachiho, were looking after her in her parents’ place. Granted, they were pretty old, so they didn’t have the opportunity to come visit her much, either.

Gorou frowned. “Hmm. That must be a little lonely.”

“It’s fine. We’ve always been like this. I get a lot of pocket money to make up for it. Thanks to that, I can buy all the B Komachi CDs and merch I want online.” Sarina smiled at him, but Gorou didn’t look very convinced. The distance between her and her parents seemed to concern him.

“Well, every family has their own dynamic… Sorry for asking something weird.” Gorou’s eyes went to the window. It was beginning to feel a lot like fall out there, and a lone crow was flying through the clear autumn sky. *Caw, caw!* echoed its shrill cry. Was it calling out to its children like in the nursery rhyme?

“You really are kind, aren’t you, Sensei?” Sarina reached out and softly took Gorou’s hand.

“Hmm?” He looked startled for a moment, but he didn’t try to pull free. Instead, he squeezed her hand back gently.

The warmth of his skin on her palm brought a smile to her face.

I wish this would last forever and ever.



In Miyazaki, the average temperature in December was around ten degrees Celsius. From what Sarina saw of the weather forecast, that was quite a bit warmer than it was in other places.

However, this winter felt a whole lot colder than usual to her. The heat was on, of course, and her comforter was soft and fluffy, just back from the cleaners. Even so, her hands and feet started trembling if she wasn’t careful.

Why was she so cold? Was it what the weatherwoman on TV

referred to as the “first serious cold wave in a decade”? Was it because her condition had been going downhill lately?

Or was it because the person who’d always been in her room before wasn’t there?

“…Sensei didn’t stop by today, either.”

Nobody had occupied the stool beside her bed for a while now. For some reason, Gorou’s visits had stopped abruptly.

“I wonder what happened. He used to come by every day.”

Sarina gazed absently out the window. The sun set a little after five these days, and stars were already twinkling in the faintly crimson sky.

As she watched the evening display, Sarina let out a sigh. For no reason in particular, she began connecting the stars with her eyes, making triangles and squares. It would have been more fun if she’d known the constellations, but she didn’t, so she just made random shapes. Even that was a pretty effective way to kill time.

Out of nowhere, Sarina remembered something she’d heard on an educational TV program once.

From where she lay on her bed, the stars only seemed to be a few centimeters from one another, but they were actually so far apart it made her head spin. And that distance was growing all the time.

She wondered whether the same thing happened with human feelings.

Even if Gorou was kind, he was just an intern. There was so much he still had to learn. He probably wouldn’t be able to pay attention to Sarina forever. If he couldn’t come visit her some days, there was nothing she could really do about that.

As she was mulling that over, there was a knock at the door.

“Dinnertime.”

It was the same kind, matronly nurse who always came. The woman pushed the cart with Sarina’s dinner on it into the room as if she felt quite at home there.

Sarina’s nose caught the scent of fish. Today’s main was apparently grilled mackerel.

“Thank you, Nurse.”

“Oh?” the woman said, looking perplexed. “Sarina? Were you not in the mood for fish?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“You don’t seem very cheerful, though.”

Had her dejection shown in her expression? The nurse peered into Sarina’s face, as if worried about her.

“Really? Nothing’s wrong or anything,” Sarina told her.

“Well, I hope not,” the woman said, mystified. She slid the overbed table into place, then set the dinner tray on top of it.

Stewed sweet potatoes and a salad of steamed cabbage sat beside the grilled fish. It was a healthy meal—though, being hospital food, that was only natural.

“Oh, by the way, about Amamiya-sensei…”

Sarina’s eyes widened hearing the nurse suddenly say that name, and she let out a “Huh?”

“You remember him, right? He stopped by to see you a lot. The intern.”

“Oh yes. What about Sensei?”

“Well, it seems nobody’s heard from him for a while now.”

“They haven’t?” That sounded ominous. What had happened to Gorou? “What do you mean?” Sarina asked, urging the nurse to go on.

“Everyone at the nurses’ station is worried, too, but who knows? Rumor has it he’s gotten himself into some sort of woman trouble.”

“What do you mean, ‘woman trouble’?”

According to the nurse, two weeks ago, a young woman had called the hospital office and said “Put Gorou Amamiya on the phone” with a really intense voice.

As soon as Gorou had taken the call, he’d looked really startled. After hanging up, he’d immediately told the director he’d be taking some time off, then sprinted straight out of the hospital.

“I bet it’s a passionate love affair that’s gone south. Maybe she’s a stalker… You wouldn’t think it, but Amamiya-sensei is pretty popular with the ladies.”

“He is?” Sarina asked.

“Oh yes,” the nurse replied. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Several of the younger nurses have made passes at him. He never seemed unhappy about it, either.”

“Huh… Seriously? I had no idea.” Sarina couldn’t believe her ears. Apparently, Gorou had a side she’d never known about.

Well, he was an adult. He probably had history he couldn’t share with Sarina. Logically, she understood that.

But honestly, this wasn’t something she wanted to know about.

“I bet he messed around with several girls and things got out of control… It’s probably something like that.”

“No way…”

The Gorou Amamiya, Playboy theory.

That was a new one to Sarina, but it did make sense for a number of reasons. After all, he had those looks, and he was a doctor in training with a promising future. That made him a catch, the sort of guy who’d have no shortage of takers. He probably hadn’t had any trouble finding girls to mess around with.

Sarina could easily imagine him getting into a situation where he’d be forced to take responsibility.

“Then Sensei’s run off somewhere?”

“There’s a good chance,” the nurse said. “After all, that woman knew where he worked. As things stand, I doubt he could just relax and continue with his training. It’s possible he fled overseas to wait for all the fuss to die down.”

The nurse was wearing the indifferent smile of a celebrity talk show host. The misfortune of others was as sweet as nectar. Sure, it was probably a fun item of gossip for someone like her who had nothing to do with it, but it was pretty hard for Sarina to take.

“Overseas…? So Sensei won’t be coming back?”

“Well, it’s just a rumor. I couldn’t say for sure.” With that, the nurse backed around toward the door. “All right, make sure you eat everything,” she said, pushing the rattling meal cart out of the room.

The woman loved to chat. Was she planning to cheerfully gossip about Gorou in other patients’ rooms, too?

Left alone, Sarina sighed. “Sensei, seriously, what are you doing…?”

Her eyes went to the grilled mackerel on the table. It had had a

nice aroma just a few minutes ago, but now it didn't smell like anything at all.



One day passed, then another.

Gorou still hadn't reappeared.

He'd dropped out of touch so abruptly and completely that Sarina was really starting to worry. The things the nurse had said—"*love affair gone south,*" "*stalker,*" "*fled overseas*"—had gone through her mind over and over during the past few days. She was so preoccupied that she couldn't even focus on Ai's songs.

Sarina sighed and looked up at the sky.

Her white breath dissipated into the December air. She couldn't help wishing the muddled mess of feelings inside her would disappear along with it.

She was up on the roof of the hospital, in an observation area that had a small garden.

She'd thought getting some fresh air might make her feel a bit better, so she'd come up here in her wheelchair.

A cold winter wind blustered under leaden clouds. She'd worn her coat, but it was still cold. It felt as if even her heart might start shivering.

"Was that also a lie, when he said he'd be my fan?"

Those words had made her feel as if someone had acknowledged her for the first time in her life. She'd been allowed to dream like a normal girl.

She'd been so happy that it felt like her heart was dancing. And yet…

Now that she thought about it, that was probably just an offhand remark Gorou had made after getting caught up in the moment. He probably said things like that to all the girls.

It had been nothing more than lip service meant to win her affection. When she thought about it that way, it made sense. He

might even have been trying to improve his evaluation as an intern by getting along with the patients.

"Argh, why didn't I pick up on that?"

She sighed again. She didn't know how many times that made today. If there was an All-Japan Sighing Championship, she would have been a solid contender for the gold medal.

"Dummy. Sensei, you dummy…"

Where was Gorou now, and what was he doing? Was he having fun with yet another girl wherever he'd run off to?

Well, he was a man, after all. Of course he'd prefer to spend his time with a healthy, pretty woman instead of a seriously ill little girl like her.

Sarina was half paralyzed, and she couldn't get around properly without her wheelchair. On top of that, the radiation treatments had left her bald. She had absolutely nothing in the way of womanly charms.

She felt a painful twinge in her chest.

She thought the sadness and frustration might drive her crazy.

The next thing she knew, her cheeks were wet. Those gloomy feelings were seeping out of the corners of her eyes, drop by drop, and she couldn't stop them.

"Huh? Ugh, why…?"

How pathetic, she thought. It wasn't as if any of this was news to her.

Sarina had been fighting her illness for as long as she could remember. It had been a life without dreams, hope, or love. She was pretty sure even her parents had given up on her.

There would be no happiness in her future, either. She'd known that for a long time now…

Yet meeting Gorou and talking with him about Ai, it seemed like somewhere in her heart, she'd started thinking it was possible.

That someone might be able to love her the way other people were loved.

"*Sniff…!* That's so stupid. I'm the real dummy…"

By getting her hopes up, she'd set herself up to get hurt for no reason. That pain made her chest constrict as badly as her illness

did, or maybe even worse.

There hadn't been anything good about her life in the first place. Having to harbor something like this in her heart until it was over seemed nothing short of torture.

Sarina's eyes went to the edge of the roof. A two-and-a-half-meter fence ran all the way around it. Beyond that, the forests of Takachiho lay quietly under the cold, cloudy sky.

She found herself wondering if jumping would make the pain go away. There was no way she'd be able to get her uncooperative body over that fence, though. That thought was hopelessly painful, too.

"Why am I even alive…?"

The cold wind caressed her scrunched-up face. Her wet cheeks and upper lip might freeze if she didn't dry them.

Sarina reached into the little bag slung over her shoulder, trying to get out her handkerchief, but her trembling hand was causing her trouble.

"Ah."

As she pulled out the handkerchief, something else tumbled out of her bag and hit the roof with a light *clink*. It was an acrylic keychain.

It had a caricaturized version of Ai on it with the words *Ai's My Fave Forever!!!*—the souvenir she'd won from the *gacha* machine that time she'd tried to go to a B Komachi show.

"What am I even doing…?"

She directed her feelings of hopelessness toward herself. There really must be something wrong with her today for her to have dropped her precious Ai keychain.

It had fallen just beside the right wheel of her chair.

I hope it didn't get scratched… Sarina twisted in her seat, leaning over and reaching down for it.

Her arm wasn't quite long enough, though. Ai's picture smiled just a few centimeters below her fingertips.

It would be so much easier if I could just stand up and get it, she thought. But there was no point thinking about something like that. If she could easily do that, she wouldn't be in a place like this to

begin with.

"Rrrgh, just a little farther…!"

Holding her breath, Sarina twisted as far as she could go. She was just three centimeters away from the keychain now. It felt as if her spine was going to cramp up as she reached out, straining with her right hand.

Just as the tip of her index finger brushed the acrylic plate, the world seemed to tilt. She'd leaned too far to the right, and the left wheel of her chair had lifted off the ground. *Oh, crud*, she thought, but it was already too late. The wheelchair was completely off-balance, and her body pitched hard to the right.

"Eeeeeeeeeek…!"

Having a limited range of motion in her body meant she couldn't catch herself properly, either. Her head was going to slam into the roof.

Sarina squeezed her eyes shut in anticipation of the pain that was about to hit her. She stiffened, bracing, trying to make it hurt a little less. It was a last resort, wisdom she'd picked up from years of living in a wheelchair.

Please don't let it hurt. She felt completely pathetic, being scared of pain when she'd wanted to die just minutes earlier.

But strangely, the impact never came. Just before she was thrown out of the chair, strong hands caught her and held her in place.

"…Whoa. That was a close one."

The familiar voice made her eyes fly open.

"Sarina, are you okay?"

The face right in front of her belonged to the person she'd been missing. The man who had nonchalantly reached over from behind to save her.

"…Sensei?"

"I was just about to call out to you when you suddenly tipped over. You really startled me."

No, you *startled* me*.* But before Sarina could tell him that, Gorou did something even more surprising.

With a "Hup!" he put one arm under Sarina's knees and lifted her

out of her chair.

A bridal carry. It was the first time a man had ever picked her up like this.

"Let's see… It doesn't look like you're hurt. What were you doing up here?"

Sarina couldn't answer. Her head was a jumble of questions and relief, and her heart was beating double time. She felt totally confused.

Maybe that was why when she did finally manage to say something, it didn't make much sense.

"Sensei, didn't you flee the country? What about your stalker?"

"Huhn?" Gorou tilted his head, looking mystified.



They went back to Sarina's hospital room together, with Gorou pushing her chair.

On the way, Sarina told him about the rumors she'd heard from the nurse. He snorted. "What the heck? A love affair gone south? Do I really look like I mess around with women that much?"

"Yeah. Pretty much. You look like you'd two-or three-time, easy," Sarina told him.

"Oh man…" Gorou scratched the back of his head. The fact that he didn't completely deny it may have meant the rumor wasn't entirely off the mark. "Well, I'm sorry I worried you. To be honest, even I didn't think it was going to take this long. The director tore me a new one," he grumbled, setting Sarina down on the bed. Then he took his regular spot on the stool.

The sheer familiarity of the sight was a relief to Sarina.

"So what were you actually doing, Sensei?"

"I went up to Tokyo for a bit."

"To Tokyo? Why? For work…? No, it can't have been that."

"Well, you see," Gorou said, sticking a hand into the front of his lab coat, "I went to get my hands on *these*."

He took out two slips of paper about the size of his palm. Sarina saw a cute design on the front and the words *B Komachi – Solo Concert in Miyazaki*.

"Huh?! Whaaaa…?! Sensei, are those—?!"

"I heard B Komachi was coming to Miyazaki soon, so I went to secure us some tickets. I thought I could take you to the show."

Sarina's eyes were as wide as they'd go. Her heart was threatening to jump up into her throat. In all her twelve years, she didn't think she'd ever been this surprised.

"Huh?" Gorou cocked his head. "Did you not know the group was coming here?"

"No, I knew! Of course I knew! I saw it online!"

B Komachi's popularity had grown to the point where they were doing a national tour. They were scheduled to give shows in ten cities around Japan, and one of those cities was Miyazaki. When Sarina had first heard about it, of course she'd been delighted, but she'd also been sad.

She'd been a diehard fan of B Komachi for ages, and now more people would know about them. She was genuinely happy about that. In the end, though, her illness would keep her from attending the show.

Ai and the other girls would be so close she could practically reach out and touch them, but she wouldn't be able to go see them. That frustration had made Sarina's feelings extremely complicated.

And here was Gorou, calmly holding out tickets to the show. The situation was so completely unexpected that she was having trouble processing it.

"You got these for me…? Why?"

"Well, you know. It's almost Christmas, so I thought I could get them for you as a present."

"Oh!" Sarina said. She picked up the phone that lay by her pillow. The date on the screen said December 20. It really was close to Christmas. It wasn't something that came up much living in the hospital, so she'd completely forgotten about it.

"A Christmas present…for me…"

Sarina didn't remember ever getting one of those from anybody.

Not even her parents. That meant just getting a present made her more than happy enough—and the fact that her present was a ticket to a B Komachi show was sending her over the moon. She had no idea how to put that joy into words.

The next thing she knew, big tears were falling from her eyes again.

"Hngh, hnnnngh, hnnnnnngh…!"

"Huh? Wha—? Sarina?" Gorou looked shocked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm…not okay… *Sniff!* This is your fault, Sensei…!"

Gorou grabbed a tissue for her, and Sarina blew her nose. It made an embarrassingly loud noise, but that hardly seemed to matter now. Just having somebody see her cry was embarrassing enough.

"I can't believe you're giving me such an amazing present…! Hnnngh… It's completely amazing! It's so amazing that 'amazing' is all I can say!"

"Perfect time for your vocabulary to fail you, huh?" As Gorou watched her, his eyes were warm. Then he smiled a little. "Well, if you're this happy about it, that long trip was worth it."

"Come to think of it, Sensei, you went all the way to Tokyo… Why? Couldn't you reserve these online?"

"I could have bought regular tickets that way, but I figured since this was a special event…" Gorou glanced down at the tickets in his hand.

When Sarina took a closer look, she realized they said *S Seat – Premium/Ai*. She doubted her eyes all over again. "Wh-what?!"

"Limited-issue front-row tickets. Apparently, you also get to take part in a bonus event after the show. You'll get to talk with the member who's named on the ticket in a private booth."

"Seriously?! I'll get to talk with Ai?! Are you kidding me?!" Sarina's eyes lit up.

Gorou went on, sounding a little proud of himself. "The limited tickets were distributed through a lottery drawing at the Tokyo venue, and they only issued ten per day. It took a whole lot of work to get those."

By now, B Komachi's popularity was top class for an indie idol

group. According to Gorou, hundreds of fans had lined up to enter the lottery for these limited tickets. And Gorou had joined that line every day until he'd won a drawing.

"After that, I had to spin the lottery drum at the Miyazaki venue until I managed to score Ai's premium tickets. It took far more time than money."

When Sarina heard his story, everything finally made sense: The reason Gorou had disappeared was to get these limited tickets.

"That's amazing! It's so amazing! Sensei, I can't believe you managed to get these."

"We got pretty lucky. The limited tickets were kept hush-hush, so there wasn't much about them online. I don't think I would've gotten them, either, if a fan in Tokyo hadn't tipped me off."

"A fan in Tokyo…? Wait, was that the super-intense woman who called the hospital?"

"That's her," Gorou said with a nod. "I met her on a B Komachi fan site, but she's a nice girl. She called me at work because she wanted to get the information to me as quickly as possible. You know, because cell phone use is restricted in hospitals."

Oh, right, Sarina thought as the pieces fell into place. The woman she'd thought was a stalker from a love affair gone wrong had actually been a kind B Komachi fan. *I'm sorry for doubting you*, she apologized silently.

"In any case, thanks to her, I managed to get these." Gorou fluttered the tickets. Front-row seats with a premium bonus event—rare tickets that would make any B Komachi fan positively drool. To Sarina, the very paper seemed to radiate a dazzling light.

Not only was she going to a B Komachi show, but she'd even get to talk to Ai. It really felt as if her dreams had come true.

Sarina swallowed hard. "I-is this really okay, though?"

"Is what okay?"

"I mean, they've almost never given me permission to go out. You worked so hard to get these, but what if I can't actually go?"

"It's all right," Gorou said so quickly that he nearly talked over her. "I've already gotten permission from both your attending physician and the hospital director. They say you'll be allowed to go

out on the day."

"Wh-what?! For real?!"

"For real, for real. They've even written out a proper permission slip," Gorou said calmly. He didn't seem like he was lying or joking.

"I get to go…! I'll get to meet the real live Ai!" Sarina was so excited that she broke out in full-body goose bumps. Since going up to the roof, she'd felt so incredibly sad and happy and astonished by turns that she felt like she was going crazy. "Aaaaaaaah! This is amaaaaaazing! Aaaaagh! Aaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Whoa, Sarina, settle down. The doctor's going to chew us out again."

Even when Gorou admonished her, Sarina didn't feel like dialing it back at all. She kept shouting "Yaaaay! Hooray!" as her feelings dictated. If she'd had free use of her legs, she would have been running all around the hospital.

"Still, you're amazing, Sensei. I asked them so many times before, but they wouldn't let me go out… How did you con them into this?"

"Con them? Don't put it like that. What will people think?" Gorou grimaced. "I just asked them. I said I wanted to take you to an idol concert."

"Huh? That's it? That's all you did, and they said okay?"

"Well, maybe it was my gleaming reputation," Gorou said, looking smug.

Yeah, I seriously doubt that, thought Sarina. After all, people had been gossiping that he'd fled overseas to escape woman trouble. His reputation was far from immaculate.

She decided not to point that out, though. Right now, she was a million times happier over the fact that she was going to get to meet Ai with Gorou. All her feelings about how rough her illness was and that her parents wouldn't come to see her had been blown away.

Even she thought she was being fickle, she was going to turn around and take back what she'd said earlier: In this moment, Sarina felt from the bottom of her heart that she was luckier and more loved than anybody.

"Seriously, I'm happier than if my birthday had come around a

hundred times at once. This is all thanks to the fact that you got super into B Komachi, Sensei."

"No, as I've told you a million times, I'm not particularly into them myself. I'm maintaining my neutral stance with regard to idols."

"You're still saying that? You went all the way to Tokyo to get limited-issue tickets. I don't think anybody but a total B Komachi addict would do that."

"Look, that's not it. I did that for you, Sarina."

Gorou's lips were pressed into a dissatisfied line. The way he wasn't honest about this stuff was incredibly cute.

Sarina had originally wanted to get him into idols so that she could use him to help with her own fan activities, but by this point, she didn't care about that. She just wanted to have fun cheering on Ai alongside him. That in itself was enough to make her the happiest person alive.

The date on the tickets was May 23. That was almost half a year away, but the season would be warm and wonderful.

She'd get to go see her beloved Ai with her beloved Sensei. It was sure to become a splendid memory.

Gorou broke into a smile. "There's still time until spring. Make sure you're in good condition by then."

"Oh, I will. I mean, come on—I'm going to meet Ai. Just thinking about it makes me feel all better. They might even discharge me by spring."

"Well, that would be great."

How would Gorou look when he met Ai in real life? Wouldn't seeing how much of a genuine goddess she was blow that cool, neutral facade of his clean away?

Stifling the laughter that was welling up inside her, Sarina turned to face Gorou. "Anyway! Thank you, Sensei! Those tickets made me so incredibly happy! It's the best Christmas present I've ever gotten!"

Right. It was the first Christmas present she'd ever received.

It would also be the last.

CHAPTER 3

【OSHI NO KO】
SPICA THE FIRST STAR

“What do you mean, her condition’s deteriorating rapidly?!”

As Gorou Amamiya shouted, lightning split the night sky. Outside the window, a blustering wind was making the trees in the forest toss and sway.

Heavy rain had been falling since that afternoon. It was a big storm, unusual for January. According to the weather report, Takachiho would be stormy all night. Large drops of rain were striking the hospital windows with a rattle like machine-gun fire.

I hate this, Gorou thought. His grandmother had died on a stormy night like this one. Bad things always happened on days when the weather was this rotten.

Just a few minutes ago, the hospital had called his phone and told him to come in. A dark premonition had hung over Gorou’s heart ever since he took that call. He kept imagining the worst, and he couldn’t shake those thoughts.

Now he was venting that unease on the person who’d summoned him.

“What exactly happened to her?! Tell me!”

“Calm down, Amamiya. Yelling isn’t going to help anything.”

The doctor seated at a desk in the medical office was Toudou, a neurosurgeon at the hospital where Gorou was interning. He was around fifty years old and Sarina Tendouji’s attending physician.

Although his hairline had retreated dramatically, he was a veteran at the hospital with a fair number of achievements under his belt. He was second to none, particularly in the field of brain surgery, and he performed over fifty operations annually. The doctor’s surgical knowledge had helped Gorou out many times during his internship.

Right now, though, Toudou was so exhausted that his veteran’s sense of self-assurance seemed to have vanished. Behind his glasses, his eyes were sunken, and his cheeks looked gaunt. Apparently, he’d been holed up in the ICU until just now. In other words, this was incredibly urgent.

"I do feel bad calling you in at a time like this," Toudou said.

Gorou just pressed him harder. "I don't care about that! I just want to know how this came out of nowhere!"

"I know exactly how you feel. I'd like the answer to that myself." Toudou picked up his coffee cup and heaved a sigh.

About thirty minutes ago, Toudou had called Gorou and said, "I need to talk to you about Sarina." It had been close to midnight. Gorou had been at home, but he'd hastily changed back into his work clothes and sped through the storm to the hospital.

Gorou was training to become a doctor, so he knew exactly what it meant when the hospital called in its staff for emergencies.

"Sarina's condition took a sharp turn for the worse a few hours ago. She developed a high fever and convulsive seizures, and she's been in a semiconscious state ever since. It's an extremely dangerous situation," Toudou repeated, as if reasoning with Gorou. "We've done all we can, but she's still walking the border between life and death. Tonight is going to be critical."

"You've got to be kidding me…!" Gorou shook his head. No matter how many times he was told the same thing, the shock of those words was huge. It made him feel as if a giant hand was crushing his heart.

After all, just this afternoon, he and Sarina had been talking like always. They'd been discussing B Komachi's upcoming show in Miyazaki, which he'd gotten tickets to the month before. They'd been having fun figuring out what they'd wear on the day and what they wanted to talk about with Ai when they met her. And now…

"All of a sudden, telling me 'Tonight is going to be critical'? … There's no way I could believe that! Sensei, come on, wasn't there anything you could do?!"

"Unfortunately, no. Medicine isn't all-powerful." Toudou shook his head weakly. It looked like he was cursing his own helplessness. "When I excised her tumor two years ago, the cancer had already metastasized to other parts of her brain. I knew the progression of the disease couldn't be stopped."

Anaplastic astrocytoma. That was the name of Sarina's disease. Simply put, it was a type of malignant tumor that tended to develop

in the brain. It generally had many serious symptoms, including sensory disturbances, impaired gait, and intellectual disability. The five-year survival rate from the time of discovery was only 20 percent. Naturally, Gorou was well aware that it wasn't an easily treatable disease.

"Once the cytoma has metastasized, radiation therapy is next to useless. We knew this day would come eventually. You must have been prepared for it as well, Amamiya."

"I mean… Yes, but…" Gorou couldn't help holding on to hope. "But she was doing so well just this afternoon. She was speaking normally, and her appetite was good. She was having so much fun talking about going to the concert!"

"I see." Toudou's shoulders slumped. "The thing is, Amamiya, that's what diseases are like. They always try to snuff out the patient's life at unpredictable times."

"I just can't believe it…!"

"I don't want to believe it myself. It always happens like this." There was pity in Toudou's eyes as he looked at Gorou.

It wasn't just him. The other doctors and nurses in the medical office were all watching Gorou with sympathy. Everyone knew he'd spent a lot of time with Sarina.

A young female nurse spoke to him. "Um, I think Sarina looked like she was doing so well because she was trying to put on a brave face. Because she was with you, Amamiya-sensei."

"Because she was…with me?"

"Her condition has been going downhill for the past several weeks. She's had several seizures, and there were some problems with memory and speech."

"No… But then why…?" *Why didn't anyone tell me?* Gorou wanted to say, but he cut himself short. He was only an intern, and Sarina wasn't his patient. He'd just chatted with her on a personal basis. He wasn't in any position to say anything about her treatment. He didn't need anybody to point that out to him.

However, the nurse's answer wasn't the one he'd expected.

"I'm sorry. Sarina told us not to. She said, 'Don't tell Sensei.'"

"Huh…?"

"She treasured the time she spent with you more than anything, Amamiya-sensei. She said she wanted to just have fun chatting with you until the very end. I think that's why she didn't want you to know her condition was getting worse. Once you knew, she wouldn't be able to talk with you as if everything was normal anymore."

Gorou was speechless. He'd had no idea Sarina was being so careful around him.

"She was planning to go to an idol concert in spring, right?" Toudou said, his expression grave. "When I gave permission for her to attend, I already knew it was very unlikely she'd be able to. The probability was ten percent at most."

"So you gave permission even though you knew it was basically impossible?"

"Either way, I knew it would be her last opportunity to make a cherished memory. If she managed to go, it would be a stroke of good fortune. Even if she wasn't able to go, it would give her something to look forward to."

"Something to look forward to…? That's just cruel."

"I do think Sarina was aware of it herself. After all, it's her body."

"So I'm the only one who didn't pick up on it?"

I'm a total idiot, he thought. Here he was, working toward becoming a doctor, and he hadn't even noticed a patient was lying. Gorou found himself grinding his teeth. "Dammit."

If only he'd picked up on that lie… If he'd realized Sarina's condition was worsening earlier, he would have been able to use that time for something more important.

"Oh, right! What about her parents? Their daughter's in bad shape. They'll need to see her soon."

"Unfortunately…" The nurse shook her head. Apparently, Sarina's parents had had plans they hadn't been able to change, so they couldn't get here right away.

Gorou couldn't understand what they were thinking. They'd never come to visit their own daughter in the hospital, and even now when she was dying, they still couldn't bother to be here?

What did they take her for? Did they really think treating her like that wouldn't make her sad? Their callousness was making his blood

boil.

"How does that even happen?!" His voice came out louder than he'd meant it to. "Sarina may be dying, and her parents can't even show up?!"

"They both work in the city, and they can't get here right away…" The nurse looked troubled. Her expression was complicated; she sympathized with Sarina, but she'd already half resigned herself to the situation.

Gorou wasn't capable of that.

Time as a family was limited. You needed to make memories while you had the chance, or you'd lose something you could never get back. There were people in the world like him, who had no memories with their parents at all. He didn't want Sarina to experience that loneliness.

"And they call themselves parents?! Mothers are—"

Sitting at the desk, Toudou sighed. "You're living in a fantasy. There are parents like hers, too. Loads of them." His tone was cold. Oddly, there was neither anger nor sadness in his expression.

Toudou had dealt with many patients in his work as a surgeon. He'd probably witnessed the deaths of more than a few from pediatrics. If he said families like Sarina's weren't uncommon, then it was a fact.

Even so, Gorou couldn't accept the way Sarina's parents were treating her. Letting her die all alone like this was just too sad.

Quietly, Toudou went on. "Sarina really took a liking to you. Go be with her at the end."

Gorou couldn't even respond. He was angry, but he didn't know who or what to vent it on.

Toudou must have seen that. With a soft sigh, he turned a commiserating gaze on Gorou. "It may be a painful experience, but it's a road every doctor must walk. Don't get too discouraged."

Gorou had no idea how to answer that. He didn't even have what it took to accept the situation yet. It took all of his effort to simply nod and say "All right."



The air in Room 201 felt heavy.

In the darkness, the only sounds were the ceaseless rain and the electronic beeps of the EKG. They made for a dissonant, ill-matched duet.

Sarina lay quietly on the bed, her eyes closed.

Her skin was terribly dry and as pale as porcelain. She could have been a lifeless doll. It was clear that she was near death.

She wasn't conscious, but Gorou could tell she was in incredible pain. Beneath her oxygen mask, her breathing was shallow and labored. The furrows between her eyebrows seemed as deep as crevasses.

There was a world of difference between this and the energetic, smiling girl she'd been just half a day ago. It was hard to believe they were the same person.

Sitting down on the stool beside her bed, Gorou hung his head. "Why? Why does it have to be like this…?"

This wasn't the first time Gorou had come face-to-face with a person dying in hospital. He'd said good-bye to his own grandmother, and over the course of his internship, he'd watched patients he'd grown close to breathe their last.

However, none of them had ever shattered him like this. The sight of Sarina gradually growing weaker made him feel as if something inside him was about to fall apart.

It was clear why. That was how big a presence she'd become in his life.

"The first time I met you, I thought you were just some weird kid."

Gorou had met Sarina the previous summer, when he'd foiled her attempt to escape from the hospital. After that, she'd told him about Ai and B Komachi, and they'd started talking frequently.

He vividly remembered all their conversations. When she was talking about the things she loved, she looked like she was having

an absolute blast, and little by little, it had charmed him.

He'd never been as enthusiastic as Sarina was about anything. Reading was about the only interest he had, but even that he could go without. He'd always assumed he wasn't the type of person who loved anything for dear life.

Maybe that was why Sarina had intrigued him. Somehow, in this moment, he was able to analyze the reason.

"Your situation's similar to mine, and yet you're completely different."

Sarina had spent most of her life alone in the hospital, and her family had never properly loved her. Gorou had probably seen himself in her. He'd never known either of his parents, and the life his grandmother had expected him to lead was the only one he'd been able to choose. In that sense, he and Sarina were similar.

However, Sarina had something he didn't: Her passion for Ai and B Komachi. Gorou hadn't been able to understand it completely, but it hadn't been a bad feeling at all watching her enjoy cheering them on.

Seeing her smile made him feel as if he'd also been saved. Maybe that was what he'd wanted.

The way Sarina was able to say "I love Ai!" from the bottom of her heart had seemed dazzling to him.

"That's right. You were looking forward to seeing Ai so much…"

When Gorou had come back with tickets to B Komachi's show in Miyazaki, Sarina had been delighted with every fiber of her being. Simply getting to see her look like that had made all the trouble he'd gone through seem worth it.

But just when her wish was finally going to come true, Sarina's time had run out.

"It's not fair… The gods are too cruel…"

Sarina was only twelve years old. At that age, she should have been going to school, playing with friends, and spending her days being cheerful and having fun. Instead, she was dying alone in a hospital bed. It was just too sad.

Looking down at Sarina's face, Gorou bit his lip. No matter how much pity he felt for her, there was nothing he could do. It was so

extremely frustrating.

Even Toudou and the other veteran doctors had determined that there was nothing to be done. He knew it was true. Modern medicine couldn't save her.

All he could do now was watch her die.

He was so helpless that it made him feel nauseous.

Just then…

"…Sensei?"

Sarina slowly opened her eyes where she lay on the bed. She'd regained consciousness. She removed her oxygen mask with a trembling hand and smiled at him. "You're here… Sorry. I didn't notice."

"Don't push yourself, Sarina. You need to sleep—"

But before Gorou could finish, Sarina said, "Guess what? I had a dream."

"A dream?"

"I was…an idol," she said, slowly and gently. Her eyes were shining so brightly that it was hard to believe she was near death. "I was a member of B Komachi… I was standing onstage, just like Ai, and performing in front of a crowd of fans."

"You were performing…?"

"There were two other members. They were both super cute, and the three of us were really close…" Sarina gave a little laugh. "That's kind of weird, huh? The real B Komachi has seven members."

"Nah, dreams never make much sense." Gorou tried to smile the way Sarina was, but he only managed to make the corners of his lips curve awkwardly.

Sarina knew her life was ending, but she was still telling him about her dream as if she was having fun. It was incredibly painful to watch.

"You were in the crowd, Sensei, waving your lightsticks for dear life and cheering us on. That made me so happy…" Sarina's eyes creased in a smile. A drop of water fell from the corner of one of them, leaving a track across her dry cheek.

Gorou didn't know how to respond. Putting on the best smile he could manage, he nodded. "Yeah. You can leave the cheering to me.

Once you're an idol, I'll race there at the drop of a hat."

"Eh-heh-heh… Because you're a total idol otaku now, huh, Sensei?"

"No, I'm—" But just as Gorou was about to deny it, Sarina gave a little grunt and grimaced with pain. Her head was probably hurting.

Gorou reached for the nurse call button by her pillow. "Just sit tight. I'll call Toudou-sensei."

But Sarina shook her head. "It's fine. I can tell…this is it…"

"That's not true. You'll be better in no time. Yeah, it's only a matter of time before they discharge you. Then you'll be able to go to all the B Komachi shows you want, and you can work on becoming an idol."

Even as he said them, the words felt ridiculously shallow.

That future wasn't a possibility for her anymore. No matter how positive he tried to be, the impossible couldn't be changed.

Sarina probably knew that as well. As she gazed into his eyes, the corners of her lips quirked up. "You're so kind, Sensei. But you're a really lousy liar…"

"I didn't mean it as a lie."

"You're not allowed to make a face like that. You've got to get better at lying." Sarina gave a little smile. Then she reached over and picked up an object off the bedside table, and held it out to Gorou. "Sensei… Here. This is for you."

She handed him an acrylic keychain. It had a caricature of Ai and the words *Ai's My Fave Forever!!!* printed on it. Apparently, it was official B Komachi merch.

"When I was doing better…I went to a B Komachi concert, just once…and I got it from…a *gacha* machine."

Sarina's voice was getting weaker. Gorou felt as if the flame of her life was burning lower with each word she said. It hurt so badly that there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Take good care of it. Pretend it's me."

He'd heard that Sarina had tried to go to a B Komachi show once. Her condition hadn't been up to it, though, and she'd said she'd ended up coming back without getting to see the actual concert.

That was the only B Komachi event she'd ever gone to. In which

case, this keychain she'd gotten there must be her greatest treasure. Now she was giving it up. Gorou didn't even want to think about what that meant.

He couldn't let Sarina see him looking sad, though. He gritted his teeth and squeezed the keychain tightly. "All right. I'll treasure it always. Forever…"

Gorou's words made Sarina giggle, and an expression of relief came over her face. She looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. "Sensei, I love you so much…" Her outstretched fingertips touched his cheek. They were cold. He couldn't sense any life left in them.

"Even if…I'm reborn, I'm sure I'll still—"

That was all she said before her eyes closed. The hand that had touched Gorou's cheek fell limply to the bed.

The monitor's intermittent beeps stopped. Sarina's heart had finally finished its work.

Gorou had forgotten he was breathing.

There was no such thing as reincarnation. He'd never see Sarina's smile again. Just thinking about it was heart-wrenching.

In the end, he hadn't been able to do anything.

All he'd done was give Sarina somebody to talk to for a little while. He hadn't been able to save her. He hadn't even managed to give her a single fun memory.

What kind of a doctor did that make him? What kind of "Sensei"? He was disgusted by his own powerlessness.

In the darkness, he looked down at the girl's still, silent body. His vision blurred until he couldn't see her face clearly anymore, but he kept his eyes fixed on it.

The ferocious sound of the rain seemed to reach him from somewhere very far away.



For a while after that, his busy days continued.

Sarina's parents didn't make an appearance at the hospital until a

full three days after her death. Make that *parent*, actually—only her father had come. Apparently, he'd given only the briefest of greetings to her doctor and the rest of the staff and hardly spoken otherwise. He'd hurriedly collected Sarina's body and had it sent to the hearse.

Gorou hadn't been there. He hadn't been confident that he could keep his cool if he met Sarina's parents face-to-face.

He'd spent that day silently applying himself to his clinical practice. He shadowed the senior doctors on their rounds, assisted with surgeries, and silently accepted the hospital director's sermons.

He did the same thing the next day and the day after that. As long as he was absorbed in something, he didn't have to think. Life was easier that way.

Several days passed. February had begun, but the weather was still bitterly cold.

On the surface, Gorou's life hadn't changed at all. He simply did what he had to do, impassively, the way he'd done before he met Sarina. He continued studying to become an ob-gyn, quietly and diligently.

About the only thing that had changed was how much he drank after work.

"—Here you go. One single malt, neat," said the white-haired bar owner, setting a glass of amber liquid down in front of Gorou.

He was in a long-standing bar behind Nobeoka Station. It had six seats at the counter, plus two tables. Gorou, sitting at the bar, was the only customer there.

The elderly owner probably ran the place by himself. Everything—the dishes, the cupboards, and the leather-upholstered chairs—gave off a retro vibe. The wall was decorated with a vintage guitar and jazz records from the '70s. The whole bar felt as if the times had left it behind, but the atmosphere was strangely pleasant. It was the perfect place to relax with a drink.

Gorou downed the glass of whiskey in front of him in one go. Its subtle fragrance traveled through his mouth, then burned its way down his throat. He felt intoxicated, his head reeling slightly. The world warped and seemed to give off a dull heat.

He'd never had any intention of savoring the drink. He just wanted the alcohol. When he wasn't drunk, he was crushed by a miserable sense of helplessness.

Setting his empty glass on the bar, Gorou looked up at the barkeep. "Another one, thanks."

The man examined his face and frowned, deepening his wrinkles. "You're not done yet? You're drinking like a fish today, my friend. Maybe you should switch to water soon."

Gorou didn't need some stranger telling him what to do. He was drinking to get drunk, full stop. He stared back at the bartender.

Giving up, the man accepted his glass with a sigh. He refilled it with whiskey, then set it back down in front of Gorou. "There. That's your twentieth glass tonight."

"Yeah. Thanks," Gorou said absentmindedly, raising the whiskey to his lips. It didn't taste good or bad. Granted, alcohol wasn't the only thing he couldn't enjoy the flavor of anymore.

The bar's owner watched him from across the counter, looking worried. "Listen, I don't know what happened, but drinking to forget isn't a great idea."

"That's not really what I'm trying to do."

"I'm telling you, it's bad for you. You're still young; you don't want to put yourself in the hospital."

Gorou started to tell him he already worked there, then shrugged. He was still technically just an intern, and even if he had been a proper doctor, it wouldn't have changed anything. He was well aware that doctors were powerless.

"Leave me alone, all right? I won't cause any trouble for your bar."

His rejection must have come through loud and clear. The owner only said "Fine, then" before averting his gaze. The fact that its proprietor was so reasonable was one of the things Gorou liked about this place.

Just as he picked up his glass again, the small bell over the bar's door tinkled.

"Well! If it isn't Gorou."

He glanced over at the speaker, who'd just walked in.

She was a rather flashy woman about his age, with reddish-brown hair styled in a carefree mass of loose curls. She was wearing a pink miniskirt and a frilly top that left her shoulders bare, and her makeup was pretty dramatic. She seemed as if she probably worked as a nightclub hostess somewhere. Her wide, mascara-fringed eyes seemed vaguely familiar to Gorou.

"Oh, uh—"

"It's me, Yumiko. Did you forget me?" The woman sat down beside him at the bar. Her perfume was intense and cloying. "Barkeep, get me one of whatever Gorou's drinking."

Had he met this woman somewhere before? He tried to remember, but his liquor-soaked brain wouldn't cooperate.

If he couldn't remember, then he just couldn't, and that was that. It meant she hadn't been all that important. Taking a gulp of whiskey, he told her, "Sorry, but I have no idea who you are."

For some reason, that seemed to strike Yumiko as funny, and she let out a cackle. "That's sooo mean! Gorou, your jokes are as harsh as ever."

"I wasn't joking."

"Oh, you actually forgot me? Well, I guess it's been about a year since we last drank together. That sure takes me back…" Yumiko gave a chuckle full of meaning, then leaned in, putting her face a little too close to his. They were so close that their breath mingled. Apparently, she'd been more than just a drinking buddy. "You haven't called me at all lately. I've been lonely."

There had been a time when Gorou had gone barhopping around here. It had been just after he'd come back to intern in Miyazaki after finishing med school in Tokyo. She might have been one of the women he'd gotten close to back then, though there were so many possibilities, he couldn't say for sure.

"Well, I guess you would be busy. After all, you're a doctor in training. I'm sure the girls won't leave you alone, either."

"It's not like that."

Thinking about it, it had been a long time since he'd messed around with a woman. His attention had been completely focused on B Komachi.

He'd been watching the videos he'd borrowed from Sarina, listening to that Talk Masterpiece Collection over and over, collating the latest information about the group online… Before he knew it, he'd been spending the bulk of his spare time following Ai.

"You know, the way you're talking, Sensei, Ai's totally taken you captive, too."

Out of nowhere, that childlike voice came back to him. A sharp pain ran through his chest. If he was remembering things like that, maybe he wasn't drunk enough yet. He took another swallow of whiskey.

Watching him out of the corner of her eye, Yumiko smiled wryly. "My, my. You're pretty strung out. Did you get your heart broken?"

"My what?"

"You just look as lonely as an abandoned puppy tonight. I thought you might be dealing with a breakup."

"That's not… It's none of your business," he told her brusquely. The woman was shameless, invading his privacy like this. "Never mind that, just leave me alone."

But Yumiko was undeterred. "Hmm." She peered insolently into his face. "You were really serious about that girl, weren't you? What was she like?"

Instead of answering, Gorou drained his glass.

Sarina hadn't been his girlfriend. She hadn't even been his patient. What had she been to him, then? Now that he thought about it, it was hard to sum up in just a few words.

A young girl with an incurable illness he'd met at the hospital where he was interning. A huge indie idol fan. A girl who'd dreamed of becoming an idol. She was all those things, yet at the same time, he felt like they were all wrong.

He'd spent half a year with her, but he couldn't even put her into a category. Although it seemed pretty late for this, the realization left Gorou stunned.

The girl's life had lasted a mere twelve years, and it had ended in a hospital bed. Because of her illness, she hadn't been blessed with a good family life, and she hadn't been able to make her dream come true.

What exactly had her life been for? What had it left in its wake?

Staring at the bits of ice left in the bottom of his glass, Gorou tried to visualize Sarina's face. Her innocent smile came back to him immediately. That was a relief.

However, in time, it would probably get harder to remember her. Her family would forget her; so would her doctors, someday. At that point, would there really be nothing to prove she'd lived? That idea was incredibly sad.

Gorou sighed. He'd thought about stuff he shouldn't think about, and now his head felt heavy. It was probably time to leave the bar for the day.

Getting up from his stool, Gorou pulled a ten-thousand-yen bill from the pocket of his slacks. "Close out my tab with this," he said, carelessly setting it on the bar. Then he started for the door on unsteady feet.

Behind him, Gorou heard the woman say "Wait, where are you going?" but he didn't even have the energy to respond.



The chilly wind caressed his alcohol-flushed skin.

He checked the time on his phone; it had just turned ten. He'd be fine, then. It should still be possible to grab a taxi.

Gorou slowly set off for the traffic circle at the station. The air was cold, and every step seemed to wake him up a little more.

To be honest, he still didn't feel drunk enough. If he was just buzzed, he'd end up thinking about unpleasant stuff again. It might be a good idea to have another drink or two at home.

As he was thinking, a sudden weight came to bear on his right shoulder.

"Gorooou?"

It was Yumiko, the woman from the bar. She'd caught his right arm and was clinging to it. The smell of her perfume was so overpowering it made his head spin.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Eh-heh-heh! When I saw how broody you were back there, I got kind of jealous.”

“Huhn?”

“If your breakup was that sad, you must be hurting, right? Want me to make you feel better tonight?”

“I’m good.”

“Aw!” Yumiko crossly puffed out her pink cheeks. “Why not, huh? It’s been ages since we saw each other. Let’s go have a few more drinks somewhere.”

“Just give it a rest. If you want to drink with a guy, go find another one. There are tons of them around here.”

Gorou tried to shake her off, but Yumiko didn’t intend to let go. She held on to his arm tightly with both hands. “Well, we don’t have to drink, then. We could just find somewhere to lie down.”

“Would you just knock it off?” Feeling fed up, Gorou shook his head. He’d picked up trouble. Things might have been different before, but he didn’t feel like spending tonight with a woman who seemed this easy.

“Come on. Let me go.” As he was trying to pry himself free of Yumiko, a rough voice shouted behind them.

“Hey! Asshole! Whaddaya think you’re doing with my girl?!”

Gorou turned to see a muscular man with spiked hair standing there. He was in his mid-thirties, wearing a button-down shirt with a garish pattern on it. Silver necklaces gleamed in its wide-open neck. He was clearly a thug.

The guy was glaring at Gorou, veins bulging on his forehead. “You better be ready for a beatdown,” he growled.

“Whoops,” Yumiko said, releasing Gorou’s arm.

This thug was probably her lover or something similar. Not that Gorou cared. Adjusting his glasses, he turned to face the other man. “Don’t get the wrong idea. She came on to me—”

“Huhn?! Trying to talk your way outta this?!”

The man closed in on Gorou and hauled him up by his shirtfront. “You sonuvabitch!” the thug roared, slamming a fist into his cheek.

Sparks exploded in front of Gorou’s eyes. The sudden pain left

him helpless, and his glasses slipped off and hit the asphalt.

Before he could ask *What are you doing?!* the man raised his fist again, and a blow to the shoulder planted Gorou on his ass.

"Eeeeek!" Yumiko screamed. "Tacchan, stop it! Violence isn't—"

"Quit yapping! You stay out of this!"

Shoving Yumiko out of the way, the man closed in on Gorou again. He was breathing heavily through his nose, apparently having lost himself in his anger. *He's like a mad bull*, Gorou thought.

No matter where you were, there were always a few people who'd jump to violence at the slightest provocation. It was ASPD—antisocial personality disorder. For some reason, Gorou hazily remembered learning about it at university. For an intern with ambitions of being an ob-gyn, that information was basically just trivia.

Even though he'd just been decked out of nowhere, Gorou's mind was calm. Even he wasn't sure why he was so cool and collected. Was it because he was drunk? Or had he lost a screw or two somewhere, making it so his ability to feel pain no longer worked properly?

Come to think of it, he remembered Sarina telling him his emotions were all dried up and dead. That was exactly what this felt like. He couldn't feel pain or suffering, delight or pleasure. Nothing.

She was pretty observant about people, he thought, and an involuntary chuckle escaped him.

The thug wasn't amused. His face twisted so ferociously that he looked like a devil. "Don't you laugh at me, you little shit!"

The thug raised a leg, then sank his foot into Gorou's solar plexus.

The jolt made it feel as if his stomach was turning inside out. As the man's toes sank into Gorou's abdomen, a pathetic grunt escaped him.

Should he run? Should he get back on his feet and defend himself? Or should he grab his phone and call the police? There were several things Gorou could have done, but he chose to do nothing.

He'd realized that if he let the pain take over, he could forget the

stuff he didn't want to think about.

Besides, even if he died here, the world wouldn't change one bit. As far as he was concerned, nothing mattered anymore.

The fact that his victim wasn't resisting seemed to go to the thug's head. He straddled Gorou's torso and started whaling away on him. "You're not getting away with this, bastard! Messing with my girl! I'll murder you!"

Between the blows to his face and head, Gorou's consciousness started to fade. Beside him, the woman was screaming something, but it was getting harder and harder to hear her.

Well, it wasn't his problem. Right now, everything felt meaningless.

If he wants to kill me, he can go right ahead. It might have been partly due to the alcohol, but his body was as heavy as lead, and he couldn't work up the energy to defend himself.

What would even be the point continuing to live such a listless life? It would just be an endless chain of empty days, tomorrow, the next day, and every day after that. He didn't foresee any pleasure in a future like that. Getting beaten to death now would probably be better.

Looking up at the thug's warped grin, Gorou muttered quietly to himself, "Might as well let it all end here."

Just then, he felt Yumiko watching him. She was staring at him with hollow eyes. What was the matter with her? She lowered her gaze and whispered to him.

"—You mustn't."

Her voice sounded odd. It was perfectly clear yet somehow otherworldly.

"Huh?" the thug said. He stopped hitting Gorou and looked at the woman. "Did you say something?"

Instead of responding, the woman took a step closer to Gorou. Crouching down, she met his eyes and held them.

Her pupils were so dilated, it was unsettling. She seemed nothing like the woman she'd been just a few minutes earlier. It was as if she was possessed.

"Do you imagine you can atone by dying here? Do you really

think it's what that girl would want?"

Gorou couldn't believe what he was hearing. The woman's hollow eyes seemed to be gazing right into his heart.

The thug looked bewildered, too. "What the hell?"

Ignoring him, Yumiko went on. "Your life isn't over yet. It mustn't end yet."

Gorou couldn't look away. He was in complete awe. It felt as if he were facing a god or a spirit, something beyond human understanding.

He swallowed hard. "What do you mean, it's not over yet?"

"You still have a duty to perform."

"A duty?"

Yumiko straightened up, looking down at Gorou. Her expression seemed inhuman, transcendent.

"Accept the proof that that child lived."

"That child? The proof that she lived? What do you mean? What *are* you…?"

Instead of answering, Yumiko pointed at Gorou. Her finger seemed to be directed at the breast pocket of his jacket.

What was this about? When Gorou put his hand to that spot, he felt something hard under his fingertips.

Come to think of it… He remembered. The keychain Sarina had given him—the acrylic one she'd gotten at the B Komachi show—was still in the inside pocket of this jacket.

When he got it out, he saw the drawing of Ai's smiling face. A magic smile, Sarina had called it. She'd said it cast a spell that captivated anyone who saw it.

How had this woman known about the keychain? It didn't make any sense.

The thug's mouth was hanging open. "Yumiko? What's the matter with you, woman?"

Without answering, Yumiko turned her back on the man and casually walked away.

"H-hey! Wait up! Where are you going?!"

The thug clambered to his feet and hastily ran after her. It wasn't long before they'd both vanished into the darkness.

Left alone on the street, Gorou felt stunned. What had that been, the change that had come over the woman?

"I don't get it…"

He sat up, putting a hand to his throbbing head.

Was it because he'd drunk too much or because he'd just gotten beaten up? He really didn't feel as if he was in his right mind. It wouldn't have been surprising if he'd hallucinated half of what had just happened.

And yet he couldn't bring himself to write off that conversation as a dream or illusion. He couldn't get the woman's words out of his mind.

"Proof that that child lived…?"

Gorou's eyes went to the keychain again. He read the words *Ai's My Fave Forever!!!* That magic smile still shone as brightly as it had when he first saw it.



The next day, Gorou visited the brain surgery medical office. He'd been avoiding the place for no particular reason ever since Sarina had died.

He'd stopped by today because he hadn't been able to get what that woman had said to him the night before out of his mind. He thought the answer—the *proof* Sarina had lived—might be here.

As soon as Gorou stepped into the office, Toudou looked up from his desk. He seemed shocked. "Amamiya, my boy, what happened to your face?"

It was no wonder Toudou was startled. The beating Gorou had gotten from the thug had left his face swollen.

He really didn't feel like saying *I got into a fight when I was drunk* at work. "Oh, uh… I fell."

To a surgeon like Toudou, it was probably clear he hadn't gotten those injuries from a fall. The man gave Gorou a long, hard look.

Getting lectured would have been a pain, so Gorou changed the

subject. “Never mind that, Sensei. I’m sorry I’ve been out of touch for so long, after all the help you gave me with Sarina.”

“Oh, no, you don’t owe me an apology. In fact, I believe I owe you one. I ended up forcing the most difficult parts off on you.” Just then, something seemed to occur to Toudou. “Actually,” he said, “speaking of Sarina, I have something for you.”

“You do?”

“The nurse found this in the back of the bedside table drawer when she was clearing out Sarina’s room.”

It was a white envelope. The words *To Gorou-sensei* were written on the front in small, rounded handwriting.

“I thought I’d give it to you the next time I saw you. I haven’t looked at what’s inside, but there must have been something she wanted to tell you.”

“Thank you very much,” Gorou said, accepting the envelope.

Would he find the answer he was searching for inside it?



After exchanging a few words with Toudou, Gorou headed for Room 201 in the inpatient ward. Until just a little while ago, that room had belonged to Sarina.

Now that she was gone, it looked completely different. The curtains and bedding had been replaced. The B Komachi DVDs and merch that had always been on the bedside table had been tidied away.

The empty room no longer held any trace of its former occupant. It was pristine, but there was something sad about it.

“Now, then…”

Settling onto the stool beside the bed, Gorou looked down at the envelope.

He hadn’t had any particular reason for coming to this room. It had just seemed like a good place to read her letter.

He opened the end of the envelope with a box cutter. Inside was

a single sheet of cute character stationery, folded up small.

When he unfolded it, the energetic words *Hi, Sensei!!* jumped out at him.

By the time you read this, I probably won't be here anymore. Since it's you, I bet you're playing it cool, but you're probably feeling real depressed when nobody's watching.

"I guess so." Gorou smiled a little. Sarina wasn't wrong. She seemed to have a good handle on his personality.

So, Sensei, I super-duper recommend this to you. Make sure you watch it.

At the end of the letter was a URL link, and that was all. It was so short that it was a bit of a letdown.

"So she's telling me to go to this site…?"

Gorou took out his phone and typed the URL into the web browser. Apparently, it directed him to a video upload site.

The moment the page opened, upbeat music started to play.

♫ *Go for it, you can do it, shine, shine, shine! You are gonna be just fine!*

The screen showed a stage bathed in the light of the setting sun.

Scenes from a school somewhere were being projected onto the backdrop. It was footage of an athletic ground where a boys' baseball team was practicing.

What sort of show was this? As Gorou was feeling perplexed, girls in cheerleader-style idol costumes ran onstage from the sides of the screen.

It was B Komachi. During the past six months, he'd watched those girls on DVD with Sarina over and over. There was no way he'd mistake them for anyone else.

The girl in the lead was Ai, the permanent center. Stopping in the middle of the stage, she flashed her best smile at the camera.

♫ *Show me the glow that's yours alone, because my fave is the best ever known!*

The camera panned up to the sky. Backed by a melodious electric guitar riff, a title appeared in the center of the screen:

A Wish for My Fave

The video had apparently been shot at a B Komachi show. Considering the fact that Gorou had never seen it before, it was probably fan-made. Both the camerawork and the editing had an amateur roughness and warmth to it.

♫ *Life's got its ups and downs, you know. There's no such thing as easy mode.*

The background footage switched from the school athletic field to a plaza in front of an urban train station. Weary-looking commuters were streaming into the station, while the B Komachi members smiled and waved pom-poms, as if cheering them on.

♫ *There may be nights when you want to cry, but pick up your headphones, look up at the sky.*

Ai extended her hand to the camera. The gesture made Gorou's heart skip a beat. It had looked as if she was singing just for him.

♫ *No matter what happens, keep looking ahead. Your joy-filled smile I can't get out of my head.*

The scene changed again, this time to a community center. Even in a hall filled with senior citizens, Ai's smile just continued to shine brighter.

♫ *When life gets hard, I'll cheer for you. 'Cause that's what makes me happy, too.*

A shopping arcade teeming with shoppers. A park where children

were playing. The background footage kept changing. In front of it all, the B Komachi cheerleaders were dancing their hearts out.

Ah, thought Gorou. *The concept for this performance is "cheering people on."* They were cheering for all sorts of people: students and working adults, the old and the young. From the energy in Ai's gaze, it felt as if she was trying to cheer up all of Japan.

♫ *Go for it, you can do it, shine, shine, shine! You are gonna be just fine!*

♫ *Show me the glow that's yours alone, because my fave is the best ever known!*

The chorus repeated, and then there was a musical interlude. The other members stepped off the edges of the screen, and the camera pulled in to focus on Ai. This was apparently her monologue.

"Thank you for listening to our new song! This is B Komachi's first cheer anthem, 'A Wish for My Fave.' What do you all think?! I was actually the one who proposed the staging for this performance!"

"Huh?" Gorou was impressed. He'd known Ai was a girl of many talents, but he hadn't thought she could pull off something like this.

Maybe that meant the song was filled with emotions she'd badly wanted to get across to her audience.

Ai's gaze on the screen seemed to be focused right on Gorou.

"You see, you're all my faves. The other members of B Komachi, our fans, even the people who aren't our fans yet but will be in the future… All of you. That means I want you to live your lives with everything you've got!"

Ai clutched her mic, smiling brightly. That magic smile.

"It's irresponsible for me to say something like 'You can do it!' but I'm saying it anyway. After all, if this song gives even one person energy, that's enough to make me happy!"

As Ai finished speaking, the music swelled. The other members returned from off-screen, getting into a dance formation with Ai at the center, and they started singing again.

♫ Go, go, everyone! Go, go, Earth! Don't forget how much you're worth!

♫ Let this song reach every boy and girl. My wish for my fave will change the world!

You're all my faves. Had Ai really meant those words? Or had they just been one of those cheap catchphrases idols tended to use?

Gorou didn't actually care which it was. Her "irresponsible" encouragement had stirred his heart to the point where it almost hurt.

♫ Go for it, you can do it, shine, shine, shine! You are gonna be just fine!

The song had reached its final chorus. The intensity in Ai's gaze seemed to be genuinely urging him on: *Go for it! You can do it!* Maybe this song had supported Sarina during her battle against her disease as well.

♫ Show me the glow that's yours alone, because my fave is the best ever known!

Oh, I see, Gorou thought. This was what Sarina had wanted to tell him. Cheering on Ai had given her the energy to live. In other words, it was the proof that she had lived.

"'If you cheer someone on, it also makes you happy,' huh…?"

The words he'd once said to Toudou came back to him, and Gorou couldn't help but let out a little laugh. "I was kidding, but I guess it really was like that for Sarina."

He'd never had anything to worry about. Through Ai's songs, Sarina had already found joy in life. Not only that, she hadn't let it stop with her; she'd tried to use this song to cheer him up as well. Doing it this way had been very like her.

"I swear, Sarina… Still fangirling right up the very end."

Even as Gorou smiled, a hot tear rolled down his cheek. The drop fell onto the screen of his phone, blurring the dancing figures of the B Komachi members.

He was incredibly sad yet also incredibly happy. He desperately wanted to cry, while also feeling like laughing out loud. The gift Sarina had left him shook his soul every which way.

"Ha-ha! …My head's such a mess. I don't even know what to think. Both Ai and Sarina are seriously amazing."

It was strange. Watching Ai perform with all her might, Gorou felt as if Sarina was there, too, singing and dancing right alongside her.

If she'd survived, and if she'd managed to make her dream come true, he was sure she would have been somebody who cheered up the people around her the way Ai did.

Somehow, Gorou could vividly imagine a future where Sarina stood onstage in front of a packed house, smiling at the audience with everything she had.

♫ Go for it, you can do it, shine, shine, shine! You're gonna be just fine!

You're gonna be just fine. It felt as if the optimism in that phrase had given him an encouraging thump on the back—Gorou suddenly felt like holding out hope for the future. The sort of future in which that young girl got another chance at life and made her dream come true.

The fact that Ai could make him think something so impossible might mean she really was somebody extraordinary.

See, Sensei? Ai's the best, isn't she?!

He felt as if he'd heard those words out of nowhere. *That couldn't sound more like Sarina*, he thought, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Show me the glow that's yours alone, because my fave is the best ever known…!"

The next thing he knew, he'd started singing the refrain to

himself in time with the Ai in the video.



"…Well, I mean, Toudou-sensei. It's true that both Ari-pyan and Kyun-pan are good singers. But listen, Ai's singing has serious potential. Simple words like *good* or *bad* aren't enough to describe it. How do I put this…? It grabs the interest of everyone who sees the show, all at once. There are very few idols like her, even if you include the major ones. Putting it bluntly, she's got the talent to sell out a dome right this minute. So at that level, you could say she's a miracle—"

"Just a minute," Toudou interrupted. "Amamiya. I can tell how enthusiastic you are about this, so sorry for derailing you, but I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"You're just telling me that *now*? You said, 'I don't understand what's so good about idols,' so I'm explaining it to you."

"No, I didn't ask you to explain it—"

"Oh, come now. Don't be like that. You'll go nuts for them, too, Sensei, I promise. I'm positive about this."

They were at Toudou's desk in the medical office. Gorou's eloquent description of his favorite idol's magnificence seemed to have left the other man stunned.

Over the course of the three months since Toudou had given him Sarina's letter, Gorou's daily routine had changed.

Two of those changes had been major ones. The first was that he'd stopped drinking himself senseless after work. The second was that, in exchange, he'd thrown himself into fandom.

He collected B Komachi information and merch, admired it to his heart's content, and spread the word about the group to everyone in his vicinity. Gorou had decided to face Ai wholeheartedly, just as Sarina had done.

Sarina had idolized this girl, so Gorou would watch her career unfold in her place. He felt as if doing so would help him move

forward as well.

Toudou's gaze was cold, but who cared? There was no stopping Gorou.

"Up until a little while ago, I thought that way, too. I thought it was weird for a grown man to be obsessed with a girl over a decade younger than him. But the thing is, I realized I was wrong."

"Huh?"

"Age has nothing to do with whether something's good or not. In fact, there's an endless amount of vitality to be gained by cheering on these girls. It'll make you feel as if you're practically their age. You'll be rejuvenated, believe it or not."

"Rejuvenated, hmm?"

Toudou seemed skeptical. So did the other doctors and nurses in the room. They were hanging back, watching Gorou coldly.

"Amamiya-sensei's seemed a little unhinged lately."

"I wonder if he's been taking any, y'know…*dangerous substances*."

"It's a bit of a shock. I thought he was handsome, but this is…"

Wild rumors flew every which way, but Gorou couldn't have cared less. Being crazy about his fave was everything to him now.

"Now, then," Gorou said, giving a quick bow to Toudou, who still looked exasperated. "On that note, I'm leaving early today."

"What do you mean, you're leaving? You haven't submitted today's report yet."

"Well, B Komachi's long-awaited Miyazaki show is tonight. This is clearly no time to be writing reports."

Gorou's attitude was so brazen that it seemed to have made Toudou give up on logical argument. He only looked perplexed, and he let out a "Huhn?" his mouth hanging open.

"I'll do my report along with tomorrow's and submit them both then. All right, Sensei. Good night."

That would do. Without waiting for the other man to respond, Gorou sailed out of the medical office in high spirits.

When he looked up at the sky through a window in the corridor, the sunset had dyed it deep crimson. It was just after five in the evening. If he left now and drove fast, he'd make it in time to catch

the beginning of the concert.

His current favorite song, “A Wish for My Fave,” was stuck in his head.

Would Ai perform that upbeat cheer anthem at today’s show?

“When somebody tells you ‘You can do it,’ of course it makes you want to try.”

Gorou gazed out absentmindedly at the eastern sky.

The first star of the evening was up there, shining aquamarine.

EPILOGUE

"—Oh, look, it's the first star."

A lone star gleamed in the red light of the eastern sky. Spotting it made Ai Hoshino oddly happy, and she gave a small, appreciative sigh.

"Come to think of it, it's been quite a while since I saw any stars."

She was leaning back against the wall of the performance hall, gazing up at the sky. She had a bit less than an hour left before the show began. Relaxing and watching the stars like this wasn't a bad way to spend the time.

She was in the parking lot of a famous concert hall in Miyazaki City.

The place was surrounded by rice paddies, forests, and large rivers. There were only a few scattered houses, and there wasn't a single building like the ones she was used to in Tokyo. Maybe the lack of artificial light was why the night sky looked so incredibly pretty. It felt as if she could just reach out and grab that star.

"Mm. That's Miyazaki for you, all right. You'd never get to see this in Tokyo."

B Komachi had launched their first national tour. Starting from the south and working their way up, they'd perform in ten cities all around Japan, beginning with this show in Miyazaki. In Tokyo, they'd mostly performed to groups of regulars, but the majority of the people in these audiences would be fans they'd never met before.

On top of that, there would be a bonus event after the concerts as well. They'd be spending a few minutes in a booth talking one-on-one with the people who had premium tickets.

As a result, this tour was loaded with lots of firsts, and some of the other members had been so nervous about it that they'd gone pale.

Well, I doubt it'll get in the way of the actual show. When Ai had sympathized with a casual "It is a bit scary, isn't it?" the other girls had said, "You think so, too, Ai?" and looked a bit relieved. In which

case, they'd probably be able to smile by the time they went out onstage.

The truth was that Ai had never felt really nervous about this tour. If anything, she was excited about it, thinking about how fun it was to travel and how delicious the food was. A sky like this, which she couldn't see at night in Tokyo, was another one of those pleasures.

The star Ai was gazing at twinkled, all alone.

"It really is pretty. Maybe I should've brought a telescope."

What was that star feeling as it kept shining in this hazy world suspended between evening and night? Was it lonely up there all by itself?

As Ai was wondering about that, a voice called out to her. "There you are. I've been looking for you. You weren't in the dressing room."

The middle-aged man who'd jogged up to her seemed a little panicked. He was a sketchy guy in sunglasses and an open-collared shirt—the president of Ichigo Production. His name was Saiki…right? As usual, she wasn't sure.

A look of relief had crossed his face seeing her. "What are you doing out in the parking lot, Ai?"

"The stars were pretty. I thought I'd watch them for a while."

"Really? Nothing happened in the dressing room with the other members?" The president took a close, worried look at her face. The various incidents that had happened last summer had probably made him extra careful about that sort of thing. He looked flashy, but he was actually a pretty conscientious president.

"Ah-ha-ha!" Ai's face creased into a smile. "It's all good, don't worry. We're getting along fine."

Last year, Ai had settled on a policy of supporting everyone in Japan. By "everyone," she didn't just mean her fans but also the other B Komachi members.

She'd started being careful not to stand out too much. She made sure other B Komachi members got time in the spotlight, too. Lately, Ai had been trying to help out the other members as much as she could. She'd quickly give up a position with a flattering camera angle

or actively include other members in the conversation during talk segments. She stuck to that policy during their usual video streams, shows, and even practice sessions.

That seemed to have been the right way to handle it. At least publicly, no one took their grievances out on her anymore. From the outside, B Komachi probably looked like a pretty close-knit idol group.

"Well, I can tell you're working hard. Thanks to that, B Komachi's grown big enough that we could put together this tour."

"That's right. You should be grateful to me, President," Ai joked.

The president snorted. "I'm plenty grateful to you. However, the more popular B Komachi gets, the more valuable that center position's going to be. You'll likely have more jealousy directed toward you from here on out."

Ai thought that was probably true. Even now, she could tell that the other members had all sorts of private gripes about her position.

She was intentionally not thinking about it, though. By pretending not to notice, she was doing a good job of ignoring it all, at least on the surface. Over the past year, Ai thought she'd gotten pretty good at passing for "normal."

"I'm sure it'll be fine, right? I'm an amazing liar."

"You think?" The president looked as if he had some conflicted feelings about her answer. "Well, if you say so…"

"Never mind that," Ai said suddenly, pointing up. "You should relax and look at the night sky, too. It's really pretty."

"The night sky, huh?"

"You should look at more than just young girls. It's important to get in touch with nature sometimes."

"Listen, kid, don't go 'round saying things other people are gonna get the wrong idea about, all right?! It's not as if I'm constantly looking at nothing but young girls!"

"I dunno about that…" Ai shrugged. This president had always had a soft spot for charming young women. Take Miyako at the agency, for example. Straightforward, pretty types like her were right in his wheelhouse.

Ai thought the two of them might get married one day. She still

didn’t really understand love, but it must be nice getting to be with the person you liked.

She looked back up at the sky, searching for the star she’d been gazing at earlier. “Look, President. See the first star there? Isn’t it gorgeous?”

“The first star?” The president’s eyes went to the sky, then stopped on that star in the east. “Ah,” he said with a nod. “That’s Spica, in the constellation Virgo.”

“Spica?”

“It’s also known as the Pearl Star. As you’d guess from the name, it shines as brightly as a jewel. Its light has a blue cast to it that makes it feel a bit like an aquamarine. It’s what’s called a first-magnitude star.”

A first-magnitude star. In other words, Spica was one of the kings of the stars. Shining in solitary splendor, jewel-like in the crimson sky, it really did seem rather noble.

“Wow,” Ai said, impressed. “President, you sure know a lot about this stuff.”

“Well, I messed around with astronomy a bit, way back when.”

“Oh… Was it so you’d be popular with girls?”

“Nah, not especially,” the president replied. He averted his gaze as he said it, though, and Ai knew she’d hit the nail on the head. “Anyway,” he said, clearing his throat, “Spica is actually twin stars.”

“Twins?”

“It looks like one star to the naked eye, but it’s not. Technically, it’s a binary star. There’s a second star right next to it, in the same orbit. Those two stars shine as if they’re nestled together, never getting closer to each other or farther away.”

“I see,” Ai said with a nod.

So it wasn’t alone after all. The thought relieved her.

No matter how dark their world was, twins wouldn’t be lonely. They’d be able to support each other and keep on shining.

“A star that’s twins, shining together…? There’s something really nice about that.”

“Huh?” The president cocked his head. “You think so?”

“Twins have always been a dream of mine. You know, because I

don’t have parents or siblings. I thought having twins in the family would make things lively and that they’d be cute.”

“Uh, kid, we’re talking about stars. Not people.”

Ai went on, completely ignoring the president. “Mm-hmm. If I ever have kids, I’d like twins. That would be fun for sure.”

“Whoa-whoa-whoa, what are you talking about? You’re an idol, remember? It’s ten…no, *twenty* years too early to be talking about having kids.”

Flustered, the president closed in on Ai, but she wasn’t listening. There was no way aiming for happiness as an idol and a mother at the same time could be a bad thing.

“The air here’s clear, and the countryside’s pretty… Say, President? If I have kids, I’d like to do it in a place like this.”

“Are you listening to me?! Don’t give me that ‘If I have kids’ crap! Seriously, you gotta be kidding!”

“Eh-heh-heh. I wouldn’t count on that.” Ai grinned, then looked at the sky again.

Gazing up at Spica, the first star, she softly put her hands together in prayer. If the gods existed, this wish might get through to them.

“I wish that, one day, even I’ll have a wonderful family.”

Mother and Children - Audience Bonus
“Perspective B”
(Written by Aka Akasaka)





It was snowing just like this when Ai died.

Or at least, that's how it seemed.

It's just a vague feeling.

There had been a concert that day, but when I think about it carefully, people had been gathered outside the dome, but none of them had an umbrella.

Actually, I do remember there was a heavy snow not long before Ai's funeral that paralyzed the transportation network. I recall having trouble with it when I went to buy mourning clothes for the farewell service.

It probably wasn't really snowing on the day she died.

But in retrospect, life gradually becomes abstract.

It's pretty common to switch the actual memory with your emotional landscape.

Often, your brain assumes that the way something felt is what really happened.

So much time has passed since that day that I recall its events as a mere impression, a memory divorced from the facts.

Even so, what happened on that day fifteen years ago, when Ai died, felt to me like the very first time snow had fallen on the world.

I pulled on the designer coat, and it looked so awful I couldn't help but laugh.

I'd decided to go down to the convenience store to buy dinner, but a cold wave had hit or something because today was particularly chilly.

The garment I'd carelessly pulled out of the closet was an expensive coat I'd bought a decade ago, practically an aesthetic symbol.

It was a mustard-colored trench coat, and at this point, even the

texture of the fabric seemed odd to me.

Peeking out from under that coat were gray sweatpants, their fabric rough with pills, and aqua-blue socks.

My house clothes were warm, but that was it. They were even more hideously incompatible with the luxury coat than I'd imagined.

Tossing the coat onto the living room chair, I stomped my feet into a pair of sport sandals.

The sandals didn't fit. A guy I'd lived with once had left them behind, ages ago.

"I guess this'll do."

It was just a three-minute walk to the convenience store. Nobody got dressed up for something like that.

I'd left a polyurethane mask by the door, and I hooked it over my ears, feeling as if I were hiding my face.

I locked both locks, top and bottom. That habit was deeply ingrained in me.

Every time I looked at the door of my condo from the outside, something deep in my heart stirred uneasily.

When it comes to caution, I think more is always better.

I left through the building's main door, which locked automatically, and stepped right into a strong crosswind.

Gritting my teeth and hunching my already small body against the December wind, I hurried toward the convenience store.

On the way, I ended up standing next to a college-aged guy at a traffic signal.

I was careful not to look at him. Even after the signal turned green, I didn't start walking right away.

If I walked ahead of him, I'd have his eyes on my back all the way to the convenience store. I didn't like that idea.

My fleeced sweats were warm, but the winter wind seemed to stab into the back of my neck.

Still, I knew all too well that human eyes were far sharper and pierced far deeper than even the freezing wind.

I stayed behind the man, walking at half my usual pace.

The convenience store was really close if I ran, but right now, it felt awfully far away.

I felt awful.

"Maybe I should've worn that coat."

From a mental health perspective, would it have been better to put on something a little more decent before I went out, instead of walking around feeling like a criminal?

I felt regret seep into my heart.

Still, even if the same thing happened next month, I'd head to the convenience store in these gray sweats.

I could be sure of that.

My thought patterns had rusted long ago. At this point, a little sentimentality wasn't enough to change a thing.

At thirty-seven, I didn't feel like changing anything anymore.

Things could not have been more different compared to when I was an idol.

Seventeen years ago.

I'd belonged to an idol group called B Komachi, and we were pretty popular for a while.

I'd flaunted my youth, been showered with cheers and envy, and lived in the public eye.

I'd had that sort of life once.

The amount of care I took with my appearance back then was incomparable to what I did now. Being more stylish than other people was one of my core values, and I was the type of person to genuinely laugh at people who didn't think that way.

I thought being cute and pretty were more important than anything.

The entertainment industry is the pinnacle of lookism.

Women are measured by their beauty, and all the jobs go to the beautiful.

That sort of thing was done without a blush, and people encouraged it as if it were natural.

Be cute, they said. *Be pretty.*

Once I was out in the working world, I realized just how abnormal that was.

No matter how you thought about it, a culture that determined a woman's value by her face was weird. If a regular company had tried that, it would definitely have turned into a huge dispute featuring words like *harassment* and *compliance*.

In the entertainment industry, that lookism went unpunished because we were products. Our looks were the specs; our schooling, the need; our hairstyles, the variation; and our fashion, the packaging.

Products had to be pretty. That was the minimum obligation imposed on us by our vendor.

After all, it's only natural for a ripped bag of potato chips to be returned with a complaint.

When did it start?

When had I started hating that world?

I used to love idols. Adored them. Wanted to be one.

At my first audition, emotion had welled up inside me like magma.

However, that emotion had gone cold and dead somewhere along the way, turning into a large lump of rock that rolled around in my chest.

The winter I was twenty-four, I left the group.

I wanted to do something besides be an idol. I didn't care what it was, as long as it was different.

If there was something I could get absorbed in, I preferred that, so I played around with being a model for a while.

After all, I was just a little prettier than average…and I had nothing else going for me.

I didn't act.

I took acting lessons because my agency recommended it, but my hands were full with the work I already had to do. In the end, I only went a few times and didn't show up again after that.

Just after leaving the group, I got jobs thanks to my status as a former B Komachi member.

I hadn't been particularly eye-catching within the group, though, and in the end, it wasn't enough of a weapon to let me compete with other performers.

Gradually, fewer and fewer jobs came in, and around the time I was struggling to keep my head above water, B Komachi broke up.

After that, I stopped getting jobs altogether. One day, when my contract renewal was coming up, President Miyako asked me, "What do you want to do?" I wondered about that.

What *could* I do?

I could sing and dance. I was young and cute. That was it.

I also knew I'd reached an age that didn't count as "young" anymore in this industry.

The stylist had stopped giving me pink costumes, replacing them with more beige and navy-blue ones.

Still, in the back of my mind, I was reluctant to move back in with my parents, and I knew I needed to find work. So I told Miyako that's what I'd do.

"I see," she said. I felt like she looked a little lonely.

…It was only a feeling, though. I wonder whether that was really true.

I don't remember. But that was how I'd wanted it to be.

After leaving the agency, I spent a while job hunting and finally managed to land a marketing position at a web services company.

As I'd anticipated, leaving the idol industry and finding work hadn't been easy.

None of the cosmetics or designer clothing companies I'd been interested in had been interested in me.

I'd managed to make it to the second round of interviews a few times, but even I picked up on the fact that the questions they

asked generally didn't have much to do with the job and instead simply reflected the hiring supervisor's personal interests.

Outside the entertainment industry, the attitude toward "entertainers" was overt, and it made things uncomfortable.

Being a former idol got people's attention, but it also marked me.

Some people seemed to dislike the fact that idols even existed, and they were openly sarcastic toward me, saying things like "I thought you were an idol."

Yes, I am an idol. Sorry I'm not very cute.

In the end, being a former idol is also probably why I ended up in marketing.

We'll be in luck if a client happens to be an old fan of hers, they'd thought, and HR had taken care of the rest.

In fact, quite a few other friends in my generation—also former idols who'd left the business—seemed to have ended up in marketing. I guess that's just how it is.

Having been popular as an idol wasn't a major advantage in our later lives. When it came to income, going to a good university would have given us more stability.

I'd had millions of yen saved up during my prime as an idol, but four years or so after I'd left the industry and started working, I'd gone through almost all of it.

Long ago, toward the end of my time as an idol, my rent had been subsidized, and I'd lived on the fourteenth floor of a high-rise apartment building. Now I was renting a cheap studio apartment in the suburbs for ninety thousand yen per month.

I didn't wonder, *How did things turn out like this?* They just had.

I'd simply realized, a little late, that money was the same.

I'd realized that youth is something you only have when you're young.

That trench coat had been a purchase from my idol days.

It was an afterimage from a time when I'd been pretty, young, and cute.

It wasn’t as if I’d wear it now anyway. I could have thrown it away or sold it.

Was it some sort of lingering attachment that stopped me?

Sometimes I envied Ai.

In my memories, even now, she was young and beautiful.

No woman in this world was better than Ai. That was how it felt anyway.

Was that also just a memory-induced hallucination?

Was I the one who wanted things to be that way, or was I just selfishly forcing it onto her?

When I was young, I’d had appropriately young ideas like “I’ll die before I get old.” But here I am, still stubbornly hanging on.

“Now that I think about it, didn’t I sing a song about that once, a long time ago?”

✳✳✳

I’m mad.

It isn’t because the photo for my birthday festival announcement was tacky or because the other members hadn’t had the choreography down during the event.

Sure, those things are annoying me, too, but they’re not the biggest peeve on my list right now.

I’m mad because my boyfriend dumped me.

More accurately, I don’t like what he said right before we broke up.

“Look, it’s a pain, okay?”

He’d said it like he deeply, sincerely thought so.

In the dressing room before a show, while we wait for our turn with the makeup artist, there’s nothing to do but fiddle with our phones or chat with one another.

“You’d been going out for, what, two months? What a coward.

Good thing you broke up."

I push the personal items other members have left on the makeup table over to the side, then thump my elbow down on it, adding a bit of drama to the gesture. "I think so, too, but there are better ways to break up, you know? You want it to end nicely, at least. I swear, this whole thing sucks! Once I get back home, I'm throwing out all his stuff!"

I'm yelling at Kanan, a member who joined recently, as I cram my street clothes into my travel case.

Kanan plays with her hair as she listens.

It's immaculately long, black, and neat.

No matter how fiercely she dances, it stays silky and straight.

Of course, it's fixed with hairspray, so it feels all crunchy if you touch it.

Kanan fiddles with her stiff bangs, combing through them with her fingers as she speaks.

"But you actually did do something to make him think it was a pain, didn't you?"

I feel as if she's got it in one. My heart refuses to be okay with that, though, and my brain tries to squeeze out an argument somehow. One that'll make me seem like the victim.

"…Well, he said we should meet up on the way back from our show in Yokohama the other day. He told me he'd made reservations at a restaurant in Chinatown, see? When I told him that wasn't enough, he just snapped."

Kanan's eyes go to a corner of the ceiling. "Oh, yeah…"

Apparently, that had satisfied her. There's a note of sympathy in her voice now.

"Even though there were going to be a ton of customers on their way home from the show there! He couldn't even imagine something like that."

This seems to strike a chord with Kanan as well. After tracing the corner of the ceiling, her gaze drops to her nails. "That sort of thing

may be hard for normal people.”

Something about that comment nags at me a bit.

Normal people. When Kanan said those words, the hint of a confident smile crossed her lips.

It was as if she was saying she wasn’t “normal.” That she was somebody special.

B Komachi’s member turnover was pretty high.

Kanan was the eleventh member since the group’s formation.

Over the group’s four-year history, five girls had quit and seven had joined.

Kanan had worked as a regional indie idol for a year, but her group had broken up, so she’d joined ours.

That meant she was relatively familiar with the industry, and she even knew a fair bit about how to navigate romance.

The members of B Komachi didn’t get along very well.

Because…

“Morning! ☆”

Slender limbs. Long black hair. Eyes brimming with confidence.

A maturity that makes her seem older than fifteen, with a youthfulness to match her age.

Our permanent center, Ai, just walked past in the hall.

“……”

I notice that Kanan has suddenly fallen silent.

That girl is the reason B Komachi doesn’t get along.

The management openly favors Ai. She’s basically the face of our group.

But she joined after we did, think the founding members.

We don’t stand a chance, think the newer members.

Of course, everyone thinks we need to get along, since we’re all

in this together.

There's no bullying, and we don't make nasty comments to each other behind her back.

Everyone just thinks it's not fun.

The atmosphere is weirdly frosty. We're friendly with other members as individuals, but are we a friendly group? Well…

The atmosphere isn't great.

Publicly, we upload photos of the group acting like we're close, of course.

I'm pretty sure Ai is part of the reason behind our high turnover… probably.

That said, it's not as if I hate her.

I put it that way because Ai doesn't make any special effort to be friends with the other members.

She's all smiles with adults, and she knows where to draw the line with what she says and does. She never seems stressed. But all that aside, what she says sounds scripted, like model answers. It's just lip service that doesn't show any of her true feelings.

The most straightforward way to put it is that I sense a wall between us.

To me, since Ai keeps a certain distance between herself and the rest of us, it feels as if there's no way to like or dislike her.

It's true that I feel the management's overt favoritism is unfair, but they probably can't help it.

After all, she's cute. She really is.

Ai is the one who leads the group, and I'm grateful to her for a lot of things.

An indie idol group that began at the whim of a minor agency has climbed out of the indies and made its major debut.

Granted, what we do hasn't changed much from when we were an indie group, but thanks to Ai, we definitely have more opportunities for media exposure.

In online surveys, we've taken top place in the rankings of "Idol groups that are going to go big soon."

It feels like we're just getting started. Not bad at all.

Somewhere in there, the atmosphere in the dressing room has reverted to the chaotic mess it usually is before a show.

"Maybe I'll stay single for a while…"

I've muttered the words as if I'm talking to myself, but Kanan answers.

"How admirable… That might be a good idea, though. It would be awful if the weeklies got photos of you."

Kanan's talking crazy.

"The weeklies…? No way. They wouldn't want photos of me. If I were somebody big, sure, but articles about nobodies like us wouldn't boost their sales one bit."

We get that reminder from all sorts of people.

However, the ones who say it are always those with a narrow view of the entertainment industry.

We're far closer to the edge of this world than our fans assume, and the world we inhabit is different from the one some stars live in. People pay far less attention to us than our fans believe they do.

"Well, that may be true of the weeklies…but there's no telling what could happen. Since you are an idol, it's probably better to keep your relationships on the quiet side."

I knew Kanan had dated a relatively famous actor when she was in her previous group.

She's merciless about her ex at this point, calling him a pedo who's into young girls, so she probably regrets going out with him.

However, there are a whole lot of adults in this industry who take advantage of young girls' ignorance. There are quite a few men who try to use that environment to their advantage in their relationships with women, so the people around those girls have to protect them.

That said, if a girl who idolizes the adult world is treated like a grown woman and offered fancy, expensive-looking champagne, she may end up mistakenly believing she *is*, in fact, an adult, and get

herself into a situation just like that… It wasn't as if I didn't understand that feeling.

My ex had been twenty-one and in a band. I'm eighteen, so it was socially acceptable—barely. Still, I have the vague feeling we'd been cutting it pretty close.

"You know…I'd like to have a normal romance."

"Seriously."

Even idols want love.

When you work with adults, though, peers your own age seem childish. At the same time, agencies have all sorts of strict rules and do their best to isolate us from men.

Naturally, we can't talk about our love lives in front of our manager.

We don't actually have many opportunities to meet men who might develop into love interests.

So when our friends introduce us to someone, or we meet a guy at some weird drinking party, we tend to cut loose.

The more restrictive a girl's agency, the harder she rebels.

That's just how it is.

On top of that, most of the guys you meet at weird drinking parties aren't decent.

Dating them never ends well.

The best life is one where you never know the taste of sparkling wine that's expensive and nothing else.

Spotlights illuminate the stage.

The hum of the audience turns to cheers.

The members bound onto the stage, one by one, and the fans respond to each of them with cries and applause.

When Ai runs on and joins the rest of us, taking up her position at the center, their volume peaks.

It always starts like this.

In the sea of multicolored lightsticks, the ones in red—Ai's color—stand out the most. They dazzle, dyeing the audience their color.

The cheers that vary based on popularity and the colors of those lightsticks are cruel, but I no longer feel any emotion toward either.

Making popularity visible is allowed in idol culture.

The fans I see over Ai's shoulder are a little scary.

This isn't the sort of place where I can just accept the cheers and be delighted.

I search out yellow lightsticks—my own color—as if clinging to them, then let out a sigh.

Cheers envelop the venue.

B Komachi has six members right now.

Ai gets the majority of the vocal assignments, but the mere fact that none of our mics are turned off means we're better off than we would be in a large group.

In groups with close to twenty members, the least popular members' mics aren't even hooked up.

In lots of venues, due to equipment limitations, the maximum number of mics that can pick up sound is sixteen. In some places, that max is eight. Mic mixers usually have eight input channels, so the number of mics used tends to be a multiple of eight.

Lots of B Komachi's songs have love as their theme. It must be intentional on management's part.

We sing things like "I like you" and "I love you" to our fans.

It makes me feel bad singing the sort of songs that could easily make them fall in love with us for real.

I don't like the whole "real love" business model, so I'd prefer to build friendly relationships with my fans.

As you'd imagine, when I've got a boyfriend, making fans fall in love with me weighs heavily on my conscience.

Since that's so, I always feel conflicted when I sing songs like these.

They aren't what I want to be singing when I'm grousing offstage about being dumped by my boyfriend.

At the end of the last chorus, I point to the audience—specifically the yellow lightsticks—and shout out, "I love you!"

My heart aches a little.

After the show, we leave the venue through the back door, then travel by car.

I get dropped off at the train station the next town over.

It's thirty minutes back to my place. Even idols take the train.

On some days, even something as natural as that feels like too much work.

Of course, I'm thinking about my ex.

I want to think out in the cold wind and try to find a way to clear away these melancholy feelings.

I sit down on a bench in a park behind the station and look up at the sky.

The moon looks as if it's been snapped neatly in half. If I gaze at it, it seems as though I might think of something.

Apparently, ideas come to me more readily when I have someone to talk to, though.

The truth is, I tend to get lonely pretty easily. I constantly have a vague sense of unease, and I always want people to praise me, to acknowledge me.

The fastest, most effective remedy for those feelings is a boyfriend. Why do I feel more comforted after complaining to the opposite sex than when I complain to another girl?

I feel like I'm the type of person who's bad at protecting her heart unless she has a guy.

I just said I'd spend a while without a boyfriend, but here I am, wondering if there are any good men around.

I think I might not be cut out to be an idol.

Spending the night with a lover, then screaming "I loooove you!" at fans right afterward.

If you think about it normally, that's basically cheating. That was the type of idol I hated the most before becoming one myself.

What else is there to do, though?

Loving men is probably just how I was born.

Even if I fell for the fans, I couldn't date them, you know?

So who's going to hold me close?

How am I, hopeless as I am, supposed to fill this hopeless emptiness inside me?

As I'm thinking hopeless things like that, out of nowhere, somebody calls to me.

"Hey!"

The voice is cheerful, but it sounds a little mechanical. I turn to look.

A girl is standing there backlit by one of the park lights, carrying a paper fast food bag that doesn't suit her pretty face.

"…Ai? What are you doing here?"

That's a shock.

Ai, B Komachi's center.

I never thought I'd run into her in a place like this, under circumstances like these.

The unexpected situation has me a little bewildered. In contrast, Ai's behaving like her usual self.

"That's what I wanted to ask you. I was thinking I'd have my dinner here."

"…Dinner?"

The way she's backlit by the park light seems to clash with her oddly mundane remark.

"There aren't any places to eat near where I live. I bought a burger by the station, and I was planning to eat it at home, but…"

Ai shoves a hand into the paper bag, yanks the entire yellow paper wrapper off a burger, crumples it up in her hand, then tosses it back into the sack.

Holding the burger in her bare hands, she chomps into it. You'd

think she'd been raised in a barn.

"Then wait until you get home to eat."

I'm a little appalled by Ai's lack of restraint, and I also feel uncomfortable. For a moment, I think our eyes meet, but Ai continues the conversation in that laid-back way of hers.

"Well, I was going to. But once I bought it, I wanted to eat it right away. It's all freshly made and hot, you know? It would've gotten cold. So I was wandering around looking for a good place to eat, and I saw a girl with this suuuuper gloomy expression. And then when I looked closer, it turned out she was a fellow group member."

Had Ai spoken to me because she was worried about me?

"…Did I really look that gloomy?"

"Yup. Like it was the end of the world."

"So you were worried about me."

Ai chews her burger, smiling, without meeting my eyes. "…Heh-heh."

…I don't get it.

Did she really just stop by on a whim? I wonder, watching Ai's profile as she takes bites out of that denuded cheeseburger.

She's really absorbed in her meal. There's already ketchup on her little finger, and I notice she's dropped some bits of onion on the ground.

Weirdly, it doesn't strike me as dirty or vulgar.

The first words that come to mind are *innocent* and *authentic*.

If I did this, I bet other people's impressions would be different.

It does bother me for some reason, though, so I mention it to

her.

"You don't have to throw the wrapper away, you know. If you keep it around the part you're holding…"

Ai looks down at her burger. She seems to think for a second.

"Oh! Right…"

She glances into the paper bag, looking as if the idea has struck her as novel and profoundly sensible.

Ai doesn't know much about the world. Some of the things she's ditzy about are completely insane.

She tends to be forgetful about our schedule, and she can't remember people's names or faces.

Frankly, I think she'd have a little trouble functioning in normal society.

At Ai's level, it goes way beyond being an airhead, but when she does stuff like this, it only proves she's a genius.

It makes you think that Leonardo da Vinci would probably be doing the same things if he were alive today.

Ai is enchanting as she licks the ketchup off her little finger.

"Um…"

Ai looks at my face and thinks for a little while.

But almost immediately, she seems to give up on whatever it was and picks up where she left off.

"Did something happen? What was that expression about?"

…She'd probably meant to call me by name.

She just hadn't been able to remember it.

Either that, or she'd remembered and just wasn't sure she had it right.

Ai had gotten all the staff members' names completely wrong at a venue once and been chewed out for it. Ever since, she'd stopped calling people by name.

Instead of using the wrong name, she just omitted it entirely.

That's the sort of person Ai is, and I know it. I look back at her as if I haven't noticed a thing.

As you'd figure, I hear she does remember the names of people she's close to.

Apparently, I'm not one of those people. She's just shown me how shallow our relationship is.

Ai's looking straight at me.

We'd run smack into each other in a random park. I feel like it's a sort of sense that this situation is special that's making her do that.

No doubt if we'd been somewhere ordinary—in the dressing room at one of our regular show venues, say—this wouldn't be happening.

That's all there is to our relationship. Still, there are some things we can say to each other precisely because we're not close.

"You won't tell anyone?"

The question makes Ai tilt her head in a charming way.

"I can't say for sure I won't. I do think I'm pretty good with secrets, though. I also make a point of not saying things that don't need to be said."

I've never heard Ai gossip about someone else.

I'm not sure whether she's actually good with secrets or whether people just don't interest her.

"What is it? Is it something interesting?" Ai asks, as if she's actually intrigued.

"Not at all. Me and my boyfriend just broke up."

Ai's expression doesn't change. "Oh… Well, that's…"

Her brows arch in a troubled way, and she puts her hands together as if to say *My condolences*.

I can't tell if she's joking or serious.

Maybe she's picked up on my sullen look, because Ai sets the paper bag down on the bench, then turns to face me squarely.

"Did you like him?"

That's a pretty weird question, I think.

We'd been going out, so the natural answer is yes… Except when Ai says it, for some reason, the question seems deeper than that.

A train begins clattering past the park.

I doubt she'd hear me if I answered with all that noise, so I fall silent for a bit.

Ai seems to have picked up on the reason. Her eyes go to the sign with the park rules.

I spend the moments until the train passes searching for the answer to her question.

After the way we'd broken up, the main thing I felt when I thought about him was anger, but it feels as if I've been given a chance to think about it calmly.

"I…probably did like him. Yeah, I think I did."

The train's gone. After a moment or two of silence, I say the words as if I'm telling myself.

Once they're out, I start to feel sad.

Maybe people get mad because they don't want to accept that they're sad.

Even cats sharpen their claws after they fall.

"I see."

Ai's expression hasn't changed.

"It must hurt, huh? Probably. I bet it does."

Those troubled eyebrows of hers are the exact same shape as they were earlier.

I can tell she's not making a joke out of this, though.

She probably doesn't know how to respond, and she's genuinely troubled.

Even so, there's no empathy in her words.

It's more as if she's looking for confirmation.

She isn't confident about calling people by name, and likewise, she doesn't seem confident that she can pick up on their feelings.

"I'm sorry… I don't know how to console people at times like this. I can't say anything very considerate."

I giggle in spite of myself.

Somehow, I'd predicted that she'd react this way.

That was why I'd told her about it.

When confronted with somebody who outranks them, some people will see them as a rival and try to fight.

Others will pander to them and try to identify with them.

Which am I?

I'm pretty sure I'm neither and that I chose not to see Ai as a human being.

When people like me get jealous, we hate that person from here to infinity.

It's tiring, and I know it.

Long ago, I'd taken piano. By the time I'd reached the level where I was in the running to win prizes at competitions, I was unbearably jealous of skilled players.

If I looked at those people, there'd be no end to it, and it probably wouldn't be over until I reached the very top.

Even I was like that, and I hadn't worked all that hard. For people who were better than me, it must have been even more hellish.

Still, I'd liked music.

I hadn't been dedicated enough to try for a career in it or

anything, but I'd clung to my work as an idol as if it was an escape. I didn't want to fight in the haven I'd fled to.

I already know I'm not the type who excels.

I'm not jealous of the fact that B Komachi's rapid progress is Ai's accomplishment.

After all, I don't think of Ai as the same type of human being as I am.

That was why I'd chosen Ai to talk through my thoughts to myself, as if I were talking to a cat or praying to a god.

I'd assumed she wouldn't hit back with something like *You're an idol, so don't get a boyfriend* or *There's something wrong with your personality.*

Ai isn't one of those normal, garden-variety people.

That's what makes it okay to talk to her about things I wouldn't talk about with a member I'm close to.

"It hurts."

"I see."

Ai's looking at me.

I'm not looking for sympathy.

"Getting dumped hurts.

"Not having him understand my work hurt.

"I hate the way I try to depend on guys.

"Even if I fall for my fans, they won't pat my head. They won't hold me tight.

"I hate the me who thinks falling for fans is pointless.

"I also hate betraying my fans, though.

"I don't want to feel guilty.

"'Idols mustn't fall in love.' Everybody knows that, and it hurts.

"I'm scared somebody will tell me 'If you're not cut out for this, why don't you quit?'"

I’m spitting out all the sediment that’s built up inside me.

Ai’s expression hasn’t changed. She’s just looking at me.

The words keep coming:

“I want to move out of my parents’ place.

“The walls and floor of that condo are thin, and not being able to practice at night hurts.

“My big brother’s a shut-in, and he’s seriously annoying.

“My parents keep nagging me to get a real job.

“I dyed my hair, but I don’t like the color.

“I’m not a fan of cold box lunches.

“It hurts that I’m not getting more followers online.

“My birthday festival announcement picture was tacky.

“I didn’t win tickets for my fave’s show, which sucks.

“It’s been hard to sleep lately, and that hurts.

“I wish the guys on the train who perv on me would go extinct.

“My phone screen’s cracked, and it’s annoying. That’s the third phone this year.

“The air freshener I bought yesterday smells like some old man’s house, which I can’t stand.

“I don’t have any money.

“But my brother pesters me for money.

“Guys who send me dirty pictures on social media are annoying.

“Fans who are all ‘Pay attention to meeeee’ when we stream are annoying.

“People who give me advice are annoying.

“I keep thinking I should’ve gone to university.

“My brother plays his games so loud.

“Classmates who leak my personal information online are annoying.

“I had this expensive bracelet, and I don’t know where it went.

“Getting dumped right before Christmas hurts.”

Boy, does it hurt.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh, life huuuuuuuuuuuurts!!!”

Ai is looking at me. She seems rather dazed.

I've never seen her make that expression before.

"…That's really rough."

I giggle, feeling as if I've managed to get payback. I startled Ai. I made her make that face.

"It really is. I have normal, ordinary troubles, just like anybody else around here."

As if I'm not an idol. Not a star.

I'm an idol who's living an incredibly normal life, and my life's as rough as normal.

"But thanks. Getting all that out made me feel a little better."

Ai's looking straight at me. "That's good, but…" She starts to say something, then pauses, mouth half open. She glances to the right, and her eyes wander from somewhere near the ground to somewhere above our heads.

The sight makes me giggle again.

I've never seen Ai get flustered before. So this is what it looks like when invincible girls feel unsettled?

"Life's full of all sorts of things, huh…?"

The remark she finally manages to squeeze out is the sort of line that doesn't mean much at all.

"Argh. I want some time off."

I stretch, as though I've just finished a job.

"Huh? Why?"

I'd just assumed the desire to take time off was something all of humanity had in common, but maybe this girl is different?

"Weren't you listening? Any of those things would make a good reason, wouldn't it?"

Ai doesn't look convinced, so I search through my feelings.

"Lately, I feel worn down after our shows."

Ai watches me quietly.

"……"

I keep going. "Singing bright, cheerful songs when I'm feeling like this… I'm used to it, sure, but it takes a mental toll. When I sing about things that are completely different from what I'm feeling, it chips away at me, bit by bit. It's like I'm gradually becoming a robot."

Idols have angst.

"Like I'm getting used to lying.

"Like it's stopped bothering me.

"Like I'm becoming a liar, body and soul."

Living in other people's wishes and ideals is rough.

"You think so? I don't really feel that way."

"You've got nerves of steel, huh, Ai? Don't you ever think 'I don't want to perform' when something painful happens?"

"……"

Ai falls silent, and I retort a little belligerently. "Yeah, you don't look like you do. You're invincible."

I swallow down the words *You don't seem as if anything anyone could say would even affect you*.

It isn't clear whether my attack hit home or not. As Ai responds, she's tracking a cloud in the night sky out of the corner of her eye. "I'm not invincible. I get depressed, too, like everybody else. As a matter of fact, I'm currently mega-depressed."

Mega-depressed, she says, but her expression is so nonchalant. She's looking me straight in the eye, and her tone is the same as always. "I…mentioned I don't have parents and that I live in a children's home, right?"

I'd heard about that. She'd spoken casually then, too, as if it was nothing.

"I'm going to have to move out soon, and some of my mom's relatives volunteered to be my guarantors. But when we actually met face-to-face, they turned me down."

It's my turn to fall silent.

"What do you suppose they didn't like? They wouldn't tell me why…so I end up thinking all sorts of things. Maybe my personality turned them off. Maybe I look like my mom, and that's what did it. Maybe they weren't okay with the fact that I'm an idol."

Ai's coming up with one thing after another, and I finally interrupt her.

"It bothers you like crazy, huh?"

That's a shock. Both the fact that Ai's talking about herself so much and the fact that the girl I'd assumed was perfect is dealing with a situation like this.

"Wait, when did this happen?"

"The day before yesterday."

How had she managed to get up onstage when something like that had just happened?

I really do think Ai's somebody special.

"You're incredible, Ai."

I sigh.

My body seems to have decided that if I'm going to try to understand this girl, it's going to take a few sighs.

"And then there's me… Just getting a little depressed is enough to make me say I don't want to perform. Maybe I'm not cut out for this."

Ai falls into a "Hrrrm" pose, using the sort of gesture she'd use onstage. It's as if none of this has really hit home for her, and I can't tell what she's thinking.

"I don't know if that's the problem… Maybe it's because you're honest."

Honest. I don't understand what she means by that.

…So I ask her. "What are you talking about?"

"I've been a liar all along, you see," Ai goes on, indifferently. "I bet 'Ai' the idol is the complete opposite of who I really am, but… How do I put this? I bet she's who I want to be. By being an idol, maybe I'm getting closer to my ideal self."

Idol theory. Everybody brings theirs out once in a while, but what Ai's saying seems a little different to me.

"Since I started out as a liar, it's like it's all the same to my original self."

Ai is talking about herself.

"If I keep telling lies, it feels as if they might become true. When we sing cheerful songs, it makes you feel sort of cheerful, you know? I thought it might be like that. When I'm onstage, that's the ideal me, the person I'm trying to become."

Ai's expression is still completely artificial.

"I'm working to become her, trying hard to get close to her. But as I do that, I'm also refining that ideal. Making her cute, and kind, and brave. Somebody who loves everybody. Somebody everybody loves."

It feels as if there's just a little of what she really thinks in what she's saying, but it also feels rather tenuous to me.

"I'd like to become that kind of person…"

"We really aren't the same. That's not how I think about being an idol."

I've given a diplomatic answer. Frankly, I hadn't really understood what Ai said.

I couldn't tell whether she was talking about some other show or whether she was just saying whatever came to mind.

She'd spoken boldly, though, and it made me think, *Maybe this is what girls with a serious fan base are like*.

“I’m not sure… I don’t think you need to put that much thought into it, really. I mean, it’s just work! We’re just idols!”

“‘Just’ idols…?”

If somebody normal had said that, it would have been sour grapes or their dissatisfaction with their job, but Ai seemed to mean what she said.

“But, Ai, I’m not like you. I don’t have anything.”

“Huh? You said you’d been playing piano since you were little. That’s not nothing.”

“I’m pretty sure there are tens of thousands of people who play piano out there.”

Piano tops the list of lessons people want their kids to take.

I hadn’t even been chosen as the accompanist for the school choir competition. Maybe it’s a special skill, but at this point, I’m hesitant to brag about it.

“Lots of people start it, then drop out. I’m just one of that crowd.”

“Is that how it is? People who have a really amazing special skill always talk like that. I think you’re setting the bar too high. When you’ve got something you can do, it seems like a waste.”

She’s talking like a teacher discussing my future course.

“Mei wrote the lyrics for that song the other day, didn’t she?” Ai points right at the tip of my nose. “Why don’t you try that?”

“You’re telling me to try writing lyrics?”

My eyebrows lowered. I hadn’t anticipated a counter from that direction.

“Not just the lyrics; write the music, too. Are you saying you can’t?”

“That’s a tough one. I mean, I’ve done it for fun, but… Playing

around is only playing, you know."

"There's nothing 'only' about that. If it's too hard to do the whole thing, you could just come up with a rough idea. I bet the arranger would turn it into something good."

"Well, yes, but… I couldn't." I finally give up, driven by the urge to get out of here.

Ai seems to be having fun, though. Her tone's risen slightly. "Why not?"

"Why not?" she says. Ai probably doesn't understand other people's feelings.

Her empathy circuits must be busted. I bet they actually are.

Still, that's got nothing to do with this. I'm probably the only one who understands what I'm feeling now.

I mean, come on…

"Well… It's embarrassing."

Ai's mouth drops open. "That's it?"

Had she been imagining some big, exaggerated reason? Sure, just hearing that a person who *can* make music *doesn't* makes it sound as if there's some big reason, but this is how reality goes.

"Yes! I can't just be all like 'I did the music' out of nowhere! It would sound like I was bragging… Wouldn't I seem sort of desperate? The best way to avoid attracting haters is to not do new things! You establish an image for yourself at the beginning, and you don't take one step outside those lines. You stay in the frame you made for yourself and behave!"

"Really…? I think you're overthinking it. You wouldn't seem like you were bragging, and I bet the fans would have your back. I don't think there's anything to get embarrassed about here."

"Gnrrrgh."

I know that, too. I'm actually just embarrassed, plain and simple.

I'm scared to let people see my inexperience for what it is. Afraid of failing.

I know that, yet I still want Ai to take a good, solid look at my

history of never, ever doing anything like this before. I've considered it over and over, and every time I decided not to…yet whenever that's pointed out to me, I get embarrassed.

People have said similar things to me before now. Every time, I dodged with a diplomatic smile. When Ai says it, though, I start thinking like this.

"In that case…if I write the music, will you write the lyrics, Ai?"

I launch my own counter. This is where she finds out what *If I go down, I'm taking you with me* really means.

"Huh…?"

Smiling brightly, I grab Ai's shoulders. "You've got a unique perspective on things. I bet you could write some good lyrics."

I genuinely mean that. Ai's not a normal person, and I bet her lyrics wouldn't be ordinary, either.

"N…no way… Ha-ha."

This may be the first time I've ever seen Ai self-conscious.

"I only graduated from middle school, so I don't know all that much, and my Japanese is sketchy…"

"None of that! You're the one who said there wasn't any need to get embarrassed! No fair changing your tune just because the focus is on you now! I want to see the lyrics you write, Ai."

It's sheer spite. *There, see? Now you know how I feel.* That's what's going through my head as I put the pressure on Ai.

In contrast to my malice, Ai's attitude is meek. "…Really?" she says slowly.

"Yeah, I'm serious."

I really am.

"But…writing lyrics for music is pretty high-level. I couldn't do that."

"You can write the lyrics first. I'll come up with a melody that fits them."

"In that case… Hmmmm…"

In a park lit by streetlights and the moon, there we were, Ai and me.

We weren't close at all. Right then, though, we were almost like classmates or people who were close enough to talk about our hypothetical futures. Like friends.

✳✳✳

Something Ai said in an interview for a fashion magazine has always stayed with me.

Q. Which group member are you closest to?

She'd answered with my name.

In the end, that night was the only time I ever had a decent conversation with Ai.

Had she just happened to remember it?

Or had her relationships with the other B Komachi members been so superficial that a single conversation had put me at the top of the list?

A few days after, Ai brought her lyrics over.

I'd honestly thought the matter would end that night. I hadn't expected her to actually bring them.

Ai uneasily handed me a notebook with *Lyrics Notebook* written on the cover in thick magic marker. The expression on her face right then could have belonged to any fifteen-year-old anywhere. It was really adorable.

When I got home and opened the notebook, I found lines of text meticulously written out.

There were conspicuous eraser marks in places.

She'd only needed to write one set of lyrics, but she'd written multiple sets over quite a few pages.

You wouldn't think it to look at her, but was she actually a pretty

dedicated person?

I felt as if I'd gotten a glimpse of an Ai no one else had ever seen.

The first section of lyrics was clearly idol-esque—things about world peace and wanting to eat cake. You could tell she'd been working on trial and error.

However, as I kept turning pages, the lyrics grew more polished. Then one set in particular caught my eye. She'd called it "Me, the Liar."

In contrast to the ominous title, the words were incredibly cheerful. They were lyrics meant to encourage somebody.

Bright, fun… Those things must count as lies to Ai.

Pain and hurt were what was real.

She wrote things like this, though, which meant she really was "the liar."

That was the message I picked up from the words.

I opened the recorder function on my phone and sat down at the piano.

I didn't know how professionals wrote music, so I didn't think about anything complicated. I just recorded a piano melody and basic vocal line to match Ai's lyrics.

At the time, I was still depressed.

I was sure that a lot of my fans were also feeling gloomy about something, the way I was.

I wrote a fun, cheerful tune so that people discouraged by family circumstances, or their love lives, or work, would feel even a little bit better.

A song written by me, in my depression, to you in yours.

That was what was on my mind when I wrote the music.

That song was recorded as the B-side of one of B Komachi's singles.

It wasn't particularly popular, and nobody kept singing it as time went on.

It's just a song that the thirty-seven-year-old me hums on nights

like this.

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