

Rascal
DOES NOT DREAM
of
Petite
Devil!
Kohai

Hajime
kamoshida

Illustration by
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He looked back and saw a very flustered Rio.

“Are you a total idiot, Azusagawa?!” she hissed. “Are you genuinely stupid?!”

She seemed very conscious of Yuuma’s gaze. He was still outside the window, spinning the basketball on his finger.

“Well, I’m definitely dumber than you,” Sakuta admitted.

“Don’t try to help me out! Kunimi might notice!”

“If he was capable of figuring it out from something like this, he already knows how you feel.”

There was a strong possibility Yuuma was just pretending he hadn’t.

“That...would suck,” Rio said, barely getting the words out. She was turning visibly red.

Teasing her any further seemed like a bad idea, so Sakuta stepped past her into the lab.

“We were just talking about you,” Yuuma said as his friend approached the window.

“Talking about me behind my back? How cruel.”

Yuuma ignored this attempt at humor.

“Is it true you’re dating Koga now?” he asked.

“It is.”

“Seriously?”

“I mean, we’re still just trying it out.”

“Hmph.”

Yuuma seemed unconvinced. When Rio caught up with him, she seemed equally suspicious. Rio likely had a hunch what was really going on. He’d already told her Tomoe was Laplace’s demon when they were discussing the current Adolescence Syndrome phenomenon.

But she didn’t pry further.

“Well, then I oughtta at least warn you,” Yuuma said, dribbling the ball. “About Koga...”

He paused dramatically.

“What?”

“There’s some ugly rumors.”

“About her taste in men?”

Considering Sakuta’s reputation, that seemed pretty likely. The first-years might think he’d looped around to good again, but the second-and third-years still seemed stuck on the hospitalization incident. Once you got a label like that stuck on you, even if you tore it off, the mark remained.

“Like she’s easy or a slut or sleeping with you.”

Yuuma lowered his voice a bit, possibly in deference to Rio. Picking up on it, she refrained from directly participating, though she was clearly listening.

“What?” This was the first Sakuta’d heard of this.

“It came up in the men’s basketball team group chat.”

That explained it.

“You asked about Yousuke the other day at work, right?” Yuuma gave him a meaningful stare. It was obvious where these rumors were coming from.

“Girls were talking about that in class, too,” Rio added.

That meant the rumors had spread pretty far.

Things were taking a turn for the worse again. Sakuta didn’t give a damn what anyone thought of him, but Tomoe definitely would.

“Figured you oughtta know.”

“Yeah.”

Yuuma raised a hand, said, “Gotta get to practice,” and ran off toward the gym. Rio watched him go.

Not wanting to interrupt, Sakuta turned away from the window and lit the alcohol lamp. He filled a beaker with water and waited for it to boil.

He'd better do something before rumors about Tomoe spread further.

"What are you doing, Azusagawa?"

He looked up and found Rio standing across the desk from him.

"I figured I'd drink some coffee and calm down."

"Not that. What about Sakurajima?"

"Where's the instant coffee?"

She opened a drawer and took out the jar.

"Fine," she said. "But what brings you here?"

"Well, I haven't looped any days since, so...I'm still wondering why it happened."

The water was boiling now, so he extinguished the flame. He dumped a scoop of instant coffee into the beaker, and a black cloud spread through the clear liquid.

"I assume what you said was right."

"Mm?"

"The first-year you're currently calling a girlfriend was Laplace's demon."

That was a very deliberate choice of words. Rio clearly knew they were faking it.

"And she's rolling the dice until things turn out the way she wants."

Rio pulled a die out of her pocket and rolled it across the counter. A five, then a four, then a two.

"Right now, she's happy with the way things are working out, so she doesn't need a redo."

The die's one was painted red. When that came up, Rio stopped rerolling.

"She's unaware of it."

"If she was, she'd be a *real* demon."

"True."

He took a sip of coffee. It was bitter.

“Sounds like you almost want another loop to happen,” Rio said, taking her glasses off.

“If it’s not going to happen again, I just want someone to tell me it won’t.”

She ignored him. “You sure you don’t want a do-over yourself?” she asked.

Like this was the whole reason she’d brought the subject up.

“.....”

“So you do.”

“Have you never thought, ‘If only I’d...’?”

“Is this about your sister?”

Rio wasn’t about to let him worm out of this one. Payback for teasing her about Yuuma?

“Yeah. Is that bad?”

“It’s not bad, but it is out of character.”

“I don’t seriously want to go back and try again.”

“Then what?”

“I just want to stop thinking about the shoulda woulda couldas when I know they won’t get me anywhere.”

“That does sound like you.”

“I can barely manage living in the present. Going back in time...no way I can deal with all the possibilities that brings. It’d be a nightmare.”

Rio ignored this as she set up her gas burner.

Sakuta flicked the die on the table. It came up a three.

“Uh, Futaba...”

“What?”

Busy with the flame, she sounded annoyed. Like she’d heard what she wanted to hear and had lost all interest in Sakuta.

“Any good ways to beat someone bigger than you who’s also an athlete?”

“.....”

Rio’s hands paused. There was a look of surprise in her eyes. But it quickly faded to scorn. Eventually, she snorted derisively.

“Not my field.”

“Thought not.”

She got the flame adjusted so it was burning blue.

“But...”

“Hmm?”

“Humans aren’t monkeys, so if you use your head...you might have a chance.”

That was a very Rio solution.



All my lies to you

1

Sunday evening, Sakuta got home from work to find a message on the answering machine.

“Who could that be?”

Their father didn’t live with them, so he called sometimes to check in.

Figuring it was from him, Sakuta pressed the button.

“This is Mai Sakurajima. I’m back from Kagoshima. Just letting you know.”

That was not what he’d expected. She sounded more formal than usual, which was a delight in its own right.

He played it back again.

“This is Mai Sakurajima. I’m back from Kagoshima. Just letting you know.”

The answering machine happily let him hear Mai’s voice again.

He was about to press it a third time when he realized that would be pretty obnoxious.

Instead, he picked up the phone and punched in her cell number. From memory, of course.

She answered on the third ring.

“Who is it?”

“Me.”

“I know. Your number’s in my contacts. I was about to take a bath.”

She sounded annoyed, like it was his fault for choosing that moment to call. He chalked this up to the mysteries of the female mind.

“So you’re naked?”

“If I was, I wouldn’t have picked up.”

“Why not?”

“Only a pervert would talk to a boy while naked.”

She had a point there. Sakuta would rather she *not* do anything like that.

“So, what?” He could tell she clearly wanted to hurry up and take her bath.

“Welcome back, Mai.”

“.....”

This seemed to rattle her a bit.

“Is that it?” she asked.

“That’s not the answer I was hoping for.”

“I’m not saying ‘I’m home.’”

Did saying it just now not count? Sakuta felt like it did, but maybe it didn’t for Mai.

As he was mulling that over, she said, “Bye,” and hung up.

You couldn’t tie her down.

Sure she’d never pick up if he dialed again, Sakuta put the receiver back on the hook, deciding to be satisfied with the knowledge she was safely back.

The next day was Monday, July 7. The day of the Star Festival—and a sunny day, not a cloud in the sky.

Sakuta turned the TV on while he ate breakfast.

“It seems like Orihime and Hikoboshi should be able to meet up safely!”

The male morning newscaster was always looking out for them like that.

The remainder of the weather report suggested that areas across the country were getting into the high eighties. The weather lady looked very pleased by this. Sakuta immediately lost all motivation.

If he could get away with it, he’d gladly skip school. But Sakuta had good reason not to. End-of-term exams started today.

Enduring the heat, Sakuta made it to school, where math and English exams lay in wait. He managed to answer everything on the math test, but the listening section of the English exam was a total wash. On his way home, he resolved to find a job that required absolutely no English.

Maybe he wasn't meant to be Santa Claus.

The short walk to the station was filled with Minegahara students. It was even busier than usual, since the sports teams didn't have practice during exams.

As he passed through the gates, Sakuta recognized someone up ahead.

Tomoe, wearing a backpack with the straps loose to hide her butt.

She had her head down, looking uncomfortable, and was dragging her feet. The three girls she was always with—Rena, Hinako, and Aya—were laughing about ten yards ahead.

It didn't seem like Tomoe had stayed behind for something and was just now catching up. It looked more like the other girls knew Tomoe was there but were pretending they hadn't noticed.

The gap between them looked intentional.

Sakuta immediately thought of what Yuuma had said last Friday.

"There's some ugly rumors."

Ugly was honestly a mild term for it.

"Like she's easy or a slut or sleeping with you."

This could be bad.

The tiny platform at Shichirigahama Station was packed with Minegahara students.

Tomoe was standing on the Fujisawa-bound side, at the far corner, looking very small. There was a little clearing around her, like she was surrounded by an invisible wall. They were all in the same place, but the air around Tomoe was different.

Sakuta used his pass and stepped through the gates, ignoring the stares to stand right by her side. He poked her in the cheek.

"Don't look so gloomy," he said.

"Senpai..."

Tomoe looked up for a moment but was too conscious of her surroundings to

stay that way for long.

Sakuta joining her had only increased the amount of attention. But nobody was blatantly staring. It was all quick glances, wondering if the rumors were true.

People were laughing at them, fascinated by the gossip, looking down on people who'd stepped out of line.

This was an everyday thing for Sakuta. He didn't think anything of it. But it was crushing Tomoe.

She was staring at her feet, and he could tell she was barely holding up. It was painfully clear she wanted to turn and run.

Like she was about to burst into tears.

This kind of attention was the one thing Tomoe was least equipped to handle. She'd been desperately reading the air to avoid anything like this happening. She'd even made Sakuta pretend to be her boyfriend to avoid this sort of embarrassment.

Like a whip across her back, a braying laugh came from behind them.

Tomoe quivered.

Irritation rising, Sakuta turned around to find three grinning third-year boys behind them. All three looked pretty trendy. Chains hanging off every hip. In the center of the group was Maesawa.

His eyes met Sakuta's. He smirked.

"First-years put out for anyone these days." He addressed the boys with him but spoke loud enough that everyone could hear. His eyes offered up a clear challenge to Sakuta.

A pretty lazy way to start a fight. This struck Sakuta as funny, so he laughed. Giving as good as he got was just basic manners.

"Ah?!" Maesawa snarled, his brow furrowing. Radiating fury, he took a couple steps toward Sakuta. "Did you just laugh at me?"

"I still am! What about it?"

“You think this is a joke?!”

Maesawa grabbed a handful of his shirt.

“I’m just openly mocking you.”

Someone down the platform laughed out loud.

An instantly later, a powerful punch caught Sakuta’s face. There was a dull thud. Sakuta staggered a few steps backward.

“Eek!”

That shriek was probably Tomoe.

Everything turned white. His left cheek went numb.

A few seconds later, a hot, throbbing pain surged across it. Maesawa was three inches taller than Sakuta, his physique honed from all that basketball, and his punch was even stronger than Sakuta had expected.

“Ow...”

A silence settled over the crowd of Minegahara students. Everyone held their breath. Tension filled the air.

Maesawa swung his arm back to unleash a follow-up.

“Senpai!”

Tomoe’s tiny body was suddenly standing between Sakuta and Maesawa.

“Don’t!” Sakuta yelled, grabbing her backpack and pulling her backward. The momentum of this left him standing where she’d been.

Tomoe must have caught Maesawa off guard, because he froze, fist in the air.

The crowd of rubberneckers didn’t dare blink.

Sakuta had planned to grin and bear it. But the pain in his cheek wasn’t going away, and he felt anger rising within him. The heat of it taking control.

“Senpai...,” Tomoe said, tugging his sleeve fretfully. Seeing her on the verge of tears made putting up with it seem stupid.

He took a big step forward and raised a fist.

Maesawa instantly put both arms up in a guard. That left his legs wide-open. Sakuta planted the tip of his shoe hard in Maesawa's shin.

"Unh?!" A grunt of surprise and pain.

Maesawa quickly knelt down, clutching his injured right leg.

"That wasn't fair!" he hissed, glaring balefully up at Sakuta.

"Rich, coming from you."

Sakuta planted the sole of his foot on Maesawa's face. Yakuza-style. It hit hard.

"Gah!"

Unable to catch himself, Maesawa fell on his ass and rolled across the platform.

He glared up at Sakuta, red with shame, anger, and mortification.

No one said anything. The shock of it all was so great, nobody knew how to react. They were all hanging on Sakuta's next words.

Sakuta wasn't about to play to the crowd's wishes, but he chose the thing he thought Maesawa would least want to hear.

"Pathetic."

A stir ran through the crowd. People were giggling.

"Who... Who...?!" Maesawa spluttered, too angry to complete the sentence. His lips flapped like a goldfish.

The two third-years with him stepped forward.

Sakuta ignored them. "You'd better wash your face, senpai," he said.

"Huh?"

"I stepped in some dogshit yesterday."

Maesawa quickly wiped his face with one hand. When the crowd saw him sniff that hand, another laugh went up.

The two third-years stopped advancing, keeping their distance. The shit barrier was a powerful force.

Sakuta looked around and saw a lot of students playing with their phones. Posting about it on social media, texting friends who'd missed the show.

And he saw Rena staring at him in shock. Hinako was in a panic next to her, and Aya was trying to calm her down.

"Th-this is bullshit!" Maesawa snarled, finally making it to his feet.

"That's my line. You don't wanna make a spectacle of yourself, don't start a shitshow. It's a pathetic way to live."

"Bullshit!"

"You said that already."

"....."

Apparently, his speech circuits had fried. Maesawa couldn't think of any other words. He just kept muttering "Bullshit" like a broken record.

"Senpai, that's enough," Tomoe said. Her hands were clutching the back of Sakuta's uniform. She seemed worried about the effect all this negative attention would have on Maesawa. Given how much she hated that kind of scrutiny, it made sense she wouldn't want it happening to anyone else, either.

But Sakuta wasn't done yet.

"No, I got one more thing to say." Sakuta glared down at Maesawa. "She's sleeping with me? Ha! I'm a virgin."

And with that he took Tomoe's hand and pulled her out of the station. Each step they took got faster. Before he knew it, they were running.

Not because he thought Maesawa might be chasing them.

They were just both so wound up they couldn't *not* run. Sakuta was almost giddy. He didn't know why he was enjoying this so much. But his heart was racing.

"Senpai, you went a bit *too* far."

"Did I?!"

"Way too far," Tomoe said. But she was grinning the whole time they ran.

The sounds of the surf and the wind calmed their racing hearts.

The ugly feelings that had been building up inside cleared away.

The beach was magic like that.

Sakuta and Tomoe had fled the station and were walking west along the Shichirigahama sands. They could see Enoshima floating on the waters ahead, getting slowly closer.

“Wanna join me?” Tomoe suggested. She had her socks and shoes off and was enjoying the waves lapping at her feet. Sakuta was a couple of yards inland, walking just out of range of the surf.

“And who would carry *my* shoes?” he asked.

Tomoe had dropped her shoes and socks on the beach, and Sakuta was carrying them for her.

It was a weekday, but there were still a decent number of people on the beach. Families with little kids, groups of college students, grown-up couples... all laughing and playing in the surf. It was a beautiful day, and they were enjoying their first beach visit of the year. Everyone seemed happy.

“Senpai.”

“I’m not coming in!”

“Not that.” Tomoe pouted, puffing out her cheeks.

“Then what?”

“Thank you.”

“.....”

“That made me really happy.”

“You’re welcome,” he said without emotion. His left cheek still hurt. It felt like it was on fire.

“I think I’m starting to understand what you said before.”

“Mm?”

“The thing about having the whole world against you but one person who

needs you. Something like that anyway.”

“You don’t even remember it!”

“I really felt like your girlfriend there. Like I really mattered to you.”

The wind and the waves swept her delight to Sakuta’s ears.

“Well, we agreed to that for the rest of the term.”

Originally, it had been a “more than a senpai, less than a boyfriend” thing, but that last part had pretty much gone away.

“Most people wouldn’t go that far for a fake girlfriend. It wouldn’t be that important.”

“I’m a perfectionist.”

“You’re such a jamoke,” Tomoe said, unleashing her natural accent.

“A what now?”

“You ain’t even know that?” Tomoe scoffed. Then she looked proud. “I’ll help you out. It means you ain’t funny.”

“I didn’t mean it to be.”

They walked on, side by side.

“Koga.”

“Mm?”

“I should be thanking you. If you hadn’t stepped in, he’d have kicked my ass.”

Given Maesawa’s size advantage, another two or three punches would have taken all the fight out of Sakuta.

“But be more careful. If he’d hit you, you could have been really hurt.”

“I just got kinda desperate.”

“Well, you are the schoolgirl of justice.”

He remembered how they first met, when she’d mistaken him for a creep and tried to save a little girl, kicking him in the ass without a thought for the consequences.

That was Tomoe's true nature, he thought.

When it got down to it, she'd moved before she had time to think. Driven by a need to do something.

Not a thing just anyone could do. Most people freeze up in a dangerous situation.

"Also, sorry."

"For what?" She looked puzzled.

"I was pretty brutal with your friend's crush."

"Ohhhh, right. Crap."

Tomoe stopped, a cloud passing over her face.

The waves lapped at her feet.

"No point thinking about it now," Sakuta said.

"It's your fault! Think with me!"

"I said I was sorry instead."

"So irresponsible!" Tomoe wailed.

Then, her shoulders flinched. She pulled her phone out of her pocket. It must have vibrated.

"Oh, it's from Rena..."

She stared at the screen, looking tense.

"What's she say?"

"“Sorry, I dunno what got into me.”"

"Oh?" Sakuta couldn't help but grin.

"“I've lost all respect for Maesawa.”"

"Well, that's a real shame. Then again, if her crush can be ended by a little dogshit in the face, it wasn't that strong."

She'd been all about the surface appeal. If she'd really loved him, a single undignified moment would never have been enough to change that. Even that

shame was still a part of him.

“‘We’re gonna study for exams. Wanna join us?’”

Well, at least everything was cleared up and they were friends again. Tomoe responded, and they went back and forth a few times. She was smiling again.

But even after she put the phone away, she seemed disinclined to leave the water.

“You aren’t going?”

“I said I wanna have you help me study.”

“And?”

She showed him her screen. There were posts from all three of her friends, containing no words—all just stamps with big grinning faces.

“Oh, right, senpai...”

“Mm?”

“There is one thing I want to say.”

She was fidgeting.

“You need to pee?”

“No!”

“Then what?”

“I—I...haven’t, either.”

“Haven’t what?”

He knew what she meant, but her evident embarrassment was so entertaining, Sakuta pretended not to. How would she explain herself?

He waited expectantly.

“I’m a virgin,” she said, looking up at him.

He couldn’t stop himself. He laughed out loud.

“Wh-why are you laughing?! That’s mean!”

She kicked water at him. Sakuta dodged.

“Don’t dodge!”

“Did you think I believed those rumors?”

“No, but if you did? I really didn’t want that.”

“Still, going straight to ‘I’m a virgin,’ just laying it out there?”

An elderly couple with a dog were passing right next to them.

“K-keep your voice down!”

“You said it first.”

“W-well...it thought it was best to be clear.”

“And it certainly is now! I’m not fussed about that stuff, either way.”

Sakuta started walking. Didn’t seem like they’d ever move on, otherwise.

“Ah! Wait!”

She came splashing after him.

Tomoe in the surf, and Sakuta on the beach, the distance between them never closing but never widening.

“But you said you’d had a boyfriend before?” he reminded her with a smirk.

“You know perfectly well that’s a lie,” she said, half-sheepish, half-annoyed.

“It didn’t seem all that unlikely.”

“I mean, everyone says they had a boyfriend in junior high. Rena, Hinako, Aya. Hinako’s still dating that same guy.”

“Hmm.”

“I didn’t volunteer the information! It was more like everyone just agreed I definitely had one. And it felt wrong to disagree, and...now here we are.”

“Ahhh.”

“And if I said I’d never dated anyone, I thought you’d look down on me.”

“Who is it you’re fighting?”

“I dunno.”

Probably the views of the world or the expectations people had for her. She was putting all kinds of work into protecting other people's conceptions of "Tomoe Koga."

A daily battle to make a version of her that nobody would dislike. A battle against something unseen...like the air.

"Uh, senpai...", she said, giving him a sidelong glance even as she kicked the water.

"Mm?"

Sakuta was picking his way across the beach, trying not to trip on the sand.

"How can I ever repay you for this?"

The sound of her footsteps stopped.

He took a few more steps, then stopped and turned toward her.

She looked very serious. Waiting for his answer.

"I can't believe you're asking that with a straight face."

"It's a serious question."

"I don't need you repaying me. The Japan team made it out of the group stage just fine."

The other day, they'd scored a huge win against a strong opponent, making it to the knockout stage. Four years of hard work had paid off, and their offense had exploded.

Tomoe had kept her promise and cheered them on the whole time. She'd shown him a picture of herself in the Japan team uniform, with the Japanese flag painted on her face.

"But..."

"If that's not enough, come out with me this weekend."

"Where?"

"I wanna buy my sister some clothes once my paycheck arrives, but I really don't know what looks are 'in.'"

“Okay...”

She'd agreed to it but didn't seem satisfied. Like that wasn't enough to pay him back.

“Fine, one more thing, then.”

“What?” she asked, a bit too eager.

“When the lie ends, we stay friends.”

“.....”

She hadn't been expecting that, and her eyes went wide. Then, she giggled, yet she didn't seem satisfied.

“You don't wanna?”

“I do, and I don't.”

“Come again?”

Like something was bothering her, Tomoe put her hand to her heart, opening and closing it nervously.

“You don't have to,” he said.

“No, you win. I'll be your best friend.”

Tomoe's smile gleamed beneath the summer sun.

“Just normal friends is fine.”

“Aww.”

Sakuta and Tomoe walked two stations' worth of beach before finally boarding a train at Koshigoe Station.

They looked around the train before they sat down. Over an hour had passed since Sakuta's fight with Maesawa, and there were hardly any Minegahara uniforms on board. Everyone had gone home early to prepare for tomorrow's exams.

Tomoe looked very relieved.

They found empty seats and sat together. There was a group of college kids directly opposite, cheering as the train threaded its way between rows of

homes.

“This is amazing!”

“They’re so close! We’re gonna hit!”

“Man, this is revolutionary.”

Doesn’t that word literally mean the opposite of what you’re trying to say?
Just as he had that thought, his eyes met Tomoe’s. She must have been thinking the same thing, because she was grinning. This train ride was more nostalgic than new. The guy needed to work on his vocabulary.

“So where we gonna study, Koga?”

“Huh? We’re actually going to?”

“If we don’t, you’ll have lied to your friends.”

“...Are you any good at chemistry?”

She gave him a searching look.

“I feel confident I’m better than you.”

“That sounds insulting.”

“How so?”

“We’ll have to find out if it’s true.”

“Then you wanna come over?”

“Huh?”

“No parents around.”

“Uhhhh?!”

“Shhh, not so loud—we’re on the train.”

A bunch of eyes had turned toward them.

“B-but...I...I wasn’t ready for...still, uh...okay.”

A rapid flurry of expressions passed over Tomoe’s face, from panic to fluster to embarrassment, but in the end, she nodded.

“You’ve definitely got the wrong idea here.”

“I—I don’t! Don’t treat me like a child.”

“Well, you don’t want to take that first step toward being a grown-up.”

Sakuta spent the remaining minutes before they reached Fujisawa Station giving ten different reasons why he would never try anything with Tomoe. Tomoe sulked the whole time and deliberately stepped on his foot on the way off the train.

It was a ten-minute walk from the station to Sakuta’s apartment. There, they took the elevator to the fifth floor.

“I’m home!” he announced, opening the door.

Kaede poked her head out of the living room.

“Welcome ba—”

She made it halfway through, realized Sakuta wasn’t alone, and hid behind the doorframe. She peered at Tomoe like a small animal that has spotted its natural predator.

“You’ve brought *another* girl over?!” she asked.

This seemed like a smirch on his honor, so he ignored it.

“Come on in.”

“Th-thanks for having me,” Tomoe said. She bobbed her head and took off her shoes. She lined them up perfectly, and then Sakuta beckoned her into his room.

Before he could follow her, Kaede tugged at his sleeve.

“What?”

She stretched to whisper in his ear.

“If you’re going to escort a lady of the night to our domicile, you should warn me in advance.”

“Kaede, you’ve definitely got the wrong idea.”

Tomoe was hardly sexy enough to warrant such a description. Her hairstyle was too simple, her makeup light, and why in the world did she say *domicile*?

No one had ever referred to their apartment in such lofty terms before.

“How much has she siphoned off you?”

“She’s Tomoe Koga, a kohai from school.”

“If you’re after younger women, you have me!”

“What are we talking about?”

“I’ll tell Mai!”

That was concerning. She had approved of the matter with Tomoe, but a play-by-play report would definitely hurt Her Majesty’s feelings.

“We’re gonna study for exams. We can talk later.”

He peeled Kaede off him and shut the door.

“Sit anywhere,” he said, waving at a cushion.

Tomoe sat down on her knees, formal Japanese-style. He set up a folding table in front of her.

“Your legs’ll go numb like that.”

“R-right.”

Minding the hem of her skirt, Tomoe shifted her legs to either side.

Sakuta sat across from her.

He opened a Modern Japanese textbook to prepare for the next day. Tomoe had her chemistry textbook and notes but didn’t seem to be focused on them. Her eyes were darting this way and that around his room. She turned red when she saw his bed. She then looked at his desk and hung her head.

Finally, she blurted, “I can’t!” and shoved her books back in her backpack. She tried to put it on but couldn’t get her arms through the straps.

“I-I’m gonna go study with Rena and the girls after all!” she said and dashed out of the room. “Th-thanks for having me!”

She was already out the door.

“Yo, Koga!” Sakuta shouted, chasing after her. He got one sandal on and took a half step outside.

She was already by the elevator. The bell rang as it reached their floor.

A moment later, the doors opened.

Tomoe tried to step in but stopped, gaping.

Someone was coming out.

“Ah!”

Sakuta gaped, too. A Minegahara uniform. Black tights despite the summer dress code. Mai.

Tomoe took Mai’s place on the elevator.

Mai glanced once at Sakuta and once back at Tomoe as the doors closed.

Then she walked toward Sakuta, her heels clicking.

“You two got awful friendly while I wasn’t looking.”

Her slim, pale finger poked him in the nose.

“She was bright red! What did you do to her?”

There was an accusation in her eyes.

“I tried to study with her.”

“Study what?”

“I went with Modern Japanese, and Koga with chemistry.”

“Hmph.”

Seemingly even more disgruntled, Mai increased the pressure behind her finger.

It seemed best to change the subject.

“Mai...did you bring us souvenirs?”

His eyes lit on the paper bag in her hands. Mai’s mood did not visibly improve, but she removed her finger.

“Yes,” she said as she shoved the bag into his hands.

He looked inside and saw impressive blocks of dried fish, some fish cakes, and a custard-filled sponge cake called *kasutadon*.

“These are all good cold, too.”

“Thank you.”

With that business taken care of, Mai turned around and headed back to the elevators.

“You aren’t coming in?”

“If I came in now, it would be like I’m in competition with that first-year.”

That kinda made sense and kinda didn’t, but she left anyway.

No point in just standing there. Sakuta went back inside and called Kaede out, and they ate the souvenirs together.

“These *are* good!”

“Yes, they are!”

2

The second day of final exams, Tuesday. Sakuta was called to the faculty office as soon as he arrived, taken to the guidance counselor’s office, and forced to take his exams alone.

He didn’t need to ask why. The cause was clearly the fight at Shichirigahama Station.

The station attendant must have phoned it in.

“During midterms, you make a huge fuss in the schoolyard, and now, during finals, you get in a fight. Do you have something against exams, Azusagawa?”

“I think we’d all be better off without them.”

“That’ll never happen.”

His homeroom teacher went through the motions of chewing him out but didn’t sound that upset. There were a lot of eyewitnesses, and it seemed like the extenuating circumstances had been reported accurately.

Especially the part where Maesawa had swung first.

The teacher concluded by warning him to be careful, but Sakuta wasn’t sure

what he was supposed to be careful of. Dogshit on the road, perhaps.

Apparently, Maesawa hadn't come to school at all.

After school, Sakuta left the guidance counselor's office and found Tomoe waiting for him in the hall.

She looked apologetic, like it was her fault Sakuta was in trouble.

"How'd your exams go?" he asked.

"Awful." Even her answer seemed downcast.

"Studying with your friends just turn into a family restaurant hangout?" he speculated.

He started walking, and she hastily followed.

"How'd your exams go?" she asked.

"Consistent."

"Consistently good?"

"Consistently bad."

"Well, at least we're in this together."

Camaraderie in bad exam results wasn't going to make either of them better students, but Tomoe seemed relieved by it anyway.

"Oh, right, senpai, you've got to get a phone."

"Huh?"

"I mean, I left suddenly yesterday, right? Then, um...I got worried what you thought about it."

"I thought you were emotionally unstable."

Tomoe's face instantly turned red. Anger boiling over.

"Well, I want to follow up on that kind of thing faster!" she snapped, glaring at him. "And you got called to the faulty office, so I wanted to get in touch with you earlier...and I couldn't focus on my tests at all."

She seemed to be carrying a grudge here.

“But, uh...that’s all you thought?” she asked, seemingly reluctant.

“All about what?”

“You didn’t have any other thoughts on yesterday?”

“I didn’t really think about you at all.”

“That’s a horrible way to put it. But...okay.”

Tomoe whispered “Good” under her breath, looking relieved. Sakuta noticed her eyes seemed a little puffy.

“Were you up all night studying?”

If so, not being able to focus on the exams was a real tragedy.

“No, but why?”

“Your eyes are a bit panda.”

“You’re kidding?!” Tomoe yanked out a mirror and checked. “Argh, they are! I’ll fix that.”

She dashed off to the girls’ restroom. Always in a hurry.

Left on his own, Sakuta muttered to himself, “That looked more like she was crying her eyes out.”

On Wednesday, the midpoint of finals, Sakuta was able to take his exams in class.

He’d spotted Maesawa on the train on the way in. Seemed like he’d recovered from the shock. Their eyes met once, and the look of disgust on Maesawa’s face suggested he had not seen the error of his ways.

With both of them on board, the air on the train turned ugly fast, and people were whispering “Dogshit” all around. Some pointing at Sakuta, some at Maesawa. One or two people also said, “Virgin proclamation.” This was definitely intended to make fun of Sakuta, but he wasn’t at all upset by it.

That seemed to be the extent of it.

Considering the scale of the conflict, this response seemed kinda understated, but it *was* during exams, which helped divert attention. Everyone was too busy

focusing on themselves to care about anything else.

But the one thing that was very clear was that everyone knew about Sakuta and Tomoe's relationship now. Everyone knew the reason Sakuta fought Maesawa had been to protect Tomoe, which *must* have meant they were in love. There was no way they were dialing things back to "more than a senpai, less than a boyfriend" now.

Which also meant their idea of naturally drifting apart over summer vacation might not be convincing. They might need a clear, definitive reason for breaking up.

When he finished his exams, Sakuta stared out the window at the ocean, trying to think of one.

The skies grew uneasy Thursday morning, and the rain came in fits and spurts. Very unpleasant.

Afternoon rolled around, and there was no sign of it clearing up. The laundry he had hung out to dry in his room was not doing well.

"Quit looking around."

Seated in Sakuta's room beneath his laundry was, for some reason, Mai.

He'd enjoyed a leisurely lunch with Kaede and had just finished hanging up the laundry when she arrived.

"We're studying for exams," she'd informed him with an intimidating growl. Which brings us to the present.

They had the folding table set up in the middle of the room and were seated on adjacent sides of it. From that forty-five-degree angle, Mai did not appear to be in a good mood.

"Are you mad at me, Mai?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you're suddenly making me study."

"Exams end tomorrow. I'm here to help you learn. Solve this problem."

She pointed at a physics problem.

It involved the Doppler effect.

“You’ve got five minutes.”

A very Spartan approach.

“As long as I don’t fail...”

“Sakuta, are you thinking about your future at all?”

“My future is at your side.”

“.....”

Mai silently clicked her mechanical pencil. She didn’t have a notebook ready, so this must have been for something besides writing. Like stabbing him.

It seemed safer to avoid more jokes.

“I do want to go to college.”

There were two conditions in his way. The first was a simple matter of academic performance. He couldn’t get into college if he couldn’t pass the entrance exams. The other condition was economic, given his family’s circumstances. His father had already dropped hints that private colleges would probably not be an option.

“You, Mai?”

“Same.”

“Not focusing on work?”

“I can do both. Always have.”

She was now.

“I’m looking at a public college in Yokohama.”

Whether run by the nation or the city, the bar for entry would be pretty high.

“You *are* a good student.”

She’d said she’d never scored below an eight.

“.....”

Chin in hand, Mai gave him a long, searching look.

This felt deliberate, so he avoided her eyes.

“Don’t look away,” she scolded. “You want to go to the same school as me, right?”

That’s what he’d expected.

“Well, I don’t—”

“You want to.”

Smiling, she pointed the tip of her pencil at him.

“If I can.”

“Then *study*.”

“.....”

“If it’s public, the burden on your parents’ resources won’t be too bad, and if it’s in Yokohama, you can commute from here.”

Mai was right. She’d already filled in all the moats. What happened to the winter campaign to take Osaka Castle? She’d skipped right ahead to the summer one.

“Yeah, well...”

“What’s your problem?”

“I’m just imagining how difficult it’ll be to achieve the required level of academic performance.”

Sakuta’s grades were thoroughly average. Rock solid on them sixes.

“But that is easily solved by you applying yourself.”

“And I don’t want to do that, which is why I’m resisting.”

“Even after what I said?”

“Honestly, I still haven’t heard a word about what you really want.”

Mai sat up at this, staring right into his eyes.

“If I said I want to go to the same school as you, would you be motivated?”

“.....”

Mai's cheeks were slightly flushed. She might be acting, but those words were still like an arrow through his heart.

"Wh-what?" she asked.

"I want to jump you right now."

"I *will* stab you."

He threw his hands up, surrendering. And then rolled over on the floor.

"No slacking!"

"I just can't get motivated."

"What if I teach you in that bunny-girl outfit?"

"That would be *very* motivating."

What exactly did she want to teach him? His heart was racing in anticipation. But he also assumed this was just a joke.

"If you agree to study, I'll put it on."

"Really?"

Sakuta leaped to his feet.

Mai had already opened his closet. She pulled out the paper bag containing the bunny-girl outfit.

"I need to change. Get out."

She really meant it.

He hadn't dared dream of this moment. He was hardly going to blow this chance.

Without a word of protest, he left the room.

"Peep, and you die," she growled.

And shut the door behind him.

Sakuta did as he was told, waiting patiently in the hall.

Mai was changing in Sakuta's bedroom, just a thin door between them. Part of him wanted to fling it open, but he restrained himself.

There was no need for such risky actions. If he just waited, he would get to savor her bunny-girl outfit again. A moment of nudity versus a lengthy bunny-girl session... Sakuta chose the latter. He believed this was the right choice.

Kaede gave him a strange look while he waited, but he covered, saying he was feeding Nasuno.

It was a good fifteen-minute wait.

“Okay,” Mai called at last.

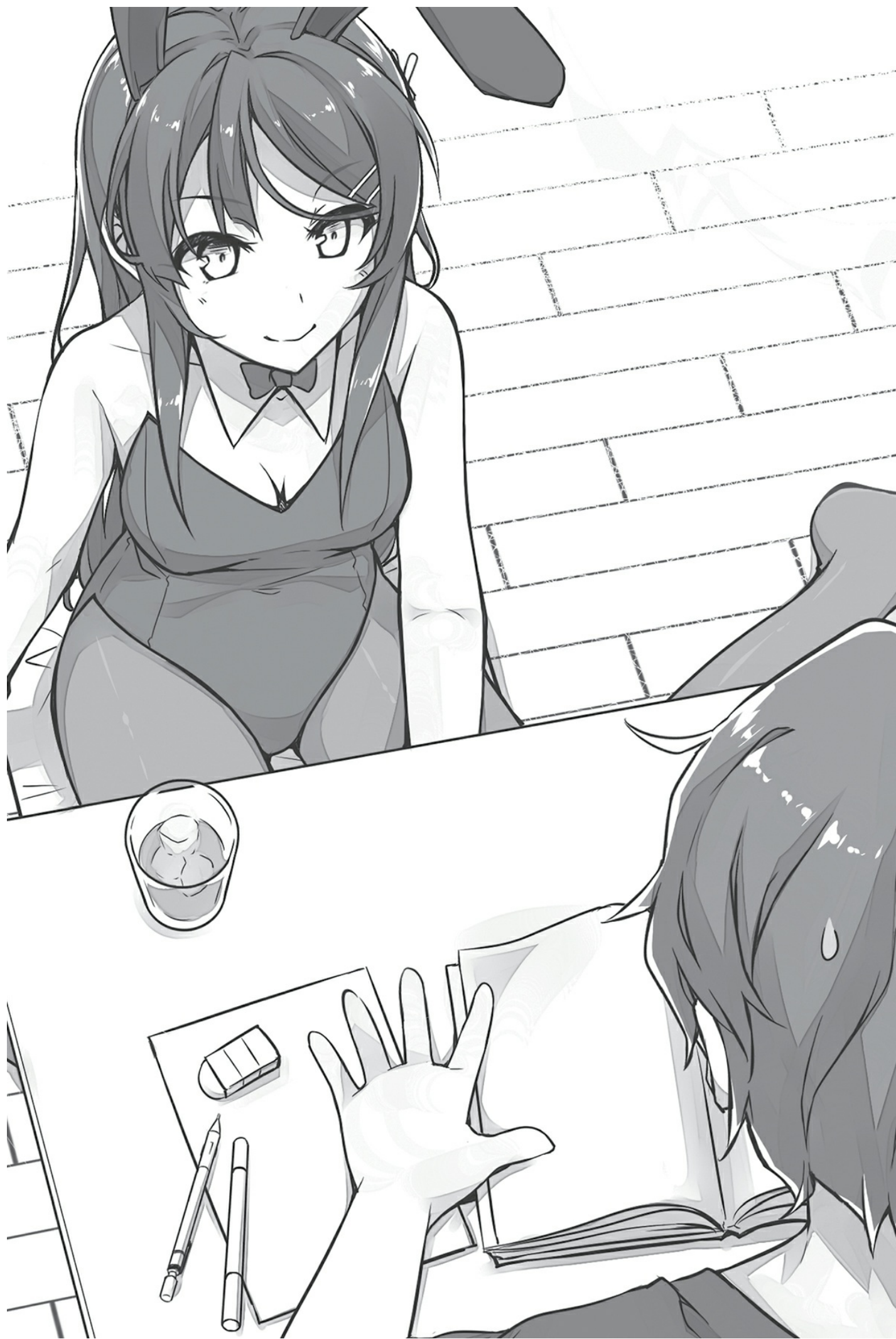
“Coming in,” he said, making sure.

“Go ahead.”

Once he heard that, he opened the door.

Mai was sitting in the same spot by the table, legs to one side.

But she was wearing a skin-tight black leotard. Black stockings on her long, slim legs. A bow tie on her throat. White cuffs on her wrists. A headband with bunny ears. The high heels alone were resting to one side, since she was indoors.



Mai's outfit had changed, but everything else was the same.

"Go on, sit down."

When Mai spoke, the ears wobbled.

Sakuta settled down across the table from her. Their knees bumped beneath it. Mai didn't pull away. Apparently, this was an acceptable level of physical contact.

"Now study."

As promised, Sakuta opened his notebook and read the problem in the textbook.

But before he knew it, his eyes were back on Mai. Her bare shoulders looked like they'd be smooth to the touch. The pale skin of her cleavage, swelling softly, forming a valley between. The tight indentation at her waist, the aesthetically pleasing curve of her hips and thighs. He could stare at her all day.

"Your hands aren't moving."

Mai reached out and poked him in the nose.

"Look at your textbook, not me."

He thought she'd be mad, but that didn't appear to be the case. She seemed to enjoy being the focus of his rapt attention.

"What's this, Mai?"

"What's what?"

"You don't seem mad."

"Should I be?"

"Something good happen?"

"No...I just figured I should try the carrot sometimes."

Mai turned away and said something else. He couldn't hear her.

"What?"

"I said, I didn't think you'd get in a fight for her."

“You saw what happened Monday?”

“Part of it. You did wash your shoe, right?”

“I made the dogshit thing up.”

“Oh. Argh, I don’t like it.”

This was hardly fair. It was a lot of work to stay on Her Majesty’s good side sometimes. He didn’t think this quite qualified as jealousy, but she was definitely displeased.

Mai let herself fall facedown on the table, glaring up at Sakuta. This really emphasized her cleavage.

“Stop staring at my boobs!”

“So basically, you’re just starved for attention.”

“Do you want to get punched?”

“Not the face!” He raised his hands, joke-guarding. She did a slow-mo punch and twisted her fist on his shoulder.

Then she sighed dramatically.

“Come on! Try to make me feel better!”

A tall order. Yet it just sounded right coming from her.

“Mai, do you have plans over summer vacation?”

“I’ll be working for half of it. You?”

“Mostly working, too. But the rest of my time, I’d love to spend with you. It is summer.”

“I can’t do pools and beaches.”

“Aww.”

“I mean it. I’m a celebrity.”

And not just any celebrity. She was a nationally famous actress. If she showed up in a swimsuit at a local beach or pool, she’d cause a small riot.

“Take your cute girlfriend to those,” Mai said, like it didn’t matter to her.

“Mai.”

“What?”

“I love *you*.”

Her hand reached out and twisted his cheek.

“Owww.”

“Don’t cheat! You’re that first-year’s boyfriend right now.”

“Well, I saw this incredibly beautiful girl and couldn’t fight the impulse.”

“Don’t tell people you love them on impulse.”

It sounded like she was scolding him, but she was smiling. Her mood seemed to have improved. Or maybe she was just enjoying messing with him.

“Come on, study.”

“Aww.”

“You can’t sleep till you solve all these problems.”

There were a lot of physics equations on the page she pointed to. The price of the bunny-girl outfit was very high. But a promise was a promise...

3

After school on Friday, with the five days of finals complete, Tomoe kept her word and went shopping with Sakuta.

They took the JR Tokaido Line from Fujisawa Station.

About a twenty-minute ride.

Tomoe took a fashion magazine out of her backpack and pored over it, looking very serious. She was still going when they reached Yokohama Station.

This stop was huge and seemingly always under construction. They changed there for the Negishi Line.

One station down that line was Sakuragicho.

The Landmark Tower, which had recently become the second tallest building

in Japan. An unmissably huge Ferris wheel. A very different type of harbor from Shichirigahama.

The sights here were the essence of what most people thought of as “Yokohama.” Yet you wouldn’t see anything like this if you stepped outside Yokohama Station.

“Senpai, you’re from Yokohama, right? Or was that just a rumor, too?”

“I’m from farther inland, out of sight of the sea, but Yokohama sprawls like that.”

Was she even listening? Tomoe had her phone out and was taking a picture of the far-off Ferris wheel. It might be a lie, but for this term only, they were a couple. She spared no effort to record these memories.

The first place Sakuta and Tomoe hit up was a large shopping mall a seven-or eight-minute walk from the station. A new place that had just opened a year before, it was all still very shiny.

It took them about half an hour to complete the necessary shopping. Sakuta’s designated budget had been approximately seven to eight thousand yen, so Tomoe helped him find a top and bottom that would be right for Kaede. The outfit was definitely the fashion of the day. And surprisingly affordable.

Since he had a little budget left over, he could aim for age appropriate underneath, too.

“Uh, Koga...”

“What?”

“What kind of underwear do you wear?”

“.....”

“.....”

“Huh?” She turned around and gaped at him.

“Are you not wearing any?”

“I am! Just normal... Why am I talking about this?! Why would you ask that?!”

“I just figured we should also get some underwear that a fifteen-year-old girl

finds appropriate.”

“Your sister should buy that on her own!”

“Uh, so I didn’t mention this when you were over, but Kaede’s quite a homebody.”

“A homebody?” Tomoe blinked at him.

“A shut-in, basically. She was bullied in junior high.”

“Huh? What about your mom?”

“The mess with my sister was too much for her. We don’t live together. My father’s taking care of her.”

“.....”

Tomoe studied his face closely.

“It finally makes sense.”

“What does?”

“That’s why you’re helping me.”

“You really are good at reading the air.”

There was no point in denying it now.

“You are, too. I thought at first you couldn’t, and that’s why you didn’t fit in, but you can figure it out just fine. You just choose to ignore it.”

“Do I?”

“You do.” Tomoe grinned and turned left. “You wait here.”

“Why?”

“J-just wait! Don’t you dare move!”

Tomoe took an escalator to the floor above.

He waited about fifteen minutes. When Tomoe came back, she was holding a blue plastic bag, too opaque to see what was inside.

“Here.”

She handed it to him, but when he started to loosen the drawstrings, she

stopped him.

“No peeking!”

“Why not?”

“B-because they’re the same ones I have on.”

She smoothed down her skirt, fidgeting. Sakuta looked at her, then at the bag in his hand.

“Now I really want to look,” he said, tugging at the drawstrings again.

“No! Don’t! Argh, senpai! If you keep being such a perv, Sakurajima will dump you.”

“Huh?”

Why bring Mai into this?

“Somehow you’ve got a nationally famous actress interested in you. Don’t blow it!”

“Weren’t you insisting it was all in my head the other day?”

She hadn’t believed him. Tomoe had demanded to know if Mai had expressly said she loved him. This was while she was sick in the nurse’s office.

“But then I saw her show up at your apartment.”

“Oh yeah, she brought us some souvenirs.”

Tomoe had given up on studying and bumped into Mai on the elevator on her way out.

“I’ll help you with her, senpai! Make sure you two get together.”

“Whose fault is it we’re not together now?”

“Urp...th-that’s why I want to help!”

“Sure, thanks. I appreciate the thought... So what next? Anything you want to buy yourself?”

“Er...uh, mm. Mind if I check one thing?”

He followed Tomoe up a floor, and a world of color opened up before him.

The swimsuit section. Swimsuits of all shapes and colors.

“I promised to go to the beach with the girls,” she said. “But my only swimsuit is the one the school makes us get... What will everyone wear?”

“Don’t you have one from junior high?”

“Why would I go back to that? Oh, how about this one?”

Looking slightly embarrassed, Tomoe picked up a frilly pink bikini.

She held it up against herself.

“Never been into padding.”

“It’s not for you!”

“Suits like that...”

Sakuta turned his attention to the curvy mannequin nearby for comparison. But his eyes lit on a blond beauty who put the mannequin to shame. A foreign bombshell so stunning his jaw dropped and he couldn’t help but stare. Curves for days.

Gorgeous blue eyes. Sexy lips. Her clothes utterly failed to hide the size of her chest or how tight her waist was. She was in a corner of the swimsuit section, speaking fluent Japanese, saying “How’s this? Or this?” to a slender girl with long black hair.

No, wait, the girl with long black hair wasn’t a girl, but a willowy man with a very androgynous face. More “beautiful boy” than “handsome.” He seemed about the same age as the blond.

This international couple was drawing attention from all over the store, not just Sakuta and Tomoe.

“What about this?”

“They’re all great,” her boyfriend said, clearly sick of it.

“No need to get all embarrassed! Nobody’s watching.”

Yeah, no, everyone was. And the boyfriend wasn’t embarrassed, he was just fed up. Was this relationship healthy?

“They’re all the same!”

“You mean you think I can make anything look good?” she asked, grinning mischievously.

That really reminded him of Mai. The particular confidence of a woman who knew exactly how beautiful she was. She was joking, but she also meant every word.

“Yeah,” he admitted. This seemed to catch her off guard. But then she smiled happily. The kind of brilliant smile that made the air around her brighten.

“Not often I get a compliment from you.”

“It’s merely a statement of fact,” he said, and then he started walking away like he just couldn’t take any more.

“Ah! Wait!” She went dashing after him, taking his arm despite his protests.

“I thought you went back to England? Why are you in Japan again?”

“I told you I have an exhibit here. And my parents are with me. You should come meet them tonight!”

“Wh-what?! That’s news to me!”

“I’m telling you now.”

Things seemed to be heating up, but since they were on the escalator now, Sakuta had no way of knowing the rest.

“Uh, so you see, Koga?” he said, turning back. “Once you fill out like that blond girl, you’ll be ready for a bikini.”

“I’ll never look like *her*!”

“I’d go with something like this instead.” He picked up a nearby suit.

It was a camisole type, covering everything up top from the chest to the waistline. The bottom was cut like a pair of shorts. On closer inspection, both top and bottom had two layers.

Tomoe stared at it for a long time, then put the suit back on the rack.

“I’ll think about it and buy something later,” she said.

When they finished shopping, Sakuta and Tomoe took a walk over to Yamashita Park. This was a pretty big park on the edge of the water. Tomoe took a ton of pictures, and occasionally they posed together, like a couple.

As the sun started setting, Tomoe pointed at the huge Ferris wheel. “Let’s finish with that,” she suggested.

The lights were making the city glow.

Their gondola slowly rose higher. They had a view of the entire harbor, drenched in the light of the sunset. Again, the phone came out, recording their date.

When she finished, Sakuta decided it was time to address the elephant in the room.

“So, Koga...”

“What?”

She was plastered to the glass, enraptured by the view.

“We need to figure out how we’re gonna break up.”

“Huh? Oh yeah...I know.”

She turned around, nodding. This suggested she was way ahead of him.

Knowledge of their relationship had spread through all corners of Minegahara. He’d even fought an upperclassman for her, so everyone thought they were pretty serious.

If their relationship just fizzled out over summer vacation, nobody would believe it. They needed to come up with a specific reason why things ended.

“Don’t worry—I’ve got a plan to dump you,” Tomoe said, like she’d thought of a fun new game.

“Wait, I’m the one getting dumped?”

“Yes, I realized you still weren’t over Sakurajima, and I broke up with you because of that.”

“That’s awfully close to home.”

“It ends with me slapping you and shouting, ‘I don’t need you!’”

“We have to act the whole thing out?”

“Reality is critical.”

“Hoo boy...”

“Make some time after the end-of-term ceremony. We’ll have our fight on the way home from a beach date.”

Tomoe smiled the whole time she explained the slap-Sakuta strategy.

While on a giant Ferris wheel filled with couples.

But things between them had never felt syrupy, the way it did with real couples. They’d never had to force the fake couple act, either.

If he had to put their relationship into words, they’d be a senpai and a kohai who got along. Somewhere along the line, they’d forged the kind of friendship where it was totally natural to tease each other.

He felt like the promise they’d made had already come true.

“When the lie ends, we stay friends.”

The way they acted together was definitely already there.

“Why are you grinning?”

“No reason.”

“Ugh, don’t play me like that!”

And Sakuta felt really comfortable with her.

4

With the final exams over, the mood in the school was like summer vacation had already arrived. Rejoicing or despairing over the exam scores aside, everyone was poised for escape, taking comfort in the knowledge they just had to survive this week.

With the local beaches officially open, it was impossible to sit in class diligently reviewing the exam answers.

The one saving grace was that the waves on Shichirigahama were pretty rough, and swimming wasn't currently allowed. On days when the crowds were right outside the windows, students were poised to riot. But you only had to look left to see the Yuigahama beach and right to see Enoshima Eastside Beach.

The sight of far-off crowds and roofs of beach stalls made studying feel like a complete waste.

The teachers knew it as well and were just going through the motions.

Nobody cared.

Loads of students went off to swim the moment school let out. You could tell who, because they were all red with sunburn.

A typical summer sight at any seaside school.

The week passed peacefully.

The fake relationship with Tomoe went well. No one suspected a thing. Tomoe was getting along with her friends as well. She'd gone shopping with Rena, Hinako, and Aya on Sunday and bought a swimsuit. She told Sakuta about it at work.

"You want to see it, senpai?"

"Not really. More important, Koga..."

"How could anything be?!"

"My sister really liked the clothes you picked for her. Thanks."

"Oh, sure. Good!"

"But I can't believe you wear *those* panties."

"Huh?! You saw them?!"

"I never would have suspected *that* was lurking beneath your skirt."

"Th-they're totally normal!"

Enjoying their time together, the final week of the term came to an end. And the last day, Friday, July 18, came all too soon and all too readily.

On the day of the end-of-term ceremony, Sakuta was woken by Kaede

shaking him, as always.

“Morning, Kaede.”

“Good morning!”

They went to the living room, and he got breakfast ready. He flipped on the TV while he waited for the toast to finish, and it was showing highlights of the Fresh All-Star game from the night before. Crowds in a Nagasaki stadium cheering on two teams made of the best young players from each baseball league.

He and Kaede ate breakfast, absently watching it. At their feet, Nasuno munched happily away on a bowl of cat food.

“Summer vacation starts tomorrow, right?”

“And what does summer bring?”

“Watermelon!”

“I’ll bring one home.”

“It better be round!”

Eating an entire watermelon was a daunting task. They might have to foist some off on Mai, Sakuta thought. He got ready and left for school.

“Have fun!”

Kaede saw him off again.

On the train to school, he ran into Yuuma. They stood side by side, hanging on to straps above.

“You got summer plans, Sakuta?”

“Work.”

“Koga’s there, too!” Yuuma said, teasing him.

Sakuta ignored this. Yuuma had been baffled by their relationship at first but, after observing them together, seemed to have come around.

“You, Kunimi?”

“Work, practice, dates.”

“The essence of youth.”

“You’re one to talk!” Yuuma laughed, bumping his shoulder.

They chatted about this and that the rest of the way to school.

After morning homeroom, all students gathered in the gym for the ceremony. The principal’s well-intentioned speech fell on deaf ears—it was too hot to listen. Some students had brought in fans and were flapping them the whole time. Nobody yelled at them because the teachers were just as hot.

Back in his classroom, Sakuta sat through the final homeroom of the first term. The teacher read out each name in turn and handed over their report card.

Azusagawa was the first called, so he had no time to be nervous. The school used a ten-point rating system that soon brought reality crashing down on him.

His grades were basically the same as they always were. Thanks to Mai’s bunny-girl coaching, his physics grade was an eight, but everything else kept him at a thoroughly average six.

In the comment field, his teacher included a roundabout warning related to the incident with Maesawa. There was nothing else of interest.

The teacher wrapped up homeroom with a warning. “I know it’s summer, but don’t get carried away and hurt yourselves.” Teachers had been ending homerooms that way since elementary school.

The student on duty yelled, “Rise! Bow!” and a cheer went up. It was over. Finally. Emotions ran high.

Putting the commotion behind him, Sakuta left quickly.

The hall was filled with lingering students. It was a long vacation, and given they all had one another’s numbers, why not just go home? Was there some reason nobody did?

Since most students were taking their time, the road to the station was unusually empty. So was Shichirigahama Station itself. When Sakuta got there, there were maybe ten people around.

He walked down to where the first car on a Fujisawa-bound train stopped and

waited for the train. Six more minutes.

Before it pulled in, Tomoe came running up.

“You beat me here!” she said.

They’d agreed to go to the beach today.

Their final date.

They’d decided to meet at the station.

Tomoe was fussing with the top of her skirt, like it wasn’t sitting right. She noticed his look.

“I changed into my swimsuit in the school changing room,” she offered before he could ask.

A classic seaside school trick. Students on different sports teams left the beaches, went back to school, and used the team showers. Yuuma had mentioned this last year.

“You’re leering, senpai.”

“I know.”

He could see pink through her uniform blouse.

“That was a hint that you should stop,” Tomoe chided, holding her marine tote bag up protectively.

While they were talking, the train rolled slowly into the station.

Sakuta and Tomoe left the train at the Enoden Enoshima Station and, in less than ten minutes, were on the Eastside beach. A long, gentle curve of sand that could get really crowded this time of year.

It was a weekday, though, so it was only locals and still pretty empty.

They split up by the stalls, and Sakuta changed into his trunks. He also put on a T-shirt. People tended to get the wrong idea if they saw the scars on his chest.

He dropped his things in a locker just as Tomoe emerged. Changing into her suit at school had certainly sped things up.

“Right, let’s swim!”

“Huh? No opinions?”

“I thought you didn’t want me looking.”

Sakuta recognized the suit she was wearing. It was the same one he’d held up when they were shopping together. She’d elected not to buy it then but had gone back with her friends and chosen that one anyway.

“I think it’s cute,” he said.

“D-don’t say *cute*!”

“Then what do you want me to say?”

“.....”

Tomoe thought about it.

“...*Cute*, I guess?”

“You’re emotionally unstable again, Koga.”

“You know how girls’ minds work!”

“Not a whit.”

“Ah, shucks! You’re at it again!”

“Well, if we’re gonna shuck things, let’s get some corn on the cob.”

He turned around and headed for the stall.

“Oh! Me, too.”

Tomoe hurried back to his side.

Corn on the cob with the summer sun beating down on them was a treat like no other.

Midway through, there was a sudden shower, but everyone was at the beach to get wet anyway.

For lunch, they grabbed some *yakisoba* from the beach stall. While they waited for it to digest, he pulled Tomoe into the water, and once thoroughly drenched, they started swimming again. When they were tired, they made castles in the sand.

“Which castle will survive the waves the longest?”

“The loser buys shaved ice!”

“No complaints later.”

“Same to you, senpai.”

Sakuta lost.

The deciding factor was the depression in the sand between the water and the castle. Tomoe had been sitting there while she worked and left a sizable butt-print, which had proved an effective moat.



“You’ve been saved by your butt, Koga.”

“Sh-shut up! You’re still buying!”

Tomoe had her hands on her rear again and was turning red.

A loss was a loss, so he paid for the shaved ice. Tomoe went with strawberry syrup, and Sakuta went with melon.

When the sun started setting, Sakuta and Tomoe sat on the beach, watching a five-or six-year-old boy and girl playing with a beach ball.

The girl’s powerful attacks had the boy reeling. He caught the ball with his face a lot.

“Senpai...”

“You hungry again?”

“Thanks for your help.”

“.....”

“Okay,” Tomoe said, holding out her hand. “Let’s shake.”

“On what?”

“Good-byes.”

Sakuta wiped his hand on his T-shirt and took her hand. It felt very small.

“Ultimately, you still carried a candle for Sakurajima. I couldn’t deal with that, so I broke up with you,” Tomoe said, gazing out to sea like she was reading a story out loud.

“We don’t have to do the slap thing?”

“Let’s not and say we did. If I slapped you here, it would just be mega ungrateful.”

“Okay. Well...best of luck?”

He’d never been in a situation like this before, so he wasn’t really sure what to say.

“Mm.”

“Have a good vacation.”

“You, too. I hope Sakurajima says yes.”

“I’m very tenacious.”

Tomoe let go of his hand and stood.

“I’d better get going,” she said, smiling.

“Yeah, all this swimming really wore me out.” Sakuta staggered to his feet.

“You sound like an old man!” Tomoe laughed.

They headed to the lockers to get their things.

Once they’d changed, they boarded the Enoden and headed back to Fujisawa Station.

“You have plans for summer vacation, senpai?”

“I’m gonna do a whole lot of nothing.”

They chatted about nothing in particular...

Not one innuendo.

Friendly and fun to the very end.

A thoroughly enjoyable day, like one spent with a very good friend.

And thus their lie ended, without any students figuring it out.

And the joys of summer vacation arrived.

It all worked out because of you, senpai.

Now I'm okay.

I'll be okay.

But...

...because you were here for me, I may have made one mistake.



Laplace's mini-Demon

1

His body was shaking. Being shaken.

“Wake up! It’s morning!”

Sakuta answered his sister’s call by sitting up.

“Morning.”

“Good morning!”

He rubbed his eyes.

“Uh, Kaede...”

“Yes?”

“There’s this thing called summer vacation...”

He was allowed to sleep in today. The only people who woke up bright and early on the first day of vacation were small children headed out to do radio calisthenics.

“But that’s tomorrow!” Kaede said, looking baffled.

“.....”

What did she just say?

“No, it’s today.”

“No...definitely tomorrow.”

He grabbed his clock. The digital screen said July 18. Friday. If Sakuta’s memories were correct, that should have been yesterday...

July 18 was, like Kaede said, not yet summer vacation.

It was the last day of the term.

“.....”

Just when he’d thought he was safe, the day was looping again. The first time since June 27.

But somehow, he wasn't surprised.

Somewhere deep down, he may have had a hunch.

Something had felt slightly off during his time with Tomoe.

She'd seemed to be having a great time at the beach yesterday. They'd parted with a smile, like she had not a care in the world.

But that was exactly what was wrong.

It was too easy.

"....."

Sakuta got out of bed and went to the living room. He flipped on the TV, and they were reporting the results of last night's pro baseball Fresh All-Star game.

The same thing he'd seen yesterday, on the first July 18.

It was weirdly comforting.

"Something wrong?"

"How would you like some watermelon, Kaede?"

"Huh? I'd love some."

"I'll make sure to bring a round one home."

They ate breakfast, and he got ready for school.

"Have fun!"

Kaede waved him out the door, and Sakuta began his second July 18.

He ran into Yuuma on the Enoden.

Yuuma came over and grabbed a strap next to him.

"You got summer plans, Sakuta?"

"Work."

"Koga's there, too!"

Exactly as he'd remembered it. Even Yuuma's grin was the same.

"You, Kunimi?"

“Work, practice, dates.”

“The essence of youth.”

“You’re one to talk!” Yuuma laughed and bumped his shoulder exactly as he had before.

Everything was just like the first July 18.

Sakuta and Yuuma split up at the shoe cubbies, but instead of heading upstairs to class, he headed right to Class 1-4. Tomoe’s class.

He looked around the room and found her right away. She was at a table with Rena, Hinako, and Aya, chatting away happily.

Hinako spotted him and nudged Tomoe.

She looked surprised. But then she joined him in the hall, looking slightly self-conscious.

“You can’t just drop by my class!” she said, checking to see if anyone was watching.

“I know, but I don’t have much choice.”

The situation was what it was. Best to touch base right away.

“Did something go wrong?” he asked.

As far as he knew, everything had gone great. Exactly as planned, everything working out. They’d made it all the way to summer vacation without anyone the wiser. All Tomoe had to do was tell her friends she’d dumped him. That information would spread through the school without any further help from them. It should all have been over.

“Why?” Tomoe asked, confused.

“Um.” Sakuta paused. Her reaction wasn’t adding up. She didn’t seem the least bit worried.

“We’re looping again.”

“Huh?” Tomoe gaped at him.

That clinched it. She definitely didn’t know.

A shudder ran up his spine.

“This is the second today, right?”

“...No,” Tomoe said gravely.

“So wait. This is your first time?”

“Yes,” she answered, looking him right in the eye.

The bell rang, signaling the start of homeroom.

“Right. Well, forget I said anything.”

“After school?”

“As planned.”

“R-right.”

“Later.”

Sakuta turned to go. Tomoe waved after him, looking a little worried.

After the end-of-term ceremony, they had the final homeroom, and the teacher handed him the report card. He already knew what it said. His grades hadn't changed. The vague comment addressing his fight with Maesawa was there, too.

“I know it's summer, but don't get carried away and hurt yourselves.”

With these thoughtful words behind him, Sakuta left Class 2-1. Class 2-2 had wrapped up already, so there were only a few people still in the room.

No sign of Rio Futaba. She was probably where she always was.

Sakuta headed for the science lab and found her. She was writing a formula on the blackboard.

He launched immediately into an explanation of the time loop.

“What do you think?” he asked at last.

“Azusagawa, are you insane?” inquired Rio, turning around.

“Why, exactly?”

“The fact that you even have to ask...”

“Please elaborate.”

“A child could get this one.”

“.....”

Children these days were very perceptive. The country’s future was secure.

“If you’re right and that first-year...”

“Tomoe Koga.”

“If she’s Laplace’s demon, then the answer is obvious.”

“It is?”

“What’s the key difference between July 18 and July 19? Any changes to, say, her relationship with you?”

“.....”

Her observational skills were something else. Sakuta hadn’t explained a thing about his fake relationship contract with Tomoe, but Rio seemed to have it all worked out.

“I knew you wouldn’t keep something like that going indefinitely.”

She knew him well.

“Azusagawa, are you sure you haven’t noticed?”

“Noticed what?”

“The reason she rolled the dice again.”

Sakuta looked up at the ceiling, avoiding Rio’s gaze.

“.....”

He wasn’t completely clueless. Given the choice between having clues and having no clues, he would have to say the former. But that was a far cry from actually knowing.

“But this time around, Koga doesn’t know it’s the second time.”

That was what confused him.

She’d looked genuinely surprised, and that was terrifying. A chill in the pit of

his stomach.

“Hmm... Then maybe it’s what I originally said, and you’re the demon.”

Rio didn’t seem interested either way. But as ready as she was to call him a demon, she didn’t seem to believe what she was saying. It was more like she put it out there for the sake of argument.

“I’m not.”

“Then there’s only one other possibility.”

“Only one?”

“Yes. She’s lying.”

Sakuta did not disagree.

Sakuta left the science lab, met Tomoe at the station, and headed for the beach. Just like last time, they ate corn on the cob and *yakisoba*, made castles on the beach, bought shaved ice, and had fun swimming.

Tomoe seemed to enjoy it all.

On the way home, she thanked him for everything. Their handshake at the end was the same as the first July 18.

Nothing changed.

If tomorrow came, he’d have nothing to complain about.

But when Sakuta work up the next morning, it was Friday, July 18, again.

His third last day of the term.

Sakuta’s summer vacation just would not arrive.

On June 27, he’d escaped without a fourth round.

Based on that experience, Sakuta started out the day the same way. Wondering if maybe there was a three-day limit.

Unaware of the loop, Tomoe had a great time at the beach again.

But Sakuta's faint hopes were dashed when the fourth July 18 arrived.

Clearly, the only way out of this was to banish Laplace's demon.

He got on the train like always and ran into Yuuma yet again.

"Yo."

"Mm." Sakuta answered Yuuma's pleasant smile with a scowl.

Yuuma grabbed a strap next to him, unperturbed.

They watched the town go by for a while.

"Kunimi," Sakuta said, at last.

"Mm?"

"You've got a girlfriend."

"And I'm grateful for it."

"What would you do if another girl had feelings for you?"

"....."

A look of caution appeared in Yuuma's eyes.

"What would you do if you realized how she felt?" Sakuta asked.

"Who are we talking about?" Yuuma gave him a sidelong stare, probing.

"Purely hypothetical."

"Sure it is."

Sakuta had included no specifics, but Yuuma was taking this awfully seriously. That suggested only one thing.

Yuuma knew exactly how Rio felt.

That was why he was giving Sakuta's question the gravity it deserved.

"Does she...know I know?"

"Not at the moment."

Neither checked to see who they were talking about.

"At the moment," Yuuma proceeded, wincing. "I don't want to dig up feelings

when she's hiding them." He kept his gaze on the sea in front of them.

Squinting into the light.

"I feel like it would just be conceited, you know? Like, who do I think I am?"

Yuuma was choosing his words carefully.

"But I don't think letting things stand as they are is healthy in the long run. What should I do?"

"I'm the one asking."

They reached Shichirigahama Station without either of them finding an answer.

All students gathered in the gym for the end-of-term ceremony. Sakuta's fourth time sitting through it. His fourth time hearing the principal's speech, so he tuned it out, thinking about something else.

About Tomoe.

He could see her sitting with the other first-years.

She must have sensed him watching, because she glanced back.

When their eyes met, she looked surprised. But then she smiled.

When he saw that, it felt like everything was falling into place.

Yes. She's lying.

Tomoe *was* lying.

After school, Sakuta and Tomoe met up at Shichirigahama Station and rode three stops to Enoshima Station, talking about their grades.

They walked down the bricks of Subana Street to the sea. They used the tunnel to cross under Route 134.

And Sakuta went straight on to Enoshima.

"Senpai? The beach is this way?"

Tomoe pointed left. The Eastside beach, with all its stalls and lockers. To the right was the Westside beach.

“This is my fourth today.”

“So you’re sick of the beach?”

“Glad you read the air so well,” he said.

He stepped onto Benten Bridge.

“We’re going to Enoshima?” Tomoe asked. She caught up, light on her feet, and leaned in to look at his face.

“We never made it there on our first date, did we?”

“Oh, right.”

They’d stopped halfway across the bridge, and Tomoe had spotted a classmate in trouble. That girl...Nana Yoneyama had lost a phone strap. She and her friends had all bought matching ones, so she’d been desperate to find it.

“The island. The sky. The ocean.”

Ahead of them, the sky and sea framed Enoshima. Those three things were all the eye could see.

Tomoe reached out her hands as if trying to reach the sky.

There was a kite wheeling through the air above. This bird was often responsible for beachgoers losing their meals.

The bridge was over four hundred yards across, and when they finally reached the other end, they were met with the usual tourist-trap array of souvenir shops, as well as stalls run by local fishermen. This place was bustling this time of year.

Once through the torii gate, the path went uphill—and wasn’t exactly a gentle slope. The road narrowed, the look evoking days of yore. On either side were shops selling all kinds of things, from whitebait (a local specialty) to colorful wallets with metal clasps.

They passed a college couple sharing a giant rice cracker with an octopus baked into it.

Sakuta felt eyes on him.

“All this stall food is bad for you,” he said, but he handed the stall owner

some money.

“I’m starting a diet tomorrow.”

“Oh?”

They talked as they waited for the octopus cracker to fry.

“This is huge!” Tomoe marveled. It was bigger than their heads.

They continued up the path, taking turns breaking pieces off the cracker.

Ahead of them was a towering staircase with a red torii gate in the middle. Above that were the three shrines of Enoshima Shrine.

Sakuta and Tomoe stuffed the rest of the cracker into their mouths while outside the gate, then made their way up the stairs.

This was hard enough work that they both fell silent, focusing on keeping their feet moving. By the time they reached the first shrine, Hetsumiya, they were both out of breath.

“My legs are quivering.”

“But you’re a first-year!”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“You have youth!”

Once they caught their breath, they both paid their respects.

“Koga, they got wish plaques for matchmaking.”

There were a ton of wooden plaques dangling from the stands around the matchmaking tree.

“Let’s write one.”

“Huh? Isn’t that lying to the goddess?”

Sakuta ignored Tomoe and bought an *ema* plaque from the shrine maiden.

“S-Senpai!”

The maiden must have thought Tomoe was just embarrassed. She gave her a big smile.

Sakuta borrowed a pen and wrote his full name inside the heart. *Sakuta Azusagawa*.

“See?”

“It’s bad luck!”

“We were ready to go to hell the moment we decided to fool everyone.”

“I was, sure. But I don’t want to drag you down with me!”

Tomoe hesitated, then flipped the plaque over. The backside of it was a list of types of relationships the prayer would affect. And the first one was “unrequited love.”

He heard her gasp.

Tomoe hesitated for a moment, then took the pen. She wrote *Tomoe Koga* in round letters next to his name. Sakuta snatched it out of her hands and started tying it to the racks at the matchmaking tree.

“Senpai! We can’t put a lie in with all these real prayers. I’m taking this home with me.”

She tugged his arm, desperate to stop him. He was worried the shrine maiden might overhear.

“I’m the only one lying here, so we’re good.”

“Huh?”

Her arms went limp. Sakuta seized his chance and finished tying the plaque. It would be pretty hard to get it off.

They climbed more stairs in silence, like this was a religious exercise. They paid their respects at Nakatsumiya, with its distinctive red pillars. A little farther on, they found themselves at the base of the landmark observation tower.

Sakuta and Tomoe passed right by it, heading for Okutsumiya at the back of the island.

An old-fashioned stone-paved path, quite narrow. It definitely set the mood. Stairs frequently took them up and down, and there were several souvenir stands, Japanese sweet shops, and restaurants.

It was like something out of an old movie. It had that pleasant, comfy vibe you get when everyone knows their neighbors. The occasional cat scurried past, and Tomoe tried to pet them all, but to no avail.

“Senpai, earlier...”

“Mm?”

“The matchmaking tree.”

“.....”

“Oh, never mind.”

“.....”

He knew what she wanted.

She wanted to ask about what he’d said earlier.

“I’m the only one lying here, so we’re good.”

He could tell this was eating at her, but Tomoe kept her mouth tightly shut. They reached Okutsumiya without her saying another word.

They paid their respects in silence. He glanced at her profile as she clasped her hands together, and she looked very serious. What was she praying for?

The path grew even narrower. They went down a long, narrow staircase and reached the Western edge of Enoshima—Chigogafuchi.

A rocky marine plateau a little over fifty yards wide, where the waves mingled with the rocks, smoothing the surfaces. Supposedly, this place rose out of the water during the Great Kanto earthquake.

It was a clear day, and they had a great view of Mount Fuji. It was a sight to behold.

The sea breeze eased their exhaustion. Lots of other couples had stopped to gaze at the strange formations nature had created.

“Hinako said this place is lovely at sunset,” Tomoe said, with both hands on the rail.

She’d probably figured it out.

Why he'd invited her to Enoshima.

And why he'd said what he said.

And she was pretending she hadn't noticed.

"Let's go."

"Mm."

Her answers were getting shorter and shorter.

They headed back the way they'd come in silence.

Neither of them said much.

The path up had been a real workout, but it was much easier going down. They passed through that first torii gate again, into the bustling shopping area. Stall keepers called out to them, but they kept moving, leaving Enoshima behind.

On the way back across Benten Bridge, they had a clear view of the beaches in either direction. The orientation was reversed, and the Westside beach was on their left, with the Eastside beach on their right. The sun was high in the sky to the south, and the beaches were packed. A decent number of Minegahara students must have come straight here after the end-of-term ceremony. Like Sakuta and Tomoe had planned to do.

"Senpai, you still wanna hit the beach?" Tomoe asked, looking along it. "*I am* wearing a swimsuit under this."

There was an excited bounce to her voice. She sounded just like her usual self.

That made up his mind. Sakuta stopped in his tracks.

Tomoe noticed a moment later and turned around three yards away, shooting him a puzzled look. They were right in the center of Benten Bridge, surrounded by ocean.

"Senpai?"

"Koga, the lie has to end."

"Huh? Oh yeah. Today's the last day."

“Not that one.”

“...Senpai? You’re scaring me.”

She gave him a baffled look.

“.....”

But Sakuta didn’t relent.

“Uh...what’s going on?”

“You think I didn’t notice?”

“What are we talking about?”

“It might have been fake, but we’ve been going out for three weeks.”

“.....”

“You once said I can read the air but don’t.”

“You’re being really weird, senpai,” she protested, at a loss.

“You don’t have to say it for me to know.”

“.....”

“You know it’s true,” he said.

She’d met his gaze this whole time, but now she hung her head.

“No matter how many times you roll the dice, people’s feelings don’t change.”

“.....”

“A lie won’t become the truth, and the truth won’t become a lie.”

In response, Tomoe tightly gripped the sleeves of her uniform. Like she was barely holding on.

“...Even after a hundred times?” she croaked, staring at her feet. The sea breeze snatched her words away.

“No.”

“.....Even a thousand?”

Her voice shook.

“Nope.”

“Ten thousand?”

“You could go a million times. I’d still be in love with Mai.”

“.....”

“And no matter how many times we repeat, your feelings won’t change, either.”

“.....”

“.....”

A weighty silence settled over them.

Large drops of rain began falling, and the dry ground turned dark.

He looked up, and the sky was still blue. It was a sun-shower.

“You’re a liar, senpai,” Tomoe said, her voice almost lost in the patter of the rain. “...Feelings do change.”

The drops were so big they hurt, and the volume of them was only getting worse.

“Each time we repeat, they get stronger. Grew stronger.”

Her voice hoarse, Tomoe admitted the lie she’d told herself. Tomoe knew they were repeating the day. She knew it but had acted just like she had the first time. The second and third passes through July 18, she’d had a great time at the beach as if she had no idea. But it was all an act.

All to hide these feelings.

“I knew I had to forget, but I couldn’t. Each time I thought, ‘This time I’ll do it.’ But it didn’t work. No matter how much I wanted not to feel this way!”

The quaver in her voice hit Sakuta like a knife to the chest.

All the emotions she’d had bottled up inside her were starting to come out. These feelings were so very human. No demon could have anything like them.

“We were supposed to have a great time on our last date and end the fake

relationship with a smile. And after we broke up, you and Sakurajima were going to get together, and when second term started, I was going to tease you mercilessly about it.”

“Koga...”

“And we’d be friends. The kind of friends who can talk about anything. You’d be an older friend I could rely on. And I knew you’d like that, too. We’d talk about everything that happened, even this fake relationship, like it was all a lot of fun. And we’d stay friends forever!”

Tomoe looked up, tried to smile, and failed.

“That’s what I want.”

The pain on her face squeezed at his heart.

“That’s all I want. I didn’t want anything special. I didn’t want to be selfish. I didn’t want to make trouble for anyone. So... So why won’t tomorrow come?!”

“.....”

“I made up my mind to put an end to these feelings, so why do I wake up in the morning to find them even stronger than the day before?!”

Because that’s how it works. Hiding them deep within you doesn’t make them go away. They aren’t going to just fade out. Those feelings live on in the depths of your heart.

The more you try to deny them, the harder it is to get them out of your mind.

“This is just awful...”

Human memories and feelings aren’t digital. You can’t erase them with the flip of a switch. They aren’t like phone numbers, e-mail addresses, or app IDs. You can’t just hit delete and be done. Humans are bound together in other ways. The three weeks Sakuta and Tomoe had spent together had connected them.

“I made up my mind to get rid of these feelings. I made that choice!”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I do!”

Tomoe lived the way she did. No matter how much doing so made her suffer.

“I mean, you’re in love with Sakurajima! I’m just in the way. These aren’t feelings friends have! A friend has no business feeling like this!”

That was what Sakuta had asked of her.

“When the lie ends, we stay friends.”

Tomoe had made up her mind to hide her feelings so she could live up to that request. She had no other choice. She didn’t want to be a burden to him.

That’s why she’d said nothing and tried to handle it on her own. Tried to stifle her feelings. Make it like they were never there. That was what she had to do to be his friend.

To be by his side, as a slightly younger friend, a cheeky little kohai.

But her feelings wouldn’t cooperate, and trying to make it all work the way she wanted proved impossible.

Some emotions are too strong to control. And we don’t always fully understand our own feelings.

This might be the first time Tomoe ever had to face emotions like these.

Their relationship had begun as a lie.

But before she knew it, her feelings were true. They’d become real.

Even so, it was a lie, so she’d taken the day of the breakup in stride...but those true feelings stayed with her. Powerful emotions locked inside, unresolved. Unable to air them out, trapped in the darkness inside her, those feelings pleaded with her.

But Tomoe wouldn’t let herself listen. If she let her emotions out, it would make trouble. Trouble for Sakuta. To be the Tomoe Koga he wanted her to be, her only option was to kill these feelings. To trample them down, to bury them inside.

This was painful, devastating, and inescapable. It awakened the sleeping demon within.

This was the demon’s true form. It was the Tomoe she’d trapped inside

herself. The part of her that didn't want summer vacation to come. That wanted to keep dating Sakuta, even if it was a lie. That hoped tomorrow would never arrive.

But even then, Tomoe stayed silent, trying to forget him. Tried to make it so this never happened. That's why she'd lied.

"Koga."

When he spoke, she flinched.

But even if this hurt her, he had to say it.

"You've been making trouble for me the whole time."

"You're so mean..."

"You just noticed?"

"I don't like you. I hate you! This is all your fault! If you hadn't been so damn nice to me..."

"Yeah. So you don't need to worry about being a burden."

"I hate myself, too. This isn't who I am!"

"It is, though. This is part of you, Koga."

"No! It's not me! I want summer to come! I want to be friends with you, have fun, laugh together! That's all I want!"

Tomoe still hadn't shed a single tear. Her eyes glistened as she looked back at him. Like if she let the tears flow, it would all be over.

"Don't lie to yourself anymore."

"....."

"You're the schoolgirl of justice, remember?"

"That's not fair. If you put it that way..."

"There's nothing you can't do, Koga."

"That's not fair. You're not fair."

"You don't need to bottle it up anymore."

“You’re so dumb! You’re an idiot! I hate you! I can’t stand you! But...”

The pain in her voice was clear.

“But...I also love you.”

The tears welled up.

“I love you, senpai.”

She sniffed, then took a deep breath.

“I love you!” she shouted. Letting all the emotions she’d trapped within free. Unleashing all of them, right in his face.

A torrent of pure emotion echoed across the sky.

“Koga,” he said softly. As gently as he knew how.

For a moment, Tomoe tried to hold back the tears. But Sakuta’s words wouldn’t let her.

“Well done,” he said.

Her face crumpled. The tears flowed, glittering on her cheeks.

“Good job.”

She sobbed wordlessly. The ground at her feet turned wet from her tears.

The blue sky watched them without a word, clear as far as the eye could see.

The sun-shower had long since stopped.



the world you chose

His eyes could tell it was getting brighter even though they were closed. Sakuta realized he must be awake.

The sunlight streaming through the gap in the curtains left cloudlike shadows on the ceiling of his room. The familiar feel of his bed assured him he was in his own room.

He reached for the digital alarm clock.

If the loop had ended, this should be July 19. Summer vacation.

Sakuta checked the display to be sure.

“.....”

It took his eyes a few seconds to focus on the number. July 19? Or July 18 again? But the number shown was totally different.

“Huh?”

Sakuta jumped up and ran into the living room. He turned on the TV.

The morning news was just beginning.

“And a big win for the Japan team!”

That was very familiar. He’d heard that phrase before. The male newscaster was very enthusiastic.

“Good morning. Today is Friday, June 27. Our top story today is the results of yesterday’s big game.”

The screen started showing a World Cup game held on the other side of the world. A highlight reel of the second game of the group stage.

As the first half drew to a close, Japan was one point behind. Japanese player number ten dribbled into enemy territory and was taken down by some aggressive defense. Whistles blew.

Just outside the penalty box, so a free-kick chance. Number four took the kick. A short run up, a shot, the keeper dove the wrong way, and the ball hit the net. Number four roared, and the Japan team flocked to him, celebrating.

That point put momentum on Japan’s side, and they scored a follow-up in the

second half, winning 2–1.

As Sakuta watched the extended coverage, his thoughts turned to one person.

Tomoe Koga.

A kohai from the year below him and Laplace's demon "She's kind of amazing..." he said, the words escaping his lips. "It *was* all a simulation of the future, then."

Just as Rio had suggested. The repeating days weren't because they were going back in time. It was all a calculation of the future from one point in time.

And in this case, that point was June 27.

What else could Sakuta do but laugh?

He and Kaede ate breakfast, and he got ready for school like always.

It was the end of June, and the rainy season was not yet over. The sun beating down wasn't nearly as hot as it had been in the July of the day before, but it was much more humid.

"Sup, Sakuta. Another amazing bed head."

"This hairstyle's all the rage these days."

"You're on the cutting edge of fashion."

Yuuma laughed. This was just like it had been on the previous June 27.

"....."

"Something wrong, Sakuta?"

".....No."

"Seriously, what?"

"That handsome face of yours is infuriating."

"Huh? This again?"

"Agh, it's terrible."

Morning classes were math, physics, English, and Modern Japanese. During

math, the teacher said, “This’ll be on the exam!” The physics teacher’s bad pun still dropped dead. Third-period English earned him another “Mr. Azusagawa, listen to me” for not paying attention, and he was forced to read aloud. And once again, the Modern Japanese teacher had lipstick on his shirt collar.

Each detail further proved that Sakuta had experienced a projection of the future.

Lunch arrived.

Sakuta and Mai were alone together in an empty classroom on the third floor.

The window was slightly open, and a sultry sea breeze blew in. The curtains swayed slightly. It was a moment of peace.

They sat on opposite sides of a desk with the lunch Mai had made for Sakuta spread out between them. Fried chicken, egg rolls, potato salad, cherry tomatoes, and a side of *hijiki* seaweed and soybeans. Sakuta tried each in turn and told her how good they were.

Mai seemed thoroughly satisfied with the opportunity to prove her culinary skills.

Once they finished eating, Sakuta sat up straight.

“Mai,” he said.

“Mm?” She looked up, chopsticks between her lips.

“I love you. Please go out with me.”

“.....”

She looked away. She picked some egg roll out of her lunch and ate it.

“.....”

She chewed for a while.

“.....”

He waited until she swallowed, but still no answer came.

“You’re just gonna ignore it?!”

“I’m just not feeling the magic,” she said with a bored sigh. “You say the same

thing to me every day for a month, and it just loses all meaning.”

“Oh...rejection? Then I’ll just have to search elsewhere for love.”

“Wha...?”

“Thank you for everything.”

He bowed his head and gave a heartbroken sigh.

“I—I didn’t say no! Why are you giving up?” Mai asked, giving him a reproachful glare.

“Then is it a yes?”

“Urgh...you’ve got a lot of nerve.”

“Is that a yes?”

He stuck to his guns. One last push.

“.....Mm,” she said, nodding. Her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s a yes.”

As if trying to cover her embarrassment, Mai quickly started eating an egg roll. This was adorable. Sakuta decided to press his advantage and make sure of one other thing.

“So.”

“What?”

“What are your feelings for me?”

“Well, obviously...”

The cherry tomato slipped from her chopsticks.

“Obviously?”

“What does it matter?”

“I’m asking because it does.”

“Sakuta, give it up.”

“This is very important.”

“You have to hear it?”

“From your own lips.”

A cherry tomato passed through those lips. She chewed for a while, then swallowed.

“I’m only saying this once.”

“Okay.”

“.....”

“.....”

There was a brief silence. Mai took a deep breath.

Then her eyes suddenly turned to the window. “Oh,” she said.

“Mm?”

Sakuta turned to look. All he could see were the sands of Shichirigahama, the sea, and the sky. Nothing out of the ordinary. Big summer clouds streaming by.

Then a sweet scent enveloped him. A shadow fell over his eyes. Before he knew it, something soft pressed against his cheek.

Surprised, he turned back toward her.

“Does that clear things up?”

Mai shot him a mischievous smile, only slightly embarrassed.

Sakuta reached up and felt his cheeks, certain that sensation had been Mai’s lips.

“I’d have preferred mouth to mouth.”

“Don’t push your luck.”

Under the desk, Mai stepped on his foot. It didn’t hurt a bit.

“Stop grinning!”

“That’s your fault, Mai.”

The two of them savored their time together.

When the bell rang, his lunch date with Mai was tragically brought to a close. Sakuta went down the hall alone, heading back to the second-year classrooms.

As he passed the stairs, he saw a familiar face on the landing.

Tomoe Koga.

She was with that third-year, Maesawa.

Things seemed tense, so Sakuta hid himself against the wall.

“I’m sorry,” Tomoe said, bowing her head. “I can’t go out with you.”

“You don’t have a boyfriend, though?”



“No.”

“You in love with someone else, then?”

“Yeah.”

Tomoe nodded.

“He on the team with me?”

“No.”

“Then...”

“He’s a caveman who doesn’t even own a phone.”

As she said this, Tomoe’s face lit up like a flower blooming.

“Huh?” Maesawa just sounded baffled. Still, he shrugged, said, “Well, maybe some other time,” whatever that meant, and turned to head up the stairs.

Sakuta stepped out and walked right past him, expressionless. He headed down the stairs.

Tomoe saw him coming.

“Eavesdropping’s a crime,” she said.

Sakuta knew instantly she remembered everything.

“I just happened to pass by.”

“Hmph.”

“Also, I’m not a caveman.”

“I wasn’t talking about *you*.” Tomoe puffed up her cheeks. “Being that self-absorbed is so not cool.”

He’d broken her heart only a day before, but she’d already rebounded enough to interact with him like this—a testament to her inner strength. This situation was her doing.

“Senpai, are you ready to accept the consequences?”

“Hmm?”

“If Rena ends up hating me because of this and I lose my place in class...”

“How is that my problem?”

“Well, the whole thing’s your fault.”

“Please explain.”

“You made a woman out of me.”

“That sounds damningly scandalous.”

“You know what I mean, but you always make a joke out of it. Is it because you’re secretly embarrassed?”

She grinned like she saw right through him. This smug attitude annoyed him a bit, but given that arguing the point would just prove her right, he steered the conversation back on track.

“Well, if anything happens to you, Koga, I’ll be your friend for life.”

Then he put his hand on her head.

“So at least you won’t be alone.”

“I’m the one willing to be your best friend,” she countered. Even cheekier.

Sakuta knew she woke up at six to get her hair right, so he deliberately messed it up.

“Augh! Don’t!”

He didn’t stop until the bell rang.

From there until summer vacation began was astonishing.

The days Sakuta and Tomoe had experienced played out the same way.

The Japan soccer team made it out of the group stage. Solid play took them to the quarterfinals. There, they suffered a painful loss, but these results let the world know Japan was a real contender.

Closer to home, the content on the final exams was exactly the same. Sakuta had taken all these tests before. And they’d gone over all the answers once, so his scores were excellent.

He felt mildly guilty about that, but considering all the trouble Adolescence Syndrome had put him through, this felt like a decent way of making up for it.

Also, Tomoe ended up working part-time with him at the restaurant.

Saki Kamisato called him to the rooftop that same Saturday.

Many of his interactions with Mai were the same. She still brought clothes over for Kaede, went to Kagoshima for a week filming a TV show, called him from there, showed up and forced him to study, and even agreed to change into the bunny-girl outfit while he did.

There were some minor differences, since he wasn't faking a relationship with Tomoe, but without exception, the events he remembered came to pass.

This was more than enough evidence to suggest the version of June 27 to July 18 the two of them experienced was no mere dream, but an accurate projection of the future.

One day after school, in the science lab, he talked this over with Rio.

"If that's true, it's certainly astonishing."

"You think I'm lying?"

"Azusagawa...in this projected future, you managed to convince the whole school you were dating a first-year, so I think you could lie convincingly about this, too."

Sakuta didn't see any point in insisting she should believe him.

"But it does make some sense," Rio said absently. "A girl who wants to fit in so badly she spends all her time desperately reading others, and before she knows it, she can even read the future."

At least, it made sense to her.

But the one thing that puzzled Sakuta was how he'd come to get mixed up in her Adolescence Syndrome. While seven billion other people never noticed anything wrong, never realized they were repeating the same day.

When he asked Rio about it, she just said "Quantum entanglement" like he was supposed to know what that meant.

"Quantums entangle?" he asked.

"Yes. You see?"

“Not a whit.”

“A what?”

“I mean I don’t have the foggiest clue what you mean.”

“Hmph.”

Rio wrote *whit* on the blackboard to look up later.

“So what is quantum entanglement?”

“A spooky phenomenon in which two particles in separate locations instantly share information without any intermediary.”

“Do particles have cell phones?”

“Those count as intermediaries.”

“Then they’re telepathic?”

“Exactly.”

“Seriously?”

He’d intended that to be a joke.

“In fact, world-famous professors have done research on whether they can apply the principles of quantum entanglement to realize actual telepathy.”

“Again, are you serious?”

“Quantum entanglement itself is a verified phenomenon.”

“So you think Koga and I became entangled and synched up that way?”

Rio nodded.

“But why were we entangled?”

“Quantum entanglement occurs after the particles collide. Did you and that first-year collide recently?”

In a sense, yes.

“We kicked each other’s butts.”

“.....”

“.....”

“Azusagawa.”

“What?”

“I would like to replicate this effect. Present your hindquarters.”

“Nope.”

“Come on, hurry up, rascal.”

“That’s no way to ask for a favor!”

Rio looked genuinely disappointed. Perhaps she’d actually meant it.

As for Tomoe after rejecting Maesawa...well, like she’d predicted, she was driven out of Rena’s group.

Sakuta found her the Wednesday after, sitting on the stairs to the roof, eating lunch alone.

He sat down next to her, and they ate together.

“Should I come to the bathroom with you, too?”

“That would make it worse.”

“Ask me any time.”

“Seriously, that’s creepy. Do I have to report you?”

This continued through Thursday and Friday, but on the first day of final exams, he saw Tomoe talking to another classmate on the train in to school. Not Rena, Hinako, or Aya. The reason he knew she was a first-year in Tomoe’s class was because in the projection of the future, Sakuta had met her.

On his first date with Tomoe, they’d helped a girl with glasses find her phone strap. Her name was Nana Yoneyama.

Nana took her phone out, and he saw the jellyfish strap hanging from it, the one Tomoe had gotten soaking wet to retrieve.

Sakuta guessed Tomoe had gone and helped her search again. Proving that notion was the fact that she’d caught a cold again, on the exact same day as before.

At work after exams, Tomoe said, "I've made some new friends."

"The girl with the phone strap?"

"Yep. And Nana let me join her group in class."

"That's nice."

"Yeah."

Tomoe seemed a little sheepish but very happy.

"All thanks to you."

"I didn't do a thing."

Tomoe's own good behavior had proved her salvation.

With a personality like hers, he didn't think it would take her all that long to patch things over with Rena, either.

"But because of you, I got through this without having to lie, so...thank you."

In a sense, she meant that literally. She hadn't lied to anyone this time. But in another sense, he thought she was talking about lying to herself.

With his concerns all resolved, the days passed peacefully.

The end-of-term ceremony arrived.

The principal made his grand speech, and the teacher handed out report cards.

After homeroom, he waited for Mai at the shoe cubbies, and they left together. Lately, Mai had been out of school for work a lot, so it had actually been two whole weeks since they'd been able to leave together like this.

When they stepped onto the train at Shichirigahama Station, Mai held out her hand expectantly.

He tried to take it, but she snatched it away.

"Show me your report card."

"Then say that."

"Just do it."

“I’d prefer not to.”

“Why?”

“Why do you want to see it?”

“You’re going to the same college as me, right?”

“That’s what I put on the class survey...”

“Then go on.”

She held out her hand again. No getting out of this one. Sakuta forking over his report card was a forgone conclusion.

“If it’s better than you think, do I get a reward?”

“If your average is higher than a seven, I’ll listen to any one request you make.”

Minegahara grades were on a ten-point scale. Anyone scoring over a seven was doing very well.

“That’s a tall order,” Sakuta said.

He glumly handed over his report card.

She looked down at it, clearly surprised.

“Er...how?”

He hadn’t actually crunched the numbers, but the average was probably over seven. This was all thanks to Laplace’s demon. He would have to buy Tomoe lunch later. After all, Mai had to accept a request from him now.

“Soooo, what should I have you do?”

“If it’s too weird, I’ll break up with you,” Mai said preemptively.

She handed his report card back.

“Then will you come over tonight and make dinner?”

“Is that all?”

Having a girlfriend come over to cook dinner was a top-tier event in his mind. Especially if it was Mai Sakurajima. This seemed lost on her, though.

"I just want to see you in an apron."

"I never wear an apron to cook."

"Aww."

"Okay, okay, I'll put one on."

"We could go straight to the naked apron."

"I could add laxatives to everything."

"I'm kidding."

"You were not."

Her eyes bored through him, and he did his best to laugh it off.

"Should we stop by the grocery store on the way home?"

"Let's."

Sakuta was thrilled to get another shopping date.

After buying groceries at the store near Fujisawa Station, Sakuta and Mai stepped outside to find it raining. The skies were blue, but it was coming down pretty hard. Quite a sun-shower.

"Sakuta, you have an umbrella?"

"I do."

He pulled it out of his schoolbag and opened it. Mai stepped under it with him.

"I'll hold one of those," she said.

Sakuta's right hand was holding up the umbrella, but on his left side, he had both his schoolbag slung over his shoulder and a plastic grocery bag with green onions sticking out dangling from his hand.

"I've got it."

"You're sure?"

He kept the umbrella angled so Mai would stay dry as they walked.

"Mai, what are you gonna make?"

“It’s a secret. It’s no fun if I tell you now.”

“Fair.”

At this point, they were in sight of the park a few minutes from his apartment building.

As they were passing by, Mai suddenly stopped.

“What’s with that girl?”

Sakuta followed her gaze.

A girl with a red umbrella was standing just inside the entrance, by the grass. She was wearing a uniform from a local junior high. It looked pretty new still, so she must’ve been a first-year.

How long had she been there? Her shoulders and legs were soaking wet.

When he looked closer, he saw a cardboard box hidden in the grass.

Mai started walking in her direction, so Sakuta was forced to follow.

“What’s wrong?” Mai asked.

The girl turned toward them, her face emerging from beneath the umbrella.

The moment he saw her face, something felt wrong. No, not “wrong,” exactly. It was like he’d met this red umbrella girl before. Or she reminded him of someone he knew.

“Um, this kitten...,” the girl whimpered, her voice very faint.

She looked down at the cardboard box again. There was a kitten curled up inside, shivery from the cold and wet.

The girl was clearly worried about the kitten but had no idea what to do about it.

“Mai, can you hold the umbrella?”

“Sure.”

She took it from him. Sakuta bent down and picked the kitten up with one hand.

“I’ll take it home with me. If it gets better, great; if not, I’ll take it to the vet.”

“Okay. Oh, but...”

“Mm?”

“I want to adopt it.”

“Oh, then...”

Sakuta gave the girl his phone number. She punched it into her cell phone.

“Is that right?” she asked, showing him the screen.

“Yep. My name’s Sakuta Azusagawa. Same Azusagawa as the highway rest area chain. Sakuta is written as a blooming Tarou.”

She typed in his name as instructed.

Then, she looked up from the phone and gave him a long look.

“My name’s Shouko Makinohara.”

The moment he heard this name, Sakuta’s heart started beating so hard it hurt. But it took his brain longer to catch up.

He blinked several times. Then he finally worked out just what had been bugging him. He knew that name. No wonder he felt like he’d met her before. It made sense—but also begged a much bigger question.

“What did you say?”

“My name’s Shouko Makinohara.”

The junior high school girl in front of him had the same name as the high school girl who’d been Sakuta’s first love.

Afterword

This is the second volume in the *Rascal* series.

The first volume's title was *Rascal Does Not Dream of Bunny Girl Senpai*, so if this book has piqued your interest, I recommend reading that one as well.

As you can see, this series has taken the reckless approach of changing the title every time instead of using numbers.

Sorry for making it so hard to determine the order.

But I'm sure my editor, Aragi, will find a way to make it clear, even if he has to rely on the bellyband ads wrapped around the books. It'll work out somehow!

Maybe Keji Mizoguchi will find some miraculous way of including the volume number in the cover illustrations.

Thanks in advance!

At any rate, the title for Volume 3 will be *Rascal Does Not Dream of...* something or other. What will it be?!

Whether your guesses are right or not, you'll have to wait to find out.

Mizoguchi, Aragi, thanks for everything once again. I look forward to working with you next time.

Finally, my heartfelt gratitude to all the readers who've stuck with me.

The third volume should come out before the cold weather passes...I hope.

Hajime Kamoshida

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