

幼なじみが絶対に負けないラブコメ

「著」二丸修一

「絵」しぐれうい

VOLUME: TWO

2



OSANANAJIMI GA ZETTAI NI

MAKENAI

LOVE COMEDY

SHUICHI NIMARU



# A New "Childhood Friend" Enters the Fray!?

**KACHI SHIROKUSA**

THE BLACK-HAIRED, PRISM AND PROPER SCHOOL IDOL. A CURRENT AKUTAMI AWARD-WINNING HIGH SCHOOL GIRL AUTHOR. SHE IS ALSO SUHARU'S FIRST LOVE.

**SHIDA KUROHA**

A CUTE LOLITA CHILDHOOD FRIEND BUT A KIND OLDER SISTER-TYPE AT HEART. SHE LIVES NEXT TO SUHARU AND THEY'RE ALSO IN THE SAME CLASS.

**MARU SUEHARU**

BEING SHUT DOWN HARD AT THE CONFESSION FESTIVAL MADE HIM SLIGHTLY WORRY OF WOMEN, BUT MARIA'S APPEARANCE PUTS HIM AT THE MERCY OF THE HEROINES ONCE AGAIN.

**MOMOSAKA MARIA**

A YOUNG ACTRESS WHO PLAYS THE LEADING ROLE IN THE DRAMA SERIES "THE IDEAL LITTLE SISTER". SHE WAS LIKE A LITTLE SISTER TO SUHARU DURING HIS TIME AS A CHILD ACTOR.

"First love" VS "Childhood Friend" VS "The Ideal Little Sister" starts now!!!!



OSANANAJIMI GA ZETTAI NI  
MAKENAI  
LOVE COMEDY

KURO'S  
SLIP  
A BIT

"EH?!"

"AREM."

"... HARU,  
IT SEEMS LIKE

YOU AND KACHI-SAN  
HAVE GOTTEN  
PRETTY CLOSE...

CARE TO TELL ME  
WHAT'S GOING ON?"



...HMM.

I GUESS I'LL TAKE YOU UP ON YOUR OFFER. SHE'S BEING SNIPIED.

I WASN'T IN A POSITION WHERE I COULD TALK TO SHIDA-SAN YESTERDAY BUT... IS SHE ALRIGHT?

...HMM.

I'VE FOUND A WAY TO DEAL WITH IT... SHALL WE GO TOGETHER?"

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# Prologue

I was awoken by a late summer's ray of sunlight sifting through a gap in the curtains.

I opened my eyes slightly, glancing at the clock hanging on the wall as I lay sprawled on my bed.

9:03 am.

“–Crap, am I late for school?!”

But in the instant that I got up I realised that today was Saturday.

“*Sigh...* I panicked for no reason.”

Speaking of which, yesterday had been the cultural festival. Our school's cultural festival was always held on a Friday, with the day after that deemed to be the beginning of a break.

Today was the first day of a three-day weekend.

I decided to nap for a while longer, dragging over the blanket which I had thrown up against the wall earlier, but the gears in my brain, which had been shaken awake momentarily, slowly began turning.

A chill ran down my spine. I kind of knew instinctively.

*–That it would be better if I didn't remember.*

But as my alertness returned, inevitably so did my memories.

*Don't think about anything... Just go to sleep for now... That's right, just...*

**“I love yooooooooooooooooooooou!”**

..... Ah.

I remembered.

I remembered for a moment, and in the end the rest of my memories came surging back like a flood.

*“I’ve finally realised that you’ve been by my side all this time! I was saved because you were there for me! I’m sorry for all the trouble that I’ve caused you! I might continue to cause you trouble from now on, but you’re the person that I need!”*

*Oh no, oh no, oh no oh no oh no oh no.*

*Emergency. Emergency. Terminate all thought processes immediately. Terminate all thought processes immediately.*

My mind was in a crisis. The situation could not be allowed to escalate any further. I enacted a complete embargo.

*At any rate as long as I turned my mind to more enjoyable things... Oh yeah, I could play a word-chaining game<sup>1</sup> with the names of gravure idols!*

*Nice job, Sueharu! Great idea! If I could make it through at least ten people, I would probably be able to calm down!*

We’ll start with “A”. Anzai Maaya... Alright, I’m doing well. Next is “Ya” then.

Ya... Ya...

**“-No.”<sup>2</sup>**

.....Ahh.

See, I knew it. I knew it was a bad idea to remember.

To be reminded about these kinds of things, man...

**“Ahhhhhhhhh!!”**

I dove onto my bed and buried my face in my pillow, yelling as loud as I could.

“You idiot, you idiot! God, I’m such an idiot! What the hell was I doing?! Why did I try to act all cool, just to get so magnificently rejected?! What am I supposed to do now?! How am I going to deal with this?! How am I supposed to act when I go to school on Tuesday?! Argghhhhhh, there’s nothing I can dooooo!”

My head was giddy with incredible embarrassment.

I had really done it this time. I had screwed up royally beyond the point of having the luxury to think about whether the situation could be salvaged or not.

“Man, I really got too ahead of myself, didn’t I?! You got it into your head that if you beat Abe you’d have a one hundred percent chance of succeeding in your confession? You thought that because it was Kuro she’d definitely accept it? Idiot! Idiot! Look at how things turned out! What a clown I am! I mean, Kuro did approach me quite aggressively... or at least I thought she

did... And she's also always been so loving towards me... that's why... I just... **Ahhhhhhhhh!!**"

I banged my head against the wall. I did so repeatedly, ignoring the *thumping* it produced.

"I'm such an idiot! I'm a dull stupid moronic piece of crap dumbass! REEEEEEE!"

"Quit making a fuss so early in the morning, Sueharu!"

A voice came over from the house next door.

It belonged to the second-eldest daughter of the Shida family – Midori.

The Shida family stayed in the house next to mine. There lived the "Four Shida Sisters", of which Kuroha was the eldest.

They were pretty well known. Their fame extended to not only amongst the neighbourhood, but over to the adjacent town as well.

It was rare in the first place to have four sisters in one family. It was rare enough to see four siblings, certainly rarer still for all of them to be girls. And if all of them also turned out to be cute, it would almost be a miracle.

And yet here *that miracle had occurred*.

–The eldest daughter, Shida Kuroha. A second-year high school student.

–The second daughter, Shida Midori. A third-year middle school student.

–The third daughter, Shida Aoi. A first-year middle school student.

–The youngest daughter, Shida Akane. Also a first-year middle school student.

By a group of fans the four of them were called "The Four Beautiful Sisters of the Shida Family" or "The Colourful Sisters", among other things, and were figures to be revered. As to why "Colourful", it apparently pandered to

the fact that all four sisters had one colour-related character in each of their names.<sup>3</sup> The bluntness of it aside, I thought the connection was easy to make.

The room facing mine was Kuroha's, with the rest of her sisters' lined up next to it in order. Thus the room Aoi and Akane, the first-year middle schooler twins shared aside, if I went berserk in my own room it was plenty loud enough for Midori to hear from where she was.

Midori was the second of the miraculous "Colourful Sisters" – and as indicated by her rude language, she was far and away the crudest amongst them.

"You're the noisy one, Midori!" I replied after running out onto the veranda.

I was honestly just trying to vent my anger. At the same time of course I also felt comfortable enough saying it knowing it was Midori who was listening.

"Whatchu say, Sueharu?! You saying I'm the one at fault?!"

Midori clenched her hand into a fist and shook it. The strength I felt from it far exceeded that of a girl's. In reality her bicep was quite well-developed.

Midori was Kuroha's younger sister by two years and a third-year student in middle school. She was the owner of a violent personality completely out of place as one of Kuroha's sisters.

She was 170 centimetres tall, twice the size of Kuroha, and had athletic ability good enough to appear in the national summer tennis competition as a result of the power and speed she could leverage off her lanky frame.

The part of her appearance which people saw first was probably her boyish short hair. It fit her violent personality, and to me Midori was something close to a younger brother, but the truth was that – amongst the four sisters, Midori had overwhelmingly the largest bust. Thus no matter how tomboyish she was, I could never see her as a guy. By the sole virtue of being Kuroha's younger sister, her features were also pretty well-arranged.

Even now, in the T-shirt and hot pants which made up her completely



apathetic roomwear, her strong, beautiful legs and her prominent bust asserted unmistakably that she was a girl. In fact her style was too outstanding and her clothes really quite compact. She looked as if she were in the thick of puberty, like what currently fit her perfectly would soon be too small.

In my heart I wished to reject it, thinking “*Hmmm, well, a middle-schooler’s unattractive body isn’t gonna bother a high-schooler like me, you know?*”, but in reality she was a lot more fashionable than Kuroha was, a real temptress of the eyes.

Obviously to Midori I made sure never to say any complimentary words of that sort. For if I did the cheeky Midori would indubitably bring up and brag about them countless times afterward.

“Midori, you’ve really got a bad mouth. This is why you’re more popular amongst girls.”

As Midori’s now frozen gaze so uncomfortably revealed, I had just inadvertently used a forbidden phrase.

The above was a common complaint of hers.

“*Being troubled by being more popular amongst girls than boys*”.

She would on occasion also find love letters written by other girls in her shoebox. Strange, huh, considering how I’ve never had that experience before? Isn’t there something wrong with this world?

Or so I thought while realising at the same time that I should, well, show my magnanimity as the older person here, signalling out “*Damn, I know,*” – my understanding for her plight as I always had. And it was then that it became a fight. *Life was so unreasonable...*

“Sueharu! You bastard, you just said something you shouldn’t have—”

Midori began picking up and brandishing the tennis balls in her room.

I got down on my knees in a panic.

“Woah, Midori! I get it, I get it! I stepped over the line! I’ll apologise, so really please just give me a break for today!”

I had regained some presence of mind after playing around with Midori, but obviously not the same amount of energy that I usually had when sparring with her.

It appeared that in this state I had aroused Midori’s suspicions.

“What’s wrong, Sueharu? You’re not acting yourself.” She asked with an elbow propped against the window frame, as the tension went out of her shoulders.

“...Nothing, really.”

“Hey, don’t talk like that. Not when I’m asking because I’m trying to do you a favour by listening.”

“Is that your way of trying to get somebody to open up to you? You really do have none of the qualities required of a counselor. At times like these you have to be like Kuro and—”

My blood pressure skyrocketed as I said it. I had been so strongly affected even though I had only said her name. I really was something else.

“...Go on.”

“...I’ve said enough. It doesn’t matter, right?”

“*Sigh* ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ”

Midori gave an ostentatious, bloody long sigh.

“Big Sis Kuro’s been acting strange since yesterday, and so are you. Did something happen?”

“...*Not at all.*”

“.....”

Midori’s gaze was cold.

What, that was a perfect acting job, you got a problem with that?

“Hm, well whatever. I’m always the odd one out when it comes to these kinds of things anyway.”

“What are you sulking about?”

“I’m not sulking!”

“You are.”

“Tsk... Screw this!”

She shut the window with a *slam* and left.

“What’s her problem?”

Please don’t react in a way that I can’t comprehend. As it is my mind’s already messed up and I no longer understand girls, so if I can’t understand even you then I’ll truly be too lost and confused.

As I sighed and turned away from the veranda, returning towards my room, a voice came from behind me.

“Erm... Big Brother Haru.”

“Aoi-chan, is it?”

The face which appeared in replacement at the window belonged to the third daughter, Aoi.

A first-year middle schooler, Aoi was the older twin to the youngest daughter Akane.

On the whole she was delicate and slender. At 150 centimetres she had a

fairly small stature, but one still just a little taller than Kuroha's. Kuroha's depression at being overtaken in height by her had been tremendous indeed. But in terms of bust size Kuroha still won handily, so for Aoi... greater things were to be expected of her in the future.

Extremely neat twintails of black hair fell to her hips. She was the most feminine amongst the four sisters, with a hobby of sewing and a passion for sweet things, cute clothing and dolls.

“Is it true that nothing happened...?”

It seemed like she had heard the earlier conversation.

“Like Big Sister Midori said, Big Sister Kuro's been acting weirdly since yesterday and I'm a little worried... And from what little I've heard earlier, Big Brother Haru, so have you...” Aoi said with tears welling up in the recesses of her large eyes.

“Please, tell me anything if I can help. I might not be able to do a lot, but I'll do as much as I can so...”

My cheeks softened unconsciously at her heartfelt consideration.

She was extremely kind. Too kind in fact, to the point that neglecting herself had become a habit and also a cause for concern.

She was a younger sister-like younger sister, one variety of the ideal younger sister. That was my impression of Aoi.

“Thanks, Aoi-chan, but I'm pretty sure that I'll have to do something about this myself...”

I was pathetic for causing a first-year middle schooler to worry. Knowing she would listen to anything sincerely made me want to talk to her, but even so I obviously couldn't let her hear about the love-related complications between her “*actual sister*” and the “*big brother she got along well with from next door*”.

Yikes. When I thought about it that way, matters of love, when entangled or

inflamed, were nothing to be joked about.

“I see...”

Aoi looked crestfallen. She had apparently gotten the wrong idea that she couldn't be told because she couldn't be trusted. She was an incredibly virtuous girl, to the point where one would be hard pressed to find anything in her resembling a fault. Yet she also had a low opinion of herself, and a tendency to conclude that she was to blame when anything went wrong.

I thus spoke up.

“Thanks for your concern, Aoi-chan. Honestly, you've already helped me out a lot by just talking to me. So don't look so sad – in fact, you should be proud.”

“No...”

Aoi adorably clasped both of her hands tightly in front of her chest.

“I'm... No, we're the ones who've been saved, Big Brother Haru. You always cheer me up, and I think you're very dependable.”

Seriously, this girl... She was sincere, cute, noble and innocent. All those things appealed greatly to my protective instincts. Talking to her healed my heart and made me willing to do anything for her.

“*Sigh*, you really are a good girl, Aoi-chan. Wanna stay with me instead?”

I had rooms free, and she could stay in one of them as my adopted younger sister.

Aoi appeared troubled briefly before immediately breaking out into a cute, bitter smile.

“...Ooh, Big Brother Haru... You're always joking around.”

“I wasn't, though.”

Well I was for about ninety percent, but for the remaining ten I thought it would be pretty good if the above actually materialised.

“...I’m overjoyed at your invitation, but I’d feel sorry for the people who want you, Big Brother Haru.”

“*Sigh*, now this is what I’m talking about. Telling me that there are ‘people who want me’ even if you’re only trying to be polite... Midori could learn a thing or two from you, Aoi-chan.”

“Die, dumb Sueharu!”

“Woah, you were listening, Midori?”

The window next to Aoi’s suddenly opened and from it came Midori’s rude voice.

I rose to meet the new challenge immediately and in response Aoi smiled bitterly. I didn’t notice her jealous-looking eyes.

\*

“Woah, you were listening, Midori?”

Lazing on top of her bed in a daze, hearing Sueharu’s voice come from outside snapped Kuroha wide awake.

She had been eavesdropping nervously at first but... her dissatisfaction had gradually accumulated.

As Sueharu’s presence finally receded and peace returned to what lay beyond the windows, Kuroha violently threw the pillow she was holding with all her might onto the floor.

**“Ahhhhhhhhh!!”**

She resisted strenuously the urge to open the window and yell, channelling all her rage into her fists. She punched her pillow repeatedly.

“Ooh, Haru, you idiot! You idiot! Idiot, idiot, idiot! This is all your fault, Haru! If you had just accepted my confession from the start, then none of this... **Ooooooh!**”

She wasn't sure whether she should be angry or cry.

Only that all her blood had collected at the top of her head, that her cheeks were flushed, and that her face was hot enough to make her giddy.

“I won! I unmistakably won! I was completely victorious! So why... why am I... what am I going to do?! How am I going to face Haru?! Oooooh... I wanna die I wanna die I wanna die!”

Kuroha hugged her pillow and rolled back and forth on top of the carpet.

“Big Sis Kuro, what are you doing?!”

She pulled on the door as she spoke, but it got stuck on the lock. To act without thinking beforehand was without a doubt very Midori-esque... but her presumptuous action only added to Kuroha's wrath.

Kuroha glared at the door, then threw her pillow at it.

“Midori! That's enough, please go somewhere else!”





She could probably gauge the extent of Kuroha's anger by the pillow hitting the door. Midori's voice grew tight.

"Yikes, you're getting angry at me instead? You really are in a bad mood."

"If you're going to complain, Big Sister has no reservations about beating that personality of yours into shape, you know?"

"Alright, I get it! Tsk, seriously, first you, then Sueharu, what the hell is going on..."

Midori left while complaining under her breath.

After making sure Midori's voice had faded into the distance, for some reason all tension left Kuroha.

"Really, what am I going to do..."

She fell back onto the carpet bottom first with a *thud*, dragging her pillow towards her and embracing it tightly to her chest to stem her unease.

"I went too far trying to get back..."

Feelings weren't meant to be controlled.

At that moment, up until the very moment she had been confessed to, Kuroha had planned on accepting it. But revenge had swayed her heart, and in her mind she had arrived at the same conclusion.

She had loved him, after all. If she rejected him, she didn't know if their relationship would sour.

But in the heat of the moment – she had.

The more she thought about it coolly, the more it seemed she had overreacted.

If she wanted revenge, she could have given him a thorough tongue-lashing, for example, or gotten back some other way, after she had accepted his

confession and they had started dating.

If she had gotten back at him while the two of them were alone, at worst she could have apologised, saying “*Sorry. In return I’ll do X,*” and they would have had the luxury of working out some kind of exchange.

But now that wouldn’t do. Her rejection of him at the Confession Festival had been too severe. There was really no way she could take that back. “*Sorry, it was a joke,*” wouldn’t cut it at all.

“Ooooooh, I’m too much of an idiot... I can’t blame Haru for this...”

She had completely self-imploded. The explosion had been so spectacular it had caught herself, her target and a third party in the blast and blown them all away.

“Won’t time go back...?”

She naively looked at the date shown on her phone.

It was the 16th of September, a Saturday. The cultural festival had definitively ended.

“I guess not, huh... Ooooooh, what am I doing...?”

Time passed melancholically.

After being depressed and alone, the first emotion that came to her was anger.

“If that losing dog hadn’t been around, none of this...”

She was a prideful coward who couldn’t even make conversation with Sueharu in class despite always sneaking glances at him, yet also a vixen who continually and stealthily made passes at him in the background. Ever since Kuroha had found out that she had been the reason why Sueharu had rejected her, she had thought her extremely bold for daring to cross her, and resolved not to ever forgive her.

The present situation clearly worked in Shirokusa’s favour.

Having rejected Sueharu's confession, Kuroha could not hope for them to get along as they had used to. On the other hand, Shirokusa had since learned the important truth that "Sueharu had liked her in the past". Indubitably she would now go strongly onto the offensive, putting Kuroha on the defensive while necessitating that she come up with a plan of attack from a completely different direction.

Also – with Sueharu's acting prowess now resurrected – came the potential for *new headaches* to arise.

Kuroha hugged her head.

"What am I going to do..."

The circumstances were adverse and truly fearsome. It was a situation of her own making, but one which made her want to pray to God.

"But... I can't lose."

Kuroha stood, turning her eyes towards the photo board hanging beside her workdesk.

Of the photos there she picked one, innocently taken in school when she had been a student in the lower grades of elementary school. Kuroha's mother had taken it on an open day for parents to visit – a picture of Kuroha, then a grade representative trying to gather the class, and Sueharu, who was acting in support, both of them laughing together.

Kuroha stared fixedly at the picture, before turning red-faced and hugging it dearly to her chest.

"–Because I love you."

\*

"...Hm?"

In the middle of a massive bed covered by a canopy, Shirokusa awoke.

The momentum of her sitting up caused the shoulder straps of her gown to slide off. Shirokusa smoothed out her negligee while in a daze. It felt extremely pleasant caressing the white lacy frills which made up her dress-style negligee which appeared translucent under light. It had also since become a habit of hers to use the feeling of lace as a tactile stimulus to wake herself up faster.

“... My Suu-chan doll...”

Shirokusa had always had a propensity for low blood pressure, and difficulty getting up after sleeping. What her non-functioning brain wanted before anything else was her Suu-chan doll.

She had privately asked her maid to make one six years ago after Sueharu had stopped coming to her house. The momento had at times borne the brunt of her anger, others, her affection, and after going through multiple rounds of upgrading and repairs, it was now the high school version (Suu-chan Doll ver. 5) which had just been completed about a week prior that Shirokusa spied beside her pillow and pulled towards her.

Shirokusa took the “Suu-chan doll” in her hands, stretched herself out and held it aloft.

“He was really so cool...”

For the first time in six years she had watched the Nyuu-kun dance live. It had even come with the song.

Having matured into a high schooler, his movements had become more dynamic and cooler than before.

“Suu-chan was so cool, and now I too have become his equal...”

Not illusorily, but in reality, the person whom she had admired and pursued all this time had appeared close by.

And now, she had become not merely just an admirer, but a professional novelist as well. In other words, she could probably say as much that she had

become someone worthy of standing by his side.

The pride and joy she experienced from that could be called arousal, and in that instant Shirokusa felt that all her hard work thus far had come to fruition.

“Suu-chan...”

Shirokusa enveloped the head of the doll with both her hands and carried it slowly towards her.

Her target was its lips. She brought hers towards them—

“*I — liked you.*”

But stopped just before they touched.

“Ooooooooooh...!”

*Liked, liked, liked...*

Shirokusa got up into a sitting position on her bed and held the Suu-chan doll aloft – before bringing it down again without subjecting it to abuse.

**“Waaaaaa! Suu-chan, you idiottt!”**

Shirokusa cried large tears, wailing loudly like a child.

“I... made you fall in love...! I worked hard, and made you fall in love with me...! And yet... and yet... Suu-chan, **you cheater!** You liked me, so why did you turn to some other girl instead?! Why couldn't you be satisfied with me alone...?! You moron, you moron, you moronnnnn!”

Shirokusa's room was about thirty square meters<sup>4</sup> large and well-soundproofed. But of course if she cried loudly it would be noticed by

anyone in the corridor outside.

Word travelled quickly, and soon there was knocking on her room's large Western-style door.

“Shiro, it's Papa! Is something going on?”

“.....”

Even to her respected and beloved father there was no way she could show her crying face, thus Shirokusa chose to ignore him.

“Hm! No response! This is bad, Shiro could've passed out from a stroke! Quick, bring the master key!”

“In truth I considered that possibility, so I have it right here.”

“Well done! Shiro, Papa's coming!”

“Oh no no no no.”

Too emotionally preoccupied to find the words to stop him, Shirokusa was in a panic.

At any rate she could not allow the door to be opened. If it did her father would discover the Suu-chan doll which had been made in secret from him, and so too would he see her reddened eyes and immodest negligee.

“-Nooooooooo!”

“Shiro! Papa's- Oof!”

On the spur of the moment Shirokusa threw the electronic dictionary placed at her bedside just as her father opened the door!

The dictionary hit her father squarely in the head, and he passed out while still in the hallway.

Shirokusa returned the maid's cool gaze.

“...Sorry. Could you please make up some random excuse for Papa?”

“...Understood, my lady.”

Silently apologising, Shirokusa re-locked the door. She then picked up the Suu-chan doll she had promptly thrown aside earlier, staring at it firmly.

“Suu-chan, you’re an idiot—”

Dolls couldn’t respond, but for some reason there was something that made her feel fulfilled.

“—But I still love you.”

Of course there was no reply, but she knew that she was blushing.

“I haven’t lost yet. I’ll show that I can take Suu-chan’s heart back from that thieving cat. For strangely enough, she was the one who taught me how.”

Kuroha had once been rejected, yet she had continued fighting and made Sueharu fall in love with her. In other words, it was possible to make the other party fall in love even after being rejected.

“Besides, I wasn’t rejected! I made him fall in love with me! It’s just that that thieving cat who’s just a little closer to Suu-chan used her dirty methods to lead him by the nose!”

Yes, yes, Suu-chan wasn’t at fault. That thieving cat was. There was no mistake.

But—

“How should I look when I meet Suu-chan...?”

How did Suu-chan feel right now? He had liked her before, but not at all any more? That wasn’t the case, was it? If Suu-chan’s love for her was a hundred, then his for that thieving cat had become about a hundred and one only “temporarily”, right? If so, if she rounded up they were pretty much equal anyway, and after taking into account his latent affection for her and the

meaning of things in the greater universe, et cetera, wasn't it a clear victory for her then? So it would be no trouble for her to turn things around then, right?

It seemed like she still had a fairly good shot. But thinking about how Suu-chan had once fallen in love with her—

“This is so embarrassing...”

Her face flushed, and she felt like she wouldn't be able to show it properly to him. She felt like it would eventually burn into a crisp.

On the other hand, thinking about how Sueharu now liked that thieving cat the most made her conversely angry enough to want to slap him.

“Oooooooh...!”

She began crying once again.

Shirokusa hugged her Suu-chan doll from behind, pressing her cheek against the back of its head.

“Suu-chan's an idiooot... And I'm an idiot toooooo...”

Her voice proliferated and dissipated like ripples of water within the confines of her extravagant room.

From the doll of course there was no reply.

—And thus for the three of them, Tuesday began.

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<sup>1</sup> As some of our more experienced readers would have guessed, this is *shiritori*.

<sup>2</sup> Kuroha's infamous rejection of Sueharu towards the end of volume 1 is delivered as “*—Yada.*” in the original text, hence the joke here. It doesn't work so well in English though.



<sup>3</sup> In order of age, *Kuro* = black, *Midori* = green, *Ao* = blue, *Aka* = red.

<sup>4</sup> Converted from 20 *jo*, or the size of one *tatami* mat. For you Americans, that's about 323 square feet.

# **Chapter 1: Storms followed by cloudy weather, with occasional gales and tornados in some areas**

## Part 1

“Oi, did you hear? About Maru and Kai.”

The 19th of September.

After the cultural festival which had happened on Friday, the 15th, and sandwiching the weekend and Respect-for-the-Aged Day<sup>1</sup> in between, it was the beginning of a peaceful Tuesday with a new atmosphere about it – or at least, it should have been.

Unfortunately on that day Hozumino Private High School was devastated by a storm.

Someone had uploaded a video of the cultural festival’s “Confession Festival”, and in three days it had exceeded a million views.

That alone could have been called a big event, more than sufficient to serve as a topic of conversation, but the turmoil continued further.

The sudden appearance of the media. The deeply meaningful announcement asking for “Maru Sueharu” and “Kai Tetsuhiko”. The intrusion of the in-vogue young actress, Momosaka Maria. And then – the hellish scene of carnage which followed.

Hozumino High was a normal school catered towards students preparing for university. Calling it “*normal*” might have been a little peculiar, considering celebrities went to it and academic ability was high, but still it was not a so-called top school, a school geared towards getting students into university it may have been, so it wasn’t like there were many famous scholars among its graduates. Naturally almost none of the clubs competed at a national level, but neither were they all barren. Things were, in other words, fundamentally peaceful, and it was not a school where trouble usually happened. The major

incident which occurred there was a definite shock to the many students going about their tranquil school lives.

The rumours spread, and during the break there were enough people who had come to take a look in the hallway outside 2-B to form a crowd. The words that they exchanged while there of course involved intelligence related to the major incident. The conversations those observers had went mostly like this.

“That dumbspicable duo, man... You know, I always knew they weren’t normal from the beginning, but this is something else...”

“Apparently the media are paying a lot of attention to how Maru’s moving.”

“You mean like who he’s getting close to?”

“Ahh, well that too, but that’s probably been settled already considering he’s been rejected. So what they’re looking at then is if he looks like he’ll return to the entertainment world or not.”

“But to think he’s the real Maru-chan... I mean, it’s not like the name’s extremely common, but I always thought that ‘Maru-chan’ was just a stage name, and that he only just so happened to share it.”

“Me too. He’s an idiot, after all.”

“Uh huh.”

“He’s Maria-chan’s first love though, apparently.”

“For real?”

“For real.”

“...I’ve heard info that Kachi called him Suu-chan, you know anything about that?”

“A report from the investigation team says that it’s apparently true. It seems that they kept each others’ company when that dumbass was a child actor.”

“For real?”

“For real.”

“...He was rejected by Shida-san though, right?”

“Well about that, Shida-san apparently behaved quite jealously during the incident when Maria-chan trespassed.”

“For real?”

“For real.”

“.....”

“.....”

“...Alright, let’s do it then.”

“Let’s.”

–An unsettling air thus emerged.

But of course, this was still a school geared towards getting students into university. There weren’t many here who would easily resort to violence. Male students, driven insane by jealousy, thus took a different route.

\*

<sup>1</sup> Japanese national holiday, held on the 3rd Monday in September.

## Part 2

“Say—, Sueharu.”

“What, Tetsuhiko?”

“Things were real hairy this morning when Maria-chan came, but has she gotten in touch with you since then?”

Lunch break. Tetsuhiko and I sat facing each other in the classroom as we usually did and talked.

“...I knew you were the one who gave her my address. Between this and the video thing, you really need to stop playing around, alright?”

With regards to the present situation I really couldn't conceal my anger.

I understood Tetsuhiko's scumminess well. Things therefore usually went as I anticipated, though whether I forgave him for them or not was a different matter, and I was both empathetic and prepared to a certain extent. But there were limits to everything.

“I'm kinda pissed off, you know? Isn't there something else you should say?”

“I know, I know. That's why I got you lunch, right?”

“Grr...”

I grinded my molars against each other.

*“This guy really doesn't apologise, does he...?”*

Having made it this far, in a certain sense I thought it was pretty amazing. The incredible part about Tetsuhiko being that he always made sure to

prepare an alluring gift in lieu of apologising.

“Tetsuhiko, you bastard...”

“*After behaving so outrageously, you think getting me lunch would be enough for me to forgive you?*” – that was what I thought to an extent. It would be far too convenient to allow things to become even like this without him apologising.

However.

The lunch he offered – was something way too potent.

Pizza.

Placed extremely prominently on the table between Tetsuhiko and I was a large box. No matter how I looked, it appeared to be one meant for delivery pizza.

The smell of cheese drifted over from the box, tickling my nostrils.

“*This guy...*”

I glared at the fearlessly smiling Tetsuhiko.

“*Thinks like the devil–*”

How did Tetsuhiko come up with something like this...? This potent aroma... God, I can't resist!

To a hungry high school boy, this was way too provocative!

“This is unfair, Tetsuhiko!”

“Unfair? How? This is called ‘*sincerity*’, Sueharu.”

“Ugh...!”

Eating delivery pizza for lunch in school... I had imagined, but never heard

of anyone actually doing it, obviously. There was no way that the vendors could come all the way up to the classrooms, and they typically wouldn't be able to take orders either. Even if you came to class bringing the pizza yourself, it would be over immediately once someone tattled to a teacher.

It would not have been an exaggeration to describe delivery pizza as a school's forbidden fruit. That itself made it highly attractive.

“Hm? You don't want it?”

Tetsuhiko provoked me, as if seeing through my heart's intentions.

“Tsk, even if you try paying me off with this...”

“Huh? Guess I'll have it myself then.”

Tetsuhiko casually picked up the box containing the pizza and turned his body 180 degrees. From my perspective the box became perfectly concealed by Tetsuhiko's back. While in this position Tetsuhiko opened the lid off the box.

A pungent odour drifted about.

Rich cheese, chicken, mayonnaise... my nose keenly perceived their aroma and my mouth filled with saliva.

Tetsuhiko looked around, smiling broadly as he watched my face, before both catching in his mouth cheese which looked like it might trickle off a slice of pizza and taking a bite out of it at one go.

“Ahh, deliciousss.”

That single phrase caused my resistance to collapse.

“H- Hmph! Well, you seem somewhat apologetic, at least? I- I suppose I can forgive you.”

In a roundabout way I hoped to get the sentiment that “I would forgive him so he should make a show of apologising at least” across. Yet Tetsuhiko paid



no heed, purposely cupping his ear with his hand.

“Eh? What was that?”

“It’s actually incredible how after doing all these things you’re not apologising but even provoking me! How do you raise someone to become someone like you?!”

“At any rate I’ve shown my intent to make up for things, haven’t I? If you get that then eat.”

Tetsuhiko pulled out a slice of pizza and shoved it into my mouth.

“Ahh! Ah!”

“Eh? You want me to feed you some more?”

“You bastard, are you Satan? It’s burning, can’t you tell?!”

Cheese stuck to and seared the skin on my lips. I stuck out and licked it off with my tongue and swallowed.

“...Wow, deliciousssss!”

“Right?”

“Damn, this is great, man!”

This heat, this richness, this *umami*! And above all else, the sinfulness of eating a pizza in school!

In good order Tetsuhiko once again placed the pizza box he had hidden behind him on my table.

Hungry, I at once devoured it greedily.

“Delicious! Delicious!”

“This guy’s a dumbass.”

“He’s letting him off with just a pizza after he had all those things done to him...”

I could hear derisive voices around me, but I didn’t stop eating.

But I mean, this is really tasty, you know? Of course I’m pissed off at what Tetsuhiko did. But that’s over now, and it wasn’t like I got absolutely nothing out of it, right?

Yes, as a result of Tetsuhiko uploading that video without prior notice, I had discovered a few different things.

One of which was that society at large still knew my name. Knowing that was big.

Having left the entertainment world for six years, it would have been unavoidable had people forgotten me completely. But now talk shows might pick it up if a video of me went viral. In other words, I still had value on television.

And also as a result of that video, my fame was once again sharply on the rise.

Fame garnered attention. Attention garnered money. It was my opinion that a positive image naturally increased one’s value, but before talking about anything else one first had to make his name known.

If I were to consider making a potential return, the impactful exposé I had made as a result of that video had really been quite juicy. It had been something similar to a grandiose publicity stunt one might receive from an agency he signed with, and one hugely successful at that. It hurt, of course, doing something akin to selling away your privacy piece by piece, but in the first place if one became popular enough, nothing of yours would be private any longer. If following this I was about worthy enough to be discovered and covered by a weekly magazine, it could be said that an approach similar to the one I had taken this time had been valuable, at least in the sense that it had made a comeback easier for me.

Having understood that much alone, I couldn't be completely mad at Tetsuhiko, even if I wanted to be.

“Knowing you, you probably did it knowing everything that would follow.”

“And if I did?”

“Well, nothing really. Just that you should probably ask for permission first when you're going to do something. Me aside, you won't be able to complain then if someone else does something to you.”

I said so while washing pizza down the back of my throat, reaching my arm out for slice number two.

It was at that moment when something bumped into my head.

It didn't hurt at all. I glanced backwards and saw a paper plane falling. The tip of the plane had hit the back of my head.

Truthfully speaking, this wasn't the first time it had happened. Many paper planes had come flying since earlier, only that they hadn't hit me, simply landing nearby.

I thus chose not to care and ignored it.

“So, Tetsuhiko, how did you even manage to get a pizza? Security at the school gate's even stricter than normal today after the press came, right?”

“Hm? Oh, about that...”

“T'sall thanks to me.”

I instinctively looked upwards, seeing a lively-looking girl standing in front of me.

She was fairly short, just about 155 cm? Her features were pretty cute, but perhaps they were better described as charming. A protruding tooth and ponytail left a lasting impression, and as for her chest... Hmm?!

I was drawn unconsciously into its bulge.

If had to choose a single word to describe it, that word would be...  
“explosive”. Yes, indeed it was a bomb.

There was an artist who once said that “Art is explosion”<sup>1</sup>, while that chest could probably also be considered art, in other words thus proving the equation “Art = Explosion = Chest”. Q.E.D.– proof complete.

Shirokusa’s bust was pretty incredible too, but the one word I would have used to describe it was “plentiful”. Hers invoked feelings of gratefulness towards the common folk of this country within me, but on a spectrum of busts it really couldn’t be called “explosive”.

To think there was such an outstanding talent in this school...

“Ah, Maru-senpai, here’s my name card.”

“Oh, well thanks.”

Together with the words “Jack of All Trades – Asagi Rena”, a phone number and Hotline address were written on the card.

“...Jack of All Trades?”

“s’Right. Name’s Asagi Rena, first year. Tetsu-senpai calls me Rena, so you should too, Maru-senpai.”

“Is that so? In that case, Rena, what exactly does a Jack of All Trades do?”

“I’ll help with anything, depending on the pay.”

“*Anything...?*”

*Anything... Anything... Anything...*

*Hmmm, anything, huh...*

*Anything goes...?*

“What about erotic stuff the—”

“s’Out of the question.”

***“Oooooohhhhhh!”***

I was stricken by despair.



“Damn it! **Are there no hope or dreams left in this world?!**”

“Tetsu-senpai, who the hell is this guy?! He’s super interesting!”

“He’s an idiot, isn’t he?”

“Well, I do think he’s kinda interesting as a person, **but coming from a girl he’s the worst.**”

Wow, those words coming from an underclassman really hurt. Of all the comebacks I had endured thus far, “coming from a girl he’s the worst” had to be within the uppermost tier for pain.

“Oh, you can ignore his lewd remarks. Just the words of a loser.”

“That’s why he tried to pay his way through with money, huh. What a loser.”

“You all really have no mercy, huh?! Also could you seriously stop calling me a loser?! I just gave in to my urges a little, that’s all!”

I could hear voices saying “moron” and “disgusting” around me, but I pretended not to.

Another paper plane hit my head. Before it had been the back, but this time it was the front of my head which had been targeted. As a result the plane landed on top of the pizza in front of me.

To that extent it was indeed difficult for me to continue turning a blind eye. I thus picked up the paper plane and tried unfolding it.

《※Warning – Do not get any closer to Shida-san, Kachi-san or Maria-chan. There will be no further warnings after this one.》

“.....”

I also showed the warning to Tetsuhiko.

Like they did in American comedies, Tetsuhiko hugged his shoulders in an exaggerated manner and I followed his lead.



“Pffftffff!”

I blew my nose as hard as I could into the paper, before crumpling it into a ball and throwing it into a bin.

“Right, more importantly–”

“H- H-H- How can you be so calm?!”

Rena rattled on without pausing.

“No, honestly I also thought it would’ve been a little rude of me to make a fuss before introducing myself earlier... so I kept quiet, but the two of you are really acting very strangely!”

“Hm? How so?” I replied, before Rena pointed to my surroundings.

“This!”

Well, to be fair, I too thought that there was something wrong with the current situation.

From a cursory count alone there were about ten or so paper planes littered around me, together with several paper balls. There was a sheet of paper with the words “*Go to hell*” written on it pasted with cellophane tape prominently onto the side of my desk. They were all the handiwork of male students driven mad by jealousy, who had resorted to writing their warnings et cetera on pieces of paper and pasting them on my desk, or turning them into paper balls and planes and throwing them at me because they couldn’t say anything to me directly.

“This isn’t normal, y’know?! Is this supposed to be some sorta cafeteria from hell?! This is a cauldron of hate and jealousy! How can you be so composed?!”

I held a conversation with Tetsuhiko through our eyes, shrugging my shoulders.

“Well, that’s just how it is, isn’t it?”

“As long as it doesn’t get physical I honestly don’t care.”

“Woow, these people are completely desensitised!”

Tetsuhiko questioned me with a slightly surprised look.

“Speaking of which, Sueharu, you’re being pretty gutsy today, huh. Usually at this time you’d probably say something like ‘*I’m mentally weak, so give me a break!*’, right?”

“Hm? Ooh, I actually felt that way during morning recess and such, but—”

“—But what?”

“I got used to it.”

Tetsuhiko shut his eyes and pressed his index finger against his forehead. He seemed troubled, for some reason.

“What’s wrong, Tetsuhiko?”

“You know—”

Tetsuhiko was uncommonly emphatic.

“Saying you got used to it quickly doesn’t even describe it!”

“Really? I mean, it’s gloomy and depressing, but after a while don’t things gradually seem to matter less and less?”

“Yikes, you’re even more of an idiot than I imagined. Are you usually on drugs or what?”

“What the hell, this guy’s mindset’s crazy... kinda like how a phoenix keeps rebirthing itself?”

“Nah, he’s a single-celled organism. If you cut one it just divides without taking damage, right? This and that are the same thing.”

“Ahh, I get it.”

“No, don’t just get it! And I’d rather you heckle from the sidelines, because it hurts when you say it like this straight to my face!”

Tetsuhiko scratched his head, casually ignoring my plea.

“...But, well, now I get it. I’ve always wondered how you could be so popular despite your soft mentality, but it turns out that it’s because you’re an idiot that you’re so incredibly quick to get back on your feet... Now that I think about it, that’s the feeling that I’ve gotten all the way up till now...”

“Idiots are pretty tough, huh.”

“Rena, you’re now totally looking down on me, aren’t you?”

“No no, I respect you, Maru-paisen.”

“You said that really halfheartedly, huh?! In my entire life I’ve never once felt respect from being called ‘paisen’!”

“I wasn’t lying. I just think you’re a little perverted, dumb, and strange in the head, that’s all.”

“*Sigh*–, I’m really being played for a fool here. Being so despised by an underclassman with an explosive chest I’ve just met for the first time..... Hang on, maybe that’s a good thing?”

“Don’t look at me for approval, Dummyharu.”

“Explosive chest’s sexual harassment, by the way.”

What’s going on with these people? They’re pretty close, huh. Tetsuhiko, who should have been hated by pretty much all of the girls in school, was being treated fairly normally.

“Speaking of which, how are the two of you connected?”

Rena, who had begun eating the pizza without our permission, raised her

hand energetically.

“We went to the same middle school.”

“I use her occasionally because it’s convenient. I told her that recently you’ve begun smelling of money, you see. She’s been pestering me to introduce the two of you to each other, so I made her bring this pizza as the fee for doing so.”

“You’re incredible, you know that? You mean this pizza you’re using as a substitute for an apology wasn’t paid for using your own money? I’m impressed that you’ve gotten this far.”

“Stop complimenting me, man, you’re making me blush.”

“I wasn’t praising you for a single millisecond there, Trashiko!”

Rena eyed the two of us with deep interest.

“Honestly, I’ve no idea how the two of y’all’re friends...”

“Ahh, well, I can see how it might look that way from a third person’s perspective. We fight all the time, after all. And in the first place, Tetsuhiko’s the one who always gives me grief.”

“Well, it definitely does look that way.”

“But that isn’t how it is, is it? Those things don’t decide whether you’re pals or not.”

“...Huh? No, I don’t get it. So why’re you friends then?”

Tetsuhiko feigned ignorance, showing no intention of joining the conversation. That left me with no choice but to come up with an answer of my own thinking, huh.

“Well, there really isn’t any significant reason, but—”

“Oh—”

Rena suddenly turned her gaze towards my rear and her eyes froze in that position.

As her attention went, so did my willingness to speak—

“S- Sususu- Suu-chan...”

That sudden voice caused my back to straighten with a *snap*.

I didn't need to ask to know who it was. There was only one person who referred to me that way.

“O- Oh ~ , Shiro, is that you...?”

“Ah, y- yes...!”

Her long, beautiful black hair was as soft as silk. Her sharp gaze, which had always intimidated her surroundings, now appeared vulnerable in places, perhaps due to her embarrassment.

“...*She's too damn cute.*”

This *aaalll* has to be illegal, doesn't it? This is a girl who's popular enough to appear on TV and in *gravure* pics, calling me something like “Suu-chan” albeit the fact that we've had a connection in the past, all while bashfully approaching me at the same time, you know? To top it off she's a cool beauty who normally treats all the boys around her indifferently too.

She looked happy from just hearing me say “Shiro, is that you”, as a loyal dog would... If I were her dad I'd be a little worried, you know?

—Those emotions flowed through me, but in reality I felt some resistance towards talking to Shirokusa at present. Thus I spoke, turning a little incoherent in the process.

“W- What's up, Shiro? You didn't leave the classroom earlier?”

That's right, glancing sideways I had clearly caught Shirokusa leaving the classroom with her good friend Mina Meiko as soon as lunch break had

started. I thought it had been right of her to flee the classroom, after figuring out that people would gather in the hallway during the break, making it hard to eat lunch in peace.

“W- W- Well...”

Shirokusa faltered. Grasping her *bento* box tightly, she attempted to continue talking, but instead turned bright red and silent.

“.....*Man, these stares from around hurt.*”

We were being watched extremely closely. Today Shirokusa and I had zealously avoided making contact with each other. Any interaction between us would have been certain to catch the attention of onlookers who had gathered after watching that video.

“O- Oi, look at that—”

“Eh? What’s happening? A new development? Kachi’s approaching him?”

“Guiltyyyyyy! The childhood friend who made a promise long ago, you are guiltyyyyyyy!”

“It’s alright, Goudo! Maru’s an idiot, so the word’s that he didn’t realise Kachi-san was his childhood friend! That’s great, isn’t it?! She’ll definitely run out of patience with him! Thank God he’s an idiot!”

Ah—, things were getting rowdy, as expected.

Hey, I can hear all of you, you know? Besides, how the hell are all of you so well-informed? Can you all not show like you’re smart kids preparing for university only when it comes to strange things?

Any at rate, what was Shirokusa thinking? If she wanted to talk, she could have done so when the turbulence had died down a little, or reached me by phone. There had been no need at all for her to go to the lengths of returning immediately after eating lunch.

“Y- Yes? W- Ww- What’s up?”

That said, I had no leeway at all either. I felt the pressure of being bathed in attention, but honestly, more so from my conversation partner being Shirokusa – and that made my heart beat out of control.

“–*I liked you.*”

That was what I had said to Shirokusa at the Confession Festival.

I only realised later, but honestly hadn't that been something like a confession? And also, something that I didn't have to say, right? We could have concluded our conversation, even if I had omitted it, right?

It had been my first time back on stage for a long time. This was all the result of me acting on that excitement!

Frankly, I had felt immmmmmmmensely regretful over the break! Relieving the experience countless times, I had buried my face in my pillow and rolled back and forth on my bed as I felt physically assaulted by my own stupidity!

Well, compared to being rejected after confessing, this was obviously still prefera..... No, it would be better if I didn't think about this any further.

At any rate it had been something like a confession, which made it kind of hard for us to look at each other's faces. Making the video of it publicly available on top of that afterwards felt like the finishing blow.

*Sigh ~ ~*, why did I have to say “–*I liked you*”? I really wanted to take that back. I thought it was, in other words, the same as having said that “*I liked you before but now no longer, you know?*”, but I had absolutely no idea how a girl who was told that would feel...

Would she, for example, think that “*Hmmm, so you liked me before, huh...*” and feel a sense of superiority?

Ahh, that would explain her shy, yet promising approach.

Beyond that, another possible option would be for her to think “*Well, I was grateful for your affection, and what happened in the past aside we aren't in*

*a romantic relationship at present, so us getting along as friends feels just about right?”... or something like that?*

Yes, Shirokusa was popular, and probably also hated being moved on in an awkward manner, so that seemed like a possibility as well. Only that, you know, I also felt that she should have been angrier in the scenario that she thought *“If you liked me then why did you change your mind?”*, thus indirectly proving that it indeed had been unrequited love on my part all along.

Considering those things as well, then...

Aaaaaargh, I seriouslyyyy have no idea what she’s feelingggg!

“It’s alright, Shirokusa-san.”

The chubby, easygoing type of girl standing to the right and rear of Shirokusa – Mina Meiko, gave her a push in the back.

*“...Alright? What’s alright?”*

I was left completely in the dark as to the meaning behind her cryptic reassurances, but I could tell both that it had worked and that strength had returned to Shirokusa’s wavering eyes.

“Suu-chan!”

“Y- Yes!”

Shirokusa’s strong tone caused me to stand at attention.

With her free hand Shirokusa touched her ample bosom and breathed deeply, then declared in one breath:



**“–Please go out with me!”**

“.....Hm?”

“.....Hm?”

“Eh?”

“Huh?”

In an instant the classroom froze. The incredulousness of those words caused everyone to stop thinking.

In the midst of that silence, after several seconds had passed, I finally realised:

*“...Wait, did I just get confessed to?”*

“Seriouslyyyyy?!”

As I jumped up and so exclaimed, a calm voice gently reached my ears.

*“...Please come with me, you mean?”*

It was Shirokusa’s friend, Meiko, who thus interjected.

“Right, Shirokusa-san?”

“Ah.....? Eh.....? .....Eeh?”

Quite belatedly... and looking from a distance, at last Shirokusa had realised the meaning of those words she had said. She rattled on while her face turned as red as a lobster.

“W- Wait! Th- ThThThat’s not wh- what I! ...No, I ...mean, ththth- that–”

Shirokusa was inarticulate. She had tried putting on a brave front on the spur of the moment, but appeared to have realised immediately that that alone wouldn’t do anything for the situation, and regret showed undisguised in her expression as this time she searched for masquerading words.

“You and Shirokusa-san’s father are acquaintances, right, Maru-san?”

From the lifeline Meiko threw I finally grasped the situation.

“O- Ooh, I’ve met my fair share of sponsors, but it was he who treated me the best.”

“Apparently Shirokusa’s father’s been concerned about how you’ve been doing all this time, so for the first time in a while he’d like to see you in good spirits... right?”

Her calm voice had a soothing effect on the heart.

I could pick out the logic returning in Shirokusa’s eyes.

“E- Exactly!”

Shirokusa stuck out her ample chest, causing the beautiful black hair hanging over her shoulders to dance in midair.

“W- When I talked about you to Papa, Suu-chan, he said that he wanted to meet you, so I just thought that when you have the time maybe you should come over to my house to play! Th- There’s no way I’d ask you to ‘*go out with me*’ right in the middle of this classroom, is there?! D- Don’t get the wrong idea, okay?!”

“Y- yeah, hahaha...”

Right?

Whew, that was a real shock. I thought my heart had stopped.

Tetsuhiko had actually told me on the way home after the cultural festival that *“there was no way that Shirokusa and Abe were dating”*, leading me to believe that the slightest of chances had existed.

I had by the way also heard from him that *“Abe was a fan of mine, and had volunteered to be the villain in order to rouse me”*, though I didn’t know where he had gotten that information... And well even if I were to let that slide, he was still a guy handsome enough to jolt me with inferiority, which frankly made me not want to get too close.

“Of course, there’s no way...”

Honestly, I just wanted it to stop. Thinking *“Aren’t you actually in love with me after all?”* hurt, even just for a second.

...Well, I had just confessed to Kuroha, but that didn’t change the fact that Shirokusa had been my first love. Plus it wasn’t anything like I now definitely hated her, only that I had realised how amazing and important Kuroha had been to me, and the warmth I felt towards Shirokusa per se hadn’t decreased.

I was pretty sure I would be happy if I ended up in a situation where she confessed to me, and my heart would leap even if I thought it was a little strange at the same time. So, now I knew I had misunderstood, and my expectations had been raised only to be let down, huh. I felt like a clown for getting the wrong idea, feeling both embarrassed and pathetic.

*“Also, what I’m feeling doesn’t seem to match the way I’m being looked at from around.”*

It seemed like those around me looked at me like I was popular. But that wasn’t the case.

This was important. Realities had to be acknowledged. For if I really was popular, couldn’t I have had juicier things happen to me? Even just one erotic thing, perhaps?

The only reality I saw before my eyes was that I had “confessed and gotten

rejected”.

No, not quite. If I were speaking with regards to Kuroha, a more accurate description would be that I had *“made a one-in-a-lifetime confession equivalent to betting away my own life, thinking I had a 100 percent chance of succeeding, only to be sublimely rejected”*.

By the way, with Shirokusa it was probably alright to say that *“she wasn’t angry at all despite me kind of telling her my feelings had changed, meaning that she probably never had romantic feelings for me in the first place”*.

No, seriously... I really had no clue when it came to girls.

My affairs were in this state even with Kuroha, the person I had been the closest to, the most intimate with, and known for the longest time. It was a certainty that I understood other girls even less clearly.

That’s why–

I could still sort of steel myself and feign coolness when talking, for instance, but right now when it came to liking or disliking people and boy-girl relationships – I just wanted to get away from it all for a while.

I had known once upon a time. Up until now, I had thought of being liked by someone as something to be unconditionally happy about. When it came to love, I had thought that one should move forward unswervingly.

But now–

–I could also feel fear.

“You know, Kachi’s–”

Tetsuhiko whispered with a cola in one hand.

“–Unexpectedly clumsy underneath, huh.”

“Huuh?”

A black miasma began issuing out of Shirokusa.

“Eek...”

Rena grimaced with her cheeks and pulled away. Well, it was only natural for her to be afraid of an upperclassman she met for the first time giving off that kind of aura. Honestly, if I were her I'd have fled immediately.

“Tetsuhiko, really I know you fear too little because you've got nerves of steel, but give me a break, alright? Sometimes it's a lot scarier for those watching, okay?”

“Scary? Kachi?”

“This isn't the time for clever comebacks, Tetsuhiko.”

“Sorry, Suu-chan... Please step back for a moment.”

Shirokusa placed her hand on my shoulder, shutting me up, then folded her arms and stared down Tetsuhiko intimidatingly.

“Kai-kun, isn't there something you should say with regards to you selfishly publicising that video?”

“Huuh?”

Ohh, right, of course Shirokusa was angry too.

The only issue was that Tetsuhiko didn't look the slightest bit apologetic.

“At this present moment I have absolutely no intention of forgiving you, but since Suu-chan looks like he has to an extent, if there were a sincere apology from you I'd be willing to call off our fight, at least on the surface.”

Oh, well done. She had properly created a path towards reconciliation. I had thought that Shirokusa would have reacted more excessively.

...Still, it's Tetsuhiko she's talking to...

“Why’s there a need for me to apologise? You weren’t the central topic of the video, Kachi. I mean, I wouldn’t say that it isn’t your business completely, but you were hardly in it, and didn’t lose anything by it, did you?”

“Ehhhh?!”

To Shirokusa that reply must have been totally unexpected. To a certain extent she still had a scary look on her face, but she was also a little repulsed perhaps because it had been such an unforeseen reaction.

Those were probably Shirokusa’s roots. Her originally timid character had manifested as a result of her surprise.

“W- Why you— You— You— Y- You— d- demonnnnn!”

Wow, that had all the bluntness of children arguing. Her vocabulary had contracted as a result of her panic. Wasn’t that kind of alarming for a novelist? Well, it was kinda cute though.

There was absolutely none of the intimidating air Shirokusa wanted to project. No matter how high she raised her eyebrows she could only give the impression of embarrassment. Watching coolly it was the same as someone timidly trying to act.

The match had been decided. To Shirokusa, who intimidated her surroundings by making herself appear larger, the twisted, supernatural Tetsuhiko had been too ill-fitting an opponent. Mirages didn’t work on Tetsuhiko, so there had been no contest.

“Let’s call it off, Shiro. I’ve already forgiven Tetsuhiko, so there’s no need for you to be angry here. I’ll punch him later, so please forgive him too on my account.”

“S- Suu-chan...”

Shirokusa twiddled her fingers adorably in front of her chest and gave a small nod.

“W- Well if you say so, Suu-chan, then it’s not like I won’t forgive him...”

She was adorable. As a result of Shirokusa resembling a loyal dog too much, I somehow felt like I was gradually becoming more and more like a father...

Tetsuhiko's shoulders sagged and he looked about the vicinity.

“Well, now that I've been forgiven by Sueharu and Kachi, next is Shida-chan, huh...?”

“Looking for me?”

—And there she was.

At last... no, having waited for the right moment, perhaps? Kuroha inserted herself into the conversation.

The distance between Kuroha and I felt close, as it customarily was. Her head appeared unexpectedly beside the tip of my shoulder, allowing me to feel her heat and smell her scent whether I liked it or not.

“—No.”

Memories swam through my mind.

I stood upright and motionless, trying my hardest to suppress the urge to yelp and run away from the shock.

“Oh, Shida-san. **What's the person who's rejected Suu-chan trying to do now?**”

“Oof!”

Shirokusa's nonchalant statement hurt my heart with ease.

Kuroha returned a stern glare.

“Why you...!”

“Hmm, something wrong? Was there a mistake in something that I said?”

“Ug... Kk...”

Kuroha gnashed her teeth, resisting firmly.

“Having said all those things, could it be that you’re now planning on defending them? Well, I never! There’s no way that that Shida-san... would do something like that, is there?”

“...Slut.”

“My my, I thought I just heard something very hurtful. Well, I am a charitable person, so I’ll listen to whatever you have to say at least. Please, do go on.”

Kuroha spoke up while glancing at me sideways.

“...Well, I... you know, err...”

But no words came out beyond those. At that point Shirokusa drove her boot in further.

“Could it be that... you panicked over me inviting Suu-chan over to my house and entered our conversation without thinking? It couldn’t be, could it? Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve imagined something horrible.”

Yikes, Shirokusa seemed to be having a lot of fun. I had never seen her in such high spirits before.

“Tsk—”

Kuroha clicked her tongue. Seeing that Shirokusa snorted a laugh through her nose, adding further provocation.

I had no clue as to how to stop the danger posed by the two of them. If I could it might have been good for me to do so by stepping into the space between them... but my body wouldn’t move.

My heart jumped, my legs trembled, and cold sweat flowed.



“...What’s wrong, Suu-chan? Are you feeling alright?”

Shirokusa had perhaps noticed me acting abnormally and called over.

I looked up as a result and–

“Ah...”

Squarely locked eyes with Kuroha, who had peeked at me out of concern right at the same time.

Cute eyes like those of a small animal pierced through my heart.

My tremors further intensified. My mind went blank. Neat and tidy braids together with lips a faint pink colour made my heart beat fast, but beyond that fear descended upon me like an avalanche.

Then– a circuit breaker dropped on my thought processes.

“Ooh... Oogeeeeeeeeee!”

My mind reverted into a feral state, and with the instincts I had inherited from our simian ancestors I nimbly hopped and hid myself behind Shirokusa.

“Oh, paissen went feral.”

“That’s because no matter how strong his ability to recover is, his mindset itself’s still weak... He can get used to jealousy, but not to the extent that he can digest being rejected, huh...?”

“Pfff... Ahahahaha!”

It was Shirokusa who thus laughed out loud. Her grin was reminiscent of an evil character’s proclaiming her victory.

“My my ~? Shida-san... is there anything you’d like to say? This is all because of what you did... all because you **rejected Suu-chan**, understand? Poor Suu-chan... It’s alright. I won’t do those horrible things like Shida-san did to you.”

Shirokusa gently caressed my head. In my happiness I nuzzled my cheek against the back of Shirokusa's hand.

“Gggggggg—”

Kuroha clenched her teeth.

“Heheheh, that's a nice expression you've got there, Shida-san! How fitting for a thieving cat! That's the face that I've wanted to see!”

“Woow, Tetsu-senpai, Kachi-senpai's gone completely over to the dark side, you sure we can leave her be?”

“This is the first time I've seen Kachi so energetic. Tsk, damn, I should've caught this on camera.”

“Hmm, you haven't learnt your lesson at all despite the mess this currently is, huh, paissen...?”

Shirokusa continued rubbing my head with an expression of ecstasy, but her hand suddenly stopped as she watched me taking to it obediently.

“...At this rate I might have to raise you at home, Suu-chan. Yes, that would be good.”

“No it ain't?!”

“Shirokusa-san, that's a little...”

Perhaps her conscience returned as a result of Meiko's words, for Shirokusa whispered “Too bad...”, apparently quite reluctantly and gave up.

“Haru...”

Kuroha turned towards me timidly and reached out her hand.

Her small hand looked like it would shatter if something touched it. Kuroha's fragrance drifted over from her sleeve, giving my brain a jolt.

Her familiar hand and scent lulled me into a sense of security–

“–No.”

Suddenly, a flashback.

“Oogeeeeee!”

“Ah...”

I slapped away Kuroha’s hand instinctively and hid behind Shirokusa.

“That was scary, wasn’t it, Suu-chan?”

Shirokusa stood before me, shielding Kuroha away from my view.

“With things as they are, Shida-san, could I ask you to not see Suu-chan for a while?”

“...B- But...”

“It was you who made Suu-chan this way. Will you not graciously take your leave? Just saying, but if you’re going to make Suu-chan suffer any more than he already has, I’ll–”

Shirokusa spoke after taking a breath.

“–**Make free use of my forbidden knowledge, kept hidden in the darkness by mankind, to eliminate you.**”

“Yikes! Kachi-senpai’s terrifying!”

Rena pulled away, and naturally so did the surrounding observing crowd.

In the middle however, just two people were quiet.

“.....”

Tetsuhiko observed the expressions of the people there, lost in thought.

“.....”

And the other person – Kuroha – kept her expression unchanged for a few seconds, merely closing her eyes, before leaving the scene silently without a word of rebuttal to Shirokusa.

\*

<sup>1</sup> Abstract and avant-garde artist Okamoto Taro said this in a 1981 commercial.

## Part 3

The time was getting past 6 pm. The setting sun cast shadows upon the buildings.

The river was quiet and unaltered by the rain from last night, and deeply embraced any stone no matter how hard I threw it, as it always had.

“Hm–Hm—Hmhm, Hm–Hm—Hm, Hmhmhm–Hmhm–Hm–Hm—, Hm–Hm–Mhmhm...”

Humming the tune shops played when they were closing<sup>1</sup>, I picked up a rock and held it aloft. I had been stone skipping since a while ago with the aim of skipping a stone at least four times, only for it to only skip thrice multiple times.

Hearing the melody of Child Star playing, I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

“Is that you, Tetsuhiko? How’s it going?”

“I’m in front of your house now, but there’s nobody here. Same for when I came over from the station.”

“I see.”

The press had converged upon the school in the morning. There therefore had been the possibility of them having an eye on when I left, or gathering in front of my house. As a result Tetsuhiko had gone reconnoitering to show he was taking responsibility for causing this round’s scandal... but everything seemed to be alright.

“Nobody in front of Shida-chan’s house either. Well, anyway, guess I’ll pay

her a short visit.”

“Visit”, because Kuroha had left school early in the afternoon.

Kuroha had apparently felt unwell and gone to the infirmary after her dust-up with Shirokusa, then left early unnoticed.

“Tell me properly how she’s doing, alright? And you’d better apologise too, okay?”

I was worried about Kuroha’s condition. But at present I couldn’t find the courage to contact her asking if she was alright.

I was concerned about if she hadn’t been trapped by the media while leaving early, and also about her current mental state, among other things. I was thus using Tetsuhiko, who I had sent on reconnaissance to take a look at my house, to simultaneously enquire on Kuroha, who lived next door.

“Speaking of which, isn’t taking care of Shida-chan supposed to be your job? What’s going on, Sueharu? Because of that one thing you hate her now?”

“No I don’t!”

Those words came out without resistance. It was a good thing that they were so immediate. I felt that no matter what happened I couldn’t grow to hate Kuroha, but I was a little less confident about how my instincts would react.

“Hmm, pretty impressive for you to say that. But you are a little pissed off, aren’t you?”

“No, that’s not really how I feel... I mean, in the end, *Kuro only did to me what I tried to do to Shiro*. That’s karma, isn’t it, having something you tried doing be done to you by someone else? That’s why I don’t think that I so much as have the right to be angry, and I should accept it contentedly.”

“Like how you should only hit people who are expecting it?”

“I feel like that’s a little different, but I can’t really say how, so that’s fine. At any rate, when it comes to Kuro, I neither hate her nor am angry at her,

but...”

“But what?”

“It’s just that the amount of time Kuro and I have known each other isn’t anything to sniff at. Amongst both boys and girls, Kuro’s still way ahead in first place. So much so that there isn’t a second and third place, and her younger sisters are probably fourth. We’ve piled and piled on a mountainfull of favours and memories, and, well, first of all I feel kind of sad. And then also... scared.”

“Because you were betrayed?”

“I don’t feel like I was. It’s just that I’m an idiot, so I couldn’t understand Kuro. The part I’m afraid of is not understanding someone’s intentions because I’m an idiot. I couldn’t even figure out Kuro, the person closest to me, and the one whom I wanted to know more about than anyone else. So that goes even more so for other girls. When it comes to guys, well, I’m a guy too, and I’d probably be able to get by even if I just messed around, but when it comes to girls... seriously, what should I do...?”

“You must be an idiot.”

Tetsuhiko’s words were too direct and they enraged me.

“Now listen here, since earlier I’ve already called myself an idiot thousands of—”

“No, not that. I’m saying you’re an idiot because you’ve stopped thinking at what you should do.”

“...Hm?”

Huh, those words were different from the ones I had been expecting. You know, it was an extremely constructive opinion.

“Dummyharu. Just saying, but even I don’t make 100 percent of the girls I hit on fall in love with me. Not even 50. There are lots of things I don’t get and I fail all the time. But I reflect, and put what I’ve learnt to good use the next

time around, and that's how I increase my chances of success.”

“...Oi, who're you? Your voice sounds like Tetsuhiko's, but you've got to be someone else.”

“I'll kill you, you know?”

Tetsuhiko sighed deeply, then returned to the conversation.

“...Well, Shida-chan's the only one I'd like not to make an enemy out of, so for just this once I'll do as you say and apologise.”

“Seriously, you had no problems locking horns with Shiro, yet you're being so considerate of Kuro.”

Shirokusa had someone pick her up, by the way, so dealing with the media hadn't been an issue for her. Laying my eyes upon her black-lacquered, luxurious-looking imported car, I was once again cognisant of the fact that she actually was a rich heiress.

“Sueharu...”

Tetsuhiko spoke in a blatantly mocking tone. It made me angry enough that I probably would have given his head a chop had he been around.

“But of course. Shida-chan and Kachi and *completely different*. Surely you can understand that, at least?”

“...What do you mean?”

Tetsuhiko spoke, ignoring my question.

“More importantly, the lights in your place are on. Did you forget to turn them off this morning?”

“No, I remembered to. ...Maybe that's Kuroha's mom? I've passed her the master key just in case she needed it for anything.”

“Hmm, well, at any rate there wasn't a single press member all the way until



here. In fact, it's almost eerily quiet online and on television. This is just my intuition, but it feels like some higher power's at work."

"...You don't say."

There were *two* options that I could think of. There was a possibility for a third, but at any rate I couldn't be sure without checking.

"Well, I'll be heading home now, Tetsuhiko, so you better give me a proper report on Kuroha."

"Yeah yeah, I know."

The call cut. I put my phone back into my pocket and headed for home.

"Kuro was there for me when I came here before, huh..."

At that time I had been feeling depressed having heard that Shirokusa and Abe had started dating, and it was on this embankment that Kuroha had consoled me, encouraged me, and sworn together with me to get our revenge.

I hadn't been alone, which was why I became lonely on the way home, even as my heart was hurting.

"*Sigh...*"

Still, I had been rejected by Kuroha. Therefore I could no longer presume upon her.

Of course our relationship as childhood friends would probably continue. But from this point on, we had to each recognise where we stood perhaps, as friends, childhood friends – a line had to be clearly drawn.

We had to, or otherwise when Kuroha found a boyfriend it would be a nuisance–

"Aaahhhh..."

Damn it... I'm hopeless... I still couldn't come to a clear decision on

anything...

Even as I thought I had to quit after being so magnificently rejected, I couldn't break off immediately...

It was the same as when I had been rejected by Shirokusa. I knew I couldn't, but my feelings still remained.

Only I didn't feel like getting revenge on Kuroha. What I felt was only sorrow and fear.

There was a gaping hole in my heart, and unease advanced upon me.

Completely clueless about what to do, I picked up a stone, and threw it into the river.

\*

<sup>1</sup> Our beloved MC is humming the song *Hotaru no Hikari* – “Glow of a Firefly”, sung to the tune of what should to you be the more familiar *Auld Lang Syne*.

## Part 4

Tetsuhiko ended the call, and looked up towards Sueharu's home.

The two-storey house couldn't be called particularly big, but it was spacious enough for a family to live in. In a small garden there were traces of a flower bed, but there now only weeds remained.

"Was that good enough for you, Shida-chan?"

"Mm."

Kuroha, who had been listening, stuck her head out from behind a hiding place in the Shida house. To hide the fact that the two of them were in touch, however, after making a second of eye contact she returned to the other side of the wall.

Tetsuhiko and Kuroha assumed positions on either side of the wall, unable to see each other's faces, only able to hear each other's voices.

"Hmm, so you want to apologise to me, Tetsuhiko-kun."

"I'd pay any amount if it's just lip service we're talking about. But that wouldn't have any meaning at all, would it?"

"...Well, that figures."

"So, Shida-chan, what're you going to do? To put it bluntly the situation looks so unfavourable that I currently can't see you having any chance of success."

Kuroha made a bitter expression.

"You can't see me... having any chance of success...?"

“I mean, Sueharu’s completely traumatised. You’ve seen what he turns into just from you approaching. You aren’t going to win with him like this, probably even if you tried seducing him.”

“Ooh... I suppose you’re right...”

“Kachi’s in a far more advantageous position right now. Then again, perhaps she’s been traumatised by the Confession Festival as well, so Maria-chan, who hasn’t been affected at all, might have it the easiest from here on out.”

“...Speaking of Momosaka-san, what do you think her objective is?”

Tetsuhiko thought only briefly before answering.

“On the surface, returning Sueharu back to the entertainment world. That much is probably true.”

“Yup. I don’t know if she so much as ‘hopes to gain something by bringing Sueharu back to entertainment world’, but otherwise I feel the same way you do.”

As expected of Shida-chan. She had fully grasped the implications of the phrase “on the surface”.

“You know, Tetsuhiko-kun, I honestly don’t feel like I’ll lose to either of them, no matter what you say.”

“You’ve got incredible self-confidence.”

“But if Haru’s taken back to the entertainment world, I don’t think I can win either.”

*I see*, Tetsuhiko whispered.

“Maria-chan’s absolutely a celebrity, after all. She’s worthy enough to stand beside Sueharu, and in fact it’s her principal occupation to. They’ll be closer if Sueharu goes back to the entertainment world, and it’ll also be easier for her to try several things on him. If we’re going there, you could say that Kachi’s a cultural pundit halfway between a commoner and a celebrity

herself. Her relationship with Sueharu can stay the same whether he makes a comeback or not. But you're a total commoner, Shida-chan. If we add further disadvantages to your already disadvantaged position, I can't see you having any chance of success."

"Oo... you're right."

Kuroha's unnatural reaction caused Tetsuhiko to unconsciously turn his head.

"Shida-chan, what's wrong?"

"...Stress, maybe? I'm feeling a little dizzy. But please, don't tell Haru."

"Well, if you say so, Shida-chan."

Kuroha had expectedly seemed to be enduring well too. It was already amazing enough that she could calmly grasp the situation despite being driven so far into a corner. One would typically be a little more discouraged, thereby allowing their desires to cloud their judgement, or losing the composure required to accurately perceive the situation.

"And also, Tetsuhiko-kun."

Kuroha pressed in a peremptory tone.

"You're my ally this time around, aren't you? By my conjecture, Tetsuhiko-kun, you aren't on the side of anyone in particular. You occasionally ally someone when it benefits you to, and *being mine this time around probably suits your aims*, doesn't it?"

How much could she see, and how much did she read? Tetsuhiko had no choice but to boost his appraisal of her again much higher.

"Okay. Allow me to direct you then, Shida-chan, in this tug-of-war between us and the entertainment world for Sueharu. So, the problem's now Kachi, who's probably an ally... no, probably leaning slightly towards the entertainment world? She may want to make Sueharu act in something she writes, after all. But at this rate – we can turn things around."

“I think I have high hopes for you when it comes to that as well, Tetsuhiko-kun. But I’d hate it if our goals diverge or we clash halfway, so I just think I’ll ask.”

Kuroha inquired with the incisiveness of a blade.

“–*Tetsuhiko-kun, what is your goal?*”

The temperature was close to 30 degrees, but Tetsuhiko felt a chill as if perhaps water had been sprayed upon the back of his neck.

“I think for now we should just set a goal of ‘*winning by preventing Haru from going to the entertainment world*’. If we can succeed even at that, it could probably make a situation we can’t even touch at present just a little better.”

“I understand your reasoning, Shida-chan, and I have no intention of denying it. But don’t you think your privilege when it comes to that and me revealing my goals are just a little different?”

“...I see. Then this is just an inference of mine, Tetsuhiko-kun, but today Asagi Rena-chan came, didn’t she? Was that–”

Kuroha spoke smoothly facing the sky. The content of her words caused cold sweat to flow from Tetsuhiko unabated.

“And then looking at how you’ve been acting, Tetsuhiko-kun, in the entertainment world there’s–”

“–Okay, stop, Shida-chan. I get it. If you can see that much I’ll tell you. I don’t want to make an enemy out of you after you get the wrong idea.”

“Well you did say that at the start. It’s not like I want to put you on the spot either.”

Thereafter, Tetsuhiko talked about his personal objective–

Kuroha her plans for hereafter–

The both of them various things, putting together the details.

“—but doing so—then Haru’ll definitely—”

As Kuroha spun her tale together, Tetsuhiko felt as if there was electricity running through his entire body.

Haha, I’m stoked. This girl’s definitely on another level compared to all those middling childhood friends who’ve lost.

Tetsuhiko believed firmly.

—In the fact that *this girl truly was the strongest.*

“.....So what do you think?”

Tetsuhiko took a long, deep breath.

“...A- Ahh... I mean, I don’t lose anything, and in fact this way I could achieve my goal too, so I’ll happily play along, but... this is what we’re going with, huh...?”

“I see, that’s good then.”

“But *is it possible*, though...?”

Kuroha appeared to be laughing through her nose.

“It isn’t about whether it can be done or not – we just have to ‘do’ it.”

“...Incredible.”

Admiration unwittingly left his lips.

“Shida-chan, perhaps you should be a strategist if you were ever transported to another world.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“Course.”

“Sigh...”

Kuroha appeared to be in a state of shocked speechlessness.

“Boys really do love to talk about things that can’t happen, huh.”

“From my perspective it’s your plan that isn’t possible, Shida-chan.”

“I’m desperate, you know. –I love Haru, after all.”

She had an ability to observe calmly, to hypothesise accurately and logically, and to get things done decisively.

Kuroha possessed multiple outstanding qualities which couldn’t be captured by her performance in school, but her strongest points as a childhood friend were probably the following:

A heart that didn’t give up, and an unwavering mind that accepted that she liked the person whom she did, at times even openly declaring it.

She wasn’t an introverted childhood friend who couldn’t convey her feelings.

She wasn’t a childhood friend who took pride in having a complicit relationship, only to eventually take it for granted.

There was sincerity in her efforts, in her sheer focus, and in her refusal to lie about her feelings, to the point that it was almost moving.

*“With her so wholeheartedly genuine, even I would think that way–”*

Tetsuhiko moved his body away from the wall he had been leaning on.

“You know, I have no intention of becoming anyone’s ally, but if we take away all my obligations and cost-benefit calculations, I think I’d want you to win, Shida-chan.”

“...I see. Well thanks then.”



It was a curt, but natural reaction in response to a declaration that they could be enemies in the future.

“Right, I’ll leave Kachi-san and the various other things to you.”

“Got it. Leave the rest to me.”

Kuroha’s presence on the opposite side of the wall went away into the distance.

Tetsuhiko wiped the sweat flowing off his forehead, projecting his voice towards Sueharu’s home next door.

“–Told you, Sueharu. Shida-chan’s completely different.”

Well, completely different she might have been, but the products of that were another matter too.

Love could be compared to a battle, but in one area it was decisively different.

*Not only the strong could win. The strongest lost because they were the strongest. Only in love could that happen.*

“So, what’s going to happen now?”

The corners of Tetsuhiko’s lips rose, and he took out his phone to report to Sueharu.

\*

## Part 5

I arrived home almost anticlimactically without being noticed by anyone. It had already turned 7, and my surroundings were completely dark.

Bits of conversation entered my ear over from the living room of the neighbouring house to the right. It seemed that it was now time for their dinner.

The Shida house accommodated a six-person family – the four sisters and their parents. It was always lively there and it made me feel their familial warmth.

Because my mother had died, and my father had begun traveling around the entire country for work, it could be said that it was the Shida family who had taught me how warm a family could be. Just being able to hear their lighthearted conversation made me feel at ease.

The update from Tetsuhiko had been that “he had spoken to Shida-chan a little and she didn’t seem to have a fever, just that perhaps because of stress there were times that he had felt she had been acting a little strangely”.

I couldn’t hear Kuroha’s voice coming over from the Shida house at present, but there wasn’t a sombre tone amongst those that were either. Did it mean that her condition wasn’t so serious that her family had to worry? Or perhaps that Kuroha wasn’t at dinner together with them?

...Maybe I’ll wait awhile more before trying to sound out one of her sisters.

“Ahh, that reminds me, I’m hungry too.”

I had forgotten to buy dinner as a result of being on guard against the media. Lunch had been pizza, so if I ordered delivery... I could maybe do sushi? I

wasn't feeling particularly good. It wouldn't hurt if I splurged a little.

As I so thought, I stuck my key into the door of the entrance.

“Hm...?”

Strange... it was unlocked.

“Hang on... the lights...?”

Speaking of which, why were the lights in the living room on? Strange, wasn't it? Come to think of it, did Tetsuhiko say something similar earlier? I thought I heard Auntie's voice coming over from the Shida house... so what was going on?

I thought so ominously, opening the door while being on my guard.

“Welcome home, Big Brother Sueharu ♪”

“.....”

*Slam.*

I closed the door without saying a word. I breathed in the air outside, organising my thoughts.

Hmm? That was strange. Had that been an illusion? There appeared to have been a cute girl at the entrance...

She had long silky hair hanging in gentle waves. Almond eyes which mesmerised people. A beautiful girl on the same level as... no, perhaps surpassing idols.



For that kind of girl to be dressed in a neat and tidy mission school uniform, wearing an apron on top of it, kneeling down in wait for me... it just wasn't possible, was it?

Thereupon the door opened on its own, and a beautiful girl's face appeared in the breach.

"What are you doing out here, Big Brother? Come on, hurry up and come inside."

"O- Oi..."

The beautiful girl dragged me forcefully by the arm and into the house, whereupon she wordlessly locked the door and applied the chain.

"...Why are you locking the door and putting on the chain?"

"Big Brother, aren't you tired?"

"No, no, no, are you listening to what I'm saying?! Please, answer my question!"

"Would you like dinner, Big Brother? A bath? Or perhaps... *me*?"

"Ahh, yes, yes, if you're asking, of course I'd pick y- wait, noooo! Now just wait a minute, Momo!"

Crap, I had been carried away unconsciously by the erotic situation. Confronted once again with an utterly improbable scene and development, it had taken some time for my thought processes to return to normal.

The name of the beautiful girl who stood before my eyes was Momosaka Maria—

The most popular young actress at present, and a junior I had taken care of in the past at the agency.

She had suddenly come to school this morning and thrown it into chaos, finally disappearing because lessons were starting – or at least, she should

have. But for her to have already gotten into my house was...

“...Eh? Wait, but for what, Big Brother? Is something the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter with me; what’s the matter with you?!”

“As I expected of you, Big Brother Haru. You’ve really got a way with words.”

I wanted to attribute her complete lack of unease under pressure to the poise of a popular actress – but this brazenness undoubtedly belonged to the Maria whom I knew.

“Listen, Momo! There are so many things wrong with this that I could point out right now, but... where did you get the key to my house?”

Maria tapped her index finger against her forehead, pretended to think for a second, then deliberately – but incredibly adorably – tilted her head to the side and grinned.

“Uh-uh-uh Momo, now you’re just trying to deceive me with that airy smile of yours, aren’t you?!”

“...What could you be talking about?”

“If you’re going to play dumb, could I get you to step out of my house for the time being?”

“...Oh~, that’s right, your key fell down from the sky. It must all be because of my usual good behaviour!”

“Your mindset’s incredible for thinking that would work! In a certain sense you’re on the same level as Tetsuhiko!”

My stomach let out a *grumble* as I so quipped.

Maria, with a grin that felt like it said “*Oh, my*”, went around me and gave me a push in the back.

“Come, come, Big Brother, dinner’s ready! Momo worked really hard today! Let’s eat together!”

Ugh, this was fast becoming a situation which wouldn’t change no matter how much I quipped about it.

Half-resignedly I allowed myself to be forced into the living room.

On the dining table several different foods were arranged.

There was *miso* soup with tofu and spring onions in it, beef and potatoes<sup>1</sup>, chicken *karaage*, stir-fried vegetables, boiled spinach in a *dashi*-based dressing<sup>2</sup>— a nostalgic line-up, in some respects. They were all my favourites, dishes I had gotten away from for a while.

“Did... you make all of these?”

“Yes, of course. Oh, I’ll warm up the food now, so please watch the TV or something while you wait.”

“...I’d feel bad after you’ve already done all the cooking, though. I’ll do the warming up, at least.”

“In that case, please take the roasted barley tea out from the fridge. And while you’re at it, could I get you to serve the rice as well?”

“Of course I can.”

Maria showed great dexterity warming up the food. Her preparing it had evidently not been a lie.

“Momo, this spread...”

“Was made with the food you like, Big Brother, at its core. Was I wrong?”

“Y- Yeah, these are the things I like, but how come you knew?”

“I’ve wanted to know everything about you since a long time ago, Big Brother, so I found out from your mother while I was bombarding her with

questions.”

It was true that Maria had had that element about her. Emotionally attached to me, it had seemed like she desired to know everything related to me, and always wanted to be close.

“I see... Thanks, Momo.”

“...For what?”

“I’d never thought I’d be able to look upon this spread once again. I’m moved, to be honest.”

Perhaps she wasn’t expecting to be thanked in this manner.

Maria’s eyes turned into circles and she blinked several times. Taking my words in slowly, she produced a heartfelt, blissful smile.

“If you’re going to say that, then you better eat without complaining, alright?”

“It’s you. The taste will probably be fine.”

“Hehe, you’re really good at flattery, Big Brother.”

It definitely hadn’t been flattery.

I just knew. *About the potential held within the girl known as Momosaka Maria.*

Maria and I ate dinner facing each other. The flavour of the food was of course different from my mother’s, but Maria’s culinary skills were superb, and I consumed it again and again in a state of enthrallment. I ate too much as a result, and after the meal I ended up throwing myself upon the sofa.

“I’ve prepared ice cream for dessert, Big Brother, but do you think you can eat some?”

“Ooh, if it’s ice cream I think I might want some.”



“Alright, I’ll go and bring some over then.”

Maria was being too familiar. She really understood me, despite six years having passed. It was almost scary.

Maria had played the main character in the recent drama series “The Ideal Little Sister”, earning with her splendid acting a large quantity of fans who all styled themselves as “Big Brothers”, but the Maria who stood before me at present was indeed the “ideal little sister”.

Cute, thoughtful, and willing to do anything.

...Well, as long as I turned a blind eye to her crime of trespassing into my house.

“—So, it’s about time you told me the reason for why you barged into my house.”

As I reached for an ice cream with one hand, Maria placed hers together in front of her chest.

“I wanted to talk to you, Big Brother. Somewhere no one could disturb us.”

“...I feel like you aren’t lying, but I don’t think that was your true reason either.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because you’ve always known where my house is, haven’t you? I haven’t moved since before I retired. If you wanted to talk, couldn’t you have come before that video went around?”

“...I expected no less from you, Big Brother.”

Maria revarnished her lips.

Their increased lustre further added a polish to her already existing cuteness and loveliness. Clad in an overwhelmingly lovable aura, Maria stood silent and still.

“It’s true that I could have gone to see you at any time, Big Brother. But I *really never expected you to stay retired as you did*, and even when I contacted you, you wouldn’t reply...”

I scratched my head.

“My bad. I don’t remember much from back then, but according to my dad, apparently I was in a weird funk. He took away my phone too, because he didn’t want me strangely being reminded of work. That’s why I couldn’t talk to or reply to you.”

“I found out about the circumstances later... It was unavoidable, I now think.”

“Sorry. The truth is that when I had settled down a few years later and my phone was returned to me, I read and replied to a ton of your messages, but then it seemed like your address had changed and all of my replies just bounced back.”

“...I see.”

“The odds of me being able to make a comeback were next to none, so while there was no way I could have forgotten you, it still wasn’t like I could have gone to see you either. I would’ve been happy to receive you had you come over to play, but—”

“I’ve been hesitating for a long time. About whether it would be alright for me to come see you.”

Maria was probably concerned about what had happened six years ago – the last time Maria and I had met.

“I’ve been reminiscing a lot about you lately, Big Brother, but I just can’t seem to find the courage... *We parted ways in that manner*, after all – because it’s you, Big Brother, I figured you would probably forgive me, but even so it would have been impossible for me to come without a cue.”

“And that cue turned out to be that video, huh... Well, about how we parted,

I don't really care. So much that, in fact, I only just remembered something like that had happened, after you brought it up."

"...I really like that part about you, you know, Big Brother?"

I tilted my head instinctively to the side.

"You're an incredibly beautiful girl, so why isn't my heart skipping a beat...? I guess it's because I've always treated you as a little sister, perhaps...?"

"My, you're horrible, Big Brother... Especially when I've already become so big..."

Maria casually brought her chest together, accentuating a fullness which protruded through her uniform—

"Wait a minute. Isn't your chest bigger than it was this morning? You put something in, didn't you?"

Maria tilted her head to the side, producing a smile anyone would want to protect.

"Uh-uh, you aren't fooling me even with that smile. Do you know how much I've been messed around with by you?"

Typically I'd end up forgiving her if such a cute and orderly girl smiled at me, but I was acquainted with the Maria of the past. Only too well.

Seriously, just how much trouble had this smile given me...?

"Ooh, Big Brother... Please forget about what happened back then..."

Maria's mouth puffed up. It seemed that she considered what had happened back then to be her dark past.

"How could I? Forget being the "ideal little sister" – you were a total problem child. I got my hands burnt thoroughly looking after you all the time. I was basically something like your babysitter."

That's why I had come to see Maria as family.

"...This is nostalgic, isn't it? It really is."

Maria whispered while looking into the distance.

"It was because of you that I was able to come this far, Big Brother. I'm truly grateful to you from the bottom of my heart. Do you know that?"

Maria's gaze was far too direct and it was blinding.

Having since retired from the entertainment world, Maria, whom I could call a little sister-like childhood friend, was to me an existence I had watched over the growth and success of with anticipation. I felt like I hadn't done anything of great magnitude, but if to Maria I had been a boon, nothing could make me happier.

"No, you did that with your true ability, didn't you? Seriously, that problem child did well to become such a celebrity."

"I hate it when you drag up the past to tease me, Big Brother..."

Ooh, in my nostalgia I had inadvertently said "problem child" too many times. Perhaps it was time for a change in subject.

"Speaking of which, was it not you who chased away the media and cooled off the internet?"

Maria smiled broadly.

"As I expected of you, Big Brother. You noticed, did you? Yes, I used my influence on the media and online. While the initial excitement had a good impact, I didn't think any more would be good for you in the future, Big Brother. Well, it was just something like a gift exchange."

Hmm, so it had been her. Between the two possibilities I thought this had been the less probable option, but apparently Maria had become stronger than I imagined.

The other option had been, by the way, “the CEO of the agency I had belonged to taking into account my future reinstatement and subduing the spread of information where proper”. Thinking logically this option had been more likely, so I was a little surprised.

“What surprises me is you have the power to do something like that.”

“I’m sixteen years old... a first year in high school. It’s been six years since we parted ways, Big Brother. Of course I’d be able to do this much.”

“Of course, huh...”

There were probably no actresses outside of Maria who were capable of doing such a thing.

Talent was a ruthless thing – if there were those who only possessed one, so existed others who owned multiple as well. An exemplar of the latter group would be Maria, who had many – with each of them at a level beyond par at that.

First was her appearance. A quality deemed essential for actresses, it was one Maria had more than enough of.

Next was her acting. You could call it a sense, but in that respect Maria had a natural ability.

Where to place one’s eyes for an instant, how to move one’s fingertips – the manner in which people conveyed themselves to others changed in subtle ways, but Maria, while conscious of these things unfailingly, could also process and display them effectively at the same time. There were those who could master it by way of their hard work, but her having done so at such a young age was probably clear proof of her flair.

She had a great memory, an ability to observe her surroundings, and also one to draw people’s eyes.

Yet Maria’s most overwhelming talent was – her ability to “create her own environment”.

Exceptional looks, and an ability to act – the entertainment world wasn't one you could get ahead in by merely having those.

One, for example, needed luck. Even with the right looks and acting skill, one couldn't become a star without good fortune.

My appearance was average, but I had luck. I didn't know if I had become a star, but I thus had become a famous person.

Maria's ability wasn't to seize opportunities. Her ability wasn't at a level where it could be manipulated by something as unreliable as luck. Maria had enough influence and brains to make those around her recognise her capabilities, and turn them into a cheer team before one knew.

Having observed Maria's talents while they were blooming, I knew about her overwhelming ability better than anyone.

"...I was moved while watching that video, Big Brother Sueharu. Watching you, I knew that you were indeed still the Big Brother Sueharu that I love."

"Something's... wrong with your Japanese."

"No, not at all. And at the same time, Big Brother Sueharu, I was assured in my belief that it is also only you who can save me."

"...Save you? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Could it be that she was being stalked, or being asked to do strange things by someone who had dirt on her...?

"That's--"

It was at that moment when I suddenly thought I heard a door being unlocked. As I then thought I heard the sound of it being pulled open, and then its chain getting snagged, immediately came a barrage of door chimes. The sound of the bell reverberated with incredible energy.

"What's going on? What's going on?"

I panicked and got up from the sofa while Maria simply faced the entrance in her current position.

“O–i, Sueharu! Why’ve you got this on?! You’re in, aren’t you?! Open up!”

The owner of the voice persistently tugged on the door several times, in spite of it getting caught on the chain.

Could she perhaps not hear the clattering sound it was making? Or was she perhaps trying to break the chain? No, she was probably producing the sound on purpose in an appeal to have the chain removed as soon as possible.

“So rough, as always. Just wait, Midori, I’ll open it right away.”

“I’m not rough! You’re the one at fault for acting sneaky and putting on the chain, Sueharu!”

“I’m the one at fault?!”

“You better not have brought a woman or something back, alright?!”

“*Gulp.*”

I unconsciously let out a sound.

It was sunset. In the living room a beautiful, extremely popular girl on television lingered. A young boy and girl were alone together, there was no way something wouldn’t happen—

Anyone would have those same delusions. But it would also be a pain for me to explain myself, so... right, well, I guess it was alright with Midori on the other end. I’ll ignore her, I will.

I attempted to leave, quashing the sound of my footsteps.

“Ahh, Sueharu, you’re trying to escape, aren’t you?! Seriously, quit playing around!”

“Give it a rest, it’s already nighttime, man! Stop bothering the neighbours!”

“...Big Bro Haru, I’m here too.”

Oh, this voice was–

I froze my legs, which were in the process of leaving, and placed my ear closer to the entrance door.

“You’re here too, Akane?”

“Yup.”

This indifferent tone belonged unmistakably to the youngest of the “Colourful Sisters”, Akane.

Midori alone aside, I could not ignore them with Akane there.

I hurriedly scooped up Maria’s shoes which were placed at the entrance, passing them to her as she stuck her head out from the living room to study the situation. I put my forefinger against my lips to emphasise that she better stay quiet, whereby Maria produced an “ok” sign and withdrew to the back of the living room.

I removed the chain and the sisters surged into the entrance immediately.

“Took you long enough!”

It was Midori who thus let loose the abusive language. Seriously, couldn’t she do a little something about the way she spoke? Otherwise she wouldn’t be popular despite being born with a nice appearance, you know?

“More importantly, Big Sis Midori, we need to explain ourselves.”

Surprised not to see a certain girl, who together with Akane could even be called a set, I inquired.

“Huh, where’s Aoi-chan?”

“That girl stayed back to monitor Big Sis Kuro.”



“Monitor...?”

That was a disquieting word. Akane pressed Midori as I prepared my heart for the dark clouds that wafted out all at once.

“Big Sis Dori...”



“I know, I know.”

Midori took a deep breath, settled her heart, then spit everything out at one go.

“You know what... **Big Sis Kuro’s gone crazy!**”

“What did you say?!”

It was shocking... yet, to be honest, there were too many things that added up.

The severity was to the extent that even Tetsuhiko’s report mentioned that he had “felt that Kuroha had been acting strangely”. Her family would probably know clearly the degree of her queerness. I pressed Midori further.

“Give me the details. What is it like, specifically?”

## “She’s eating food normally!”

“Wh- What...?!”

The incomprehensibility of that proposition made me giddy.

“Kuro’s..... eating food..... normally.....?! That’s impossible!”

“Right?! That’s why I said she’s crazy!”

“What about that thing?! She spread honey over her fish, didn’t she?!”

“She didn’t!”

“Then what about putting canned tuna in her *miso* soup, or chocolate on her pickled vegetables?!”

“Unfortunately... not...”

“No way...!”

Midori and I gnawed on our molars, stricken.

“I see the both of you are terrible as always, Big Bro Haru and Big Sis Dori. This conversation’s not moving forward at all.”

Akane pushed up her glasses with her middle finger, then spoke in her usual monotonous voice.

“Big Bro Haru, it seems like Big Sis Kuro’s – **lost her memory.**”

“.....Huh?”

A terrible storm had been blowing since this morning.

The press arrived, I found out about that video, then Maria barged in... when just as I thought things were finally settling down, Shirokusa and Kuroha then had their squabble.

Still unable to relax after class, I eventually got home after killing time by the river bank, only to find Maria lying in wait as the outcome. Then came this – the finishing blow.

Forget a storm, this was a tornado. The roof over my heart had been blown off, leaving my emotions exposed to the rain.

Seriously, what was I supposed to do about this...?

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<sup>1</sup>*nikujaga*

<sup>2</sup>*spinach ohitashi*

# **Chapter 2: The Four Shida Sisters and the Ultramarine Channel**

## Part 1

“It doesn’t look like you believe me, so I’ll say it once again. I think Big Sis Kuro’s lost her memory.”

The defining feature of the youngest daughter of the Shida family, Akane, was her intellect. She excelled especially in mathematics, having obtained *Suken* 1st-kyu<sup>1</sup> certification while a sixth-year student in elementary school. That was also good enough for her to appear in the local newspaper.

She was currently a first-year student in middle school. She and Aoi were twins, her being the younger.

Her physique roughly matched Aoi’s, but in comparison to Aoi’s relatively droopy eyes, hers were slanted marginally upwards.

People’s eyes were probably first drawn towards her glasses, and the gentle wavy hair that reached her hips.

She had what could be described as an intelligent look. Though twins, the frigidity and shrewdness one could sense in her features were polar opposites of the warmth and restraint exuded by Aoi. In practice the intonation in her voice was also limited, and she projected the air of a pragmatist.

Akane’s shortcoming was probably her aloofness. Her three elder sisters were all of the outgoing type, but Akane gave an image of solitude.

In elementary school she was always thought to be together with someone, but that person always turned out to be Aoi. She was not seen with anyone else. Perhaps because her intellect was so outstanding, it had been hard for her to hold a conversation with those around.

In reality amongst the four sisters I relied on Akane the most.

Her composure and rationality made her the perfect person to consult, and when I did she always gave me advice I could comprehend. Of course Kuroha too had the insight and ability suitable to be an advisor, but our proximity and shared circumstances made many matters hard to discuss. In that sense, the distance between Akane and I felt just right.

I counted on her despite her being four years my junior, while I sensed that Akane idolised me – though Akane being Akane – her indifferent attitude made her hard to read.

Aoi's praiseworthiness made me want to dote on her, but Akane's intermittent air of loneliness made me want to keep her company. Thus if ever Akane sent out an SOS, I planned to extend my hand towards her first. The two of them had differing personalities for sure, but to me they were both my cherished childhood friends.

Of the four Shida sisters–

–The eldest daughter, Kuroha. A helpful and sociable second-year model high school student. A short-statured loli elder sister.

–The second daughter, Midori. A third-year middle school student. Tomboyish and crude. Easy to talk to and possessing outstanding athletic ability. Has a great figure.

–The third daughter, Aoi. A first-year middle school student. A kind, innocent, comforting type who modestly puts others ahead of herself. The older of the twins.

–The youngest daughter, Akane. Also a first-year middle school student. A calm, rational, intellectual type. A relatively aloof glasses-wearing girl. The younger of the twins.

The second-eldest and youngest had presently barged into my house.

In response to those shocking words from the person I relied upon the most from the bottom of my heart – Akane – I could only reinquire thoughtlessly.



“Akane, I... you know. Are you seriously saying that... Kuro’s lost her memory?”

“You think I’m lying, Big Bro Haru?”

Akane pushed her glasses up with her index finger.

As one could tell from her cold expression and dispassionate tone, Akane wasn’t the type to joke around.

“That’s true. If you’re saying so, Akane, then it might be real, but...”

Even as I trusted Akane, with things as they were I could not carelessly accept her word without questioning it.

“I don’t think it’s amnesia, though. That’s definitely just her trying to bluff her way out of an inconvenient situation. Well, but I can’t deny that she’s acting strangely.”

It seemed that Midori belonged to the amnesia-denying faction.

“What do you mean, ‘inconvenient’?”

Midori plucked at her short hair as I tried asking.

“I mean, how am I supposed to believe it? She’s lost her memories up to around last summer vacation, you know?”

“.....Heh? You mean—”

“Everything from around the start of the summer holidays, up till around when that video was... around the cultural festival earlier’s completely gone!”

“.....Huh? Eh, w... huh?”

Wait, wait, wait, how was this possible?! What was happening?! Did this mean that the entire revenge scandal from before had been completely undone?!

“Wait a minute, if you say ‘around the start of the summer holidays’, that means—”

“It’s around the time Big Sis Kuro confessed to and got rejected by you, Sueharu. But as to whether she remembers that or not, I was too scared to ask.”

“Huh?!”

Wait, wait, wait, wait, come on, that’s the most important thing, isn’t it?!  
God, my head hurts...

“—Wait, hold on a minute.”

That too was an issue, but what Midori had said in the first place was strange.

“Oi, Midori. Why do you know Kuro confessed to and got rejected by me?”

No one should have known about this outside of when Kuroha herself had revealed it within our class. I hadn’t heard about Midori being connected to someone from our school, and in that video there shouldn’t have been any mention of Kuroha confessing to me. That left the possibility of Kuroha telling her sisters, but as the dependable eldest I didn’t think she would show her failings to them.

Midori uttered “*crap*” and slapped her hand against her forehead, then turned her face away. Akane stayed expressionless and did the same.

“Was this leaked between you sisters?”

Midori and Akane turned to face each other, but it was the second daughter Midori who acted with seniority and opened her mouth.

“Well, Big Sis Kuro didn’t say anything. But, you know, you could tell looking at her behaviour and mood all the same.”

“Midori, for you to say something so sensitive...”

“What?! Well I’m a girl, so can I understand too!”

“You’re a girl? Then perhaps you should act a little more like one...”

“Ahh, that’s sexual discrimination, you horrible bastard!”

Hmmm, I’ve been accused of being a horrible bastard, have I? And of sexual discrimination at that... At times like these it was easy to return a clumsy rebuttal from various angles, due to the extremely sensitive nature of the issue.

I quickly gazed over Midori’s entire body.

She was in her usual unguarded form, wearing a T-shirt and hot pants. They were garments that accentuated, let alone concealed, in spite of the largeness of her chest and butt.

Unaware of the allur... *punch* her flesh held, and completely oblivious to the male gaze... she was indeed anything but sensitive.

“...What?”

“That’s right...”

Being the elder I had to show my magnanimity, so I honestly admitted my mistake.

“I was wrong for saying you should act like a girl. You’re already feminine enough.”

“Hmpf, good of you to know... wait– huh?!”

Midori’s face turned completely red.

Ah, about now she should have realised the meaning behind my words and gaze.

“Eh?!”

“You’re really slow, Midori. What are you hoping to achieve by hiding your body only now?”

In her extreme bashfulness Midori was dyed red down to her neck, and she made a fist.

“Sueharuuuu! You bastarddddd! You perverted son of a bitchhhhh!”

“Huh, so what if I am? I’ve long finished preserving that curvaceous form of yours inside my brain!”

“Then I’ll punch your head and erase your memories!”

Ahh, as expected of Midori, her methods of resolving issues were also sports-oriented.

“Do it if you can! I’m going to teach you to fear your elders!”

“You lazy slob, you think you can beat me?!”

Our hands engaged and locked together, and in this state it devolved into us pushing and shoving each other.

“Uuuuuugh!”

“Grrrr!”

Oh crap, that girl Midori was really strong. It seemed like I was about to lose to a girl younger than me.

“Akane, h- help me!”

“Ah, that’s cheating, Sueharu! Akane, you tell this idiot he sucks too!”

Akane gazed at us jostling while in deep reflection, then muttered.

“In the course of the current conversation I can’t confirm Big Bro Haru’s been an idiot, but it is true that the remarks he made to and the way he looked at Big Sis Dori were deviant-like and disgusting.”

“Nggggh...!”

The power balance collapsed and I was instantly forced back by Midori.

What the hell?! That really hurt!

I had become accustomed to scathing criticism from Midori and it didn't bother me. But to be rejected by a younger sister-like existence I doted on was really quite depressing.

“You really are merciless, aren't you, Akane?! Well I'm sorry for being disgusting!”

“Now's the timeeeee!”

“Woah!”

Midori seized the opportunity to overcome me as my strength waned.

I fell onto the floor of the entrance, landing hard on my bum.

“Hahaha, take that, Sueharu! This is what you get for your usual rotten behaviour!”

“Crap, that damn Midori...”

She was getting ahead of herself. She better not underestimate her elders. I would not fail to teach her how scary I could be if and when the opportunity next arose.

As I thus vexed, Akane removed her shoes before extending her arm towards me.

“Certainly your words and gaze were awful, Big Bro Haru, but that doesn't mean that I think that you are. I don't think we should judge the character of a person based on a single act of theirs alone.”

“Akane...”

Did you hear those cute and sound words?

Akane only said what she thought without restraint, and at her core she was a kind girl.

“You’re a good girl, Akane! Come, I shall give you a pat on the head!”

“...Big Bro Haru, make another wrong move and it’ll be sexual harassment.”

“Oof!”

Akane’s guard was considerably stiff. It was my future objective for Akane to eventually allow me to embrace her as Aoi did.

“Hmpf! Serves you right, Sueharu! This is what happens when you’re always being favoured by Akane or Aoi!”

“Shut up, Midori!”

I stood up with help from Akane’s arm, and as I prepared to fight with Midori, as I always did—

“Seems like you’re having fun... Big Brother Sueharu.”

The figure of Maria, who had been eavesdropping onto the racket, appeared in the living room.

“?!”

The sisters’ eyes widened into circles at the sudden entrance of the beautiful girl.

“W- Momo?! You-?!”

“What’s wrong, Big Brother Sueharu? Aren’t these the girls who are like your younger sisters? I just remembered you saying so before. –Will you not introduce us?”

Shit, she had totally picked her own time to appear. Well, I suppose she wasn’t one to stay docile in the first place, huh.

Midori probably hadn't counted on herself hitting the nail on the head when she had jokingly said "*You better not have brought a woman or something back, alright?!*" in character earlier. She spoke while alternately pointing her index finger between Maria and I.

**"S- S- Sueharu! Y- You brought home another woman immediately after being rejected by Big Sis Kuro?!"**

"Now hold up, Midori! I'll kill you, you bastard! There's a proper way to phrase things, you know!"

Come on, how am I going to carry on living if the neighbours hear that, huh?!

"...How sleazy. ...I've made a miscalculation."

"*Et tu, Akane?!*"

Ouch! Akane's the cute little sister I'm trying to get to accept me... but alas! Look at her, looking at me like I'm garbage... it makes me wanna die!

"...Wait, what?"

The disdainful look Midori's eyes were sending suddenly turned into blinking.

"Could this girl actually be... Momosaka Maria from 'The Ideal Little Sister'?!"

"Heh?"

Ohh, I see. I had known Maria from the past and thus would have been nonplussed, but this was how one typically reacted to seeing her.

I sniggered through my nose, then introduced her boastfully.

"Yes, she is. She's an acquaintance from when I was a child actor in the past, and she's come to visit me for the first time in a while after seeing that video."

“Hehh, seriously?! Come to think of it, Sueharu, you were a celebrity in the past, huh. Woahh, but this really is amazing! What the hell!”

I was a fifth-year student in elementary school when I retired from the entertainment world. Midori had been a third-year elementary school student then.

A two year difference in elementary school was huge, especially when those children were around an age where they chose to start watching dramas or not. So while Midori knew I had been a former celebrity, her impression of me as the Big Brother from the house next door had probably been stronger, because she didn't have much interest in dramas back then.

“You were the drama watching-type, Midori?”

“I don't watch that much 'cuz I'm busy with club practice, but I do tape down and check out the trending ones. I would hate to be left out of the conversation, after all.”

So there were areas where she paid quite a bit of attention to her surroundings, despite being so boorish. Perhaps due to her being self-conscious about her tomboyishness, it could be observed that she had a disproportionate inclination to fit in with her female friends. Midori being Midori already had strong points aplenty, so I didn't really feel like she had to do so.

“Erm... would it be alright for me to ask what your name is?” Maria inquired of Midori.

The gracefulness of her approach, and the perfection of the smile she produced. Maria gave forth a celebrity's aura so polished it couldn't be compared to the one she had six years before, and it was enough to floor even me who had known her in the past.

“Oh, err... yes.”

Caught within that aura, a plebeian like Midori lost immediately. Her body fidgeted restlessly, while her gaze wandered all about. Her cheeks flushed red



and she was in a state of disorder.

“Err, I’m Shida Midori... a third-year middle school student.”

“Could it be that you’re the little sister of that (*thieving cat*) girl in the video?”

...Hm? Had there been a weird pause in the space between “that” and “girl” just now...?

“Eh, err... yes.”

Shaking, Midori appeared to be completely unconcerned. If I asked though, I felt like something sinister would be divulged...

“I’m so happy you watched my drama. Thank you.”

“Oh, of course! Wow, wow!”

Seeing Maria’s outstretched arm, Midori’s shoulders sprung up as she shook Maria’s hand.

“I’m only a year older, so you don’t have to be so polite with me, you know?”

“Oh... really? I’m not great at that, to be honest, so this is much more appreciated... I think.”

“You’re a (*simple,*) good girl, and cute. It seems like you’ve got some kind of brother-sister relationship with Big Brother, so if you consider mine with him, it means that you and I are like older and younger sisters too, aren’t we?”

“Hm...?”

Midori had been led by the nose and now predictably appeared to have been caught in the trap.

Yes, there was something strange about that logic. There probably had been a

huge leap somewhere.

“So, you can specially call me Big Sister Momo if you’d like.”

Yikes, Maria was projecting her aura even more strongly. Unlike earlier, perhaps it could now definitively be called that of an empress. That girl Maria had fixed her rating with Midori.

“Stop.”

“Ow!”

As I gave her a light chop, the terror coming from Maria dissipated.

“Come on, what are you trying to coerce Midori to do after just meeting her for the first time?”

“But Big Brother Sueharu ~ , you’re supposed to be my big brother alone ~”

“I’ve been eating at the Shida house since forever, so if anything I’d say these girls should be my family. What’s strange is you calling me Big Brother instead.”

“Eh ~ , you’re so mean, Big Brother...” Maria snuggled against me as she said so.

“I didn’t tell you not to call me that. Anyway, no more indiscriminately intimidating people. Your celebrity aura isn’t anything to sniff at, so it frightens normal humans.”

“...Well, if you say so, Big Brother.”

Phew, Maria had settled down at last. Managing her was truly challenging.

“Y’all get along pretty well, huh, Sueharu.”

It was Midori who thus instigated.

It seemed as if Midori too had grasped Maria’s true nature, the result of

which was that she perceived her not as an ally but an enemy.

“Hmm, I mean, you were making a good show of it. I know about you being a former celebrity, but from this point on are you planning to abandon Big Sis Kuro and become one again?”

“This is why I told you to watch your phrasing! What am I going to do if the neighbours get the wrong idea?!”

Maria cut into the space in between us.

“Midori-chan... Big Sister Momo prefers girls who are a little more honest, you know?”

Ohh man, again Maria had fanned the flames!

Maria looked upwards with her aura fully activated, while Midori made full use of her height and stared down upon her intimidatingly from above. The amicability of their initial encounter had already become a thing of the past.

“Look, I know you’re a popular actress and I’ll admit that you’re really cute, but don’t you think you’re sticking to Sueharu a little too closely?”

“...Is that bad?”

“It’s not about whether it’s good or bad, it’s that we’ve known each other for over ten years, and with Big Sis Kuro this guy’s—”

“If I recall correctly, that person’s already rejected Big Brother Haru, has she not? If so, she’s out of the picture, isn’t she? Or do you personally have a problem with me sticking to Big Brother Haru?”

“Oo– no, I—”

Please, stop, Midori. If you disclose that it’ll hurt me more than it’ll hurt you.

Towards Midori, who was still searching for words, Maria swiftly lowered her head.

“Oh, I’m sorry... I wasn’t planning on looking for a fight. Whenever it comes to Big Brother Haru, I just... I’ll apologise, so can we make up...?”

She held out her hand – the one Midori had bashfully shaken earlier – but this time the latter swept it aside in rejection.

“Your condescending attitude really pisses me off!”

“...I see. I suppose you won’t be wanting a photo either then? Right now we can not only take a shot together, but I can even post it on social media, you know?”

“–Eh?”

Ah, the tides had shifted.

“Take it as my apology. You’ll definitely be able to boast to your friends, you know? No, not just that. I don’t sell myself cheaply, so there almost aren’t any couple photos with me in them going around. When I upload the photo on social media it’ll unmistakably be the centre of attention. So if there’s someone you’re interested in, Midori-chan, this could possibly be the opportunity for the two of you to get closer together. It takes the courage to make the first step and all of your strength to break open your future – or at least that’s how I think – but what will you do, Midori-chan?”

Woow, was this the part where I was supposed to say “as I expected”? This is what I had been talking about. This was Maria’s true essence, her ability to cut open her own path without relying on luck. She never hesitated to use any abilities at her disposal, and always swayed things into a way that would be to her convenience.

Presented with an alluring fruit, the defiant Midori wavered.

In this by the time you wavered you had already lost.

“H- Hmpf! You won’t be able to entice me with something like that!”

“That wasn’t really my intention... or rather, it’s alright then if you don’t have a need for it. All I wanted was to get along with (*so that I can*

*manipulate her as I please*) a(n *eyesore of a*) girl who's close to Big Brother Sueharu like a little sister..."

As expected of an actress. While Maria acted meekly, Midori was assaulted by the guilt of having done something terribly wrong.

"Ah, it wasn't like I rejected you because I had any particular reason to either...!"

Maria revealed a gentle smile.

"In that case I think we definitely can be friends (*of convenience*). After all, I only came here to visit Big Brother Sueharu for the first time in a while."

"Really?"

"Yes. You (*really*) are a simple and good girl.

"...Oi, Momo. Your real opinions are leaking."

"Ah—"

"Ah—"

Momo promptly placed her hand against her mouth, then tried to play it cool with a broad grin.

Obviously, that didn't have a shot at working.

"So you really are playing me for a fool, aren't you?!"

"Oh, I'm not playing you for a fool, you know? I just think you're easy."

"Aren't those two things the sameeee?!"

"Calm down, Midori! This is just the kind of person Momo is!"

Getting caught in Maria's tailwind before I realised it had been a fearsome habit of mine in the past.

She could have laid low while I was pacifying Midori, but in that time Maria had already begun talking to Akane.

“We could be friends too, if you’d like?”

“...I’m good. I neither use social media nor have any particular interest in you.”

“I do want to be on good terms with you too, you know?”

“Like I said, I’m fine.”

“...Alright, I understand (*that you’re a stubborn one*). (*I’ll definitely make you kneel, so*) shall we talk again some other time?”

“If the opportunity arises.”

*Sigh*, it was said that three girls were a crowd, but the aftermath of throwing an explosive known as Maria towards the sisters had been truly uncontrollable.

I brought the conversation forcibly to a close.

“Anyway, we’re going back to the earlier issue! I hear what you all are saying about Kuro, and I think I want to carefully work out some countermeasures. For the time being though, it looks like Momo has something to say to me, so I’ll hear her out first. I’ll come calling for you all again later, so Midori and Akane, you all please head home for now.”

“You sure?”

Midori looked at me as if she were scrutinising every inch of my body.

She doesn’t trust me.

“Of course. I’m giving Momo priority because her house is further away, and also because I’ve judged that for her to go home later might be dangerous.”

“Well, that’s...”

My logic was flawless. So much so that even Midori seemed to be lost for words.

As I felt my chest swell with the pride of having admirably gotten through this ordeal—

“But I **don’t mind staying over like this**, though—”

—Again Maria tossed another bomb.

“Sueharu! You...!”

“Calm down, Midori! And Momo! You premeditated this crime, didn’t you?! Because I can tell!”

“...Well, what might you be talking about?”

“Don’t you act dumb now!”

“Could it be that you’re going to punish me, Big Brother Sueharu? Are we going to **play doctor again like you loved to** six years ago?”

“Sueharuuuu!”

“Big Bro Haru...”

Ooh, Midori’s aside, Akane’s gaze was painfulll!

“...My bad, Momo. I don’t think I can beat you, so could you let me off the hook for now? By the way, if you don’t, I’ll refuse to listen to what it was you wanted to discuss about.”

“Ooh, you’re so mean, Big Brother Sueharu! Also, to the sisters over there, I was joking, okay?”

Midori and Akane were totally creeped out.

To Midori in particular... you are overly so. Your face looks like a zombie’s.

“Well, Big Bro Haru. Later.”

On account of having achieved her objective, Akane turned around.

“Sure, I’ll contact you la—” I began, before Maria cut in.

“—That’s alright, I can say what I want to here as well.”

The sisters, who were taking their leave, stood still in their tracks.

Maria smiled thinly, then leisurely placed her eyes on me.

“Big Brother Sueharu... please come back to the entertainment world. And then – we should act together again. If I’m together with you, I feel like I can shine brighter than I ever have.”

Maria returned to the living room, then came back holding a pochette.

“Big Brother Sueharu, this is the name card of the agency’s current CEO.”

Current? Did this mean that the CEO had changed since I had retired?

On the name card the following was written:

[ Hardy Pro / President and Chief Executive Officer / Hardy, Shun ]

The CEO while I was there had been an old woman of mixed descent called Nina Hardy, the founder of the acting agency and a wizard of her generation. She was a strict yet kind person, to the extent that she was known by many belonging to the agency affectionately as “Grandma Nina”.

“Momo, what about Grandma Nina?”

I unearthed that nostalgic name and thus inquired.

“Last year her health deteriorated...”

“Eh, you mean...?!”



“...No, she got better immediately, but she lost the motivation to work after taking it easy for the first time in such a long time. So she’s handed everything over to her son Shun-san, and now she’s traveling the world with her husband.”

“Ahh, she was that kind of person...”

She was a powerful yet breezy woman of character, someone who would act immediately after hitting upon an idea. Well, it was very much like her to do so, and if she was healthy I could see her again...

“After he watched that video, Big Brother, I came because Shun-san requested me to persuade you to return. Well, I had the intention to do so anyway even if Shun-san hadn’t told me to.”

“Shun-san, huh... I’ve never even heard of him being mentioned before. Grandma Nina never talked about him either, after all.”

“Apparently the relationship between mother and son isn’t particularly close.”

“And your impression of him, Momo?”

“What is certain is that he has ability.”

“What else? His character?”

“I think it would be better for you to confirm anything else with your own eyes, Big Brother. In the meantime, what would you say about meeting him?”

“Hmm, I see...”

“Do you have no inclination of returning?”

“...I’m wavering a little, to be honest.”

I had hit it off in the past as a child actor, but along with a six-year hiatus, I had since only once stood upon a stage, and one at a cultural festival at that. Whether I could perform about as well as I used to was still very much an

unknown variable, but in the first place the requirements were different from when I had been a child actor, now that I had become a high school student.

In addition, it was thanks to Kuroha that I was able to try so hard during the cultural festival. Because she had since fallen into a difficult situation, I was also painfully reluctant to put that aside and make my return.

Only I thought I had to make the best use of this opportunity. I was grateful alone for having been thus reached out to.

“Big Brother, would it be alright for you to tell me what time you’ll be free this Saturday? I’d like to arrange your interview with the CEO.”

“...Well, yeah... I guess I’ll try meeting him.”

It didn’t look like I would arrive at a conclusion agonising over it at this point in time. To not meet the CEO and listen to what he had to say seemed to mean not making progress on anything.

“That would be good.”

Maria turned her sight to the sisters.

“Erm, would you mind doing me a favour by handing this over to Kuroha-san?”

What Maria presented to them was a name card identical to the one she had handed to me.

“Oi, Momo. You mean the CEO’s also interested in...?”

“Yes, he appears to be interested, and if possible he’d like the two of you to come see him together – was what he said.”

So it was because of this that Maria hadn’t let the sisters go home, huh.

“Hey, weren’t you listening to what we were saying?!” Midori flared up. “Big Sis Kuro’s now gone crazy, but despite that you’re talking about the entertainment world...?!”

“Even I couldn’t have foreseen something like that happening. But having come this far, I’m just wondering if passing on the message alone would be the logical move. That said, I still intend to take care not to go and hand this to her directly. I’ll entrust you all with deciding whether to hand this to Kuroha-san or not.”

“.....Fine, got it.”

She had probably understood Maria’s reasoning. I felt reluctance on Midori’s part but she accepted the name card.

“Well, my work is done here, so I’ll be going home now.”

“I see. Do you want to hail a cab? I’ll pay since you deliberately came all the way.”

“Hehe, Big Brother, who do you think I am? Things have changed since six years ago, you know?”

Maria gave a cute wink.

“If I give my chauffeur one ring, he’ll be here within a minute.”

“Wow. That’s a huge difference from before.”

“Of course.”

Maria brushed the sisters aside, then slid her feet into her school-designated leather shoes.

“Oh, that’s right, Momo. I forgot something.”

“What’s that, Big Brother? Our goodbye kiss?”

“Are you dumb? This.”

I took out my handphone, putting my log on display.

Fifty-seven Hotline messages, fourteen missed calls. From the morning until

now – so much as half a day – this had been the toll.

“Wow...”

“Is she a stalker...?”

Natural reactions, probably. This was the common sense.

“This is too much, even for you. I won’t ask you to stop contacting me, but please, restrain yourself a little.”

This was the reason I had angrily told Tetsuhiko “not to give out my address at his own convenience”. I had foreseen this happening if he told Maria, never mind someone else.

“...Oh, my ride has arrived. Goodbye then, everyone.”

“Come on! At least say you’re sorry or you’ll stop before leaving!”

In this respect she really resembled Tetsuhiko. Perhaps this was precisely the sort of tough mindset that was required to survive in the entertainment world.

If so, I wasn’t good enough. Could I truly reinstate myself to the entertainment world?

Those were some of the thoughts that I had.

\*

<sup>1</sup>A college/university-level math test and the hardest out of 14 administered by the Mathematics Certification Institute of Japan. In 2019 only 14.4% of candidates taking the 1st-*kyu* exam passed, one of whom was a 9 year old boy, so Akane ain’t that great. ￣\\_(ツ)\_/￣

## Part 2

I showed Midori and Akane into the living room after Maria left and prepared tea. After we had settled down, I explained to them what had happened in school – from Maria’s intrusion to the discord with Shirokusa – in an abridged manner.

“I see...”

“Seems that it’s true that there was stress intense enough to actually warrant memory loss.”

As they each nodded it appeared that they had finally been able to grasp the chain of events.

“Well, I’ve gotten it to an extent, but... Sueharu.”

“What, Midori?”

“What the hell are you going to do, man?! Seriously, no kidding!”

“No, what the hell am I going to do about what?”

“First of all, Big Sis Kuro.”

“Ooh!”

I clutched against my chest.

My heart palpitated dangerously whenever Kuroha was mentioned. I entered a state where again it felt like those words would pop into my head, leaving me to strenuously recall the names of those gravure idols I fancied in order to somehow soothe my emotions.

“O- Oi, Sueharu! What’s wrong?!”

“If we consider the situation until now, Big Sis Dori, there is no question Big Bro Haru too is under quite a bit of stress. It would be dangerous to drive him against the wall any further.”

“T- That might be true, but still!”

Midori seemed to be emotionally opposed, despite having heard Akane’s analysis.

“First of all, Big Bro Haru was harshly rejected by Big Sis Kuro. That was the **bed-binding level.**”

“Oof!”

The sharpness of Akane’s tongue. Shirokusa as much as she could chose strong words in order to intimidate others, but Akane went for weak spots indifferently without malice, and like throwing body blows she steadily found her mark.

“Having that scene be uploaded as a video, then viewed more than a million times – that was the **suicide level.**”

“Eek!”

“W- Wait, Akane?!”

“And then if despite all of that, he’s told that he’s responsible for driving Big Sis Kuro to the point of amnesia, then **there will soon be no other way to describe this but the *harakiri*<sup>1</sup> level–**”

“Wait, wait, wait, even I didn’t go that far, Akane!”

“Ooh... Oogeeeeeee!”

My stress levels quickly surpassed my limits, and my instincts painted over my sense of reason.

“O- Oi, Sueharu! What’s going on?!”

“Oo oo oo oo oo!”

Transformed into an anthropoid ape, I promptly hid myself behind Midori’s back, sticking only my head out at Akane trying to intimidate her.

“It’s no good, I can’t get through to him... Looks like this guy’s taken quite a bit of damage too, huh...” Midori sighed.

Akane was aghast.

“Oh, Big Bro Haru... sorry. It wasn’t my intention to...”

Seeing Akane’s seemingly apologetic face swiftly brought my reasoning back.

At times like these this girl could really pull a sad-looking expression. She couldn’t do things well, despite knowing her own clumsiness better than anyone did. That she thought so was shown plainly on her face.

There were times when the gears in Akane’s head wouldn’t stop spinning after they had been started. Because she only had the intelligence to recognise that as a shortcoming, her impulse to blame herself was strong. To that extent I thus thought of it as my role to help Akane take herself less seriously as much as I could.

“There!”

“Ouch!”

I sent a flick towards Akane’s forehead, causing her to press on it and hurriedly push up with her middle finger her glasses which had slid down.

“I don’t need anything more than ‘sorry’ from a junior.”

“...But.”

“You think about some things too much, Akane. If I know you, you’ve

already thought about several ways to apologise, haven't you?"

"...About forty-three."

"That's a lot!"

All the same, at the very least I could hope for her to be a scholar in the future.

"At times like these, your job as the junior is to apologise from the heart."

"...Okay."

"The senior's job is to forgive and laugh it off. Anyone who doesn't is trash and you shouldn't get close."

"...Who said that?" Midori quipped from the side.

"Ohh, someone from Acid Rain if I'm not mistaken."

"Woah, you're friends with people from Acid Rain, Sueharu? ...Oh, right, it was because of Child Star, was it? ...Honestly, I'm a huge fan, though! I heard their new song's going to be an intense one like those during the indie rock era, but did you hear anything about that?"

"No, no, there was a relationship, but I don't know 'cuz we never got in touch after I retired."

"I see ~. Well, I really can't form an image of Acid Rain talking to you though, Sueharu."

"They looked really scary because they were former delinquents, but in actuality they were all incredibly helpful people."

"Really. I can't imagine that at all..."

Akane's unchanging expression broke into the slightest smile.

"If you remember that line, Big Bro Haru, then I think that there is value in



doing so. I think that spirit is magnificent.”

This girl was incredible, only she was bad at expressing her emotions. I thought she was cute, her clumsiness included. I thus verbalised that as much as I could.

“Unlike Midori you’re a good girl, Akane.”

“Tsk, yeah, I guess I’ll always be a bad girl no matter what.”

Oh dear, oh dear, I wasn’t going anywhere at all talking to these girls. They were middle school schoolgirls, childhood friends akin to family they might have been. It wasn’t healthy for them to be in the house of a boy who wasn’t family.

I so thought, trying to drive the conversation forward.

“At any rate, it’s honestly a little tough for me to think about romance right now.”

“.....”

“.....”

Why are the two of you silent?! And exchanging looks with each other meaningfully at that?!

“Still, I don’t think it would be right for me to leave Kuro alone. If you have a plan, I intend to help.”

“A plan, huh...”

Midori behaved as if she were thinking, but she definitely wasn’t.

“How about it, Akane?”

See, she had dumped the problem off onto Akane, as expected. She was the type that got a fever after only three seconds of thinking.

Akane raised her index finger and began twirling it around. Someone who didn't know any better might have thought she was hailing a UFO, but this was proof of Akane being in concentrated thought.

"...To begin, I cannot read at all what Big Sis Kuro's mental state is, or rather, where she's heading towards. As a result, I feel that it would be dangerous for Big Bro Haru to start talking to Big Sis Kuro."

"Hmm."

"I think that it would be good for us to first explain everything to Big Sis Kuro. Whether it's about her confession to Big Bro Haru or the video et cetera, she'll probably learn about it in school sooner or later, so for us – her family – to tell her would create less of a fuss."

"Well, that's true. Then I guess the three of us should explain to her when we get back, huh." Midori also approved.

"After we finish explaining to her, and I think it'll probably happen tomorrow, Big Sis Kuro will try to talk to you normally, Big Bro Haru. When that happens I want you to be totally prepared, and if possible I also want you to watch over how she's trending."

"...Right."

When I thought of Kuroha, the scene of my rejection would shimmer before me whether I liked it or not.

But right now Kuroha was in a large bind. It wouldn't do for me to panic here.

"Alright, got it. Let's cooperate. If there's anything let's contact each other immediately."

"If you would. And also, Big Bro Haru."

"Yes, Akane?"

"I'll be proud if you return to the entertainment world, Big Bro Haru – but

also lonely.”

“?!”

Honest words. They deeply touched my heart.

“Still, I don’t think I could stop you either.”

“Akane…”

Precisely because Akane projected an image of solitude, seeing her lonely-looking expression compelled me emotionally to want to act in accordance with her wishes.

“I think that whichever you choose is alright, though? You should do what you want to, Sueharu.”

Midori was as she always was. But looking closely, she might have looked a little forlorn.

“Only if there’s one thing I can say—”

“Hm?”

Akane occasionally took upon the appearance of a prophet. Yes, when her eyes were perfectly clear and she was overflowing with conviction as she was right now. This sagacious girl could perhaps see things that ordinary people could not.

“It’s that even if you should choose reinstatement, I want you to do so with positive emotions to the end, not for negative reasons such as running away from love. Because, Big Bro Haru, this will probably become one of the biggest decisions of your life.”

This girl’s a first-year middle school student, isn’t she?

When I was a first-year middle school student, I… no, I shouldn’t think about this any further. It was embarrassing too to compare. I didn’t secretly rely on her the most for nothing.

“Thanks, Akane.”

I took Akane’s tiny hand and enveloped it tightly.

“I’ll try giving it some serious thought. I intend to make a decision I won’t regret.”

“Big Bro Haru... please... my hand... my hand...”

Akane whispered so while completely red in the face.

Despite her being able to say those words, I found her unexpected shyness cute.

As I incidentally looked towards the side, I saw Midori scratching her head as if to say “good grief”.

\*

<sup>1</sup>Japanese ritual suicide. If you want details, that’s what Wikipedia’s for.

## Part 3

The next day I got out of bed unusually early. There were multiple reasons for me doing so, but the biggest was that I had woken up.

As a result of that I made *bento* for lunch, a rare occurrence that did or did not happen once per year.

Even then I still had time to spare, so I thoroughly savoured the breakfast bread I would have usually simply tossed into my stomach, and took five minutes to style the hair I would have done in thirty seconds. Sitting on the sofa and gazing at the TV playing background music, I then had the luxury of checking what the fortune said would be my luck for the day.

“For Libras... today, your fortune in love will be the worst!”

“Oh, hmmm.”

I stealthily changed the channel. Right, I’ll pretend like I never saw that.

I had the luxury of time despite it being morning – but in reality my heart had none at all. It was all the result of the call I had received from Midori the day before.

*“For the time being we’ve told Big Sis Kuro everything we know.”*

*“And her reaction?”*

*“Hmm, well, relaxed. Seems like the truth didn’t sink in.”*

*“Hmm...”*

To begin with, I didn’t understand amnesia well. I mean, I knew it was an actual phenomenon, but take for example not even remembering your own

name like the way they did in dramas. If that was true I had questions, such as, for instance, “How can a person who can’t remember his own name be able to speak Japanese?”. If his memories had reverted to those of a baby, then he should have forgotten about language as well. Or while I thought so in my ignorance, it was possible that in the field of Medicine conversations like these were entirely commonplace. In other words, no matter how much I tried to reason it out within my head I still wouldn’t understand. For that same reason I had no idea on what to make of Kuroha’s reaction either.

*“She’s not going to the hospital?”*

*“Big Sis Kuro herself didn’t seem to think too much of it, saying she was fine and refusing to go.”*

*“What did Uncle and Auntie say?”*

*“Well, it isn’t like it’ll be an obstacle to her life, so... it feels like maybe they just want to observe how she looks for a little while longer.”*

*“...I see.”*

Too pinpoint, were the memories that she had lost. Well sure, if stress had been the reason for her amnesia, then it stood to reason that precisely those stressful portions alone would have gotten erased. However, a tempestuous change had since called upon the relationship we had built as childhood friends, my feelings were also evolving, and as we were on the verge of starting a new, different relationship – this had occurred.

Aaaaaaaah, what the hell was I supposed to dooooo?!

*“So, Big Sis Kuro seems like she wants to talk to you a little, Sueharu, so she said tomorrow she’d like to go to school together with you. I think she’ll want to go and meet you in the morning, but there won’t be a problem, will there?”*

*“Ooh...”*

It wasn’t like I typically went to school together with Kuroha, but on days

with field trips, tests, when we would get caught for being late, or the sports festival et cetera, Kuroha would come to meet me. Thus while it wasn't like I was against us going to school together... all the same I couldn't control my shaking.

Towards Kuroha I felt trust, gratefulness, friendship, intimacy, feelings of attraction – and fear.

These emotions of mine were in a mess, and I still really couldn't put them all together. So while I felt intense pressure being alone together with her... I also really didn't have a reason to refuse.

*“You better not run, okay, Sueharu?”*

Ah, crap. She had struck first and sealed off my escape route.

I wondered if perhaps she could have put that a little more gently, but such were Midori's blasts. Though it was true that as a result of that, I felt my motivation rising.

*“Okay, I get it, I get it! I'll wait for Kuro tomorrow morning, and then we'll go to school together. That'll do, right?”*

*“C'mon, I'm not asking you to do me a favour.”*

You're a good person, though, Midori. Just that with that crude speech of yours honestly no man is going to come closer.

While those were my thoughts, there would have been an argument had I verbalised them, and I hung up on the call after simply leaving a word of thanks.

–And with that it was now morning.

The time was 7:15. I always left on the forty-five minute mark, so I was still half an hour early.

*Ding dong!*

The sound of the intercom reverberated.

I stood up from the sofa immediately after, grabbing my school-designated school bag which had been placed nearby, then made my way to the entrance while moving like a broken tin doll.

“Haru..... good morning.”

In the entrance Kuroha stood in her uniform. It killed me to see the cuteness of her loitering figure, bathing in the morning sun through the glass, yet the sight of her still made my heart sing.

Just that, somehow – there was a difference compared to how it had been until now.

If I were to express that difference in a single sentence, it would be that *this was the most feminine I had ever seen her.*

Of course, unlike Midori, Kuroha had been feminine to begin with. But even so right now she felt a cut above how she previously had been.

When I put my entire head into thinking about which part of her was different from what it usually was, I arrived nicely at a single word.

At present, “shyness” exuded from every inch of Kuroha’s body.

Her cheeks were flushed red, and her gaze was to the side. Occasionally she would glance to see how I was doing, before escaping hurriedly away again whenever I tried to bring my eyes to meet hers, fidgeting as she fixed her eyes in a completely different direction.

Because Kuroha to me took the position of being a caring older sister despite us being in the same grade, if I were asked I’d say she was more of an attacker rather than a defender. There were certainly a lot more times when Kuroha had initiated conversation with or lampooned me. That as a result made Kuroha’s current behaviour curiously all the more refreshing.

What, Kuro, are you some final boss with one last transformation up your sleeve? Damn she was cute.



“H- Hiii, Kuro. M- M- Morning!”

Absorbing the heavy damage from the preemptive punch that had been her extraordinary cuteness, I tried my utmost to inquire after Kuroha’s condition.

How much did she remember? How did she feel about it? What was that shyness of hers? And why?

I felt like I would fall into a bog if I made the wrong choice. For now I had somehow managed to suppress my fear, but still it followed along my footsteps, ready for when it seemed like I would plunge into the bottom of the swamp at any time.

But I couldn’t submit to fear right now. The recent state of affairs aside, if I looked through the lens of Kuroha and I “borrowing” and “lending” each other things, I had kept borrowing, leaving an obligation I could almost never finish repaying. To Kuroha who was in a pinch as a result of her amnesia, now was the time for me to return the favour. I had to face this without running away.

“...Well, it seems like things have really gotten out of hand, huh...”

Kuroha whispered while still not looking me in the eye.

Hmm, would it be right to describe my impression of her as she seemed to have an understanding towards the recent sequence of events, but it was not accompanied with a feeling of having personally experienced them, as Midori’s words had accurately reflected?

There were a lot of things that would become hard to ask once we had gone outside.

Thinking so, I made up my mind to try questioning her.

“Kuro, how much do you remember? When’s the last thing you do?”

“.....A little before summer vacation.”

This too was in accordance with Midori's intel. That left the matter of her confession, but... fine, I'll ask.

“Does that mean about me rejecting you and so on, you...”

“I confessed to you and got rejected, right Haru? Then after that some things happened, but eventually you confessed to me at the cultural festival, before this time I rejected you, didn't I?”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Oh man, hearing it said in this manner, it was scary how much turmoil had occurred in the space of only one and a half months!

“I remember up till about when I decided I was going to confess to you, Haru. But after that, I don't remember anything... it's like even after I listened to the girls, everything seems like it came out of a storybook. Or rather, it was like hearing about things that weren't related to me at all...”

“I see...”

Having amnesia must be terrible. Well, painful memories they might have been, but they were deeply engraved ones all the same. Not being able to share those seemed kind of sad.

“That's why—”

Kuroha kneaded her fingers in front of her chest.

“I didn't know how I should face you, Haru... I love you, but it seems like I rejected you for some reason... From what I could see in that video, I did something terrible to you in front of so many people... And because of that, you were probably hurt pretty badly, so... I didn't know what I should do...”

“?!”

W- What?

I see, so to the Kuroha of the present, the twin realities that “Kuroha had

confessed to me and gotten rejected” and that “I had confessed to Kuroha and gotten rejected” no longer applied... Was this going to turn into a case where the Kuroha of the present thus became “*a pure and innocent Kuroha who would try to confess to me for the first time*”...?!

I mean, would it be alright for me to describe this as a situation where it seemed like Kuroha alone had leapt into the future? It could perhaps be said that losing one’s memory was a practical method of skipping time that didn’t count on science fiction.

As to why I had gotten rejected, I still didn’t understand. About Kuroha’s reason for doing so I was still extremely curious.

But the reality of us having “confessed to and gotten rejected by each other” hurt us mutually, and towered quite considerably as a wall obstructing us from moving forward. If that reality had been erased on Kuroha’s end... then so had all problems been entirely.

Right now, Kuroha had just said that she liked me.

But of course. This was natural if her memories only went back to just before she confessed to me. She even said as much that she had “done something terrible” and “didn’t know why she had rejected me”. Those were the words I had dearly wanted to hear ever since being rejected by Kuroha.

“Say, Haru, what do you think...? Do you still like me after I did all those horrible things to you...?”

“I- I...”

I was so happy I felt I might faint.

My affection towards her still clearly remained. I never had any reasons to hate Kuroha in the first place. I couldn’t think of a life without Kuroha.

Therefore—

“I—”

–love you.

Was what I wanted to say, but my voice refused to leave my throat.

“.....?”

Kuroha seemed to doubt if I was going to continue, tilting her head towards the side.

At that moment I had an auditory hallucination.

“–No.”

Kuroha probably wouldn't say that if I confessed to her now.

That was what I thought. No, that was what I believed in. No, what I wanted to believe in.

She wouldn't say it once out of ten thousand times I confessed. Probably not even once in a million.

But–

I thought that the chances of her doing so could still be called about one in a billion.

The pain of heartbreak Kuroha had felt had probably been erased along with her memories.

But my pain remained. It still remained – and deeply so.

“...That's fine, Haru. You don't have to say anything more.”

Kuroha produced a bitter smile.

“I guess I must have hurt you really badly, haven't I, Haru... Sorry...”

“Kuro...”

“If so, then I want to make it up to you...”

Kuroha tried to reach for my hand.

As her usual mellow scent gently tickled my nose – I unconsciously backed away.

“Ah...”

Kuroha’s eyes opened wide. I could perceive her emotional shock.

“Sorry, Kuro! It wasn’t my intention to...”

I felt guilt for the actions I had performed on the spur of the moment.

As I bowed my head deeply, I heard whispering descend from above my head.

“I expected that would be too...”

“Eh?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Kuroha turned around, putting her back towards me.

“Haru... I can stay by your side, can’t I...?”

My chest felt like it would burst open.

Being asked something so heartrending, there was no way I couldn’t say the following.

“Of course you can! What are you saying?!”

“...Will you watch me, Haru? I want to become the version of myself that you trusted again.”

“That’s...! That’s not it!” I denied fervently.

“I’m saying that there’s no need for you to say that! I got rejected probably because I did something stupid again, and you’re not at fault in the slightest! Look, I’m sorry that we can’t fix things because I don’t know exactly what the causes or your reasons were, but I have absolutely no intention of blaming you!”

By my cowardice I had hurt Kuroha.

At this point I really was a loser, a kneeler, a dumbass and a fucking moron. Despite me never having any intentions of hurting such a good person who always stood by my side... I had hurt her again.

As I thus grit my teeth, Kuroha spun around to face me head on, producing a smile like Mother Mary’s.

“Well then – let’s make up, Haru.”

“Make up...?”

“I think that we just put the buttons on wrongly... If we refasten them properly from the start, then everything will be solved. Right...?”

“...No, you aren’t wrong.”

If I had accepted to begin with when Kuroha had confessed to me before summer vacation, then we could have gotten together without any obstacles whatsoever. Me liking Shirokusa had been the biggest reason for me rejecting Kuroha, but if I had realised her charm or indispensability sooner, there wouldn’t have followed such a complicated series of events.

So at present it could be said that the situation had returned to almost the same as it was when Kuroha had first confessed to me, albeit due to the abnormal circumstances of Kuroha’s amnesia.

All that remained were the “memories of heartbreak” that were etched within me. If I overcame those, I could get together with Kuroha.

A point of contention was how much I could trust her.

Of course I still did right now. I intended to trust her more than anyone else.

But when it came to romance alone – I was a little afraid.

From this point on, though, if we properly reconciled, and I gradually repeated for myself to hear that *“Everything’s alright. I can trust Kuro after all. She’ll probably accept it legitimately if I confess to her”*, my wounds would definitely heal.

“I should be the one asking, Kuro! Please, stay by my side! I’ll definitely overcome this, so...!”

“...Mm. Of course. Thanks.”

That smile, I wanted to protect.

The thought that I still liked Kuroha after all came to me easily.

“Oh, it’s already this late, huh. Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

Kuroha handed me my shoes without a moment’s delay. As I thanked her while quickly putting them on–

“Crap, they’re coming out...!”

I could hear such a voice come from beyond the door.

In an instant Kuroha’s expression transformed into one of a demon’s. She then flung open the door at one go.

“...Midori!”

“Ugh–”

In the process of trying to run away, Midori fell over. Hurriedly, Aoi and Akane then attempted to pull her up.

“Aoi! And you too, Akane?!”

They tried to flee in a panic, but helping Midori up had taken too much time and they were too late. Before they could reach the gate they were all caught respectively by the napes of their necks.

“...The three of you... better make a line...”

The three sisters meekly obeyed Kuroha, who had since transformed into her scary elder sister mode. They knew all too well what would happen if they resisted.

Only that, well, looking objectively, what was amusing was that Kuroha was the shortest of the lot. I found this composition of the three of them being made to dejectedly huddle their shoulders at the diminutive Kuroha’s anger to be oddly adorable to no end.

It was a different story, though, until three years ago... Three years ago Midori had easily overtaken her, while Kuroha’s height had henceforth remained unchanged, and the difference between them had only grown larger. Then at last the year before Aoi and Akane too had surpassed her... and thus a loli eldest sister was born.

“The three of you... what is it you should say to Big Sister...?”

“Erm... Sorry, Big Sister Kuro.”

Aoi was the first to apologise. As expected of the most temperate girl.

“Sorry, Big Sis Kuro, but I was curious to see how it would turn out.”

Akane too was fundamentally obedient. While she explained the reasons behind her actions, apologising first gave her a lot of credit.

“It doesn’t matter, does it?! This is a pain in the ass for us too, you know?!” went Midori. She truly wasn’t one to submit...

“Midori! You’re really...! Can’t you look just a little more sorry?!”



Midori turned away, plucking at her head.

“...But, well, our bad. Sorry, Big Sis Kuro.”

Having heard that much, Kuroha lit up a smile brimming with affection, as if she had abruptly put on a halo.

“—Alright, that’s the end of it then, since you all properly apologised. You all better not do the same thing again, alright?”

“Okay.”

The power of an older sister truly not to be sniffed at. Leadership and generalship enough to completely control her three unique sisters. These probably should have been said to be the areas where Kuroha – the sister-managing eldest daughter of the well-known and beautiful girl-replete “Colourful Sisters” – showed her true ability.



“Well, if you all get it then hurry up and go to school. Especially you, Midori, what about morning practice? Are you not totally skipping right now?”

“W- Well, so I thought about it a bit, and...”

“What do you mean, ‘a bit’?”

“That’s—”

While Kuroha and Midori were having their conversation, a car pulled up into the road. It gleamed with a black lustre, and at a look one could tell that it was a luxury car.

“Thank you, Uonuma-san. Please wait here for a short while.”

Thanking the driver while springing out of the back seat – came Shirokusa.

Then confronted with the four sisters... she froze.

“Ah—”

Yikes! Woah, what was going on?! No one spoke, but I felt like in that instant information had been exchanged at an incredible rate, though?!

Kuroha glared at Shirokusa, intimidation mode activated.

Midori, looking at Kuroha, was totally creeped out.

Aoi looked for a good time to step in and arbitrate, but she could only dither helplessly, powerless to do anything.

Akane’s expression and emotions were unreadable, as they always were.

And most importantly, Shirokusa – was clearly shaken.

Well, it was only natural. To encounter the four sisters thus lined up in full force must not only have been unfamiliar, but also quite overwhelming. To be able to see allies waiting immediately in the wings in addition to Kuroha’s intimidation was a numerically disadvantageous scene anyone would flinch

from, let alone the timid Shirokusa.

“H- Hey, Shiro. What’s up?”

I threw the frozen, silent Shirokusa a lifeline.

It probably wasn’t wise to let a fight before the entrance of my house go on first thing in the morning.

In the first place, I felt like perhaps something had to be done about the sour relations between Kuroha and Shirokusa. To me they were girls I thought about differently, but to the two of them I also felt particularly close. I relied upon and felt goodwill towards each of them respectively, which was precisely why I didn’t want them to fight.

Oh, but things were really beyond my control once the two of them caught fire. What could a rat do if it jumped into a fight between a wolf and a tiger? Nothing but die, am I right? Q.E.D. – proof complete.

“Oh, Suu-chan...”

Shirokusa’s face lit up brightly. She seemed to realise that she had just been handed a lifeline.

Shirokusa’s face was truly beautiful at times like these. It was perhaps the contrast, or due to her customarily conducting herself as a cool beauty, its preciousness that made it so. *I want to make her smile forever*, I was inadvertently made to think.

...Did this mean I was still being pulled along by my first love? No, no, this was merely a shared desire of men all over the world to see a beauty of this calibre smile. I had made Kuroha my heart’s desire be that as it may she had rejected me, so to me Shirokusa couldn’t be anyone special–

“Ouch!”

I felt a sharp pain radiate from the pit of my stomach. Midori had given me an elbow into my flank.

“Oi, Midori! What was that for?”

“Nothing!”

“Kuro, as the eldest could you please say something to this violent younger sister of yours?”

“Hmpf!”

Huh? Why was she so cold? Did I do something wrong?

“Aoi-chan, you...”

“I- I’ll a- abstain...”

“Akane?!”

“You suck.”

“But whyyyyyyyy?!”

Seriously, it was really scary how quickly my popularity had dropped without me knowing!

As I fell prostrate onto the ground in my despair, Shirokusa extended her arm towards me.

“Let’s go, Suu-chan. Please get in the car.”

“Heh?”

“All the same, I think it’ll be alright... But the media might be lying in wait in front of the school gate again today, don’t you think? That’s why I got permission from the school to go there specially by car.”

“Ohh, I see. That certainly would be appreciated...”

Maria said she had reined them in, but I didn’t know exactly how effective that would be. Even if, for example, she could successfully contain the

mainstream media, that did not preclude the possibility of staff from a bunch of shady gossip magazines showing up.

“Right, then Kuro and I will—”

“...Shida-san will be fine, won't she?”

“Eeh...”

Ahh, but why did she have to exclude Kuroha, who was in the same circumstances as we were?! That would really be quite evil, wouldn't it?!

In a disorderly mix of sadness and anger I unconsciously grabbed Shirokusa by both her shoulders.

“Shiro!”

“Eh?!”

Shirokusa turned completely red and averted her gaze, but I didn't stop now that the blood had already rushed to my head.

“Your relationship with Kuro really sucks! I mean, to dislike someone is natural, so I'm not asking you to get along with her against your will, okay? But, you know, it doesn't feel good either for those watching to see someone get left out, does it?! I don't think doing these sorts of things are good, Shiro!”

“Ah, o- okay, if you say so, Suu-chan...”

Shirokusa nodded with her face bright red.

I swear, Shirokusa had become a lot more docile after confessing that she had been Shirou. Becoming able to see me as someone she didn't have to act tough in front of had perhaps been the key.

“Shida-san... the passenger seat's unoccupied, if you're alright with it... Shall we go together?”

“...Hmm, I guess I’ll take your offer.” Kuroha said indifferently. “You all better get going too, soon, or all of you are going to be late.”

“O- Okay.” The sisters flinched.

Of course they did. I understood. Because Kuroha at present was far too scary!

...Wait, I invited her because I didn’t think it would have been good to leave her out, but could that have been the wrong decision...?

*“—Crap, it totally was, wasn’t it?!”*

By the time I realised that, Kuroha had gotten into the passenger seat, Shirokusa and I the back, and the car had already departed.

A miasma hung in the air inside the car. It was suffocating. You’re telling me this isn’t a demon king’s lair or something? There was a sensation that I had completely screwed up.

The silence that enveloped the interior of the car... was awkward. The driver tactfully let the radio play at a low volume, but it had no such efficacy in dispelling the heavy atmosphere.

Shirokusa brought her body closer to mine, putting her mouth close to my ear.

“Erm, Suu-chan... I wasn’t in a position to talk to Shida-san yesterday, but... is she alright?”

It was a topic neither of us wanted Kuroha to hear. Thus I too lowered my voice as I whispered into Shirokusa’s ear.

“The truth is, Kuro’s now suffering from a bit of amnesia...”

“Eh?!”

Shirokusa unconsciously raised her voice.

Kuroha's eyes glanced sharply from the passenger seat, but she said nothing.

Shirokusa inquired while curling her body.

“What does that mean...?”

Crap, for a while now my quivering hadn't stopped.

When her breath came against my ear, a tingling, pleasant sensation would run through my entire body.

It was the sensation of almost, but not quite touching her. We weren't touching, but her warmth conveyed itself to my skin, allowing me to sense her presence acutely.

Perhaps again because we were inside a car, Shirokusa's odour smelled strongly fragrant. While Kuroha's scent was of a more floral type, Shirokusa's was citrusy. It was cool and refreshing, but in this particular situation it also engendered in me a peculiar feeling of immorality.

I shook my head, returning my mind to a state of normalcy, then brought my mouth closer towards Shirokusa's ear.

“I don't really know too much, but she's completely lost all memories of her rejecting or being rejected by me... that's why I'm planning to watch a little over how she does. It's like an illness, Shiro, so I hope you'll treat her kindly too...”

“Well, if you say so, Suu-chan, then I guess it can't be helped...”

“Ahem.”

A cough came from the driver. Kuroha watched us through the mirror.

“...Haru, it seems like you and Kachi-san have gotten pretty close... Care to tell me what's going on?”<sup>1</sup>

It was not just anger... but also bewilderment that I felt from her.



...I see.

Nothing had changed since before if she was at home, and the memories that she had lost were only about a month and a half's worth. She probably couldn't have felt that there was very much out of place. Once she went outside, however, the feeling of unease would undoubtedly get stronger.

My relationship with Shirokusa growing tighter, was a thing that had only occurred within the last ten days. Midori and company had no interaction with Shirokusa, and thus probably had not conveyed what had happened in that time.

Kuroha probably thought of Shirokusa and I as "just classmates who barely talked to each other". If she saw us conversing so intimately, well of course she would have found it strange.

*"Man, I'm really..."*

My heart had been led adrift despite Kuroha being nearby, due to Shirokusa being the girl I had first fallen in love with and her also being indeed still as attractive as before.

To have not paid attention... despite Kuroha having lost her memory, I was really...

I felt a serious sense of self-loathing. I was pathetic.

*"Ahh, well about that, Kuro--"*

*"Shida-san, are you... curious about our relationship?"*

Listening to that blowing chill was enough to make me shudder.

Oooh man, why did Shirokusa always insist on being so quick to put down Kuroha?!

*"Hmm... A little."*

*"Really, just a little? Are you sure you're not actually incredibly eager to find*

out?”

“So you were this kind of person, Kachi-san. Now I know why you don’t have a lot of friends.”

“N- Now wait just a minute!”

At this point, listening to them felt like navigating a minefield in the middle of a firefight. Bullets took turns flying from all directions, but I was too petrified to move for fear of getting blown up.

But all the same I couldn’t listen and be quiet either.

“I’m telling you all, the two of you are trying too hard to kill each other with your words! I know it’ll probably be impossible for the two of you to be on good terms immediately, but in the meantime shall we not talk about some other topic?”

“...Such as?”

Nice, Kuroha had come on board.

“That’s right, let’s talk about club activities then. How’s badminton coming along, Kuro?”

“I don’t remember anything that happened recently, so I don’t really know. I feel like my feel for it hasn’t really changed, so I think I can pick up where I left off.”

“That’s right! You’ve got amnesia after all!”

Why was I always digging my own grave?

There really wasn’t a good topic the three of us could get excited about?

Or so I thought before Shirokusa tugged onto my sleeve and whispered into my ear.

“Suu-chan, don’t you really think it’s just a little strange...?”

“What is?”

My first thought was that it wouldn't be good to provoke Kuroha further, but Shirokusa's voice echoed earnestly. I thus responded to her in lowered tones.

“I don't think Shida-san looks like she's lost her memories.”

...Hmm. Come to think of it, Midori did have the same opinion yesterday.

“You have a basis for saying so?”

“...My maiden's intuition.”

In a certain sense that had a higher credibility than anything else, but in another it meant that she had no basis at all.

I believed that Kuroha had amnesia. But an exceedingly large component of that belief hinged upon because Kuroha had said so. Taking into account that Midori and Shirokusa, who rejected this belief, also trusted Kuroha less comparatively, it was probably safe to see “whether one believed whether Kuroha had amnesia or not” as a faithful representation of “how much one trusted her”. In that vein when I also tried probing Aoi for her opinion, “*I think it's amnesia,*” was the answer that I received.

Oh... that's right. There was a reliable way of ascertaining the present Kuroha's abnormality.

“Shiro... leave it to me. I just thought of something good. If I use this method to investigate, then I'll know for sure whether something strange is happening with Kuro.”

“Eh, there's a method that will allow you to do that...?”

“Yeah. I'll carry it out at lunchtime. Could I trouble you to prepare a place where Kuro and I can eat alone together?”

“Mm... okay, sure.”

Kuroha averted her gaze without a moment's delay when I checked to see

how she was doing via the mirror.

Did she do that out of embarrassment? To make sure her lie wouldn't be exposed?

I wanted to believe Kuroha.

Of course, at the point that I was performing something like a test on her, it could be said that I no longer believed her.

But it was impossible for a person to peek into another's heart. So I wasn't ashamed of what I was about to do. Something you accumulated and built up through small reactions and tests – that was what I thought trust was.

\*

<sup>1</sup>see Volume 2, Colour Illustrations

## Part 4

Lunch break arrived. The venue Shirokusa had kindly produced was the Library Preparation Room she had reserved once before for us to meet in preparation for the earlier cultural festival. We never got to use it then because I collapsed, and for that reason this was my first time utilising the room.

“Wow, I didn’t know we had such a nice place. You know this place pretty well, huh, Haru?”

“I guess.”

The Preparation Room was located at the back of the library. It was narrow and lined with bookshelves. Due to the observable abundance of old books, the room was permeated with a unique moldy smell.

Even so, there was less dust than anticipated. There was a table for six which had been kept clean that I thought was used for administrative work, and for us to eat a meal there was absolutely nothing lacking.

We lightly swept the dust off the chairs as a formality, then took our seats beside each other.

“I wonder how long it’s been since you last invited me to lunch, Haru...”

“This could be the first time outside of an event, maybe...?”

It wasn’t rare for me to get called over to the Shida house to eat at noon on Saturdays. But I had no recollection of us ever having lunch together in school, and especially not with just the two of us alone.

Kuroha, being sociable, had a group she was close to and ate with. I ate most

of the time with Tetsuhiko. If I hadn't found the courage to ask her out, we definitely wouldn't have been able to meet.

“So what's this change in wind direction about?”

“Well, you know... our classmates don't know that you've lost your memories, so I didn't know if you'd be able to talk to them so well or if you'd end up in trouble.”

That was the excuse I had used all of my effort to come up with during class.

There would no longer be any point in testing her if I was found out, and I would have also hated it for Kuroha to accept my excuse without her actually believing it. Thus I had paid meticulous caution.

For that same reason I hadn't allowed my accomplice Shirokusa to sit in. I didn't want to put Kuroha unnaturally on her guard.

“Even so—”

Kuroha turned her gaze towards the floor and whispered while looking embarrassed.

“To be invited out to lunch alone together with you, Haru... It makes me really happy.”

Oh my goddd! The sense of guilt was overwhelming!

You know, for her to be so happy although I had set all of this up for the purpose of ascertaining whether she had amnesia or not...! Was I not the most despicable person in the entire world?!

Man, at this point let's just quickly confirm she doesn't have any problems! Then I'll be able to believe Kuroha without any reservations, and enjoy lunch with her as much as possible! Let's do this!

“The truth is, Kuro, that today... I've made my own *bento*!”

I did so because I had woken up far too early in my excessive anxiety

towards meeting Kuroha in the morning. Bored and unable to relax, I ended up warming up some refrigerated food I typically kept stocked up for dinner, and packed it into a *bento* box which had been hibernating in the depths of a cabinet.

Kuroha, by the way, usually settled lunch with dietary supplements in gelatin or block form. She would make excuses to those around her that she was “on a diet” or “concerned about getting nutritional balance”, and her biggest reason for doing so was that her taste was so extraordinary no one could possibly understand it. She would be disgraced if she ate while applying weird seasoning, so what Kuroha *did* eat was fixed by both what she could palate and what it was acceptable to be seen eating.

“Eating gelatin or whatever all the time’s kind of dull for you, isn’t it? I heard from Midori that your taste has changed. How about a bite?” I said while picking up a *tako* wiener.

–Yes, this was the most crucial moment!

Come to think of it, when I heard the story from Midori, I also thought that it was impossible for Kuroha to have amnesia... at first, but I believed it soon after. That was because I was then told that Kuroha’s sense of taste had become normal.

I was her childhood friend, so I knew. About the existence of Kuroha’s tongue in this universe.

Kuroha was a person with few shortcomings, and depending on how you looked, she could even be said to be beyond reproach.

But Kuroha had a single attribute which could be called a flaw. For her to have fixed that was far too unfathomable, even if you believed that she had gotten amnesia. Another way of putting it could have been that “*it would have been impossible for her taste buds to change, if not for the already abnormal circumstances on the level of her getting amnesia*”.

Thus there was all the more need for caution in my investigations.

It wouldn't do for me to let her eat any old side dish. There was a possibility that if on the off chance I gave her something half-rotten and the taste of it became something out of this world, in the end it might fit Kuroha's taste buds just right!

A *tako* wiener had I personally prepared, personally taste-tested, and personally packed... using this then would I be able to accept that such a cataclysmic event had occurred. Because Kuroha had a traumatic history with *tako* wieners. While we were eating our *bentos* together during a sports meet, Kuroha had collapsed after eating a *tako* wiener her mom had prepared because of how cute it had looked. Due to that experience, Kuroha absolutely refused to eat *tako* wieners.

"I feel like you're thinking about something rude, Haru..."

"No, no, not at all."

Was she resisting? Could she not eat it after all? Was her amnesia a lie?

As I observed her demeanour, Kuroha spoke as if it were nothing out of the ordinary.

"Well, I guess I'll have a bite. I would have definitely never eaten one until now, but... I don't know. Today I can see it looks really good."

Phew, she had passed the first obstacle.

But amnesia really was an amazing thing. Was it something so impactful that it could make something you hated look tasty?

No, I couldn't afford to be careless just yet. With her mouth she could say anything.

The second hurdle ended with her eating the wiener. The third was watching her reaction after she did so. Only after Kuroha had cleared all of these, could I then arrive at a conclusion deciding whether she had amnesia or not.

As I watched with deep-seated attention, Kuroha marginally closed the distance between us from the seat next to mine – and closed her eyes.



“Right, then... ‘Aaah’.”

“?!”

A- Aaah... for real...?

I hadn’t conceived of this... I swear, I didn’t know where Kuroha’s creativity in finding ways to toy with me ended...

And of top of that–

“If you want me to feed you, then why isn’t your mouth open...?”

At this point, I certainly *couldn’t see this as anything besides a prelude to a k- kiss*, though...?!

I was able to fixate upon her face thanks to Kuroha closing her eyes.

Woah, were her eyelashes always this long? Her beautiful pink-coloured lips looked soft.

...Wait, this wasn’t the time for me to give my impressions, was it?!

“–You have a problem with what Big Sister’s doing?”

Shit, was she trying to muzzle me here with her Big Sister mode?!

“...*What was I supposed to make of this? As Kuro inviting me to kiss her? No, no, perhaps she was trying a suicide attack to–*”

*Enough* – when I said that I was already beyond recovery.

Perhaps tired of me taking forever to make a move, Kuroha called off waiting for a kiss.

“Haru, right now you run away every time I try to get close, don’t you?”

“Ah, no, well... yes, I do.”

“And that’s because before I lost my memories, I rejected you in such a horrible way, so you can’t trust me, am I right?”

“...W- Well, if I were to put it briefly, probably.”

“Then what would happen if you tried getting closer to me, Haru? With me not moving as a prerequisite, of course.”

“...I see, we should think about this the other way around, huh.”

The Kuroha of after the summer holidays had had a dictatorial assertiveness, accepting of everything while expelling all notions of retreating. She had been the “Ultimate Kuroha”, so to speak.

The current Kuroha existed in a state before I had rejected her. A complex state of, while not having experienced recovering after a rejection, having gone through both being rejected and rejecting someone while having no recollection of either. Perhaps as a result of that, on the whole she felt passive and strongly shy – a so-called “Pure Kuroha”.

The passiveness of this “Pure Kuroha” was such that even I could make an advance on her. By doing so I could perhaps then understand the extent of my trauma, and determine where the boundaries of physical contact lay between us.

“So, now that you understand... ‘Aaah’.”

“Like I said before, why isn’t your mouth open if you want me to feed youuuuuu?!”

This had been the problem from the start!

“...My eyes are closed, so you can do whatever you want, you know?”

“Damn it, I’m really not getting an answer here!”

There was neither any logic to be found here, nor any reason to argue.

But... goddamn was this cute!

Her face was completely red, and she was trembling!

I was certain that the Kuroha of the present would not attack. She waited.

Could it be any more obvious how completely defenseless she was?!

“Kuro, you’re really embarrassed, aren’t you?”

“...*Not at all.*”

What was with that crappy acting? I felt an incredible affinity for it, though.<sup>1</sup>

“You’re so completely red it’s honestly embarrassing for me to watch too, you know?”

“That’s just you trying to hide your own bashfulness, isn’t it, Haru ~”

Oh, our eyes met for an instant as Kuroha took a glance with hers half-opened.

I could see that they had become completely round.

Ahh, at some point had she exchanged all of her defense for attack strength and transformed into “Ultimate Kuroha”? She must have faced incredible pressure.

I put on a brave front so as to not give way under the stress.

“You’re the one who’s hiding her shame, Kuro. It’s embarrassing me, to be honest.”

“Oooooooh!”

My poised comeback seemed to displease her. The livid Kuroha whacked me repeatedly with a tube of gelatin.

“Ooh! Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!”

“Oww! The gelatin hurts! It really does! Forgive me, Big Sister Kuroha!”

Kuroha always said “Ooh” to mean “Ooh, what am I going to do with you?”, but from the way she now used it in rapid succession – I could easily figure out the extent of her anger.

“*Huff–, huff–*”

Yikes. While a little calmer, she was clearly in a bad mood. She had her arms folded together and faced off to the side, occasionally looking back menacingly as if to dare me to complain.

Hmmm, what should I do... I couldn't very well leave things alone and not perform the test either, so... I had no choice but to force my way through, huh.

“Kuro...”

“...What?”

“...’Aaah’.”

Nice, I had been able to say it myself. While I was doing so I had thought my fear might return.

“Oh...”

In an instant Kuroha's cheeks were painted scarlet red, and she whispered subduedly.

“If you had done that from the start...”

“Err, Kuro, what did you just–”

“Shut up. I said it so that you wouldn't hear, so leave it alone.”

Hmm, her words told me not to press the point, but her tone itself had been fairly gentle. I could strongly feel her bashfulness.

Apparently I was close to being on the right track. I was probably about a final push away from bringing her mood back to normal.

“...S- So, ooh... I suppose it can't be helped then... A- aah.”

Wow, even her ears had turned completely red, though. As usual she was weak when it was her turn to be on the defensive.

That said, her anxiety had infected me. My heart pounded dangerously in my chest. I didn't know why it was dangerous; all I knew was that it certainly was.

“...Here I come.”

I pinched a bite-sized *tako* wiener between my chopsticks and gingerly brought it towards Kuroha's mouth.

“...Mm.”

As the *tako* wiener touched her lips, Kuroha adjusted her position a little before opening her mouth wide open and eating it.

I was enraptured by the inexpressible contrast between the vivid redness of the wiener and the glossy pinkness of her lips.

“*She really is cute, huh, Kuro is...*”

But I was rejected so magnificently too, and only just four days ago.

A desire to step forward fought with a desire to run away.

Precisely because she was so adorable, so attractive, there was a feeling deep inside my heart that I would rather not see her at all if I couldn't be close to or have her. To chase like an idiot a dangling carrot I couldn't eat, would have been really too depressing.

“Mm, delicious ”

Kuroha had swiftly eaten the wiener.

Up till now she would have resisted mightily before eating it, then twisted her face so much when it had entered her mouth that her eyebrows might have

spiralled into knots. It was unfathomable that she had consumed it so easily...

At this point it would have been safe to believe that she had amnesia, but perhaps the seeds of doubt had been sown deeper in me than I imagined.

Thinking that – there was a one in ten thousand... no, one in a billion chance that it could have been an act, I grabbed another *tako* wiener with my chopsticks.

“...Want another?”

“Sure, ‘aaah’.”

It was fun feeding Kuroha, which was reminiscent of feeding a pet. I felt I now understood a little how Kuroha did when she so often took care of others.

“...How is it?”

“Great ”

A full-faced grin.

–Yeah, this was definitely amnesia.

I was satisfied at last.

I had felt unable to believe it even after being told by Midori, but now I was unmistakably confident.

Looking through the eyes of someone who didn't know Kuroha, it would probably have felt dumb for me to make my judgement based on something like that.

But they would have been wrong. Something impossible had definitely occurred.

Kuroha was shrewd and generally capable of doing anything. To boot she had the disposition of a born manager, and was a better attacker than defender.

For those things she had possessed enough influence to be called the “boss” during her time in lower elementary school. A coward and owner of a weak mindset, I had merely followed her around as her Henchman A.

The sole weakness of that Kuroha was her sense of taste.

To her school-provided meals must have been hell. She would always leave food over due to it not being to her taste, but her teacher when she was a first-year in elementary school was a person that wouldn’t allow her to.

Thanks to that she alone would be detained during lunchtime. She would throw a fit and cry watching everyone else play, but still the teacher would remain unmoved.

So that was the part where I came in. I would finish the leftover food in a jiffy while the teacher wasn’t around, and that would be the end of the story.

For my efforts I established my position as the “boss’ idiot right arm”, and so weathered the turbulent lower elementary school years.

Well, to be honest, I did it not for Kuroha’s sake, but simply because the growing me wanted to eat more. As her next-door neighbour I was informed about her pickiness better than anyone, and I committed the crime of stealing her food knowing it would make her happy, to say nothing of making her dislike me.

Kuroha and I had accumulated years upon years of memories like these.

I could thus assert that for Kuroha to have eaten a *tako* wiener naturally was impossible, and I could now also believe in her amnesia with conviction.

“Which reminds me, Haru, what’s that about us going to visit the agency you belonged to this Saturday?” Kuroha inquired while having a taste of her gelatinised dietary supplements – lunch.

“Ahh, did you hear that from the girls?”

“Are you returning?”

“...I don’t know. But I can’t decide if I don’t try and hear what they have to say first, so for the time being that’s what I’ll do.”

“Hmm.”

Hmm, judging from her tone, she didn’t think too highly of it?

“Are you against me making a comeback, Kuro?”

“...I am, if I were to pick a side. After all, I’ve seen how much you’ve had to suffer, Haru.”

Right, right.

Pre-amnesia Kuroha had too been opposed to me appearing on stage at the cultural festival. Without any personal memories of seeing me succeeding, so were her opinions unlikely to change.

“But you did dance pretty well in that video, didn’t you, Haru? What did you do?”

“It was thanks to you, Kuro.”

“Me?”

Ah—

At that moment in the depths of my heart something fell with a *thump*.

It was something my mind had known all along.

—That having amnesia was a sorrowful thing.

That realisation had really come far too late, but now I could finally feel it for myself.

I had been able to resurrect myself as a result of Kuroha’s advice. Without that it would have been impossible for me to do so, with me collapsing on the way as the outcome.



Thus I was extremely grateful to Kuroha. On that stage I had eradicated a regret which had mounted over six years.

Such was the magnitude of that accomplishment that I now held great hope for the future.

For Kuroha – who could have been called the Most Valuable Player – to not remember any of it – was just too heartbreaking, wasn't it?

“Haru...?”

“Oh, no, it's nothing...”

I hurriedly turned my back on her.

It was no use, for my eyes became moist and I felt like I couldn't stop the tears.

As I tried my best to hold them in, I felt a gentle warmth convey itself to my back. Kuroha had hugged me from there.

“Thanks, Haru. Those tears are for me, aren't they...?”

“Kuro...”

“Big Sister's really happy.”

What was it? I didn't feel the slightest bit of fear towards Kuroha right now, and instead the warmth being transferred from my back was being used to heal my heart.

“Haru, can I come along with you to the agency?”

“...Why?”

“I might be against you returning to the entertainment world, but your future is yours to decide, Haru. I want to see that happen with my own eyes. And besides, I was invited too, so I guess I could take the opportunity to reject them while I'm at it.”

I see, so Midori and company had handed over the name card they had gotten from Maria after all, huh.

“You have no interest in trying to work in public entertainment, Kuro?”

In terms of appearance I thought she met the criteria sufficiently. While I had never seen her act before, with her ingenuity it seemed like she could more or less make it.

Yet Kuroha’s talents probably didn’t lie there. She had one which made me think she could succeed working in public entertainment.

“I like your voice when you sing, Kuro. I think you can succeed if you set your sights on being a singer, you know?”

Kuroha didn’t sing often, but her voice had a clear, resonating quality and most importantly the charm to make people want to hear more. With her benchmarks already as they were just from singing karaoke, after acquiring some proper training I thought becoming a professional would be within her reach.

“No way, no way. I’m different from you, Haru. I don’t so much as have that kind of special talent.”

“Really? I think you do, though.”

“You’re just flattering me. Really, I can’t.”

Aiming towards becoming a singer carried a fair amount of risk. There were lots of people who had talent and worked hard, but only a miniscule number could become professionals. Of those who did fewer still sold well enough to make a living. A thorny path, to be sure.

I would support her if she had the motivation to do so, but if she didn’t it was not something to be forced.

I felt a little disappointed, but perhaps it couldn’t be helped.

“Alright then. So for the time being I guess we’ll go to the agency together?”

“Yeah. I’ll still reject them all the same, but it’ll be more reassuring if I’m with you, Haru.”

“Okay.”

If so, perhaps I should adjust my schedule a little. For Kuroha, Maria and I – the three of us – I had to find a convenient time.

“W- Hey, hold up, I said!”

“Let go of me!”

It was kind of noisy outside. Well “outside” I might have said, but because we were in the Library Preparation Room at the back of the library, it was really the library that was experiencing a commotion.

Suddenly the door of the Preparation Room flew open.

“Suu-chan! Is it true that you’re hesitating about making a comeback?!”

It was Shirokusa who appeared, and she strode closer briskly before pulling Kuroha away.

“Get away at once, you thieving cat!”

“...Is there a reason why I have to take this from you, Kachi-san?”

Oh man, they had started fighting immediately! Seriously, how bad were things between them?!

“More importantly, how do you know what we were talking about earlier, Shiro?!”

“There isn’t so much as a thing that I don’t know.”

“No, no, no, what are you, a god?!”

As I so quipped,

“Tch, owwww...”

Tetsuhiko followed in making his appearance.

Apparently he had been restraining Shirokusa until just a while ago, the proof of which was a scratch across his face.

“Tetsuhiko... seems like I’ve caused you trouble this time around, huh...”

“I’m certainly never playing this role ever again.”

“Do you know the reason why Shiro knew about what we were talking about here?”

The fact that Tetsuhiko had been restraining Shirokusa meant that the probability of the two of them being together from the start was fairly high.

Tetsuhiko pointed swiftly at a corner in the ceiling of the Preparation Room.

“What?”

His finger led towards a brand-new camera and suspicious microphone which had both been installed.

“Those are totally a surveillance camera and a listening device, aren’t they?! Why are things like those in this room?!”

“Kachi commissioned Rena to install them.”

“The heck? Rich heiresses are scary.”

To a commoner it was fearsome how she could freely use her purchasing power.

In other words, Shirokusa had secured the Library Preparation Room, after I had entrusted her with preparing a place where I could ascertain that Kuroha had amnesia. Without a moment’s delay Rena had next installed the surveillance camera and listening device. Rena then leaked this information to Tetsuhiko, who together with Shirokusa had probably observed our actions

via a monitor. Following which Shirokusa had intended to burst in and interrupt the exchange between Kuroha and I, but she was restrained by Tetsuhiko who wished to observe the situation for a little longer. That eventually reached a limit and Shirokusa stormed in, followed by an exasperated Tetsuhiko – or something like that, huh.

Hmm, that I could easily picture such a relatively complicated series of events was kind of curious.

“Kai-kun... you sold us out...!”

Shirokusa gave off the cool air of a cool beauty.

However–

“So what if I did? Huuh?”

“Oo–”

As expected, it had no effect on Tetsuhiko!

Shirokusa glared at Tetsuhiko as she hid behind my back.

“I don’t like you...”

I see, so while Shirokusa did partake in coercion, as a result of her original timidity she lacked the nerve to attack someone physically. Without a means of resisting Tetsuhiko, who saw completely through her, perhaps hiding and seeking shelter in this fashion was about as much as she could do.

“Being hated by girls doesn’t scare you at all, huh.”

“I mean, for me, none of them matter outside of the girl that I like.”

“You enemy of women! Grrr...”

I thought Shirokusa when thus neutered was also cute and liked it though. I really couldn’t leave her be.

I slapped the back of Tetsuhiko's head.



*Me*

“There you go, Shiro. I’ve given Tetsuhiko a smack, so you’ll have to be satisfied with that.”

“Suu-chan...”

Shirokusa made her eyes sparkle dazzlingly as they stared at me. I got worried for this girl when she occasionally became too obliging.

“...That hurt, Sueharu.”

While Shirokusa’s mood had improved, in replacement Tetsuhiko had become livid.

“What? You should be thankful I solved the problem with that, Tetsuhiko.”

“Huuuuuh? What did you say?! I lost out when I got punched hard enough for it to hurt, didn’t I?!”

“Ain’t it your fault for indiscriminately looking for a fight?!”

“You loser!” “Adulterer!” “Fucking mentally fragile slug moron!” “Demonic scumbag bastard!”

On the sidelines of this ugly battle Kuroha tossed her dietary supplements into her mouth.

“You wanna bring your lunch over too, Kachi-san? Now that it’s become like this it’ll be over later rather than sooner, you know?”

“Eh, isn’t it typically scary when boys quarrel like this?”

“...You get used to it.”

“Are you trying to boast about the fact that you’ve known them for a long time?”

“Nope. Just my honest opinion.”

“...Well, perhaps I shall bring my lunch over then.”



Five minutes later—

As Tetsuhiko and I at last ended our argument, to the side Kuroha and Shirokusa were in the process of finishing their lunches.

“Y’all ate fast!” I exclaimed in surprise, to which Kuroha replied “Yes we did—, we did eat fast—!” while grinning. Ah, this was her clearly making fun of me.

Feeling disgruntled but unable to retort, I began gulping down what was left of my *bento*.

“That reminds me, Kachi, have you joined an agency?” Tetsuhiko thus brought up a new topic. Shirokusa, however, seemed fairly wary of Tetsuhiko.

She only opened her mouth after going around and shielding half her body behind my back.

“I haven’t joined an agency. Papa does everything well for me.”

“Ahh, I see, Shiro. After all, your father does have deep ties to people involved in public entertainment.”

Well, so much so that he had become a drama sponsor. He looked like he held a varied range of connections. Because Shirokusa herself wasn’t aggressively trying to promote her brand through working in public entertainment, there probably wasn’t a need for sales operations either.

Putting that into consideration, I felt that for Shirokusa’s father to manage everything, and discuss and decide together with her whether to accept commissions or not when they arrived, was the right option.

“Why do you care about that, Tetsuhiko?”

“Kachi’s goal is to have you act as the main character in a screenplay she writes, isn’t it? I just thought that that might have something to do with the leverage an agency has.”

“Well I won’t say it definitely doesn’t play a part, but the auditions usually come after you have a screenplay, don’t they? Then at the audition the people who have a say in things are probably the director and the rest of the production team, and after them the sponsors. It might be a different story though if an agency throws in cash and enters itself amongst the sponsors.”

“Hmmm.”

Despite my explanation Tetsuhiko’s reply was indifferent.

From that reaction Shirokusa had apparently picked up on Tetsuhiko having another, separate intention.

“What is it you want to say, Kai-kun?”

Thus pressed, Tetsuhiko whispered smoothly, but also with the incisiveness of piercing someone with a knife.

“Kachi, you should be hoping for Sueharu’s reinstatement to the entertainment world... but that’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“\_”

Shirokusa grinded her molars forcefully and let her emotions explode.

“Why do I have to take this from you?! Yes! I want Suu-chan to return to the entertainment world, because I want to see him flourish again! You saw him on that stage, didn’t you? Suu-chan has the grounding of a star! Suu-chan can still do many, many more great things! That’s why Suu-chan has to go back to where he should be!”

Wow, Shirokusa’s expectations weighed heavily. Considering the whole story thus far, I had expected to a certain extent, and was genuinely grateful to her for saying those hope-filled words, but... With regards to my self-confidence... with the added element of my hiatus, the truth was that I could really only believe in myself about halfway.

“But like I said... that’s wrong, isn’t it?”

Tetsuhiko never changed pace even before Shirokusa's tempestuous rush.

"What is?!"

"The more of a star Sueharu becomes, Kachi, the thinner the chances of him acting in your screenplay, you know?"

"....."

Ahh, I see.

"Your Akutami award-winning novel, Kachi... 'The Seasons When You Were There', was it? Any talk of it being adapted to a drama or a movie?"

"I've heard there were plans for a movie adaptation, but... nothing concrete."

"I see. Well 'right now' Sueharu doesn't have any arrangements, so with your creator's privilege you could probably push fairly strongly for him to be the main character. But 'from now on' no one can say for sure what's going to happen. In the first place, Kachi, we don't know if your novels or screenplays will be put to film and come out in the future."

Shirokusa probably hoped for my success in the entertainment world more strongly than anyone, and believed in it. If I could flourish in accordance with her wishes, it would also mean that I would become an actor beyond doing her screenplay, huh.

I had heard Shirokusa's Akutami-award winning piece had sold fairly well, but it wasn't like it had become a social phenomenon or even that year's best selling book.

In this world there were many Akutami or other major-award winning works, followed by still others written by the foremost best-selling authors, all while not mentioning the great quantity of original manga which sold on a level beyond comparison to novels. If we talked about digital adaptation, Shirokusa was still but a newcomer who might not even be standing at the entrance.

Honestly speaking, I personally thought that Shirokusa's screenplay would be

wasted on me. I felt ingratiatingly that *“If Shiro’s screenplay were ever adapted digitally, I would be grateful to be nominated by creator’s privilege, even if it were for just a minor role”*.

To Shirokusa, however, it seemed that I was an exceedingly splendid actor, and she was left speechless by the reality Tetsuhiko had thrust before her.

“Stop beating around the bush, Tetsuhiko. Isn’t there something you want to say? Something involving Shiro and I, I’ll bet.”

“Hmmm, that was an awfully good guess for you, huh.”

Tetsuhiko handed a few sheets of paper each to Shirokusa, Kuroha and I.

It was – a proposal. On the cover page the words “Ultramarine Channel” were written.

“I’ve given some thought as to what the Entertainment Appreciation Society should do going forward into the future. With Sueharu’s rebirth and our name recognition increasing at the ‘Confession Festival’, the scope of what we can achieve has dramatically increased. So, written here is one of the forms of the vision I am aiming towards.”

I tried skimming through the proposal.

The theme was... hmm, “doing anything fun”, huh. The Entertainment Appreciation Society itself was born out of a single line from Tetsuhiko saying we should do something fun, so terms of concept it could probably be said that there wasn’t much of a discrepancy.

“...So in other words, the Entertainment Appreciation Society is turning into a WE TUBE channel?”

In the proposal it was written that the Entertainment Appreciation Society was to establish the “Ultramarine Channel” on WE TUBE and on there make videos available to the public.

“In one aspect, yes. But not completely.”

“By that are you referring to taking contracts for producing things like ads?” Kuroha asked.

“Well, that’s one of the steps for after we set the plan in motion, but... it’s as you say, Shida-chan. Sueharu, you’ll probably be receiving work requests in the near future, right? If so, do you intend to attach yourself to some agency then?”

“Well if I reinstate myself, probably.”

“Then will you be quitting high school?”

“!”

I hadn’t thought about it that far at all, but in elementary school I didn’t go much during my prime – even while I was an elementary school student and in spite of my mother curbing my workload. Those restrictions would easily disappear if I got busy in the future, and it might turn into a situation where I had no choice but to quit high school.

“I think it would be better for you to do things high school students do while you’re a high school student, you know? I mean, you can still go to the entertainment world after you’ve turned into an adult, but now’s your only chance to be a high school student, right?”

Tetsuhiko’s argument was to the point.

I had wavered over my ability to make a comeback, and if I had the self-confidence to pull it off. If I did choose to return, however, my only option was to do so with nothing held back, regardless of how much self-confidence I had. Therefore, if there was something to hesitate over, it was–

*–Between the entertainment world and my everyday life, which should I choose?*

That.

Having spent six years away from the entertainment world, I knew the preciousness of my daily life. I thought a life spent studying towards making

it into a university as I currently was and then working at some company wasn't bad at all. To return to the entertainment world immediately, however, would probably be to reject that path completely.

This was an exceedingly important crossroads, worthy of being called life-changing.

“What are you going to do if a job you don't like comes in, Sueharu? Will you be able to say you won't do it?”

“Well, that probably can't be helped. There were a few times like that even back when I was a child actor. I'll be prepared for that at least if I'm going to make my comeback.”

“For real? You were a *child* when you were a child actor, weren't you? You think they'll go easy on high school students?”

“Ooh—”

Well to be fair, I also had my worries in those areas.

“So you're saying that the 'Ultramarine Channel' will solve all of those problems entirely?” Shirokusa came in pouring cold water.

“—No.”

Tetsuhiko did not debate Shirokusa, but instead spoke of his dream.

“But, you know, it'll definitely be fun. With you around, Sueharu, at any rate the views will come, and the videos will show us doing whatever interesting thing we come up with. That way, maybe someone will show up asking us to do something.”

“Such as those ads you mentioned earlier?”

“Yup. From there we make our capital, then spend it later on producing a drama. Making and distributing something that seems like it would require a little more cash as part of our work would be interesting too.”

“—I see, so that’s what you’re expecting of me as a founding member, huh.”

Tetsuhiko grinned at Shirokusa.

“That’s right. Kachi, you’ve been waiting for a digital adaptation, but you’re not sure if it can be done, right? If so, you should just make one without having to wait for it. Both you and Sueharu go to the same school. If you also then belong to the same club, then that becomes a possibility.”

“Is it my popularity that you’re after?”

“That too of course, but more importantly your ability to plan and create stories. By my intuition, I feel like you’ll make the best use out of Sueharu... Am I wrong?”

That was good. Thus provoked, Shirokusa could only reply: “...But of course. Who do you think I am? At putting Suu-chan to good use there is no better person than me.”

“I feel like everything you’ve said seems awfully convenient, Tetsuhiko-kun.” It was Kuroha who thus pointed out.

“Wait, aren’t you on the side against Sueharu’s reinstatement to the entertainment world, Shida-chan?”

“That isn’t the same as this.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Frankly, Tetsuhiko-kun, this doesn’t match your character. ‘Let’s have the most fun possible’ sounds like something Haru would say happily, but you aren’t that simple, are you?”

She knew me too well. While in reality I hadn’t yet replied to Tetsuhiko’s proposal, listening to it alone had made me excited.

“—Isn’t there another, deeper reason why you’re doing this?”

For an instant Tetsuhiko’s throat was jammed, before in the next he grinned

intrepidly.

“As expected of Shida-chan. I won’t say... that there isn’t one. But nothing I’ve said so far has been a lie. That I can promise.”

Again another questionable expression. But well, to me that was enough.

“In that case, you won’t hear any more questions from me.”

“Suu-chan?!”

Shirokusa was surprised, but I knew here there was no meaning in spending any time.

“No matter how much you ask, Tetsuhiko won’t say something he doesn’t want to. Well, if one of these days you do think that you’ll be alright with saying it, then please let us hear that other reason of yours hiding in the depths or whatever.”

“I think that probably won’t happen, but for the moment I’ll just say I understand.”

“So, personally, while it’s annoying I honestly think it looks interesting... Designing something all of us want to do then delivering it all across the world, kind of feels like *working day and night in a secret base to achieve world domination*, and is really up my alley.”

On top of that, I more or less had a reasonable amount of experience in the entertainment world, while Shirokusa was also of a professional calibre. Tetsuhiko too was quick-witted, and as a result I kind of felt like part of a chosen elite, which appealed to my heart even more. With these members it looked like we could create something incredibly interesting.

That’s right. I had thought that I wanted to do something with these people again when I had succeeded on the stage of the Confession Festival.

A stage I had succeeded on with Shirokusa’s design and Tetsuhiko’s support. With their powers I could fly high again. That was how I felt.



“So you’re supposing that your starting members will be the three of us – you, me and Shiro?”

“No, four of us, including Shida-chan.”

Nice. Even better. With Kuro around it definitely looked like we could make something even more interesting.

But–

“From what you’re saying, we’re doing something akin to playing house, aren’t we, if we’re comparing against the things professionals do?” Shirokusa spoke as if representing my thoughts.

It was an already anticipated rebuttal perhaps, for Tetsuhiko was unshaken.

“That I can’t deny either. But with these members, *I think we can go higher speaking from the perspective of entertainment.*”

This guy Tetsuhiko really had a thing for loaded expressions, huh.

“Tetsuhiko, can you say that in a way that’s a little easier to understand?”

“Professionals are professionals because they make money. For that reason they plan and produce in a way that will maximise their benefit. On the other hand, the ‘Ultramarine Channel’ will plan whatever it thinks looks interesting, and produce something with the aim of making it so. So even if the film is grainy or the music is poor, we might be able to win in terms of entertainment value.”

“That’s an idealistic argument. Without technique, entertainment value too will fall.” Shirokusa was composed to the end.

“If we get sponsors, we’ll be able to outsource areas requiring skill over to professionals. In the future we can make friends with people who can do these sorts of things. Shouldn’t we pursue the things we can do only because we’re high school students?”

“*Only because we’re high school students*”, huh. This guy Tetsuhiko really

knew how to say things that stirred my heart.

Before I realised it I had become a second-year high school student. While my state of mind was still roughly on par with that of a middle schooler's, as the former in reality I didn't have much of a choice.

Having come this far I too naturally began contemplating the termination of my status as a student.

If I didn't go to a university, in another year and a half my long time as a student would come to an end. Counting from the start of elementary school, it would be the cessation of a twelve-year life as a student – a lengthy period occupying two-thirds of my life thus far, considering when that happened I would probably be eighteen.

From that point onwards it was unknown territory. To make money, I had to work. No matter how extensive my experience as a child actor, back then I had been under the guardianship of my parents. Either way I had to say I knew not about earning my own living.

I was scared, to be honest. How would things turn out? I wondered if they would be alright.

At the same time – no, precisely because of that – while I still could... yes, while I was still a student, I felt like I wanted to do stupid things. I felt like only right now could I do them.

The Ultramarine Channel was something incredibly dumb. On top of that the plan was for a close group of people to go full ham on doing stupid things together.

Exactly why *it could only be done while we were currently students*. At the very least I didn't know if the people here could gather once we became university students. It was precisely at this moment that these members were assembled. It could have been called the opportunity of a lifetime.

With that in mind I was able to find the proposal absolutely scintillating.

Tetsuhiko might be seeing through this heart of mine.

His words and the proposal he had produced had definitely triggered my excitement centre.

“Let me take home this proposal of yours, Tetsuhiko. I’ll listen to what they have to say at the agency, then decide if I’m going to return or join in your plan. Is that alright with you?”

“It is, but – if it suits you, Sueharu, take me along to the agency too, man.”

“Huh? Why you too?”

“There’s something I wanna see.”

“What do you mean, ‘there’s something you wanna see’?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it?”

“What, are you planning on obstructing me from making a comeback?”

Having spoken about his proposal so passionately probably showed how much this guy really wanted to do it. In addition, there appeared to be some other ulterior plan as well. Tetsuhiko was certainly capable enough of doing something on the level of thwarting my reinstatement to the entertainment world.

“I won’t, man.”

“No, no, I’m telling you, I can’t believe that.”

“.....Please.”

For real–

*That Tetsuhiko...* had bowed his head.

The Tetsuhiko who hadn’t apologised for publicising that video, who hadn’t even paid for the pizza he had used as a substitute for an apology himself –

had.

What could it be that he wanted to see?

For him to have said “It doesn’t matter, does it?”, probably meant that he didn’t want to reveal his reasons. Tetsuhiko was saying he wanted to tag along while still keeping his rationale for doing so hidden.

I plucked away at my head.

“Ahh..... alright. Alright, I get it.”

I had been made to understand. He had his reasons, a lot of them. If so I could only say the following.

“But seriously, you better not interfere, understand?”

“I know. I’m just tagging along this time. I won’t say a word.”

“I- I want to go too!”

This time it was Shirokusa who raised her hand.

“I won’t say anything either, but I just want to listen together beside you. ... Can I?”

Shirokusa probably wouldn’t intrude. That being the case, at this point having accepted Tetsuhiko, I had no reasons left with which to refuse her.

“Alright, but my, Kuro and Momo’s schedules come first. If we can’t make them fit with yours, then I won’t take the two of you along. Sound good?”

“Sure.”

“Okay.”

Tetsuhiko’s objectives–

Kuroha’s designs–

Shirokusa's intentions—

Maria's motives—

I felt like they had all somehow become entwined and were influencing each other in complex fashions.

I couldn't see any of it. But I had decided what I was to do.

*“It's that even if you should choose reinstatement, I want you to do so with positive emotions to the end, not for negative reasons such as running away from love. Because, Big Bro Haru, this will probably become one of the biggest decisions of your life.”*

Indeed, Akane. Life choices had to be made with a positive attitude.

Akin to a younger sister she may have been, but she had given me genuinely good advice.

I had to thank her, I thought, if and when a time I could make some kind of decision came.

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<sup>1</sup>Intentionally or otherwise, Kuroha is mimicking Maru's completely unconvincing manner of speaking when he's trying to play something cool. See *Volume 1, Chapter 2 Part 2*, when Tetsuhiko tells Maru he knows he's been rejected.

# Chapter 3: At Hardy Pro

## Part 1

–I hated everything. Everything aside from my older sister... I hated it all.

My parents were terrible. I can still see it in my dreams. Scenes of them arguing, then figures of them walking towards me their fists raised overhead, their wrath now directed towards me.

Mom and Dad both worked in the nighttime entertainment business, and even then they were on the fringes, not doing anything so great such as having their own establishment.

We were cheerfully taken to family restaurants in the months when their income was good. My parents and older sister were all smiles then, and I remembered those times as being extremely happy.

But the smiles decreased as the years went on. My parents lost the charm of youth while they gained in age, and their earnings fell proportionately.

At some point onward my father's violence became an element of daily life. While my mother was fundamentally on the receiving end of said violence, her resentment gathered and was released in the form of more violence against my weaker older sister and I. Neither Mom nor Dad were on our side – they existed solely to torment us.

To me my only salvation was my sister, seven years older than I was.

*“I’ll definitely keep you safe, Maria.”*

I thought it was incredible. How could such a magnificent older sister be born to parents like these?

She was a kind older sister. She looked out for me even if it meant sacrificing

time to play with her friends. She cooked, cleaned, and at times secretly worked part-time jobs to make money for dinner, no matter the fact that she was only a middle school student.

Having said that, she certainly never dipped into the realm of immorality.

She never sold her body nor made eyes at anyone – respectably, nobly, and conferring with those around her whenever she met with difficulty, she fought while walking openly along a path which the sun shone upon.

My older sister had apparently long ago devised a plan to escape our parents. She discussed with those close to her, and took care to make sure our parents wouldn't pursue us and there would be no problems legally.

The plan was set into motion at the same time as her middle school graduation. When I was a third-year student in elementary school, I was taken by my older sister to the capital.

Even now I feel frustrated recalling it.

My older sister's grades were excellent, good enough even to get her into the top college-preparatory school in our hometown. Despite that, she chose to work as a middle-school graduate. Her job after arriving at the capital was low-paying factory work.

My older sister worked fervently while raising me in place of our parents, but I was suffering.

I loved my older sister. She was my only ally.

Yet – I had only brought her pain.

I had destroyed my older sister's future. If I wasn't around, she could have certainly spread her wings more freely. If I wasn't around, she could have studied more and saved up more money, and so have been able to re-enter high school or university.

I – hated it.



I hated the world beyond my older sister. I hated this world which made my older sister suffer. And after my worthless parents, I hated the baggage that could only drag down my older sister in its powerlessness – myself – most of all.

Then one day, I was scouted by a strange old lady.

*“Your face gets a pass. More importantly, those eyes... eyes that look as if they hate this whole world – they’re irresistible, they are. Those are eyes that have the power to attract people. If you’re interested, come by my place.”*

This happened when I was walking around the neighbourhood with my older sister.

I had thought my older sister was the most beautiful person on this planet. Yet that old woman’s interest had been directed at me. To me that was more than a little shocking.

In truth I had no interest. But–

*“I’ve always thought you were the cutest thing on this planet, Maria. I’m glad that seems to have been acknowledged.”*

My older sister’s unexpected joy, and–

*“If I work, there’ll definitely be compensation. I might get clothes or something too depending on the nature of the job.”*

The possibility of easing my older sister’s burden, even just a little.

For those two reasons, I decided to join the agency.

I attached one condition.

*“I don’t want to give my older sister a harder time, so I won’t let her send me to or pick me up from anywhere, or watch over me on site. I won’t let her pay a cent. That means you’re paying for transport and meals. You can take that out of my compensation. Basically I won’t accept anything that would increase her burden.”*

The old woman who scouted me – Nina Hardy – accepted that prerequisite, and said she had pushed for me to sort of be the younger sister to be paired with an older boy chaperone I would study under.

–That was Big Brother Sueharu. My fated person.

I hated everyone outside of my older sister. Detested them. So naturally I had no intentions of getting along with Big Brother Sueharu.

Big Brother Sueharu acting older and teaching me about different things pissed me off. I hated how he tried to behave like an older brother; his hypocrisy in trying to become my kin.

We couldn't become close. Anyone outside of my older sister would just betray me, after all. For even Dad and Mom – had become my enemies. That was how I thought as I went to work at the agency in search of a little money.

But–

*“You think I’ll lose?! I’ll show you, I’m going to find Mom no matter what!”<sup>1</sup>*

I loved – Big Brother Sueharu’s acting.

*What pure talent,* I thought to myself.

Big Brother Sueharu normally couldn't be called outstanding, even if one were being polite. Amongst the many well-arranged faces of the entertainment world, his features were average, and it wasn't like he had a quirk that attracted people. He wasn't bright, nor was he quick with words. He couldn't read a room either, occasionally being pathetically flattering, and often being fit to laugh at because he had gotten the wrong idea. In a certain sense, in a profession where unique talents were gathered, on the contrary it was almost rare not to be able to see a glimpse of talent in him.

But when the acting started – all of that changed completely.

When Big Brother Sueharu started acting, the adults who all while grumbling exasperatedly, spent half their time poking fun at and the other half tepidly watching over him, would suddenly fall into silence and change their

expressions as they became enthralled. I loved seeing that, irresistibly so.

Big Brother Sueharu's talent was made for public entertainment. His talent was refined solely to entertain other people.

Big Brother Sueharu was my polar opposite – a person whose every fibre only aimed to make others happy. As I thought that way, to me he began to sparkle.

*“You know, you’ve been keeping detached for the loooongest time, but is it really fun for you to live this way?”* I was suddenly asked by Big Brother Sueharu one day, while I sulked after being asked to do a retake upon being entrusted with a relatively major role for the first time.

*“You sure you’re alright with this? You’re not going to regret doing a haphazard job?”*

I was pissed off, to be honest. Majorly so. He had prodded me in a painful spot.

*“I’m not the same as you are. I can’t do it like you do.”*

*“Nope, I’m telling you, you totally can.”*

*“..... How can you be so sure?”*

*“Well that’s because you understand everything, don’t you?”*

My throat sealed itself unconsciously. ...I hadn't even begun to consider I'd be exposed.

*“The situation, the atmosphere, the personalities and tempers of your fellow actors – you grasp all of that. Of course I’d be able to tell seeing how you behave. But the reason why it doesn’t go well for you is all because you’re holding back.”*

From the beginning I had thought of all the adults around me as stupid. I sneered inwardly, wondering how there were so many idiots who couldn't understand the things I could.

Yet as the result of being born into proper families, these idiots were able to smoothly progress all the way up to and graduate from university, then legitimately earn a living. My older sister was more exceptional than these idiots were, but not only was she unable to find a normal job as a middle-school graduate – her pay was meagre too. At the rate things were going, I'd end up on the same path as her too.

It was ridiculous. It was as if one's birth decided everything that followed.

Talent, hard work – it was all meaningless if one was born into the wrong circumstances.

A bottomless pit surrounds every person. One can fall in at any time without any warning whatsoever.

Take accidents and disease, for example. Your life could end even through no fault of your own, and from another's perspective it would just seem like "bad luck". You would hardly find solace in simply calling it that if you met that kind of fate, but so long as it was someone else's problem instead you could wall yourself off where you liked, resting easy whilst whispering to yourself that you were safe.

One could also fall into the pit right from the start by virtue of being born, as my older sister and I did.

From my perspective, Big Brother Sueharu lived a blessed existence. He had the talent, and support of his mother on every front.

Looking up towards that light from the bottom of the pit, I could only sneer with as much hostility as I could muster.

*This guy might have the talent for public entertainment, but he's an idiot. I know more things than he does, the proof of that being that he can't even tell what I'm thinking. See, I knew he was a dumbass. He hasn't even realised that I'm better than him. It's all because of my bad upbringing that I'm not being appreciated. Poor old me.*

In that fashion I mocked him, gave up on my own accord, and consoled

myself.

“.....!”

It was the embarrassment of having my foolish inner thoughts seen through by Big Brother Sueharu – whom I had ridiculed – that dyed my face red.

“Yeah, so what?!” I yelled. “*Will anything good come out of me trying?! I’m not blessed like you are!*”

Big Brother Sueharu didn’t retort, but simply watched me intently. His demeanour only fanned the flames burning my heart.

“*I don’t have a bright future like you do! Anything I do is pointless, and that’s a fact that can’t be changed! Tell me, what am I supposed to do?!*”

“..... *I only heard from Grandma Nina, but you and your kind older sister are trying to start over, right? If so, you don’t think you should try to give her an easier time?*”

“..... *I do! I do think that way! But–*”

## **“No buts!”**

A loud *bonk* was produced.

A headbutt. Our foreheads had collided without restraint. My thought processes short-circuited at the unexpectedness of the circumstances, but as the pain from my forehead spread I belatedly grasped the situation.

“Owww!”

*“If you’re fine with how things are then I have nothing left to say! But you see, you do want to make things easier for your older sister, don’t you?! If so, then why won’t you do something?! Why are you holding back?!”*

*“Because no matter what I do, it’ll all be—”*

*“Pointless? Really? For sure? When you haven’t tried giving your best effort? You won’t regret not doing that?”*

“Ooh—”

Being so questioned I was at a loss for words.

I understood. I was afraid of giving my all. Because if I failed after putting in my best effort, I wouldn’t be able to make excuses anymore. I’d become aware of my own lack of talent, leaving me no choice but to stare down despair going forward. If so it was easier for me to deceive myself saying I’d “actually got through somehow, just that I didn’t give my full effort”, than to just not try at all.

*“You need to give this all you’ve got! You have the talent! Your head’s probably better than mine anyway, and your intuition’s good too! Well, I won’t lose though if it comes to acting! Just saying, but it’s quite a feat to be*

*around my level, you know? This is the first time I've ever said that to someone my age."*

Big Brother Sueharu might not be smart, but neither did he live waywardly.

He lived life upright. He tackled everything ahead of him with all his might.

He had never lied to me either, so I could grasp that he truly meant what he was saying.

*"R- Really.....? I have as much talent... as you do.....? I do.....?"*

I honestly couldn't believe it.

I too had that kind of shining talent within me? I too could become someone who shone, and then save my older sister? Me, who could do nothing but accept my older sister's help?

*"I guarantee it, so grow up!"*

Those words assailed me like a sudden gust of wind, blasting away *something* from my entire body.

..... Up till then I had only run away. Away from Mom and Dad, away from my surroundings.

I ran and ran, all while my older sister protected me. Even when rewarded I would still think I was inept. I had no self-confidence. I had no fight.

But this person said I could do it. Someone possessing so much talent said I could. He clamoured for me to stand on my own, to move.

If so, then maybe I could do it. Even someone like me.

Yes, up till then I had been a child who had simply run away from everything. My surroundings had permitted me to.

But being told to grow up by someone close to my age – I thought that I should.

If I didn't stand up and face things with all my power right then, I'd live a life of perpetually running away. Such was my premonition.

*“–Alright.”*

I rose.

*“I'll..... try. I'll try..... hard enough to catch up to you. Will you wait for me until then?”*

*“–Of course.”*

For the longest time I chased Big Brother Sueharu.

I chased after that shining light I could see from the bottom of the well, winning victory after victory.

Yet before those who could be called my rivals had all but disappeared, Big Brother Sueharu was gone.

*“But you're amazing, Big Brother! You're a hero! It isn't possible that you'd become unable to act! After all, you're going to wait for me until I come running up to you, right?!”*

It was after I fired off those words that Big Brother Sueharu disappeared from the glitzy world.

So I thought I'd forget about him for a time.

I was already independent, so Big Brother Sueharu no longer mattered. I still had my rivals. I still had my enemies. I had to continue winning at all costs.

And while I thought that, my enemies dwindled, my rivals disappeared – and then I became lonely.

*“Big Brother..... please..... save me from this loneliness.....”*

Big Brother Sueharu had saved my life. His demeanour hadn't changed at all even after becoming a high school student, and I was overjoyed to be



received by his smiling face, despite me having said such cruel things back then and severing our ties. I cried that day while reminiscing before bed, but I had truly, truly been happy.

At the same time, however, I had also felt fear.

*Big Brother Sueharu had fallen into the bottomless pit. What if he had lost his sheen as a result of that.....? No, I didn't want to lose hope.....*

That video had shown me a glimpse, but at the same time it could have been called his old trademark routine. At present, I couldn't tell how well he could act.

“Please, make me believe..... Big Brother Sueharu.....”

Six years had passed, and while I thought I had worked hard and pulled myself out of the pit, there was still more darkness to be found outside of it too.

A gaudy stage one could stand on, but it was lonely being up there alone.

I was still in the middle of the dark.

\*

<sup>1</sup>Maru saying a line from the *Taiga* drama that made him blow up, where the objective of the protagonist is to find his mother.

## Part 2

Hardy Pro was a ten-minute walk after getting off at Shibuya station. It was on the fifth floor of a ten-storey building that one could find turning south after proceeding along Dougenzaka Avenue.

It was an agency that could be in some ways counted as the fiftieth in the entertainment world, but due to charismatic founder Nina Hardy's occasional discovery of what could be called smash-hit talent, in time its reputation had grown.

The last examples of these smash hits were Momosaka Maria and yours truly, Maru Sueharu.

“How about it, Big Brother Sueharu? Is it nostalgic?”

“..... I guess.”

Looking upwards towards the building, the office on the third floor had since been converted into an *izakaya* bar. While I couldn't see many changes in the building's exterior, some time had clearly elapsed.

From kindergarten onwards I was part of a certain theatre group that was in partnership with Hardy Pro. The story after that was that when I was a third-year elementary school student, Grandma Nina came over to the theatre group, whispered “*You look interesting, I'm going to use you,*” as soon as she saw me before dragging me away, and then I made my debut. In the two years before I retired, I made my way to the agency just about every week.

“It was also here where I met you too, huh, Big Brother.”

“..... Uh huh.”

It was when I was a fourth-year elementary school student that I met Maria.

The Maria of back then had been a problem child who was gloomy, timid and cowardly, and basically didn't bother to trust anyone.

*“Sueharu, go watch over her like an older brother.”*

Suddenly being told to do as such by Grandma Nina, I had been well and truly perplexed.

Grandma Nina, however, had probably recognised that what Maria needed was someone of her own age she could rely on.

So too had she probably intended to encourage my growth as a person by it. As a result of my ties to the Shida family I had played the role of an older brother, but in the end we were just neighbours. I hadn't understood what it truly meant to take care of another person. To pair Maria and I up had probably been a tactic of Grandma Nina's for each of us to force the other to grow.

*“What's your name?”*

As I had so asked, Maria with her dead eyes retreated into a hiding place before replying.

*“..... Die, dumbass.”*

Yup, Maria had been a rabid dog who would give anyone a bite..... well, her cuteness alone had stood out after all, so she could have been called something of a rabid rabbit.

Harrowing, it had truly been. Although I had taught her a few things and Grandma Nina had ordered us to move around together, still she would lash out at her surroundings, refuse to fit in, and basically cause quite a bit of trouble.

But it was in that time that I realised. Realised that *hey, wasn't this girl actually amazingly capable after all?*

*“..... Wha- who was it who put this whoopie cushion here?!”*

As above, her methods of harassing me had been terrifyingly on point.

When I needed to be serious, she would make me laugh. When I needed to laugh, she would do something that would make me want to cry.

She could legitimately identify opportunity, and then perceive what it was that could perturb me. Well, apart from that fact that she was using her head to attack me I was pissed off, though.

“I’m deeply moved, Big Brother Sueharu..... to be able to come here once again with you like this.”

“I don’t know about being deeply moved, but it is true that this is quite stirring.”

It was probably influence from the time that I spent as her caretaker that I didn’t have any romantic feelings for Maria, who had since matured into one of showbiz’s brightest stars. Having spent so much time looking after her, it was kind of like I couldn’t think of her as an outsider any longer. To me she was really best suited to be someone akin to a little sister.

Maria muttered while looking at her branded watch.

“..... Everyone’s late, huh. I’m fairly sure they got lost. Shall we leave them behind and go?”

As Maria so said and took my hand, it was at that moment when the taxi Tetsuhiko and the rest were on arrived.

“Now look here you, what do you think you’re doing holding Suu-chan’s hand?!”

Shirokusa came flying out of the back seat in a fury.

“..... Oh, this? I thought Big Brother Sueharu might be unfamiliar with the way after so long, so I’m just holding his hand so I can show him around, you know?”

“What? That’s a little far-fetched for an excuse, don’t you think?”

“If we think about this with some common sense, I’d say *your* conduct’s been more shameful, though?”

These two were on terrible terms..... My tummy’s starting to hurt too, so perhaps I should make a run for it?

“Momo-san, there’s something I’d like to ask you.....” Kuroha alighted following Shirokusa and asked of Maria. From behind her I could also see still later Tetsuhiko’s figure emerging from the passenger seat.

“Yes?”

“You paid for our taxi fare in advance, right? You also mentioned that you didn’t need change for it?”

“Yes, I did, so?”

“If so, then how do you explain the obviously bizarre route we took to get here? We’d be much, much later if Tetsuhiko-kun hadn’t realised.”

“..... Hm?”

The conversation had somehow abruptly turned peculiar.

Earlier today, Tetsuhiko, Kuroha and Shirokusa had rendezvoused at my house. We had planned for Maria to come meet us there by car.

Maria had then come bringing two cars, one of which was her personal vehicle, the other a taxi. Maria wished for me alone to board her personal vehicle, saying she wanted to reminisce about the past with me, and so the remaining three of them got on the cab.

From my house we had then supposedly set off for the agency at the same time, but—

“That must have been terrible,” Maria said as if with heartfelt consideration.

To Maria Kuroha matter-of-factly broke the truth.

“If we put those two things together and think about it, I have no choice but to imagine you paid off the taxi driver to try and buy time for yourself and separate us from Haru..... right?”

.....Ahh, yeah, Kuro was probably right. To the extent that what she said could be declared the truth without any further cross-examination required. It had definitely been something Momo seemed likely to do.

Everyone present there eyed Maria with suspicion. Faced with those looks, Maria broke into an adorable grin.

“–But I didn’t.”

“How is it you can have such a shameless mentality?! I really think it’s amazing how you can say that so casually!”

When I so quipped Maria pressed her hands against both her cheeks before happily wriggling her body back and forth, as if overjoyed to be praised by her older brother.

I wasn’t, but it was true that I thought she was amazing.

I could neither make the switch between normal life and the stage spontaneously, nor lie without difficulty, but Maria could flip in an instant. A natural predisposition for acting, this girl truly had.

But either way Shirokusa had been turned to mute amazement, and we had probably done enough standing and talking.

“Well, Momo, everyone’s gathered, so could you please take us to where the president is?”

“Alright. Shall we get moving then, Big Brother Sueharu and freeloaders?”

“Huuuh?”

Kuroha and Shirokusa’s brows furrowed.

What was with these girls? Could it be that there was a huge fad right now amongst high school girls to see how much they could piss each other off? Even so there was still too much animosity, though.

“... Well I may be a freeloader, but Shida-chan got a name card and Kachi’s an actual celebrity, so I wouldn’t say it’s like they’ve got nothing to do with this, right?”

In reality it was Tetsuhiko who was the most bothered. The Tetsuhiko of today was somewhat quieter, or perhaps there was a difference compared to how he usually spun things, but either way basically he had a different air about him. Like in what he had just said, for instance – bringing himself alone down so as to elevate Kuroha and Shirokusa. It wasn’t like him to do so.

“..... Show us the way,” Kuroha prompted.

Shirokusa didn’t seem to have hit on it, but Kuroha had apparently picked up on Tetsuhiko’s abnormal transformation.

From Maria too disappeared her playful air. She had probably read the room. Her sense of perception might have become even more polished since before.

The five of us got on the elevator for the fifth floor. After passing through a gaudy entrance, we haphazardly emerged onto the landing.

“Hey, if it isn’t Maru-chan!”

“Oh, it really is! Wow, he’s really become a high-schooler now!”

“Huh, for real for real?!”

This was the production department, so in other words it was full of people I had made connections with in the past. In no time at all I was surrounded.

“Oh dear, hi guys. It’s been a while. Oh, thanks for looking out for me before.”

There were honestly more people I didn’t recognise than I did, but it was of

utmost importance here that I wasn't impolite! There was no profit to be gained from hurting someone's feelings!

*“You definitely mustn't put on airs in front of people who've supported you! In fact, the more famous you become, the more humble you should be! Remember this well – ‘the boughs that bear most hang the lowest’!”*

Those were the words my mother had taught me and beaten into my bones. Now having become a high school student, I was once again grateful to her for those valuable words she had imparted.

“Ooh, not at all, thanks. .... Oh, I'm a little busy today, maybe another time! .... Oh, that's not it, I'm just here to listen for now, that's all..... Honestly, I'm just grateful to be remembered! I really feel like dying being called the ‘Man Who's Been Rejected a Million Times’, so please..... Ah, I really mustn't keep the president waiting, so I'll have to leave you all here for now!”

In the above fashion I pulled through.

I returned to the reception where everyone else was, and all around there were various promotional items deposited, such that Kuroha seemed ill at ease, as if she had been dropped into some other world. In that same vein, as expected, the active celebrity Shirokusa was used to it enough that she could put on a thin, forced smile even when talked to. Only Tetsuhiko was behaving a little strangely after all, and it sounded about right to call him cold, but what I really felt was that his heart wasn't here.

We arrived at the president's office at the very rear. Maria, who had led the way there, knocked, and we heard someone say “come in” in a relaxed, light-hearted voice.

“–After you, Big Brother Sueharu.”

Urged on by Maria, I had no choice but to take the lead and enter.

It was the expensive-looking paintings and antiques that caught my eyes first. The thirty square metre-large room<sup>1</sup> was packed full of them. The sofa, table,



and basically everything else also looked pricey, such that there was an air of almost vulgar ostentation – that was my first impression.

Grandma Nina had been practical above all else. She had been a person with the type of mentality that there was no issue in keeping a cracked cup so long as it could still be used, so the difference was really quite jarring.

At the centre of this now extravagant room with his feet together atop an extravagant chair, was a middle-aged man drinking wine on a Saturday morning.

So *this* – was President Hardy Shun, huh.

“Sup, Maru-chan!”

President Shun got up from his seat as soon as he saw me, before theatrically spreading both his arms wide.

I recoiled subconsciously.

I mean, if I were to describe him in a single word, it would be..... “shady”.

First of all, his blond hair was shady. A quarter of him wasn’t Japanese, so it wasn’t like it didn’t suit him, but he really had the air of a Japanese about him, and his age was probably around forty, such that it all couldn’t help but reek of fishiness.

Then his goatee too was shady. What was he trying to be, a bad uncle?

His purple shirt was shady. ....What was he, a host?

Woah, his shoes were pointy. Would someone get stabbed if he kicked them?

On the whole he stunk incredibly of a philanderer. What kind of life had he been living to become like that in middle age?

..... In this fashion I was overwhelmed by the many gibes and doubts popping up one after another inside my mind.

Come to think of it, Maria had said something relevant.

*“And your impression of him, Momo?”*

*“What is certain is that he has ability.”*

*“What else? His character?”*

*“I think it would be better for you to confirm anything else with your own eyes, Big Brother. In the meantime, what would you say about meeting him?”*

Well, to that I could only reply that for now I guess I would get acquainted with the shadiness, though...

Amid that heaping helping of dishonesty, what was shadiest of all was—

*“Well, well, well, Maru-chan..... this is great! Yes, yes, Maru-chan in the flesh..... excellent! I’m very pleased. You know, you really do have some kind of aura about you somewhere. Not too sure where, though. But no matter, this is perfect, purrfect ~”*

—His manner of speech.

Wait, was he praising me? Or criticising me?

All jokes aside I couldn’t tell how serious he was.

*Yeah, this guy belonged to the type of people I’d want to punch – I thought to myself instinctively.*

*.....Calm down. He’s a president. If I punched him it would mean my own destruction.*

I took a deep breath, then flipped a switch in my head sending myself into “business mode”.

*“Wow, President! Your aura’s incredible! I was floored the moment I saw you! I was like ‘Wow, so this is what they call a dandy’!”*

Observe, my tempered powers of flattery!

Hmpf, I was a man who had mastered the art of getting on my knees..... I had no qualms about faking a smile or being supplicant!

“Good, goood ~! You understand, Maru-channn ~!”

“On the contrary, President! Your stylish outfit is clearly the ensemble of someone who knows what they’re doing!”

“Wow, you’re really good at flattery, huuuh. Where did you learn how to do that, hmm?”

“No, no, I’m really only saying how I truly feel, hahaha!”

I wanted to be praised. For having the talking ability to instantly contend with this shady middle-aged man. Well, perhaps that could have been attributed more to a willingness to throw my pride away than my ability to talk per se, but..... to that I’ll close my eyes.

“Haru.....”

“Suu-chan.....”

Cold stares drilled into my back.

Wait, could it be that my actions had been hugely unpopular.....?

Of those frosty looks, Tetsuhiko’s was yet another level above the rest.

Yes, it was more..... contempt than exasperation, perhaps? Were those the eyes of one looking at trash? Hmm, mixed with an intent to kill too, it was.

..... Oh and moreover, it wasn’t directed at me, but at President Shun instead.

To force his way into accompanying me then stare down the president looking for a fight..... What was this guy doing?

“I expected no less of you, Big Brother Sueharu. A sight to behold.”

In all only Maria complimented me.

Well this had again been one of my mother’s lessons.

*“Be humble to those who support you.”*

*“Be even more humble to sponsors and the agency’s management.”*

Just kowtow all the time, in other words. I didn’t feel any resistance towards doing that. By the time those teachings had been beaten into me I had already ditched anything resembling pride.

“So, how about it, Maru-chan? You coming back?”

“Ohh, well, to be honest, I’m still hesitating a little!”

“Huuuh, why though?”

“Well you know, I’ve been on hiatus for quite a while after all, and then I also want to consider how it’s all going to fit in together with my school life.....”

“But Maru-chan, now is the time to strike, you knooow ~? You understand, don’t yooou ~?”

“Well, I..... I do, but.....”

“You should just forget about something like school and think about making as much money as possible, am I right?”

“Haha.....”

Yeah, this pacing. It didn’t feel at all like I was having a conversation with a forty-year-old uncle.

That, combined with a feeling of being casually forced to do something against my will and I was a little..... no, really quite ill-adapted.

What he was saying wasn't wrong; in fact it was logical.

Indeed this was “the time to strike” thanks to that video causing my fame to skyrocket, and if we took into account the importance of timing it was appropriate to be dismissive of “something like school”.

But people weren't moved based on logic alone. Emotionally, under no circumstances could I think of it merely as “something like school”.

“Oooh, if my eyes don't deceive me, that's Shida-san, isn't it?!”

Uh oh, so he had found Kuroha, huh.....

A goody-two-shoes, Kuroha was, so she'd never do anything like show dislike for people she was meeting for the first time. But here she was uncomfortable, from what I could see, unable to fully hide the fact that she didn't have a good impression of the president.

“How about it, Shida-chan? You'll make your debut, won't you?”

“N- No, erm..... with regards to that.....”

“You're not seriously going to say you won't, right?”

Kuroha broke into a pained smile in the face of President Shun's arm-twisting, but after taking in a single, large breath, she bowed her head while ceasing to force herself to smile.

“..... No, but I must refuse. It is for that purpose that I came here today.”

Kuroha did things diligently, as expected.

Her – as demonstrated – unassailable strength, had my heartfelt respect.

“..... Hmmm.”

From the behind the mask of the easily excitable playboy – a different face peeked out.

A penetrating coldness, disquiet, and an all-too visceral disgust formed a thick sludge that came clinging onto me.

I knew instantly.

–That, yeah, this was probably his true nature.

“You know, Shida-chan..... if you were to make your debut together with Maru-chan right now..... you could make a billion yen in three years.”

“?!”

At that naturally even Kuroha’s eyes widened into circles.

“And by the way, for you, Maru-chan, it’s three billion in three years. I can’t fully guarantee it, but well, it’s certainly an achievable amount if we act according to my plan.”

Three billion yen.....? Some said that the average person made about that much money in his or her lifetime, so in other words I could make a lifetime’s worth of wages in only three years?

“The truth is, Maru-chan, is that there’s a sponsor out there who expects great things from you, and he said he’d like you to play the leading role in a commercial. Interest will double if we also get Shida-chan involved in this. Our sponsor also mentioned he’d very much like to meet you when he heard you were coming today. He’s scheduled to show up in just a bit, so I’ll leave it to you to just say hi or something for now, alright?”

Three billion..... three billion..... three billion.....

Stunned by the three billion yen, President Shun’s words never reached my ears.

If I actually raked that much money in, then–

I clenched my hand into a tight fist.

“Tetsuhiko, if I made that much I could make Rena shut up even if I asked

her to do something perverted, right?!”

“Sueharu, that conception of yours is so disgusting, even I’m in shock. In a sense I guess you’ve exceeded my expectations for the very first time.”

“Haru.....”

“Suu-chan.....”

Wait..... Sure, in my excitement I had let my mouth run a little, but..... it wasn’t being very well received?!

“W- Well, I get why the girls don’t like it, but..... Tetsuhiko! You’re a male high school student..... same as me, right?! Don’t go off alone acting like you don’t think it’s true!”

“Huh? Look, I’m not thirsty for women, so I really don’t get where you’re coming from, though? You’re so desperate, Sueharu, it’s gross.”

“You bastarrrrrrr! Apologise to all the high school boys in this countryyyyy!”

“Dumbassssssss! Guys who aren’t popular only have themselves to blameeeee! You’re going to represent them and apologise to meeee! Maybe after that then I’ll teach you some tricks to make yourself popular amongst the girlsssss!”

“Wait, seriously? Oh, I’ll apologise! In return you better teach me properly!”

“Haru.....”

“Suu-chan.....”

Hmm, strange. I felt like my favourability amongst Kuroha and Shirokusa had fallen quite considerably since we entered this room, despite me having only acted true to myself.....

“It’s alright, Big Brother Sueharu. I’ll make sure to straighten you out properly, down to your character.”

While making it look like she approved, Maria too had casually repudiated me.....

President Shun coughed lightly in order to bring the conversation back to his speed.

“Well, putting that piece of rubbish aside, you’re good with this, aren’t you, Shida-chan? One billion in three years! You know how amazing that is?”

“Y- Yes..... well.....”

Despite having firmly refused once, to no surprise Kuroha had clearly been stunned by the magnitude of the amount of money at stake. She wasn’t the type to obsess over wealth, but she felt guilty too from having been enticed by the money, which caused her to be unable to end the conversation.

“Of course, if you show us that you have more diverse talents, Shida-chan, that amount could even double, no, triple. It goes without saying then that you could work in showbiz a long time if you wanted to, let alone three years. On the other hand, you could also make a billion yen in three years, then call it quits completely. With that much money saved up, you could go to university. Then again, in those three years you could also get close to some handsome guy and get married. You’d get to rub shoulders with some big names you’d never get the chance to become acquainted with otherwise, you know? With your popularity and the amount of attention you’re getting right now already way higher than some crappy idol’s, this is certainly something that can be done, Shida-chan.”

The delivery had been unpleasant, but all of it had probably been the truth. It was logical, and equally true was the fact that the kind of future the president had painted could typically be called “desirable”.

But I knew well that Kuroha held a different attitude to what was normally “desirable”. She was the owner of a mindset deeply grounded in reality.

Kuroha cherished her daily routine. She cherished her family. She cherished her friends, which was why she helped others out of her own free will, and was quick to offer advice when it was needed. She found happiness in simply



being involved with those around her.

In other words – Kuroha didn't think particularly much about standing out. That she had come immediately to the conclusion that she had no interest in showbiz too was only natural after considering her personality.

“Erm..... I am grateful for this conversation..... but I must apologise.”

“But you just said you were grateful, right? You understand the value of money, don't you? If so, should you really be apologising then?”

*–Isn't Kuro already saying no?*

“No, what I'm saying is that money is important, but I value more the things that I'm close to.....”

“If you have money, you'd be able to give the people you're close to a better life, right? Never thought about being filial to your parents?”

*–If so, why is he forcing her to do this against her will?*

“Of course I do, but.....”

“Then do it! Work in public entertainment!”

*–It's as if he's taking her parents hostage in order to threaten her.....*

“No, as I've already mentioned many times before, I came here today to reject your offer.....”

“..... You're not too quick on the uptake, are you? I guess your parents didn't raise you well?”

The colour of Kuroha's face changed. But of course it did. She wasn't someone who could keep quiet in the face of her parents being ridiculed.

But then..... what about me?

*–In the face of Kuro, Kuro's parents..... people who were dear to me being*

ridiculed, what would I do.....?

*“Be humble to those who support you.”*

*“Be even more humble to sponsors and the agency’s management.”*

But to my mother’s lesson – there had been a second part.

*“But there’s no need to bow for the people you hold dear. For them you must fight–”*

–That’s right. The most important thing she taught me was to have a heart that wouldn’t waver about fighting to protect the people important to me.

Kuroha glowered upwards sternly. President Shun’s eyes narrowed, as if calling her an impenitent girl.

At that dumb president’s head – I hurled the wine which was sitting atop the table.

*“–Don’t make a fool out of my childhood friend.”*

Red wine ran down the president’s cheek and dripped onto the carpet.

Time came to a stop in the president’s office. The shock was such that no one breathed and all eyes were opened wide.

At the audacity of my action President Shun was dumbfounded.

Within only a few seconds, however, he grasped the situation, and as I watched his face was transformed by hatred.

On the contrary I had been fairly composed.

My actions had been performed unintentionally out of rage – but all the same there could not have been a worse target for them.

*“O- Oh, this is a..... you know..... yeah, that’s right, an accidental discharge! I mean, everyone knows the first shot doesn’t count when it comes*

to accidental discharges, right?! This is the same thing! This is all just the result of several slip ups—”

“Suu-chan, that line of reasoning really doesn’t.....”

“Trying to smooth over things at this hour..... Sueharu, just how utterly shameless can you be?”

“Shut up! Leave me alone!”

As I thoughtlessly forced a smile, President Shun pulled out a handkerchief which had been decorated in poor taste, and wiped away the wine which had come down in streaks off his face.

That breezy tone from earlier too had all but disappeared. The disdain in his eyes was total as he brought them to glare at me.

“Tsk, I had a bad feeling when you showed up with rubbish. So you too are garbage, huh!”

..... Hm, what did he mean by what he had just said?

The latter portion of “so you too are garbage” had undoubtedly been addressed to me.

Well, so be it. I had done all that, after all.

But then the part where he said that I had “showed up with rubbish”..... could it be that that referred to Tetsuhiko? Come to think of it, when he had talked about “putting that piece of rubbish aside” earlier, had that also been directed at him?

..... Wait, President Shun knew Tetsuhiko? But how?

“Oi..... you bastard, what did you just say?”

Tetsuhiko suddenly snapped. He had sprung forth before anyone could react, and when we realised it he had already grabbed hold of and was squeezing the nape of President Shun’s neck.

“Wa- Tetsuhiko-kun?! Going this far is not according to our plan—”

.....Plan?

I was curious about what it was Kuroha had attempted to say, but right now clearly I didn't have the luxury of asking.

“Tetsuhiko, stop!”

I too had gotten mad at the president, but really Tetsuhiko had gone too far.

I put Tetsuhiko into a Nelson hold, forcibly tearing him away.

“This isn't like you, man! What's going on?!”

“Shut up, Dummyharu! Let go of me! I don't care about myself! But this piece of crap here is making a fool out of my pal – so I can't keep quiet, can I?!”

“Tetsuhiko.....”

You dumbass, Tetsuhiko. If you say something like that, how is my chest not supposed to swell?

But the way in which he had snapped had been extraordinary. Could it be that..... there was some sort of shared destiny between President Shun and Tetsuhiko? And in turn, could that be related to the “something” Tetsuhiko mentioned he “wanted to see”? I wanted to ask, but..... I didn't think President Shun or Tetsuhiko would be kind enough to answer under any circumstances.

“You pieces of trash.....”

President Shun adjusted his tie before picking up the phone on the desk.

“Oi, call the police. Some ruffians have intruded into my office. ....  
Hm? What's that?”

He had apparently called someone within the agency, but something was

awry.

“..... Oh, no, that’s not what..... give me a moment.”

Had something happened? The colour of President Shun’s face shifted, and “You all had better stay here!” was how he threatened us, before he left his office for some reason.

Left behind, it was our plight to stand rock still in silence.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“..... What are we gonna dooo?”

My heart screamed.

“Oi, what are we gonna do, Tetsuhiko? You don’t have a good plan or something?” I gave Tetsuhiko a small nudge with my elbow.

“We didn’t hurt him and it was just us here. All we gotta do is to testify that nothing happened.”

“What about my wine thing then? They’d be able to tell from the smell, right?”

“Wouldn’t it be fine if we just said that that asshole fell and hit his head on it or something?”

“I see..... this must be the first time I’ve ever found you so reliable.....”

Incredible, as expected of Tetsuhiko. He had a truly devious way of thinking. It was perfect for an excuse produced on the fly.

“That’s how I’ll testify. Because that man..... he’s too much. I can’t forgive him.” Shirokusa signified her endorsement.

“I will too, if there’s a need for it.” Maria too agreed on the spot.

“–Haru.”

A frigid voice rang out.

Kuroha stood before me, looking directly upward. Her expression..... was the one she took when in lecture mode.

“You know, for Big Sister, whether it’s about throwing the wine or all of us planning to lie together, I have to say that we’ve gone too far.”

“..... Well, we did.”

As expected of an honour student. It was as she said. If we thought about this rationally, Kuroha was completely right.

“What are you planning on doing, Haru? Even if you manage to bluff your way through with some cheap trick, at the end of the day that’s only a temporary measure, right? Having done something like that to the president of an agency, wouldn’t this put your return to showbiz itself in jeopardy.....?”

“I guess..... I can see that piece of shit president spreading the word about what happened with a few details mixed in, so that other agencies probably wouldn’t take me in either.....”

“Ooh..... Haru, you idiot!”

Kuroha began pounding my chest.

“You idiot, you idiot, you idiot! You went through so much just to be able to stand on stage once again, then you let that chance slip right through your fingers!”

Kuroha’s eyes welled up with tears. The blows directed at my chest weren’t

particularly powerful, but my throat tightened as if they each conveyed to me Kuroha's anguish.

"No, I understand that very well, but....."

All the same, I had no regrets. Insulting Kuroha and her parents..... that alone I couldn't overlook. If I couldn't enter showbiz without enduring that, then I'd be the one to refuse.

Kuroha dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief, then stared at me feverishly while her cheeks turned red.

"-But I'm glad I'm your childhood friend, Haru."

Unexpected words coming from the goody-two-shoes that was Kuroha. I blinked without thinking.

"..... Eh?"

"I really couldn't forgive him for mocking Mom and Dad. I'd want nothing to do with someone like that ever again, so I had to fight back. But because I've never tried to so much as hurt someone before, I hesitated. You fought back for me before I could, Haru. I do think what you did was incredibly stupid, but - I was really happy. It reminded me of how back in elementary school, you would show up where I was being detained and secretly eat the school meals I couldn't."

Well, back then with the school meals I had also gotten caught, resulting in the teacher chewing me out after that for doing something stupid, I think. This time I had once again merely done something of my own accord, so I really didn't have a right to be thanked, but..... Kuroha's eyes were so sparkly that I felt kind of embarrassed.

I could only tell her not to mention it while scratching at my cheek.

"..... What's all this about a police incident?! Maru-chan's here, isn't he?! What's going on?!"

"Erm..... this is..... I'll explain, so....."

“That’s quite alright! I’ll ask him myself!”

Just as I thought I could make out some voices coming from down the hallway, the doors to the president’s office suddenly flew open.

There it was a dandy middle-aged man who appeared.

“Ooh, it’s Maru-chan! Long time no see! Remember me? I’m Kachi Souichirou!”

Ah, this was nostalgic. This man was Shirokusa’s father, Kachi Souichirou – the CEO of a pharmaceutical company, and in the past once the leading sponsor of a drama series. It was from then that he became incredibly invested in me and began looking after my affairs.

Compared to President Shun’s shadiness, this man had achieved a refined compromise between coolness and thoughtfulness. In addition to the refreshingness he exuded, the accents on his one-point embroidery showed off his immaculate sense of fashion. Six years had passed, which probably made him a little over fifty years old at present? I could feel him project even more stability than before; an image that could be called nothing short of a gentleman’s.

Souichirou-san came flying with his arms wide open as soon as he saw me.

“Woow, you’ve really gotten big, huh! I wanted to see you so I just found myself coming here! Do you remember me? Perhaps it would be better if I were to introduce myself as Shiro’s father?”

“No, I remember you very well. It has been a long time.”

“P- Papa.....”

I found it to be awkward most of the time when a Japanese called his or her father “Papa”, but perhaps because of Shirokusa’s father’s overwhelming dandyism, I thought it was very fitting in this case.

When the dandy Souichirou-san became privy to his daughter’s presence, his



eyes widened into circles.

“Why are you here, Shiro?”

“..... I was curious about whether Suu-chan would return to showbiz, so I ended up coming.”

“I see..... Then if I’m not mistaken, you must be Shida Kuroha-kun..... and you too are here, Maria-kun.”

“Yes, it’s been awhile,” Maria greeted gracefully. Kuroha, though probably never having made Souichirou-san’s acquaintance, bowed her head for the time being.

“For a police incident to happen amongst these members here..... what could have happened, I wonder?”

The eyes of President Shun were glaring as he entered the office a time after Souichirou-san did.

Ooh, I see. When President Shun had tried phoning someone within the agency to call the police, it was right about then when Souichirou-san had arrived, huh. Hearing about it shocked Souichirou-san, who then took matters into his own hands. So that’s how it was.

“President Kachi, I’m sure the children have already coordinated their stories and will insist on their innocence. The police shall verify, so any interference will be unnecessary.”

Wow, this guy was no idiot. He had seized the initiative and forestalled our plan.

“Papa..... please..... hear me out!”

Towards his daughter, who came rushing over, Souichirou-san put up his hands to hold her back.

“President Shun, as long as my daughter’s involved in this, I do believe that I’m not completely unconcerned either. For now, I do think that I have the

right at least to listen to what the kids have to say?”

“..... Well, if that’s all you’re doing.”

“No matter what happens, Shiro, Papa’ll always be your ally, but right now what I want to hear are objective opinions. .... Right, Maria-kun, would you mind if we start with you explaining what happened first? As for the rest of you, I’d like you all to add on if anything Maria-kun says jumps out at you.”

As expected of a capable president who had grown his company big in just a single generation. He very clearly perceived the situation.

Shirokusa was losing her composure, while at the same time, as interested parties, Kuroha, Tetsuhiko and I were likely to become emotional. For those reasons, Maria was undoubtedly the calmest at this point in time.

It all reflected a discernment to pass judgement through observation alone, without asking anyone so much as a word. As ever, Souichirou-san appeared to be someone I could trust.

The tension in my shoulders disappeared.

It looked like it would be best to leave things to his judgement. If it were just us here alone, it seemed to me like we’d end up being enticed by Tetsuhiko’s plan. I thought we should frankly tell the truth with nothing to lose.

.....

.....

.....

“I see. So that’s how it was, was it.”

On one side of a pair of sofas opposing each other sat Papa Shirokusa. On the other sat Maria in the middle, with Kuroha and Shirokusa lining her flanks.

Tetsuhiko and I were in the vicinity of Maria and company, but with no place

left to sit, we stood watching over the proceedings.

President Shun, by the way, was sitting on his own chair in spectator mode. Rather than awkwardly try to intercede and lower Souichirou-san's impression of him, he seemed to have judged that it was better to keep silent and observe.

“Personally, I do think that calling the police was going too far, and that there were some extenuating circumstances. But well, if we're talking about who's at fault, I have to say that it's Maru-chan and Tetsuhiko-kun for making a move.”

“I expected no less from you, President Kachi. A measured decision.”

Fuck, this piece of crap president was really pissing me off. I should've given him at least one punch earlier.

“Erm, Haru acted for my sake, so if you could please blame me instead!”

At Kuroha's suggestion, Souichirou-san pondered with his hand against his chin.

“I know how you feel, but that isn't how this works. I'm sure that deep down, you too understand that, don't you?”

His calm tone alone had the effect of restoring one's sobriety.

Kuroha bit her lip and nodded deeply.

“Papa..... no matter what the law says, I'm still going to defend Suu-chan.”

“..... Shiro.”

Shirokusa stood up gallantly and spoke with resolution.

“For me, I'm convinced that Suu-chan did the right thing to do as a person. Who was it who decided that hurting someone had to be a physical act? After all, words are weapons enough. This time around, it was that president over there who caused the most hurt. That will never change for me, no matter

what the law says.”

“Shiro.....”

Shirokusa was prideful. Timid she may have been, but she had her own sense of justice and the strength to pierce through with it – a side of this noble, hard worker I had been attracted to and had fallen in love with.

The beauty of Shirokusa’s dignified profile was more than sufficient to evoke in me memories of my first love.

“Now then.”

Perhaps as if to put a period on the conversation, Maria clasped her hands aloud before her chest.

“Putting everyone’s opinions together, my impression is that we all want to support Big Brother Sueharu. We don’t want to make this a police incident, and instead want to somehow bring this peacefully to a conclusion. Are we all okay with this?”

We all nodded wordlessly. Souichirou-san included, we were all in agreement.

“Except that Shun-san definitely won’t accept that.”

“It’s only natural, right? I’m the victim here, you know. The victim.”

Tsk, this dude was seriously full of shit. Even as Tetsuhiko, Kuroha, Shirokusa and I..... the four of us glared at him, he didn’t flinch in the slightest. His audaciousness alone I felt was worthy of giving praise to.

At President Shun Souichirou-san prodded sharply.

“I think that manner of speech will give the children cause to harbour some resentment. Don’t you think you’re being childish with them?”

President Shun simply chortled through his nose.

“Oh, I don’t think it’s as you say at all, President Kachi. No matter what kind of language I’ve used, it’s a fact that whoever raises his fist is the one at fault. I’d like you to consider the possibility that these children might be lying in order to excuse themselves.”

Tetsuhiko made fists with his hands and took a step forward, so Kuroha and I grabbed his arms and restrained him.

At this point Maria’s eyes began to smile. It was an expression I had seen countless times before, one Maria made when demonstrating the full extent of her talents.

“In that case, shall we not have a..... commercial competition then?”

Hm.....? What was that.....? A commercial competition.....?

Her astonishing words had probably caught us all off guard. A weird silence ensued.

Maria turned around and gave President Shun a grin.

“You say you’re going to tell the police, Shun-san, but what about trying to be a little more composed about this? You mustn’t be led astray by a moment of anger. If you do tell the police, then Big Brother Sueharu won’t join the agency, which would mean of course that no benefit would come out of this whatsoever. I would assume that that isn’t your true will, Shun-san?”

“..... I see, it’s as you say, Momosaka-chan. There wouldn’t be a single yen’s worth of profit in it for me to report Maru-chan to the police.”

“But if Big Brother Sueharu was kind enough to join the agency, it would result in a tremendous profit, yes?”

“Indeed.”

President Shun started to think. His profile began to markedly project that of a businessman’s.

I expected no less from Maria, who had had the presence of mind to turn

negotiations into an analysis over cost and benefit.

“I’m going to make a suggestion. What about if Shun-san and Big Brother Sueharu compete over making commercials, and if Shun-san wins, then Big Brother Sueharu will join the agency where he’ll work by Shun-san’s kind offices? To you, Shun-san, wouldn’t that be the best result?”

“Hm..... I see.”

In President Shun’s head he had probably made several calculations. Caressing his beard, he then gave a large nod.

“Alright ~, Momosaka-chan! Now we’re really talking! If that’s how it is, then I can get on too!”

“But if Big Brother Sueharu wins, then you won’t file a complaint with the police, and you’ll have to drop Tetsuhiko-san’s case too. You’ll leave the decision to join the agency up to Big Brother Sueharu, allow him not to, and won’t obstruct him from signing a contract with or working for another agency. You’re okay with that, right?”

“Hmm!”

President Shun hesitated for a moment, but then proceeded immediately to show his white teeth.

“Sureee, sureee. Okay. I’ll accept it.”

“Uncle, could I trouble you to be the witness?”

“Of course.”

It was reassuring to see Maria demonstrate her skill in roping in and securing Souichirou-san’s commitment.

However..... it was at this point that I finally grasped Maria’s intentions.

If things stayed as they were, neither party would be pleased. We would stay mad at that piece of crap president, while he wouldn’t very well keep quiet

over getting wine thrown at his head either. We were far from a compromise. It was a quandary.

In that case we might as well settle things in a contest, for at the very least then one party would have their grievances soothed.

If we won we'd deal President Shun a blow, and be able to make as if trouble never happened.

If President Shun won, he'd get me and turn a profit from this affair.

It wasn't bad at all, though I was perplexed when Maria first suggested it. A contest we would have.

“What about you, Big Brother Sueharu? Will you compete?”

“..... Yeah, I'll do it.”

I was enraged at this irritating, piece of shit president from the bottom of my heart. But all the same, it wasn't like I could punch him.

If I won, however, then I'd be able to shut him up. Tell him to suck it. Opportunities like these were few and far between. If I lost I'd be worked to the bone at the agency, of course, but well it probably wouldn't kill me. I intended to win, after all, so I'd think about what would happen after I lost only if and when it was time to.

All that remained to be seen was if the contest's conditions would be fair. The fact that the president looked like he had no reservations about using dirty tricks terrified me.

“Right then, now that we've gotten both parties to agree, there's something I'd like to check..... Uncle, would it be alright if Big Brother Sueharu on one side and the agency on the other, make two versions of the commercial you mentioned you'd like to entrust Big Brother Sueharu with if he came back?”

“If that's what we're going with, then of course I don't mind. After all, like this, in its own way, it seems as if things might blow up.”

Ahh, come to think about it, earlier President Shun I think had briefly mentioned about a sponsor who was banking on me doing a commercial coming over to say hi..... So that had been Souichirou-san, huh.

“We’ll open the commercials next to each other publicly on a specially created website, then get viewers to vote on which they liked better. What say we call the winner whoever wins the most votes?”

*I see* – was what I thought to myself when Kuroha came cutting in.

“But this way Haru doesn’t have a chance of winning, does he? Clearly it’s impossible for Haru to do everything alone. Maybe you set up this kind of contest because you want Haru to join the agency, but either way I won’t be fooled.”

Woah, Kuroha and Maria were having an intense staring contest, but why though?

Ohh, I see. Kuroha was being wary of Maria with regards to her trying to draw me back into the agency, thus even now she thought of Maria as being on President Shun’s side, if she had to put her on one.

Because of my close ties to Maria in the past, however, I felt that she leaned towards mine instead. It was Maria who had initially invited me back to the agency, but how complicated things had become since then. It was when she suggested the commercial contest that I first wondered if she wasn’t planning to side with me.

But who knew for sure? Could Kuroha’s judgment be correct instead, which meant that Maria was really favouring the agency? Hmm, I had no idea. Perhaps I’d try asking Maria if I could find the right time.

“Well it isn’t as if only Big Brother Sueharu will be participating in this contest, you know? For what I’m proposing, Kuroha-san..... I’d want you to join in as well.”

“..... Eh?”



Kuroha probably hadn't thought she'd be involved in the commercial contest. She stiffened.

"I heard about it earlier from Big Brother Sueharu. The 'Ultramarine Channel'..... Tetsuhiko-san's idea or something. Why not? It smells very much like youth. I even admire it a little. Perhaps for the time being you could even call yourselves the 'Ultramarine Alliance'. With the members of the 'Ultramarine Channel' on board, then maybe we can have a good fight."

"Is this a joke? We're only high school students, you know? It'll be impossible for us to win against professionals." Kuroha leerily inquired of Maria.

"Is that really the case?"

Maria looked over the lineup of characters presently assembled.

"I can personally guarantee that Big Brother Sueharu at his best has a magnetism that's top tier even amongst the rest of the entertainment world. And Shirokusa-san. You're also a professional yourself, and at that one with a strong fixation over Big Brother Sueharu..... correct?"

Shirokusa displayed a moment of hesitation before eventually giving her honest agreement.

"..... Yes, I am."

"I've seen many ways in which obsession can demonstrate its incredible power. At the end of the day, when it comes to making things, I think it's easiest for someone making something they love for someone they love to produce something of quality. Your obsession and conceptual ability, Shirokusa-san. I predict that if you can put those two things together, you could very well make a proposal capable of competing with a professional's. What do you say? Doesn't Big Brother Sueharu starring in a commercial you came up with..... get you fired up?"

Shirokusa gently combed out her beautiful black hair.

“If I do say so myself – I don’t feel like I’m going to lose.”

The contrast between this proud, overwhelmingly self-confident Shirokusa and those times when she had been cowed into submission was such that she appeared three times cooler and more beautiful than she usually was.

“I’ve been watching your work, Shirokusa-chan.”

“?!”

President Shun abruptly locked onto Shirokusa.

It must have felt pretty disgusting. Shirokusa shuddered.

“A place little more than a club is hardly the place for someone as talented as you. If you’re alright with it, why not try working with us on the commercial our agency’s going to make? This time around we’ll make the commercial whatever you propose.”

Tsk, the shakedown had come without delay. Without Shirokusa’s proposal and script, we had no chance of winning the commercial contest. Was that what the president had determined? If so, he was probably..... not mistaken.

I could sense that things were taking a dangerous turn, but President Shun’s suggestions sounded so mesmerising even to an onlooker like me, that I never considered that they might be bait used to promptly lure Shirokusa into becoming his ally.

As I prepared to mount a response, acting first with the same idea – was Tetsuhiko.

“Do you know, Kachi, that siding with the agency only means that, at the end of the day, you’re just going to be made into one of their lackeys?”

Tetsuhiko spoke matter-of-factly while looking threateningly at President Shun.

“I’ve said it before, haven’t I? You’ll become an amateur if you’re surrounded by other professionals. Would that really satisfy you?”

“That’s—”

“Besides, we’ve got Sueharu here in the ‘Ultramarine Alliance’. If anyone can make your dreams come true – it’s us.”

“.....”

There was a short pause. But without much agonising, Shirokusa came to a decision.

“I’m going to follow Suu-chan. I don’t appreciate how Kai-kun made me feel like I was being provoked, but what he said was the truth after all, and as for that guy – I don’t like him very much anyway.”

“That guy”, of course, referred to President Shun.

The president broke into a peerless smile, as if to say menacingly that he hoped Shirokusa wouldn’t regret her decision. She, however, ignored this, and raised her shapely nose up towards the sky.

“If we’re going to do this, Uncle, I assume you’ll be alright with splitting the money to cover production costs evenly between the two groups?”

“..... Yes. That would be fair.”

“Perhaps it would also be better to leave the creation of the special website and such to you, Uncle. You would be playing the umpire, so to speak.”

“Of course. I’ll make arrangements.”

“Now that that’s settled, since our agency has the overwhelming advantage in everything from experience to financial muscle – the contest shall begin a week from now. What about holding it on..... the three days starting Saturday, the 30th of September and ending on Monday, the 2nd of October? With a shorter time period it would then be impossible for the agency to secure a production team, likely making the circumstances for both sides somewhat more equal.”

I see. This schedule was impossible. But I could also understand that – that it

was precisely because it was so tight that as a result the gap between the agency and some high school students was narrowed. As the agency managed to lock down the services of best-selling idols or famous producers, so would our odds of victory decrease proportionately.

“Uncle, can I enlist your help in securing the cameramen and editorial staff Big Brother Sueharu and company will require?”

“Sure, I do have some connections. It probably wouldn’t be much of a contest otherwise if I didn’t do at least that much.”

“Thank you.”

I had expected no less from Maria. She had sufficiently created enough of a balance such that it now seemed like there would be a fair fight. While I sensed that she had some sort of ulterior motive, I could also feel her fastidiousness towards parity. The only thing was perhaps I should try ascertaining where she stood.

“More importantly, Momo, you’re on my side, aren’t you? You’re going to appear in our commercial, right?”

“Eh? No, I won’t.”

My next lines I delivered in a tone as if asking Maria how she could suggest something so incredulous.

“Wha- Wait, what?! Seriously, I was really counting on your popularity, you know?!”

“Haru.....”

“Suu-chan.....”

Kuroha and Shirokusa’s gazes were once again freezing. Was this not becoming some kind of trend?

“But I mean, you’re close to me, Momo, so no matter how I think about it, you’d have to favour me, right?”

“I want to show just how much I’ve grown over these last six years – so I think I’m going to star for Shun-san instead.”

“No, no, no, I swear I don’t want any part of this battle manga-esque turn of events! My life depends on this, so please, have mercy on me.”

I got on my knees with rapid speed.

“Sueharuuu, you’ve gotta be kidding meee. Getting down on your knees in the middle of this kind of conversation?!”

“You dumbass, our chances of winning are gonna fall by a whole lot if Momo becomes our enemy! Is this not the time to use our tears or any other means necessary in order to make her relent?! Because she’s really good and super famous, okay?!”

“I mean, you’re right, but, it was just kind of inappropriate to do that in the whole flow of things, you know?”

“Big Brother Sueharu.....”

Maria squatted down, gently took my hand, and brought me to my feet.

“–Do your best, okay? ♡”

“Oi, listen to me!”

“How about doing it this way, Shun-san?”

When Maria turned around, President Shun gave a satisfied nod.

“Well, it probably wouldn’t be much of a contest otherwise without all these arrangements. Not bad terms at all.”

Something bothered me, though. I didn’t think Maria would be the type to offer her allegiance to the president.....

“–I see!”

Maria sought salvation from me. Which meant that, it was reasonable to view this development – as the result of President Shun having something on Maria. That was why she couldn't leave the agency's side. That was why she had to fight us with all her might.

This whole plan *itself* was the hand with which Maria reached out to me for assistance.

She wanted me to destroy President Shun. Only by that then could she also be saved.

While I couldn't let out from my mouth that I knew she had her reasons, I still wanted to sympathise with Maria. In other words, there was something I had to do.

Knowing the truth, I whispered into Maria's ear.

“Momo, are you sure that it's alright that you didn't add in the condition that you'll quit the agency if we win?”

“Big Brother Sueharu.....”

“..... I'm worried, you know? About leaving you near someone like that.”

“..... Thank you, Big Brother Sueharu. I'll secretly add in the condition about me quitting the agency later. It's alright, I'll convince Shun-san, I'll show you.”

All right. This meant that Maria could be saved too. All that remained – was for us to win.

“-Erm.”

Shirokusa raised her arm, to which Maria held out the palm of her hand, gesturing to her to speak.

“While I'd also like the detailed terms of this contest to be put into a list..... before that there's one thing I'd like to point out.”

“What is it?”

“Assuming that Momosaka-san is going to be starring in the agency’s commercial..... it would be to our overwhelming disadvantage if that were to be, for example, announced on live television.”

“..... I see. In that case, while this commercial contest won’t preclude the actors involved from their work, we’ll forbid the mentioning of anything related to the commercials while they’re on the job..... Would you be alright with that, Shun-san?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“And you, Shirokusa-san?”

“Yes, that would be good enough for me.”

“Then it’s decided.”

Shirokusa was deliberating something with her index finger pressed against her lips. As one would expect of a novelist, this pose made her look very intellectual.

Maria caught her breath, then surveyed all the people present.

“Right, then let us now disperse from here at this juncture. I will shortly send the list of terms either to Big Brother Sueharu or Tetsuhiko-san. Thank you all for coming today.”

And with that signalled the conclusion of our discussions at Hardy Pro.

\*

<sup>1</sup>Converted from 20 *jo*, or the size of one *tatami* mat. For you Americans, that’s about 323 square feet. Our beloved author was too lazy to pick another number from the one in the prologue, so I was also too lazy to write up another TL note from scratch.

<sup>2</sup>A poor localisation of *choi waru oyaji*, which refers to middle-age men that

come close to the image of a Latin or Italian “macho” and accordingly combine a certain fashion style most popularly advocated by the magazine *LEON*. Come to think of it, it would have been so much more efficient for both me and you, dear reader, for you to have googled images of this yourself.



## Part 3

“..... And with that, the 1st Round Table Meeting of the ‘Ultramarine Alliance’, formerly known as the Entertainment Appreciation Society, is now in session.”

Sunday, the next day. Tetsuhiko thus proclaimed to the members gathered inside my house first thing in the morning.

The living room was wrapped in tension. The other participants present were Kuroha and Shirokusa. It was a new beginning with a total of four members.

Acting as chairman, Tetsuhiko drove the proceedings forward.

“Without further ado, here are the official terms Maria-chan has sent over. I’ve printed them out, so please do try reading them on your own.”

There were two A4-sized pieces of paper, densely filled with words.

I immediately lost the desire to read.

It was like a contract or something. The kind of thing that made you feel sleepy immediately after starting to read it.

“How is it, Tetsuhiko? Did they add anything weird outside of the conditions Momo mentioned yesterday?”

“Nope. It all sounds about right for Maria-chan. You can think of the terms written here to be unchanged from the ones she mentioned yesterday. Anything outside of that is more or less legalese, or additional conditions to prevent rule-breaking.”

President Shun aside, I thought that Maria hoped for a contest that would be fair and square. She had probably been kind enough to prepare the contents

of the contract too. If the latter passed through Tetsuhiko's checks without a problem, then naturally I had no objections to raise either.

“The commercial is going to be for a sports drink that is set to go on sale in the near future. What Kachi's father has told us is that he ‘wants to market the drink to young people, so we should opt for a youthful approach’. You were supposed to bring some samples of the drink, Kachi?”

“Here they are.”

From a hand-carry bag Shirokusa retrieved and laid out four bottles of a sports drink I had never seen before.

Kuroha murmured as she picked up one of the bottles and glanced over it.

“So then, what are we going to do? I'll be able to commit myself fully to this, since all the clubs are taking a break this week, but.....”

“What should we do?”she asked, to which “what *should* we do?”..... would have been my honest reaction. I was three times as motivated as anyone else, but I didn't yet have so much as a vision.

“What are your thoughts, Tetsuhiko?”

“More importantly, you should be asking about Kachi's.”

Our gazes coalesced onto Shirokusa. Shirokusa herself, however, hadn't been listening to the conversation.

“..... Yes, this way..... okay, that's cleared. .... Yes, everything's alright. This way we can win.....”

Shirokusa was reading the contract-esque list of terms, all the while muttering to herself.

Of the things she muttered there was a phrase that caught my attention, to which I didn't let slip the chance to ask her about.

“Shiro, can we win.....?”

In the instant that I so inquired of her, Shirokusa slapped the paper onto the table.

With a loud *bang* the dark clouds which had started to drift in broke up.

Shirokusa rose to her feet, and faced me as I sat at the dining table with an undefeatable smile.

“–We can win.”

“*Wait, really?*” I thought to myself for a second, but Shirokusa’s eyes were filled with spirit and conviction.

The cheer that gave me instantly cleared away the anxiety which had lain in the depths of my heart.

“I see, so we’ve won then–” as I said that I smiled back at her.

My gaze met Shirokusa’s and we grinned meaningfully at each other. It was a very delightful feeling.

“Erm, Haru..... Kachi-san aside, you clearly don’t understand what’s happening, do you?”

“Shh! Shida-chan, don’t you know that Sueharu just adores these kinds of *chuunibyuu*-esque developments? Let him be.”

“Yes, of course I knew, but..... all the same it makes me embarrassed just to watch.”

“I took a picture of you smiling earlier so I’m going to be making that into a tweet. With captions, of course.”

“You moronnnnn! Tetsuhikooooo! You do that and I’ll kill youuuuu!”

If he did that to me of course I’d feel like dying!

“Heheheh! I’d like to see you try!”

“Shut up!”

It was a firm voice that made us stop. Shirokusa stared fixedly at us with both hands on her hips.

“We don’t have much time. Listen to my plan and then act to make it a reality. If my plan materialises – then we won’t lose.”

Tetsuhiko and I put down the fists we had brandished, while Kuroha nodded.

*–Let’s do it. And then let’s win.*

As I so murmured, we all gathered wordlessly towards where Shirokusa stood.

I understood.

That if a girl who was timid at her core had said that much, then what she said could not be mistaken.

We listened to Shirokusa’s plan and began to move.

Towards the end of September in my second year in high school, as scent of autumn began to hang in the air–

The battle with our youth on the line commenced.

# Chapter 4: He who laughs last

## Part 1

The 30th of September, Saturday. The first day of the commercial contest, and the first day the commercials would be released to the public.

“Right, then...”

On the top floor of a luxurious mansion in Meguro City bought two years prior—

After both of them had each taken a bath, Maria, who had eaten a late dinner, unfolded her notebook in the living room, accompanied by her elder sister who had since returned from her part-time job at a restaurant.

“Oooh, what’s up, Maria? You’ve brought the laptop out.”

“I thought I’d watch Big Brother Sueharu’s commercial with you, Big Sis.”

“Hm? You haven’t seen Sueharu-kun’s commercial yet?”

“You said you wanted to watch it too, right, Big Sis? Since we’ve got this opportunity, I took the laptop out in advance hoping we could watch it together.”

“Oh ho..... I appreciate your intentions, but are you sure about this?”

“About what?”

“I’ll get to watch when you fall in love all over again with Sueharu-kun, you know? I’ll take a photo at just the right moment.”

“..... Big Sis, you’re so mean.”

“Hehehe, just realised? A bit late for that, you know?”

“Pfft.”

“Awww, what a sourpuss..... You’re so cute, Maria!”

As Maria turned away, Eri leaned forward and embraced her with her ample bosom.

At present Eri was twenty-three, her social status being a university student.

It was after Maria’s income had skyrocketed that she told her elder sister *“things are alright now, so I want you to live your own life”*. Eri gladly accepted Maria’s assistance all while feeling extremely grateful for her kindness, and she passed the high-school equivalency examination. Last year, she enrolled at one of Tokyo’s Big6 universities.<sup>1</sup>

Maria had savings of her own, so she thought that Eri should at the very least have fun while she was a university student, but Eri said something to the effect of her being of a frugal disposition and she continued to work part-time.

*“Even if my younger sister’s a huge success, it doesn’t mean that I’ve succeeded. I’m just accepting her support for the moment,”* was what Eri had said.

For that Maria respected her elder sister wholeheartedly.

It was by no means easy to go back to studying while having a hugely successful younger sister; being in a position to survive without having to work. It was precisely because she had been raised by parents corrupted by money, and watched them try to swindle any amount they could from others, that Maria knew very well how valuable that kind of sincerity and poise were. For this kind of elder sister, she thought, she wouldn’t mind giving any amount of support.

It was due to her elder sister that she had lived to this point. If it were for her elder sister, she’d have no qualms about even becoming a demon.

Maria pledged on her heart to do so.

“Right then, perhaps I’ll have you show me yours first, Maria ~?”

Eri’s goading – the force of her boobs, in other words, directed against Maria’s back was honestly compelling enough for shame of their difference in bust size to cross Maria’s mind. Once in this clingy mode, however, her elder sister would tease her about anything, so without putting up any futile resistance, Maria navigated towards the specially created webpage for the time being.

“Ooh ~, so the videos are lined up side by side.”

“It’s been made such that you won’t be able to skip either of them, and only after you’ve watched both videos will you be able to go to the voting page.”

“I see, it’s all to prevent cheating, huh.”

“Yup.”

“Oh, we can see how many votes there are right now? Hmm, there’s quite the big difference.”

It was eleven p.m. at present, twenty-three hours since voting had begun. As for the numbers, the agency had about fifty-two thousand votes while the Ultramarine Channel had about thirty-four thousand.

“Releasing the vote counts to the public was a condition made by Big Brother Sueharu’s team.”

It had probably been Tetsuhiko’s idea – was what Maria had discerned.

He had probably figured that President Shun wouldn’t shy away from using every trick available. If the vote counts were manipulated through hacking they’d have no chance of winning no matter what they did, and beyond that there were still other dishonest methods to go about doing things, such as paying off the people tallying the votes. Publicly displaying the numbers of votes had undoubtedly been suggested because it would stamp these things out entirely.

“Well, Uncle and I have tried to defend against any dishonesty, though.”



What Maria sought was a fair competition. For that purpose she had declared to President Shun that under no circumstances would she forgive him if he cheated.

Big Brother Sueharu seemed to have gotten the wrong idea, but Maria felt no sense of obligation towards President Shun whatsoever. They were just business partners, in a relationship where they could reliably communicate what each of them wanted to say to the other.

Only to be honest their chemistry wasn't great – was what Maria felt.

President Shun was too logical. To put it more simply, *he lacked respect for actors and the artistry required of his job.*

Maria stayed on at the agency out of a debt towards Grandma Nina, who had taken her in, and also because of the many memories she had there. Beyond that – there was also the possibility of Sueharu returning.

For those reasons Maria was indifferent to whether she won or lost the commercial contest.

Only–

Yes, only that she was interested in Sueharu's acting. She wanted to see him at full force, so she hadn't held back during her commercial.

If the agency won, Sueharu would come back. They'd be able to act together again. Win.

If Sueharu won, perhaps he'd return to school, or go to some other agency. In that event she'd also have quit from Hardy Pro and be free to follow him. Win.

In other words, regardless of the outcome Maria wouldn't have anything to lose.

Only – she was scared. Of possibly being disappointed by Sueharu.

Waiting for her elder sister to watch Sueharu together had also been for the purpose of having someone nearby when the shock of Sueharu's acting missing her expectations came. That's how terrified she was.

"Come on, Maria. Play it."

"Oh, yeah."

With the sensation of her elder sister's chin against her right shoulder, Maria clicked the left mouse button.

\* \* \* \* \*

*"–The season of love has arrived."*

The sky was a perfectly clear blue as far as it stretched. A group of two men and women played in a campground draped in autumn leaves.

Cycling, autumn-leaf viewing, fishing – the four of them were fully enjoying their youth.

The camera showed Maria's point of view. Maria stared fixedly at one of the men in the group.

The man was at present a popular young actor and played Maria's older brother in the drama "The Ideal Little Sister" – in other words, he was also the star of the show.

Once night fell there was a barbeque. After that the four made to return to their own bungalows, but the man Maria was staring at was having an intimate conversation with the other woman, and she couldn't call out to him. All this while, the other man had his eyes on Maria.

Having returned to her bungalow, Maria guzzled a bottle of the sports drink but her palpitations wouldn't stop.

It was at that point when she heard a knock.

"Yes?"

The door opened, and beyond it stood the man who had been watching Maria earlier – holding a sports drink as a gift.

“You made it seem like you had something you wanted to talk about, so.....”

“..... Yeah.”

The man stepped into Maria’s bungalow.

*“Enriching love and youth – the ‘Aquaman’ sports drink.”*

\* \* \* \* \*

As the video ended Eri poked Maria’s cheek while wearing a huge grin.

“Ho ~ , Ho ~ .”

“..... What are you trying to say, Big Sis?”

“My dear little sister..... acting out such a steamy scene with a hottie like that..... So what happened after that, huh?! You cheeky little.....!”

There were times when her elder sister’s teasing became a little annoying, at which point Maria would just play dumb emotionlessly.

“I thought we did very well to get actors of this calibre while working on such a hectic schedule. And this is incredible once you consider how little time we had to film and produce the commercial. Well, but I do think that Shun-san probably tried too hard without regard for cost, though.”

“Where did you all film?”

“Hokkaido. It was really just all too demanding..... I’m never doing anything on this kind of schedule again.”

“*Sigh* ~ , terraced houses, huh ~ . Makes your heart pound even if you already know, doesn’t it ~ .”

“..... Yeah, I guess.”

Maria felt that it had been quite the blunt approach towards the theme of “youth”.

It had probably been due to self-confidence in their side having greater potential. Using popular actors, capturing beautiful scenery – so long as they could do those things there was no need for detours. It was all very straightforward and simple to understand, as if to say that this was the way a king fought.

Maria thought that she’d probably do the same thing, if she had been in President Shun’s position. With the upper hand, one ran a lower chance of failure attacking head on.

“Alright, next, next! Maria’s beloved Big Brother Sueharu’s video, let’s go!”

“What do you mean, ‘beloved’.....”

Yes, it was true, but all the same it was embarrassing hearing it from her elder sister.

Eri gave her a hug as Maria fidgeted with her fingers in shame.

“Oooh ~ , my darling little sister’s so cute ~ ! Take this!”

Uh oh, her elder sister was getting annoying.

Wanting to do something about that oppressiveness, Maria clicked on Sueharu’s video.

\* \* \* \* \*

The setting was a high school classroom.

Sueharu lay flat over his table while Tetsuhiko looked down upon him.

“*Sigh* ~ , boring.”

“Hey, hey, are you dumb, Sueharu? This is your only life, the only time you get to be a student. What’s the point if you don’t enjoy yourself?”

“Well yeah, but..... what should I do?”

“If things aren’t interesting, then all you have to do is make them interesting.”

“..... That’s it.”

The two of them started running.

Then there was text in enormous calligraphic font displayed across the entire screen.

– *“The Ultramarine Alliance”*

The two of them tried their best to talk to Shirokusa as she loitered in the library. While initially they were ignored, Shirokusa became increasingly moved by their passion and eventually she joined in.

–*“The Ultramarine Alliance is.....”*

Kuroha was playing badminton. Tetsuhiko jabbed Sueharu with his elbow, urging him on. Sueharu bashfully stepped up towards Kuroha, then yelled something loudly.

Kuroha turned red in the face and surrounding them there was an uproar. Sueharu fled out of excessive shame, while from the way Kuroha moved her lips one could tell that she had whispered “idiot”.

–*“An alliance for all those who just want to have fun.”*

The feed turned black, then shifted to a room inside the gymnasium. On a table drinks and snacks were placed.

“Yahoooo, we finally got a room!”

“Hold on, Suu-chan?! You’re getting too excited!”

“Ooh, you’re such a troublemaker, Haru.”

Tetsuhiko made an announcement.

“We, the ‘Ultramarine Alliance’, hereby as of this moment announce the establishment of the ‘Ultramarine Channel’.”

The laptop Tetsuhiko held showed the ‘Ultramarine Channel’ on WE TUBE.

Sueharu’s fist pierced the sky.

“We’re gonna show the whole world that we’re the ones having the most fun!”

The four of them then toasted their sports drinks.

“Oooo ~ ~ ~ yeahhhhh!”

They then each merrily jumped up and down in their own fashion.

“*Aquaman – Enjoy Youth.*”

\* \* \* \* \*

The video ended.

In her heart Maria sorted out her emotions.

*..... I see, so that’s how it is. So this is what it’s become.*

*I’m shaking..... less than I thought I would. Alright, I’m not disappointed.*

Maria gave a secret sigh as Eri grinfully nuzzled against her cheek.

“*Sigh, I couldn’t tell very well from that other video before, but Sueharu-kun’s grown up pretty nicely, hasn’t he. He gets a lot of points for how green and innocent he looks, you know ~ . Comes across as a bit of an idiot, though.*”

“..... You think so too after all, Big Sis?”

“Hm? Is it bad to?”

“No, it isn’t, but.....”

In her head Maria exchanged the emotions she had experienced for logical words.

“I think the same, but because I can’t ignore Big Brother Sueharu’s past no matter what, he draws my attention. In that sense, while there were four actors, there wasn’t a good balance between them. To be honest really, Big Brother Sueharu was so commandingly eye-catching that I almost didn’t see anyone else. Well, Big Brother Sueharu’s acting skills and flashiness obviously played a part too, but I think how his character stood out as an overexcited idiot is also another reason why he grabs your attention.”

“Ahh, well that’s true. Perhaps it would be different after watching it a few times, but I don’t have any impression of the other three actors either.”

“I also get what they’re aiming for with their content. Not romance, but selling out completely for boys and girls sharing their youth together. Personally, I feel like this kind of approach is a little out of the ordinary, because when dealing with youth without touching romance, you see unisex configurations a lot more often. Like the cast being all idols and the stage being a girls’ high school, or something. This way it’s much easier to narrow down your target audience, after all. I think that doing it in classes or schools may be more of an exception rather than the rule if you’re going to jumble up boys and girls. In that sense this is kind of unique, and at the same time *very much like the real high school experience.*”

Eri gave a thoughtful sigh.

“I seeee. It is true that when you put high school boys and girls together, it always ends up going down the romantic route.”

“That’s why I think that Big Brother Sueharu and company have made the interesting parts stand out, and by having filmed the inauguration ceremony

of the ‘Ultramarine Channel’ they’re going to be running from now on, they’ve simultaneously managed to convey the kind of content they want to promote. Consequently the popularity of the ‘Ultramarine Channel’ will then skyrocket; it’s so clear what they’re trying to aim for. But–”

“But?”

“That part’s a *distraction*.”

To elaborate, there was too much information. Maria could understand the desire to provide information about the “Ultramarine Channel”, but the primary objective had been to make a “sports drink commercial”. At this rate it was only natural if they were asked if this was an advertisement for the “Ultramarine Channel” instead.

It might’ve been Shirokusa’s fault – was what Maria had surmised.

Perhaps it was something like a bad habit of novelists to put in too much information. In commercials information was to be minimised – if possible the stuff to be conveyed was to be narrowed down into one message, imprinted in the audience in the form of images, and voice lines reduced.

Maria thought that their concept and target had been interesting. But they hadn’t been refined.

“Perhaps I overestimated them.....” Maria murmured under her breath.

“–So, speaking of Sueharu-kun.....”

At her elder sister’s voice Maria lifted her face.

“What was that last smile of his all about.....?”

Yes, that alone had bothered Maria.

Comparing the commercials one could tell. That this contest was a victory for the agency. The agency could probably win by quite a margin even without doing anything special.



But the “Ultramarine Channel” team had left a mark at the very end of their video. Whilst everyone left the room drinking their sports drinks, the lips of Sueharu, the last person remaining, had curled upward.

It had been a very – “*haughty*” smile.

It was as if Sueharu was part of some conspiracy, or perhaps it didn’t fit the dumbish role he had been playing the entire time. At any rate it was a peculiar smile, completely incongruent with the image Sueharu had presented thus far. Crossed with the acting skills driven by his unique charisma, Maria had found it oddly bothersome and couldn’t get it out of her mind.

Had he hoped to make some sort of impact with the contrast? Even so Maria couldn’t think of it as something he had done to win.

“It..... bothers me a little.....”

“Uh huh.”

But still, Sueharu deserved all the attention for being able to leave such an impression with just one smile. *As expected*, perhaps it should be said. He was, as before, a head above the other actors of his generation. Though Maria of course had the self-confidence that she definitely wouldn’t lose to him either.

It was at this moment when Maria’s cellphone rang. The caller was President Shun.

“Good work on the filming today, Momosaka-chan. Have you settled down?”

“Yes, at the moment I’m just relaxing at home.”

“In that case, have you watched the commercials yet?”

“I just did, as a matter of fact.”

“To put it bluntly, it’s an overwhelming victory for us, no?”

“..... Probably.”

Sueharu's smile bothered her, but it would not factor into a comeback. In reality, the agency had about a 1.5 times advantage in votes. An obvious result, because the agency's product was so much more complete.

"An annoying brat to be sure, but even now I can confirm that Maru-chan has flair. Momosaka-chan, I can entrust you with reining him in, can't I?"

"I understand."

To President Shun, obtaining Sueharu was already a foregone conclusion. Not being able to control him after that appeared to trouble him more.

What was important to Maria was if Sueharu would be able to work. Anything that got in his way, she would remove. If he got into a dispute with President Shun, she would settle it. This time she wanted to use her own record to get Sueharu more work, until he could do so to his heart's content. That was what Maria thought repaying Sueharu meant.

"I pray for Big Brother Sueharu's success from the bottom of my heart, so I'll do nothing but try my very best to make sure he gets a lot of work."

"..... Good then."

The call ended. Arbitrarily, as usual.

"Maria, you're not going to vote?"

"..... Which side do you want to vote for, Big Sis?"

"Is it okay if I..... choose whichever side I want?"

"Yup. You really don't need to show favouritism to me, you know."

At that Eri then spoke plainly.

"In that case I'll vote for Sueharu-kun, I guess. I wanna see what those kids do for a little while longer."

Maria's eyes widened.

“That’s a little surprising.....”

“It is? After all, I mean, yours was pretty ordinary, Maria, the typical kind of commercial you see all the time. A love story makes the heart throb of course, but it’s way too direct. Apart from you, Maria, there wasn’t another actor I was particularly attached to anyway. Because I want to see what those real-life high school students are going to do after this, I’m casting my one vote for them as a show of my support – that’s how I think.”

*I see, so that way of thinking also exists, huh.* From an older person’s perspective, perhaps it was easier to watch and get behind a youth of high school boys and girls free from the awkward involvement of romance.

*Was this what they had aimed for?* But if they had it deviated away from the theme of appealing to young people. With the real-life discrepancy in voting numbers, Maria understood the aim but the result was a little lacking.

*If so..... was this how it would truly end.....? In a victory for the agency.....?*

Eating at Maria in the back of her mind, was Sueharu’s smile at the end of the commercial.

Maria abruptly took out her phone and made a call.

“Ooh, what’s up, Momo?” Sueharu picked up immediately.

But for some reason..... it was noisy in the background.

It sounded like there were a lot of people gathered, but somehow it didn’t seem like they were in the middle of a street.

“Big Brother Sueharu, where are you right now?”

“Who, me? Hehehe, that’s a secret.”

Sueharu’s uncharacteristically roundabout manner of speaking, stacked on top of his haughty smile in the commercial, greatly provoked Maria’s curiosity.

“What are you doing? Is this related to the commercial?”

“Oi, Sueharu! We’ve finished preparing!”

The voice she could hear in the background was Tetsuhiko’s.

*.....Preparing? This commotion was..... Could they actually be filming?!  
When the commercials had already been made public?!*

“Sorry, Momo. I’m a little busy so I’m going to have to hang up.”

“–Big Brother Sueharu!”

Maria questioned Sueharu like she was physically pulling his hand to hold him back.

“Did you watch my commercial? How was I?”

Sueharu appeared to chuckle. From the phone immediately returned a cheerful voice.

“You’ve really become a good actor, huh. If you show me something like that, there’s no way I’m gonna lose either.”

“..... You haven’t accepted you’ve lost?”

“Course not. What my ‘full power’ is right now – I’ll show you.”

At that moment the call suddenly ended. When Maria tried calling again, the other phone had been switched off.

*–This isn’t over yet. Big Brother Sueharu’s still doing something.*

Maria’s heart bounded.

*That’s right. It was Big Brother Sueharu who had taught me the importance of standing up and facing things with all one’s might. There was no way things could end with just that commercial.*

The intense throbbing of a rekindled first love overwhelmed Maria's chest.

Sparkling lights glimmered in front of her eyes.

*–Ahh, Big Brother Sueharu had returned.*

\*

<sup>1</sup>A group of six prominent universities in the Tokyo area which comprise the Tokyo Big6 Baseball League. They are Hosei University, Keio University, Meiji University, Rikkyo University, The University of Tokyo and Waseda University.

## Part 2

“Oi, Sueharu. It doesn’t mean you can let the cat out of the bag just because it’s Maria-chan, you know!”

Tetsuhiko snatched away my phone and turned it off. I explained to him that I hadn’t had that intention though, but with a “*yeah, yeah*” Tetsuhiko simply ignored me.

He tossed my phone back to me.

“I’ve got a message from Acid Snake’s Maa-chan. He said that timewise it has to be settled in an instant or we’ll be in trouble.”

“Oh, I’ll bet. It’s fine, I’ve just finished getting fired up.”

“..... Judging from your eyes, I guess your switch is on, huh.”

It was as he said. The first switch had already been flipped. Right now I was a superhero. Fireworks were going off inside my head. When I was in this state I had nothing left to fear.

“Maru-san, it’s time! If you will!”

“Right.”

As I stood up after being called, I was abruptly assaulted by a dizzy spell.

“Ah.....”

“Watch out, Haru!”

Kuroha frantically held me up. Thanks to her it concluded without me falling.

“Haru, are you okay.....?! Listen, I’m going to bring some gelatin over right now, so have some alright? You really have been cutting down on food too much.....”

It was true that I was hungry. For a week I had sworn off all carbohydrates and eaten as little as possible of everything else. When I looked in the mirror a little while earlier, I saw bloodshot eyes, sunken cheeks; clearly a dangerous person staring back at me.

But so be it. As of right now I had completely entered my role. Having done this much, surely it could be said that I had given my all.

“Thanks, Kuro, but it’s fine. When this is over I’ll go eat a whole bunch.”

“..... Ooh, what I am going to do with you?”

Kuroha’s “Ooh”<sup>1</sup> had appeared; proof of her acceptance.

I stepped forth again, but still some giddiness remained. Then I was hit without restraint in the back.

“Ow! Oi, Tetsuhiko! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“You said from this point you’re gonna settle things, but that walk isn’t gonna cut it, is it? I just figured you needed some motivation.”

“Tsk, as you say, dumbass.”

“I’m counting on you.”

“Leave it to me.”

The pain stretched out, returning my unsteady gait back to normal. With my reinvigorated legs I arrived at the centre of the “stage”.

I was on the roof of a building. A place which was ordinarily empty and deserted; an expanse of only raw concrete. Now lights shone upon it, however, turning it into a kind of “stage”.

The atmosphere was tense. Everyone in the staff knew that this was a contest which would be decided in an instant. Spirit and unease dwelled within us all – failure was not an option.

“..... Suu-chan.”

Standing and facing me was Shirokusa. This was her first shot at acting, but she seemed more confident than I had anticipated.

“Shiro, are you alright? Are you nervous?”

“I am, but..... more than that, I’m excited. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I could so much as act together with you, Suu-chan.”

“I see.”

A signal came from the director.

A contest which would be decided in an instant. I didn’t want to have any regrets.

Therefore I would give this my all. Do everything that I could, all in this present moment.

As I so thought I flipped a switch in my head, setting into motion my second transformation.

Then I turned into a different person.

\*

<sup>1</sup>From Volume 1 Chapter 2: “Kuroha’s ‘Ooh’ was a shortened version of the longer ‘Ooh, what am I going to do with you’... Examples of times she would use this phrase included, but were not limited to, her already being prepared to forgive the other party while still being somewhat dissatisfied, or... when she appeared reproachful while actually hiding her embarrassment.”



## Part 3

While voting on the first day had at some points gone back and forth, it still had been an overwhelming victory for the side of the agency.

On the second day the gap had widened even further, with the agency winning more than twice as many votes.

It was as things began to feel a little one-sided on Monday, October 2nd – the third and final day of voting – when the news reached Maria’s ears.

“Now we bring you the news that, for the first time in six years, Acid Snake have collaborated with Maru-chan on the music video for their latest song!”

On that day, upon hearing those words on the morning news channel she was watching with her elder sister, Maria froze in the process of scooping out her yogurt.

“We have come to learn that Maru-chan is taking the lead role in Acid Snake’s music video for their new song ‘Narcolepsy’, releasing today! Maru-chan is at present competing in the ‘Aquaman’ sports drink commercial contest, and members of the ‘Ultramarine Alliance’ he acted with also play full roles in the music video. The acting skills of the novelist Kachi Shirokusa-san, and Maru-chan’s childhood friend Shida Kuroha-san, have also attracted attention.”

“Eh?! Maria, you knew about this?!”

“..... No.”

But she promptly figured out that the filming two days earlier had been for this purpose.

Maria immediately proceeded to gather information on the Internet. The reinstatement of a partnership which had in the past created a social phenomenon, was more than newsworthy enough to display as the top story on news sites.

“Is this them trying to promote their commercial by doing other work or—”

That thought momentarily crossed Maria’s mind before she was reminded of her conversation with Shirokusa.

*“Assuming that Momosaka-san is going to be starring in the agency’s commercial..... it would be to our overwhelming disadvantage if that were to be, for example, announced on live television.”*

*“..... I see. In that case, while this commercial contest won’t preclude the actors involved from their work, we’ll forbid the mentioning of anything related to the commercials while they’re on the job..... Would you be alright with that, Shun-san?”*

*..... I see. It had been decided that the commercial contest wouldn’t preclude the actors involved from doing their work.*

For Sueharu and company – Ultramarine Alliance members – they were just working on a music video, not publicising their commercial. The media had simply tied and presented those two things together of their own accord.

“Shirokusa-san, so it was from that point which you began picturing this development.....”

With that established, Maria all of a sudden became interested in the video’s content. Upon searching, she found that the music video had already been uploaded on WE TUBE.

“For now let’s just watch it, Maria.”

“Yes, Big Sis.”

Maria then hit the play button on the music video.

\* \* \* \* \*

The music video began with the close-up of Sueharu's smile. That clearly emphasised that it was a continuation of the commercial.

As Sueharu bade farewell to the life so filled with youthfulness, he became tortured by a sleeping disorder. After waking up suddenly in the middle of the night, he chanced upon an urban legend of a certain knife on the Internet. It was written that the knife was a special object that made its owners hear voices urging them to kill.

During the day, Sueharu was attacked by an intense urge to sleep. The boundary between illusion and reality began to blur.

Whilst being tormented by a daydream one day, Sueharu picked up a folding knife – the knife from the urban legend.

*“The sneering voice I hear from somewhere*

*The smell of blood floating in the air*

*My heart's dying from exhaustion–”*

The singing and lyrics followed Sueharu's downward spiral.

Having sensed his strange transformation, Kuroha came to Sueharu's house.

His concerned childhood friend – Sueharu brutally murdered.

*“What am I doing*

*To go where is my will*

*All that I hear is*

*I need to kill”*

The next to arrive at his house was his friend Tetsuhiko.

Sueharu, who invited him in, showed off Kuroha's dead body.

He then seized the opportunity to thrust the knife into Tetsuhiko while the latter lay astonished by the corpse.

Sueharu ran out of his house. His descent into madness accelerated.

Meanwhile, questioned by the police about the crimes, Sueharu's lover Shirokusa began investigating the knife. She wrote the results of her investigation into a letter, stuffed it inside the breast of her clothing, then went looking around for Sueharu.

The two of them reunited in the city at night. On a nostalgic rooftop of a building where they had looked up at the stars together.

Tears streamed from Shirokusa as she tried to address Sueharu. Perhaps because of that the light returned to Sueharu's eyes.

Shirokusa smiled, then ran towards him. Yet—

Sueharu pierced the knife into Shirokusa's heart. There was no doubt or hesitation. Sueharu's heart felt joy at the crime of stabbing his lover.

From the lifeless Shirokusa the letter fell. Sueharu picked it up calmly and began to read.

It was written inside that upon pursuing the origin of the knife Sueharu had retrieved, it turned out to be no more than an ordinary folding knife. The knife had simply been dropped by coincidence. However, it had served as the impetus for the urban legend and Sueharu's daydream melding into each other, causing him to fall into madness. It had all been an unfortunate phenomenon created by the intersection of disease, urban legend and pure coincidence..... spelled out in no uncertain terms by the letter.

Yes, it had all been an illusion created by narcolepsy.

*“AAAAaAaaaaAaaaaah!”*

In the silence left behind by the song ending..... Sueharu stood on the edge

of the building and screamed in despair.

He then looked back for an instant–

“*Sorry,*”

And apologised to his lover Shirokusa, before leaping off the building.

\* \* \* \* \*

“This is.....”

Maria couldn’t stop shaking.

An insanity-hued sketch – Sueharu had performed to perfection.

“Was that really Sueharu-kun.....?” Eri whispered. “He was completely different, wasn’t he..... Sueharu-kun’s character looked so stupid in the commercial, but he can also play this sort of character..... It was like, really scary, but also super thrilling. Was that kid ever this cool.....? It was strangely sexy and made my heart pound.”

“*I understand,*” was the first thought that crossed Maria’s mind as she watched the music video.

Sueharu could perform any role, but his greatest strength was in “spotlighting a gap”.

In his breakout work, Child Star, he had become greatly popular for showing the maturation of an otherwise helpless young boy into an eventually admirable person.

Throughout the commercial, Sueharu had portrayed an idiotic character. Then without pausing, he had turned into a murderous demon in the music video. That gap – was an incredible thing to behold.

“You’ve really done it..... Shirokusa-san.”

If nothing else this proved her obsession with Sueharu. Yes, Maria

*understood very well.*

This way Maria could also see the meaning of the commercial in a different light. It was something meant to be linked to the music video. In that case there was no issue even with there being too much information, because where the topic of the music video came out, the media would provide commentary on the commercial anyway. It was a mechanism that allowed viewers to digest even an excess of information.

After watching the music video, they'd certainly want to do the same for the commercial again. They would then feel relief at seeing the four of them enjoying their youth, and hope that the relationships between them would continue. Naturally.

Right now it was 8 a.m. on the second of October. There were sixteen hours remaining until the end of voting – no time left to pull off anything new.

“Maria, your phone’s ringing, you know?”

It was a call from President Shun. Bothersome, so Maria threw her phone onto the sofa.

“You sure?”

“.....”

“Maria?”

“..... Sorry, Big Sis. Let me focus for a bit.”

The intense throbbing in her chest wouldn't stop. With these feelings inside her, she wanted to rewatch the video without any further ado.

The music video was played.

The drums, guitar and bass beated out an intense rhythm. The cacophony occasionally joining in augmented Sueharu's crazed expressions.

“..... Amazing,” Maria said unconsciously.

The more she watched the more thrilled she got. It was content filled with enough insanity to make her want to cover her eyes, but it was accompanied by a coolness and sexiness which drew her in at the same time.

“Can I do this too.....?”

It was a habit of actors to wonder unconsciously if they could also perform a difficult role after watching someone else do so.

*I can pull off this kind of madness too.....* was what Maria wanted to say, but it was difficult.

If she tried to, some innocence or cuteness would probably remain. Even if those were to be artfully erased using makeup—

“—Probably..... not.....”

A hint of slyness would probably still be there.

It would also be difficult, if one asked her to pull off the kind of moronic acting Sueharu had done in the commercial.

“Amazing..... Big Brother Sueharu’s as amazing as he was before.....”

The amplitude of the gap between those two roles was simply too large.

The more Maria watched the more she was taken in. Her heart pounded just from watching.

As she had expected, it hadn’t dimmed at all. That glittering talent of Sueharu’s at present still shone as brightly as ever.

“Amazing..... Amazing..... Big Brother Sueharu..... This even I can’t do..... Big Brother Sueharu, I still haven’t caught up to you.....”

But it was precisely so, that—

“I get to chase you again..... I’m not lonely anymore..... I’m not alone..... Because in front of me, Big Brother Sueharu..... you’re

there.....”

“Maria.....”

She noticed the handkerchief being held out to her. From both of her eyes large teardrops fell.

“..... Good for you, huh.”

“..... Yeah.”

By this point she already knew the result of the contest without having to look.





\* \* \* \* \*

It was after school on Tuesday, the 3rd of October. The day after voting on the commercials had closed.

In Meeting Room 3, which had since become the clubroom of the Entertainment Appreciation Society – also known as the “Ultramarine Alliance”, Tetsuhiko addressed Sueharu, Kuroha and Shirokusa and raised a toast.

“I’m sure all of you already know, but..... with a huge gap larger than our competition’s total number of votes, yeah boy, the commercial contest ends in a total victory for us! Take that, you piece of shit president! Alright, cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Aquaman” sports drinks were toasted.

To commemorate the victory, Shirokusa’s father had – “for the moment” he said – earlier brought in a cardboard box containing twenty-four 500ml bottles of the sports drink; there were twenty boxes in total. To each of the four members he was gifting a year’s worth of sports drinks. Upon asking, apparently they were free to do as they pleased with the three bottles a day multiplied by 365 days multiplied by four people’s worth of sports drinks.

*This doesn’t make me happy at all. There’s no way we’d finish drinking all of this. This is why the rich are beyond saving. But well..... the sports clubs would probably want some, so perhaps they could be used as bargaining chips.*

Or so Tetsuhiko thought before–

“Righttt, here are the *ohagi*<sup>1</sup> y’all ordered!”

Rena came flying into the room with both arms holding shopping bags.

Within the bags were a large amount of *ohagi*. There were twenty in total – ten soybean flour-flavoured ones and another ten of red bean variety.

“Oooh, I’ve been waiting for this, Rena!”

“I’ll just leave the receipt here then, and I look forward to y’all using me again in the future!”

Having said so Rena left without delay.

Sueharu stretched his arms out as if to plunder, then began eating the large amount of *ohagi* like he had an insatiable craving for them.

“Delicioussss! Seriously, carbs rock!”

“Good for you, Suu-chan. You couldn’t eat for a long time, after all.”

Shirokusa was in a good mood. Her profile had almost none of its typical aloofness as she grinned watching the figure of Sueharu eating.

Well, in both the commercial and music video she had gotten Sueharu to star in a script of her own making, achieved victory on top of fulfilling her dream, and even cunningly managed to play the role of his lover in the latter. How could she be in anything but high spirits?

“Ooh, you’ve been having nothing but carbs since this morning, you know? Big Sister can’t help but worry a little.”

Or so Kuroha lectured, but she also seemed to be in a good mood.

“But Tetsuhiko treating something is like saying it will snow tomorrow, you know?”

“I never said I would, though?”

“Huh?”

Tetsuhiko glanced sideways at Sueharu’s dumbfounded face while he checked the price indicated on the receipt received from Rena.

“I did say I was gonna prepare food and drinks, but I never said I was gonna

pay for them. The arrangement is if I hand over the receipts to Kachi's dad they'll be settled later. A treat for us because we won the commercial contest, apparently."

"I see, apparently the weather will be sunny tomorrow."

While he checked the forecast on his phone Sueharu again stuffed more *ohagi* into his mouth.

In this commercial contest Shirokusa had almost undoubtedly been the Most Valuable Player, due to her proposed two-part plan and the contrast created between the commercial and music video, but if there was a prize for fighting spirit it would have gone to Sueharu.

The commercial part had been settled pretty swiftly because the required members were all present and filming could be done in school.

The issue had been with the music video, and after contacting them through Shirokusa's father, Tetsuhiko together with Sueharu had conducted direct negotiations with Acid Snake.

The latter agreed to the impossible schedule out of a shared desire for popularity, but as part of what could have been called the "real work", Sueharu had sworn off carbohydrates.

*"If this is what the music video's going to be about, then it would absolutely be better if I pushed myself until my cheeks begin to sink in—"*

Hearing those words Tetsuhiko was reminded that Sueharu had been a professional after all, but he stopped himself from saying so because it would have been irritating for it to go into Sueharu's head.

With the assistance of the Shida family Sueharu had fasted enough to sharpen his spirit, and by the day of the music video's filming he was up to his shoulders in madness.

Shirokusa's plan owed everything to Sueharu's existence, for no matter how brilliant the scheme was it could surely not have won without him. They had

been able to win because the two of them were together. That was unmistakable.

“Well, with regards to the fasting, even I think you did good.”

“Huh, it’s kind of rare for you to give praise, Tetsuhiko…….”

“How dare you do something so reckless.”

“Huh? I wasn’t being reckless. I went all out because I wanted to have fun. In the first place, isn’t the ‘Ultramarine Alliance’ supposed to be an alliance for all the people who do? If so, it’s only natural that I went all out, right? *It was fun because I tried my best, wasn’t it?*”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Ahh, that was truly an idiot’s way of thinking. But it was precisely because he was an idiot that he could cut through and grasp the true essence of things.

“Are ya dumb or what?”

“You’re the one person I don’t wanna hear that from!”

“Damn you, that’s my line!”

As a quarrel thus broke out, Shirokusa spoke whilst glancing at her phone’s display. Before she had been frightened by fights between boys, but now she seemed to think nothing of them at all.

“Kai-kun, have all the receipts been collected?”

“Hm? Yeah, Rena’s was the last.”

“Papa says he’s going home since he’s finished greeting the principal. The drinks have also been loaded into the store, apparently.”

““Kay. Where’s your dad right now?”

“The school gate, he said.”

“Got it.”

Tetsuhiko exited the clubroom leaving Sueharu and company behind.

When he got to the school gate, standing there with his arm over a black-painted car was Shirokusa’s father – Souichirou, dressed immaculately in a suit. It was like a view from a fashion magazine directed at middle-aged men.

“Sorry, I’ve kept you waiting.”

“..... Just you, huh.”

The odd pause bothered Tetsuhiko, but he simply concurred.

“Well, money isn’t something which should be handed over in front of a crowd. Perhaps we could also do this inside the car?”

“..... Sure.”

Tetsuhiko sensed – that there was something Souichirou wanted to talk about.

When Tetsuhiko handed over the receipts after getting into the passenger seat, from the driver’s side Souichirou took out and passed over a hard candy.

“I’ve always had these on me since I quit smoking.”

“..... Well, don’t mind if I do then.”

The taste of strawberry permeated his mouth.

“So, what are we talking about? I’m not a particularly patient guy.”

“..... Would you understand what I mean, if I said that I’ve more or less found out about your circumstances?”

“Hmmm.”

Tetsuhiko crushed the hard candy inside his mouth between his molars.

“See, now this is why I don’t like rich people.”

“The ‘Ultramarine Alliance’, and then the ‘Ultramarine Channel’ – what do you plan on doing with them from this point on? Do you intend to use them as tools for revenge against Hardy Shun..... *your father*, perhaps?”

“.....”

“Did you get close to Maru-chan *because he was the biggest star of the agency the father you hate is connected to?*”

Tetsuhiko sighed deeply.

Yeah, this was why.

–This was why he hated the rich with a passion.

After a broad conversation, Tetsuhiko vacated the passenger seat of the car.

“Right, I’ll be counting on your support for the ‘Ultramarine Alliance’ then.”

“Yes, I shall settle all legal and tax-related issues. Only, I was a little surprised.”

“..... About what?”

“That you were more upset *about your relationship with that kid than about your father.*”

Tetsuhiko made a show of sighing very ostentatiously.

“Look..... I’m going to get really angry, alright?”

“Ooh, sorry! No, I didn’t mean anything negative by that! I wouldn’t have any intentions of supporting you otherwise, if you were someone moved only by revenge.”

“Is that all you want to say?”

“In lieu of apologising, let me know if you have any requests. Is there anything I can do?”

“..... In that case, there is one thing. I’ve got this junior called Asagi Rena, see, would you mind letting her work in some place to do with the ‘Ultramarine Alliance’? At a level where it wouldn’t affect her school life, of course. And then in addition I’d like you to give her a reasonable amount of compensation regularly.”

“So you’ve managed to find out on your own that she’s *your sister from a different mother.*”

*Tch, so he had managed to dig that deep, huh.....*

Tetsuhiko plucked at his head.

“Well, yeah. .... My mother’s heart might be broken, but she was well-off to begin with so we’ve managed to get by. But that kid’s family’s poor, though, so.....”

“Understood. I have no reason to refuse. If anything I think I’m glad you made this kind of suggestion.”

“What the hell? Are all rich folks just beings who love to push their aggressive meddling onto other people?”

Like Senpai X, or also Senpai X.

Just that unlike a certain senior though, Souichirou was an adult all the same. He had mastered the self-important, complacency-filled smile.

“Mum’s the word, by the way. Rena doesn’t know I’m her older brother, after all.”

“If you say so.”

“And in that same vein Shida-chan’s the most mistrustful among us, so please really do take care in front of her.”



“.....Is that so.”

Souichirou’s eyes widened.

*There are too many who don’t know how terrifying she can be,* Tetsuhiko thought.

That girl was no ordinary person. If she was she would have lost completely upon being rejected after confessing as a childhood friend.

“At the very least your daughter won’t be winning so easily.”

“That’s alright. For me, what I want to do is to give my daughter Shiro the gift of the ‘greatest youth’ she could possibly have. I think that would be a present far more splendid than leaving her a fortune. This is, at the end of the day, the sole reason for why I am assisting you all.”

So to conflict over love was too all a part of adolescence, huh? The good were truly irredeemable.

“This is what they call being a ‘doting’ parent, you know? Or was it a ‘doltish’ parent, perhaps?” Tetsuhiko spoke sarcastically, but if anything Souichirou replied with pride.

“Don’t you know? All who are parents – are idiots.”

*See ya,* Souichirou called out as he floored the accelerator and left.

Tetsuhiko kicked away a rock lying nearby as hard as he could.

“–This is why I hate adults.”

“What a coincidence. I don’t particularly like them very much either.”

No sooner had that troublesome adult finally disappeared before from somewhere, having watched who knew how much of their encounter – a certain well-to-do Senpai X, who loved to push his aggressive meddling onto other people, showed up alongside as if it was the most natural thing to do in the world.

“Erm, I’m sorry. Who’s that? I’m really scared from suddenly being talked to by someone I don’t recognise. I’ll call the police, you know?”

“Your sulkiness has to be a Guinness World Record. Sure, call the police why don’t you. It wouldn’t trouble me particularly if you did, after all.”

“I was being sarcastic, you know?”

“I replied knowing that, of course.”

Tetsuhiko clicked his tongue. This all too casual demeanour – this man known as Abe he really did not like.

“In that case, thanks for all the hard work, as always ~.”

So uttered Tetsuhiko swimmingly as he tried to return towards the clubroom, but Abe immediately fell into step beside him.

“Would you mind joining me for a short chat perhaps? There’s something I want to ask.”

“There isn’t anything I’d like to ask, though.”

“It’s not like I had absolutely nothing to do with what happened this time around, you know.”

“..... What do you mean?”

“For example, it was I who showed Uncle Souichirou the way to your clubroom, and I again who brought him to the Principal’s Office after that.”

“Oh, well thanks for that. Still seems to me that you were more or less completely uninvolved, though.”

“Beyond that I was prepared to rescue any member of the Ultramarine Alliance if *things* happened to them during the commercial contest or after. Well, just in case, anyway.”

Tetsuhiko stood still. They were currently on a path which took them around

the back of the annex where the Faculty Room was, which also functioned as a shortcut to the gymnasium and clubroom. For that reason barely anyone came by this way and so it was a place suited to having a conversation.

So Abe had sensed the danger posed by Hardy Shun, and then moved to secure the fairness of the contest or prevent anything improper from happening? If thugs had attacked Sueharu leaving him unable to appear in the commercial, for example, the game would have been over. There had also been the possibility of Sueharu being worked to the bone if they had lost the commercial contest. Abe had apparently been prepared to assist as a third party if “things” like these had occurred.

Tetsuhiko sighed once, reclined against the school building, then lightly bent one of his feet.

“Who asked you to?”

“No one did, but from Shirokusa-chan I got to hear a summary of what happened this time around. So just in case, I made it such that my father would do something if push came to shove.”

Abe’s father was a famous actor who in the entertainment world undoubtedly wielded a large amount of influence.

“You did well to personally think of doing something which would have brought you no recognition, let alone any benefit whatsoever.....”

“I don’t really think I suffered a loss. After all, I do want to see more of Maru-kun’s work.”

“..... I heard about that the last time around so I’ll pass.”

“Is that so?”

Truly no matter what kind of sarcastic quip Tetsuhiko hurled Abe would still smile. Tetsuhiko hated dealing with these sorts of people because they made him feel stupid for being snide.

“So, is that all you wanted to talk about?”

“No, this point is where the real conversation starts. I’ve heard the rough story from Shirokusa-chan and Uncle Souichirou, but there’s something I want to ask you, an interested party, you see.”

“..... Well, if it’s something I can give a short answer to.”

“Would you perhaps mind telling me of the major characters who won or lost? From your perspective will be fine, of course.”

Ahh, this piece of shit senpai had clearly watched with more than a little amusement the events which had unfolded this time around. There was no doubt that it was because he had been on the outside looking in that he had been able to enjoy himself without reserve.

Tetsuhiko returned the question while clicking his tongue.

“What’s your take, senpai?”

“I feel like it’s a complete victory for Maru-kun and Shirokusa-chan perhaps? In the course of this event both of them have greatly increased their value. Maru-kun’s made known that he can still pass for a professional, while Shirokusa-chan’s proven to both within and without that she has a talent for not only being a novelist, but a planner as well.”

“..... Well, you’re not mistaken.”

Through the commercial and music video Sueharu had raised his appraisal as an actor. Since winning the commercial contest had also blocked his ill repute from spreading, the Sueharu of the present could probably enter any agency he wished to. There was really no way things could end poorly for him.

Shirokusa too had achieved a victory.

Hijacking the confession at the Confession Festival had been Shirokusa’s idea, but then ultimately she had only been involved in planning. This time, however, everything from the concept to the script could have been said to be the products of Shirokusa’s brain. The commercial contest had been won by “Shirokusa’s production and Sueharu’s lead-acting”, so to speak, which

probably meant that the dream Shirokusa had had since young had truly been fulfilled. As a result of that she had been in incredible spirits.

“This time it was the agency’s piece of shit president’s sole defeat. My impression is that none of our alliance’s members lost. However—”

“..... However?”

“The biggest winner’s probably *Shida-chan*, followed by me.”

“The biggest winner is Shida-san.....?”

Abe seemed not to believe it. Well it was only natural perhaps, looking from the outside.

But he was wrong. For in this round’s turmoil, almost everything had gone as she had foreseen.

.....

.....

.....

“...I see. Then this is just an inference of mine, Tetsuhiko-kun, but today Asagi Rena-chan came, didn’t she?”

This was a story from before, on the day Kuroha went home early and Sueharu quite emphatically told Tetsuhiko to visit her while doing some reconnaissance.

It was on that day that Kuroha had detected the relationship Tetsuhiko had with Rena which no one knew about.

“I think the way you worry about her isn’t like you, Tetsuhiko-kun. Is she not a relative of yours, maybe? Judging from the distance between the two of you, she’s about on the level of a cousin? And to top it all off only you know while she doesn’t or something, that’s what I feel.”

It was truly frightening that she had surmised that much from only seeing Rena and him together for the first time.

But Kuroha had also figured out Hardy Shun.

*“Which also means, Tetsuhiko-kun, that in the entertainment world – there’s someone who you consider an enemy, isn’t there? Was it not also because of that that you became friends with Haru? Putting that aside of course, I know the two of you have great chemistry..... but looking at how you’ve been acting since the beginning and such, Tetsuhiko-kun, I thought that that wasn’t all there was to it.”*

While unable to perceive the specific relationships, Kuroha had already managed to grasp the larger picture. Thus sensing that they could have a collaborative relationship this time around, Kuroha had sought Tetsuhiko’s cooperation.

Unable to conceal everything, of course, Tetsuhiko had simply told Kuroha that *“the president of Sueharu’s agency was a piece of trash and that he was the enemy”*. All while hiding the fact that the president was his father, obviously.

The plan Kuroha had spoken of after putting the above into consideration was something which had made Tetsuhiko shiver.

*“In that case, there’s all the more reason for me not wanting to let Haru return to showbiz.”*

*“–I plan to lose my memory.”*

*“For starters, this way the problems between Haru and I will disappear accordingly.”*

*“It’s dirty, but I think this is for the best.”*

*“After that so long as we can prevent Haru’s return to showbiz, I’ll be able to manage.”*

*“Right now Haru might have some trauma left over, but if I become amnesic*

*he'll definitely get worried and try to close the distance between us. That way with time I'll be able to get rid of his trauma."*

*"Also I plan on accompanying Haru on his visit to the agency."*

*"If the president's scum like you say he is, Tetsuhiko-kun, then he'll probably say something nasty to me too."*

*"Haru hates it when something nasty's said to someone he's close to, more than when it's being said to him. So if I'm attacked having lost my memory, then his return to showbiz will probably be cancelled."*

–That much Kuroha had predicted.

And in the end..... it had more or less gone as she had said it would.

(And like Tetsuhiko had said, it would absolutely have been so much better for her to reincarnate in another world as a military strategist.)

This was the wrong place for her to express her talents. They should have been used to save the world, and Tetsuhiko felt like they were wasted merely being used to get the boy she liked to look her way.

..... No, perhaps it was *precisely because she wanted the boy she liked to look her way, that she had put so much effort into thinking.*

First love truly was scary.

.....

.....

.....

“Well, so in other words, the moment Shida-chan had defined winning to be ‘Sueharu not going into showbiz’, she had already won completely. On top of that Sueharu still doesn’t belong to anyone, and she took away most of Sueharu’s trauma during the trials of filming the commercial, such that before you know it they’re already back to how close they were as childhood

friends. Just think about it, why don't you? After the Confession Festival, Shida-chan was in a spot where she couldn't even touch or talk to Sueharu. Kachi was so incredibly far ahead, and yet before anyone's realised they're neck and neck once again. No matter how you look at it, this is a huge victory for Shida-chan."

"Ahh, I see. While this time it certainly seems as if Shirokusa-chan's dream was fulfilled, if anything her love's taken a step in the opposite direction."

With his hands in his pockets Tetsuhiko looked up towards the deep blue sky.

"Everything that happened this time around can be summarised into a tug of war between Sueharu returning to the entertainment world or not. The agency and Maria had been for it, Shida-chan and I on the side against it. I can say this while laughing, now that we've won, but it was our side which had been at an overwhelming disadvantage. If Kachi who had been on the fence had gone over to the other side, I get the sense that eight or nine times out of ten we would've lost."

"..... Now that you mention it, Shirokusa-chan's eyes were sparkling when she suddenly mentioned that it looked as if her dream from the past was going to be fulfilled. Hmm, could it be that—"

"Probably a result of me bringing out my proposal for the 'Ultramarine Channel', I reckon. She had been made to recognise that sticking with us would have been the better option for realising her dream. Only, well, things got a little scary though when that piece of trash president shook her up at the agency. But we still won in the end."

"..... You probably did this knowing it would set Shirokusa-chan back romantically as a result, didn't you? What a terrible person you are."

"Well, I paired up with Shida-chan this time around because our interests were aligned. Besides, it was Kachi who chose."

As Tetsuhiko said so nonchalantly, Abe shrugged his shoulders.

"It's just that, you know, I get the feeling that to Shida-chan, this is an *even*



*bigger victory than the one she'd been expecting."*

"..... How so?"

Tetsuhiko kicked away a rock which had been at his foot.

"Did you hear about Sueharu tossing wine at that piece of shit president being for Shida-chan's sake?"

"It wasn't made that clear to me, but to a certain extent it was. It's not something I would be able to do. .... Very admirable."

Although this person very clearly respected Sueharu all while being such a perfect superhuman himself, occasionally he would reveal the sense of inferiority he felt towards him as well.

"Don't you think then, that in a certain sense, it could be said that Sueharu chose Shida-chan over showbiz?"

"..... I see, you certainly do have a point."

"Well, Shida-chan's really happy, of course. This is a man with the talents to be a star throwing away money, fame and admiration, all so he can pick her. What's there not to be ecstatic about? Honestly, she's been in such an incredible mood since the commercial contest began that on the contrary it's almost scary. She got to care for him so tenderly while he was fasting too. Well, it's fine so long as she doesn't get carried away and fall into a pit, I suppose."

"I get the feeling that Maru-kun didn't think it through so thoroughly, though."

"Oh, so you do look at Sueharu pretty coolly, huh. Well yeah, that guy probably didn't. But just saying, he probably would've snapped too if Kachi had been the one being ridiculed there. The same goes for Maria..... or maybe even me for that matter. He's just that kind of guy."

"I think he's very admirable all the same."

Tetsuhiko shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, for that matter, perhaps I can get you to see how this is also a huge victory for me? I’ve let the wider world know about the ‘Ultramarine Alliance’ and ‘Ultramarine Channel’, and secured the lineup of members I’d hoped for. The efforts of Sueharu and Kachi will further spread the word, and we’ll undoubtedly be receiving commissions for various jobs going into the future.”

“I’ll say you did well.”

“Well thanks for that.”

Beyond that, of the major players in this round’s incident, there was still Maria.

Come to think of it, she had taken a peculiar position of not doing anything hostile, for someone who had turned into their adversary in the commercial contest. With that in mind, Tetsuhiko could see that she had apparently not been hung up on its result. If so, could the present developments be considered a victory for her as well?

Tetsuhiko’s thoughts ran in this fashion, before his eyes landed on a young girl who had suddenly appeared in the back of the gym.

“–Ahh, well I’ll be.”

Tetsuhiko inadvertently laughed.

One could tell from looking at that expression.

That for her too – it was a huge victory.

\*

*<sup>1</sup>Rice balls coated with sweetened red beans, soybean flour or sesame*

## Part 4

“So, without any further ado, I am Momosaka Maria, and it has been decided that I will now be transferring to this school. I hope to get along with all of you.”

The appearance of a sweetly smiling, flawless, little sister-type beautiful girl in the Entertainment Appreciation Society alias “Ultramarine Alliance’s” clubroom caused it to freeze over in a second.

“..... What’s the meaning of this, Suu-chan?”

“..... Haru, explain.”

“Now wait a minute! Why do I have to get talked to like I’m the one to blame?!”

I wanted to strongly point out that this time I hadn’t so much as done anything wrong.

I appealed, shaking my head from left to right, until Maria spoke while looking quite embarrassed with both her hands cupping her cheeks.

“Big Brother Sueharu said he wanted me, so—”

## “Alright, I get it, Momo! Now shut up!”

Was this girl not an assassin sent to kill me? With one line she had turned the atmosphere hellish and I was scared to death.

“–Let me say it correctly.”

I explained the situation to Kuroha and Shirokusa unhurriedly.

“In the first place, Momo came to see me for the purpose of seeking my aid.”

“..... Aid?”

Kuroha’s eyes narrowed.

“Yup. So it came to me when I was listening to that conversation about us having the commercial contest. That Momo was being hurt by that piece of shit president, and she wanted help. Which was why she added the condition that she would quit the agency when we won. That’s how the story went, right, Momo?”

“That’s completely wrong, though.”

“..... Eh?”

My pupils shrank into dots.

“I wasn’t really being bothered by Shun-san. Shun-san’s capable, but it’s true that I was trying to quit the agency because we didn’t have good chemistry. So this certainly became a good cue for me to leave and I got helped out.”

“..... Wait, so you weren’t looking for my aid?”

“I was. I was – **starving for love.**”

“..... Ohh.” Kuroha and Shirokusa harmonised.

Yikes! Those were the dearest “ohh”s I’d ever heard!

“I..... was lonely, but I was rescued by Big Brother Sueharu’s **love!**”

“Ahh, ohh, I seeee..... Haru, what does she mean by ‘love’?”

“Is that so, hmmm..... Suu-chan, what did you do?”

I felt like my life was in danger. The palpitations of my heart intensified, and cold sweat flowed from me unabated.

“No no no, I swear I didn’t do this out of love or anything.....”

“You were willing to help me so far as to fight Shun-san, weren’t you? Then it has to be **love.**”

“Then that kind of love has to be the kind between siblings or something!”

As I so declared, the eyes of Kuroha and Shirokusa instantly widened in surprise and they both grinned.

What the heck, they had gotten their good moods back in an instant?!

But like, seriously, what was going on?

I thought that both Kuroha and Shirokusa felt some affection towards me, you know? The only problem was that I didn’t know of which variety that affection was.

For if it was feelings of romance that they held, then how did things end up with me being rejected? Well, the Kuroha of the present had since lost her memory, so perhaps she now genuinely did have romantic feelings for me though. But if I again considered how I had once been rejected..... did she perhaps not think of me as some kind of favourite pet instead?

“Big Brother Sueharu, how could you.....? When I feel so strongly about you.....?”

With that in mind Maria's affection was very straightforward, such that I could tell of what kind it was without having to waver over it. That made me genuinely happy, but—

“Sorry, Momo.....”

Perhaps it was because I had looked after her for too long, but at the very least I didn't have any romantic feelings for her right now.

Maria was so incredibly cute, though..... This kind of feels like how I couldn't see Kuroha as a romantic interest at first because she was in the childhood-friendzone.....

Hm.....? Flipping that around, didn't that mean that like Kuroha, Maria also could become a romantic interest if there was a chance for it to..... no, I mustn't think about that now.

When I fearfully glanced up towards Maria with upturned eyes, full of remorse at being unable to accept her feelings, she simply smiled with a face completely devoid of gloom.

“I don't really mind, Big Brother Sueharu. Right now I feel blessed if I can just be by your side. After all, it's why I decided to transfer schools ♡”

By any measure Maria was behaving too obliviously. Affected by her radiance, even Kuroha and Shirokusa were dumbfounded.

“The truth is that working in public entertainment has taken up all my time, so I haven't been able to have a proper school life for these past six years. That's why I think that this is a great opportunity. I'll lack common knowledge if I don't acquire the kind of experience everyone else goes through, and besides more importantly I've always longed to have one anyway. A fun and exciting school life, I mean.”

“..... I see.”

Having taken back my normal life by force, I understood how important it was.

While Maria too felt the importance of her normal life, she hadn't had the opportunity to return to it. So had she now decided to lean on me as her elder brother, and transferred schools for the purpose of learning about the preciousness of living a normal life?

All the same I thought Maria was wise. It wasn't easy, what she was doing.

Which was why I thought that I wanted to support her with all that I could.

“Got it, Momo. I'm glad you came. You're very welcome here.”

“Thank you, Big Brother Sueharu.”

Maria accepted the hand I held out. A cute underclassman had arrived.

By now the feeling of being formally accepted should have hit her. Maria abruptly turned around and bowed towards Kuroha and Shirokusa.

“Oh, but everyone, naturally I'll be joining the 'Ultramarine Alliance' too. Big Brother Sueharu and I – the two of us leading the way..... with such a wonderful leading actor and actress, a low-budget film simply won't do! Hehe, right now we're invincible!”

She had her cute parts, didn't she?

Maria certainly had both ability and popularity, and as far as her fighting power was concerned there was nothing to complain about. One would pay through the nose to have her.

“Ahh, but you know, don't you think it would really be a bit too conspicuous if you and I teamed up together? Will the president not come and try to retaliate against us or something?”

“He probably will.”

“How can you say something like that so calmly, Momooo?!”

This was really bad, wasn't it? We were mere high school students, up against a president. The odds were stacked against us.

“Because for the time being, I’ve given him a warning.”

According to Maria, it had gone something like this:

Maria had quit the agency as stipulated, and gone to say her last farewells.

When she did–

*“Momosaka-chan, I have no choice because this was a condition, but it would be better if you were all prepared to be my enemy from this point forward. Would you mind telling that to those pieces of scrap?”*

Something to that effect had apparently been said.

As a result, Maria had supposedly replied:

*“Oh, I certainly will, but in that case let me say one thing as well. If you challenge us to a fair fight then we’ll happily oblige, but if you start attacking us with cowardly behaviour that goes against the law, then I’ll crush you with all the power and connections I’ve built up thus far. Please be prepared.”*

I spoke to Maria with a huge grin on my face.

“Why’d you say he could challenge us? Wasn’t that like super provocative?”

“Eh? After all, it’s a lot more exciting when you’ve got a rival, right?”

From this angle Maria appeared to be quite the acting junkie. She had a combative mentality, or a penchant for wanting to meet other strong people or something. Well at any rate she had at least done us the favour of warning the president against using unlawful means to attack us, so perhaps we should only worry if and when something happened.

I whispered into Kuroha and Shirokusa’s ears.

“Getting Momo to join us is going to be huge. She’s the strongest asset we could possibly add. Don’t you think this will put the Ultramarine Channel at a level where we can start competing with professionals?”



But both of their expressions were clouded.

“Hmm, I understand what you’re trying to say, Suu-chan, but.....”

“There’s something about this that bothers Big Sister a little.....”

The two girls were relatively dissatisfied. But well Tetsuhiko would probably be in favour of it, and so was I.

It was two votes to two, upon which the matter would likely be decided with Maria herself saying she was going to join.

“My, a little too immoral, isn’t it, for the three of you to be making out in such broad daylight?”

Our whispered conversation had apparently led us to be wrongly accused.

Maria smiled sweetly as the three of us each made our own denials.

“Oh, not to be worried, the two of you. I have a large heart, so I’ll allow it even if Big Brother Sueharu cheats on me with the both of you a little.”

“..... Huh?”

Murderous intent projected from Kuroha and Shirokusa, but Maria’s smile was unwavering.

Yeah, this was a dangerous development.....

I worked my phone surreptitiously and three-called<sup>1</sup> a certain number.

“We students are young, after all, and it’s a common thing for a boy’s eyes to wander. But please, consider what will happen ten years into the future. Big Brother Sueharu will probably have become the actor who represents all Japan, and I certainly the actress who does..... it could be that we might have even gone to Hollywood. In that event, I will be the only one who can stand by Big Brother Sueharu’s side, so to speak..... or perhaps it is better said that all those who aren’t me will be unworthy to..... Because I know I shall be chosen in the end, my heart is large in the sense that I perhaps

wouldn't mind it if Big Brother Sueharu showed a *teeny* bit of mercy to some **poor fools.**"

"..... You know, perhaps it would be better if we wrapped this kid in a bamboo mat and threw her into a river."

"..... What a coincidence, Kachi-san. I was just thinking the exact same thing."

So how come the two of you can buddy up so quickly only when it's Maria who you're dealing with?!

"Oh, and I'll welcome you whenever, Big Brother Sueharu, so please do call on me when it pleases you to ♡"

There we go. Maria being Maria, she had said something to audaciously fan the flames.

Since it had come to this, then—

"..... Oh, that reminds me, I forgot something! I gotta go back to the classroom and grab it!"

Saying so I threw open the door of the room and ran.

"Big Brother Sueharu?!"

"Wa-, Haru?!"

"Suu-chan?!"

How could I possibly stay there?! My heart would die if I did!

There were footsteps and people behind me. The three of them were chasing.

In the back of the gym, devoid of human presence, Rena stood with a *completely ordinary cardboard box placed naturally beside her.*

With my eyes I gave Rena a signal, then immediately crouched into a ball on

the spot. Without further ado she then covered me with the box from above, upon which my vision darkened.

“Rena-chan! Did you see Haru?!”

“He was running the other way.”

“Thanks, Asagi-san.”

“Is that girl an acquaintance?”

“She works as a jack of all trades. She’s a first-year like you, Momo-san, so why not try talking to her some time?”

“..... Perhaps I will.”

The voices got further away. But with safety in mind, just in case I waited motionlessly.

“You can come out now.”

“Niceee, thanks, Rena!”

I took out my wallet and handed her a thousand-yen bill.

“Any time.”

My arrangements for if push came to shove had borne fruit.

Me hanging up after three rings was the signal for there being an emergency, and for Rena to assist by bringing over a cardboard box and standing by near the room. If I then managed to get away safely she’d get a thousand-yen reward for succeeding. Everything had gone according to plan.

But of course all this wouldn’t have materialised if Rena hadn’t been close. So, well, she had been there for me just when I thought it would be great if she was. She was an underclassman I could rely on.

“By the way, paissen.”

“Yeah?”

“I forgot after asking the last time around, but why’re you friends with Tetsu-senpai again? ‘Specially when y’all fight all the time.”

“Ahh.”

I was asked about something like that, was I? It wasn’t a big deal so I had completely forgotten.

My answer was prompt.

“Well, I get asked a lot to do something, or show something, when people find out I used to be a child actor, you know?”

“Well, I would expect so.”

“It’s not like I can’t, but in the end they’re just rubbernecking, aren’t they? In that sense, those people are kind of distant, like it’s a relationship where I’m the only one doing anything and the rest of them are just watching or something.”

“Hm.”

“But Tetsuhiko alone’s different.”

The high school entrance ceremony had ended, and we had done our self-introductions in the classroom.

Going out into the corridor, thinking about going home – it was Tetsuhiko who had enthusiastically tapped me on the shoulder.

“–Hey, you’re that former child actor, Maru Sueharu, aren’t you? Wanna do something interesting with me?”

At that instant, I thought that, *yeah, this was it.*

“They say friends are the people who stand beside you, right? Having different personalities, interests..... well to a certain extent you’d get along

better if those things matched, but there isn't anyone who's a hundred percent the same as you are anyway, so all of that is pretty unimportant, isn't it? That guy alone tried to do something with me. In other words, he stands beside me. So that's why he and I are friends."

"Ahh ~, I see ~"

Rena appeared to be impressed.

"You're a little alike, paissen, you and Tetsu-senpai are. But not everywhere, of course."

I grinned broadly, then spoke definitively.

"Would you mind not saying that I'm like him even if you're only joking? I'll get hurt, you know?"

"Wow, this guy's a pain in the ass."

Hmm, how cheeky.

Thereupon I visited a light chop upon my underclassman, teaching her how scary an upperclassman could be.

\*

<sup>1</sup>In Japan, to ring someone else's phone three times. Apparently derived from the concept of picking up a phone within the first three rings as part of good business etiquette.

## Part 5

“Crap, I ate too much *ohagi*.....”

“Ooh, is this not why Big Sister said you should control yourself? Now what are you going to do for dinner?”

The victory celebration had ended, and Kuroha and I were heading home.

From the embankment the river looked as if it was glistening from being shone on by the sun.

“Hmmm, perhaps I shouldn’t go to your house today then, Kuro..... If you’re alright with it, maybe I’ll just go and grab the stuff I’ve left behind or something.....”

“That’ll end up with you eating late or something and totally getting fat, right? In that case, wouldn’t it be better if you just ate with us for the time being? For only as much as you can, of course.”

“Ahh, that’s true. Perhaps that’s what I’ll do then.”

“Mmhmm, you should, I’m telling you.”

Time passed tenderly away.

It had been hard to look Kuroha in the eye after rejecting her confession, and everyone knew what had transpired since the start of the second semester. Our very stormy relationship had continued, and for a period of time I had even felt fear at the prospect of talking to Kuroha all due to the shock of being rejected.

But having spent lots of time together by way of the commercial contest, our relationship had once again returned to normal.

A large part of that had been influenced, of course, by Kuroha becoming amnesic and the problematic parts of her memory being reset. Her amnesia was a sad thing, but with regards to us repairing our relationship it had undeniably been helpful in many ways.

Still, I didn't know if or when her amnesia might worsen again and cause her problems in her daily life. When that happened, I thought above all else I would help her out. For all the favours I had received thus far were not things which could be paid back so easily.

Kuroha spoke while looking at her phone.

“Ah, dinner today's Hamburg steaks apparently. Your favourite, Haru.”

“For real.....? I wanna eat..... but my stomach's..... yeah..... what's the rest of the menu, by the way?”

“Potato salad and corn soup, but a *shoyu* version for me. Nice, just what I like.”

“..... Hm?”

I stopped still without thinking.

“Kuro, your sense of taste's come back.....?”

Her taste should have normalised along with her losing her memory.

“Eh? ..... Ah, o- oh, that's right! My taste's changed, hasn't it! I just got excited because it was something I liked from before! My bad my bad.....”

“What the heck, Kuro. That's a blunder.”

“Even so I'm a *looooot* less clumsy than you are, Haru.”

It was when Kuroha so adorably emphasised her words and dragged them out peculiarly that it proved she was in a good mood.

“Ohh, sure, sure. Right you are.”

What she said was so true that I was at a loss to say anything else.

“You also made lots of careless mistakes in that mini-test from a while ago, didn’t you, Haru? Don’t you think your results have just been a little too poor?”

“..... Ooh.”

Bad things had come crashing down upon me like violent waves since the cultural festival, such that there really hadn’t been the time for me to study. As a result my academics had taken a nosedive.

“You always manage to keep your high ranking too, Kuro. That’s amazing.”

“Hehe.”

Kuroha lifted her nose and stuck out her moderately large chest.

“The amount of effort we put in is different. After all, all you did was sleep through the summer courses we had during summer vacation, didn’t you, Haru. I could see you, you know?”

“..... Kuro.”

“Yes?”

“Why do you remember what happened during the summer courses even though you’ve lost your memory?”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”



“.....”

“..... Teehee ♡”

“KuroooooooooOOOOooooo?!”

My childhood friend grinned adorably and showed me her tongue.

My wailing, on the other hand, reverberated across the dry riverbed and was absorbed into the cirrocumulus clouds.



# Afterword

Hi, Nimaru here. I've been living out days filled with surprise and gratitude ever since Volume 1 first went on sale, thanks to my life's first ever reprint, a manga adaptation being confirmed and a promotional video being produced et cetera – developments, sales and responses far exceeding my wildest imagination.

Truth be told, for a while now I've been quite prepared for criticism, due to many areas of this light novel venturing away from the tried-and-true path taken by romcoms. While I've used various devices not commonly found in romcoms, not only to promote the characters, but also in my pursuit of making the plot interesting, the result is a framework consisting of too much information, dragging readers out from comfort and forcing them to think or something. This is true, for example, of the main character Sueharu.

When at the outset it was decided that “Revenge” would be a theme of this series, I figured that I had to make things as light as I could. Otherwise while I could write a “love story”, it would never become a “romantic comedy”, and with that so would go any prospects of this novel selling.

I feel like a lot of modern mainstream light novel protagonists – while accorded relatively low statuses in the works they appear in – are of the wisecracking type, don't mess up, and have their own brand of philosophy. I wonder if protagonists of the stress-immune mold are just easier for readers to project themselves onto?

Sueharu was at first constructed as a wisecracking type, but for the purpose of making things lighter I had no choice but to make him into a dumb character. If anything he takes the form of protagonists from one or two generations ago, who messed up, were ridiculed, and were unsuited to self-projection. But thinking all the same that a pure idiot was maybe not a fit for

the modern age, I ended up incorporating the look and make-up (i.e. having one talent which would ultimately manifest) of a sports manga protagonist.

So, with regards to the Sueharu-kun created in the end..... personally, I like protagonists like him quite a lot.

Of Osamake's themes another is "The Over-exuberance of Youth", and if anything it has been and will be the main one for Volume 2 and after. When I think of "Youth", I get an image of "messing up" and "nothing held back". People running in anime OPs. Whether it's "love" or "friendship", youth keeps on running. This is why the Sueharu born from my desire to make things brighter at some point became the exact embodiment of my image of "Youth". He holds respect for his friends, and though ridiculed he worries very hard over things in his own way, then stands and faces them with all his might. I'd be overjoyed if you would continue supporting him and his upstandingness together with me.

Oh, and this time I asked and someone kindly made a preview<sup>1</sup> for the next volume!

Previews for light novels personally remind me of "The Irresponsible Three Kingdoms".<sup>2</sup> Back then they made me feel super excited, so I was incredibly happy knowing I could now do them too. At the end of the day, of course, it's just a scheduled preview, but if it makes you just a little excited for the next volume then I'd be very glad.

Lastly, my editors, Kurokawa-sama and Onodera-sama, and the illustrator, Shigure Ui-sama, I'd like to thank you all very much for staying with me after Volume 1. Thank you to all those who cheered me on through Twitter or fan letters – I read them all even if I can't reply to everything. Then to all those who have supported me – you have my heartfelt gratitude.

August 2019 Nimaru Shuuichi

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<sup>1</sup>Was included in the raws but who cares when you can just read the next

volume?

<sup>2</sup>10-volume light novel series which ran from '97 to '98.