

亦又態王子と

笑あない猫。



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The "HENTAI" prince and the stony cat.

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The "HENTAI" prince and the story cat.

変態王子と 笑わない猫。





You're just asking for a thorough punishment.

鋼鉄の王

Could it be that you want to be hated by every single girl in the world?

筒隱月子

Quit saying I'm flat-chested, you perv!

小豆梓

I'll become your dog, just so I can be by your side!

横寺陽人



Again, you say?
I see. So this is
not your first
time. You are a
complete,
utter pervert
beyond any
shadow of
doubt.

It all looked as if I
had pushed her
down, and yet she
showed no sign of
being upset.



...W-W-Whyyyyyyyyy...!

Right, right.
A girl who's
easy to
understand
through her
expressions
... Oh wait.

You're the real thing!

What are you
doing here,
you perv?!

Chapter 1 – The Pervert and the Stony Cat

Say if there was a popularity contest to decide on the best swimsuit style. What would be number one?

Is there anyone who has not thought about this eternal question of life even once? I ponder over it every day, just so you know.

Some people reveal their ulterior motives when they claim that the bikini is the best, what with how unrestricted it is (when you can see the boobs). But no, hold on - there's also the one-piece type swimsuit, a smash hit among those who like to fantasise about pure girls.

My mind is occupied with something much deeper, though. There is a third great power at work here. Let us not forget the competitive swimsuit.

Before you laugh and point at me, I'd like you to check out the girls' swimming club activities pronto. It's not as boring as you think. Without any doubt, you will realise that the competitive swimsuit is the stuff of magic.

(Disclaimer: I hold no responsibility for the enormous difficulties in life you may face should you barge into the pool in the name of research on this magic.)

So, you ask, just how would you observe the swimming club?

Simple.

At my high school, the field grounds are directly adjoined to the outdoor pool. Unfortunately, the pool is blocked up by a reinforced metal and concrete wall. But on my third day of high school, I discovered a thin gap on the corner of the wall. You could catch a glimpse of paradise without anyone from the pool side noticing you. It was an oasis from heaven.

Naturally, peeping is a crime. An absolutely heinous crime.

But hey, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do!

I joined the Track and Field club, where we carry out our club activities towards the very end of the track grounds. It was the closest club to the oasis. If I got tired from practice and accidentally spotted the inside of the pool while I was leaning against the wall chatting to my fellow club members, it couldn't be helped. There was nothing I could do about it.

To quote what my favourite perverted Irish author Oscar Wilde said even while he was in prison: "I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure." It's just as he said. How could I let any chance to see a summer paradise slip between my fingers?

If I miscalculated anything, it was about the Track and Field club itself.

I should have investigated it thoroughly while I had the chance to back out. You see, because the club is for mixed genders, I thought I would be surrounded by sweaty girls in their gym clothes. When it comes to being near girls without much clothing, the Track and Field club kills two birds with one stone. Looking back, it was all wishful thinking. My romantic prospects in the Track and Field club were non-existent right from the start.

In the summer of my first year, I never saw a single swimsuit. I was in hell on Earth.

Every day I was thrown and tossed around like a dirty dishrag ad nauseum, and whenever I got home I slept like the dead. Since I was too tired to watch any late night shows I recorded, the unwatched episodes of the swimsuit idol competition piled up.

But there was no way I could quit. The Track and Field club is under the Steel King's fist. I can just imagine any normal person looking at me dubiously if I said that, though. "*Who's the Steel King?*" they'd ask. "*A relative of the King of Distortion¹? Or maybe a colleague of Andrew Carnegie²?*" Well, no.

¹ A reference to *Boogiepop*, one of the earliest modern light novel series.

² An industrialist credited for pushing forward the expansion of the American steel industry in the 1800's.

Imagine one of those demon army sergeants from war flicks. They'd flee without their shoes on – that is how intimidating the Steel King is.

When the biggest delinquent in town was causing a ruckus at the downtown arcade, yelling stuff like *"Huuuh? Whatchu lookin' at? I'll flay the guts outta ya!"* and so on, he accidentally bumped into the Steel King. Then, after the thorough treatment he received, he opened his mouth and said, *"Ah, my life is at your service. Your wish is my command, sire."*

It was a dramatic turnaround. I've lost count of all these miraculous stories by now.

...ah crap, who cares about the Steel King anyway? I want to discuss swimsuits. I want to discuss swimsuits with every man in this world. As long as water and swimsuits exist, I can go on living.

So as I was saying, competitive swimsuits are magical. I came to this conclusion in the summer of my second year of high school, after one full cycle of the seasons. At that time, I was finally starting to get used to the Track and Field club's practice routine.

Unfortunately, at the same time I came to that conclusion, my life was in crisis.

Chapter 1: Part 2

That day, I stretched diligently in preparation for a full-scale five-kilometre run. I had pulled a calf muscle, you see. By chance, the gap in the concrete wall was in my line of sight and I could see the pool ahead of me. (It was just a coincidence. Couldn't be helped.)

The blazing July sun shone overhead. With hardly any breeze, the sun held itself high in the southern sky. The summer haze rose up across the track grounds – it was the kind of hellish weather that scorches you from head to foot.

The poolside was one step higher than the base of the wall. I could see a great number of bodies dressed in bold, revealing navy-blue competitive swimsuits splashing around in the glistening water. Whenever they did their bending and stretching exercises, I could see less of what they were wearing and more of their angelic limbs.

It was then, as I stood in awe in the presence of swimsuits, that I understood. The power of the competitive swimsuit lies in how it leaves the spectator spellbound to the spot. It's the kind of fetishism that guarantees a young guy won't be going anywhere. You stand there, appreciating to the highest degree both the woman's assets and the tightness of her outfi-

"Oi, Yokodera, what are you doing?"

I thought my heart stopped. A moment later, my heartbeat was throbbing wildly and so was my head – all my blood had rushed up there.

I had been in the Track and Field club for one year and four months. Uh oh, had my humble oasis been found out?

With a sinking stomach, I looked behind me and realised it would have been better if my heart gave out after all. With long, tied-up black hair, the lone person standing there before me was-

"T-t-the Steel K-!"

“Steel? I don’t get it. Say things clearly.”

“St-steel... is, um, iron. And you know what they say – you gotta strike the iron while it’s hot... which is like when you strike a girl when she’s young, and that would, uh, mess up her head. That’s not a good thing, is it?”

The Steel King glared at me sharply. “...what are you talking about? Have you got sand in your ears? Yokodera. I hate weaklings the most. Do you know what I hate after that?”

All hail the absolute monarch, the president of the Track and Field club. While her face was shrewd and intelligent, her trademark feature was her black ponytail. Her *no*-nonsense manner gave her a tomboyish appeal. With her considerable bust and her supple limbs, it wouldn’t be so strange to see her on the opening colour pages of a track and field magazine.

...and as long as she has those withering, demonic eyes to correct you with, you couldn’t say otherwise.

The club president’s expression was always the same. Cool, piercing gaze. Thin, drawn lips. There was no trace of laughter or sadness on her face no matter where you looked. The only emotion that could seemingly scratch her iron surface was exasperation. Her haughty pride was as immovable as iron, and so people called her the Steel King. In my opinion, her parents had an impeccable naming sense, whoever they were.

I clamped my mouth shut.



“Yokodera? If you don’t know, I’ll tell you,” the club president continued quietly. Her husky voice seemed to come from hell itself. “It’s having my trust betrayed.”

“Uuuuuuh, w-wait, I think there’s been a slight misunderstanding here...”

“There is no misunderstanding. If you betray me, you will die and rot in hell.”

A rumour that the club president was a black belt in karate, judo and aikido flashed through my mind. She was a kendo and Kung Fu master, and plus she could count with an abacus and do calligraphy. The absolutely horrifying part was that she had achieved the highest grade in all of these things. While calligraphy and counting on an abacus are not what a tough guy would study, she wielded the writing brush and abacus purely as dark instruments of human destruction, and she was a master at them.

So now, if I revealed in a moment of weakness that I had betrayed her trust by peeping on girls – even if it was a gift of chance and it was by coincidence that I was peeping on the girls in the swimming club – I had no idea what would happen to me. Out of the nobility in her soul, the King had told me herself what she hated the most. And yet, as it so happened today, I overlooked the crisis at hand. My life points were in mortal danger.

There was nothing for it.

“Ah! Prez! Look over there!”

“What?”

“The sky’s pink and there’s a *space whale*! Ahhhh, the world’s gonna end! I gotta go home early!”

“Hold on, we’re not done talking. The whale is... huh? Where? Is it to the east? Or maybe the south? Hm? Never mind – we can leave that to the world defence forces to handle.”

Just as I made a break towards the back gate, she grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. My escape failed. Just as you'd expect from the Steel King, she had eyes in the back of her head. My world was already over.

"But I am also a man," I said aloud. "Now that we have come this far, I will not say any apologies. It was a sudden impulse. No, it was a coincidence. No, no, let me correct that, it's a conspiracy from a secret intelligence organisation. I was set up!"

"Then what were you talking about before? World defence forces this, secret intelligence organisations that... what thrilling... never mind. Spare me your fairy tales. I told you not to betray my trust since you will be the next club president."

"It's true – from the moment I was born I have not thought for a single second about peepi... Did you say I'll be the club president?"

"...peeping? What's that?"

Two people talking at cross-purposes. Our conversation was like the ends of a blunted pair of scissors, failing to meet each other.

"So, uh, when you say club president, what exactly-?"

"You don't have to ask – it's obvious what I mean. So, what's peeping?"

"It's a thought experiment where you imagine complex organisms peeping at humankind in a miniature garden. We are all being peeped upon!"

"Complex organisms...? I don't really get it – say it in track and field terms."

"It's like if Carl Lewis was trying to compete with a bullet train while inside the bullet train and the conductor was watching and laughing?"

"I don't get it at all."

"I also do not comprehend it. It is a privilege to meet a fellow ignorant! By the way, president, you are a club president. You can only be yourself, in other words, you are the club president."

The club president opened her tightly pursed lips faintly enough to let out a frustrated sigh. With great effort, she placed a hand on my shoulder. I chose the principle of non-resistance as if I were Gandhi himself.

As they realised what was happening, the Track and Field club members at the edge of the grounds buzzed with interest. Somehow or other, the club president seemed to be gearing up for a speech. I'd been minding my own business by the concrete wall, and now I was the centre of attention.

"This should go without saying, but I'll say it once more." The club president delivered her speech to the club members lined up behind me – I thought I was finally being let go. But instead, she pinned me to the ground with her eyes. The Track and Field club had instantly become a stage show. Without the club president's say-so, I couldn't get away. "Yokodera, I did not emphasise this to you sooner, but you are a man of great talent."

"...are you being sarcastic? Is this a trick question? Or have you been trying to catch me out all along? Well, there's nothing to catch me out on. I'm innocent, I swear!"

"Why are you shaking? Do you know what time of the year it is right now?"

"Huh? It's the time of the year when girls wear skimpy outfits."

"Right – wait, *is* that right? Ah well, next week it'll be July. It'll be the final summer for the third-years. There'll be a talk after the inter-high is over, but I want to get things out of the way before the next semester starts."

"Ooooh, sounds tough."

"Why are you looking as if this is none of your business, future club president?"

I saw a light-brown, sun-tanned finger in front of me. It was pointed straight at – me?

"...uh, what?"

"Why are you looking behind you? I am acknowledging you."

She looked angry as always, but unless I heard wrong, I think she might have just praised me. It was the first time the Steel King had ever said something nice to another person. I think this might be a world first.

I was in a daze. None of the club members had prepared a placard for this big success. Everyone looked at each other sheepishly. In our Track and Field club, the King's lone voice called all the shots. If she said crows are white, then white they are. If she told you to run, then run – even in the rain. She was always right, and even when she was wrong she was right.

And she nominated who to do what?

“So, uhhhh, is this a trick...?”

“I was thinking a lot about how the next Track and Field club president should be a person who will take after me. Yokodera, from the day you have joined you have not skipped a single practice. You do not neglect to train yourself. What's more, you have grown significantly. Indeed, you are our club's most valuable asset.”

“Y-you're exaggerating!”

“Of course, you have developed some odd habits a while ago and there is always room for improvement. But your heart is in the right place. There is no boy who loves the Track and Field club more than you. Others should take note of this boy's example, so that you all can awaken as true members of the Track and Field club.”

Looking as regal as always, the club president flicked her ponytail as she issued her speech. Somehow or other, my secret wall had not been found out.

But now my situation had become even more ludicrous.

The club members looked at me with collective envy. Their thoughts were so obvious it hurt: *“So you think you can be the second King just 'cos the Steel King said something nice to you, huh? Man, give me a break. It's not even a big deal, so don't look so smug!”*

I'm not proud of it, but it's true that I am a dedicated Track and Field member. Refusing to succumb to the Spartan training from hell, I'd taken the initiative and my jump results began to improve drastically, as well as my times for the 5000-metre race.

Needless to say, this was all for the sake of swimsuits. Pleasure and pain are two sides of the same coin. When I stretched, it was so that I could put my hand on the wall, and the more I raced with the others towards the finish line, the more I could take my time near the wall. If you'd told me I would be the future club president, I'd have taken that as a joke.

I was sorry for taking Track and Field seriously – it had blown up in everyone's faces. It wasn't what it looked like. "Prez! T-thanks a lot for the kind offer, but uh...!"

"Hm?"

"It's not about whether I love or hate the Track and Field club."

"Uh-huh."

"When I joined the club back then, you could say I, uh, had a different goal in mind..."

"Enough with the false modesty. You're entitled to your freedom of speech." The Steel King irritably kicked the ground. There went her previous generosity and goodwill.

"I'm speaking freely, but I'm not entitled to my freedom after the speech," I said. The words came out like magic. A second voice from inside my head had taken over. Spooky.

"So, what is it? Ask what you want."

"I'm only just asking." (the second voice)

I could see the depths of her killing intent in her sharp eyes. Her steely pressure coiled around my body. Who could stand before the King and defy her? If she got serious, no one would be able to stop her.

...even so, I had to tell the truth.

If I didn't say it, I felt keenly that I would regret it for the rest of my life.

"I am really sorry, and this is incredibly hard for me to say, but what I am trying to tell you is that I..."

"You're too indecisive! Clearly, say it clearly!"

"I was born into this world to be your successor! To be the next club president fills me with deep emotion! I humbly accept your offer!"

"Hmph! Yokodera, to hear you say that fills me with confidence! Don't betray my trust."

"...yes."

I had been babbling just before, but I was already back to my senses.

Satisfied, the club president pulled her head back. I had no doubt that when she retired I would be a puppet president and she would still be ruling behind the scenes with her iron fist. In the lull that followed, the other club members sighed because they understood. I just wished they would sigh for *my* sake.

I had a vision of following a grey-coloured path all the way to its end, my surroundings entrapped in a wall of steel. A short, dark shadow fell across the ground, and as it spread itself wide, it swallowed up the entire world.

Goddamn it, I thought, from the bottom of my heart.

Chapter 1: Part 3

I am an easily misunderstood person. It's been like that for ages.

In elementary school, I thought that I could see up girls' skirts on the shiny reflection of the corridor floor. So I furiously scrubbed the floor with a rag from top to bottom, only to have the principal announce what I was doing in front of the entire student body. "This is Yokodera-kun from class 5-1. What a virtuous lad, never forgetting to do his daily public service in our building." But the service I really wanted was the one you could get from girls.

Another time, I thought I could see up the girls' skirts whenever the girls jumped across the overgrown weeds on the way to school. So I furiously watered the weeds every day, only to get interviewed about it on local television. "This middle school student has loved nature for three years. What a virtuous lad, transforming this lifeless school road into one of flowers." But the floral design I really wanted to know about was the one on panties.

And this other time, I thought I could see up the girls' skirts whenever bicycles zoomed past and the wind flipped the skirts up. So I furiously rode my bicycle day and night without ever averting my eyes, only to have an article written about me on a national paper. "This astounding high school student makes it his business to chase crime to the ends of the earth! What a virtuous lad – here he is receiving a letter of thanks from the police." But what I really wanted to catch was a girl's heart.

No matter what I do, people think I'm a nice guy. I end up putting on a façade every time I open my mouth.

From elementary school to high school, I haven't matured at all. On the contrary, I silently pray to see swimsuits every single day, and lately, my perversions have increased. For example, if I see a girl in a swimsuit, I can guess her three sizes. It's embarrassing what that says about me as a person. That's not who I am at all!

No, that was a hollow statement.

I'll be honest. I want to be true to myself. I want to focus more on girls. I want to see girls in their various shapes and forms. I want to get intimate with girls in every way, both in and out of their pants.

That's why becoming the president of the Track and Field club is out of the question. As long as the Steel King ruled with her deep, abiding love of order, that club would have a dark, dark future.

I wanted to quit the club and have a *"Why, Senpai, is this your classroom? I'm getting this kind of special feeling from being in the same room as you. Come to think of it, now that we're alone together, shall I close the door, tee hee?"* kind of afterschool rendezvous experience. And after doing the nasty, I wanted the *"Geez, you forgot your jersey, but I suppose it can't be helped. I'll lend you my sweater, but since I've only got one, let's wear it together, tee hee,"* kind of rosy development. It would be an improvement over being in the club. Even if it was forbidden, I'd keep rebelling, and then a more serious student would take up the club president's duty.

...yeah, I should've said *no* back then.

Past or present, it's always been the same for me. I've only ever hidden behind a façade and said what I didn't mean whenever I should have told the truth. Why was it that I couldn't say the right things at the right times? No matter how many words I utter, my simplest, honest desires will never reach the other person.

Chapter 1: Part 4

I was on the way back from school. In the summer, the sun was slow to set and the shadows fell long and haphazardly across the asphalt. Instead of going straight home, I headed for the children's park. When I got off my bicycle, the person who had been sitting on the bench broke into a hearty applause.

"I heard the news, you lady-killer! That's some special treatment you received – *damn*, do I envy you!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb with me, O future Steel King!" He snickered loudly.

This was Ponta, who had a dirty reputation way back from elementary school. He was a soldier whose name was derived from a long career of valiant deeds in the world of porn. He went from "Porn Hunter" to "Pornter" to finally "Ponta". Seeing as porn was once a part of his name, he only said stupid things whenever he opened his mouth.

When I entered high school, my time out of school had dwindled thanks to my club activities, but because this park was the exact midpoint between our houses, it ended up being our hangout.

"It's not as good as it sounds. My head's been aching all day."

"I'd say it's an honour to be noticed by a beautiful senpai. What, is there a catch?"

"I mean, think about it. What a Steel King is, in general. Wouldn't it be weirder if she were just a beauty and nothing else?"

"Whaddaya mean?"

I sat down at the edge of the jungle gym. "When you think of steel, you don't usually think of beautiful steel maidens or steel princesses."

Ponta thought about that for a moment. "I see how it is. So if she's just a *king* who's already turned to the dark side and thrown away her girl side, then

you guys are out of luck being kept awake by her all night!” He smiled bitterly.
“Stop being so blasé about it.”

“No, really, she’s just a bother...”

Like Ponta, I kind of had expectations at first. The older students had fought over her once or twice when they talked about the good-looking girls, and it’s natural for a guy to lie in bed fantasising about what she was like. But those fantasies dispersed like the ephemeral evening dew. Let’s just say that when it came to those clueless Don Quixote types, all it took was one punch to convince them out of trying to court the King. There was no room in the Steel King’s heart for love or leisure. Her aim was self-discipline. She even forced that upon those who were already in a club, and the Track and Field club members were no exception.

I shudder to even think about this so-called beauty and I’m careful not to step on her steely toes. As a romantic candidate, she was out of bounds.

“Well, whatever. Why don’t you take the chance to live out the Track and Field dream?”

“You should’ve told me that ten years ago. It’s too late – there’s no way I can do that kind of stuff now.”

“What are you saying, little rabbit? Slow and steady wins the race. Go forth and become the star of the Track and Field world!”

“What is *up* with you, Ponta? That’s not like you. Or me either.”

He said some oddly passionate things. I wondered if maybe he was addicted to *those* kinds of videos – the kind where an amorous coach and a beautiful athlete get it on despite the age difference.

“Heh heh heh, you’re too naïve. Naïve as a newborn baby.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve already moved on from porn.”

“Yeah, yeah – if you can move on from porn, I can move on from the cycle of reincarnation.”

“You’d never believe it! Hold on and look at this – I reckon this is what I’ve been waiting for.”

Ponta opened the schoolbag that was next to him and took out a huge stack of goods. It was bulging, so I couldn’t begin to count how many books and videos were packed inside... but wait.

“N-no way! The entire ten thousand yen collection of *A Princess’s First New Year’s Greeting*! That’s the legendary impossible-to-find collector’s edition! And this is the banned street corner swimsuit collection! What is this – your hidden collection?!”

“I don’t need these anymore, so I’m selling them to you.”

“Wha-?”

I stared slack-jawed at Ponta. His face was completely sincere – he wasn’t joking. No way. This one time at his house, Ponta punched me because I almost spilled soft drink over his lewd photo collection. He had the bloodshot eyes of a madman and he socked me right in the gut.

Thinking of that, I thought maybe he was getting ahead of himself. How long had this been going on? He must have received money. Oh yeah, I’d heard these days he had only one kidney.

“Hey, lady-killer. You do know that I sold my organs so that the children in Africa can have a good life?”

“...uh, yeah?”

“They’re humans just like us who live in the same world just like we do – I just can’t forgive the injustice of it all! But my piggy bank is empty. I ask you as my best friend, will you take this off me for one hundred yen? With a hundred yen, the children can drink forty litres of water.”

“Hundred? Wha-? A hundred yen?”

Ponta had a deep look of compassion across his face as if he were an enlightened being. I’d had the exact same thought of selling my organs, but I had no idea what to make of this spiritual gap between us. It was impressive, though. Very impressive. To think he had gotten so excited over seeing big-breasted African babes – that’s just the kind of perverted thing he would say.

But then, why would he get rid of his only treasures in the first place? “...tits,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Buttocks.”

“Eww.”

“Curvy hips.”

“Ooooooh no, we can’t have that.”

“You didn’t react to the three major titillations! Are you sick, Ponta?”

“I have awoken. I now realise what the meaning of life is. Clouds plume, birds tweet and flowers wilt. This world is full of treasures more important than female bodies.”

“W-what’s happened to you...?”

“I heard the Word, you might say.”

Ponta looked up at the westward sky with a faraway look in his eyes, as if he were seeking Gandhara¹. It was like he had suddenly attained all this newfound wisdom.

I wondered if there was still time to take him to a medical checkup...

¹ Gandhara is an ancient kingdom which existed in what is now Pakistan.

Just as I fell into a bemused silence, Ponta suddenly laughed. “Don’t give me that face. Perhaps you, too, may be saved by the Word – and it all started with the cat deity on Ipponsugi Hill. You know about it, right?”

“...you mean the Stony Cat statue?”

Confused and struck by what he said, I also looked towards the west. The view of Ipponsugi Hill emerged on the outskirts of town, rising up over the top of the massive jungle gym and craning over the roofs of all the houses. The uplands were covered with pleasant, green swathes of grass and an ancient cedar tree towered on the summit. Through someone’s prank or otherwise, a wooden cat statue was enshrined unobtrusively at the base of that large tree.

AKA the “Stony Cat”.

That beckoning cat looked similar but not quite the same as a real cat, and its peculiar appearance helped explain why that hill had become something of a pilgrim spot.

“Have you heard that rumour about the Stony Cat’s power when you give it an offering?”

“No, what?”

“Tut tut, since you don’t know, I’ll fill you in. Imagine a dashing handsome young man, aged sixteen, bravely enduring the tyranny of a vicious adult. To him, the raging tempests of society run high and his end-of-semester exam isn’t graded. Then, in March, he’s accused of slacking off by his classical literature teacher!”

“...wasn’t that you, Ponta? Isn’t it embarrassing talking about yourself like that? If you’d just prepared for the test better, nothing would’ve happened. So isn’t that your own fault?”

“Hey, I’m trying to comfort myself. Stop pouring salt on the wound! I was copying your paper in that test! My exam preparations were perfect; I was just surprised when my test paper went missing. One thing led to another, and after a week’s wait I took the makeup exam.

On the reading comprehension about Hikaru Genji², I answered that he is a lolicon with an Oedipus complex who is beyond saving – that’s the only possible interpretation. Yandere, tsundere, married woman, ojousama, genki girl – I only wrote a list of character traits and didn’t get the grammar at all.” Ponta stood up on the bench, and yelled his weird, blustering speech to the empty sky. “That’s one dirty text! Everything is about his horniness, and then he gets in trouble over his horniness, like whoa...!”

Somehow or other, I felt relieved. Ponta hadn’t changed on the inside. That was good, then. I gave him my one-hundred yen coin and packed his treasures into my schoolbag.

“That’s where the rumour of the Stony Cat comes in,” he went on. “If you give it an offering, it’ll take what you don’t want and give it to someone who needs it! It’s the polar opposite of a normal cat. What other cat does deliveries? Obviously, horniness isn’t something you want. So the young man thought: what was an example of something perverted that he so treasured? That’s right – his body pillow! So I offered that up to the Stony Cat – and lo and behold, something mysterious happened. My perverted desires have completely left me – classical literature here I come. Vroom vroom vroom! So then I safely got through my makeup exam, and all the way up to today I feel as if saying goodbye to my horniness has made the world seem more beautiful!”

“Hip hip hooray. Now, since I haven’t said goodbye to my horniness, I’m off. Kthxbai!”

“H-hey! I haven’t properly thanked you, so thank you! And may God’s blessing be upon you...!”

I stepped hard on my bicycle’s pedals and put as much distance as I could between the park and myself. Ponta yelled something behind me, but I couldn’t hear him. My schoolbag made rattling noises as its contents jumped up and down on the seat.

² A reference to the eponymous character of *The Tale of Genji*, said to be the world’s oldest novel.

And that was that. In his brief time as a sage, Ponta had made a grave mistake by leaving things to me. His treasured goods were in my hands. No matter what anyone said, they were mine now.

Chapter 1: Part 5

“...the phone’s not ringing.”

I ate dinner, watched TV, had a bath and appreciated my treasures for one hour. By then, it had gotten really late, but my cell phone never vibrated at all.

I assumed that Ponta, who had become so serene lately, would be crying and begging for his stuff back. My guess was that he wasn’t thinking straight. As if anyone would sell such a useful product of human wisdom for one hundred yen. Yes, it was gallant of him, but that gallantry wasn’t manly at all. Maybe Ponta was actually a girl. Now that would be an unexpected plot twist. Not that it was a development I approved of.

...in any case, just where did Ponta’s horniness go?

The makeup exam for classic literature was already four months ago. He’d had more than enough time to cool his head. Had he not looked back on his treasures even once in that time? How many kilometres would he have to run to get away from the magnetic pull of breasts, to the degree that he never yabbered on to me about them once? It had to be the doing of something beyond all human intelligence.

Outside the window pane, I could see Ipponsugi Hill in the summer night sky. Manmade lights twinkled from the houses; only at the hill did total darkness and silence return.

I remembered the rumour of the Stony Cat, uttered to me in such feverish tones: *“If you give it an offering, it’ll take what you don’t want and give it to someone who needs it.”*

I gulped.

I knew what I didn’t need: my façade. Pretending to be honoured at becoming the future club president, only saying politically correct things – to me that was, as Ponta would probably put it: “Utterly redonkulous!”

The good thing about Ponta was that he was honest. If it's bad, he'll say it's bad. If it's good, he'll say it's good. Me, though, I'm not nearly so open about myself. Thanks to the stuff I said under my façade, my life was not really my own. If I could only say my true feelings clearly without bending under the Steel King's pressure, I could get closer to the world of swimsuits.

"It's my only wish," I muttered. "It's not too much to ask..." I was grasping at straws and I knew it. I wallowed in the quagmire known as my façade.

It was no joke that I suffered because of my own actions. That was why it wasn't so strange that I, who had a stony façade, would rely on the Stony Cat for help.

My gaze flickered towards Ipponsugi Hill, where that peculiar cat statue lay.

Chapter 1: Part 6

I stopped my bike at the foot of the hill and slipped through a gap in the fence. Since the hill was in fact private property, its surroundings were enclosed in barbed wire. Still, it looked like no one was taking care of it. The weeds were overgrown, the ground was downtrodden and the barbed wire was all torn up. I hadn't heard about all the kids playing around and vandalising the place.

Using my flashlight, I trudged up the narrow dirt trail with a great deal of effort. My back bent under the weight of my body pillow. Luckily, the hill was a small one and it only took ten minutes to reach the summit. There, the ancient cedar tree spread itself out, its single thick bough appearing to cradle the night sky.

The Stony Cat was there that night too, propped up by the base of that tree.

Its face was about half as big as my leg. It was three feet tall, stood on two feet and was crudely made. Even though it had eyes, whiskers and a nose carved into its wooden face, the Stony Cat had so little in the way of expressions that for some reason I thought it looked strange. While a normal cat raises one paw to beckon, this cat had both paws raised. On top of that, the back of its paws were faced my way.

Maybe Mother Nature was its maker. The sight of it was both awful and awe-inspiring. I didn't know how long it had been enshrined, but I had a sense that it had always been there. Looking at this creature, I could certainly see how the bizarre rumours had come about.

Because of the bugs gathering around, I turned off my flashlight. As if on cue, the darkness instantly became total. I put my body pillow in front of the cat and immediately set down to pray – or so I intended. I hesitated first. “Hmmm, maybe it's better if I do this,” I muttered as I removed my leather belt and fixed my body pillow up straight.

By impulse, I had mail-ordered a body pillow just like Ponta's. It even had a name: “Barbara.” A posing shot of an idol I liked at the time was supposed to be printed on the fabric, but when I got the pillow I was shocked. The image was from

another dimension, a creature from an alien invasion. I didn't have the wisdom to return it nor the guts to trash it.

You see, Ponta and I forced each other into having it. It was a pass-the-parcel game spanning a couple of months. Recently, as a way of congratulating him for passing the high school entrance exam, I snuck it into Ponta's locker. Then at some point in March this year, it had ended up back in my closet. Come to think of it, it was in March when Ponta prayed to the cat statue. He said he used the pillow as an offering, but then just how did it find its way to my closet through all the wind and rain?

Barbara was being used twice for religious purposes, so she had to be satisfied with herself. "I wonder if this god will be happy with a body pillow of all things as an offering," I thought aloud. "I hope it'll be okay..."

Then again, since Ponta's wish was granted and all, I figured no other offering would work. Good thing it was the middle of the night. If someone saw me lugging Barbara around, just what would they thi-

Plonk. Someone kicked a rock.

I held my breath in the darkness. Who was it? The police? A high school kid walking around with a human-like object strapped to him with a belt was just asking to be arrested for disturbing the peace! If they searched my house, my treasures would be confiscated! Destroyed! I'd rather die.

Yeah, that probably wouldn't happen, but if the Steel King found out, she'd be furious: *"Body pillows are a sign of weakness! Such insolence!"* She'd probably beat me to a pulp. That's not the kind of hard-core hobby I'm into. Same thing if I was discovered by a neighbour or by someone from school. I didn't want to live out my youth under the dubious title of "Barbara's boyfriend".

I had no intention of dying - socially or physically. Man, oh man. What was I gonna do?

While I struggled to hold my thoughts together, the sound of footsteps trampling through the undergrowth grew nearer. I was frozen to the spot, unable to make up my mind between running away or announcing myself. I didn't even question why anyone would choose to go to Ipponsugi Hill of all places.

Ahead of me, I saw a beam from a flashlight teeter from side to side. It was practically right under my nose already. The intruder was only a metre away or so. Argh, I didn't care if it was the police, the Steel King or a complete stranger. I'd rather live to fight another day than stay in these dire straits.

The instant I stood up, we collided.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!"

We'd been closer than I thought. Had my eyes misjudged things in the dark?

"E-EEK! Eww! P-p-perv...!" the intruder yelled.

"W-whadju say?!" I yelled.

The flashlight fell to the ground, casting light on the offering in front of it. And in that split second, Barbara could be seen for the bizarre sight that she was. You could not unsee the vision.

What vision? Answer: a naked body I'd just fooled around with and then thrown aside!

"Eeeeeeeek, it's a pervert! Do I need the police or the ambulance – right, I need the police!"

"D-don't bring the police into this! Barbara's not alive, so it's okay!"

"I'm sure the police would love to be brought into this! Now if you excuse me, I have business to do in a phone box!"

It was the voice of a girl I didn't know. Still, I understood that it was the voice of someone who had encountered a degenerate lowlife.

“Wait wait, let’s talk this out first! This is all a big misunderstanding!”

“Lalalalala, I can’t hear you! I’m not looking at you! I saw nothing!”

“You saw nothing?! That’s not gonna hold up in a cross-examination, you know!”

“Of course it will! All the policemen in Japan are on my side! The policemen are mighty! They’re invincible against perverts!” The girl’s screams were getting more incoherent by the second.

The prospect of being handcuffed and jailed got much more real much more quickly. At this rate, if I went back to town my hit points would be in the critical zone!

The girl tripped over her feet, and at that same moment, her chest bumped against my hands.

Silence. We were in a precarious stalemate.

We sized each other up as if we were playing cat and mouse, and then our noses bumped. That instantly broke the spell.

“Eww eww ewwwww! You need to be in love to do those sorts of things!”

“*What* sort of things?! Just shut up and I’ll be gentle with you! Then we’ll all be happy!”

“Gentle or rough it’s still eww! My life sucks right now!”

“Get over yourself already!”

The girl wriggled violently, and at that same moment, I put her in a nelson hold¹.

She was frantic. So was I. Struggling wildly against each other, our feet tangled up and sent us tumbling across the undergrowth. Our knees touched, and somewhere I felt skin under my fingertips. My first thought was that girls are

¹ A kind of wrestling technique that involves pinning the partner’s arm and neck from behind.

really soft to touch, and then I realised this would look really suspicious to other people. I had unwittingly stumbled across the line into criminal activity.

“I’m not tasty at all! I’m skinny and flat and I’m not wearing any underwear, so I’ll taste really yucky if you eat me! It’s true – don’t kill me!”

“Don’t say such sad things about yourself! Have some more self-esteem!”

“I don’t need any self-esteem as long as my body still belongs to me! My measurements are the worst in the class! I’ll taste better if you wait for two years, so I... I... want to be pure until then...!”

Without warning, the girl stopped resisting. The darkness clouded my view, but I didn’t need to see anything – I could sense it from her voice.

This girl was crying.

The tears and the snot streamed down her face, and her childish body hitched as she let out a hoarse sob.

I felt my panic rising, which didn’t help my growing headache. Even though I had just become a criminal, I had my morals. A boy who makes a girl cry is the worst. No matter how low you sink, that is the absolute.

I clasped my hand on the girl’s shoulder, which was pressed up against the ground. As I hovered over her, I inhaled deeply and said, “Hey, listen! Barbara’s just a body pillow!”

Her shoulder was so fragile I felt a pang in my chest. She was as delicate as china, and I feared that her weak and brittle frame would shatter under my touch.

In that moment, I threw away my façade and my dignity and I bellowed with all my lungs. “She’s not human, just a collector’s item I brought up here! I’m not dangerous and I won’t hurt you! Honestly, I’ve never pushed down a girl before either! My body’s pure!”

My voice echoed throughout the entire hill.

I took out my flashlight so that two beams now shone on the body pillow. The dim circle of lights revealed a lump of fabric – the symbol of a young man's lusts. I depended on it to clear me of my crimes.

"...so this is your first time pushing someone down, I see," she answered. "If you're as pure as you say, could you get off me right now, please?" The suspicion still showed in her eyes.

Satisfied that she was no longer crying, I did as she said.

You can see just from that conversation that I would never touch a "forced sex" video. I could never be excited by a girl's crying face. I have my morals. Whenever I choose what to download, I refuse to use anything from that genre – that is my absolute!

Chapter 1: Part 7

It was a humid night. The grass had a suffocating stench. Because the moon was hidden behind the clouds, we had to rely purely on our flashlights to see each other. After shining our light here and there around the hill, we settled down at the base of the cedar tree. For now, we kept our distance and sat two metres apart.

“...and that’s the story.” As a way of excusing myself for carrying around a body pillow in the middle of the night, I opened up to her about everything. “I thought if I prayed to the cat statue, I’d get rid of my façade.”

The girl hugged a paper bag to her chest and stared pointedly at the ground. Her body was very petite. You’d think she was a grade schooler just from her stature. I couldn’t see her face clearly, but I figured she was cute. I felt as if I knew her from somewhere too.

“Ah, I didn’t make up the rumour about the offering just now,” I added. “My friend actually tried it.”

“It’s okay. I heard the same rumour. It’s spreading quite fast, it seems. I didn’t believe in it, though.” Up until now, the girl had kept to herself, but now she turned to face me. “Is your club president really that scary?”

“If you ask me, even a bulldozer on steroids couldn’t match up to her.”

“A bulldozer?” the girl laughed. She must have thought something was funny. It was only a soft chuckle, but it sounded like a bell, high-pitched and clear.

She rubbed her eyes furiously with both hands. After that, she rummaged around for something in her paper bag. When she turned her hips, she couldn’t reach me, so she sidled up closer and placed something in my hand.

“Is this...a pork bun?”

“Yes. Has it gone cold? Go on, eat up.”

“Thanks.”

After clamming up around each other for all this time, the distance between us shrank down to a metre and we each took a pork bun. It wasn't that warm, but because I was tired and hungry, it hit the spot.

She was a thoughtful girl. Although I wanted to know why someone her age would be taking a walk at this hour with a pork bun in hand, I didn't ask. It sounded a bit rich for a pervert to ask. Why, anyone could feel like going for a walk in the night. She felt like it. So did I. Could be something you did when you messed up your mail-order shopping or whatever.

When the girl finished her pork bun, I was still eating. She kept looking at my face. "In our family, there's a tradition that if a man embarrasses a girl, he has to take care of her for the rest of his life. Prepare yourself for it!"

"Uhhh."

"...I was joking," she sighed wearily in the dark. "You didn't have to sound so put off..."

No, no! That was my façade! I care too much about appearances under my façade and I react weirdly – but I was actually really happy on the inside! Man, do façades suck – they're the root of all evil!

When I told her all of that, the girl finally understood and sighed once again. "Is a façade really such a bad thing?"

"To me it is. I reckon if I'd just told you earlier that this was a body pillow like I meant to, I wouldn't be in this mess."

"Mess, huh..."

"Um, well, about that. I meant that I wouldn't have done such an awful thing to you!"

"It's okay. I'm just a crybaby." She trembled faintly. Somehow, I got the impression she was about to start crying again.

"There are times when it's good to be a crybaby, you know!"

“When is that?”

“Huh? Uh, um... it depends on the situation, I guess...”

“If you’re trying to cheer me up, then take responsibility until you die,” the girl said sulkily.

I couldn’t see her, but I was certain she was pouting. After all, she *was* just a kid with erratic mood swings. Without thinking, I laughed, and the girl couldn’t help but laugh along with me. I didn’t have a little sister, but if they could be anything like this little girl, I wouldn’t mind having a dozen of them, give or take.

“I want to be more mature,” she said. “I want to be able to hide my feelings without crying or getting mad easily.”

“Don’t you think girls are cuter when they show their emotions?”

“Not at all! I hate being childish...oh right, we came here to pray. Want to try it together?”

“Mmm, I forgot about that.”

Swallowing what was left of my pork bun, I turned around to face the cat statue. I got on my knees and lowered my head. Next to me, the girl did the same.

At first, I didn’t know what to wish for, but the simplest sentence came to mind without me thinking hard about it: *I pray to get close to all the girls in swimsuits and skirts*. It was the stereotypical kind of thing I’d pray for on New Year’s.

“Er... uh... I pray to lose my façade, stop telling lies, and to never be misunderstood again.”

“My turn: I pray to lose the ability to express my true emotions.”

We opened our mouths and made our wishes nonchalantly. I assumed our prayers would have no special meaning, that it was all an extension of childish rituals like writing a letter to Santa.

The wind began to howl. I remember having a hallucination where all of a sudden the Stony Cat blew up to massive proportions. My head stung with white-hot pressure. But soon enough, the heat slid down my throat and faded away forever.

I wasn't sure why, but when I realised what had happened, I was sweating hard.

"...what's this? How many of my pork buns did you eat?" The girl was cool and collected, completely opposite from how agitated I was.

I felt like a boyfriend scared on his first date at a haunted house. It was nothing short of embarrassing. "I only ate the one you gave me," I insisted.

"But there is one less than that here."

"Didn't you eat it? When I ate mine, you munched on two without noticing it. You'll blow up and get fat! Anyway, it's getting late, so let's go home. Shall I walk you?"

"I am not that much of a glutton. Excuse me if I enjoy eating. No, I will not get fat. My house is close by, so I am fine on my own. Hm..." The girl paced around, refusing to give up on her search.

She wasn't the only one.

"...what's this?" I strained my eyes to peer at Barbara in front of me. While her picture was still as unfortunate-looking as ever, the leather belt I'd used to carry her along was gone. It could have been the darkness, but no matter where I looked, I couldn't see it. "I can't go home carrying something like this in the open! No one's gonna play along with my harmless little fantasies."

When I thought about the travesty that was walking home with Barbara by my side, I groaned.

...looking back, we were careless. When we prayed to the Stony Cat, we underestimated its power, even after everything that came to pass.

Chapter 2 – One Man’s Treasure Is Another Man’s Trash

“Hey, Ponta. What do you think summer is all about?”

“The scorching heat from the sun! The parched earth! O mother star, I vow here that we will protect this world...”

“...I see you’re still talking crap.”

“Hey now, I’m serious. I’m stopping myself from breathing for one hour a day so I can reduce CO₂ levels.”

“Whoa, you don’t need to do anything *that* drastic.”

It was a peaceful, sunny morning. The road to school was crowded with students who had gotten off the bus. Ponta and I kept close together, pedalling on our bikes. It had been quite a while since we had last gone to school together.

“By the way, good sir,” said Ponta, “are you okay with skipping your morning practice? This is the first time we’ve met at this hour.”

“I am *not* okay. I have no idea what to say to the Prez. ‘Last night, I physically restrained someone, pushed her down and made her cry, so then I got tired and overslept,’ maybe?”

“You mustn’t confuse your videos with real life. Or get so defensive about it.”

“I *am* talking about real life! I can still feel that girl’s warmth in my palm!”

“Heh heh, whatever floats your boat. Enough of that, though. What do *you* think summer is all about?”

“Glad you asked! It’s about straining your eyes to see the outline of a girl’s bra through her blouse! It’s about the arousing scent of sweat!” As I said that, we stopped at a red light. From my bike seat, I could see a heap of sexy girls, all sweating thanks to the sweltering heat. Just like them, I was red in the face. “Like that chick, for example. Oooh, she’s nice too! Whoa, this is amazing!”

“...look. Since we’re friends, can I just say something?”

“What?”

“Wouldn’t your life at school be easier if you refrained from pointing from now on?”

The girls around me glared at me as if I were a bad smell. I lowered my finger, feeling dismayed. “Gee, thanks a lot... just when I was finally getting excited from seeing their bras clearly.”

The girls went on glaring. It was like they thought I was a slug. As soon as the pedestrian lights turned blue, they dashed through the crossing as if their lives depended on it.

“Huh, you’re really letting loose this morning,” Ponta remarked. “Just what’s the big idea anyway? Don’t you see that you’re pushing their buttons by staring like that, even if it’s fun for you?”

“No, that’s not how it is... if we’re talking about what pushes *my* buttons, that’d be your treasures, Ponta. That sweat-fetish DVD was great. That whole concept of sit-up exercises with chicks was totally unique!”

“Hehehe, that so? Your user satisfaction will bring happiness to you, me and Africa.”

“Er, yeah...” I said, craning my neck.

Something was strange. I just couldn’t explain it. Somehow, the air around my body felt lighter than usual, as if the very molecules they were made of had thinned out and starved away.

Chapter 2: Part 2

When I passed through the pedestrian crossing, I noticed people were crowding around the school gate. Ponta and I got off our bikes and gathered around the gate too.

Ponta peered over the shoulders of the people in the crowd. “Ah... here we go. Another session of Azuki Azusa’s Reward Time,” he said, shrugging flippantly.

“...what’s that? And hang on, who’s she?”

“Good sir, did you say you didn’t know? That’s her over there, the rich girl who transferred to our school in April.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of her... ah, wait, hold on. I heard about a super cute transfer student from another class. I didn’t know her name, though. Was it Azusa or Hikari?”

“That’s Azuki Azusa, all right. Compared to the other girls in our year, she’s on a whole different level. She’s famous for always receiving love confessions.”

“A beautiful, popular and rich girl – what a perfect superhuman! Since I’m busy with my club activities from morning to evening, I only remember the girls from the Track and Field club and the swimming club.”

“I’m impressed by how diligent you are... hm? Why are you so acquainted with the swimming club?”

“I seeeee, so that’s Azuki Azusa, huh? So, what’s Reward Time?” My interest piqued, I waded my way to the front of the crowd.

The cause of the commotion immediately became clear. The other students had formed a ring around the school gate, where a boy and a girl faced off against each other as if they were having a duel.

On one side, the boy yelled out, “Azuki-san! I-really-really-love-you-for-you-are-my-heart’s-desire! Please go out with me!”

While he might have pulled those lines out of some deep work of literature, they weren't exactly sparkingly original. Azuki Azusa, who was listening, said, "Go out with you, you say? *Hmph.*" She tilted her small, delicate neck to the side. "Then what?"

That gesture was all it took to make her seem like a dainty fairy. It was as if she had come into existence on the outer reaches of the cosmos itself. Her long, chestnut hair was like a net made of silk. Whenever she blinked and frowned, her slender lips parted, making her look like one of the flower fairies¹.

"Don't tell me that's all you've got to say?" she said, not mincing any words. "Even flamingos flap their wings and have a mating dance. What a sham of a human being you are. You're even lower than a pre-evolved ape. Why don't you crawl on the ground like the inferior life form that you are?"

Um, what? Where did my fairy go?

Azuki Azusa's words stung like a red-hot iron. "And I'm not telling you to drive me around in a Rolls-Royce or roll out a red carpet for me at school. I don't want a peasant to do that for me. I only want something simple. Would you be my golden retriever? If I called for you at two in the morning, or when you're on a faraway vacation, or when your parents just died, would you always, *always* come running to me? Could you swallow all that and follow my orders like a blind sheep?"

Her eyes were like jewels and her cheeks blushed lightly. A stiff choker emphasised the suppleness of her nape. Even if you painted all the surrounding girls with the most expensive art tools you could get, they would never look half as pretty as Azuki Azusa was.

Everything about her was so fairy-like, and yet...

¹ Refers to the famous set illustrations drawn by Cicely Mary Barker.



“...ha. I already know it’s useless. Can you stop talking to me now? You’re about as interesting as a bug. Go back into your cocoon and do your life over again,” Azuki Azusa said scornfully, waving one arm as if to ward off an invisible flying insect.

The boy who had just confessed stiffened. I thought that he stood a better chance of impressing her if he told her he was a butterfly because technically they were insects too. But then I remembered their average life span was only about a month long. Sad, really.

Utterly defeated, the boy sighed and prostrated himself on the ground. “Thank you very much!” he exclaimed in ecstasy. *What the hell?* I thought. “Azuki Azusa, you are a true aristocrat. I know that our love can never be. Ever since you transferred here, you have constantly trampled over our confessions.”

“If you didn’t realise,” Ponta whispered behind me into my ear, “it’s the guys who are into that kind of thing who call it Reward Time. I guess to them it’s like a daily morning ritual. Lately, she’s been toning it down somewhat, but today she went all out with the fanservice. Those were some first-degree burns.”

“What kinda fanservice is that...? It would suck for anyone who’s not hardcore.”

“Yeah, she sure knows how to talk. But man, since she looks like such a princess, I can understand why you’d want her to talk to you at least once. Then, after getting pushed around so much, you get a taste for it and call it a gift from God or something.”

Glancing at the boy who had confessed to her, Azuki Azusa let out an elegant sigh and turned her back to him, her hair fluttering behind her. I thought she looked like a flower display. The surrounding crowd hushed and made way for her, as if they were in a museum appreciating a masterpiece. No one was allowed to get close to her.

Alone in the cosmos, she bloomed without any sunshine.

“She’s cute, eh? Even though I’ve left my horniness behind, just looking at her makes my heart pound.”

“That so, huh.”

“She’s got looks *and* she comes from a good family. Whoever said you can’t have your cake and eat it too!”

“That so, huh.”

“That so – hey! You don’t really care, do you?”

I’d already seen all there was to see in this girl with one look. My gaze fell to the area below her clunky choker. It went even further down past the ribbon tied to the front of her uniform. Specifically, I looked straight at her modest pair of (o)(o). I didn’t have to measure her with a tape. I could see how small she was just by looking at her. As if I could bring myself to care about this fairy’s body when it just happened to be fairy-sized.

“Don’t you see?” I said. “That chick acts all high and mighty, but she’s flat as a board!”

At this point, I should mention something that I’m curious about. If all the students clamouring around school in their free time just so happen to go quiet at this one exact moment, then wouldn’t that moment be a bad time to say something without thinking? It’d be all weird and embarrassing, right? What are you supposed to do if that happened?

I want to know. Like, right now.

When I spoke, I did not get any bad vibes. I just think that everything zoned out. In front of that whole crowd, my voice was the only one that could be heard.

Azuki Azusa looked down at her own chest. I think her mouth twitched. “Flat...as a board...” Maybe she was secretly bothered over it. Her face went red as a plum.

Everyone around me stared and then quickly looked away. *I didn’t say that, oh no not me.*

When it comes to the group mentality at these sorts of moments, it's impressive how everyone cooperates. Before I knew it, a tide had pushed me in front of Azuki Azusa. I was the only one whose appearance stood out.

"...well now! You said something very interesting just now." The young lady glared at me with fire brewing in her eyes. Sparks crackled, as if threatening to ignite the entire cosmos in flames. If I didn't answer her straight, her fire would consume me.

This was no time to panic. Calm down, I told myself. *I can do anything.*

I channelled every ounce of calm, gentlemanly spirit I had in me and said, "I-it's okay! Fear not! While I prefer big titties over small ones every time, flat chests are a sign of status in this world. There are people out there who value how rare they are! Or you could say there are philosophers who prefer the plains over the hills! And since you don't have breasts, you don't need to wear a bra, so I reckon changing clothes for you is easy. They won't ever sag either, not that there's anything there that'll sag. Oh man, how lucky!"

As I gave her the thumbs-up, I realised that I had said much more than I ever needed to. Although I had said my true feelings, I should have known it was TMI. No one was forcing me to look Azuki Azusa in the eyes, but I did still peek at her face.

"*Die, Pervert*" was written all across the dainty fairy's face.

"Eh heh heh heh... aren't you an interesting one?" she said mildly. "How fun, it's like I got bitten by a badly trained dog. You're in trouble now. Why don't we take a nice little walk together, okay?" The dainty fairy looked about three seconds away from a major eruption. Her shoulders shook ominously.

Sensing that Reward Time was forthcoming, I tried to pull away, but there was nowhere to run except into a back shed which no one could get into anyway. I could feel the envious stares from the boys. I was not into that kind of fetish at all, though. *Please, no*, I thought. *Oh god, save me-*

“Hold it. I’ll be taking care of Yokodera.”

I knew who it was, just from the aura around that voice.

The newcomer on the scene was a distinguished individual. She was dressed in running shorts and a T-shirt, a sure sign that she had come from morning practice. The morning practice I skipped out on, that is.

The Steel King cracked her knuckles and stared right through me with a demonic gleam in her eyes. If looks could kill, I was already dead.

“Who are you?” Azuki Azusa demanded. “If you’ve got business with me, here I am.”

“This man’s about to choose between life and death. DEAD OR DIE. That is all.”

“Y-you don’t make any sense! Stop talking broken English!”

“Hm? Did you say something? Surely you aren’t insulting me, are you?”

“Urk... n-no, I’m not.”

The Steel King silenced Azuki Azusa with one look. I marvelled at the stark difference between them. When it really came down to it, the rich girl was surprisingly submissive.

I felt giddy seeing two girls fight over me. It was like a dream. Well, more like a nightmare, really. If it’s not one thing it’s another. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, just like Nostradamus predicted. Oh gosh, save me from this fate.

The Steel King drew herself to her full height in front of me. “Now then, Yokodera. What do you intend to do after coming to school this late?”

Seeing her in that outfit was bad news to me. That outfit was the last thing I needed.

“I just appointed you as the future club president, and then you suddenly don’t turn up to morning practice without permission,” she went on.

“I thought I told you I hate having my expectations betrayed. If you have any explanation for this, you better ‘fess up. Are we clear?”

“Er, uh, um...”

“What is it? Choose your excuse carefully. I don’t want to beat you up over what happened this morning either.”

“S-sh-sho...”

My mind went blank. Normally, I would have made up something about world defence forces and secret military organisations because the Steel King liked those kinds of stories, surprisingly enough. But while that would have been enough to excuse spilling a cup of tea, today it was too little too late.

As soon as my mouth opened on its own accord, I was past the point of no return.

“Why are you wearing running shorts, Prez?! Your tights! What happened to the tights you normally wear?! Those running tights of yours are just as magical as competitive swimsuits! It’s the magic of fetishism that keeps me tied to you! Thanks to those tights, I was able to endure so much practice from hell. Without it there is no meaning to the Track and Field club’s existence! You’ve been doing Track and Field for so long and you still don’t understand that?! If you just changed to your tights straight away, I wouldn’t be having these thoughts!”

The Steel King was speechless. The look on her face was beyond description.

I had no idea what the hell I was spouting. I had let my true feelings slip right in front of the King’s presence and ruined every prospect I had in life. I was about as innocent as the door-to-door salesman who sells uncensored adult magazines at the police station.

I had to think of an excuse, quick!

“Er, uh, uuuuum... it’s not what you think! What I was trying to say was that – well, it’s true that I think about this stuff every day, but... oh, hurry up and change out of those clothes already, please...”

“...uh huh.”

When I saw how wooden her response was, I knew it was all over.

There was a deathly silence. The surrounding students were frozen with fear at the prospect of the King’s steely retribution. My impending doom was set in stone. I looked forward to my next life.

After a pregnant pause, the King opened her mouth slowly. “Is that so? That’s how it is, huh?” she said, blinking multiple times. To my surprise, I found myself admiring how long her eyelashes were, when all of a sudden her sharp eyes narrowed. “Yokodera... you must be tired. Your pain must have been unimaginable and all this time I didn’t see it. I cannot apologise to you enough.”

“Er, you see, that is...”

“Rest at ease – I will tell everyone! You have poured so much of your heart and soul into Track and Field. Otherwise, you would not have said such baffling things. It was as if you had become a mere pervert. I will therefore turn a blind eye to this morning’s incident. You should rest your body for a while,” she advised me gently. One thing led to another and now her attitude was that of someone caring for a sick person.

She was just like Jesus.

Chapter 2: Part 3

Something was definitely up.

My mind was not my own. Maybe something *was* wrong with my head, but that thought didn't seem right to me, so I put it aside. The problem was with my tongue. Normally, when I did think about, say, swimsuits, I'd make up something about space whales to cover it up. But today out of all days I just blurted out what I was thinking. It's like if I fought in a war in the near future without using a single AT field¹.

After that morning's incident, I sexually harassed my classmates seven times. The teacher sent me out of the classroom four times. Students from other classes and year levels came to stare at me over fifty times.

"Who's he?" "That's the crazy tights guy." "Oh, him." "Hey, he looks different from what I expected." "So that's him, huh?"

The Hentai Prince².

It was a name the guys came up with among themselves after seeing me escape from the Steel King's jaws without a scratch. If the King dubbed me a pervert, then I was the "Hentai Prince". It was the most horrible naming sense I'd seen in years. It sure gave "Porn Hunter" a run for its money.

"Still, I think Hentai Prince suits you, good sir," Ponta said to me after school. He patted me teasingly on the shoulder. "That was a joke. Just messin' with ya."

"Don't give me that crap! I don't reckon my nickname fits me any more than yours fits you. You're just getting back at me."

"Ooooh... why are you glaring at me like that?"

¹ A reference to the near-impenetrable barriers used in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. They're said to symbolise the psychological barriers people put up to avoid feeling vulnerable, so they're pretty much the same thing as a façade.

² Literally the "Perverted Prince". The Japanese officially translates "Hentai Ouji" as "Hentai Prince" so I kept it like that.

“Take back what you said about me being a Hentai Prince, or else!”

Chortling, Ponta crossed his arms like a monk. Then he said, “In all seriousness, we are all driven by worldly desires at heart. Unless you attack the root of all evil, there can be no peace in this world. How about you pray to the Stony Cat like I did?”

“I already prayed to the statue... oh. *Oh.*” I remembered the ritual from last night.

No way, I thought, shaking my head. I’d only prayed for around a few seconds at most. I just couldn’t believe that doing that would make me lose control of my tongue... I think.

“Oh, so you went as well, good sir? And your offering vanished? So it *is* the real thing! See, Barbara was too much for it. As soon as I took my eyes off her, she was gone.”

“Come again?”

The body pillow was useless as an offering so the Stony Cat had thrown it into my closet. And now I still had it in my possession.

As Ponta told me the story, I shuddered. “What do you mean, she vanished?”

Again, Ponta looked at me gravely. “Exactly what I said. She evaporated. Disappeared from the face of the earth. Her whereabouts are unknown. How do I say it? As proof that it grants your wish, the Stony Cat makes your offering vanish. It’s the same thing as being an expert kidnapper. If these were peaceful times, I would have asked the police to search for her.” He sighed deeply. “I miss her.”

I knew he was not the kind of guy to pull off such an elaborate prank. But if it wasn’t a prank, what was it?

The offering vanished, only to appear in my room? Ponta’s horniness vanished, whereas Barbara hadn’t when I tried the same thing. So when I prayed, what did vanish...?

Something was strange. The pieces of the puzzle were all laid out before me, but the big picture vaguely eluded me. I just didn't think it could be right.

While I stood there, dumbfounded, Ponta came to his own conclusion and furrowed his brow in worry. "Just drop it. The effects of your offering might not show immediately, for it is all up to Providence. Rumours have a short lifespan, too. That applies to your Hentai Prince nickname as well!"

This time when he patted me on the shoulder, he did it comfortingly. Then he stood up as his way of saying goodbye. He was off to further the cause of world peace. I was too confused to wave him off.

I didn't know what was going on, but my gut told me that I had fallen into a dangerous situation.

Chapter 2: Part 4

I wonder how long I was in a daze. No matter how much I racked my brains, no clear answers came to me and it wore me down trying to think of what to do next.

There was no one in the classroom. Everyone had gone their separate ways. “This sucks,” I groaned.

I was deprived of my club activities. According to the Steel King, my cool-off period could be no shorter than a week. While I did deserve it, I was parted from my beloved concrete wall. I couldn’t appreciate the tights worn by the Track and Field girls either. I was back to having no purpose in life.

“Argh, craaaaaaap! Goddamn iiiiiiit!” I roared without provocation. “Even if I just went home now, I can’t even watch the idol swimsuit competition! I can just see those high-def boobs in my mind’s eye!”

My head had barely cleared. I thought I might be able to vent my emotions if I opened the window all the way and yelled my lungs out. I decided to do it. I unlatched the window facing the grounds and the window facing the hallway, and then-

“You’re a bigger pervert than I expected.”

“Aaaaaaaargh!” I reacted without thinking.

I had no idea when it could have happened, but a girl had slipped into the classroom as if she was a ghost. The ribbon on her uniform indicated that she was a first-year student and her short haircut emphasised her petite figure. She had one ponytail which was tied at the side of her head and pointed diagonally. Although she had a small stature, the total lack of expression on her face made a strong impression on me. She seemed as cold as ice.

I felt as if I knew this girl from somewhere. It totally bugged me.

I stared at the girl and she stared back coolly. Rather than being reminded of a person, I thought of a Siamese cat. In a way, she was more animal than human.

“Man, I really wanna stroke your ponytail,” I said.

“...you’re a pervert, I see.”

“N-no, I was just giving you a special compliment or something!”

“Many perverts end up in court, I see.”

“Isn’t that going overboard?! And hey, what are you doing in a second-year classroom?”

“Indeed. I have business with an upperclassman... pervert.”

“You didn’t have to add ‘pervert’ on the end there! You say you’ve got business with me, but is this our first meeting?”

“You don’t remember, huh? I see,” the girl said as she slowly sidled up to me. In spite of the significant height difference between us, her unblinking stare felt really eerie for some reason. “Will this jog your memory?”

The girl grabbed my collar and pulled me to the ground in one smooth motion. I landed on my knees with a muffled impact.

It was a secret rendezvous for two. Caught in the space between two desks, the girl’s body was sprawled out beneath me. Against all odds, one of my private after-school fantasies had turned into reality.

“Oi, what are you doing?!” I spluttered. “I-if I get seen like this again...!”

“Again, you say? I see. So this is not your first time. Clearly, without any doubt, you are an absolute pervert.”

It all looked as if I had pushed her down, and yet she showed no sign of being upset. It was as if she couldn’t show any more expression than what she had on her face.

And yet she was cute. Although she had a small nose, pink lips and a delicate chin, her eyes held a power that belied all of that. Her eyebrows were tilted upwards and her watery-blue eyes scrutinised me. If I were a poet, I'd describe myself as being sucked into her gaze, unable to tear myself away.

My mind was so out of it I couldn't seem to control my body properly. I had to put my hand somewhere, so I rested it on the girl's delicate shoulder...

...delicate shoulder?

It was through our touch that I recalled her. I remembered her weak and brittle frame, as delicate as china.

"Th-the girl from Ipponsugi Hill!"

Wasn't she the pork-bun girl who had been bawling her eyes out? I was sure I wasn't mistaken, but since it was dark and the impression she gave off through her words and actions were that of a completely different person, I hadn't realised at all.

"Correct. You helped me out back then." Then she pursed her tiny lips together and sighed coolly. "Now then, this is embarrassing, so I would like you to get off me."

"Embarrassing?"

"Yes. So embarrassing I could die," she said.

She didn't look embarrassed this time either.

Chapter 2: Part 5

Her name was Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko. If I ever had a girlfriend, “Tsukiko” sounded like a name she could have. Seeing as she was one year younger than me, I asked if I could call her “Tsukiko-chan”, but she immediately shook her head.

She said it was embarrassing; her expression said otherwise.

“So basically, um... Tsutsukakushi-san... you’ve lost your ability to change or show any expression. Am I getting this right?”

We sat down on the desks, keeping a polite distance between us. When the girl dangled her small feet over the side of a perfectly normal desk, the desk looked king-sized in comparison to her.

“It is unnecessary to put ‘-san’ after your kouhai’s name, Hentai Prince-senpai. I am troubled over what has happened.”

“‘Senpai’ is kinda a mouthful too, you know. Tsutsukakushi... was this all ‘cos you prayed to the Stony Cat? So you could stop expressing your true feelings?”

“I don’t see what else it could be. You also prayed with me... Hentai-senpai... and then you got into trouble yourself because you lost your façade.”

“You don’t have to say hentai either! But yeah, unrealistic things like that do happen, huh?”

“Is it unrealistic for you to say perverted things to your Track and Field club president in public?”

“Urk.”

“Are you not a mild pervert who gives your body pillow a name? Or perhaps it has nothing to do with what you prayed for and it’s normal for you to blurt out perverted things like an extremist? Is it really unnecessary to call you a pervert?”

She had me there.

Tsutsukakushi's repeated accusations of my pervert status bowled me over. It was less about what she actually said and more about how coldly she stared at me as she said it that stung more than it needed to. It felt like she was an android out of a movie. The true feelings of that crybaby girl were completely obscured without trace.

But wasn't this what Tsutsukakushi had wished for?

"I cannot control my voice or my expressions very well. At this rate, I won't be able to have a normal school life. Do you have the same problem, senpai? Even the first years have been hearing rumours about a Hentai Prince. So I thought I should ask you for advice."

"Er, you know, I don't have any advice to give. Neither of us have a clue what's going on... oh, I got it-!"

A light bulb lit up in my head. If we could get to the heart of the problem, then it would be easy to come up with a solution. It was the least I could do for a kouhai who had gone through all the trouble of asking her senpai for help.

"I also thought about what happened. It all started with our prayers to the cat statue, so if we went back to it again..." Tsutsukakushi trailed off. She tilted her head slightly and pressed her finger against her cheek, holding that pose like a statue. She peered up at me mutely and nodded.

"I've got a better plan than that," I said.

"Huh. What may that be?"

I flexed my fingers. Then I unleashed my tickling attack from hell. "C'mon! Laugh, laugh, laaaaaaugh!"

Tsutsukakushi grunted in shock. Her tiny body squirmed against the table and she curled herself up into a ball.

If she couldn't express her emotions, then I decided I would force them out of her. If someone did this kind of thing to me, I wouldn't be able to hold back my

laughter for a moment. (Getting tickled is embarrassing, though, so I would rather not do it if I could help it.)

Tsutsukakushi gasped. And yet she remained surprisingly stubborn. My tickling caused no change to her facial expression at all and I didn't hear any noise resembling laughter. All she did was breathe heavily. The Stony Cat's divine power was fearsome indeed.

There was nothing for it, so I tickled her even harder.

"Ahh...! Mmmmmmmfffff...!"

The back of her neck turned from white to pale pink and she shook her head fervently from side to side. Her ponytail swished back and forth as her doll-like fingers gripped the edge of the table. She kicked the legs of the table with her slippers as if in surrender. Under her weight, the table made a sound like a creaking bed.

I had the feeling we were doing something very naughty...

"Hang on," I said aloud. "I'm only tickling you, but this is making me look like a pervert."

"Mmmmmfffff...! You *are*... a pervert...!"

As soon as I eased up my attack a little, Tsutsukakushi opened her mouth wide and bit my arm. *Ouch!* I winced in pain and pulled my hand away reflexively. Tsutsukakushi rolled off the table and flailed around on the floor, her whole body quivering like a fish.

"Y-you all right?" I asked. "It's like we're playing cat and dog... you left teeth marks on me!"

Silence.

"I thought it was a good idea, though. Should I have tickled you harder?"

Silence.

"If you can't laugh by nature, you've got it tough."

Silence.

"...Tsutsukakushi?"

Tsutsukakushi finally lifted herself up, shrugging her shoulders. She smoothed down the hem of her rumpled skirt and the creases on her blouse as best she could. As she tied her ribbon again, she stared right at me without saying a word. It was a gaze that could melt steel.

"Er, Tsutsukakushi-san..."

"I am not mad," she interrupted me. She spoke without any inflection at all, as if she had forgotten how to be angry or kind. "I am not the slightest bit mad."

"...um."

"I simply wish to perform a CT scan on your head, senpai. I am not mad."

There was nothing to say to that.

"I would simply prefer it if you did not lay even one finger on me from now on. I am not mad."

I realised I was at fault. "I am so sorry..." I muttered, lowering my head.

Although the Steel King's power was more outright dominating, I felt like the pressure exuding from Tsutsukakushi's gaze belonged to the same kin.



For a long moment, Tsutsukakushi gazed deep into my soul. “Good, you understand then,” she responded indifferently. Her clenched fist pressed up against her skirt, hinting at untold violence.

Even though her expressions could not communicate her true feelings, I got the picture. Tickling was a no-go. It was easy enough to understand what she was actually saying, but her tone of voice made it hard to get the nuance. That was true not only when she spoke but when she was being tickled, too.

I made a mental note to let go next time before I could get bitten.

“Senpai. Are you sorry about what you did?”

“Nope! Wait, what?”

“...so that’s the truth, huh,” she said tartly.

If we didn’t cure our conditions quick, I thought, it could only go downhill from here.

Chapter 2: Part 6

If I couldn't use direct means, there was only one other means possible. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to the Cat God what is God's¹. I decided to ask the Stony Cat to take back my prayer.

I walked out the school gates and rode my bike down the path towards the afternoon sun. There was quite a distance between our school and Ipponsugi Hill. Since Tsutsukakushi went to school by bus, she rode with me on the back seat. The pedals neatly supported the weight of two people. Even though this run-down pushbike was a hand-me-down from the neighbours, it carried the girl as my noble steed.

"This is my first time riding a bike with another person," Tsutsukakushi informed me as she coyly wrapped her arms around my waist.

I was filled with an inexplicable, exultant feeling, as if something warm was trickling down my body. "First time, you say...? No other boy took you for a ride?"

"I am a very shy person."

"Ahhhh. I've ridden with another person quite a few times, but since you're light, I'm worried you might fall off accidentally, Tsutsukakushi. Hold on tight, okay?"

The other person I rode with was, of course, just Ponta. His bike was forever getting punctures. I always gave him a lift to school whenever that happened, but compared to him it was so much easier to ride with Tsutsukakushi. My bike practically flew across the ground.

"...you've done it quite a few times," Tsutsukakushi said blandly. "I see." She summoned her strength and pinched my skin. It stung, no two ways about it. I wondered if this was revenge for the tickling.

¹ A Bible reference... in a Japanese otaku light novel. It's an exact quote from Matthew 22:21, except God is referred to as the Stony Cat. As an aside, I think Yokodera misinterprets what that quote actually means in context, but he uses it here to emphasise to the Stony Cat's divinity and how he needs to treat it like a god.

Thanks to her, we made it to the hill in record time. We passed through the wire mesh, which no one seemed to be taking care of that day either, and together we made our way to the cat statue.

Meanwhile, I did a little thinking. Maybe the truth was that my big mouth and Tsutsukakushi's lack of emotions were completely separate, unrelated issues. Tsutsukakushi's hunch and the rumours had influenced my way of thinking. It was a mere coincidence that we had prayed to the Stony Cat and coming to Ipponsugi Hill was a waste of time. Couldn't I just bask in the simple happiness of taking a ride with a girl?

But that thought was completely out of the question. "I gotta kick this habit of fantasising..." I muttered to myself.

"Rather plump, is it not?" Tsutsukakushi interjected.

The Stony Cat at the base of the cedar tree had developed a serious weight problem.

To put it more accurately, the giant statue had changed into the size of a humungous pork bun. The shape it had been for countless years before had been easy on the eyes, at least. Now, it was as if half a dozen pigs had been stuffed inside of it. Actually, it was a shame that it wasn't edible, seeing as it was made of wood.

"...oh yeah, Tsutsukakushi. You said your pork bun went missing, right?" It was a totally crazy thought. If it couldn't open its mouth, it didn't need food. "I don't know how it did it, but it looks like it took it... I think. Hahaha."

"...it seems the pork bun was not the only thing it took."

"Huh?"

The Porky Cat's face came up to the same height as Tsutsukakushi's eyes. It could no longer be called the Stony Cat.

The cat statue was laughing.

Its face, which shouldn't have held any expression at all, was split into a wide grin. It was much more expressive than a human was – as if its face was like, for instance, a shy, crybaby girl who hated acting childish. It was beyond eerie. It had become an unspeakable horror.

“The rumour of the Stony Cat was that it takes what you do not want and gives it to someone who needs it, was it not?” Tsutsukakushi said slowly. “We gave up the pork bun as an offering and the cat statue took away my expressions. Was that how it went?”

Anyone would have laughed that away as a joke or prank, but Tsutsukakushi's voice expressed no emotion whatsoever. She said it calmly, but her knees were shaking.

The (former) Stony Cat sure was uncanny. It was unnerving how Tsutsukakushi had to clarify what she was feeling no matter how she expressed herself. Of course, she had decided herself to have no expressions, but a girl who had lost the ability to express her true emotions because of a cat statue just had to be miserable. It pained me to even think about it.

Tsutsukakushi knelt against the undergrowth, which was tinted amber with the rays of the evening sun. She bent over so far that her head scraped against the ground in front of the fat cat. She concentrated solely on her prayers, as if she were a truth seeker at the Hill of the Golgotha²: *I beg of you to return my true feelings. Please.*

“It's no use,” I broke in suddenly.

Tsutsukakushi lifted her head and looked at me sharply. Her gaze betrayed no emotion.

“The cat statue's power is the real deal,” I said.

“Then it would not return my emotions if I prayed to it?”

² Another Bible reference in a Japanese otaku light novel. The Hill of Golgotha is the site where Jesus was crucified. It is now known as Calvary.

“It’s not as if it grants every single wish you make. It probably only has the power to give what you don’t need to someone else. You and I need our expressions and our façades. But it’s not as if someone else doesn’t need those. It’s not as if we prayed to have those things. I think.”

Tsutsukakushi opened her mouth slightly and then closed it again. She did not bite the bottom of her lip. Not even a single tear formed at the corner of her eye. She looked at me with a face that could not express the sadness she felt.

“You think,” she repeated blankly. “So, what do you *think* I should do? Will my expression stay like this? What will happen to me? Do you know what to do, senpai?”

As she kneeled, neither standing nor sitting, the evening wind blew against her hair. A single lock of her black hair fluttered without sticking to the side of her face. It was like a kitten’s tail, lingering at times but never staying in the same spot.

“If you know what to do, then please, I want you to tell me,” she whispered, almost inaudibly.

I... couldn’t stay quiet then, I realised. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. I had a man’s duty to fulfill. If I couldn’t protect a girl, there was no justice.

...that’s what a cool male protagonist from an eroge said. People like that are popular with the girls. I wanted to be popular too.

I racked my brains for something comforting to say. *Aha!*

“You aren’t the only one who lost something important, Tsutsukakushi. I heard about it from my friend.”

“...what?”

“My friend Ponta, you see, prayed to the cat statue. He wished to lose his horniness since it was making it hard for him to concentrate. But actually, he had to take a makeup exam because of me.

Someone was in charge of collecting the papers for the end-of-term classic literature exam, but when no one was looking, someone accidentally-on-purpose made a paper plane out of Ponta's exam. How wily and cunning, eh? But thanks to Ponta losing his horniness, he passed the makeup exam. He offered up his body pillow, which he had treasured for so long, and somehow it ended up in my room.

"Since then, I've only gotten hornier. When I became a second-year student, I could guess the three sizes of the swimming club girls using just my eyes. Oh, don't get me wrong – there's no dirty meaning behind it. I had the same feelings as a parent has towards their child. My thoughts were like 'oh, you're maturing by the day', or 'if you skip practice, you'll get flabby'. But I digress. Anyway, since we're on this subject, Tsutsukakushi, what're *your* three sizes? No, no, what I'm trying to say is that, like how Ponta wanted to block away his perverted thoughts, I just... I just..."

I had no idea what I wanted to say. Without my façade to put a stopper on things, my mouth was like a broken faucet. Acting purely on intuition, I spoke nothing but the naked truth.

Tsutsukakushi opened her mouth halfway and let out a long, heavy sigh. Then she stood up and turned her back to me, poised to run.

"Ah, wait! I made a mistake! I'm wrong about the whole three sizes thing and stuff! How do you say it? Um, right. I want to help you out, Tsutsukakushi."

Tsutsukakushi turned around. "I see you are a hopeless pervert," she sighed once again. She stretched out a finger and waggled it in front of my face. "What we need is someone who is like your friend. Someone who would willingly pray to the cat statue because they think of expressing their true emotions or having a façade as a nuisance."

"Huh?"

"If they do that, the things we need will return to us. If I can express my true emotions, I will be able to laugh again. You will have a filter between your mouth and brain again, senpai – that sort of thing."

If the statue was not going to return Tsutsukakushi's true feelings and my façade, we had to find the people who could give it back to us. That was what she was saying.

"R-right! So that's what you were getting at! That's what I was trying to say before too!"

"Really now?"

"Nope, that was a lie! Badum tish!"

"At least you are honest..."

"...sorry."

"...are you sure about that? I will understand even if you apologise without any feeling behind it. You have never lied to me at all. Because you have no façade, I can see right through you. Everything after that is your own fault. You are a second-year high school student, almost an adult, so you understand what I am saying, yes?" She scolded me thoroughly.

(Getting told off by a girl younger and smaller than I was made my skin crawl for some reason.)

Tsutsukakushi held her hands on her hips and went on. "Without your façade, senpai, you are too clumsy. If you act the way you do, the girls will hate you more and more," she warned me earnestly. "How unfortunate."

It was already dusk, but the growing darkness did nothing to obscure her penetrating gaze. Her gleaming eyes were as blue as the open sky. I was too busy admiring her to remember that I was mad at her.

"Oh geez," Tsutsukakushi sighed for the third time.

Then she held out her right hand towards me.

I had no idea what she was doing. As I stared at her blankly, she forcibly took my hand and held it in her own.

“We will not be seen if I do this here. There is nothing else for it, so I will help you, senpai. I think together we can find people who do not need a façade,” Tsutsukakushi said. She gripped my hand tightly, but she looked up at me hesitantly.

“...ah, yes!” I exclaimed. “I’ll look for people who want to hide their emotions!”

And so it happened that, in our own roundabout way, we established an alliance between us. She and I were comrades who lacked true feelings and a façade respectively. I felt the resolve in her palm, just as she felt the resolve in mine.

We went on holding hands even longer, just so we could defy the bizarre and sinister cat statue. I smiled; Tsutsukakushi did not. Without showing any emotion, she nodded, and so the deal was sealed.



Chapter 3 – Little Miss Fairy Won't Get Mad

At this point, let's consider the concept of a façade.

There's some long-winded entry in the dictionary about how it means "to act according to society's expectations" or "to be noticeably different in public than in private", but it's really not such a hard thing to understand.

A façade is about protecting yourself by hiding what you really think. Or rather, it's about not being *able* to show your feelings. Like, if you got sexually harassed by a Hentai Prince from your school, you'd only pretend to forgive him next time you saw him. *That* would be a façade. Screw apologies, what you'd really want to do is beat him up.

Still, while there's a link between what we think and what we say out loud, our actions aren't set in stone.

Here are some examples:

On one hand, we have type #1: the worrywart teenager. The shy girl who always cries herself to sleep after someone sexually harasses her. As she snuffles in her bed, she wonders why she can't put on a braver face. She hates how she's such a weakling and so she thinks, *"Geez, I don't need this façade!"*

On the other hand, we have type #2: the lovesick maiden. The violent girl who lashes right back at someone who sexually harasses her. Looking in the mirror, she gets depressed and wonders why her crush never notices her. She hates how unladylike she is and so she thinks, *"Argh, I want to hide my true feelings!"*

"Man, isn't hitting on girls such an intelligent strategy!" I thought aloud.

"Uh huh."

"It's sexual harassment for a great cause! Don't you think that's so cool?"

"Could it be that you want to be hated by every single girl in the world?"

Tsutsukakushi asked with a straight face. (She always had a straight face, though.)

Her words cut deep like a razor blade. I shut up without a murmur and started counting the stains on the ceiling.

It was lunch break and we were alone in the nurse's office, which smelled like disinfectant. It was like we were playing at doctor and patient. In this case, the doctor was Tsutsukakushi, who sat at the side of my bed. The nurse must have gone to a meeting or something because we couldn't see her around anywhere. So without any instruction, Tsutsukakushi prepared an icepack for me instead.

As she pressed the icepack against my swollen cheek, she let out a deep sigh. "So the first thing you did was blurt out what you were thinking to the one person who would beat you senseless."

"No, you're wrong! You're making me sound like someone who enjoys pain. It's not like I was waiting around to get punched!"

No matter how you looked at it, making a pass at the Steel King was an act of suicide. I valued my life too much for that.

But maybe – just maybe – I thought, the Prez might confide in me about how she had trouble expressing her emotions. There was the possibility that I could turn the Steel King into a lovesick maiden just by talking to her! There is no such thing as an unwinnable heroine!

That was the subject of our morning discussion.

"Good morning, Prez! Nice weather today, eh?" I turned my face towards the Track and Field club members, watching them go about their morning practice routine. As I did, I asked my next question. "What year of elementary school were you in when you started growing those huge knockers of yours?"

It was the question I had always wanted to ask.

As if on cue, my fellow club members surrounded us. "The Hentai Prince is challenging the Steel King to a duel! He's challenging her to the throne!" they exclaimed, and so on. I had no idea why they put it in such colourful terms. It wasn't as if a fight was about to start.

Meanwhile, I stared at the ground, mortified about the question I had just asked. I had plenty of opportunity to scream in horror as I did a 100-metre race. You see, the instant I spotted the Steel King making a mad dash towards me, I ran away like the wind. Don't underestimate an active Track and Field club member (on hiatus).

...except the Steel King was faster than me. It was kind of odd since her specialty was javelin-throwing.

"That was the most outrageous greeting I've heard in all my years since middle school," she remarked. "Now I'm giving you three options. One: I flay you until you have no skin left. Two: You cut open your stomach and apologise. Three: I bury you and recycle you. Now choose. You'll take them all? Right then."

Just as she was on the verge of catching me at the school gate, I spoke up.

"The great 19th century author Oscar Wilde said this: 'We all look at Nature too much, and live with her too little.' Prez, your boobs have grown lately, haven't they? I don't just want to ogle your boobs, I want to live with them too. I want to measure how big they grow and fondle them. Is this what they call art for art's own sake?"

She punched me in the face.

"I can't believe your illness has progressed this far. What's the word for what I'm feeling right now? Er, right, I'm *shocked*. The most I can do is punch your teeth out – the least I can do is wait until you've been cured. So take your time and rest up well before you return to the Track and Field club."

"...I am deeply moved. Your heart is as big as your breasts. It's enough to make me cry-!"

She punched me in the face for the second time.

Because of that, my cheek was swollen as a tomato, and from morning till noon I lay in the nurse's office groaning in pain.

“I pretty much figured this would happen,” I said with a grimace. “Well, I can say for sure now that the Steel King has no problem expressing her emotions.”

Tsutsukakushi shook her head. She was awed and dismayed in equal measure. “...I see she is very strong. If I saw what happens when you say your perverted things, I would cry straight away.”

“Y-you’d cry? You don’t like my plan?”

“It leaves much to be desired. Plus, I am – *was* a crybaby,” Tsutsukakushi hastily corrected herself as she wiped her cheek with her palm.

There was nothing wet on her cheek; her emotions had dried up.

Chapter 3: Part 2

It had been one week since we had clasped hands on the top of the hill.

No matter how hard I looked, I couldn't find anyone who had received Tsutsukakushi's true feelings or my façade. Instead, my reputation as the Hentai Prince only deepened further. Now all the girls in my class won't come within a two-metre radius of me. It was like they thought they would get pregnant just from looking at me. It was unfair. I had the right to choose which girl to impregnate, after all. When I mentioned that, the two-metre radius got wider.

Never mind becoming the next club president. At this rate, my life was on the line. It was checkmate. I couldn't tell if the Steel King was incredibly kind or incredibly thick for letting me stay in the Track and Field club even after all of this.

"Now that you mention it," said Tsutsukakushi, as if suddenly remembering something, "I have been skipping out on my club too."

She sat on a round stool by the bedside and ate her bento without much appetite. The bento was stuffed to the brim with all sorts of food. I wished she would feed me. But my cheek still hurt, so I couldn't eat anything anyway.

"What kind of club are you in, Tsutsukakushi?" I asked.

"The Child-Minding club."

"...ah, so you're the type who visits nurseries and playgrounds, huh?"

The Child-Minding club was about giving kids a healthy childhood by playing tag with them and putting on puppet shows... at least I thought that was the idea. Her choice of club caught me off guard. It was a bit peculiar, to say the least.

"My voice is too monotone for playacting," Tsutsukakushi said woodenly. "And if I never smile, the children will feel uncomfortable. How can I smile for them?"

"It's funny how you're in the Child-Minding club. It's like a kid taking care of other kids. You probably have to put up with lots of crap since there's nothing to distinguish you from the other kids."

“You think it is funny? Is that how it is?”

“What?! Th-that’s not what I really think!”

She kicked me smartly. “Thank you for the honest feedback.” Her small feet looked like they could have belonged to a grade schooler. “This boiled potato is very appetising, but I have decided to give you exactly none of it.”

“...well, I’m hardly in any condition to eat it, but you don’t seem like eating it yourself, Tsutsukakushi.”

“You make a good point. But you are still not having any.”

“Hahaha... better change the subject. What did your family say about what happened?”

If a teenage girl suddenly stopped laughing, that would be a cause for concern, I thought.

The hand which held the chopsticks suddenly stopped moving. Tsutsukakushi’s cold gaze drifted down the table. “My family... is not particularly bothered. There are other things keeping them busy.”

Then she went on eating as if nothing was wrong.

I found it hard to believe that nobody worried about a girl who had suddenly lost her emotions. I read in a magazine that everyone gets along really well in families with a girl in it and if they didn’t know what to do, they could always count on papa.

Tsutsukakushi, who had turned her attention back to her bento, began piling the food into her mouth with a vengeance. It was impossible to get a word in, what with her eating so much faster than before. It was like she was telling me not to ask.

But I just had to do it! While I didn’t have any interest in solving mysteries, I loved juicy gossip!

“Hey, Tsutsukakushi. Tell me more about your fam-”

At that moment, I heard someone shuffling around behind the curtain partitioning the bed. Tsutsukakushi swung around and my words died on my tongue.

I hadn’t known someone was over there. I’d been nursing my cheek for the last hour, but had someone come here before then?

Tsutsukakushi snapped her bento shut. Holding the icepack with one hand, I lifted my head off the bed. The timing to ask Tsutsukakushi about her family seemed to have slipped away.

The person who appeared on the other side of the curtain was a drowsy girl who looked like a dainty fairy.

“Ugh, it’s the pervert.”

It was Azuki Azusa. Although she was yawning and rubbing her eyes, she broke out into a spectacular groan as soon as she got a square look at me. I wondered if rich girls were supposed to look the way she did. From the way she showed her disgust, it was hard to tell whether she had a problem linking her feelings to her expressions or whether she just had a problem with me.

Azuki Azusa covered up whatever she was thinking with a fake cough. Then she spotted Tsutsukakushi and did a double take. “Good afternoon. You are a first year, I presume? If you need that bed, then go ahead and take it.”

She acted as if I didn’t even exist.

Without answering, Tsutsukakushi looked from me to Azuki Azusa with her wide, solemn eyes, as if trying to work out the relationship between the two of us. Not that there was anything to tell. The answer was simple: I was the object of hatred of every girl in the school. They shunned me.

Incidentally, no matter what Tsutsukakushi said, her default expression was as cold as ice. An antisocial kouhai who stared at you without saying a word would

unnerve anyone at their first meeting. Azuki Azusa was no different. She physically recoiled and retreated to the space between our beds. The atmosphere heightened with tension.

Right. It was up to me to break the ice.

“Hey, Azuki Azusa. Had a nice nap?”

“...don’t talk to me, you perv. What’re you asking me that for, you perv?”

“You’ve still got drool on your face, that’s why!”

Azuki Azusa went bright red in an instant, as if she had been scalded by hot water. Reverently, I held out a tissue for her, which she snatched from me before I could even blink. She wiped her cheek and tried to hide her face from me.

“But when you’re a rich girl,” I went on, “drool is just another fashion accessory, eh?”

“T-that’s right! But of course! You’re a keen observer of the obvious, huh? Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Yeah, yeah. So what’s with all the bedhead? The open button on your blouse? Why is your skirt lifted up, I wonder? Your sleeping posture is so bad it makes me wonder if you’re seducing me. That’s the feeling I get. Better not be so obvious about it, eh?”

Azuki Azusa’s face went from red to blue, then back to red again. I was amused by how much she resembled a set of traffic lights¹. She straightened her frazzled hair, which was twisted like a screw. At the same time, she scrambled to hide her chest, smoothed down the hem of her skirt over her legs and threw her arms around in a panic. Only when she had done all that did she think to hide herself behind the curtain.

¹ Japanese traffic lights have blue lights instead of green ones.

“Seeing how a lady always checks how she looks, it must be intentional,” I remarked.

“Huh?! ...w-well, yeah... You didn’t have to put it so bluntly!”

“Yep yep, gotta preserve your modesty. But that’s not the vibe I’m getting here. You’re seducing me again.”

“Urk... you perv...” Azuki Azusa said, grimacing. Although her voice trembled with her persistent sleepiness, she refused to acknowledge it. I understood why people would put up a front, but I thought this girl would one day lose something important to her because of her haughty pride.

“Sorry if I’m interrupting something,” Tsutsukakushi broke in suddenly, in an infinitely level-headed tone. “I was curious what sort of relationship you have with senpai – Yokodera-senpai.”

The only thing Azuki Azusa and I could be was enemies. But judging from how Tsutsukakushi timed her question, I had to conclude that between being a sadist or a masochist, she was probably a sadist.

...what I didn’t understand was why she stared so unblinkingly at my face, as if I were the object of an interrogation. But hey, it wasn’t like it was the first time I couldn’t read Tsutsukakushi’s expressions.

“O-our relationship?!” Azuki Azusa yelped. “With this perv...”

“Oh, come now! If we were total strangers, there’s no way a rich girl like you would be out to seduce me.”

“With this perv... urk... um, right! It’s kind of like we scratch each other’s backs!” Azuki Azusa answered frantically. It was what you would call an act of self-implosion.

She kept on fumbling over herself as she dressed herself, and when she was done she sprinted out the nurse’s office.

She had glared at me with a face that was bright red all the way up to her ears, but I couldn't help but think that half of that was her own fault anyway. Had she really wanted to protect her rich girl image that much?

"I see," said Tsutsukakushi. "You scratch each other's backs, huh?"

"Tsutsukakushi, stop kicking the bed for no reason! When she says she scratches my back, she means she's trying to hurt me with her claws. It sucks for me since she's got so much pride."

As I adjusted the ice pack on my cheek, I sat up in deep thought. I had the strong feeling that my life would be so much happier if I just stopped pissing people off. That way I wouldn't get beaten up time and time again.

For a while, Tsutsukakushi glanced at me sideways. "Her pride might have something to do with it..." she muttered, "...but are you sure you are not dating?"

"It's true. There's nothing going on between us. If we were alone together and I said that to her, she'd rip me to shreds."

"In that case, you were joking with her, senpai."

"How do you say it...? I was trying to piss her off...? Yeah, that's how you say it. Now what do I do?"

"Ah, then that makes sense. That girl just now was speaking with a façade, was she not?"

As soon as the words came out of her mouth, we looked at each other.

Q. What were we looking for?

A. *Someone who had been given a façade.*

Chapter 3: Part 3

The Azuki Azusa Observation Squad commenced operations the next day. The commanding officer was Tsutsukakushi. The chief of staff was Tsutsukakushi. The secretary was, once again, Tsutsukakushi. I was the cannon fodder.

“Azuki Azusa is in class 2-2 and her seat number is 2. Her star sign is Aquarius and her blood type is A. She is not affiliated with any club. She transferred to this school in April as a second-year student. She arrives at school every day in a black car, her favourite kind. She always arrives at a different time every day. She receives a considerable number of love letters. The number of boys she has turned down is also high. Lately, her manner of rejecting people has become quite a spectacle. No boyfriend. No friends either. Although she has no illness or misfortune, she does not have a very strong physique.”

Tsutsukakushi noted down each fact I had investigated. On our table, there were two glasses of water and a packet of curry rice.

“This might be a stupid question, but where’s your lunchbox, Tsutsukakushi? Didn’t you make lunch today?”

“I already ate it.”

“So what’s with the curry?”

“It is for my second stomach.”

“There’s no such thing as a second stomach!”

Just where did she fit all that food in her skinny body? Or, more to the point, why did she never get any fatter? Her body was one of the deep mysteries of the universe.

Tsutsukakushi constantly switched between holding a pencil and spoon in her tiny hand. As if unknowingly realising how much she ate on her own, she held out her spoon to me. I shook my head in reply; my cheeks had started stinging again.

Tsutsukakushi laid the spoon down and picked up her pencil once again. "Putting it all together, we appear to have come across a formidable opponent," she said curtly, peering sideways through some decorative foliage.

Azuki Azusa, the target of our research operations, was eating all alone right in the middle of the cafeteria, perfectly calm and composed. You could indeed spot the princess in a crowd at a busy time of the day just through the shape of her soft, flowing hair. I could glimpse her expensive ring and an even more expensive wristwatch, and those were just samples of her accessories.

Azuki Azusa rounded her mornings off with a session of Reward Time. As a result of all this, talking to her had become a task of the utmost difficulty.

...which was why she was always alone. It was hard to tell whether she herself was aware of that. She lapped up everyone's silent stares. It was no metaphor that the world revolved around her. She stood out radiantly amongst all the others.

A girl as cute and rich as her would probably be popular with everyone if she kept her insults to a minimum. She had no tits, though.

"Come to think of it, my curse compelled me to tell that chick she was flat-chested."

"You were compelled, you say? I see you are a pervert."

"But I didn't say a single bad thing about her. Isn't that unnatural? Still, she looked so bothered about her tiny tits."

"It could also be that she did not want to hear any disgusting talk. That is exactly what it looks like to me."

"Hahaha, that's harsh! What a lame joke, Tsutsukakushi!"

"Except I was not joking in the slightest."

“Uh, why are you standing up, Tsutsukakushi? Wait, hang on. It’s not what you think. I was talking about how it looks like Azuki Azusa covers up the parts of her that wouldn’t make a good impression. She didn’t even yell at me in front of everyone. Like that time in the nurse’s office, she has to protect her rich girl image when she’s with other people. But a façade that strong just isn’t normal. And look at that.”

I pointed at Azuki Azusa’s choker. It accentuated her lovely nape and made it look even better than it normally would. It was stiff and sturdy, and it looked like a pet’s collar.

“Doesn’t that belong to me? It looks a lot like the belt I lost at the Stony Cat’s place.”

Tsutsukakushi dropped her pencil. She blinked. “Huh?”

From my tireless observations, that was the conclusion I came to. The size had changed somewhat, but it was the same principle that was behind the cat statue taking on the shape of a pork bun.

“Ponta’s horniness and his body pillow were both pushed onto me.

Tsutsukakushi, the Stony Cat took your ability to smile and your pork bun as a set. Azuki Azusa has my leather belt. Which means that...”

It was a matching game. By process of elimination, the answer was simple.

“The reason why that girl doesn’t say what she really means is because she received my facade. If you ask me, lately it was getting to the stage where she couldn’t shake off the guys who were used to being spurned by her, but in this past week, she’s been ripping a new hole into them. It’s like she levelled up.”

“...is that so?”

Tsutsukakushi picked up the pencil again and doodled sloppily over her notebook. She looked up, as if she were pondering my words deeply.

“Your façade... was given to her, senpai. That is not good news.”

“How come?”

“Azuki Azusa received your façade because she needed it. If that is the case, she has more things worrying her than an ordinary person. I do not think she would let go of the façade that easily.”

“...no waaaaaay!” I slammed my fist against the table reflexively. As Tsutsukakushi’s gaze returned to me, I went on. “It’s common sense to give back what you’ve taken!”

“Is that how you see it? Do you realise what you are sayi-?”

“I’ll be right back!”

“Senpai, what are you-?”

I stood up from our table. I knew what Tsutsukakushi said was right. Of course Azuki Azusa was no pushover. I suspected that ordinary methods wouldn’t make her give back what she had taken from me.

But so what?

Here I was, working tirelessly to get my façade back and copping so much physical and verbal abuse in the process, and Azuki Azusa had the nerve to take my façade away from me and live the high life! I couldn’t forgive that flat-chested pipsqueak!

Pushing the plants to the side and bumping my way past the students surrounding me, I jumped out right in front of Azuki Azusa, my sworn nemesis. I inhaled deeply into my lungs.

And then I screamed.

“Azuki Azusa! Give back what you’ve stolen from me!”

The cafeteria fell into a stunned silence. Everyone’s eyes were on the two of us. Even with all that, I couldn’t stop my rage. My cheek stung and half of it was Azuki Azusa’s fault.

"I've always, *always* been watching you! And then I realised! You've taken everything from me, Azuki Azusa! I can't live like this! Only you can save me from all this pain and heartache! Take responsibility!"

"Wha...?" Azuki Azusa's eyes widened like saucers. As she stared, she flushed bright red from the choker around her neck all the way up to the tip of her forehead.

The pause that followed stretched beyond any natural length. The next instant, the silence burst into chatter.

"...the Hentai Prince is hitting on his next victim!" "He's switched from the Steel King to the rich girl." "I thought he was checking Azuki-san out." "Man, the Prince's confession is really something else." "What a complete perv!" "I'm getting goosebumps."

So was I. I wondered what I would do when I got out of this dream. How would I deal with Azuki Azusa's Reward Time...?

"W-what are you spouting, perv...?!" She glared furiously at me. Geez, if looks could kill. But then, aware of all the eyes that were upon her, she coughed. "W-weeeeeell, I suppose I can understand the pain and heartache even a guinea pig feels." I had no idea what she was trying to say. I thought she had been trying to pick a fight with me. "More importantly, is there perhaps something I can do for you...?"

She had lovely lips that were like petals and she acted like a benign princess. Deep down inside, what she probably really wanted to do right now was wring my neck savagely. She was using a façade, the façade that belonged to me.

"Damn it! Look, the thing is, Azuki Azusa, I want just about every part of you!

"E-e-e-every part?!"

"I won't be *that* unreasonable, though. Azuki Azusa... at least let me stay by your side! I'll be with you twenty-four hours a day – wherever, whenever!

Open up your body and soul to me, Azuki Azusa! We can do it right here right now, if that takes your fancy. We can share something precious!”

“W-w-whaaaaaaa...?!”

“You said it yourself before, that feelings should be expressed through actions! It’s what you wished for!”

I supposed that if I tried to hold Azuki Azusa’s hand, she would dodge me with superhuman speed. Her true feelings were slipping out. But giving up on her was out of the question. Pursuing her hand would be like punching it for her.

“...stop it!” Azuki Azusa yelped. “I-I get it! You don’t have to say it again!”

It was as if she had lost all patience. With a glance, she saw all the onlookers in the cafeteria holding their breath in anticipation. As she glared daggers at me, she weighed up her dignity against her desires.

“That’s such a joke, having a pervert for a boyfr... toy. There is an order to these things. I understand your feelings, such as, for instance, er... right! You’re good for some things, like carrying my bags and warming up my shoes... er, wait, that would just turn this perv on... a pet! Right, you’ll be my pet! A pet is exactly what I wanted. As long as you serve me as a pet, you can stay by my side. But really, this is so like y-”

“Woof!”

I raised my hand above Azuki Azusa’s knee and curled it like a paw. I held that as my pose.

“W-what?! What’re you doing? You’re my pet! Do you hear me?!”

“But of course! Woof! I’ll become your dog, just so I can be by your side!” I intoned, as if swearing a vow.

I held the speechless Azuki Azusa’s hand and barked once more. I was so happy to be Azuki Azusa’s pet. Woof woof.

It wasn't as if I wasn't embarrassed by any of this. But between the choices of "trying to get façade back" and "suffering the humiliation of being Azuki Azusa's pet", my heart was making me choose both options at once, and somehow things had escalated from there.

Azuki Azusa spoke as if she was trying to fight down the words that came out of her mouth. "Y-yay... you did it... I'm so happy I could cry..." She leaned back, depleted. Her chestnut-coloured ringlets had lost their lustre.

"...what just happened?" "The princess just raised the white flag." "I confessed to her so many times, but." "Ah, me too." "After getting beaten up so many times, the Hentai Prince found true love." "What a touching story!"

Someone slowly started clapping from somewhere. Soon enough, the whole cafeteria broke out into a wild applause.

That was the day I changed my job from a prince to a dog.

Chapter 3: Part 4

July 2 Thursday – Mostly sunny.

7:00 – Got out of bed. Waited outside school gate today like usual. Heard people say “How loyal!” “He’s just like Hachiko!”¹ etc.

8:20 – Saw Azuki Azusa get dropped off. Greeted her. She ran away again. Looked for her till homeroom started. Couldn’t find her.

Recess – Went to Azuki Azusa’s classroom. Didn’t see her. Scoured Master’s desk. Discovered what brand of strap she uses on cell phone. No numbers registered. Added mine as first.

Recess – Went to nurse’s office. Didn’t see her. Went to rooftop. Looked at water tower. Saw her sleeping in shade. Was drooling. Terrible sleeping posture. Stuck letter next to where she was sleeping: “I came to report on your condition. You were drooling.”

Recess – Went to rooftop. Sleeping posture was even worse than before. Was strange. Could see belly button. Woot. Did some graffiti on Master’s stomach with permanent marker. Took photo just in case. Called it “Pom Poko Raccoon Dog and the Moon”². Sent it to her.

Lunchtime – Azuki Azusa came to me. Was grinning. Took me on friendly walk. Everyone was smiling. I was smiling. Was very grateful for walk. Arrived at back garden. Was strangled. Cell phone confiscated. Photos deleted. Number erased also. Master got pissed. Strangled me some more.

Recess – Went to Azuki Azusa’s class. Said sorry. Got no attention. Knelt on ground in front of her. Said, “I won’t ever mess with your stomach ever again.” Caused uproar around me.

¹ A reference to a famous dog that remained loyal to his owner, even many years after his owner’s death.

² A reference to the 1994 Studio Ghibli film *Pom Poko*, which features unflattering raccoon dogs.



After school – Went to Azuki Azusa’s class. Master went home early.

On the way home – Read dirty magazine. Worked out plan. Thought of good idea. Track Master. Cheer Master up. Run away with swimsuit in mouth, for example. Master will be happy.

Around 1:00 – Bedtime.

-

“So you have fun being a pet, you say? I see. You are a pervert beyond saving.”

“Th-that kinda stung.”

“It is just your imagination,” Tsutsukakushi said icily. “This is how I sound when you cannot see how I really feel.”

Her expression was the same as usual, but I couldn’t help but think that Tsutsukakushi had gotten crabby at me lately. She wouldn’t admit it to herself for sure, but she was like a cat in a bad mood.

It was a languid, humid Sunday afternoon, and it looked like a downpour was just around the corner. Since we’d gone through all the effort of meeting up for our second interim report, we decided to take a trip on the local railway into the next town.

The train was so empty I had to wonder how the private railway made any money. There were only seven people on board.

Tsutsukakushi and I sat next to each other on one of the seats. “It’s not like we’re on a date...” I muttered. This was merely a meeting to discuss our battle strategy. I totally got that, but with Tsutsukakushi wearing a cookie-shaped cap and a chocolate-coloured, pleated skirt, she had to be the cutest resident of the candy world.

I wanted to casually drape my arm around her shoulder. I couldn’t do that, though. If I did, she’d give me that cold “Watch where you put your hand” look and snub me even further.

“...what nonsense are you thinking of now?” Tsutsukakushi asked.

“H-how rude! I wasn’t thinking about you *that* much!”

“You thought about me... I see.” Tsutsukakushi clacked the heels of her boots together with a light rhythm. As usual, I couldn’t read her expression.

It seemed I had lost track of the conversation before she got mad. “Oh yeah,” I said. “About me being a pet, I actually don’t think it’s like that at all. I thought it would be more along the lines of me being all ‘Master, woof woof!’ and she’ll whistle and be all ‘Lie down! Have a reward! Brush my teeth and get in the bath with me!’”

“Just what were you expecting? Pervert.”

“W-well, I kinda thought Azuki Azusa was a rich girl, you see... like she had a really sheltered existence. Her sleeping posture is, kinda, *well*... It would be good if she warned someone about it.”

“How many times have you watched her sleep to talk about her like that?”

“It’s not about how many times I’ve seen her. She’s been doing her best to avoid me.”

Azuki Azusa had a façade. But the image she showed to everyone didn’t apply to how she treated her pet. It wasn’t like she had any obligation to act nice towards me. Besides, she was different in class. At best, I was only able to go see her and play with her at recess or thereabouts. In the mornings and after school she ran away from me like the plague.

“That’s why there’s been no major progress. Still, if she hates me more now, then she’ll start thinking she doesn’t want her façade anymore. Leaving things hanging would suck for both of us.”

“So what are you going to do this time?”

“I wanted to talk to you about it, Tsutsukakushi. Got any ideas?”

“How about giving up on Azuki-san?”

“Retreat is not an option! There’s no reason why she should have *my* façade without even knowing where it came from!”

Tsutsukakushi sighed deeply. “...is that really all there is to it?”

Before I could ask her what she meant, the train arrived at the station. She walked off without me, so I had to hurry up and get off at the terminal by myself. That made me sigh. It really wasn’t a date after all. If we were a real couple, we’d be joined at the hip. That was the impression I got from watching dramas.

Chapter 3: Part 5

Yes, there was an actual reason why we went all the way to the next town for our strategy meeting.

The reason was right in front of us.

“Oriental... Animal Café?” Tsutsukakushi said questioningly.

“I looked up this place and I think it has a pretty good reputation, so I wanted to come here with you, Tsutsukakushi.”

Our destination was a brick building hidden in a back street off the main road from the station. It had blended into the background, so we hung around trying to find it in the rain. The sign above the door had a chic design with cat and dog footprints. As she propped herself under a polka-dot umbrella, Tsutsukakushi read the written description aloud intently.

In this shop, customers are served by cats and dogs. Feel free to eat tasty sweets with them to your heart's content.

Tsutsukakushi nodded with approval. “How nice. Shall we go in?”

It didn't escape me how she bounded inside and stood on her tiptoes. Girls usually liked small animals. This little-known date spot had the Internet's seal of approval and was guaranteed to make a girlfriend happy.

The reason why I took Tsutsukakushi here was to improve her mood and to work out a plan to capture Azuki Azusa... or at least, that was how it looked on the surface. Actually, I just wanted to ogle the waitresses. They wore frilly maid outfits which were fitted with animal ears and a tail. And if you asked them to, they even said stuff like “Woof woof! Welcome back, master!” or “Meow! Open up wide!” as they spoon-fed you. It was like a dream. I figured I should invite Ponta here sometime.

One thing was for sure: I wouldn't be telling Tsutsukakushi that I'd done all this research beforehand.

“...I see. You came here for the waitresses,” she said.

“H-huh?! I didn’t say anything!”

“Senpai, I can tell just by looking at you.” She had figured me out as soon as we walked into the café.

We were directed to a table and took a seat. Tsutsukakushi rested her chin on her hands and stared at me somewhat coldly.

“You would not come here in the first place if it had nothing to do with girls, senpai.”

“N-no... that’s true, but... the cats and dogs were a part of it too.”

The puppies and kittens nudged my leg. They curled up into fluffy balls, making cute noises. As you might expect from she who was without emotions, Tsutsukakushi brushed the furballs off her shoulder without any reaction whatsoever.

“That was a joke,” she explained. “This is a nice café... I also think the waitresses’ outfits are cute.”

“I know, right?! Everything about them is just so soft and cuddly – their paws, their ears, their aprons – but the weird thing is that when they’re sitting still, they look like they come from some ancient Japanese fairy tale.”

“I do not know what you mean by ‘fairy tale’, but I would like to try wearing one of those outfits at least once.”

“I also want see you cosplay at least once!”

“If you only want to look then maybe.”

“There’s a 100% chance I’ll do more than just look!”

“There is a 100% chance I will not wear it.”

As the two of us bantered, a waitress walked out from the kitchen holding a tea tray close to her chest. As I checked the waitress's body out, I noticed that she was wearing a short skirt and knee-high socks. She also wore animal paws for shoes, a blouse that was spotted like a leopard's and large tiger ears. Her long, chestnut hair glowed and looked really pretty to me. Her choker looked like a collar worn by real animals and her apron was covered entirely with white frills. She had a wild and domestic image, all rolled into one package, which really enhanced her appeal.

What I didn't say aloud was that it would have helped if she didn't have such a small chest. She looked just like someone I knew.

She gasped. "W-w-whyyyyyyyyy...!"

Right, right. A girl who's easy to understand through her expressions...

Oh wait.

"You're the real thing!"

"What are you doing here, you perv?!"

Dumbfounded, Azuki Azusa tipped the tray upside down. The teacup fell off the tray altogether, creating a puddle of barley tea all over the carpet. The puppies scampered away.

"Senpai... did you know she was here?" Tsutsukakushi asked.

I shook my head furiously. "No way! What a coincidence!"

I was the one who was surprised. I would never have dreamed a rich girl would be working part-time at a place like this!

Azuki Azusa, currently neither human nor animal, was experiencing an existential crisis. Her animal paw gloves shook along with the tray. "How could you *coincidentally* come all the way here?! I thought I'd seen the last of you at school! It's because you're a perv, right?! A big, fat perv!"

I was surprised to see tears welling up in the corner of her eyes.

“That is hard to deny,” Tsutsukakushi said calmly. “Now that we have established that, it would be a good idea if you picked up the teacup.”

As it turned out, not being able to show any expressions had its uses after all. Tsutsukakushi had the best handle on the situation out of all of us. Incidentally, I wondered just what was so hard for her to deny.

The café owner wasted no time cleaning the mess on the floor. “How rude of you, Azuki-chan,” he reprimanded her. “Smile! Smile for the customers!” And with that, he left.

As if under a spell, Azuki Azusa bent her knees and bowed as if she had done it a million times before. “Good afternoon, Master. Please give your pet an order.” Her striped tail fluttered lightly as she bowed.

It was painful to watch her, but I couldn’t tear my gaze away. All the subtle movements of her ears and tail stood out like crazy. It was a shame she sounded like she was reciting from a manual and that she couldn’t keep the blush off her face, but oh well.

“Okay, then... I’ll have the Japanese-style cutlets with the ‘Animal Maid Spoon-Feeding’ service.”

“H-huh?! You bas- I mean, Master, that is...!”

“Problem? I mean, you are the maid and I am your master... ouch!”

Just as I was getting into the whole role reversal thing, someone kicked me under the table. The boot of justice didn’t belong to Azuki Azusa, though, even if she was on the brink of explosion. It was Tsutsukakushi’s. I hadn’t known she hated these kinds of jokes.

“We will have one rice cake¹ and a sandwich, thank you,” she said.

¹ Literally *daifuku*, a kind of Japanese confectionary made of mochi.

But how could she only order food she could finish off in one bite? I thought Tsutsukakushi was a glutton. Since I'd come all this way, I wanted to have my eye candy too.

"Understood, meow." Azuki Azusa lifted both her hands, beckoning like a cat, as the situation required of her. "I will do my best for my Master's sake... meow... ugh," she moaned.

She fawned all over me – it was like the complete opposite of her Reward Time. I wanted to take her home with me.

...but really, Tsutsukakushi's order was the right thing to say in this context. I figured this café was a tough place to work in.

With a murderous look on her face, Azuki Azusa slammed the new cup of tea on the table. For a moment there, I thought she was about to hurl it at me. Then, while Tsutsukakushi petted the puppies and kittens, Azuki Azusa stepped on my feet at least once every three seconds, as if she believed that I would immediately pounce on the animal maids if she didn't.

Well, geez, I thought. *Be like that*. It was like she didn't even trust me. I couldn't think of a single reason for why I would move one inch from where I was sitting.

...wait, why did I come here again?

Chapter 3: Part 6

"I never thought we would talk to Azuki-san in that café," Tsutsukakushi sighed as we left the shop.

As it turned out, we only stayed at the Oriental Animal Café for ten minutes. Yet somehow, Tsutsukakushi still had the time to scarf down the rice cake and sandwich.

"So Azuki-san was working in this vicinity all along..." she went on, musing aloud. "Senpai, have you forgotten our original purpose for coming here?"

"I don't have the foggiest clue! I was only thinking about seeing you in an animal maid outfit!"

"...uh huh."

She sighed again. She only ever seemed to sigh when she was around me. It made me feel kind of guilty.

"B-but you know," I added, "I'm glad we found out Azuki Azusa's secret. We're probably the only ones who know the princess has a part-time job."

"Care to explain the evil grin on your face?"

"Now we can milk Azuki Azusa for all she's worth. Part-time jobs shouldn't be allowed by the school rules. The princess should learn to look before she leaps! She thinks she can keep a human as a pet, huh? Well, the oppressed commoners will always strike down the snobbish elite!"

"I won't fault you for recognising the historical significance of the Russian Revolution, but what are you actually planning to do? You will not tell the teacher about her, will you?"

"Hmmm... I was thinking something like enlarging the photos of her in an animal maid outfit and hanging them on the rooftop."

"That has nothing to do with her façade. That is just sexual harassment."

“Urk...” The words died in my throat.

My plan was foiled. My brain was fried. There went my hopes and dreams for the future.

The rain was pouring heavily now, and even though it was summer, I was left shivering. Rain pelted me everywhere. It was like getting kicked while I was already down.

The falling rain painted the world grey, making the brick walls of the Oriental Animal Café and the asphalt in the back alley look dull and colourless. A billboard flashing primary colours blatantly stood out among everything else. *Uh oh*, I thought, shaking my head. It looked very suspicious to me.

Tsutsukakushi turned her gaze to our surroundings. “This will do,” she sighed, pulling on my arm.

She led me towards the building with the neon sign. The sign had “Take a break” written on it with love hearts around it.

Wasn’t this one of those places? I thought. Where men and women get in a good mood and come together in union, even while they’re avoiding each other’s eyes? One of those so-called love ho-?

“Huuuh?! What the-?! What the hell are we doing here?!” I demanded.

“Shhh. Not so loud, please.”

“I-I don’t even! Aren’t we still high school students?! You need to be in love to do those sorts of things!”

“I have heard that line from somewhere. What do you mean by *those things*?”

Unruffled, Tsutsukakushi took me to the door. There was no one around and the place reeked. Shady advertisements were plastered all over the grimy walls. But the entrance itself was covered with the kinds of phrases you’d see at any proper reception area: “4000 yen for two hours, food and drink included. Vending machine and lotion service provided.”

At that point, my brain imploded. Was I about to climb the stairs to adulthood in one leap? Was I Cinderella and Tsutsukakushi Prince Charming?

"I-I-I'm inexperienced, but... I'll do my best..." I said numbly, as if I were a robot.

"What are you babbling about?"

Tsutsukakushi only pretended to walk into the reception. Instead, she leaned her entire body against the large emergency door to the side. The rusty door creaked open. I was greeted, not with the stairs to adulthood, but with the stairs to the fire exit.

"...huh?" I said dumbly.

"There is a roof here, so we can shelter from the rain."

"Oh, a shelter...? Wait? What? Why? I was so sure you and I would-"

Tsutsukakushi shook her head vigorously.

BAM. It was a sucker punch to the gut.

"What do you mean *you and I*?" she asked. "Actually, on second thought, spare me the details. I hope you observe some basic form of ethics in your fantasies about me. Otherwise, I will not be amused."

As she said that, she lost her footing and tumbled halfway down the stairs, landing on her backside on the bottom step. Her folded umbrella pointed to the other side of the road, where I spotted the red bricks of the Oriental Animal Café ahead.

"Here, we can stay out of the rain and wait for Azuki-san," Tsutsukakushi went on. "A little while ago, I went to the toilet in the café and saw the timetable for all the shifts posted in the kitchen. Since it seems her shift will be ending soon, it would be good if we can catch her when she comes out and talk to her then."

"Talk to her... a-about what?"

“About how you threaten to tell on her to the school. Although I feel it would be mean to actually go through with it, I think you can get her to talk by doing that. If that is the case, I would not mind if she hated you more for it. Perhaps if she keeps encountering you because of her façade, she will get fed up with it and wish to be rid of it.”

“Ahhhh...”

If I tried to talk to her at school, someone might ask questions or we might get interrupted. And besides, it would be more fitting if we caught her red-handed.

There was some truth to what Tsutsukakushi said. She had a point, but...

“You should’ve told me your plan earlier! I totally thought we were going into the hotel, so I got all excited.”

“...you were excited? I see.” Tsutsukakushi closed her mouth.

An uncomfortable silence rose between us. *Not this again*, I thought. I couldn’t see what Tsutsukakushi was really feeling. I never had any idea what this girl was thinking about.

We sat side-by-side in the emergency staircase. Neither of us uttered a word as we watched over the café. There was me, the plain old average Joe, and then there was Tsutsukakushi, whose outfit could have been smuggled from the candy world. We were supposed to be looking in the same direction, but I felt like we perceived two entirely different worlds.

Time passed, and the cold rain only fell harder.

I didn’t think I was a bad person. Yeah, I was quick to jump to conclusions and maybe I *was* a pervert. But still, wasn’t it natural that I would get the wrong idea if she pulled on my arm without saying anything? Sure, she couldn’t change her expressions, but she *was* a cute younger girl.

I glanced at the side of Tsutsukakushi’s face. She had long eyelashes like a doll, and the texture of her white skin looked like it was moulded from clay.

Peeping at her through the corner of my eye, I felt the urge to give her a kiss. If she were my little sister, any guy hovering around her would get the death sentence. It wasn't my fault if I got excited from being around a girl like that!

I got more agitated the more I thought about it. I wondered if it was okay to tell Tsutsukakushi about the one big problem I had with not being able to read her expressions. I'd just made up my mind to tell her when-

"Oi, what're youse doin' here?"

A red-haired young man with nose piercings appeared at the fire door.

"You ain't allowed here! Can't you brats read the sign? Screw you!"

He was one of the hotel staff, judging from how he was dressed in an apron and held cleaning tools in one hand. His other hand was wrapped around an umbrella. As he spoke, he tutted in displeasure. He had quite a scary face and his arms were as thick as logs.

"Are youse students? Hangin' round here when you got no dough makes you a goddamn pain in the arse! Screw you! Screw you a hundred times over!" He made a big show of kicking the fence outside the emergency stairs with his heavy, iron-rimmed boots. There was a dull echo.

Tsutsukakushi clung to my arm tightly. Her palms were shaking imperceptibly. She was scared out of her wits. As soon as I realised that, it was like the scales came off my eyes. Oh yeah, she was a girl – just a normal girl.

Weirdly enough, I wasn't afraid of the red-haired man. A thousand death threats didn't faze me. The only thing that felt real to me was the girl standing next to me.

"Kids oughta stay indoors! Stop showin' off! I get rejected by all the chicks and I'm stuck workin' my ass off Sundays at a goddamn love hotel. Do youse get how I feel, changin' all them soiled sheets? No, ya don't, since yer a couple. I hope yer dick falls off! Damn fool..."

By the end of his rant, I felt like he was talking to himself. He wiped the rain out of his eyes, sniffing. It was like he had forgotten our existence or even (maybe) what he had come to do in the first place.

While he was distracted, we escaped from the hotel site. Panting, we ran and ran until we reached a place where we were safe.

When Tsutsukakushi and I looked at each other, I smiled. Tsutsukakushi didn't smile back, but at least she tilted her head as if she didn't find me unpleasant. It was strange to see her react so nervously over such a small thing. Whatever it was that rattled her so much, it didn't matter to me. I felt the kind of happiness you only feel on a Sunday where you don't have to work.

"Oh, good. I thought for a moment you'd tell him we weren't a couple and that you hate the idea of having a boyfriend too."

"I was thinking of saying 'This person is assaulting me. Please save me!'"

"You're so mean!"

"That was a joke," Tsutsukakushi said with a straight face. Unconsciously, she tilted her small head to the side. "Do we look like a couple?"

"I wonder about that. What do you think?"

"I have no idea. I have never had any male friends, so I cannot tell the difference between friends and lovers."

"You've never had a single male friend? Not even in elementary school?" It wasn't like I had any experience with girls, either. It occurred to me that having no friends of either gender would be the very definition of an untainted childhood.

"My father passed away when I was too young to understand it, so even now I have never been able to understand the existence of boys. Talking to boys is embarrassing for me, so I have only ever ran away from them."

"I get it... so what about now? Do I make you feel awkward?"

Tsutsukakushi sighed.

That got me thinking. This girl constantly sighed deeply, but it wasn't just out of disgust or weariness. I thought there was probably a different meaning to it.

"I might feel awkward, but I cannot show strong emotions," she explained. "It is the same principle as hiding a tree in a forest. It is the only thing I feel grateful towards the Stony Cat for."

I peered at Tsutsukakushi closely. She lowered her eyes. Even so, I didn't look away. No matter how much I gazed at her delicate face, I found myself marvelling at the depths in her wide eyes.

Somehow or other, I felt like I understood Tsutsukakushi a bit better now.

"...what is it?" she asked.

"I was just thinking how you're kinda like a cat," I said frankly. I was only capable of saying the truth.

"A cat, you say?"

"Mhmm. You're as tame as a cat. You look as if you're unconcerned by everything you see around you, even when your true feelings are different or when you're really in trouble."

"That is not what 'tame' means," Tsutsukakushi said indifferently, turning the other way. "And also, I do not understand what you are saying."

Unable to help myself, I smiled at her again, and Tsutsukakushi shifted her eyes further and further away from mine.

...as I was about to say something else to her, the back door of the café opened and Azuki Azusa emerged. It killed the moment.

Before that thought could even register in my brain, Azuki Azusa broke out into a sprint. She ran as if she had business so important her life depended on it.

"C'mon, let's chase after her!"



I grabbed Tsutsukakushi by the arm and ran. Her hand was much warmer than I thought, and holding her hand warmed up mine too. I could keenly feel her breathing next to me. By then, the rain had completely cleared up.

Hearing a girl pant so hard was kind of arousing. But if I said that aloud, she wouldn't hold my hand anymore. She'd probably claw it instead.

Chapter 3: Part 7

We lost sight of Azuki Azusa as we got close to the main road.

I figured she could have entered someone's house. A construction site was blocking up everything in the vicinity (which is also bad for the environment, by the way). It was such a long detour to the residential area, though.

We walked around for a while, but we just couldn't find any leads. Just as I was about to give up and go home, a bunch of people dressed in work clothes appeared near a prefabricated building. Trucks and cranes moved around the area. It looked like people were doing construction work today as well.

Someone stood in the corner of the area directing the traffic in this sudden beehive of activity. It was this person's role to hold up a red stick and guide the vehicles along so that they wouldn't take any unnecessary detours.

"...hey," I said to Tsutsukakushi. "Have you ever had a dream in broad daylight?"

"...no. I dream when I am in bed."

I kept rubbing my eyes, but I wasn't mistaken. Azuki Azusa was over there. Dressed in a crude blue jumpsuit and a reflective vest, she was waving a traffic baton around with a completely straight look on her face.

"That's kinda hard work for a rich girl."

"In that sense, it is not much different from her animal maid job."

"...this has gotten kinda bizarre."

I strained my eyes looking at Azuki Azusa. Her helmet looked catastrophically awful on her. What kind of rich girl does all the hard work without relying on her family? This had to be one of those rags-to-riches stories.

Azuki Azusa and construction work – at first glance, you wouldn't link those two words together. So just what was behind all of this?

"Senpai. Have you figured something out?"

“Hmm... her construction work clothes really stand out and I reckon you could use ‘em as a light if you get it on outside in the dark.”

“I regret asking you. As usual, you are a hopeless pervert.”

“So don’t ask me questions! I always blurt out what I think even if it’s not on purpose. Honestly, I’d rather get chewed out by Little Miss Doggie in her Reward Time.”

“I see you are an irredeemable pervert,” Tsutsukakushi said coldly. Although she spoke with the same volume as she usually did, I had come to understand that the nuance was not the same.

By that, I mean I was screwed. I was majorly screwed. Her voice was as cold as a blizzard, so to speak.

“W-well, let’s put that aside for now. After all, a man should never shirk his duties. I will elegantly reveal the solution to this mystery!”

That way I could salvage my reputation... or was it restore myself to my former glory? I forgot what the right phrase was in this situation, but whatever, my point stands.

-0-0-0-0-

Azuki Azusa’s mornings start early.

She delivers newspapers on her scooter while everyone in town is asleep. Although she has a slight tendency to crash into things, she is used to the job. She throws a newspaper into a mailbox from a ten-metre distance and gets it in for a goal. From time to time during her deliveries, someone’s dog hits the newspaper back at her with its tail. Azuki Azusa giggles and gets really into it when she plays catch with these mischievous rascals. Playing with cats and dogs brightens up her day.

Azuki Azusa lives on the fourth floor of an ordinary apartment building. Pets are forbidden.

Her mother likes to say that if you want a pet, you should go have a baby. Azuki Azusa is depressed just thinking about it. It brings up traumatic memories. Her mother never dreamed of saying anything like that back when daddy, who was a hot air balloonist, was still alive.

Azuki Azusa is still drowsy by the time school starts. She always catches up on her sleep in the nurse's office. After school, she has many things to do and she has to leave the classroom straight away. When homeroom seems to take too long, her trademark technique is to escape by pretending she has anaemia.

She chose to work at the Oriental Animal Café because she thought that no one she knew would see her if she went all the way to the next town. After she's done scrubbing the floors, she immediately heads off for the construction site. As usual, she'll be up all night directing the traffic. Azuki Azusa isn't bothered over being a night owl. As she waves her traffic baton around in the summer night sky, she looks up at the stars.

My chest may be small, but my dreams are as big as daddy's hot air balloons. One day, I'll reach for the stars! That's-!

"...how rich she'll be! And that's one day in the life of Azuki Azusa. The end."

It was after school and we were in the AV room. My presentation included a bunch of slides with photos on them, and at the end of it, a second **-0-0-0-0-** flashed up on the screen. If you ask me, I did a pretty good job of it. I accomplished it all while procrastinating on studying for my exam.

For a short while after my presentation, a heavy silence came over the room. I wondered why. I clenched the microphone in my hand, looking around for applause.

Instead, I heard a voice. "So basically, you stalked me for a whole day?"

"Stalking isn't that big a deal, Azuki Azusa," I replied. "In order to get closer to you emotionally, I had to get closer to you physically first. Think of it as one-way communication."

Her reaction was instantaneous. “That’s called stalking, you perv!” she screeched.

I had called out to Azuki Azusa, telling her there was something she needed to see before she went to work. She seemed less than impressed by what I had to show her. Whether it was because she wasn’t compelled to put up her rich girl façade or because it was just the two of us, she laid her true feelings completely bare before me.

“What’s this I hear? I was just trying to spend time with my master like a good pet and all you’re doing is complaining about it-?”

“Why are you making it out like it’s *my* fault?! No one in the world would want a pet like you! And what’s with the narration? Why would I ride a hot air balloon?!”

“It’s romantic. Like you’ll fly in the sky one day.”

“I’m not asking about your future plans, you perv! That’s not my daddy’s occupation – and he’s not even dead in the first place, for that matter! He has a normal job! Ugh, you’re so melodramatic! Mummy doesn’t have any weird sayings, I don’t deliver newspapers and throw them in for goals, and I *don’t* play with dogs!”

“But I did get the gist of it, right, O Flat-chested One?”

“Don’t call me flat-chested, you perv! It was all wrong from A to Z, you rotten perv! And besides, it wasn’t like I was trying to get rich off my part-time jobs.”

“But y’know, it’s no lie that you’re not really a rich girl, that you work part-time and you live in an ordinary apartment building. That’s what the story was about.”

Azuki Azusa suddenly went quiet. She glared at me hurtfully, as if my words had sent her reeling.

The most beautiful girl in our year level – the fragile princess – was just an ordinary girl who worked her butt off at an ordinary job and lived in an ordinary house. The school life she led was one of deceit. Underneath her rich girl façade, she constantly used the nurse’s office to catch up on her sleep.

That was all I was trying to say. This sort of thing wasn't so different from a gravure idol lying about her age. But for Azuki Azusa, having her secret exposed meant the end of the world. She opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again, leaving it hanging. Her usual scathing remarks died in her throat.

"The owner of the Oriental Animal Café said so, you know. That you work hard and that you have fun helping out the cats and dogs. I asked if you had any other jobs and he said that you didn't just concentrate on one job and that you were still a big help, anyway."

Azuki Azusa's lips moved soundlessly. If she said something like "Shut up" or "It's none of your business", I couldn't hear it.

"I reckon it's excessive for a rich girl to have such nasty part-time jobs," I went on. "Isn't it kinda stupid to do all that hard work so you can wear some expensive brand of watch and some dumb accessories? You don't have to put up with so much crap just to show off how much better you are than everyone else."

I had struck a nerve. "I'm doing what I want to do, so leave me alone!" Azuki Azusa fumed. I didn't know just what had pushed her buttons, but in any case, she was livid. Thanks to that, she could finally muster up the words to speak.

"...but it's not like I'm here to complain about your hobbies," I added. "Is it really that fun turning down confessions of love and pretending you're from some privileged class that looks down on everyone else?"

Azuki Azusa stood up from her seat. "Yeah, and so what?" she retorted. "You're standing there like some high-and-mighty baboon and you're trying to lecture me?" She clasped her schoolbag in her hand and swung it over her shoulder. "I didn't know you'd call me out here just to tell me such crap. I'm leaving."

"Stop right there! We're not done talking yet."

"We're done talking as of now," she said scathingly. "If you were perhaps trying to blackmail me, then I'm sorry to disappoint you. If you want to tell everyone, go right ahead. I always knew you were a lowly flea."

The way she tried to shun me was kind of adorable. What a splendid and magnificent façade she had put up.

...but, well, it was just words.

As she tried to walk away, Azuki Azusa got tangled up by a nearby desk. Her legs wobbled like crazy and it looked like she was about to topple over any second.

“...you know, Azuki Azusa. If you’re having trouble, you should just say so.”

“M-me having trouble?! Like anything a perv like you could say would s-s-scare someone like m-m-me... meep...!”

I didn’t know if I should tell her how much her teeth were chattering.

The dainty fairy bit her trembling lips until they went white. Lacking any support, she wobbled violently from head to toe, and she looked at me with the wide eyes of a frightened virgin.

Geez, having more pride than others led to nothing but pain. Yeah, it was all my fault, but it would still be good for her if she got rid of the façade.

“And anyway, I think you’re getting the wrong idea,” I said. “I wasn’t trying to threaten you at all.”

“R-really? ...N-no, I already said you’re a stalker!”

“I apologise for that. But like I said before, Azuki Azusa, it’s because I’m your pet. I know my master is always tired, so I thought I’d just investigate why.”

“...I said you’re a perv,” Azuki Azusa said uncertainly. She looked at me from head to toe, as if she was trying to work me out.

As I watched her extricate her arm from where it was stuck, I shivered. I never had any intention to blackmail her. I think I’ve said this before, but I prefer videos with smiling girls over the ones where the girls are assaulted.

“Do you remember what I said at the cafeteria?” I asked.

“...hmpf, that was when you were harassing me.”

“I wasn’t harassing you. Those were my unmistakable true feelings. I am the kind of person who cannot tell lies. You stole something precious from me. Whenever I look at you laughing so innocently, my heart starts pounding so hard I can’t stand it!”

I especially feel that way when I see your choker. It looks so much like my belt. I’m convinced that the symbol of my façade hangs around your neck. It causes pain in my chest and it makes me want to tear it off you.

I said that last part quietly, but it didn’t seem like Azuki Azusa was listening. Her eyes widened, and just when I thought her colour was returning, she went bright red in the face. She blinked forcefully and waved a hand fan back and forth in front of her chest, trying to blow away the hot air she felt from somewhere.

“Er... um. What? You’re very forward, you perv. That’s not something you say with a straight face...”

“I say it because that’s how I really feel.”

“E-enough already! So what are you getting at?”

“Anyone can see you overwork yourself, Azuki Azusa. It sucks not being able to stay by my master’s side after I went through all this effort to become your pet. So after the exams, will you go on a date with me?”

Azuki Azusa promptly imploded.

“D-date-?!”

“If we can’t date, we can always take a walk or go to the dog races or to the petting zoo! Anyway, if I can go out and play with you, you’ll get to know my good points and I’ll get something out of it too. It’ll make us happy, Azuki Azusa!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, pervert...”

“No good?”

Azuki Azusa blushinglly avoided my eyes.

Then she said, "I'll go."

She glanced at me sideways as I cheered and threw a victory pose. Then she took a few shaky steps away from me. When she got to the door, she looked back at me.

"W-well, isn't it a master's duty to reward her pet dog?" she said shrilly, as if trying to convince herself.

It was just her façade playing up again, I guess.

As soon as Azuki Azusa was out of earshot, I made a signal. Tsutsukakushi poked her head out from the shadow of the projector. "...what are you planning to do?" she asked.

"Just what I said. Azuki Azusa seems to yearn for the high life. She thinks it's necessary 'cos of her façade. That's why I'm gonna show her how nice it is to be a peasant and do peasant-like things with a peasant like me. If she gets used to getting her hands dirty, she just naturally won't need a façade anymore, I bet. I think it's a realistic approach since I can't act like a dog."

"So you wanted to go on a date with Azuki-san? I see."

"Huh? Didn't you hear what I was saying?"

Tsutsukakushi looked at me unsmilingly. Her eyes sucked me in. She had a hard, uncompromising expression on her face. I thought that I'd finally come up with a great plan to salvage my reputation (that was the right word, right?), so why did Tsutsukakushi have to look so displeased?

She was sulking.

That was the word to describe it. Although I didn't think she was deliberately trying to be mysterious this time, she was acting a little strange, come to think of it. Tsutsukakushi was usually so expressionless; today, she wasn't acting like herself.

"I will tag along on the date," she announced.

"Huh? I don't really mind, but I thought it was just between me and Azuki Azusa."

"No arguing."

"Uh, okay..."

Well, whatever, I thought. I figured it would just do my head in if I thought too hard about it.

Chapter 3: Part 8

The pressure on a high school kid is strong. And it just keeps piling up every day. I especially felt that way just before the end-of-semester exam. The whole time, the desire to play video games was carved into my very soul.

The other thing I thought long and hard about was what kind of date spots were for peasants. I asked Ponta about it as we played a death match in Super Mario Brothers and he told me I should try the arcade.

“The arcade? Strip Mah-jong may be Japan’s greatest invention, but I don’t think a girl would wanna play it. Don’t you have any common sense, Ponta?”

“Oi, don’t blame me for your idiocy. Why would you play Strip Mah-jong at an arcade? And wait, hold on a little. What did you say there, Hentai Prince? You’re going on a date with a girl? What are you talking about? Is the world ending? I won’t forgive your sins for as long as I live!”

“What about your dreams of world peace?! It’s not gonna happen if you keep beating me up in the game!”

...and with that, Ponta and I let our button mashing do the talking. Since I was so busy fighting, I didn’t tell Azuki Azusa when our date was supposed to be – or anything else, for that matter. I kind of thought I was forgetting something. Uh, was it my exam? That was already game over for me.

I only remembered to contact Azuki Azusa the day before we went out. I rang her house, trying to ask her out to have lunch at one o’clock or thereabouts, but it was her extremely enthusiastic mother who answered the phone instead.

“My, oh my, you’re the boy who’s always helping Azusa out!” “It’s no big deal, ma’am.” “No, really. Azusa’s always talking about you.” “Uh... what does she say?” “Oh, this and that. By the way, I also love dogs, you see.” “Uhhhh.” “Please come over next time!” “Uhhhh.” “Ufufufufu!”

We ended up chatting for longer than I thought, which was why I ended up forgetting to tell Tsutsukakushi about tomorrow.

Finally, the exam break arrived. When I got to the entrance of the fashion building outside the station, Azuki Azusa was already there.

“Sorry, did I keep you waiting? ...I always wanted to try that line at least once.”

“...what’s this about lines?” Azuki Azusa asked. Then she said, “I only just got here. It wasn’t like I was waiting for you. And it wasn’t like I was looking forward to this date or anything.”

“Sounds about right.”

“But putting that aside, why did you take so long to call me? I had to study for my exams *and* I had my jobs *and* I had to mentally prepare myself, too. I didn’t have the time since you only told me the day before. Just what were you thinking, making me wait? I was worried you forgot! You’re just asking for it, you long-necked giraffe!”

I had no idea what she was on about. This has nothing to do with anything, but I got there thirty minutes early.

“And after I went through all this trouble to come here for you,” Azuki Azusa muttered. “Well, since I’m taking you on a date, I order you to go up the escalator! That reminds me, where are we going today? You never told me at all.”

She checked her reflection against the glass on the building and pulled on the hem of her flared skirt, as if giving herself a last-minute makeover. The tint of her orange blouse matched her chestnut-coloured hair. The previous image I had of her as a high-maintenance, aloof fairy was undergoing quite a change. She was more like a sunflower that had grown up straight and tall from being in the sunlight all summer.

“Those clothes look good on you,” I commented.

“W-whaaat?! What are you saying so suddenly? I-I mean of course! I’m surprised you’d say something so obvious...”

“But ya know, there are clothes out there that would look even better on you. Like that.”

I pointed to the side of the fashion building, where a big window display faced the street. The manikins were wearing what every girl longed for: a pure white wedding dress.

Our first destination was the bridal shop.

“...huh?” said Azuki Azusa dumbly.

“I thought that we could chill out in this shop, first of all.”

Since Ponta kind of didn’t tell me what to do, I did a bit of my own thinking. What was so good about being a peasant and how I could tell Azuki Azusa about it? After all, wasn’t marriage the biggest source of happiness for a peasant? If you were a rich girl, you had to take things like your partner’s family pedigree or their political standing into consideration, but if you were a peasant, you didn’t have to worry about marrying someone you didn’t like. You could marry the person you love. I wanted her to ask a professional married person about it and realise that kind of happiness.

I pulled Azuki Azusa, who was stiff as a statue, across the road and into the bridal shop. The store revolved around the pure white aesthetic. A wide variety of wedding dresses were displayed in the shop, standing out in all their glory. On the display rack hung a cross, which I think was a church motif. A small bell and a doll shaped like an angel hung on the rack too.

“Excuse me,” I said to one of the staff members, who was dressed in a suit. “The two of us were thinking of getting married.”

He smiled in a very practiced way. “Congratulations. I wish you the best of luck on your engagem-”

“Eeeeeeeek!” Azuki Azusa yelled behind me in a high-pitched voice.

Before I knew it, she had pulled me out the store. I had no idea she had so much arm strength. She ran a whole hundred metres down the main street, dragging me by the scruff of the neck.

After she pulled me away from the bridal store in an exaggerated fashion, we could finally stop and smell the roses.

Azuki Azusa flicked the sweat off her hair. She was blushing all over. "That's too soon! Way too soon!" she insisted.

"Huh? You think?"

"D-don't you do that kind of thing after you get to know each other better?! I'm not your guinea pig when it comes to love. Think before you act!"

"I did think about it... I thought it'd be great if you knew about the things peasants like me do. Don't you want to wear a wedding dress, Azuki Azusa?"

"That's got nothing to do with it!" She shrugged. "You have to take it one step at a time, not that we *have* that kind of relationship or anything. And not that I'm saying I *want* that kind of relationship..." she trailed off in a small voice. She rubbed her bright red ears with both hands and blew into her palms, as if trying to cool a burn.

I suddenly got the feeling that someone was watching us from the other side of road.

Although I had a pretty good idea who it was, I knew I had to stick to the plan. "It can't be helped," I said to Azuki Azusa. "If marriage is out of the question, let's move on to the next item. There's some truth in what you say, that we should take it one step at a time. I intend to reach for the stars, so for now, will you leave things to me?"

"If you reach for the stars, you'll die from lack of oxygen! Why do you have to pick the next place too?" Azuki Azusa fumed, fighting and resisting my arms.

Thanks to that, she arrived at our second destination looking even more ill-at-ease than she did at the bridal store. At the corner of the intersection on the main road, there stood a multi-purpose building. Inside, there were shops, offices, restaurants – the works. A huge, flashy billboard caught my attention.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD CLINIC

After marriage, people have babies, of course. It was a universal human happiness. This time, it was no exaggeration to say that having babies was a foolproof plan.

“...nrgggh,” Azuki Azusa grunted, halting in her tracks.

She stood bolt upright as if to shake herself out of the brink of collapse. Steam shot out of her ears like she was a kettle.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Let’s hurry up and go in. You’ll damage your precious body if you just stand there like that.”

She did not reply.

“I know how to take responsibility like a man,” I said. Since it was a hot day, we’d probably suffer from a heat stroke if we stayed outside. I would much rather stay inside an air-conditioned hospital and discuss the happiness of childbirth with some experienced personnel. If a million sketchy things happened between us, this was the go-to place to take responsibility and have it all explained to us.

Azuki Azusa, whose feet were glued to the spot, started trembling.

“You pervy perverted pervert perv idiot pervert! Beast! Cur! Are you in heat?!”

“Whoa, what’s got your knickers in a knot?”

“Shut up! I can’t believe you, you idiot pervert!” she wailed distractedly. “When?! When did you do it?! When I was sleeping?! It was my first – my *first time*! What’s gonna happen to me? What are you gonna do? HOW ARE YOU GONNA MAKE THIS UP TO ME?!”

The kettle had boiled over. She was absolutely seething. Up until now, she had never done anything resembling a track and field activity, but now she swung my body around like the hammer-throwing event.

Azuki Azusa's ears were as red as a beetroot. I laughed giddily at how cross-eyed she went. This kind of bodily experience was also a first for me.

A high school girl challenged the world record of boy-throwing outside the entrance of a planned parenthood clinic, attracting the attention of all the people around her.

"Young people these days." "They waste their youths getting up to mischief in the summer." "They just never think ahead. So many idiots in this world, eh?" "Oh yes, so many idiots." "And this is the result." "What a despicable pervert."

And so on and so forth. I was being criticised from every angle. It was woefully regrettable. I could only think that all these people who didn't know a thing about me were jumping to conclusions.

That is, until a girl I knew very well joined in. "You really, truly are a lowly, sleazy, womanising pervert," she said.

She wore army pants, a newsboy cap and carried a pochette¹. Her clothes made her look like she was a toy soldier about to cheerfully go off to war. Tsutsukakushi had finally come out into the open.

I knew she had been tailing us from the start. The stare I felt earlier had been hers. But she had kept exactly ten metres behind us, and it never seemed like she was getting any closer, so I had to wonder if she was a walking compass. I was concerned for her. I didn't want her to follow me around and watch me get pummelled to the ground. She was still just a kid, after all.

"Hey, why aren't you carrying your cell phone, Tsutsukakushi?"

¹ A type of handbag.

“That is for summoning the policeman with. Is it a realistic approach to tell him where there has been a rape? I think you should stay in a prison cell and consider the weight of your crimes.”

“R-rape?!”

I take back what I said. Tsutsukakushi was no child. Her face was the ultimate form of blankness and she accused me in a listless monotone, as if she were reading a recipe out of a book. The warmth in her eyes was so far below freezing point I was sure it was absolute zero. Her gaze was like a blade, piercing my already battered body to the bone.

“What are you imagining?” I whined. “I’d only do something so awful in a dream!”

“You are not doing it in reality? Ah, I see,” said Tsutsukakushi knowingly. “So you do it in your dreams?”

“Well, duh! I have to do nice things in reality!”

Azuki Azusa stopped throwing me around suddenly. She was still blushing faintly.

“...I have no idea what you’re saying,” she said, narrowing her eyes at me. It made her look like the daughter of the yakuza. But her voice was as cold as tundra, so if anything it was like she had connections to the Siberian underworld, not Japan.

“Basically I’m saying that I am always a gentleman!” I insisted. “Surely you understand me, Azuki Azusa!”

“I understand that you have perverted dreams, you perverted perv. But there’s still something I don’t get.”

“You don’t understand at all! That has nothing to do with what we were talking about!”

“Whatever-! Just come over here for a bit!”

Round one of the girl-throws-boy-like-a-hammer event went to Azuki Azusa.

She had hurled me into a back alley. It was an artificial closed space, cut off from the gazes of those passing by. That was kind of a positive. I'd been fantasising about this kind of rosy scenario. It was just like the setup of an R-18+ video. Boy, did this situation escalate quickly.

As soon as I thought that, I got strangled.

"...hey. Who's that girl?" Azuki Azusa asked roughly.

"Haven't you seen her before? She's Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko, from our school. It's okay, she knows what's going o-"

"That's not what I'm talking about! And why does another girl know we're on a date, anyway? Just why did she have to tag along?! What are you thinking?! It's just as rude as petting a stray cat in front of your pet dog!"

"So you're the same as a dog, Azuki Azusa... I guess you *are* bothered by it? Also... can't... breathe..."

"H-huh! I'm not bothered in the least! I knew this wasn't anything like a real date right from the start. Right. That's right. That's exactly right! My idea of having fun is to get the dirt on you by letting you take me to perverted places and talk about perverted things! It wasn't like I was tricked by you! The idea I would mark this date on my calendar is sheer idiocy! Now your nose will be as short as an elephant's, do you hear me?!"

Nope, she made even less sense than before.

Also, not being able to breathe was an entirely new feeling for me. I started to hallucinate about the late Sir Oscar Wilde, who lives in a flowerbed beyond the sky.

"Sorry," Tsutsukakushi interjected. "Senpai is not a bad person. I implored him to let me come along to your date."

My heavenly saviour had arrived. It was a good thing no senpais were harmed in the making of this date. I had always believed in Tsutsukakushi's kindness. I had really misread her, huh?

"To begin with," Tsutsukakushi said, "being friends with senpai has left me with a terrible burden. I see you must feel the same way, Azuki-san. Senpai is dangerous if left to his own devices."

"So you're saying you're his watchdog, huh? I appreciate the sentiment and all, but it's fine. I already knew that a pervert is a pervert, no matter what. He doesn't need two people to watch out for him on a date."

"Incorrect. You do not know the true pervert that lies within him, Azuki-san."

...Tsutsukakushi was not kind at all. Azuki Azusa had tossed me aside, but Tsutsukakushi wouldn't spare a glance my way either. It was like sparks were crackling as the two girls stared each other down. Well, the main one who was seething was Azuki Azusa.



“Uh huh! You talk big. The true pervert – eh? So you mean how he puts his arms around a sleeping girl and sniffs her neck in the nurse’s office? Something like that, hm?”

“So senpai is into that kind of thing, too...”

“He thinks necks are kinky. And, let’s see, what else? Did you know that when you’re sleeping, he whispers things like, ‘I wanna see you in a swimsuit when you wake up’ over and over and *over* again in your ears?”

“...ooh. I see. Well, then, are you aware that he writes letters to the student council every day using a different handwriting, asking to triple the funds for the girls’ swimming club for its so-called ‘expansion and development’?”

“Wha...? So any girl in a swimsuit would turn him on?”

“Furthermore, he is full of schemes to get his ideal school swimsuit worn by all the girls in the school. He even approaches swimsuit retailers about it.”

“What’s with his sense of priorities? It’s like he can only see swimsuits. How indecent! Talking about him makes me so mad!” The blush was back on Azuki Azusa’s cheeks in full force. She had taken damage from Tsutsukakushi, who was cool as a cucumber.

From where I was standing, it was already obvious who had won the match.

“Quit fighting over me, you two!”

“Shut up, perv!” Azuki Azusa yelled. “Nobody asked for your opinion!”

“We were never fighting to begin with,” Tsutsukakushi added. “We were merely sharing our collective impressions of you.”

It was my complete, utter defeat. As soon as they realised that, they banded together to torture me.

I crouched in the lonely back alley in the foetal position. Why did these things keep happening to me, I wonder? What did I ever do wrong? Was society at fault? The country? The earth? The sun? Was the sun too bright for this world?

“Th-that’s right,” I said shakily. “It’s too hot today. Let’s continue our conversation somewhere cool.”

“If you take me to another planned parenthood clinic, I’m gonna make you wish you’d never been born,” Azuki Azusa said.

“If you went to a nursery or a kindergarten or somewhere like that, you would end up in court,” Tsutsukakushi said.

“Why do you have such little faith in me?!” I whined. “When I said let’s go to a cool place, that wasn’t exactly what I had in mind! Have some common sense, you two!”

“Common sense, you say?” Tsutsukakushi and Azuki Azusa snorted in perfect harmony.

They glared at me with the same fury, groaned with the same exasperation and shook their heads at me with the same feelings of frustration in their hearts.

What a beautiful friendship those two had.

Chapter 3: Part 9

I thought it was a good idea to move somewhere else so that I could break up the uncomfortable atmosphere. I swore I could hear police sirens from somewhere. As it turned out, it was the right move.

Lo and behold! Ponta had been right all along. Nobody played Strip Mah-jong at the arcade. “So they have the UFO Catcher game here...” I mused. In the downtown arcade, brand new games coexisted with retro ones, so high schoolers from around here considered themselves gaming connoisseurs.

Even though I’d been here countless times before, I stood spellbound in the middle of the revolving doors.

The first floor of the arcade was packed with all sorts of crane games. You could win just about anything, from plushies and sweets to cell phone straps and figurines. But no matter how much I looked around, I couldn’t see an underground strip corner.

Azuki Azusa pressed her forehead against the glass cabinet of a crane game close to the entrance, tugging vainly on the controls. “C’mon... just a little bit more! Argh! This sucks! Damn it!” The prize she was aiming for was a turtle plushie big enough to wrap your arms around.

The crane hovered over the soft, cuddly shell, wobbling precariously. Back and forth, back and forth. She couldn’t have been worse at handling the controls if she were drunk.

As Azuki Azusa was putting her umpteenth hundred-yen coin into the machine, I grabbed her hand. “Uh, you know...”

“What?” she demanded.

“You’re the worst I’ve seen at this. I can’t believe how clumsy you are!”

“Sh-shut up! It’s my first time trying this, so what do you expect? Even a bird can’t fly right after it’s hatched!”

“That’s most birds. Chickens go their whole lives without being able to fly.”

“Urk... well, it’s not like you can do any better, you perv!” she retorted.

At first, I got irritated by what she said, but then I decided to just let it go. I would’ve had more confidence in myself if this was a Strip Crane Game, though.

“Whoa! Whooooa!” I exclaimed, after I put one coin into the machine. “It keeps slipping off the claw!”

“See what I mean! This game is so hard you can’t even get the octopus or the squid!”

“Something tells me it’s not the number of arms the toy has that matters.”

It was just a matter of skill, I thought. I looked to Tsutsukakushi for help. But Tsutsukakushi wasn’t beside me. Just where had she gone?

I looked for a tiny girl with a newsboy cap, but I found a candy hunter in her place. Her arms were loaded with snacks, and, without any expression on her face, her eyes flitted rapidly between machines, greedily looking for the next crane game to win from. She gauged the arm claw’s strength and how easy it was to pick up the items inside. Then, with a steady hand, she punched her money in and aimed for the kill. She was a crane game pro. Just looking at all the snacks she had won made my stomach growl.

“...whoa,” I said. “Hey, since this one’s no good, how about you try a different game?”

“No! I said I want that!” Azuki Azusa insisted, reluctant to move away. She pursed her lips and pointed to the turtle plushie. Since there was no money in the machine, the button wouldn’t work, but she kept on pressing it anyway. She was like an overgrown toddler.

In the end, not even having one of Tsutsukakushi’s biscuits improved Azuki Azusa’s sour mood. It was only when Tsutsukakushi told her that the arm was too slack to work properly did Azuki Azusa reluctantly concede defeat.

Geez, I thought. From the way they acted, you wouldn't know which one of those two was actually the older one. When I said that, Azuki Azusa predictably exploded with rage, while Tsutsukakushi's reaction was barely noticeable.

At that point, we occupied our time doing random things. Time flies when you're having fun.

After we finished playing the crane game, we went for the whack-a-mole game on the second floor. We made a big ruckus that kind of went like this:

A: "Let's stop already. This is boring!"

T: "Why are you crying, Azuki-san?"

Y: "I never thought I'd meet someone who actually feels sorry for the moles."

A: "N-no I'm not!"

On the third floor, we played the drum game, and we made a big ruckus that kind of went like this:

A: "Bam! Er, wait, uh... whoosh! Huh, where do I hit it? Heeyah!"

T: "Please calm yourself."

Y: "Man, you're so clumsy, Azuki Azusa."

A: "Hmph."

T: "Hm. Next is my turn."

Y: "...why do you have your own drumsticks?"

A: "Your hands move like a blur, Tsutsukakushi-san!"

We went down to the basement floor, and we made a big ruckus that kind of went like this:

A: "Ugh, the lighting's so dim."

T: "It smells of cigarette smoke."

Y: “The new Mah-jong game just came out! Oho! So this time I’m playing the nurse, huh?”

A: “So, onto the next place, huh?”

T: “Indeed.”

Y: “Don’t leave me behind!”

A&T: “Shut up.”

I’ll say it again: time flies when you’re having fun.

Before I knew it, it was evening. The moon was just starting to rise in the east sky. We ploughed our way through every floor, until finally we flopped down on a bench on the first floor.

I’d only come here to temporarily distract the girls from bitching me out, but playing at the arcade took up the whole day. What happened to our date? Speaking of which, did this even still count as a date?

“This was my first time coming to an arcade, but I ended up having more fun than I thought,” Azuki Azusa said, twirling her fingers like a child. She was munching on gum and sipping on the ramune¹ Tsutsukakushi had won at the crane game.

“I know, right?” I said. “It’s so fun, right? The peasant life is WONDERFUL, right? The peasant life is EXCITING, right? The peasant life is ALL YOU NEED, right?!”

“...what’s with the sales pitch? Sometimes, perv, the things you say are beyond perverted and just plain weird.”

“Hahaha... you’re getting cookie crumbs all over the place.”

“Y-y-yeah, I knew that, kind of! It was accidentally-on-purpose!” Azuki Azusa answered sourly, shoving her finger into her mouth.

¹ A popular Japanese soft drink.

I had this thought when we were playing games earlier as well, but if it wasn't for the accessories on her body, you wouldn't think she was a rich girl at all. She had lost her haughty pride. Now she acted just like a normal girl. Not that her being such a kid was necessarily a bad thing.

Just what was she supposed to do now, though? If she had always been a peasant from the start, this didn't really count as throwing away her façade.

Incidentally, the reason why Tsutsukakushi, whose help I needed at times like this, was not saying anything was because she was munching on her snacks. It made me very envious. Man, I was starving after all. Tsutsukakushi was just like a house mouse, always nibbling away on something with her small mouth. It was like she would die as soon as she stopped eating.

"I have the feeling you thought something very rude," she said.

"What do you expect?" Azuki Azusa replied. "The perv is always thinking about rude things. If it's not one thing, it's another!"

"You are right. I was rude to you, senpai. I apologise for senpai's rudeness on his behalf."

"...you two get along so well."

Tsutsukakushi, who had just finished demolishing her own snacks, stared unblinkingly at the ramune left in Azuki Azusa's hand. Her shoulders shaking from her giggles, Azuki Azusa gave Tsutsukakushi one swig at a time, as if feeding her. It was a charming scene.

"You know, it's nice how girls make friends with each other so quickly," I remarked. "It's like you're sisters."

My words had an immediate effect.

The two girls stopped in their tracks. They went completely stiff, as if I had dropped a bombshell on them. My words were that explosive.

"Huh? Did I say something strange... maybe?"

It looked like they got along well on the surface, but their true feelings weren't like that and they quickly looked away from each other. In that moment, I got a glimpse of how hesitant and confused the two girls really were.

It was too real for me. I wanted it to stop.

The first to open her mouth was Tsutsukakushi. "Ah, no," she said evenly. "I was also vaguely thinking how nice it would be to have Azuki-senpai as an older sister. You just surprised me."

She spoke nonchalantly as if to prove she had no evil secret in particular.

"Come to think of it," I said. "Tsutsukakushi, you're an only child, aren't you?"

"Actually, I have an older sister. But now, she is... well..."

Well, what? I wasn't able to repeat my question, though.

"Who said we were friends...?" Azuki Azusa broke out suddenly in a strange voice. "Don't decide that on your own."

Her tone was restrained, but it still betrayed her obvious discomfort. She sighed heavily, unable to hide her irritation.

"It's true that we're hanging out right now. But that's just because I'm letting you pull the wool over my eyes. It's not like I want friends or to hang out or anything."

"...does the word 'friend' really bother you that much?" I asked.

"I like being alone, okay. It's the same as a cheetah in a savannah. It's a pain meeting up with friends. They only get in the way."

It was true that Azuki Azusa was always alone. She was able to meet me as her pet, but no one around her was normal. Of course, that was partly because of her Reward Time, but despising those around her was her own choice.

...but still.

"It's not very persuasive when you say it so cheerfully."

“W-what part of me looks cheerful to you?”

It could have had something to do with how she gripped Tsutsukakushi’s hand, dancing around for joy on her tiptoes. Just a wild guess, really.

The words Azuki Azusa said under her façade were impressive, but her actions and expressions didn’t match her words in the slightest. As she spat out the words denouncing her friends, she blushed like a naïve maiden. What a strange girl – she was a mess of contradictions.

“So, if we aren’t your friends, Azuki Azusa, what are we to you?” I asked. “Do you really hate us that much?”

“Er, um, uh... that’s not exactly what I-”

“Oh, then what? How do you feel about Tsutsukakushi? What does her existence mean to you?”

Azuki Azusa abruptly stood up from the bench. “I’m going to the toilet for a bit,” she announced.

“You went just before. It’s cowardly to run away.”

“I-I’m not running away! I’m bursting! I’ve been holding it this whole time! You don’t have to wait for me, either! I’m perfectly okay! You’re not my friends – you’re obviously just trying to trick me. Of course I’m all alone in this world!”

“All alone?”

I’d heard this kind of line from somewhere. Wasn’t it something you said when you’re a hard-core masochist who loves emotional pain? If she was into that kind of roleplaying, shouldn’t she go to a specialised store and look for a specialised partner for that?

Azuki Azusa clenched her fists. “I’m not a masochist, you perv! Geez, I told you already that we’re not friends...!” she yelled like she was pouring out her soul.

Throwing down the candy, she sprinted off like the wind towards the toilets. Her face was as dark as her sunflower-coloured blouse was bright. I could tell just by looking at her that she was about to cry. As Azuki Azusa tore past two female shop assistants, they looked at her with confusion.

I knew it, I thought. That girl was paying a dear price for her façade.

Chapter 3: Part 10

“So Azuki-san does not want us to play with her,” Tsutsukakushi said to me accusingly as soon as Azuki Azusa’s sunflower-coloured back was out of sight. As usual, she blamed me for everything. “I can understand why you’d bully a girl if you were in grade school. Why would you keep doing it when you are a second-year high school student?”

“...I’m sorry.”

She got mad at me like a grade schooler, and I apologised like a grade schooler. Then Tsutsukakushi sighed out of long practice.

Unlike the stony Tsutsukakushi, Azuki Azusa’s reaction had been so easy to tell, I thought. I could never get tired watching her. As that thought went through my mind, though, I shivered involuntarily.

Tsutsukakushi had been just as expressive in the past. It wasn’t like she had no emotions. I just couldn’t see them.

If I forgot about that, it would most certainly come back to haunt me one day.

“Just about any normal person would find it hard to answer what their relationship to another person is,” Tsutsukakushi went on. “I want you to tell me how you really feel-”

How you really feel. As soon as she uttered those words, Tsutsukakushi stopped. She closed her mouth awkwardly.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

I looked where she was looking. Ahead of us, there was a photo booth. Looking at it reminded me that we never took a photo together to mark this day. So Tsutsukakushi was into this kind of thing. She had a cute side to her, I thought blithely. But when I saw who came out from behind the booth’s curtain, I almost jumped out of my skin.

It was the Steel King.

There was a hard glint in her cool, shapely eyes. Even though there was no school today, the Steel King strode around outside with her uniform on, looking no less majestic than she usually did. She was dragging along two of her hapless victims: first-year girls from the Track and Field club.

It wasn't like the high-and-mighty King had developed a taste for the vulgar activities of those beneath her. I'd heard about her chivalrous deeds. Part one of the Steel King's heroic saga was her beating up the biggest delinquent in town at the arcade.

That was then and this was now, though. As for why the Steel King would be prowling around downtown, she was checking if the club members weren't slacking off on their self-training. She also made sure no one was up to any lovey-dovey business. There was no such thing as a rest day in this dark, dark club. That was the Track and Field club for you.

The two first-year students looked like lambs being led to the slaughter¹. "I will reflect on my actions from the bottom of my heart!" one of them said, and the other said, "I will go home and vomit blood!"

They left the arcade dejected. The club president had sent them packing without having to say a word. I felt sorry for them. They deserved to have their fun sometimes, too.

As the Steel King scouted for fires, she glanced our way. Then she looked at us for the second time. The third time, she stared right at us. Her eyes widened – she had locked onto her target.

"U-uh oh, I got a bad feeling about this! I dunno, let's scram!" I yanked on Tsutsukakushi's arm, but she wouldn't budge.

Like an army boy, she stood her ground and stared right back at the King, as if waging a war against her.

¹ The Japanese is a direct reference to the "Donna Donna" song, a Yiddish theatre song about animal sacrifice. It's full of black humour, as you can imagine.

The King's appearance was as awe-inspiring today as ever. She could turn people to mush just by looking at them, just like how Moses parted the Red Sea. She swaggered forward one step – and then another – until I thought she was right in our faces, towering over us.

I was puzzled, though. Since I was taking a break from club activities, wasn't I safe from her lecture? As that thought went through my mind, I came to a sudden realisation.

The Steel King hadn't looked at me even once.

"Tsukiko. What are you doing in a place like this?" she demanded.

"...I am on a date," Tsutsukakushi answered in her usual flat tone. Her expression was as wooden as ever.

"*What?* I never heard about this."

"Indeed. You never asked."

"What did you just say...?"

The two of them exchanged curt words. It was like they were sizing each other up as they spoke.

The climactic showdown between the Icy Maiden and the Steel King had arrived. Icy wind cut through steel rock. Tsutsukakushi held up her calm exterior no matter what, like she was the one made of steel. It was an evenly matched battle between two very similar people.



No way, I thought. *They couldn't be-*

Something clicked in my head.

It was something I'd never thought about before, but the Steel King obviously had a surname, just like everybody else. That meant she had a given name too. I suddenly remembered that when I first saw Tsutsukakushi's face in the light, I thought she looked like someone I knew.

How did I not realise this sooner? Although their expressions were different, the colour of their eyes was exactly the same: so blue they sucked you in and so bright they made you shiver. They were like two peas in a pod.

"...Tsutsukakushi. So about that 'older sister' you mentioned-

"Indeed. She is the president of the Track and Field club, Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi," Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko admitted without a flicker of expression on her face. Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi said nothing to deny it.

The Tsutsukakushi Sisters. I would never have imagined they came from the same household. It was true that when you held them up next to each other they looked alike, but was this really the kind of conversation two sisters would have with each other? I wondered. I had an older sister too, but I never spoke to her so coldly. I thought sisters were supposed to have a sweet relationship and do things like drink tea while Maria-sama watched over them².

"Yokodera," said the Steel King, snapping me out of my reverie. "I thought you were still recuperating." She looked straight at me. "I see you have been engaging in a love affair..."

"Er, uh, that is..."

"Hm, I see. So that's how it is. You need this as part of your recovery," the Steel King said in that loving voice I had heard so often lately. I don't know where she pulled it from. "I hear modern maladies are mysterious things. They are not so

² A reference to *Maria-sama ga Miteru* (lit. *The Virgin Mary Watches Over You*), a light-hearted yuri series about Catholic schoolgirls who refer to each other as sisters.

simple that they can be cured by a layman. It is not as if I can understand them myself.

“However, the one part of this I cannot overlook is Tsukiko. Why did you choose her as your partner? My sister has just turned sixteen. Seeing boys at that age is out of the question. I’ll be frank with you – you better not be screwing with me.”

...I wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

Was it because of the Steel King’s pressure? What a farce. When I saw how much she thirsted for my blood, everything I’d been subjected to so far was nothing but child’s play in comparison.

Her body and hair gave off the same impression. I’d seen the Steel King’s angry face before. That was her default expression. But I never remembered feeling this afraid. It was the same feeling you might get from seeing a demon from hell. *Ah, so this is how I die*, I thought.

“Y-you’re mistaken, Prez-! Yes, it’s a date, but you see – there’s actually another girl,” I babbled. I was paralysed with fear, but I still blurted out what I was really thinking.

I uttered the inconvenient truth.

“Oho? So you’re a two-timer. I’m impressed.”

“D-d-don’t be absurd! I was really aiming for the other girl-”

“So you led Tsukiko on just for fun? What a pleasant turn of events,” said the Steel King, frowning thunderously. “Do tell me more.”

“...you have no right to speak to him like that, Nee-san,” Tsutsukakushi interjected stonily. “It has nothing to do with you, for a start.”

She was adding fuel to the fire.

“Nothing to do with me, you say...?” The Steel King’s voice shook with anger. She swung around decisively, switching her attention to her sister-

Before I could think, my feet started moving quickly.

Run. Just run. Run like the wind. Run like your life depends on it.

“Senpai, what are you-?”

I grabbed Tsutsukakushi’s hand. “Hurry up and run!”

I began to sprint towards the exit. My frantic heartbeat drowned out everything: from the younger Tsutsukakushi’s protests at my side to the older Tsutsukakushi’s furious yelling behind me. I dropped the sweets and our bags, and escaped with Tsutsukakushi in tow.

I didn’t let go of her hand. I felt like our souls would no longer be connected if I did.

...it was a cool-sounding line, but I’d ripped it off from somewhere without thinking about it. It’s a really good game. I recommend it to all the readers!³

When I got out of the arcade, God, who usually caused me so much misery, turned *dere* for me. An unoccupied taxi drove into view right before my eyes. The instant the door opened I leaped inside and shoved my wallet into the driver’s hand. “Go as far as this money can take us!”

“Senpai, that-”

“Heh, don’t worry about it. I’m getting my pocket money soon.”

“That is not what I m-”

“It’s *fine*, Tsutsukakushi. Keep quiet! Now, c’mon, get in the car quick!”

She pulled her small body down. Strangely enough, the comment she had been originally trying to make died in her throat. Maybe she didn’t want to run away from her older sister, but it’s written in the Constitution that a citizen’s freedom of speech was restricted in the case of a national emergency.

³ A quote from *Ico*, an obscure PS2 game.

The Steel King chased after us, and we saw her pass us by through the car's back mirror. I could feel the pressure exuding off this horrifying demon from inside the taxi.

After a pause, she grunted. "Tch!"

With extreme anxiety, the driver eyed Tsutsukakushi, who was struggling on top of my knee. "I thought this might be a kidnapping. Indeed. However, to think this unfortunate boy finds this so stimulating..."

Even as he launched into his lecture, he put his foot on the pedal and drove us as far away as he could take us.

Driving in a taxi without a destination was awesome. I can't deny that this whole venture was extremely hard-boiled. As the darkness of the twilight sky filtered in through the car window, I hummed the tune of the Rickshaw Man⁴. At the same time, I thought it probably wasn't so good to romanticise the experience.

But no matter how much of a positive spin I put on it, Tsutsukakushi had other ideas.

"-nom nom nom."

"Oooouch! Why are you always biting me?!"

She didn't have to bare her teeth at me! As I nursed my palms, she looked at me with a level-headed gaze. I wondered if biting things was a force of habit for her. Was she a cat that needed training? I couldn't get her to stop biting me on my own - she was the one to let go first.

"...whew. That should be enough pain." After breathing out heavily for what felt like days, Tsutsukakushi forcefully got off my knee. "Why are you always so reckless?" she asked.

⁴ An old Japanese film about a rickshaw man who becomes the surrogate father of a widowed woman.

“Well, the Steel King is your sister and all. It would be tough on her if she killed us and had to attend our joint funeral.”

“You exaggerate too much, senpai. Nee-san might be a wild animal, but she is not a bulldozer. She does not do bad things, so I am fine with the way she is.”

“You might say that because you’re siblings, but... how come you never really told me she was your sister? I was really surprised.”

In all this time, I had never once thought of the Steel King as someone’s sister. She had always been *that person*. Or Prez. Learning about the relationship between the two sisters cleared up any need for vague pronouns like that. I didn’t know if I could talk to her without thinking about what I was meant to call her now.

“I always thought that, despite how much she scared you, you knew the president’s surname since you were in the Track and Field club. And besides, senpai...” Tsutsukakushi avoided my eyes, hesitating slightly. “I thought this topic would not interest you after you have just had a fight with a friend. That is how I would feel about it. Even now, I do not think it is very important.”

“It’s not unimportant. It’s the main issue!”

“No. It *is* unimportant. Do you think this is more important than Azuki-san?”

“Ah.”

My blood went cold. Just how much time had passed since we had left her downtown? I took my wallet back from the driver and paid him for the mileage he had driven. Between Tsutsukakushi and I, we were broke.

The taxi dropped us off on the national highway. It was about four or five kilometres back to the main street. There was no train close by, and we had left Tsutsukakushi’s bag in the arcade. I’d gotten Azuki Azusa’s cell phone number, but thanks to that weird photo incident, it’d been deleted. Just as I thought, God was a *tsuntsun*.

“...w-we gotta run back!” Before I finished speaking, Tsutsukakushi was already trotting down the wide footpath on the side of the national highway. I chased after her. That warm feeling I’d gotten from holding hands with her never lasted. Now I felt torn up on the inside.

I think I’ve only ever run away from things. I’ve looked everywhere for a sign telling me what to do, but all I’ve ever done is stray off the beaten path.

Chapter 3: Part 11

Five kilometres was not such a great distance for an active Track and Field club member (on hiatus), but it was a long haul at best for someone in the Child-Minding club. Tsutsukakushi refused to drag her feet right to the end, but it still took us thirty minutes to get back to the main street. When we entered the arcade, dripping with sweat, Azuki Azusa was still sitting on the same bench as before.

Great, we made it in time, I thought, relieved. But then all the apologies I thought of died on my lips.

Azuki Azusa was not alone. She was sandwiched between two girls, who were laughing bawdily.

“Like, omigosh, it’s been *ages*, Bean Sprout¹! What’s up?”

“You changed your hairstyle – you seem so different! Is this your first time at the arcade? You’re really trying hard.”

Azuki Azusa’s self-styled princess-like hair fell down over her face. She didn’t say a word.

“So, like, have you made any new friends at your new school?”

“She probs doesn’t want anyone to know she came to the arcade by herself.”

“Oh, whoops! Eheheh, sorry I said that.”

From the clothes the two talkative girls wore, I guessed they worked at the arcade. And from their height, I figured they were probably high school students working part-time here. That was all I could figure out.

I sweated. I didn’t understand what they were saying – I didn’t *want* to understand.

¹ In Japanese, they call her ‘Komame-chan’. I wanted to follow a translation familiar to those who watched the anime. Crunchyroll uses ‘Little Bean’, which doesn’t particularly sound like a term of endearment, so I went with Eveyuu’s ‘Bean Sprout’.

“Bean Sprout, if you still have no friends, you can totes come back to our school.”

“It wasn’t our fault you transferred, ya know. You had us worried.”

Without sparing a glance at the small handbag Tsutsukakushi had forgotten, Azuki Azusa gripped the wrappers of the sweets she had been nibbling on. She had a hard expression on her face and it was easy to see why her blue lips trembled. The girls showed no difficulty or restraint in bullying her. They laughed as they did it.

It made my blood boil. They were the bad guys. I had no reason to hate them, but I did.

“-oh ho,” a familiar pony-tailed girl interrupted me suddenly. “So you’ve admirably returned to face your execution, Yokodera. I’ve been waiting for you. Now about you and Tsukiko...”

“I don’t give a crap about that right now! Move aside, you idiot! ...no, *I’m* the idiot! Aaaargh, how’d it all end up like this? How could I have been such an idiot, forgetting something so basic?”

“Wha-? Uh? Eh?”

“Idiot, idiot, I’m such an idiot! You’re an idiot too! You’re in the way, you idiot!”

“Hold on – ah!” I pushed her out of my field of vision. She was distraught, but I had no way of knowing that. “An idiot? Me? Why?” she demanded shrilly.

While I was hindered by obstacles, Tsutsukakushi rushed over to the bench.

“What are you doing to Azuki-san?” she asked flatly, staring up at the girls without any fear.

They laughed again. “What, is this your friend, Bean Sprout? She’s kinda awkward. How old is she? Oh no, we’re not laughing, I mean you gotta treasure your first friend ever, amirite!”

“Good for you! You couldn’t make friends at high school, but at least you could, like, make friends with an elementary schooler. We’re happy for you!”

This time, it was Tsutsukakushi's turn to tremble with rage. Her small body shook at all the injustice. She spoke without any fear – at least that was how it looked like. But only I could see how much her puny legs trembled with fright.

As soon as I realised that, I grabbed the girls by the arm. "You bitches!"

"Huuuh? Who're you?" the first girl asked.

"We're talkin' to Bean Sprout here, so, like, move it!" said the second girl.

"Shut up, you fools! Everyone's a fool! Stop saying foolishly foolish things like a fool and shut the hell up!" I roared.

I wondered why I was so mad over someone else's business. Because they'd made fun of Azuki Azusa and Tsutsukakushi? No, that wasn't it. Because we couldn't finish our date? No, that wasn't it either. So why was I so mad?

"Aaaargh, screw it! Why can't I say what I want to say?!" I didn't know what my true feelings were. Even though it was something to do with me, I didn't know what it was. I didn't understand myself, and so I yelled in my frustration.

"Huh...? Are you for real? Aren't you, like, gettin' carried away?"

"You're frickin' annoying. Oi, there's, like, a weird guy here."

The girls waved their arms for attention, but no one looked their way.

Instead, a heroic figure appeared. "You called for me? I despise being in bug-infested places." The Steel King held the two girls with one hand each. "I met my worthless sister at this worthless place, only for my worthless sister to worthlessly run away from me. But what gets me the most is being called an idiot by the boy she was going out with. It's unreasonable. It *cannot* be more unreasonable. By the way, you're responsible for making my worthless sister upset. At least I'll share with you how unreasonable you've been. It's best if you accept it without complaints."

She dragged the two girls out of the arcade. Then I heard cries of pain and agony.

I didn't care what happened to them. It was just background noise to me, as trivial as whether an idol's photo shoots were taken in Hawaii or not.

What I had to do now was-

"...see. You get it now, don't you?" Shaking her head slowly, Azuki Azusa stood up from the bench. "We're not friends. I wasn't expecting anything at all, really."

In her hand, she held the wrapping paper of the sweets. As she tossed the remnants of our fun times into the rubbish bin, a hollow, thin smile came upon her face, like she was letting something go.

"N-no... I know it was bad of us not to wait for you, but we had reasons."

"That's right. Everyone has their own reasons. So, there's one thing I want to ask you: can you explain why you asked me out on a date?"

"I told you before. I wanted you to see my good points..."

If only she could just yell at me like she usually did, I would have felt relieved.

"Is that the only reason? You're not telling the whole story. You had an ulterior motive, didn't you?" Azuki Azusa said without any emotion at all. Her eyes were dull as she spoke those ambiguously self-deprecating words. She was like a sick dog that couldn't deal with its problems without scratching itself.

And so I couldn't lie to her. I couldn't kick a dog when it was down.

"Y-you're wrong. Well, you're *right*, but only kind of. I did have another motive, but there were reasons for that too."

"More reasons? Huh, I can imagine. Just like how you fooled me by saying we're on a date. Or how you got a girl I don't know to come along. Or how you made me let my guard down and kept me waiting. Or how you forced me to meet people from my old school. You had reasons for plotting everything like a sly snake, I'm sure."

It had been thirty minutes at most. But those thirty minutes had changed everything.

What had she thought as she had sat alone and helpless on that bench? Just how did she feel, having to withstand the words from those girls, waiting for all that time?

It was just like that time I showed her my information report. What should have been a slight pain for her was multiplied a hundred times over, as if it was the end of the world. And her tiny, frail body took the entire beating.

“I knew you were out to get me. No matter what I say, you’ll just laugh at me. You said we’re friends, but the two of you are just making fun of me. That’s all you met me for. Why...? I knew the whole time, but I feel like such a fool.”

Why? Why did she have to say such a thing?

Tsutsukakushi shook her head. She shook it fervently over and over. Her expression never changed, but I could read her emotions. *Oh right*, I thought inappropriately. This was how Tsutsukakushi had once been.

“No. You are wrong. That was never our intention-”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to make excuses. I’m not bothered at all. There’s no reason I *would* be bothered.” Azuki Azusa bit her lip. Her façade had risen up like a snake responding to a snake charmer’s flute.

I knew that expression of hers. I knew what it meant when her knees shook beneath her. It was when Azuki Azusa couldn’t say how she really felt with words.

But at the same time, I knew – Azuki Azusa was unable to get rid of her façade.

“Please wait,” Tsutsukakushi coughed, clinging to Azuki Azusa’s arm as she turned her back on us. “We apologise. But please, please listen to u-”

But Tsutsukakushi’s body was too scrawny to stop her. Azuki Azusa didn’t spare her a single glance.

“Ah...” I couldn’t find the words I should have said. The true feelings I would normally have blurted out remained bottled up inside of me, unable to come out.

“...move,” Azuki Azusa intoned, pushing Tsutsukakushi’s arm out of the way. “You’re all... you’re all just liars. Why do you have to deceive people? You’d be better off talking to a parrot.”

The floodgates had opened. She had finally lashed out at us. But still, she trembled faintly. And so did her voice. She desperately tried to cling to what remained of her pride, and yet her eyes blurred with tears. That was the kind of expression she had on her face.

Before she left, she turned around and faced us. “Never talk to me again, you hear? You’re about as interesting as a bug. You don’t know me at all, so just crawl off and do your own thing...”

I’d heard her say those words before, but never to us. Something had awoken from within the depths of Azuki Azusa’s soul. We had opened Pandora’s Box.

“Azuki-san-” Tsutsukakushi called out to her flatly. She couldn’t show her pain and regret, nor could she show her sincerity. The only thing she could do was let out her voice without any emotion on her face.

Her eyes downcast, Azuki Azusa disappeared into the bustling street. She was a sunflower that had been withered by tears. Only her façade kept her stem upright.

As we stared at her back, we did nothing but stand there like fools. We had reached a critical bypass, but the important things were left unsaid. That was how things were. Even if there was no façade to get in the way, nothing would change.

...the three of us were the same. We were imperfect beings.

One whose true feelings could never be seen, one who refused to show her true feelings, one whose true feelings were all that he could express.

None of us would ever be happy.

Chapter 4 – Say It Before You Regret It

I couldn't stand the chirping of the cicadas.

On the morning news, the short-sleeved weather lady announced that “*My, oh my,*” today was going to be yet another stinking hot summer day in the Japanese archipelago. “*My, oh my.*”

“Substitute *y* for *x*... right. Then, uh... with *z* you uh... ummmm... I don't understand this at all. Lend me your advice, Hentai Prince.”

“Are we making paper planes with this handout? Awesome, let's start a tournament. Making paper planes fly is my specialty.”

“I'm asking you seriously! How about I do the questions on the back of the sheet and you do the ones on the front, good sir? Then we'll swap.”

“Nice try, Ponta. There are no questions on the back.”

Oh man, I thought. I wanted to race out of school and sit under the air conditioner at home.

You'd think that once the end-of-semester exams were over, the long holidays would start. It was practically D-Day for us. And yet here we were in the peak of summer, stuck in a classroom taking supplementary maths classes.

It all started when we received the notice.

“During your exam break, we are giving out free coupons for a family restaurant as compensation for studying so hard. Go finish your duty before you stuff yourselves, idiots.”

It was on the “Life is short, so we'll forgive you even if you rebelled against the entire system” level of leniency.

I chanted “There are no rebels without reasons” as I went to school, but there was no one to hear me, only the printouts that were left for us on the teacher's desk. There were no free coupons, just self-serve supplementary lessons.

“It might not be the North-South Divide,” said Ponta, “but isn’t this a little unfair? Hentai Prince, won’t you sing a song for spring?”

“Spring already ended. We’re in the depths of the rainy season now.”

“Tut tut tut, that doesn’t do it for me. Is that how far you’ll go pretending not to know? In the one-two-three years that I’ve known you, you haven’t once gone on a hot date like the other day. I have a witness testimony to prove it.”

“...I get the feeling you just made that up like in a game of Chinese Whispers.”

“Whaaaat? I would never do anything like cheating. Good sir, do you not understand the extent to which the other guys wish despair and poverty upon you?”

Whether it was because of the heat, Ponta was doing his best to get on my nerves today. He prodded me with his pencil relentlessly.

“I thought we were best buddies... since when did you start drifting away from me? First, the Tsutsukakushi sisters and now Azuki Azusa – it’s like a royal Arab harem. What kind of trick did you pull to get them to hang out with you? I’m about to cry with jealousy here, man.”

“Didn’t you lose your horniness, Ponta?”

“Tut tut tut, that’s another matter entirely. That doesn’t stop me being jealous of you. Whenever I see one of the masterpieces by Van Gogh, Millet or Monet, I want to pick it apart and appreciate how it’s crafted.”

“Uh, it’s nice to hear you put me on the same level as a picture... hey, did you mention the Tsutsukakushi sisters just now? Ponta, you knew that the Steel King had a sister?”

“But of course! I only needed to see them from a distance to know. The little sister looks exactly like the older one – or were you too stupid to realise?”

“...you’re right,” I sighed. “Anyone who’s been with someone all this time but never even looked at her properly is beyond stupid. If it happened once, it’ll just keep happening over and over again.”

Although the formulas were right there on the front of the sheet, I didn’t write a single number in the blanks. My hand stopped moving entirely.

It had been three days since our fight at the arcade. I hadn’t heard from Tsutsukakushi or Azuki Azusa since that day. The reason was simple: I still didn’t know what I should say to them.

Azuki Azusa wasn’t an angelic fairy from some painting – she was a normal girl. Tsutsukakushi was no different. She had feelings just like Azuki Azusa did, and more emotions stewed around inside her than she could ever show on the surface. I didn’t understand like the idiot I was.

By being so fixated on getting my façade back, I was only ever able to see their outward characteristics, as if they were characters from a game. I thought solely in terms of tactics like “how about I make her return to her peasant form?” or “how can I make her abandon her façade?” and in doing so, I had kind of overlooked the single most important thing.

That is, how would a girl feel, being deceived by the boy she was dating?

“I don’t mind at all,” Azuki Azusa had said. But that wasn’t the truth. Her lies didn’t help her. I was sure that look she had on her face back then was that of a dog abandoned by its owner. It wouldn’t stop haunting me.

And the cause of her withdrawn reaction – it was what those girls had said to her. About transferring, about her friends. Maybe it was *that* kind of problem.

I didn’t want to think so deeply about something like that. I wanted to think about girls in swimsuits instead. I wanted to think about things like the magic of leggings or the insides of skirts, to live life without ever facing the difficult things.

But the more I tried not to think about it, the more my head hurt. I couldn’t help but keep seeing Azuki Azusa in my mind’s eye.

In the end, I never got anything done on the supplementary homework.

Chapter 4: Part 2

It was lunchtime soon after. I had to go hand in my blank sheet of paper to the teacher. “Oh man... what should I do...?”

“You just gotta tell him straight up. Say that you were skipping class so you didn’t understand the questions and tell him it’s *his* fault you’re not motivated because he’s a crappy teacher.”

“Ohhhh, I see. Okay. I’ll tell him that...”

“Wait, you actually took me seriously?! ...hey, you’ve been staring up at the ceiling all day. What’s wrong? Something worrying you?”

“I guess you could say something’s worrying me. I don’t know why I’m worrying, so I’m worried.”

“What’s that, you say?” A question mark floated over Ponta’s head.

I really couldn’t speak my mind right then. As a cool character would say: “*There might be discrepancies in the transmission of data.*”¹

I passed through the corridor and into the maths prep room. The maths teacher, who had a face like a gnome, did a double take when he saw us.

“What? It’s just you two?”

“We were the only ones here from the start,” said Ponta. “We had ample time in this stinking heat to sweat it out and discuss the various problems around the world-poverty issue, that is-”

“If you hit your head, go to the nurse’s office. Oh, wait, I already said that to Azuki...”

Wait, what? My heart stopped upon hearing those unexpected words. “Sensei. By Azuki, are you talking about Azuki Azusa?”

¹ A quote from Nagato Yuki, a character from *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*.

“Hm? Ah, yes. She got around a twenty for her score, so I asked her to come up here, but she wasn’t sounding too good and wouldn’t say a word.”

“Hahaha, Azuki-san is a surprisingly bad student,” laughed Ponta.

“Like you can talk, you pinhead.”

As the teacher scratched his round, bearded face, Ponta clapped his hands together. He quickly met my eyes. “In that case, someone has to deliver the handouts to Azuki-san’s house.”

“Huuh? Um, that’s, uh...”

“Have no fear! There must be someone among us who is in an intimate relationship with Azuki-san and knows where she lives.”

Oh come on, I thought. What was with that suspiciously specific statement?

Ponta nudged me with his elbow. *You don’t need to thank me. Just go forth and fix those worries of yours, good sir*. He was caught up in some strange misunderstanding.

“High schoolers these days sure grow up quick. Why can’t I get in an intimate relationship with someone? How irritating,” the teacher remarked in a laid-back tone before he went on to give me instructions. “There should be a handout left on my desk. Now get going and give it to her.” Then he looked at my homework. “What’s this? You’ve only written your name! Did you really intend to hand this in?”

“I didn’t understand the questions because you’re a crappy teacher... is what Ponta said.”

“Uuuuurk! I told you not to take me seriously!” Ponta whined.

“...you two are to be back here for supplementary classes tomorrow,” the teacher said with a sour face. “Bring Azuki too.”

Chapter 4: Part 3

But, well, Ponta was right. Thanks to my work with the Azuki Azusa Observation Squad, I knew where Azuki Azusa lived.

“I see how it is,” Ponta said to me. “Anyone who gets in the way of the power of love should get his ass kicked. No need to thank me!”

The power of love. I was pretty sure I didn’t like Azuki Azusa that way, though. Ponta had misunderstood.

After I parted ways from him, I headed straight for the station. Although this whole “delivering your true feelings” thing was just Ponta’s hare-brained scheme, a part of me still did want to see how Azuki Azusa was doing. No façades involved – just my true and honest self.

After a few stops, the train jerked to a halt at a commuter town, where a handful of condominiums stood all bunched up together. I struggled through the scorching midsummer heat, all the way up to the fourth floor of Azuki Azusa’s housing complex. I stopped in front of room 403, where the name *Azuki* was written on the doorplate. When I spoke into the intercom, the door opened, and I was greeted with a familiar voice:

“My, oh my, look who it is! You’re that boy I talked to on the phone.”

“Um, yes, I’m Yokodera. I’m from Azuki Azusa’s school.”

“So you really came to visit. Come in, come in.”

Like her daughter, Azuki Azusa’s mother didn’t have much in the way of a chest, which was a strike against her, but she made up for it with her friendly, affable attitude. She could have passed as Azuki Azusa’s long-lost sister.

“Ohhh, so you *are* just like my daughter said,” she said, peering at my face in the hallway. “I can see for it myself. You *are* like a little doggie.”

“Um.”

“My, my, never mind me. You heard nothing.”

She bounced her way through the entrance hall with small, sprightly steps. As I tried to make up my mind whether she acted young because she looked young, or if she looked young because she acted young, I ended up following her all the way into the living room.

It was a bright and clean house. There was a fish tank against the wall. As a sign of the owner’s vast, unending love, it was half-filled with transparent water, and it was neatly laid out with pebbles, bricks and seaweed. But I couldn’t see a single fish inside.

As if noticing what I was looking at, Azuki Azusa’s mother tilted her head to the side. That small gesture was *such* an Azuki Azusa thing to do. “Oh my, is something wrong?” she asked.

“Er, uh... I have two questions.”

“My, my, if it’s something I can answer, why don’t you go ahead and ask me?”

“Right, so for starters, what’s that?”

Azuki Azusa’s mother held a blanket around something in her arms. Something was pushing against the fabric from the inside. It looked like a creature’s head.

“It’s a green turtle. Could you call her Victor, please¹? Her face is a lot like my daughter’s, don’t you think? She hates the cold, so I have to warm her up like this.”

That explained the empty fish tank. Upon hearing its name called out, the palm-sized Victor poked its head out, looking annoyed, before immediately retreating into the blanket once again.

“...okay, so here’s my second question,” I continued. “What’s with the room temperature?”

¹ Even though ‘Victor’ is a boy’s name, Azuki Azusa’s mother explicitly refers to the turtle as female. Just to clarify.

The Azuki house was crazily cold – you wouldn't think it was midsummer in here. By the time I sat down on the couch, my sweat had all dried up. "Sorry, I think your air con works *too* well."

"Oh my, I'm so sorry about that. I thought when you're cooling down someone with a fever you have to lower the room temperature."

"That has the opposite effect..."

"Oh my, why's that?" Azuki Azusa's mother asked vacantly as she cut up an apple.

She carved it into the shape of a rabbit's head. *Was that another way of combating the cold?* I wondered.

As I fell silent, Azuki Azusa's mother looked at me suddenly. "My, oh my, that reminds me. Rather than talking to me, shouldn't you be speaking to Azusa right now?"

"Um, uh, I wasn't really planning-"

"It's *fine*. Azusa's always talking about you. About how you're an overzealous little doggie. She's always saying how much of a pain it is when you confess your love to her, but she doesn't seem too against the idea."

"M-my love?!"

I didn't remember saying any such thing! I almost spat out the apple in my mouth. But then I realised:

Azuki Azusa had put up her façade even in front of her family. She had been unable to say that I was her pet. So she'd pretended we were in love, because that was easy to understand. Maybe.

"But I'm so sorry to disappoint you after you came all this way. Azuki Azusa still hasn't recovered yet," Azuki Azusa's mother said as she nonchalantly tore the apple into pieces.

"She hasn't recovered? What do you mean?"

“Oh my, so you didn’t come to see how she was doing? She has a cold. It seems Azusa has been sick ever since she came home from her date with you.”

“I see...”

“She might have caught it on her date. She took a lot of time off work and she couldn’t get into the mood to study for her exams. She must have been looking forward to that date a lot.”

A calendar hung on the white walls of the living room. I noticed that the date of our outing together was marked with a red pen.

“A lot of things happened at her last school, you see,” Azuki Azusa’s mother went on. “That’s why she got caught up in things. She’s hard to get along with – I think that makes it difficult for everyone. She’s a kind girl deep down, so it’s nice of you to go out on a date with her.” Azuki Azusa’s mother shrugged like she was a kid herself. Then she said, “Yet oh my, if you didn’t come to see how she was doing, why did you visit at all? Oh dear, did you really come to see me? My, oh my! That won’t do! My heart already belongs to someone else!”

“N-no! Uh, I just came to deliver a class handout.”

“A handout? Oh my, you went to school on a holiday?” This time, she shook her head, bemused. Before I could answer, she snapped her fingers. “My, I’ve got it. You want to talk with Azusa. Sorry I didn’t realise what you were thinking. Even though you have no classes, you say you have a handout for her, ufufufu. How cute.”

“Th-that’s not it! I was asked to do this!”

“Come now. You really are like a little doggie. I’ll bring you to Azusa’s room. I don’t know if she’ll open the door, but I’m sure she’ll cheer up when she hears your voice.”

Azuki Azusa’s mother pushed me into the hallway past the living room. She took me all the way to the end of the passage, and then with a wink, she retreated back into the living room and closed the door. “*Enjoy!*” she seemed to be saying.

“...I can’t believe this,” I muttered. It was the same as with Ponta. Azuki Azusa’s mother had misunderstood me.

Even without a façade, people didn’t really change, I thought.

Azusa was written across the plate on the door in front of me. The door was locked. The chilly air from the living room had drifted all the way over here. I wondered if even the light bulb was busted, because the surroundings were coated in darkness.

Now what was I going to say?

As I looked around uncertainly, I noticed a bookshelf, which had blended into the general gloominess. The books were lined up in a row, and I could see the titles on their back covers: *Vegetables Basket*, *Mackey Mouse*, *Princess Godzilla*, *Kimba the Black Lion*, *Paradogs*... all of them were manga about animals². But one title felt off.

As I went quiet, I heard a voice from the other side of the door. “Why are you here?”

It sounded very close. I suspected Azuki Azusa had been listening with her ear pressed against the door. She was surprisingly active for someone who had a cold.

But she didn’t speak with her usual terse voice – it was the voice of someone who had cried for three days and three nights, until she had no more tears left to cry.

“Er, uh... you have a cold, right? Are you okay? I came to deliver a class handout,” I said.

“You’re lying.”

“I-I’m not lying! It’s a handout from the supplementary maths class! You got a notice on your cell phone yesterday, didn’t you?”

“You’re lying.”

² The references are to *Fruits Basket*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Princess Sarah*, *Kimba the White Lion* and *Parasyte*.

“...I swear it’s the truth.”

“You’re lying,” she said suspiciously. She just wouldn’t budge.

As proof, I slipped the handout through the gap between the door and the floor.

“Look at this. See? The gnome’s signature is on there. To tell you the truth, I also needed supplementary lessons. So the gnome asked me to give this to you.”

“...so, if you’re telling the truth...” I heard the sound of sniffing from the other side of the door. “You could’ve asked anyone. They’d say Azuki Azusa is an idiot who takes supplementary classes for maths. They’d think I couldn’t study because I was too busy mucking around with someone else... oh no, I get it. It’s because you asked me out on that date that I lost my concentration and couldn’t study.”

“H-huh?”

“And then I got such a bad score. Now everyone’s laughing at me for being on the same level as a chimpanzee. Right, that’s how it is. You took so long to see me because you don’t want to look at my face every day. You think I’m weird.”

“...um. Azuki Azusa?”

What was this girl saying?

“I predicted aaaaall of this,” she said haughtily. “You didn’t trick me – I *let* you trick me. I let you go on a date with *me*. I’m not an idiot. I’m not hurt at all. I’m tired of rejecting so many people who are so beneath me...” She sniffed again.

What was this wet stuff in my eyes? It had nothing to do with the coolness from the air conditioner. I didn’t want to be here. This whole place stank like a war zone!

...no matter how much I tried yelling out what I was feeling, my mouth wouldn’t move like it could before. I didn’t understand my own true feelings. There was no way I could speak the truth to her when I lied so much, even to myself.

“How do I say this? Uh... you’ve got the wrong idea about everything.”

“There’s no room for misunderstanding. You guys are all beneath me. Only friends can stand on equal terms. Hmph, but you aren’t my friend,” she went on gloomily. “You just ran as far away from me as you could...”

The negative thoughts poured out of her like heavy, oppressive rain. This girl, who had built herself up as the centre of the cosmos with her façade, was now left to drown in her own weakness. She had made all the mistakes and now she was suffering the consequences, taking all those extra hard lessons.

The most beautiful girl in our year level – the composed rich girl – was not in control of herself at all. She blamed herself too easily and she got frustrated over that. Where had the rich girl Azuki Azusa gone? She was like a totally different person now.

“Uh, I just wanted to say something!”

“...what?”

“Uh, that is...”

I’d yelled out my feelings, but then I hesitated. I didn’t know what I wanted to say.

Don’t say such stupid things. Cheer up. Let’s be friends like we used to.

Your façade is slipping. Now’s the time to return it to me.

Which was the right option? What was I meant to say to Azuki Azusa? What feelings were the true feelings I wanted to convey to her?

While I was still caught in indecision, I heard her voice from behind the door.

“Huh. Go away, then,” she said wearily. “I told you to keep your nose out of my business.”

After that, there was nothing more to say. She never said a word back to me.

At length, I went back to the living room. It was as cold as midwinter. As she welcomed me back, Azuki Azusa’s mother nonchalantly gave her apple to Victor.

I think she seriously thought dogs and turtles served the same purpose. Not that I really cared either way.

“My, oh my, you’re leaving already? I hoped you’d stay here till nightfall. Is Azusa feeling better?”

“...I don’t know.”

“My, is that so? If her cold got better in the hour since you came here, that has to be through the mysterious power of love.”

“Haha...”

“But my, I still got my hopes up. I thought if there was anyone who could get her to show her face again, it would be you,” she said in a low voice. She was crestfallen. “Azusa’s been in her room ever since she told me she had a cold. I have no idea how she’s doing and I’ve been worried sick.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t want you to worry about her, ma’am. She has her pride.”

“I suppose so... and after I told her she could rely on me.”

Azuki Azusa’s cheerful mother dispelled the atmosphere around that dark and gloomy hallway. So the darkness didn’t carry on over to me, nor did it get in the way of our conversation.

As she waved me off at the entrance, Azuki Azusa’s mother bobbed her head up and down. “Thanks for coming today!” she said eagerly. “I’m really glad she transferred to this school. Her classmates at her old school would never have dreamed of checking up on her every day on their vacation.”

“It’s no big deal... wait, ‘every day’?”

“Mhmm. A girl came to see how she was doing yesterday and the day before that. My, my, how do I describe her...? She had a long surname I can’t remember and... she was so very small, cool and cute.”

“Are you talking about Tsutsukakushi?”

“Yes, yes! That’s her name. Please don’t let what happened today discourage you either, so come again to visit sometime.”

Waving, I made my way down the stairs of the housing complex. Outside the maddening chilliness of the Azuki house, the level of heat from the summer sun felt particularly strong. My back was instantly coated with sweat.

I’d been thinking too hard about so many different things since morning. Now my head hurt.

At a time like this, I wanted someone to help me. And that someone was a small, cool and cute girl with an icy gaze. She was the only one who could handle all the confusing things.

I wanted to see Tsutsukakushi.

Chapter 4: Part 4

Ipponsugi Hill was dyed orange. The wind had died down sometime before nightfall.

I thought I could meet Tsutsukakushi again here. It was just my intuition – I had no way to be sure of it. Yet I believed in my intuition, because it told me that it *would* become a surety. There were many things I was ignorant about, but somehow I felt like I understood Tsutsukakushi, and Tsutsukakushi alone. It was like that night I met her – I just *knew* she had wanted to take a walk in her own company.

So when I spotted her small figure on the overgrown trail, I was not surprised. I waved my hand in her direction. “Heeeeeeey!”

“...hey. Do I say ‘hey hey’ or just ‘hey’?” Tsutsukakushi asked. She was clutching a paper wrapper in her hand. A pork bun.

As we sat down lazily at the base of the cedar tree, I stretched out my hand. Tsutsukakushi sat next to me, clutching three pork buns. She placed one of them in my hand to begin with. The paper around it was still hot.

Tsutsukakushi put the next pork bun on her lap. She laid down the last one at the feet of the cat statue as an offering. Together, we made our obligatory visit to the shrine at Ipponsugi Hill.

“...the Stony Cat sure got big,” I remarked.

“Indeed,” she said. “But its face would make a child cry.”

Hearing that, I peered at the cat statue. Today, its expression was sorrowful. I don’t know if real cats cry, but the cat statue looked ready to burst into tears, to say the least. Its wooden eyes looked haunted and its mouth yawned wide, etched with despair. I had never realised Japan was such a spooky place to be.

“Looks like it’s sad about something,” I remarked.

“I do not understand. Does the cat statue have emotions too?”

“I don’t know either, but I think it does have a soul.”

The rumour of the Stony Cat’s divine power was only spreading further. This was the giant pork bun-shaped cat statue, which had the power to take what you didn’t need. Seeing as it could mysteriously change its size as well, the rumour was that much more believable. This children’s playground had suddenly become a sacred place of worship.

A swath of offerings was placed at its feet: old clothes, a bunch of flowers, cheap trinkets you win playing *pachinko*¹ – odds and ends, mostly. When it granted your wish, the Stony Cat was meant to take away the offering, but perhaps these worshippers hadn’t prayed with all their heart. Or maybe the Stony Cat didn’t know which offering was which.

“...say if it does have a soul. I still find it hard to believe that it is a god,” Tsutsukakushi insisted, shaking her head. As she stared without any emotion at the cat statue that had taken her expressions away, she picked at her pork bun.

She wasn’t the only one. I stuffed my mouth with pork bun, and the meat juice oozed out of my mouth.

“Senpai, why did you come here today?” she asked me.

“Uh... well, see, I just wanted to ask you a bit of advice on something... hm? You’ve already finished eating?”

“Not yet.”

The pork bun in Tsutsukakushi’s hand was depleting fast. She nibbled on the pork bun like a hamster until her cheeks were bulging. Then the entire bun went down the hatch and she swallowed. The magic trick was complete. She pretended not to notice that she had just eaten the pork bun which was supposed to be given up to the cat statue. This little girl sucked up everything like a black hole. It was like she had been planning to eat the two pork buns herself from the very start.

¹ Japanese slot machines. Children can play them too, but not for cash.

"You want my advice?" She paused. "Is this about Azuki-san?"

"Got it in one."

"I can read you like a book, senpai."

"I-I see. So, Tsutsukakushi, can you read what I randomly thought just now? I was thinking how weirdly sexy you look with meat juice glossing your lips."

"...pervert," she sighed. She wiped her lips with a handkerchief, which was kind of a shame.

"Haha... oh yeah. I'm glad you're being yourself."

"...thank you for asking. I am doing okay."

"The Steel K- I mean your sister... did anything change?"

"Not really. I suppose our relationship is incapable of changing anymore," she said, correctly reading my unspoken question. "More importantly, what is your problem with Azuki-san?" she asked as she played with her ponytail, twirling it around her finger. Whenever the Steel King was brought up in conversation, she got obstinate, it seemed, and refused to say anything more.

Thinking of that time in Azuki Azusa's cold room, I felt exhausted. But Tsutsukakushi was listening attentively, so I mustered up my energy. "You went to Azuki Azusa's house to check up on her too, right?"

"Yes. I wanted to tell her that what happened that day was not just because of you, senpai," Tsutsukakushi said evasively. "My sister was part of the cause, but-" She spoke with evident difficulty.

"I made a mess of things too. Just like Azuki Azusa said, I didn't go out on a genuine date with her. The truth is that I just did it to get my façade back. Even now, I still want her to return it. When I went to see her, a part of me was hoping she'd give her façade to me right then and there... I guess."

"And somehow, you could not admit that to yourself?"

“Yeah. That sounds about right. Never mind whether I like Azuki Azusa or not – I can’t tell my real feelings from a façade. I don’t know what to do. It bothers me so much.”

...if Azuki Azusa wasn’t so flat-chested and instead had a huge rack, I wouldn’t have minded so much, I thought.

The lengthening shadow of the cedar tree cast a long line dividing the hill in two. It symbolised the eternal battle between small breasts and big ones, I bet.

As I peered vaguely at the shadow and pondered deeply, Tsutsukakushi coughed loudly. “Senpai. Changing your behaviour towards someone according to their breast size is something a pervert does.”

“Huh? ...Wait, did I say something?!”

“Just a Freudian slip.”

“Urk. I mean, those were my true thoughts, and those were good thoughts. But I have thoughts that really bother me, too.”

“Your thoughts bother me more than they do you.” She stared at me coldly. “You should study female emotions more.”

Ouch, that stung.

I handed up my half-eaten pork bun to her as a sign of truce. She looked closely at the teeth marks I still had on me without smiling. Then, with a purr as if to say it couldn’t be helped, she latched onto my peace offering. Slowly, Tsutsukakushi the cat opened her mouth.

“Senpai, you said you did not know the difference between your façade and your true feelings. Is it really that necessary to distinguish between them?”

“Well, you’ve got to know yourself. You can’t always do what you want straight out. When you’re borrowing a DVD at the rental shop, you slip the DVD with the hot girls between the foreign movies everyone else likes so that it’s camouflaged, you know?”

“That is not what I was talking about. In that case, I have no pity for you.”

“Sorry...”

“...you are such a handful. Listen. I think you are overthinking the matter of your true feelings and your façade.” As she patted her own chest, she went on.

“Senpai, the things you are saying now are not calculated. Are they not your true feelings? Human emotions cannot be so neatly labelled. Why not let both your façade and your true feelings guide you and just act according to what you say?”

“What I say isn’t the truth. And plus, words are useless when it really comes down to it. I never know what I’m supposed to say at the important moments. If I do what I say, I’ll end up regretting it...”

“Even if you think about lofty things like what you are supposed to say and what you are *not* supposed to say, you cannot help it, so you may as well not worry about it. I also cannot tell whether what I am saying right now is a reflection of my true feelings or a façade. I might sorely regret meeting you and Azuki-san. Yet I will not stay silent. Even if my true feelings cannot be seen, I still have my words. And even if my words are mixed up with other things besides the truth, I can only keep going forward.”

“Ooooooh, so you’re the type who says something and makes a mess of things.”

“I am the type who says it *before* I make a mess of things,” Tsutsukakushi said, continuing to pat her chest.

Her words struck a chord somewhere deep inside of me. I didn’t understand what my own reaction meant, and it troubled me.

It doesn’t matter – just say it anyway. You can’t begin to change if you don’t take the first step.

Basically, to quote a foreign actress on the other side of a screen: “OH YES. YEEEEES.” Now while those meaningless words got me all pent up and excited, I’d have greater empathy for someone who spoke Japanese, using words that I could understand. I was sure that was what Tsutsukakushi was talking about.

“...you are thinking about perverted things again,” she said. I got the feeling she was disgusted.

“H-how did you know?!”

“From your expressions and the way you talk. I believe they are highly accurate indications.”

“I see... how illuminating!”

“I was not complimenting you.”

Tsutsukakushi’s expressionless, unapproachable aura was drifting away. I could make a fair guess at what she was thinking through the subtle way she raised her eyebrows and from how she pursed her lips. I would never have learned to read her so carefully if it wasn’t for the cat statue, though.

“Hey, you know, Tsutsukakushi, lately I know how you’re feeling about fifty percent of the time. I’m developing my ability to read you better. My dream is to get an eighty percent batting rate, see.”

“I see.” She patted her chest once again. “I am also developing...” she murmured, as if talking to herself.

Somehow, I got the feeling we were not on the same wavelength, but whatever. That was another matter. The fact that we, who had our façade and true feelings stolen from us, could communicate with each other at all was something to be proud of in itself.

I mean, well, someone who had no façade couldn’t *not* get their feelings across. Okay, that was pushing it, but it was how I thought of it.

As soon as Tsutsukakushi and I parted ways, I texted Ponta.

I’m skipping out tomorrow. Azuki Azusa’s not coming either, so make sure you tell that to the gnome, okay!

His reply was instant:

Okey-dokey. I'll cover for you during all the sup classes, so don't sweat it. Give it your best shot!

Thank you, Ponta. You're a bro.

I didn't know how he was going to break it to the teacher, but I figured I should treat Ponta to some pom juice next time I saw him. I bowed towards him, wherever he was.

Then I set out to do what I had to do.

Chapter 4: Part 5

It was common knowledge to anyone who played the crane game at arcade.

When you couldn't get the prize you were aiming for despite pouring a certain amount of money into the machine, all you needed to do was look up at one of the staff members and say, "I used a thousand yen, but I still can't get that~ oh noooo, what do I doooooo~?" When you begged, they'd open up the case for you.

However, if you didn't get your two cute female companions or a glamorous older woman to ask for you, the staff will just tut and snub their nose at you. *"Yeah, but it ain't none of our business,"* they'd say, using the kind of vocabulary Ponta did in his text message.

But common knowledge changes by the day. This time, when I tried asking for a prize at the arcade, they gave me two in response. What a coincidence that I met the same two staff members who were working part-time there last time. What a coincidence that they conspicuously corrected their slang talk when they caught sight of me. What a coincidence that they showed me their unusually good sides, as if they had just encountered something made of metal – no, steel.

And so I had a chat with those girls about Azuki Azusa.

We didn't talk about anything much. These cute girls were talking to a boy, so they really changed their attitude from how they would talk to their classmates. Since I was a boy, and girls like them flirted with boys, they did their best to convince me that they were not bullies.

"B-but ya know, I totally thought we did get along."

"We might've taken things a bit far, but I thought we were friends."

However, one time on their school trip, the girls played a prank. They told Azuki Azusa, who often took days off from school, that the destination of their school trip was to Hokkaido, so they had to meet up at the local airport. Azuki Azusa was determined to come, so she waited all alone at the northern airport.

Her classmates never appeared. The real destination had been Okinawa, as it turned out.

“We thought Bean Sprout might come along to the school trip if we told her we were going to Hokkaido. She really likes the foxes from up there.”

“We were totally gonna spill the beans when she got to Haneda airport. We didn’t think she’d take the flight two hours before our meeting time. She was one step ahead of us.”

“We didn’t mean anything bad. We wanted to apologise to her, seeing how it was our fault she transferred.”

That was what Azuki Azusa’s self-proclaimed friends said to me.

I hadn’t considered that it was a practical joke that had blown up to such an extent. Now I understood.

Tell that to her face, you morons.

Chapter 4: Part 6

9:00 am the next day:

Although I'd only been to visit the day before, Azuki Azusa's mother cheerfully let me in at the door. She was clutching the blankets containing Victor the green turtle. "My, oh my, so you came. Have some milk. Which would you prefer to have with it: meat or fish?"

"Huh? I, uh, didn't come here to eat."

"A loyal little doggie like you deserves any reward you like. Have a cookie?"

"Oh, sure..."

And so I ended up taking a lunch break in that Antarctic living room. Azuki Azusa's mother grinned as she watched me eat. I had the feeling I was being forced to eat somehow.

Once again, we had a little chat about Azuki Azusa. We talked about many things: her old school, her current school, and the manga on the bookshelf down the hallway.

"Thanks for the meal. So right now, is Azuki-san still...?"

"Yes, she's still shut up in her room. The North Wind and the Sun wouldn't get her to come out."

"The North Wind and the Sun? Are you talking about one of Aesop's Fables?"

Azuki Azusa's mother held up one of her fingers. "My, I wonder," she said secretively.

Today, the house was still freezing. If I were a pet that lived here, I wouldn't feel overly compelled to stay cooped up indoors all day.

I peered into the hallway. A stubborn silence exuded from that closed-off space. I wondered if she was still hiding under her blanket. Geez, I couldn't make up my mind whether she was being strong-willed or weak-willed.

“Hey, mind if I borrow your daughter for a bit?”

“My, oh my, you’re quite a forward little doggie. Do as you like.”

We’d established our rental contract before you could even blink.

I went into the hallway and took a deep breath in front of the massive bookshelf. Then I knocked on Azuki Azusa’s door.

“...I keep telling you to go away,” a hoarse voice answered immediately. Just like yesterday, she might have been straining her ears to hear me.

The one thing that stood between us was the locked wooden door.

“That’s not how it’s going to be,” I said.

“...like I said, if I forgive you, you’ll just leave me all alone again. I’m not letting you trick me anymore. Hmph. The last thing I’ll do is open the doo- Huh?! Hold it! What are you doing?!”

“Right. I’m unlocking the door.”

“W-what did you say?! What’s going on?!”

My master key was a picklock. I slipped a coin into the space between the handle and twisted it like you do when you’re trying to get a capsule toy. The door opened without any difficulty.

I pulled against the doorknob with all my might. As I did, a figure dressed in a soft pink nightie tumbled into the hallway.

“Good morning, Azuki Azusa.”

“Ugh!” a red-faced Azuki Azusa spluttered, her mouth hanging open like a goldfish. “I-! W-what...?!”

Her hairstyle was dishevelled beyond all recognition. There was not a hint of her fine, soft curls in those long, chestnut-coloured tangles.

Her posture when lying down was as horrible as ever. Her peach-coloured pyjamas revealed a bare spot between the front of her neck and her collarbone. Oh, yes, MARVELLOUS.

“Right, let’s head off, then.”

Azuki Azusa shook her head frantically. “What?! Where?! *Why?!*” She had just woken up in a complete state of disarray and was now yapping like crazy. That, along with her clunky choker, made her look like a pet dog that didn’t want to go on a walk.

“If you don’t want to walk, I’ll carry you.”

“Eeek! Eeeeeeeek! Mama! *Mama!* I’m being assaulted by a pervert again!”

What an impudent remark. “I’m not assaulting you!” I was only forcefully carrying her on my back. “We’re just going out for a little walk!”

She was still lethargic, so picking her up was not a problem. But she kept throwing her head around, so it was difficult to carry her for any distance. Incidentally, her mother was leisurely taking her time returning Victor to her fish tank and setting the air conditioner temperature back to normal.

“Let me go, let me gooo!” Azuki Azusa yelped. “I’m not going out for a walk!”

“You know what they say: it’s not good to stay indoors all day, never to see the light of day! You’re young, so you need your exercise!”

“That’s not what I’m worried about! It’s my pyjamas! My face! My hair! How can I go out like this?”

“Oh, sorry for the inconvenience.”

As we passed through the living room, I bowed to Azuki Azusa’s mother. She smiled and cheered. Betrayed and alone, the daughter groaned. “I thought you understood me, mama... I won’t struggle anymore, so can you *please* at least let me brush my hair and change my clothes...? That’s all I’ll do, I swear.”

"No can do. I have a theory that your façade will make you shut yourself indoors."

"It's not a façade! It's my true feelings! Who would want to be seen in this getup?"

"Your façade controls everything you say, Azuki Azusa. Well, off we go!"

"Have a nice trip!" Azuki Azusa's mother said cheerfully to my back as I stepped out into the hallway of the housing complex.

"Nooo..." Azuki Azusa moaned.

"You'll be *fine*. No one's really looking. I don't care either."

"You pervert! Oaf! I care..." Azuki Azusa trailed off suddenly. She really didn't want to be noticed by her neighbours, it seemed. She managed to hide her face somehow by burying her head against the back of my neck. I felt the tip of her nose touching me. It tickled.

Thanks to her no longer struggling, she was easy to carry.

"I really, *really* don't like where this is going..."

"Oh, pish tosh!"

"Then what if I take revenge? You won't want to mess with me..."

But even though she blew her nose and got snot all over my back, I went on walking.

It wasn't as if this was one of those exposure videos. Was it really that disorienting to go outside in your nightwear? As much as I hated seeing a girl cry, I knew that if I quit now, she'd lock herself back up in her room. It wouldn't solve anything.

We reached the stair landing where nobody could see us. As I comforted Azuki Azusa, I called a taxi on my cell phone. This whole venture was costing me quite a lot, in every sense of the word. As Tsutsukakushi would say, a girl's heart is hard to understand.

Chapter 4: Part 7

“As a mere driver, I can do nothing more than pray for the safety of your new victim...”

The taxi driver was a familiar face. He sure liked practising his lectures on me, huh? I only realised after I got in the car that Azuki Azusa wasn't wearing any shoes.

With her wrinkled pyjamas and her bare feet, my prisoner looked as if she had just woken up out of bed. She sat on the seat and hugged her knees as if she was in gym class. I could picture her as a timid dog with drooped ears and a tail. Only the choker which looked like my belt was in neat condition.

“Don't give me that look, Azuki Azusa. It's not like I'm taking you anywhere weird.”

“You sound like a wolf trying to trick a rabbit. I can't believe there are people out there who would go this far...”

“You don't have to believe me right now. At least sit up straight like an elegant young lady.”

She buried her tiny face in her knees. Maybe she didn't want to see my face. This wasn't good. “I-I got it. By young lady, I mean like *Princess Godzilla*¹. I also read that manga when I was a kid. Princess Plasma pulverises her evil bullies – it's a great action story for loners!”

“How did you...?”

“It was on your bookshelf. It was mixed up with all this manga about animals, so it caught my eye. Do you like that story?”

“...what does it matter that I'm all alone? I can read what I want. Leave me alone...” Azuki Azusa retreated further and further into herself.

¹ Literally *Princess Gamera* in Japanese. A gamera is a kind of kaijuu (giant monster) that became popular in the 1960s.



I knew it was a mistake to bring up that line of conversation, but I'd said too much to change course now. It wasn't like I could control what came out of my mouth.

But in spite of – no, *because* of that – I could say what I wanted to say.

"I'm here because I *can't* leave you alone. Get that through your head, at least."

"Oh..."

"I've gotten to know you, Azuki Azusa. You're overly sensitive. You cry easily and you shut yourself away.

You modelled yourself on manga like *Princess Godzilla*, right? The main character is a high-and-mighty rich girl who overcomes bullying. You changed your hairstyle to be like hers, and you work night and day, dressing yourself up with money. And you pretend you don't need any friends or a boyfriend."

"Y-you're wrong... I really do like being alone, I swear."

"You're lying."

As her pet, I was closer to Azuki Azusa than anyone else. So I was confident I could tear down the web of lies she'd built around herself.

"W... what makes you think you can say that?"

"When you hung out with us, it looked like you had a blast. I'd never seen you look like that at school."

If that cheerful, energetic Azuki Azusa from the arcade had been her true self, then the girl at school could only be a phony. It was as scripted a performance as the so-called pure girls on late-night idol programs. Would've been nice if she wore a bikini, though!

"I thought you were making out you were better than everyone else, but I was wrong. It was because you were telling yourself that you didn't mind being alone that you came up with things like Reward Time. You demanded too much from others and it made you hard to approach."

“...oooooh.”

“And then in the end, your high-and-mighty princess façade made you even more alone. You’re an idiot.”

“Y-you didn’t have to put it like that!” Azuki Azusa rubbed the corner of her eye against her knee.

She looked about ready to cry, as if I had struck her mercilessly without any feeling for her whatsoever. If I pushed her any further, she’d start crying a fountain. Enough to get the seat wet.

“Trying to deceive people with words... people are liars, not like Victor is. What would *you* know about getting bullied...?”

“How can I *not* know what it’s like to get bullied? I’m the Hentai Prince! Don’t you know how I was singled out as the black sheep by every single girl in my class? They moved seats on their own and left me in exile. When it was time to hand out the test papers for end-of-semester exams, they passed it to me through magic. They were four metres away from me!”

“B-but I was tricked by those girls I thought were my friends. They left me waiting...”

“You weren’t the only who was tricked. I was so looking forward to the day the girls took their measurements, but the year-level coordinator made me count all the grains of sand on the grounds. They may as well have put up a sign saying ‘Trespassing Forbidden’ inside the school. It was like they were quarantining me for the whole day!”

“Isn’t that what you get for being a pervert?”

“Yeah. It was all my fault. But everything is your own fault to begin with. We all start off getting bullied and crying easily. You captured our hearts and turned them upside down when you treated us like playthings. Yes, yes, you know how to get into a boy’s heart. No one else in the class stood out as much as you did.”

“...c-captured your heart?” Azuki Azusa stiffened, evidently taken aback. She was like an infantryman who had been ambushed, forced to swallow bullets from a sight unseen.

“You didn’t notice? You know how straight after you transferred to our school, someone confessed to you? And since you distanced yourself from them in such a weird way, you only attracted weird boys.

You looked like one of those stuck-up rich girls. Plus, there was your Reward Time. You’re naturally cute, so you didn’t need all that extra stuff. It was a bit much.”

“H... huh? You think I’m cute?”

“You can’t get what you need from others. Your strength has to grow from within you. I think if you acted normally, people would like you naturally. I also like you better as a normal girl, Azuki Azusa.”

“Like... you I-like me...” Azuki Azusa stammered for a while, half in tears.

“Oooooohhhh...”

I didn’t see how she couldn’t have known. If a hot girl with a strict face sits behind the counter at the bookstore, her milkshake brings all the boys to the yard. All the perverts who buy adult magazines with weird covers gather around her, hoping to get abused. Wasn’t that common knowledge?

As Azuki pondered whatever she was thinking about, I pondered how much fun it would be to buy an adult magazine that way. Meanwhile, the taxi slowed to a crawl. Soon enough, we would arrive at the base of the hill. As the car finished settling down, the door opened.

“...I’ve got no shoes,” Azuki Azusa said.

“Oh, okay. I see.”

“...piggyback.”

“Huh? Oh, sure.”

It was quite a stroke of luck, carrying Azuki Azusa on my back again. She clung to me timidly. It seemed she had mustered an infinite amount of courage compared to how she had been in the taxi.

I was so glad. So glad.

Chapter 4: Part 8

There was no trace of any soul at Ipponsugi Hill. Only the face of the sun and the tears of the cat statue were there to greet us.

As I carried the pyjama-clad girl further towards the summit, it got harder to move my feet. They say you shouldn't mention body weight at a time like this. Even I, who was clueless about girls and their emotions, knew that much. But still, I could feel her soft touch against my back, and the scent of her perfume went straight to my head. I shook my head to dispel the unbidden thoughts that came to me. They had nothing to do with anything, I told myself.

"I brought you to this hill," I told her. "I wonder if you've ever seen the Stony Cat."

"Never, but I know about the rumours... why do you ask?"

"I have something important to tell you about your façade. This is the only place I can tell you."

A cool wind rustled the leaves quietly around us. As she took a deep breath under the shadow of the cedar tree, Azuki Azusa played with her hair behind me. She had come to a decision. "Um, before you tell me that, there's just one thing I want to make certain."

"Like what?"

"W-well, it's already obvious and it's too late to change it now. I just want to know how you feel about me," she said hesitantly, her arms tightening around me. She pulled herself closer to my neck. Leaning forward, she peered directly at the side of my face. It was an action that seemed strangely intimate. "About what you said before... i-if I threw away my façade and acted normally, would that make you like m-m-me more?"

"Nope."

"...huh?"

“I’ve been thinking this for a while, but when it comes to liking you as a love interest, I don’t have those sorts of feelings for you. I think. You’re not the only one who makes my heart throb, after all.”

As I said that, Azuki Azusa’s grip on me slackened. She drooped, all her momentum seeping out of her.

“Er, but if you’re talking about whether I’d like you better if you act normal, what I meant is that people in general would like you more if you acted like yourself! I want you to be popular with people besides me – that’s what I was getting at!”

“...you liar,” she sighed deeply. She was keenly depressed.

We were at the cedar tree, and suddenly she didn’t want to go on. Now what?

“H-hold on! The rumour about the cat statue I was asking you about before – that’s it over there! I dunno if you heard about this before, but see how that cat is crying? Doesn’t it give you a sense of unease?”

She said nothing.

“It didn’t have that kind of face before. It had no expressions. It took them from Tsutsukakushi,” I went on, undeterred by Azuki Azusa’s silence. The words guided me, and I told her about everything that had happened until now. About me and Tsutsukakushi. About facades and true feelings. About everything in-between.

It was a fantastic tale. I wouldn’t have been surprised if her first impulse was to deny it or to blow up at me.

But Azuki Azusa’s reaction was neither one of those.

She accepted the facts straight up, only making a mildly disbelieving grunt once. She swallowed the whole story as if she had more important things on her mind than whether the rumour of the cat statue was true. As she listened, she gripped my arm hard.

All of a sudden, she pushed herself away from me. Stumbling a few steps as she tried to regain her footing, she stood up on the ground barefoot.

"So you *were* lying to me the whole time," she said with a sharp sideway glance.

"What did I lie about?"

"Even though you didn't like me, you went out with me so you could get at my façade, perv. I got the wrong idea about everything. That's what it was all about."

"Yeah... when you put it like that, I can't deny it."

"...I'm such an idiot," Azuki Azusa said bitterly, looking up at the sky. Her thin shoulders trembled slightly.

Azuki Azusa was determined to take the damage, trying to hide her weakness with her façade. Right now, she was a flower fairy, fading away into the black. It was the face I had seen on her when we parted ways at our date.

But this time, things were different. I still had things I wanted to say. "Listen." I stooped and bowed before her. "I'm sorry for lying to you. I hurt your feelings."

I finally understood now what I had wanted to say at the arcade but couldn't.

I had wanted to apologise.

Ever since I was a grade schooler, I've only said proper things to go along with proper occasions. Because of that, I had forgotten how to apologise with more than just words. And now, for the first time in a long time, I uttered those long-neglected words.

Azuki Azusa's eyes widened. She gazed at me with misty eyes, and before I knew it, large teardrops trickled down her face.

"Q-quit it! Don't say any more." She hiccoughed. "You'll just make me miserable...!"

"I really am sorry. But y'know, I want to be your friend for real without anything like façades getting in the way. As long as it's okay with you, that is."

Azuki Azusa shook her head like a petulant child. "No!" she sobbed. "I don't get it. Go find your own façade!"

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said, hanging my head in acceptance. Me and my big mouth, going on about façades. Azuki Azusa cried even harder as she slapped me in reproach. I went on, “But I didn’t have ulterior motives for staying with you after that. Those were my true feelings.”

As I looked upon the crying face of Azuki Azusa, bawling like a child at the top of hill, I suddenly remembered the girl from before. The girl who really had cried because of what I did to her at Ipponsugi Hill. The girl who was no longer capable of crying.

Those two girls were so different they were like parallel lines that never intersected. Yet deep down, they were the same.

Tsutsukakushi wanted to hide her true feelings because she was a crybaby.

Azuki Azusa wanted to mend her problems with her façade because she was a crybaby.

They had both wanted to change themselves, and so they made a wish. One prayed to the cat statue, the other remade herself as a rich girl.

And yet...

“Relying on your façade is a mistake. You’re just living a lie. It’s better to be yourself, you know? If you compare that to those who can’t or just won’t express their true feelings, it’s so much better.”

“I-I don’t want to hear that from you.”

“I can say it because right now I don’t have a façade. I might need a façade, but you don’t.”

Azuki Azusa’s face was drenched with tears all the way down to the collar of her pyjamas. She stepped through the undergrowth with chilly, bare feet. You couldn’t call her an elegant rich girl even to flatter her, but even so, she seemed as cute as a fairy. At the moment, it was her only charming point for sure.

“I know that you’re a crybaby and you get mad easily, Azuki Azusa, and that when you cry, the snot and tears just come gushing out of you. I know that you have a terrible sleeping posture. I also know that your belly button is crooked. I know many things about you. But I want to be your friend. Being with you and being friends with you for real – that has nothing to do with whether you have a façade!” I exclaimed.

I was reminded of what Tsutsukakushi had said. I said what I felt and “made a mess of things”. But at that moment, all my self-doubt about whether that would ruin everything disappeared from my mind. Still, if I were the main character in a game with lots of girls in it, I could have said something cooler.

I shook my head at myself. I could only blurt out what I was thinking.

Azuki Azusa, on the other hand, could only blurt out what she wasn’t thinking. Her mouth opened and closed, and then opened again. She sobbed, and then she bit her lip to stop herself from sobbing, and then she sobbed some more because she had bitten her lip. Rinse and repeat. Azuki Azusa was being a huge brat. For a while, I just went on stroking her head.

I kind of regretted not watching videos about girls who did things besides smiling the whole time. There hadn’t been enough data inputted into my brain to tell me what to do at a time like this. Was I meant to embrace her or comfort her or what? I had no idea.

So instead, I whispered into her ear: “You’re cute. Cute enough for someone to make a pass at you. You should have more confidence in yourself. You know what they say: ‘To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.’”

“Uh...”

“They also say that ‘Life is not complex. We are complex. Life is simple, and the simple thing is the right thing.’ You should live more simply. I want to support you and remove that burden of a façade of yours.”

“Er...”

I went on and on. Incidentally, all those quotes were from Oscar Wilde. The wise master within my heart had good things to say after all.

The shadows had lengthened by twenty degrees by the time Azuki Azusa had cried her heart out. She lifted up her stained pyjamas and used it as a towel, dabbing her face clean. As she did so, she looked at me with runny, inky black eyes, like those of a newborn puppy.

“Can I really trust you this time?”

“Yeah. I really meant it when I said that you don’t need a façade. That was no lie.”

“...but it’s also not a lie that you want me to return your façade to you, am I right?”

“...yeah.”

“You’re a cruel pet,” she giggled softly. The winds had changed, bringing the sunniness back to her voice. “Ahh, an owner who keeps getting tricked by her pet,” she said, wiping her eyes once again. “It’s a never-ending story.”

I opened my mouth to apologise, but she pressed her index finger against my lips.

“Next time, tell it to me straight. If I ever find out you’ve been doing things behind my back, I’ll get mad.”

Azuki Azusa turned her back to me and faced the pork bun-shaped cat statue. She began to pray so softly, I wasn’t sure I really heard her.

“I pray to be rid of my useless façade.”

Behind her, I stretched out my hand towards her neck. Azuki Azusa’s body seized up as if she was being tickled, but nobody was touching her.

I put my hand on her grubby leather choker. I’d actually tried to take it off her once before. At the time it wouldn’t come off at all, and she’d misunderstood me for trying to sniff her neck.

But this time, it fell neatly into my hand as if it had always belonged to me. A small jolt of electricity ran through my whole body. It was not an unpleasant feeling. It was as if I were a disconnected light bulb producing light again.

It wasn't something I knew – it was something I felt.

My façade had returned to me.

Azuki Azusa's sturdy, burdensome choker. And my belt, made for tying up Barbara and my photo stash to easily hide them away. They both served the same essential purpose. They were symbols of our façades, restricting our true feelings.

That same object was offered up to the cat statue, and it had ended up being exchanged between us. It was such a trivial thing and I remembered it in such fine detail. For a moment there, I basked in my sense of achievement.

"...hey," said Azuki Azusa, turning around to face me now that she had finished praying. She pointed down at the obese cat statue's feet. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yeah, it is. Yesterday, I fought hard and won it. Neat, isn't it?"

It was the prize from the crane game – the giant turtle plushie. It was a present from the cat statue, wrapped up with a ribbon. The arm from the crane game had been too weak, so no matter how many times I went at it, it was impossible to pick it up through conventional tactics. And so I had made use of the "common knowledge" of the arcade.

But after so many days of saying nothing but the truth, I opened my mouth and uttered a lie. "Even a chicken that can't fly can do it if it flaps its wings hard enough. But you're more than a chicken – you're human. If you work hard enough, you can do anything. That's the reason why I'm giving this to you, Azuki Azusa."

"You're blowing this all out of proportion... but thank you. I'm really happy."

Azuki Azusa's smile was like a flower frayed around the edges. Only a trace of her tears remained on her face, and soon enough, it would be gone too. The simplest, most common sense thought occurred to me then.

A girl was at her cutest when she showed her true feelings.



Chapter 5 – How to End the Reign of a Carefree King

By the way, you might recall that I'd asked Ponta to do something about the gnome's supplementary maths class for me, but well, about that...

I fully expected everything to work out neatly the next day, now that I'd gotten back what I'd lost and all. After getting a call from the gnome, I went to the maths prep room.

"Love trumps studying. Indeed, that's right. Crunch as many numbers as you like, but you'll never solve the important equation. But *because* of that, studying is meaningful. For example, i is an imaginary number that doesn't exist in the real world, but when you sketch it on the complex plane, the coordinates reveal its shape. I think that seeing what can't be seen is the true purpose behind academics, and I want you to feel that too..."

The sunlight streaming through the window of the prep room made the sweat drip off the gnome's beard. But after a pause, he just went on speaking, this time more earnestly than when he spoke in class.

"Yesterday, I heard quite enough about how your world revolves around love. You do not have to resort to elopement. Stay in school, I tell you! As your teacher, I think that studying at school broadens your prospects."

In other words, Ponta had used elopement out of all things as my excuse for not turning up to the supplementary classes. What I really needed was a friend who had a brain. How I longed to throw Ponta into a blender.

"You're here to do something about your maths results. Not something else, like elopement. I want you to carefully reconsider that over your summer holidays. At least seek advice to make your marriage work."

Surprisingly, the gnome thought like a student. He had forgotten all about the supplementary class. He was rambling by the end there, but I nodded along with the divine power of my façade.

I returned to the classroom, where Azuki Azusa, who was taking the supplementary classes along with me, was sitting. “We’ve got free time...” I said, after mentioning the conclusion and nothing in-between. “So now what?”

“Right, right! Since I have to thank you for getting me that plushie and I already came all the way here, why not hang out together?”

“Sure. Are we inviting Ponta too?”

Azuki Azusa pursed her lips with extreme dissatisfaction. “You’re so dense,” she said, fidgeting nervously. “Do you want to hang out with me?”

“Just the two of us?”

“Just the two of us! I only made t-t-two lunches, so anyone else would get in the way!”

With a red face, she held out the boxes, wrapped in *furoshiki*¹. This kind of antique stuff was right up my alley. My heart couldn’t take it. *Did this mean it paid to have a façade?* I wondered. I sure couldn’t bring myself to resent Ponta for this.

Azuki Azusa continued to skip out on class for about ten seconds.

Those ten seconds lasted from the moment I accompanied Azuki Azusa down the hallway to the moment we bumped into the year-level coordinator.

“Azuki-san, what great timing,” she said. “I was just thinking of ringing you. It seems you did fairly badly this semester, hmm? There are handouts for English, geology, world history, classic literature, P.E. and home economics waiting for you.”

“...I’ve got *really* important plans right now. It’s more important than what Santa’s reindeer have to do for Christmas. Could you please overlook it just this once?”

¹ A kind of traditional Japanese wrapping cloth.

“Not this time. I’ll tell them on your behalf that you were being forced to hang out with this pathetic, noxious insect of a pervert who is the enemy of all women and deserves to be quarantined. You ought to be grateful. Now hurry to the student counselling room.”

“Noooooooo!” Azuki Azusa was dragged away, kicking and screaming. This turn of events made it even harder for either of us to concentrate on studying.

I wondered where I should file my complaints to get the year-level coordinator changed.

And with that, Azuki Azusa and I fell completely out of touch. Since the teachers still went to work and club activities were carried out fervently as usual during the exam period, the atmosphere at school was pretty much unchanged. Since I was the only one in limbo, I had nothing to do. As I ambled about aimlessly, I got a strange sense of *déjà vu*.

I knew just what to do at a time like this.

As I opened the window in the hallway and tried to make up my mind what late night program I wanted to yell out, the *déjà vu* hit me again. Well, what do you know? Ask and ye shall receive. Just around the corner, there was a small room I could spy on others from.

“I Spy a Maid – that’s the name of an old drama.”

“What are you talking about?”

“So you appear out of nowhere with ‘oh dear’ written all over your face. What’s up, Tsutsukakushi?”

“Nothing much. I was just thinking about how you and Azuki-san have made up,” said Tsutsukakushi coolly, as if she were a tame cat², only half appearing into view from around the corner.

² As you might recall from chapter 3, Yokodera thinks that ‘tame’ means ‘emotionally distant’.

"Thanks to you, it looks like she's in a much better mood now. I owe you a bunch."

"You owe me, you say? I see." She paused. "Very well then, go on a date with me. Just the two of us," she said flatly, but with a strange wink that made her sound like she was misquoting borrowed words.

"A d-date? Uh, well I'm okay with it, but it's kind of a waste. I was thinking of a different way to make it up to you."

"What do you mean by 'it's a waste'?"

"I kinda want to be the one to ask you out on a date, Tsutsukakushi."

I had no little sister. I only had an older sister who was a pain in the butt. Hanging out with my cool and cute kouhai made me feel like an older brother.

I beckoned with my hand, and this time Tsutsukakushi's whole body appeared. She looked up at me sullenly, not fully understanding. Well, as sullenly as one could without any expressions. It wasn't as if she seemed mad at me, though.

"So where do you wanna go?"

"Er. That is... I was joking about the date."

"Aww, man! Why would you joke about that?!"

"No particular reason. I merely got in the mood for it suddenly. What a coincidence." A beat. "That is the kind of tone you would adopt now that you have your façade back, senpai."

Ouch, she was right on the money. She was right, but my words before had been my true feelings. But since she wasn't wrong about me getting my façade back, I laughed and nodded.

"Thank goodness," she said. "So that was all you wanted."

"Seems that way. Looks like you saw right through me, so I thought I'd apologise."

“Since I want to hear your true feelings, senpai, there is no need to apologise. Instead, I want to hear you apologise for all the perverted things you have uttered up until now.”

“...I am deeply sorry.” I bowed my head like one of Ivan Pavlov’s dogs³. It was weird. Whenever I looked at Tsutsukakushi, I had a conditioned reflex to apologise, as if she had set up a kind of program that made me do it.

Tsutsukakushi sighed deeply. What a familiar sight, I thought idly, as she lifted her schoolbag. Her retort was to hit me with the corner of the bag, making my head swell.

“If you really wish to thank me, please accompany me for a while,” she requested politely as she walked into the empty classroom nearby.

³ Ivan Pavlov was a physiologist famous for his experiments on the conditional behaviour of dogs.

Chapter 5: Part 2

Tsutsukakushi wanted me to critique her dramatic reading. It seemed the reason why she had come to school in the first place was to borrow the equipment from her club.

“A dramatic reading? Just what kind of club is this for? The Drama club?”

“The Child-Minding club. I told you about it before.”

“Huh? You did...?”

I had no recollection of it at all. As I shook my head, Tsutsukakushi opened her schoolbag and took out a gigantic picture storybook, which she propped up on the teacher’s desk.

Tsutsukakushi, who had to crane her head just to be visible over the teacher’s desk, was completely obscured by the picture storybook. All I could see of her was her tiny hands holding up the book from both ends. Watching a child who needed minding herself grapple vainly with a picture book made me smile to myself.

“...you forgot what I told you and yet you have the same reaction. Is there something you want to say?”

“D-don’t mind me. Child-minding is a splendid thing to do. I was smiling at how much you wanted to contribute to society in your own little way.”

“Are you telling the truth?”

“I’m telling the truth! I haven’t said a single lie until now!”

“...now that your façade is back, you have become oddly detestable,” she said.

This was accompanied by that sound you hear when someone gets kicked under the table. Thinking it was best to avoid any stray bullets that came my way, I retreated to the back of the classroom.

“Now then. This is the beginning of a story called ‘The King Who Lost His Friend’,” Tsutsukakushi read out tonelessly.

I was instantly appalled.

Yeah, it was a script written for the Child-Minding club. The artwork had some neat touches here and there, and plus the story itself was pretty interesting, but the soulless narration was a major letdown. She zoomed right past even the heartbreaking climactic scene without pausing for breath. She could show that to as many kids as she liked, but the most good it would do was break the world record in yawning.

But even so, Tsutsukakushi went on reading stubbornly with an unchanging expression. She would never be a hit with the kids – and it was the cat statue’s fault for taking her true feelings away from her. I couldn’t forgive it for that.

Tsutsukakushi turned the last page. “...and so the king made his first friend. And he lived happily ever after,” she read aloud, wrapping up the story. She poked out her face from the side of the teacher’s desk, and it was only then that I realised the story was over. There was no deep feeling or lingering emotion around it, either.

“How was it, senpai?”

“Uh... the pictures were good. I think the kids might like those.”

“I see. So my reading was hopeless in comparison.”

“Er, uh, I didn’t say that...”

“There is no need to use your façade in front of me. I also thought I was hopeless.” With a shrug, Tsutsukakushi took the picture book down from the desk and closed her schoolbag. “Besides, it makes me somewhat happy that you said the illustrations were good. Thank you very much. Someone else wrote the story, but I was the one who drew the pictures.”

“Oh, really? You put a lot of effort into them!”

“That is because I am a dedicated club member,” said Tsutsukakushi. She paused. “I have been told that at the end of July, there will be a storytelling session at the children’s playgroup. I wanted to be in charge of this picture storybook no matter what, so I tried practising it somewhat. As it turns out, I am no good at it,” she said expressionlessly, as if nothing was wrong. But her wide eyes blinked unnaturally over and over again.

Something cold pierced my heart. It was the kind of feeling you’d get from having the gravure idol photo stash you love so much returned to you, only to drop half of them. Tsutsukakushi and I were partners, and as her partner, I had a duty to fulfil. It meant that I had to get her true feelings back for her.

“Even though all I learned today was that my voice is useless for dramatic reading, I still got something out of it. I am thinking of returning to my behind-the-scenes role at my club.”

“Tsutsukakushi...”

“You might be unaware of this, senpai, but I am a fairly good utility player. I can draw pictures and prepare tasty lunches. My specialty is shoulder massages, although I have mastered the art of lower back massages and my foot massages are to die for. If I were to pull out, there would be much difficulty for the others.”

She was putting on a brave face, I thought. But since Tsutsukakushi clearly spoke with conviction, I smiled too. “Well, in that case, you should give me a massage next time.”

“Not happening. My pervert detection senses are tingling.”

“W-what did you say?! My feelings are pure!”

“I know quite well that you are thinking perverted thoughts, senpai. It is as easy as breathing. The way you pronounced ‘massage’ was suspicious.”

“Eheheheh...”

Yeah, it was true that when it comes to getting a massage from a girl, I could only associate it with this, that and the other. That was a universal truth. But I'd just recovered my façade, so how did she see right through me?

Tsutsukakushi stared me down with eyes of an eternal blizzard. I tried to change the subject. "W-well, it's just that seeing as you're a utility player and all, isn't the Child-Minding club a bit plain for you?" I simpered. "You'd be handy to have around as the manager of some kind of sports club." It was easy to see that I was trying to flatter her. I had a façade to maintain.

"A manager, you say? I never considered that."

"You'd be a hit for sure. For example, what if you joined the Track and Field club?"

"You are in that club. It turns me off."

"Ouch..."

"That was a joke," said Tsutsukakushi. She paused. "What really turns me off is..." She turned her face towards the window.

Voices from the Track and Field club came to us from the grounds. One husky voice stood out all too plainly from amongst them. Even though I knew it wasn't me whom the Steel King was scolding, I cowered in fear.

"And there you have it," Tsutsukakushi murmured. She didn't need to explain.

"...I asked you this before, but..." I coughed. "Why did you stop getting along with your Steel Sister?"

"Because she hates me," she answered easily. She was doing her best to distance herself from her feelings. "I do not want you to misunderstand. I do not dislike my sister."

"You don't dislike her even though you don't get along?"

“Right. Of course, I think it would be better if I did like her. We used to get along in the past. Until Nee-san went to middle school, we were always taking baths and sleeping together. I always made her read books to me. Perhaps I joined the Child-Minding club because of her too. I wanted others to know about the joy of hearing stories.”

“So why don’t you get along?”

“I was the one at fault. After my mother and father passed away, I pestered my older sister. From the time I woke up till I went to sleep I would whine and ask her to feed me, to give me snacks and toys, to play with me, to teach me, to fuss over me... Nee-san had no time for herself. She was beyond being fed up with me. Nee-san began to avoid me ever since I graduated from middle school,” Tsutsukakushi said all too tonelessly, as if she was reading out a boring event in her picture storybook.

Even a dimwit like me could tell that wasn’t what she was really thinking. This wasn’t the time to put on rose-coloured glasses and fantasise about her having a bath with her sister. It was *because* she spoke so flatly that I could feel the weight behind her words, all the pain and suffering lying within.

“That time at the main street was the first time we had spoken to each other in a long while. I could never find the right timing to talk to her. I would do anything for us to go back to how we used to be. It was my personality that was the cause of our estrangement. I thought that if I stopped acting so childish, we could get along as we did in the past...” she trailed off.

As she went on looking out the window, the side of her face was split by light and shadow. Her narrowed eyes showed wisdom beyond her years. And I was filled with fear, as if she would fade away altogether.

“H-hey, you know!”

Without thinking, I squeezed Tsutsukakushi’s hand. She swung around to face me. Almost everything about her was tiny and only her eyes were large.

I was reminded of that night we first met on Ipponsugi Hill. At that time, I had been wondering to myself why a young girl would go out for a walk by herself. I might be jumping to conclusions here, but it was just possible that she had been aiming to pray about her older sister from the very start.

As a result, the Stony Cat had taken on her shape. After all, that was the kind of thing a small girl would do.

“...hey, you know. I got my façade back, so now it’s your turn, Tsutsukakushi. How are we gonna do this? I’ll do anything I can for you.”

“...I see. Thank you.”

I could see myself reflected in her Stony Cat-like eyes. This time, I had a genuinely earnest look on my face. It would have been nice if some of that rubbed off on Tsutsukakushi too, though.

“Senpai, are you free tomorrow?”

“Of course!”

“Then I would like a bit of your time.”

She tapped my hand. It took quite a bit of time before I realised that she was trying to tell me that my grip hurt, *now please let go*.

Chapter 5: Part 3

Tsutsukakushi said she still had club business to attend to. That worked out great for me. After we worked out what time and place we would meet tomorrow, I went to the school grounds.

It seemed as if the baseball club and the soccer club were taking a break today too. The Track and Field club members, who normally occupied a corner of the grounds, were marching right in the centre and getting knocked around. Right in front of my eyes, a javelin whooshed through the air, tracing the arc of a parabola.

The person who threw it was, of course, our good club president Tsutsukakushi. She had been steadily extending her record during all this time. I was sure she went to sleep and woke up with nothing but track and field on her brain.

I sat down on the stone steps and observed the action. In that short span of time, I lost count of how many times she scolded the other club members. *“Stop dawdling! Look straight! Get a move on!”*

The amount of burns she delivered just kept increasing, I thought. I figured I’d had my fill of seeing a girl slap another girl on the backside from watching videos.

“...right! Ten minute break,” the Steel King commanded. Half the club members promptly collapsed on the ground. The other half fainted while standing up.

And then, before I knew it, the Steel King was looking in my direction. Oh yay, she was wearing tights today. *But this wasn’t the time to rejoice,* I thought as I sprang to my feet and saluted with gusto. “Reporting for duty!”

“Quit acting like a soldier. I don’t like it. The original purpose of club activities is to be full of harmony like those whatchamacallit Rangers.”

“You really like referential humour, huh, President Tsutsukakushi?”

“Huh? What does that mean...? Oh, never mind. More importantly, Yokodera, it’s good to see you in the flesh today.”

“Indeed. I have caused you a great inconvenience, although I have safely made a full recovery.”

“Oho!” With a stern face, the Steel King held her palm out. I assumed she would beat me up before I could even apologise, just like her sister did. My body tensed. I threw my arms over myself in defence, flailing aimlessly.

“...hm, congrats. I’m happy for you. Yippee,” the Steel King said dourly at length, clapping her right and left hand together to give herself a high five. What a strange person. “When you said those things I couldn’t understand, I was in anguish too. However, with this I can retire in peace. Hurry up and take over for me, starting from today.”

“I thank you for the kind words, but I’m sorry.”

“Hm? About what?”

“There is still something that is bothering me, so could you please let me off until I solve the problem?”

“That matter is more important than the Track and Field club?”

“Yes, it is very important to me. So then-” I gingerly wiped off the sweat sticking to my palm. There was something I had to say no matter what. “About the matter of who will be the next club president, could you defer on that for now? I think there are other people more qualified than I am.”

“Are you questioning my judgment?” The Steel King’s eyes narrowed with disgust.

An image of me being compressed and obliterated by a dark blue pressing machine flashed through my mind. I bit down my desire to admit defeat and run with my tail between my legs. This kind of pressure was nothing compared to true fear. But I’d still rather not get beaten up.

After ten full seconds of enraged silence, the Steel King sighed. “You’ve changed. I would never have thought you’d be able to look me in the eyes and say all that.

Very well then. Make haste and deal with your issues,” she said softly. “We’ll talk about the club presidency after that.”

It was only very slight and no one was there to see it, but she was actually conceding to me. *After that first time being referred to by a nickname, it wasn’t so bad to be called a prince*, I thought. That way I could work together with Tsutsukakushi without having to worry about other things.

“However, I said make haste. Make haste. Don’t you slack off. I have things I want to do as well.”

“Thank you very much. That reminds me, you have university entrance exams to attend to yourself, huh?”

“Hmph... exams, along with marriage and other similar things. I must do them all so I can advance in life.”

“Y-you’re getting married?! Right now?! With who?!”

“Don’t be so shocked. I’m of age – that means I’ll be an adult,” the Steel King mused aloud as she peered at my stunned face.

It was an expression one didn’t just associate with the vague idea of a peasant’s happiness – it was hard reality. So my club president was getting married... and here I thought track and field was her only calling in life. I wondered what sort of person she was getting married to. Maybe someone who liked pain?

“Never mind me, though. So about the girl I saw you with the other day...” As she uttered those choice words that drove newlywed couples into divorce, she clasped her hands on my shoulder.

“The other day? Why do you ask?”

“That was when you two-timed my worthless sister. You still haven’t offered any wishy-washy excuse.”

She was still holding a grudge! It looked as if she was trying to be blasé about it, but her eyes weren't smiling at all. Her grip crushed my shoulder. The seemingly relaxed air was spiked with a different kind of tension.

"I cut you some slack since you were right in the middle of your recuperation phase, but now that you've made a complete recovery, there should be no problem. Are you going to open up to me?"

"Er, um. How do I say it? M-maybe that was my... twin brother you saw? Yeah! What a scary coincidence, huh?"

"What's that you say? That's the first I've heard of it... but, well, he *did* look exactly like you."

"It's a secret from everyone! There's a 1-out-of-256 percent chance you'll encounter him. You're lucky, Prez. It's like a wave of metal slimes¹!"

"Metal? Slimes? A metallic gooey substance? Huh?"

"Yeah, metal, because it's hard to hit. My long-lost brother has a huge ego and we don't hit it off well. He's got nothing to do with me. The date with Tsutsukakushi was all his doing. What a two-timing scoundrel!"

"Hmm... I don't really get it, but basically your brother is the bad guy and you're innocent...?"

"I'm glad we see eye to eye. Please take out your anger on my womanising little brother. By the way, I heard you don't get along with your little sister either."

Yessss, I'd scored! Good going, façade of mine!

...or so I thought.

As soon as I spotted the open scowl on her face, I knew I'd stepped on a landmine.

¹ Super rare monsters from the *Dragon Quest* franchise.

“Who told you about Tsukiko and I?”

“Er, uh...”

“Only an imbecile would believe such baseless rumours. You keep your nose out of my business,” the king said scornfully.

Stomping on minefields wasn’t a habit of mine; I wasn’t trying to be so tough. There were some places no humans should ever go – like the very back of my bookshelf, for instance.

And yet.

When I heard her say those bitter words in such a flat tone, I knew that closing my ears to them would be wrong.

“...you’re not dissatisfied about your relationship with your sister?”

“You just go on and on. I’m telling you that whether we get along or not is none of your business.”

“W-well, I just got the impression that you and your sister have kind of a strained relationship lately and that you were kind of bothered over it and-”

“Quit it with your foolish noise. Even *if* Tsukiko and I were nervous around each other, which we’re not, you’re still barking up the wrong tree. Family disputes should stay in the family. You understand?” the King said haughtily, denying me offhand. It made me want to hold my ground against her.

Don’t pull random assumptions out of your arse. Stop denying it, you idiot.

Not that I could muster the courage to say any of that, though.

“Please tell me one thing. It’s something I need to know. Do you think your little sister has stopped expressing her true feelings lately?”

“True feelings...? What are you talking about?”

“There’s a rumour about a Stony Cat. Is it true?”

“Wait, hold it. A Stony Cat? I have no idea what you’re saying.” The Steel King’s hand shook violently. She was demanding an explanation.

As it turned out, the King was completely divorced from rumours. Just what did she talk about with those around her? I filled her in about what happened to the younger Tsutsukakushi’s body – that is, what happened to Tsukiko.

Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi blinked with eyes exactly like her sister’s as she listened to the end. “It’s a lovely story, but it’s too absurd,” she said, laughing. “That cat can grant wishes? There is no cat god with such great powers... godly powers don’t exist.”

“You might not be able to believe me, but it’s the truth.”

“As if! In my great wisdom, I have never been deceived by another person,” she said with a sharp, demonic glint in her eyes. She had an extremely high opinion of herself. Being the top dog of the Track and Field club had spoiled her. I wanted to tell her that she had just never realised she was being deceived. Not that I *could* say tha-

“You see, there’s absolutely no way the cat statue has that kind of power. I made it when I was a child.”

I was dumbfounded upon hearing those words.

“You made it?! You?!”

“Indeed. Hmph, so it was worshipped under the name of the Stony Cat, huh? I had no idea. That’s quite an elaborate pretence, although it sounds like a kind of evil spirit...”

“I can’t believe it! Why did you illegally dump such a weird thing at Ipponsugi Hill?”

“What are you saying? It’s not against the law or anything if it’s my own backyard.”

“Y-your backyard?!”

“What? You didn’t know? That hill belongs to the Tsutsukakushi family. My grandfather was a landlord, so he owned various plots of land. That hill is one of them. You might say we have a mountain in our backyard. It wasn’t used for anything, so they let us children use it as a playground,” she said briskly.

Winded by the shock of it all, I stared with my mouth wide open. The Steel King did not care in the slightest about the fact that she had no artistic sense or about how genuinely rich she was. How like a king.

The thing that surprised me was how I didn’t even know. Tsutsukakushi hadn’t mentioned it once. I thought she’d finally started to open up to me about her older sister, but there were still things that were hidden from me. It didn’t feel good knowing so little after knowing her so long. From the older sister’s attitude, it seemed possible that the root of their feud went back deep.

“That’s why you must be misunderstanding something when you say the cat can grant wishes. By the way, I still call it my masterpiece to this day. Do you hear me? Yokodera? Hm? Are you listening? What are you zoning out for? What is it?”

As the Steel King yabbered on and on, I thought to myself: *Oh, shut up.*

“...hmpf,” she grunted finally. “I see you’re still recovering after all. You had better rest well.”

She returned to the grounds. Her conscious cleared, she resumed her Spartan training with renewed vigour.

Although I was deep in thought and forgot to say hi to everybody, it wasn’t as if I was struck with a great idea about what to do with the Tsutsukakushi sisters. Let sleeping kings lie. Those were the words that came to my mind.

On the way home, I went to the student counselling room to check out how things were going there.

“Another ninety-eight, ninety-nine, a hundred pages to go... urrrgh, when is this gonna end...? What about my date...?”

A miserable, teary-eyed Azuki Azusa looked an awful lot like Sadako from *The Ring*². Sooner or later, she might be added to one of the school's seven mysteries.

I snuck a parting message in an envelope through the gap in the door. "*I'm always watching you! I'll come check up on you tomorrow, too!*" It was my way of saying goodbye ahead of time.

Since I wasn't a stalker, I thought it might be better if I cheered her on in person, but a piece of paper with "*No Perverts Allowed*" written on it was stuck on the door. I got the feeling that the year-level coordinator was grossly violating human rights.

² The Japanese refers to Okiku from the Bancho Sarayashi story. This folk story has been famously reinvented as the inspiration for the Japanese horror film *The Ring*, which I think is more familiar to readers. Sadako is portrayed as a creepy woman with long, black hair with a grudge against humanity.

Chapter 5: Part 4

Geez, the sun's heat had a way of boring into you even at the crack of dawn. It made me want to ride my bike completely naked. Of course, I was blessed with the average person's sense of shame, so I held back on the stripping, at least.

I had no idea what Tsutsukakushi was trying to do to get her true feelings back. All she had said was, "Please come to the bus stop near the school gate." I stopped my bike by the guard rails and sat on the bench at the bus stop for ten minutes, waiting.

Tsutsukakushi always had an impeccable fashion sense, so I was looking forward to what kind of get-up she'd be wearing this time. When she walked in wearing her pleated school skirt, I was a little disappointed. That feeling might have showed on my face.

"I was at my club activities. I cannot go to school without my uniform." As if to apologise, she threw me a slow ball rather than her usual fast balls.

"Ah, well, can't be helped... hey, it wasn't like I was looking forward to seeing you in plain clothes!"

"...I see. I apologise."

"It's fine, it's fine. At this time of the year, you can see through blouses, not that I was thinking about the superb view I'm getting, either."

"I take back my apology. According to the Computer Entertainment Rating Organisation's code of ethics, it is prohibited to look at me from now on." She stated the judgment with obvious personal bias.

Then she pushed me onto the bus. The air conditioner was working reasonably well, and a sense of ease came over me. We occupied two seats right next to each other.

I'd gotten used to walking around with Tsutsukakushi like this. You might say we were comfortable around each other.

My heart didn't fly as if we were on a date; it was the sort of feeling you'd get from hanging out with a childhood friend who was younger than you.

If someone pressed me about our actual relationship, I wouldn't be able to answer them, but somehow I was happy not knowing. She could communicate only through words and unmoving expressions, and I understood her extremely well even though we weren't a couple. I'm sure Tsutsukakushi thought the same way about me.

...as it turned out, I was so busy flattering myself I realised too late that something about the atmosphere was off.

At the bus stop on the main road, Tsutsukakushi pushed me again to get off. Since we were on the main road, we kept getting a whiff of the exhaust from the buses passing by, so it was hard to breathe.

Coming all the way here meant that there was only one place our destination could be. "Is there something you want to buy?" I asked.

"Yes. Many things."

Our destination was a jumbo discount store.

Tsutsukakushi kept pushing me incessantly all the way through the pedestrian crossing, out of the car park and into the store.

Wherever I looked, I was dazzled by the selection. It was a massive store with three basement floors and twelve floors above ground, and it looked like every single thing in the world could be bought here. It was enough to make me dizzy. Inside, the latest pop music hits were playing full-blast. The whole place had the features of an entertainment district, only you wouldn't be able to tell what country we were in.

When the store first opened, Ponta and I came here together. We heard that they sold photos of people wearing cosplay outfits in a corner of the fifth floor, so we got all excited and went on a research-gathering trip, but then everyone who saw us gave us cold stares. I definitely wasn't going to spill that story!

As I was thinking over that, Tsutsukakushi was talking. “The Santa outfit is cute. The miniskirt is somewhat off-putting, though. Then there are the classic vampire and the magical girl looks. I think the outfit from *Alice in Wonderland* might be the best. Which one do you like, senpai?” She was looking around the floor enthusiastically from top-to-bottom.

“Huh? So what you wanted to buy was a costume?”

“No. I was planning to buy the materials and make them myself. However, since the ready-made ones are kindly displayed here, I might as well buy one of them.”

As she constantly checked the price tags, she got swept away by the music and tapped her feet here and there. She kept pushing me from behind, but she drove me like a drunk driver.

“I think the nurse outfit is good... wait, Tsutsukakushi, are you going to wear it?”

“It is part of my Child-Minding club activities. I told you we were having a storytelling session at the children’s playgroup. Wearing a costume would make the story more exciting, would it not?”

“I... okay then.” I swallowed. My desire for swimwear of all kinds, from bikinis to competitive swimsuits, was written all over my face. And I had swimsuit models at the back of my mind, too. Could it be, I thought, that my chance had finally come to actually prove to the world the fine theory behind the swimsuit’s appeal?

“Yeah, there’s the nurse outfit, but swimsuits are the best. Hasn’t it been hot lately? You should wear clothes that don’t use much fabric to show the children how to take care of our planet’s resources. Stop global warming!”

Silence. Tsutsukakushi stopped pushing me.

Uh oh, I thought. Did I push her too far? I’d squandered the opportunity to see her in cosplay. As I wallowed in my regret, she said in a voice barely above a whisper, “You may be right. A swimsuit might look good too.”

I felt her take her hands away from my back. I turned around, my hunger for swimsuits rising effortlessly. *"Wait for me please,"* Tsutsukakushi said as her tiny body vanished into the dressing room.

"Huh?"

Wait for me please. What that line meant was that she was going to change her clothes. In other words, that translated to *"I want you to see me in a swimsuit"*.

This would surely put an end to the debate on which swimsuit style looked the best on girls! God bless you, Tsutsukakushi! Bare thy flesh before me!

...yeah, as if that would happen. No wait, it *might* happen. It would be awesome. Except...

I was standing in front of the dressing room. I could faintly hear the sound of rustling clothes from behind the closed curtain. A mental image of a blue sky floated into my head, only to be pushed away by dark clouds of unease.

Was Tsutsukakushi really *that* kind of girl? Didn't she say something along the lines of she would rather die before cosplaying in front of me that time we went to the Oriental Animal Café? She should be scolding me for asking to see her in a swimsuit. Now she was walking into a dressing room for me. Just what had caused her change of heart?

Tsutsukakushi had no expressions. I thought that was obvious. But, well, had I really thought about what kind of emotions she was embracing behind her expressionless face?

Tsutsukakushi was originally a shy girl. Far from saying *"Wait for me please"* as if it was nothing, she'd refuse her senpai's advances and look as if she'd start crying.

...and that would suck big time. I learned that from my experience with Azuki Azusa. If I disregarded her feelings and only saw her for her outward characteristics, would that whole fiasco be repeated?

My feelings overcame my reason, and impulsively, I pushed the curtain aside.

“-don’t force yourself, Tsutsukakushi! I made a... mistake?”

Silence. She blinked rapidly. I could see myself reflected in her eyes, as pale as moonlight.

Tsutsukakushi was completely naked.

Well, to put on a swimsuit, you need to take off the top and bottom parts of your uniform. Even the underwear needs to go. Upon opening the dressing room curtain, I was suddenly confronted with just the sort of sight you’d expect.

“...mistake... I made a mistake. Dun goofed. Yep... hahaha.”

“Ah, Tsutsukakushi, you made a mistake too, hahaha. I only know this from watching videos, but when you’re putting on a swimsuit, you don’t have to take off your shorts. Haha. Ha...”

The silence got louder.

Tsutsukakushi was as beautiful as the moon rabbit¹. If I were a shameless erotic novelist, I’d describe her as white like snow and pink like unripe fruit. By that I obviously mean her retinas. Well, no, I wasn’t thinking about that – what was I doing?!

Sorry. Thank you. I was surprised. As I struggled to find what to say, the words billowing like a raging current inside my head, Tsutsukakushi wordlessly closed the curtain.

With a loud groan, I collapsed to the ground. This sucked. It really sucked. It couldn’t have been worse if I had jumped for joy and said, “*Yippee! I’m so lucky!*”

Tsutsukakushi didn’t come out of the dressing room for twenty minutes after that. I had no idea how to make it up to her for my disgusting behaviour. I definitely couldn’t tell her that I wanted to see her in a swimsuit again.

¹ A reference to a Japanese folklore tale. The moon apparently looks like a rabbit making rice cake. You can decide for yourselves whether that mental image is pretty or not. Also, the ‘tsuki’ in ‘Tsukiko’ is spelt with the Japanese character for moon.



Chapter 5: Part 5

“A tank-top bikini is good too, you know, but I want to see you in a mini-bikini!”

“Senpai, I see you are a shady character who loves swimsuits. You would think that anything looks good on m... why are you suddenly beating your head against the table?”

“No reason, hahaha. I’m just beating myself up for my own weakness again...”

The opportunity to apologise came at the food court on the first floor.

Tsutsukakushi was the one to bring up the swimsuit story. As she chewed on an *okonomiyaki*¹ three times bigger than mine, she took it into her own hands to lead the conversation down that particular track. Guess who didn’t take the opportunity to do some serious self-reflection? Me. Bleh.

“Forget about what happened earlier. I am not mad.”

In the silence that followed, I remembered something else about Tsutsukakushi. She spoke with her usual flat tone, so her true feelings were an eternal mystery. It was just like that time I tickled her and it was like she couldn’t even feel anything. The atmosphere heightened with tension.

Then the moment passed and the pressure eased.

“Senpai, you cannot help yourself. It was my responsibility to take precautions. You only did what came to you naturally, so do not blame yourself.”

“Stop being so nice to me! I didn’t intend to peep on you on purpose. All I was thinking about was stopping you from forcing yourself – I had the purest intentions...”

“Okay. I understand very well,” Tsutsukakushi said as if she understood something different entirely.

¹ A kind of Japanese-style grilled pancake.

She stopped pressing down on my bruised head and tugged on my sleeve sourly. This was a good sign, since we'd been touching a lot all day and I thought she might have been in a bad mood.

But for some reason something felt off. And that feeling was only getting stronger.

"Next time I will choose to lock the dressing room, so have no worries. I have the courage to wear a... risqué swimsuit."

"Oh. You, uh, really intend to wear it?"

"I thought that even if I cannot smile, wearing a costume would help me get along with the children. I do not know much about cosplay, I thought we could put our heads together and – get something you like," Tsutsukakushi whispered as she played with her ponytail with her index finger.

I realised just what had felt so off.

What had we come here for in the first place? To get back Tsutsukakushi's ability to express her true feelings. Not to come to terms with her emotionless state. Even so, Tsutsukakushi was misdirecting her courage and effort. She was such a smart kid who had her priorities straight, but now she was veering off the right course.

"...um, hey. There's something I want to ask you."

"What is it? If you are asking me my sizes I won't answer."

"Er, no. Today, you've been acting kind of... I can't put my finger on it, Tsutsukakushi, but it's about getting your true feelings back... that cat statue is the whole key, you know. Oh wait, your Steel Sister made it, right?" I said, not really getting to the point. Normally, I was the one making the mistakes and Tsutsukakushi was the one pointing them out. Now the tables were flipped.

"...you heard about the cat statue from my sister?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah... was it a bad memory for you?"

“No. The opposite. She made it when we were young and rarely fought. It was not much to look at, admittedly. One time, we fought and I did not know what to do. Nee-chan did not apologise straight out, so to make it up to me, she made the cat statue as a promise for us to always be together,” Tsutsukakushi sighed deeply as she relived her old memories. “It is a precious memory for me... I had already given up, thinking that she had forgotten, but Nee-chan remembered everything. Perhaps we can still fix things after all.”

“That’d be nice. We’re partners, you know. I’d do anything to help you out.”

“...um. Senpai, about you helping me out,” Tsutsukakushi said falteringly all of a sudden. As if snapping herself out of a dream, she took a deep breath, and then another. “Are you doing this for me – no, I mean for my true feelings?” she asked incredibly seriously, as if she had come to a decision.

“Of course I am. I’m the only one whose condition has been restored. I won’t leave you alone until you get back your ability to express your true feelings.”

“...is that so? I see.”

The background music in the building was loud and I couldn’t hear Tsutsukakushi’s inflectionless voice very well. Not to state the obvious, but to me she just looked so tiny.

After that, we went on shopping for a while, but in the end, we didn’t buy a single costume. We got a bunch of other things for the Child-Minding club: sweets, drawing paper and crayons. Tsutsukakushi was unusually quiet. For example, when I tried to lecture her about the right way to “bend” books, she nodded and went on with her own business instead of picking on me for using the wrong word for “bind”.

I wondered if the shock from the dressing room had a lasting impact on her. Was there now nothing left to do but cut open my stomach?

After we left the discount store, we got on a rocky bus back to the station.

I never found the right opportunity to apologise properly by the time I got on the connecting bus towards Tsutsukakushi's house. All I could do was carry her baggage all the way to the entrance.

I didn't have any ulterior motives at all. Those were my truest of true feelings. But in my foolishness, there was something I'd forgotten.

When it came to my sworn enemy the King, normal rules didn't apply.

Chapter 5: Part 6

The last stop was at the district right next door to Ipponsugi Hill. To my left were tiny apartments and an assortment of mansions, and to my right was an elongated stone wall. When you walked along the wall, you could see an elaborate roof and doorway just ahead. That was Tsutsukakushi's house. It had an air of gravity and lavishness, just like a feudal lord's residence.

And standing right outside the gate was the beautiful, black-haired ruler of the establishment.

"So you're with Tsukiko again. You've got a lot of time on your hands, I see," she proclaimed as she stared me down with evil eyes.

She could have been lying in ambush waiting for me for God knows how long. The front area of her uniform was moist with sweat. This wasn't the right time or place to escape from reality by perving on her and celebrating the fact that it was summer.

"Th-this isn't a date – we were just shopping for a bit. And Prez, what are you doing here in the first pl-"

"Silence. You have no right to call me your president," she snarled as harshly as she ever had. You could practically see the flames of carnage blazing on the asphalt in this summer afternoon. The Steel King looked furious.

"...what are you so mad at, Nee-san?" Tsutsukakushi tilted her head like a cautious cat.

Good job, I thought. She asked just what I was thinking. I had no idea what was going on.

"That's between me and this boy," said the Steel King. "Go inside, Tsukiko."

She yanked Tsutsukakushi away from my arm. "Hey-!" Tsutsukakushi exclaimed as we were torn apart.

The Steel King pushed Tsutsukakushi towards the gate and bolted it shut. From outside I could hear Tsutsukakushi's protests as she slammed her fist against the gate. Her voice sounded unperturbed.

The Steel King was still pulling on my arm, dragging me somewhere. Not towards the entrance but to a place that looked like a spacious courtyard, where white pebbles were spread out on the ground.

An out-of-the-way inner sanctum. Overgrown vegetation. There were no eyewitnesses around, and the ground was soft for burying corpses. The Steel King had literally whisked me off my feet. Or was it figuratively? *Argh, this wasn't the time to think about grammar*, I realised, as the Steel King grabbed me by the collar. "Wh-wh-what are you doing?!"

"That's what I should be saying. What are you planning to do to Tsukiko?" The King was possessed by a demon. Deep wisdom and hatred showed on her face. My blood went cold with the same soul-crushing fear I felt at the arcade. It all came rushing back to me.

And yet, *I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away*. (Well, not to the extent that I'd plagiarise a boy pilot's cool scenes – that time even the mountains got the short end of the stick.)¹ *I won't run away anymore!*

"Er, uh, um. Look at these bags I'm carrying! Er, aaack! I dropped them a little while back, but anyway! I was just carrying her stuff for her, you see?! Aren't you misunderstanding something here?!"

...except my voice trembled the whole time. Oops.

"Between you and Tsukiko, I've been hearing that a lot. Getting walked home is a big deal for a girl. If you use that as an excuse to manhandle her, I won't stand for it!"

¹ A reference to Shinji's catchphrase from *Evangelion* and to the iconic scene where his mecha unit went berserk.

“Your sister’s not stupid enough to fall for that! You jump to conclusions way too quickly, Prez!”

“How many times have I told you not to call me your president?!” the King roared, loudly enough to split the sky in two. “Taking your twin brother’s form – if you think you can fool me, think again!”

“Huh?”

“Young Yokodera knows nothing. So you thought you could get away with making a fool of someone who sees and knows nothing? And then continue to make passes at my worthless sister?!”

The stone lanterns flipped over and the sky and the earth swapped places. In other words, I got turned upside-down. Ooh, there was a sharp jolt in the right-hand side of my body. Oh, right. I was getting beaten up and thrown into the air. I don’t know how she managed to perform such a feat. This person was wasting her talents on the athletics track.

“Say your prayers, Yokodera’s brother!” Grabbing my collar once again, the King yanked me to the ground so that I was face-to-face with her.

But wait, hang on. The King had just said something weird. “Brother?”

“So you’re playing dumb. Your brother told me everything. Hmph... now that I’m looking at you closely, you have such a strong resemblance I can’t tell the difference. But you won’t fool me any longer!”

“H-huuuuuh?!”

What the hell? She actually believed my half-assed lie?

I’d learned my lesson about not telling lies, but now that I’d gotten my façade back I was neck deep in trouble. It was like I hadn’t made any progress at all. I wondered if she’d forgive me if I told her the truth now. Something like, *“That bit about my brother was obviously a joke. Teeheehee, you’re such an idiot, Prez!”*

...yeah, right. *As if*. She'd tear all the hair off my body and set me on fire. There was no going back. I had passed the point of no return.

"Yeah... it's me, no, *INDEED IT IS I... YOKODERA'S BROTHER. YOU HAVE MET YOUR MATCH.*"

"So those are your last words, huh?"

"T-time out!"

She still held my arm in the air. Was I an idiot or what? I was just asking to have my arse handed to me.

"No waiting. I'll make you regret starting a fight with such flimsy resolve."

"...before you do that, why are you so against letting your sister hang out with me, I mean *FROLIC WITH I?* I don't reckon it's any of your busi- I mean *IT HAS NAUGHT TO DO WITH YOU.*"

"Nothing to do with me...?"

"*INDEED. YOU HAVE NO RELATION TO YOUR SISTER.*"

Faced with my desperate words, the Steel King faltered slightly. Her grip on my arm weakened. Could it be that I had discovered her weak spot?

"Isn't it enough just to be with her? Your little sister is already a high school student. What right do you have as an older sister to tie her down? I'm also... I mean *I TOO AM A LITTLE BROTHER*. I understand all too well. Your sister's thinking what a big help you are. But she's also thinking what a burden you are, how fed up she is with you, how she wishes you'd leave her alone. *CAN'T YOU HEAR WHAT SHE'S SAYING IN HER HEART?*"

I pointed my finger at her accusingly. The Steel King stiffened as if she had been doused with cold water, but she seemed angry at the imposter me rather than shocked. Slowly, deliberately, she let go of my chest.

Just as I thought I'd won – CRACK! There was the sound of a firecracker exploding. *BOOM. CRACKLE.* Sparks continued to fly.

Belatedly, I realised that this was the sound of the person in front of me grinding her teeth. Just what was going on? More than a sign of her violent impulse, it was a heartbreakingly melancholy sound too.

The Steel King slowly opened her mouth. "I have a reason to interfere with Tsukiko's life," she said.

"...huh?"

"You said it yourself. That I have no relation to my sister. That is something I prayed for," she spat out, as if kicking down a sealed door. "I want to sever our sibling ties."

"W-what...?"

"Her tendency to break down and cry. To laugh without warning. To get confused and act immature. Her fickleness. Her uncertainty. Her lack of self-awareness. Everything about her from head-to-toe is the opposite of me. That's what I'm talking about. I am reluctant to admit that a sister like that is related to me by blood. That is why I cannot stomach the thought of that girl hanging around with a boy. It stands to reason that I'd disapprove," she uttered scornfully. With those depressingly bleak words, she categorically denied the girl named Tsutsukakshi Tsukiko's very existence.

Everything around us went eerily still.

A lot of time had passed since the Steel King had dragged me into the gate. I could have run around the walls of the residence and made a break for it countless times by now, but I didn't feel the need. That would mean turning my back on the existence of a certain someone who was holding her breath and peeping on us without a single sound.

Normally, the Steel King inspired the fear of an absolute ruler, but right now I wished for her and that certain somebody to get along once more.

I wondered how a little sister would feel, hearing her older sister say what the Steel King just said.

“...you bastard, where are you putting your hand?”

Without thinking, I'd grabbed Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi by the front of her shirt. My anger was spent and I came to my senses. I deliberately ignored thoughts like “*Holy crap, her breasts are soft and squishy like marshmallows!*” I could read the atmosphere every once in a while. “What did you just say about Tsutsukakushi?”

“Hm?”

“That she cries a lot. That she laughs a lot. That she gets confused? Are you still spouting all that?!”

There was no way Tsutsukakushi showed that side of herself these days. She *couldn't*.

As usual, this person was blind to everything around her. Even though she *lived* with Tsutsukakushi. Even though she was Tsutsukakushi's precious sister. Even though they used to get along so well. It was unbearably painful.

“So Tsutsukakushi was telling the truth when she said you ignored her this whole time. You don't understand anything Tsutsukakushi's been going through! Don't screw with her, you idiot!”

“...idiot? Did you call me an idiot? You called me an idiot again!”

“I called you an idiot because you're an idiot, idiot!”

“You said it three times! The idiot who calls someone else an idiot is an idiot! You've got it all backwards, you fool!” The Steel King gnashed her teeth together, making a sound like a tambourine. But that couldn't compare to the full orchestra concert that symbolised the extent to which my blood seethed throughout my entire body.

“Tsutsukakushi stopped smiling because of the Stony Cat! She prayed so earnestly to the cat statue for her sister’s sake, and all you say to that is ‘I want to sever my sibling ties with her so I’ll get in her way’? The word idiot describes people like you perfectly!”

“Watch your tone, you bastard... hm?” Her clenched fist was three millimetres away from my nose when she pulled her punch. “You said she prayed for my sake? That’s part of the cat statue story?”

“Yeah! Now you can’t see Tsutsukakushi’s true feelings! Such a cute girl, and she has to put up with having an unnatural lack of expressions.”

“...you’re the second person who’s told me about this. The Stony Cat. Has that rumour been spreading a lot?”

What an idiot. That so-called “second person” was me. If I mentioned stuff like that, the conversation would get even more entangled, so I held my tongue. Deferring to her was a principle that still stuck with me even after everything that happened.

That is, until I heard what she said next.

“However, I *am* aware that Tsukiko has changed lately. That is not because of the cat statue.” The Steel King shrugged. “If this is some scheme of yours, give it up. The cat statue has nothing to do with how Tsukiko lost her expressions over time. That is what it means to become an adult. She decided that she didn’t need her expressions on her own. It’s something everyone goes through – it’s a kind of rite of passage, to put it in other words.”

“What are you saying...?”

“Indeed. I should just break that cat statue with my own hands. Don’t you and the others who spread that idle gossip understand that Tsukiko changing is her own problem? Yes, that could be a good idea. That way, I can leave the house with peace of mind and chase my own future. Honestly, I can’t believe there are others in this world who are as worthless as my sis-”

I had a sensation of cutting through the wind. My fist was flying towards the Steel King's face.

There was nothing that could make me forgive this person. I had to defeat the King for no one's sake but my own.

...except my enemy was goddamn steel. There was no way a mere pervert could match up. I accepted that a long time ago.

My pre-emptive punch struck open air, while she countered with lightning speed. All it took was one hit. Her fist connected neatly with my chin, sending me flying. And that was the end of that.

The Steel King was scrutinising my face. Vaguely, I could see her looking down at me sternly and wrathfully, just like before.

It was the last thing I saw before everything went black-

Chapter 5: Part 7

“-ouuuuuch!”

The instant I jerked awake, I received a nasty shock. I was in agony, as if a bulldozer had crushed all the nerves in my brain into tiny pieces.

“You ought to keep sleeping.” Someone pressed their hands against my shoulder, forcing me to lie down again on my back. The back of my head rested on a soft pillow.

I opened my eyes and saw Tsutsukakushi peering down at me.

Even though she was so close to me, I couldn’t see her face properly because of the backlight. What I could see was the orange glow of the setting sun through huge skylights that looked like they belonged in a planetarium.

“Where am I...?”

It was an awfully spacious room. I could feel the cool touch of the wooden floor against my bare feet. Looking around, I saw an old-fashioned refrigerator and cupboard behind Tsutsukakushi. “This is our kitchen,” she said. “I carried you here.”

“Wait? What? Why?”

“Nee-san has never been in here, so this is where you can feel safest.”

“...so the King can’t cook.”

The sink was quite low compared to the one in my own house, as if someone had stipulated it match the user’s height. A picture of the Steel King holding a carving knife in this miniature kitchen popped into my head, only for it to instantly change into one of her brandishing her fists.

Oh right. It occurred to me then that I had lost. My body didn’t hurt anywhere. Only my head throbbed violently in protest.

From what I was hearing, it seemed the Steel King had dumped me, the pitiful loser, outside the gate. From there, Tsutsukakushi had collected the trash, dragging her great lump of baggage around the wall and carrying it into the kitchen via the back door. As far as I was concerned, it was one serious close call.

“You were heavy, senpai. I got worn out carrying you,” Tsutsukakushi remarked as she put the wet towel that had slipped off my forehead back in place.

“...thanks.”

In other words, she was playing doctor for me again. Oh man.

My condition was quite a bit more serious than that time in the nurse’s office, but in exchange, Tsutsukakushi’s face was closer. When I turned my head to the side, I could even see the seams of her blouse. It looked like she was hanging over me, and it seemed she was cradling my head in her arms, and – oh hang on a minute here.

“Are you resting me on your lap?!”

“I apologise. I could not find a futon or a pillow in the kitchen.”

“Oh no, that’s totally cool.”

I thought I’d been resting on a soft pillow, but it was Tsutsukakushi’s lap. It was faintly warm and gently soothing. I shivered in delight. Wasn’t this the greatest bed you could ask for? If it wasn’t for my headache, I would’ve tried nuzzling her with the back of my head.

“Senpai, you always have a perverted look on your face.”

“Er, uh, that is...”

“It is fine, I suppose,” said Tsutsukakushi with a small sigh. “I was worried about you.”

She gently stroked my hair. I wondered what kind of expression this girl was wearing right now, in the shadow of the backlight.

“...you saved me, huh? Were you watching just before?”

“Indeed I was. I dislike quarrelling.”

“It wasn’t a quarrel. You’d call that a quarrel? I wouldn’t describe doing battle with a force of evil as a quarrel.”

Tsutsukakushi’s face was inscrutable to me. All I could see was her sharp chin line. I knew she wasn’t smiling. Even so, I wondered what her *true* expression was.

How did she feel, hearing those words from the only sister she had?

“...do not worry yourself over me. Somehow, I was expecting her to say that,” Tsutsukakushi said unconcernedly, as if she had read my thoughts. *Was that right?* “Nee-san is short-tempered, but she is also forgetful and quick to misunderstand. I am sure she was not dragging you down with her,” she added.

Was that right?

“I am used to sitting on my knees. Although, it is my first time acting as a pillow for someone. Take your time and rest up here, and when you feel a little better, shall I call a taxi for you?”

“No. That’s not right!”

“Senpai, don’t sit u-”

“Who cares about me?! The King said stuff about breaking the cat statue! Your smile, your true feelings – they’ll vanish forever, Tsutsukakushi! Be more angry! Why aren’t you angry, Tsutsukakushi?!”

She stopped, letting go of her tight grip on my arm. Finally, I could sit up straight. I was groaning as if I was forced to eat shit off a dump truck, but I couldn’t tell if it was because of the pain I was in or because of how angry I was.

“...of course I am angry,” said Tsutsukakushi.

“That’s not what your face is telling me.”

“That goes without saying. You only cannot understand how I feel because my true feelings were taken from me.”

“I understand! I *do* understand. You’re not the least bit mad, Tsutsukakushi!”

As we sat there facing each other on the floor, I pressed my forehead against hers. For the first time in a long while, I saw her eyes. I was close enough from this distance to count her eyelashes one-by-one, and I found myself captured by Tsutsukakushi’s distinctive pair of eyes. When it really came down to it, those wide, cat-like eyes were the centre of all gravitational pull. I was being controlled by the gods up above so that I could feel the emotions of an expressionless girl.

“Look, aren’t you totally giving up, you coward?! What happened to the guts you showed when you took me to a love hotel?! D-don’t tell me you only take charge for *that* kind of thing?”

“...shut up. How rude. You are mistaking the facts,” Tsutsukakushi declared, staving off my words with her tiny hands. Her expressionless face never changed, but this time, she was working herself into a rage. “I have known since the beginning. That cat statue belongs to Nee-san. If she takes it in her head to break it, I am in no position to stop her. I only have my memories of her – I have no right to change anything. And besides, even if she did break it, it is not such a big deal.”

And then, more than anger, her wide eyes exploded with fiery passion to their very brim.

There was a short pause, and then- “There is something I need more far more than my true feelings.” As if to reign in her emotions, Tsutsukakushi lowered her eyes and heaved a long sigh. “If I stop ‘trying to be an adult’, Nee-san will hate me even more. But if my true feelings were to... if I remain expressionless... she might come to like me.”

“What are you saying? That’s not how things should work!”

I pounded the floor. I was angry, but more than that, I wanted to break out laughing for some reason. Tsutsukakushi loved jokes. I half-expected her to say that whole exchange was a prank of hers.

After all, Tsutsukakushi's way of thinking would be too miserable otherwise.

"Senpai, in order to hide your true feelings leaking out and causing you trouble, you needed a façade. For me, something has to change so that I can hide my true feelings."

"You've got it all wrong – that's not the issue here at all! Why don't you get it? Quit thinking it's okay to kill your expressions for your sister's sake. You said yourself that losing your true feelings makes things inconvenient for you!"

"Senpai, I see you understand my emotions. Then it was not so inconvenient for me."

"There's no point if I'm the only one who understands! It's not just my problem!"

"It is just your problem." Instead of shouting, Tsutsukakushi slammed her fist against the floor. It caused the wooden floor to tremble violently, more so than when I did it. The cupboard creaked and a wooden spoon fell down from the sink.

"...just my problem? Why?" I asked blankly, forgetting what I was going to say.

Coming to her senses, Tsutsukakushi covered her mouth, but she couldn't take back the words she'd already blurted out. She stared at me unblinkingly, as if to shake off the silence that had descended on us. "In that case, I have something to ask you. Senpai, what am I to you?"

"What... do you mean by that?"

"Senpai, what is our relationship?" she said coolly and without any inflection, as if she were a gambler playing her trump card.

But this wasn't a game of poker – her trump card was built on a shaky foundation. Any minute it would all come crashing down.

“We’re partners helping each other get our true feelings and façades back, except...”

That was a trite response. It would just make things worse. I couldn’t give the right answer if I didn’t know it. It was like I lost my nerves and my headache as soon I looked into her captivating eyes.

“Indeed. We are only just helping each other out. We were only seeing each other because of the cat statue. What will you do after I get my true feelings back? We will not have any reason to meet at school or go out on the weekends. I am sure that you would stop talking to me, senpai. Will I be alone for as long as my sister hates me?”

“That’s not true at all! You’ve got to make things happen, as any game character would tell you! Not having any events would mess the narrative up!”

“...I will do anything to be with senpai. Anything. Today in the dressing room, I thought I would bite my tongue and die, but I held my tears back.”

“Oh...”

“That was a joke. The only thing that would kill me was the embarrassment.”

“Don’t joke about stuff like that! Say it differently! I was the one who wanted to die!” I didn’t know if I was supposed to get mad or laugh. My way of compromising was to prostrate myself on the ground in front of her.

“...however. Even if I did want to be with you, that would not be enough in itself.”

“What? Why are you saying that so suddenly...? Even if there was nothing going on, I’d still want to meet up with you, Tsutsukakushi. I’d meet up with you and talk to you. That way, we’d be together forever.”

“That is a lie.” Tsutsukakushi shook her head briskly. She picked up the wooden spoon that had fallen on the floor and gently traced a boundary line between us.

Whatever it was that lay brimming in her cat-like eyes was disappearing to the bottom all of a sudden, and I couldn't drag it back out of her. "Senpai, you have Azuki-san."

"Huh? W-why'd you bring up Azuki Azusa? Azuki Azusa's my friend, but we're not anything more or less than that."

"That might be the case now. But it might not be that way in the future. No one can say for certain. You and Azuki-san suit each other very well. When I saw you carrying her on your back on the hill, I really, really regretted it." Tsutsukakushi's voice trailed off as she threw down the wooden spoon in self-abandonment.

"What is certain is that if I got my true feelings back, Nee-san would still go on hating me. I do not know whether you would still be with me in that case. We have nothing in common; we are not even in the same grade. Even then, would you really want to be close to me? Senpai. Tell me. When you have finished helping me out..."

What will I be to you?

Only her lips moved for those last words. No sound came out. Even so, that message reverberated throughout my brain.

Invisible on the floor was the line Tsutsukakushi had drawn with the wooden spoon. On the other side of that line was an android-like girl whose speech system had broken. The setting sun cast light on her robotic expression. She'd been scarred and knocked to the ground by an unforgiving world, and now she sat on the floor all alone, waiting for just one friend who could save her.

And I – I didn't cross the line.

I turned my back to Tsutsukakushi's face and closed the door of that tiny kitchen behind me.

She made no move to stop me. When I left through the back entrance, I thought I heard a small, faint sigh, but that was all.

Chapter 5: Part 8

When I went back to school and told Azuki Azusa what happened, her first reaction was to screech at me. “You *jerk!*” The open door of the student counselling room shook from the tremor.

As dusk approached, the hallway was devoid of any sign of human life. There was only the “*No Perverts Allowed*” paper sign, torn up and scattered into thousands of little pieces.

“Why didn’t you say anything right then?! Why’d you come to me?! What were you thinking?!”

“Yeah... so um, how many pages of supplementary homework do you have left?”

“Tons! I swear they breed like rabbits. But you’ve got more important things to do than checking up on me, you ninny! Get your priorities straight!”

Her anger was less like that of a cosmic fairy and more like that a furiously yapping puppy. If her huge stack of printouts hadn’t become a fort standing between us, she might have promptly chewed my head off.

“Were you even thinking when you said that to Tsutsukakushi-san?”

“I was thinking. Isn’t it obvious a bunch of stuff was going through my head?”

“So then why?!”

“Tsutsukakushi wouldn’t believe me if I just said something to her. What she was really looking for wasn’t something I could tell her.”

When I saw how much Tsutsukakushi’s shoulders shook, I wanted to do something like put my arms around her. But that wouldn’t do. I’d come to acknowledge Tsutsukakushi’s declaration that she needed no true feelings. Just who was the one being made to think negative?

In other words, when there was no real enemy to defeat, there was no solution.

“Azuki Azusa. I want you to tell me, what is Tsutsukakushi to you?”

The affronted puppy avoided meeting my eyes ever so slightly. “What are you saying so suddenly...? She’s my kouhai, no, a frie... no, before that, we’re rivals, maybe?”

“Rivals? Since when?”

“I-it’s got nothing to do with anything – right now, Tsutsukakushi-san means a lot to me.”

Just what kind of rivals were they? I had no idea myself, but was this some kind of cat-versus-dog conflict? I kind of wanted to see.

But in any case, I could sense that the animosity between those two had completely eased up.

I’d heard from Tsutsukakushi that she and Azuki Azusa had made up. On that day I got my façade back, she got a call from Azuki’s family thanking her for coming to their house so many times, telling her about how Azuki Azusa thought of her like a real sister, or something like that. *So Azuki Azusa didn’t hate her*, I thought with a sigh of relief.

But I never thought she would get so mad for Tsutsukakushi’s sake. What a pleasant surprise. “In that case, I’ve got a favour to ask of you.”

Only Azuki Azusa was inside the student counselling room. Apparently, the homeroom teacher, in her boundless trust, had conferred Azuki Azusa the key to close up the room and leave when she was done.

Along the wall was a glass-encased shelf full of official documents. Student report cards and career advice forms along with various other files that had personal information enclosed in them were lined up on the shelf. And the key to the shelf was dangling from the same key ring that Azuki Azusa was holding.

“I need it to defeat the Steel King,” I said.

“...you mean opening the shelf and peeking inside?”

“Yeah. It might be a bad thing to do, but as Oscar Wilde said, ‘Conscience and cowardice are really the same things’...”

Azuki Azusa interrupted me with a snort. “Who cares about what some other person said? I want to know what *you* think.”

...this was the girl who had clung to her false pride, who imitated manga, who was defined by her façade. Not a single trace of her weakness remained.

The lovely fairy had bright eyes, unlike Tsutsukakushi’s, whose eyes had a way of swallowing all the light that came in. As she peered at me, the light in Azuki Azusa’s eyes, which had once started off as a gloomy, dim nightstand, now shone with the radiance of a brilliant jewel.

And because I was faced with that, I had no choice but to answer with my true feelings too.

“...Tsutsukakushi is more important to me than anything else.”

I had always blurted out lies, avoided my problems by blaming anything and everything on the gods, and relied on words over actions. It didn’t matter whether I had a façade – I never said the right things at the right moments. Even so, it wasn’t like I changed so much that I hated myself.

But when it came to the girl I cared about, it was okay that there were times when my instincts clashed with my true feelings.

“I want to help Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko no matter what. Only you can help me with that. So I implore you: please, *please* help me.”

“...okay. So you *can* say it.” Azuki Azusa nodded, satisfied.

And then she smiled, looking somehow lonely.

Chapter 5: Part 9

Have you heard of the American film called *High Noon*? I haven't actually seen it. But there was an R-18+ video parodying that title amongst Ponta's treasured goods. So I roughly know what the story is about.

At 12:00 noon the next day, I leaned against the cedar tree at Ipponsugi Hill like I was the sheriff of justice. I had no allies and the only weapons I had were my fists and my conviction. I'd stopped Azuki Azusa from coming – this was one of those times when a man has to do what a man has to do. Man, that sounded pretty cool. In Ponta's video, there was also this girl cosplaying as a sheriff getting this-and-that done to her by the evil gang, but that was another story.

Matching the Western setting, the midsummer sun blazed overhead. Presently, the bad guy appeared on the hill. The promised hour had come.

"Sending me a letter of challenge, how exciting – I mean how clichéd," she said. "Have you been saying your prayers?"

"That's what I should be saying to you. See that sun in the sky? Remember it, because it'll be the last thing you'll ever see."

"The only thing I can commend you on is how big you talk."

Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi was clad in her school uniform today as usual. The King marched up to me with her arms folded, displaying her sheer tyranny over me. The grass, an innocent bystander in all of this, groaned under her crushing feet.

"However, Yokodera's brother, do you really think you can beat me in a duel? In that case, be aware that you are vermin, only useful as a punching bag."

"Your pride will be your undoing," I said to the King. "You know what they say – pride comes before a fall."

"Hmph, I see only your mouth is in working order. What do they call fools like you in French?" Then after a pause she said, "Never mind. It slipped my tongue."

The distance was gradually closing between us. As the sun glared down at us, a gust howled throughout Ipponsugi Hill. The Steel King's glossy black hair swayed in the wind.

Those haughty, narrowed eyes suddenly blinked and widened, as if she were in a manga. "How can this be...! My cat statue's features are too atrocious to look at!"

Situated next to me was a familiar sight – the enormous, pork bun-shaped, obese cat statue. Today, it was in a bloodthirsty state. It bared its fangs menacingly and its pupils glared at everything around it.

Tsutsukakushi had declared more than once that she would break the cat statue, but now that she was on the hill, it seemed she couldn't take one step forward. Confronted with the sight of the statue she had carved with her own two hands, she stood stock still in a daze, preoccupied by how thoroughly it had changed. *Was it that much of a shock?* I wondered. The eerie, expressionless cat statue from before could give the current cat statue a run for its money.

"Took you this long to realise? As you can see, the rumour about the statue is true," I said, pausing for effect. "Now watch as I – I mean, BEHOLD AS MY PRAYERS COME TRUE."

"W-what are you praying for?"

"That it'll take what I don't need. Right now, what I need least is-" I knelt on the ground. If I thought about what I truly didn't need, I was sure the cat statue would answer me. I faced it and made my wish, "-my 'sense of shame'! I want my awkwardness, shyness and hesitancy to go away!"

At that moment, a thunderous roar like a waterfall broke out, alongside a violent squall. The trunk of the cedar tree creaked, frighteningly intensely. Unable to stand on my two feet, I tumbled over sideways around the hill countless times. The overgrown weeds pricked my skin, stinging me. My lower stomach area stung in particular – no, wait – I felt air down in a strange place... oh god.

"My underwear?!"

The trousers inside my pants had unexpectedly taken their leave of me.

That made sense – the cat statue needed it as an offering. My underwear had been given up as a symbol of my sense of shame. Perhaps right now at this very minute, a boy's trousers appeared in the closet of someone's house somewhere. I hoped its owner would treasure that newfound source of embarrassment.

Oh well, it was summer and it was hot and all, so I wouldn't be missing my underwear anyway. It'd be handy when I went to the toilet, I thought idly, now that my sense of shame was gone.

Then I stood up once more.

"My preparations are complete! Now I can finally match you," I said to the King.

"What? I'm wondering why you mentioned your underwear... and what is this match you speak of? If you're talking about our fight the other day, you already did tha-"

"Who cares about that?! There is only one reason I would do battle with you!" I planted my feet firmly on the ground and bent my knees. Now was the time to bring my plans together. "You and I will fight over Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko!" I yelled out, loudly enough for someone far away to hear me.

"...how impudent!"

"You're the one who's being impudent. Siblings are something you should cherish! All the videos I have say so. If you want to break your ties and stuff, don't go happily calling yourself her older sister! You don't have the qualifications to be someone's sister!"

"Did you lose your reason along with your shame? You're just asking for a thorough punishment."

Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi clenched her fists hard enough for them to be a lethal weapon. She launched a "Suck It Up and Deal With It" Steel Punch.

The instant I jumped to the side, her fist left an imprint on the ground where I had been standing. She was serious.

However, as a great man once said, “It doesn’t matter how powerful you are if you can’t hit me¹”. Forgetfulness is my strong suit. I had erased all my traumatic memories from yesterday. I was no longer afraid.

“You have even less of a right to say such things,” said the King. “What is Tsukiko to you? No one’s forcing you to give a half-assed answer.”

It was the question that I had never been able to answer for so long.

But now, things were different. Now, I had no sense of shame. There was not a single thing getting in my way.

“But of course. Tsukiko-chan is my beloved-”

“Oh?”

“-sister! I swore an oath to her by the Stony Cat at Ipponsugi Hill!”

Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi’s expression hardened. “Huh? You?”

“Yeah, and what of it? It’s got nothing to do with blood relations, laws or what the other person wants! You are disqualified from being her sibling,” I said to the King. “I’ll defeat you and officially become Tsukiko-chan’s brother!”

She could cook. She could draw cute pictures. Massages were her specialty. She was a shy little girl and a cry baby who was quick to sulk when things didn’t go her way. She was the kind of girl who dreaded the thought of parting with her older sister so much that, for the sole sake of her worthless sister, she abandoned the ability to express her true feelings.

As if I could follow such stupid reasoning!

¹ A quote by Char Aznabel from *Mobile Suit Gundam*.

“I’ll become her brother and always stay by her side. I’ll protect the cat statue from the evil King, and one day I’ll get her true feelings back!”

“Why are you doing all this...?”

“Because I love Tsukiko-chan!”

Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi’s mouth hung half-open. She had an idiotic look on her face for once. As if suddenly remembering what her reaction was supposed to be, she threw a punch at me, but it was as flimsy as a child’s. “How dare you? I don’t know how you can say that with a straight face...”

“Saying that means you’ve already lost. True love is shameless. I love Tsukiko-chan as a brother! Can you say that about yourself, Steel King?”

“Don’t use that awful nickname! Who’s the Steel King?”

Her punches suddenly got faster. She battered me over and over again.

Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi was in a flying rage. I could hardly believe it – was the King really unaware of what name she went under? I learned it in my first month in my first year of high school. Did she really have no friends to tell her that?

When it came to a physical fight, my body was at a disadvantage, just as I expected. I dashed around the hill. The president of the Track and Field club followed me in pursuit. What ensued was a struggle for the throne. Good thing I was wearing spikes on my shoes, the type you use on the athletics track. My opponent was wearing leather shoes – today, I wouldn’t lose at track and field.

“Oh, and unlike you, Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi, I have more memories with Tsukiko-chan! I’ve pinned her down. She’s pinned me down. We went to a love hotel. And I’ve seen her naked as the day she was born!”

“-oho!”

She caught me in three seconds flat.

Oh wow, I could see the Steel King’s hair really standing up on end. She was absolutely seething.

But even though she grabbed me by the hair, I really didn't want mine to become the same shape as hers. *Stop it, please*, I thought. *I have a boo-boo*. My scalp was threatening to come off.

"This brotherly love of yours is filthy. You hurt Tsukiko, so you don't deserve to live. First, I'll gouge your eyes out. I'll gouge them lovingly for hours."

"Y-you're resorting to violence because you can't win! Don't be cruel! You're a tyrant!" I wailed.

Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi frowned at me. "Isn't this a duel?" she demanded after a pause. "My memories win over yours in the first place. All your memories of her are recent, are they not? So it's ridiculous to have this conversation. Memories are things you point to when you pine away over what happened long ago."

"Do you have those kinds of memories?"

"Hmph, I've had all the time in the world to make them. Bow down before me. We'd count how many moles we had on each other when we were in the bath."

"W-what?!"

"She had them in some strange spots. I'd laugh at her all the time. I've also washed her futon when she wet herself in her sleep. Even towards the end of elementary school, she hadn't quite kicked the habit, so I'd wash her futon once every week. She got in so much trouble wetting the bed she kept a good-luck charm to get her to stop."

Her power level was OVER NINE THOUSAND²!

Man, was I jealous! I smacked my lips, and the sound seemed to feed Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi's ego. She peered at the cat statue as if remembering something. Surprisingly, it was a soft gaze.

² The Japanese actually does have a dumb reference to *Dragon Ball Z* here: "Her power level would have broken a scouter." I exchanged that for the more widely quoted Internet meme.

"I have too many memories to count. We had an argument over splitting a pork bun. She was a massive glutton, so she called me stingy for dividing the halves equally. We had a huge squabble. That was around the time I made the cat statue. Tsukiko praised me and called it a masterpiece. She was so happy. We got over our fight and made a promise..." she said softly, her face overflowing with emotion.

There were a few discrepancies with her memories about her sister, but whatever. Now that the lid of her precious jewel box of memories had been cracked open, she was positively gushing.

But, well...

"It's weird," I said to the King. "From the way you talk, it sounds like you still love your sister."

"Of course! You say your love for her is so great, but you'll only hear her sleep-talk in hell!" Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi roared, banging her fist against the cedar tree resoundingly. "It's obvious that I love my cute-as-a-button little sister more than you do!"

"Oh, is that so?"

It was uncanny timing. The interjection, which sounded like the lines a housewife would say when she discovered her husband cheating on her, came as a slap in the face. The voice came from the cat statue. I'd told her to stay quiet, but she couldn't keep her mouth shut.

"Th-that voice...!" As the colour of the Steel King's face changed, she involuntarily let me go of my hair. *Welcome back, my follicles*, I thought.

And then the spectator, hidden in the shadow of the cat statue, slowly emerged and showed her face.

"...you have plenty of things you want to say, I see. For now, I want you to either apologise to me or pull your tongues out, senpai, Nee-chan."

Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko's shoulders were trembling slightly.

Chapter 5: Part 10

Now that the duel had come to a hazy, roundabout end, Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko made the two duellists sit on their knees in front of the cat statue.

“Do you understand now? Senpai, because you were having your important discussion, I was listening quietly. And then what did you talk about? Love, moles, wetting the... I did not think I would receive such humiliation. The two of you need to do some serious self-reflection and soul-searching.”

As she walked in circles, the expressionless Tsutsukakushi preached on and on. She was like the moon circling the globe. When it came to who had the power now, the shoe was on the other foot.

“...I only said normal things,” I insisted. “The Steel King was the only one who remembered weird things.”

“Yokodera’s little brother was the one who set me up. I fought the duel on the terms given to me.”

As we hung our heads in shame, the (temporary) older sister dug her elbow into the (self-proclaimed) older brother, and he did it back to her. *“This is all your fault, O ugly King.” “What did you say? It’s all your fault, boy.” “Shut up, fool. Foolishly foolish fool.” “Who are you calling a fool?” “You! You’re the fool.”*

Thwack. Thwack. Tsutsukakushi smacked our shoulders in turn. “Stop fighting. Do not blame each other.”

“...sorry,” the Steel King and I said in unison. Our Pavlov’s dog instincts had kicked into gear.

It was a somewhat unpleasant situation. The King was no doubt thinking the same thing, because we glared at each other surreptitiously.

“Oh my goodness...” Tsutsukakushi sighed. “I can understand senpai being like that, but Nee-san, you should act more like an adult.”

What did she mean by *that*? Instead of wondering about it, though, I understood something important. Her sigh was one of baffled amazement. It was one of deep relief from the bottom of her heart. What made her so relieved? Well of course, it had to be-

“...by the way, Nee-san. You were saying it before, but is it true?”

“What are you talking about? I should be getting back to the Track and Field club. Let’s call it a day.”

“I’m asking if you love me, Nee-san.”

“Oh? Ohhh? Ohhhhhh? Could you please file the paperwork before you ask such a private question?”

“Do. You. Love. Me?” the expressionless Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko asked, enunciating every word. *Whoosh*. The little sister closed in on her older sister, cutting off all avenues for escape. The older sister struggled for words, her confusion utterly transparent.

Oh, believe me, it was a charming scene. It was just a matter of time before their sisterly relationship was restored.

I was silent for a moment.

“No wait,” I cried out suddenly, “don’t let her fool you, Tsukiko-chan!”

“Senpai. Please stop calling me that.”

“Don’t forget, Tsukiko-chan, that she said every bad thing about you she could think of. That’s how much she wants to break ties with you! Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi is a lying cheat – she’s evil incarnate!”

If the two of them made up, it would just be a half-assed ending at this rate, and I couldn’t accept that. The joker had yet to make an appearance.

“I’ll tell you, Tsukiko-chan,” I went on, this time in a calmer tone, “so that you’ll know just how inhuman Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi is. The shocking reveal!”

“You keep ploughing ahead and adding *chan* to my name anyway... what is this reveal you speak of?”

“The truth is, for her university entrance exams, the King is aiming for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology!”

Azuki Azusa and I had found her career advice form in the student counselling room. Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi’s first choice was a university in a foreign country on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. It was a prestigious, super elite school in the American state of Massachusetts, where so many graduates went on to become the Secretary Generals of the United Nations and the winners of the Nobel Prize.

“Huh...” Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko was lost for words.

I was shocked too when I found out. Even the career advice teacher seemed flabbergasted. Only one word was written in the comments section on the interview form: *Idiot*. That was all.

“It’s outrageous that an older sister would leave the house on her own and abandon her helpless kid sister to wallow in misery!” I declared. “Here’s the proof that Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi is a fake sister who has been pulling the wool over your eyes!”

“...that is a non-issue. I am already a high school student. I am not helpless. I can function by myself. If I had to pick between the two of you, I would say you are the one who is acting outrageous, senpai.”

“Do you hear that, Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi? Your sister is putting on such a brave face!”

“I want you to listen to what I am saying, senpai.”

“But even so, what kind of older sister wants to break her ties without even looking twice at her little sister?!” My combo attack against the fake sister was impeccable.

Tsutsukakushi sighed as if she was getting increasingly fed up with me and looked only at her sister. *Why was I the one getting ignored?* I wondered.

“Nee-san... what were you thinking, taking the exam for MIT?”

“...I love track and field. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, there’s a college that specialises in health science. I don’t want to cast away the theories I learned from the Track and Field club. I want to confirm them from a scientific perspective.”

“Indeed, but do you really need to go all the way to America for that? You cannot even write the alphabet.”

“Th-that’s not true. I bought a pillow over mail order that can teach you stuff in your sleep, so I’m planning to become fluent right away. I’m mastering English for daily conversation, and my dream is to join the ranks of superheroes like Spiderman.”

“You are as easy to fool as a boy in middle school. Please open your eyes to reality.”

The Steel King had a rather sour look on her face after getting told off by her little sister, who was two years younger than her. She was like a resurrected pharaoh whose tomb had been broken into. She didn’t just *glare* at me – she channelled all of her hatred into my being. All she needed was one more push.

“What you said just now was a façade, wasn’t it?” I said to the King. “Your true feelings are about something else.”

“Urgh... how did you know...?”

“I know because I’ve been struggling all this time with my true feelings and my façade. I can say it clearly now, though. Even if, say, your words are vague, all you can do is move forward. That’s what Tsukiko-chan said, but I think so too. Confessing everything is your only choice.”

The same words were being uttered on Ipponsugi Hill again. I got the feeling they sounded better after all when someone else said them instead of me.

The time had finally come for the King to take responsibility. Her eyebrows knitted together, making a crease appear on the middle of her forehead.

Say it, I thought with glee. Say that you'll cross the ocean to get away from your sister. Say that you don't deserve to be her older sister.

"My true feelings, huh... hmph. I want to sever the ties between me and my worthless sister – that's a fact."

"What a cruel older sister you are. And then? What next?"

"...and then, since the State of Massachusetts permits gay marriage..."

"Man, you're so unforgivable... wait. Gay... marriage?"

"Tsukiko and I-" Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko suddenly yelled out, as if drunkenly, "-are getting married! I want us to move to Massachusetts and live there, not as siblings, but as a married couple in bliss!"

What was this person saying?

The two of us were speechless. With a sideway glance in our direction, the King leaped on her sister like a coil, stroking her tiny head. She purred in complete disregard for her sister's squirming. The entirety of her being was that of an affectionate cat.



“Just stop and think about it. Tsukiko and I have been close since we were very young. When two adults get along very well, they get married and live together – that’s how it’s been everywhere throughout history. Am I not acting as nature has dictated?”

“Er, um,” I said to the King. “That’s only for men and women...”

“I know. With Japan’s current laws, Tsukiko and I can’t get married! Why must the Emperor thwart my marriage plan? Is the sovereignty of the people a lie as well?”

“...I’m pretty sure that marrying your sister is not part of the constitution.”

“Lies! Whichever worthless people came up with that worthless idea of not letting me marry my sister deserves to die a thousand worthless deaths!”

Since that was pretty much everyone in history, well more than a thousand of them would have died by now. *Oh I give up*, I thought. I glanced at Tsutsukakushi and she had a “*Senpai, please don’t reject her*” look on her face. Somehow, I knew that was what she was asking of me.

“Oh geez,” the King went on, “that worthless rule about little sisters is the most worthless rule in the world. For example, my daily routine is to invade my sister’s room through her bedroom window at two in the morning and squish her cheeks together until I’m worn out, but in this country I cannot keep the promise I made to her that day!”

“...Nee-san,” said Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko, “we will be having a nice, long talk later about what your squishing has done to my cheeks. Now what promise are you talking about?”

“Stop trying to fool me! Did we not wish in front of this cat statue after our fight that we would stay together forever? That we’d walk side-by-side through thick and thin? Tsukiko, aren’t you just going through marriage blues?”

Marriage blues. A phenomenon where women fell into a vague sense of melancholy before they got married.

Tsutsukakushi and I proceeded to have an eloquent conversation through eye contact alone. *"Is that so, Tsutsukakushi? Congrats. Invite me to the wedding."*
"Please do not indulge in escapism, senpai."

Our hearts were currently connected more deeply than anything else. But strangely enough, I didn't feel happy.

"Tsukiko will soon be having her birthday," said the Steel King. "She will finally be sixteen. She'll be an adult and we can get married! Getting marriage blues before the wedding is the norm, they say. That's exactly why I forsook you and pretended we were having a fight. Those were hard days. Tsukiko, you were playing along when you stopped smiling, right? However, my use for a façade has come to an end. If we go to Massachusetts, we can get married! Clearly, all I need to do is study and get accepted at Chu Chu University¹!"

"I have no idea where to start... first of all, sisters can't get married. No one who is blood-related can. Is that not so, senpai? That is not the issue here, though."

Tsutsukakushi glanced at me. *Please, let me handle this.*

"W-what did you say...? That my splendid plan has come to ruin? Then I'll give up on going to a university. Studying is hard! I'll spend my whole life at home with you, Tsukiko!"

"I am talking about something else entirely. If you want us to get along for the rest of your life, please study for your exams."

"You're so nice, Tsukiko. All I can hope for is a change in the law so we can get marr... oh. Ohhh. So did you know all this time that you and I couldn't get married, my cute and wise Tsukiko?"

"The only person in the entire world who thought we could get married was you, Nee-san."

¹ "Chu Chu" is probably a shortcut for Massachusetts. As a side note, the way English words are spelt in Tsukushi's speech indicates how terrible her accent. That could not be conveyed in translation, unfortunately.

“Th-then why’d you go through marriage blues?! Don’t tell me – don’t tell me you’re getting married to Yokodera’s brother?! Never! I’ll never accept him! If you intend to get married to this boy, I’ll stop at nothing to burn down every church, temple, shrine, priest and clergyman in the world!” the King wailed, clinging to her sister by her thin shoulders. Tsutsukakushi’s hair flopped up and down, but the King was the only one making a noise.

Even in this kind of situation, her Demon King expression didn’t just occupy a corner of her face – she was a completely different person whose facial components merely *looked* human.

I had no idea how to react. Was this her true form? She was such a kid on the inside. I’d been called a pervert by the King and that was how I became the Pervert Prince, but wasn’t the Steel King more like the real thing? I could sense how hopelessly strong her power levels were.

But with a practiced gesture, Tsutsukakushi said, “Senpai is a good person, Nee-san is a good person – you just don’t listen to what people are saying... which is what you should be doing. I do not have marriage blues – the cat statue took my expressions away.”

Thwack. She performed a chop on the King’s forehead. But contrary to what you’d expect, she didn’t come to her senses right away. The world didn’t work that way.

“Oh, I see. That’s good. No, it isn’t! You bastard cat statue, what do you plan to do with the privileges I gave you? You’d better return Tsukiko’s expressions at once! Otherwise, I won’t go easy on you, cat statue! I’ll scoop your body out. That’s how much I care about Tsukiko!”

This time, the cat statue was on the receiving end of Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi’s angry roar. *Hahaha, serves you right*, I thought. I was too exhausted to do anything more than just crack a weak smile.

...that was the moment the Stony Cat smiled.

Chapter 5: Part 11

The cat statue's expressions didn't just change as if it were a living being. It broke out into a high-pitched laughter, signifying its dominance. As if it had been waiting eagerly to hear Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi's words, as if those true feelings had been the trigger.

Tears flowed from the cat's eyes, as if it was *too* happy, and its body, carved from wood, began to twist and distort out of shape. As it convulsed with laughter, it got smaller and smaller and smaller and *smaller*, until – pop! It was back to its original size. Its pork bun-shaped face had also reverted to the same bland, expressionless face as before.

It was a vivid transformation, just like magic. Faced with this sinister sight, the Steel King finally went quiet.

The Stony Cat was a cat statue that had been made to fix the relationship between the Tsutsukakushi siblings. The strong feelings that had been injected into it had become its own will before long. Maybe it, too, had a wish to express its own feelings.

-and forever afterwards, that thought was on its mind.

If you asked me what I thought at that moment, of course I was freaked out, unable to get off my knees and onto my feet. But at the same time, I was impressed by it.

I realised what Tsutsukakushi was doing at once. There was a gaping wide space on the ground where the cat statue had grown small. And what was tumbling into that space was something that should have been given up a long time ago-

"Nee-san," she said, picking it up. "We may not be able to get married, but we can least eat a pork bun like we did in the past."

With a single sigh, Tsutsukakushi held out her cold, frugal offering.

The Steel King looked from the pork bun to her sister. “You want to make up with me again...?”

“You are the only sister I have. There is nothing I would rather do than make it up to you. I was never mad from the start.”

“I-I see!”

“However, there are many things I would like for you to improve on, Nee-san. You always miss the point. That is why you misunderstand, for instance – you are made of steel and you are a bulldozer. That is why even the Track and Field club seems to be afraid of you. There is nothing else for it, so I will help improve your image for you, Nee-san.”

There is nothing else for it, so I will help you. I’d heard that phrase before.

That time when we clasped hands as we swore we would get my façade and her true feelings back. In the end, it was Tsutsukakushi that helped me regain my façade back then, not the other way around.

Tsutsukakushi was always like that. She always put others before herself.

“Nee-san, it was good when you discarded your weird thoughts and your façade and showed me what you were really thinking with your words and expressions. So then, will you eat this pork bun with me? Have some.”

“Oh? I don’t really get it, giving me the whole thing means you’ve really grown.”

I had no idea why the Steel King accepted it so cheerfully. It wasn’t just a plain old pork bun. *It was a pork bun that symbolised something.* Thanks to the cat statue sacrificing itself, Tsutsukakushi’s true feelings had finally returned to her.

Which meant that if she gave it to anyone else, Tsutsukakushi’s true feelings – her smile – would be lost once more.

Then there was Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi, who hated her other name as the Steel King. The truth was that she was a dunce and a raging siscon. Her problem was that the only expression she could show was one of anger. If she learned to laugh

and cry like her sister did, she would be able to fit in with her surroundings better. I understood that much.

But Tsutsukakushi didn't have to sacrifice her true feelings for her, did she?

"H-hold on, Tsukiko-chan! Giving up food isn't like you!"

"I am sorry," Tsutsukakushi murmured, stony-faced as usual. She was cute. So cute I wanted to cry. And yet, if her eyes laughed too, she would have been that much cuter.

I knew that it was pointless to say anything more. But because the general idea behind my sense of shame was gone, I went on blabbering anyway. "You didn't have to go that far for the King... seeing as I want to be siblings with you, I'll become your brother."

Tsutsukakushi looked down as if she was considering it for a moment. "I love my older sister," she said, shaking her head slowly. "Besides, you do not feel like a brother to me, senpai. Sorry."

"Hmph! I am Tsukiko's authentic older sister! Don't you go calling her Tsukiko-chan again!" the Steel King interjected, not understanding what was what.

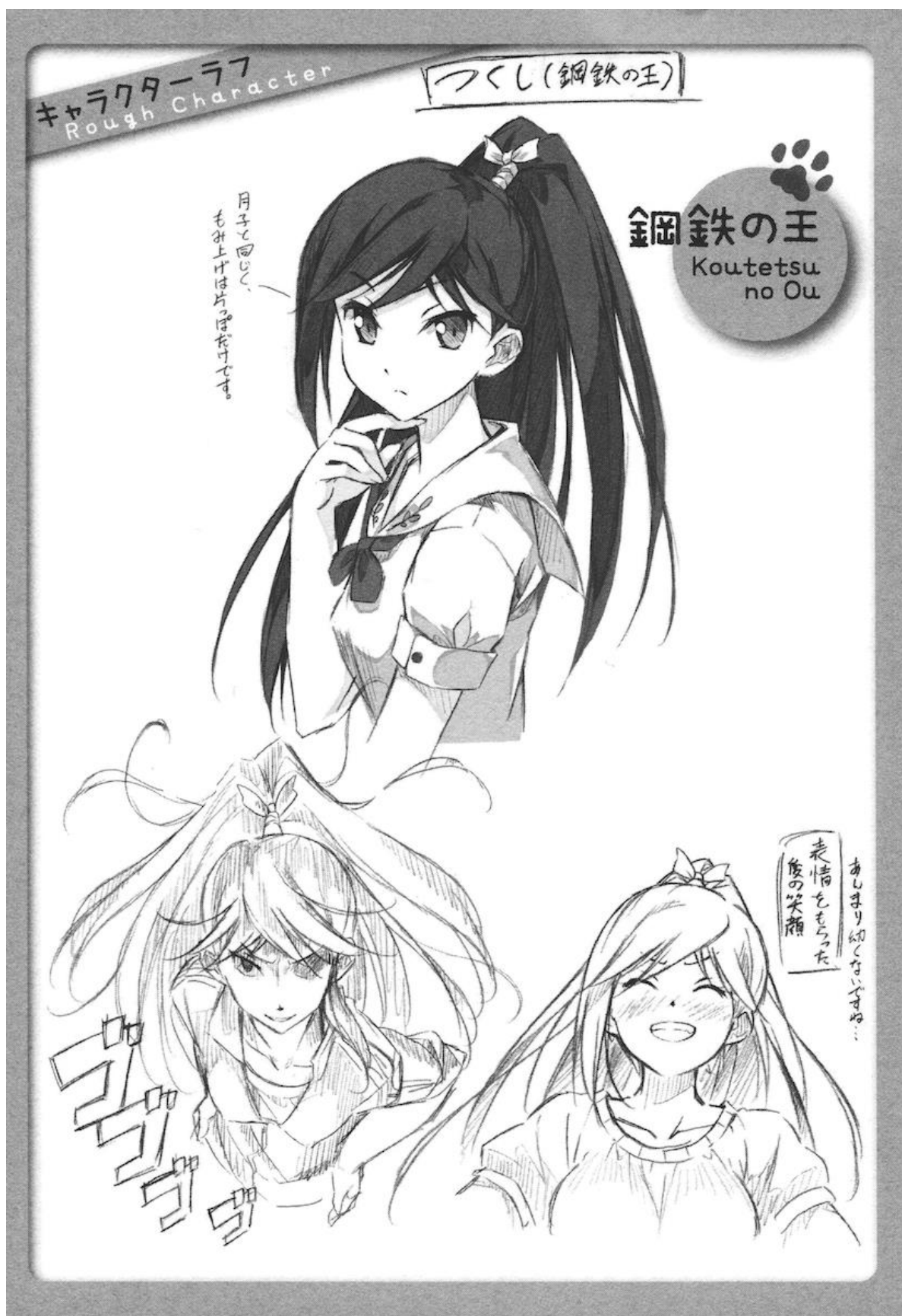
She was beaming like a kid without any worries in the world. It was the first time I ever saw an expression like that on her face. She looked so young it was like she had used a time machine – she certainly looked clever enough for it now. *Oh wow*, I thought. Not what I was expecting.

There was nothing left of the pork bun in Tsutsukakushi Tsukushi's hand. I could see now that it was true: the Steel King was 200% friendlier than she was before.

But the smile I really wanted to see belonged to someone else – the girl in front of me!

All of a sudden, I remembered my trunks were missing. I let out a sneeze. It was a hollow sneeze.

I didn't become Tsutsukakushi's brother, and she never got her expressions back either – the sheriff of justice had been utterly defeated.



Chapter 6 – The Pervert Is Still at It to This Day...

An epilogue? There's no need for that. It was a bad ending, after all.

Looking back calmly after everything that happened, getting my façade back had nothing to do with how the girls saw me. It wasn't like I could sweep that Hentai Prince image under the carpet. The real trouble was getting back the trust that I had temporarily lost: *"Eww, it's that guy..."*

During the summer holidays, I went to the school roof, where the wind blew against me lazily under the shadow of the water tower. There was no other place where I could secretly observe the school grounds without having to meet anyone.

I could hear the harmonious voices from the Track and Field club today as usual. Ever since that day, the club's atmosphere had brightened up immensely. I was taking note of how far the Steel King had embraced her peculiarities. Since she was bad at expressing her true feelings, she couldn't get the younger members to warm up to her entirely. When she was patrolling the arcade, it could very well have been that she had just wanted to play with them.

Well, either way, I was an outsider. If I returned to the Track and Field club now, an overwhelming number of girls would give me the cold shoulder. *"He said that spiel about running shorts, yeek..."* *"He wants to live as someone's pet, yeek..."* *"He's the Hentai Prince, yeek..."*

I heard the Steel King had passionately attempted to win them over for me, but it's the Steel King we're talking about here.

"Yokodera is a good man. There is a world of difference between him and his twin brother! All that bastard is good at is ruining my little sister's purity. If you see him, tell me."

Yeah, I got the feeling she was still saying unnecessary things. I didn't *have* a twin brother. When it came to the Steel King, I knew that if it wasn't one thing, it was another. The first day after the holidays were over was tinged with melancholy.

“Who cares about other people? It’s like the difference between a frog and a toad,” Azuki Azusa tried to comfort me. “Understand the people who understand you.”

When I told her I couldn’t become Tsutsukakushi’s brother, the first thing she had done was gently encourage me, all the while grinning from ear to ear. Why was that, I wonder?

Oh, right. Thanks to her not needing to earn money under her façade, she’d quit her newspaper delivery and her road construction jobs. The hourly wage at the Oriental Animal Café was bad, but it seemed she kept the job because she could play with the cats and dogs she liked so much.

“If I save up enough money, I’ll go on a trip, you see! I’ll go to the Okinawa next time, since I couldn’t go there last time. Me and only one other person! I-i-is that all right?!” she said with a bright red face.

Good for her, I thought. Just who did she plan to go with? It’d be nice if he could make her happy. She was flat-chested, though.

That was how my summer holidays went, doing this and that. I had absolutely no plans besides hanging out with Ponta, but spacing out and observing the Track and Field club ended up becoming a daily ritual for me.

From the grounds, past where the eye could see, one long line of vapour trailed across the sky diagonally like a javelin. Alone, I slouched against the water tower, stretching my legs.

I’d dreaded the thought of becoming the club president. But now I was aimless, I realised belatedly. For the first time, I understood what I had lost, and the thought weighed down on me. My cherry-coloured youth¹. That might have been the wrong phrase.

¹ The correct phrase is “rose-coloured youth”, which is a Japanese phrase referring to a lively, fulfilling youth.

“Just where did I go wrong, huh...? Instead of peeping on girls in competitive swimsuits, I should have picked girls in, like, kendo outfits or tennis gear from the start.”

“I would say that kind of perverted way of thinking is where you went wrong.”

“Aaaaargh!”

Just when did that happen? All of a sudden, there was a little girl sitting next to me, hugging her knees unobtrusively.

“Senpai, you always exaggerate.”

“You’re always surprising me, Tsutsukakushi! I bet you were a ghost in your previous life!”

“A ghost does not count as a previous life. I always announce myself.”

“I want you to keep announcing yourself until I realise you’re there,” I said. Then I paused. “But I get that you’re here.”

“I see you understand somehow, senpai,” Tsutsukakushi said, playing with her ponytail out of habit. I could see a thin bead of sweat on her forehead. She could have been walking around everywhere desperately in this heat.

“...it’s been a while,” I said. “Has something happened?”

“No, I would not say something has *happened*, exactly,” Tsutsukakushi answered indifferently, before closing her mouth indifferently.

Without expression and without emotion, she was peering into a far-off world. By now, the memories I had of her crying under my arm were like a midsummer night’s dream.

And yet I knew without any doubt that Tsutsukakushi and I lived in the same world. The emotions she felt that I didn’t understand at all when I tickled her – I could feel them quite distinctly now.

"I see. There is no doubt... after you let go of your true feelings, you thought it was awkward to find someone *else* who doesn't need their true feelings, so you oh-so-casually came to check up on me, remembering what I said to you in the kitchen, and now that you're here you're confused and you're thinking you don't know how to break the ice, is that it?"

"...you are a very, very malicious person, senpai," she said, lifting her chin defiantly. As usual, she had no expressions, but she was sulking quite plainly. Her eyes told me so.

I saw that all with a glance. Her blue, cat-like eyes drew me in like a magnet and wouldn't let go.

"...will you not help me anymore, malicious senpai?" she asked hesitantly, letting out one small, timid sigh.

For a short while, I mused to myself. This girl knew that I was a pervert, and yet still she said all that to me. What was I to Tsutsukakushi? Why did she want me to help her?

I had wanted to become this girl's brother. But I couldn't. So what did Tsutsukakushi see me as? What was my pretext for helping her?

I came to a decision.

"Hey, can I be your steed?"

"Huh? What is this all of a sudden?"

Before the girl beside me could refuse me, I pressed my finger against her cheeks. Since my sense of shame was gone, touching her was well within my boundaries. Tsutsukakushi stiffened, but she did not evade me. I pinched the soft skin on her cheeks gently, and took the opportunity to peer down at her through the corner of my eye.

"If I keep working at it like this, your smile..."

"...will not be seen."

“No, it can’t. Your face looks weird.”

“Please let me go right now. I am very mad.”

Actually, the moment I saw Tsutsukakushi’s face, I understood.

What was important wasn’t our relationship or the label we put on it. The right answer was always a simple one.

I want to see this girl smile.

That was all. From the time we met, Tsutsukakushi had never once shown me her smile. That feeling never changed after all this time. There were things that I was okay with if they never changed.

“It’s a waste since your cheeks are as stretchy and squishy as a rice cake.”

“How rude. That hurts very much. I am looking for an explanation for just how that is a waste.”

“For example, just seeing you smile would make me feel so happy, like spring has come again.”

“...please do not praise me. I do not understand your meaning, senpai.” She sighed again.

This time she wasn’t angry or disgusted. I knew that. Tsutsukakushi was a shy girl, so she sighed constantly even when she was happy or in the highest of spirits.

If I could describe her right now, I would say Tsutsukakushi Tsukiko was positively beaming.

Of course, since I had my façade and all, I didn’t say that aloud, and since Tsutsukakushi didn’t have her true feelings, she couldn’t acknowledge anything like that herself. We balanced each other out quite nicely.

“If doing so will make you happy, will you let me be your steed too, senpai?”

“Afterwards.”

“A long time afterwards?”

“Forever afterwards. I’m sure that your true feelings will return, Tsutsukakushi.”

I got up and held out my hand for her, and Tsutsukakushi took it as she stood up as well.

So that we would face the future and meet it head on, we wouldn’t let go of each other’s hands, come what may. We shared the warmth in our bodies through our clasped hands.

I smiled – Tsutsukakushi didn’t. Only the cat in her eyes was smiling.

Author's Note

“Hentikan!” means “Stop!” in Indonesian.

To me, that word feels a lot like “Hentai”. Hentai is already part of the international lingo, so if you are a cute lady getting harassed in Indonesia, why not say “Hentikan, hentai!”? If you’re on the receiving end of those rhymes, you’ll probably also get punched in the face. It’s best to broaden your horizons.

Pleased to meet you. This is Sagara Sou, winner of the 6th MF Bunko J Light Novel Awards for the “Most Outstanding” entry.

After receiving such an excessive prize, I’m spending my days as a nervous wreck. I am currently training very hard somewhere so that I can face the cheerful voices of all the readers. I listen to anything my saviour – that is, my supervisor – will tell me. For example, I happily leaped on this kindly advice: “Since the title is *Hentai Ouji*, it’s okay to write perverted things again in the afterword. Stick with that option to the utmost. Er, well, it is one option. It’s one option, I guess. You understand? Hm?”

Since you’ve come all this way, let me tell you a story about the title.

As you can see, the working title *Roundabout Expressions* is a bit different from the final version. I thought I had better make that clear here, in the afterword. What I am trying to convey to you, my dear reader, is that this story does not in fact have a perverted plot. I think. Maybe. It is more akin to the “heartwarming teenage romcom” genre. Sorry for misleading you.

In any case, I was supposed to change the title for publication. However, after half a year of long, heated discussion, I reached the conclusion of “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” By no means did I pick this title feeling at ease about it.

It was only to match the other ideas that I came up with the tentative title of *The Forthright Prince and the Stony Cat*. I thought an innocent title like that would get through, but my supervisor looked at it as if it were a pile of sludge and said, “Er, no... he’s just a regular pervert... what are you dreaming of...?” So I gave that up.

If you can claim that “I’m more perverted than he is!” or “That’s not what a pervert is like!” by all means, please fill out the questionnaire on your cell phone and lend me your support.

Incidentally, personally speaking I think my saviour (metaphorically speaking) is number one. “A photo of the author? Why don’t you use a photo of your *randoseru*? Oh, no, it’s best to only use your soprano recorder¹. An alto is fine too, but you’ve definitely got the look of a soprano! Quick, quick, get out your recorder!” He made many such decisions for me in broad daylight. I believe he is in dire need of medical treatment.

...all joking aside, I really do thank my supervisor Iwaasa for the support. I believe he polished my feeble manuscript until it shone. I apologise for only ever causing him grief. I will continue to work hard.

Again, I apologise for all the courtesies, but I must thank all the members of the reviewing panel from the bottom of my heart. I am grateful for all the warm comments you have written on the book’s jacket. On top of that, I must thank Hirasaka-sensei for all the pleasant comments he contributed. I was very pleased. I will devote myself to transforming your words into energy!

Next, I have special thanks for the editor-in-chief, who stuck with this book until it was released. On that note, I thank my friends H-kun and M-kun for all the support they gave me in revising the manuscript.

Finally, we come to Kantoku-sama, who drew all the splendid illustrations in my book. There are not enough words in this world to express the depth of my eternal gratitude. Were it not for his pictures, I would not still be alive. When someone asked me, “Whose life do you value more?” I slapped that person in the face – that is how much I love the illustrations. Please go easy on me although I have held so many others back!

¹ I’m really not sure, but this seems like a reference to the title of *Recorder to Randoseru*, a 4koma manga.

The genders of all the people the author mentions are not specified. I have assumed they are male.

And so, to all those who read this book to the end, my wish is that we can meet again. Hentikan, hentai! (A greeting)

Sagara Sou

Illustrator's Note

Thank you for reading all the way to end. This is Kantoku, who was in charge of the illustrations. Why is it that I can never get bored of the charm of looking at a girl who has lost her expressions? Because she's cute!

Yokodera may be a pervert, but I think he knows the appeals of girls the best. That must mean he is the ally of all women! I think that stands to reason.

This time, I did some thinking as I drew the illustrations. Drawing Tsukiko helped bring out my lolicon side first of all, Azusa's rapidly changing expressions brought out my tsundere side, and Tsukushi's cold eyes brought out my cool side. Somehow, this was a work that made me think, once again, that girls have a wide range of expressions. I think my expression as I was drawing must have been full of glee like the cat statue's.

Kantoku

あとがき

最後まで読んで頂いてありがとうございます。イラストを担当しました、カントクです。表情が無くなってしまった女の子なのに、何故こんなにも魅力的で、見ていて飽きないのか。可愛いからだよ！

横寺は変態だけど、女の子の魅力を一番よく知っていると思うんだ。そういう意味では全ての女性の味方！一本筋が通ってると思いました。

今回、イラストを描いていて思ったんです。僕のロリコン分を、まず月子が補ってくれて、コロコロ表情が変化するようなツンデレ分を梓がくれて、クールな目ツキのかっこいい分をつくしが与えてくれました。なんだか、女の子って色んな形があるんだなと改めて思わされた作品です。描いている時の僕の表情は、猫像のように楽しんでいました。



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