

Rejected: After the Harem

by /a/non

Prologue: Lost Loves

“...and that’s why, Ichimaru-kun...” I swallowed. “I don’t want you to forget me! I know I’m changing schools and we won’t see each other much, but...I lov-”

Ichimaru-kun held out his hand, and I halted mid-word. “Junko, wait.” His face was as serious as I’d ever seen it before. “I’m sorry. I can’t accept your feelings. I’m in love with Miki.”

Even though I knew this was coming, my pounding heart dropped into my stomach. “...right.” I looked down so Ichimaru-kun didn’t see me welling up. “I’ll...go home, then.” It was bad enough getting rejected; I didn’t need the embarrassment to last any longer. I turned on my heel and ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

“Junko, wait!” Ichimaru-kun called out behind me, but I kept running. Tears streamed down my face as my loafers slapped limply against the road in front of my lost love’s home. I hoped to hear Ichimaru-kun run up behind me but he didn’t give chase. After I was out of sight of his home, I started walking, wiping my face with the sleeves of my school uniform’s blazer.

I’m sure I looked terrible. Well, obviously – I can’t have been all that cute to lose my childhood friend to another girl in the first place – but I bet my eyes were puffy and my nose was running. As I made my way back to my home – which was on the same street – I noticed my cell phone going off and checked it absentmindedly. It was a LANE message from Ichimaru-kun.

“Are you okay?”

What do you think, jerk? I thought to myself. “I’m fine,” I replied.

“Message me when you get home. The weather’s getting bad.” I looked up at the darkening sky through my bleary eyes and grimaced. Of course I was going to make it home in time to avoid

the weather, but this meant he wouldn't be coming over once I messaged him back. I almost laughed at how pathetic I was, still clinging to hope even after getting rejected so flatly.

I walked through the door of my home as distant thunder clapped behind me. Navigating the stacks of boxes, I called out to my parents.

"We're in here packing, Junko!" replied my mom from my parents' bedroom. "Is everything okay? You're home awfully late."

"I'm fine," I said. "I just got held up at school for a while."

"Make sure you tell us next time," said my father. He'd moved to the top of the stairs so we didn't need to shout. I couldn't see his eyes behind his aviator-style glasses; the same pair he'd been wearing since he was my age. "We were starting to get worried about you."

"I *said*, I was fine." I don't know why I replied that way, but I did. Part of me wanted to run up the stairs and give my dad a big hug, cry into his chest like I always used to when I was sad. Another part of me, and the part that won out that day, blamed him for my getting rejected. More accurately, I begrudged him for denying me the chance to pursue Ichimaru-kun by moving for work.

He raised an eyebrow. "Did something happen? Maybe I can help—"

"Just leave me alone!" I said a little louder than I meant to. I realized what I did, felt bad for it immediately, and ran past him at the top of the stairs toward my room, slamming the door hard behind me.

"Junko!" I could hear him move for my bedroom before my mom spoke up.

"It's okay, dear. Give her some time."

I wept quietly as I could into my hands. *No, don't do that. Break in here and hold me.* My sobs shook my body up and down but I kept the volume as low as I could. I'm sure they heard me anyway.

My phone went off again. I didn't recognize the contact information.

“Is everything alright? Ichimaru-kun told me what happened.”

“Who is this?” I responded with one hand. My other was still stifling my cries for help.

“It’s Kitahara Miki. I happened to call Ichimaru-kun after you left. I feel bad about what happened. Cheer up, okay? I’m sure there will be good guys at your new school.”

I glared at the screen for a moment before throwing my phone as hard as I could with a cry. It bounced against the side of my bed and fell to the floor with a thud. Was she serious? What right did she have to “console” me after stealing the boy I loved like that? Did she know he liked her? Were they already dating and just hadn’t mentioned it yet? They were probably laughing at me, huh? My mind swirled into a vortex of questions I didn’t really want the answer to.

I spent a few more minutes angrily crying before I finally stood up and changed out of my uniform. Before putting my night clothes on, I caught a glimpse of my figure in the mirror. I set the clothes I was going to try on down and looked myself over from all kinds of angles, hyper-critical of any blemish or sore spot that might have turned Ichimaru-kun away.

My chest wasn’t that big. My hips could have been a bit better. My gait wasn’t very girly. I had bad skin. My muscles were too visible, especially on my torso. My hair was too short. I was covered in bruises from karate. Who knew which one of these it was? Was it all of them?

Finally I gave up on the self-deprecation and got dressed.

“Junko,” my mom called from downstairs, “dinner’s ready. We’re having katsu curry.” My favorite. They probably changed plans for me.

“Coming,” I said. I checked my phone and saw that Miki and Ichimaru had both tried to contact me a couple of times. I didn’t even bother to read their messages before heading downstairs.

To say dinner was uncomfortable would be an understatement. Everyone quietly chewed their food without as much as a word. My parents kept giving each other sidelong glances.

“I’m fine, now,” I lied. Dinner tasted like gravel, but I shoveled it down as quickly as I could to get away even though I really did want to talk to them about everything that happened. “Thanks for the meal.”

I stood up and reached to pick up my dishes. My dad placed his hand on top of mine. “Are you sure?” He looked into my probably beet-red eyes. “..yeah. Thanks.” I faked a smile and went back up to my room. I laid in bed but couldn’t sleep all night. I refused to check my phone.

The next day, the movers came. Ichimaru-kun didn’t come to say goodbye.

* * *

“Nakagawa-kun, stop! The fight’s over!”

“Someone pull her away!”

Ignoring the calls I kept wailing on my opponent. Blow after blow collided with his arms and swollen face. He could hardly keep his hands up to block after I’d gotten the upper hand.

I swung one more fist but it was caught by the karate club councilor, Kubo- sensei. “I said, that’s *enough!* What are you thinking?”

My vision was red. I was panting. My opponent was, too, but in a different way. My chest heaved. Kubo practically dragged me off the tatami and into the faculty office.

“This was just an exhibition match, Nakagawa. Why were you fighting him like that?” He’d sat me in a chair next to his desk. There weren’t any other teachers in the office since it was a Sunday.

Why? “I wanted to win,” I blurted.

“You’d already won as soon as he went to the ground. It’s not like this was a real fight!”

“He hit me hard. I was just—”

“You’re the one who said you wanted to fight the boys’ club captain! You knew what you were getting in to!”

“So did he, right?”

“No one expects to get mauled in a school martial arts club! What are you even thinking?” He was totally exasperated.

We were quiet for a long time. He turned to face his desk and shuffled some papers around. I guessed he was pretending to look busy since he didn’t want to make eye contact with me. I saw some blood on my knuckles.

“I’m going to have to remove you from the club,” he said with a sigh.

“What, because I beat the guy up!? That’s not fair!” I stood up, my wheeled chair flying behind me and into a desk. My hands were balled up at my sides.

“It’s not just that,” he said, raising his voice. “Sit down.” I stood. “...look, if this was a one-time thing and you didn’t have any other problems, it would be fine. The fact is that you cut half your classes and the other girls in the club are going to be even more afraid of you now. I have to think of their—”

“Bullshit! If they’re afraid, shouldn’t they just get stronger!?” My breathing was getting ragged again. My heart had sunk into my stomach.

“I can’t ask a bunch of girls who are doing karate to ‘toughen up,’ Nakagawa. They were already intimidated by you before today.” He finally locked eyes with me. “And you’re ignoring what I said about your attendance.”

I clenched my fists so hard my knuckles were white. “If I come to school every day, can I stay in the club? I’ll join the boys’ club if I have to.”

“You know I can’t do that. Besides, I doubt the captain will want anything to do with you after today.” He sighed. “It’s a shame. You’re really skilled and could do a lot for the school. It’s just too big a risk.”

My eyes were glued to the floor. In my mind I tried to come up with some kind of compromise or way out of this but came up blank. New, cold sweat trickled down my brow.

“...fine.” I turned and made for the exit, ignoring Kubo’s protests that I come back to the office.

There was no one in the hallway, whose lights were shut off. The setting sun covered the white walls with an orange glow. My vision was blurry. I ran into the girls' restroom and stood in front of the sink, staring at myself in the mirror.

Don't cry, I thought to myself, taking deep breaths through my clenched teeth. *You're done crying*. Nevertheless, tears welled up in the corners of my eyes. I tried my best to keep a mean, or serious face. *It's just the school club. You weren't going to get any better practicing against those kids*. I slowed my breathing to try and stave off my emotions. My hands, which gripped the rim of the porcelain sink, shook.

Eyes narrowed, I stared into my reflection. She glared right back. Before I realized it, I'd balled my hand into a fist and swung weakly at the mirror.

Then the crying started in earnest. I kept pounding at my reflection with limp blows, my forehead now pressed against the glass, while my tears collected in the sink below.

"Damn it," I sobbed quietly.

I heard the bathroom door swing open and quickly wiped my face. A couple of girls from the karate club were walking in.

"Can you believe she did that?"

"I hope sensei takes her out of the club...I don't want to practice with her."

"She's a total animal. I don't care how good she is. She's dangerous." They stopped when they saw me. My eyes were red and my face was contorted into a frown.

We stared each other down for a few seconds; they weren't trying to intimidate me, but they didn't know what to say after so obviously talking about me like that. It felt like an eternity.

Eventually one of them, the second-year club captain, took a step forward. As soon as she moved her foot I feigned a punch aimed right at her nose. She froze in place, eyes wide, and the other two gasped.

I grinned at them. "Better be careful. There's a dangerous animal in this school, you know? You could get hurt if you

don't watch out." She didn't say anything and just stood there. I pushed past her and walked out, alone.

I

Transfer Student

“You’re in the way,” I said through my cigarette’s smoke. “Don’t you want me to get to class on time?” I flipped some ashes on the ground and inhaled another puff.

“Nakagawa-kun, there is to be no smoking on campus. Put that out. You shouldn’t be smoking at your age, anyway.” As usual, Kubo-sensei wore a Very Serious expression.

“Then call the cops,” I replied as I exhaled.

“This isn’t a game, Nakagawa-kun. You’re already on thin ice with the administration between your liberal interpretation of the uniform and your attendance. I’m just trying to help you. If you keep causing trouble you’ll get expelled.” He waved the smoke out of his face.

“Sure, big help. Thanks a ton.” I dropped the cigarette butt and stamped it out. “Now can I get into school? My parents are getting on my case about skipping.” I’d missed school more than I’d attended for the last few months.

The teacher narrowed his eyes at me. “Go on.” I could tell he wanted to say more, but either didn’t have the guts or didn’t want to keep me at it. As I walked past I stuck my tongue out at him.

I noticed a girl staring at me walking the other direction. I pretended to lunge at her and she jumped about a foot, then bolted when I started laughing at her. “Chickenshit.”

Everyone avoided me in the halls. Girls would keep their distance and boys would avoid eye contact with me entirely. Given the way I’d behaved over the last two years at this school, that was the expected reaction.

I slung my bag onto my desk, which was in the back row by the door, before taking my seat. I propped one foot up on the chair for the desk next to me and tapped the other impatiently

on the linoleum. The sooner class started, the sooner I could “go to the bathroom” and bail.

The teacher walked in, then turned around at the door and said something to somebody outside the class. I couldn’t make it out, but she shut the door behind her so I figured she was just telling some other kids to get to their home rooms. Everyone but I sat at attention as soon as she made it to the blackboard.

“Alright, everyone. Before homeroom begins today, I have an announcement to make.” I was already tuning her out. “We have a new transfer student joining us, beginning today. Amenohara-kun, please introduce yourself.”

I looked up to the front of the class out of the corner of my eye to see what the new kid looked like. *Not impressive, but not terrible-looking either.* I’d never seen such an average person.

He bowed to the class. “Hello. I’m Amenohara Shinjiro. You can call me Shinjiro, or just Shinji, if you’d like. I hope we get along.” Everyone clapped as he bowed again.

“Now, then...ah, the only open seat is there, next to Nakagawa-san.” He nodded at the teacher’s instruction and headed to where she pointed. I didn’t move my foot.

“Um, excuse me...Nakagawa-san?”

“What.” I didn’t look at him.

“Well, Aizawa-sensei just said this was my seat. Could you move your foot?”

I scooted it just enough that he had room to sit, but it was still propped up against the side of the chair.

“Thanks!” I blinked. I expected him to ask again or something but he just plopped down next to my shoe.

“Nakagawa-san, could you share your books with Amenohara-san for the day? He’ll get his after class.”

I reached for the day’s book and tossed it onto Amenohara’s desk.

“Thanks!” He smiled at me again. I noticed him linger for a second before turning away quick.

“What’re you staring at, transfer?” I was still facing him, not the teacher, with my foot propped up on his chair.

“Well...” he went to a whisper. “I can see them.”

“See what?”

“Your...” it was muffled.

I was starting to get pissed. “Speak up, twerp!”

“Your panties!” he shouted.

...

“Haaah?!” I shouted, thrusting a hand down to block anyone else’s view while dropping my leg. I could feel my face getting hot. The whole class was leering at the commotion.

“What the hell are you looking at?!” That got them to quickly turn away. I pretended not to hear some of the other students laughing under their breath.

With that outburst resolved, Sensei started teaching. I glared at Amenohara, who was dutifully taking notes and comparing what the teacher said to my borrowed book. He pissed me off, acting like nothing had even happened.

After five or so minutes more of lecture I stood up. “Sensei, can I use the restroom?” Before she even responded I was halfway out the door with my bag over my shoulder.

The roof was supposed to be off limits with the door locked, but I swiped the key one of the times I was brought to the faculty office my first year for kicking some kid’s ass after I caught him looking at me sideways.

The hot summer sun beat down on the exposed rooftop, no shadows in sight. “Perfect weather,” I said to myself aloud. Hot weather was great for training in – the sweat really made me feel alive. I made sure nobody was around and, hiding in a secluded spot, changed into my gym wear – spats and a sports bra – under the lightest karate-dogi I owned. I made a note to wear my spats under my skirt from now on in case that freak Amenohara tried to sneak another peek at me.

I shook my head. Why was I worrying about that so much? It was just my underwear. Nothing embarrassing about wearing

them, right? I tried to get my mind off it as I set up the practice bag I'd sneaked up to the roof last winter.

Just as soon as I started kicking, I heard the door to the stairway open, then slam closed. "Junko, you up here?"

"Of course I am, moron. How do you think the door was unlocked?" I replied between hard kicks.

"You're so mean! I just wanted to make sure it was you." Saeko walked around the stairwell entrance, pouting.

"You really are a dumbass, then. What if it was a teacher up here?" I started kicking harder. My blows thudded against the bag and echoed out over the campus.

"Would a teacher be kicking that bag? I could hear it from inside."

"Did you just come up here to ask questions, smartass?"

"Nope." Saeko sat down against the wall, knees up. Her skirt rode up her thigh; her loose-fitting, half-buttoned uniform shirt paired with her low-cut bra proved that her tan was natural. "Just wanted to check on you. It's been a while since you bothered to come to school." She twirled her hair on her finger.

"Yeah, mom and dad kept bugging me to go."

"It's good that they're worried about you."

"Shut up." I switched sides, kicking with my left leg now.

"What did I even say? You're on edge today, Junko. Did something happen this morning?"

I ignored her and kept kicking.

"Well?"

"Just come off it, Saeko." I finished that set and, panting, sat down on the rooftop. Sweat trickled down my brow and I could feel it soaking my cotton uniform. Saeko offered me a bottle of water.

"You shouldn't forget to bring a drink when you train up here."

"Thanks," I said as I swiped it and took a swig. I poured some of the water over my face for good measure.

"I wanna know what happened. You were going at it harder than usual today." She lit a cigarette for herself as she spoke.

"It's no big deal. The new kid just pisses me off."

"New kid? Oh, that's right, your class was going to get a transfer soon. Amenohara, right?"

"Who cares?"

"Don't try to act so cool. You're obviously a little concerned about him." She took a drag, looking off in the distance. "Apparently he was an honors student at his last school but caused some kind of trouble and that's why he had to transfer. Did he do something to you?"

"...what kind of trouble?" I asked, dodging her question. I was starting to catch my breath.

"No one knows for sure, but the rumor is that he covered the whole school in graffiti. He even tagged the principal's office top to bottom!" She laughed. "Wouldn't expect that from looking at him huh?"

"Guess not. He looks way too plain for that."

"Right? If it's true, that is. He may have just needed to move because of his parents or something."

"But he lost his honors status either way. That means something must have gone down." I took another drink. The sun beat against my exposed nape.

"See, you are interested!" Damn Saeko. She could play just about anybody. "What did he do, huh? Tell me!"

I mumbled, looking away from her. "...panties."

"Huh? He brought candy?"

"He saw my panties, okay?!" I yelled, then cupped my mouth. The redness came back to my face.

Saeko blinked. She tried to stifle a laugh, failed, and busted a gut. "That's hilarious! He really is a badass!" She was laughing so hard she fell onto her back and started kicking the air.

"It's not funny," I said quietly.

"Sure it is! I doubt he saw them on purpose. No one would try to flip up *your* skirt."

"Tch. No, it wasn't on purpose. Quit laughin'."

"What kind of panties did you wear today? Are they cute?"

“Shut up!” She kept laughing, so hard that tears were falling down her face. I stood up and started punching the bag now. Saeko crawled on her hands and knees over to my bag.

“They’re in here, right? I gotta see ’em!”

“Hey!” I turned to stop her but she’d already scooped up my bag and started rifling through it.

“Oooh, how bold, Nakagawa-san!” Proudly she held up my delicates, a pair of white panties with a pink, somewhat frilly trim.

“Put those back!” I snatched them from her and stuffed them into my bag.

She giggled, but finally stopped herself from laughing after another minute or so. “Sorry, I just didn’t expect something like that to bother you so much. Guys see *my* panties all the time.” Her cigarette dangled from her lips, slurring her speech a little.

“Yeah, because you’re a total slut! Your skirt couldn’t *be* any shorter!”

Saeko smirked and lifted her skirt, showing her underwear off to me. They matched her bra: black and barely there. I could see the g-string through her white shirt; it rode up around her hips, meeting her dyed-blond hair at the small of her back. “It could be this short,” she teased with a wink.

“Quit fucking with me,” I grumbled.

“Oh, lighten up!” She patted me on the back. “I’m just having a little fun is all. I’ve missed you!”

“Whatever. Let me get back to training.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said with a grin.

She was quiet for a while and I sparred with the bag some more, alternating between different punches and kicks. After a fourth set of punches I sat back down on the roof and took another drink of Saeko’s water.

“You know...those panties were pretty cutesy. I didn’t expect that of you.”

“Are you seriously still thinking about that?” Talking about my delicates reminded me that a boy had seen them, which made me blush again.

“Not really. I just expected you to only wear super-plain stuff.”

“Well...it’s not like I’m not a girl at all,” I said under my breath.

“Yeah, just barely,” she teased.

“Quiet.” I stood up to start changing out of my workout clothes.

“Oh, has it been that long already? Time flies, huh?” Saeko stood as well.

“I’ll keep a look out to make sure no one comes up while you’re changing.”

“Thanks,” I said, then tossed off my dogi’s jacket. I extended my arms and

basked in the sun for a second. The heat against my sweat-soaked skin felt incredible. My breathing still ragged, I started to pull off the trousers.

“Shit! Someone’s coming!”

“What?!” I was bent over, one leg still in my pants as Saeko rounded the corner. She paused for a second.

“Hide!” She whisper-shouted before ducking behind the wall.

I didn’t even have time to blink before none other than Amenohara rounded the corner. His eyes went wide as soon as he saw me.

We stared at each other in silence. I was bent forward, looking over my shoulder with my ass pointed right toward him. Sweat ran down my forehead, and not from the heat.

“Get the hell outta here!” I shouted.

He bolted without a word. I could see how red his cheeks were.

Saeko was snickering to herself, covering her mouth with her hand.

“What?! What’s funny?!” I’d pulled my pants back up at this point. “You let him get way too close!” I grabbed her by the collar.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” she said, laughing as hard as she was earlier. “I just couldn’t believe it was him of all people coming up

the stairs! I had to see your reaction..." she looked up at me. "It totally paid off, too. You're so cute!"

"Shut up!" My face was still beet red. "Go make sure he doesn't come back. I still gotta change.

"Okay~"

Against my better judgment I put my faith in Saeko actually keeping watch this time as I towed myself off and changed back into my normal underwear. She peeked around the corner.

"Looking good, Junko!" She flashed a thumbs-up and a wink.

"Go away!" I didn't bother to cover myself – Saeko first saw me naked long ago and it didn't really get to me anymore when she perved on me.

She hid behind the stairwell entrance again and said, "I wish I had the patience to train for a body like yours."

"No way. You're in good enough shape."

"Naah, I'm totally getting fat."

"Isn't that just your boobs getting bigger again?"

"Maybe, but I think my belly is starting to poke out too."

"Stop eating melon bread for lunch then," I said as I rounded the corner, finally dry and dressed.

"Just doing that won't give me a hard tummy like yours, though."

"Guys don't like that, anyway. Believe me, if you asked them they'd say you've got a way nicer body than I do."

"Hmmm, I wonder..." She poked at her bottom lip. I could still faintly sense tobacco on her breath.

The school bell rang out as she pondered whether she or I were more attractive. She was probably doing it out of pity. I said, "Come on, class just switched. I gotta get back."

"Alright!" Seeming to drop the idea, she followed me down to the third floor hallway.

We split up at the bottom of the stairs with a casual wave. While I walked back alone, I started thinking about Amenohara again. *Why was he on the roof, anyway?*

II

The Second Impression

For the next few classes, I had to share my textbook with Amenohara since he didn't have any. It really got under my skin that I had to sit next to this kid who'd seen me in such a state *twice*, but I couldn't do anything about it for now. I made a mental note to ensure he didn't go blabbing about seeing me and Saeko on the roof. Not that he could – if he saw me up there, he was up there, and if he was up there he could get kicked out of school if there was any truth to the rumors about him.

In science class, Kubo-sensei, the teacher from this morning, droned on about the periodic table while Amenohara studiously examined my textbook. I chewed on my pen, dying for a cigarette. *I should have taken a puff of Saeko's on the roof*, I thought. Then again, she'd probably make fun of me for asking for an indirect kiss or something.

"Now, then...Nakagawa-kun." Are you serious? "Can you tell me how many valence electrons are in an atom of oxygen?" The class was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

"I don't know," I said, still seated even though he called on me.

"Come on, Nakagawa-kun. If you were paying attention, you'd know what it was. Just look at the periodic table here." He pointed to the table in question, which he brought in for the lesson.

Before I could retort, I heard a whisper from my left. "It's six," said Amenohara under his breath.

Was he trying to help me?

I gave it a try. "...six?"

Kubo-sensei beamed. "Yes, that's right! See, you can do well if you just apply yourself." He resumed the lesson from there, calling on another student.

What was that? I looked over at Amenohara, who just kept right on taking notes like nothing had happened. He didn't even glance my way.

I guessed nothing *had* happened. He just helped me out. But why?

Classes changed shortly after that. The next class, Koyama-sensei's Japanese, was uneventful. At the bell, Amenohara finished jotting down the last of the teacher's lecture before standing up and making for the hallway. I waited a beat and stood up to follow him as he left the classroom.

He was quick for someone walking at such an even keel. We were about the same height, but he did a good job of weaving through the other students in the crowded hallway while still making long strides. I didn't have to worry about anyone standing in my path, though, so it was easy to keep up with him; losing him in the crowd was the problem.

Finally he turned the corner and, as I thought, he was heading for the stairs to the roof. I hid behind a corner, ignoring the group of students watching me, and waited to see what he'd do when he realized the door was locked...but he just walked right through.

Huh? I was sure to lock it this morning when I left the roof with Saeko. Does he have a key?

I waited for the door to close and pursued him up the stairs, fishing through my bag for my own copy of the roof key in case he locked the door behind him. He didn't, though, and I ended up loudly crashing into the door and flinging it open. The metal door clanged against the brick wall.

Amenohara stared while the door swung shut behind me, mouth half-open read to take a bite of the lunch he'd brought. After a short staring match, he spoke up.

"Do you...normally eat lunch up here? I can leave if you—"

"Hold on," I interrupted. "How did you get the door open?"

"What do you mean?"

“You know we aren’t allowed up here, right? They keep the door locked.”

“But you and that other girl were up here earlier, right?”

“Sure, but we weren’t supposed to be. Anyway, what were you doing up here then?”

“I just wanted to get some fresh air, is all. It’s a nice day.”

I shook my head. This wasn’t the point; he was trying to get me off-topic. “How did you get through the door?”

“This morning? It wasn’t locked.”

“No, not this morning. Don’t play stupid with me. I’m talking about just now. How did you get the door unlocked?” He stared at me for a second, so I spoke again. “Don’t try to come up with a lie. I’m not going to fall for it.”

He sighed. “Fine. You caught me. I picked the lock. Can you go now? If not, I will,” he confessed as he closed up his bento and stood.

As he tried to walk past me, I held my arm out straight to block his path. “Bullshit. That was too fast.”

“Why are you so worried about this? Is it such a big deal if I eat on the roof?” He tried to push my hand out of the way but I pushed back harder.

“You could get expelled, you know.”

He blinked, then looked me up and down. “What do you care? It’s not like you’re a model student yourself.”

...what *did* I care?

“...fine. You can eat up here. I don’t really care about that. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t go blabbing about me practicing on the roof earlier.

“Practicing what, taking your clothes off?”

I could feel myself getting flustered. “I, wha, *no!* Not taking my clothes off, I was practicing karate and I was just changing is all that it was. Don’t get any weird ideas, sicko.”

“You’re the one who was changing her clothes on the roof in broad daylight. All I did was come up here.”

He was really starting to piss me off. “Whatever! Just keep it to yourself!” I turned around and reached for the door. Just as my hand grasped the knob, I felt it turn on its own.

“Junko, I brought you a choco coronet!” Saeko shouted.

She looked up from her phone and saw me and Amenohara standing there. The biggest shit-eating grin I’d ever seen spread across her face. “Oh, excuse me! I didn’t meant to interrupt your rendezvous~” She did a cutesy little twirl and hopped back down the stairs.

Amenohara just shrugged and got back to his lunch without a word. “Aren’t you going to...oh, forget it! Saeko, get back here!” I bolted down the steps after her. Unlike Amenohara, she stood out too much for me to have a chance at losing her. Besides, I knew where she’d be going.

I arrived, panting, at the empty classroom we used sometimes for lunch. Saeko pretended like she wasn’t just running from me as fast as she could and turned to the sliding door when I flung it open. “Oh, Junko! I’m surprised to see you. I hope my interruption didn’t cut your little fling short!”

“Fling? What?” Some others overheard her in the hallway.

I slammed the door behind me. It shook on the rails. “Watch what you’re saying out loud! People will misunderstand!”

“Misunderstand what? Looked like you were having lunch with Amenohara to me...” She looked up at the ceiling in thought for a second. Then, her eyes gleamed. “The star-crossed lovers of Namiuchi High! The class-cutting yankee tempts the reformed transfer student to return to his old, delinquent ways! Will their love be the end of his high school career?!” She accompanied her spiel with bombastic gestures, one hand on her heart and the other over her head.

“Would you shut up?! It’s not like that at all, I said!”

“Then why are you blushing so much?” She asked, feigning innocence.

“Because you— I’m not— damn it!” I paused and took a long breath, then fell into the seat next to hers. “I just wanted to see why he was going to the roof in the first place.”

“Why do you care?” Saeko asked, her mouth full of melon bread.

There’s that question again. Why did I care, exactly? I’d only just met him today. We had no history and had barely spoken to one another, and when we did talk he was kind of a jerk. So, what was my deal?

“I guess...I’m just worried he’ll get expelled if the rumors you told me about were true.”

“So?”

“Well, he helped me out in class today without a good reason. I guess I think I owe him a favor.”

“You don’t stalk someone through the halls to repay a favor.” She sipped her juice box.

“Well, it’s not just that. It bothered me that he went up to the roof this morning to begin with. No one but your or I should be going up there.”

“We shouldn’t be going up there either, though. I bet other kids do it all the time, too. You wouldn’t know about it because you barely go to school. It’s really not that strange for him to do it.”

“I guess. Something about it just bothered me.”

“Are you worried that he went up there for your sake since you flashed him?” The way she asked that question so casually pissed me off, but I ignored it.

“I doubt it. When I approached him earlier he seemed totally disinterested in what I had to say. Besides, I’m not pretty or anything so I doubt he likes me that way.”

“Whatever you say.” She finished her food and crumpled up all the wrappers. “We better go; class is starting soon.” Then she winked and said, “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone about you two.”

I growled and said, “I keep telling you, it’s not that kind of thing!”

“Right, I got it. I’ll make sure nobody suspects you guys!”

Before I could retort she was out of the empty room and around the closest corner. I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed before heading back myself.

On the way back to class I walked past Amenohara, who had left the roof at some point, chatting with two of the other boys from our home room. They were giving him the usual new kid treatment:

“Why’d you have to transfer? Did you do something bad?”

“What do you think of the principal? Total asshole, right?”

“How about the girls at your old school? Were they better than the girls here?” I didn’t catch his answer to the first two, but I heard this one perfectly:

“Actually, I think some of the girls at this school are really cute.”

“Really? You’ve got some weird tastes, man. Most of the girls here are totally plain.”

“Yeah, and then you got freaks like Nakagawa! I bet she eats her lovers’ heads, like a praying mantis!” I stopped next to them.

“Uh...” his friend tugged at his uniform to try and get his attention.

“No, it’s true, man! She’d probably—”

“Probably what?” I asked, leaning over the kid’s shoulder and talking directly into his ear.

I saw his eyes go wide. “Um...I was just...” he stammered.

“Go on. I wanna hear it. What kind of lover am I?” I put my hand around his back and rested it on his shoulder. “I got a good sense of humor, you know? I can take a joke or two.”

“Well...I was gonna say that you’d probably t...take the guy’s dick off...or something...as a joke, though!” He was sweating cold.

I grinned. “That’s fuckin’ hilarious!” I faked a big laugh, then slapped the kid on the back. He stumbled, but his friend caught him. “You’re a real comedian! I could have never come up with that shit!”

“Yeah..yeah, I guess it is kinda funny, huh?” He started to laugh too, and turned to face me. The rest of the hallway was dead silent.

I took a step toward him and placed my left hand on his right shoulder, this time facing each other. I was still “laughing,” but I stared unblinking in his eyes. His laughter faded away.

“Can you, uh, let me go?” He tried to break my grip, but couldn’t.

“What? No more jokes? I wanna hear another one. I bet you got tons about me, right?”

“Uh, well, I don’t have any more jokes about you, actually..” He trailed off and broke eye contact.

“Here, I know a good one.” I slammed my fist into his solar plexus. His breath left him and he doubled over before falling onto the hallway floor in front of me.

I looked down on the squirming punk and grimaced. “What a loser. If you can’t even take that, you better seriously watch what you say.”

As I turned away I met Amenohara’s eyes. Where I expected fear, or maybe disgust, or at least apprehension, I saw something else. I didn’t know what it was at the time, but it bothered me the rest of the day.

III

Crumbling Walls

The last bell ended and I shot up out of my seat. I hadn't been so anxious to leave school in a long time...then again, I skipped a lot. Still, today had been more frustrating than usual. Most of the time I hated school because I had to listen to some old fart talk about useless shit for hours at a time while people pretended not to stare at me, but that was comparatively mild next to the other events of the day.

To my surprise, nobody bothered to report me for leveling the kid Amenohara was talking with. Usually I found myself in the faculty office or even talking to the principal for those "outbursts" of mine. I wondered why I was so bothered; that sort of shit-talk normally rolled off my back like rain.

Whatever, I thought to myself. I was probably just in a bad mood after Saeko had been teasing me all day, not to mention the pantyshots.

Just as I was thinking of her she appeared. Rather, she was waiting for me at the end of the hallway, surrounded by boys as usual.

"Can I walk you home?" asked one chubby kid.

"Do you want anything from the school store?" said another guy.

"Are you free on Sunday?" asked a third, more bold suitor.

She paid them no attention and scrolled through her phone. When I approached and cast a shadow over it, she put it back in her purse.

"Sorry, guys! I'm walking home with Junko today!" She looked up at me pleadingly. "Right?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I'll come with you today." The boys dispersed, murmuring to each other dejectedly.

"Yay!" She turned to the door. "Let's get something to eat on the way home, 'kay? I have a lot to ask you about!"

"It better not be what I think it is..."

Once we were out of the boys' earshot, she said, "You mean your new boyfriend? Why wouldn't I ask about it?"

"Come on, you know it's not like that—"

I heard someone call out after us. "Hey! Nakagawa-kun!"

Shit. "Yes, Kubo-sensei?" I replied without turning to face him and rolled my eyes.

"I need a favor from you."

"Can't you ask someone else?"

"You're the only one who lives on the same street. I need you to walk home with Amenohara-san."

Saeko stifled a laugh.

"Why? He too stupid to read a map?"

By this point he closed this distance between us. "He got dropped off here and doesn't know the way. Just do me this one favor, okay?"

I sighed. "And if I don't?"

"Then your parents will hear about that altercation earlier today."

Damn, he *did* know. I turned to face him. "Alright, alright! I'll take him home. Just don't expect me to make friends with him or anything."

He smiled again. That same grin he gave in class when Amenohara fed me the answer. The same one he gave in my first year when I joined the karate club.

"Thank you. Amenohara, you've met Nakagawa Junko, right?"

"Yeah. We sit next to each other."

"That's right, you do! Great, then there's no need for introductions. The both of you live next door, so—"

"Huh?!" I cut him off.

"What? That's why I asked *you* to show him the way." He looked at me like I was an idiot. I could tell it was taking every-

thing Saeko had not to die laughing right there. Amenohara was unfazed as usual.

I was speechless.

“So you’ll take him then, right? Tell your father I said hello when you get home, okay?” With that, Kubo-sensei went back into the school and left me, Amenohara, and Saeko all standing in a circle.

Amenohara spoke up first. “...can we get going? I’d like to get back home before dark, if that’s okay.”

“No way! You should totally come with me and Junko to the family restaurant to eat first!”

“My mom probably made dinner already, but thanks for the offer. If you don’t want to go out of your way, I can go home by myself.”

“Nonsense!” Saeko said with dramatic flair. “We can’t leave you to your own devices like that! You could get lost, so Junko will take responsibility and show you the way. She and I can go out another time.” She looked over and winked at me. I could have killed her.

“Well, if you say so. Thanks.”

“Totally! See ya later, guys!” Saeko ran off, waving behind her. I hadn’t even *said* anything since Kubo left us, and here I was alone with Amenohara.

“...tch. Alright, let’s go.” I started walking again, my strides a little quicker than usual. My legs were sore from practice earlier but I did my best to ignore it and keep going as quick as I could stand.

Amenohara, surprisingly for a twiggy guy like him, didn’t have a problem keeping up with me.

After a few minutes the silence must have started bugging him. “So...how long have you been living in this area?”

“Since the start of my first year.”

“Just over two years, then, huh? I lived here when I was a kid but my family had to move away for my mom’s work.”

“Wow,” I replied, dead-pan.

“Why’d you move here? The school?”

“No. My dad’s work.” I lit the first cigarette I had since that morning.

“Oh.” He paused for a second to think of what to say next. “Well,-”

“Look, you don’t have to talk to me.”

“...alright.”

I looked straight ahead and tried to pretend he wasn’t there. This was a normal walk home, after all. He just happened to be going in the same direction. The thought of frequently seeing him on my way to and from school made me want to skip even more than usual.

“That was really cool, earlier,” he said out of the blue.

“I said—huh?”

“When you punched that kid’s guts in.” I could see he was dead serious out of the corner of my eye. “He was bothering me, too, but I couldn’t get him to leave me alone.”

“Oh...well, I didn’t do it for your benefit. He just pissed me off.”

“I know. I’m just saying, it was cool.”

“...thanks.” I guess?

“How long have you been training to fight?”

“I’ve been doing karate since elementary school.”

“That explains the uniform I saw on the roof.”

“Don’t talk so loud about the roof. We’re still close to the school.”

“Oh, right. Well, anyway, that explains the uniform you had on.”

I was trying to forget that he saw me in it at all, given the context.

“Do you go up there a lot?”

“..yeah. When I come to school I find some time to go up there with Saeko. Why?” I finally looked over at him. He looked like he had been waiting for me to face him.

“Just wondering.”

We got quiet again. I didn’t think I’d been this uncomfortable since middle school. Usually people left me alone, so I wasn’t

sure how to talk to somebody new. I didn't know where the lines were or what would cross them.

Still, something had been bothering me. "You said you picked the lock to get to the roof, right?"

"Yeah."

"Where did you learn to do that?"

"My last school's roof had the same door."

"Why did you pick *that* lock?"

"I wanted to get on the roof back then, too."

"For what?"

"You ask some weird questions." *Who* was the weird one here? "I guess I can tell you. All the faculty know anyway, and probably half the kids. I used to skip class, go up to the roof and read manga. My grades were good so they didn't bother making me attend class, but I got caught red-handed picking the lock by a teacher who hated me. Next thing I knew, I was expelled."

"...manga?"

"Yeah."

We got quiet for a second. All I could hear were some birds in the distance and the clack of our shoes against the pavement.

I couldn't hold back any more. I was practically shaking from holding it in, but finally I *had* to let go. I burst out into the loudest laugh I think I'd ever done since starting high school. My sides hurt and I clutched them, doubled over and wrapped in my own arms.

"Manga?! All that build up and mystery for manga?!" I howled.

I could see Amenohara was embarrassed, but to his credit he didn't get upset with me for making fun of him.

I wiped a tear from my eye. "Sorry. I just didn't expect that. The rumor right now is that you spray painted the school. I expected you to say you did something seriously crazy, but you're a good kid after all."

"Yeah, I guess..." he kicked at the ground. "I kind of wish I could get away with more, but my parents have been really strict

since I got kicked out of my old school. This school is my last chance, so I guess they aren't wrong to be."

I shrugged. "It's not that great. Blowing off school, I mean. It's fun the first couple of times but eventually it gets just as routine as everything else."

"Do you and that other girl skip class often?"

"Saeko never skips school, but she cuts class once in a while to bug me on the roof. I cut when I can get away with it, but my dad's been busting my chops over whether I'll be able to graduate lately. I don't think I'll skip until summer break, at least."

"Summer break is in two weeks."

"Yeah, I know." That was how long I could stand normal attendance. We rounded the corner to our street. The late afternoon sun baked the sidewalk. Some elementary school kids were playing loudly at a nearby park, arguing over something I couldn't make out.

"What do you do when you skip, anyway?"

"Depends. Sometimes I go for a bike ride. Sometimes I find a place to train. I used to go to different karate dojos but they stopped letting me in during school hours when they found out I was a student."

"Why do you like fighting so much?"

I thought about it for a second. In that time, we reached our houses – which were right next door to each other – and I stood in front of my gate. "I guess it's all I have. Anyway, this is my house. Later."

"Oh, right. I didn't notice. See you tomorrow."

I shut the gate behind me and made for the door.

IV

Modeling

The door was unlocked as usual. I let it close on its own behind me and kicked my shoes off in the foyer.

"I'm back," I called to my parents.

"Welcome home," said my mother from the kitchen. "Your father is out back. How was school?"

"I've had better days there," I replied, making for the kitchen. I poked my head in the doorway. "What are we having?"

"Hamburger steak," she said. "Your father was in such a good mood when he saw you leaving the house in your uniform for once that he asked for it." She was smiling while she shaped the meat.

He better not get too used to it, I thought. Today's events were more than enough for me. Still, I thought I should go let the old man know I was home.

As I headed for the back door, my mom said, "I was happy to see that, too."

As if I didn't feel bad enough...I opened the kitchen door and stuck my head out. My dad was tending to his garden; I could see he'd been at it for a while by the sweat on his back.

"I'm home, dad."

He turned to face me. His graying hair shined with sweat under his wide-brimmed hat. "Welcome back, Junko. I'm glad I didn't have to come pick you up."

"Did you need to say that? It's not like I *always* get into trouble."

"Don't you?" He kept smiling, the same smile that Kubo gave earlier. "I used to have to come to that school and get you once a week or more. When you went, that is." He was struggling with a particularly deep-rooted weed.

“Here, let me.” I reached for it but he stopped my hand.

“I’m not that old just yet.” With a grunt he ripped it out of the ground, roots and all. He let out a sharp breath and I thought I heard something pop, but he played it off. “Anyway, how was class today?”

“...fine, I guess. Kubo-sensei says hey.”

“Glad to hear he’s still doing well.” The old man stood with a groan and stretched his back. “Did anything interesting happen? Any more adventures on the roof with that girl?”

“Tch. Saeko and I don’t go on ‘adventures,’ we just hang out.”

“She’s a nice girl, that Saeko-chan. You should have her over again soon.”

“Mom says she’s a bad influence.”

“That’s just because she’s so cute.” He paused. “Don’t tell mom I said that, or she’ll have a fit. And don’t you go having a fit either.”

“Dirty old man.” It was a little gross for him to talk about the closest thing I had to a friend that way, but Saeko *was* pretty. I couldn’t blame him.

He just nodded. “Anyhow, I’m glad she keeps an eye on you. Seems like you’ve been getting into less trouble since she came into the picture.”

She just keeps watch so no one catches me, I kept to myself. “Anyway, I’m going to take a shower before dinner. I, uh...ran home from school.”

“Go ahead. I was going to wait until later to take my bath, anyway.”

I went back inside before him and made for my bedroom to get changed out of my uniform. I ensured my curtains were closed in case Amenohara’s bedroom was the one across from mine before disrobing.

Halfway through I took a glance at myself in the mirror; the same full-length one I’d had since I was in middle school. I didn’t look at it much anymore. I seldom spent any time in my room at all, and I didn’t pay much mind to my appearance in a way that I needed a mirror to check.

This time, though, I noticed the pink, frilly trim on my underwear and they reminded me of accidentally flashing Amenohara and Saeko's teasing.

"Not what you'd expect, huh..." I traced the waistband with my finger. I guessed she was right – I don't think many people would picture a girl like me wearing this sort of thing. Something like the spats I wore while training is probably what most people imagined. It wasn't exactly relaxing to bring these up to the checkout counter, either. It was probably just my imagination, but the cashier seemed to be wondering whether I was buying those for someone else. *Saeko could have been a little nicer about it*, I thought.

I turned around and looked over my shoulder at my backside. I wondered how it looked when I was bent over...then I saw my face getting a little red while I wondered what Amenohara might have thought of me. I shook it off, mussing up my hair even more than it already was.

As I slipped out of the panties I heard my phone go off in my bag. I opened it and sure enough, Saeko's icon was there. Against my better judgment, I answered her call. I heard some chatter in the background before she spoke; she was alone at some kind of café.

"How was the walk? Did you two elope?"

"Shut up."

"Come on! Let me have a little fun. He's kind of mysterious, right? He's got that going for him at least! Even if his looks aren't the best."

"He didn't graffiti the school."

"Oh, he told you about it?! You're getting close awful fast! What was it?"

I smirked. "Not telling. It's pretty shocking."

"What?! No fair!"

"That's your punishment for earlier."

"What did I do?!" She put on her best whine. She could have been an actor.

"You basically invited him to my strip tease."

“I did not! It’s not my fault he saw you bent over like that!”

“It is.”

“Come on!!! Tell me, tell me!!” I wondered if she was bothering the people around her with how loud she was.

I sighed. “You can’t tell anyone else. I don’t think he wants people to know the real story.”

“Ooh, why, why? Is it really serious? Or really embarrassing, maybe? Was he having sex at school?!”

“No, that’s you.”

“Hey! I’m a pure maiden! An untouched flower! Don’t you accuse me of such a thing!”

“...pure maiden?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Just tell me what Amenohara did!”

“He brought manga to school and read it on the roof.”

She went quiet. Her bated breath was released and she said, “Oh.”

We sat there in silence for a while, long enough to realize I’d been standing around naked. “Anyway, I’m gonna go take a shower.”

“Let me watch! That will make up for that shitty story. Junko Nakagawa reveals all! Watch the water run down her muscular back!”

Muscular back, huh? I looked at it in the mirror. My tan line made it a little harder to tell, but I guessed it was pretty well-defined compared to other girls I’d seen in the locker room.

Saeko kept going. “Just how far will she go with the detached shower head?! Get the exhilarating show on pay-per-view!”

“Do they do pay-per-view porn?”

“That’s not important! I wanna see!”

“Can I hang up now? I’d like to be done before dinner.”

“Fiine! Just send me a spicy pic, okay?!”

“Tch.” I hung up and tossed my phone onto my bed. I noticed it land next to the panties I tossed away while I was on the phone and started wondering again.

“I’m gonna regret this,” I said aloud as I snapped the picture.

The hot water was exactly what I'd needed after my training session earlier. If Amenohara hadn't seen me I would have sneaked into the school's locker rooms, but I was on edge and worried Saeko would somehow lead him there for my "full reveal."

I faced the spout and let the water run down my front side. It was my legs in particular that needed the soothing sensation after all that kicking. While the water massaged my muscles my mind started to wander yet again.

"Why do you like fighting so much?"

I wondered about my answer. *Is it really all I have?* I thought about my family, Saeko, even Kubo-sensei who looked out for me from time to time. Why did I single out fighting?

I looked down at my body. I had scars in all sorts of places and my legs were bruised from kicking the bag so much today. My hands weren't in much better shape. But still, in spite of all this, there was something about training – let alone fighting someone for real – that made me...happy? No, not quite. Fulfilled, I guessed, as I shut the water off. Proud, maybe?

The room was full top to bottom with steam. I waved some of it out of my face and went for a towel. My sore muscles begged to get back in the shower for a few more minutes but I ignored the pain and dried off.

Ignored the pain, huh?

"Junko, are you coming to dinner?" I faintly heard my mom call.

"Yeah," I hollered. "I'm just getting dressed." I threw on some flannel pajama pants and one of my dad's old t-shirts with some ancient band's logo on the front.

On the way back to the dining room I checked my phone. Saeko responded to the picture I sent her almost instantly, tried to call me, then sent about 15 text messages in the span of 5 minutes.

Is it really that big a deal? I wondered as I sat down at the table, scrolling through her messages.

“Wow! That’s really bold! I never expected that! And you call me a slut!” she said, with a flurry of emojis haphazardly peppered in. “The panties are cute, sure! But wow!” *What is she talking about?* I scrolled back up and furtively examined the image, checking over my shoulder to see if anyone was behind me as I sat at the table. All I sent was a picture of the panties from before, with the caption, “Is it really that weird for me to wear something like this?”

...or, so I thought. I had held them up with one hand to take the picture and sent it almost immediately after, failing to notice that my mirror was visible in the shot. I unwittingly sent Saeko a (blurry, out-of-focus) fully nude side-view of my body from the neck down.

I dropped my phone into my dinner in shock.

“Junko! What’s wrong?” asked my mother.

“Did something happen?” my father asked, his expression getting serious.

I was too stunned to reply. *Kill me. Kill me*, I prayed. My mom lifted my phone out of the burgers, its screen having gone black when I dropped it. I snatched it from her hand, wiped it down with a napkin, and shoved it into my pocket in one swift motion.

I frantically scarfed down the remains of my dinner, shouted “thanks!” and bolted back into my room.

“Junko! Is everything alright!”

“I’m fine,” I replied, my voice cracking. “I just remembered a, uh, an answer to a question in class! I wanted to write it down!”

I doubt they believed me but I didn’t care. I speed-dialed Saeko and held my breath while I waited for her to answer. My head was spinning. Dinner considered vaulting out of my stomach. Every ring made it worse.

Saeko refused to answer. She texted me a picture of herself (fully clothed) winking and flashing a peace sign. The caption read, “we can talk about it on the roof tomorrow!”

V

Rooftop Confessional

Saeko was waiting for me on the roof, staring at her phone and twirling her hair on her finger. It was overcast and her blonde locks stood out against the gray skies behind her.

“DELETE THAT PHOTO RIGHT NOW!”

“Hmm?” She looked up innocently. “Didn’t you have a photoshoot today?”

“Shut up and delete it!” I yelled, swiping at the phone. “I didn’t mean for you to see the mirror!”

Saeko dodged me effortlessly. “You didn’t? But it was a great shot! I almost thought a pro took it...” she feigned disappointment; of course she knew all along that I didn’t intend to send her *everything* like that.

“I’m serious, delete that! I could go to jail over that kind of thing, you know?” I kept poking my head into the door on the roof to make sure nobody was listening nearby.

“Oh, come on. It’s not like—”

“Delete it now!” I started panting.

“But I already made it my background image,” she cooed, showing me the side view of my bare ass on her phone screen. “You look so cute, standing there all nervous!”

“Damn it, Saeko, this isn’t funny!”

“I know it’s not! This kind of expression of your sexuality is a very serious thing for a growing girl!” She was laughing.

“Saeko! I’m not kidding around! I’ll kill you if you don’t delete that damn picture!” I was getting louder without realizing it.

She wiped a tear from her eye and caught her breath. “Okay...I’ll delete it. It’s the best picture on my phone, though, so I have a condition.”

“You’re blackmailing me?!” I could have punched her.

“Just hear me out...why did you ask me that question about your underwear to begin with?”

My heavy breathing stopped on a dime. “What? Why?”

“Yeah! Why did you ask me whether wearing that kind of thing was strange for you, Junko?”

“Because you said it was unexpected yesterday. Now delete the—”

“So? I say stuff like that about you all the time. Like that day you put lip balm on. I said, ‘I didn’t expect you to care about that kind of thing.’ You bonked me on the head, said it was because your lips chap in the winter, and we left it at that. This time, it seems like it really got to you, though.”

“Well...” I swallowed. “I guess I was embarrassed about it.”

“Because a boy saw them, right?”

“Wha- no! I don’t care about what he thinks!”

“Sure you do. It’s normal, you know? For a girl to care about what boys think of her. I know I care.”

“But I don’t like Amenohara that way! I barely know him! In fact, I don’t like him at all!”

“Maybe. You sure seem curious about him, though, ever since he saw your panties.” She paused for a second. “By the way, I bet they look really cute on you, Junko. They suit you. Amenohara probably thought so too.”

“...really?” I couldn’t believe I said that and covered my mouth as soon as the word left it.

She smirked. “See? You *are* concerned about what he thinks. Well, it’s not like that means you *like* him though.”

“..yeah.” I thought about it for a second. “Well, he probably doesn’t like me that way anyhow. Cute panties or not, I’m not pretty,” I said with a shrug.

“What makes you say that?”

I had started lighting a cigarette and I paused mid-stroke of the lighter when she asked me that. Raising an eyebrow I asked, muffled by the cigarette, “What do you mean, ‘what?’ No girl who trains like I do is going to be pretty.”

"I don't think that's true," she said, uncharacteristically seriously. "Didn't Sugimiya ask you out last year?"

"Oh, come on. That was a prank. His friends put him up to it. You saw for yourself that they were watching around the corner." I dropped my lighter back in my school jacket pocket and took a drag.

"I don't know. He sounded pretty serious. They were probably there to support him since you're kind of intimidating. Then you punched him, and *that's* when they started laughing."

"Kicked him," I corrected. "A front kick to the guts." I remembered it well. I got his buddies, too.

"What if he *was* serious?" she asked, pulling me out of the memory. "Did you consider that possibility at the time?"

"S-sure I did," I said, looking away from her. "But I don't believe he was."

"Would you have accepted his confession if you thought he meant it?"

"Well, I don't know!" I raised my voice louder than I meant to. "Why are you grilling me so much about this, anyway?"

"Because," she said. "I think you're scared."

"What the hell did you say?" I leaned forward and got in her face. Our noses were almost touching. "Who are you calling scared?"

"You," she replied, unflinching. "I think you're afraid to get close to anyone, especially boys. I'm the odd one out, and you only put up with me because we were friends back in elementary school. Everyone else – the karate club, the other students, even the other truants at this school – you've pushed them all away."

"Shut up!" I said. "I ain't afraid!"

"Then why do you do it, Junko?" Her voice was steady and calm. It made me feel stupid for yelling. "Why don't you let anyone in?"

I was fuming, and breathing heavy through my nose. Saeko burned holes in my eyes with her own, arms crossed and foot tapping while she waited impatiently for my reply.

I couldn't manage eye contact. "I just don't think anyone will like me."

"Why not?"

"Because!" I yelped, my voice cracking a little. "Look at me! I'm a big, scary-looking 'girl' who introduced herself to the school by pounding a kid's face into hamburger! I'm mean and ugly and I've already been turned away by everyone I've tried to get close to before!" I was panting. "All I've ever done is lose the people I care about, either to someone else or to my own mistakes!"

Saeko stepped closer to me. Until I felt her wipe away a tear, I didn't realize I started crying. Once I realized it, I couldn't stop. She took another step forward and hugged me close.

I fell into her and let her wrap her arms around my back. I cried into her shoulder, my whole body shaking as she hugged me. We both went to our knees as I returned her embrace.

"It's okay," she said, rubbing my back.

Eventually I calmed down a little. I pulled away from her now tear-stained sweater and wiped my face with my sleeve. "Sorry," I mumbled.

"It's okay," she said with a smile. "Feel better?"

"Not really," I said, laughing a little. "I feel like an idiot. I guess I decided that the people who rejected me were right to."

"Then you decided no one *could* like you. Right?"

"Yeah..." I said, sniffing. The sun had broken through the clouds while I cried into Saeko's shoulder. The light shone against her golden hair.

"So, are you going to stop judging yourself like that?" She reached into her purse and pulled out a handkerchief, handing it over to me.

I wiped my face. The handkerchief smelled like her perfume; I knew because I just spent five minutes pressed against a shirt that smelled the same way. I tried to hand it back but she declined it. "Am I just supposed to pretend like the last three years didn't happen? Fact is, I *did* hurt some people. Even if some deserved

it, that makes me kind of scary, huh? I doubt anyone will want to befriend me at this point.”

“Well, what about Amenohara? He doesn’t know anything about that stuff, besides rumors. Why don’t you try making friends with him?”

“He saw me punch a kid yesterday,” I said quietly, looking away. “I doubt—”

“But he still walked home together with you. He talked to you the whole way, too,” she said, cutting me off.

“Huh?”

She grinned. “I might have taken a detour on my way to the restaurant to see how your walk with him went.”

“You what?!”

With a giggle, she stood up. “Anyway, I think you should try to get to know him. Who knows what might happen? Maybe you’ll end up with some youthful memories.” She opened the door to the roof as the school bell chimed.

Maybe, I thought. I sat there for a minute. She stood with the door open, waiting for me to get up. “Wait a second,” I said as I realized something.

“What?” Saeko asked innocently.

“You never deleted that picture!”

“Uh-oh.”

I jumped to my feet and ran at her full-tilt toward the stairs, which she was already quickly descending. “Get back here and give me your phone, now!” For some reason, I was laughing along with her.

VI

The Invitation

When I got back to class after ensuring Saeko really did delete the picture, Amenohara's desk was empty. I wondered as Kubo-sensei droned on and on about the elements if he was on the roof. I was a little disappointed; I wasn't thrilled about seeing him but Saeko was right that I should at least *try* to make another friend. School was going to end for me soon, after all.

I twirled my pen in my fingers as I stared absentmindedly at his unoccupied seat. The sun shone through the classroom windows and some crows rested on a phone line outside. One of them inched nervously closer to another.

I stood up to go to the roof. "Sensei, bathroom break," I called on the way out. He called after me but I just ignored him; I had the excuse all girls have when it comes to bathroom breaks anyway.

No one else was in the hallway and I noticed the unusual quiet for the first time in a while. Normally, I didn't think anything of the loneliness of these walks to the roof, but something about it struck me today. Aside from the clap of my soles against the linoleum and the occasional muffled lecture from a teacher I couldn't hear anything. Rather, there was nothing to hear in the first place.

At the top of the stairs, I noticed my hand shaking when I tried to unlock the door. I took a deep breath to calm myself down. *What are you nervous for?* I asked myself.

"You're afraid," my memory of Saeko that morning reminded me. I shook my head at myself, forced the key into the doorknob, and turned it.

There sat Amenohara alone, flipping through a book with his back to the door. Next to him stood a tower of dog-eared manga

volumes. *Moron*, I thought to myself – no one was even here to keep watch.

I crept up behind him after quietly shutting the door. He didn't seem to notice, so I got a bit closer, then closer still. Finally, I was just a few inches behind him. "Whatcha reading?"

He jumped, yelped, and spun in one singular motion until he was facing me. "N-Nakagawa-san," he started, half-hiding his face with his book. "When did you get up here?"

"Just now," I said, sitting down cross-legged in front of him. I wore spats under my skirt that day, so I wasn't worried about another unintended pantyshot. "That manga must be pretty good, since you didn't notice me open the door."

"I guess," he said meekly while rubbing the back of his head. "I just got to a good part."

"What kind of manga?" I grabbed the volume on the top of his tower.

"Wait," he started, reaching out a hand, but it was too late.

"Gorgeous Mend?" I read aloud. On the cover, two young girls were posing cutely while dressed in garish, frilly outfits. I turned to the back cover and read aloud, "Mari-chan and Naomi-chan finally come face to face with the leader of the evil organization Maze, and—"

Amenohara snatched the book from my hand while yelling, "Stop reading it so loud!" He held a finger up to his lips. "People will hear you."

"Ah...right..." I managed. I stared at Amenohara with, probably, a really dumb look on my face. "So, you, uh, you like that kind of thing?"

"Yeah," he said sheepishly. "Ever since I was a kid I've been a big fan of GoMen." He looked away. "Kind of lame, I guess."

"Yeah," I agreed without realizing. "Er, I mean—"

He laughed. "Thanks for being honest. Sometimes people try to make me feel better about it, but I know it's weird for a high schooler to like a manga for little girls."

That explained why he was so weird and distant on the roof yesterday – he didn't want anyone to reveal his tastes to the

school. "I won't tell anyone," I said. "Since you helped me out in class yesterday."

He smiled. "Really? Thanks," he said with a sigh of relief, his face lightening after going a pretty dark shade of red before. "I guess I owe you one."

"Then," I cleared my throat. "How...how about going to get something to eat together after school?" I caught myself looking away, but couldn't turn my head back to face him so I watched myself draw a circle with my finger. "If, you know, if you aren't busy." In an instant my heart went from beating normally to jumping out of my throat.

Before I could take it back, he replied, "Okay! I'll meet you at the school gate." When I looked up, he was smiling. I couldn't read his emotions. Was it pity? Maybe he accepted out of fear? Maybe he was just...happy?

"Yeah...okay. I'll be hanging around there after class, then." I didn't know what to do now, so I stood up and turned away. "Don't be late," I said over my shoulder after taking a couple steps.

As soon as I got to the bottom of the stairs I slapped myself on the forehead. '*Don't be late?*' *What are you threatening him for, idiot?* Too embarrassed to go back up the stairs and explain what I meant and too full of nervous energy to go back to class and sit down, I found myself wandering around the silent halls once again. Eventually I came by a propped-open window and leaned onto the sill.

At least he didn't turn down the invitation outright, I thought. In fact, didn't he seem kind of...excited? I wished I'd seen his reaction rather than just hearing it. Maybe I was overthinking it. Maybe he *was* just taking pity on me and humoring the one invitation before avoiding me for the rest of the year.

I propped my chin on my fist as the birds played in the empty courtyard outside the window. I noticed a couple sitting on a bench, cutting class in favor of holding hands and staring at each

other. When they started making out I turned away. “Get a room,” I muttered out loud.

“Room for what?” As soon as I turned away from the kissing couple Saeko appeared before me, hands clasped behind her back.

“What are you, a stalker?”

“Did you talk to Amenohara yet?”

“..yeah. We’re going to eat together after school.”

She beamed, took a deep breath like she was going to say something loud, then paused. “As a date?”

“No!” I said, louder than I meant to. The teacher in the room across the hall, whose droning voice had become ambient noise, suddenly stopped speaking. I heard his footsteps approach the classroom door.

“Shit. Look, I’ll talk to you later. I don’t want to get caught skipping.” I scooped up my bag and made my way back to my own classroom.

“Okay, but you better not hide any details from me,” she whispered as we split up.

When I walked back into my classroom, Kubo raised an eyebrow. He must have been surprised that I actually bothered to come back within the same class period. I fell into my seat and stared at the ceiling, still wondering how I should approach this afternoon.

VII

This is (Not) a Date

I crossed my arms and tapped my foot impatiently as the other students passed me at the school gate, their eyes fixed to the ground. I tried not to let it bother me that everyone was keeping a wide berth when they walked past.

Where is he? I thought. Then again, it would probably be better if no one saw us walking out together, for his sake. Wouldn't want him to deal with any annoying rumors.

"Oh, you're here," said Amenohara, appearing seemingly out of thin air. "I thought I'd be the one waiting for you." He smiled.

"Well, sorry for being so fast, I guess." I uncrossed my arms and looked at him for a second. Then we looked at each other some more. People were whispering as they walked past our staring contest.

"So, which restaurant were you thinking of going to?" he asked after a moment, a little nervous.

Oh, right. I invited him. I also didn't have a real plan; inviting him to eat was obviously a spur-of-the-moment decision and one I didn't put much thought into before asking him. Since asking him, I worried more about what he was thinking than where we should actually go.

I decided to wing it. "There's a family restaurant not far from here that Saeko and I visit sometimes." I picked my bag up and started walking that way.

"That sounds good," he replied, having taken a moment to collect himself and catch up with me. "Is your friend going to come eat with us today?"

"No, she has part-time work right after school. Why, disappointed that it's just me?"

“Huh? Why would I be? You mentioned her, so I just thought she might be joining us. I actually prefer that it’s the two of us by ourselves.”

“What? Why?” Did he have a problem with Saeko or something?

“Well, it would be weird to have a third wheel on our date—”

“Wait, wait a minute!” I spun around and held out my hand, clutching my bag’s straps so tight with the other that my knuckles were white. “Don’t get the wrong idea, here!” Some people turned toward us.

He tilted his head. “What? We’re going out together, boy and girl, so this is a date. Am I mistaken?”

“Yes!” I was practically screaming. A little boy pointed it out and his mother scolded him to not look at weird people. “I just wanted to get to know you better is all, not invite you on a d-date!”

“Hmm...so you asked me to go out with you after school so we could get to know each other better over food in private?” He rubbed his chin in thought.

“Exactly!”

“That’s just a date, Nakagawa-san.” He said confidently.

“Stop saying that! Aren’t you embarrassed?”

“Why would I be embarrassed about going out with a girl like you?”

My face went bright red. I blocked his view of it with my hand, palm out.

“I’m obviously not getting through to you! Let’s just go!” I stormed off toward the restaurant, hoping I would calm down enough to explain (or, figure out) the difference between what we were doing and a date by the time we got there.

I stayed a good two feet ahead of Amenohara for the rest of the walk, during which he remained silent. I didn’t know if he was contemplating what I’d said to him before or something else, but I was grateful for the chance to catch my breath.

The little bell on the glass door chimed as we made our entrance. The sign said “Please seat yourselves!” and I took the lib-

erty of grabbing an open booth. Amenohara sat across from me and we were presented with menus and asked to order drinks before we got a chance to speak.

Amenohara spoke up first when the waitress left us. "Thanks again for—"

"Don't thank me," I interrupted. "I'm not doing you a favor right now."

"Sure you are," he said. "I'm new to this part of town and you're taking the time to get to know me like this. That's really kind."

"You know," I started, "you're a little too honest about how you feel."

"What do you mean?"

"Like just now. 'That's really kind,'" I mocked in a deliberately terrible impression of Amenohara. "Saying that sort of shit can make people think you're coming on too strong, Amenohara...san." I realized I'd never called him by name until just then.

"You can just call me Shinjiro," he said with a smile.

"And that!" I held my hand out emphatically, as if presenting his words to him. "Who the hell gets on a first-name basis after knowing someone for less than two days!?"

"Okay, then Amenohara is fine for now." The entire time we talked, he pored over the menu. It was kind of annoying me that he could multi-task like that. "Anyway, I don't think there's a problem with coming on strong in this case. I have a good chance here."

"Chance? Chance for what?"

"To get a cute girlfriend at my new school?" He said it like I was a total idiot for not understanding intuitively.

"Cu-cute?" I looked away, blushing at the butterflies I got from the compliment, then caught myself. "Wait, wait, wait! I keep telling you, this isn't a date or anything!"

"Fine," he shrugged. "It's not a date. I'll just have to impress you enough to get you to go on a real date with me later, then."

“Stop that already,” I whined. All that calming down on the walk over here did me precisely no good. I hid my face behind the restaurant’s plastic-bound menu and pretended to read it while I thought about what was happening.

Is he serious? He’s moving way too fast! I don’t even know if I like this guy yet and he’s talking about boyfriends and dates and all this shit already! I peeked over the top of the menu to find Amenohara still deciding what he’d like to eat. *And he’s so damn casual about it! Was he a player or something at his last school? Am I in over my head here?*

Before I got sucked into a spiral of questions about Amenohara’s true intentions, the waitress returned and took our orders. I just got the hamburger steak on instinct (even though I ate the same thing yesterday for dinner) since I hadn’t actually taken any time to decide what I wanted.

Once she left, Amenohara spoke up again. “So, what got you into karate when you were a kid?”

“Huh? How do you know that?” Was he stalking me? Was this part of his plan to play me?

“...I asked you yesterday how long you trained, and you said you did karate in elementary school.”

“Oh. Oh, right...I forgot about that.” I scratched my head. “Back then...I guess I did karate because I wanted to be strong.”

“Why?” He asked. “Usually little girls don’t have that kind of goal.”

“Well, I used to get bullied as a little kid. The girls in my class would call me names, make fun of me, or mess with my stuff. The only one who didn’t back then was Saeko, but they bullied her for defending me.”

“So you wanted to protect your friend?”

“I guess that was part of it, sure. But I also thought that if I got stronger it wouldn’t bother me as much when they picked on me.”

“Did it work?”

“I didn’t get a chance to find out. I ended up moving schools for my dad’s work not long after I started.”

“Didn’t you say that was the same reason you ended up moving here?”

“Yeah. My old man ended up going back to his old job after a few years because they offered him a better position and better pay.” I was surprised at how quickly we were getting into a conversational groove; every other time we’d talked until now was riddled with awkward silences and unrelated segues.

“Sounds like it was a pretty good move. How did you feel about it at the time?” He took a sip of his drink and watched me intently.

“It’s not like I had a choice, so of course I went along with it.”

“Do you think things would have been better for you, personally, if you didn’t have to move?”

Here was a pause, though this one wasn’t because we’d run out of things to say like before. “Well...I don’t know. I had friends back in middle school, but we weren’t really tight or anything.” I stared into my soda. “I guess that’s not true. I had one good friend, but we lost touch after I moved.”

“That’s too bad. Maybe you should reach out?”

“...no, I don’t think that’s a good idea. We parted on bad terms and haven’t spoken since the day before I left.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Well, I can’t tell you what to do since I don’t know all the details. It might be for the best like this, you know?”

“..yeah.” I didn’t expect to get caught up in reminiscing like this while I was out with Amenohara. Maybe that was part of moving on, or something. Come to think of it, I hadn’t thought about Ichimaru in a long time. It really stung to think about that last day of middle school, in front of his house.

“I guess I don’t want to get hurt again,” I blurted out, mostly to myself.

“Sounds like it was pretty bad,” Amenohara replied, reminding me that he was there. I didn’t intend to spill my guts to him like this.

“Anyway,” I spoke up, clearing my throat. “What about you? Did you have any friends at your old school?”

It was his turn to shrug awkwardly. "Not really. An honors student who slacks off isn't popular with other slackers or other honors students, and I didn't try hard enough in gym class for sports clubs to want me." He shrugged. "But that's alright with me."

Our food arrived before I could respond. I was surprised at how quickly Amenohara ate. For a skinny guy, he could sure pack it away.

Between bites I spoke up. "It doesn't bother you?"

"Hmph?" He looked up mid-chew to confirm what I was asking.

"That you didn't make any friends back then, I mean."

He swallowed. "Oh, that. Not really. I didn't *try* to make friends, so it was natural that no one tried to make friends with me."

"You don't regret it now?"

"Do you?"

"What do you mean?"

He washed down his dinner, which was completed in record time, and said, "From what I have seen and heard, people tend to avoid you. Do you regret not being approachable enough to make more friends?"

"I..." I recalled that morning on the roof and cleared my throat. "I think I do, yeah."

He hummed again. "I wonder. How much better do you think your life would be if you were surrounded by a bunch of friends who weren't very close to you? I don't think that sounds very good."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm saying that having a lot of friends might be overrated. I think everyone needs a friend or two but it's probably not better to have more than that. Things start to get fake between you and your 'friends,' or at least you end up with an incomplete relationship."

I wasn't sure how to respond. Amenohara seemed to notice so he continued. "Say, for example, you went back in time and

made yourself more approachable to others. Would those others, who decided that you were worthy of rejection in this timeline, be good friends to you? Isn't it more likely that you would have to perform for them, rather than being true to yourself?"

"I guess you have a point...but isn't there a line? If someone is so terrible that no one will befriend him, I think that person is at least partly to blame. Like, if someone abused animals I wouldn't expect anyone who knew that to befriend him. Right?"

"But where is the line for 'terrible,' then? After all, I said myself that I didn't have any friends. I don't think I've ever done anything truly terrible, and I don't think my personality is so bad that I'm totally unlikable. Maybe you're right that I'm a little too open a little too quickly – in that case, is that bad personality trait worth rejecting the very idea of being friends with me? If someone thinks that, I think *he's* the bad one."

I poked my chin with the dull end of my fork, having cleaned my plate while Amenohara explained his position. He clearly spent a lot of time thinking about this sort of thing. "But aren't you then rejecting him for the same kind of petty reasons he rejected you?"

"I guess. Maybe I'm terrible in *that* way. Regardless, I think it makes more sense to be true to myself and stick with those who stick around me. That's how real friendship happens, and I'm okay with waiting for real friendship."

"And if it never comes?"

"Then I'm the terrible one after all." He said it flippantly, seeming very sure that it wasn't the case. "Anyway, I'll pay and we can go if you're finished."

"You don't need to pay for me," I said, reaching into my purse.

"Don't be silly," he said. "I'll pay as thanks for the invitation."

I thought he had that backward, but I wasn't going to turn down a free meal so I just shrugged and said, "Thanks."

The walk home was quiet and uneventful. I could tell the two of us were thinking about our conversation, but didn't want or

know how to add more to it right now. We parted ways in front of my house, the same as yesterday.

“I’ll see you at school tomorrow,” I said to Amenohara’s back.

“Thanks again for inviting me,” he replied with a wave, turning so I could see him smile.

VIII

Bearing it and Baring It

The next morning, I found myself punching the bag on the roof in my karate-dogi again. Saeko was sitting with her knees up again, scrolling through her Quitter feed absentmindedly while I explained what had happened between me and Amenohara after school.

“Anyway,” I grunted between strikes. “That’s what we talked about.”

“What a downer,” she said.

“Yeah. He has a point though,” I said before swinging at the bag a few more times.

“Sure,” she said. “It’s not good to pretend to be someone you’re not. But everyone already knows that. There’s a difference between *that* and being reasonable enough to make friends with people. I think he’s taking it too seriously.” She blew a bubble with her gum. “So, do you want to be his friend?”

“Are you asking...” I began, throwing another punch at the bag halfway through the sentence, “...if I’m a terrible person?”

She laughed. “I know you aren’t.”

“I don’t know,” I answered, stopping for a drink of water. “I don’t think he’s a bad guy. I definitely don’t like him like *that*, but based on how he views friendship I think he’d be a good guy to have around.”

“Do you think he likes you like *that*?”

“...maybe. He seems like he might. He kept calling it a ‘date’ and saying it was his chance to make a cute girl his girlfriend, but he lost interest in that kind of stuff as the evening went on.”

“It totally *was* a date.”

“Shut up.” I got back to the bag, kicking this time.

“Anyway, you said you don’t like him that way so that settles the romance aspect. Unless you think he’d take you rejecting his romance super-hard, you should just be normal friends with him. If that’s what you want, of course.”

“Do you think it’s possible to be normal friends with a guy who is into you like that?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged.

I rolled my eyes. “So what, should I just keep going as normal and if he never asks me out, he lost interest?”

“I guess?” She adjusted her bra strap under her uniform top.

“Very helpful,” I spat. The heat was starting to get to me.

“Do you agree with him that the people who rejected you were part of the problem?” She blew another pink bubble.

“I don’t think,” I strained, “they’re entirely,” another kick, “to blame.”

“But partially?”

“Yeah.” I grunted as I finished the last rep. “I was shitty and I did some things I shouldn’t have, but people rejected me before I ever did anything bad.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that you lost someone you care about to someone else, right?”

“..yes.” I said shyly. Remembering the previous morning was embarrassing; I cried like a baby.

“..want to talk about it?”

“No, I don’t.” I scooped up my bag. “I’ve tortured myself over that enough for one lifetime.” With that parting remark, I made my way downstairs.

The school showers always smelled weird. I didn’t know what the girls in the sports clubs were doing in there, but I didn’t want to stick around much and find out.

Thankfully, there wasn’t anything wrong with the showers themselves: good pressure, good heat, nice and steamy. I smiled despite myself.

I turned the knob down and jumped when the warm water suddenly turned cool against my skin before shutting off entirely. When I stepped out of the shower and back over to the lockers, I realized there was another girl there; one I recognized from my first year. The current captain of the girls' karate club, Nobara Miya.

She glared as soon as she saw me. "You can't just use the showers whenever you want to, Nakagawa. They're only for athletic club members."

I ignored her and dried off, facing away.

She didn't like that. "Didn't you hear me?"

"Am I supposed to put the water back?" I turned to face her. "Just leave me alone. I'll be out of here in a second." I did my best to keep my voice low.

"Don't be a smartass. I'm going to tell a teacher."

"In your underwear?" I gestured with a nod; she was dressing down for a shower of her own. "It's not like *you're* meant to be in here in the middle of class, either. They'll probably question you, too."

I could see her clench her fist. While I put my own underwear back on she said, "I got permission to come in here. Did you?"

"I don't believe you," I said, fastening my skirt. "Anyway, I would already be done here if you didn't keep bugging me." I pulled my shirt on and buttoned it, leaving it untucked as usual.

She stopped talking and continued to undress. I rolled my eyes and finished dressing myself before making for the door.

On the way out, I paused. She noticed. "Hurry it up."

"Hang on." I turned around to face her. "I just have a question for you."

"I don't care to answer it," she said, throwing her towel over her shoulder. I asked anyway. "What's your problem with me? It's not like I'm still screwing up the karate club for you guys. I haven't even spoken to you in almost two full years."

"Are you kidding? It's not like we're going to just forgive you for what you did to senpai back then. He had to go to the hospi-

tal!" She held out her hand emphatically and her chest jiggled a little.

"I'm aware," I grimaced. "He's the one who told me to go all-out. You heard him tell me not to hold back yourself. I didn't mean to hurt him that bad."

"Anyway, you totally screwed up the club dynamic. Everything was awkward for the rest of that year. We all felt like we had to look over our shoulders in case you came around again."

"That's bullshit," I spat. "I never did anything to hurt any of you."

"How were we supposed to know you wouldn't? You threatened me and those two second-years that day, too."

"I was pissed off, okay? I got kicked out of the club, and then I heard a bunch of weak-ass girls talking shit about me. How would you react?"

"Tch. It doesn't matter. The point is, you caused the club a lot of problems. Why *wouldn't* I have a problem with you?"

"I'm not asking to be your fuckin' pal, Nobara. I just don't want enemies, either." I scratched my head and looked at the floor.

"Why not? All you've done since coming to this school was make enemies. You just hit a kid this week! Why the sudden change of heart?"

"It's not a change of heart. I just..." I paused. To my surprise, she didn't interrupt. "I just don't think it's a good idea to be hated, and that's what I am."

"So, what? You want me to just pretend nothing happened and let you walk all over me? And the rest of the club? Should I start spreading rumors about how you were actually super nice once I got to know you?"

"No," I said, rubbing my forehead in frustration. "I don't want to come back to the club or anything. It's way past too late for anything like that. I don't even really like you girls, anyway. I guess I'm trying to apologize."

"Apologize?"

“Yeah. You’re right that I went too far against senpai. I should have held back in our fight. I flew off the handle when he punched me and I regret that.” I put my hand on my hip. “I’m *not* sorry about scaring the pants off you and those other two girls back then, though. Shit-talkers deserve that much, at least.”

She rolled her eyes. “Some apology.”

I turned back around and started to walk out. Just before I was out of earshot, she said, “For what it’s worth, I’m not sorry that I said I hoped sensei took you out of the club. I really meant that. But I will apologize for what the captain back then said. She shouldn’t have called you those names.”

I nodded, then walked out without another word.

I was met with a dirty look from Koyama-sensei, the Japanese teacher, when I came back to the classroom.

“Nakagawa-kun, where have you been? You missed all of Kubo-sensei’s class *and* the first half of this one. You better have a good explanation.” None of the teachers liked me (not that I blamed them), but Koyama in particular had a problem with my truancy.

“I was at school,” I said. “Just not in this class.”

“That’s not an explanation. Where were you?”

“The locker rooms,” I said. “I needed the toilet and the ladies’ room was occupied.” I sat at my desk next to Amenohara.

Koyama looked down his nose at me. “We’ll talk about it after class.” With that he continued his lesson, to which I paid no attention. I was half-tempted to bail on class again when Amenohara passed a note to me.

“Want to get lunch together today?”

I rubbed the back of my head and stared at the ceiling. I figured I didn’t have plans anymore since I went off on Saeko. I’d never done anything that extreme before; I realized what she said must have really gotten to me. I replied in the affirmative and passed the note back after making sure the teacher wasn’t looking at me.

“Okay,” said the next note, “I’ll meet you on the roof after class.” I stuffed it into my skirt pocket.

IX

Building Bridges

Koyama's lecture was the same as he and every other teacher had given me a hundred times before – it's *my* future, what of my parents who are working hard for me to get through school, it's unfair to the other students, the works – and I didn't even bother pretending to take it to heart. "Can I go now? It's lunch time, and—"

"Just a moment. I need a favor from you."

Again with the favors. Could the teachers at this school do anything themselves? "Why are you asking me?"

"You're friends with Morino Saeko-kun, right?" He adjusted his glasses.

"Yeah, I guess. Did something happen?"

"I'm her home room teacher. I was handing out parent-teacher conference sign-up papers this morning and noticed she left hers on her desk. Could you take it to her? She needs to return it with her parents' signature tomorrow."

"You can't just give it to her later?"

"Not if she doesn't come back to class," he retorted. "I would ask someone else, but you're right here and I just remembered it, is all. I know you aren't reliable with this kind of thing, but Kubo-sensei mentioned that you helped him out the other day with Amenohara-kun."

I grimaced. "Alright, I'll see if I can find her. No promises though." I snatched the sheet from his outstretched hand and crammed it into my pocket.

"Is that all?"

"Go on and get your lunch," he nodded before shuffling slowly out of the classroom. He was really getting up there in years; every year the students placed bets on whether he would

finally retire, but at this point some people were starting to bet he'd croak as a teacher.

I grabbed my bag, which had my packed lunch, and headed to the roof. I ensured no teachers were watching before making my way up the stairs.

As I turned the doorknob, I heard voices from outside.

"What are *you* doing up here?" said a boy's voice.

"I *always* come up here for lunch," replied a girl. "What are *you* doing here?" I had the mental image of crossed arms and mean glares.

It didn't take a brain trust to figure out who was arguing beyond the door. I almost didn't open it for fear of getting caught in the crossfire, but against my better judgment I walked onto the roof.

Saeko and Amenohara stood about three feet apart, staring each other down. They didn't appear to notice me yet and kept right on arguing.

"I was planning to eat up here with Nakagawa-san," said Amenohara.

"That's what *I* was doing," retorted Saeko, whose arms were in fact crossed in front of her chest. I don't think she meant to, but she was pushing her boobs up and emphasizing her already ample cleavage.

"Well I specifically invited her to eat up here," replied Amenohara. The door to the roof finally latched behind me after I'd released it earlier. "Speak of the devil! I was wondering what was taking you," he said with a smile to me.

"Junko!," said Saeko energetically. She was sweet as ever; I guessed she wasn't as bothered by our little spat earlier as I was. That, or she was just trying to act super-friendly to get Amenohara to go away. Regardless, I wanted to clear the air with her.

...later. I needed to defuse this situation first. "Hey, guys," I waved sheepishly. "What's for lunch?"

They blinked. Amenohara spoke first. "Aren't you going to say something to your friend about interrupting our lunch?"

“Oh, I’m interrupting, huh?” growled Saeko. They got a little closer to each other, and their voices louder.

“Guys, someone will hear you...” I tried to calm them down.

“Yeah, you’re interrupting! She and I were going to enjoy a nice lunch break together!”

“What, am I so bothersome you wouldn’t even be able to eat?!”

“Guys...”

“You’re doing a great job of being a pain right now!”

“Oh, I’ll show you a thing or two about pain!” Saeko rolled her already- short sleeve up to her shoulder.

I was worried she would really hit him, so I grabbed both of them by their collars. With little effort I was hoisting them up off the ground. “Enough!” I shouted louder than either of them were capable. “You two are acting like dumbasses. This is how we’ll get caught up here.”

There was a brief, awkward silence before Amenohara spoke up again. “Um, Nakagawa-san...”

“Listen, Amenohara.” I dropped the honorific and set both him and Saeko down. “I don’t want you to get the wrong impression. I think you’re alright, and I want to be friends with you. You’ve helped me out, been nice to me and all. I appreciate that. But I don’t want to date you, or be your girlfriend.”

He looked at his feet.

“See?” Saeko started, sticking her tongue out at the dejected boy. “You should have just left me alone from the start.”

“Don’t get uppity. You aren’t innocent here either.”

“But he-”

“Just drop it,” I said. “I want us all to get along, okay? I’m short enough on friends as it is.” They were both looking down, now, so I gave them a shake on the shoulders.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s eat.”

The meal started off awkward and quiet. All I could hear were the sounds of the three of us chewing and some chatter in the distance; no exchange of words took place for several minutes.

“Oh yeah,” I remembered. “Saeko, Koyama-sensei wanted me to give this to you.” I reached into my skirt and pulled out the now-crumpled sign-up sheet.

“You’re turning into such a teacher’s pet,” she said between mouthfuls of octopus-shaped sausage. “First walking *him* home for Kubo-sensei, and now this.” She stuffed the paper in her bag without looking at it.

“You don’t need to call me *him*,” said Amenohara. “You can just say my name.” He’d already finished his food and was beginning to pack his box up.

“I wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Saeko remarked sarcastically. “You’re so sensitive, after all.”

“*I’m* sensitive? You’re the one who—”

“Oi,” I interrupted. “No fighting.”

They glared at each other through narrowed eyes, but relented. “Anyway,” I said, “you’re one to talk about being teacher’s pet, Saeko. I’ve seen how you get your way with Maruyama-sensei.”

“I do *not* ‘get my way’ with him. He just likes me because I—”

“Because of the way you bat your eyes at him,” I interrupted. “Shenshei, can I pweashe get anodder day for my homework?” I mocked a pleading Saeko, pressing my boobs together under my shirt and looking up with puppy-dog eyes. “I’ww do anything~”

“I don’t do that!” she blushed so hard I could see it through her tan.

“Why not?” Amenohara interjected. We both raised an eyebrow at him. “If I was a cute girl, I’d have such a hold on the male teachers they would give me an A for skipping class. It’d be the easiest way to get through school.”

I looked at Saeko, who looked at me, then we both looked back at Amenohara. Saeko spoke up first. “So you would flirt with people to get your way, knowing that you’re just leading them on?”

“Just teachers. Boys our age are too sensitive for that, but a teacher would just take it for what it is. Hell, they’d probably get a kick out of it.”

I spoke up next. "You're a weird guy, Amenohara."

He shrugged. "You're the ones who are missing out on easy A's. I bet the teachers would *let* you onto the roof if you played them right."

Saeko finished her meal and packed her lunch box away while responding. "You must think it's *so* easy to be a girl, huh?"

"No, I didn't say that. I know there are problems only girls have. What I *am* saying is that girls don't use their strengths to their advantage like they should. You aren't...ambitious enough, I guess is the way I'd put it."

"You can't just say that we should use our bodies to our advantage!"

"Why not? Men use our bodies to our advantage, just in a different way than you girls can. We don't hold back on our strengths."

I spoke up, "Don't speak for all of us. There are absolutely girls who do that, and Saeko is one of them. But there's a line you shouldn't cross and every girl's line is different. Some probably don't have one. I guess you'd be one of those. But other girls hate that kind of girl, so you'd have to consider that."

He poked at his bottom lip ponderously, looking up at the sky. "I guess that's something I didn't consider." He looked back down. "Do other girls not get along with Morino-san?"

"Nope," Saeko and I said in unison.

"That's why I hang out with Junko. She's the only girl who *doesn't* have a bone to pick with me. And I don't even do anything that bad!"

"Why *do* you two get along so well?"

"Because I won't leave her alone," grinned Saeko.

"That's *one* way to put it," I said. "When I first moved back here, I was training on the roof alone and she came up here to smoke. I told her to get lost, but she ignored me even when I threatened to kick her ass. 'You'll just have to try!' is what she said back then."

"You're all talk," she said. "Well, and all muscle."

“She hit someone just the other day,” Amenohara spoke up. “Right in front of everyone. He almost puked.”

“Only because he was making fun of me,” I said. “Saeko is a pain, but she never did anything like that.”

“I’m not a pain!” She pouted with her hands on her hips.

Finally, I finished my lunch and put it away. Usually I ate much faster; all this talking slowed me way down. The bell rang as I stood up, and I felt the cool breeze against the back of my legs.

I stood there for a second with my hands on my hips, looking over my shoulder at Saeko and Amenohara, who were still seated. “We should do this again, guys.”

I noticed Amenohara’s face was getting a little red. Saeko stifled a laugh.

“What is it?” I asked, still looking behind me.

“It sure is windy out today, huh?” said Saeko.

“I guess...” I ‘felt the breeze’ again, then looked down. My skirt had blown straight up, and my ass was on full display for the two of them. I’d changed out of my spats after working out earlier and into a pair of all-white panties similar to the ones I’d worn the other day. In a panic, I spun around, but that just gave them the full frontal view instead.

Amenohara had looked away, but I could see him peeking out of the corner of his eye. Saeko laughed so hard she fell back, kicking her legs. “The little pink bow—!” she managed between snorting laughter. I threw my hand down to block their view, red as a tomato.

“Shut up,” I yelled over the wind. “And put your phone away! No pictures!”

Amenohara started laughing, and before I knew it the both of them were gasping for air. “It’s not funny!” I groaned, smiling despite myself.

X

Relief

The next couple of weeks passed in a blur. Routines have a funny way of making you forget the events of the days themselves, and after that day on the roof the three of us developed a routine of hanging out together every day.

At first Amenohara only joined us for lunch, but after a couple of days he brought his manga up to the roof to read with Saeko while I trained. Once in a while I would flip through a volume with them, but I just couldn't get into the magical girl stuff. They always solved their problems by talking and casting little spells; I wanted to see some fighting.

The two of them would go on and on about it, though. Saeko read it when she was a kid, and was really stoked to talk about it with someone who knew as much as Amenohara did. One day she said something about the GoMen convention over summer, and that they should exchange contact information so they could meet up there. Saeko kept trying to get me to cosplay one of the villain characters, but as soon as I saw how little clothing she wore I turned her down emphatically.

"But you'd be so sexy," said Saeko, Amenohara nodding behind her. "You totally have the body to pull it off!"

"No way," I insisted. "I ain't wearing that outfit. It's practically a microbikini with hot pants!" The lady *did* look kind of like me, but I didn't want to admit that right now.

"That's why it would look so good!"

"I'm not doing it!"

She pouted, but I stood my ground. "Fine," she said. "You don't have to."

Or so she said, but she spent the next week trying to convince me to wear the stupid outfit. I refused every time, despite her

imploring, and when summer vacation finally arrived she and Amenohara decided to go to the convention without me (which was what I wanted in the first place).

The day of the convention, I awoke with little to do. I remembered that this used to be normal for me on school breaks – I would spend off-days “causing trouble,” as my dad would say. Since Amenohara started hanging out with me and Saeko, I started spending a lot more of my time with the two of them. I seldom hung out with Saeko outside the school before Amenohara came into the picture; I preferred to be alone then.

I lay in bed with just my night clothes on, staring at the ceiling and trying to ignore the heat. I wondered at what to do for the first time in a while. Saeko made me promise not to train if it got too hot since no one would be around to look after me, and the sun was scorching that day. Mom was reading in the living room when I poked my head inside. “Where’s dad?”

“He’s working in the garden,” she said without looking up from her book.

“Alright.”

“Going out with your friends?”

“Nah, they’re doing something together today.” She smiled, but I didn’t get why. Must have been the book.

I went to the back door after getting dressed and saw dad bent over the soil. His hat did little to protect him from the heat, and I could see him struggling with his tools.

I walked out with a bottle of water and handed it to him. “Need some help, old man?”

He took the bottle and smiled. “I’m not old yet, you know. But I could use a hand.” Dad took a long, slow drink.

I knelt down beside him and picked up where he left off, making little holes for the tomato seeds he was planting.

He lectured me about the size of the holes and I did my best to keep up, but gardening was harder work than I gave him credit

for. Before I knew it, *I* was struggling against the hot sun beating down on my back.

We took a break after a couple of hours. “Not spending the day with your friends?” he asked after taking another drink.

“No,” I replied. “They’re hanging out together at some manga thing.”

“Just the two of them?”

“..yeah?” He looked kind of disappointed. “It’s not like they aren’t still my friends, dad. You don’t need to worry so much about me.”

He perked up. “Oh, that’s not what I’m thinking about,” he chuckled. “I know they’re good friends to you.”

I raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. He started to ask about summer homework, so I stood up with renewed vigor and got back to gardening until mom called for dinner.

That night, after showering, I looked in the mirror again. It was the same body I’d looked at with such disgust when Ichimaru rejected me, more or less – my boobs weren’t even any bigger three years later – and yet I didn’t hate the way it looked anymore. Maybe I just didn’t hate *myself* anymore. I was too exhausted to think about it for long; I flopped onto my bed in just my underwear and fell asleep in seconds.

The next day, Saeko called me first thing in the morning.

“The beach!”

“Huh?”

“We’re going to the beach! Shinji-kun and I decided yesterday that the beach sounded fun, and we wanted to invite you since you missed the con yesterday!” She sounded really enthusiastic.

“Shinji...kun?”

“Yeah, you know! Shinji-kun! Anyway, we’re going to meet at the beach in an hour. Be there in a swimsuit!”

“Wait,” I started, but she hung up. Amenohara texted me right after. “Did Saeko tell you about the beach yet?”

“Yeah, she called me about it.”

I rolled out of bed after triple checking that the curtains were completely shut, having fallen asleep almost totally naked thanks to the heat. I grabbed some casual clothes and as I made my way to the bathroom to take a shower (I worked up a serious sweat in my sleep), my phone rang again.

“You have a swimsuit, right?”

“Good morning to you too, Saeko. Yes, I have a swimsuit.”

“*Not* the school swimsuit, right? You have a bikini or something, right?”

“Yes, I have a normal swimsuit.” I hadn’t worn it yet, though.

“Good. I’ll be at your house soon.”

“Wait—”

Again, she hung up before I could say more.

I took a cold shower, this time, to try and stave off some of the heat. Even with the A/C running, the air was wet and tepid inside.

I didn’t have time to dry my hair before Saeko rang our doorbell.

“Coming,” I called as I walked toward the door, towel still covering my head. I pulled it open and there stood Saeko with Amenohara.

“Junko! Let’s go!” She was practically jumping with excitement.

“Wait a second,” I said. “Don’t just drag me along. I don’t even have my stuff. And why the beach all of the sudden, anyway?”

“It’s hot! It’s summer break! Do we need more reason than that?!” She declared. “Hurry up and get your things! I wanna get there early!” I rolled my eyes and went back inside to grab my swimsuit and some basic beach supplies like sunscreen.

On the way out, I saw dad standing at the door talking to my friends.

“Don’t worry, Nakagawa-san. We’ll be careful!”

“I was talking to Amenohara, Saeko-chan...” he said with a barely detectable hint of venom. When he noticed me he perked up a bit. “Oh, good morning, Junko.” He looked at me over his

shoulder. "Saeko-chan just let me know you're going to the beach with her and Amenohara-san. Be careful not to get a sunburn, okay?" He was talking casually but he looked a little down somehow.

"Everything alright, dad? If you need me to stay, I—"

"No, no," he interrupted, "it's nothing. I'm just thinking about getting older, is all." He sighed and walked back toward the house. When he turned, he looked surprised; I followed his gaze and saw my mom standing in the doorway with her arms crossed.

He suddenly looked a bit nervous. "Anyway, Junko, like I was saying. Take care on your trip."

"...right. See you later dad, mom." I made for the gate where Saeko and Amenohara were whispering about something. When the door shut behind my dad, I interrupted them. "So why the beach all of the sudden? I figured you two would want to rest after that nerd thing."

"No way!" Saeko rejoined. "We can't waste our summer laying around! Now let's go!"

She grabbed me and Amenohara by the hand and pulled us all the way to the station.

The beach was surprisingly empty for such a hot morning. There were a handful of umbrellas and towels set up, but it was hardly the packed crowd I expected to be there.

"Let's go change," Saeko said. "We'll be back out in a few minutes, Shinji-kun!" She dragged me into the changing room and closed the door behind us.

"Why're you in such a hurry?" I asked. "It's not like the beach is going anywhere. And what's up with this 'Shinji-kun' stuff?" I tossed off my t-shirt and started undoing my shorts.

"I just wanna get changed, is all," she said, humming a little tune as she pulled her sundress over her head. Her underwear, which was barely there in the first place, hit the floor soon after.

I started to take off my own delicates. "Okay, what's going on?" My bra made a small noise as it hit the tiled floor of the

changing room. "You are in way too good a mood and it's creeping me out."

"Nothing!" she said. "Come on, hurry up!"

As further evidence that Saeko was way too excited about this, she'd already put her bikini top on. It was technically covering the important parts, barely, and the bright red stood out against her skin.

"That's pretty bold," I said as I put my own, more modest top on.

"Is it? Do you think it's too much?"

"Since when do you care?"

"Since..." she stopped. "I just do, okay?"

"No," I said, stepping toward her after I pulled my bottom on. They were black like the top, in a boyshorts style. "You never cared what people thought of your outfits before." I stepped closer to her as she mulled over her bra, still totally bottomless. "Something's up with you today."

She was blushing like crazy, I realized. I'd never seen her so self-conscious before. It wasn't because she didn't have bottoms on – it wasn't new for the two of us to see each other nude – so I figured it was connected to her newfound concern over the modesty of her dress.

"Well, I wanted to wait to tell you until later," she said.

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want to make you mad."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why would I get mad?"

"Because..." She stood in silence for a while, poking her fingers together and fiddling with her bikini top.

"Yeah...?"

She took a deep breath. "Amenohara and I kissed at the convention yesterday and we're kind of dating now but I don't want you to think you are a third wheel or something because you're still like, super important to me and if me dating him will be a problem then I will break it off but anyway I don't want him to think I'm a total slut or something so maybe we should trade bikinis but I guess my top wouldn't fit you huh?"

I blinked. That was a lot of new information all at once.

“Oh, god, you’re mad,” she started.

“Wait, wait,” I held up a hand and it stopped her. “I’m not mad.”

“You’re not?”

“No,” I said. “Why would I be?”

“I guessed I thought you might be jealous?”

“Of Amenohara? No way. He’s all yours, sister.” I gave her an encouraging slap on the bottom, at which she jumped and yelped like a puppy.

My slap reminded her to pull her bottoms on. They were just as skimpy as her bra; from the back, she might as well have gone without them. “No, not like that! I thought you’d be worried that your friend was being taken away.”

I grinned. “Aw. You must really like me, huh?”

“Don’t get cocky!” She put her fists on her bare hips. “I’m being serious. I was worried about how you’d feel.”

“Well, don’t be.” I put my hand on her shoulder. “I trust you enough to know you wouldn’t hurt me like that.”

“So you’re okay with it?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you!” She wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug. I could feel her boobs pressing against my stomach.

“Easy, easy,” I said. “Let’s get back outside, yeah? Amenohara’s probably been changed for a while. Wouldn’t want to keep him waiting, right?”

She nodded, and we walked out of the dark room together.

To say our day at the beach was eventful would be an understatement. Saeko started with modeling her swimsuit for Amenohara, and his reaction – turning completely around and saying it was great – showed just how much he liked her.

After that, Saeko brought out the water pistols she brought. I want to say they put up a good fight, but even as a team they didn’t stand a chance against me. We went to the tides after our

war and splashed around a bit before getting lunch at the nearby beach house.

Saeko wanted to work on her tan and asked Amenohara to put her sunscreen on. I pretended not to notice how obviously she overreacted to how “cold” the lotion was, but did she *really* need to make such a loud noise?

I must have fallen asleep while they were having their fun, because I woke up buried from the neck down in the sand. “That’s revenge for the water guns,” they said with smirks. The smug looks fell right off their faces when I effortlessly lifted myself out of my sandy prison.

Right before we were set to leave, we got back in the water to splash around some more. The two of them were really going at me, and unlike with the pistols I was actually having a hard time dealing with the assault two-front water assault. “Okay,” I managed between splashes, “I give!”

“Yay! We won, Shinji-kun!” Saeko jumped for joy when she cheered, and that was when Amenohara and I realized *something* was missing. It must have been obvious how suddenly we got quiet, because Saeko stopped cheering. “Guys? What’s wrong?”

Amenohara couldn’t say anything. He just stared dumbfounded. I covered my mouth with one hand to hide my smile.

“What is it? This isn’t funny!”

“Well, Saeko-chan...your...”

“My *what*?” Finally, she looked down. Her bikini top had fallen off in the tumult of our splashing and her chest was totally exposed, complete with hard nipples from the cool water dripping off them.

I lost it. I laughed so hard I couldn’t stand in the water and fell onto my butt. She panicked and covered herself with her arms while desperately searching for her lost top. Amenohara moved into waist-deep water.

The search party was brief – I started to feel bad for Saeko and helped look for the missing garment after a minute and we found it floating nearby.

Finally, we made our way back to the station and headed for home.

"I'm beat," said Saeko. "Gonna be sore tomorrow."

"Same here," yawned Amenohara. "I might sleep all day."

"Didn't you guys say you wanted to have as much fun as possible over summer?" I asked.

"Sleeping is a lot of fun," rebutted Amenohara. I didn't bother to point out the contradiction.

The three of us found a seat together on the nearly empty train. It took next to no time for Saeko to pass out, head against my shoulder. Amenohara fell asleep leaning into her.

"Jeez," I said to myself, adjusting so they'd be a bit more comfortable. I looked down at their snoring faces and smiled.

Soon I started leaning onto Saeko myself. Just to prop myself up. I wasn't tired enough to fall asleep...

Afterword

Thank you sincerely for reading my story. I hope you enjoyed it.

While I was writing this story I took a different approach from usual – normally I plan the entire story out in advance and expand on each pre-written section until it is somewhat cohesive. You may be able to tell, but this time I decided to just “wing” it and go with whatever my gut told me the characters would do as I went. As a result, the rough draft version is different from this final version in some pretty substantial ways – characters changed as I went on writing the story and their past actions became contradictions to their final characterizations, so I had to make some major edits for the first time. If you read the rough draft, I’d be interested to know which version of the characters’ development you preferred.

Speaking of the characters: I think this is the “closest” I’ve felt to a character I wrote in a long time. It’s the first time I let them decide what they would do rather than fitting them into my premade box, so I got to connect with them in a different way from usual. I don’t know if they are my strongest characters or if they’re even well-written at all, but I certainly enjoyed this method of writing.

In my initial concept for the story, Junko and Amenohara ended up in a romantic relationship at the end. As I was writing it, though, I noticed that the two of them had next to no romantic chemistry and behaved more like new friends than two people who were attracted to each other.

There was a brief point where Junko and Saeko got romantically involved. When Junko spills her guts on the roof in chapter 5, Saeko originally gave her a kiss as proof that she wasn’t ugly and that people did like her. However, the story went into a dark direction against my will from there and I decided that re-

ardless of Saeko's feelings, Junko simply was not made for yuri. I couldn't go anywhere with it that didn't involve Junko, ironically, rejecting Saeko's feelings, and that sort of sour ending was one I wanted to avoid here. Besides that, I really liked Saeko and Junko's chemistry as friends and wanted to preserve their existing, fun dynamic.

Of course, that begs the question of what the hell caused Junko to turn around emotionally from that point (chapter 5) onward besides just venting her frustrations with herself. I didn't want to end with the simple solution of "if you have a relationship go wrong, the solution is to get into another one," because it's a) not what I believe and b) a bit of a sad message to send. If Amenohara ends up with Junko as a sort of delayed rebound from Ichimaru, is that the kind of "real" relationship he is so interested in cultivating? Similarly, if Saeko and Junko ended up together, would that *really* solve Junko's self-loathing? (No, which is why their relationship went in a sad direction when I tried to force them together). I decided that Amenohara's rambling about true friendship was the answer I needed.

I don't know if I did a good job of showing that Junko let herself trust others again once she got close to both Amenohara and Saeko. The point of the locker room argument was to demonstrate her resolve to let down her own walls so she could get through to others and start properly connecting with people again. I don't know if that really works, but I like the scene.

I'm sure some anons will question whether all the fanservice was necessary. This story has a lot of panchira, embarrassed and non-embarrassed nudity, and so on. I won't pretend some of it wasn't just because I thought it would be funny or erotic, but the idea is that Junko unwittingly lets down her metaphorical defenses to Amenohara which is why she is so interested in him at first – she feels "exposed" to someone else, and that lets her rationalize trying to get close to him when she hadn't done so for so long (even if she doesn't really admit it at any point in the story). If you notice, most of the scenes where she is nude or mostly nude involve some introspection and examination of both her

physical and emotional selves, and her nude selfie to Saeko is what leads to Saeko “seeing through her” on the roof later. Of course, there’s also nothing wrong with naked girls for their own sake, so if you liked it for that reason that’s fine with me.

I wish I had more time to develop Junko’s relationship with her parents, particularly her mother who exists mostly as a prop. From the look we get into her home life, she gets along pretty well with her parents but her father tends to scold or chide her for her delinquency and truancy. That’s good, and that’s the idea – her father tends his garden, after all, and that isn’t just literal – but I think an argument or a disappointed conversation after she did some actually bad deed (as in a crime or fight at school, which I could only allude to due to time constraints) would shed more light on what kind of parents she has. As it is, they’re just okay but they’re my biggest regret with the story.

Anyway, as I said at the start of this afterword, I hope you enjoyed my perspective on how someone might handle the rejection so often seen in harem stories badly, and what it might take to pull them out of that mental state. Thanks, again, for reading.

– Anon