
The Sidekick Never Gets the Girl, Let Alone the Protag's Sister!
1
THE SIDEKICK NEVER GETS THE GIRL, LET ALONE THE PROTAG'S SISTER!
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# Table of Contents


Cover

Prologue

Meetings Come When You Least Expect Them

Life Goes On, Like It or Not

History Repeats Itself

Kiryu Kyouka

Late-Night Date-Night

In Search of Memories

If Only Monday Would Wait for My Problems

An Extra Watches from the Background

Secret Sidekick Man

Natural Enemies

A Love, Ended

Epilogue

Side Story 1: A Sidekick Is Born

Side Story 2: A Morning of Destiny

Afterword

Color Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

# Prologue

“*UGRAAAAHHHHHHHH!*”

I grimaced, flinching away from the beast’s savage roar. It was covered in wounds, drenched in its own blood, yet still it rampaged: king of all monsters, the Archfiend. Before it had earned that title, it was just another human—a remarkably kindhearted one, at that.

I heard a gulp; it took me a moment to realize that sound had come from my own throat. The hilt of my sword was wrapped with cloth to prevent blood from making it too slippery, but try as I might, I couldn’t stop the tip of my blade from trembling. Whether my hands shook with fear or revulsion at the idea of facing off against *him*, I couldn’t say. If it was the latter, perhaps I could think of it as a sign that there was still some hope left for my own humanity.

“Koh...!”

I heard a pained voice call my name. It was Alexion, a knight and member of the fellowship that accompanied me on my long journey of salvation. He and my other companions were already gravely injured. I hadn’t heard the other two’s voices in some time, but I didn’t have the leeway to check if they were dead or merely unconscious. I kept my gaze firmly locked on the Archfiend as I flashed a quick hand sign at Alexion, ordering him to retreat.

I knew I’d be killed if I showed the slightest of openings, but of course not even the minuscule lapse in attention needed to send a single hand sign escaped the Archfiend. Its eyes narrowed in a glare full of bloodlust and it unleashed another terrible roar, powerful enough to shake the earth itself.

“Ugh... Oh hell, that’s—”

My eyes widened as the Archfiend brought its hands together, manifesting an orb of magical energy. As it expanded, the surrounding rubble was reduced to dust—I could literally tell at a glance that I’d be finished if I let it so much as touch me.

“*GRAAAHHHH!*”

It launched the orb straight at me without the slightest hint of hesitation. If I were to dodge, the orb would slam directly into my friends, who lay fallen behind me. There was no time to think—I had to act.

"*Extension Blast!*"

I swung my holy sword, carving a perfectly horizontal line through the air. The stroke of my blade formed its own magical blast that shot forward, colliding with the Archfiend's orb and exploding violently. I'd slain countless foes with this attack in the past, and yet the most it could do was cancel out the Archfiend's spell. But still, I pressed on.

"Haaaaaah!"

I dashed through the smoke screen raised by the blast, pumping pure magic through my veins, and closed into point-blank range in the blink of an eye. With that, the battle was decided. All I had to do was bring my blade down in one final stroke, and it would all be over. That was all it would take—or so I thought.

"*GRAAAAAH!*"

"Ugh?! Aaaah!"

The Archfiend's hand flashed out at the last second. Long, razor-sharp claws (it certainly didn't have *those* back when it was a human) pierced my shoulder. Blinding, intense pain shot through me, wracking my entire body like an electrical current. It was so excruciating that I'd have surely passed out if it weren't for the divine protection afforded to me as a Hero.

It hurt, it burned, my hands shook, and my mind was numb—but I just couldn't stop. I was a Hero, and it was my duty to cast down the enemies of humanity and lead the world to peace.

I could at least be thankful that my left shoulder had been impaled, leaving my dominant arm still functional. At the very least, I could still swing my sword. My left arm was done for, but I managed to use its last ounce of strength to catch the Archfiend's hand in a death grip.

"*GRAAAH?!*"

It swung its arm wildly, trying to shake me off, but I wasn't about to relinquish

my grip that easily. I knew that my arm would be useless the moment I loosened my hold. I wouldn't be able to get close to the Archfiend, much less grab on to it again.

"I'm never letting you go, Balrog!"

I called out the name I had known the monster by when it was still human. Balrog had believed that the power of magic could bring salvation to people across the world. He would pour himself into developing new spells with all the joy and enthusiasm of a child with a brand-new toy, working himself to the bone for the sake of his family and the people precious to him. He had been my best friend.

But in the end, his aspirations were trampled. Everything he loved was stolen away, everyone he treasured brutally, cruelly, and gruesomely slain by humanity's avarice. In all his rage and grief, Balrog fell, his body twisted by his own magic into the perversion of nature he was today. His mind crumbled to pieces, replaced with an overpowering desire to end mankind.

Most likely, my voice could no longer reach him—why would it? Mine was the voice of the man who failed to protect everything beloved to him. But still, I persisted.

"I'll end this... I'll end *you*, no matter what!"

"*GRAAAAAUGH?!*"

"I'll never let go! I never should've left you on your own... You taught me that people can be warm and kind, even in this horrible, miserable world. But I... I couldn't be there for you when you were suffering. I couldn't be there when you *needed* me! I refuse to have any regrets like that ever again!"

I was crying, and as my vision blurred and wavered it felt like my consciousness was dangling by a fraying thread. Even so, I hung on for dear life, the strength of my feelings granting me the power I needed to keep going.

"I wanted to save you, but I don't have that sort of power. Destruction's all I'm good for; turning a monster back into a human's beyond me. But that doesn't matter. I want to save you anyway... So I'll do everything I can!"

—Koh.

I heard his voice. The voice he *used* to speak with.

—Thank you.

"*GRAAAAAAHHHHH!*"

But he spoke no longer. All he could do was scream—an ugly, bestial wail of anguish, grief, rage, despair, and a thousand other intermingled emotions. His scream drove me forward, and I let myself be carried away by the momentum, leaping towards him and swinging my holy sword in a selfless daze. My blade struck true and I cleaved through the Archfiend's head—Balrog's head—splitting it and his entire body clean in two.

—Now I can finally be with Lyra again.

Balrog's body began to crumble away, dissolving into dust. He would die as all demons do.

—Sorry to burden you with this.

"Dammit, you idiot..."

I staggered forward, collapsing onto the mountain of dust that had once been Balrog. How ironic that his ashes would cushion my fall, sparing me the pain of a hard landing.

"I'm a Hero."

I wept. My tears were ceaseless, uncontrollable.

"So this was my duty."

I could no longer hear his voice. I didn't even know if he'd really been speaking to me, or if it was just a figment of my imagination.

"Why...? Why'd you have to become a damn Archfiend?!"

The tears clouded my vision. Blood still flowed from my countless injuries and I was barely clinging to consciousness. Nevertheless, I understood all too clearly: I just killed my best friend.

Archfiend or not, monster or not, he was still my best friend.

And I killed him...with my own two hands.

# Meetings Come When You Least Expect Them

## *“HOLY CRAP I’M LAAAAAAAAAAATE?!”*

*It’s eight friggin’ thirty!*

There I was, sprinting at full speed down the road to my school, knowing full well that class had started *ages* ago. It goes without saying that I had a slice of bread in my mouth... I mean, really, I *had* a slice of bread in my mouth, but turns out it’s actually pretty darn hard to run like that. I ended up shoving it into a plastic bag, then chucking *that* into my satchel for good measure.

I suddenly became keenly aware that the only people who could hum a jaunty tune as they skip their way to school under these circumstances must be fictional. I’m just not carefree enough to have that sorta attitude, dangit! And if I were, I’d just skip school entirely! So I kept running, cursing those nonexistent, happy-go-lucky punks...until I came to a sudden stop.

“Haaah... Wheeze... Bleugh...”

Yeah, running to the point of exhaustion in the blazing summer heat sure is a great way to make yourself barf. I propped myself up on a nearby telephone pole, retching as I tried to catch my breath. Absolutely pathetic.

“Screw it... Maybe I should just ditch.”

In my exhaustion, my thought process took a turn for the logical. I mean, if I ditched school for the day, I wouldn’t have to force myself to keep running, right?

“C’mon, it’s just one day! What’s the big deal?” The tiny devil on my shoulder whispered into my ear.

*“*You shouldn’t be running around like this! You never know when a car might come speeding around the corner; it’s much too dangerous. You should go home and take it easy for today.*”* The tiny angel on my other shoulder offered an alternate opinion. Indeed, this could be the debate of the century brewing... Wait, huh? They actually agreed! Well, so much for that!

“Yup, time to play hooky.”

The moment I made the decision, I felt a massive weight lift from my shoulders. It'd be completely unthinkable for a puny little human like me to defy the will of my guardian angel-devil duo! They made the call, so there's nothing I can do about it! I, Kunugi Kou, was a free man, and as such there was nothing to stop me from triumphantly abandoning the road to my school. Yes, this would be one small step for me, one giant leap for my journey towards habitual delinquency!

I mean, let's be real here: the likes of me cutting school for a day isn't gonna bring the whole of society to a grinding halt. You get further in life if you don't sweat the small stuff and live in the moment! Probably. I was all ready to set off and enjoy the fruits of my freedom to the fullest.

"*Kyaaaaahhhhhhh!*"

Suddenly, a girlish scream rang out.

Three words (which I'll write as an acronym for decency's sake) popped into my head: WTF?

"WTF?"

I actually said it out loud, on account of it being just that unnatural a situation for me to get thrust into. This sort of comic-book-cliché development's not supposed to happen to me! I'm an extra, for crying out loud, not the main character! Shouldn't he be the one who runs into stuff like this?!

Unfortunately, reality's a cruel mistress that doesn't wait for you, no matter how much you wish for it. While I was frozen in shock, a girl burst out from a side street off to the right, just a little ways ahead of me. A beautiful girl. Yup, a plain old beautiful girl. A beautiful girl who had abject terror written all over her face, but a beautiful girl nonetheless.

I had a horrible feeling I knew what was going on. It was one of those scenes where an attractive young woman gets set upon by a rampaging hoodlum, and the random dude who happens to be nearby saves her, thus getting promoted to protagonist status. I figured that if I was right about that, this could very well be a heaven-sent opportunity intended to reward me for being so quiet and cooperative in my role as an extra.

But y'know what, God? Hate to say it, but I think you might be misunderstanding something here. I don't want that promotion you're offering me in the slightest. I happen to like my peaceful, quiet, dull-as-dirt lifestyle—in fact, I love it! I don't want any big, crazy events. I wanna live out my life the same way that billions of people have done before me: by watching it slowly dribble down the drain in a state of complete, unremarkable tedium. That's my wish, if you feel like granting it.

As a side note, putting a girl through something traumatizing enough to make her scream like that, just to give some extra a promotion? Dick move, God. You bumbling, balding blowhard.

So anyway, my apologies, random beautiful girl. God's presumably the one who thought this development up, so it's not really my responsibility, but I still feel like I should say sorry for the fact that I can't do squat to help you out here. Assuming I'm reading the situation right, some *really* nasty delinquent's about to come barging out of that side street after her. Most likely, he's chasing her 'cause he's been entranced by her beauty. There might even be more than one of them. That's how these things usually go.

The thing is, extras who could *actually* deal with that sort of thing are pretty much one in a million. You'd have to be holding hidden depths of strength, or have learned karate via a correspondence course, or some other super special something-or-other along those lines. This was too heavy a responsibility for me to deal with.

That said, I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I abandoned her without helping at all. If anything, standing back and watching a disaster like this play out in front of me without batting an eyelash would be pretty protagonist-ish in its own right. If I didn't help her, odds were good she'd shout something along the lines of "Hey, why aren't you helping?! What kind of person doesn't help in a situation like this?!" and drag me into the mess against my will.

As such, I'll have to fight cliché with cliché. Time for operation "Officer, over here!" It's actually quite straightforward. Step one: call the cops. Step two: tell them where you are and what's happening. That's literally it. I mean, come on, she's a delicate lady and this is Japan, a country of peace and tranquility. The odds of her getting knocked out and abducted before the police show up are

super low, probably!

Meanwhile, while I was busy internally monologuing about my next move, the girl tripped over her own feet and face-planted right in front of me. It was such a painfully cliché development, it almost made me want to ask her if I could see the script.

“Umm, hey, you okay?”

My innocent bystander instincts kicked in and I talked to her. *Crap!* The girl looked up at me in shock, then flinched away at the sound of footsteps pounding down the side street after her. Those footsteps had me more confused than freaked out, though, namely because there was only one person’s worth of them. Judging by the weight of the impacts, I could tell that they were on the heavier side of things, and pretty darn slow too. She looked perfectly fit at a glance, so I had to wonder: couldn’t she just outrun her mystery pursuer? At the speed they were going, it wouldn’t be all that hard.

Of course, while I was distracted by all that nonsense, I missed my chance to A: call the cops and B: just run the hell away. That’s when, as if dispatched by the fates themselves to mock me for my carelessness...*it* appeared.

“C’mewe, pweddy wady! Wait foh meeeeeee!”

“*Gyaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!”*

“Wha— *Augh?!*”

“It” was absolutely repulsive, and the slightest glance at it triggered my fight-or-flight reflex so hard that I kicked it back the way it came without thinking twice. This...*thing* was a butt-naked old man. I’ll spare you the gory details—take my word for it, you don’t wanna hear them, and I *definitely* don’t wanna talk about them. Let’s just say he was so potent an exhibitionist that just breathing the same air as him was enough to make me regret getting up that morning.

Come on, *seriously*?! This sort of scene calls for a street punk, not some freaky old streaker! The real world doesn’t have a filter to censor that crap with pixels!

Anyway, the sudden pervert appearance was such a completely unexpected development that I went and unleashed my golden foot of decapitation

(capable of pulverizing the spine of even the most thick-necked boxer!) on him. As such, I figured it was time to scrap operation “Officer, over here!” and swap over to operation “Officer, *he’s* over here!” The actual process is exactly the same—just turn the desperation dial up to 1200%. That’s right, it’s time for 1200% courage mode. Just gotta bite the bullet and go for it...

“Ah, umm!”

“Wha—huh?!”

Caught off guard by a sudden voice, I reflexively hid behind a nearby telephone pole. I didn’t have the chance to look, but I was sure that the person talking to me was the girl the creepy pervert guy had been chasing after. Now, admittedly, I’d barely seen her face and I’d only really heard her scream up until then, but I still had absolute confidence in my conclusion. My evidence: we were literally the only people around at the time. Yeah, just call me Sherlock.

“Ah... Um, th-thank you!”

She sounded bewildered.

She wants to thank me? Oooh, okay, I get it. Yeah, I guess that’s the natural flow in this sorta situation. I’m her hero, after all. He wasn’t a street punk, but in a certain sense getting chased around by a middle-aged, overweight exhibitionist’s even scarier than the hypothetical punk setup, and I saved her by taking him out in one ~~punch~~ kick. A “thank you” or two could very well be in order here.

Hate to say it, though, but she’s wrong. I’m no hero; I’m a perfectly ordinary citizen, a man whose greatest impact on society at large is sucking up oxygen and spitting out carbon dioxide. In short, I’m nothing more than an extra. I wanted to make sure she wouldn’t get any weird ideas about me, so I stayed hidden behind the pole and tried to let her down as bluntly as possible.

“My name’s not worth mentioning.”

“I, um, didn’t actually ask yet.”

*Shoot, jumped the gun!* Gotta say, though, I was surprised she had the presence of mind to call me out that quickly. You’d never think she was getting chased around by a pervert just a moment ago. Girl’s got grit.

“Sounds like you’re doing just fine, then.”

“Not really, no... I’m still shivering...”

“Oh, no worries there—so am I.” I stuck a leg out from behind the pole and shook it around. No reaction. Sort of felt like the temperature suddenly dropped a couple degrees, but I was probably just imagining it. “A-Anyway, I’ll call this in, so you should hurry on outta here. Sticking around for too long is just *begging* the cops to question you!”

“U-Um, wait! What’s your name?”

I tried to guide the conversation to a natural conclusion, but she went and asked me anyway. And right after I failed miserably at using the “name’s not worth mentioning” power move too! Could her timing possibly be any worse? There was no way I could say it again; it was still on cooldown! She had me cornered—my only choice left was to tell her my name!

Or at least it would’ve been, but I’m a supporting character to the bitter end, and my name is genuinely not worth mentioning. Besides, being a hero and saving beautiful girls is a job for a protagonist. Love stories between beauties and beasts are well established at this point, but there’s absolutely no market or demand for romance between beautiful girls and stick figures.

Even supposing I gave in to my lecherous side and tried to get close to her, I know exactly how it’d turn out in the end. In the best-case scenario, we’d discover our values don’t match up, we’d drift apart, and eventually our relationship would naturally fizzle out. However, if I *really* screwed up, it’s totally possible she’d get stolen away by the protagonist! Sorry, but that is absolutely *not* my fetish, and there’s no chance in hell I’ll go anywhere near a situation that might lead me in that sorta direction. As such, there was really only one move available to me.

“Ayase Kaito.”

“Huh?”

“My name’s Ayase Kaito. Ayase Kaito, second-year student at Oumei High School, class B. I know I said my name’s not worth mentioning, but if you *really* insist, it’s Ayase Kaito. Blood type’s A, birthday’s September 23rd. That’s me:

Ayase Kaito.”

I told her a name without turning around to face her, then took off without giving her the chance to react! A dashing exit in more ways than one, if I may say so myself! Look at me, everyone, I’m totally a protagonist! But the cool dude beating a hasty retreat isn’t me, background extra Kunugi Kou—it’s Oumei High second-year Ayase Kaito from class B.

For the record, that wasn’t some nonsense name I made up on the spot. On the contrary, I was actually really proud of myself for doing a good deed. After all, Ayase Kaito’s not an extra like me: he’s a genuine, bona fide protagonist. That girl never got a decent look at my face either. All she saw was the back of a guy wearing an Oumei High uniform. She’ll forget what my voice sounded like in no time too.

A sincere, courageous girl like her will no doubt take action in the most heroine-like manner possible. She’ll show up at class B, call out Ayase Kaito to thank him, and the case will be closed with everyone happy. If she really *is* one of the chosen heroines, then one look at his overwhelming rom-com protagonist aura is all it’ll take for her to fall hopelessly captive to his charms.

He may be one of those super cliché protagonists who just can’t take a hint, but he’s also a gentleman at heart, and I can’t imagine he’ll have it in him to say no to a beautiful girl coming on to him. And bam, just like that, a new heroine’s added to his roster, the girl gets to meet her hero, and my everyday life goes unchanged! That’s a win-win-win situation if I’ve ever heard of one.

I called in the assault while I fled, then headed off to my beloved Oumei High with a smile on my face and a spring in my step. That whole disaster was a lot to take in, especially first thing in the morning, but in the end everyone except the culprit came out ahead. Poetic justice at its finest!

“Gooood morning!”

I was about as hyper as could be, and let out the sort of loud and enthusiastic greeting I have absolutely never given as I slid open the classroom door. *Nothing in this world can stop me now! Think you can get in my way?! Just try me, punk!*

“...Good morning, Kunugi.”

“Oh, Daimon-sensei! Good morning!”

“Takes some guts to make an entrance like that when you’re as late as you are, huh?”

“As late as...? Oh.”

“Let’s step outside, Kunugi. Sorry, everyone, study hall for now. I’ll be right back.”

“...I forgot I was gonna ditch.”

Then she chewed the absolute hell out of me.

❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤

“Are you sure you have a brain in that skull of yours, Kou?”

“Oh, shut it... And anyway, what’s with that old bag? What kinda teacher puts the whole class on hold to lecture someone?”

“Isn’t she a bit young to be an old bag? She’s still in her twenties, isn’t she?”

I was slumped over my desk, still in a state of shock from the lecture that ended up dragging on well into my lunch break... Or, really, in a state of shock over the fact that my random pervert encounter made me totally forget that I was planning to skip. I showed up at school *completely* unprepared.

Sitting nearby, sighing with exasperation at my antics, was the aforementioned Ayase Kaito. Handsome through and through, his naturally brown hair was impeccably styled and his charming smile made his good looks all the more striking. When all’s said and done, however, I never got the feeling he was one of those nationwide idol types who could catch the eye of literally anyone and everyone. No, he’s got that very specific sort of popularity that only attracts certain, *specific* people, all of whom happen to be jaw-dropping, head-turning beauties. In short, he’s the definition of your classic rom-com hero. He’s like one of those people who only goes for good-looking girls, only in reverse, I guess.

By some bizarre turn of events I ended up getting close enough to a guy like that to call myself his best friend. In other words, I’m not just an extra: I’m an extra with the Best Friend attribute, one of those characters who just barely

clings to the bottom ranks of the popularity polls by a hair's breadth! Yes, it is I, the protagonist's best friend-wingman-sidekick-extra!

"Anyway, we've got more important things to talk about! What's this I hear about you and Kotou Tsumugi getting all flirty-wirty with each other first thing in the morning?!"

"'Flirty-wirty'?" Kaito retorted. "We were just walking to school together, same as always. We've known each other for ages and her house is right next door; it's totally normal."

"Oh, *really?* Then what's this I hear about you holding hands, huh?! Huuuuh?!"

"She hugged me and I folded my arms, that's all."

"Whaddya have running through your veins, punk?! Ice?!"

"Blood, actually."

"Ah, right, yeah. Fair enough."

His sound rebuttal was like a brick wall dropped in the path of my argument, and I plopped back down into the chair I'd enthusiastically jumped out of. Incidentally, Kotou Tsumugi was the class next door's resident Madonna (dated reference, but it still works) and Kaito's childhood friend on top of that. You'd think a person in her position would end up in the same class as him, but apparently she and mister pokes-holes-in-my-argument over there are both hopelessly unlucky in that respect.

"Ayase-kun."

And, surprising absolutely no one, yet *another* girl showed up to talk with Kaito. I probably don't even have to bother specifying that she was beautiful. She had silky black hair that reached down to her waist, and the sharp look in her eyes gave her a pretty strong-willed sort of impression. That's right—it's the top batter of every played-out rom-com, the super-sadistic, verbally abusive honor student heroine (who also happens to be a huge loner): our fair lady Kiryu Kyouka!

"If you talk with garbage, you're liable to pick up its stench."

“Say what?!”

The pile of garbage occupying my seat—that is, me—stood up, full of determination and sending said seat clattering backwards. I may be an extra, but I have the right to fight back when I get unilaterally and unjustly bad-mouthed! Hell, I’d fight back whether or not I had the right—standing up to injustice is a man’s destiny!

“Hmm?”

“Never mind!”

*Scrape, plop.*

One glare later and I judged the fight I was picking as unwinnable, quietly pulling my chair back into position and sitting down like nothing happened. My chair must be pretty shocked about all the standing up and sitting down I’ve been doing today. Anyway, the afternoon break’s a time for eating lunch, not getting into brawls. I’ll spare you this time, Kiryu.

“What? Got something to say to me?”

She slammed her hands down onto my desk and glared at me. Have I mentioned she’s intimidating?

“I’m sorry...”

I couldn’t take the pressure and reflexively pulled a five hundred yen coin out from my wallet, sliding it across the desk in a show of apology.

“That’s just pathetic...”

Kaito let out an exasperated sigh, but he had it all wrong. I wasn’t being pathetic at all! I was just a little bit freaked out and decided to let money do the talking! Okay, yeah, it’s pretty pathetic when I put it that way, but there was still one point I had to make perfectly clear.

“Hey, you’d better not look down on me! I’ll have you know that’s all the money I have to my name! You’ve got my life savings up for ransom here, so I don’t wanna hear you calling it pathetic!”

“I don’t want your spare change.”

Spare change?! She's the one who picked an undeserved fight with me, and when I valiantly offer up everything I own to settle the matter, she has the gall to call it spare change?!

"I'm so sorry; please forgive me..."

Not even ransom money could get me out of it, so I had no choice but to apologize like a normal person. Kowtowing on the ground would get my uniform dirty, so I pressed my face into my desk in a deep bow instead. Also, she said she didn't want my five hundred yen, so I stowed it back in my wallet. Phew.

"C'mon, Kyouka, let it go. Let's go get lunch, okay?"

Kiryu was practically seething with irritation, but Kaito cut in with a smile to calm her down. Now that's a protagonist move if I've ever seen one. Keep it up, dude, you're killing it!

"...Fine, then."

Considering how quickly she went along with his suggestion, yeah, she's gotta be a heroine. Even if she had a bad attitude about it. Would've been way better if she hadn't opened her conversation with Kaito by giving me crap, of course. And speaking of which, how long is she planning on glaring at me? Making it really hard for me to get out of here, Kiryu.

"Kaitooo! Let's have lunch!"

And with impeccable timing, a certain empty-headed bundle of energy barged into the classroom. More of a "cute" than "beautiful" sort, she's the type of girl people always describe as being like a tiny, adorable animal: Kaito's childhood friend, Kotou Tsumugi (who I've already introduced, so that's out of the way). She'd made a habit of showing up in our class every afternoon to eat lunch with Kaito like the heroine she is. Side note: supposedly, Kaito's sister handmakes his lunch for him. I swear, that guy has a sister complex. (Yes, I'm jealous.) "Ah, Kiryu-san!"

"What is it, Kotou-san?"

Kotou finally noticed that Kaito was with Kiryu, and gave her an ever so slightly sharp glance. Being rivals in love, the two of them don't exactly get

along the best. You know what they say about women's battles, probably.

"Man, Kaito, you never cease to impress."

"What? I don't get it."

"Right, exactly."

I chatted with Kaito as I stood up. Not to join their little conversation circle, of course—I was going out to buy lunch at the school store. Or, rather, using that as a pretext to blow this Popsicle stand.

"Just don't go overboard, 'kay?"

"Seriously... Overboard *how*?" Kaito replied with one of his usual incredibly vacuous remarks, as befitting a super-dense protagonist.

I left him and his pair of heroines behind and wandered out of the classroom. Two heroines is plenty to keep a conversation going, so even if I stuck around, I'd only be good for generating white noise, which, y'know, isn't super helpful when you're trying to have a conversation.

After all, I reiterate: I'm nothing more than the wingman sidekick of the protagonist, Ayase Kaito. I have a bit of a role to play—every once in a while I'll get super jealous of him, or make comments at his heroines that just barely fall on the safe side of the sexual harassment line—but when all's said and done, I'm fundamentally an extra. Excessive interference with his business is forbidden. This is *definitely* not me being negligent! It's just one of those times when you get the most work done by not working at all, I swear!

I arrived at the school store, still not totally sure who I was trying to excuse myself to a moment before. I can't say for sure if it's because we have a resident protagonist in the building, but my school's store is exactly like the ones you see in every cliché rom-com ever written: stupidly crowded literally every single day. A veritable mob of students swarmed the counter in a desperate battle for their day's bread. *Come on, people, it's called "lunch break" because you're supposed to take a break, not because you're supposed to break someone's face! I'd probably be better off going to a convenience store than subjecting myself to this bedlam...*

"*GRAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!*"

Next thing I knew, I was screaming like a maniac as I dove into the crowd. Wait. What?

My body's...moving on its own?! Don't tell me the power of cliché's compelling me to act?!

Swept up in the vortex of hungry high schoolers, I let out a battle cry, reached out as far as I could, and somehow managed to grab a single sandwich. At the exact same moment, I chucked the five hundred yen coin I'd been carrying towards the register! Witness my ultimate technique: catch and release!

"Heh, keep the change."

"Here ya go, three hundred yen."

I blinked, and was suddenly holding three hundred yen. Is that cashier lady some sort of monster?! W-Well, whatever, this is fine. In the end, I got my bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich (BLT for short. Bet you didn't know that one, right?) at list price. Time to hustle back to the classroom.

"Hmm?"

As I turned away from the school store, I happened to catch sight of a particular girl.

"Uwuu..."

"Uwuu?!" Did she seriously just say "uwuu," and does she realize how ridiculous it sounded?!

She was a beautiful but incredibly petite girl—so small, in fact, I almost thought she was an elementary schooler—and she was shrinking back from the mayhem blocking her path to the school store. For a second I thought she might've gotten lost and wandered into the wrong school, but since she was wearing our uniform, I was forced to conclude that she was a genuine high schooler. Best I could tell, she'd been hoping to buy lunch but couldn't manage to break through the human wall standing in her way.

I felt sorta sorry for her, sure, but in the end I decided to ignore her. The biggest pity of all was that the person who happened to notice her was an extra like me. If Kaito were here in my place, he'd probably hold out his sandwich

with a smile and say something like “you start from one end, I’ll start from the other, and we’ll meet in the middle.” I, on the other hand, am just not that generous!

*Groooooowl.*

“Hmm?”

Just as I was passing in front of her, I heard what sounded sort of like a stomach growling. It was pretty distinct, and pretty darn loud too. I was just distracted enough to stop in my tracks, and the tiny girl shot me a look, blushing furiously. She must’ve heard that careless “hmm” I let slip out.

“Uwuu...”

We meet again, uwuu. Is that even a real noise? Are there actually any living organisms on this planet that make that noise? In any case, if I just ignored her and walked away after getting noticed like that, I’d look like some sort of monster. I’m picturing a front-page exposé in the school newspaper: “Local Student Abandons Starving Child; Shunned by Society.” You never know when the media might be lurking around the corner and looking for a scoop.

“Hey, shorty.”

“Wh-What do you want...?”

It felt like my only choice was to say something to her, so I did, but she stared down at the floor and replied in an incredibly meek tone of voice. Man, now it looks like I’m bullying her!

“Want this?”

I dangled my BLT in front of her and her eyes shot right back up again, locking onto it as I waved it back and forth. Not gonna lie, it was pretty funny. She was starting to drool too.

“Y-You mean I can have it?!”

“Hah! As if, moron.”

“Whaaa?!”

Save those expectations for the protagonist. You really think there’s such a

thing as a free lunch in this world? Oh, the naivety!

“Not for free, anyway. Four hundred yen and it’s yours.”

“Wha?! B-But those cost two hundred yen in the store...”

“Hmm? What was that? Got a problem with the price? C’mon, you want it so badly you can practically *taste* it, right? I’ll be just fine eating it myself if you don’t, y’know? C’mon, you want it? You *want* it?!”

I flaunted the sandwich, waggling it right in front of her face. Somebody definitely whispered, “Wow, what a dick” behind me, but *not* my problem! *You people were all perfectly happy to ignore this starving little pipsqueak a minute ago, so get off your high horses and stuff your hypocritical nitpicking where the sun don’t shine!*

“Uwuu...”

Yup, she uwuu’d me again. I guess that’s her special move. She was tearing up a bit too.

“I wanna buy it...”

She sounded really, really reluctant, but she timidly pulled out four hundred yen. (Side note: it’s pretty weird to say that you “want” to buy something when you’re actively in the process of buying it.) But business transcends *all* borders! Even if you talk like a weirdo, a deal’s a deal! This is true righteousness! Witness me, onlookers!

“Sold! Here you go, shorty.”

“Thank you... Wait, huh?”

The runt blinked in confusion. Most likely, she’d felt the cold, hard coins that I slipped into her hand under the sandwich. The three hundred yen that the lunch lady forced on me, that is.

“Keep this between the two of us, ’kay?”

She hesitated, but I forced the sandwich into her hand. I mean, come on, as if I could take money from an elementary schooler! Just ignore the part where I came out a hundred yen ahead!

My lunch was lost, but I kept my cool and walked away. The kid looked dazed, like she didn't quite understand what just happened as she kept glancing back and forth between me and the small change in her hand. I decided to make my exit nice and quick while she was still processing the situation.

"Hey, hold up."

But the lady who manned the school store had other ideas. Apparently she'd sold out while the child and I had our exchange, and now had too much time on her hands for her own good.

"Smooth moves, kid."

"I was just too embarrassed to do it normally."

I was so surprised that she saw through me that I spit out the honest truth before I could stop myself. I'd been trying to make a show of it, but apparently I really suck at ad-libbing! The whole thing turned out pretty nonsensical in the end. Holy crap, the shame!

"Well, aren't you a plain ol' mister nice guy? I had something special tucked away for myself, buuut I *think* I'll sell it to you instead," she said as she set a bread roll on the counter.

"Are you an angel, lady?!"

"...For four hundred yen."

"Are you an extortionist, lady?!"

I bought it. That afternoon, I was reminded once again: you can never trust a salesperson.

❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤

School's out! What a wonderful ring those words have to them! I have no clue who coined the phrase, and I've always sorta wondered what it would mean for school to be "in," but the point is that it always lifts my spirits right the heck up. I guess this is one of those feelings you can only appreciate during adolescence, huh? The older you grow, the more you lose that special spark. It's tragic, really.

"Hey, Kou, doing anything today? Wanna come over to my place?"

“Me go!”

Me + Kaito = best friends! We + play = fun, fun!

Kaito invited me over to his house after homeroom, and I immediately agreed to go. This is totally normal for us—we hang out all the time. I have my doubts, of course. I mean, if he has the time to hang out with me, wouldn’t he be better off using it to hang out with a girl instead? But on the other hand, the way he never gets tired of me’s part of what makes *him* so charming, and part of what makes *me* want to root for him so much. As a general rule, I never turn down his invitations. Not like I have any other obligations, for the most part.

Speaking of after-school pastimes, Kotou’s in the cooking club. Given that she didn’t show up in our classroom the second the bell rang, I figured she probably had club activities keeping her busy. Kotou and Kiryu aside, I know of two other heroines/candidates for Kaito’s affection. One of them’s an underclassman on the track team, and the other’s the president of the student council. Their traits all fit the heroine template to a T, but most of them are pretty much always busy with their various activities. Kaito, meanwhile, isn’t in a club at all, and has an awful lot of time on his hands as a result.

Seeing as he’s the protagonist and all, part of me thinks that he should start up a weird, dubious club (that could only exist in a rom-com like this) and invite all his heroines to join it with him. Considering that they’re all working their hardest in their various clubs and activities, though, pulling them out to join a new one feels like it’d be detrimental to their characters. Worst case, they could lose all their heroine-esque charm!

And besides, rom-com clubs always end up being about sitting around and chatting over snacks, or running around and flirting with each other while supposedly helping people who come to them for advice. What kind of school would approve a club like that in the first place?

In short: the heroines are all busy, so it’s totally natural for me to end up with the golden ticket to Kaito’s house. QED. Note: Kiryu Kyouka went home on her own the moment the bell rang. Seriously, what’s her deal? Get your act together, girl!

❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤

“Heyo, comin’ in!”

I stepped into Kaito’s presumably empty house. Both of his parents were living overseas for work, leaving their entire two-story home for Kaito and his younger sister to share. Sure, it’s as trite of a setup as setups can be, but it’s also awesome, so you won’t see me questioning it.

I end up at his house pretty often, but somehow I have yet to ever actually meet his sister, who’s one year younger than us. Apparently she goes to the same school as us, and since she’s part of the student council, her name crops up every once in a while. Her name *might* be Hikari, or something? I know you have to get the top score in the entrance exam to get into the council as a first-year, so I figure she’s gotta be an honor-student type. Since we’re in different grades, I’ve never had the opportunity to come into contact with Ayase the Younger at school, and her student council work tends to keep her there past the time I leave when I go over to his house. As far as I know, we’ve never even crossed paths.

“Up for a game?”

“Works for me.”

Kaito passed me a controller and loaded a popular racing game up on his TV. We do all sorts of things when we hang out—sometimes we stop for food on the way home, sometimes we just laze around and chat, sometimes we read manga together, sometimes we play video games... Totally mundane stuff all around, really. Incidentally, his game console’s set up in his living room, and his couch is *stupidly* soft. Seriously, this thing’s comfy as hell; I love it.

“By the way, y’know how we’ve got tests coming up soon? Been studying, Kaito?”

“Eh, a bit.”

“Yeah, tests have never really freaked you out, huh?”

“I guess. I mean, Renge-san always helps me study for them.”

“Say what?! You mean to say you’re being taught by the student council president of our beloved Oumei High and the heiress to the Myourenji Corporation, Myourenji Renge?!”

“That was a weirdly expositional way of putting it... And besides, you always show up to our study group too!”

“Irrelevant!”

“Hey! Hands off my controller, you cheater!”

Kaito’s kart fell to the back of the pack. There was just one flaw in my brilliant strategy, though: I couldn’t pay attention to my own controller while I was screwing with his. I got dragged back with him, and we finished neck and neck for last place.

“No way... Were you aiming for this all along, you monster?!”

“Come on, man, you self-destructed and you know it.”

“I want a rematch!”

Kaito poured salt right into the wound, and I shot him a death glare as I set up another round. But, before I could finish, I heard the click of the living room door opening.

“Kaito...?”

It was a girl’s voice. She sounded a bit gloomy, somehow, and the second I heard her, I felt my heart skip a beat.

“Oh, is that you, Hikari? You’re home already?”

Kaito looked surprised to see her. She really must be his sister after all... But no, surely not. It couldn’t be.

“Ah...”

The girl, Ayase Hikari, noticed me. Her eyes widened, and I’m pretty positive I looked exactly as shocked as she did.



“Oh, right, I guess this is probably the first time you two’ve met, huh? This is my friend, Kunugi Kou. Kou, this is my little sister, Hikari.”

“...Hello.”

“I knew it—you’re the guy from this morning...”

Part of me wanted to ask if her mom never taught her how to reply to a polite greeting, but in that moment, I didn’t even have it in me to be flippant. It really wasn’t the time.

“This morning? Did something happen?”

“He, um, sort of saved me.”

Her explanation was, in a word, concise. She probably didn’t want to talk about the details, and who could blame her? I mean, she was the victim of a brutally disturbing attack by a creepy old flasher, of all things! Her uniform was pretty wrinkled, so I figured she’d gone right home after the incident, collapsed into bed out of pure shock, and slept the day away. Yet another trope to add to the pile... I mean, it’s not *entirely* unexpected, yeah, but jeez...

“He did? Nice work, Kou, thanks.”

“Nah, no biggie.”

Man, you’d almost think I was bad at talking to people! Normally I’d be all, like, “What sayeth thee?! Doth this lovely maiden truly be thine kin, Lord Kaito?! Verily, hers is a face that could launch a thousand ships; I might swoon from the shock! I beseech thee, O brother of an angel, grant this humble peasant thine sister’s hand in marriage! Forsooth, forsooth!” or something to that effect, but I wasn’t in even *close* to a jovial enough mood for that sort of act.

The girl from this morning was Kaito’s sister, of all people! In other words, the instant I declared myself to be Ayase Kaito, she—that is, Ayase Hikari—knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was lying. I was absolutely mortified. Like, I’m talking condemned-criminal-being-led-up-the-gallows levels of horror and shame, here! Not that I’d even know what that feels like firsthand.

“Thank you very much for this morning, Kunugi Kou-senpai.”

She wasn't flustered enough to forget the name Kaito introduced me by, at least, and thanked me politely with a deep, formal bow. I happened to notice that her back was totally soaked with sweat.

"I-It's cool."

Yeeep, this is bad. This is all *sorts* of bad. "Little sister" is an *absolutely* valid attribute for a rom-com heroine. They hold a social position unconditionally next to the protagonist from the moment they're born, and they're super effective against the protagonist's sense of self-respect, fostering an irresistible urge to protect them under all circumstances!

Moreover, with Japan's birth rate absolutely in the pits thanks to the economic slump and the nation effectively operating under a self-imposed one-child-per-family policy, little sisters are gradually becoming more and more of an endangered species! No doubt about it, a little sister would be an indispensable addition to Kaito's rom-com harem. The fact that they're related by blood makes it a forbidden relationship, sure, but that just ups the odds that she'll end up being a tsundere on top of it all!

All that said, if the protagonist's little sister ends up getting to know his background character of a best friend without the protagonist around to mediate, it's very possible that bloodthirsty readers could slut-shame her to hell and back, and send her plummeting in the popularity polls! Don't even get me started on how bad it'd be if they ended up in a hero/heroine relationship after the extra saved the sister from a rampaging nutjob (a nut of such unparalleled talent, he's taken his nuttiness and made a career out of it). Yup, no choice; gotta push those two together... *Ahem, ahem!*

"Whoops, just remembered! Got stuff to do! Bye-bye!"

My thought process was a jumbled mess, and I found myself excusing my way out of the situation before I knew it. I was pretty sure that I'd successfully pulled the wool over their eyes with that bit of ridiculous fast-talking. Pulling a move like that's *supposed* to be the protagonist's special privilege, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Granted, I only ended up in this unnecessary and incredibly awkward situation by claiming Ayase Kaito's name to trick his sister, but if I didn't smooth it all over with a bit more trickery on top

of it, I knew for a fact that the problem would spiral *horribly* out of control.

But then— —Hey, Koh. Would you mind meeting up with my sister sometime?

—Your sister?

—Yeah. I told her a bit about you, and I guess she wants to meet you in person now.

“Ugh!”

A vivid image—a scene from long ago—flashed through my mind, and it felt like something was trying to crawl its way up from the depths of my heart and into my throat. I clasped a hand over my mouth without even realizing it. Glancing over, I found Kaito and his sister both staring at me in shock.

“Whoa, hey! What’s wrong, Kou?! You’re super pale, and you’re sweating like crazy...”

“It’s nothing! Later!”

I practically fled the Ayase household, sprinting down the street until I stumbled upon a park. I dashed into the public restroom, slumped over a toilet, and puked my guts out.

—Hee hee! You certainly are a funny person, Koh.

I gasped and heaved for breath. What the hell am I doing? She’s not *her*. She’s nothing like *her*. She’s another little sister, and that’s *all*. Why the hell am I freaking out like this...?

But, for whatever reason...the memories flooded back. I ran away. I tried to forget. I thought I had forgotten, long ago, but they wouldn’t stop. That’s not me anymore! I’m nothing! I’m a totally average, pointless background character who only exists to be someone’s best friend—I’m just an extra! I’m like the parsley you push off to the side of your plate and never bother eating!

—Koh, please...care of...brother...

“*AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!*”

I screamed. All I could do was scream. Whether it was a howl of remorse, of

terror, or rage, I couldn’t say. It was a deluge of pure, incoherent emotion, overflowing from my mouth without end.

Suddenly, a sharp crack brought me back to my senses.

I’d shattered the toilet seat with my bare hands.

# Life Goes On, Like It or Not I got home...somehow. All of a sudden I was waking up in my apartment, still wearing my uniform, with no clear memory of how I made it back. My head throbbed a bit as I listlessly hauled myself upright, but compared to the night before, it was totally tolerable. I recover from that sort of stuff pretty darn quickly, if I do say so myself.

I wasn't exactly *raring* to greet the new day, but at the very least I'd recovered enough to function on a basic level. I figured it was time to make like a student and go to school. As I was heading out the door, though, a thought came to me, so I glanced at my phone. *Yeeeup, ten in the morning. Unambiguously late*. Probably shouldn't have bothered taking a shower after I got up, but I was absolutely drenched with sweat and I had to draw the line *somewhere*.

"Oh, huh. I missed a call?"

According to my phone, Kaito tried to call me at some point. He'd sent a text after I failed to pick up, which read: "You left your bag at my place last night." Which, in retrospect, would explain why I felt so unburdened: I actually *was* empty-handed.

I sent him a text in reply: "Sorry, just noticed. Bring it to school for me?"

I knew he was probably in class, but I didn't let that stop me. If he'd happened to forget to put his phone on silent, he'd probably get chewed out. Given the time, I figured he was probably partway through Japanese class, which just so happens to be led by a certain short-fused, perpetually single teacher who's already made a minor appearance thus far. She's young and has looks to spare, but her impatience to get married has driven her into a *bit* of a self-sabotaging

frenzy. She is, in other words, another cliché character archetype to toss onto the pile. I was sure that if Kaito's phone rang in front of her, she'd use it as a chance to vent her frustrations at him. *Mwa ha ha ha!*

Huh? Wait a second. If his phone rings and she sees my text, wouldn't *I* be the one she'd explode at? I mean, I'm the guy who's casually sending texts when I'm supposed to be in class.

*Oh, crap. Oooooh, crap! Code red! I do* not *wanna get lectured two days in a row!* I'd fallen into serious danger of getting demoted from "best friend extra" to "problem student," and being a "problem student" is pretty much synonymous with being one misstep away from fast-tracking my way onto the teacher route!

I mean, sure, having the best friend fall hopelessly in love with his teacher and get brutally rejected is certainly a perfectly acceptable rom-com development, assuming the teacher isn't already part of the harem herself. It, like, humanizes the best friend, and gives the audience a chance to see his vulnerable side, and all that jazz. But the plot had not progressed *nearly* enough for that sort of thing to transpire! If you were to jump right into the best friend episode this early in the game, it's totally possible that he'd get written out of the rest of the story without ever actually getting to support the protagonist!

My mindset did a complete 180 and I prayed feverishly that our teacher didn't catch that text after all. A couple seconds later, my phone beeped.

*Kaito: Left it at home.*

"Phew... Huh?"

I was relieved that he apparently didn't get caught, for a moment, but wait, at home? He left it...at home...?

"He left it at home?!"

Meaning: my bag's currently lying abandoned in the Ayase household?!

*Kaito: Hikari's home, so you can go get it yourself.*

*Gaaaaahhhhhhhhhh?!*

I just barely held a scream in after that last text. She stayed home from school

to watch over my bag?! Why in the hell would she do that?! There's being considerate, and then there's being *way too* considerate in a weird and totally unhelpful direction!

*Kou: why?!*

*Kaito: She said she's sick.*

Not that part! I mean, okay, that part too, but no!

*Kou: you couldn't have brought it to school with you?!*

*Kaito: Lol nope Kou: so what, you expect your sick sister to wait on me?!*

*Kaito: Hikari said she was fine with it.*

*What?! What's fine?! Don't give me that crap, man!* Gaaah, whatever—standing around sending texts wasn't gonna get me anywhere!

I figured I might as well just call him, but before I could even process that idea, he actually called me instead. *Heheheh, excellent work, best friend! We really are on the same wavelength!*

"Hey, Kaito! The hell does—"

"Kunugi."

"...O-Oh."

"You've got some nerve, showing up late two days in a row."

"D-D-D-Daimon-sensei?!"

"I've got the gist of the situation. Go pick up your bag, then get your ass to school on the double!"

Why did she know about the situation? Why was she letting me go get my bag? Why wasn't she telling me to get my ass to school right *this* instant?!

"Understand?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

It was the end of the line for me. I mean, I couldn't exactly weasel my way out of a direct order from my teacher. I felt the blood drain from my face, and as despair set in, I heard Daimon-sensei say "Thanks, Ayase" as she passed the

phone back to Kaito.

"So, uhh... I'm hanging up now," said Kaito.

"'Hanging up now' my ass, you traitor! What kind of monster sells his best friend out to his teacher?! Dammit, that old bag's been on the shelf for so long that her mind's gone twisted! We're young and free, and that pisses her off! This is *exactly* why she can't find a husband!"

"Kou..."

"What?!"

"I'm so sorry. You're on speakerphone."

He hung up.

".....Wha?"

It took me several long, painful seconds to parse his last words. *Speakerphone? Does that mean what I think it means? It does, doesn't it? It totally means* exactly *what I think it does. But wait, no, c'mon, seriously? She heard all that? Then, that means...*

"Yup. I'm super dead."

*She's gonna bring the iron fist of rage down upon me, no question about it.* That would definitely count as corporal punishment, but it's a pipe dream to think that'd stop her! For every misdeed, a price must be paid—that's the cardinal rule of society. Not only did I have to go visit Kaito's house and engage with his little sister to get my bag, I had to march right over to school to get the crap beaten out of me immediately after.

"Could this day get any more cursed...?"

A part of me couldn't help but wish I'd just slept the entire day away.

❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤

"Finally made it..."

I heaved a heavy sigh as I wiped the sweat from my brow. The Ayase household: at a glance it looked like any other family home, but I knew for a fact that Ayase Hikari lurked somewhere within, waiting for me. As I reached a

trembling finger out towards the intercom, it occurred to me that this was the first opportunity we'd had to really speak with each other since we met the previous morning.

C'mon, stop freaking out! I might've tossed cookies yesterday, sure, but that was just because it all happened so suddenly! I've had plenty of time to prepare myself today; it'll be fine!

Thinking about our first meeting made me realize something strange: I'd passed by the place where it happened on the way to her house, and in spite of the rampaging pervert who was caught in the area the day before, there wasn't a single stranger-danger warning sign or poster to be seen. I sort of assumed it'd be pretty big news, but apparently word had yet to spread about it. Either that, or maybe incidents like that happen so regularly around here that it wasn't even newsworthy? Was that disaster just the tip of the iceberg?

"Nah, that can't possibly be it. No way."

*Stay focused, Kunugi Kou! No more weird mental tangents! That guy was just a gag character, you'll never have to meet him again*! Or so I told myself—my life would never be the same if I didn't believe that.

"Gah, crap, stop it! Don't give him a second thought! Block that memory out! I *just* have to get my bag. As long as I can get my bag back, everything'll work out just fine."

The streaker's horrifying silhouette loomed large in my mind, but I drove it away and finally pushed the intercom's call button. It made a cheerful "ding-dong!" noise, and a few seconds later, I heard a reply.

"Yes?"

It was a girl's voice. Considering my reaction the night before, I was surprised by how normal she sounded—perhaps due to the machine mediating our conversation.

"Hey, it's Kunugi. Kaito's friend? Apparently I left my bag here."

I answered a bit nervously and heard a quiet gasp from the intercom.

"I'll be right there, Senpai!"

The front door opened just a moment later to reveal (unsurprisingly) the little sister of Ayase Kaito: Ayase Hikari. She was exactly as pretty as Kaito was handsome, and she seemed a bit nervous as she peeked out the door at me.

“Hmm?”

“Um, Senpai...?”

“Hmmmmm?” I felt no sign whatsoever of the nausea-inducing allergic reaction from yesterday. “You’re Ayase Hikari, right? Like, for real?”

“Um, yes?”

“Ooooh? Hmm? Hmm. Gotcha, gotcha!”

“Ah, ouch!”

I was so overjoyed that I gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder. Long story short, it seemed my allergy had been cured! She was the same girl from the day before, no doubt about it. She had the same brown hair as Kaito, cut just a bit above her shoulders, and her big, round eyes gave her more of a cute sort of image than a beautiful one. But when all was said and done, she was *normal*. Absolutely unremarkable. She was cute, she was the protagonist’s sister, and she got chased around the block by a naked old man the day before, but she was still normal. Seeing her in that new light, I realized there was nothing for me to be scared of at all.

“Okay, kind of in a rush here, so I’ll just grab my bag and—”

“Please, come inside for a moment!”

“My... My bag...?”

*Huh? Wait, I’m here to get my bag, right? Why’s she inviting me in?*

While I was busy scratching my head in befuddlement, she disappeared into her house. I glanced around, but there was no sign of my bag anywhere I could see from the entryway.

“Th-Thanks for having me?”

*I guess this is fine? Yeah, this is fine.* I followed her into the living room, where I found her fussing about with something in the connected kitchen.

“Are you a tea drinker, Senpai?”

“Umm, nah, not really.”

“Oh, okay. Coffee, then?”

“Not a fan. You really don’t have to bother; if I can just get my bag, I’ll—”

“Okay, water it is! I’m sorry, I’d offer you something more interesting, but we’re fresh out of soda. I should’ve stocked up last time I was at the store.”

She went over to the sink and filled up a glass with water. It sort of felt like she was using the sound of the tap as an excuse to ignore me.

“Ah, thanks.”

Apparently she’d already brewed some tea for herself, which she set out on the living room table along with my glass of water. She sat down, and I followed her lead, pulling out a chair across from her. Then she just sorta...stared at me. It was *incredibly* uncomfortable.

“Senpai?”

“Ah, yeah?”

“Thank you so much for yesterday.”

“Oh, you mean with the creepy old dude?”

“Please don’t talk about him. I’m...trying to forget.”

“Yeah, fair enough.”

I was right with her on that one, but the more I tried to forget about him, the clearer the image grew. I tried to at least pixelate him out in my mind’s eye, but somehow that just made the whole thing even grosser. Why do creeps like that have to exist in the first place?! In any case, it didn’t seem like she was done talking. She began to speak again, slowly and nervously, like she was choosing each word with great care.

“I want to do something for you...to thank you.”

“Nah, it’s cool.”

“But you saved me!”

“It was more of a self-defense sorta situation from my perspective.”

It was simply my survival instincts that made me kick the guy, so I couldn’t exactly pretend like I was a hero. Also, do the two of us have absolutely nothing in common to talk about other than *him*, or what? It felt like I was gonna start hallucinating a creepy old dude trying to set the two of us up at any second—and of course, no sooner had I thought that than a shoulder-angel-sized old creeper drifted through the air between us. My symptoms were terminal.

“Hey, piss off!” I shouted internally, and he vanished as quickly as he’d appeared. Evil spirit: vanquished! *All right, time to change the topic while I have the chance!*

“So, on a completely different note...” I continued.

“Yes?”

“Err, don’t you have to go to school today?” I asked on the spur of the moment, and realized a second later that it was a terrible move. Her expression clouded over and she stared at the floor.

“I’m...too scared to go outside.”

No further explanation was needed. I mean, who wouldn’t have the heebie-jeebies about going outside, or get a bit scared of random guys on the street after running into a perverted old... OLD MAAAAAAN?! *Oh god, I thought I got rid of him, but he’s back! And he’s giving me a thumbs-up?! Out! Out, I say!*

“Crap, this isn’t working...” I mumbled to myself.

“Huh?” Apparently she overheard me.

“If I wanna go back to my life of peace, that old dude’s gonna have to go...”

“‘Old dude’?”

“As long as you’re shackled by your old dude trauma, we’re both stuck with him for life! Old sleazebag! *Literally* forever! You get me, right?!”

“No, I really don’t!”

“Look, just hear me out on this. Imagine your best friend dies, okay?”

“Umm, okay?”

“Right, your best friend...” *Dies*... I froze, my mouth still half-open. Hikari cocked her head in confusion. Something about the way she was looking at me made me feel a strange, crushing sensation deep inside my chest...

“...Senpai?”

“Ah, no, I mean... Forget the ‘best friend’ thing. Imagine, um, some random person you see out on the street every once in a while dies all of a sudden.”

“This feels a lot less personal now.”

“Like hell it does! All life is equally precious!”

“R-Right, that’s true.”

I was getting desperate, and she looked a little weirded out. Okay, no, *extremely* weirded out.

“So, imagine you end up going to that person’s funeral.”

“I don’t think I’d get invited to a funeral for a person I barely knew, though...”

“Let’s just say you were. Roll with it.”

“Umm, okay, I guess. This is getting harder and harder to imagine, but I’ll do my best.”

*This girl’s poking holes in my hypothetical! At least let me finish the setup without interrupting, please!* She said that she’d do her best, though, so I decided to give it another go and see what happens.

“So you’re at the funeral, okay? You end up seeing their body in the casket. Wouldn’t that make you think, like, ‘Oh, wow, this person’s dead’?”

“I think I’d realize they were dead at the point I got invited to their funeral, actually.”

“No, I mean, like, at that point, you’d really *feel* it.”

“I’d ‘feel’ it...? Okay, I think I understand.” Man, she’s really good at keeping her cool. Maybe even a bit pragmatic? Is that just what kids are like these days?

“But you’d still have all your memories of that person. Like, you’d always think, ‘Oh, right, we always chatted at that one place’ or whatever.”

“Right.”

“So, as long as you have those memories, that person will still be alive somewhere in your heart. Even if they’re only a memory, they’ll never disappear.”

“I guess so. Yeah, that makes sense.”

She nodded, apparently convinced. The cool, pragmatic girl and I had transcended our differences and reached an understanding. You see this sort of logic in all sorts of grand, moving tales. As long as you don’t forget those you’ve lost, they’ll live on forever; you’ll carry them along with you. Comes up all the time, right? But...

“But that means that as long as you haven’t forgotten that creepy, perverted dude, he’ll live on inside you forever!”

“*What?!*”

“Even if he gets locked up for life, in your heart, he’ll always be right by your side!”

“What kind of logic is that?!”

“Even if he’s socially dead and buried, the scars he left in the minds of his victims will remain forevermore!”

“That’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard!”

She was starting to tear up. *I know, right? Right?! And, err, sorry. This is excruciating for me too, for whatever that’s worth.*

“Look, I don’t like it any more than you do. I was just going with the flow when I saved you, but speaking as someone who’s carrying the same freaky streaker on my back as you, I wanna get rid of him as soon as possible.”

“Y-You shouldn’t commit any crimes, okay?”

“Like hell I would! Do you have any idea how stupid that’d be?! If I actually, *literally* killed the guy, I’d end up in the books as the Old Man Slayer! No way I could stand having that creeper go down on my permanent record!”

There’d be no hope left for me if I ended up in that situation! Death would be

the only option, but even if I killed myself, he'd totally haunt me beyond the grave. I don't even wanna think about having my obituary read: "Driven to suicide by mental trauma of murdering a middle-aged pervert"!

"Okay, look, this is getting grim. Let's talk about something happy for a change. Any good topics come to mind, Ayase Hikari?"

"Hmm, good topics... Actually, first of all— 'Ayase Hikari'?"

"Huh? That's your name, isn't it?"

"It is, yeah, but isn't it kind of weird to casually call someone by their full name?"

"Countless generations of ancestors passed your last name down to you, and your parents put love and care into picking out your first name! You'd scorn all of their good intentions?!"

"That's not what I meant at all!"

Ayase Hikari's face flushed with indignation. *My effort to liven up the conversation was a rousing success!* I thought, smirking like a nihilistic mastermind whose plan was going, for lack of better words, just as planned.

"Okay then, I'll call you Ayase."

"My last name, huh?"

"Countless generations of ancestors passed your—"

"I'm not scorning them! I wouldn't mock my ancestors!"

"Then what's the problem?"

"...Fine, you win." Ayase pouted for some reason. *C'mon, this conversation's going nowhere!*

"Anyway, happy topics! You've gotta have something in mind, right?"

"Not off the top of my head, no..."

"Oh! Make it something about guys, if you can. You've got a nasty image of men planted in your head right now, so it'd be best if you could overwrite it with a good one."

“That just makes this even harder... Ah.”

She suddenly looked back up at me, as if a thought had just struck her. Our eyes met for the umpteenth time that day, and for just an instant I felt an unnerving chill flash through my body. The blood drained from my face in a flash. Ayase, meanwhile, was faintly blushing.

“There’s, well, someone I’m a bit interested in...”

*Oh, crap*. An immediate sense of dread came over me. Being the best friend of a thickheaded protagonist means that you can’t be thickheaded yourself, or else the entire plot grinds to a halt. That’s why I’ve been trying my best to stay aware of everyone’s emotional subtleties, and that’s why I could tell where she was going with this. Maybe my nerves were making me read too much into it, but at the very least the warning signs were clear. Before I knew it, the same nauseous sensation I’d felt the day before was beginning to overwhelm me again.

“I, um...”

A voice inside of me screamed: *Stop!* Not for Ayase’s sake—for my own. My faint memories of a joyous yet cruel time long past were once again coming back to me. Her gaze was burning my heart to ashes.

“Senpai, when you saved me, I—”

*Think. Think.* Think! *How can I stop her? How can I change her mind? How can I run away from all this?* I thought and thought, but the more I focused, the more my mind was dominated by one image—that day, the village, the girl, and...

“*STOP!*”

I shouted before I could stop myself. I wasn’t acting on any sort of logic. I was just flailing wildly to suppress the memories that were rising up within me. But somehow, it actually worked. Ayase froze, her sentence unfinished, and stared at me in shock.

“Uh, umm... Senpai...?”

“Ah, no, I mean...”

Ayase sounded shaken, and I faltered as well, mumbling incoherently. I told myself once more: the girl in front of me is Ayase Hikari. She's just a girl who's a little younger than me, that's all. A perfectly normal girl. Drowning out or evading her words out of pure selfishness would be incredibly dishonest of me. And yet...

"Well, y'know, we can think up a better method some other time."

I took advantage of her hesitation and dodged the topic. *God, I'm pathetic.* What kind of garbage sidekick steamrolls the protagonist's sister to keep her feelings ambiguous?

"I guess we can, yeah."

I couldn't quite tell whether she'd caught on to my intentions, but she mumbled a quiet reply and took a sip of her tea. The conversation ground to a halt as she slowly savored it. It sort of felt like she was trying to take a moment to cool off and collect herself.

"So, yeah, long story short: you can't let that old dude tie you down anymore."

"I still can't bring myself to go outside, though... I'm scared of what might happen, with all the men out there..."

Her worries were completely reasonable. They say if you find one cockroach in your house, it's pretty much guaranteed there's a whole nest of them hidden just out of sight, and that logic extends beyond the realm of household pests. There are seven and a half billion people on this planet, so, if anything, it was surprising she'd only met one degenerate flasher so far. Three cheers for miracles, I guess.

"Aren't your friends worried about you?"

"I guess they might be, but..." She trailed off, looking a bit shaken, before hanging her head disconsolately, her hands faintly trembling. I realized at that point that pushing my agenda any further would probably just cause her more pain. It's not like I'm a trained counselor in the first place.

I took that thought process a step further and reminded myself that I'm also not the protagonist. Girls with Ayase's heroine aura belong alongside a

legendary holy warrior, or at least a proper main character. She needed a *real* hero to save her from the demonic old man who was haunting her. And, guess what? It was her lucky day! I knew just the hero—and he happened to be closer to her than anyone else.

"You've got your brother there for you, right? Kaito, I mean. You'd be fine if he was around, wouldn't you?"

"I...suppose. He's family, so of course I don't get scared talking with him."

"Okay then, how 'bout you start by going out somewhere with him?"

"With Kaito?"

"Why not? You two're pretty close, right?"

She looked a bit put off by that one. I was caught off guard by that reaction in turn and leaned forward.

"Wait, you're not? Do you guys not get along?"

"No, it's not like that." She shifted uncomfortably.

"You make his lunch every day, right?"

"Well, yeah, since cooking's one of my chores."

"Don't you love him?"

"Love him?"

"You know, like, as a *guy*."

"Absolutely not!"

She wasn't just being shy about it. She was genuinely, overtly indignant, and her shout almost sent me toppling over backwards, chair and all. But come on, she's the protagonist's sister in a rom-com, right? Why *wouldn't* she have a thing for her brother? I mean, okay, from a "common sense" perspective, blood relatives being into each other like that's pretty out there. I totally get why she'd be reluctant to admit it to some random guy she'd only just met.

Even so, you'd think that when I brought it up she'd jump right into tsundere mode, or protest a bit *too* much, or something. Y'know, something to foreshadow that classic rom-com plot twist! Judging by her reaction alone, I'd

almost think that Ayase actually, honestly isn't crushing on her brother, but that's impossible! There's no such thing as a little sister who's not into her big bro!

Right around that point, Ayase sighed and rolled her eyes. She might've realized what I was thinking.

"Do you have any siblings, Senpai?"

"Nope, sure don't."

"Then I guess it makes sense you wouldn't know this. Look, it might be true that siblings are 'special' to each other, in a sense, but generally speaking, most people find their siblings more 'obnoxious' than anything else."

*Whoa! Did she seriously just say that?! I mean, yeah, you hear that sometimes, but not from a little sister! Little sister characters aren't supposed to talk like that!*

"We're living alone together right now because of family circumstances, but we don't really talk much at all."

*Doesn't she care about the popularity poll?! She knows this is gonna get her flamed by the fans, right?!*

"I mean, we don't have much to talk about to begin with."

*All tsun! No dere!*

"Every once in a while he asks me if I want to take a bath with him, though."

*Ooof, yeah, sounds like him. That's kinda weird, not gonna lie.*

"Well, um," I began, trying to get back to the core issue. "Anyway, the goal here is rehabilitation! Why not start by getting used to being around your brother, and... Um... Right..."

The ship showed absolutely no signs of sailing whatsoever, and as that fact gradually sank in, I decided that it was probably about time to move the conversation along. Sorry, Kaito. I don't know if I'll be able to look you in the eye from now on...

"A-Anyway, you can start by getting used to your brother, then move on to

someone else you're pretty close to. Like, yeah, one of your guy friends or something. You...have some of those, right?"

"Guy friends, huh...?"

"Or, like, a boyfriend or something."

"...I don't have one." She glowered at me. Right, okay, point taken. My bad.

If I were the protagonist, now's the bit where I'd be like (imagine this next part in a sexy voice) "You don't? What a waste! And you're *such* a beauty!" Then she'd blush and get all flustered, probably. Unfortunately, though, I'm *not* the protagonist, and my voice isn't even slightly sexy.

"Oh. Makes sense."

"What does that mean?"

"Huh?"

"Why does it 'make sense' that I don't have a boyfriend?"

Her glower evolved into a full-on glare. Guess implying that it was only natural she wouldn't be in a relationship must've touched a nerve? She looked pretty pissed.

"So, what, I'm totally unattractive? Is that it?"

Oooh, okay, I get it now. My thoughtless comment must've wounded her pride.

"No, that's not what I meant," I said, trying to recover. "I just figured that, y'know, you just started high school and all, so it figures you wouldn't have one yet."

"I'm actually quite popular, I'll have you know! I've been asked out and gotten love letters a bunch of times."

"Oh, huh. That's pretty impressive."

Of course, what's *really* impressive is that people are still sending love letters in this day and age. Never got one myself, so I wouldn't know. Wonder if Kaito has? Wouldn't surprise me, but I'm not actually sure. Maybe I should rifle through his bag sometime soon.

“Thinking about all that is just frightening me all over again. I have a feeling some of the guys who asked me out or wrote those letters were, uh, sort of nasty.”

“Ahh, yeah, I could see that. Like, imagine if you had a supernatural power to make the guys around you get so turned on, they turn into flashers! That’d majorly tip the scales in favor of you running into that sort of situation again.”

“You go off on some pretty bizarre tangents sometimes, Senpai. Superpowers aren’t real, you know?”

“Exactly! Superpowers aren’t real, ergo, the odds of you getting assaulted by some random person are really low!”

Ayase’s eyes widened, and she smiled. I think she bought it.

“You have a really weird way of comforting people.”

“Are you not impressed?”

“...Thank you.”

“Wait, what?”

“You were trying to make me feel better, right? I appreciate it.”

Ayase smiled brightly. A moment later, she stood up and walked over to the TV in the living room. She reached behind it and pulled out a plastic bag.

“What’s that?”

I watched her absentmindedly—right up until she pulled a certain something out of the bag, and I shouted.

“My bag?!”

“Yup!”

She agreed, apparently seeing nothing wrong with the situation.

“Why was it back *there?!*”

“I thought you’d leave if I gave it back right away, so I hid it.”

*She hid it...? Okay, but why?* Before I had the chance to question her, Ayase tucked my bag under her arm and pulled out her smartphone.

“Will you give me your number, Senpai?”

“Huh? Why?”

This time I questioned her immediately, and got an intense stare in response.

“You’re going to help me wipe that man from my memory, aren’t you? I’ll have to get in touch with you for that.”

“Wait, I am?”

“You are.”

Pressured by her smile, I reluctantly pulled out my phone, opened up my contacts menu, and froze.

“Senpai?”

“Ah, um...”

I thought for a moment, then made a proposal.

“I’m fine with giving you my number, but let’s stick to actual calls, okay?”

“Actual calls? So, no texting or email?”

She frowned, unable to figure out what I was aiming for.

“You know what they say: you get about seventy percent less information through text than you would in person. Considering your current state, I’m sorta worried I’ll send a careless message and make things even worse.”

“All right, then. It’s better than the alternative, at least.”

My logic was flimsy at best, but Ayase seemed satisfied, and I ended up giving her my phone number while keeping my email private. As I stepped away from her, she mumbled something so quietly, I couldn’t make it out at all. *Meh, no reason to pry. Probably better off not hearing it anyway.*

“’Kay, sorry to bother you. Oh, and thanks for the bag.”

“You’re welcome, Senpai.”

She passed me my bag, and we said our goodbyes. Definitely not letting her keep me here any longer than she already has.

“I’ll give you a call sometime soon,” she added.

“...Right.”

“Oh, and Senpai?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll do my best to get through this. So, um... If anything happens, will you come save me again?”

“Doesn’t have to be me, does it? I mean, you could ask Kaito, or Kaito, or maybe Kaito...”

“If I know you’re watching over me, it’ll help me stay motivated to get better.”

“...Oh? Well in that case, I’ll do what I can.”

“Great! I’ll be counting on you, Senpai.”

Ayase grinned, and I returned the smile with a slightly strained one of my own. Then I got the heck out of the Ayase household. A block or two away, I paused for a moment to sigh.

“Ayase Hikari, huh? Man...”

I thought about her as I strolled towards school, weighed down by my bag once more. On one hand, she seemed totally fine when she was talking to me; on the other, she was an honor student on the student council, and was skipping school in spite of the pressure to perform I had to assume she felt. It seemed safe to say her emotional wounds were a lot deeper than I could perceive on a surface level. Resolving them would take a lot of time and a lot of work, so I had a lot of thinking to do about what the best way to go about that would be.

Something about Ayase reminded me of *her*. Their personalities were totally different. They were both beautiful, sure, but that aside, they honestly didn’t even look that similar. Yet still, somehow, something I couldn’t pin down made me associate the two of them with each other. The one thing I knew for sure was that I should do as much as I could to not get involved with her.

Nothing good could come of getting involved with Ayase Hikari. It’d end in disaster. Just like it did for *her*.

# History Repeats Itself “Siddown.”

“Eep.”

Kunugi Kou checked in at the student counseling room! I tweeted a message out to my internal social network as I sat down on Sensei’s orders. It got precisely zero likes.

“Why’re you sitting by the door? C’mon, there’s plenty of room back here.”

“Oh, y’know, just didn’t want to waste time walking all the way—”

“And since when have you ever been in a hurry, Mister Showed-Up-Late-Twice-in-a-Row?”

“That’s not what I—”

“Siddown. And shut up.”

“...Okay.”

So much for securing an escape route. I ended up sitting *exactly* where I didn’t want to be (waaay in the back of the room, by the windows, with my teacher positioned directly between me and the door). Daimon-sensei (thirtyish, unmarried, pretty-hot-but-also-scary, and dragged down by all sorts of personality defects) sat across from me.

“First off, I’ve got a question.”

“Okay?”

“Why’d you come in through the back gate?”

“...”

I glanced away awkwardly, but judging by the way her glare was burning a hole in me, she had no intention of letting me dodge the question.

“Why. Did you. Come in. Through. The back gate?” she asked again. Yup, seems we’re not moving on until she gets her answer.

“Y’know how every once in a while you sorta just feel like changing up your routine?”

“You were three hours late, and you just *happened* to feel like changing things up.”

“I knew you’d be waiting for me at the front gate so I was trying to dodge you by sneaking in through the back.” *Wha? Crap!* Her tone of voice was so loaded with pressure, I accidentally told the truth on reflex!

A handy-dandy summary of the events that led me to this point, for reference: Arrive at school → Notice Daimon-sensei staking out the front gate → Circle around to the back gate → Climb over the fence; Daimon-sensei’s there too, *somehow* (biggest mystery of the year) → Get hauled off to the student counseling room → Arrive at my current predicament.

Seriously, though, I was *positive* I had seen her at the front gate! How she caught me anyway’s anyone’s guess.

“You knew, huh? You *knew*.”

Oh, right, I guess I sorta let the fact that I saw her slip by saying that. Whoopsie-daisy~☆

...Wait, wait, wait. She knows I saw her?! “Whoopsie-daisy” my ass! Since when was I that big a moron?! She looked so serious, her glare was making me shiver! *How do I get out of this?! What the hell am I supposed to do?!*

“I’m so sorry...”

I apologized on instinct alone before I even had the chance to think about it! And by “apologized,” I mean full-on, face-pressed-to-the-desk supplication.

“...Ayase explained the situation to me, so I understand why you were late.”

I assumed she was talking about Ayase the Elder. Or rather, Ayase the Protag. Or rather, Ayase the War Criminal Antihero who put the stupid call on speakerphone.

“But still, forgetting your bag at his house was your own mistake. You see where I’m coming from, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“Then, of course, there’s the part where you shit-talked me.”

“Okay, lemme explain—”

“What was it you said...? I’m ‘an old bag’ who’s ‘been on the shelf for so long her mind’s gone twisted’...?”

Daimon-sensei, no! You’re just hurting yourself by repeating it! Why did I even say something that horrible?! I’ve watched enough bad TV to know that all that being-of-marriageable-age stuff’s a really sensitive subject for some adults! *God, what the hell is wrong with me?!*

“So anyway, consider yourself signed up for summer school.” *This stupid old bag!*

“Wait, what?! But we’re still three weeks off from finals! Aren’t you the one who told us that summer school’s a special privilege for people who fail their tests?! By the way, I’ve heard you have to score less than forty percent to fail!”

“Whether or not you fail your tests and whether or not you explain the summer school system back to me, you’re still going. Congratulations.” She smirked at me. “See, Oumei High gives homeroom teachers the authority to send problem children in their classes who don’t know right from wrong to summer school, regardless of their grades. I’m pulling that authority on you.”

“N-No, don’t! Please, don’t do this to me! Do you realize how precious summer vacation is to high schoolers?!”

“I get one week of summer vacation total. Problem?”

“I’m so very, very sorry!”

Holy crap, working in a public school sounds awful! No wonder she can’t find a spouse! Is that how it works for all adults? Jeez!

“B-But, Daimon-sensei?”

“What?”

“Shouldn’t you be in class right now?”

It was just about time for fourth period to start, and I didn’t really think she had the time to be loitering around in a place like this (read: prison). And despite the fact that I was absolutely, indisputably in the right for questioning it...

“I don’t wanna hear that from a guy who skipped three of my classes two days in a row.”

My homeroom teacher (who also happened to teach Japanese, as well as modern and classical literature) smiled the sort of smile that tells you you’re absolutely screwed. I felt like an innocent little lamb getting stared down by a hungry wolf. *I’m not coughing up blood, am I? Eyes haven’t rolled back into my head? Still alive in there, Kou? Kou?!*

“I’ll be spending all day today whipping you into shape with remedial lessons. That’s in my jurisdiction as your homeroom teacher too.”

Her smile took on a sadistic edge. This school gives its teachers way too much authority, seriously. I figured her lessons were already over for the day, so she was totally free to stick around and keep me in line. As for the other classes I was supposed to go to that afternoon, apparently Japanese lessons took priority in her mind, so she couldn’t care less if I missed them.

*My* mind, however, was occupied by a far more serious matter. Something so incredibly grave and weighty it blew everything else we’d discussed out of the water.

“‘Whip you into shape’ sounds kinda dirty, doesn’t it?”

“Drop dead.”

“Rude!”

She knows I’m supposed to be a student, right?! Wait, not “supposed to be”—I’m an actual, genuine student here! What kind of teacher tells their students to drop dead?! “What, you can say anything just ’cause I sexually harassed you a little bit, is that how this works?!” ...I screamed, internally.

I admit it: the fault was mine, and mine alone. And the fact that I acknowledged I was at fault meant that I sure as heck didn’t have the guts to complain. If a main character-type was sitting here instead of me, I bet Sensei would’ve said something like, “H-Hey, dummy, you can’t say stuff like that to your teacher! You’re my student! We can’t! Not until you graduate... I, I mean, no! Aww, what’re you making me say, you little rapscallion?” or whatever. Asking an extra to get that sort of reaction out of their beautiful shrew of a

teacher's asking too much, though.

"I've got enough worksheets ready for you to last us for *days*."

That whole time I'd been shooting the occasional uncomfortable glance at a veritable mountain of papers she had beside her, and she plopped it all onto my desk. Yup, looks like those were for me after all. Great.

"*This* is whipping me into shape? We'll be here all day!"

"You stupid or something? *I* don't have that sort of time. *You'll* be here all day. I'll come check on the room when you're done, so be sure to clean up."

"What kind of teacher tells their students to drop dead, calls them stupid, then dumps a load of paperwork on them?! A bad one, that's what! Hey, you listening?!"

She wasn't, because she'd already left. This was supposed to be a makeup lesson? It barely counted as a lesson at all! She just left me in the counseling room... All alone...

"Heh..."

I couldn't hold it in.

"Heheheh..."

"It" being, of course...

"Hee hee... Ha ha ha ha! AAAHA HA HA HA HA HA!"

...Triumphant, ebullient laughter! I did it! I *did* it! A winner is me! *Hell* yeah!

I mean, come on, if this didn't count as a huge victory, what would?! I escaped the watchful eye of my harpy of a prison guard! Dread incarnate has left the room! Without anyone around to watch me, I can half-ass my way through these worksheets in no time, spend the rest of the day slacking off, and declare victory! Summer school still sounds like it's gonna totally suck, but it also sounds like a really background character sorta thing to end up in, so screw it, that's a win too! Worst-case scenario, I can just ditch!

"HAAA HA HA HA HA HA! WAA HA HA HA HA HA! HYAA HA HA HA HA!"

"*Shaddup!*"

“Right! Sorry!”

Daimon-sensei came right back in and shouted me into submission, bringing my brief stint as emperor of the counseling room to a close. My reign lasted seven seconds in total. Then she made me do an absolute truckton of worksheets.

❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤

Lunchtime! Aaand I was less than a tenth of the way through my mountain of worksheets. *I mean, come on, just look at the size of that pile!* But when the lunch bell tolls, it tolls for thee (whether or not you’re done with your work). I was left no recourse but to casually stroll out of the counseling room. My destination: the school store. My goal: get something to eat.

“C’mon, kids, no pushing!”

I heard the cashier lady’s voice long before I saw her. The place was an absolute madhouse, as usual, and just like the day before...

“Ah, um, ah...”

A certain shorty was waffling around at the back of the crowd. Apparently she hadn’t learned her lesson the day before, and was once again staring helplessly and teary-eyed at the raging mass of humanity between her and her lunch.

She knew it’d be like this, didn’t she? Otherwise, why wouldn’t she just go to a convenience store and save herself the trouble? *Oh well! Not my problem!* I chose to ignore the munchkin, claim my luncheon, dash back to the counselin’ (room), and eat a bunch...in’? Okay, well, that rhyme totally fell apart.

“Hmm?”

Just as I resolved myself to sortie, I felt something pulling on my uniform. I glanced down, and of course...

“Um...”

*Gyaaaahhhhhhh?! It’s the shorty! A wild shrimp’s trying to hitch a free ride on me!*

“H-Hey, let go!” I shouted.

“Please help me!” she squealed.

“Not even trying to beat around the bush, are you?!”

“Grant me salvation!”

“What does that even mean?! Cut it out, Li’l Dummy! I’m gonna catch your idiocy at this rate!”

“My name’s not ‘Li’l Dummy,’ it’s Yuu! And I’m not an idiot!”

“Let go! Seriously, stop it, people’re gonna lump me in with *you* at this rate! I’ll do it; I’ll buy you something! Salvation is yooours!”

And a few minutes later...

“H-Here, hope you’re happy with this,” I said, holding one of the buns out to her.

“Good enough, I guess!”

“Why do I have to go through this crap? Seriously...”

Getting your hands on a single item from the store’s hard enough, and securing two took some serious toil on my part. Meanwhile, Little Miss Can’t-Be-Bothered relaxed out in the safe zone and couldn’t even concern herself with thanking me properly for my valiant effort.

“I want the honey one!” she pouted.

“Demanding, much?”

“Come on, I’ll pay for it and everything.”

“You’d better! You’re not getting either of ’em if you don’t!”

“The honey one, please!”

“Fine, fine.”

Seriously, what drives this girl to be such a belligerent little gremlin? I reluctantly handed over the honey-margarine bun I bought, and she passed me a hundred yen coin in return. Part of me wanted to shake her down for sales tax, but screw it, not worth the effort.

“All right, lunchtime!” she cheered.

“Yeah, enjoy. I’m outta here.”

“Wait, what? Aren’t we gonna eat together?”

“’Scuse me? You can’t be serious. Is your brain as tiny as you are, Little Miss Yuuta?”

“‘Yuuta’? That’s a boy’s name! I’m Yuu, and I’m a girl!”

“Shut it! If you’re gonna beg me for salvation, then I get to call you *whatever* I want, and that means you get to be ‘Yuuta’! Deal with it!”

*To all the Yuutas around the world: I’m so sorry for comparing you to this shrimpy little weirdo. C’mon, Li’l Dummy, you apologize too!*

“Yuu! I’m Yuu! Not Yuuta!”

“You are you, and thou art I?”

*I guess it’d have to be “I art I” to fit the pattern? Would that be, like, an us-vs-them “I’m me, you’re you” sort of deal?* I wanted absolutely nothing to do with this girl’s true self, regardless.

“My name’s *Yuu!*”

Yuuta pulled out her student ID and flashed it at me. *What is she, a cop?* The card had her picture (in which she was making a hilariously serious face) on it, as well as “Class 1-A” and her name.

“Yoshi Kiyuu?”

“Yo-shi-ki! My name’s Yoshiki,” she paused, presumably for emphasis, “Yuu!”

“Ah, Yoshiki, got it. I’ll keep that in mind, Yuuta.”

“No, you won’t! You already aren’t!”

“You get to be Yuuta until you stop begging me for food. Sheesh, what kind of kouhai sends their senpai out to buy bread for them, anyway? You’re one nasty little lady.”

“I didn’t even know you were an upperclassman!”

“You’re a first-year, so everyone in this school’s either in your grade or above it! Also, you’re *hella* short.”

“I’m really sensitive about my height, so stop bringing it up!”

Yuuta started kicking up an absolute screaming racket, and I came to the conclusion that ignoring her entirely would be the easiest option. I did just that and started to head off towards the counseling room, buuut...

“Huh? There aren’t any classrooms down that hallway, are there? Where are you going?” the nosy girl butted in.

“Y’think you could *not* follow me, perhaps?”

I thought that was a pretty explicit rejection, but Yuuta just wasn’t hearing it. She walked alongside me like she thought we were friends or something. I was getting pretty annoyed at that point, but I knew that trying to drive her off would just drag me into another totally fruitless argument, so I decided to try scaring her away instead.

“Heh heh heh, *this* is where I spend my time...” I jerked my thumb towards the counseling room, and made sure to put on the creepiest, sleaziest grin I could manage.

“Th-The counseling room?!”

*Yup, that definitely caught her off guard!*

“You were a fugitive this whole time?!” she continued.

“It’s not a jail. And I haven’t actually escaped, by the way. I’m still stuck here.”

“So you’re a convict?”

“I-I’m doing my time!”

“I’m not seeing a difference.”

Yuuta opened up the counseling room’s door and strolled right in without the slightest hint of hesitation. Somebody *sure marches to the beat of her own drum.*

“Oh, huh, so this is what it looks like on the inside!”

“Why’re you walking around like you own the place?”

“You keep it cleaner than I expected.”

“I don’t *live* here!” *I’m stuck here for now, sure, but I don’t live here! It’s an important distinction!*

“Oh, wow, that’s a lot of worksheets.”

“Man, you found them already? I can’t stand nosy brats with good intuition.”

“Let’s see if I have this straight: you did something to make your homeroom teacher super mad, so they shut you up in here and gave you an enormous pile of worksheets to deal with. Something like that, right? And, let’s see, it looks like you have Japanese, modern lit, and classical lit worksheets, so...they’ve gotta be from Daimon-sensei, right?”

“Okay, correction—your intuition’s *crazy* good.”

“And all of this leads me to one single, inescapable conclusion: you, Senpai, are in class 2-B!”

“What’s a master detective like you doing in a high school?!”

She might be pocket-sized, but she’s got deductive ability to spare! Having spectacularly sussed out my grade and class, Yuuta’s eyes sparkled proudly. She looked like a little kid who really wanted to be praised by their parents. Unfortunately for her, though, it’ll take a lot more than guessing my class to get under my skin.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, sure are. I’m in 2-B.”

“All right! I figured there was a ten percent chance or so that the teacher who sent you here wasn’t your homeroom teacher after all, so I was sorta worried.”

“What numbers gave you that percentage, and where the heck’d you pull ’em from?”

Yuuta sat down in the far seat I’d previously occupied, looking incredibly pleased with herself. She tore open the plastic bag her honey bun was packaged in.

“All right, time to eat! Lunch break doesn’t last forever!”

“Sure doesn’t.”

I was too exasperated to resist anymore. It wasn't worth the effort. Couldn't be bothered with any more of that nonsense. It was munchin'-with-the-munchkin time! *Take care to remove the little desiccant packet before you eat!* Incidentally, my meal was a perfectly ordinary roll filled with pastry cream.



“Oh, by the way, Senpai...”

“S’bad manners to talk while you eat.”

“What’s your name?”

“Kunugi Kou.”

“Wow, that was surprisingly easy!”

“I’m shocked that *you’re* shocked by that!”

“Well, I haven’t known you for very long, but I can already tell that you’re the most contrary person I’ve ever met. I thought you’d try to dodge the question for sure.”

“You’re *definitely* making fun of me, aren’t you?”

“I’ll remember that, though! Kunugi Kou—I guess I’ll call you Kunugi-san, then.”

“Not even gonna deny it, huh?”

Even just learning my name was enough to make Yuuta smirk obnoxiously. We’d only met the day before, and she was already totally looking down on me (somehow). That was a first.

That was when it hit me: Yuuta was in the same class as a certain someone.

“Hey, Yuuta?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re in 1-A, right? Is Ayase Hikari in your class?”

“Hikari? She is, yeah.”

“In that case, I’ve got a question for you.”

And so my lunch break passed by...

“See, look! Two-to-one again! How do you like that, shortstuff?!”

“Grr... One more round! It’ll turn out differently this time, I swear!”

“What the hell do you two think you’re doing?!”

“What, isn’t it obvious? We’re testing the theory that if you play old maid

with two people, it'll always come down to one card vs. two... Wait, huh?"

I noticed a moment too late that a real-life old maid (my homeroom teacher) was observing our quest to discover the truth behind the card game's secrets. I paused for a moment to assess the situation, and came to the conclusion that I, um, might've just screwed up pretty badly yet again.

"Psst, Yuuta! What time is it?"

"Um, looks like it's two thirty... Wait, two thirty?! Fifth period started ages ago!"

"Uh, yeah, no duh! I told you to go to class back when the bell rang, but you said this was more important and dismissed me!"

"Wh-Whaaat? Nuh-uh, no I didn't!"

"It's her fault, Daimon-sensei! *She* dragged me into this! I wasn't slacking off by my own free will, I swear!"

"What?! Kunugi-san, you dirty traitor! He's lying, Daimon-sensei; he forced me into it! It's all this smelly jerk's fault!"

"Say what?! I don't smell!"

"Yeah, you do! You put the 'bad' in 'BO'!"

"The 'B' stands for 'body,' and I do not! I smell fantastic!"

She leaned over and sniffed me. "Nope, it's 'bad' all right, at least for you!"

"Why you little..."

*This pint-sized punk! Surely she realizes that even I, Kunugi Kou, famed in my homeland for my mild-mannered geniality, get angry sometimes? Because I friggin' do!* As her senpai, I figured it was high time I taught the saucy little shrimp what happens when you stick your neck out in a hierarchical society!

"Are you two done yet?" Daimon-sensei chimed in.

"Err."

"Uwuu!"

Yuuta and I froze solid in the face of the absolute top of the local hierarchy.

She smiled.

“I hope you’re ready to face the music, Kunugi. And you—you’re a first-year, right? Yoshiki, was it?”

“Aw, jeez...”

“She knows your name? You’re *so* screwed.”

“Whatever. Just get back to class,” sighed Daimon-sensei.

“Thank you very much, Sensei!”

“Wha?!” I screeched.

“Heh heh heh, I’ll be off, then! Have fun, Kunugi-san!” Yuuta called after me as she took off.

*The runt got acquitted!* I was so upset to see Yuuta skip off scot-free I actually shouted.

“This isn’t fair! Why her?!”

“Oh? You think it’s unfair, huh?”

“Ah, um, no, I...”

“Guess that means this isn’t enough worksheets to make you get the point, huh?”

“Ah, aha ha...”

After that point, my memory’s a blur. All I can say for sure is that before I knew it, the sun had set, and I was left sitting alone in the counseling room with a massive pile of (finished!) worksheets stacked atop my desk. I spent a moment staring blankly at my miserable, defeated reflection in the window, then finally dragged myself over to the staff room to turn in my work and return the counseling room’s key. When I got there, the very few remaining teachers told me that Daimon-sensei went home ages ago. *That stupid hag!*

It was pitch-black outside by the time I left my school. Well, not *really* pitch-black, of course. There were plenty of streetlights dotted here and there, and the businesses that were still open at that time of night kept their surroundings well-lit. Y’know that feeling when you look up into the starry night sky and think

“the night is dark, and I am alone, isolated in a vast, uncaring universe”? Well, it’s really hard to indulge in that sort of adolescent faux-ennui when you’re in the big city and can’t swing a stick without breaking a light bulb.

I strolled home, keenly aware that with each step science takes forward, humanity as a whole loses something primal and essential. Until, that is, my brooding was interrupted by my phone vibrating in my pocket. I pulled it out and found that I had a call from a number I didn’t recognize.

“Hello?”

“Good evening, Senpai!”

“Geh. You?”

I felt myself frown reflexively. It was Ayase Hikari, who I’d given my number to earlier that very same day.

“What do you mean, ‘geh’?”

“I mean, y’know... Do you think it’s normal to call a person the same day you get their number?”

“Is it not?”

“Beats me. I don’t exactly exchange numbers with people all the time.”

“We didn’t exchange numbers at all, technically. You gave me your number and didn’t even ask for mine.” I heard her snicker. It seemed she was enjoying herself. “So, how was school today, Senpai?”

“What are you, my mom?”

“Come on, just tell me! I haven’t been going myself, so I’m curious.”

“I can think of one way to solve that problem: go to school.”

“I wouldn’t be going through all this trouble if it were that easy! Sheesh.”

“*Sheesh?” Sheesh, she says!* Judging by her defiant attitude, Ayase’s path to recovery was still a long one. As a general rule, people who snap back in this sort of situation are a lot worse off than people who just quietly worry about it.

More to the point, I didn’t actually have enough material to follow up on her request in the first place. Not only was I in a completely different class and

grade than her, I'd also spent the day shut up in the counseling room for the mortal sin of being late. In a certain sense, I was just as much of a shut-in as Ayase herself, albeit shut into a *totally* different sort of place. What's a shut-in supposed to learn from another shut-in? Nothing productive could come out of that sort of conversation.

"Ask someone who's actually in your class. Like Yuuta, or whatever."

"Yuuta? I don't think there's a Yuuta in my class, though..."

"There totally is! Y'know, the shrimpy one? Yuu, um... Yuu... Yuu something-or-other."

"Do you mean Yuu-chan? Yoshiki Yuu?"

"Yeah, her!"

"Why do you know who Yuu-chan is?"

*Yikes*. She sounded weirdly forceful, there.

"Wh-Why am I getting interrogated?"

"I'm not interrogating you; I'm just asking a simple question."

*Again: what is she, my mom?! She's definitely the sort of person who never admits they're angry, even when they're absolutely furious!* Or at least that's the image I got, anyway.

On second thought, though, why am I getting so worried about this? I just happened to meet Yuuta; it was a total coincidence. Then, I just *happened* to feed her and just *happened* to play cards with her. That's all there was between us, so why was I jumping right into thinking up excuses? Hell, even supposing I did try to hit on her, there wouldn't be any reason for me to feel guilty about it! Not that I could imagine hitting on her in the first place.

"We just randomly met and ended up chatting."

"With Yuu-chan, of all people? That's hard to believe."

"Of all people?" Where'd that come from? I didn't exactly know her super well, but I hadn't gotten the impression that talking to me was out of character for her at all. From everything I'd seen, she was just a cheeky, selfish moron.

Why would her talking to me be a surprise...? Were Ayase and I even talking about the same Yuu?

*Hmm. Wait,* are *we really talking about the same Yuu? It couldn't be...?!*

"Does she have...a twin?!"

"She's an only child. Are you an idiot, Senpai?"

Was that last comment really necessary?

"...I was kidding."

"Heh heh, were you?"

"What's so funny?"

Was it the joke? Had I actually tickled her funny bone with that one? Like, really? I was genuinely astonished that there was another human being out there who shared my totally mediocre sense of humor. And to think it'd be her, of all people! Call me Michael Jordan, 'cause apparently that joke was a slam dunk!

"I was just thinking that if we can make stupid, pointless small talk like this, it must mean we've gotten pretty close to each other!"

"...That's not funny."

So much for my joke! So much for my sense of humor! I thought I scored a slam dunk, but turns out I was traveling the whole time! *Forgive me, Mikey, for I have sullied your name!*

"You don't have to be all shy about it," Ayase said.

"I'm not shy! Look, okay, lemme set this straight. I'm your senpai; you're my kouhai. You went through a pretty out-there experience and got hurt, and I was gallant and kindhearted enough to offer to help you. That's all there is to it."

"Yeah, I know. So hurry up and save me, Senpai!"

"Is it just me, or is that way more intense a way to put it than 'help me'? Cut it out! I'm really not good at dealing with intense word choices like that!"

"Intense words, huh? Like 'genocide'?"

“Is ‘genocide’ seriously the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the phrase ‘intense word choices’? Related: is something wrong with your brain?”

“Why don’t you take a look in my head and find out?”

*How?! Holy crap, this girl’s blowing past “proactive” and “friendly” and heading straight for “ax murderer”!*

“Just kidding! Tee hee—gotcha!”

“Oh, shut it. Besides, this whole conversation’s been a joke so far.”

“You’re horrible, Senpai! Just when our little chat was getting lively... Also, I really meant the part about saving me, y’know?”

Ayase bantered away into the phone, obviously enjoying herself wholeheartedly, and I couldn’t hold back a sigh.

“Sounds like you’re doing pretty well, at this point. Don’t you think you’d be fine going back to school?”

“Definitely not! Just talking with a boy over the phone for this long is making me break out in hives!”

“Oof, sounds rough. Guess I’d better let you go, then.”

“No, I’m lying! That wasn’t true! I’m fine!”

“You should really think twice before you lie like that. Didn’t your mother teach you that lying’s a slippery slope to a life of crime?”

“I could say literally the exact same thing to you.”

Hey, whoa, time out! I’m a man who’s famed for his honesty—no way I’d *ever* lie! But, supposing I *had* lied about something at some point, just hypothetically...what “lie” was she talking about? Could I really even say for sure what counted as “the truth” and what counted as “a lie” in the first place? Doubt it! There are as many “truths” as there are people on the planet, and the idea of objective truth is in and of itself an objective lie!

“Let’s put that conversation on hold for now, Senpai. Are you coming over again tomorrow?”

“Coming over where?”

“To my house, of course!”

“I have no idea why that’d be a matter of course, and why would I go over to your house? Not like I have anything to do there.”

“You’re a real scalawag, aren’t you?”

“Archaic word choice, much?!”

I was getting the distinct feeling that she was making fun of me, and dealing with that attitude of hers was exhausting. I don’t dislike spending energy on these sorts of shenanigans, as a general rule, but I’d already had to deal with Ayase in the morning, the shortest girl on the planet at lunchtime, and worksheet hell in the afternoon. I had *no* intention of letting my day become an exhaustion sandwich made with Ayase bread.

I really was worn out—the spitting image of the sort of Japanese businessperson (read: corporate slave) who works from early morning till late at night, pitied by the entire world for their miserable life of hardships. That sort of lifestyle’s overambitious for a student, and, more importantly, is excruciating in all sorts of ways. I wasn’t even getting paid! No sick leave either!

“Okay, but for real, I’ve gotta go soon.”

“Oh? Okay, then—good night, Senpai!”

She hung up before I had the chance. I could tell from her tone of voice alone that she was grinning at the end too. I double-checked my phone, making absolutely sure the call was over, then sighed. Much as I hated to admit it, we had a good rapport with each other. I’d honestly enjoyed the conversation. I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything less from the leading man’s little sister, but I knew I couldn’t let this burgeoning relationship carry on any further.

After all, I’m an extra! I’m the protagonist’s sidekick, at absolute best! Ayase Hikari has the makings of a genuine heroine, and there’s no way someone like me could be a good match for her. But some weird quirk of karma keeps bringing us together. One thing’s for sure: if I want to cancel our current relationship and reset things to the way they should be, I can’t just sit on my heels and wait it out. I’m gonna have to actively bring things to a conclusion, one way or another.

On the one hand you've got me, the rando who just happened to save her from a rampaging flasher. On the other you've got her, the girl who was traumatized into truancy but at the same time keeps trying to get closer to me. Our relationship is awkward and half-baked, but there has to be a hint in there somewhere that'll let me unravel the mystery that is Ayase.

By all ordinary standards, even if I do occupy the coveted "best friend" role, a sidekick like me never gets the girl, let alone the protagonist's sister. But even if I'm just set dressing, I *am* also a human being, more or less. I'm not exactly happy about getting unilaterally toyed with for someone else's amusement, and that goes double when it puts my status as the lead's best friend at risk. I worked really friggin' hard to get myself into this position, and there's no way in hell I'm taking on a side role that could threaten it!

I knew exactly what I had to do, and I felt a grin creep across my face. If I looked into a mirror at that moment, I bet I'd have seen a demon staring back at me...

"Mwa ha ha... You'll regret making light of me, I promise you... It's time for me to show you my *true* power!"

My bold declaration echoed away into the stygian depths of the night... Okay, no, it sort of hovered awkwardly in the light of the streetlamps.

*Ding-a-ling!*

Then a bicycle's bell drowned it out. Some random guy pedaled past me.

"Heh!" he chuckled.

"Hey, what're you laughing at?! That was my big moment, you jerk! Mind your own business! And get a damn light for your bike! The cops are gonna haul you in if they catch you riding around without one! Dumbass!"

I chewed him out before I could stop myself. I couldn't really tell if he actually heard me or not, but as I watched him pedal off into the well-lit distance, I could only think one thing: Man, I sure am glad he didn't get pissed and turn around.

## Kiryu Kyouka

# *AAAAAAAUUUUUUUGGGGGHHHHHHHHH! I'M LAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAATE!*

...Gotcha! What, you really thought I'd pull the same stunt three days in a row? As if! I woke up bright and early today! I'm walking the road to redemption!

As such, my morning commute was a calm and casual stroll to school, in sharp contrast to the panicked and harried road to death from the previous few days. Honestly, I feel like being late is best avoided as a general rule. I mean, I only ran into that crazy pervert guy the other day 'cause I was late, and being late yesterday got me worked over by my teacher (no, not like that; get your mind out of the gutter). I just kept repeating the same mantra to myself: *Don't be late... Don't be late...* And so, gradually, my mind emptied of all other thoughts. I was like an extremely punctual houseplant (not even remotely true).

"Quit clinging to me, Tsumugi! It's hot enough out as is!"

"C'mon, what's the big deal?"

*Oho!* And who should I spot walking in front of me but our hero, Ayase Kaito, accompanied by his jovial childhood friend Kotou Tsumugi! It'd only been a day since I last saw the two of them, but somehow that one day felt like an eon.

The weather was getting sweltering, summer vacation was just around the corner, and our school had just swapped over to summer uniforms. Tsumugi had her arms wrapped around Kaito's, and her chest pressed right into him. Picture an adorable cartoon animal bouncing along with a little "boing, boing!" sound effect, and you've got a pretty good idea of my state of mind at that precise moment. I could practically *feel* them in the palm of my hand.

Okay, no, sorry, that was a lie. I was bluffing, I honestly have *no clue* what they feel like. Yeah, I admit it, I have no idea whatsoever! Got a problem with that?! I *wish* I could practically feel them in the palm of my hand! If only grasping the wind felt like a boob. Man...

“Oh, hey. That you, Kou?”

“Hey...”

“Whoa, what’s got you so down first thing in the morning?”

Kaito the eagle-eyed protagonist spotted me and went out of his way to say hi. Naturally, the boo—ahem, Kotou came with him.

“Morning, Kunugicchi!”

Apparently clinging to Kaito in front of me was a bit much for Kotou. She let his arm go and gave me a big, childish wave as she said hello, smiling happily and calling me by a nickname more suited for a farming game’s mascot animal than an actual human being.

“’Sup, Kaito, Kotou...”

“N-Not much, really. Morning, Kou. Hey, you okay?” Kaito tilted his head. “You sound pretty glum.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just lamenting the injustice of the world a bit, that’s all.” I shrugged.

Kaito smiled in a kinda strained “what on earth is this guy talking about?” sort of way. Honestly, I sort of regretted bumping the scale all the way up to “the world.” Should’ve narrowed it down to “the local vicinity.” As a side note, it’s not like Kotou and I were on bad terms or anything, but we definitely didn’t have anything even close to a hero/heroine relationship. If I had to pin our relationship down with a single word, I think it’d probably be reasonably fair to say that we’re friends, I guess, maybe. She’s Kaito’s childhood friend, and he’s my best friend. Nothing weird about us coming into contact every once in a while through him.

Okay, let me establish something in advance: it is absolutely *not* normal for a heroine to be a jerk. If your heroines are mean, they won’t pull in readers, and your rom-com won’t sell. If you make a heroine with a nasty personality then you have to do so under the assumption that the readers will hate her, and at that point you’ve pretty much just written a villain. Are you following me here? Real heroines don’t verbally abuse the people around them for no reason, and, just for good measure, they don’t go to the bathroom either!

“Good morning, Ayase-kun, Kotou-san. And oh my, I see you have a bipedal pile of garbage following along after you today.”

And, I was instantly proven wrong as a genuinely catty heroine reasserted her existence.

“Ah, good morning, Kyouka!” Kaito grinned.

“Morning, Kiryu-san,” Kotou said, less enthusiastically.

Another one of my classmates, Kiryu Kyouka, entered the scene with an incredibly aggressive greeting (to me exclusively). Then she turned her cool dial back up to its usual position at eleven, smiled so genuinely it was almost sickening, and gave a perfectly normal and friendly greeting (to everyone except me), which Kaito and Kotou replied to. Kotou was never a big fan of Kiryu’s—or rather, wasn’t very good at dealing with her—and looked a bit put off by her sudden appearance. I could sympathize. I can’t handle her either.

Kiryu’s tongue was so sharp and my poor, sensitive heart so fragile that she could (and regularly did) chop my state of mind to mincemeat with a single sentence. I had a feeling that Kotou’s grudge against her ran so incredibly deep that it made mine look downright petty in comparison, though. I was sure they had one of those rivalries that only women can truly appreciate.

“What?” Kiryu noticed that I was staring at her and faintly shuddered with disgust. Just faintly—just the tiniest little shake—but Kotou was apparently incredibly sensitive to her movements and noticed. The cheerful light immediately faded from her eyes for one incredibly obvious reason: Kiryu’s chest.

To be clear, it’s not like Kotou’s poorly endowed! By normal standards, she’s perfectly impressive! It’s just that compared to her, Kiryu was at least twice... Wait, no, *three* times bigger?! *What the hell is she, some sort of mutant?!*

“Keep it together, Kotou! You can still win this; she hasn’t beat you yet!”

“It’s no use, Kunugicchi, I’m done for! Just look at her—she’s got a full circumference, and here I am stuck with plain old pi... What’s pi supposed to do against *that*...?”

Aaand she lost me. That was a real head-scratcher of an incomprehensible

quip, but she looked like she was about to completely go to pieces and I couldn't just abandon her, so I desperately made crap up and ran with it.

"And what's wrong with π, Kotou?! π's great! π makes calculating stuff way easier since you don't have to type out '3.14' every single time! π's been the salvation of countless math-hating kids from all across the world!"

I was starting to sound like a πling from the planet π who starts every sentence with π under all circumstances, but my pep talk had its intended effect. Kotou gradually rose from the depths of despair. Apparently, my shot in the dark actually landed! *I owe you one, πlings.*

"You really think so...?"

"Heck yeah! You're a cham**π**on! Keep your s**π**rits up!"

"It's way too early in the morning for this nonsense!"

Wham! Kiryu scored a clean hit to the back of my head with her bag, knocking me over. I toppled right past her chest, which was even more clearly defined than usual through the thin fabric of her summer uniform. The way they gently swayed in the air drove in the harsh cruelty of the unjust reality we live in. "Boing boing" didn't even come *close* to doing them justice. Picture that adorable little cartoon animal from before getting *blasted* out of the park by a big-league slugger and you'd have a pretty good idea of the level of ordinance she was packing.

Kotou must've been watching too—her eyes were dull and lifeless, with no hope of recovery in sight. Kiryu really was gifted, whether she knew it or not. Kaito, meanwhile, was exactly as entranced by her chest as me and Kotou. *I worry about him sometimes, but it looks like he's got manly desires like the rest of us after all!* His personality meant the most he could do was steal glances, of course, and I sighed at him internally...while simultaneously stealing glances of my own.



“Unbelievable... Leave that dullard behind and hurry up, you two. We’ll be late.”

Completely failing to notice that her three companions were preoccupied in two very distinct ways, my assailant set off ahead of us.

“Y-Yeah, right. Let’s go, Tsumugi. C’mon, Kou, you too.”

“O-Okay...”

“You hit me! Not even my own father ever hit me!” I spat out, thirty seconds too late.

The three of us chased after her, Kaito in the lead with Kotou and me trailing behind. We took a lot of damage back there, mentally in Kotou’s case, and physically in mine.

“I’m not giving up. I’ll win out against Kiryu-san someday!” Kotou quietly but resolutely muttered to herself.

I couldn’t bring myself to reply. Rock can never win against paper—it’s a tragic but undeniable fact of life. I was completely powerless to help my friend through her predicament. The best I could come up with was “That’s, uhh, probably not happening,” and I sure as heck wasn’t about to say *that* out loud.

Sorry, Kotou, but that’s just the sort of relationship we have. You’re a friend, yes, but you’re also one of Kaito’s love interests. The sidekick’s just not allowed to give any real assistance to the heroines. The most I can do is offer some perfunctory encouragement—actually helping them out is a protagonist-exclusive territory. The sidekick only gets to support one of them if he has some sort of driving motivation, like being secretly in love with her, or whatever.

*Live strong, Kotou. Don’t let this get you down! You have plenty of good qualities! You’re bright, you’re lively, and even though you can be sorta tactless, you’re still fun to be around! Seriously, you’ll be okay. Uh, but we should just forget the whole boobs thing.*

The two of us walked along glumly behind Kaito and Kiryu, occasionally exchanging a sentence or two. Kotou’s usual exuberance was nowhere to be seen, but cheering her on internally was the most I could manage.

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The day passed by, and school came to an end. Yeah, really, already. Absolutely nothing noteworthy happened during my classes, and though I did end up having my wallet squeezed by a certain pipsqueak at lunchtime, that didn't bear any special mention either. Point of order: doesn't "Kou buys for his kouhai" sort of sound like the punch line to an awful dad joke? Gags like that are at *least* a millennia out of date! What kind of rubbish sense of humor does it take to come up with something like that?

"Hey, Kaito, wanna go somewhere after school?"

"Sure, sounds good."

Kotou brazenly strolled in from the classroom next door, and Kaito immediately accepted her invitation. After-school date: secured! That's pretty much the usual pattern for days when she doesn't have club activities.

"Ah, you wanna come too, Kiryu?" Kaito threw out an invitation to Kiryu, who had already finished packing her bag and was standing up to go home. Meanwhile, Kotou looked deeply conflicted.

"I'm sorry, but not today. I have some business to take care of."

All right, boys and girls, listen up: I've got some very important advice for you. There are a lot of mean, nasty people out there in the world, and Kiryu Kyouka is absolutely one of them. She might have *said* she's sorry, but there's a zero percent chance that she actually *meant* it. It was obviously lip service, and anyone with half a brain and at least one eye could see it! And she turned down an invitation from the protagonist himself? Seriously, that girl has absolutely no self-awareness of her role as a heroine whatsoever.

"You in, Kunugicchi?"

*Wait, what?! Kotou, what are you doing?! Stahp!*

Seeing Kiryu get invited must've really shaken her up. Either she was hoping that I could back her up by occupying Kiryu's attention (in which case oh *wow*, bad call, I'd almost certainly be totally useless), or she was just hoping my presence would provide some mental support. Whatever her reason, she invited me in spite of the fact that Kiryu instantly turned the offer down. *Come*

*on, girl, if you hadn't opened your big mouth, you'd be in date city right now!*

"I, ah, err..."

*What should I do?!* Man, I can't handle making decisions in times like these! I don't have the authority to stick my nose directly into hero/heroine relations! I couldn't exactly take her up on it, but I couldn't exactly turn her down either! The fact that the heroine involved invited me herself made this *so* much harder to cope with!

It'd be a billion times easier if Kaito had been the one to ask me along! If I said okay, it'd turn into one of those scenes where the thickheaded protagonist spoils an almost-date and the heroine gets super worked up about it. I could also totally say no by being all "Ooooh, someone's got a daaate! Look at Mister *Popular* over here! Not gonna catch me being your third wheel, no siree!" and teasing the hell out of him.

And if I hadn't been invited at all? Naturally, I'd go absolutely mad with jealousy of stupid Kaito and his stupid after-school date. What's that? You think that's totally unreasonable? Like hell it is! (I say, lashing out to cover up the fact that I'm totally in the wrong.) "Yeah, sorry, I'm sorta busy too..." I wasn't confident I was making the right call, but in the end I squeezed out an incredibly half-baked excuse to turn her down. Guess it's time to go home alone and reflect on my mistakes.

"Oh, too bad. Maybe next time."

Kotou actually, genuinely sounded disappointed that I couldn't make it. I'm really fond of that side of her, but I also think she'd do well to be at least a *bit* more aggressive when it comes to pursuing her love interest.

That was around when I noticed that Kiryu was still in the classroom. She was standing by the door, silently staring right at me for who knows what reason. For a moment, our eyes met. Then she gave me a slight but pointed glare and walked out the door. *Yeah, get outta here, lady! This isn't a show!*

"All right, let's head out, Tsumugi. See you tomorrow, Kou."

"Laters, Kunugicchi!"

"Yeah, later."

I saw the two of them off, and almost immediately started doubting my decision. Speaking as Kaito's wingman sidekick, watching him leave without raising a finger would be a pretty major dereliction of duty, right? He's finally going on a date, and I put myself in a position where I can't intervene at all? Lame!

But wait, okay, no need to jump the gun here. This might be a great chance for the two of them to build up some affection points with each other. I might really just be a third wheel if I was around. If you're gonna get involved, make sure you do it in a major scene, not one of those private side events! The Sidekick Handbook is *very* specific on the matter!

Yeah, that settles it. Today's a perfect day to go straight home, call it an early night and get a healthy fourteen hours of sleep or so. I'll recharge my energy level so much, it'll send me straight into overdrive mode! This works out *perfectly* for me!

"So, where do you wanna go, Tsumugi?"

"I thought we could wander around the shopping district, maybe... Oh, no, I know! I'll cook dinner for you tonight!"

"Really? I'd better give Hikari a call and let her know. Thanks, that sounds great!"

Ten minutes later, Kaito and Kotou were well on their way into what an outside observer could only describe as a date, and a certain man was following along about ten meters behind, stealthily observing them. I probably don't need to specify that said man was none other than me.

I-It's not like I was stalking them because I was lonely, or anything! I just thought that the two of them might be getting an awful lot closer to each other pretty soon, and if they did, I'd be able to pull a "Hey, I just happened to win these tickets in a raffle or something and don't have anyone to go with, why don't you take them and invite Kotou?" It's a classic wingman move, but I need to know what sort of date spots are popular with the young'uns these days, and figure out how much tickets cost, and all sorts of other stuff! It is *not* what you're thinking! Hmph!

Apropos of nothing, Kaito doesn't actually have any tsundere-types in his

harem. Kotou's got the friendly-and-lively-but-a-bit-ditzy vibe covered, and Kiryu fills in the calm-and-cool-honor-student slot, but doesn't have an affectionate bone in her body. Neither of the two heroines I have yet to introduce really fit the tsundere bill either. I've heard the archetype was super dominant at one point in history, but it looks like they're about as desirable in a harem as a sumo wrestler's used loincloth nowadays. It's kinda sad.

"Whoops, gotta keep an eye out! Looks like they went into that bookstore? Nice. Good move, Kaito."

I followed them in and watched them make their way towards the manga section. I took up a position in a convenient blind spot where I could keep an eye out (right around the reference book section) and pulled out one of the many disguises I keep on hand, just in case: a pair of lensless glasses! With the glasses equipped and my honor student persona assumed, I grabbed a random book to pretend to read. It was about...poop? Huh. That works, I guess.

I loitered around, pretending to read but secretly observing Kaito and Kotou. Best as I could tell they were browsing the weekly magazines and chatting about manga. And, I mean, they were clearly enjoying themselves, but that's not exactly the most romantic date activity, is it? That was one of Kotou's biggest weaknesses in the war for Kaito's heart—they were close, sure, but close in the sort of way that would almost make you think their relationship was totally platonic. That mindset was majorly holding her back, in my book.

She was actually pretty popular with other boys in our school, but Kaito was trapped in the just-childhood-friends pit as well, and barely seemed to think of her as a girl at all. Unless a mischievous weather god happened to pass by and summon a sudden shower for the sake of some pulse-pounding, super embarrassing wet T-shirt action, the odds of him breaking out of that mindset any time soon were pretty darn low. And considering you can buy an umbrella at just about any convenience store these days, that probably wouldn't even help. Heck, Kaito and Kotou are both the sort of people who carry around those little foldable umbrellas in their bags. They've got absolutely no weaknesses!

"Grr... What am I supposed to do about this...?"

"Hey, you."

“Sorry, can’t talk right now. I’m thinking about something extremely important.”

“You realize that’s an elementary school workbook?”

“Wha? Wait, why’re you here, Kiryu...? *Kiryu?!*”

Oh god why?! The sadistic honor student herself, Kiryu Kyouka, just happened to catch me reading a poop-themed children’s textbook! Wasn’t she supposed to be busy with something?!

“Wh-What do you want? Don’t tell me... You’re after this book?!”

“No. Weren’t you listening? That’s an elementary school workbook.”

“O-Oh, is it? Hmm, well, I mean, I knew that, of course. Yup.”

Pausing for a moment to take a proper look at it, I found that it was, in fact, a poop-themed workbook full of kanji drills. The perfect study aid for a kid who loves potty humor. Y’know the sort of workbook that makes studying fun by turning its problems into a little story about kanji-man vs. the forces of ignorance, or whatever? Yeah.

“So, what are you doing here? If you’re looking for the picture book section, it’s over that way.” Kiryu glared at me.

“Don’t you think you’re giving my mental age a bit too little credit there?”

“Well, apparently you can’t even read kanji yet.”

“Can too!”

*Not that I sound very convincing, given the elementary school workbook I’m holding! Ah, crap, gotta keep it down—can’t let Kaito notice us.*

“Look, we can talk later, okay?”

“Talk? Why would I ever want to talk with someone like you?”

“Ha ha, right, yup, fair enough. Bye.”

That seemed like a pretty natural point to say goodbye and make a break for it. I was *not* expecting a heroine to show up out of nowhere and was really panicking for a minute there, but it turned out decently enough in the end. *Withdraw!*

“Wait.”

“Huh?”

“...All right. If you want to talk, I’m willing.”

“Huuuuuh?”

“This works out perfectly. I was just thinking it was about time we made it perfectly clear where we stand with one another.”

I really didn’t like the sound of that.

Kiryu exuded a pressure unlike anything I’d ever felt before; I couldn’t resist. We decided to find a better venue for our chat, eventually ending up in a nearby fast-food joint. It goes without saying that Operation: Tail Kaito and Kotou was a bust. I wasn’t about to try stalking them with another heroine in tow; no way that could possibly end well.

“I’ve never been to a place like this before,” Kiryu mumbled to herself as she looked around the store. She seemed fascinated, which was weird, seeing as it was an absolutely mundane, run-of-the-mill chain restaurant you could find literally anywhere. She looked sort of like a country bumpkin gawking at the sights during their first visit to the big city, and I had to hold back a laugh.

“Want something? I was thinking of grabbing a bite.” I figured I might as well ask. It was still fairly early for dinner, but if I was gonna hang out at a fast-food place, why not get a meal out of the way as well? I knew perfectly well that Kiryu would decide to get a drink and nothing else, of course.

Snobs like her *always* go on about the calories, or the sodium content, and turn their noses up at fast food (I assume). They’re under the false impression that belittling fast food makes them look sophisticated, but the truth of the matter’s that the biggest snobs always have the smallest brains (okay, so I have a bit of an ax to grind). I was all prepared for Kiryu’s snobbery to clash with my dullard-level commoner tastes and spin out into our second spat of the day. I was about to be shocked.

“Hmm... All right, I suppose I’ll get something too.”

“Whoa, seriously? You actually eat this stuff?”

“I’ve never tried it, but my family won’t be home today, so...”

*Sexy!* Something about that phrase was weirdly erotic! Maybe it was the way she was bashfully twirling her hair around a finger while she said it? Personality aside, she’s got all the makings of an absolute jaw-dropping beauty, so even the tiniest gestures of hers can have that effect. The majority of men would fall for her in a second if she could keep that act up! If you took a recording of that and put it out as a ringtone, you’d be hearing Kiryu’s “my family won’t be home today” all over town within the day, no doubt about it!

That said, all the glorious you-can-stay-over-tonight implications in the world couldn’t change the fact that we *weren’t* at her house. We were at an utterly garden-variety chain restaurant, and the odds of Kiryu and I ending up in that sort of relationship were substantially *less* than one in a million.

The conversation sorta trailed off after that point. We waited in line until our turn came, then we stepped up to the counter together to look at the menu. And I mean, like, *together* together. *Uncomfortably close* together. *I don’t know how to deal with this! Kiryu and I would never end up standing this close to each other under normal circumstances! It’s totally unthinkable!* I leaned over to look at a nearby sign advertising the restaurant’s current specials, which conveniently bought me some distance.

“Do you know what you’re getting?” she asked.

“Ayup. You?”

“No, not yet... I’m surprised by the menu’s variety. I was under the impression that these places only served hamburgers, but it seems they have chicken sandwiches, fish, shrimp—there’s even a vegetable-based option...” Kiryu mumbled to herself. She was absolutely captivated by the menu.

The clerk, meanwhile, was absolutely captivated by her, and I couldn’t blame him. It’s really rare to see a girl like her act that unguarded. I already did the “Wait, maybe she’s actually her twin?!” thing yesterday, so I’ll spare you that whole schtick (reluctantly).

She spent a couple minutes pondering her options. “All right, I’ve decided,” she said, taking a step off to the side. I took that to mean she wanted me to order first.

“I’ll have the special on the sign—err, the soft-boiled egg burger. With fries, thanks.”

“I’ll have the same.”

*She ripped off my order! “I’ve decided” my ass!* I raised an eyebrow at her, and she glanced away.

“As Yoshida Kenkou once wrote: ‘Even in the most trifling of matters, it behooves you to follow the lead of one more experienced.’”

*Wow, what an incredibly petty thing to quote classical literature about! Pretty sure that Yoshida Kenkou didn’t have french fries in mind when he penned that particular parable, but what do I know, I’m not a 14th-century Buddhist monk.*

“What would you like to drink?”

“To drink...?” She glanced over at me.

“It comes with the meal.”

“...I see.” She nodded.

Following the established pattern, I should’ve ordered first again, but I wasn’t planning on playing along. I’d make her choose a drink *before* me, like it or not! I mean, it’d be *super* embarrassing if she copied my drink too. We’d look like we were friends, or something! I already had my drink picked out, of course—I always get the same thing.

“All right... I’ll have apple juice.”

“Guh!”

“And you, sir?”

“...Apple juice.”

“Thought so,” interjected Kiryu. *Did you?! What’re you insinuating, lady?!*

Kiryu scowled as we collected our drinks and receipts, then found a table. This particular fast-food joint was actually one of those places that brought you your food when it was done.

“Now, then.” Kiryu Kyouka sat right in front of me, her arms crossed, and stared me down. She didn’t so much as touch her apple juice. Side note,

crossing her arms made her chest even more eye-catching than usual. *Don't stare! Eyes up!*

"It's been quite a long time since we talked face-to-face like this."

"Weird way to put it when this is our *first* time talking like this." I sipped on my apple juice. That had come out harsher than I intended it to—I was sort of surprised by how unhappy I sounded, myself. Kiryu's scowl deepened.

"Yes, I expected you to play dumb."

"About what?"

"...About me."

"What's there to play dumb about? Your name's Kiryu Kyouka, you're the universally acknowledged number-one beauty in our class, and you're so cold to your many suitors that you straight up ignore them instead of properly turning them down. You're also a prodigy with the highest grades in our year, and have a black belt in Aikido."

"Y-You're well-informed."

"I did my homework."

I've looked into all of Kaito's potential heroines, gathering up all the information I could find with some digging. I didn't know their weight or measurements or anything that personal, of course, but Kiryu still looked repulsed.

"I see," she sighed, and took a sip of her juice. "Ah... This is actually good."

"I know, right? This place's apple juice is crazy good for a chain restaurant."

From what I understand, the company started out as an orchard, and they get the apples for their juice fresh from there. It's a uniquely delicious juice that you can only get from this one specific chain!

"You have quite the palate," she quipped.

"Huh? Was that supposed to be sarcasm? 'Cause I sure do, as a matter of fact! Always have! Any time, any place, I got the best taste!"

"No, I wasn't being sarcastic. Not this time."

“What do you mean ‘this’ time?”

“I’m actually impressed, for once.”

“Okay, sarcastic or not, you’re *definitely* making fun of me!”

We kept bantering and jabbing at each other like that for some time, and surprisingly enough, it didn’t feel mean-spirited at all. When I actually stopped to think about it, I’d never truly had an extended conversation with her before. The fact that we didn’t have Kaito literally standing between us probably helped.

“Thank you for waiting! Two soft-boiled egg burger meals.”

Conveniently, our food arrived just as the conversation was reaching a lull. Kiryu stared at her wrapped-up burger for a moment, then glanced over at me.

“What?”

“Where’s the silverware?”

“Oh my *god* could you at least *try* to not be a living, breathing cliché?”

“It was a joke.” She chuckled, then ate a french fry, apparently not concerned in the slightest with getting her fingers greasy. If I’d snapped a picture of that moment, her fans would’ve probably flocked to me in droves, begging me to take their money for it. Might’ve kept one for myself too.

“This certainly is a strange development, isn’t it?” Kiryu mused.

“Hmm?”

“I never imagined we’d ever share a meal like this. You know, just the two of us.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Even if we were the only ones at the table, a crowded fast-food restaurant didn’t exactly have a just-the-two-of-us sort of ambiance. I couldn’t deny that it was a pretty weird turn of events, but I also felt weird about agreeing with her when she was sitting right in front of me like that. I was totally thinking it, though. *Man, I really can be petty.*

“You’re the same as ever in some ways, but in the end, you really *have*

changed.”

“Wait, what’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Good question.” Kiryu looked calm on the surface, but something about the way she sipped at her juice felt oddly desolate.

I, meanwhile, had a furrowed brow, an obvious frown, and a slight but distracting throbbing pain building up in my forehead. She was messing with me, and it was really starting to get on my nerves.

“About the apple juice,” she continued.

“Wha?”

“Why do you like it?”

“Why...? I mean, y’know, I just do. Just sorta think it’s good... Y’know the forbidden fruit in the Bible? Some people say that it was an apple, so I figured they’d be a perfect fit for the dark, brooding emotions that secretly eat away at me!”

“You like that it’s sweet, but a little sour too.”

I was acting like an idiot again, but Kiryu wasn’t about to play along, and muttered so quietly I barely heard her.

“Wait, what?”

“Or so I heard.” Her words felt really loaded. What, was she interrogating me now?

“...From who?”

“How much do you remember from when you were a kid?”

I almost quipped about not answering questions with questions, but I held back. She sounded really serious, and I could tell we were about to reach the real issue at hand. Childhood memories, though...?

“When I was a kid? I dunno. That was a long time ago.”

“...Like from elementary school, for example.”

I presumed that was what she’d been aiming for this whole time. I closed my

eyes and tried to cast my mind back, but was greeted with nothing but pitch-black darkness.

“Sorry, but I don’t really remember much from back then at all.”

“No, I suppose you don’t. You’d never be like *this* if you did...”

“Okay, look, this is getting old. Stop beating around the bush and just tell me already! What’re you after?”

She glared again. It really did feel like she was blaming me for something, and I was getting progressively more and more upset, myself. There was no way she could’ve known, but her question had touched on a really sore subject for me. It was drawing my attention towards a certain truth that I did my best to keep locked away safely in a deep, dark corner of my mind.

*If she’s really set on dragging it out of me, though—if she’s so convinced that something will change if I give her an explanation—then fine.* My pride’s not worth much, so now was as good a time as any to throw it away.

“I don’t have any memories from before five years ago.”

“You...what? No memories...? You didn’t just forget?”

“I dunno if it’s any different from forgetting, really, but I don’t remember anything from before that point whatsoever. From my perspective, it’s like I never had any memories from then to begin with.”

“So, you have amnesia?”

“You could call it that, I guess.”

“So then... You don’t remember Daiki at all?”

“Daiki?”

“My little brother.”

She squeezed the words out with obvious difficulty.

“Kiryu Daiki. That name doesn’t ring a bell...?”

“...It doesn’t. Sorry.”

She was clenching her fists so hard, they trembled. It was like she was shaking

with the effort of enduring something, but I didn't know what, and I had no idea what I could say to her.

"I... I hated you," she managed to spit out.

"Yeah, I sorta figured that out already. The constant trash talk was a pretty big hint."

"Of course I did! I met you again after all this time, but you acted like you didn't know me, and you never said a *word* about Daiki. I thought you were playing dumb. How could I have *possibly* imagined you had amnesia?"

She looked like she was about to break down in tears, and I was at a complete loss. *What if I hadn't lost my memory?* She looked so weak, so tragic and frail, that I couldn't help but ponder that totally pointless hypothetical. I wanted to help her.

I'm the one who forgot her, but Kiryu was the one who scorned me without understanding my circumstances. It was all too clear to me how much she regretted it now. If it was going to turn out like this, maybe we'd have been better off letting this misunderstanding drag on forever.

"...Let's go somewhere else. It would be hard to talk about this in here," she muttered.

Kiryu had barely even started on her hamburger. She wrapped it back up and put it in her bag—I guess she thought throwing it away would be a waste. I hadn't even touched mine, so I followed her example, stashing my burger in my bag and standing up.

To be totally honest, I didn't think we had much to gain from carrying on the conversation. I couldn't force myself to remember her brother, and I knew that even in my current state I wouldn't be able to avoid getting involved with her if she told me about him. Unfortunately, though, it was already a bit too late to back out. I'd have to be a gigantic asshole to trample all over her feelings like that, and I didn't quite have it in me to play that sort of role.

"Where should we go?"

"My house. It's not far."

The unimaginable had happened. “My family won’t be home today” had actually turned into an invitation into her house. For once, though, I didn’t feel like running my mouth about it. I let Kiryu take the lead, following her silently through the gradually darkening streets of the shopping district.

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Kiryu lived in a lovely, two-story tall, single-family home. I was still flabbergasted by the fact that I was visiting the home of *the* Kiryu Kyouka, the beauty queen of class 2-B. It was finally starting to feel real, and I was finally realizing just how big of an event it really was.

“Hey, do you have any friends?”

“Where did *that* come from?”

“Nowhere, really... Was just wondering if it’s okay for someone like me to be the first classmate that *the* Kiryu Kyouka brings home...”

“I don’t particularly care. And, besides...you’re not my friend in the first place.”

*If I’m not your friend, do you think you could try to look a little less dejected about all this?* She almost certainly wasn’t aware of how she was coming across, though, doing her best to act unperturbed as she unlocked the door and walked right on inside. She totally left the door open too. It’s not like I expected her to have the consideration to hold the door for me, given her usual attitude, but, like, it felt kind of awkward being left out there like that. I decided to just let myself in.

*Wait, is it just me, or did she just admit she doesn’t have any friends...? Nah, no way, she’s just never had them over at her house. Yeah. Gotta be that.*

The fact that she’s such a beauty has always made her kind of hard to approach, and she’s got a sort of hard-to-describe “don’t touch me aura” on top of it. *Surely* that’s *the issue—she’s just kind of hard to strike up a conversation with!* I nodded to myself, convinced by my own rationalization as I obediently followed her into the Kiryu estate.

“Sorry to intrude...”

“This way.”

There was a staircase just past the entryway, and I was immediately confused when Kiryu started climbing up it. *Weren’t we going to the living room? Is it on the second floor in this house? That’d be pretty weird.*

“Hey, where’re we going?”

“My room.”

“.....Huh?”

“Come on, hurry up.”

“My room,” as in, *Kiryu Kyouka’s* room? *Nooope, nope, nope, nope! This is* way *too much, too fast! I* cannot *deal with this!*

“Whoa, hold up! You’re seriously underestimating the significance of inviting a totally average high school boy into a girl’s room!”

“I couldn’t care less.”

“Care! At least a little—*hey*!”

Kiryu finally lost patience with my grumbling, grabbed me by the arm, and dragged me up the staircase and down the hallway. I had just enough time to see her name written on a plate on the door before she shoved me inside.

“Wait here.”

She turned around and walked out, leaving me in her room on my own.

*Okay, seriously, what on* earth *is that girl’s deal?* We were skipping past *so* many stages it genuinely freaked me out! Why would you leave a classmate (note: not a friend; definitely just a classmate) in your room on their own?! Who knows what kind of weird crap I could get up to in there! There are men out there who run around the streets in the nude first thing in the morning, y’know?!

*Even if she has a black belt in Aikido and could wipe the floor with a perfectly ordinary citizen like myself, her guard’s way too low. I mean, I* am *a guy!*

“So, this is Kiryu’s room...”

Even as I was freaking out, I couldn’t help but glance around. Her desk was

clean and tidy, and there was a weird plushie of some mascot character I couldn't identify on her bed. There was a shelf (full of books that looked way too dry for my taste) and a hanger on the wall, where I assumed she kept her uniform when she wasn't wearing it. There was also a closet (shut) and a dresser (shut, and almost definitely full of the sort of clothing guys dream about on a regular basis). A rug was laid out on the wood-panel flooring. The lack of cushions to sit on was a pretty clear hint that she didn't have visitors very often.

And so there I was, left alone in an actual, authentic girl's room. I had *no* clue whatsoever what to do with myself, so I sat down dead center in the middle of the rug and waited for Kiryu to return, not budging a muscle. I'm sure most high school boys would be over the moon to get invited into a beauty's room like this, but considering the subject at hand, I felt more like an inmate waiting to be led off to his execution.

"I'm back."

Kiryu returned a few minutes later. She was carrying something, but it wasn't the glass of welcome-to-my-home tea I was expecting, but rather some sort of big book.

"What's that?"

"A photo album...from when I was in grade school."

"Okay, but why?"

"Surely you can guess, amnesia or not." She sighed as she opened it up. "We went to the same school."

"Huh, that so?"

I had, in fact, pretty much already guessed that. If I couldn't figure *that* out from context, I'd have serious doubts about my language comprehension ability on the whole. It'd be horrifying for me to be *that* bad at Japanese, considering I've supposedly been whipped into shape on the subject.

"I'm fairly certain we're the only students at Oumei High who went to that school. It's in another prefecture, after all."

"So you moved here?"

“Yes. My father’s job transferred him to the area.”

That would imply it really was a total coincidence that we bumped into each other again. I guess from her perspective, it must’ve seemed like I’d chased after her. My missing memories made it hard for me to judge how much of a coincidence it truly was—the whole situation still barely felt real to me at all.

“Man, though, the same elementary school... What’s it like, anyway? Like, how do kids interact with each other?”

That might’ve come across as pretty blunt, but since I didn’t remember anything from that period, I was actually genuinely curious. Of course, that’s probably one of those things where it’s different for everyone. Kiryu sat down on her bed, still holding the album.

“I’m not really sure how to answer that. It’s different for everyone.”

“Y’know, I had a feeling you’d say that.”

She gave the obvious answer with complete sincerity, and I pretty much had to accept it. Then the conversation came to a grinding halt. If you were to compare conversations to a game of catch, then Kiryu’s signature tactic was to take the ball and go home. The silence was deafening.

“S-So, elementary school friends, huh? Is it like that one kids’ song? Y’know, make a hundred friends, eat lunch on top of Mount Fuji, go on a tour across Japan and make the whole world laugh with joy, that sorta deal?”

“I’m aware of that song, but I can say with confidence that not a single elementary schooler in history has ever done all those things.”

“Okay, fair enough! Heck, considering the declining birth rate and all, you’d be lucky just to have a hundred kids in your grade level, let alone a hundred friends!”

“Yes, that’s true.”

*...Silence. Deafening.*

“I don’t suppose you’d mind if we got to the point?”

“Yes, please.” I gave up on playing dumb. If I went any further with it, she’d peg me as the sort of guy who can’t read the mood at all (assuming she hadn’t

already), so I quietly leaned over and took a look at her album.

"Is that me?"

One of the pictures on the page Kiryu opened the album to had a picture on it of a young version of her, along with a boy who I could just barely recognize as myself. I could tell it was her in an instant—she had the same striking features as a kid, apparently. She and the boy were pressed up against each other, so close their faces were practically touching and smiling the bright and innocent smiles you'd expect from kids their age. It was hard to believe a girl like that grew up to be the stone-cold ice queen I knew. A label on the page informed me that the picture was from a second-grade field trip.

"I guess we were pretty close?"

"We were."

"Oh... Huh."

I hadn't expected her to agree that easily. It was sort of awkward.

"The seating chart was arranged by ABCs, and our names put us right next to each other."

"Aaah, gotcha. Yeah, that makes sense."

I hadn't really thought about it like that before, but she was right. "Kiryu" and "Kunugi" were pretty close together, alphabetically speaking. We were in the same class again, of course, and the seating chart was still alphabetical, but we had a kid named Kudou in our class as well this time and ended up one desk apart. Our surnames are close, but they're not so close that there couldn't be an interruption between them. No wonder we became friends if we sat next to each other all the time. Little kids are like that.

*...Side note, "arranged by ABCs"? Surely Kiryu's the sort of person who'd say "arranged alphabetically"? What, is she trying to look cute by acting out of character?*

"You sat right behind me, and could absolutely never sit still, even during class. You were always messing with me during the lessons, and the teacher would always end up scolding both of us together."

“Ah. Err... Sorry?”

“It’s not like I’m holding a grudge over it. If anything, I’m grateful.”

She wistfully brushed her fingers across the album’s page.

“I was incredibly shy back then, and couldn’t make any friends, no matter how hard I tried...”

“Wow, considering what you’re like now, I...can totally imagine that. Yeah, sorry, that checks out.”

“I’m not shy anymore. I just don’t particularly feel the need to socialize.”

That certainly checked out as well. I couldn’t think of a single time I’d seen her chatting with our classmates. She probably spent longer answering our teachers’ questions in class than she did talking with her peers. *But on the contrary, my dear Kiryu, saying it like that implies you’re just making up excuses!* I knew she’d give me the death glare treatment if I said that, of course, so I kept my mouth firmly shut.

“I guess that means we were friends back in the day.”

“I suppose...” she started, before rectifying her statement. “Yes, I believe we were.”

“You don’t sound very sure about that. What, do you have amnesia too?”

“No. It’s just that things were...complicated back then.”

She rested her fingers on the young me in the picture as she spoke. *Complicated, huh? I guess even elementary schoolers can have a lot going on.*

“You were a really important person to Daiki.”

“Daiki... That’s your little brother, right?”

She had just told me about him at the restaurant, so his name was still fresh in my mind. I had to assume he was the point of all this—the reason she’d brought me over to her house. In all honesty, no matter how much I feigned composure and playfully bantered...if I could’ve found a chance to run away, I absolutely would have.

I was seriously regretting going along with her. Part of me had wondered if,

just maybe, there was a possibility that hearing her story would make me remember something. But it was no use. Seeing that old picture of myself and learning that Kiryu and I used to be friends wasn't sparking any memories at all. Didn't ring even a single bell. Kiryu Kyouka, Kiryu Daiki, and even the young Kunugi Kou in the picture—to me, they were all just characters in a work of fiction. None of them even felt *real* in the slightest.

Kiryu pulled another picture out from her desk. It showed a slightly older version of her—probably around middle school age, or so—smiling and standing next to a young boy that I could only assume was Daiki. Even in a picture, something about his appearance struck me as oddly delicate.

"Daiki was sickly from the day he was born. He couldn't go to school much at all, and even when he went, he never seemed to make any friends."

The Kiryu siblings were both in the same boat in that respect. Having a circle of friends can make a world of difference when school's concerned, and elementary school in particular's hard to get through when you're isolated, supposedly. Little kids are seriously ruthless when it comes to bullying.

The qualities that can earn you friends in elementary school are things like being hyper, or fast, or strong. Being smart or sickly's the opposite of helpful. It paints a target on your back, if anything. I couldn't exactly remember what they were like firsthand, but it was easy enough to imagine that the two of them fell into the latter category.

"Must've been pretty rough on him, huh?"

"Not in particular."

"Huh. Really?"

"Really. Because you were there." She smiled faintly, but I wasn't following her at all. Why would I crop up at this point in the conversation?

"But wait, he wasn't in our grade, right?"

"No, he was one year below us. But you and I were, well...we were friends."

"Oooh..." *I guess it would be pretty normal to get to know your sibling's friends, when you put it that way.*

“Daiki really looked up to you. He thought you were the funniest person he’d ever met, and considered you a role model. You were all he’d talk about, even after we got home, and thanks to you he started looking forward to school. His condition was never stable so he couldn’t go every day, but whenever he did, the three of us would walk to school together...”

“Jeez... I’m, ah, sorry I can’t remember any of this.”

“Right...” Kiryu’s voice grew quiet and subdued. “You’re not going to ask where Daiki is now?”

“Well, umm... Can I?”

“...His condition took a turn for the worse three years ago. He never recovered...”

“Ah...”

Between the fact she was so confident her family wouldn’t be at home and the knowledge that she had a brother, I already had my suspicions, and seeing that picture more or less confirmed them. Still, though, hearing it so directly left me speechless.

“The time Daiki spent with you meant the world to him. More than anything, except maybe the time he spent with his family. He more or less stopped going to school after you went away.”

“After I ‘went away’...?”

“You vanished out of nowhere when we were in fifth grade, just a short while before summer vacation. You’d promised to play with me and Daiki over the summer, but of course that never happened. You never submitted any notice that you were transferring to a new school, and your parents vanished right along with you, so there were even rumors floating around that you might’ve been the victim of a family murder-suicide.”

Her words carried an edge to them, along with an implicit question: did I *really* not remember any of this? But the truth of the matter was that I didn’t. I didn’t even remember what my own parents looked like. I shook my head, and she looked crestfallen.

“I admired you. When we were in elementary school together you were lively, and funny, and had a knack for leading the kids who gathered around you. It wasn’t just Daiki and me—the whole class idolized you. You were incredible...”

“Wow. Really?”

“So, the way you are now is just...”

She didn’t finish her sentence, but I could guess where it was going: she couldn’t stand the new me. After facing her pure, unreserved emotions head-on, I could tell. It wasn’t just a matter of hostility—I could hear her disappointment, her pain, and her grief, all mixed together into her voice. It was excruciating to listen to.

“I knew it was you the moment I saw you at the opening ceremony, but you acted like you didn’t know me at all... Having you—having Kunugi Kou look at me like I was absolutely nothing to him was painful. I ended up hating you because it was the only way I could protect myself.”

Protecting yourself by hating someone else, huh? She was desperately keeping her emotions in check, holding them back lest they overflow. It was the first time I’d ever seen her look so vulnerable. I wondered if the old me knew about this side of hers.

“Do you remember the time I tried to talk to you, back when we were first-years?”

“...Yeah.” I remembered it all too vividly, in fact. I was deeply suspicious—why would a beauty like her be talking to a guy like me?

It was about half a year after we enrolled at Oumei High, and I’d already secured my role as Kaito’s best friend. I figured that he’d done something to earn her affection, prompting her to seek me out as a way to get closer to him. When she started lashing out at me after our first meeting, I lumped it into the same category.

I thought her feelings for Kaito explained everything about her, but apparently that assumption was woefully misguided. I believed it because it was what I *wanted* to believe, but the fact of the matter was that she’d been after *me* from the very beginning. Kaito had nothing to do with it. She just wanted to

talk to me...

“I’m sorry.”

What else could I say? Not that apologizing would fix anything. I couldn’t remember a single thing about Kiryu or her brother. She poured all her feelings out onto me, but still, none of it felt real at all. It was almost sickening. There she was, telling all these stories about my past, and there I was, unable to see them as anything other than someone else’s history.

The worst part was that I knew it probably had nothing to do with my amnesia. Kiryu probably sensed it too: the problem wasn’t my memory, it was with me. My inability to empathize with her was a flaw in my character, plain and simple. No matter how long I spent watching her agonize over our history, I still wouldn’t be able to face my own past. I was too scared. That was my only reason.

“Amnesia, of all things...? Why?! How could you forget?! The only people left to remember Daiki are my family and you! Please... Please, remember him... I know I’m being irrational, and I know I’m being selfish, but if you don’t remember him, then...then Daiki... Daiki really will be dead...”

“Kiryu...”

She was crying. But still, even after all that, I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t the Kunugi Kou she wanted me to be. I wanted to make something up on the spot, to tell a white lie and reassure her, at least for the moment, but I couldn’t spit it out. She stared at me, silently, tears pouring down her grief-stricken face. It was all too much for me, and I awkwardly looked away.

“...When I got into high school and found you again, I was happy...at first. I was never satisfied with all the explanations for why you disappeared, and I thought that if I could just say a few words to you, that’d be enough for me... To my family and me, to the very few people who knew Daiki, you were a special person. I thought that would be enough.”

She paused for a moment, swallowing her emotions to make one final, cold, definitive statement.

“But I was wrong. The Kou-kun we all loved... He doesn’t exist anymore.”

I left the Kiryu household—I practically fled from it. I was in a daze on my way out, barely capable of paying attention to Kiryu's parting words. With each step I took, it got harder and harder to remember the one that came before it. Kiryu's raw words from before resounded in my mind, drowning out everything else.

How must she have felt going to school up until now? How must she have felt every time she saw me? How must she have felt while she was eating that hamburger? And how must she have felt, telling me all about her little brother?

Maybe if she'd confronted me after the opening ceremony, maybe if we'd ended up in the same class during our first year, things would've turned out differently between us. But thinking about what-ifs wouldn't change anything.

"How could I forget, huh...?"

If I'd told her *how* I lost my memories, would that have satisfied her? Hah, as if.

"If I told her *that*, I bet she'd have decked me in the face. She'd have thought I was making crap up to dodge the issue."

I could make all the excuses I wanted, but the reality was that I completely brought this upon myself by losing my memories—no, by throwing them away. I did it for my sake, and mine alone. I was convinced that the Kunugi Kou of the past, the Kunugi Kou who Kiryu loved, would tell me that it was the right decision if he was here.

But that decision was tormenting Kiryu. I gave her hope, then dropped her right back down into despair. I hid behind my amnesia, excusing my actions away, and caused her to blame herself for hating me, even though in the end it really *was* all my fault. Kiryu had every right to blame and abuse me, but even if she did, it's totally possible she'd just be making herself feel even worse.

"I'm such a piece of shit."

Maybe this is just who I am. Maybe all I'm good for is making people suffer. I'm jealous of my elementary school self. I bet he'd be able to do all the things I want to, all the things I can't bring myself to, and he'd make it look easy.

"Why should they care about a waste of space like me...?"

Just as I moaned feebly to myself, my phone buzzed. I felt a sudden rush of relief as I answered. There it was—my chance to run away from everything. I didn't even bother to check who was calling. I just shoved all the jumbled, messed-up thoughts that were preoccupying me into the back of my mind and tried to force my normal self to the surface again. The ideal me: the protagonist's best friend sidekick, a cheery, flippant, insignificant dumbass whose only adult-like trait is his overinflated sense of pride. With no small amount of effort, I squeezed out a greeting.

"Hello?"

Of course, going back to normal couldn't possibly be that easy. Even I could hear the weight and stiffness in my own tone of voice.

"You finally picked up, Senpai!"

A voice cut through the dizzy, almost nauseous sensation that was overtaking me. The voice of a girl I'd met just recently.

"Is that you, Ayase...?"

"It sure is! It's your cute little kouhai, Ayase Hikari speaking!"

It sounded like she was trying to banter with me, but I couldn't find it in me to give her a decent reply. A second or two of silence passed before she followed up.

"Can you come meet up with me?"

And she continued.

"Let's go on a date, Kunugi Kou-senpai."

She sounded absolutely serious.

# Late-Night Date-Night “A *date*?”

I was so caught off guard, I parroted her words back at her. I actually started to wonder if we were really in that sort of relationship... No. No, we were most definitely not! At least, not unless I’d been seriously misunderstanding the meaning of the word “date” for my entire life. I took a look at my phone’s screen, and found that it was a bit past ten p.m. Part of me was surprised by how long I’d spent in Kiryu’s house while the rest of me was appalled by the idea of going on a date that late in the evening.

“Y’know... *Good* little boys and girls are already in bed by now.”

“I’m a truant, remember?” Ayase giggled. “I’m already a bad girl, so I’m not worried about that at all. Besides, tomorrow’s Saturday, so what’s the harm in staying up a bit late?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a shut-in? Now’s the perfect moment to live up to your title and, well, shut yourself in.”

I suddenly remembered a story I saw on the news a while back about people who use virtual reality to meet up for long-distance get-togethers. *Could that be what she’s proposing? Actually, that makes a lot of sense—solves both the shut-in and the late-night problems all at once. A VR date. Virtual dating... Wait, no, when I put it that way it sounds kinda pathetic.*

“Well, I can’t deny that I’m a shut-in... There’ll be a lot less people out and about late at night, though, so I thought I wouldn’t have to worry as much about perverts.”

“Perverts know there are less people out at night too! Trust me, that old dude was an exception. *Normal* perverts only go out at nighttime.”

“What exactly is a ‘normal pervert’?”

“Okay, when you put it that way, I guess *all* perverts are abnormal by definition...”

I’d said “pervert” so many times at that point the word was starting to go through semantic satiation. I wouldn’t mind at all if it stayed in that doesn’t-

sound-like-a-real-word state forever, frankly.

“Whatever. My point is that you shouldn’t walk around at night. We can meet up sometime when it’s actually light out.”

“Haven’t you been listening, Senpai? I don’t wanna go out during the day; there’s too many people! The first pervert I met was out and about during the day too.”

*Please don’t phrase it like you’re assuming there’ll be a second pervert someday.*

“Besides, I can’t just leave you on your own right now,” she continued.

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just give up and go out with me, okay? Ah, I don’t mean that in a boy-girl ‘going out’ sense! Just in a going-on-a-date sort of way.”

“Not really following this...”

For one thing, isn’t “boy-girl going out” what dating means? Heck, isn’t “going on a date” basically synonymous with “going out,” period? Whatever the case, none of that quibbling made me any more inclined to take her up on her offer.

“Okay, I’m heading out now! Meet me at, hmm... Do you know where Aoba Park is? The one with the jungle gym that’s shaped like a giraffe?”

“I do...”

The giraffe-shaped jungle gym was pretty distinct, and I’d definitely seen it around. It was at a little park right by Kaito’s house. The place was totally unremarkable except for that weird giraffe thing. It had a climbing pole that ran from its neck to the ground, which always struck me as sorta grotesque.

“Perfect! Meet me there.”

I heard her open the door, followed by the sound of the wind blowing.

“Hey, wait!”

“By the way, no matter how long you take, I’ll be there waiting for you! I might really get assaulted by a pervert if you’re too slow, you hear me?” she snickered. I didn’t know what sort of act she was trying to put on, but I didn’t

miss the slight wavering in her voice. “Please come, okay? I’ll be in big trouble if you don’t. I mean, *really* big trouble... Please. I’ll be waiting.”

Then she hung up.

I could tell that she was really worried towards the end of the call. Seriously, why push yourself that hard? If it’s that scary, then don’t force yourself into going out on a date in the first place! And besides, why would she want to meet up in the middle of the night, anyway? Was she planning on dragging me out to a twenty-four-hour beef bowl joint for a midnight snack, or something?

“Dammit...” I swore reflexively.

I was *not* in the mood. I would *never* be in the mood, but doubly so that moment in particular. I couldn’t exactly abandon her, though, so I ended up dragging myself towards Aoba Park against my will.

It’s not like I was taking everything she said totally seriously. I didn’t know her well enough to make sweeping judgments about her character, but I could at least tell that she was the sort of person who likes teasing and messing with people. But on the one in a million chance she was serious, there was also a one in a million chance she’d actually run into trouble.

I’d never been to Kiryu’s house before and didn’t really know how to get back to my apartment from there, especially if I’d be making a stop at the park on the way. Thanks to the boundless creativity and inventive nature of mankind (read: my smartphone and GPS), however, I didn’t have any difficulties finding a route there.

Residential streets all look the same even when it’s not dark out, and yet it still felt like I was lost, even though I knew I was on the right path. I suddenly and deeply appreciated the fact that maps are a vitally important tool, no matter what sort of world you live in. Whoever decided to make them freely available was a saint.

“Ah, that must be the place.”

The park that Ayase directed me to was smack-dab in the middle of a residential area. It wasn’t particularly large, but the only lighting in the area was a single, aging lamppost in the middle, so it was pretty gloomy on the whole.

“Where is she...?”

I squinted as I scanned around the area. I couldn’t see anyone at a glance, but then I noticed something move in my peripheral vision.

“Senpai...?”

“That you, Ayase? What’re you doing back there?”

For some reason, she’d been crouched down behind a nearby bench. She stood up somewhat unsteadily and fiddled with the hem of the one-piece dress she was wearing as she walked towards me.

“Good evening, Senpai! Well? What do you think?”

“Of what?”

“L-Like what you see?”

“Are you listening to yourself right now?”

Normal girls aren’t supposed to talk like that about themselves, never mind one on the student council! Ayase’s supposed to be a role model for the whole student body (even if she *is* a shut-in at the moment)! That’s part of the charm that (I assume) makes all the boys in her class swoon, though her looks probably also play a factor. Just imagine the disappointed looks on their faces if they saw this egregious display!

Well, I suppose a certain percentage of lechers might actually be into it. Oh yeah, and if it’s embarrassing enough that saying it makes you blush, I’m of the opinion that you shouldn’t say it in the first place!

“Don’t worry, Senpai. I only act this way around *you*.”

“Don’t act that way, period! Seriously, I don’t know how to react when you do stuff like that.”

She beamed, and I didn’t know how to react. Surprise surprise.

“So, uhh, why were you hiding behind the bench?” I asked, changing the subject.

“A girl goes out of her way to show off by wearing her favorite dress for you, and you’re just going to ignore her?” she pouted.

“Yup, you’ve successfully shown off. I’m *very* impressed. Good for you. So, why the bench?”

“Are you really *that* curious?” She gave me an irritated half-glare.

“Well, of course I am. I mean, what if the one in a million happened? And the other one in a million, which would make it a one in a trillion, I guess? Anyway, yeah, of course I am.”

There was also the *other* one in a million chance she’d already run into a pervert. The more used to these one in a million chances you get, the more dangerous they become. Not that “getting used to it” even makes sense in this context.

“I was...”

“Say what?”

“I was scared. Waiting out in the dark like that... It was really scary...” Her tone of voice dropped dramatically, to the point she was practically whispering, and she stared at her shoes. “I didn’t want to take my phone out, either, since I thought the light from the screen might catch someone’s attention. I didn’t have anything to do to pass the time, and it felt like I was waiting forever...”

By that point, she’d begun to tremble. I finally remembered that she was, in fact, a shut-in. She’d only been one for two days, but being out and about like this was still asking a lot from her. Actually, does a two-day-old shut-in *really* count as a shut-in? How many days do you have to spend without going outside before you qualify? If two’s enough, you could end up as one on accident over the course of a lazy weekend. Isn’t this the sort of thing that usually gets measured in, like, years? Man.

“I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t... Hey, are you listening, Senpai?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah, I am. Good thing a pervert didn’t show up this time, right?”

“W-Well, yeah, but that’s also not really...” Ayase’s words trailed off, and she turned back around to face the bench. “Umm, why don’t we sit down for a moment?”

“I’m not exactly looking to take my time here. My job’s to get you home with Kaito, safe and sound, then go home and pass out.”

“You really think you could sleep, even if you tried?” Her words carried a serious weight to them, and I felt myself stiffen up. “I had a feeling after we talked on the phone, but now that I’ve seen you in person, I’m positive. Something happened to you, didn’t it?”

“...What do you mean, ‘something’?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t known you for long enough and don’t know you well enough to figure that much out...unfortunately.” She smiled in a meek, sort of girly manner. Talking to her in person gave a really different impression than getting brutally teased by her over the phone. “But still, I can tell it’s something, more or less. It’s okay, Senpai, you can talk to me. What happened—was it something bad?”

Defying all my expectations, it seemed she’d mustered up the courage to come all the way out to the park in the middle of the night just to give me a chance to vent. Her own trauma was far from healed, and there she was, worrying about mine. I wasn’t sure if she was being kind, or just plain nosy.

“You’ve been doing your best to support me, so it’s only fair for me to support you in return, right?”

She sounded excited by her own logic, and I sighed. It wasn’t a bad sort of sigh, though—not in the slightest, much to my surprise. Ayase Hikari was one weird girl, plain and simple. If I had to put a pin on what it was that struck me as so odd, it was her sheer over-familiarity, considering we’d only just met. She was absolutely, stubbornly determined to earn my trust, and something about her presence felt weirdly reassuring. That strange comfort was accompanied by an unpleasant weight in the pit of my stomach, of course, but I pushed through it.

“All right, fine.”

I plopped down onto the bench. I had a feeling she wasn’t planning to drop the topic no matter how hard I tried to dodge around it, and she’d been really brave to come out here, all for my sake. I had at least enough sincerity left in me to not let that go to waste. Ayase looked surprised for a moment, then

beamed as she sat down (just a little bit too close) next to me.

She paused, taking a couple of deep breaths, then put on a serious expression and turned to face me. I noted, however, that the corners of her lips were twitching, almost like she was doing her best to hold back a smile. She looked so silly I almost ended up cracking up as I tried to figure out where to even start describing the day's events. I'd decided to tell her about it all, but a bunch of aspects of my conversation with Kiryu were pretty dangerous privacy-wise. I couldn't let myself screw up and blab all about her dead brother for obvious reasons.

"Is it hard to talk about?" she asked, considerately. I'd been sitting there for quite a while without so much as opening my mouth. "I can tell you're under a lot of pressure. It's okay, you can start with something easy and move to the harder stuff from there. Take it nice and slow. We have plenty of time."

"...Yeah, okay."

I wasn't super convinced by the "plenty of time" part. Actually, if we stretched this out any longer we'd be liable to get scolded by a passing cop for being out too late. Still, though, I was really grateful for the "take it slow" part. I knew I'd inevitably need to face Kiryu and her brother face-to-face *someday*. It was inevitable that I'd find out about them eventually too. It just so happened that that day was today. So I needed to move forward, at my own pace, step-by-faltering-step.

"Hey, can I say something out of the blue?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"I have amnesia."

"...What?"

"Yeah, no memories at all from before five years ago."

"*Whaaat?!*"

"But, then I ran into somebody I knew during that period I forgot about, and everything's kinda all weird and messy now. That's about the size of it."

"Senpai, *stop!* Time out!" She freaked out and tried to stop me, but she was a

little late on the draw—I was actually already finished. “What happened to taking it nice and slow?!”

“Huh? I thought I did? I was talking really slowly, by my standards.”

“I meant in terms of telling it step-by-step, not words per minute!”

*Huh? Why’s she panicking? Weird.*

“‘Amnesia’ is a ridiculously huge pill to swallow already, and then you skipped over all the details on top of it! I can’t understand what you’re actually going through at all!”

“Are we in school? What, you grading my essay?”

“No, we’re not, but if that’s what it takes to make you take this seriously, then fine, let’s say we are!”

She was *really* starting to freak out. This must be why all the old folks always freak out about how the young’uns these days freak out too much.

“Anyway, start over, from the top, with more detail!”

“I’m an amnesiac and I met a person I supposedly know. What do?”

“That was even worse than the first time!”

“I mean, it’s not like going into detail’s gonna help.”

Considering all the privacy issues involved, I figured it’d be best to just skim over the issue in broad strokes and leave the rest to her imagination. I had a pretty strong feeling that if I let her dig any deeper than that, she’d end up prying the whole story out of me.

“Well, all right, fine.” She sounded less than pleased. I guess she might’ve assumed that I didn’t trust her enough to give her the full story. She said “fine,” but it was definitely a “this is not actually fine” sort of “fine.” She was clearly sulking.

“How did you end up with amnesia in the first place?”

“Does that mean you actually believe me?”

“Of course I do. Why would you lie to me?”

*Holy crap, this girl's way too innocent for her own good! I hope she doesn't swallow stories like that without a second thought from just anyone.*

"This is my first time meeting a real amnesiac," she continued. "Did you get in a big accident, or something like that?"

"All it takes is a single stun-gun shot directly to the brain and blammo! Bye-bye, memories!"

"There's no way that legitimately happened to you."

"The *cause* isn't really the problem here, so let's just move on for now. The problem's that by getting amnesia I ended up hurting this person pretty badly, and I'm not really sure what to do about it..."

"You're really kind, aren't you, Senpai?" Ayase beamed at me again, but I scowled in response.

"You're kidding, right?"

"No way! Losing your memories has to be an incredibly big deal for you, but you're more worried about that acquaintance of yours than you are about yourself."

*Okay, I guess if you go out of your way to explain it like that, it'd almost sound like I'm a decent person.*

"Look, I'm definitely in the wrong here. This all started because I forgot everything. That's all on me."

"Did you give yourself amnesia on purpose?"

"Don't ask me... *I'm* not the one who forgot it all. You'd have to talk to the *old me* about that."

I wasn't lying, technically. I didn't have any memories when I awoke as the current me, after all. Of course, I did have all the details explained to me after the fact.

"By the way, what sort of person is this acquaintance?"

"We're classmates, I guess."

"That means you'll run into each other next Monday, right?"

“Yeah, it sure does...”

Wow, look at me, I’ve got a truant worrying about my school life. She’s right, though—if I don’t come up with a solid plan to deal with this situation before next Monday, I’m in serious danger of losing my best friend sidekick status! Extras aren’t allowed to have long, dragged out plot arcs about their worries!

“By the way, what sort of relationship did you have with this person before you lost your memories?”

“I mean, I can’t remember, but supposedly we were friends in elementary school.”

“Friends? Hmm.”

“I guess we both lived in another prefecture, and went to the same school. We met up again here by total coincidence, thanks to parents getting transferred for work and stuff.”

“I see, I see... By the way...”

*Okay, that was definitely one “by the way” too many. What, am I talking with Ayase “By the Way” Hikari?* I glanced over at her right around then, and noticed that her expression was pretty grim. Like, scary grim, and she was looking right at me. If this was a horror movie, this would be the part where the creepy violins start droning in the background—then, suddenly, *dead* silence.

“What is this person’s gender?”

*...Huh? That’s it? You busted out the creepy violins to psych yourself up for* that? *Of all the questions to go all-out on!*

“Sh-She’s a girl...?”

“Is that so?” Her tone of voice could give a man frostbite. For a second, I couldn’t even believe it came from her. “By the way. Is she cute?”

“Not sure if ‘cute’ is *quite* the right word...”

“‘Pretty,’ then. That settles it. You’re guilty as charged.”

“Why?!” *As in both “why am I guilty” and just a plain, general, “*why*”?!*

“You ignored my phone call to flirt with some other girl? I don’t believe you,

Senpai! Looks like you're in desperate need of a proper scolding."

"No, seriously, on like five different levels, *why?!* We're not even dating, are we?!"

"Of course we are! We've been together for almost eight years."

"Wha—no, that's not—you're kidding, right...?"

"Of course I am."

"YEAH! NO SHIT!"

Okay, for real though, jokes about the No Memories Zone are off-limits. For all I know, *anything* could've happened during that period! The whole deal with Kiryu came out of absolutely nowhere, and I didn't know what to believe anymore.

"You really do have amnesia, don't you?" Ayase crossed her arms, nodding thoughtfully. I guess my reaction there must've convinced her.

"What, were you testing me?"

"Teehee, I sort of just felt like it."

*Then what was with the death glare?!*

"Well, considering it's so tied up with your amnesia, it's hard for me to dig into the details. But there's one thing I can say, at least." She cleared her throat, stood up, then walked right in front of me and bent over to look me straight in the eye. "This isn't like you, Senpai."

"What's not like me?"

"Back when we talked about that horrible old pervert, you charged right into the subject without stopping to think about tact or delicacy for a second. Isn't getting hung up on the details and brooding over them out of character for you? If accidentally hurting someone makes you feel *this* depressed, then why were you fine treating me like damaged goods?"

"Holy crap, phrasing!" *This girl really has a way of picking the most messed up way to say stuff sometimes!*

"Maybe as far as your old friend's concerned, the current you is a totally

different person than the one she knew. But that was over five years ago! You were an elementary schooler, right? Wouldn't it be weird if you grew up physically but hadn't changed at *all* mentally over that much time? You'd be a kid in the body of an adult! You'd be a teenager running around with a pacifier in his mouth!"

"No, I wouldn't!"

*I might not remember anything about past me, but I'm pretty confident I wouldn't run around with a pacifier under any circumstances. Hell, kids that age are already way too old for those in the first place!*

Even while she was messing with me, though, Ayase still kept her eyes locked onto mine. Her expression didn't suit her jocular tone in the slightest. While looking pretty serious, she also seemed like she was nervous.

"Then you should just tell her! Tell her that even if you've changed, you're still the one and only Kunugi Kou."

"I'm...the one and only me?"

"Maybe I'm being a bit unfair to your pretty little childhood friend, but the way I see it, living the life you want to live's more important than sparing her feelings." Ayase's face lit up in a smile once more. "And no matter how it turns out, *I'll* always accept you, Senpai!"

Yeah, I can't deny it: there's absolutely a resemblance. Maybe it's rude of me to think about her this way, but no matter how I look at it, Ayase reminds me of *her*. It's something about the way she always seems to be jumping from one thing to the next, the way her expression changes at the drop of a hat, and the way she directly tackles problems when push comes to shove, breaking down the walls I've built around my heart—whether I like it or not.

It makes me want to do what she tells me to. To trust my everything to her. To let her pamper me.

"All right," my answer comes out, naturally and immediately. "I have no clue if this is a good idea, though. I'll take a shot at living the way I *want* to, and if I crash and burn, well, that's that."

"That's right! If it turns out badly, just come and find me. I'll do my best to

comfort you!” She cheered me on with a smile.

She called me kind, of all things, then went and worried about me even more than she worried about herself. She was far kinder than I could ever be... Or maybe “good-natured” would be a better word for it? She was a true heroine who came running out into the darkness in spite of the wounds that still ate away at her, and I felt like I had to at least express my gratitude.

“Thank you, Ayase.” It was short, as far as expressions of gratitude go, but it came from my heart.

“Ah... Any time!”

I’m sure I was wearing an effortless, natural smile at that moment. Seeing Ayase’s own heartfelt grin made it easy to tell.

*All right, just you wait, Kiryu! Screw next Monday—I’m confronting your memories of Kunugi Kou head-on, and I’m afraid to say that means confronting* you *head-on as well. I’ll take you on as myself: the Kunugi Kou you so despise!*

“Achoo!” While I was busy exulting in my resolve and declaring war against Kiryu in my mind’s eye, Ayase let out an adorable little sneeze, then blushed.

“Yeah, I guess it gets pretty chilly at night, even during the summer.”

“E-Excuse me!”

“I’ll walk you home. I have absolutely no clue what I’ll say to Kaito if he catches us, though.”

“Don’t worry, I know I can make something up that’ll fool him.”

*Well, somebody’s confident.* I chuckled as we set off, walking down the road side by side with only the occasional streetlight to illuminate the way. We didn’t talk. She stayed quiet, and I was perfectly content to follow her lead.

Right now I’m just your average everyman extra. I happen to be her brother’s best friend, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m not suited to talk to a heroine of her caliber. Even supposing that Ayase has feelings for me in one way or another, it’s absolutely never happening. It *can’t* happen.

“Well, here we are. Good night, Senpai!”

In the end, we arrived at her house without exchanging so much as a word. She gave a quick goodbye and ran inside, not sparing even a moment for me to reply. I heard Kaito shouting something a moment later—it was pretty easy to guess that he'd been worried about his sister, considering how she ran out of the house without explaining a thing to him. He'd probably been sitting around waiting for her the whole time. Ayase the Younger claimed to not have a crush on Ayase the Elder, but I was still convinced that Kaito had a huge sister complex. I was relieved to see that she was well taken care of. And yet...

*"To be honest, Hikari-chan's been really isolated at school lately..."*

I thought back to what Yuuta told me back in the counseling room. She'd explained that Ayase was facing some problems, but wasn't very specific about them. Even so, there are only so many reasons why a high schooler might end up ostracized from her peers. Ayase Hikari managed to join the student council as a first-year—that's allowed only for the one new student chosen to represent their grade level. The representative, in turn, is determined by the entrance exam: whoever gets the highest score gets the job.

When I was a first-year, Kiryu was our grade's chosen representative. Apparently, she'd turned down the student council part of the job, thus leaving them without a new staff member. So I didn't really know what it was like being in class with a first-year member of the council, but I was still certain that joining them must have earned Ayase a lot of respect and attention from her peers. The likely cause of her ostracization followed pretty naturally from there: jealousy.

At the end of the day these were all just my assumptions, of course. I knew that if I was on the right track, there could be more than one reason why she didn't want to go to school. Of course, this wasn't the time to be thinking about any of that stuff. I had to focus on solving the problem in front of me, and worry about her issues once that was over with.

Soon after, I arrived at my next destination, which also happened to be a place I'd run away from just a few hours earlier: Kiryu's house. Checking my phone, I found that it was already a bit after midnight, so I figured her parents had most likely already come home. I wasn't *quite* stupid enough to call them up on the intercom, though. Heck, even if I was, I'd have higher odds of waking

them up and annoying the hell out of them than successfully getting in touch with her.

As such, I decided to conceal myself behind a nearby utility pole and bide my time. I'd stopped by a convenience store on the way there to buy a bottle of milk and a red bean bun, which I pulled out of my bag.

"If you're gonna do a stakeout, you gotta eat the classic stakeout snack!" I said, to nobody in particular.

By the way, I don't actually *like* red bean paste. Also, eating junk food late at night's super bad for you. Honestly, I only bought it in the first place because that's what cops always eat when they're on stakeouts in police dramas. My *actual* secret weapon was (drumroll, please)...

"Shampoo! ☆ Weekly!"

It was my trusty partner for the night's stakeout: a weekly advice magazine centered entirely around shampoo. I'd never read it before, but the instant it entered my line of sight it had my full attention. Oh, and it was only 208 yen total, with tax! In other words, hella cheap! Pretty hefty for the price too, if I do say so myself (and I do). I bet that if I wrapped it around my waist and slid my shirt over it, it'd even protect me from a knife-wielding mugger. Entertainment *and* practical application: this thing's got it all! Without further ado, let's take a look inside.

I flipped open the magazine and was greeted by a veritable ocean of shampoo. Page after page of shampoo bottles, arranged one after another catalog-style, each with a pretty extensive review attached to it.

Hmm, hmm, I see, I see! A top three hundred shampoos of the year ranking, huh? Man, I didn't even know they made this many different kinds of shampoo! This one claims that "a capable man starts his day off right by choosing a capable shampoo!" Real men care *that* much about shampoo? News to me. I'd better write that one down.

Wait, wait, hold on a second—this is a *weekly* magazine, right? As in, they put out a new one of these every single week?! How is that even possible? Their editors must be university-educated shampoo PhDs to crank these out at that pace! I mean, the sheer excess of it all strikes me as sorta stupid, but it's also

pretty entertaining in its own right. This must be what culture shock feels like. I'm going through a real learning experience.

It also has pretty extensive sections on the historical origins of shampoo and shampoo trivia, not to mention what I'm pretty sure is some sort of serialized manga? A battle manga, at that, themed around and starring construction workers. And it's actually pretty good! I'm honestly curious about what'll happen next! But, I mean, y'know. This has absolutely nothing to do with shampoo, right? Huh.

I bought this thing on a whim after it caught my eye, but it turned out to be the ultimate tool for killing time. Wonder if kids these days grow up reading stuff like this? It's making me want to go buy some shampoo so badly, I can hardly resist. Turns out the world of shampoo is so deep and expansive, you might even have to import a bottle from overseas if you want the *really* good stuff.

Okay, okay, here's some trivia for you: you can make your own shampoo at home with just vinegar and baking soda! Homemade shampoo's this *whole* thing in YA fantasy novels. Like, the main character will get whisked away to another world and use their modern knowledge to "invent" the wonders of modern civilization (yes, shampoo) and cheat their way into prosperity. That always bothered me, actually—I mean, most people don't just casually memorize shampoo recipes, do they? What kind of life do you have to live to end up with specialized knowledge like that? You've got a lot of explaining to do, Isekai-san!

Shampoo Weekly actually included a comment on the subject: "The authors of those stories don't *really* know their stuff. They just look it all up on the internet!" C'mon, shampoo people, you can't just say stuff like that! The editor-in-chief wrote a comment too, saying "If *I* got summoned to another world, I'd end all war with the power of shampoo! I'd bring about a shampoo revolution!" Just reading it made me cringe.

...Yeah, it's sorta nice to peek into a totally foreign culture like this every once in a while. The trivia sections and the columns are pretty fascinating, and I'm honestly sort of excited to see what hot shampoo takes they'll put into next week's issue. Not that I'm actually gonna buy it.

When I finally finished reading through that edition of *Shampoo!*, a bout of sudden dread plowed right into me. I'm pretty sure I've read a paper about how past the hour of midnight, electronic waves emitted by the moon do something to the human body that spikes adrenaline? Uhh, maybe?

Anyway, I figured that I'd probably fallen victim to Late-Night Energy Spike Syndrome. Up until just a moment before I'd been in all-out "Woo-hoo, the real party's just starting! Pump it up and bring it on, yeah yeah yeah!" mode, but unfortunately that energy went the way of Cinderella's carriage, leaving me with nothing more than an imaginary pumpkin to keep me company until dawn.

To top it off, the spell left behind in its wake not a pair of glass slippers, but rather a serious case of sleep deprivation-induced fatigue and despondency. I've heard that if you make a habit of using that late-night energy boost, you can end up with an actual sleep disorder, unable to go to bed at a reasonable hour even if you want to. Man, the human body's really inconvenient sometimes, isn't it?

I read through *Shampoo!* three times in a row, trying to pick out all the typos in a desperate attempt to whip my gradually slowing brain back into shape, before I finally heard trains start to run up and down the nearby tracks. Glancing up, I found that the sky was just beginning its transition from pitch-black to blue. The morning was finally dawning. Thank you, Mr. Sun. Thank you, *Shampoo!*.

I wrapped *Shampoo!* up in the bag I got from the convenience store and shoved it into my satchel, where I found my hamburger from the day before. I'd completely forgotten about it, and it was stone cold. *Meh, whatever. I'll save it for later.*

I had more important things to worry about at that moment—specifically, the fact that there were no signs of life coming from the Kiryu household. It was Saturday, so her parents were probably off of work and it was within the realm of possibility that they'd sleep in until noon. Maybe Kiryu herself would as well? I hadn't considered that at all and was starting to panic.

And just as I was starting to freak out about the fatal flaw in my master plan, the warm rays of the morning sun lit up my surroundings, and the door opened.

Out stepped a strikingly beautiful young woman with long black hair: Kiryu Kyouka herself. Her clean, well put together atmosphere was somewhat contrasted by the unfashionable tracksuit she was wearing. Between that and the way she tied up her hair, then started doing warm-up exercises by her front door, I assumed she was going out for her daily run.

So wait, not only is she a perfect honor student, she's dedicated enough to keep a consistent workout schedule on top of it? Even on weekends?! What kind of monstrous ambitions are driving this girl?! *You're doing this all wrong again, Kiryu—you're supposed to be too top-heavy on account of your massive brain to be good at sports stuff! Either that, or you could have all the skill for sports, but none of the stamina! That's how characters like you appeal to the audience! Working hard for the sake of self-improvement isn't gonna win you any fans!*

It worked out perfectly for me, though. I gave my cheeks a slap to try and stave off the fog of sleepiness that was clouding my mind, then jumped out in front of her. *That's* gotta wake me up, right? I mean, if seeing a pretty girl was all it took to wake people up we wouldn't need coffee, but still!

"Kiryu!"

"Aaah?! Wait... Kunugi-kun?"

"I need you to go out with me!"

"...Excuse me?"

Ah, whoops. Stepped on a land mine. Kiryu was giving me the imminent murder stare. You know how this sort of thing goes—you have a whole paragraph of explanation in mind, but then you're so stupidly sleepy that it gets abridged down to a single sentence and ends up meaning something completely different. Just one of those "Oh no, now it looks like I was confessing my love to her!" sorta whoopsie-daisies.

We'd officially moved beyond Monday-being-awkward territory. We were into "'So hey, like, y'know that Kunugi kid? He, like, totally asked me out, y'know?' 'Omigod, no way, for real? Poor Kyouka-chan!' 'Kyouka-chan's, like, totally crying, Kunugi! Apologize!' 'Cough up your reparations, then drop dead! Gya ha ha!'" territory. I'm talking full-on verbal abuse from all and sundry, no

doubt about it. I was cruising straight for a bad ending.

“Aaah, no, not what I meant! Not ‘go out’ in a dating way! I mean, like, in a literal, ‘go with me to a specific place’ sense!”

“A specific place?”

“...The town we lived in before I lost my memories.” Kiryu’s eyes widened with shock. “I might remember something if I actually go there, right? It’s a long shot, but I thought it’d at least be worth a try.”

“I...see. All right, then. I’ll go along with you.”

It took her a moment of thought, her chin rested in her hand, before she finally agreed.

“Really? You’re sure?”

“Just one thing, first...” Kiryu looked me up and down, appraising me and obviously not liking what she saw. “You’re wearing the same outfit as yesterday. You haven’t been home since then?”

“Err, ah, yeah, I guess.”

I was, in fact, still wearing the same clothes as yesterday—in other words, my school uniform. Goes without saying that I hadn’t taken a bath, either, and don’t even ask about my underwear.

“In that case, go home, take a shower, and change clothes. I can’t stand being around filthy people.”

Harsh, but fair.

“Got it, will do. Let’s meet at the station in a bit, then.”

“...I’m sorry to make you go to all this trouble.”

“Nah, I was just thinking about how much I wanted to take a shower. I’m so sweaty and sticky, I’m grossing myself out. Summer humidity’s the worst, right?”

“That’s not what I meant.” *It wasn’t? Huh.* “You waited out here all night just for me, didn’t you?” She looked exasperated, but at the same time, she smiled.

When I really thought about it, though, I realized: isn’t staking out

somebody's house all night pretty stalker-ish? It was a bit late for that revelation, but in retrospect, I was really glad she didn't call the cops on me.

"You're such an awkward guy."

I was breaking out into a cold sweat internally, but Kiryu was riding a completely different train of thought and mumbled to herself in an almost wistful tone. Whether or not I'm an awkward person on the whole, I was certainly feeling awkward after hearing that, or at least embarrassed. I forced a grin to try and cover it up.

"It's cool. This whole thing was my idea. I mean, I guess it would've been easier if I had some way of contacting you, but you never gave me your number no matter how many times I asked."

"That's true, now that you mention it. Should we exchange numbers, then?"

She pulled her phone out of her pocket.

"Huh? Seriously? That easily?"

"I mean, you always asked as part of some joke—it always felt like you were making fun of me. Who'd give you their number in that context? You'd probably abuse it somehow."

"Riiight, fair..."

"But considering everything that's happened, I wouldn't mind anymore. You bothering me, that is." She pulled out her phone as she casually dropped that bomb on me. Her tone of voice was intensely suggestive—anyone other than me might've swooned just from hearing her talk like that.

"I mean...it's not like we know if I'll ever need to contact you again, after this," I hesitantly added.

"I have a feeling you will. Quite soon, in fact."

"If you say so..."

I didn't really get it, but I traded numbers with her anyway. As far as I knew, not even Kaito had managed to get ahold of her number. I might have actually been the first person in my whole class to accomplish it, and I was weirdly psyched about that.

“Okay. Ten at the station sound good to you?”

“All right.”

Our plans established, I headed back to my place to tidy myself up. I was honestly shocked at just how well the whole thing went. As to whether or not this venture would be for the better or the worse in the long run, well... Either way, it’d be better than doing nothing at all, surely. I walked along with high spirits and a spring in my step.

# In Search of Memories “Shaddup...”

I awoke to the sound of my phone vibrating up a storm. I’d been dead asleep a moment before, and was more than a bit irritated to have my rest so rudely interrupted. As a general rule I try to not be terrible about getting up in the mornings, but I think *anyone* would feel like crap if they didn’t manage to get at least a solid three hours of sleep or so. In any case, it seemed I had a call, judging by how my phone just wouldn’t stop buzzing. I fumbled around until I found it and answered without even bothering to sit up.

“Hello...?”

“Finally! I’m at the station, but I can’t find you. Where are you right now?”

*Hmm? Is that Kiryu? Why would Kiryu be calling me...? Oh, right, I gave her my number, I guess. Hmm... Feels like I’m forgetting something else... Ah.*

Oh. *CRAAAAAAAAAAP!*

I fell asleep! I went home and fell right friggin’ asleep!

I couldn’t believe it—after I promised to meet up with Kiryu, I’d gone home, taken a shower, and then for some inexplicable reason dove right into bed! I blame my tiny, one-person apartment for this. It’s so small that when you exit the bathroom, the bed’s just a couple steps away. I’d fallen under the influence of its powerful sleeping magic and was out for several hours, waking up right around the time I was supposed to already be there.

“K-Kiryu-san...”

“What?”

“I’m really sorry to ask this, but, umm, d-do you think you could wait there for a bit...?”

Dead. Silence. Without saying a single word, Kiryu managed to communicate exactly how displeased she was with me.

“Where do you live?”

“Eeek?!”

“I’ll come get you, so hurry up and get ready.”

“N-No, just wait for me! I’ll be quick! I’ll be right there, I swear!”

“You have ten minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I flew into motion, getting ready in a matter of seconds. I tossed on some clothes, splashed my hair with water to deal with my bedhead, grabbed the bare minimum of supplies—my wallet, phone, and house key—and *literally* sprinted out the door. The station was about ten minutes away on foot, but I ran fast enough to cut it down to five, just barely arriving before my ten-minute time limit was up (making me, in total, about twenty minutes late).

It was the weekend, and the station was pretty reasonably crowded. I took a few seconds to stop, catch my breath, and wait for my heart to stop pounding before I looked around for Kiryu. No matter where I looked, though, all I could make out was an impenetrable mass of humanity. I could look for her all day in this crowd and not find her!

I found her barely a second later. She was, after all, a stand-out beauty. All I had to do was follow the gazes of the other passersby. It’s not like anyone was staring, exactly, but they were definitely shooting her glances. Being a knockout has some advantages, I suppose.

Anyway, the eye-catchingly beautiful and well-endowed lady of the hour, Kiryu Kyouka, was sitting on a nearby bench, reading a book. Every once in a while she’d impatiently glance at her phone, which was lying on the bench beside her. Despite her restless attitude, though, I figured that if I’d snapped a picture of her in that pose, I probably could’ve won an award or two at a photography contest. Actually, wait, I could totally go for even *more* pervy best friend points here by printing out a bunch of copies and setting up a covert shop in the gym storage room, or something!

“No! No, this is *not* the time for this crap! Hey, Kir— Actually no, wait.”

I was about to call out to her, but then I stopped in my tracks. I knew how straitlaced a person Kiryu was. She was absolutely the type to take punctuality seriously, and there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that she’d tan my hide for being

this late. Maybe even literally, if I ran up to her without setting things up appropriately (reminder: black belt in Aikido).

Step one: action! Call her up and give her the "Hey, I just got to the station, where are you?" treatment. Step two: reaction! Assess her tone and figure out exactly how screwed I am. Step three: solution! Using my knowledge of her current mood, determine the best way to approach her, which leads us to step four: mission! Execute the plan! Yeah, this is perfect. Oh, can't forget step five: passion! The most vital element of all!

My innovative—nay, *revolutionary*—plan set in stone, I gave Kiryu a call.

"Ah!"

She let out a little yelp and jumped like a cat going after a toy as her phone buzzed. Maybe she doesn't get calls very often? She looked at the screen, and for just a second she actually faintly smiled. Then she cleared her throat—twice—put on the same look of exasperated impatience as before, and answered the phone.

"Hello?"

Her voice came through sharp and harsh, with a distinct touch of "I'm super pissed off."

"Sorry, Kiryu! I just got to the station, and, umm, do you want me to pick something up for you on the way in? I can stop by the convenience store. My treat, of course!"

I did my best to sound as genuinely apologetic as possible. I actually was pretty sorry about being so late. I also regretted it. I was honestly happy to stop by the convenience store and buy us some drinks and lunch, and if she forgave me as a result, even better.

"I'm at the bench in front of the clock tower in the plaza. Just get over here." Kiryu completely disregarded my proposed motion and demanded my presence on the double. *Can't* argue with that.

After that incredibly brief exchange she hung up, slid a bookmark into her novel, stowed it in her bag, and let out a sigh. I waited just a moment longer, watching her, then ran up towards her. Needless to say, I made a show of acting

like I was out of breath.

“Kiryu! Sorry!”

Then I bent over in a deep, perfect, ninety-degree bow. Okay, it was probably closer to forty-five degrees, really, but it was worth a full one-eighty in terms of the feelings I put into it.

“You’re a half hour late, in total.”

“Huh? But it’s only ten twenty...”

“Arriving ten minutes early is basic etiquette.”

*News to me, lady!*

“I’m very, very sorry...”

But I doubled down on my apology anyway. Not because I was scared of her! No way! I did it because, according to her logic, I’d made her wait a full half hour. I definitely wasn’t thinking about how unreasonable that was. *Definitely* not.

“Well, fine. I thought for a moment you might have run away.”

“I’m the one who came up with this whole plan! Why would I ditch you?”

“I was kidding.” She smiled. It was the same sort of expression I’d recently seen so often on Ayase’s face, but in contrast to hers, Kiryu’s smile had a certain calm and cool quality to it. “Well then, shall we?”

She stood up. Judging by her attitude, she didn’t actually care that much at all about my tardiness. She probably didn’t expect any better of me in the first place. She said she was joking, but if me being late was a given in her mind, she might’ve actually believed that I was the sort of person who’d stand her up like that. It kinda hurt my feelings.

That’s when I realized that this was my first time seeing Kiryu wearing anything other than her school uniform. Right, of course! The standard practice in this sort of situation is to compliment the girl’s clothes to get her in a good mood! I knew I’d be spending the better part of the day with her, so I figured that anything I could do to improve our relationship would be to my long-term benefit.

Hmm... Well, she looked good in her outfit, but even an elementary schooler could come up with a compliment like that. Maybe something about how she looks really neat and proper in it? But how to actually *say* that? Regrettably, I didn't know the first thing about fashion. I got the clothes I was wearing by copying a random mannequin's clothes and buying three sets of them, so I didn't exactly have discerning taste. It goes without saying that I didn't have a clue about styles, fashions, trends, or any of that stuff. Hell, I didn't even know the difference between a "style," a "fashion," and a "trend"!

All I care about when it comes to clothes is their durability, comfort, and equipment bonuses. I knew I had to compliment her clothes, even if just for politeness's sake, but seriously, what on earth could I say...?

"Kiryu?"

"Yes?"

"Your clothes are, umm...super *chick!*"

How do you like that?! I'm pretty sure that I read somewhere that all fashion basically breaks down into two broad categories: "chick" and "casual"! *Pretty* sure I'm getting that right! And if that's the case, then Kiryu's outfit probably belongs in the "chick" category. I think it's, like, a sort of twisted abbreviation of "classic"? In which case, yeah, it's definitely more "chick" than "casual." Most likely.

"..."

Kiryu, however, betrayed my expectations entirely by giving me a look of utter disappointment.

"...You really couldn't think of a better way to say that?"

"That already took everything I had. I'll have you know that I didn't even know the difference between a polo shirt and a flannel shirt until just recently!"

"Why would you brag about that?" She pressed her hand up against her temple, like she was trying to hold back a headache.

"Oh yeah? Then can *you* tell me what a flannel shirt is? I'll give you a hint, it's not a fancy type of pajamas!"

“Flannel’s a type of fabric. They’re literally just shirts made from flannel.”

“...Yup, you got it.” Instantly and effortlessly too. My shoulders slumped in defeat while she smirked victoriously. Okay, so I didn’t know what flannel was—so what?! There’s more to winning in life than just knowing what flannel is, dangit!

“I assume, then, that you don’t know what this is either?”

She stroked her skirt. But, I mean, come on, really? She can’t think I’m *that* big of a moron?

“It’s a skirt, right?”

“More precisely, it’s a salopette skirt.”

“Shallow pet?”

“Surely you realized you’d misheard me before you tried to repeat it?” She sighed, heavily. *Err. Sorry?* “...Not that it even matters. I chose these clothes at random out of my closet, so I don’t especially care.”

“Ah, Kiryu?”

“What?”

“Your skirt still has a tag on it.”

“Y-You could’ve told me sooner!”

I was pretty sure that was the first time I’d seen her blush like that, but I didn’t have the time to appreciate the experience before she sent me running off to the convenience store to buy a pair of scissors.

Her skirt’s tag safely severed, Kiryu and I boarded the train and sat side by side as it clattered its way along the tracks. I was messing around with my phone, and Kiryu was reading the same book as before. I glanced over at one point to read the title, and from what I could tell it was some high-brow work of literature. I guess she must be a real bookworm, which matched up with her established character really nicely. *That’s right, expand your traits! Broaden your appeal!*

The elementary school that Kiryu and I had gone to was located in a town

called Shusen City. It was roughly a two-hour train ride away from our current town of residence, Meiou City, with one transfer somewhere around the middle of the trip. I hadn't really considered the travel time when I proposed the trip, and in retrospect, I was pretty glad it wasn't ridiculously far away.

Not to say that two hours each way is right next door, but it's a reasonable enough distance to travel for a day trip. We might've had to take the bullet train, or an airplane, or in the worst case a chartered flight to some far-flung, isolated island. I'm absolutely confident that I would've given up on this memory-seeking journey in an instant if that'd been the case.

"Sort of late for this, but sorry to make you come all the way out here with me."

"I don't particularly mind. I decided to accompany you myself."

Kiryu replied without so much as glancing up from her book, and I quickly looked back to my phone, sensing that the conversation was over. As a matter of pure practicality, you can't really look at your conversational partner for long when they're sitting right next to you. It's a very literal pain in the neck.

"I never thought I'd return to that town like this."

"Why? Is it at the root of some horrible problem for your family?"

"...No. We aren't in a novel; it's nothing that contrived." *Yup, spoken like a true intelligentsia, as always.* "I just meant that I never imagined I'd return there with *you*, or that you'd be an amnesiac."

"Yeah, that makes sense... But when you put it that way, this is sort of a novel-like development in its own way, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is, actually."

Amnesia's not exactly a common affliction, after all. At the very least, I'm the only amnesiac I've ever encountered. The fact that I'd ever have a calm and pleasant conversation with Kiryu like this is something that I could've only imagined in a work of fiction up until now too.

Actually, the more I think about it, the more this feels like a scene from some random YA novel. A mysterious amnesiac and his beautiful childhood friend,

setting out on a journey to find his lost memories—it totally does sound like the sort of plot you'd see in one of those. That'd make me the protagonist, of course, and I'm *definitely* not fond of that idea, but sometimes you just have to make do. This is just a spin-off. A self-contained, single chapter story that the readers will feel just as betrayed by as I do.

I'm not prepared to say that Kiryu's this spin-off's heroine, though. She's in way too high a pay grade to work alongside some random extra in that capacity, or at least not without putting up a fight. More to the point, I can't imagine the two of us ending up in that sort of bittersweet relationship at all. It's just not possible, which I thought of as being "my fault" on one hand and "thanks to Kiryu" on the other.

We fell into silence once more. No more friendly conversation between the two of us at all. I just sat there, blearily scrolling through news sites on my phone and shutting myself up in my own little world. Kiryu was doing more or less the same. Our prior conversation was nothing more than a means of killing time.

If this really were a novel, there'd be a few lines describing the scenery that flew by outside the windows, then bam, turn the page, and we've reached our destination. The whole of our travel time would be packed into a couple dense little sentences.

Unfortunately, the real world doesn't work like that. I had no choice but to sit there in awkward, unpleasant silence, constantly mulling over a muddled mixture of curiosity, worry, hope, and regret regarding my destination. To me, that two-hour train ride felt like an eternity.

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"So this is Shusen City," I couldn't help but mumble quietly to myself, in spite of the fact that it seemed like an almost extraordinarily ordinary place. I give myself credit for not saying "we're finally here," or something hopelessly generic along those lines, at least.

At one point in time I probably knew this place like the back of my hand, but to the new me, nothing looked even slightly familiar. And, to be honest, I could barely even distinguish it from the streets and sights of Meiou City. The same

chain stores you see around every train station were scattered about in front of me—I was having a hard time picking out anything about the place that I could describe as unique.

“So we’re finally here,” Kiryu said.

“Hey! I’ve been fighting the urge to drop that line this whole time! Don’t just come out and say it!”

“So? Remember anything yet?”

“Yeah, sure, just ignore me then!” I scoffed. “And nope! Sorry, not bringing anything back in particular!”

“I suppose it wouldn’t, no.”

“It wouldn’t?”

“It’s been quite a while since I’ve returned here as well, and it seems the town’s changed quite a bit since then.”

She went on to explain that the town went through a lengthy renewal and redevelopment process. The area around the station was more or less a construction site for ages, apparently. When she and the past me lived here, the station was constantly being worked on and we never got to see the final product.

“Should we get something to eat before we go exploring?” I suggested.

“...All right.”

“I’ll treat you, since I was late and all.”

“Thank you. I’ll get something at that pasta restaurant over there, then. You can pick any of the other places nearby.”

“Why do we have to go out of the way to eat at different places?!”

“I was kidding.”

*You think you could make your jokes at least a* little *less deadpan, thanks?!* I thought she was serious! She still looked like she was in a sorta pissy mood, after all. Anyway, we ended up grabbing lunch at the pasta place, then went out to wander around the city streets...not that there was much to see at all. Not

only was it not much of a tourist town, it wasn't much of an *anything* town. I said this already, but I *seriously* couldn't tell the difference between it and our current city of residence. Just house after house after house—a perfectly normal, utterly unremarkable place. I found myself hoping we'd reach our destination soon.

"This really takes me back..." she muttered nostalgically.

"Huh? It does?" *Does this particular street have some sort of significance? For real?!*

"This is the route we used to take to school. The three of us walked it together all the time."

*Oh jeez, it does—and it's pretty important too!* To me, of course, it just looked like any old street. It was becoming apparent that this wasn't the sort of situation where I'd miraculously bump into something that'd jog my memory.

I'd happened to read an article on the train ride over that talked about how our brains store knowledge and memories in totally separate places. I guess knowledge is to memories as TV news programs are to variety shows. Wait, no, that's a bit convoluted and doesn't make any sense.

Anyway, the point is that I had a hypothesis: If the memories of the time I spent in this town—those that had been erased—were still stored away in some form in my brain, then I might be able to bring them back by finding *just* the right thing to refresh my brain. My latent journalist's spirit burned with motivation!

"So? Did this trigger anything?"

"Sorry, but nope. Not even a little bit."

It didn't work. I already saw this place as a painfully generic town, and my memories remained as slippery as ever. It was like trying to climb up a bouldering wall that was drenched with oil. *At this rate I'll never catch the attention of my secret warrior order's oddly fashionable leader!*

"All right, then, let's just move on."

"You gave up on that pretty quickly."

“If you can’t remember anything, then you can’t remember anything. There’s no point in trying to force it. I’ve never had to help someone with amnesia get their memories back before, so I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

She walked off once more without turning to face me. Her tone was cold and businesslike, as if she wasn’t expecting anything to come of this in the first place. It sort of hurt.

We walked on without a moment’s rest. Kiryu guided me around the town, but absolutely nothing I saw struck the slightest of chords. My memories were as lost as ever. I was starting to think that it’d be easier if we could just say that the Kunugi Kou she knew was a totally different person than me. That’d be easier for me as well, considering *how* I forgot. I knew from the start that I wouldn’t be getting them back all that easily.

Our memory hunt/tour of Shusen City continued, but all we really managed to accomplish was wasting a whole bunch of time. Hours into the venture, we only had two places in the immediate area left to visit: the elementary school we’d attended, and the houses we’d lived in. At first I thought we were saving the main course for last, but I figured that likely wasn’t the real reason. In truth, it seemed most plausible that remembering the time she, Daiki, and I spent together was really hard on Kiryu. She’d probably been avoiding those places. After all, she had just as many memories in this town as I supposedly did.

“I’m sorry about yesterday.” Kiryu suddenly came to a stop and apologized out of the blue.

“Huh? Where’s this coming from?”

“Your amnesia... I’m sure it’s been harder on you than anyone else, but I shouted at you anyway.” Her apology was completely earnest, and the tension was stifling. I *had* to find a way to lighten up the conversation.

“Nah, it’s cool, you don’t have to get all serious about apologizing. It’s totally true that I forgot, and I didn’t stop to think about any of this stuff until just recently. I should feel a lot worse about that than you should about chewing me out the one time.”

“But even if you do remember everything, we still won’t...”

“Whoa, wait, hold up, why do you sound all nervous? Where’s this coming from?!”

“I’m scared... What if we go see our school, see our homes, and you still don’t remember a thing? Wouldn’t that mean... Wouldn’t that mean that we were never really important to you after all...?” She bit her lip, her expression communicating a confused mixture of grief, frustration, and fear all at once.

“I-I mean, c’mon, for all you know, I might be lying about the whole amnesia thing, right? Or, hell, maybe you’ve got the wrong Kunugi Kou!”

I tried to distract her by breaking down her basic assumptions about the situation. Sure, I might end up getting scorned as a liar if she took me seriously, but it’d be way better than letting her stew in her own worry and despair.

“No, you’re the right Kunugi Kou. I’m sure of it,” she replied with a faint, frail smile. “I know I said all sorts of horrible things to you yesterday, but in the end, I think you really are the same Kunugi Kou that I used to know. Sometimes you seem different, of course. Like the way you smile, and the way you talk—they’re a bit *off* every once in a while. But when I see the way you act when you’re actually serious about something, or the way you get depressed when our teacher scolds you, I can tell you haven’t changed at all. You’re...not the sort of person who would tell hurtful lies like that...”

“You’ve, uh, been watching me pretty closely, huh...?”

*Holy crap, hooooly crap, that’s so embarrassing!* Especially the bit about me getting depressed after I get scolded—I was so sure I’d kept a tight lid on that!

“You hate me, right?” she asked. “I’m hard to be around, aren’t I?”

“Huh?! N-No, of course not...”

“I wouldn’t blame you. From your perspective, I hated you from the start for no reason at all. But you worried about me and listened to me anyway. Your good-natured side hasn’t changed at all...”

“Good-natured”? That didn’t sound like me at all, and I figured she was misunderstanding something. I’ve always marched to the beat of my own self-centered drum, of that I was sure. Our whole expedition was pretty much just me dragging her around for my own benefit.

“Of course, that probably sounds incredibly fake coming from me,” she continued. “*I’m* the one who went a whole year without ever trying to understand you, or realizing you had amnesia in the first place.”

“Okay, you *definitely* don’t have to feel responsible for something like that!”

“In the end, I couldn’t believe in you. I couldn’t believe...in the Kou-kun I used to know.”

“Kiryu...”

“I’m going to learn from my mistakes. I want to see you as yourself, as Kunugi Kou, whether you get your memories back or not.” She paused, fidgeting. “So, umm... Maybe this is asking too much, but can...can we go back to being...?” She was too embarrassed to finish the sentence—to say “friends”—and she looked away.

I, meanwhile, was stuck staring at her in gobsmacked silence. She said that she’d never looked at me as myself, but I couldn’t *possibly* criticize her for that. How could I? I was the one who’d pegged her as an always-cool loner of an honor student sort of character, and never tried to see past that. I shoved the role on her without a second thought. Even at that moment, part of me couldn’t help but think: “Is this *really* the same Kiryu?”

But when I actually bothered to look at her for who she was, I discovered a girl who’s diligent but somewhat spacey. A girl who treasures her memories of her brother, who’s surprisingly prone to cracking jokes, who laughs, who cries... In complete contrast to my over-the-top image of her, she was a perfectly normal person.

“You take all this stuff really seriously, huh?” I quipped.

“That’s one of my better features,” she replied. “You’d do well to learn from my example, don’t you think?” She held her head just a bit higher than before, seemingly proud of that trait. Straightening up like that made her chest jut out more noticeably than usual, of course, and I couldn’t exactly stare. That’s *definitely* why I looked away.

“Sheesh, you sure talk a big game, Kiki.”

“Huh...? Wh-What did you just say?!”

I hadn't said anything particularly strange at all, as far as I could tell, but for some reason Kiryu's eyes widened with shock. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to ask why.

"Mnh...? Hey, Kiryu?! You're Kiryu Kyouka, ain'tcha?!" With absolutely no warning, some guy shouted her name. I turned to look, and found a boy of about our age with bleached, slicked-back hair and piercings in his ears and nose. He was a character type that we didn't have represented back in the town we lived in: the shallow, stupid, playboy sort.

"Who the hell're you, asshole?! What're you doin' with my Kiryu?!"

"Nothing, really, you've got the wrong... Wait, sorry, 'your' Kiryu?"

I glanced over at Kiryu, sending her a nonverbal plea for an explanation, but she was still staring at me, completely petrified. Meanwhile, the playboy guy stomped up to me, grabbed me by the collar, and lifted me up onto my tiptoes. *Would* somebody *please explain what the hell's going on here?!*

"So, err, who might you be?"

"Who might I be?! I'm Kiryu's boyfriend, dickbag!"

What a stunning revelation! Kiryu had a boyfriend! This whole time!

"S-Seriously?"

I was *almost* shocked speechless, but managed to blearily mumble out a single word, at least. Meanwhile, internally, I was losing my goddamn mind. Like, shook beyond description. I'm talking bolt-from-the-blue surprised in the literally-struck-by-lightning sense.

Kiryu had a *boyfriend?!* I was positively convinced that she was the "forever alone" type...but I guess that was just another of my convenient assumptions, wasn't it? I had her down as too straitlaced a character to be dating someone. Actually, even before that, I assumed it was impossible 'cause heroines aren't supposed to *have* boyfriends.

*Gotta say, though: if this is the sort of guy she's into, she has surprisingly awful taste in men.* I looked over at her again, and found that she hadn't reacted to any of the recent developments at all. She was still frozen and still

staring at me, but my frantic “for the love of god, explain” signal *finally* seemed to get through to her, and she snapped back to reality with a start. She looked at me, then turned to look at the guy who had me hanging by my lapels.

“...Who are you?” she asked him.

“*Whaaaaaaaaaaaat?!*”

If you’re wondering who screamed that, surprise! It was both of us. Wait, both of us? *Why’re* you *surprised by this, random pickup guy?!*

“You’re not going out with him?!”

“Excuse me? Of course not. I’m out with you at this very moment, aren’t I?”

“Holy crap, could you at least *try* to not make this messier than it already is?! What am I supposed to do if he takes that the wrong way?!”

“The wrong...? N-No, of course I didn’t mean it that way! You should know that already, stupid!”

“Of course I do, and if anyone here’s stupid, it’s the girl who’s not paying any attention to the situation we’re in! That said, I get why you’d want to play dumb after your boyfriend catches you wandering around alone with another guy!”

*Seriously, Boyfriend-san, it’s not what you think!* I looked back over at him, only to find that he was now cemented in place and blinking dumbfoundedly at Kiryu. *Really wish he’d let me down sometime soon.*

“You... You don’t recognize me?!”

“I don’t. Let’s go, Kunugi-kun.”

“Not so fast! It’s me! Y’know, me!”

“Oh, I know this one. I’m supposed to guess a name now, and you’ll claim to be that person, right? You’ve picked a rather old scam to use for your pickup scheme,” Kiryu responded coldly and curtly. The guy looked like he was going to blow a gasket.

*Seriously, though, what am I witnessing? Are they acting out some sort of messed up roleplay scenario?*

“Umm... Should I, y’know, give you two some space?” I asked, hopefully.

Kiryu sighed. “Kunugi-kun, I don’t know why you’re trying to be considerate now of all times, but for the record: I *don’t* have a boyfriend.”

“Right, but that guy says he’s your... Wait, you don’t?”

I was starting to panic, but I tried to muster what little calm I had left to think through the situation. Kiryu’s story and the weird playboy guy’s story didn’t match up. *Who should I believe?*

“Okay, so if you’re not her boyfriend, who *are* you?”

I chose to believe Kiryu. Obviously. The guy’s grip had loosened at some point, and I shook him off and stood between him and his so-called “girlfriend.” Now that I had a better grasp of the situation, I could say with certainty: having some guy show up out of nowhere and claim to be your boyfriend would be super gross. Scary, actually. There are way too many creeps in this world, I swear.

“It’s me, dammit! Maruo!”

“You liar! No way a guy like you could be called Maruo—that’s a *nerd* name! Come back and try again after you put on some big, thick glasses, get a bowl cut and start saying crap like, ‘You see, blah blah blah, ergo, blah’!” I mocked.

“What the hell kinda stereotype is that?!”

“Whoa, watch out, Kiryu! This guy’s bad news! His identity’s a total mess!”

Will Maruo-kun completely flip his lid? Will this be the biggest disaster of the year? Find out after the commercial break!

“Maruo...” mumbled Kiryu. “I feel like I *might’ve* known a Maruo at some point...? Or maybe not...”

“You’d remember a guy like him if you did, so probably not, right?”

“Yes, probably not.”

“Uh-uh, yes you do! The Maruo you know is me, and I’m standing right here!”

Maruo-kun the Playboy (which is really long—maybe I’ll start calling him Maru-boy) was surprisingly adept at snappy comebacks.

“You seriously sayin’ you don’t remember me, Kiryu?! We took Aikido together! We went to elementary school together too! C’mon, it’s me, Maruo

Hatsuo!”

“‘Hatsuo’? So, like, ‘Maruo Hatsuo’? Your name *rhymes*? *Seriously*?!”

“Stay out of this!”

“Nope, no way, this is just too good to miss. You were totally the first son in your family too, weren’t you?”

“H-How’d you know?!”

“Because, you see, ‘Hatsuo’ literally means ‘first son’! Ergo, you’re the first son in your family!”

“Careful, Kou-kun. You’re starting to sound like a Maruo,” Kiryu prodded.

*Crap, she’s right!* I was letting him influence me! The Maruo-esque traits he was suppressing were trying to take root in my body instead! Worst case, I could wake up the next morning with a bowl cut! Gotta keep my guard up!

“Quit makin’ fun of me, god dammit!”

“Oh, wait... I remember now. I may have known a kid named Maruo after all.”

“Really? You’re totally positive? Swear to god?” I pleaded.

“Well, no, I’m not quite *that* certain,” she dismissed.

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up already, asshole?!” the delinquent interjected.

Maruo-kun continued to flip out. Ergo: c’est la vie, dude. Take a chill pill.

“So then, Maruo-kun—what, exactly, did you want? *We’re* actually rather busy right now, as it so happens.”

*Seriously. Sorry, man, but right now we’re l’occupé... Wait. Hmm? Why’d she stress the “we” in that sentence so much? Is she trying to drag me even deeper into this mess than I already am?*

“K-Kiryu...” he stammered. “Who’s this guy supposed to be, anyway?”

Maru-boy the Super Freaky Self-Proclaimed Boyfriend completely took the bait. His death glare was...actually, it didn’t feel nearly as scary as it was back when he first showed up.

“Who? He’s, well... He’s m-my boyfriend.”

“Pfff!”

“WHAAUGH?!”

I did a spit take, and Maru-boy gasped in incoherent, wordless rage. She wasn’t just dragging me deeper into the problem, she was throwing me under the bus!

“Why would you *say* that, Kiryu?! She’s lying, we’re not dating! Hell, she’s the one who said that we weren’t going out ‘like that’ just a minute ago!”

“I thought I could trick him by saying we’re dating and get us out of this situation! Wouldn’t it be easier that way? So I changed my story *just* a little.”

“Nobody’s dumb enough to get tricked by a lie like that this late in the game! You realize we’re dealing with a complete wacko who’s already calling himself *your boyfriend*, right?! You’re just dumping all the aggro right on me!”

“That just means you have to find a way to make him leave.”

“*Right* under the bus!”

“This is no time for this nonsense in the first place. Kunugi-kun, did you just call me—”

“*QUIT GODDAMN FLIRTIIIIING!*” What the heck?! Maru-boy shouted out of absolutely nowhere!

“Kiryu...” he continued. “I’ve had my eye on you for as long as I can remember! I even started taking Aikido ’cause I wanted to be with you...” His eyes sparkled. “Hey, you remember when I told you how I feel about you, right? You turned me down, and transferred schools right after. I couldn’t figure out where you went...but I always knew, deep down, that you really loved me! You only turned me down ’cause you were too embarrassed to admit it...”

“Oh *god*, this guy’s a lunatic!” I shrieked.

“Ugh, that’s horrifying! You’ve been stalking me?!” Kiryu shuddered.

“Don’t say that, you’re just fanning the flames—oh jeez, is he *crying?!*”

He was grossing me the heck out in a thousand different ways, but I have to admit that seeing the guy break down in tears made me feel just a bit sorry for

him. Kiryu had torn up every last shred of the would-be boyfriend's credibility, and then demoted him to a worthless, nerdy stalker.

"Umm, look, it's okay, don't cry. She was lying, really! I promise we're not dating. Here, have a...err, a receipt? Sorry, it's the best I've got." I didn't have any tissues or a handkerchief on hand, but I *did* have the receipt from my stop at the convenience store earlier on. I figured it was better than nothing.

"You makin' fun of me, jackass...? Do you know who I *am?!* I'm the Hound Outta Hell, Maruo Hatsuo, goddammit!"

Oh man, he's one of those guys with a super cringey nickname! And he actually said it himself! Upon closer inspection I concurred that he *did* have sort of a delinquent image going on, so it made a certain amount of sense he was one of *those* people.

"Oh!" Kiryu slapped her palm with her other fist, like she'd just had a revelation. "I remember! You're Maruo-kun the crybaby, aren't you? We really were in the same class."

"Seriously? *Now* you remember, of all times?"

"You were in the class with us as well, Kunugi-kun."

"*Really?!*"

I did *not* see that coming! He's an old classmate of mine?!

"Kunugi? From our class...?" he pondered. "Wait a second! Are you Kunugi Kou?!"

"Err, yes?"

I suddenly understood with excruciating clarity the terror and pain of being known by someone who you don't know at all. I was shaking in my sneakers. Meanwhile, Kiryu was still perfectly composed. *Is this chick's mind made of steel, or what?*

"You're gettin' in my way *again,* you son of a bitch?!"

*Wait, why's he getting mad at me?! Hmm? What's that, you say? He's already* been *mad at me this whole time? True that!*

“I’m not completely sure about this,” added Kiryu, “but I think he had a crush on me.”

“Is that really the sort of thing you should casually drop into the middle of a conversation?!” I shouted, throwing my hands up. “Though, actually? Considering how the conversation’s gone so far, it’d be weirder if he didn’t.”

“Back then, Maruo-kun was the type of kid who spent all his time reading back in the corner of the classroom. I was fairly timid and didn’t have many friends, either, so I think he empathized with me.”

*This is not the right time to analyze his attraction for you, Kiryu!*

“I actually do remember him coming to my Aikido classes too.”

“Doesn’t that mean you saw him pretty often...?”

“Well, yes, but considering how he looks now, of course I didn’t recognize him.”

She pointed at Maru-boy, and, yeah, she had a point. I’d be sort of terrified if I saw an elementary schooler with bleached hair and a billion piercings.

“Welp, you heard her, Maru-boy. Kiryu finally remembers you, so let’s calm down and talk this out, okay?”

“Don’t screw with me, Kunugi... I’ve hated you from the moment I met you!”

“Whaaat?! When did this start being about *me?!*”

Maru-boy seemed like he’d forgotten about Kiryu entirely. He loomed over me with a menacing aura that told me he was liable to punch me out at any moment. I stayed between him and Kiryu, but I also took a couple steps away from him.

“Hey, Kiryu... Get away from Kunugi this second, and I’ll let you off easy, for now...” His tone was absolutely dripping with menace.

*Yeah, he’s definitely targeting me now! What the hell am I supposed to do about this?!*

“What’s wrong, Maruo-kun? I don’t remember you being this sort of person,” she said, completely monotone. *Not! Helping!*

“I’m not the crybaby Maruo you used to know... I’m the Hound Outta Hell, Martini Joe!”

*Martini Joe?!* What sort of nickname is that?! The secondhand shame was so intense, I couldn’t even bring myself to be scared anymore! I mean, I guess they sound *sort of* similar? Mahr-oo-oh, Mahr-tee-nee Joh—and it rhymes! What’s with this guy and rhyming names?! And, like, I feel like the names are structured similarly, somehow... But honestly, who am I kidding? No matter how I try to justify it, it’s still gonna sound insane.

Kiryu looked like she had no clue what to make of the situation either. I guess it’s only natural to be put off when someone you knew as a nerd in your childhood shows up looking like *that*, even if you did forget about them for most of the intervening period. He’s the before → after comparison shot from hell.

“I’m gonna kill the *shit* outta you!” He dropped that incredibly ominous line as he pulled out and flipped open a pocket knife. The situation was officially *way* out of hand!

“C-Calm down, man! If this is supposed to be a joke, it’s really not funny!”

“Shaddup! You’re only gettin’ outta this if you make tracks and leave the girl with me! You’re finally gonna be my woman, Kiryu, like it or not!”

*What kind of story does this guy think he’s in?!* He belongs in a hard-boiled, hot-blooded fighting epic where rival delinquents spill each other’s blood to rule the school! He could totally get by as a bit character in one of those, by my mark. Pretty sure Aikido’s a rare fighting style in that genre, right?

“Isn’t this getting a bit out of hand...?” inquired Kiryu, helpfully.

“Yes! Has been for a while now!” I screamed. “Do you seriously need to ask?!”

“*GRAAAAHHHHHHHH!*” Martini-boy let loose what he probably meant to be a battle cry but what sounded more like a panicked scream as he flailed his knife at me. Without wasting a second, I reached into my pocket and pulled the only weapon I had available to block his attack: the scissors I bought to snip the tag off Kiryu’s skirt. I caught the knife between its blades, stopping it just in time with a harsh, grating squeal of metal on metal.

“What the?!”

“Didn’t your mom tell you not to point knives at people?”

Seriously, that was way too close. If I’d been spacing out like I usually do, he totally would’ve shanked me. When knives come into the picture, dealing with amateurs can actually be more dangerous than taking on trained fighters.

“I *told* you, do *not* screw with me, asshole!”

“Why would I?! I *just* said this wasn’t even a good joke!”

The “Hound Outta Hell” pulled back his knife and lunged in for a stab, but I calmly reversed my grip on the scissors and caught its blade in one of the handle’s holes. All it took after that was a quick flick of the wrist in just the right direction, and the “Hound” was defanged. His grip on the blade was pathetically weak—he probably never even considered that I’d be capable of catching the stab, much less disarming him, and the exchange was pretty much over before it even began.

Well, for him, anyway. He was frozen in shock, but I was still moving. I let go of the scissors, snatched the knife out of the air, then grabbed him by the neck with my other hand, shoving him to the ground before he even knew what was happening.

“Guhagh?!”

“Ugh, gross!”

The impact knocked the wind out of him, and with it came way more spit than I’d anticipated. All over my face. *Blech.* I was so distracted by the spray that I barely even noticed as I reflexively spun the knife into an underhanded grip, and prepared to jam it straight into his skull.

“Ah, crap! That was close,” I muttered as I caught my knife hand a second before I delivered the killing blow. Muscle memory can be a real pain sometimes. *Calm down, nerves, it’s over. We’re all good here.*

“Eeeek...!”

Man, see, this is exactly what I was afraid of! I went and scared poor Maru-boy. If I’d let myself get careless, that could’ve turned out way worse than it

actually did. And considering that it *hadn't*, I didn't really like how he was looking at me like I was some sort of murderer.

"H-Ha ha, just kidding!"

In a last-ditch effort to salvage things, I forced a smile and tried to play it off as one big joke. Unfortunately, it had the exact opposite effect—Maru-boy took one look at me and passed out. I was, once again, in a real pickle.

For a minute I was absolutely convinced that he'd end up spreading some sort of crazy misunderstanding about me, but a moment later, I realized that we barely even knew each other. Even if he did come away from this with a bunch of crazy misapprehensions, it wouldn't *really* cause any problems. We didn't even live in the same town anymore. This was a once-in-a-lifetime encounter, probably.

"Kunugi-kun...?"

No sooner had I concluded that train of thought than a nervous voice addressed me from behind. It was, of course, Kiryu, who'd been standing there the whole time. I turned to look, and found her staring at me in astonishment, with a hint of suspicion thrown in for good measure.

*Did I just screw up really, really badly...?*

Kiryu stood there, staring at me in confused, shaken silence. I kneeled on the ground, staring back at her without the slightest clue what I should do. It was awkward. *Really* awkward. So awkward that I was already looking back fondly on getting shouted at by Maru-boy the self-proclaimed boyfriend/stalker. That was *nothing* compared to this.

But of course, I couldn't exactly stay frozen there for eternity. I looked like a crazed, knife-wielding lunatic, looming over Maru-boy's unconscious body. I folded up the knife and shoved it into my pocket. I wasn't about to give it back to its owner, considering how quick he was to brandish it, so I decided to safely and properly dispose of it myself.

"So, umm," I stammered. "Should we head home soon?"

The sky was already blanketed in the orangish-red glow of sunset. Considering how long the train ride back would take, I figured we didn't have the time to

check out our old school or houses... Or at least, that was a convenient pretext to get out of there.

“All right...” Kiryu agreed, and walked off.

I let her take the lead, following along about five paces behind her—after dragging Maru-boy over the side of the road, that is. I figured some Good Samaritan would come along and help him out, eventually, and I was in no position to worry about the guy any more than I already had.

Kiryu’s gait was unsteady, almost like she was too caught up in her own thoughts to pay attention to her footing. I was occupied too, worrying myself to pieces about what I should say to her, or whether I should even say anything at all. Before I knew it, I’d worried myself all the way to the station.

The silence continued unbroken as we walked to the platform and boarded the train back to Meiou City. We just couldn’t seem to find the right chance to strike up a conversation. We were the only passengers in the car; I flopped down in the corner seat by the door, and Kiryu sat across from me, staring down at her palms.

As I watched her brood, I felt a powerful sense of guilt and self-loathing well up within me, gradually eating away at my mind. I didn’t know what I’d expected going out there would accomplish, but I certainly hadn’t anticipated an unpleasant reminder that she and I lived in entirely different worlds. The fact that I hadn’t *actually* stabbed him in the end didn’t absolve me of the attempt in Kiryu’s mind, most likely.

The seconds and minutes ticked on in total silence. I was sure that after the day ended, Kiryu and I would go back to the same tense, strained relationship we had before. No, after today, she might be even more reluctant than ever to get involved with me at all.

But then, suddenly, she mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

“...Huh?”

“I’m sorry I’ve been so quiet.”

“Wh-What’re you talking about?”

“I just had to take a moment and sort through what happened. I’m sure you were worried about me, weren’t you?” Suddenly, she was acting perfectly normally again. Or at the very least, she didn’t seem to be afraid of me at all.

“Wait, but... Didn’t I intimidate you? Aren’t you scared of me?”

“Excuse me? Why would I be?”

“Why? I mean, I almost stabbed that guy in the face, and all...”

“Oh, that... I’ll admit, I was surprised. But you didn’t actually stab him in the end, did you?” She said it like it was a matter of course. “I would’ve had to turn you in to the police if you’d actually gone through with it, but...you didn’t. If anything, I was happy that you protected me. Thank you, Kunugi-kun.”

“R-Right, any time...”

*How can she say something like that?* I didn’t get it at all. The most I could manage was a weak nod in response. She stared at me, opening and closing her mouth as if she was hesitating to say something. A few moments later, she managed to spit it out in a quiet, reserved tone.

“I have a question. What you did back there—the way you almost stabbed him—was that all automatic? Did you do it reflexively?”

I froze. For a second, I couldn’t even process what she’d asked me. As it finally registered, though, a different sort of emotion started to well up inside me, and I averted my gaze.

“Why would you say that?”

“It almost looked like your hand was moving on its own, from my perspective. And you had to grab on to it with all your strength to stop it.”

“You realize that if that’s true, it means I’m a guy who might try to kill someone on instinct at any moment, right?”

That wasn’t what I really wanted to say. Not even close. I should’ve come up with some clever excuse to throw her off the trail, but the words that popped out instead were full of self-deprecation. They were an outright rejection of her understanding.

“I’m sure there’s some sort of reason behind it, right?”

“...”

“I’m not planning on forcing you to explain. The look on your face alone tells me it’s something painful.” She chose her words carefully, tiptoeing around my feelings in the most kind and considerate way she could manage. “But no matter what happens, you’re still you, Kunugi-kun. I don’t plan to forget that ever again.”

“Okay, sure, but me being me doesn’t change the fact that I’m dangerous, does it?”

“Dangerous? Weren’t you listening when I thanked you for saving me?”

“I...”

Her gaze was gentle. Most likely she’d realized that nobody was more put off by my actions than me. Nobody was more scared of me than myself. There was no way I could ever possibly communicate the horrors that were weighing me down, but even without understanding their substance, she was still trying to accept me.



“Hey, Kunugi-kun? Do you think the old you’s completely gone? Are you positive there isn’t a single trace of him left?”

“...No.” I wouldn’t go that far. After I lost my memories, I went through a lengthy process of building myself up, piece by piece, regaining my feelings until I became the me I am today. But I wasn’t starting from absolute zero. I had everything the old me left—all the traces of him in my body to serve as my foundation. It’d be more accurate to say that the current me was an extension of the old me, rather than a total replacement.

“I think your body still remembers who you were before you lost your memories.”

“My body...?”

I figured she was right, but I couldn’t admit it. The reflexive movements that almost made me murder Maruo Hatsuo were something like a curse brought about by the loss of my memories. The things that the past me did consciously were ingrained into my unconscious mind as a byproduct of my amnesia. In short: the past me, the me that Kiryu knew, was the one who tried to bring the knife down. Like hell I could tell her that.

“How do you figure?” I couldn’t say it, so I shoved those thoughts into the back of my mind, forced a smile and tried to smooth it all over. She probably knew I was faking it, and frowned sadly for just a moment before her lips curled into a smile once more.

“You called me Kiki, didn’t you?”

“...Huh?”

*Kiki? I called Kiryu “Kiki”? Did I, really?*

“What’s Kiki supposed to mean?”

“I knew it! You really weren’t conscious of it.”

Her smile broadened. I, in contrast, had no clue what she was getting at and was bewildered.

“What’re you talking about?”

“Kiki was my nickname.”

*Kiki? Kiryu’s nickname was Kiki?*

“You took the first letters of my first and last name and added an extra ‘i’ to make Kiki. That’s right—you’re the one who gave it to me.”

“D-Did I?”

“I wasn’t very fond of it back then, actually. I thought that it was a bit embarrassing, and I’ve always been a dog person, myself.”

“Wait, so it’s seriously supposed to be, like, *that* Kiki?!”

“You’re the only one who ever actually called me it, though.”

Her smile took on a bittersweet tinge. *Kiki, huh? I guess elementary school me must’ve really liked that movie. I still like it, actually. Also, I’ve got a funny feeling that Kiryu doesn’t know that Kiki’s the girl, not the cat.*

“And you’re saying I called you that without even noticing it?”

“That’s right. But since ‘Maru-boy’ interrupted us just a moment later, I didn’t have the chance to ask you about it until now.”

*Man, c’mon, Maru-boy! That guy’s a troublemaker through and through*. Gotta say, though, having it pointed out that I subconsciously called her by an elementary school nickname was weirdly embarrassing.

“Man, I couldn’t have at least come up with a better nickname? Kiki doesn’t even make *sense* for Kiryu Kyouka—I could’ve, like, taken the start of your family name and the end of your given name and called you Kirika! Doesn’t that, like, have a nice ring to it? Sounds like a protagonist’s name, right? Maybe a genderbent one?”

“What on *earth* are you talking about?”

“I wish I knew.”

*Seriously, what* am *I rambling about?* Weirdly enough, though, the gloom that was whirling about in my mind mere moments before had all but cleared away. In my experience up to that point, almost everything that the old me left in my subconscious reeked of blood and death. If I really called her by her old

nickname, though, then that would mean there was more to those buried memories. Maybe they weren't exclusively dark and awful, after all... Somehow, the thought made me so happy, I was almost overcome with emotion.

And that wasn't all. Kiryu *saw* what I did with that knife. She'd surely realized that I was hiding a serious abnormality deep within my unconscious mind, and she'd almost certainly figured out that I was hiding it deliberately. It wouldn't take a genius to put the pieces together, considering how I acted back there.

But she wasn't pressing me for details. Most likely...she was waiting for me to be *ready* to tell her. She was trying to accept me. That made me just as happy as the revelation about my memories. I'd probably never actually be *able* to tell her everything, of course, whether she waited or not.

Anyway, the conversation was getting progressively more and more embarrassing, and I wanted to gloss over it as soon as possible. I spoke up again, in a deliberately teasing sort of tone (though I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eye while I did it).

"Man, though, 'Kiki'? Really?"

"What?"

"I was just thinking about how it doesn't suit you at all."

"*You're* the one who gave it to me, aren't you?"

"Not as far as I can remember!"

It was an incredibly stupid and questionably appropriate joke, but before I knew it, both of us were laughing together. Our adventure had only barely borne fruit, but to me, the whole day felt like a massive turning point for us. I was sure that she had no idea how much it meant to me that we could smile and laugh together from the bottoms of our hearts...and I was okay with that.

We spent the whole ride back to Meiou City talking about all sorts of things. About the book she was reading, about the news I'd skimmed, about our classes, about the weather... We started out sitting across from each other, but before I knew it we were side by side again, like we'd sat on the first trip. It felt like we'd gotten a lot closer than last time as we chattered away. It was the sort of conversation that would get abridged out of existence if this were a novel. A

full scene of utterly unimportant, undramatic small talk.

This time, though, I was genuinely happy that it wasn't skipped over like it would be in a novel. It was a rare, pleasant moment of tranquility, and it'd be a waste to leave it out.

# If Only Monday Would Wait for My Problems

# “Thank you for walking me back. Do you think you could stop by Daiki’s grave sometime? I’m sure he’d love to hear from you.”

“Sure... Once we have everything sorted out between us, anyway. If I went now, he’d probably end up just as confused as you were when we first met back up again.”

“Heh, I suppose that’s true.” She smiled, then began to turn. “Well then—good night, Kunugi-kun.” With those parting words, Kiryu vanished into her home.

By that point, it was already eight in the evening, meaning we’d spent almost the entire day together. *I’m just glad I managed to get her home safe and sound, all things considered.* I was about to return to my own apartment and finally get some decent sleep when I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket.

“Hello?”

“Good evening, Senpai!” It was Hikari. Her timing was so impeccable, I started to worry she might’ve been spying on me from somewhere. “The moon is beautiful tonight, isn’t it?”

“Too bad for you, Little Miss Shut-in. It’s actually overcast.” I didn’t think she meant it literally, to be clear—even *I* got that reference. Ayase brought out the Soseki cannon, but unfortunately for her, it misfired. *C’mon, you could’ve at* least *checked the weather online before you tried to play that card!*

“A-Anyway, moving on!” She cleared her throat, trying to reset the conversation. Not that there’d been much of a conversation to reset in the first place, at that point. “You sound like you’re in a pretty great mood, aren’tcha?” *Am I? News to me.* “Does that mean you solved your problem?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I wouldn’t necessarily have called it *solved*, but we’d at least taken a step forward. Things were *getting* better. From my perspective,

anyway. “Guess you deserve credit for it too. Thanks, Ayase.”

“W-Well, I suppose you owe me one.” She sounded so bashful, I couldn’t help but laugh. “What?” she continued, a bit indignantly.

“Nothing, really. Just kinda funny to hear you all embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed!” she protested.

“Yeah, sure you aren’t.”

“I’m *not*, really!”

I chuckled for a moment, then stopped, leaning up against a nearby guardrail. “Hey, Ayase?”

“What...?”

“Come back to school, already.” I waited for a moment, but she didn’t reply. “It’s only been a week since you stopped going. The longer you wait, the harder it’s gonna be to come back, y’know?”

“I know! I know, but... I’m scared.”

*Scared*—the word carried the distinct weight of truth. There was no doubt in my mind that she was being completely sincere. But she’d hesitated to say it. She’d taken the time to choose her words carefully. I was convinced that there was something else to the situation, some reason for her truancy that she couldn’t bring herself to tell me.

“You sure you’re okay with this?”

“Okay with what?”

“If you don’t show up to school, I’ll, umm—ah, I know! I’ll take the chance to interrogate your friends and learn *all* your deepest, darkest secrets! Mwa ha ha ha!”

“*As if!* I doubt you know a single one of my friends... Oh, wait, I guess you said you know Yuu-chan, didn’t you?”

“Yuu-chan? Who?”

Ayase sighed so deeply, I could *feel* her exasperation through the phone. “Yoshiki Yuu-chan?”

“Oooh, right, her! Yeah, I know her! She’s that one girl, probably.”

“Do you *really* know who I’m talking about?”

“Yeah, ’course I do, she’s, y’know... Look, I’m picturing her right now, I swear.” I had an abnormally short silhouette in mind. *Yup, that’s her, no doubt about it.*

“I guess I’ll have to contact Yuu-chan and tell her she’s under a gag order, in that case.”

“Hah, nice try! Too bad for you, though—the shrimp’s already eating from the palm of my hand! *Almost* literally!”

“Wha—that’s not fair! *I’m the one who gets to share lunches with her!*”

“How long’s she been begging for food?!” *No wonder she’s such a scrawny little twig! It’s tragic, really.* I decided to grab an extra-large helping for her next lunchtime. “But whatever, who cares about that munchkin? Point is, if you don’t come to school soon, I’ll make sure to expose absolutely *everything* you’ve kept hidden!”

“What are you, a pervert?”

“That’s right—if you don’t wanna get lumped in with that pervy old man, you’d better fight back while you have the chance! Mwa ha ha ha ha!” *Actually, wait. Wouldn’t* I *be the one that gets lumped in with him? I didn’t think this through.*

“That—let’s see here—one: is incredibly unscrupulous of you; two: definitely counts as sexual harassment; and three: is scummy in just about every possible way I can imagine.” Ayase sighed again. I could practically feel her breath against my ear, and it sorta tickled. “But fine, go ahead. Do your worst!”

It almost sounded like she was trying to provoke me. She wasn’t done there, though.

“You’re supporting me, right, Senpai? It only makes sense that you’d take the initiative to go out and gather all the information you can!” She sounded almost elated as she prattled on. She was trying to put on a show of not being worried, but it was super obvious she was flustered.

“You’d better not underestimate me, y’know? Sure, my brain and most of my body’s on a perfectly-average-high-schooler level, but I’ll have you know my legs are a whole different matter!”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Worst-case scenario, I’ll just barge into your class and kick the gossip out of ’em! I mean literally, like, run on in and go ‘let’s play soccer—you’re the ball!’ Then I’ll punt ’em straight out the window!”

“Don’t. No, really, *don’t.*”

I mean, it’s not like I *wanted* to, but desperate times call for desperate measures! And those were definitely desperate times, right? Right?

“I mean, I get it. My special combo-shot *is* powerful enough to make the ball burst into actual flames. I’d be worried if I were in your position too.”

“How are you supposed to kick a combo-shot by yourself?”

“I have two legs! I’ll *make* it work.”

“I’m imagining you trying to pull that off right now, and it’s the stupidest image. Only you, Senpai.”

“Stupid?! No way, it’d be super cool! Ridiculously cool! Keep your lackluster mental images away from my fantasy!”

“Using a person as a ball rules out you being cool on a basic level.”

*Yup! Agreed! No argument there!*

“...Okay, fine. I’ll hold off on using your classmates as soccer balls, at least until I see how things develop.”

“Seriously, *do not*, okay? I’m only being this insistent because I honestly wouldn’t put it past you.”

“What kind of guy do you think I am?” Come to think of it, I *did* kick that old streaker right in front of her. Sent him flying a full several meters too. On the other hand, he *was* more or less ball-shaped already. I bet if I looked up his family history I’d discover he was half man, half soccer ball. “Anyway, we’re getting way off-topic. Point is, I owe you one for today.”

“I didn’t do anything in particular though?”

Damn, this girl’s cool as ice! If I were in her position, I’d totally use my gratitude as an excuse to shake me down for everything I’m worth. I’m talking extortion *city!* That said, she *did* say that I owed her one a minute ago. I hadn’t forgotten about that.

“Well, if you *insist* that you owe me a favor, let’s see... Call me ‘Hikari’ from now on and we’ll call it even, okay?”

“Nope. Rejected.”

“Whaaat?!”

Ha ha ha ha! Mooooron! I’d have to be some sorta *protagonist* to fall for a line like that! I’m a self-proclaimed sidekick, lady! I’m aiming to win the Olympic gold medal for best-friending someday! You really think I’d let you raise your affection points with me that easily? Dream on! Besides, calling you by your first name is the exclusive privilege of your older brother, no matter what the affection points say. No way I’d even attempt to rival Kaito’s calling-people-by-their-first-name abilities!

Listen up, Ayase the Younger: best friend sidekick characters are basically trees. Their job’s to sit in the background, entirely immobile, so that the main characters have a place to return to when they need some peace of mind. *That’s* the reality of being a best friend!

“Look, Ayase, I already decided ages ago how I’m gonna pay you back.”

“I know what you’re thinking...and that’s just not something you can manage, Senpai.”

“It’s not up to you.”

“Senpai...”

“’Course, it’s not up to me either.”

“Senpai?!”

“Wait. Huh?” I realized a critical flaw in this plan. “Who *is* it up to, then?”

“Why are you asking me?!”

Seriously, though, who? Can't be me, that's for sure. For one thing, I'm not even in the same grade as her. I don't exactly have many options when it comes to intervening in her situation. It'd have to be somebody closer to her... Yuuta's right out, unfortunately. She doesn't have what it takes to pull it off, and even if she tried, she'd inevitably get carted in seconds. I'll have somebody else help me hunt this monster, thanks—you get to go on standby back in base camp.

"Your teacher, I guess...?"

"Nobody likes a tattletale."

"The student council?"

"That's waaay too much of an escalation, don't you think?" Ayase hesitated just a moment before that reply. That convinced me: there was definitely some reason she didn't want me to talk to the council. Not gonna lie, having to deal with their leader wasn't great for me either, but beggars can't be choosers and you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs, or whatever.

"That settles it! I'mma snitch to the student council president. She'll totally help me out if I tell her it's for the Ayase siblings' sake! I can't stand her myself, but she definitely means well!"

"Don't! Really! Please, don't!"

"If you don't want me to, then just come to school."

"But..."

"I mean, not like I'm gonna enact this plan right away. You've got plenty of time to mull it over. It'll get harder and harder to come back, like I said, but summer vacation's right around the corner anyway, so you can just say you went on break a bit early and make up for your time off in summer school! I'm technically already signed up for it myself, so I can even keep you company!"

Granted I didn't actually know how summer school worked and wasn't sure if we'd even be in the same room, but I could at least walk with her to and from school. *I dunno if that really counts as keeping her company during makeup lessons though... Y'know what, I'm just not gonna think about it.*

"Anyway," I continued, "don't worry—you're in good hands!"

“I am *incredibly* worried.”

“Being worried’s just a step away from being excited, right?”

“You’re starting to sound desperate.”

She, meanwhile, was finally starting to get fed up with my antics. Sheesh—wait, nope, can’t say that. Saying “sheesh” at a time like this would earn me unwanted protagonist points!

“Anyway,” I continued, “consider yourself fairly warned, and prepare for the consequences!”

“I’ll think about it,” she huffed. *Did I put her in a bad mood?* Unfortunate, but it had to be done.

“Okay, I’m hanging up now.”

“All right. Good night, Senpai!”

“Night.”

I never know whether to hang up the phone myself or wait for the person I’m talking with to handle it, but in that case she didn’t seem especially opposed to the conversation ending, so I went ahead and took the initiative to cut the call. This probably means I’m bad at communicating with people, huh? Teach me your ways, O masters of socialization—if those are even a thing!

“Guess I might as well head home.” It had been a tiring day in all sorts of ways, but I wasn’t too torn up about it. It was still Saturday, and that meant that I could sleep all the way until noon the day after! Having found my slothful resolve, I finally started off on the trek home.

(insert scene transition sound effect here) Time flew on by, and Monday arrived! I knew I’d be in serious trouble if I was late *again* after last week, so I made absolutely certain to wake up at a decent hour and arrive at school precisely when I was supposed to. Let me put this on the record for the sake of my public image: I’m almost never late for school, honestly! I spent most of Sunday catching up on sleep, just to make sure!

Sunday is also known as the day of the Sabbath. God rested on the seventh day after the world’s creation, apparently, and that’s where Sundays come

from. If even God needs a day to rest after six days on the clock, it goes without saying that a pathetic, piddling little human like me would need one too.

That said, the feeling of waking up on Sunday and realizing it's already the evening, well, sucks. Like, a lot. And that's not even considering the fact that Sunday evening is a cursed time of the week when you can practically *hear* Monday morning looming off in the distance, rapidly growing closer and closer. I figure God probably gets depressed about having to go back to work on Monday too, and that gloom probably spreads out over the entire world as a result. They say mankind was made in God's image, and the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, after all.

"Mornin'," I grumbled as I plodded into the classroom, not particularly ready for the five days of miserable toil that were sure to follow. A number of students were already inside.

"Morning, Kou!" replied Kaito, who was one of those already present students.

"G'morning, Kunugicchi!" chirped Kotou, who was another of them. Which should've been weird, considering she was in a totally different class, but somehow she was fitting in just fine. *She* does *have friends in her own class too, right? I really worry about that girl sometimes.*

"Hey, do you have a minute, Kou?"

"Huh?"

Kaito had been talking with Kotou at the time I showed up, but he immediately broke off that conversation to strike one up with me instead. *Really, dude? You're not supposed to prioritize your sidekick over your heroines!* I didn't have a good excuse to turn him down though, so I dropped my bag off at my desk, then followed him out into the hallway. Kaito had only mentioned me, but Kotou came along with us, so I assumed that they'd already discussed whatever it was he wanted me for.

"I was just talking with Tsumugi about this," began Kaito, confirming my suspicions. "It's about Hikari."

"Hikari, Hikari... Oh, right, isn't that your sister?"

“Yeah. It looks like she hasn’t been going to school lately...” *Umm?! Kaito?! You seriously* just *noticed that?!* “You get along with her pretty well, right, Kou? I thought she might’ve mentioned something about it to you.”

*I “get along with her pretty well,” huh?* Sort of a weird thing for him to assume, given that as far as he knew, the only time I really got to talk with her was the time I picked up my bag from their house... Though upon further consideration, I realized that he might’ve known that she’d been calling me on the phone every night since then. *Wow, she really has been calling me every night, hasn’t she? That’s kinda disquieting.*

I was getting sidetracked and still hadn’t figured out how to answer his question. Judging by the way Ayase the Younger talked about the issue, it seemed pretty obvious that she didn’t want all the details getting spread around. That applied to both the pervert incident and the as-of-yet undetermined problems she was having at school. That being said, I thought it would be more appropriate for Kaito to hear about them from his sister herself, rather than from me.

I was a bit worried about whether or not Kaito had it in him to be proactive when it came to her, but in the best-case scenario, I figured this could be a *fantastic* opportunity for her to open up to him. Yeah, it had to be! A heroine confiding her secret worries to the protagonist is a major, unmissable event! Like hell I’d ruin it by jumping the gun and spilling the beans!

“Nah, nothing in particular,” I lied. In my defense, lying was the only option I had left.

“Nothing? Well, thanks anyway...”

“I still can’t believe Hikari-chan would skip school!” Kotou jumped into the exchange. Considering she was Kaito’s childhood friend, it made total sense that she’d be acquainted with his sister as well. Kotou made it sound like her skipping school was totally unfathomable, which checked out in my mind as well. She was the reliable, put-together honor student type of character, after all.

On the flip side, you see the “she was such a kind, gentle girl! I can’t believe she’d commit such a terrible crime!” pattern in interviews on TV all the time.

Just because you *think* you're super close to someone doesn't mean they don't have a side or two they keep hidden from you. It was possible that all of us were being too narrow-minded, too convinced that our impression of her was perfectly representative of her in totality.

"Why not ask Kazuki?" I suggested. "She's in the same grade as your sister, right?"

Kazuki was a first-year girl who was on the track team and happened to be in love with Kaito. Not much else to say on the matter, honestly—she was a kouhai-type heroine who I have yet to get the chance to introduce properly. Incidentally, the moment I mentioned Kazuki's name, Kotou's face twitched for just the slightest fraction of a second. Envy's one of the seven deadly sins for a reason, I guess... But she needs to remember that Kazuki's her kouhai! *Try not to go overboard on the underclassmen, Kotou!*

All ulterior motives aside, I legitimately thought that talking to her was a pretty good idea. Putting aside the pervert problem, if Kaito wanted to learn about the troubles his sister was going through in school, someone with firsthand experience of her classroom environment would be the best person to turn to for info. I knew I might end up putting in a bit of work myself, but I really did think that things would wrap up nice and neatly if Kaito would be the one to properly solve the problem.

"Oh, yeah, I should probably try asking her. I don't think she's in Hikari's class, though, so I'm not sure if they see each other very often..."

*Oh, right.* Just because they were in the same grade didn't mean they're in the same class. That changed things substantially. *Guess I'll have to rely on that stupid little shrimp after all? Man, this sucks.*

"Good morning. What are the three of you doing out in the corridor?" All three of us sunk into silence, pondering our various predicaments, when suddenly a girl addressed us from somewhere behind me. Her notably chilling voice was incredibly distinct, and I didn't even have to turn around to know who it was.

"Oh, hey, Kyouka! Morning!"

"...Good morning, Kiryu-san."

“’Sup.”

It could only be Kiryu Kyouka, and as usual, Kotou’s mood took a nosedive the second she entered the picture. *Keep calm, Kotou! Deep breaths!*

“How strange,” Kiryu continued.

“What is?” I replied.

“I wouldn’t think anything of Ayase-kun and Kotou-san being out here together, but with you added into the picture, Kunugi-kun, I can’t help but feel unsettled.”

“Wow, talking crap already? Really? Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the bed!”

“I’m just telling the truth.”

“Just because you’re right doesn’t mean it’s a nice thing to say!”

As always, I got brutally teased first thing in the morning. That’s just the sort of character I am. Incidentally, I wasn’t especially surprised to see that Kiryu was treating me the same way she always did, in spite of everything that had happened between us over the weekend. We didn’t specifically plan to keep things the same way as always or anything. It was more that after everything we’d been through, acting all calm and polite around each other at school would just feel...off. In short, I was totally okay with keeping things as they were.

Kaito had no idea about any of that, of course, and rolled his eyes in a “you people never change” sort of way. Weirdly enough, though, I couldn’t say the same of Kotou. *She* was looking back and forth between Kiryu and me, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“Umm... Kiryu-san? Can we talk?”

“What is it, Kotou-san?”

“Just c’mere, okay?”

“What? Wait, just let me drop off my bag—hey, stop pulling me!”

*And they’re off. The heck was that? The opening salvo in a war between*

*women? Wouldn't it be better to wait until the other heroines are around for something like that?*

"Wonder what that was all about," pondered Kaito.

"Good question," I replied. Normally this is the part where I'd make a snappy quip about what a blockhead he is, but that one came so far out of left field that even I, an uninvolved third party, was totally bewildered by it. Really hard to figure these things out when you don't even know what incited them. We stood there for a while, not sure how to react, but thinking it over wasn't going to provide any answers. Just when I figured I should probably break the silence, Kaito beat me to the punch.

"Hikari's pretty tough, y'know?"

Part of me wanted to say "Wow, where'd *that* come from?" or something to that effect, but Kaito's tone seemed sad—almost lonely, somehow. I decided not to interrupt.

"It's been quite a long while since our parents got shipped out overseas. They come back a couple times a year, sure, but it's been that way since I was in middle school, and she was still in elementary school. I was supposed to be there to protect her; it was my big, important duty. But when it came down to it, I think she was still at the age where she wanted her parents around to dote on her."

*Really, though, where* is *this coming from?* This kind of conversation is supposed to happen somewhere, y'know, atmospheric! At the very least they're sure as hell not supposed to happen in a crowded, bustling hallway right before the first class of the day.

"To be honest, Hikari's always really had it together, even when she was just a kid. I..."

*You what?* I waited, but he never finished the thought. He hung his head for a moment, his expression somehow wistful, and yet at the same time totally unreadable. By the time he looked up again, though, he was back to his usual smile.

"Thanks, Kou."

“Huh? For what?”

“I get the feeling Hikari really trusts you. Pretty sure you two’ve been keeping secrets from me, haven’tcha?”

“Huh? Wha?”

*What’s happening? What kind of crazy turn did the conversation take to end up* here*? What’s going on?! Director?! What’s my line?!*

“If it’s all for Hikari’s sake, though, I’m fine with that. Gotta admit, it makes me a bit sad, but sometimes an older brother just has to sit back and watch over his sister without sticking his nose into her business.”

His smile was tinged with a forlorn understanding. *Just how much does he know? Wasn’t he supposed to be on the super thickheaded end of the protagonist spectrum?!*

“If there was anything at all I could do for Hikari, I’d do it. It’s an older brother thing, y’know? But right now, all I can do is ask for your help. I want you to support her. I can rest easy if you’re there for her, Kou.”

—I can rest easy if you’re there for her, Koh.

A piercing jolt of pain shot through my skull. A powerful sense of déjà vu overcame me as well—or rather, déjà entendu, since it was auditory. They really were similar, brother and sister alike. But why? Why did he have to do the same thing all over again?

“You’re really overestimating me,” I said, unable to stop myself. “I’m not the guy for the job. I can’t.”

I’d already made that mistake. I’d already failed. My best friend had already entrusted his sister to me, and I had already lost her once before. There was no way in *hell* I’d ever let myself choose that path again. I couldn’t bring myself to bear that burden once more—not knowing what would happen if I screwed it up again.

“Kou...?”

Kaito stared at me in shock. He probably never even considered that I might say no. After all, I’d never turned down a sincere request of his before. Saving

the protagonist's sister would be an incredible honor! Indeed, it'd be the most effective way imaginable to prove my worth as his best friend! But talking to her on the phone every day and laying the groundwork for her problems' resolution was seriously the best I could do. And for the record, I was already pretty much bleeding myself dry to do it. It was *not* easy!

My goals were specific and limited: help Ayase Hikari's social rehabilitation and eliminate the problems she was facing at school. Everything after that was up to her. Taking responsibility for her well-being beyond that was beyond *me*.

"You said you'd do anything for her, right? Then what're you thinking, asking someone else to save her instead of you? That's a major role, y'know?"

Speaking as Kaito's best friend/sidekick, that was the only answer I could possibly give him. The situation was tricky, but still, I had to give him that push.

"Yeah... You're right." Kaito glanced away as he agreed. Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to assess the emotions packed into the gesture before we were interrupted.

"We're baaack!"

Kotou and Kiryu returned, and the heavy pall that hung over Kaito and me dispersed with their coming.

"What were you guys up to?" Kaito immediately brightened his tone back up, shaking off his dark mood from the prior moment. I still couldn't help but wonder what would've happened if our conversation had continued uninterrupted, but I followed his example and turned to face the girls. Kotou was positively beaming, while in contrast Kiryu looked exhausted and was massaging her temples. *What? Okay, seriously, what* happened *between those two?*

"Oho, nothing, really! Right, Kyouka-chan?"

"R-Right, yes." Something felt different about their attitudes towards each other.

"All right, time to head back to class! Laters!" Kaito and I were still deeply confused, but the main culprit behind whatever the hell that was skipped off towards her own classroom before we could question her further.

“What was *that* about?”

“Good question...”

Kotou left in the highest of spirits, Kiryu looked mentally drained as she staggered back into our classroom, and Kaito and I could only scratch our heads in bewilderment as we watched them go.

❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤

So that was weird as hell.

Once classes finally started, the day passed by pretty much the same way they always do. I wasn’t late, so I was spared the wrath of my homeroom’s resident witch, and I whittled the morning away in relative peace. Then, the second my lunch break began, I shot out of my classroom, making a beeline for the school store.

“*Seriously?!*”

*How does this even happen?!* It’d been less than two minutes since class ended and I thought I just might’ve been able to avoid the usual clichéd development, but alas, the store was already absolutely mobbed with students. Where the heck do these people spawn from?!

But actually, at a second glance, the crowd wasn’t quite as brutal as it usually was. So long as I didn’t let my guard down, I figured I’d be able to secure my target with ease. “Bread isn’t just food,” I told myself. “Bread is *life!*”

“GRAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” *Wham!* I fell (spectacularly, painfully) flat on my face.

“The friggin’ heck was that for, jerkwad?!” I shouted indignantly at the moron who’d grabbed my ankle, prompting my pratfall. I didn’t even have to look to know who it was—there was only one person who I ever encountered at the school store. “Fancy meeting you today, *Steve!*”

“Who the heck is Steve?!”

“Who the heck are *you?!* And what’ve you done to Steve?!”

“I’m Yuu! Yoshiki Yuu! I don’t even know who Steve is!”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You do?! Really?!”

“Well, I mean, yeah. Why’re you so surprised? We just met like two days ago.”

“Don’t give me that look! You don’t get to act like this is obvious! Ugh, you’re so obnoxious...”

*What’s she getting all pissy about? Pretty sure I’m the one who should be mad in this situation, actually!*

“Okay, so, why exactly did you grab me? If we’re playing tag, then nobody told me, and you’re doing it wrong.”

“What I *wanted* to tell you is that if you’re going to buy something from the store anyway, you might as well get me something too.”

“*Wow.* Shameless, much?”

“You’re just now noticing?”

“Why would you be proud of that?!” While we were having our little tiff, the frenzy surrounding the store was only getting worse. The odds of me successfully buying anything were effectively zero.

I shrugged. “Whatever, I’ll just go to the cafeteria.”

“What?! The cafeteria?!” Yuuta’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Hm? What, you wanna go too?”

“Can I?!”

“Yeah, sure. Can’t exactly stop you; I don’t own the place.”

“Woo-hoo! Free lunch!”

“Hold up, I didn’t say anything about *treating* you!”

“Woo-hoo! Free lunch!” Yuuta kept repeating the same line like an obnoxious toy with a broken voice box. *Actually, I think her brain was broken from the very beginning...* She dragged me towards the cafeteria, all the while singing an unspeakably annoying tune to herself that went something along the lines of,

“Lunch, lunch, free lunch! Lunch, lunch...” and so on, ad nauseam.

The cafeteria was usually pretty crowded as well, but it wasn’t even close to the extent that the school store was. The line moved at a pretty reasonable pace too. The only obstacle was the lack of seating. In that respect, the students who brought their lunch from home once again came out on top. And so, we arrived at the ever-popular— “We’re heeere!” Yuuta leapt into the cafeteria with a shout, shamelessly cutting off my internal monologue, and marched right over to an unoccupied ticket machine, pulling me along with her.

“I’m gonna get a large-sized set!” she exclaimed. It was more of a demand than a request, really. The large-sized sets were stupidly expensive for a school cafeteria too—a full eight hundred yen! That’s the sort of price working adults pay for their lunches (it *was* big enough to satisfy a working adult, to be fair). The normal-sized sets were only five hundred yen, so you could get eight of them for the same price as eating big sets for a school week.

“C’mon, just get the normal one. The big set is too expensive, and I bet you couldn’t even finish it.”

“Nuh-uh, I totally can!”

“Don’t ‘nuh-uh’ me, you greedy little pipsqueak! It’s *my* five hundred yen, so you’re getting the regular set! I’m not treating you to anything more than that!”

“So you’ll treat me to the regular set? I’m holding you to that!”

“Wait, crap!” I accidentally agreed to pay for her food! She purposefully went for the most expensive thing on the menu to make paying for something cheap seem reasonable in comparison! This girl’s a genuine tactician! Beneath that unassuming and extremely short exterior lurks the mind of Zhuge Liang!

“Dammit, I’ve been had. This is what happens when you don’t know your enemy... It’s true that the ignorant have to fight to win...”

“Yeah, and the wise win before they fight at all!”

“Yeah, and you’re supposed to detach from your desires too! Get rid of your food fixations!”

I bought set meal tickets for Zhuge Liang—ahem, for Yuuta and myself, and

headed over to the counter to turn them in and pick up our food. I'm not the type to back out of a promise once I've given my word. Kunugi Kou is a man of honor!

"Here's yours. Carry it yourself," I said as I passed Yuuta her tray.

"Okaaay!"

"Hey, don't run! You're totally gonna trip!"

Yuuta replied with a big, exaggerated nod, then started walking around to find us some seats. Meanwhile, I got to follow along at a leisurely pace behind her, sneaking the occasional bite of my still piping hot lunch. Mwa ha ha—I've spared myself the effort of finding a seat (though I at least grabbed us a couple glasses of water to make up for it)! There was simply no way she'd find seats that easily, considering how popular the cafeteria was! *Worst-case scenario, we might end up standing around for ages and waiting for someone else to leave!*

"Kunugi-saaaan! Over heeeere!"

No sooner had I thought that than the scout-shrimp *somehow* managed to find a spot for us with incredible ease and waved me down. *O-Okay, gotta admit, finding seats that quickly's really something. I'm actually sort of impressed.*

"Nice work, mini-minion! Gotta hand it to you, that was... Hmm?"

She was standing by a four-person table, and two of its seats were already occupied.

"They said they didn't mind if we take the other two!"

"What? No, wait! Hey!"

The plate on my tray clattered as my hands started to tremble.

"What're you waiting for, Kunugi? Not gonna sit?" one of the two asked.

"Oh, I was wondering who it might be. If it isn't Kunugi-kun!" the other commented.

Sharing a table was totally fine with me on principle. Sharing a table with *them,* on the other hand, would pose a problem. One of them was the old bag

herself, Daimon-sensei, and the other was a half-Japanese girl with instantly identifiable long, wavy blonde hair. It was our school's resident princess...

"Myourenji Renge..."

"Oh? You're calling me by my name now?"

"N-No way, of course not, Miss President! Why, I'd never dream of being that rude, nuh-uh! Aha ha ha!"

I laughed, doing my best to act casual and/or suck up to her. The shorty to my right gaped at me in astonishment, the student council president kept her eyes firmly fixed upon me in a stare so sharp it was pretty much a glare, and my teacher was just plain old smirking. It was a tableful of chaos. I knew that the moment I sat down, I'd be dooming myself to a terrible fate of death by teasing. A new shut-in was sure to be born that day.



“Hey, Yoshiki-kun?”

“What is it, Kunugi-san? Considering you called me by my actual name, I’m guessing you’re about to tell me you just saw a flying pig?”

“Save the played-out comebacks for later, thanks! Take another look at that table, okay? It’s obvious that Sensei and the president are busy, right? See how none of the other students are trying to take those seats? They’re trying to be considerate!”

“What? No, we’re not,” interjected Daimon-sensei. “Besides, this is a public space for students. If you want to sit down, that’s your prerogative.”

“S-Sensei...”

*She’s right! But for the record, being right doesn’t always mean you’re doing the right thing! This is why you can’t find someone to marry, you stupid sophist!*

“She’s right, Kunugi-san! And if she says so herself, I don’t see any problems. Can I sit next to you, Sensei?”

*N-No, shorty, stop! At least take the seat next to the president!*

“How long do you plan to keep standing there, Kunugi-kun? You realize you’re blocking the other students’ paths, right?” the president smiled in a way that just *screamed* “I am absolutely faking this smile and I don’t care if you know it.” It was a smile that told me that I’d lost.

I told Ayase the Younger that I’d tattle on her to the president, but when I was actually forced to stand face-to-face with her, I couldn’t bring myself to even *consider* it. I was just that bad at dealing with her—or rather, I just couldn’t stand her. I had zero intention of digging into my beef with her in the middle of the cafeteria, though, and I imagined she felt the same way. I just had to keep quiet and ride out the lunch break as well as I could.

“...Mind if I sit next to you, President?”

“Not in the least,” she replied with a smile (though I got the feeling that wasn’t how she actually felt). The instant I took a seat, I caught a big old whiff of what I assumed was the perfume she was wearing. All I could do was keep my gaze fixed straight ahead on my teacher and the munchkin beside her, which

wasn't exactly much of a consolation, to say the least.

On one hand, a little girl (*supposedly* only one year younger than me), and on the other an old lady (*supposedly* somewhere around thirty)... Actually, wait. No comment on the runtling, but when I really thought about it, it occurred to me that if Daimon-sensei weren't such a hardass she'd be a genuinely attractive lady. I had a feeling that her personality would probably be a lot less conspicuous mid-meal too... And if you *have* to choose between a kitten and a cougar, the latter is the ethically correct choice. *Crap... Feels like I'm on a fast-track to the (unrequited) teacher route...*

"By the way, you two," Yuuta began, "is that the super-large set you're eating?"

*What?! You mean the cafeteria menu's most legendary item, the two-thousand-yen super-large set?! I thought it was a myth!*

"Yeah, it is. It's my first time trying it, though," replied Daimon-sensei with a smile.

"Indeed. Sebastian was on holiday today, so I decided to give the cafeteria a try for once." The President's reply, in contrast, carried the implication that she'd never eat this *commoner* food under ordinary circumstances. *See, this is a perfect example. I'm in camp Sensei, all the way.*

"That's incredible! Kunugi-san's so stingy, he'd only treat me to the regular-sized set."

"Oh my, that won't do, Kunugi-kun! You simply mustn't deny a growing girl the nutrients she needs. No wonder her development is so stunted!"

"That's right! You'd better listen to the president, Kunugi-san!" *You realize that she just implied you were my pet, right? Don't let her calm and gentle demeanor fool you!*

Daimon-sensei, meanwhile, was muttering something about how she always gets the regular set herself, her eyes glassy and dead inside. *No, come back to us, Sensei! We're all getting swept up in the president's spoiled-rich-girl flow, but getting the regular set's nothing to be ashamed about! Being economical with your meal planning's a sign that you have your life together, if anything!*

“And yet I see *you’ve* gotten an extra-large helping of rice with your *own* meal.” The President was still smiling, but her words were full of undisguised contempt.

“S-So what if I did?! I’m gonna eat it all, and they don’t charge more for extra rice! It just so happens that my favorite foods are rice and more rice!”

“Pathetic, truly...” she sighed. *You super-large types could never understand the struggles of a regular! And hold on a sec, why’re* you *giving me that look, shorty?! You got an extra-large serving of rice too! You’re not allowed to jump on this bandwagon!*

“Now, now. Myourenji. You don’t have to be that hard on him.”

Daimon-sensei jumped in to pacify the president and save me... *Hah, as if!* In reality, she was almost definitely just upset to see the five hundred yen regular set that she always ordered get made fun of. Still, comparing her to the president was like comparing night and day. Never thought that coming here would end up earning Sensei points in my book, but these things happen, I guess. *Anyway, this* is *my chance, so might as well get this over with.*

“Umm, do you have a minute, President? There’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“I’m quite busy, as it so happens.”

“’Kay, never mind then.”

My policy with her’s to back off without hesitation the second I get turned down. She’s the one person I just *can’t* be persistent with. *Oooh, what a shame, couldn’t ask about Ayase! Too bad, so sad, whatever shall I do?*

“Wow, Kunugi-san, that was super lame!” Yuuta ribbed.

“Shut it, shortstuff! And don’t talk with your mouth full!”

“What are you, my mom?”

“No, I’m your dad! I mean—no, I’m not that either!”

“You just never stop, do you...?” *Aww, man! Now even my beloved Sensei’s fed up with me! Thanks a lot, munchkin!*

“Really, he’s unbelievable. I could hardly enjoy my tea while being subjected to this racket.” The President stood up, and I wanted to comment about how the cafeteria’s not the place to leisurely sip a cup of tea in the first place, but I held back so as to not hold *her* back. She was taking herself out of the picture, and I was thoroughly okay with that. Actually, forget “okay”—I was friggin’ stoked! Woo-hoo! Being loud and obnoxious totally paid off! My glorious victory was indisputable and overwhelming! I did a mental happy dance.

“If you have something to speak with me about, send me a text message. I’ll spare the time to read it, at the very least.” As she passed by me, the president paused for just long enough to whisper into my ear, quietly enough to be certain that only I could hear her. She pulled it off super smoothly too, but that wasn’t exactly surprising. I’d always figured she was good at keeping secrets and moving behind the scenes.

“Something going on between you and Myourenji, Kunugi?” asked Daimon-sensei.

“What do you mean, ‘something’?”

“Seems pretty obvious you’ve got beef with each other. And besides, why do you two—”

“Nope, nothing in particular!” I cut her off, then shoveled food into my mouth to further distract from the question. Daimon-sensei gave me a doubtful glare, but luck was on my side. And by “luck” I mean “Yuuta.”

“Mbbwgh?! Rice! Stuck! Choking!” Yuuta, who’d been pretty much inhaling her rice, started moaning and coughing.

“What did you expect, eating that fast? Here, wash it down.” Daimon-sensei was thoroughly distracted, and began helping her clear her throat out with a glass of water. *Why was she eating that fast in the first place, anyway?*

“Glug, glug, glug...” she slurped, noisily. “Bwaah! Jeez, I thought I was a goner...”

“You sure you’re *really* a girl, shorty?”

*I mean, what kind of girl nearly asphyxiates herself on plain white rice? Mochi would be one thing, but this is ridiculous!* Yuuta slumped over on the table,

worn out by her near-death experience.

“Well, I’d better get going,” said Daimon-sensei as she stood up. “You okay, Yoshiki? Need an ambulance?”

“I think she is probably in good health. I would jest about choking to death on rice, but this situation is not nearly humorous enough for such tomfoolery. No need to trouble yourself, Sensei—I propose we let her sort herself out in the nurse’s office.” *Also, an ambulance would be overkill regardless!*

“Fair enough... Why’re you talking like that, though?”

“Just trying to express my undying respect for you, Sensei!” I tried to play it casual. She was so considerate, she’d even take care of someone like *Yuuta!* If only I could find a way to express my reverence for her!

“You screwing with me?”

“Of course not! Why, I would never even *dream* of it!”

*Oh, whoops. There goes that vein in her forehead. This might be bad.* I momentarily forgot that she was the sort of person who really couldn’t take a joke. Riiight, that’s why she can’t find someone to marry, *etc.* etc.!

“Anyway, I’ve got Miss Shortypants under control. You have more important stuff to deal with, right? I’ll take her to the nurse’s office.”

“Her name’s Yoshiki, not Shortypants, but... You sure? That’d be great, actually.”

“But of course! Leave it to me!” I didn’t really think it was a big enough deal to warrant taking her to the nurse, but if I left her on her own and she happened to vanish for whatever reason, it was possible I’d end up being a suspect in the missing person case. That’s definitely *not* how I wanna end up on TV! *Surely she’ll be safe if I shut her up in the nurse’s office. Thank goodness schools are equipped with a dedicated zone to isolate the idiots!*

“All right, let’s get going, Shrimpy.”

“My name’s not Shrimpy...”

“Let’s get going, Yuuta.”

“Carry me, please...”

“Pretty calm for a girl who nearly choked to death, aren’tcha?” *And why does she think she’s in a position to make demands like that, anyway?* I scooped her up under an arm and carried her off.

“I changed my mind, this sucks! I look like an animal getting carried back to its cage!”

“Wow, you understand this situation better than I expected!” She was actually even easier to carry than I’d expect the average animal to be. I’d call it more of a carrying-a-bag-of-rice-under-one-arm sort of situation. Yeah, that’s not a bad image at all... *Side note, you know everyone’s gonna see up your skirt if you struggle in this position, right, Yuuta?*

“I’m being violated!” she protested.

“Do you have to say it like *that?!* Phrasing!” Thank goodness we were in a pretty unpopulated part of the school! I wouldn’t be able to go out in public if people thought I was into little girls like her! “I’m not even a teeny, *tiny* bit interested in you! You’ve got the figure of a piece of tissue paper! I’m into, like, mature girls with *curves* and stuff!”

“You mean like the president?”

“She’s an exception.” She had curves for days, sure, and was awfully pretty to boot, but her personality was a dealbreaker. Her perfume too. And the way she talks? Can’t stand it. Yup, three strikes, she’s out!

“You’re really picky, aren’t you, Kunugi-san?”

“Feeling judgmental, huh?”

“Nuh-uh, no way, don’t be ridonculous!”

“I swear, the way you talk gets weirder by the minute...”

“It’s an important part of my identity!”

“God, I can *feel* my brain cells dying with every sentence!” *I don’t even know why I bother talking with this chick. She’s seriously gonna drive me crazy if I don’t hand her off to someone else soon!*

“’Scuse me! Is the nurse...?” I glanced around. “Nnnope, no sign of her.”

“Sob, sniff...” she dramatized. “Now that I’m trapped in here with Kunugi-san, surely he’ll strip me down and do all sorts of horrible things to me!”

“Can you not?”

“Yeah, okay!” Yuuta finally calmed down, and I tossed her onto the bed. Literally. She made a hilarious little grunt as she landed too.

“A’ight, I’m outta here.”

“Kunugi-san, wait!”

“What?”

“Let’s chat for a little!”

“You realize what time it is, right?” The bell had already rung, and fifth period was due to start at any second. Surely she hadn’t forgotten?

“Cut class with me!”

“Wow, way to casually suggest the absurd!” *Though come to think of it, she cut class to play cards with me last week, didn’t she? She really doesn’t hesitate to ditch. Looks like I’m dealing with a real punk.*

“You can tell them that my condition took a turn for the worse, and you had to treat me! How’s that for an excuse?”

“Not bad, actually.” Humans are truly weak-minded beings. Once we get an idea like cutting class in our heads, it’s incredibly difficult to let it go. And if somebody offers to take the blame for it, all the more so—maybe letting them do so’s a kindness, in a certain sense...

“So, what’d you want to talk about?”

“About Hikari-chan, actually.”

“Hikari-chan...You mean Ayase?”

“You asked me about her a few days ago, right? Well, I realized something!”

*Wait, why’d her tone of voice just change all of a sudden?! She sounds almost sensible for once!* Or at least, I sorta got that feeling. Could it be that she’s just

*pretending* to be a gigantic moron most of the time, and is secretly super smart?! Is all her ridiculous babble just camouflage to disguise her true brilliance?!

"I realized that you have a crush on her! Don't you, Kunugi-san?"

Nope, never mind, she's a huge moron after all. *But wait—even if she is misunderstanding the situation, could it be that the basic foundation of her theory's not actually that far off the mark...?*

"But now you have a thing for me too, and you're having trouble deciding which of the girls in your life you want to pursue!"

Nope, huge moron. Confirmed.

"You don't have to force yourself to sound smart like that, y'know? Besides, you totally slipped back into your usual moron tone without realizing it a minute ago."

"For reals?!" she gasped, slipping back into her usual moron tone without realizing it.

"See?"

"Y-You tricked me! I was trying so hard too!" *Don't think I put enough effort into that for it to really count as trickery, honestly. Also, if that was you trying hard, you've got a real talent for idiocy. I think life in the big city might be a bit much for you.*

"Talking about Ayase the Younger actually works out for me, though."

"'The Younger'?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm her older brother's best friend, see."

"No way!"

"Is it that surprising?"

"Not as surprising as I made it look! I actually don't really care about your relationships at all."

"Why you little..." If the age of corporal punishment weren't over, she'd have definitely earned herself a smack by that point. *Hold it in... It's still too early to*

*make an enemy of the PTA...*

"But, I mean, I *guess* I could tell you about Hikari-chan, seeing as you're too shy to find out yourself!"

"Could you possibly get any more condescending?"

"Come on, come on! Ask me anything!"

"Okay, what're her measurements?"

The silence was deafening.

"...Say something."

"Creep."

"I'm extremely sorry!" She said I could ask her *anything!* Speaking as a high school boy, I was obligated to immediately take it in that direction!

"Okay, let's start over. You told me before that Ayase's been isolated in her class lately, right?"

She wavered for a moment. "That's right."

"And you're the ringleader behind it all, right?"

"Whaaat?!"

"Huh? Am I wrong?"

"Yes! Yes, you are!"

"Yeah, figures." The usual pattern for this sort of plot arc is that the first person you come into contact with will secretly turn out to have been the culprit the entire time. Of course, that's just a hackneyed plot device to make stories more exciting—the real world barely ever works that way. I figured I'd take a shot at it anyway, but looks like that shot was a miss. "Sorry. Was worth a try."

"You almost gave me a heart attack!"

"My bad, my bad." *Whoops, getting sidetracked! I just can't have a decent conversation with Yuuta without it getting derailed. Side note, man—cutting class to chat together? I'd almost think we were* friends *or something, if I didn't*

*know better!*

"I can't say you're *completely* wrong, though, I guess..."

"How's that?"

"Hikari's being targeted by a person who's sorta like the class's leader..."

*A person who's sorta like the class's leader?!* "Does this person have a sleazy-looking goatee?!"

"She's a girl, so no, of course not."

"Just because she's a girl doesn't necessarily mean we can rule the evil goatee out!" *You can never be sure with these behind-the-scenes ringleader types!* "This boss-lady in your class has Ayase in her sights, though? That sounds like it could be pretty nasty."

"It's the same old story you hear all the time—she's been ignoring Ayase, and that pressures everyone else in the class to ostracize her too."

"That's just straight-up bullying!"

"It really is... Hikari-chan's a really good girl, when you get to know her, but she's so pretty and her grades are so great that she's sort of intimidating and hard to talk to. I guess everyone has that same impression of her..." Yuuta squeezed the bedsheets. I could tell that she was really frustrated by the whole situation. "I'm supposed to be her friend, but I was too scared of getting targeted, and I couldn't help her at all..." She paused, then looked up at me. "But ever since I met you, Kunugi-san, I've started thinking that I want to change!"

"Huh? Me?" What did *I* do? I'd given her a sandwich or two, and that was basically it.

"I was starving, but you were there to save me by giving me a sandwich!"

"Wait, seriously?! It was the sandwich thing?! For real?!"

"It taught me how wonderful it feels to have someone offer you help when everyone else around is ignoring you... I don't think I could put it into better words than that."

I had no idea she'd been *that* desperate. I probably should've just given the sandwich to her back then without subjecting her to the whole teasing process... But on the other hand, doing it that way resulted in her continuing to follow me around and sponge off me, so I guess we can call it even. If anything, *I'm* the one who got the short end of the stick.

"So I've decided that I want to be just like you and give Hikari-chan the help she needs!"

"Okay, seriously, I'm not as incredible as you're making me out to be! I just gave it to you on impulse; it was a one-time thing!" I really don't like how it feels when people look up to me like that. It's sorta, I dunno, eerie? Or rather, it makes me feel guilty.

"But Hikari-chan's not even coming to school anymore... I'm all alone now."

"Don't you have any friends other than Ayase?"

"No."

"Oh." Suddenly, I felt guilty for a whole new reason. I vaguely remembered Ayase mentioning that Yuuta actually opening up to people was really rare, or something along those lines. "Well, I mean, y'know—we're basically friends at this point too, right?"

She looked like she was really depressed, and I couldn't just stand there and watch. I wasn't sure if we really were friends or not, though. Like, I'm the one who said it, but I still had to question it. We also had the whole senpai/kouhai thing going, which complicated the whole deal.

"We're friends? You're my friend, Kunugi-san...?" *Yeah, see? I knew she'd be confused too... Wait, is she...? Whaaat?!* "Sniff... Bweeehh..."

"You're *crying?!*"

"I'm just...so happy, I... I'm sorry!"

"N-Nah, it's cool..." Making friends with me made her so happy, it brought her to tears?! *For the record, you're seriously overvaluing my friendship! You're totally on the road to a friendzone ending, y'know? My route's* hella *hard to clear, y'know?! I'm the sort of person who calls people his friend for*

*convenience's sake when he doesn't know how else to describe the relationship,* y'know*?!*

I didn't actually say any of that, of course, and just rubbed Yuuta on the back as she blubbered away. *This isn't too touchy, right? I'm not gonna get sued for sexual harassment for a back pat, am I? Oh, huh... She's a lot warmer than I expected her to be. Oh no, this is totally veering into bad-touch territory now.*

"Sniff... Your hand's so warm..." I was just about to stop, but even as she curled herself up into a ball, Yuuta didn't try to push me away or make any sign that she didn't want me to touch her. I wasn't totally sure what to do, but I decided to keep with the back-rubbing for the moment, and it wasn't long before she'd cried herself into a deep and peaceful slumber.

That pretty much wrapped up my business in the nurse's office, so I decided to leave her there to sleep it off and head back to class... Or at least, that was the theory.

"Wait, what? When did *this* happen?!" She was holding on to the hem of my uniform. And I mean, like, *really* clenching it, so trying to pull it out of her hand would probably mean waking her up in the process.

"Ugh... Well, whatever, I guess."

Not even I was unprincipled enough to wake up a girl who was sleeping that peacefully. It took her about ten minutes or so to fall into a deep enough sleep that her grip loosened, and I spent that period idly messing around with my phone.

And that's how I made my weirdest friend yet.

**An Extra Watches from the Background Kazuki Rena. Although she was still in her first year at Oumei High, she'd already firmly established herself as a running prodigy and the track team's ace. Her slender and finely-toned body gave her a certain boyish charm, and she'd become a well-known figure at local track-and-field events thanks to her exceptional talent. Last but not least, her sporty persona was complemented by her thoroughly charming looks, earning her popularity from boys and girls abound.**

I'm not exactly well-informed when it comes to track-and-field, but even I could tell how impressive her record was. Supposedly she excelled in short-distance running and broke a ton of records back when she was in middle school. I don't know if you can even cheat in track, but it sure seemed like she had.

That isn't to say that she was running off pure talent alone—her natural gifts were supplemented by an almost unimaginable amount of hard work and perseverance. Even on that dreary, rainy day, I saw Kazuki diligently running circles around the track from the counseling room's window.

From.

The.

Counseling.

Room's.

Window.

Yup! Again! I'm so, so sorry. I'd like to say it was a "three strikes and I'm out" situation, but in this case it was more like, "Oh crap, it's my third strike and I'm literally in jail." I tried to apologize! It didn't work!

Of course, with an introduction like that, you probably assumed that I was about to introduce a new heroine. Betcha got your expectations up, right? Society may be cruel and those expectations might get betrayed with crushing regularity, but please, never let it take that optimism away from you.

"You think you've got aaaall the time in the world to just stare out the window and daydream, huh?"

"Eeek!"

"Even after I went to the trouble of printing out aaaall these worksheets for you too!" There was a devil in the room with me. A genuine incarnation of El Diablo himself. Forget society—there was an entire *world's* worth of cruelty packed into the counseling room alone!

"So, umm, Sensei? People go to school to, like, *learn*, right? Not to get fed worksheets assembly-line style...?"

"Remind me—*who* was it that decided learning could take a backseat to chatting with an underclassman girl and skipped out on his classes?"

"Me! It was me! I'm so, so sorry!"

Daimon-sensei wouldn't hear any of my excuses and had judged me guilty of the crime of cutting class, so I was once again coerced into resuming my (unpaid) worksheet-disposal side job. I really don't know how that woman's smile can exude so much pressure. A veritable mountain of worksheets sat in front of me, and there was no indication my teacher would be leaving any time soon. She'd looked like an angel in comparison to the student council president, but in isolation she was a devil indeed.

"By the way, you've got a pretty impressive variety of these things. Aren't you supposed to be a *Japanese* teacher?" The layer of worksheet hell I'd been

damned to that day had all sorts of subjects worked into it, and it was hard for me to believe she could've put them all together on her own. I felt an intense, invisible force behind them I couldn't quite identify.

"Oh, you know... The other teachers quite readily gave me a hand. It's pretty rare for kids to cut class at this school, so everyone went *really* all-out with it."

"Why would *that* be the thing you people spend your energy on?! And that means you were blatantly expecting me to end up in here again, weren't you?!"

"Less talking, more writing, punk!" Daimon-sensei, who at that point had assumed her mantle as the High Priestess of Worksheetdom, glared daggers at me.

"But, Sensei, isn't wasting your time watching over me all day gonna mess with your own work? You'll fall behind, right...?" I pleaded.

"Nope. Brought it with me." She pulled out a laptop, which she set up across from me on the table. It was starting to sink in that she really *did* intend to stay there and monitor me all day long. "You'll slack off in a second if I take my eyes off you. The vice principal's been on my case about doing too much overtime too, and I'm sure as hell not giving him another chance to chew me out."

*"Overtime," my ass! You went home early last time you shut me up in here!* She wasn't finished, though. "You're pretty bright when you actually bother to try, Kunugi, so hurry up and get it over with. Think about it as a chance to suck up to the teachers whose classes you cut—not so bad that way, right?"

"A-And just maybe, if I suck up enough, could I work my way out of having to take remedial lessons over the summer...?"

"S'possible."

"I'll try my hardest, Sensei!"

"For the other teachers, I mean. You're not getting out of mine no matter *what* you do." *From glorious hope to the depths of despair in five seconds flat! Why* not *yours?! You're my homeroom teacher! Aren't you supposed to be the authority figure who throws me a bone every once in a while?!* "You wouldn't believe how dull it gets at school over the summer with all the students out. Ha ha ha, look at me, doting on my kids so much I want them around, even during

the summer! Am I a model teacher, or what?”

“You’d really quash your student’s summer vacation for a petty, personal reason like that, Sensei?!”

“What’re you being so dramatic about? It’ll only be a week’s worth of lessons or so.”

“A week’s worth of lessons for Japanese alone?!” *That’s a quarter of my precious time off!*

“I’ll get you nice and ready for the next tests, so don’t you worry your pretty little head.” *I never asked for this!*

“Well, I guess if it means being all alone with a beauty like you, Sensei, it might not be so bad. Oh, whoopsie-daisy~! Did I say that out loud? Tee hee, what a blunder!”

“You wanna die?”

“Kidding. If I don’t make at least one smarmy joke over the course of a conversation, I start feeling like I’m suffocating. Actually, y’know what, screw it! Lemme be straight with you: this sort of environment’s not fit for a growing boy! In fact, I’d go so far as to say that it’s *poisonous!* If I’m locked up in a room with my cool, unflappable Sensei, of *course* I’m gonna want to crack a joke or two and make her get all cute and flustered! Is there a *problem* with that?!”

“Too many to count. Don’t lust after your teachers, you horny ape.”

*Oh god, what have I done?!* I knew that running my mouth without thinking about what I was saying could only land me in hot water, but I went and did it anyway! There was *nothing* good about getting stuck with my teacher for company. Nothing at all! *This is why she can’t find someone to marry!*

That said, I was still making progress. I was gradually learning to read the stirrings of her heart, so I could say that with confidence. If I were a rom-com protagonist like Kaito, at this point I’d probably already be able to whisper a couple sweet nothings to her and convince her to give me some private, late-night (okay, technically early evening) lessons. Unfortunately, I wasn’t a protagonist—I was playing the role of a best friend sidekick in heat, and my options were limited.

“Y’know what, though, Sensei? Knowing that I’m all locked up in this tiny little room with you really does make it hard to calm down! It’s, like, my heart’s going all pitter-patter and I’m, like, just filled to the brim with pubescent impulses! My heart’s a chocolate fountain, and my hormones are the chocolate!”

*If I can make her think that I’m an unstoppable lust-monster and creep her out as hard as possible, then not only will I be able to escape from this current situation, I might even be able to get out of summer school! Bring! It! Ooooon! Then grant me the sweet mercy of death because oh* god, *why the hell am I doing this?*

I put my life on the line in an all-or-nothing blitzkrieg attack, and Daimon-sensei said...nothing. Not a word. *Actually, she’s, umm...gone totally expressionless...?*

“Phew, that was a close one,” she began, finally breaking the silence. “If I weren’t a teacher and you weren’t my student, I would’ve given in and literally beaten you to death just now.”

“Eeek!”

“None of your stupid plans are gonna work on me, so quit stalling and get working.” *Wait, how’d she know?!*

“Ha ha, plans? What plans? I don’t have any plans!”

“Besides,” she muttered, ignoring me, “making a pass on someone like me will bring you nothing but grief in the long term.” *Sensei, no! I can still hear you, you’re not whispering quietly enough! Also, don’t say stuff like that! You’re just hurting yourself!*

“I-It’s not like you’re *that* old, right? I mean, sure, you’re *almost* thirty, b-but that means you’re still technically in your twenties! You’re practically still a teenager! Still plenty of chances left to find love!”

“Oh yeah? Do you know what it feels like to get a wedding invitation from one of your old friends from high school or college, kid? Do you know how isolating it is to watch the pool of singles in your social circle get smaller and smaller until the married ones outnumber you?! Do you know how *goddamn* humiliating it is

when they say shit like, ‘Oh, you’re still single, Kasumi? I’m jealous—you must feel so free and liberated’?! *Do you?!*”

“I’m sorry! I’m so, so sorry!” *The darkness! It’s so very, very deep, and it’s closing in on me! Noooooo!*

She gasped and panted, winded from her outburst. “Get the picture? If you do, then hurry up and do your damn worksheets! My free time’s riding on this!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” I wasn’t about to let her blame me for the fact that she can’t get a date to save her life! People like to joke about how getting married’s the same as getting buried, but those people *clearly* aren’t considering that there are others out there who get left to waste away by the roadside without even the dignity of a grave to be buried in.

If you ask me, judging by outward appearances alone, Daimon-sensei was *easily* attractive enough to get attention from any number of suitors. She had a certain aura of coolness that would totally make me yearn for her affection if I were only a decade older or so—heck, maybe even if I wasn’t! Though actually, on second thought, maybe that coolness is the problem? Some dudes have such incredibly fragile egos about that sort of thing. Like, they want a damsel-in-distress type of woman, instead of a strong-and-independent type. What a pain.

Anyway, I blitzed my way through worksheet after worksheet and by the time it was finally over and I’d earned my freedom from the counseling room, the sun had long since set. *Is this just my life now? Please, let me escape from this “get scolded → get sent to worksheet jail → rinse and repeat” cycle as soon as possible! This is all Yuuta’s fault to begin with. If I hadn’t fallen for her honeyed words, right now I’d already be...doing nothing of any particular importance, actually. Aaaah, whatever. I’mma go right home and pass out.*

“Huh?” As I plodded my way through the shopping district on my way home, I happened to see a familiar silhouette ahead of me. No way I could mistake him; there’s only one guy I know who has that intense of a mild-mannered aura. “Kaito?”

It was him for sure. Ayase Kaito in the flesh, and Kotou was with him. He was carrying a plastic bag, so I assumed they’d just finished shopping and were now heading home. *Gotcha! You’ve been spotted, Kaito! Could it be? Are you...on a*

*date?!*

I was pleased and thoroughly impressed to discover that Kaito was racking up lovey-dovey events with his heroines, even when I wasn't around to wingman for him. Pleased, but also just a little bit sad to see my boy leave the nest. And mildly skeptical too—should he *really* be out playing around with girls when his little sister's refusing to leave their house?

"Hmm... I was *positive* he had a sister complex, but maybe he's actually surprisingly laissez-faire with her?" *Are you* absolutely *sure about leaving her alone like this, Kaito? Jerkwad protagonists are* not *in style these days!*

At the rate things were going, there was a real danger of some supporting character diving in and revealing himself as the *true* protagonist, making off with both Kaito's heroines and his popularity in one fell swoop! He'd lose his protagonist status in an instant, and my best friend status would get caught up in the blast as collateral damage!

If it ended with me getting the metaphorical crap beaten out of my social status I wouldn't particularly care, but a super weird development like that could easily result in me getting way too much time in the spotlight, and there was no way I was gonna let *that* happen! Getting that much attention would be way too humiliating! For the record, I think that sidekicks who get ahead of themselves and use chances like that to act like some sorta *main character* are wildly disgraceful. Those degenerates have no pride in their positions whatsoever!

"Hmm, do you think this'll be enough?" asked Kaito, glancing in his bag.

"Yeah, should be plenty," replied Kotou.

And so, naturally, as they walked off like a happy little couple, I went ahead and stalked them. What's that, dear readers? You want to know how that's "natural" at all? Excellent question! Listen up, it's lecture time!

To put it plainly: as Kaito's sidekick and best friend, I am bound by duty to both make sure he doesn't make any terrible life choices and to convince him to return to the path of righteousness if he ever seems to be straying! The two of them might be putting out major nice-couple vibes right now, but the world's a dangerous place and you never know what might happen. Anyway, no need to

worry—they don't call me the Demon Stalker of Meiou because I'm *bad* at it! Sure, a wild Kiryu spoiled my efforts the other day, but there's no way anyone's gonna disturb me *this* time...

*Bzzt! Bzzt!*

"Hmm?" No sooner had I thought that than my phone vibrated in my pocket. *Hah, nice try, world! I'm the sort of guy who keeps his phone perpetually set to vibrate! I'd never let myself fall into that played-out given-away-by-a-ringing-phone trap!* I checked my phone, and sure enough, the call was from exactly the girl I was expecting. I hesitated for a moment, unsure whether to pick up or not, but I knew that if I didn't she'd give me crap for it later. I had to bite the bullet and pick up. No, really, I was forced to, okay?! I had no choice!

"Hello?"

"Good evening...Senpai."

"Whoa, *somebody* sounds pretty down in the dumps." Needless to say, the caller was Ayase Hikari. Her tone was a lot more restrained than usual, though.

"It's been a sort of tiring day, I guess..."

"No need to call if you're already tuckered out. I'm actually pretty busy right now, myself!"

"No, calling you's part of my identity now! If I'm not going to school, I have to at *least* keep this part of my routine going. It feels like I won't have a presence in the outside world at all if I don't..."

She was picking a really weird routine to get all stubborn about—I wished she wouldn't form her identity around me without at *least* mentioning it beforehand. Also, would this *really* help her have a presence outside? It's not like she was talking with anyone other than me! Having a presence in the eyes of a best friend character like me would only gain her a minor role in a spin-off written from my perspective at best! And considering I'm one of those background extra best friend types, the odds of me getting a spin-off were hilariously low in the first place.

"Not to mention everything that happened yesterday," she continued.

“Yesterday? Why, what happened yesterday?”

“I knew it...” she sulked. “You don’t remember after all...” These millennials, always getting upset about stuff without explaining why. “I called you yesterday too, didn’t I?”

“Uhhhh, maybe?”

“But you didn’t even say anything! You spent the entire conversation groaning and moaning into the phone like a zombie. It was so stressful, I thought my heart was going to burst to pieces!”

“Ahhh... That’s my bad.” Considering I’d spent pretty much the entirety of the day before in idle slumber, I figured she’d caught me while I was half asleep. I only had a slight, hazy recollection of the conversation happening at all. Ayase brought this upon herself by calling me on the holy day of the Sabbath, though!

All that said, I decided to be a gentleman about it and apologize, even though it was totally all her fault. That would bring the conversation to an end quicker, thus saving me precious energy. I’m a focused man who knows how to stick to his objectives!

“So that’s why you’re tired today?”

“No, it’s not.” Okay, got that one wrong. She sounded weirdly upset about it too. “You see, Tsumugi-chan came over to my house.”

“Already?!” *But I thought I was right behind them!* I was confused for a moment, but then I figured it out. “Oh, I get it—you mean she was over at your place before, right? Yesterday, maybe?”

“Yeah, that’s right—wait, ‘already’? Did you *know* that she was coming over to my house again today, Senpai?” Her question carried an implicit undertone of “is this all part of your plan?” Man, am I really that untrustworthy?

“I’m both a pacifist and a sidekick to the bitter end! Don’t think for a second that I have anywhere even *close* to the ability to set up an event of that scale between the protagonist and his heroines!”

“Every once in a while you say stuff that I can’t follow at all, Senpai.” She let out an exasperated sigh. “But honestly, I would’ve actually felt better about this

if you *were* involved somehow. I don't suppose you'd be willing to come over too?"

"As if me being there would make things any better."

"Tsumugi-chan's been going *way* out of her way to be considerate of me, and Kaito's...Kaito, so of course he's been doing the same and also trying his hardest to cheer me up. It's ridiculous! It feels like I have two weirdly polite houseguests to entertain! *You* wouldn't bother trying to be considerate of me, right, Senpai?"

"That might be a good quality in *your* mind, but it's a bad one in pretty much everyone else's!" *And for the record, anyone (including me) would normally try to be considerate when talking to someone who's been driven to truancy too!*

"Well, you're doing it right now, aren't you? You're not being considerate at all!"

"Okay, *yeah,* but still!" Ayase was a special case—our relationship itself was a special case, to be honest. I *was* still doing my best (by my standards, anyway) to help her go back to school, so I'd give myself a passing grade overall! Judging by how she was complaining, though, she was half annoyed by her brother and Kotou's attitudes towards her, half embarrassed, and yet also not *completely* unhappy with the situation, surprisingly. *This is low-key obnoxious.*

"But if you *didn't* set this up, that must mean..." She paused, taking on a more suspicious tone. "Senpai, were you tailing my brother and Tsumugi?"

"Geh!"

"That noise just told me everything I need to know. I'm right, aren't I?" *How the hell did she know?! Is this girl psychic?!* "In that case, you need to come over after all!"

"Nope, not happening."

"Think of it as doing me a favor!"

"I told you, didn't I? I'm busy."

"Busy with nothing, I bet. You were totally about to go home and sleep."

"Rude, much?" *I would've* showered *before going to bed! I'm not an animal,*

*and I take great care to not be obnoxiously smelly!* "You know Kaito and Kotou are worried about you, right? No brother could ever keep his cool when his little sister stops going to school!" He certainly *seemed* worried earlier that morning, after all. I wanted to punch myself for doubting him for even a second! "It's the same with the problems in your class too. Running away from all this stuff isn't gonna solve anything."

"You know why I don't want to go back to school, huh? I should've known you'd figure it out, Senpai..." I wanted to question *why* she thought she "should've known" that, but moving the conversation forward was more important.

"Yoshiki spilled the beans. So much for your gag order, eh?"

"I never put one out in the first place! I haven't even spoken with her."

"Your whole situation's getting to her, y'know? I'm pretty good at telling when people are lying, for the record, and I'm not getting that sense from her at all. She's truly worried."

"Is she...?"

"Yeah, it's just that risking getting ostracized's pretty rough. Makes it hard for her. You've still got plenty of people who can support you at school, though, right? Like Yoshiki, Kaito, and Kotou—plus everyone else on the student council, I'm sure."

"Plus you! Right, Senpai?"

"Of course." Not that I expected I'd actually be of help in any capacity. Still, though, if it made her feel better, I'd try to help as much as she wanted. "This is just between you and me, but I think I might have a plan to deal with the *other* problem too. Came to me after I spent all of yesterday sleeping like a log."

"Wait...really?"

"Really." The *other* problem, of course, being the pervy creeper who caused Ayase and me to meet in the first place. Truthfully, it was an idea I'd had on some level since the very beginning. I just wasn't sure if it was really possible, not to mention whether or not I had the guts to go through with it. Considering her current circumstances and the situation at school, though, I didn't really

have the leeway to drag it out any longer. “If you’d just go to school already, you might be surprised how easily that problem could get solved. Our school’s focused on college prep, and we don’t have many troublemakers. I doubt it’ll last for all that long.”

“I’ll...think about it.”

“Yeah, you do that. Ah, whoops—out of time!” At that very moment, I was witnessing Kaito and Kotou step through the Ayase household’s front door.

“Wait, what? Senpai?”

“Good luck; have fun! Later!”

“Senpai?! No, wait just a—”

I hung up. You wouldn’t know it just by watching them, but I was well aware that neither Kaito nor Kotou were as dumb as they looked. They’d take good care of Ayase, and I had my own business to deal with in the meantime.

I pulled out my cell phone and tapped out a text. I *really* didn’t want to be in *her* debt, but considering the circumstances, I knew that if she couldn’t help, nobody could. I could deal with her constant, snide jabs, but if she wanted something concrete in exchange for her help, I knew I might be in trouble.

I sent the text, then spent a moment watching the lights come on in the Ayase household. Soon enough, our daily phone calls would come to an end. I couldn’t help but feel a bit sad about that, and in turn, that sadness made me feel like a loser. I’d made up my mind, though. Even if it made me feel lonely in the end, I wouldn’t hesitate. I had one goal in mind, and one goal alone: “I’ll make Kaito and Hikari happy, whatever it takes.”

It sounded so incredibly cheap and conceited when I put my resolve into words that I almost had to laugh at myself. It was an oath I swore without telling anyone, at nobody’s behest, that nobody was expecting of me. And yet, ever since I met Kaito, a small part of me deep down had always secretly hoped that as long as he was happy, I might come to understand what meaning there could be to me living on in this world. That hope was what kept me going—it was what kept me alive.

**Secret Sidekick Man The next morning, I got up about a half hour earlier than usual and headed off in an equally unusual direction, making my way towards a certain place. Okay, so “a certain place” makes it sound way more dramatic than it actually was, but bear with me. I arrived at my destination, leaned up against a nearby wall, and waited for a few minutes more.**

“Huh? That you, Kou?”

A boy walked out of the house in front of me. His eyes widened the moment he noticed I was there.

“Morning, Kaito.”

“M-Morning—wait, no, seriously, what’re you doing here?”

“I’ve been waiting for you...and your sister.” That’s right—I woke up early so that I could make it to Kaito’s house before he left! As for why I bothered, well, I just told him myself. Unfortunately, my secondary target—Ayase Hikari—was nowhere to be seen. “I sorta got worried after what you told me yesterday. She’s staying home again today?”

“Thanks for thinking about her, but yeah, sorry. She did manage to get ready for school today, at least, but I guess she couldn’t go through with it...”

“Makes sense.”

“Should I call her out here?”

“Nah, it’s cool. We can’t exactly force her to go, and walking to school with my best friend sounds pretty nice as is. Feels like it’s been ages.” I wrapped my

arm around Kaito's shoulder and dragged him along with me. He seemed a bit flustered by how pushy I was being, but he didn't resist or anything.

I'd more or less assumed that Ayase Hikari wouldn't make an appearance. My objective was to see for myself whether or not she'd be at school that day—the actual answer didn't matter much to me, as long as I *knew*. If anything, things would be easier without her around.

A little while after we set off, I heard footsteps behind us and turned around to find Kotou running our way. No surprise there. I mean, they were neighbors and all.

"Hey, Kaito! And Kunugicchi, too?! Don't see you here every day!"

"Morning, Tsumugi. Get this—Kou was so worried about Hikari, he actually waited for us outside our house!"

"No way! Guess you *can* be a pretty good dude every once in a while!"

"I'm a good dude on a fundamental level, thank you very much." We said our hellos and walked along together for a while, until suddenly, Kotou came to a stop. As soon as we noticed, Kaito and I paused as well.

"Are you waiting for somebody, Tsumugi?" Kaito asked, carelessly. *Come on, dude. What're you gonna do if she says she's waiting for some guy? Not that Kotou'd actually say anything like that.*

"Yeah, uhh, a friend's supposed to... Ah, there she is! Heeey! Over here!" Kotou waved at a figure in the distance. Looking a bit closer, it was a girl. A student, specifically, and she was walking in our direction. She started to timidly return Kotou's wave, but the moment she noticed me, a skeptical look came over her face and she lowered her hand again.

"Huh? Wait, what's happening here?" I asked, confused out of my mind. Kaito, who was apparently slightly quicker on the uptake than me for once, grinned wryly. Kotou, meanwhile, was grinning with inexplicable triumph and puffing out her perfectly average chest.

"Morning, Kyouka-chan!"

"Good morning, Kotou-san... So, why are *you* here?" Kotou's so-called

“friend” was none other than Kiryu Kyouka. She returned Kotou’s greeting, then immediately set her sights on me.

“That’s my line! Like...*what?* You had plans to meet up with *Kotou* on the way to school?”

“Sure did!” Kotou answered in Kiryu’s stead. I’d been there the morning before when they came to some sort of sudden understanding, of course, but I’d never imagined they’d become good enough friends to walk to school together. It was kinda blowing my mind. Rock can’t beat paper, but apparently rock and paper can be friends? *I’m so moved, I might shed a tear!*

“Did you know about this, Kaito?”

“I guess. Y’know.” Oh, so he *had* been informed in advance! I felt left out for a second, but then it occurred to me that I was even more of an irregular element in the scene than Kiryu was. *Actually, considering I’m all that’s standing in the way of Kaito walking to school with a heroine on each arm, isn’t there a teeny tiny chance it would’ve been better for me to not show up at all?*

“So Hikari-chan didn’t come in the end, after all...?” Kotou muttered uncharacteristically quietly, glancing over Kaito’s shoulder at the nobody who stood behind him.

“Looks like she needs a bit more time,” he replied.

“Oh.” She’d spent the previous evening taking care of Ayase the Younger, so it only took a few words to tell her everything she needed to know. As a result, only one person present was left unable to follow the conversation: Kiryu.

“What are you talking about?” She cocked her head slightly and turned to me for context.

“It’s complicated.”

“...I see.” Either she wasn’t very interested or she decided that it wasn’t worth worrying about. One way or another, Kiryu let the subject drop without prying further. *If you’re not gonna bother, then don’t ask in the first place.*

It wasn’t like I was gonna shout “big trouble—the protagonist’s sister is a shut-in!” to the high heavens, or anything like that. I’m not that much of a

gossip. If anyone was going to spill the beans to Kiryu, it'd probably be her friend-as-of-yesterday, Kotou, and if Kotou hadn't said anything, then surely I didn't have to either. After all, I didn't have anything to do with Ayase Hikari myself (or at least that's the story I was sticking to in public).

"All right, everybody! Oumei High, ho! Let's-a-go!" Kotou tried to pull us all back together, leading the way towards our school. Unsurprisingly, Kotou and Kiryu ended up chatting together up ahead while Kaito and I followed along a short ways behind.

"Kinda nice to see, huh?" I mumbled.

"You mean Tsumugi and Kyouka?" replied Kaito.

"Yeah. Kotou always felt really on-guard around Kiryu up until just recently, right?"

"True that. Looks like they finally managed to work things out. I'm glad."

"Hard same." Seeing Kotou overwhelmed by the difference in scale between her and Kiryu the other day wasn't exactly pleasant for me. Everyone's got their strong points, so no need to harp on the weak ones. I was, however, still pretty perplexed by her sudden change of heart. I'd been under the impression that she didn't really get along with Kiryu—hell, at the worst of times I thought she outright *hated* her, and I assumed Kaito was to blame for that.

As far as I could tell, Kotou thought that Kaito had a thing for Kiryu, and Kotou ended up fixating on her as a result. Forget about the part where I exacerbated the situation whenever possible. Kiryu aside, Kotou also seemed to be on-guard around Kazuki (the first-year girl on the track team) and the student council president too. Jealousy is only one step away from envy, and there's a reason that's one of the seven deadly sins! She was definitely a *something*-dere, and I just had to pray that her prefix wasn't "yan."

All that said, I still had absolutely no clue why Kiryu had suddenly dropped off Kotou's radar. Watching them from behind, it actually looked like Kotou was the one trying proactively to be friendly with her. Kiryu seemed a bit overwhelmed, if anything.

"...Man, I really don't get girls," I mumbled.

“Yeah, but you know what they say: women’s minds change as quickly as trees in autumn,” Kaito casually replied. We were on pretty much the same wavelength. Kaito had probably been even more worried about the two of them not getting along than I was, actually. He’s a real non-confrontationalist, as a general rule.

*That said, umm, Kaito? You realize that that expression was originally about “*men’s *minds,” right? It’s used in a derogatory sense to ridicule women for being ruled by their emotions these days, but it used to be more specifically about how men fall in and out of love at the drop of a hat.* This knowledge has been brought to you by the ten billion worksheets that Daimon-sensei made me do! Don’t bother taking notes, ’cause it probably won’t be on the test! That said, I could hardly think of a better expression to describe the average rom-com protagonist.

If *I* were the protagonist in a harem story, though, I’m pretty sure I’d settle on a single heroine at the end of it all. That’s how it should be, in my book. As things stood, Kaito had four potential partners... Well, three, discounting Kiryu. It was totally possible that that number would go up in the future—but even if it didn’t, he had plenty of options to agonize over.

*And if he ever* does *choose a single heroine to pursue, I intend to back him up as hard as I possibly can. After I’ve conducted a thorough investigation and determined that she’s good enough for him, that is. That’s pretty much my whole reason for being here.*

❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤

The four of us arrived at school and chatted with each other as we waited for class to start. When the time came, we went off to our desks and quietly listened to our teacher’s morning lecture. Each class at our school had somewhere around thirty students or so, but even with that many kids packed into the same room, our studies were generally an individual affair. Each student waged their own solitary war, responsible for their grades alone with no expectation of support from their peers.

I mean, you can’t exactly split the work when “the work” is memorizing vocabulary or learning how to solve complex formulae. I mean, sure, you *could*

borrow (and copy) a classmate's notes, ignoring your teacher's lessons in their entirety, but that'd be super inefficient. Studying on your own and studying in class are fundamentally different things; no matter how many worksheets or textbooks you pore through, it doesn't guarantee that you'll do well on exams. Classes and tests are more or less a dialogue between you and your teacher. Just cramming knowledge into your head isn't enough, obnoxious though that truth might be.

Unnecessarily long story short: I found all my classes incredibly tedious. No matter how many worksheet mountains I climbed, no matter how well I understood the material, it wouldn't make the classroom atmosphere feel any less uncomfortable. The discomfort had nothing to do with the material or the lesson at all, in fact—I just felt inescapably out of place.

I was certain that Ayase would experience that same feeling in the future. I'd only cut a class here and there over the past several days, but she'd been missing all of hers for an entire week! And that's not even mentioning the fact that the cause of her truancy stemmed from her class itself. Even if she did willingly go back to school, she'd probably feel even more out of place than I did, by a long shot. *Ugh.*

"That was a pretty big sigh, huh, Kunugi?" I rested my chin in my hands and sighed deeply, only to notice the next instant that Daimon-sensei was standing right next to me. *Oh. Right. This period's classical literature, isn't it?* I'd been so immersed in my thoughts, I hadn't even noticed until just then. Every gaze in the classroom landed upon me, and I felt even more uncomfortable than ever. I *really* didn't want to get subjected to a public scolding—it was time to resort to my last-ditch ace in the hole (which also happened to be my *first*-ditch ace in the hole)!

"Ugh, aaah, my stomach, it hurts so muuuuch!"

She silently glared a hole in me. *Ow! Sensei, stop! The pain! Okay, screw it, this is no time to be worrying about appearances!*

*"Grrrrrruunngghhhhhhh!"*

An incredibly loud grumble resounded throughout the classroom: the characteristic melody of my own stomach. It echoed on in everyone's ears long

after the actual sound faded. Witness the first of Kunugi Kou's three ultimate techniques: the Stomach Rumbler! It's exactly what it sounds like: a technique that makes my stomach rumble *very* loudly.

"A-Are you okay?" Yes, indeed, it made my stomach rumble loudly enough that even my ever-cool teacher went pale with worry. *Now's my chance!*

"U-Umm, sorry, but I'm gonna run to the restroom, if that's okay...?"

"Got it; go ahead." *Victory!* I'd successfully created a good enough pretext to get my teacher to let me leave the classroom. The price I paid, however, was dire indeed. Judging by how they were acting, the noise I'd just made was so over the top that at least half my classmates were convinced I'd actually soiled myself. An especially large percentage of the girls were grimacing at me and holding their noses. I *swear* I heard someone whisper "Gross..."

*Whatever! Who cares! It's not like I* actually *crapped my pants!*

That was during third period, right around eleven in the morning. Lunchtime was still a bit over an hour away. *I'll just tell 'em that my stomach didn't feel better after I used the restroom, so I spent the rest of the period in the health room.*

Having casually decided to ditch the rest of my class, I headed off not towards the toilets—of course—but rather in the direction of the first-year classrooms. It didn't take me long at all before I found my target: glancing into a classroom through the window by its back door, I spotted an eye-catchingly short girl staring at the blackboard. One of the other desks was conspicuously unoccupied as well. It seemed safe to assume that it was Ayase's seat.

In spite of her absence, they were carrying on with their lesson as if everything was perfectly normal. I mean, of course they were. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, and the cruel truth of the matter's that if you can't keep up with society, you'll be discarded in a heartbeat. Not to say that holding everyone else behind for the sake of one person would be for the best—all things considered, I agreed that moving on was the right call.

"All right, who's this supposed class leader...?" One of the students immediately caught my attention as a likely culprit: a girl with dyed hair. I couldn't see her super well, since I was behind her, but it looked like her

uniform had been fashionably altered to compliment her flamboyant hair. In other words, she was your classic, over the top fashionista. We didn't have many students like that in Oumei High. While it wasn't *quite* as iconic as an evil goatee would've been, you could do way worse as far as secret masterminds go.

She was totally the type to say stuff like, "So omigod, I, like, totally, like, do modeling work part-time!" Her type might've been rare at our school, but that just made her come off all the more attention-grabbing. Most likely the other girls in her class looked up to her for that. She looked like the sort of girl who'd have a ton of allies in her class, and a loudmouth on top of it.

I tried sending Yuuta a text to double-check if I'd made the right conclusion, but she didn't even check her phone. She was still focused on the blackboard, scrupulously copying everything on it into her notebook. *Stupid little shrimp just* has *to take her classes seriously, huh?* Word had it that Yuuta's grades were shockingly good (just a hair shy of Ayase's, in fact) but I didn't buy it for a second. If her entire class was teeming with morons even more moronic than that little moron, we might as well just kiss our country's future goodbye here and now.

In any case, I figured the odds were ten to one that my target was that fashionista student, and as long as I could identify her at a glance, everything would work out just fine. Loitering around and peeping on their class any longer wouldn't accomplish anything, so I decided to move on to my next objective. I felt like the sole human in a village full of animal people, working his rear off running fetch quest after fetch quest.

What better timing, then, to activate Kunugi Kou's second ultimate technique: the Tiptoe Tread! What's that, you say? Walking on tiptoes is way too easy and lame to count as an ultimate technique? I wouldn't be so sure about that! You see, my stealth skills are so masterful, I'm considered a living national treasure for them! My sneaking speed and soundless steps are exquisite, working together in breathtaking harmony! My technique could rival even that of the gods! Even the most discerning of gourmet palates would judge my skills superlative! I swept along like the breeze itself, blending in perfectly with the darkness (of the afternoon).

A few minutes later I reached my destination: a room on the opposite side of the school from the classrooms, where most of the clubrooms were situated. I knocked on the door, waited until I heard a girl's voice from inside tell me to come in, and took her up on it without hesitation.

The room was transparently unlike any other in the whole school. The long table set up in the middle was ordinary enough, but the massive, ostentatious desk at the far end was transparently not designed with a high schooler in mind —and that's not even accounting for the cutting-edge desktop computer that was set up atop it.

"What are you doing? Don't just stand there; come inside. Now." In spite of the fact that classes were in session, a beautiful, blonde-haired girl sat behind the desk. Her tone carried an air of utter indifference as she waved me inside. She was, of course, the girl I'd clashed with in the cafeteria just the other day, aka the student council president: Myourenji Renge.

That's right—I was in the student council room. A room that she and Ayase were very familiar with, but that an ordinary student like me would have very little hope of setting foot in, under most circumstances. I grimaced as I took a seat as close to the door as I could manage.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class? I was under the impression you're meant to be a role model for the student body."

"I've received permission to be here now, as it so happens." I didn't even have to ask whose permission she was talking about. Even a cursory glance at her room and all the fancy-schmancy crap she had set up in it was enough to tell you that *nobody* in the school was capable of standing up to her. Hearing about her connections straight from the horse's mouth wouldn't accomplish anything other than deepening my displeasure with her, so it was time to stick to the topic and finish up my business as quickly as possible.

I cleared my throat. "I was hoping to speak with you about the thing I texted you about yesterday."

"That's quite all right, but before that, I don't suppose you'd stop trying to act so polite with me? It's sickening to watch."

"Sure, but only if you drop the disgusting rich-girl act too."

“Oh, my—and I was under the impression I was well-regarded for my speech and conduct!” She beamed, but I couldn’t see that smile as anything other than a fabrication. “Well then, I suppose we’ll both have to dispense with our respective pretenses.”

Her fake smile vanished in an instant. It was like she’d been swapped with a totally different person—a person who could smile naturally, brilliantly, and innocently.

“We’ll talk the way we did back when we first met. You’re all right with that, aren’t you, Kou?”

“Yeah, fine with me... Renge.” I stretched out my legs and tossed a careless, unemotional response her way. That, however, just made Renge’s grin grow even wider.

**Natural Enemies I've got a pretty unusual background. And when I say "pretty unusual," I mean "if I told a hundred people about it, a hundred of them wouldn't believe me." The matter of the amnesia that I opened up to Kiryu about was deeply related to it, and that was the closest I'd come to touching on the subject with anyone in quite a long while. However, a very small number of people knew the full story. Myourenji Renge was one of them, and she was also the very first person I spoke with in this world.**

My family and I had been missing for a long, long time, and when the police found me, they took me into protective custody. It took some time, but a man finally appeared to act as my parental guardian. He was Renge's father, and she happened to come along with him. I'd answered the police's questions before she showed up, to be clear, but I wouldn't really say I "spoke" with them. It didn't amount to much of a conversation, that's for sure—they just asked question after question, checking off box after box on a sheet to try and figure out who I actually was.

As such, it's true that she's the first person I had a proper conversation with. She came to speak with me in the waiting room while her father was busy handling the cops' paperwork. I think she must've been worried about me, and was kind enough to try and keep me company.

"Do you remember me?" she said. "Myourenji Renge?"

“...No.”

“Oh. Well, that makes sense. It’s been almost ten years since the last time we met. I didn’t recognize you at first either, Kou-kun.” She smiled at me, a sorrowful look in her eyes, but I just stared blankly back at her in response. “But, you know what, Kou-kun? From now on, we’re going to be a family!”

“A family...?” I replied, looking away from her. “Strangers can’t be family.”

“We’re not strangers! Not at all,” she said, as she embraced me from behind. “We’re related! Only distantly, though—we’re second cousins.”

“‘Second cousins’?”

“We’re as related as cod and salmon roe.”

“Huh?” I couldn’t make sense of anything she was saying to me at the time. Actually, it took me a *really* long time to figure it out even after that. I’m talking *months*.

“Renge?”

“Father! Are you already finished?”

“Yeah. It’s been a while, Kou-kun. I guess you probably don’t remember me, huh? My name’s Myourenji Gouki, and I’m your dad’s cousin.” Renge’s father, Gouki, was a man with an imposing face and an intimidating aura. “Kazuhiro—your dad, I mean... We were pretty close. I’ve been searching for you and your family since the day you went missing.”

His air of intimidation wasn’t enough to keep me from perceiving the kindness concealed beneath it. That’s the biggest reason why I decided I could trust him.

“Where are Kazuhiro and Iori-san?” he pressed.

Renge hugged me a bit tighter. She was probably trying to shield me from her father’s forceful questioning, but I wasn’t actually afraid of him at all. I returned his gaze, looking him directly in the eye, which seemed to surprise him.

“Kazuhiro and Iori... Are those my parents’ names?”

“...What?”

“If so, they’re dead. Both of them.”

I spoke dispassionately and matter-of-factly. I honestly didn't think much of it. Not even when I saw their corpses myself.

"What... What the hell happened to you? What happened to your family?"

I did my best to answer his question. I told him everything that had happened to me... Or rather, everything that had happened to me since I'd been reborn just a few years beforehand, and what little I'd been able to piece together about what had occurred before then.

I told him how my family and I had been sent to another world, thrown into a gruesome daily life of battle and bloodshed. I told him how at some point along the way, my parents had been killed. I now know how insane it all was, but back then I accepted it like it was nothing. I was left with only the knowledge of my own sins, and the punishment I'd never been subjected to. They ate away at me, picking my heart into pieces.

It goes without saying that Gouki and Renge were both completely taken aback by my story.

"He's...serious, isn't he?" Renge practically whispered. "I don't think he's making it up."

"It completely defies all of this world's logic and common sense," Gouki muttered in a low, serious tone.

"This sort of story does come up a lot in fiction, though..." Renge was trembling.

I immediately regretted telling them my story. In retrospect, no wonder the police had treated me like I was a lunatic when I told them everything as if I'd been telling them about yesterday's weather. Those two were different, though. They hadn't given any indication they distrusted me in the slightest.

"Do you believe me?"

"From my perspective, you don't seem like you're lying. I believe you," replied Gouki.

"Kou-kun," Renge added, "I can't believe the horrible things you've suffered through..."

Gouki's words were kind beyond my expectations, and Renge was crying for my sake. As I stewed in discomfort and bewilderment, Gouki laid a hand on my head.

"It's all right now, Kou. I'll protect you in Kazuhiro and Iori-san's place."

"You'll...protect me...?"

"Me too! I'll protect you too!"

Their kindness was warm and gentle, and I didn't know whether or not it was all right for me to accept it. My hands were stained with blood. How could I have the right to receive that warmth? How could I ever be worthy of it? But I knew that if I told them that, they'd just worry about me. I'd put them in a strange, uncomfortable position.

So I faked it. I twisted the corners of my mouth into a false smile, and made a show of accepting them.

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Renge's warm, gentle smile was unchanged from all the way back when I first met her, and seeing it caused an indescribable wave of nostalgia and guilt to crash over me. She was my family, my savior. And what had I done in return...?

"The thing I texted you about... You've already looked into it, right?"

"I have, yes."

I forced the swirling mass of bitterness that was writhing within me down and spoke as matter-of-factly as I could manage. Renge seemed to realize what I was going through, and responded as happily as ever. We said that we'd speak with each other the way we used to, but the truth was that I'd changed a lot since then. As I became involved with more and more of this world's people, starting with her, I'd gradually grown used to them.

Being with her, however—with *Renge*, not "President Renge"—made me feel like I might revert to how I was back when I met her. It was like the old me was trying to assert his existence, to prove that he was the *real* me and defy the bright and cheery facade I'd learned to put on.

"I've determined that the cause of Hikari-san's extended absence lies within

the student council," she began. That was what I'd asked her in the text I sent the day before: to dig into Ayase Hikari's acquaintances and social circles. Judging by her attitude, she'd already concluded her investigation. "Hikari-san is an exceptional student, and has made quite an impression even within my student council, which would explain, well... Are you familiar with a boy named Murata Seiji-kun?"

"He's in my grade and he's on the council, right? We're not in the same class, but I've heard he's super hot, and popular to boot." He hadn't been able to join the council until his second year, thanks to Kiryu sniping the top spot on our entrance exam. The council's new members get announced to the school when they're chosen, and there were a decent number of rumors floating around about him—he stuck out in my memory as a result.

"It would seem that he's developed a crush on Hikari-san. In turn, a girl in her class called Mikura Kanako-san grew jealous and started harassing her."

"Jealous? Why?"

"Because Mikura-san is Murata-kun's childhood friend, to my understanding."

"Oooh...? So Mikura Kanako's in love with Murata Seiji?"

"Correct."

If this were a play, that would just be the beginning. A fresh, exciting plot twist would be waiting just around the corner to overwrite that dull, wholesale-grade setup.

Reality, however, was a different matter. There would be no shocking plot twist, and the truth of the matter was exactly as it looked at face value: Mikura Kanako was harassing Ayase Hikari out of pure, pathetic jealousy.

"Well, that makes this easy enough. We just have to call Mikura out, in public. And by 'we' I mean... Actually, what if we just got Murata himself to handle it? He seems like a good pick."

"If we did, it's entirely possible that Mikura-san would be bullied next as a result."

"Like I care. They call it poetic *justice* for a reason. What goes around comes

around, right?" As long as it didn't have any negative effect on Ayase Hikari (and Yoshiki Yuu by extension, I guess), I didn't see a problem with it.

"Does it? Speaking as the head of the student council, I'm afraid that's not a position I can allow myself to take."

"You do you, Miss President. But do you *really* understand the position that Ayase's in?"

"More or less. Considering the sort of girl she is, it's hard to believe that she'd stop coming to school over something as petty as being ignored. I've suspected that there's some other factor contributing to her truancy." Her tone carried an implied question: *Do you know anything?* It seemed she'd caught on to the fact that I was in the know, but she wasn't aware of any of the details.

I didn't feel any inclination to spread the story beyond Hikari and me, so I kept my reply short and vague. "You're not wrong about that."

"I see." While Renge knew a fair bit about my life and circumstances, I'd never specifically told her *why* I was so fixated on Kaito and Hikari. She had all the pieces on hand and it wouldn't have been especially difficult for her to put them together. All the more reason for me to dodge her questioning as much as possible. "In that case, I'll go ahead and get into contact with Murata-kun."

"Yeah, probably for the best. Thanks." I was barely even aware of the guy's existence, but Renge could use her position as the president to incite him to action. She had the perfect position for the job.

"Think nothing of it. The Ayase siblings are my beacon of hope, after all."

"Your, uh, 'beacon of hope'?"

"Isn't love between close relatives the most *wonderful* thing?" Her eyes gleamed. "To be charmed by your own blood relative, rejecting one's instinctual inclination towards genetic diversity! It's a form of love that transcends the fundamental principles of biology itself!"

*Yikes.* "H-Huh, you think so?"

"It comes up *all the time* in anime."

"Don't base your perception of reality on anime, you ginormous nerd!"

“I consider ‘nerd’ a compliment, Kou.” In that sense, she really hadn’t changed at all. She almost certainly never let that side of herself show through in her student council president persona, though.

“A-Anyway, I should go.”

“Wait!” Renge exclaimed. The bell rang, signaling the end of the third period, but lunchtime was still a while off. I knew that the other student council members were unlikely to show up to the room until then, at the earliest. “Can you stay here and hang out with me just a while longer...? Say, an hour or so?”

“Like, all the way until lunch? You already know this, but I’m on record as hating the student council’s president—”

“Well *she’s* not here right now. We agreed we’d be our old selves for the moment, didn’t we?”

“And you want it to stay that way for as long as we’re in this room?”

“That’s right.”

“All right, fine... You’re helping me out with the Ayase thing, so sure.” I’d already stood halfway up, but I plopped myself back down in my chair and heaved an exhausted sigh.

I heard the bell ring again in the distance, signaling the start of fourth period. Upon reflection, being all alone in a room with the lovely president of the student council is a situation most high school boys would envy. Real shame that I, the person actually *in* that position, just found it suffocating. I’d already accomplished all of my objectives. Being around Renge just made me remember things I’d rather not think about at all.

My first year or so’s worth of memories after arriving in this world are dominated by the time I spent with Renge. She brought me into the Myourenji household and nursed me like the social invalid I more or less was, breaking down my emotional walls with a double-helix drill of motherly affection and fatherly bravery. She made me feel human again, against my will.

She was quick to laugh, quick to cry, quick to anger, quick to sulk... I’d been told that she was responsible and reliable when she was out in the outside world, but at home she was a mess, perhaps *because* she had to keep up an act

at all other times. She'd stick to me like glue and force me to watch all her favorite anime from beginning to end, leaving me at least slightly brainwashed.

As time passed by, I gradually opened up to her. Little by little, I confided in her about my past, my sins, my anguish... But none of it drove her away. She accepted it all. If I were a normal person, raised in this world without ever having to dirty myself, I'd probably have ended up like all the other boys in my school and admired her—maybe even fallen for her. But...I regretted my actions far too much. I regretted foisting the weight of my crimes and the retribution they prompted onto her, even in the slightest sense. I regretted pulling her into troubles that she should've never had any part in. That's why I distanced myself from her.

"Kou?"

I snapped back to attention at the sound of Renge's voice, only to find that she'd moved from her desk and was now sitting right across from me at the table. I forced the dark, depressing thought process that'd been dominating my attention into a corner in my mind, and replied.

"Oh, sorry, just got a bit distracted... Huh." Not that it matters, but Renge was leaning forward just enough to leave her ample chest resting on the table.

"'Huh'? 'Huh' what?"

"Err, nothing, really..."

If Kotou was rock and Kiryu was paper, then Renge's chest was a pair of scissors strong and sharp enough to shred the heavens themselves! Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating a little, but they had at least the impact of a pair of high-ordinance missiles. A chest with the perfect trifecta of adjectives all assembled: "big," "amazing," and "sexy!" She was half British, and boy did it ever show.

*Wait. If I follow this metaphor to its logical conclusion, wouldn't it mean that Kotou is supposed to beat out Renge? W-Well, I mean, it's not like small is* bad*. Pretty sure there are people out there who're into tiny titties! Yeah, let's go with that. I'd feel bad for her if she couldn't beat* anyone, *after all*.

Her naturally blonde hair and blue eyes could also be attributed to her mixed

ancestry. I hadn't paid them any mind at all back when I first met her—I was coming from an environment where people had hair and eyes of all sorts of vibrant colors, so they didn't strike me as unusual in the slightest. In this world, though, the people's hair and eye colors were so homogeneous, they may as well have all been churned out of the same assembly line. People like her were a rarity and stood out, like it or not. She felt special. Incidentally, her mother was really something as well. And I mean, like, *really* something. Big ol' bazongas.

"You're not thinking about something unsavory by any chance, are you, Kou?"

"As if! I'm thinking about something extremely proper and respectable."

"And that would be...?"

"Not important!" I couldn't exactly admit what I'd *actually* been thinking about without creeping her out... Or rather, I'd *hope* it would, but Renge marched to the beat of a highly abnormal drum. I decided to change the topic. "Come to think of it, the bell doesn't ring in this room?"

"No, it doesn't. I disabled it."

"Didn't even know you could do that... Another of your presidential privileges?"

"That's right." *Just how much special treatment does the student council president get at this school?* I pondered the question for a moment before realizing that the answer was obvious: it wasn't because she was the president; it was because she was Myourenji Renge. The Myourenji Corporation was a giant conglomerate that operated on a global scale, and in spite of her age, Renge had already started helping out with its work. She was a monster of a high schooler, and when it came to high school-level work, knocking off one perfect score after another was child's play for her.

I'd met a number of geniuses since I arrived in this world, but Renge was indisputably the most outstanding of all of them. Appointing her as the student council president would probably do good things for the *school's* reputation more than it would for hers—plus, I doubt the school's higher-ups would want to risk offending her and damaging their relations with her family. The adult world's full of that sort of dirty dealing.

“Myourenji Renge does it again...”

“My father’s the incredible one, not me.” She sighed. “I’m just...desperate.”

“‘Desperate’? For what?” Now *that* was a word I never expected to hear from her. She’d been incredibly talented for literally as long as I’d known her. At the very least, her academic skills were second to none—a year’s worth of her tutelage was enough to let me pass an academically rigorous high school’s entrance exam, in spite of how long I’d spent neglecting my studies in favor of complete devotion to the ways of battle. I couldn’t even imagine a situation that could make *her* of all people desperate.

“It’s certainly true that I’ve been gifted many things by my parents. Perhaps the ‘talent’ that everyone claims I have is among those gifts.” Renge gazed off into the distance, looking somewhat lonesome as she spoke. “And perhaps I *could* live my life relying on my talent alone, but I know that I shouldn’t. There are people I want to support, and I’m nowhere near strong enough to do so at the moment. I need to work harder, to become more capable!”

Renge clenched her fists, and all I could think about was how astonishing it was to see her act like that. She’d been quite childish back when we lived together, but after we parted, I was sure she’d grown into a high-handed princess type. Even though I’d known on some level that it was an act, it was still shocking to see her so openly frustrated, and even more so to learn that she considered herself inadequate.

“Do you remember what you told me back then, Kou? ‘If we stay together, I’ll end up ruining you someday. That’s why I have to hate you.’”

“I do.” Those were the exact words I said to her on the day I left the Myourenji household after she tried to stop me. Hearing it repeated back to me made me realize how unambiguously cringey a line it had been, but even so, I hadn’t changed my mind in the intervening years. “Can’t believe you still remember that.”

“I remember every bit of the time we spent together. I have it all recorded.”

“You have it *what?!* Holy crap, that’s terrifying! What, you keeping me under surveillance?!” I couldn’t help but notice that the moment she said the word “recorded,” a red light flashed on a little device that I’d only just realized was

sticking out of one of her pockets. It was a digital voice recorder. *Y'know what, I'm just gonna pretend I didn't see that.* "I really hope you're not about to tell me that you have my phone bugged?"

"No, I would never. I would prefer you not to think that I'm the sort of heavy-handed—or rather, *inflexible* woman who would do something like that." Her words carried a bizarre intensity to them. *Is it just me, or is she angry about something?* "I *am* angry, yes."

"Would you mind *not* reading my mind, thanks?"

"Kou. You haven't just been close with Hikari-san, recently. Your relationship with Kiryu Kyouka has improved as well, hasn't it?"

"Kinda straining some definitions, there. We've only gotten to the point where we can talk to each other at all over the past few days."

"You visited Shusen City together, didn't you?"

"How and *why* do you know about that?!"

"That's not important." *Isn't it, though?! Dodging the question like that just makes it even scarier!* "Kou?"

"What?" I replied after a brief, doubtful pause. Suddenly she looked completely serious, and I wondered if she was trying to cut off the train of thought I'd been on just a moment ago. It was another face I hadn't seen her make since the day I left her household.

"No matter where you are, and no matter how much we drift apart, I'll always be on your side. If you really want me to act like I hate you, then I'll do it, no matter how much it hurts. If you want to think of me as a member of Ayase-kun's harem, go right ahead... None of that changes the fact that I'm the person you go to when you need help, even while you try so hard to keep me at a distance."

She spoke slowly, choosing each word carefully and deliberately. She knew what she was doing. She knew that every word she spoke made the crushing weight within my chest grow heavier and heavier.

"But I'm only doing all of that for your sake, Kou. Even if you distance yourself

from me, we're still family, whether you like it or not. That's why I can't turn a blind eye if I know that something's going to hurt you."

"What're you trying to say...?"

"I want you to stop seeing Kiryu-san."

I paused. Her request was incredibly direct—a candid and straightforward rejection of my recent association with her.

"I think you're getting the wrong idea about us. Kiryu and I aren't like that."

"I want you to stop trying to uncover your past with her."

I paused once more. "Why?"

"I want to protect you, Kou. That's my one and only desire. If you do get your memories back, and if the knowledge that you left for yourself—if the knowledge that the *old* you left for you turns out to be true, then all those memories will do is make you suffer. If the truth is horrible, and cruel, and painful enough that you don't even want to *listen* to it, then you're better off never remembering at all!" The words poured out of her, raw and vivid. "If you remember your past, then you may *never* be able to go back to the way you are now. Or even worse, you might not be able to stand the pain, and... I can't even bear to think about it..."

I didn't say a word. Remembering Kiryu—remembering my old self—would mean remembering all those things that were best left forgotten. It would mean actively remembering the hell that I'd only read about, and it would mean remembering all the sensibilities I'd developed while I was raised in this world. Would the old me, the me who was so spoiled by this world's peace, be able to bear the weight of all those memories? Most likely, he wouldn't. He *couldn't*.

In the end, I really did hate Renge. I *had* to hate her. She had a gentle, compassionate soul, and to me, that kindness was a poison. Being with her made me want to forgive myself.

"I'm fine with that. I need to remember, even if it breaks me. I threw away my memories out of pure selfishness, and that choice hurt people."

"But," she sputtered, "that's not your fault..."

“Doesn’t matter. I’ve made my decision.” She was starting to tear up, and I turned away. I couldn’t bear to watch her cry.

“Can I ask you just one thing?”

“What?”

“How are you planning to save Hikari-san?” To *save* her. It struck me as an incredibly pretentious word—all the more so considering that what I was trying to do wasn’t any sort of salvation. “Dealing with the ringleader behind her bullying isn’t guaranteed to resolve the issue. And that’s not the only problem she’s facing, is it?”

“Nah, it’s not. But I never thought that handling one thing would take care of all the rest. As for my plan...” I’d been thinking about what I was about to do for a long time. No, maybe it’d be better to say that I’d been hesitating to go through with it. It was an unambiguously horrible thing to do. I was, effectively, trying to destroy a young woman. I was almost definitely the only person out there who thought it was the right decision. But still, I’d made up my mind. “Sorry, but I can’t tell you.”

“Kou!”

“That’s the one thing I can’t share. Not with you, not with anyone.” If I told her, Renge would do anything and everything in her power to stop me. She probably already had an idea that I was planning on doing something reprehensible.

There was just one thing I could do. One thing that would save Ayase Hikari. This was all wrong in the first place—I was never meant to take an active role in saving a heroine. That’s not a job for an extra like me.

No matter where, no matter when, young women like her are meant to be saved by wondrous, almost magical miracles.

# A Love, Ended “How could you, Kanako...? Why would you ever bully Hikari-chan...?”

“I didn’t! I never bullied her! Listen to me, I just—”

“I already know why. I heard that you have a crush on me.”

A scene right out of a classic YA drama was unfolding in an after-school classroom. On one hand you have the gentle, handsome, mild-mannered boy, and on the other you have the popular, fashionable girl. In a certain sense, they were made for each other. And they were childhood friends, on top of it! Plus, the girl (that is, Mikura) was apparently in love with the boy (Murata). Who could’ve possibly seen *that* coming?

“But, I’m sorry. I’m in love with Hikari-chan.” Mikura gasped, but Murata kept going. “I’m pretty sure that she has feelings for me too... I can’t go out with you, Kanako.”

She was *not* taking it well, and her face was twisted with sorrow. *How pitiful.* It’s not like she wasn’t perfectly attractive herself—she’d just been carried away by her jealousy, driven to bullying by her feelings for Murata. He, in contrast, cast her aside without the slightest hint of mercy.

“Seiji, please,” she cried.

“I want you to stop harassing Hikari-chan. If you don’t...” He paused, then delivered the finishing blow. “I’m through with you.”

Murata left the room, and Mikura broke down in sobbing, wailing tears. *With that,* I supposed, *one love has come to an end.* The jealousy she’d felt when she realized the man she loved was himself in love with Ayase must’ve been too much to bear, and she resorted to isolating Ayase in an effort to rid herself of that envy. Her own actions led to her heart being broken. But none of that was anything remarkable—I was sure that sort of thing happened all the time.

I didn’t feel *that* bad for her. Why should I? It’s not like she died. And it’s not like she’d never fall in love again—this world’s really flexible about that sort of thing. Not even marriage can rule that out, seeing as divorce is an option here.

Heartbreak on that scale would suck in the moment, sure, but she'd get over it eventually and it'd be filed away with all her other adolescent memories. The journey of life goes on. She'll get renewed for another season someday.

Anyway, that pretty much wrapped up Ayase's at-school problems. With their leader out of commission, her class would give up on ostracizing her before long. Mikura might've still bore some resentment towards her, but if she tried anything funny, Murata wouldn't let it pass. Unfortunately for her, he was more than just her one-sided crush. He was her childhood friend, and that's not a relationship you can do away with that easily. The same went for Murata as well, of course.

I offered my internal thanks to the student council president for making good on her word and inciting Murata to act, then made a stealthy exit from the classroom I'd been spying on.

"Might as well head home," I muttered to myself. I wasn't about to stick my neck out and try to comfort Mikura. Why would I? I'm no protagonist. And besides, I knew that the most sympathetic thing I could do for her was to let her cry it out in peace, then move on as soon as possible. I did feel the need to send a silent word of thanks to her as well before I left, though. She'd gained nothing but animosity and ill will out of the matter, but thanks to her actions, my next move would be a lot easier to pull off.

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I happened to exit the school just as the sports clubs were wrapping up their practice and clearing off the field.

"Oh, hey! If it isn't Friend A-senpai!"

I was all set to ignore them and head home until somebody called my name. Glancing back at the field, I saw the track team's first-year ace, Kazuki Rena. She had a few hurdles slung over her shoulder—I guess cleanup's a job for the first-years, even if the one in question does happen to be the best runner on the team.



“Hello, aaand goodbye.”

“Oh, no you don’t! C’mon, these things are super heavy! You wouldn’t walk right past a girl who’s carrying a bunch of bulky junk and go home without offering to help, would you?”

“For your information, the world’s gradually moving in the direction of true gender equality! It doesn’t matter whether you’re a boy or a girl—and by the way, you’re just *asking* to get sued for sexual harassment, talking like that.”

“Okay, but you’re still my senpai! Help an underclassman out?”

“Try that line on the upperclassmen who’re actually in your club.” I was totally in the right, for the record, but she *did* look like she was having a hard time with the hurdles, so I ended up carrying some of them for her in spite of everything. Kazuki had a pretty slender build, and watching a girl like her struggle around with her arms full of massive hurdles made me feel pretty exci— *Ahem*, guilty. She said she didn’t want to foist them all off on me, so I took half of her load, leaving each of us with just two to deal with. Four of those things is just too much for a normal girl to carry, unless she has the ability to sprout an extra pair of arms, or something to that effect.

“Anyway, shouldn’t you have asked Kaito to help out with this? That’d work out better for you, right?”

“You were the one who happened to pass by, so I went with what I could get,” she said with a grin. “Plus, I’m over Ayase-senpai.”

“*Bwuh?!*” I did a sort of half shout, half spit take out of pure shock. A heroine had just admitted defeat, apropos of nothing, right in front of me! She’d been knocked out of the contest for Kaito’s heart, just like that!

Kazuki had been in love with Kaito. I was *pretty* positive about that. He’d apprehended some creeper who’d tried to grope her on a crowded train, and she’d thought of him as her hero ever since. No real surprise she ended up being targeted—she was slender, beautiful, and basically adorable, with a prominent tan giving her a certain sexiness as well. The guy probably just couldn’t resist! He couldn’t resist arrest, that’s for sure!

I was actually there at the time too. I didn’t really do much, though—Kaito

was the one who caught the guy and helped take care of Kazuki after it was over. All that I really contributed was keeping the groper from escaping with a well-placed kick and keeping him restrained until the cops showed up. I happened to identify myself as “Friend A” at the time, and I guess that stuck in her mind. *Not that* any *of that matters right now!*

“Did you tell him how you feel?”

“Nope.”

“Then *why* are you giving up?! Don’t back off before you even try!!!”

“Well, I mean, I guess I just realized I was being really immature about the whole thing. Like, I’m not even totally sure if I was ever in *love*-love with him in the first place. I had a crush on him, but that’s different, y’know?”

“Seriously...?”

“And I guess I’m just more interested in running than dating right now. Ayase-senpai’s super cool and hot and all, but he and Kotou-senpai make a really cute couple too.”

“Kotou?! What does *Kotou* have to do with any of this?! Don’t tell me—is she blackmailing you?!”

“Do you really think she’s that kind of person, Senpai?” Kazuki rolled her eyes. “It’s not like that. It’s just, like, when I really took a look at her, I realized that the way I feel about him isn’t quite the same as the way she does. Y’know how every once in a while when you’re talking to Ayase-senpai, you get the feeling that somebody’s watching you and plotting your murder? That’s totally Kotou-senpai, one hundred percent.”

*So Kotou Tsumugi’s awakened to her inner yandere nature after all...? And that’s barely even different from what I just said!*

“So, yup, that’s that for me being in love—for now! I mean, except for running, I totally love that. It’s my purpose in life! There’s more than one way to spend your youth, right?” Her smile didn’t falter for a second, and I had to conclude that she was being totally sincere. But I had to wonder—was she *really* okay with that? *I mean, sure, things have been pretty crazy lately, but are you seriously planning on just fading out of the story without getting any real*

*screen time, or even any decent characterization? Kazuki? Hey, Kazuki?! Hello?!*

"Running's pretty great, y'know? Ever think about giving it a shot, Friend A-senpai?"

"Are you really trying to scout a second-year right before summer vacation starts?" Not that I'd have been any more receptive to the idea if she'd invited me earlier.

We arrived at the PE storehouse and put away the hurdles. That was the first time I'd registered how obnoxious it was that the storehouse was off on the side of the gymnasium, way the heck away from the field.

"Thanks, Friend A-senpai!"

"No prob."

"Hey, do you wanna walk home together? I just have to take a shower, get changed, and go to our club's wrap-up meeting first."

"Y'know, I think I'll pass, thanks."

"Suit yourself!" Let the record show that the two of us weren't super close or anything. No, seriously. Our relationship was distant enough that if Kazuki hadn't had the news about her giving up on Kaito to share with me, we wouldn't have had anything to talk about at all. She did have enough faith in me to tell me about her love troubles, I guess, but I didn't read into that too deeply. I had a feeling that she was just the sort of person who's pretty open about those things.

As for me, I was in a state of shock. Can you blame me? I'd gotten so wrapped up in another supporting character's love life that I'd somehow *completely* missed a heroine falling out of the race!

Kiryu's attraction to Kaito was probably just my misunderstanding in the first place, Renge was more interested in messing with me than being one of his heroines, and Kazuki *was* genuinely in love with him, but gave up on it. Kaito's rom-com journey was supposed to be full of twists and turns until he finally picked a single heroine's route to pursue, but before I knew it, Kotou was the only one actually left in the running.

I mean, don't get me wrong—Kotou was a really nice girl, and I thought they'd make a great couple too. But one heroine doesn't make a harem. With how things were developing, a best friend character like me would be a nuisance, at best. Not that that's what *really* mattered!

As long as Kaito was happy, everything was A-okay in my book. Didn't matter whether he was with Kotou, or whoever. It's just that in the anime that Renge showed me, it was super common for the male lead to have feelings for a bunch of different girls at once. I got it in my head that *that* was how happiness looked.

But of course, I'd always been of the personal opinion that cultivating and nurturing a relationship with just one heroine would be nicer overall. In reality, a harem would mean that no matter how many of them he had feelings for, Kaito would have to choose somebody eventually, and the rest of them would unavoidably be hurt by his choice. Right?

*Maybe I was never needed in this whole equation in the first place.* The thought made me feel miserable and helpless in a way I don't think I even have the words to describe.

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Later that evening, I scrolled through my phone's contact list. It was right around time for the daily call, and the odds were good that if I just waited around, *she'd* reach out again and spare me the trouble. Even so, I decided to take the initiative. After a few rings, I heard a somewhat nervous but euphonious voice reply.

"Hello? Is that you, Senpai?"

"Yeah, it is. Evening."

"Good evening... I'm surprised *you* called *me* tonight! You never do that." Her voice was definitely a bit stiff, like she was tensed up. I could also hear something moving around, though I couldn't tell what.

"You busy right now?"

"N-No, but, I mean, you called out of nowhere! I wasn't ready for this..."

“Should I call back?”

“N-No! No, I’m fine. Give me just a moment to calm down.” She must’ve moved away from the phone, but not far enough. I could hear her as she took a few long, deep breaths. I found it charming. When she got back, I continued.

“So you didn’t make it to school today, huh?”

“Well, I mean...” she began, sounding a bit sulky. I figured she was about to launch into an excuse, but instead, she just clammed up.

“All right, fine,” I sighed. “I’ll give you a test.”

“A test? What do you mean?”

“You remember the park where we met a while back? Aoba Park? Meet me there.”

“Huh?”

“Did you realize that I went all the way to your house to see you this morning? I’d rather not waste my time and energy like that again, thanks.”

“You did?! Really?!”

“Anyway, you get the picture. See you there.” She sounded shocked and confused, but I hung up anyway, then heaved a sigh. I was actually already at Aoba Park, sitting on the bench that Ayase and I had occupied the last time we were here. I stared idly at the nearby antique of a lamppost.

I was uncharacteristically nervous, clenching my fists unconsciously until they were all gross and sweaty. My heart was pounding a hole in my chest. I only had to wait a few minutes, but it felt like hours had passed.

Finally, she appeared, panting and gasping for breath. From the look of things, she’d thrown a jacket on over her pajamas and rushed out the door, just like that. She broke into a slight, just barely noticeable smile the moment she saw me, but immediately forced her face back into a frown, trying to look upset as she ran up to me.

“What’d you, hah, call me, hah, out here, hah, for, Senpai?” she said, panting.

“That was fast. Here, have some water.” I offered her a plastic bottle that I’d

bought in advance. She accepted it and took a sip, then frowned and gave me a skeptical glance.

“This is a sports drink, not water.”

“What’s the problem? Considering you just went for a run, I’d say that means I’m being *more* considerate, if anything. You thought it was water, but surprise, it was actually a sports drink! Lucky you, right?”

“You could’ve just told me what it was when you gave it to me. You’re a pretty twisted person, you know, Senpai?”

“Hah, as if! I bet you’ve never met a man more sincere and up-front than me!” Ayase sighed and shrugged exasperatedly, then sat down beside me. Probably doesn’t even bear mentioning at this point, but I mean *right* beside me. Less bumping-shoulders range, more arms-pressed-right-into-each-other’s.

“Kinda hot, isn’t it?”

“Yeah... It is.” *Then, think you could give me some space?* I had a feeling that even though she’d agreed with me, she meant it with a very different nuance than I had. I didn’t draw attention to that, though, and took a gulp out of my own water bottle. Summer was in full swing, but the air was actually a bit chilly that night. Certainly not warm enough to inflame any passions.

“You all right with being outside?” I asked.

“I think I feel a lot better about it now, yeah. I doubt that people like *that guy* show up very often.”

“True enough.” I was surprised by how easy that was. Apparently she’d recovered a lot more than I’d expected.

“And besides, I knew you’d be there to protect me.”

“Huh?”

“It was the same last time too. I think I can probably relax because I know you’re around, Senpai. That’s why I was fine going outside.”

—I think I can relax because you’re here for me, Koh.

Her words overlapped with *hers*. They always had, really. Ayase’s did, Kaito’s

did... And as for me...

“I’m not as strong as you’re giving me credit for. You really shouldn’t expect that much out of me...”

“It’s not about being strong, weak, or anything like that.” Ayase gazed up into the night sky as she spoke. “My brother’s always been something like a surrogate parent for me. Our parents are still alive, but they work overseas, and they’re almost never at home... My brother’s always pushed himself to try and protect me, and I always hated that.”

“Oh, but I’m grateful too, of course!” she added with a chuckle. I couldn’t think of anything to say in response. Kaito had been a pretty different person before I met him—or rather, he’d changed a lot *since* I met him. His smile used to be stiff and forced, and he was the sort of habitually quiet person who never voiced his own opinions. That’s how he seemed to me, anyway.

“But after he got into Oumei High, Kaito changed. He still put my needs above everything else, but he got a lot more cheerful, and started telling me about the things that happened to him at school.”

“That so?”

“And he talked about you more than anything else, Kou-senpai.” Her smile was brilliant, and the flickering light from the lamppost was just bright enough to reveal that she was faintly blushing. “Neither of us have ever had very many friends. We’ve known Tsumugi-chan ever since we were kids, so she’s a bit special, but her aside... Anyway, I think that’s probably why he was so ecstatic that he finally made friends with a boy in his class.”

“Well, that’s kinda embarrassing.”

“You’re telling me! He talked about you so much, it felt like I knew everything about you, even though I’d never actually met you... Or, well, I guess you could say I started getting curious about you before I knew it. That’s why I can believe in you. I spent so long wondering what sort of person you were, and when I actually met you, you were so, so much more than I expected...” *He really told her* that *much about me?*

“Is talking about this sort of thing awkward for you?” she asked.

“I dunno...” If I *had* to pick one way or another, then yeah, it was awkward. It was putting me on the spot, that was for sure. Still, though, I didn’t want to cut her off.

“I know you might not believe me, but back when we first met, I actually wondered if you might be *the* Kunugi Kou-senpai that Kaito always talks about. But then I asked you your name and you said you were *him!*”

“I *do* feel bad about that, by the way.”

“Oh? Because it turned out I was Ayase Kaito’s very own sister?”

“Well...” I hesitated. “Okay, yeah, maybe.” I wouldn’t have claimed to be Ayase Kaito if I’d known in advance that she was Ayase Hikari, that’s for darn sure. I probably wouldn’t have called myself Kunugi Kou either. Picking a name she knew meant I’d failed in my quest to be as much of an unknown in her mind as possible. But brooding over what-ifs is pointless. It’s pointless, but I just can’t help myself. I can’t help but wonder about how things could’ve been if I wasn’t me, and if she wasn’t her.

“Is that why you’re so considerate of me? Because I’m Ayase Kaito’s little sister?”

That one left me at a loss. She leaned forward, looking up at my face, and even as I leaned back to get some distance I looked her in the eye as well. The lantern light flickered in my peripheral vision.

My mind wandered back to earlier in the day—to Mikura Kanako, and to Kazuki Rena. In the end, after Mikura’s feelings had been crushed, why *hadn’t* I tried to talk to her and offer her some support? No, that’s not the right question. Why did I think it was all right for her to be hurt in the first place?

Was it because I’d thought of her as a villain for bullying Ayase? Wasn’t getting her denounced like that disproportionate, considering all she’d really done was ignore her? Sure, it was *possible* that the situation could’ve escalated in time, but was that *really* a good enough reason for me to drag Renge into the issue and wipe the problem out as quickly and forcefully as possible?

I hadn’t considered any of those things at all until I heard about how Kazuki Rena had given up on Kaito. That was probably the trigger that set my mind

turning. The details of their circumstances were totally different, but even so, both Kazuki's and Mikura's loves had come to an end. Would I have still been able to bring myself to be so cruel to Mikura if I'd learned about Kazuki giving up on her own love beforehand...? Hearing her story brought the transience, uncertainty, and value of love to the front of my mind. It made me realize that it's a feeling to be treasured.

"Senpai?"

Ayase's voice cut through my thoughts. I realized that I'd been so absorbed in them, I'd totally tuned out whatever it was she said a moment before.

"Err, sorry. What was that?"

"Never mind!" Apparently, I'd upset her. She pursed her lips and pulled back away from me. She really was different from Mikura, in the sense that I was actually concerned about whether or not I'd hurt her. But what about Kazuki? Or Kiryu, or Renge, or Kaito? Kotou? Yoshiki? Daimon-sensei? Who would I be willing to hurt? Who would I judge as off-limits?

"Have *you* made any friends, Ayase?"

"Huh?"

"Y'know, like Kaito. You were just talking about how happy he was after he found a guy his age he could be friends with—what about you?"

"I have! And you already know about her, remember? Yuu-chan? She might not be ready to say we're friends for sure, but she's the only one who thinks that way."

"So you like her?"

"Of course I do! Yuu-chan really has two sides to her. She's super quiet and meek with people she doesn't know very well, but when she's with me she gets so loud and excited and adorable, you'd think she was a different person! She's like a hyper little chipmunk... I'm sort of jealous, honestly. I could never be cute like she is."

That was actually less surprising to hear from her than I might've thought. Ayase was a model student, and I could definitely imagine her being envious of

how Yoshiki could be shamelessly free and uninhibited in some circumstances.

“I don’t think you really have anything to be jealous of, though.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, I mean... You can’t really assess people’s good qualities objectively, right? Everyone has their own idea about what’s a good quality and what’s a bad one, or what’s cute and what isn’t. Everyone’s different.” I was more or less on autopilot, talking in an unfiltered stream of consciousness.

“D-Do you think so...?” Ayase replied, her voice wavering slightly.

“I sorta have to. Otherwise, people with no redeeming qualities like me would be better off kicking the bucket and hoping we get lucky next reincarnation, right?”

“You have plenty of good qualities, Senpai!”

“D-Do I?”

“Yeah! Like—”

“Nah, don’t start. Hearing that sort of stuff face-to-face sounds really embarrassing, and it’d sorta feel like I forced you into saying them too. Hard to take praise at face value when you fished for it.”

“You really are pretty twisted, after all.” She chuckled exasperatedly. It felt like she was starting to relax a bit. “Have it your way, Senpai, but let me say just one thing.”

“What?”

Ayase stood up, almost nonchalantly taking my hand as she did so. She clasped it between her own hands and looked me straight in the eye. I stayed seated and returned her gaze.

“I like you, Senpai.”

“...‘Like’?”

“I know we’ve only just met, but still... I love you.”

Her face flushed scarlet as she confessed her love to me.



In an instant, I felt something welling up within me. It was the same sensation I felt the first time I came face-to-face with her, back in Kaito's house. She made me remember *her*. *Her* love. *Her* death. My trauma was pounding away inside my mind, desperately calling for my attention, trying to deliver a message.

*Are you going to walk the same path all over again?*

I heard it loud and clear. But no—I wouldn't go down that road again. I'd never even dream of it. All I wanted to do was protect Hikari and Kaito. This time, for sure...

"Seriously, this is ridiculous... Can't believe you'd even say it the same way."

"What...?"

"Ayase—Hikari, you're a lot like somebody I used to know." A lot like *her*? Hardly—she was *exactly* like *her.* It was like they were the same person. My memories and my heart were both in agreement on that point. "I don't really understand 'love,' honestly."

"Huh?"

"At what point does it stop being platonic, and start being romantic...? I don't get all that stuff. 'Course, I can't allow myself to want to be with someone like that in the first place." That hadn't changed, and so nothing else that would follow would change as well. As long as he was like *him,* she was like *her,* and I was like *me*, then I knew the siblings would once again meet a terrible fate.

It was irrational. There was no great evil menacing this world. But no matter how many times I talked myself through that logic, the fear still wriggled its way into the deepest reaches of my mind and refused to leave.

"This sort of thing always sticks with you. Whether it's the happiness of having your feelings reciprocated or the heartbreak of being rejected, a little bit of that feeling will always linger in your heart."

"Kou-senpai?" I couldn't bear to keep looking at her and turned my gaze to the sky, but there wasn't a star up there to be seen. A dull, stagnant darkness stretched out above me. An unsettling void that didn't even have the decency to swallow me up into it. I felt my hand suddenly tremble, surprising Hikari so

much she let out a small yelp.

*It doesn't even matter anymore.* No matter how I answered her confession, those traces would remain with her. So I didn't need to answer at all. I held her hand, returning her grip—then pulled her towards me. Hikari was light enough that it didn't take much force at all, and she stumbled forward, right into me. Then I wrapped my other arm around her, resting my hand on the back of her head.

"S-S-S-Senpai?!"

"Hey, Hikari?" I whispered. "I'm a wizard."

"Huh...?"

"I'm about to cast a spell that'll wipe away all of your trauma, for good." It was the third and final of Kunugi Kou's ultimate techniques... Not. It wasn't anything deserving a grandiose name like that. It was nothing more than a defect that just happened to stick with me. "Your trauma's not the only thing that'll disappear, though."

"Senpai, what're you...?"

If I were the protagonist, I'd probably have found a better answer than this. I'd have uncovered some incredible option that would let everyone have a happy ending. Protagonists are a bunch of dirty cheaters. They stroll through life without the slightest of worries, and whenever they hit a fork in the road, a third path that solves everything perfectly for everyone magically materializes. Meanwhile, I can't make so much as a single person happy.

In the end, I couldn't pull off being a half-decent sidekick and Kaito might never have been a harem comedy's protagonist in the first place. But even if all my assumptions and preconceptions crumbled around me, I knew one thing for certain:

Kunugi Kou *must not* get the girl, let alone Ayase Hikari.

And with that answer in mind, my path was clear.

Hikari let out a quiet gasp as a pale light spilled from my hand. Her expression faded away and her gaze turned hollow and vacant as she slumped forward

listlessly. Her head lulled to the side, and I felt her grip on my hand weaken. I pulled her towards me, holding her in my arms to make sure she didn't fall. It took everything I had to swallow the surge of nausea that was clawing its way up my throat.

I destroyed all of it. The degenerate flasher who'd foisted a lasting trauma upon her, the hero who'd saved her from his assault, and by association, each and every memory that was linked to them. Each and every memory she had with *me*.

It was a spell of forgetting—of oblivion. A cursed power that I created long ago to kill *myself*. Disregarding all of this world's laws and logic, trampling over all boundaries with pure power like the fraud I am, I callously laid hands upon Ayase Hikari's innocent, adolescent love—and I killed it. Like a pathetic, contemptible coward, and without even offering an answer to the confession she'd mustered up all of her courage to deliver.

I felt it. I sensed it, and that sensation would linger on in my hand, clear as day.

# Epilogue

*I* began on the battlefield.

There I was, engulfed in darkness, squared off alone against a single enemy. It was some sort of creature that looked like a mass of black fog.

“Wh-What the hell did you just do?!” it shrieked. “Your own hopes and despair killed your spirit *dead!* I saw it happen!”

In spite of how suddenly I’d been thrust into the situation, I had a fairly solid grasp of my circumstances. To begin with, I knew that the creature before me was my enemy. It prided itself on its psychological attacks, and had tried to crush my spirit.

And, somehow, I knew that I was a Hero. I couldn’t remember my own name, but that fact and the awareness that I had to defeat the enemy before me were burned into my consciousness. I also knew that I’d lost my memories, and that I myself had been the one to erase them.

In that moment, though, I held no interest in analyzing any of those facts. Before anything else, I had to kill my enemy.

It barely took an instant. My body moved on its own as I dispassionately brought down my sword, channeling magical power through it and eradicating the fog-like creature with a single blow.

The darkness that surrounded me dispersed, and a trio of people rushed over to me. They were all shouting—“Kunughi” this, “Koh” that. I just stared blankly at them until a suspicious-looking, armor-clad man among them asked me, “What?”

“Who are you people?” I replied. They seemed disturbed by that question, but after spending a moment deliberating among themselves, they started to explain.

Supposedly, my name was Kunughi Koh. Two years before I lost my memories, I’d been summoned to another world and became a Hero. These people were my party—the trusty comrades who accompanied and supported

me on my journey.

Among the personal effects they gave me (all of which were mine to begin with, it seemed) was an old, dirty notebook. “Kunugi Kou” was written on its cover in Japanese—that’s how I learned how my own name was spelled. None of the others could read it or write the language, but I could read it effortlessly, and figured I could probably write it as well. That made it easy to believe that I had indeed come from another world. As for why I hadn’t forgotten how to read Japanese, honestly, I didn’t really worry about it. I could still think, I could still speak, and I still had all the common knowledge that I needed to get by, so I wasn’t especially inconvenienced at all.

The notebook turned out to be my diary.

I was able to discern that the world I was in was “my” own personal hell. The kingdom I found myself in took my parents hostage, and I had no choice but to obey their every command. I was essentially tortured in the name of “getting used to pain” and learning the skills that I’d need to fight. My status as the Hero granted me a measure of divine protection that kept me from dying, and *they* exploited that fact by performing all sorts of experiments on me as well. The whole journal was a seemingly never-ending collection of grudges and anguish along those lines.

The only thing that kept me from running away in spite of it all was the hope that someday I’d be able to return to my former world. That world was a peaceful, blissful place, and I was dedicated to making it back with my parents in tow. Apparently, that’s why I consented to fight as a Hero. I’d written it over and over and over again, almost like I was trying to place a curse upon myself.

That would explain the “hopes and despair” that the fog-creature talked about. With my memories gone and my mind more or less empty, I could think of it all from an outsider’s perspective. Most likely, I forced myself to fixate on getting home in order to keep myself sane. It was pretty clear that I’d been maintaining that balance by a hair’s breadth, and when I encountered a foe that used those dreams and nightmares against me, I deliberately let go of them in an instant. Maybe I’d been looking for an excuse to give up on it all in the first place.

Even knowing all of that on an intellectual level, though, none of it felt *real*. It felt like it happened to some stranger, not me. And besides, no matter how I thought or felt about it, it wouldn't relieve me of my duty as a Hero. If I stayed a Hero, I could probably save my so-called parents. I could return to the old world I didn't even remember anymore. I could protect Alexion, Elena, and Brad, the companions who explained how I lost my memory.

So I fought. I fought on behalf of the kingdom that was trying to squeeze me dry. Alexion and Elena would worry about me, and Brad would occasionally look like he pitied me, but I didn't give a damn. I was a Hero, and I had a duty to slay my enemies—in the end, that was all I had left. It's possible that my divine protection was why that one memory remained, even while all the rest of them were wiped away.

Though I'd forgotten all about the hellish training they put me through, I retained every skill I'd learned through muscle memory. My body moved with a mind of its own, slaying my foes of its own volition. I didn't have to think about anything else. All I had to do was swing my sword over and over.

A year later, I met a boy named Balrog. Not long after, I met his sister, Rei. Meeting them let me understand hope once more, and losing them let me understand despair.

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That world is long behind me. These days, I do my best to look back on it as little as possible, letting my life drip down the drain in the world I was born into. I found a boy who somehow resembled the friend I'd lost, and foisted all sorts of expectations upon him, declaring him the protagonist, and myself a supporting character. I rationalized everything around me as if we were actors on a stage, and in doing so barely managed to keep myself together as I carried out my unsightly existence.

And even though I tried, I couldn't outrun my past. It was never long before something happened that reminded me of a simple fact:

"The crimes you've committed are unforgivable. You can never escape them. You will never be able to make anyone happy."

I'm scared. I'm scared of remembering everything that happened in that

other world, I'm scared of facing my past, and I'm scared of living on *without* remembering as well.

But a small, *stupid* part of me still can't help but think that someday, I might be happy. That a day might come when I'll be absolved of my sins and be forgiven. Foolish though they are, I can't keep those thoughts from rising up in my mind time after time, and they're eating away at me.

That's why I lost it all again. I met a girl who reminded me inescapably of *her*, the girl who loved me in spite of everything. And, in all my selfishness, I hurt her. I sullied her.

Just let it end, dammit. Let it all come crashing down as soon as possible. Let the greedy, stupid, *pathetic* coward that I am be broken and done with.

# Side Story 1: A Sidekick Is Born “Umm, hey! You dropped this.”

Those were the first words I heard him say. He wasn’t speaking to me, though. He was talking to a girl from our school—apparently, he’d picked up something she’d dropped on the ground. It looked like a train pass or something.

“Huh...? Ah, thank you so much!”

The girl blinked a couple times, then realized what had happened and blushed with embarrassment. She started thanking him profusely, and he just stood there awkwardly as me and the other students behind me passed him by. I didn’t think much of it at the time, but I’d encounter him once again later that very same day after Oumei High’s entrance ceremony.

“My name’s Ayase Kaito. Hope we all have a good year together!”

By the time he introduced himself to the class, I was already impressed with him. This is probably gonna sound rude to everyone else, but he had a certain celebrity-esque aura that set him apart from all the rest of our classmates. His hair was a natural-looking brown; it didn’t seem dyed from what I could tell. His voice was mild and pleasant, and his facial features were perfectly balanced.

His general aura of sincerity completed the picture: it was *exactly* the sort of atmosphere that surrounds those legendary beings they call “protagonists.” Never could I have dreamed that one would exist in the real world!

I felt myself grin. *This might just be my lucky day!* In a certain sense, high schools are overflowing with a special, particular sort of energy. This world’s filled to the brim with works of fiction, and those that take place in the modern day are overwhelmingly set in schools like mine.

Common sense tells us that applying that sort of fictional concept to reality’s a load of nonsense. Common sense would *also* lead you to believe that the life I myself had led up to that point could only happen in fiction. Sure, this world looked perfectly normal at a glance—nary a sword or sorcerer to be seen—but that didn’t necessarily guarantee that I couldn’t be caught up in another story

regardless.

That carried implications. *Big ones.*

So I figured that if I was going to get dragged into a story regardless, I might as well make sure it's one that's set in a world I can stand. A peaceful world, with neither war nor bloodshed. And if I could successfully blend my way into a world like that, playing the role of an utterly unremarkable extra, then maybe—just maybe—I'd be freed from the endless sequence of nightmares that seethed constantly within my skull. For that sake, I'd be as pathetic and cowardly as I had to.

"Hey, what're you smirking about? It's your turn!"

"Gaaah?!"

A beautiful woman stood before me. And I mean, like, *beautiful* beautiful! Her suit gave her a real career woman sorta vibe, and she had adultlike charm for days. Even when she was glaring. Which she was. At me. *What's an actress doing in* my *high school?!* I glanced around the classroom, looking for the camera, but there wasn't a single one to be seen.

*Oh, right! Of course! She's my teacher, Daimon-sensei!* She'd *just* introduced herself to the class, and I'd *already* thought something stupid along the lines of "Oh, daaang, look at her! Do they hire high school teachers based on looks these days, or what?" mere moments before. Apparently, I'd been so entranced by Ayase Kaito that my previous line of thought had been blown totally out of the water.

Anyway, I was in a fix. Didn't think I'd screw the pooch *that* quickly. Literally every single student was staring at me, and naturally, that included Ayase Kaito (who was sitting right next to me! Hot damn!) himself. In a situation like that, if I hoped to work my way towards the position I wanted, there was only one valid option! Okay, so there were probably a lot of options, but I could only think of one, so I decided to run with it.

"Student number seven, Kunugi Kou!" I popped out of my seat, sending it scooting backwards with a clatter, and locked eyes with Daimon-sensei, who was slightly hunched over as she glared down at me. That brought me really close to her face, and I could feel my virgin heart flutter. Her eyes widened

slightly too—she must've been surprised. *But this is no time for observation! Now's the time to take the helm and ride this storm through!*

"That's 'Kunugi' as in the species of oak tree plus the first character in Thursday, and 'Kou' as in steel! I'm fifteen years old, and," I took a deep breath, then desperately shouted at the top of my lungs, "I'm currently accepting applicants to be my girlfriend! Thanks! That's all!"

*I said it. Oh god, did I ever say it!* A hush so profound you could *feel* it on your skin dominated the classroom. That was the path I'd chosen: to become the rom-com protagonist's comedic, slightly perverted best friend. Though really, "best friend" implied a lot more screen time than I intended to give myself. I'd bury myself in the background noise of everyday life, so calling myself a best friend sidekick/extra might've been closer to the point.

My mind was made up: I'd turn Ayase Kaito into the rom-com protagonist of my dreams, and latch onto him like a parasite, acting as his trusty sidekick! Frankly, I was *incredibly* ashamed of how I was acting. My face felt like it was burning up, and I may well have been blushing. Thankfully I was seated in the classroom's front row, so at the very least nobody could see my expression quiver with profound embarrassment. Except, that is, my beauty of a homeroom teacher.

"Wha...?" She stared at me, completely dumbfounded. And kept staring. In total silence. Looking *right* at me as I shivered with shame. I probably looked like some sort of tragic clown, makeup washed away by his own tears, and Daimon-sensei clearly had no clue how to deal with me. From what I'd heard, Oumei High was one of the most academically rigorous schools in the vicinity, known for the diligence and character of its students. As such, class clowns like me were a rarity.

Daimon-sensei's atmosphere in that moment was downright demonic, but judging by her appearance and complexion, she was probably quite young—if I had to guess, I'd put her in her late twenties. I doubted she had much experience dealing with students who acted more like horny apes than human beings.

*Think! Yes, I've wandered my way into a labyrinth of humiliation and dragged*

*Daimon-sensei with me, but there's* gotta *be a way to get us both out of it!* I wanted to reinforce my slightly pervy class clown image, preferably without getting murdered in the process. Meanwhile, Daimon-sensei wanted to show off what an excellent teacher she was by skillfully dealing with the problem student before her. Probably.

Looking down just a tad, my gaze landed on her elegantly slender hands. I was all right with the idea of my little performance ending violently, as long as it was over quickly. I could take a slap without complaint. It'd take some serious sexual harassment to pull that off, though—I had to set it up very carefully so that nobody would blame her for smacking the crap out of me.

I looked back up at her face. Our eye contact lasted for barely a couple seconds, but all I could do was pray that she got the message anyway and jump in headfirst.

"Let's cut to the chase! Marry me, Sen—"

"Drop dead!"

"Bugaugh?!" I didn't even manage to finish my sentence before she dunked her attendance sheet right onto my skull, clipboard and all. *Perfection.* We were so fabulously in sync, you'd almost think we had it all scripted out in advance. She was already reaching out for the clipboard on her desk by the time I got to the first syllable of "marry." Most people would've missed that detail, but I caught it.

That said, it didn't look like she had a lot of experience bludgeoning people. A hundred-point smack would make a nice, vivid "thwap" noise, but wouldn't actually hurt very much at all. Hers, in contrast, let out more of a dull "thud" and hurt like hell, so that's a failing grade for sure. Hopefully she'll polish her skills for future attempts.

The self-introductions continued while I was slumped over on my desk, (pretending to be) passed out. Overall, the girls in my class were exceptionally attractive. I figured that was another point in favor of this being a rom-com world—it was checking off all the standard requirements one after another.

It was a shame that the ultra-gorgeous top student in our grade level, Kiryu, was in another class, but there'd be plenty of opportunities to get to know her

outside of our lessons as well. Speaking of genre conventions and clichés, the principal's speech at the opening ceremony was *way* longer than hers, and an absolute snoozefest to boot. Supposedly all grade levels are obligated to attend the ceremony, but I swore to myself that I'd skip it next year regardless.

In the end, I stayed facedown on my desk for the better part of my first day in high school. That sounds more impressive than it actually was, though—that first day was occupied solely by self-introductions and a bunch of explanations from our teacher, which didn't really take much time at all. From the look of things, we'd get our textbooks and stuff during our first real classes.

Speaking of, I discovered a love letter that had been nonchalantly slid between my folded-up arms at some point over the course of the class. And by "love letter" I mean "instructions to personally carry my entire class's worth of textbooks and class materials to our room before the start of our first lesson." *Ooooh, that stupid windbag!* I was enraged, but had totally missed my chance to sit up and call her out on it, and was left to consider my options for how best to approach Ayase Kaito instead.

There were an awful lot of barriers standing between me and becoming his comedic best friend sidekick. To start, there was the danger of the character I'd chosen to play already being represented in my class. The majority of high schoolers are irredeemable horndogs who've been thoroughly possessed by the evil spirits of adolescence and puberty. Academically rigorous or not, it was possible that there'd be somebody in my class who was *naturally* like that, and since my persona was manufactured, that could be a real issue.

Buuut, I'd actually already nipped that potential pitfall in the bud! *Congratulations to me!* My self-introduction and Daimon-sensei's subsequent outburst of violence ensured that any class clowns lurking in the shadows would be staying there until further notice. Nobody wants to see the same joke get rehashed that quickly, so busting it out as early as possible let me monopolize the class clown position by force. I railroaded any potential competitors right out of the picture!

That wasn't the only roadblock in my path, though—not by a long shot. Next up was finding an opportunity to strike up a conversation with the protagonist. The classic move would be to tap him on the shoulder and go, "Hey, bro! You

look like a pretty chill dude to hang with. I totally dig your vibe! Wanna be best buds?!" or something to that effect, but that move was a bit too "uuuhhh" (for lack of a better word to describe it) even for my taste.

Besides, pulling off a successful SST (Sudden Shoulder Tap) requires you to be sitting *behind* your target. They're too far away when you're off to the side, and reaching all the way over to them's just not natural enough. When your target's beside you, you're pretty much limited to "oops, I dropped my eraser" and passing notes.

Plus, if I wanted to deepen my bond with him, a shared secret was a must. Aiming for the suspension bridge effect seemed like a very solid option. In other words, my goal was to talk to him during a time when we weren't meant to be talking at all! Midway through the opening ceremony or during the orientation that followed it would've been optimal, but he hadn't been on my radar yet when the ceremony happened, and I'd *just* spent the entirety of orientation "passed out." Not to mention that finding an opening for a secret chat's totally impossible when you're sitting in the front row!

*Grr... An opening! I just need an opening! Just the slightest chance to let me become his best friend... Please, God, I only need one chance! I'll do anything in exchange!*

"Hey." As I growled with barely-repressed frustration, I felt a tap on my arm. *Wait. A tap?! Oh, crap! Was I being too conspicuous?! Did I just get* myself *SST'd?!* I sat up with a start and a shout. There wasn't anyone in front of me, which meant that my mysterious poker was...

"To the right!"

"Whoa!"

"Huh?!" I spun to the right so suddenly that Ayase Kaito, the culprit, jumped with surprise. *Wait. Ayase Kaito...?*

"S-Sorry, my bad," he stammered. "You looked like you were having a nightmare, so I thought I should wake you up."

"Y-Yeah, thanks for that. Guess it was all just a bad dream after all... I thought I'd gotten assaulted by my homeroom teacher on the very first day of school.

Crazy, right?" I found myself chattering away before I knew it.

Ayase Kaito responded with a chuckle. "That wasn't a dream, actually..." *Him* proactively approaching *me* wasn't part of my calculations at all. Rom-com protagonists usually only have eyes for the girls in their class, so it never even occurred to me. That was actually one of the barriers I'd thought I would have to surmount to get at him. "Umm, my name's Ayase. I sit right next to you...?"

"Kaito, right? I remember you from the introductions." In fact, he was the *only* part about the introductions I remembered. Actually talking with him, though, I was surprised by how nervous he seemed—or rather, timid, maybe? He still had his protagonist aura blazing at full strength, but he wasn't really anything like *him* at all... *Wait. Why'd I just compare Ayase Kaito to* him*...?*

"Y-Yeah, that's me! Thanks for remembering, Kou-kun." *Calling me by my first name right from the get-go? He's a friendly one, but I can do better than that!*

"No problem! You can drop the 'kun,' by the way. I'll just call you Kaito too, if that's cool."

"Sure! Will do, Kou." *This was* definitely *an act of divine intervention! I got to talk with Ayase Kaito—or rather, with* Kaito*, and it wasn't even hard!*

His personality was a bit off from what I'd expected, but he had the makings of a genuine protagonist for sure. The absolute best period to set a rom-com in's the second year of high school, since that's the year you have classmates, senpais, *and* kouhais all on the table, so I had plenty of time to nudge him in the right direction before it really mattered. At least I could count myself lucky that he didn't turn out to be a "talk to me at your own risk" edgelord type. And, more than anything else, I was just happy.

"Kou? What're you grinning about?"

"Oh, nothing, really!" I'd been self-importantly blathering on about my master plan for ages at that point, but to be completely honest, deep down I was really just happy to have made a best friend. Kaito had looked a bit bemused, but barely a moment later he was smiling along with me. And barely a moment after *that*, our conversation was interrupted.

"Kaitooo! Let's go hooome!" A lovely lady burst into our classroom out of

nowhere!

“Oh hey, Tsumugi,” Kaito replied.

“Whaaat?! Kaito, you’re talking to a dude?! That *never* happens!”

“Wait, hold up! Who’s this girl?!” I interjected.

“Name’s Kotou Tsumugi! I’m Mr. Ayase Kaito’s most important person! No, not his SO—I’m his more-than-friend, less-than-lover!”

“His...” I paused. “W-Wait, how’s that work out?”

“Too much, too quickly, Tsumugi.” Kaito shook his head. “She’s my childhood friend, Kou.” *Oooh, his childhood friend! In other words...*

“*She’s basically your friggin’ girlfrieeeeeend?!”*

“Whoa!”

“Ooooh, that wasn’t a bad shout at all!” Kaito was taken aback, and Kotou smiled cheerfully. To be clear, I’d anticipated that he’d probably have a childhood friend or two. He *was* a rom-com protagonist, after all.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, though,” she continued. “I’m his childhood friend, sure, but we’re not dating yet!” *Yet, she says!* Kaito didn’t really react to that at all, though. Maybe he’s the dense type? Classic!

“Grrr,” I growled, “and just when I was planning on forming the League of Unpopularity with you!”

“S-Sorry...” Kaito’s shoulders slumped. He looked a lot more put off by my feigned hostility than I’d expected. *That reaction... Wait a minute. He’s got the sort of personality that lets him be pushed around, and he has Kotou, a charming childhood friend. Plus, he has the sort of protagonist-aura that girls go wild for. Then there’s the fact that he took a joke like that so seriously that he actually seems to think he’s about to lose his new best friend (me).* There was no doubt about it—I knew *exactly* what sort of character he was, which left me with only one choice!

“Heh heh heh... *Bwa ha ha ha ha ha!*” I burst out in over-the-top, maniacal laughter. Then I boldly declared, “I’ve had a revelation! This is how it finally happens—getting into high school and making friends with Kaito will, at long

last, give me the chance I've always needed to evolve into the super-popular man of my dreams! Right, Kaito?!"

"E-Err, I guess? Maybe?"

"I think you mean *absolutely!* Right, Kotou?!"

"Nope, don't think so!"

"Merciless!" She cut me down in a single verbal stroke, and Kaito cracked up.

Yeah, this works. This is as good as it could get. I'm Kaito's sidekick. I'll make him a star, leading him towards happiness from the shadows as his guardian clown.

I *have* to make him happy, one way or another, and if one of the steps along that path involves me making friends with him, I swear I'll pour every fiber of my being into it.

I swore it internally, of course—wouldn't make an oath like *that* out loud. Maybe I was using that oath as a replacement for the one I'd failed to fulfill before, but even if that were the case, I would make good on it.

"Okay, wanna head home?" proposed Kaito.

"Sure," I replied.

"Okey dokey!" chimed in Kotou.

"By the way, Kotou, you said something about childhood friends being more important than SOs earlier, right? Isn't being in a relationship with someone pretty much as intimate as it gets?"

"Huh? Doesn't 'SO' mean 'slight obstacle'? Like, a person who *looks* like they're in your way but doesn't matter at all in the long term?"

"What sort of twisted world view's that?!" *Mental note: the protag's childhood friend is real scary!* Kotou beamed, and I was terrified. I leaned over and whispered into Kaito's ear. "Hey, is she being serious?"

"Ha ha ha, yeah, probably. I think she's just misinterpreting the slang. She doesn't mean anything bad by it."

"I have so many questions about that girl..." I could only hope that the rest of

his heroines would be a little easier to understand.

# Side Story 2: A Morning of Destiny “Morning, Hikari,” yawned my brother.

“Oh, good morning, Kaito!” It was early in the morning—way earlier than he usually woke up. Even though he was yawning all over the place, he’d actually changed into his uniform already. “You’re sure up early today.”

“Oh, right. I got dragged into going to the track team’s morning practice, somehow. I must’ve forgotten to tell you. My bad.”

“Ahh, that explains it. And it’s fine! I already finished making your lunch.” I was actually pretty surprised by his explanation, but I didn’t let it show and replied with a smile. I was aware that he’d been showing up to the track team’s practices every once in a while, but as far as I knew that was the first time he’d gone to a morning session.

It felt like my brother had changed a lot since he started going to Oumei High. He’d never been good at making friends outside our household. In fact, the only *friend* friend of his I knew of was Kotou Tsumugi-chan, and he’d known her for a really long time thanks to our families being on good terms. When my own friends met him they always told me how handsome he was, so he wasn’t *unpopular*, but I’d never actually seen him with a guy friend of his own. I wasn’t sure if he even had any.

I knew perfectly well that I myself was the cause of his friendlessness. Our parents’ jobs kept them away from home the majority of the time, and at that moment in particular they were actually both working overseas. You’d think they’d have taken us along with them, but from what I understood, the place they were living wasn’t a suitable environment for kids of our age. We were left to support each other, along with occasional help from our grandparents.

My brother’s a year older than me, so he felt obligated to watch over and protect me while we were living on our own. I was in charge of cooking, but he took on the majority of the other household chores and would usually head right home after classes ended to make sure I could attend my own after-school activities. I was grateful, of course, but I did always worry about whether I was

being more of a burden on him than strictly necessary.

After he got into high school, though, he started to change. In a good way, of course! I was in my third year of middle school, so I had to go home early and study for my entrance exams. I used that as an excuse to convince him to get more involved with his own school life. Tsumugi-chan was my coconspirator and helped pull him in that direction too. More than anything else, though, the biggest factor that helped my brother change was the boy he made friends with at school.

“Did that Koh-san you always talk about pull you into something again today?”

“Nah, it wasn’t Kou this time. He’s not the sorta guy to get up early for club stuff.”

Koh was my brother’s new friend, and he came up in conversation every once in a while. It seemed that my brother had made friends with a lot of boys since he started school, but I got the feeling that he was far and away the one Kaito felt closest to. I had yet to actually meet him, but I’d heard about him so often that his name had left quite an impression on me.

“Hey, don’t you think it’s about time you let me meet this Koh-san? If he’s supposed to be your best friend, then your sister should have the right to see what he’s all about!”

“Ha ha ha, sorry, sorry. The timing just hasn’t worked out so far.”

“You could always bring him over to visit me at school! Or maybe I should go visit your class instead?”

“Hmm... I’ll think about it,” he said with a strained smile. From the way Kaito described him, I got the impression he was quite the comedian, to put it generously. I had a feeling that my brother might’ve been trying to shield me from his antics, though I’d also heard that he and Tsumugi-chan got along quite well. I was honestly really curious about him, but not quite curious enough to risk damaging my brother’s social circle by barging into his class. I knew I’d probably get to meet him someday, one way or another.

“Yeah, you do that. Here’s your breakfast!” I changed the topic by serving up

his food: a bowl of white rice, a salad, and a relatively small hamburger steak.

"Hamburger steak, first thing in the morning?" he observed. "What's the occasion?"

"I didn't have time to make a side dish. I made those for our lunches, so you'll have to deal with eating them two meals in a row. This is your own fault for not telling me you'd be leaving early, for the record."

"Ugh... Yeah, sorry, and thanks." As I watched him dig into his meal, I considered what to do about my own lunch. I hadn't had time to make a proper breakfast for him, so I'd pulled the hamburger steak he was eating out of my lunch box, and was now in need of a replacement. I'd used up all the ingredients for that recipe, and I didn't really feel like going out to stock up before school. *Oh, there's still some chicken in the freezer, though! Maybe I could make something with that?*

"Finished—thanks!" shouted Kaito.

"No problem. Here's your lunch."

"Thanks for that too! Breakfast was great today as always."

"Right, right." I passed him his lunch box as he pulled his shoes on, then rushed out the door.

"Have a nice day!"

"You too, Hikari! Lock up when you leave, okay?" I saw him off, then let out a quick sigh after I was sure the door was closed. I was used to leaving before him, since my student council work started in the morning, and the unfamiliar circumstances were making it hard to keep myself focused. *One of these days, I'll drive the importance of communication into Kaito's head.*

"All right, I'd better get moving too! Gotta get ready!" I'd start with breakfast, and figure out a replacement for the hamburger steak later. I promised myself that I'd keep a firm handle on the cooking situation, and I intended to follow through!

❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤

"Oh, jeez, I'm really cutting it close!" In the end, I overthought it and my

preparations took way longer than I'd hoped they would. My school was within walking distance of my house, but since I ended up leaving way later than I usually would, I started to panic and felt very rushed. "I should just barely make it if I jog, right...? Sheesh, if I'm late then I'm blaming it on Kaito, I swear!" I muttered to myself as I rushed along.

Suddenly, a loud meow caught me off guard. I quickly noticed the black cat that had made the noise, and stopped in my tracks. Something was strange about it. Or, well, the cat itself was totally normal—the strange part was the way it was sitting right in the middle of the road, languidly stretching and staring directly at me.

"That's sort of weird..." I mumbled. For some reason, it was really grabbing my attention. I wanted to take a closer look, but I knew that if I stopped there, I'd definitely end up being late.

"Meow!"

"Whoa!" The cat meowed with incredibly good timing, almost like it was going out of its way to keep my focus. Something about the situation felt incredibly strange, and in an oddly familiar way, at that. I just couldn't get my mind off that cat.

"Meow."

After meowing once more, it started walking away. It was like it saw right through me and was telling me to follow as it gracefully strolled along.

"Ahh, ugh..." I felt really conflicted. If I chased it I'd be late for sure, but I just couldn't ignore the mysterious sensation I was feeling. "Ahh, fine! Kaito, Yuu-chan, I'm sorry!"

I swallowed my worries away and walked off after the cat. It didn't even turn around to check if I was following it, but it was still somehow walking at exactly the same pace as me. It felt like it was guiding me somewhere. I know that sounds like something straight out of a novel, but I really did believe it.

"Meow!" We'd been walking for some time when the cat suddenly dashed forward and rounded a corner.

"Ah, wait!" I rushed after it, but when I turned the corner as well, the cat was

nowhere to be seen. Instead...

"Hello there!"

I found something so repulsive, I couldn't even put it into words.

"Well, aren't you just the cutest widdle lady..."

A stark naked old man.

"*Kyaaaaahhhhhhh!*" The *instant* I registered what I was seeing, I screamed louder than I even knew I was capable of and ran away as fast as I could! *Oh god, oh god oh god oh god! Why is this happening?! What's* even *happening?! Why, why, why?!* I could feel a thudding noise behind me, and was absolutely horrified to realize that he was *chasing* me!

"No, *no...* Somebody, help me, please..." I was pouring everything I had into running as fast as I could, and I was so out of breath I could barely choke out a few scattered words. But still, I just had to keep running—until I found *him.*

He was a black-haired boy with a sort of sleepy look on his face. Those aren't remarkable features in Japan by any stretch of the imagination, but for some reason, the sight of him took my breath away, more so than anybody else I'd ever met. I was so captivated that I even forgot about the degenerate who was pursuing me...and also about my own footing. I fell, spectacularly, right on my face.

"Umm, hey, you okay?" the boy asked me, probably reflexively. But I couldn't reply. My heart was pounding so hard, it hurt—harder and more intensely than I'd ever felt it beat before. And it wasn't because I'd been sprinting. It wasn't because of the repulsive sight I'd just witnessed. It wasn't because I was embarrassed by my pratfall—okay, maybe it *was* that one, just a little bit, but that wasn't the *real* reason. It was that strangely, inexplicably, I found the boy before me so absolutely and utterly fascinating that I couldn't take my eyes off him.

They say that bad things in life are always followed by good ones. If that's true, and if my encounter mere moments before was the absolute low point of my life, then it wouldn't be strange at all for my life's absolute high point to be waiting soon after.

I knew it was true. After all, I'd always been searching for someone. I'd been waiting for them. I didn't know who they were, but I knew that they were there, always present deep within my heart.

And I had a feeling that on that morning, at that moment, I'd met with destiny itself.

# Afterword Thank you very much for buying *The Sidekick Never Gets the Girl, Let Alone the Protag's Sister!* This book is a version of a work by the same name serialized on Shosetsuka ni Naro, which was picked up for publication thanks to the whims of some capricious god. The web version began its serialization about a year ago—in other words, during the Heisei era, rather than the current Reiwa era. Saying it like that makes it feel a lot longer ago than it actually was.

Now then, on to business! In spite of the fact that I've been given the opportunity to use this afterword to talk about whatever I want to, I'm ashamed to admit that this story doesn't actually have any deep, special message that's worth talking about. As such, if you've already read through the book and found yourself thinking "huh, y'know, I'm not really sure what message that was trying to send," don't worry. You did not, in fact, miss anything. If you're about to read the book, meanwhile, I'd appreciate it if you'd just sit back, relax, and read on without worrying about any of that stuff. If anything, my hope is that this book will serve as a bit of respite from your busy day, like an electric massager that uncoils the elaborate stress knots that've been tied in your brain tissue.

Which isn't to say that I wrote this book carelessly or thoughtlessly! I tied *myself* into knots thinking as hard as I could about how to write it so that each and every one of my readers would find a way to enjoy it. In that sense, I've spent an *awful* lot of time coming up with tricks and twists, but writing all of

those out here would be an incredibly insipid thing to do. I've crammed every bit of them into the book itself, and if you can find something to enjoy as you read through it, that'd be, just...just great (behold, my overwhelming lack of a decent vocabulary).

Finally, I would like to note that I did not by any means deliver this book to its readers by my power alone. It could never have happened without all the fine people at Shufu to Seikatsu Sha Co., who approved this book for publication. It couldn't have happened without my editor (who also works for Shufu to Seikatsu Sha Co.), who pounded my not-particularly-professional writing into the form of a proper novel. It couldn't have happened without U35-sama (who does not work for Shufu to Seikatsu Sha Co.), who drew such stunningly adorable illustrations they had me questioning whether they were actually meant for *my* book at all. Finally, it couldn't have happened without all the readers who've been rooting for me ever since I first started posting my works on Shosetsuka ni Naro. I'd like to use this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to all of you.

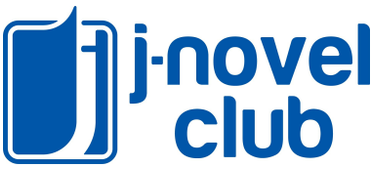
Last but not least, I hope to see you again in the sequel!

—Toshizo (May 2019)










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The Sidekick Never Gets the Girl, Let Alone the Protag’s Sister! Volume 1

by Toshizo

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