

*When
opportunity
knocks...*



*...be prepared
to answer*

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

A LESBIAN EROTIC NOVELLA
LILY LANCASTER

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

A Lesbian Erotic Novella Set in Japan

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Chapter 1: Dreams Aren't Made for Dreaming

A hot and muggy Friday morning dawned over Chiba Prefecture, Tokyo. As one of Tokyo's 23 city wards, Shibuya of course had its share of residential, commercial, educational, and other districts, same as any other ward.

But when people talked about Shibuya, they were normally referring to the popular shopping and entertainment area around Shibuya Station. It was one of those almost mythical regions that even people from outside of Japan had heard about, whether directly or in passing. Shibuya, much like Akiba, was *famous*.

For one Ema Campbell, a very much *not* famous nineteen year old with a depressing lack of direction in her life, Shibuya ward was simply where she lived, and she spent a good deal of her life attempting to *avoid* the bustle of Shibuya Station and its environs.

Her favourite location for this avoidance activity was about a mile west of the dreaded Shibuya Station, in the residential area not far from her home. Komabano Park was like a little oasis of serenity in the desert of chaos that was Tokyo; it had trees, bushes, well-used paths, and at this time of the morning only a few people around. The perfect place to sit and watch the world go by.

Finding a bench seat where she could park her posterior for an hour while idly staring at a nearby eyesore of a high-rise apartment block, Ema dropped a little backpack on the seat next to her and produced her tablet. A gentle breeze tussled her shoulder-length, dark blonde hair as she tapped the screen of the device a few times and opened a browser window.

Nearby, an elderly couple were walking their dog, a small stand opposite her bench was doing a steady trade in ramen and takoyaki, and a pleasant autumn scent of grass and fallen leaves lingered on the air as they headed into mid-September.

Averting her gaze from all these people who apparently had their lives basically sorted out, Ema opened the on-screen keyboard and typed the first few

letters of one of the dozen or so jobsites she visited on a daily basis in the vain hopes of finding something, *anything* to do with her life.

With any luck, it would be something that paid well enough to let her move out of home and away from her overbearing mother, but right now she'd settle for something that paid *at all...*

Her expression dropped as several dozen ads loaded and cluttered the screen up with useless information. Japan's websites were infamous for design that seemed terrible to Western sensibilities and user-experience standards, though to a Japanese person they made perfect, logical sense and it was Western sites that looked odd.

But the worst part of the weird design was always, *always* the ever-present and intrusive adverts. Flashing images, coloured text, weird (albeit often cute) mascot designs, and more were used extensively to try and annoy you into clicking something, even if only by accident. Ema had lived in Japan her whole life and *still* wasn't used to the design of Japanese websites.

Though there was *one* image that caught her eye, a young woman who looked of similar age to her and who was clearly an idol, a profession with a huge following that was often plagued with seedy managers and corruption. Those who got lucky and found a company that wasn't completely sleazy could make pretty good money, though.

Ema studied the girl in the ad. She had long, silky black hair, but with streaks of vivid blonde dyed into it. Must've taken some real effort to get it looking as good as it did, Ema figured. She had tried dying her hair once before, and it had gone poorly to the point where she hadn't wanted to leave the house for the next several weeks.

Apparently this idol was some hotshot with a big following, and was doing a live event at a venue right here in Shibuya ward in a day or two. Well... that was nice for her, but Ema had her own life to worry about right now, so she went back to the main site's content in hopes of maybe finding a job...

She was interrupted by a vibration in her jeans pocket alerting her to a message. Tugging the phone out, she checked the display; her friend Jun wanted

to meet up. Sending a message back with details of her location, she put the phone away and went back to the daily jobs check until Jun arrived.

Tapping the screen in a bit of a daze, not really seeing anything beyond a vague suggestion of boring and dry words like *full-time* and *regular overtime* and *apply now*, something unrelated stirred in her head, a vague image, hazy and just out of reach of her conscious mind. A memory of holding a microphone as a young girl, singing and dancing and having the time of her life, her father in the background cheering her on.

It had always felt like a good memory, a *positive* memory, on the rare occasions it sprang to mind. She just couldn't remember it *clearly*, it was like an itch she couldn't quite reach, or that word you know but can't bring to mind.

A voice intruded into her thoughts. "Hey, Ema!"

Coming back to reality, Ema looked up and saw that her friend had arrived. Jun had always been a boisterous girl, hailing from the southern islands where people seemed generally more lively than here in Tokyo, but her deep brown, chin-length hair and perpetual grin gave her a tomboyish and mischievous air even when saying nothing.

Jun came to a stop before the bench and grinned. "Sorry to keep ya waiting!"

Ema shook her head. "It's fine, I don't mind when the weather's good." She spoke softly, though not *quietly*; it came across more as stoicism than anything, a sort of resignation to her fate. "So... what did you want me for?"

"What, I can't ask my friend out on a date?" Jun said, pouting.

Spinning the tablet between her two index fingers, showing a level of unconscious dexterity she had never used for much beyond swiping a touchscreen, Ema tilted her head, though her lips remained steadfastly uncurled. "You always have an ulterior motive, Jun."

"Not always, just nine-plus-one times out of ten," Jun said, crossing her arms. "Anyway, you're coming to Azu-chan's gig with me tomorrow, right? I got you a ticket and everything!"

Ema blinked a couple of times. "Azu-chan...?"

Jun let out a put-upon breath and placed her hands on her hips. “The popular idol from Akiba? Takamachi Azusa? You know, Azu-chan? She’s sometimes called Azu-nyan? I’ve told you about her before, Ema, come on.”

“Oh... her. I was going to concentrate on job searching, actually...” Ema mumbled, remembering the ad she had just seen on her tablet.

“Not a chance,” Jun said, wagging a finger in front of her friend’s face. “You can job search any time. And I had to jump through *all the hoops* to get these tickets. All of them. Not a single hoop missed!”

“It’s pointless arguing, isn’t it?” Ema said with a resigned sigh.

Jun’s face split into an evil grin. “Totally. You’ve not won an argument against me in the last year, so just give up and come see Azu-chan with me. Okay? Okay!” She sat next to her and got comfy. “You used to love pretending to be an idol, right?”

“A long time ago. But ever since Mom said what she did...” Ema said, her shoulders dropping a little.

“Oh right... sorry, Ema, I forgot about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. She’s right anyway,” Ema said with a shrug. “I don’t have the talent to be an idol or anything like that. I just need to find a job so I can move out. I’m nineteen already, I need my own place.”

“Well, either way, come on. It’s going to be great, you can’t miss an opportunity like this. It might be your last chance,” Jun said, tugging her friend’s arm.

Ema caved, as she knew she would. “Oh all right... I guess it can’t hurt to check it out this once.”

With this decided, the wait for Saturday evening to roll around began.

Chapter 2: An Idol Event

Saturday arrived with minimal fanfare, giving them another sunny and pleasant day for their trip to Yoyogi National Stadium, a decently-sized indoor venue normally used for various sports tournaments.

The arena had several areas including the main stadium where larger tournaments could be held, a gymnasium, and a smaller stadium that was almost perfectly circular where Azusa-chan would be performing on a special stage that had been constructed in the centre of the arena floor.

The seating surrounded this central stage on all sides in concentric rings, giving the audience an unparalleled view that was superior to regular stadiums, and allowed everyone to see and hear equally. In a conventional stadium the people at the back had to rely on speakers and TV screens. Not so here.

Ema now walked the streets with Jun, taking in the sights and sounds and smells of early evening Shibuya; even in the more built-up areas there was always the humid and *green* smell of a glasshouse at this time of year, and when the wind was in the right direction she could even get a hint of sea salt from the nearby Tokyo Bay.

“Lots of people around today,” Ema said as they pushed their way through the packed street, closing in on the stadium.

“Azu-chan’s just released a new song, so everyone wants to hear it live,” Jun said, barging her way through the throng without a care and creating a clear avenue for her friend to follow. “Even if you can’t get inside, you can still enjoy it.”

“Even if you can’t get inside? Wait... you mean some of these people are here to listen outside of the event?” Ema asked, shocked.

“That’s right,” Jun said, ducking down to run through a crowd with a comical waddling gait. “If you can’t get tickets, listening outside the event has its own atmosphere as well, though it kinda sucks for a place like this that’s indoors. Done it myself a few times, actually.”

“Huh. Learn something new every day,” Ema murmured.

They arrived at the venue and saw that the carparks were already full, with many hundreds of people milling about waiting to get in through the overflowing front entrance to the secondary arena.

Ema looked around, eyes wide. “I’d forgotten how insane these places could be...”

“Wait till we get inside,” Jun said with a wink. She grabbed her friend’s hand and made for the snaking line leading to the glass doors into the building. It only took half an hour to get inside. The last time Jun had seen Azu-chan, at an even larger venue nearly a year ago, it had taken three hours.

Unlike the tidy line outside, the foyer was jam-packed, filled with dozens upon dozens of fans interspersed with staff, stands, and even a couple of local reporters covering the event.

“Always wanted to be a journo reporting on stuff like this,” Jun commented, apropos of nothing much.

Ema grabbed Jun’s arm as she was buffeted by the crowd, and raised her voice to be heard over the din. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because it’s my hobby, I didn’t want to turn it into a job,” Jun yelled back. The overall increase in volume meant one thing: the event was getting close to kick-off. Making their way further in and through a big double door, they emerged into the dimly-lit and rapidly filling hall.

Lights and strobes flashed and flickered all around, smoke machines already worked overtime to bathe the stage in the centre, and Ema’s heart rate ticked up higher and higher as the atmosphere and sense of tension and expectation washed over her.

Finding their way along the curved rows of seats, Jun once again using her elbows to good effect, they managed to fight their way to the front row positions Jun had managed to get for them, where they would have the best view possible. Here, they looked at each other, nodded in satisfaction, and prepared for two hours of shock and awe.

☆☆☆

Once everyone was in place, a 4/4 time beat started, then a simple piano melody overlaid it, followed by a deep bass line, and finally the black-haired Azu-chan appeared the backstage door and ran across to the stage, waving to her fans as she came.

Despite her usually fairly apathetic surface attitude towards idols, Ema found herself tapping a foot to the energetic tune... then she was on her feet and bouncing back and forth... then jumping and raising her hands in the air with the rest of the crowd, thoroughly lost in the moment.

After an hour of this, Luna slowed things down with a ballad, allowing the crowd to get their collective breath back before the next increase in tempo. Ema swayed back and forth with the sea of people around her, her eyes locked on like twin range finders taking in every single detail of Azu-chan's face, the amazing purple outfit she wore, the blonde-streaked midnight hair, the fluid way she moved.

Jun glanced beside her and saw her friend's enraptured face. She was well aware that Ema loved Japanese idols, for all that she seemed to have forgotten it right now, and the expression on her friend's face, the sheer *bliss* told Jun everything she needed to know. She poked Ema in the side. "You okay?"

Managing to drag her gaze away from the stage, Ema turned her head, eyebrows raised. "Eh?"

"Azu-chan's only a year older than us," Jun yelled, grinning like mad at the change in expression this elicited.

"She's only a year older?" Ema mumbled, turning back to the stage. "A year older, and yet she's up there on the stage having the time of her life, while I'm..."

Jun slipped an arm around her friend's shoulders. "Amazing, isn't she?"

Ema nodded mutely, her whole body momentarily stilled, again staring at this amazing girl on the stage who was filling her whole world with brilliant light and a feeling of euphoria.

The next hour of the show vanished as quickly as the first had, but this time she was barely aware of it, her mind was too busy mulling over the fact that Azu-chan was only a year older than her, yet here she was putting on a big event for

hundreds of people, and tens of thousands more around the country, watching through a live stream to the net.

With the last song of the evening's final notes lingering, Azu-chan thanked the audience, gave them a bow and a wave, then ran for the backstage exit.

"Aaah, that was even better than the last one," Jun said, enjoying a stretch and beaming continually. "Something to be said for a smaller venue. More intimate. Loved the new song, too."

"Yeah," Ema said, still staring at the stage as the lights came to life and people began making for the exits, excitedly chatting about their experience.

Jun poked her in the shoulder. "You okay?"

"She's so far beyond me it's not even funny," Ema muttered, dragging her gaze away from the stage and focusing on her friend as the crowd gradually dissipated.

Jun grabbed Ema's hand and tugged her back out to the stairs up. "It's not too late to start." She led them through to the massive foyer and pushed the crowds until they were outside. "There's agencies and things all around Tokyo for idol hopefuls. Or you could YouTube as a virtual idol or something?"

"I don't know about that," Ema said, taking a gulp of the fresh air. Japan was well-known for its humidity, but at this time of the evening in mid-September it had mostly faded away to leave a pleasant coolness.

"Worth a shot, isn't it?" Jun said. "You can do that and still be looking for a job, right? And hey, if you make it big, that's both problems solved."

"Except for the problem of Mom disowning me if I did that," Ema said, beginning the long walk across the carpark. "Still, that was really fun, thanks, Jun."

Jun grinned. "You're welcome."



Arriving home after seeing Jun back to her place, Ema entered her little house in the suburbs, a nice three bedroom place she had lived in her whole life. There was nothing too unusual about it; an upstairs, a downstairs, a garden out back,

and a quiet and relaxed neighbourhood far away from the hustle and bustle of Shibuya Station. Perfect for an energetic girl with a love of idols to grow up in.

The trouble was, she was no longer a young girl, or quite so energetic. She was a young woman of nineteen with a desperate need for some financial independence and a place of her own.

And Jun *did* have a point, idol agencies took on all sorts of girls who wanted to work in the business. There were also the bigger, more corporate idol production agencies, but she figured those were out of her league.

Besides... did she really have what it took to be an idol? She barely remembered how to *smile* these days, never mind anything else... and smiling was all but essential to success. Not to mention that she would have to keep it an absolute secret from her idol-disliking mother as long as she remained in this house.

Entering the building, she poked her head into the lounge just off the entrance hall, said hi to the folks—both of whom were under the impression she had been at Jun’s place looking for jobs—and dashed upstairs to her room.

As much as she wanted to be independent and have her own place, Ema *did* love her room. It was pretty basic, sure, with creamy-white walls and a light red carpet plus matching curtains, and a single bed with the comfiest mattress in existence, but it suited her to a tee and she had plenty of happy memories here.

She closed the door behind her and leaped onto the bed, reaching over to the bedside cabinet where she normally left her tablet. Swiping the screen, she opened a web browser and hesitated.

“Uh, what was she called again?” Ema mumbled, casting her eyes up towards the ceiling as she attempted to remember the name of one of the more popular Tokyo-resident idols. “Oh, Azu... chan, I think?”

Ema searched for this and got approximately a million and one results. “Oh wow, she’s pretty popular, huh? Been a full-time idol for five years... does regular live events and variety shows, and she’s resident at... oh.”

The wiki page for Azu-chan listed her as belonging to the Sakura Production Agency, generally known simply as Sakura-P. Even Ema had heard of them, and

she hadn't been into idols for years. They were one of the biggest corporate idol production companies in *the whole country*, never mind Tokyo.

Navigating over to the Sakura-P website, Ema read the official bio for Azu-chan's, and her heart sank even further. Just twenty years old and Azu-chan was putting on shows for many thousands of fans across the country, and even had a sizeable contingent of foreign fans.

Azu-chan might as well be a literal idol goddess for how unattainable and out of reach she was to someone like Ema.

Tossing the tablet to one side, Ema collapsed back into the welcoming mattress, her eyes drooping. Since entering middle school all those years ago, she had barely thought of idols. Not much to think *about* really, she'd been too busy with schoolwork to bother with such flights of fancy.

But tonight...

Tonight, she had been more hyped up and energised than at any time she could remember in the last ten years. Her body *tingled*, that jumpy and jittery feeling she got when she was so excited she couldn't sit still. Despite her situation, she felt a stirring of something she hadn't felt in a *long* time, a desire to be an idol and bring people joy, much as Azu-chan had her this evening.

Ema's eyes gradually closed as she thought of Azu-chan's event, finally dozing off and entering a wonderland of bright lights and smoky stages and adoring fans...

Chapter 3: A Chance Encounter

On the Sunday morning, Ema left the house early partly to avoid her mother, and partly so she could head to the park and ruminate on the events of the past day. When she got there, she found there were a few extra people that she was accustomed to, especially on a Sunday.

Just inside the park entrance stood several tables, upon which were a number of plates holding samples of what appeared to be Japanese boxed lunches, or *bentou*. Already a number of people wandering past were congregating in hopes of free samples.

This was doubly apparent among the young men who happened to walk past and notice the table, because standing behind it was an attractive young woman who looked of a similar age to Ema. She had dark hazel hair held in a large ponytail, was dressed in a flimsy blue one-piece dress, and sported a perpetual smile.

The girl behind the table caught sight of Ema and her beaming smile widened. She held a hand out to the plates. “Would you like to try a free sample of Good Morning Bentou’s selections?”

Ema stopped a few steps shy of the table itself. “I guess?” Her expression was currently set to ‘*suspicious*’ as she took in this girl’s own facial features; pretty and cute, sure, and that hair was *really* nice. She’d always thought ponytails looked great on basically anyone but herself. But the main thing was the *smile*.

She drew a little closer, each footstep happening at around the same speed as continental drift, and wondered how other people could smile so... *effortlessly*. Seeing someone who could smile instantly and disarmingly with no apparent effort was mildly irritating. And perhaps just a little upsetting.

“Uh...” Ema murmured, sweeping her gaze across the appetising series of Japanese morsels.

“Try anything you like,” the young woman said, making some vague hand motions towards the boxes. She picked up a pair of disposable chopsticks the company behind the offer had provided. “Here, you can use these if you like. I recommend the rolled omelette.”

Ema grasped the proffered items and pressed them closed once or twice. She hesitantly selected a piece of *tamagoyaki*, the aforementioned rolled omelette. “I guess I’ll try one of these, then, it looks safe enough for shop-bought...”

Chewing the mildly sweetened dish—a fairly common occurrence in Japanese-style omelettes—Ema’s eyebrows rose ever so slightly, just enough to express surprise at how tasty it was, but not enough to show what might be called her *true* feelings.

“Nice?” asked the young lady.

“Yeah,” Ema said with a nod. “Super nice, actually. Shop-bought lunches aren’t normally something I enjoy that much.”

A muffled and tinny sound made the girl glance at Ema’s chest, where a pair of ear buds hung around her neck. “I recognise that tune...”

Ema backed away a step, protectively holding the earbuds in her hand. “I was just looking into idols, I’ve not really kept up with them recently.”

“You know whose song that is?”

“Um, no, sorry,” Ema said, shaking her head. “It’s a playlist my friend Jun sent me.”

“You’re looking at her,” the girl said, puffing her chest out.

It took a second for Ema to realise what this beautiful girl, who was *still* smiling, was getting at. “You mean... this is your song? You’re an idol?”

“Sure am!” said the young woman. She held a hand out. “Suzumori Hinata.”

“Oh, uh... Ema, Ema Campbell, nice to meet you,” Ema said, reaching out to grasp the proffered appendage and shaking. “So... Suzumori-san—”

“Ah, none of that super polite stuff, just call me Hina,” Hinata said, pausing a moment to let another passer by enjoy a free sample.

“Hina,” Ema said, blushing a little at being so familiar with someone she had only just met. “Um, I don’t want to offend, but I wouldn’t have expected an

idol to be handing out free samples like this. Especially not an idol who has her own song...”

“Yeah, it’s a bit crap, huh?” Hinata chuckled. “I’m with Sakura-P, and what they say goes. They want me to take a job handing out samples for Good Morning Bentou? That’s what I do. It’s a price I’m mostly willing to pay for all the other benefits, though.”

Ema stepped to the side to allow a couple more people room to enjoy a sample or two, then glanced at Hinata. “One of the benefits being that they have someone write songs for you?”

Pointing a chopstick at her, Hinata nodded. “Bingo! Honestly, I do get tired of these entry-level jobs. You’d think after a while you wouldn’t be expected to do them any more, but apparently the higher-ups have other ideas. Maybe one day I’ll leave and try another agency or something. Who knows.”

“Even though you’d be leaving behind the other benefits you mentioned?” Ema said, eyebrows raised ever so slightly. “I don’t know that I’d have the courage to just leave something like that behind.”

“All the benefits in the world aren’t worth being miserable, right?” Hinata said, nodding and smiling at another freebie seeker. She noted that Ema’s expression seemed strained. “Did I hit a nerve or something?”

“No, it’s okay, I’m just trying to find a job right now so I can move out of home,” Ema said. “I was thinking of finding an idol agency or something, but I probably don’t have what it takes to be an idol anyway. Gave up on that dream ages ago.”

“All you really need is to be in fairly good shape and not be shy about working hard,” Hinata said, scanning Ema’s various body parts. “You look pretty toned to me, so that’s probably not an issue. The only other things you really need are a positive attitude and a great smile.” She illustrated this by stretching her mouth into a pearly white *‘I just won the lottery’* smile.

“That’s me out, then,” Ema said with an unamused laugh.

“Give it a try,” Hinata said, pointing both index fingers towards the corners of her own mouth.

Ema did so.

“Well, it takes practice,” Hinata laughed, though she felt bad about it. “Do you actually *want* to become an idol? I dunno if Sakura-P is taking anyone right now, but I can probably help you find somewhere that is.”

“I... don’t know, to be honest. My friend Jun said I should try a smaller agency, since they’re willing to take chances and are easier to get into, but my situation right now isn’t ideal.”

“I’m not sure what I can do for you, but maybe just talking about it with someone you don’t know might help?” Hinata said, and pointed at a piece of plastic-covered A4 paper that had been taped to the table surface, which had a QR code on it. “Also, scan the code here if you want to know more about Good Morning Bentou.”

“I might try them if I need a meal in a hurry,” Ema said, scanning the code with her phone, which proceeded to open the company’s website. “And... I don’t know about being an idol, but I’m happy to make new friends, so maybe we could meet up later or something?”

“Works for me,” Hinata said. “I’ll be here for a little while yet, until the samples are all gone, then I’ll be free.”

“Okay,” Ema said, and exchanged details so they could get in contact later. “I’m heading home now, need to do some job searching. Should I ring you later, or...?”

“I’ll send you a message when I’m done,” Hinata said.

“Okay,” Ema said, and excused herself.

Chapter 4: Meeting Up

Ema was laid on her bed browsing various job sites when the message came in. If she was honest, she had kind of expected Hinata not to bother, but apparently she wasn't quite the judge of character she thought she was. Tossing her tablet onto the pillow, she got ready and ran downstairs.

"I'm off!" she yelled upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, receiving an okay from her father in the kitchen.

"And exactly *where* are you off to?" came the voice Ema had wanted to avoid. Her mother had just arrived home from the city and was now glaring at her. Worse, she was also blocking the front door.

Ema thought fast. "To... check out a job I saw online! A music agency, they want a... receptionist." Well, if she was going to look at being an idol, mentioning an *agency* might stand her in good stead for later, in the event she found one who would take her on. Then it would be a case of making damn sure her mother didn't find out the truth.

"Well, don't be out for too long, there's some jobs I'd like your help with," her mother replied, stepping inside and heading through to the kitchen.

"Okay," Ema said, and scurried out of the house before any further awkward questions could materialise.

A fifteen minute walk later and she was back at the park from earlier, navigating her way over to where she had met her new idol friend. She hesitated on arrival, noting that Hinata seemed to have acquired a friend of her own.

Hinata waved her across. "This is my roommate, Michelle. She's from Britland, but studying Japanese here in glorious Nippon."

The other girl was a bit shorter than Hinata, had vivid blonde hair of the sort that stood out like a sore thumb in Japan, blue eyes, and a mischievous expression that immediately put Ema in mind of Jun.

Michelle beamed at her. "Oh, this is the cutie you're into, huh? I can see why you fancy her."

“Hey, cut that out!” Hinata said, and gave her friend a gentle thump on the upper arm. She turned to Ema. “Sorry about that, Michelle can be pretty crude sometimes.”

“That’s okay, I’m used to Jun,” Ema said, giving Michelle a smile and a nod.

Circling Ema a couple of times, Michelle looked her up and down, then glared at Hinata. “You’re a magnet for cute girls, you know that?”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Hinata said, doing her best to look innocent. Clearing her throat in a way that only made her seem more suspicious, she grabbed Ema’s hand and dragged her away. “Anyway, I’ll see you back at the dorm.”

“Have fun,” Michelle said, emitting an amused laugh and sauntering away.

“You two seem to get along well,” Ema said.

“Michelle’s always been super relaxed with me, ever since we met. It’d suck if I didn’t get along with my roommate, though, huh?” Hinata said. Stopping at a small stall selling icicle sticks, Hinata grabbed two, handed one to Ema, and started walking again. “So what’s the situation you’re having problems with?”

“My mom, mostly. I’m nineteen now, I want my independence and a place of my own. But to get it, I need a job, and I’m not really sure what I can even bring to a business around here.”

“Being an idol can pay well, but you’ll likely have bad luck at the start,” Hinata said. “Still, even relatively low level agencies will keep you afloat, so long as you don’t mess them about.”

Ema walked in silence for a while, thinking. “Okay, but you’re at Sakura-P, right? Isn’t basically everything provided to you there?”

“Sure, but as I said earlier, it also means doing what they say,” Hinata said. “At a smaller place, you have more freedom, assuming you can earn enough to pay rent and all that.”

“Hmm. Well, either way, I need a fairly steady income stream if I want to move out, and I don’t know if being an idol could provide that,” Ema said with a shrug.

“Maybe not at first, but isn’t it worth trying? You can at least be earning *some* money so you can save up a bit.”

“I suppose. Only problem is... my mom hates idols. If she found out I was even *thinking* of becoming one, she'd flip out...”

Hinata frowned. She knew Ema's situation better than she might like, it wasn't so different to some of the girls where she worked. Bad family situations, bad financial situations, bad... well, just generally bad everything in some cases. A large corporate idol agency like Sakura-P could help, since they provided room, food, and wages, but in return you effectively belonged to the company.

“Why doesn't your mum like idols?” Hinata said.

“I don't know. I just mentioned liking them once when I was about twelve, I think it was, and she exploded. Told me never to mention idols again.” Ema sighed, turning a corner into a new street, one with a number of stores selling outfits and accessories. “After that, I put idols out of mind and concentrated on school.”

“What changed?” Hinata said, stopping outside a storefront with some idol-related merchandise on display, including high quality rechargeable glow sticks for use at live events.

“Jun dragged me to an Azu-chan concert last night,” Ema said, studying the displayed merch. “I'd forgotten how amazing live events could be.”

Hinata glanced at her new friend's face, noting how she appeared surprisingly subdued for someone who had so recently seen one of Sakura-P's top idols perform live. “I've not actually been to one of hers. Have met her, though. Nice girl, but maybe a bit too anal.”

Straightening up and facing Hinata, Ema's expression told its own story; envy twinned with annoyance. “You've met her? Oh... hah, of course you have, you go to the same agency.”

“You kind of remind me of her, actually.”

“I... do?” Ema said, pointing to herself.

“If you've never seen her when she's not working, she rarely smiles. You both have kind of a stoic look.”

“Oh, that? I've been told I don't smile much. Nothing much to smile *about*, to be honest.”

“That just tells me you need to become an idol even more,” Hinata said, taking Ema’s hands in her own. “I moan about having to do entry-level work, but I have a blast as an idol. You could, too.”

“It does interest me, and I remember really liking idols when I was a kid,” Ema said, staring into space. “But Mom...”

Hinata placed her hands on Ema’s shoulders. “Look at it like this, it’ll take a while for you to build a fan base, yes? So it’s not likely she’ll find out what you’re doing, and that’ll give you time to figure out if it’s for you. But if you *did* somehow become an overnight sensation... you’d have the means to move out, thereby sidestepping the issue.”

Ema tilted her head slightly. “You’d get on with Jun, she’s really good at making me go along with her crazy ideas.”

“Nothing crazy about it. Know what *would* be crazy? *Not* pursuing something you might really enjoy doing while also earning a living.”

“I don’t even know where to start,” Ema muttered.

“How about coming to Sakura-P for a visit?” Hinata suggested, holding out a hand. “I’ll put on a small show, just for you, how’s that?”

Reaching out her own hand, Ema hesitated a second, then clasped. “You’d do that just for me?”

“Sure I would! Lots of girls get a shitty break as an idol, so I’d rather help you avoid that if I can,” Hinata said.

“Well... okay, that sounds great, thanks!” Ema said.

“Let’s be off, then,” Hinata said, and led the way to her workplace-cum-home.

Chapter 5: The Cherry Blossom Agency

A brief jaunt past the Yoyogi Stadium was followed by walking a half-dozen additional blocks until they reached their destination, an enormous multi-part and multi-storey building nestled in its own plot of land that was, to Ema's eyes, probably bigger than three football pitches side by side.

As befitted the corporate atmosphere of Sakura-P, the buildings were all of the glossy black glass variety, heavy on the metals and polished bricks, with automatic doors and air conditioning.

Walking up to the entrance foyer, Hinata entered and exchanged a few random greetings with some of the other girls who happened to be there. To the left of the large reception desk was a lift, so she poked the button to call it down and waited.

"This place is amazing," Ema breathed. In here, the atmosphere was one of refinement, with marble floor tiles and columns, plus a small fountain providing a splash of both colour and sound.

"Eh, it's all right," Hinata said, her tone dismissive. "Once you've been here a while, it's just another place. Though we do have our own indoor pool, so that's a perk."

"I like swimming," Ema said. "Wish I could go a bit more often."

"I can probably get you in here one day, if you like?" Hinata suggested.

"You don't need to go that far."

"We could hit up somewhere in the city, if you prefer? I'm just fishing for a swimming partner. Michelle isn't all that into it."

"Sure, I'm always up for a swim," Ema said.

The lift arrived, so Hinata tugged Ema inside and they headed up a few floors, then exited and made their way along a lengthy hall until they reached a black, glossy door. "Here we are. Should be empty, with any luck."

Inside, they were greeted by a dance practice room, probably six times the size of Ema's bedroom. The floor was, of course, polished wood, there was

mirrors all along the opposite wall so the girls could see themselves while they practised, and several comfy armchairs and a sofa for them to relax between sessions.

“I’ve seen practice rooms like this in anime,” Ema said.

“They’re pretty accurate to the real thing, yeah,” Hinata said. Before she could do anything further, a commotion from further along the hall alerted her to goings-on. She poked her head out and noted a congregation of girls around an open doorway down the hall. “Hey, what’s going on?” she asked another girl who was just running past.

The girl pointed at the growing group. “Aphrodite are practising!”

“This is perfect, let’s go see them,” Hinata said, and grabbed Ema’s hand.

“Um, Aphrodite?” Ema said as she was dragged along.

“Three girl unit the higher-ups put together a few months back,” Hinata said. She barged her way through the crowd until they could force their way through the door and into the other practice room. She leaned over to Ema, keeping her voice low. “As the unit name implies, they’re all about representing love and sexuality and all that.”

Ema studied the three young women who were presently doing a practice dance set together, effectively oblivious to their audience. As she watched, she was aware of the low-key susurrations as the other girls around her excitedly discussed their favourite aspects of Aphrodite, both as a unit and each idol individually.

Ema heard various comments on all sides; “*Aaah, Erika’s so cute and bubbly, I want to buy her a drink...!*”; “*Yumi’s so calm and collected, I’d love to have her read me a story!*”; “*Minami’s smile is the best, I can’t wait to see it!*”

Her face fell. Smiling didn’t come naturally to her, she considered this to be a simple fact of life. But hearing people state that they were looking forward to seeing an idol’s *smile*, not the idol herself, her *smile*... that stung. She could at least console herself with the fact that according to Hinata Azu-chan also rarely smiled, and she seemed to get on okay.

Returning to the three girls, Ema studied each of them, noting how they all had heavily dyed hair. First, Yumi, who had a glorious mass of azure hair held in

a large ponytail. Then Erika, whose hair was vivid pink and held in twintails. And finally Minami, with purple hair worn in a sidetail to the left of her head.

From the point of view of a girl who had fairly boring hair to go with her boring life, Ema thought the three of them looked utterly ostentatious. But not in a bad way, as though they were trying too hard to be edgy and cool. They had clearly chosen those colours to complement each other, and idols were *always* kind of flamboyant...

“What are you thinking?” Hinata asked, bringing her new friend back to reality with a start.

“Eh? Oh... just thinking how nice they look together. They’re well-matched.”

“Right? It’s not just their looks, either,” Hinata said. “They actually have special choreography done that matches up with their song lyrics to tell love stories.”

“Love stories?”

“Kind of like a stage play dealie,” Hinata said, and did her best to explain.

As the goddesses of love—Aphrodite—their whole performance revolved around intimate choreography and telling love stories of various stripes through the act of song and dance.

With some help from Sakura-P’s top dance instructors, they had created special choreography for the songs they performed; hand holding, gentle brushes of their fingertips, linking arms, often centred on Yumi and Erika.

Minami’s own dance moves during their songs leaned more towards *balance* than direct involvement. She occasionally insinuated herself between the other two, breaking them up, taking one or other girl’s hand and waltzing with her for a time, telling a tale of love and betrayal and tragedy using nothing more than their song lyrics and how they moved and danced.

While there had been a minor degree of worry over the fact that they were all female, the corporate masters had determined through various focus groups and think-tanks that a unit of this nature would be immensely popular and go a long way towards LGBT acceptance in Japan.

Hinata sighed at this. “I mean... I love that someone actually thought of that issue and wanted to address it, but I despise the corporate thinking behind the whole idea.”

“I may not be all that experienced with the world, but even I know that corporations just try and chase fads,” Ema said.

“Yeah. Still, points for at least doing something constructive for once,” Hinata said. “And... well, as much as I dislike corpo thinking, Sakura-P actually isn’t that bad. Mercenary, money-focused, and they sometimes shit-can a girl if she’s not popular enough, sure. But we’re also given a lot of freedom to do what we like, as long as we take jobs they want us to take.”

“Sounds like you’re rationalising,” Ema said, the left side of her mouth curling up ever-so-slightly.

“Pretty much. Anyway, let’s head back to the other room and I’ll give you a quick show,” Hinata said. “I can’t claim to be at Aphrodite’s level, but I’m still pretty good.” She left her phone on a small circular table in the corner of the room, propped up and pointing in Ema’s direction. Sneakily setting the camera to record, she moved away.

Bounding over to the mirrors, she spent a moment wondering what would be best to show her new friend, and eventually settled on a brief dance routine. Dance was one of those things that all idols needed to learn, since they engaged in stage events on a regular basis, so giving Ema a taste of that seemed wise.

She had Ema stand before her, then moved back a few feet. Here, she took a few breaths and began, spinning and pirouetting, dancing and jumping, alternating styles, sometimes contemporary, sometimes more traditional, and always beautiful.

There was a hypnotic rhythm to her movements, a flow and grace in which Ema could almost see patterns and images in the air; a swan taking flight, a leaping tiger, a dancing dragon, until Hinata gradually wound back down, issuing a low bow to end.

Ema burst into spontaneous applause. “That was amazing! I’d forgotten how wonderful idols could look when dancing.”

Returning upright, Hinata beamed. “Been practising my moves for more than three years now, it’s an essential component to being an idol. I’m glad you enjoyed it.” She retrieved her phone and walked over until her face was within a few inches of Ema’s. “You said you struggle to smile, right?”

“Yeah,” Ema said with a nod, locked into the gaze of this beautiful girl, unable to look away.

“You could’ve fooled me,” Hinata said, her grin widening as she held her phone up. On the screen was the video, showing Ema’s enraptured face.

“Is that... me?” Ema asked. She took the phone, her eyes widening a little. The girl on the screen clearly seemed to be her, yet she was smiling in a way she had thought herself incapable of. A few drops of moisture appeared in the corners of her eyes.

“You okay?” Hinata said, rubbing her back.

“Why can’t I smile like that normally?” Ema whispered, brows knitted.

“Enjoying whatever you’re doing will naturally make you smile. So... find something you enjoy doing. You know what I mean, right?”

Ema rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I love idols!” she said, considerably louder than she intended, receiving a number of glances from the collection of idols in the hallway outside the room. While this was intended to reinforce something she had finally remembered over the last two days of idol-soaked fun, all she really did was massively embarrass herself. She sank down to sit on her haunches, covering her face in shame.

Bending over, Hinata held a hand out. “You can’t go getting embarrassed just by saying what you feel.”

Uncovering her face, Ema did her best to compose herself, grasped the hand, and stood. “I’ve made my decision! I think.”

“Great,” Hinata said, nodding. “Let’s hear it.”

Opening her mouth to speak, Ema gasped instead. “I totally forgot Mom wanted me to help out with something...!”

“Oh crap, sorry,” Hinata said, clapping her own hands together in apology.

“It’s not your fault, I should’ve remembered. Honestly, it’s worth any amount of complaining, today was really fun. Thanks, Hina.”

Hinata gave a thumbs-up. “Any time.” She changed the thumb to a pointed finger at the door. “You should probably get going?”

“Probably. When Mom’s finished chewing me out, I might start looking into an agency to join,” Ema said, managing a weak smile for once. “Um... message me whenever you like.” With that, she dashed away.

Chapter 6: Remembering How to Smile

After her unscheduled activity with Hinata, Ema ended up back at home, lying on her bed exhausted and confused and, of course, chewed out. Nineteen and still getting chewed out by her mother, talk about pathetic.

Meanwhile, Hinata had independence and a place to call home where she wasn't constantly being made to feel uncomfortable by an overbearing parent. She even had songs written for her!

Rolling over onto her front, Ema buried her face in the pillow and heaved a sigh. She felt... less than stellar. But she also felt something else, a thrill, an excitement and exhilaration similar to when she had seen Azu-chan's event. The idea of becoming an idol against the wishes of her mother was, admittedly, worrying...

But more than that, it was *exciting*. An illicit arrangement where she would have to be careful and stealthy and cunning. Or at the very least avoid letting her mother know what was going on. Ema wasn't sure she had it in her to be cunning like the protagonists in those old adventure movies she enjoyed. But she could at least keep a low profile. Probably.

Fortunately, her current need of a job meant she could simply say she was out job hunting. *Technically*, she wasn't lying. She just needed to ensure her mother didn't discover what *type* of job she was hunting *for*...

Closing her eyes for what felt like only a few minutes, she awoke the next morning to the rumbling of her stomach combined with a mouthful of her own hair. Sitting upright, she spat her hair out and blew it to one side, then stretched and gazed around the room, her ears delivering a message that something was amiss. She finally managed to wake up enough to realise it was her phone ringing.

She answered. "Hello?"

"*Morning,*" came Hinata's voice. "*I'm coming into the city in an hour, fancy going swimming?*"

“Right now?” Ema said, getting to her feet.

“Why not? You’re not doing anything else, are you?”

“Thanks for rubbing it in,” Ema said with an unamused laugh. “I guess I can spare an hour or two. Where do you want to meet?”

Hinata gave her directions to an indoor pool not that far from the city’s main bay area, and had her meet up there in an hour.

“Okay, see you soon,” Ema said, and hung up. She clenched her fists and nodded. “All right, Ema, keep it together.” She had a quick shower, got her things ready, and ran downstairs. “I’m off to Jun’s place!” she called through the hallway into the kitchen, then exited before anything further could be said.

Half an hour later she stood before a large structure made from shiny metals and glass, glinting and glowing under the morning sun. “Doesn’t this place have a really big dive pool?”

Standing next to her in hotpants, a loose T-shirt, and sandals, Hinata grinned. “Apparently so. You going to put on a show for me?”

“I... might,” Ema said, remaining noncommittal. It had been some time since she had last done any serious swimming, and doubly so for diving, but she figured it was like riding a bike. You never forgot.

Inside, they paid and made their way through to the changing rooms, entering a cubicle each. A few minutes later, they both exited and spent a moment checking each other out.

“Nice swimsuit,” Hinata said with a nod at the plain white yet strangely sexy one-piece Ema had on.

“Jun bought it for me last year. Said it’d suit my boring tastes.”

Hinata stifled a giggle. “I think I need to meet Jun one day soon.” Her own swimsuit was a two-piece with a sarong arrangement around the lower piece, suiting her cute looks to a tee. She struck a pose.

“You look good, too,” Ema dutifully said, her expression stoic as usual.

“Forgetting how to smile again?” Hinata said, walking them through to the pool proper.

“Sorry.”

They entered the pool and took a walk over to the deep end, where Hinata lined up in one lane and waited in that expectant way that indicated a certain other girl should line up in the next lane over. Ema did so.

“I think you know what we’re doing first,” Hinata said.

“It’s been a while since I raced seriously, but I still think I can beat you,” Ema said. She bent over, arms extended and ready to dive.

“Them’s fighting words!” Hinata said, and assumed the same posture, then counted down from five. “... two, one, go!”

They hit the water at roughly the same time and Hinata immediately drew a little ahead, both girls using a practised crawl. At the quarter mark, Ema pulled ahead and stayed there for the remainder of the first length, dipped under the water to reverse direction, and kicked away from the edge of the pool, leaving Hinata in the very damp dust.

“I might’ve underestimated you,” Hinata said as she surfaced after finishing the second length.

One side of Ema’s mouth curled up a little. “You’d probably beat me at running, but swimming’s my speciality.”

“And diving?” Hinata said, nodding towards the segregated dive pool, off to one side of the main building.

“I’ll show you,” Ema said. Wandering around the slippery tiles, she led the way through the metal gates into the dive pool, which was presently devoid of people.

Hinata stood to one side of the pool, noting how much deeper than the regular pool it was. Hardly surprising; dropping from twenty feet up would be pretty painful—terminally so—in the shallower main pool.

Climbing the ladder all the way to the top of the dive platforms, Ema walked forward to the board, which waggled and wobbled under her feet. With arms out to the sides, she posed, jumped, hit the board, and dived, her form perfect and proper.

Hinata whistled under her breath, watching Ema’s petite form as she fell towards the water. “Looking good...”

Clambering out of the water, Ema padded around and joined her newest friend, her face radiating happy pride. “What did you think?”

“Honestly? I think some lucky agency is going to love having you on their books,” Hinata said, giving a thumbs-up.

“Y-You think?” Ema mumbled, looking down. “I’ve always enjoyed swimming, and I was on the dive team at my old high school. Never really thought it might come in handy for being an idol, though.”

“One of the first things I learned was that idols can be pretty much anything you like. You saw Aphrodite yesterday, and while they’re kind of at the extreme end of the spectrum, they’re a good example of how much variety there is.”

Hinata touched a finger to Ema’s cheek. “The smile’s back.”

“I love diving, it’s exhilarating,” Ema laughed. She gently felt her face with both hands, as if trying to burn the feeling of smiling into her brain in hopes of creating a new muscle memory. Back at the main pool, she slid into the water and leaned back against the tiled edge next to her new friend. “You know, it’s been ages since I last did something really fun like this? Not counting the Azu-chan event.”

“Too busy trying to be a responsible adult?” Hinata suggested.

“Hah, yeah.” Ema’s lips curled up into a happy and genuine smile. “I think somewhere along the way... I forgot how to have fun. Too busy studying, or looking for a job, or trying to keep Mom happy.”

“And now?”

“If I want to be an idol, I need to be able to enjoy myself, don’t I? If *I’m* not having fun, how can I ever expect my fans to?”

“You’re learning.”

“After watching your performance yesterday, I... might’ve seen something in you that I’d lost myself,” Ema murmured, staring down at the rippling surface of the water. “Same with Azu-chan. It felt amazing. My heart was beating like mad and I just wanted to jump around and wave my hands in the air.”

Hinata stepped sideways to be a bit closer. “It’s an infectious feeling, isn’t it? Seeing a crowd of people all having the same experience as you?”

“It’s almost like a religion, to be honest,” Ema replied.

“I... hadn’t thought of it like that, but yeah, it kind of is. The stage is our church, idols are our preachers, producers are the clergy... haha, there’s something kind of fun about that image.”

“And the fans are the congregation, there to hear the sermon of song...” Ema said, then shrank until her face was half underwater in sheer Apocalyptic embarrassment. Rising back up again, her face went through one of those changes that indicated an epiphany had just occurred. “Oh... I get it now. That’s why that girl wanted to see Minami’s smile...”

“Hmm?”

Ema explained about the girl she had overheard talking about how much she wanted to see Minami’s sexy smile the previous day. “I think I’ve figured out why she wanted to see it. Because seeing your favourite idol smiling makes *you* want to smile as well.”

“That’s right, you’re sharing in her joy,” Hinata said, nodding once. “I can’t even count the number of times I’ve seen that look on Michelle’s face. She ain’t what you’d call reserved about her feelings.”

Lifting herself up out of the water to sit on the edge of the pool, Ema clenched both her hands. “When I get home, I’m going to put together a list of agencies to try. I’ve had more fun over this weekend that I’ve had in the last five years. I want to share it!”

“You’ll need to audition,” Hinata informed her, turning around to face the poolside so she could gaze up at her friend.

“I know. I’m not sure how I’ll get on, but I’m going to give it my all.”

“Atta girl.”

With that, they enjoyed another half an hour of racing each other, Hinata even managing a couple of wins this time, then headed home.

Chapter 7: Active Ablutions

Ambling up the path to the dormitory, her head filled with Ema's face... and various other bits and pieces, all of which were shapely and cute, Hinata felt an intense sense of excitement, a light-headedness and restlessness as though she had too much energy and needed to burn some of it off.

"Ema... Ema... she's way too cute," she whispered to herself, pulling open the front door and stepping across the threshold. The dormitory was located about a mile from the main Sakura-P building, ensuring that the girls who lived there only had a short distance to walk home after a hard day.

Unlike the main building, the dormitory was only two storey and of primarily red brick construction, with a homely and relaxed feel. It had been a surprise to Hinata that a corporation would think to make a dormitory somewhere people might actually want to live, but they had apparently managed it. The dorm was, by a large, a lovely place filled with fun girls who all loved performing and singing and dancing.

Making her way along the main hall, with doors to either side, she arrived at her own shared room where she lived with Michelle. The room itself was your standard box, with sunflower yellow walls and a large window looking out over the street at the front. There were two beds, one in either corner to the right, a low table in the centre of the room with cushions for sitting, and most importantly of all a small en-suite through a door in the wall opposite the beds.

Entering, Hinata immediately changed into one of the tracksuits she used for training and prepared to get in a couple of hours of practice. Regardless of her interest in Ema, she was an idol first and foremost, and that meant keeping up with her usual fitness and training routines.

Fortunately the dormitory had its own gym at one end of the building, allowing the girls to deal with their daily fitness requirements without having to go anywhere. Very helpful if it happened to be bucketing down with rain.

With this completed to her satisfaction, Hinata returned to the room and stripped the sweat-laden tracksuit off, then jumped into the bath for a soak. Like most Japanese bathrooms, the en-suite was fully tiled and had a bath, a showerhead on the wall, and a low wooden stool. Nothing fancy, but more than she had expected when she first moved in.

Reclining in the hot water, she enjoyed the wonderfully relaxing liquid on her skin, staring vacantly at the ceiling. “Ema...”

She found herself humming. Completely out of nowhere, a random tune of happiness. Her mind was filled with thoughts of that slight figure, the nice hair, her cute voice, how enjoyable she was to spend time with...

Hinata slid her hand down from where it rested on the flat edge of the bath, into the water and zeroing in between her legs. Her own actions barely registered, she was so deeply lost in her little fantasyland, her stuttering breaths misting her lips.

Her fingers touched and caressed an area she normally felt little need to play around with, the index finger gently rubbing up and down her *other* lips, the private ones only a single other person had ever seen up close. A pause to slowly rub her clit a few times, receiving an enjoyable judder in response, and she slipped the finger into her hungry tunnel.

“Ema...” she murmured, eyes half closed as her fingers continued working their magic, her breath coming faster now, low moans escaping from her lips as she again thought of that soft hair, the subtle curves she would like to get a better look at, the—

“Hina?” came Michelle’s voice, floating through the frosted glass door into the bathroom proper.

Hinata awoke from her reverie with a start, jerking her fingers free from her secret garden and bringing the hand back up. She sat upright and stared at the door, instinctively hiding the hand behind her back, despite her roommate being unable to see anything through the hazy glass. “You’re back early!”

“That job I went for fell through, so we were sent home,” Michelle called through. “You fingering yourself again? I can hear the moans.”

“Jeez, that girl...” Hinata muttered, rolling her eyes.

Michelle was the *'other person'* who had seen her private bits and pieces, so it wasn't as though they were shy about discussing their equally private habits, vis-à-vis masturbation and lesbian liaisons with each other.

But there *were* other girls who wandered the hall outside their room, and Michelle never thought that *maybe* they weren't interested in discussions of that nature. Or rather, they probably would be interested. Too much so, to the point of gossip she didn't need to be dealing with.

"I'll be out in a sec!" Hinata called back.

Standing in the water, she gave herself a few more rubs as the pleasure gradually faded, took a few breaths, cleaned her fingers in the now-lukewarm water, and climbed out. It was always annoying being interrupted, but it generally made the eventual orgasm that much better if she was a bit frustrated, so she didn't mind it too much.

Drying herself with a towel, still a little wobbly in the legs as the euphoria faded to a pleasant afterglow twinned with the inevitable frustration, she let out a brief and uncharacteristic sigh.

Getting lost in an Ema-focused reverie had resulted in more time passing than she intended. It would take a while for her hair to fully dry in any case—even with the use of a hairdryer—so she did what she could with it and returned to the main room wrapped in a fresh towel.

Michelle immediately jumped her, sliding both arms around her roommate and giving her a peck on the lips. "You know I'm available if you need some release, right?"

"I know. But you weren't here," Hinata said, pulling away and putting a finger up to her eager friend's mouth.

"I am now," Michelle said with a shrug, walking over to her own bed and blowing a kiss as she went. She pointed at the mattress. "Yes? No? Later?"

"I just had a bath," Hinata said, rolling her eyes. She stared for a moment, shrugged, and went ahead with it anyway. It wasn't as though she couldn't have another bath later.

Chapter 8: Warm Memories, Cold Reality

After helping her mother out for most of the afternoon—mostly as penance for not doing so the previous evening—Ema thundered upstairs and launched herself onto the bed, doing her best not to spill the half-glass of banana milkshake she had in-hand, then grabbed her tablet and opened a web browser.

Now... how to begin?

She tried searching for ‘*idol agencies*’. This yielded so many results that it simply wasn’t helpful, so she refined it down to just the city of Shibuya itself, and only agencies that were actively recruiting.

Even then, there were too many hits, ranging from brand new start-ups to the longest-running agencies, some of which had been around for several decades, right back to the early days when idols were still a new phenomenon in Japan.

“Well... I have basically no real idea how to be an idol yet, so I guess one of the newest would be best?” Ema mumbled, tapping the screen for more details on an agency that had caught her eye. “Starlight Productions?” She read the details, nodding a few times while idly taking sips from her milkshake.

“They’re scouting new talent, interested in girls who want to learn and are willing to work hard...” she continued, now with a ring of yellow around her mouth. She wiped this away with a tissue and read on. “They have half a dozen girls already, eager to make a name for themselves... run by Lucy Lancaster? I have no idea who she is. Um...”

A few more minutes of sotto voce comments were followed by grabbing her phone from the bedside cabinet. Her thumb hovered over the screen, slowly tapping out a number.

After what seemed like an eternity, she had finally managed to tap out a full phone number. She hit the call button and brought the phone up to her ear, taking a deep breath. It was answered with commendable speed, giving Ema precisely no time to prepare herself.

“Starlight-P, Lucy speaking,” said a pleasant female voice.

“H-Hi, my name’s Ema Campbell, I’ve kind of been thinking of becoming an idol,” Ema said, keeping her voice low in the event her mother happened to come upstairs.

“Well, you’ve rung the right place, then,” Lucy said, her whole voice managing to convey excitement without needing to see her face at all. *“You’re at least eighteen, yes?”*

“Nineteen.”

“Perfect. In that case, how about you come and say hi, oh, let’s say Saturday morning? I’m kind of busy this week, sorry. How’s that sound?”

“Saturday’s fine, thanks. What time?”

“Ten okay?”

“Sure,” Ema said, nodding even though she felt like she wanted to end the call and hide under the duvet; the reality of what she was doing had set in and given her what Jun liked to call the screaming willies.

“Awesome. Wear something comfy, a tracksuit or whatever is fine, you’ll need to be able to move about. And bring your best singing voice. See you Saturday, Ema, I’m always stoked to see new girls interested in my agency. Cheers!” Lucy said, and cut the connection.

Ema breathed out and tossed the phone on the mattress. “Well, I’m in it now.” She went back to looking at Starlight Productions’ website, gathering together the courage to ask Hinata if she’d mind training with her...

Unfortunately, she was interrupted by her mother barging into the room unannounced. “Ema, we’re out tonight to see a show, keep an eye on the place...” She trailed off, taking in the scene; Ema seated cross-legged on the bed with a guilty expression and her arms behind her back, clearly hiding something. “Is there something you’d like to share?”

“N-Nothing at all! You just startled me. Don’t just barge in, jeez...!” Ema said, avoiding eye contact.

Her mother danced across and grabbed the tablet before Ema could react, holding it up and scanning the screen. “Idols? What did I tell you about wasting your time on this nonsense? You’re not cut out to be an idol, just forget it!”

“It’s not for me!” Ema snapped, and snatched the device back. “I met a new friend a couple of days ago, I’m just helping her out with some research, that’s all.”

“A new friend?”

“Yeah, Hina. She wants to be an idol, and since I apparently suck too much to be one myself, I wanted to help her.”

Staring for a moment, her mother eventually walked back to the door. “I’m happy that you’re being a good friend even to someone you’ve only just met, but remember you need to be focusing on finding a job.” She exited, closing the door behind her with a quiet click.

Exhaling as the tension drained from the atmosphere, Ema collapsed forward with her face buried in the pillow. “That was way too close...”

In a strange way, she wished it had been porn or something displayed on the device. It would’ve been easier to explain.

Dozing off in her comfy pillow, her mind was again filled with hazy images of her time as a child. She remembered dancing, and there was definitely a voice in the background, her father’s, no doubt about it.

But her mother was there, too, and not the often angry and stern woman she lived with now... no, this was a more relaxed incarnation, but Ema still couldn’t quite grasp the full image, it was always just out of reach...

Chapter 9: Stepping Stones

Meeting up with Hinata a couple of evenings later, a warm but overcast Wednesday with a surprising lack of activity in the city streets, Ema navigated them across to the same park where they had originally met, dressed in a comfy tracksuit each.

Dropping onto a wooden bench seat, Hinata patted next to her. Once Ema had seated herself, she began. “Okay, so you’ve got an audition on Saturday, yes?”

Ema nodded. “Right. A bit over two days. I... can’t say I’m confident...”

“I wasn’t either when I auditioned for Sakura-P,” Hinata said.

“I can’t even imagine how much harder that must be.”

“It wasn’t too bad, but that’s because I had a friend helping me. By myself, I’d have been screwed.” Hinata grabbed Ema’s hand and squeezed. “And now I’m being that friend to you.” She got to her feet and tugged Ema up with her. “I hope you’re prepared for my Hell Training.”

“Hell... training?”

“Being an idol is tough. You need to be prepared to put a lot of hard work in. *Are you ready?*”

Straightening up, Ema took a breath. “Yeah, I am. Mom doesn’t think I can be an idol, so I want to prove her wrong.”

“Let’s go, then,” Hinata added, and set off at a steady pace. “You won’t be winning *this* time,” she called over her shoulder.

“Think again!” Ema shouted back, managing a smile for once and running after her.

Two hours later, she wasn’t smiling any more.

They had done a complete circuit around the full circumference of the city centre, including some of the side streets and awkward areas with uneven floors; Hinata had learned since her early days that idols might be asked to do all manner of odd things, so being prepared for anything you could possibly

think of simply went with the territory. Back at the park, she was now doing a few cooldown stretches while Ema did her best to bring her breathing back under control.

“Okay, I concede defeat on that one,” Ema eventually said, standing up and stretching. “You’re a really good runner.”

“I’ve been doing it for years,” Hinata said. “Once you’ve got into a routine, it becomes second nature.”

“Swimming used to be like that for me, though I fell out of the habit a while ago,” Ema said.

“Time to fall back in, then.”

“Running’s probably better if I want to be an idol?”

Hinata shrugged. “Sure, but having an interest like swimming could help you build up a following. Honestly, both are good, swimming exercises different muscles to running.”

“Oh. Right,” Ema murmured, doing a few stretches before collapsing on a nearby bench. “So, what’s next?”

Hinata looked Ema in the eye and grinned. “Running. Lots and lots of running.”

“Why do you hate me so much?” Ema asked, shaking her head.

“It’s called tough love,” Hinata said. “What did Lucy tell you about the audition?”

“Not much, just to bring my best singing voice.”

“No mention of a particular song or anything?”

“No.”

Hinata nodded. “That means she’ll probably have you doing scales rather than singing a song.”

“Like... do-re-mi? That sort of thing?”

“Ah-ah-ah-ah-aaah!” Hinata sang, pitching up three times, then back down again for the final two.

“I’ve seen singers on the net doing that with a piano,” Ema said, repeating the same basic scale and showing herself to have a cute and nicely-pitched voice, high in tone but soft and easy on the ears.

“Great,” Hinata enthused. “I’m not really sure how smaller agencies operate, but from what Michelle tells me, you’ll probably just need to prove you can carry a tune and move your legs in a vaguely rhythmic way. They’ll train you properly after that.”

“Hopefully I can keep up. I’m not feeling that confident.”

“It’s not easy being positive after years feeling like the world’s out to get you, is it?” Hinata said, leaning back and stretching her legs out.

“How...?”

“I was in a similar situation before I auditioned for Sakura-P. Spent months trying to figure out what the hell to do with my life, failed hard, ended up back at home with no idea what to do next.”

“Hah... sounds like me when I left school.” Ema emitted a silent sigh and jumped off the bench. “How about another run?”

“Now you’re talking.” Hinata got up and they set off for another jaunt around the city streets.

The next day, they did it again, interspersed with more singing practice and even a few dance moves. Ema was thoroughly bushed by the time the weekend rolled around. Bushed, yes, but also filled with a new energy she’d not felt in years.



Ema turned up at the agency building on Saturday morning with mildly aching legs and a slightly more positive attitude. The building itself was a five storey affair, bog standard and plain, sandwiched between two much taller skyscrapers. Along the windows of the third floor, ‘*Starlight-P*’ had been written in red text, using coloured tape stuck directly to the glass on the inside.

She entered through the ground floor door and arrived in a small hallway with a staircase leading up. Everything was grey. Walls, floors, even the atmosphere. With her stomach sinking a little, she headed up the stairs and turned left, arriving at the first floor landing, where a hallway led through the building with rooms to the left and right.

As Ema was about to try the next floor, a door opened a little way up the hall and a young woman with blonde hair and a pair of bright pink sunglasses raised up to the top of her head walked out. She loitered in the doorway a moment, poked her head back inside the room, said, “Get the place booked ASAP, Suda-kun, we can’t afford to miss a lucrative contract like that,” and closed the door.

Placing one hand on her hip, she used the other to scratch her head, causing the sunglasses to fall and clatter to the floor. “Damn and blast!” She reached down, grabbed them, and on the way back up noticed the new arrival. “Ah, you must be my new girl? Ema, was it?”

Ema’s head bobbed. “That’s me.”

“Sweet, let’s take a walk,” the young woman said. “I’m Lucy, I own this place, though sometimes I wish I didn’t. Shouldn’t take long, Ema, I’m already liking what I’m seeing, so we just need to give you a couple of quick test-a-rinos and we’ll be set.”

“That seems... easier than I expected,” Ema said, running to keep up with Lucy’s long strides towards the stairs.

“I don’t mess about. If I like the look of you and you fit my criteria, you get a chance, simple as that. It’s up to you to *make* something of that chance,” Lucy replied, heading up to the third floor.

“How many girls do you have?” Ema asked as they ascended the stairs.

“Six right now, though maybe seven soon, hmm?” Lucy said, laughing. Reaching the top of the stairs, she turned into the hallway directly above the one they had just been in, and opened a frosted glass door. “Poke your head in here for a sec, Ema.”

Ema did so, noting that there were four girls training together, each with the same sort of outlandish hair that she had seen on Aphrodite’s members. “They look amazing. Are they practising for something special?”

“Got a big festival coming up soon, but they’re also staying in shape for whatever auditions might come their way,” Lucy said, quietly closing the door and continuing on. The next door along this dimly lit hallway opened into a similar room with polished wood floor and foam around the walls, overlooking the street out front.

In one corner was a real grand piano. Lucy sat before it. "Let's get this show on the road." She waved for Ema to come over and stand beside her. "Have you ever done scales before?"

"Only once, thanks to an idol friend of mine," Ema said, nodding.

"Oooh, do I sense the presence of a possible rival?" Lucy asked with an amused grin.

"I don't know about that," Ema began, but stopped and looked thoughtful for a moment. Maybe Lucy wasn't far off? Hinata was a lovely girl and Ema liked her a lot... but she *was* an idol, albeit one with more experience. "Actually... I guess she could be?"

"Great. Having a rival will push you to new heights, make sure you hang onto her," Lucy added, and plinked a few of the piano's keys. "Ready to start?"

"Sure."

"In that case, after me..." Lucy said, and began. Moving up the scale and back down again, she paused so that Ema could match the pitch with her voice. "Mm, good, good, you've got a nice voice. Again."

Ema once more followed the notes produced by the piano, with barely a wobble or mistake.

Half an hour of this resulted in Lucy clapping her hands together and getting to her feet. "Awesome job, you pass with flying colours."

"Does that mean I'm an idol now?" Ema said, once more surprised at how easy it seemed.

"Hold your horses, sport, we still need to make sure you're not going to fall over your own feet."

This made Ema blush.

"Follow my moves," Lucy continued, and went into a simple routine of dance practice steps; forward, back, side to side, forward, back, side to side, pirouette, repeat. "Now you try."

"O-Okay," Ema said, and fell in alongside, matching Lucy's steps with minimal fuss, though she almost managed to trip up at one point. Valiantly recovering, she finished these practice steps with no further mishaps.

“We can work on your dance, no problem,” Lucy said, and held her hand out. “Welcome aboard.”

“You mean it? I can be an idol?” Ema said, hesitantly grasping the proffered hand and shaking. “I don’t need to do an interview or anything?”

“What, you thought there’d be a bunch of silly questions about why you want to be an idol? Nope. As long as you can carry a tune and know your left foot from the right, you’re already more than qualified. Just remember, agency idols don’t normally get the same breaks as the girls at big companies like Sakura-P. So here’s the deal: you work hard for me and I’ll work hard for you.” Lucy spread her arms wide. “We’re a happy little family!”

“A happy family, huh?” Ema said under her breath, an image of her mother hanging in the forefront of her mind. Her mother loved her, Ema didn’t need to be told that. But the sternness, the irritation whenever idols were mentioned, the apparent lack of confidence in her daughter’s ability to *be* an idol...

It rankled, that’s what it did. Ema gave a single decisive nod. “I want to be an idol, please let me join your agency!”

Lucy closed her arms around Ema and gave her a brief hug. “Done.” She walked her out of the room and along the hall. “First, we’ll get you some awesome promo photos, then maybe we’ll think about finding you an audition or two to go for. After that... the world’s your pearl.”

“Isn’t that normally oyster?”

“Oh... yeah, could be,” Lucy said with a shrug.

Ema emitted a cute little giggle and let herself be shuffled along, thinking that she should send Hinata a message with the good news at the first opportunity...

Chapter 10: A Life Less Ordinary

A week later, Ema arrived outside the unassuming offices of Starlight Productions once more. Before she could properly get started, Lucy had needed to sort out various paperwork and other things of an administrative nature, so Ema had mostly been spinning her wheels until today.

Making her way inside and upstairs to the second floor dance practice rooms, she made a beeline for the one where she could hear the sounds of voices and rubber soles squeaking on polished wood.

So far Ema had managed to avoid her parents, specifically her overbearing mother, finding out about her exciting new hobby-cum-career path. The fact that she was nineteen and a legal adult—even if she was still half a year away from being legally allowed to drink—who was capable of making her own decisions and mistakes made no difference to her mother. Idols were bad, end of story.

It stung all the more because her mother refused to tell her *why* she was so opposed to idols, especially considering how popular they were. It wasn't like the old days, when idols had still been new and largely misunderstood. There were plenty of girls working this career path now and there were more agencies and other idol businesses than ever, but her mother stubbornly refused to give an inch.

Well, Ema would just have to show her that she was wrong, by becoming a wonderful and successful idol. She was technically looking for a job anyway, so regularly leaving the house was nothing unusual. She would simply have to ensure she remained vigilant and sneaky.

Knocking on the frosted glass door into the practice room, Ema stepped inside and issued a quiet hello, the sort of church mouse whisper where she kind of wanted to be heard, but also felt like running away and hiding under the pews.

At the other end of the spacious room were two girls of similar age to her, one with long, silky black hair giving her a traditional Japanese look, and the

other with a vivid purple head of dyed hair tied into twintails, who had an expression of mischievous energy similar to Jun when she had been at the alcopops.

The black-haired girl turned and saw the new arrival. "Good morning, Ema."

"Hmm?" said the purple girl, before rushing across. "Hey, great to meet you, Ema. I'm Danika, the lovely lass over there is Kirsten. You can call me Dani!"

Ema shook Danika's hand and bobbed her head at Kirsten. "Nice to meet you both. Um, Lucy said I'd be practising with you today?"

"That's right," Kirsten said, her soft voice putting Ema at ease in a way Danika's brash tone completely failed to manage. They were both dressed in colourful tracksuits, with a third set folded on a table in one corner of the room. Kirsten pointed to it. "Your jersey is over there. If you'd kindly get changed, we can begin."

Walking over to the table, Ema looked around. "I-Is there a changing room?"

"We don't normally bother with one," Danika said. "Uh, closet over there works, I guess?" She pointed at the corner of the room just next to the entrance, where a small room through the plainest of plain wooden doors was located.

"You'll often be expected to change with other idols, so you might want to try and get into the habit before you're called upon to do it for real," Kirsten said, smiling a smile of happy helpfulness.

Hesitating a moment, Ema eventually nodded and started undressing in the room with her new friends. Hinata would probably laugh at her if she discovered that she couldn't even undress among other idols, so Ema put it out of mind as best she could. It was the work of but a moment of self-consciousness speed-stripping, and she now stood in a soft grey tracksuit with pink stripes up and down the arms and legs.

"I'm ready, I think," she said, joining the two of them.

"Perfect," Danika said, manoeuvring them across to the centre of the room. "You've not debuted yet, right?"

"No..." Ema said, shaking her head. Lucy had mentioned something about it, but nothing concrete so far.

“There’s nothing all that much to it,” Danika said. “You’ll probably be given a job performing at a small venue somewhere locally. A song or two, get a bit of exposure, that type of thing. No biggie.”

Ema’s expression indicated she wasn’t so sure about this being ‘*no biggie*’.

“Well, for now let’s train,” Danika added.

Thanks to meeting Hinata, Ema had a reasonable idea of what her life would probably consist of while she was settling in as a new idol: lots and lots of practice interspersed with occasional auditions. They had exchanged over the last week and occasionally spent an hour or more talking over video chat, with Ema absorbing all the advice her friend had given her.

But while she was basically ready for the training itself, she absolutely was not prepared for the *length* of the training. Four hours could flash past in no time at all if she was watching a couple of movies with friends, or attending a live event of some sort.

But it could also feel like an eternity of torment in the deepest, darkest depths of Hell when those four hours consisted almost entirely of singing, dancing, and doing stretches, not to mention the running. Hinata really hadn’t been joking when she mentioned how much she ran, and Ema was now suffering thanks to not properly keeping up with her own training over the last few years.

Not much point, all things considered. Her mother had put her foot down hard the moment Ema mentioned wanting to be an idol, and that had been a good five years ago now. Ema had therefore focused almost exclusively on her schoolwork and graduating with at least *some* sort of qualifications.

And now here she was, secretly working to become an idol against her mother’s wishes. Laid on the wooden floor of the dance practice room, her chest rising and falling like it was going out of style, she was beginning to wonder if maybe her mother had a point.

“I don’t know if I can keep this up...” she mumbled, laughing vaguely between attempts to re-oxygenate her body. She was forced to close her eyes as her vision swam and everything went momentarily purple. The last time she had

felt this worn out was a school sports day where she had stubbornly refused to let a girl in another class win at the track event.

“You did great,” Danika said, dropping a fresh towel on Ema’s face. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, right?”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think *you* were trying to kill me,” Ema said, managing to sit up and use the towel to dry the worst of the sweat.

Danika dropped to the floor and crossed her legs, proffering a full bottle of water. “You kept up with us for the whole session, so I’d say you’re pretty much on your way to being a solid idol already.” She playfully punched the new girl’s arm and emitted a boisterous chuckle.

“I’m not sure about that,” Ema laughed, mostly to hide a minor bout of worry. “I don’t know if I really have the ability to be an idol, but I want to try.”

“Why did you decide to become an idol?” Kirsten asked, sitting to Ema’s other side and pulling her silky black hair down from the ponytail she had worn while training.

“I want to prove my mom wrong. She thinks I don’t have the talent to be an idol,” Ema said.

Kirsten exchanged a glance with Danika. “I... can’t honestly say that’s a very good reason for wanting to be an idol.”

“Yeah, it’s a bit negative, huh?” Danika said. “Isn’t there something *you* want? Something positive to work towards?”

“I’m not sure,” Ema mumbled. “My friend Jun pushed me into it, and meeting Hina was what made me decide to try. I didn’t really think about it beyond that.”

“Well, that’s no good!” Danika said, clapping her hands together and making Ema jump. “You’re not working towards anything, you’re just running away. You’ll never make it as an idol like that. Physically you’re fine, but you should work on the mental, yup.” She tapped her temple.

Ema looked down.

Reaching out and gently rubbing their newest idol’s shoulder, Kirsten said, “Would you like to visit my home with me, Ema? A change in perspective might help?”

Looking back up, Ema nodded. “That sounds nice. I don’t really feel like going... home... hah, running away. I am, aren’t I?”

Danika jumped to her feet and put a hand up to the side of her face, index and middle fingers extended in a peace sign, the tips of the fingers right beside her eye. “Have fun with my girl, Ema. Nika-tan, out!” With that, she grabbed her things and dashed for the door, showing that she still had plenty of energy even after a four hour practice session.

“Nika-tan...?” Ema muttered, an eye twitching with second-hand embarrassment.

“It’s her idol name,” Kirsten said, stifling a ladylike giggle. “-tan is a cutesy version of the -chan honorific. I suspect I might have influenced her decision, as it’s something I used to use a lot when we were children.”

“I can’t even imagine you saying something like that,” Ema said, the embarrassment deepening.

Kirsten merely smiled and got to her feet, helping her new friend up and leading them outside once they had changed and had a quick shower in the agency building’s shower facilities. The sun greeted them with its surprisingly warm rays, given it was nearly October, resulting in Kirsten stepping up the pace and keeping to the shadows wherever possible.

“Don’t you like the sun?” Ema asked as they rushed across the gap between two buildings and back into the shade.

“I like it, but I can’t stay out in it for too long. I burn easily,” Kirsten replied.

“That’s a shame. I really like being outside.”

Crossing a road, Kirsten paused a moment on the other side. “It seems we’ve already discovered a useful piece of information for your idol life.”

“We have?” Ema said, stopping beside her.

“You said you enjoy being outside, yes? There are idols who specialise in outdoors events, so that could be a good avenue for you to walk.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that...” Ema said as they got underway again.

“Huh... something to think about, at least.”

They continued on.

Chapter 11: Tradition & Modernity

In one of the suburbs on the opposite side of the city to where Ema lived, she found herself at the entrance to a Shinto shrine. Red torii gates? Check. A long flight of stone stairs leading up, with copious trees either side? Check. And at the top, a wide courtyard area paved in grey tiles, with several shrine buildings all surrounded by woods? Double check.

Each of the three main buildings was delineated by the judicious use of flower beds, most of which had gone over by now and were largely devoid of flowers. Ema thought they must look gorgeous at the height of summer, and made a mental note to visit the next year.

The whole area still had the *scent* of summer, however, making for an altogether relaxing atmosphere. It was the very picture of serenity. At least, it *was*, until a loud voice made Ema jump.

“Welcome home, Kirika-chan!”

The man who had yelled this across the square was bald and dressed in a lightweight kimono of the male variety. Unlike the female kimono, which was figure-hugging and tight, the black one worn by this man was fairly loose, featured separate trouser legs, and had a lightweight half-length jacket with long, floppy sleeves. He was presently using a straw broom to sweep up the paths outside the shrine buildings, but had paused to give them both a warm smile.

“Kirika...?” Ema said, glancing at Kirsten’s suddenly glowing features.

Kirsten uttered a Japanese expletive under her breath. “Can you please call me by my idol name in public, Father? How many times must I ask you?”

“Oh, silly me,” her father said, bopping his head. “How was your day, Kirsten?”

Walking across to stand before him, Kirsten smiled. “Lovely as always, thank you.” She tugged Ema forward. “We just received a new girl at the agency. Ema, this is my father.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr...?” Ema said, bowing her head briefly.

“Call me Kanji,” he said, vigorously shaking her hand. “Any friend of Kiri—Kirsten’s is a friend of ours.”

Leading the way around behind the main shrine building, Kirsten took them up another path behind it, winding through the trees with bamboo lampposts at regular intervals that would no doubt look lovely and atmospheric at night. The yellow-tiled path soon deposited them in another paved clearing, this time containing a building similar to the shrine itself, but larger and intended for home use.

Kirsten led the way up a shallow flight of wooden steps which deposited them in a spacious room. “This way, Ema.”

Lacquered wood and treated paper were the order of the day here, with long halls leading through the building itself, as well as around the outer edges, providing a warm and covered means of getting around even in the coldest of weather. In the very centre of the building there was a courtyard that just *screamed ‘Zen Garden’* to Ema’s eyes.

“This is beautiful,” Ema said, stopping to admire the rocky and green space. Several small ponds occupied the area, each with a number of koi carp idly swimming back and forth. “I’m half-Japanese, but I’ve not looked into that side of my heritage much.”

Kirsten stopped at the mouth to another hallway leading back inside. “You’re welcome to visit whenever you like. My father can probably tell you some stories, if you happen to be interested.” She gestured towards the hallway. “My room is just in here.”

A couple of meters into the hallway, Kirsten took a left turn into a room and closed the door most of the way, just leaving herself enough of a crack to peer out through. “If you could wait just a moment, I need to change.”

Ema raised an eyebrow.

This made Kirsten giggle. “Yes, I realise this goes against what I said earlier about changing in company, but I don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“Okay,” Ema said, nodding. Taking a few steps away, she emerged back into the sunlight of the courtyard and occupied herself by watching the fish and enjoying the peaceful atmosphere.

After ten minutes of near-total silence—excepting the many insects and birds all around the area—a sliding sound indicated Kirsten was finished changing and had exited her room.

Ema turned to see a vision of beauty in red and white, her expression switching to one of surprise.

“How do I look?” Kirsten asked, doing a slow twirl; the miko outfit she wore necessitated additional care, lest she trip and face-plant on the gravel.

Taking in the outfit, which contrasted wonderfully against Kirsten’s jet black hair, Ema nodded. “I’ve never seen a real shrine maiden outfit in person before.” She walked across. “Can I touch?”

“Certainly,” Kirsten said, raising an arm to let the white material hang loose.

“It’s softer than I imagined,” Ema murmured, rubbing some of the cloth between finger and thumb.

Kirsten emitted a soft laugh and took Ema’s hand. “Come on, we can talk while I work.”

Back at the main shrine’s plaza area, Kirsten took over from her father, inviting Ema to sit on a nearby bench. She began sweeping as Kanji headed off inside the main shrine building, and glanced at her guest. “You said earlier you have some problems at home?”

“Yeah,” Ema said, kicking her feet out and leaning back to stare at the sky. Sometimes she wished she could just book a ticket on a plane and go away to some other country. But that would require money she didn’t have. “Mom really doesn’t like idols.”

“And you’re presently training to become one,” Kirsten said, the brush momentarily stilled. She leaned on it and stared at her guest. “Putting aside the issue of your mother, can you think of a good reason to be an idol? Is there something you’d like to achieve?”

Nothing sprang to mind immediately, so Ema turned the question around. “What about you? Is there something you’re working towards? Maybe hearing your dream will help me discover my own... or something?”

Kirsten swept her way over to the bench and sat next to Ema, laying the brush down at her feet. “My dream is simple: to spread my love of Japanese

culture to as many people as I can, both here and in other countries. I work here at the shrine partly to help my parents, but also because I simply enjoy it. The festivals, the tourists here to learn about my country of origin, tying all of that into my own idol activities... I love them all!”

“Do you do anything here at the shrine? Like live events, that sort of thing?”

“Take a look over there,” Kirsten said, her glowing expression fading gently back to the usual faintly pleased one she seemed to prefer. She nodded at the other side of the square, where an open-sided stage stood, reminiscent of a band stand, only rectangular rather than circular. “Originally, the stage there would have been for kagura dance, or Noh theatre.”

“Originally? You mean...?”

“I also perform there as an idol sometimes, yes,” Kirsten said, her lips curling up a little further at some inner vision or memory. “Father is quite modern in that respect. Unfortunately, I’m quite busy for the next little while, though, so I doubt I’ll have time for another performance here until the Halloween festival next month.”

“I never would’ve thought of something like this,” Ema said. “I still don’t know what I want to work towards, but at least I have some idea of the sort of thing that’s possible. Thanks, Kirsten.”

“You are very welcome,” Kirsten replied, rubbing her new friend’s shoulder. “Some people can struggle for a long time to decide what they truly want to be, so I always like to help if I can.”

“Hina mentioned that there’s a lot of variety in idol circles,” Ema said, tapping her lip and staring into space. “Though I guess just learning the ropes first is a good idea.”

“A friend of yours?”

“Yeah. Maybe a rival, too, not sure yet,” Ema added, a bit red-faced.

Kirsten got back to her feet and retrieved the broom. “A rival might be just the thing you need to help you find your way. Dani is my rival as well as my best friend, so we’re always looking for new ways to boost each other and enjoy our lives even more.”

Ema nodded. “Maybe. I wonder if it’d be okay to train with her a bit? Would Lucy mind?”

“Why would she? Lucy wants you to succeed as much as anyone else, so if training with a rival helps you to do that, I guarantee she’d be the first one to tell you to give it a try.”

“She did say to hold onto Hina if she looked like being a good rival,” Ema added, her brows knitted in a thoughtful frown.

“I need to get on with my work now, Ema, sorry. But if you want to chat about anything in the future, I’m always happy to listen,” Kirsten said, issuing a shallow bow.

“I’d like that,” Ema said, bobbing her head in return. She wished Kirsten a pleasant afternoon and headed for the stairs back down in a thoughtful frame of mind.

Chapter 12: It's Raining Cats

Next up for Ema was further training. Or at least, that was what she had expected, this close to her debut. Lucy had informed her she had set up a small gig for her at a local venue that was known for helping new girls get onto the ladder, and Ema would be singing a single song. But Lucy had other plans for her today.

In the same practice room as before, Ema now stood with Lucy, Kirsten, and Danika, congregated around the doorway. She nodded at Lucy. "Um, so what's the plan?"

"For one thing, we need to get you acquainted with Anny soon," Lucy said. "She's away in Hokkaido right now, though, scouting out new talent. Kirsten tells me you might work well as a live event specialist, so Anny's your girl there."

Ema cocked her head. "Anny?"

"Didn't I mention her? Huh, thought I had," Lucy said with a shrug. "Angelica Kahue, or Anny for short. I met her on a holiday in Hawaii, we hit it off, and she decided to move here and work for me when I built Starlight-P. Anyway, she handles live events for us, but she's also our talent scout."

"There's a lot to take in, isn't there?" Ema said.

"You'll be fine. Just focus on your training and the rest will happen in its own time," Lucy said. "Right now, however, you're going to be spending a couple of hours with Danika at one of her jobs for today."

Danika stepped forward and put an arm around Ema's shoulders. "Ready?"

"Eh? Oh, right, yes!" Ema said. "I thought it'd be more training today."

"Gotta pace yourself, excessive training will just ruin your body," Lucy said, wagging her finger and making for the door.



Outside, Danika took a brisk walk out from the city centre, dragging the new girl along for the ride. “You’ve never done any idol work before now, right?” she said over her shoulder.

Trotting to keep up until she could get used to the fast pace, Ema nodded. “Right. I used to enjoy idols when I was younger, so I know some of what they get up to, but it’s still pretty new to me. What’s your job today?”

“Promoting a maid café in the city. Right around here actually, though I’ve never been there myself,” Danika replied, checking the street names until they arrived at the appropriate one. Stopping before a café with windows all along the front, she nodded. “This is it.”

She peered through the glass frontage to where she could see a marked absence of maids. Instead, there was a considerable presence of cats, plus a small crew setting up for her segment. “What the hell?” she muttered. “This isn’t a maid café, it’s a cat café!”

“You’re not allergic or something, are you?” Ema said.

“No, but... aargh, dammit,” Danika continued, tugging her phone from a pocket and ringing a number. “Suda-kun? You said this was a gig at a maid café, right?” She listened for a moment. “No, it’s a cat café! What? That’s a really important detail!” Another minute was spent listening while tapping her foot. “No, it’s fine, I’ll do the job, Suda-kun. I know you’re busier than usual with Anny not there, but seriously...”

Ema watched from a discrete distance until Danika was finished, then stepped forward. “Suda-kun’s that guy in the office, isn’t he?”

With a sigh, Danika slipped her phone back into a pocket and nodded. “Yeah, he’s Anny’s assistant, but he also handles a load of the admin work at the agency. Because Anny’s away right now, he’s dealing with her sending reports of potential new girls to contact, but also has his usual work, *and* he helps Lucy whenever she needs it. Completely swamped, poor chap.”

“Sounds like you need someone extra to help out,” Ema volunteered.

“No shit,” Danika said. “We *really* need a full-time producer, but Lucy’s not managed to find one she likes yet. A lot of the best ones already work for the big

assholes like Sakura-P, or they freelance, or stick with a single idol. None of which helps us.”

Ema had to bite her tongue to avoid saying what was now on her mind. She liked Hinata a great deal, but it was hard sometimes to avoid being jealous over her situation. Quite apart from attending one of the biggest idol agencies in the country, she also had access to producers and composers and the like.

Instead of complaining, Ema investigated the current predicament. “How did he mix up cats and maids?”

“The job was sold to us as a maid café that wanted some promotion, but apparently they forgot to mention the bit about there being cats,” Danika said, taking a deep breath of the sweet air; despite the café being through two thicknesses of glass door, the scents of sugar and cakes still managed to find their way out.

Gazing up at the building’s signage over the door, Ema saw a wide sign on which was written *Summer Dreamin’* in English. Odd name for a café, but she knew Japan well, and people often named things simply based on how cool or interesting it sounded, not how much sense it made.

“Pro tip for you, always arrive early. You never know what cock-ups might cause delays,” Danika continued, making an okay symbol and heading inside to meet the crew.

Here, they were greeted by a girl in a maid outfit. While she had seemingly forgotten the important *cat* part of the job description, she had conveyed the maid part perfectly. The girl was short, probably in her early twenties, and had chin-length brunette hair. She also had a hairband with cat ears attached to it, topping off the black and white costume.

“Hello, nya!” the girl said, bouncing over to stand before them.

Ema twitched. It was almost an instinctual reaction to the more out-there people in Shibuya, Akiba, and similar places. Something about them caused her an incredible amount of second-hand embarrassment.

“Nika-tan, arrival!” Danika said with a V-sign. She paid particular attention to the maid’s hairband, nodding a few times. “I see you’re also a girl with refined tastes.”

“Welcome to *Summer Dreamin'*, my little café of dreams!” the girl said with a bow. She grasped the cat ears in both hands and beamed. “You like my godly appendages?”

“They suit you, yeah,” Danika said.

“I’m trapped between insanity and madness,” Ema murmured.

“Anyway, I’m Natsu, but you can call me Nacchan if you like,” said the maid girl, doing a little twirl.

“Oh...” Ema murmured. So *that* was why the place was named *Summer Dreamin'*. *Natsu* was the Japanese word for summer, so it was clearly a reference to this girl’s name.

“I own and run this place and look after all my lovely kitties as their goddess,” Natsu continued, gesturing for them to follow her to a nearby window table.

“I know what cats are like, they probably see you as their servant,” Ema laughed.

“I don’t trust ‘em, I know that much,” Danika said in a low tone. She jumped as something brushed past her leg, then moved a few steps away, stiffening a little.

Standing there was a black and white cat with oddly short legs—a breed known as a munchkin cat—staring up at her with that vaguely disgusted look all felines use when encountering humans who apparently dislike them.

Danika took another step back. “C-Cats...”

There were almost two dozen of them lounging on every available surface, some of them staring at her with accusing eyes, others dozing in whatever spots of sunlight they could find, and a few play fighting under the tables.

Ema leaned close enough to whisper, “Are you afraid of cats?”

“No!” Danika snapped, losing her cool for a moment. She took a breath. “I just get nervous around animals, especially when there’s this many!”

“Why?”

“They’re just too... unpredictable,” Danika murmured. “I always worry I’ll do something to annoy them and get scratched.”

By now, the crew had finished setting up, ready to stream, so Natsu had Ema stand off to one side where she could observe without getting in the way, and sat Danika at a table near the front window. She nodded. “Be honest, Danika, I don’t want you pretending if you don’t actually like something, okay?”

“I never tell people what they want to hear,” Danika said, making herself comfy and trying to relax with this many unpredictable felines around the place. Already the hints of sweetness and cakes and desserts filled her nose. As an idol, she got to sample all sorts of delicious delights, it was one of the best perks of the job, even when the job was a curveball like today.

Natsu rushed off to the counter at the rear of the café, retrieved two plates laden with delectable goodies, and returned. She ran back once more for two cups of freshly home-brewed coffee, and sat at the table opposite her idol guest. With the camera rolling, she motioned for Danika to begin.

“Welcome to Summer Dreamin’ Café!” Danika said, waving an expansive arm to encompass the shop behind them. “We’re here today at the owner’s request. Kirisame Natsu-san has built her business up from the ground as *the* place to be if you like cats, coffee, and desserts, though not necessarily in that order.”

Turning to the owner herself, Danika continued. “Thanks for having us, Natsu-san. Before we get onto the important business of tasting the no doubt delicious dessert you’ve prepared for us today, tell us a little about yourself and the café.”

Natsu bobbed her head and turned to the camera. “I grew up in Japan and I’ve always loved cats, but more than that, I once tried a cup of freshly ground and brewed coffee while travelling Italy with my parents. It was the most wonderful thing I’d ever tasted. I decided then that I wanted to open my own place one day and serve coffee like that myself. Then I discovered a bit of a talent for baking desserts, and since I like cats...”

“The rest is history?” Danika suggested.

“Yup. I went to college to learn my trade as both a pâtissière and a barista, then moved back home to begin my dream, which is why this place is called

Summer Dreamin'. It's my dream given form! Things are going great right now, so I wanted to share my dream with more people."

"Being an idol is all about fulfilling dreams, so I can imagine your excitement when you finally achieved yours," Danika said, beaming like mad. "Let's move onto the portion I'm sure everyone has been looking forward to, especially me! I believe you have something very special lined up for us today?"

"Baked Alaska and a cup of my best espresso," Natsu said, doing her best not to openly salivate on a live stream. She gestured towards the plate of goodies she had retrieved before they started filming. "Please, enjoy."

Holding the plate up for the camera, Danika tilted it back and forth, showing the delicious dessert from every angle. "Natsume's dishes are all well presented, with neat and detailed work, but this Baked Alaska truly shows her incredible skill." Next, a quick inhale. "Smells wonderful, I can already get the hints of brandy and ice cream. Let's see how it tastes!"

A dainty mouthful disappeared, followed by an '*aaah, mmmm!*' of gastronomic delight. "It *melts* on the tongue, and the meringue is *just* the right consistency and texture. Baked Alaska has a reputation as one of the hardest desserts to make, and for good reason, but I'm pleased to say that Natsu-san's might be the best I've ever tried."

Off camera, Natsu blushed a little.

"Now, for the coffee!" Danika added. "Idols require energy and stamina in abundance, and a delicious cup of espresso can be just the thing after a tiring live event. If the dessert is any indication, I'd say we're in for a treat."

She took the small cup and held it up to her nose. "Mm, nothing beats the scent of freshly roasted coffee." Turning to Natsu, the camera following, she nodded at her. "You've managed to build a reputation for the best coffee in Shibuya ward, how do you do it?"

Natsu beamed. "Lots of hard work! My customers deserve the very best, so that's what I give them. I even import some of my beans from Italy, and they're never more than a week old for maximum taste explosion."

"Of course, the freshness of the beans is the most important thing for a good cup of coffee," Danika said to the camera. She took a sip of hers, her eyes

opening wide. “I might have underestimated just *how* much of a difference it makes, this is stellar.”

Placing the cup back on its saucer, Danika opened her mouth to wrap their short segment up, but was stopped dead by the appearance of an unwelcome guest. One of the many cats had taken an interest in proceedings and jumped up onto the table. Danika resisted the urge to sigh; it was part of the job and this was a cat café, so she couldn't simply *ignore* it, but...

The cat, a large ginger tom, took a few steps towards her, stopped at the very edge of the table top, and gently head-butted her, the universal cat body language for '*I require petting, human*'.

Danika stiffened, raising both hands high in the air. “A-Ahaha, you're a friendly one...?”

“All my cats are friendly, no need to be afraid,” Natsu said, reaching over to scratch the tom's back, receiving the usual '*butt in the air*' response alongside a happy purr. “Tickle him under the chin, he likes that.”

Lowering her hands in roughly the same manner as someone who had just been held up at gunpoint and was now free, Danika hesitantly extended a finger and went in for the kill. The cat raised his head expectantly, the purr intensifying. A single stroke saw Danika recoil instantly, expecting a hiss or a swipe. It didn't happen. Instead, the cat did that thing cats do where they attempt to manoeuvre themselves *into* a human's hand for maximum petting potential.

“Don't you like cats?” Natsu asked, noting her guest's hesitance.

“It's not so much that I don't like them, I'm just wary around them,” Danika said, forgetting for a moment that they were still live.

“Looks like your viewers have learned something new about you today, Nika-tan,” Natsu added with a cheesy grin.

Danika froze. Yeah... they were still live, weren't they? She took a breath and *very* carefully stroked the cat's head. Just once. No immediate scratching was forthcoming, so she tried again, receiving a purr for her troubles. She jumped as the cat stepped off the table, dropping his front paws onto her legs and rubbing

his head against her tummy. Deciding that he liked her, the cat proceeded to curl up in her lap.

“A-All in a day’s work for an idol. Cats, desserts, coffee, we’ve got it all!” Danika finally said after gathering her wits. “Thanks for watching, and be sure to check out Summer Dreamin’ Café, you won’t be disappointed!”

“I’m looking forward to meeting you all,” Natsu said, waving at the camera.

“And we’re done,” came the cameraman’s voice. “Good work, everyone.”

Deflating, though doing so carefully to avoid annoying the cat, Danika sank in the chair and sighed. “Sorry about that, Nacchan. Bit of a mix up over the type of job this would be, didn’t realise I’d have to deal with cats.”

“No worries, I’m super happy with your coverage,” Natsu replied with an honest smile. “Finish up the dessert, if you like, I don’t want it wasted.”

Danika waved Ema across and offered her a mouthful. “What did you think?”

“It was really fun,” Ema said, enjoying a taste and melting with delight.

“Mm, this is amazing, Natsu-san.”

“Thank you,” Natsume said, getting to her feet and carefully scooping the tom up, cradling him in her arms. “Better get ready to open shop. Thanks again!”

“Hope you learned something useful, anyway,” Danika added to Ema, who nodded.

“I did! Mostly that I need to be ready for anything.”

“You do in this business, yeah, especially as part of a smaller agency.”

“Also, it feels a bit strange doing something this, um... low-key?” Ema said, thinking back to how Hinata had also been doing a basic, entry-level job when they first met.

Danika cocked her head. “Low-key?”

“After seeing someone like Azu-chan performing at a big event, it just feels kind of strange how wide the gap is.”

“Everyone starts somewhere, and jobs like this are your bread and butter unless you’re really big-time.” Danika finished the last of the baked Alaska, shared the final sips of espresso with Ema, and got to her feet. “Not everyone wants that sort of crazy fame. I sure as hell don’t, hah. Come on, let’s head back.”

They thanked Natsu and the crew, then exited the café.



Walking back to the agency building, Danika sighed. “Well, that’s that.”

“I thought you did great,” Ema said.

“Ahaha, thanks,” Danika said, poking her in the side.

“Why didn’t you request another job, if you have problems with animals?”

Ema added, attempting to avoid further prodding by crab stepping to the side.

“First, because I’m a professional idol and won’t mess Lucy around like that unless I absolutely can’t avoid it,” Danika said, raising a finger. She raised a second finger. “And the other reason is simply because I need the work. I’m saving up to move out and get my own place with my... partner.”

They reached an intersection, crossed, and turned a corner into the road containing the agency building.

“You have a partner?” Ema said.

“The intimate variety,” Danika laughed. “We want to move in together, but yeah, need money. So I just have to push past any issues like today and do my best.”

“Looks like I need to work harder,” Ema said, almost but not quite under her breath.

“Hmm? Why’s that? Other than the regular issues with being an agency idol.”

“I’m also hoping to move out of home soon. Mum’s issues with idols are a problem, but she also likes to barge into my room without knocking, and is always bugging me to find a job. Anything but being an idol, of course,” Ema said, rolling her eyes.

Stopping outside the agency’s entrance, Danika grinned and held a hand out. “Looks like we both have troubles, huh? Let’s do our best.”

Ema shook and her face split into a surprisingly genuine smile for once. “It’s nice knowing I’m not alone.”

“Misery loves company and all that,” Danika added, and headed inside to report on her success. And probably to mildly abuse Suda-kun for his cock-up. “And... meet us later, say five o’clock?”

“Uh, sure, I can do that,” Ema said.

“Great. Outside the office here is fine. We’ve got somewhere to show you,” Danika said, and continued on upstairs. “Oh, and bring your tracksuit and whatever you need for a shower afterwards!”

Chapter 13: Ups & Downs

Ema arrived a few minutes early and now stood outside the agency building, looking left and right in hopes of spotting either of her new friends.

“Oh, there she is!” came a voice that could only belong to Danika. Coming to a stop with Kirsten, she grinned and gave her usual V-sign. “Ready?”

“I think so?” Ema said. “I’m not sure where we’re going, though...”

“To the gym,” Kirsten said. “It’s only a short way from here.”

“I figured it’d be more training,” Ema said with a faux sigh.

“Well... yes, but also no,” Danika said. “Let’s show the new girl our synergy.”

“Let’s,” Kirsten said, taking her best friend’s hand and leading the way.

After a few minutes walking, the three of them congregated in a little cul-de-sac off the main road. A number of building lined the street’s outer edge, with a small amount of greenery in the form of a hedge and several trees in the centre. At the very end of the cul-de-sac stood a large building with a glass foyer leading inside.

Danika led the way, unlocking the doors by swiping her phone over a reader just to the side. “Lucy rents this place for our use, you can come whenever you like, though she prefers it if you bring a partner. Accidents can happen, after all.”

Inside, she again led the charge through a short hall to one side of the foyer and into a small changing room. Similar to changing rooms everywhere, it had wooden bench seats, shower facilities, and even a sauna. She dropped her bag on a bench and started undressing.

Kirsten joined her. “Are you more confident about changing in company now, Ema?”

“I’m still a bit uncomfortable, but I won’t let that stop me,” Ema said, doing her best not to let the nerves get the better of her. Back at her old middle school, she had always loitered around the periphery until most of the others were done before she actually undressed. As both an idol and an adult, that simply wasn’t acceptable, so she simply got on with it and tried to avoid worrying too much.

Changing complete, they made for another double set of glass doors which led into the building proper, a huge space with polished wood floor and various equipment around the edges—treadmills, weights, jump ropes, and more—and in the very centre of the room, a large trampoline easily big enough for two people at once. Around the trampoline itself was a series of thick mattresses for safety.

“This is our secret weapon!” Danika said, waving a hand at the room. “Most agencies don’t have dedicated training facilities like this, unless it’s one of the bigger ones.”

“Wow,” Ema said, looking around the space. “You said we can use this whenever we like?”

“That’s right,” Kirsten said, tying her long black hair up into a ponytail. “Lucy doesn’t talk about finances all that much, but she has mentioned that she also owns at least two other businesses in the city. I believe she uses some of the profits from those in order to help fund her passion project.”

“Passion project... as in us?” Ema said, pointing to herself with her mouth agape.

“Us, yeah,” Danika said, grinning all over her face. “Lucy’s a pretty savvy businesswoman, apparently. Built a couple of other businesses first to learn how to run something like that, then used the money she made to start the agency. It’s still a tough business to be in, but not as bad as it could be.”

“Feels like I got really lucky,” Ema murmured, thinking of Hinata. She had thought her new friend was lucky as well, but it turned out Ema herself was just as fortunate to have found a good agency. “I can’t let her down now,” she added under her breath. “Um, what are we starting with?”

“Getting in sync,” Danika said, pointing at the trampoline. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you to train with us yet, I just want to show you something important.”

Kirsten stood by the edge of the trampoline on one of the mattresses. “For idols, being in sync with each other is very important. Even if you have no intention of partnering with someone or forming a unit, you might still be called

upon to participate in group events. Learning how to work with others is an important part of being an idol.”

“And this baby is one way of training that sort of teamwork,” Danika said, slapping her hand on the edge of the trampoline. She clambered onto the bouncy surface, helped her partner up, then stood side by side with her. “Watch carefully, Ema.”

“Okay,” Ema said.

Kirsten went first, jumping once, then again, and again until she had a steady rhythm going. Danika then timed her own jumps to coincide perfectly with when her partner was at the zenith of her own jump. Soon, they had a flawless rhythm of Danika going up while Kirsten came down, and vice versa.

“You watching?” Danika called as she went back up, her vivid purple twintails floating for a moment, unsure whether gravity was real or not. On the next bounce, she did a twin pirouette in mid-air, followed by Kirsten doing the same. “We’re not done yet!” Next up they began giving each other mid-air high-fives as they passed by.

Slowing to a stop, they took a quick break and picked up a couple of soft rubber balls from a rack at one side of the room, then got back into it, again alternating their jumps. They took turns making poses at their zenith, holding both hands together to form a heart shape, or even performing a full back or front flip. They even used the rubber balls to play a game of catch as they passed each other, mid-air.

Ema was mesmerised at how flawless they were in every movement. They hadn’t messed up even once, and tossing a ball for the other to catch while they were both moving in opposite directions, *and* taking into account the physics of their relative speeds was almost beyond her comprehension.

“Let’s change,” Danika said, receiving an okay from her partner.

With all the practised ease of those who had spent hundreds of hours training together, they altered their rhythm with Danika slowing until she was only bouncing a few feet each time. She slowly gained height again, this time in perfect sync with her partner, going up and down at the same time now.

At this point they did something that simply flummoxed Ema; they both bounced up together, but with a little sideways momentum in order to cross over mid-air and land in their opposite positions. Then again the other way. Coming back down together, they bounced over to the edge of the trampoline and jumped off.

“How’d you like that?” Danika asked.

“I can’t believe how perfectly in sync you were,” Ema said, clapping a few times, thinking that these two probably could’ve become some sort of Olympic champions if they had wanted.

“It took us a very long time to reach this point,” Kirsten laughed. “Of course, it helps that we’ve been friends since childhood. We’ve always been in tune with each other.”

“It shows,” Ema said, nodding.

“Now, we should probably get some serious practice in,” Danika continued. She towelled off some of her sweat and looked around the room. “Choose anything you like, we’ll be here to give you tips or whatever.”

“Sure!” Ema said, and chose something basic that was nevertheless of top level importance for idols in general, the one thing she needed over all else right now: stamina. She walked across to the several treadmills along one side of the room.

Danika showed her how they worked, then headed off to get some stretches in.

Chapter 14: Caught in the Act

A solid three hours soon vanished into the ether, and Ema was about ready to collapse. As such, she thanked her seniors for their guidance and the wonderful trampoline show earlier, and indicated she was heading home.

Standing near the trampoline itself, Danika gazed at Ema until she had left through the glass doors and turned into the short hallway leading to the changing rooms, then glanced at Kirsten. “It’s just us this evening, right?”

Kirsten gave her an oblique glance. “I believe so, yes, the other girls are either at jobs or off duty. Do I even need to ask what you have in mind?”

“We’ve not tried it here, so why not?” Danika said, waving at the room. She prodded one of the mattresses with a foot. “We’ve got these comfy things...”

A vague sigh escaped Kirsten’s lips. “I suppose we can have a little fun, since we’re here.”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” Danika whispered, and went in for a kiss...

Meanwhile, Ema had visited the changing room, but had *not* left, instead electing to get changed first and enjoy a relaxing shower at home, since this would allow her to jump straight into bed and relax. As such, she exited the changing room and walked past the glass doors into the main gym to see something she hadn’t expected; her two idol friends *doing things*.

Standing just to the side of the door, she peered around the frame and through the glass, pondering her current predicament. The scene unfolding before her eyes told her that her two idol friends were in some sort of intimate relationship—no doubt the *partner* Danika had mentioned—but also that she *really* shouldn’t interrupt. And opening the main doors would probably be loud enough to do exactly that.

Ema might be completely inexperienced in these matters, but she instinctively knew that interrupting a couple who were probably about to make

love was likely the very *best* way to get put on the shit list. And that wasn't an honour she wanted.

She could just leave them to it? But how long would that take? When about the only thing she could do to occupy herself would be to... relax in the changing room? Maybe read something on her phone? But if they headed home and she missed it, she might end up locked in...

Alternatively... she could stick around and watch...?

Ema shook her head. What was she thinking? It would be totally wrong to watch two friends get naked and do... things. Together. With each other. She took another quick look in the room, noting that Danika was—she swallowed—rubbing Kirsten through the material of her jogging trousers, both of them leaning against the trampoline and kissing for all they were worth.

“I really shouldn't be watching this,” Ema whispered, hoping that the act of *saying* it might give her the willpower to actually *stop*. It didn't. “Oh...”

The excited '*oh*' was as a direct result of Kirsten going down on her knees, where she had Danika stand with her back to the trampoline and tugged her trousers down in one smooth movement, revealing a sexy pair of sky blue panties.

“Well... I guess I've seen those before, so that's... fine?” Ema said in a silent voice, immediately realising that not only was she justifying her voyeurism, but she was also feeling *incredibly* turned on by it.

Kirsten by now had her face buried in her lover's most private area, nibbling through the fabric of Danika's panties and making her moan, audible even through the glass doors. Danika's face was screwed up in pleasure as she panted and moaned in a restrained way that made Ema confused; she was normally the brash, boisterous one, but not when being intimate, it seemed.

The panties were soon removed so Kirsten could give her a proper seeing-to, but her head was presently in the way, meaning Ema was spared an even more intimate view of events.

Ema's hand found its way to her own crotch, pressing in and trying to stop it from feeling quite so... *hungry*. Unconsciously, she rubbed a few times, a minor shock of pleasure rushing through her body for the first time she could

remember; it wasn't as though she'd made a habit of this kind of thing. But the very idea of intruding into something so personal and private and intimate sent shivers of delight coursing from head to toe, her eyes firmly fixated on the sexy tableaux before her.

Danika's legs wobbled under the weight of a brief and gentle orgasm, clamping a hand over her mouth to stifle the moan of pleasure.

Kirsten jumped to her feet and proceeded to give her girlfriend a full-on snog, resulting in Ema feeling a sense of embarrassment on her behalf; Kirsten's tongue had just been occupied with her lover's wetness, and now she was *kissing* her?

Ema was close to passing out from excitement overload by this point. "I really should go..." she murmured. Her legs didn't want to move, the scene in front was far too evocative and sexy for her brain to allow it.

More than that, Danika had now slid down the side of the trampoline to sit on the safety mattress, where she brought her hands up to cup her lover's shapely ass. Kirsten shuffled forward a little, resting her hands on the metal frame of the trampoline itself, spreading her legs wide, at which point Danika tugged her panties down in return and went to work.

"So they take it in turns?" Ema whispered.

An odd feeling of discomfort washed over her. She had heard people describe cold chills before, but until now hadn't fully understood what they meant. Now she did. It was a shivery sensation running up and down her spine, twinned with a sinking sensation in the stomach. A feeling that she shouldn't be here and certainly shouldn't be watching two friends making love.

Pulling her hand up from her own crotch, Ema took a deep breath and prepared to make a break for it. She kept an eye on proceedings, hoping for Kirsten to reach something Ema herself had never experienced—hell, she hadn't even *played* with herself before!—and make enough noise for her to escape without drawing attention when she opened the main doors.

That's all it was, she told herself. Just a convenient out so she could withdraw without causing embarrassment all round. It wasn't because she wanted to continue watching, or anything of the sort. Nope. No sirree.

Fortunately, it seemed her wish had been granted as Kirsten let go, crying out with no care in the world, contrasting with the usual soft-spoken girl Ema normally saw. Despite her body sending desperate signals that it needed attention she wasn't sure how to provide, Ema knew this was her one chance.

Backing away from the door, her eyes lingering on the sexy couple and Kirsten's continued cries of pleasure, she turned and bolted for the main door, opening it as quietly as she could and rushing out into the afternoon...

On the mattress, Kirsten was presently panting as her body settled back down. "That was... quite a good one, yes... yes..."

"Did you notice our audience?" Danika asked, laughing and snuggling up on the mattress.

"Hmm?" Kirsten murmured, half asleep. "I noticed you seemed interested in something, but I wasn't sure what."

"I didn't want to do anything to alert her, might have embarrassed her so much she'd never return."

"Ema was there? You think she was interested?" Kirsten said.

"She waited until you came before leaving," Danika chuckled.

"Perhaps she just didn't want to intrude?"

"Well, either way, she knows about us now."

Kirsten pecked her on the lips and sat up. "I'll talk to her next time I see her, it's not as though we're hiding it."

"Well, I did mention to her that I had a partner, so she already knew that much." Danika sat up and stretched. "Mm, that was fun. Wouldn't mind trying it here again, maybe without anything on, know what I mean?"

"And maybe with less of an audience," Kirsten said, giggling quietly. "Come on, we should go as well, I have a job this evening."

Getting to their unsteady feet, they re-robed themselves, had a quick shower, and headed out.

Chapter 15: In Search of Advice

It was later. Ema had wandered the streets for half an hour, feeling excited and turned on and unsure of what to do next. Masturbation seemed like a good idea to relieve her current tensions, but despite her nineteen years and adult status, she had never actually indulged in such an activity before. Too busy getting through school and trying to keep her mother happy.

And on that subject, her mother would be at home, and she had that horrible tendency to walk into Ema's room unannounced. The idea of having that happen while she was... *busy* didn't exactly make her feel comfortable risking it.

Perhaps... Hinata...?

Now there was an idea. Hinata could probably give her some tips or something? She seemed like a girl who was more up on things like this, after all, and the banter with Michelle when Ema met her indicated they were probably at least somewhat experienced in these matters. Maybe. At the very least they came across as mature enough to be able to help *somehow*.

Ema was more than a little embarrassed to realise that she actually didn't know all that much about her own body, specifically the aspects involving pleasure and making babies. Even at school, most of the sex-ed classes had gone over her head; while her classmates were fantasising about other people in the school, or whichever idols and other celebrities happened to be big at the time, her head had mostly been filled with dreams of being an idol herself, and the depressing knowledge that it could never happen.

Then, as school got more and more serious and she had to focus on her work, the idol dreams faded away to be replaced by boredom and a general lack of enthusiasm for life. But now, after witnessing what she just had... her body was *filled* with enthusiasm of the sort she barely knew the first thing about satisfying.

About all she knew of the overall process was that Tab A was meant to go in Slot B, to use a phrase Jun had once mentioned that had stuck with Ema ever since. But what happened when you were presented with a situation in which you had two Slot Bs?

Going by what Kirsten and Danika had just unintentionally showed her, you simply improvised and used fingers and tongue as an impromptu Tab B, C, and D. But still, there had to be some resources online or something that she could use for reference? There again, she was likely to find all sorts of things she felt she probably shouldn't be watching if she tried that...

She nodded. The Sakura-P dormitory it was, then. Hinata was her only hope now.



Ema did her best to remain calm as she walked over there. Every time she thought of Hinata now, her body reacted, telling her in no uncertain terms that maybe, just maybe she might have a bit of a thing for her...

And thanks to her agency friends' little show, her body was doing yet more things she had never really experienced before, making for a double whammy of worry.

The butterflies in her stomach, the slight sensation of speed, as though experiencing the world in fast forward, a mild breathlessness, the quickening of her heart, the sensations from her most private area... it all added up to an assault on her senses that she had a hard time dealing with.

Arriving at the dorm, she hesitated. Hinata had told her where she lived, but Ema had never actually been inside or seen her room. Opening the glass door and poking her head inside the foyer, she called out, "Is anyone here...?"

A couple of girls just inside heard her and one of them walked over. "Can I help?"

"Ah, yeah, I'm looking for Hinata," Ema said, bobbing her head.

"Hina-chan? She's in room 12, just down the hall there, on the right," said the other girl.

“Thanks!” Ema said, and sidled around in that direction, hoping to appear nonchalant and failing miserably. Standing, breathless and probably horny as hell—she wasn’t really sure, all things considered—outside of Hinata’s room, she knocked. No answer. “Is she out?” She knocked again, just to be sure, and this time heard something.

The soft rustle of sheets was two voices arguing over whether they could be bothered to open the door when they were *busy*; further sounds of fabric being rustled, this time indicating that someone might have just wrapped a spare bedsheet around themselves; gentle footsteps...

When the door was opened to reveal Hinata’s suspicious face, huddled over in an impromptu shawl-like arrangement comprised of a bedsheet wrapped around her head and shoulders like a shawl, Ema was forced to take a step back in mild surprise. “U-Um, is that you, Hina?”

“Oh, hey,” Hinata said, raising a hand. “Uh... something up?”

Explaining the problem she seemed to have with her body and giving an abridged version of the events with her friends from the agency—tactfully leaving out *who* she was specifically talking about—Ema finished with, “I-I’m not really sure how to deal with this, Hina, sorry...”

“Uh, gimme a sec,” Hinata said, and closed the door. She turned to Michelle, who was lounging in the closest bed with no clothes on, though she was mostly covered by the remaining bedsheet. “It seems like Ema has some... tensions she doesn’t understand. Should we help out?”

“Why are you even asking?” Michelle replied, rolling her eyes. “If she’s come to you, it means she trusts you, right? And you’re into her anyway, so...”

“Well sure, but we were about to get busy,” Hinata laughed, opening the door again. She grabbed Ema, pulled her inside, and closed the door. “We’re all yours.”

Michelle closed her eyes, nodding a few times as she lay on her side, propped up on an elbow. It was an idol’s duty to help her fans if they needed it. Though it was true they were going a bit above and beyond with what was about to transpire here...

Unknown to Michelle, but *quite* known to Ema, whose face had flushed, her sheet had fallen down to expose her shapely breasts.

Ema's heart rate increased again, making her embarrassed and ashamed at finding Hinata's roommate sexy and attractive. And that was to say nothing of what she currently felt for Hinata... herself...

Hang on...

Why were they both naked?

Ema looked closely for the first time since entering and saw that yes, Hinata was similarly disrobed, hence the sheets wrapped around her. Well. This was awkward. Apparently these two were in a relationship and Ema had just barged in and interrupted something intimate. After wanting to avoid doing that self same thing to her *other* two friends not even an hour ago. Bugger.

"I-I-I'm sorry, I didn't realise...!" she stuttered, backing away and bumping into the door. "I'll figure it out myself, don't worry, I don't want to disturb your... your activities!"

Rushing over, Hinata gave her a hug, not realising that this would just enflame Ema's problems even further. "It's okay, it's okay! You picked a bad time to come"—she paused to glare over her shoulder at Michelle, who had cracked up at this—"but it's mostly our fault. We don't normally do things this early in the evening, but... well, sometimes it's nice to break the mould a bit."

The awkwardness intensified as Ema realised she was now being hugged by a beautiful girl... while said girl had *no clothes on*. Her own body still wanted something she wasn't entirely sure how to provide, however, so she cleared her throat and asked something... embarrassing.

"I've never done anything like this before. Even"—Ema's voice trailed off as another wave of shame washed over her—"even m-masturbation." She coughed, her face radiating enough warmth to heat a small yacht.

"I think we can help with that," Hinata said, glancing at her roommate, who nodded her own agreement that a little tutoring might not go amiss. Not least because this meant she would have an unrivalled view of proceedings.

Ema, meanwhile, prepared her mind, body, and soul for something new and exciting...

Chapter 16: The Fine Art Of...

Wasting no time at all, Hinata unzipped Ema's jersey top, revealing a cute T-shirt underneath.

"Hinataaaaah!?" Ema began, her sentence changing into something untranslatable which nevertheless conveyed her immediate terror as she was gently undressed.

Soon Hinata had stripped Ema down to just her underwear, eliciting a 'wow' from both the others as they took in the surprisingly sexy emerald green bra and panties.

"I didn't expect something that sexy from you, bravo," Hinata said, admiring the slender yet shapely body so revealed.

"I just saw them one day while shopping and thought they looked nice," Ema mumbled. Well, this was certainly *one* way to get used to the idea of undressing in front of others.

Hinata grinned at her, then pulled her sheet off, revealing her naked form to Ema, who gasped in delight. She pulled her into a tight embrace, letting the girl's entire body touch her own, breast to breast, tummy to tummy, Venus to Venus. "Underwear is nice, but being naked is pretty sweet, too, hmm?"

Ema felt the soft skin against her own, the warmth, the smoothness, Hinata's erect nipples tickling her own, even through the material of her bra, and making her giggle in delight. "This is a bit more than I expected..." she whispered, feeling like she never wanted to move again. "It's wonderful...!"

"Can you feel your heart racing?" Hinata whispered in response.

"Yes..." Ema said, her voice husky with lust, something else she had never experienced before.

Hinata gently touched Ema's crotch, hand flat, and made her jump at this sudden and intimate contact, noting a hint of dampness. She pulled her hand away again, satisfied. "Okay, let's move a bit..." She sat on the bed, shuffled backwards to sit against the headboard, pulled her pillow—brought over from

her own bed whenever they slept together like this—up behind her to protect against the cold wood, then opened her legs and patted between them, inviting Ema to sit.

Michelle was mostly motionless as she watched, but Hinata could see an almost imperceptible movement of the sheets a bit further down as her roommate industriously fingered herself while she enjoyed the show.

With Ema seated comfortably between her legs, Hinata gently manoeuvred the girl's right hand down to her crotch and whispered some brief instructions into her ear. Ema closed her eyes and softly rubbed herself through the silky material of her panties.

Watching over her shoulder, Hinata gave an occasional hint, whispering into her ear and turning Ema on even more in the process. She played with herself simultaneously, as unobtrusively as she could manage so as to avoid distracting her partner too much.

“All right, try taking your panties off now,” she whispered.

Ema nodded, hypnotised by the soft voice of her partner and the warmth of Hinata's breath on her ear. She slipped the damp items down and off, dropping them close to Michelle, who immediately had the urge to steal them for her own purposes.

Agonising for a moment, Michelle wondered if she could get away with it, but she knew Hinata at the very least *would* notice; her roommate had eagle eyes at the best of times. But she also knew her roommate wouldn't *mind*, so she swiped them anyway.

Hinata, meanwhile, whispered some more general hints, telling Ema the places to touch, how to do so, having her speed up or slow down, push deep inside, flick back and forth across her now sensitive and throbbing clit...

Moaning louder and louder, Ema breathed more heavily with each stroke and each touch and each flick.

Beside them, Michelle already felt like she was ready to explode, and was doing her best to hold the tsunami back, desperate to enjoy this wonderful show some more, stealthily holding Ema's panties close to her face...

Gradually getting more and more of a feel for what she liked, which parts of her most private area felt the best, and where to push her fingers for greatest effect, Ema came closer and closer to her own endgame, something that was destined to knock her flat and make her wonder how she had managed to miss out on something this incredible for so long.

Hinata, as the experienced girl she was now, knew *exactly* where she liked to touch for best effect, and—like her roommate—was holding herself in check for now, not wanting to lose control before their guest had finished; that would be bad manners in the extreme.

Ema's moans reached a sudden crescendo, alerting them to the fact that she was about to finish, and finish *hard*. She leaned her head back into Hinata's chest, mouth open in a silent cry of absolute ecstasy as the orgasm washed over her from head to toe and back again.

The other two girls, seeing this, decided that was pretty much it for them, too, and quickly and efficiently brought themselves to equally enjoyable climaxes, Michelle realising too late that she was still under the sheets and this would result in more than the usual amount of clean-up. Not that she would ever let that stop her.

Minutes passed in near-silence as the three weary girls gradually floated back down from the upper atmospheres of pleasure, then continued passing for a little while longer as they stared into space, or sat with her eyes tightly shut in Ema's case, leaning back against Hinata's inviting breasts and wondering how the hell it was possible to feel *this* good.

"That was... was... something! I can't even describe it!" Ema said, waving a hand around, the other one still rubbing herself until the last shivers died away. "I wonder how it might feel if... if it was someone else touching me?" She avoided mentioning that she might not mind Hinata being the one to do so.

She felt utterly drained, but also content, her body finally feeling more relaxed after giving it what it plainly wanted. With a happy sigh and a huge smile plastered across her lips, Ema turned her head to look over her shoulder at the sweat-streaked face of the girl who might one day be her rival. "Thanks, Hina, that feels much better." She glanced at Michelle, unsure whether to thank

her or kiss her. Either seemed like it would be appropriate after such an experience.

Hinata gave her several soft kisses on the cheek, and even one on her bare shoulder, purposefully avoiding the lips; Ema's first kiss belonged to whichever special girl—or possibly guy—she decided to share it with.

“Aaah, that was a great little show,” Michelle said, sitting upright so she could enjoy a damn good stretch, giving their guest a full view of *everything*.

The list of *everything* included something Ema had dropped on the bed earlier. “Um, Michelle?”

“Mm?” Michelle responded, drowsily gazing at her.

“Are those... my panties?” Ema said, pointing.

“Oh.” Michelle's drowsiness made way for minor panic as she realised she still had their guest's underwear clasped in her hand.

Ema giggled. “I can tell you where to buy them if you like?”

“Nah, I got what I needed, though I appreciate the thought,” Michelle said with a wink, tossing the worn items back to their owner.

“Got what you need...?” Ema said, her cheeks glowing like twin suns.

Hinata sighed. “Honestly, Michelle, you're way too open about stuff like this...”

“Well, as long as she enjoyed herself,” Ema murmured, sliding her panties back up her legs. Given her own inexperience, she wasn't honestly sure if this was something normal between girls in these relationships. She briefly wondered if Danika and Kirsten did anything like this as well. Probably best not to ask, she figured.

With panties reacquired, Ema jumped off the bed to stand on wobbly legs and attempted to locate her clothes, scattered across the floor as they were. “Um, thanks, both of you. I suspect I'll remember this for the rest of my life,” she laughed.

Hinata joined her and issued a hug. “You are very welcome! If there's anything you ever need, just come find us, we'll be happy to help out again, right, Michelle?”

“Yep, you can approach us for anything at all, Ema. No matter how small... or how large,” Michelle said. She was half-asleep by now, reminding Ema of how her agency friends had looked after their own orgasms.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Ema said. As she pulled her clothes back on, she stared at Hinata. “Um... in that case, could I talk to you privately for a second?”

“What’s up?” Hinata said, walking them over to the other side of the room.

“This is kind of awkward,” Ema said in a quiet tone, looking down at the floor and knitting her fingers together like an untidy ball of yarn. “When I came here, I really just wanted some help with... um, you know. But I’m also feeling something else. Something to do with... with you.”

“Me? Ah, you mean...?”

“Don’t say anything, Hina, I need to finish this or I’m afraid I’ll never say it.”

Hinata returned to the silent smile, saying nothing further and hoping she could forestall what she figured Ema was about to say.

“I... I think I like you?” Ema said, her forehead wrinkling in confusion.

“After seeing Kirsten and Danika earlier, I realised I was feeling weird when I thought of you.”

Hinata nodded. “Good, because—”

“But I didn’t know you and Michelle were a thing, so I guess that’s that,” Ema said with a shrug.

“Ah, no, that’s... I’m not...”

“A-Anyway, I just wanted to let you know how I feel. Bye!” Ema said, and rushed for the door.

“Ema, we’re not together—” Hinata attempted once more, but the door was already closed. She sighed. “That could’ve gone better.”

“Yeah, it could,” Michelle said, rolling over onto her back and closing her eyes.

“Don’t act like you’re not involved, Michelle,” Hinata said, narrowing her own eyes.

“That’s what you get for being too eager. You could’ve pretended nothing was happening when she arrived, we could’ve talked to her normally. But nope, you figured it’d be more fun to have her finger herself with us.” Michelle sat up

and stared at her roommate, yawning a couple of times. “You were right, too, it was *amazingly* hot. But might not have been such a great plan with a girl you’re interested in for more than a bit of fun, right?”

“Ah, jeez, stop making so much sense!” Hinata muttered, turning away in a minor huff.

“Someone has to.”

“Yeah, normally me, except for the times when you decide to be smug and logical, like now,” Hinata said with a sigh.

“You love me, don’t deny it.”

“Sometimes. Other times, I have different words entirely for how I feel about you,” Hinata laughed. She wandered over and sat on the edge of the bed. “I’ll have to have a proper chat with her soon, make sure she understands the situation.”

“Or you could just ask her out. No point beating around the bush, especially not after what we just enjoyed with her,” Michelle said, and leaned over to peck her friend and occasional lover’s cheek. “Right, I’m off for a bath. By myself?”

“Yeah, I need to think for a while,” Hinata said.

“Sure thing.” Michelle jumped off the bed and headed for the en-suite.

Chapter 17: My Rival

The next couple of days went past in something of a daze for Ema. A sudden realisation that she had feelings for Hinata, the whole masturbation thing—which still made her steam up every time she thought of it—and the fact that she had her debut coming up the very next day had all ganged up on her to the point where her brain and body both felt addled.

At the same time she understood that it wouldn't be fair to blow Hinata off just because she was with someone already, that would be incredibly selfish and Ema had no intention of being the sort of person who would do that. Even if it would probably feel awkward as hell.

As such, while she was giving her mother a hand in the kitchen, she had sent Hinata a message asking to meet up at the usual park that evening, receiving an immediate okay. That Hinata hadn't blown her off either was comforting, at least.

Ema now made her way into the city with the sky a little overcast, dampening her mood.

Hinata was already there, fiddling with her phone. She looked up and waved. "Hey. Sent you another message, but didn't get a reply. Was worried you hated me."

Coming to a stop before her, Ema gave her a sheepish half-smile. "Of course I don't. But I'm maybe a bit jealous of Michelle." She patted her pockets. "Oh... think I left my phone in the kitchen, sorry."

"Too excited at seeing me?" Hinata said with a wink.

Figuring that honesty was the best policy, Ema shrugged. "Sure. I like spending time with you, so why wouldn't I be excited?"

Hinata spent a moment debating whether to talk about what had happened, or to put it off. The problem was that with Ema's debut the next evening, she didn't want to distract from that with other matters. Maybe she'd ask Ema out afterward or something...

In the end, she decided that putting intimate thoughts to the side was the best policy for now. They had training to do. Hinata started jogging, waving a hand for her friend to join her. Picking up the pace, they left the park and headed towards the city outskirts. “Right, let’s get into the right mind set for your coming victory tomorrow.”

“You have more faith in me than I have in myself,” Ema said, her breathing mostly under control. It had taken some serious work, but she finally felt she was starting to get back into a proper shape for all this idol business.

“Think of it as a winning philosophy,” Hinata called over her shoulder as they made their way in the vague direction of Ema’s house. “If you believe you’ll be victorious, you *will* be.”

“Positive reinforcement, that sort of thing?” Ema said.

“Yeah, basically the same deal,” Hinata said, turning into a side street that led to a smaller park only a couple of blocks over from Ema’s place. “Let’s take a quick break here.” She glanced around the area and found a convenient bench table to sit at with her partner opposite.

Settling on the seat and taking a few breaths, noting that it was getting easier to keep it under control now that she was getting back into the habit of running, Ema stared at her friend. “You have easy access to a load of other idols, right?”

“By easy access, you mean I’m friends with?” Hinata said, head cocked and a half-smile on her lips.

“I was thinking of networking more than friends. That’s important for marketing, isn’t it?” Ema said. She unclipped her small water bottle from her belt and took a swig. “So wouldn’t that mean you have another advantage over smaller agencies?”

“Yeah, networking is important, but so is being a good idol. Doesn’t matter how many people you know if you don’t have the skill to back it up,” Hinata said, shifting to be more comfy on the wooden seat. “I can see your expression, by the way.”

Ema stiffened. Apparently her face was telling its own story. Again. “It does feel a bit unfair.”

“I just got lucky. I... realise that probably doesn't make you feel any better,” Hinata said, trailing off into silence and feeling an interminable sense of shame.

“Mm...”

Leaning across the table, Hinata gently lifted the quiet girl's chin to look her in the eyes. “I think you're missing something important.”

“I am?”

“Who are you talking to right now?”

“Who...? Well... you?” Ema hazarded, unsure what her friend meant.

“And what am I?”

“An idol?”

“An idol at Sakura-P. You've already made a connection, Ema, you only need to ask me. I'm more than happy to introduce you to the girls I've met.”

Ema's expression changed to one of shameful understanding. “Oh... oh! Right, sorry, Hina. I have a habit of looking at things negatively.”

“How about you come visit one day soon? I'd love to spend a day or two with you, show you around, that kind of thing,” Hinata said. She issued a discrete cough. “If you're comfy with doing that, anyway. I understand if you aren't.”

“I'd like that, though I'll have to be careful to keep it secret from Mom,” Ema said, nodding. “Speaking of which, what time is it?”

Hinata checked her phone. “Nearly eight.”

“Uh-oh, it's later than I thought. Better get going, she still wanted a hand with something.”

“I'll walk you home, if you like?” Hinata said.

Agreeing that this sounded nice—even if she felt bad about having Hinata go out of her way like this—Ema headed off.

Proceeding at a gentle pace towards her friend's home, Hinata investigated the current situation. “How's the agency treating you, by the way?”

“It's fun, though as I said, I've only really been doing basic training so far. Everyone's super nice, and I'm looking forward to trying out some more auditions. Just as soon as I get through my debut tomorrow.”

“Your mum hasn't found out yet?”

Ema shook her head. “Thankfully, no.”

“That’s good, then.”

They were closing in on Ema’s house now, so she stopped and turned to face her friend. “This is far enough, thanks for the company.”

“No problem. How about meeting up for a run tomorrow? Some last minute training before the debut,” Hinata said.

“The park?” Ema suggested.

“Sounds good.”

They arranged to hook up in the morning at the same paved area where they had originally met, then headed their separate ways.

Chapter 18: Broken Dreams

The moment she was inside the house, Ema could *feel* there was something up. The atmosphere was colder than usual, probably because her mother was standing at the end of the entrance hall, her face radiating extreme displeasure.

“Mom...?” Ema said. Her eyes widened as her mother produced her phone. Displayed on the screen was the message Hinata had sent, mentioning their training session and Ema’s debut. There was no explaining her way out of *this* one...

“What, exactly, is this?” said her mother.

“Give it back!” Ema said, running forward to snatch the device away.

“What did I tell you about this nonsense? You can’t be an idol! I’m your mother, I know better than anyone that you’re not cut out to be one.”

Ema hesitated a moment, biting back a snappy response as the bile rose. A brief war was waged between the side of her that preferred to avoid conflict, and the side that had had enough and was more than pissed off enough to not care any more. The angry side won.

“It’s nice to know you apparently understand me better than I understand myself,” Ema growled, her usually soft and cute voice making way for something altogether more aggressive.

“You’re nineteen!” her mother snapped. “What can you *possibly* know when you’ve only just become a legal adult? Have you travelled the world? Seen other places? Met people from other cultures?”

“Of course I haven’t, because you won’t let me! Why do you think I want to be an idol? So I *can* do those things!”

“I’m thinking of your future, Ema. Chasing silly dreams like becoming an idol aren’t the way to a stable life,” her mother added. “And while you’re under this roof, there’ll be no more talk of idols, understand?”

“How about you let *me* think of my future?” Ema said, striding for the front door. “If being under this roof means not being an idol, fine, I won’t be under this roof any more!” She stormed out and slammed the door behind her.



As Hinata turned down a side street on the way home, she was surprised to hear her name being called from behind. “Whoa,” she said as a ballistic Ema collided with her, tears streaming down her cheeks. “What’s wrong?”

Burying her face in Hinata’s shoulder, Ema shook her head, unable to even speak.

“Need a place to stay?” Hinata added, rubbing her friend’s back.

A nod this time.

Hinata held her for a few minutes, letting Ema cry out whatever had upset her and receiving a wet shoulder for her troubles. “Come on, let’s walk,” she eventually said as the waterworks faded, taking Ema’s hand and leading the way back to the dorm. Fortunately Michelle was out, so at least they’d have some privacy.

On arriving in Hinata’s room, she made them both a cup of hot chocolate in the communal kitchen area, and joined Ema on the bed. “Feeling better?”

“A bit,” Ema murmured, taking a sip of her drink.

“So... what happened?”

“Had an argument with Mom. Stormed out. Probably homeless,” Ema said with a sigh.

Hinata inhaled. “I’m guessing she found out about you being an idol?”

“The message you sent, yeah.”

“Sorry, Ema,” Hinata whispered, giving her a hug.

“It’s not your fault, I shouldn’t have left my phone somewhere she could find it,” Ema said. She spent a couple of minutes explaining what had happened in more detail. “I don’t know what to do. I can’t go home, not after that, but I also don’t have anywhere else to stay. Jun might let me crash for a couple of nights, but that’s not a solution.”

Draining her mug and licking her lips, Ema placed it on the table beside the bed and collapsed backwards onto the mattress, staring at the immaculate ceiling. “Honestly, it got pretty tiresome, having to justify where I was going whenever I left the house. But... I also understand I was effectively a freeloader once I turned eighteen. And that was a year ago now.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say that,” Hinata said. “You only become a freeloader if you’re not looking for work.”

“Sure, but I was looking for something I want to do, not anything I *could* do. I... can see why Mom might be annoyed by that. But I’ve also found a good agency and have a chance now! And she refuses to even listen if it involves idols.”

“Do you know why she doesn’t like idols?” Hinata asked.

“No. It’s not something I’ve ever been comfortable asking her. For obvious reasons.”

“Shouldn’t you at least send your dad a message or something? Just so they know you’re okay.”

Ema sat up. “I... yeah, I should.” A moment was spent tapping her phone screen, then she turned the device off. “Um, you said I could stay here?”

“If you don’t mind sharing a bed?” Hinata replied, jumping to her feet and grabbing her own phone from the table. She made a call. “Michelle? Are you coming back to the room later tonight?” She listened a moment, then nodded. “You’re staying with Chino? Great, just wanted to check. Ema’s here, had some problems at home, so... yeah. Mm. Yep. Okay, see you in a day or two.” She hung up. “We have the place to ourselves, no worries.”

“Well, that’s... good. Thanks,” Ema said as the reality of her situation set in. She pressed a hand to her chest. There was a slight tightness there, a sort of breathlessness as if she’d just over-exercised. It appeared she still had feelings for Hinata. “This is just what I need on top of everything else,” she muttered.

“What’s up?” Hinata asked, rooting around in her dresser to find a spare pair of pyjamas.

“N-Nothing!” Ema said, sitting bolt upright and looking about as guilty as a cat that had just been caught with its paw in the fish pie.

“Here you go, you can wear those,” Hinata said, handing the items over. “And try not to let it get you down, okay? The universe tosses curveballs our way in order to test us.”

“I’m not going to let her beat me,” Ema said, a hint of determination combined with defiance showing in a gentle furrowing of her brows.

“That’s the spirit,” Hinata said with a thumbs-up. “You can stay here for the next couple of days, no worries. Least then you can focus on your debut tomorrow without worrying about where you’ll be sleeping.”

“Thanks, Hina, you’re an amazing friend. Especially as we only just met.”

“Well... I try and be reliable, even if it doesn’t always work out as planned,” Hinata said. Yeah... like a couple of evenings back.

Ema gave her a hug. “I’ll do everything I can to make you proud of me tomorrow.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Hinata said with a grin, enjoying this cute girl’s warmth.

They spent a couple of hours chatting and getting a little more practice in—partly as a means to take Ema’s mind off things—then hit the hay. Hinata had to exercise extreme willpower not to go snuggling up; it was an automatic reaction whenever she slept with Michelle, and that sort of habit could easily get her in trouble if she wasn’t careful.

For her part, Ema simply felt... odd. She had never slept in the same bed as someone before, it was a new and strange experience. A *good* experience, it actually felt super cosy and comfy... and that was worrying. She wasn’t sure it should feel comfortable to be *this* close to another girl in bed... though the same could be said for the *other* thing she had done while this close to a girl in bed.

Despite her conflicted feelings, and with an image of Hinata’s face floating in her mind, Ema eventually nodded off.

Chapter 19: My Friend

As Ema slept soundly in her friend's bed that night, she had a dream, a dream of long ago...

The kitchen at home looked like it had for as long as Ema could remember, albeit a little hazy, except that now it seemed... larger. She was no longer her nineteen year old self. Rather, she had reverted to a five year old who loved idols and took every opportunity to share this with her parents.

Bouncing around the kitchen floor, singing and dancing to a cheesy 90s anime song of some sort, and using a banana held as a makeshift microphone in a diminutive hand, she smiled as though it was the most natural thing in the world. "Mama! Papa! I know this song!"

"Ema really loves idols, doesn't she?" her father said. "I wonder if she'll grow up to be an idol herself?"

Her mother, looking less careworn and considerably more sunny, gave a low laugh and smiled. "Maybe she will!"

An alarm intruded on Ema's consciousness back in the here and now, rousing her instantly. "Mm? Morning already?" She took a groggy look around the unfamiliar room. Crawling out of bed, she spent a moment wondering where she was, and why she felt oddly cheerful.

Today was the day of her debut, sure, but there was something else as well...

Ah... yes, the incident at home. Her sleep-filled eyes opened wide to the realisation that she was probably homeless. Or at the very least in no position to be going back home any time soon.

Next to her, Hinata stirred and slowly sat up, a little reminiscent of a vampire rising from the coffin only to find rays of awful sunlight streaming through a crack in the curtains. Though at least she didn't crumble to dust. "Mm... really could've done with a few more hours."

"Sorry, I move around a bit when I'm in bed," Ema said, stifling a brief laugh and rubbing her eyes.

“It’s fine,” Hinata said, waving a hand.

“I had a weird dream,” Ema added. “I can’t really remember much, but I’m sure Mom was smiling in it. It didn’t feel like a dream, more like... a memory I’ve forgotten?”

Hinata jumped out of bed and stretched. “I’ve seen movies where characters have repressed memories. Maybe it’s one of those?”

“Could be...”

“Anyway, ready for your final day as a trainee idol? I’m not going to go easy on you just because you’ve run away from home,” Hinata said, hands on hips in her best military instructor pose.

“I know,” Ema nodded. “I’m going to prove her wrong and become a successful idol!”

“In that case, it’s time for a five mile run.”

Ema suddenly felt less confident. “Five... mile?”

“That’s a pretty normal morning for me now,” Hinata laughed. Grabbing two sets of running gear from her dresser, she handed one over, they performed their morning warm-up stretches together, then got underway.



After an hour of running, they ended up back at the room, hot and sweaty.

“You know, I’d love to have a little place like this,” Ema said, leaning over to grasp her knees as she wheezed her way back to life. “I know I shouldn’t be jealous, but I can’t help it sometimes. It just makes me wonder where I could be now if Mom hadn’t held me back.” She returned upright and let out a gentle sigh.

Standing behind her, Hinata placed both hands on Ema’s shoulders. “I wonder where I might be now if I’d listened to my mum’s advice a few years back. Bad advice that would’ve landed me in debt for no good reason. But you know what? I’m *here* now, and that’s all that really matters.”

Ema hesitated a moment, then brought her hands up and placed them on top of Hinata’s. “Be happy for what I have, not unhappy over what I haven’t, is that it?”

Hinata leaned her head over her friend's shoulder to be in her field of vision.
"Not convinced?"

"No, I don't mean that. It's just... my usual habit of being negative, hah. You're right, I've managed to find a really nice agency where everyone seems lovely, I can't complain." Ema leaned her head over sideways, just enough to brush her mentor's cheek. "Th-Thanks, Hinata. Jun's a great friend, but I'm not sure she'd have helped me see things quite as clearly."

"You are most welcome," Hinata added, risking a quick peck on the cheek and stepping away. "Now, I have to head off for a bit, got a couple of jobs this morning. You be okay for now?"

Ema turned to face her and nodded. "I'll practice my choreography until you get back, no problem."

"Okay, back in a couple of hours, then."

"Seeya," Ema said, waving her out of the room and closing the door.

The moment Hinata was gone, Ema got on with her practice for the morning. Her debut was that evening at an unfamiliar location, she had left home on the worst terms possible, and still had all sorts of butterfly feelings whenever she thought of Hinata.

Really, she wanted to do little more than just sit in a corner and hide away from everything, but after seeing Danika facing her fear of unpredictable animals at the café job, Ema couldn't run away; she'd be letting her newfound agency friends down, to say nothing of Hinata.

As such, she took a deep breath and launched into her dance routine...

Chapter 20: Confrontation

The next couple of hours blew past far too quickly as Ema danced and sang and did her best to avoid thinking of anything other than her debut. As much as she might have wanted to continue, however, she was more than aware of the dangers of overdoing it, so she paced herself as best she could. A couple of hours of practice, an hour of rest. Practice, rest, practice rest, until Hinata returned.

“I’m back!” Hinata said, opening the door and coming over. “Been busy?”

“Yeah,” Ema panted, halfway through another practice session. She looked at the clock and realised that she had actually been at it for nearly six hours in total. “Weren’t you only supposed to be a couple of hours?”

“Life of an idol, I’m afraid. Sometimes things run long, or go wrong, or whatever. Quite often all at once,” Hinata said with a brief chuckle. “How you feeling?”

“In need of a shower.” Ema dropped down to sit on the edge of the mattress. “I haven’t really thought of anything else. That’s not important right now.”

“We might just make an idol out of you yet,” Hinata said with a happy smile. “Sometimes you have to make sacrifices, and sometimes things go wrong, but that doesn’t mean you can just blow off a job because you’re upset. That’s what it means to be a pro.”

“Nearly time...” Ema murmured. A few more hours and she’d be en-route to the venue.

“Worried?” Hinata asked, sitting next to her and making herself comfy.

“Getting a serious case of cold feet...”

“That’s normal the first time. I wanted to run away and hide in my room when I did my first event,” Hinata said, smiling at the memory.

“At least I’ll have you with me, that makes me feel a bit better. Jun’s out of the city visiting family, though, so she won’t be there,” Ema said, sitting upright and making an effort to ignore the butterflies currently tap dancing in her

stomach, both due to nerves and close proximity to the girl she was pretty sure she liked.

“That’s what friends are for,” Hinata said, putting an arm around Ema’s shoulders and causing her some additional bother. “Are your friends from the agency coming?”

“With Lucy, yeah. In some ways, that’s making me more nervous than having you there,” Ema laughed.

“I know the pressure of having to perform,” Hinata said, rubbing her back. “After the first time, it got a lot easier. Confidence comes mostly from experience.”

Ema got to her feet and clenched her hands. “So I just need to get past the first time. Okay... I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Once you’ve had a shower. And we still have a few hours yet. Best use that time to relax, you don’t want a pulled muscle or something ridiculous because you overdid it.”

“I’ve been taking breaks, but yeah, maybe I should rest for now. Thanks, Hina, I’m glad I met you.”

“Likewise, Ema, likewise.”

Several hours later, showered and fresh, they left the dormitory and made their way to the venue. With a spring in her step and more than a hint of trepidation, Ema set her sights on the first step into her new future.



“I’ll meet you there, I need to do something quickly,” Hinata said as they were about halfway there, dashing off by herself.

“Okay,” Ema said, and headed the other way. She figured Hinata was simply testing her resolve, having her go on alone. With a shrug and a nod of determination, she picked up the pace.

Meanwhile, Hinata ran at a steady pace fast enough to get where she needed to be while also keeping her breathing under perfect control. She eventually arrived at an unfamiliar street. She had only been here a few times before; the

previous evening when she had walked Ema home, and occasionally when they had been spending a day together. She walked along until she reached the right house, took a deep breath, and knocked.

The door was opened by Ema's mother. "Hello?"

"Evening, Mrs Campbell," Hinata said, nodding once. "My name's Suzumori Hinata. Could I have a few minutes of your time? It's about Ema."

"Ema? What's she... wait, Hinata? I recognise that name from that message. Are you the one who put those fanciful ideas of becoming an idol back in her head!?"

"Can't very well put an idea in there that already exists, can I?" Hinata said, her lips forming a half-smile that was anything but amused. "I want to extend an invitation to you and your husband. Ema's debu—"

"I want no part in this—!" Ema's mother began.

"So you want no part in your daughter's life? You're just going to shut the door on her and ignore her desires?" Hinata snapped back, the half-smile vanishing as quickly as ice under a blowtorch.

"How dare you...!"

Hinata held a hand up. "Please, just *listen*. Ema's debut as an idol is this evening, in less than an hour, and I really want you to come and watch. At least give her a chance to prove she has it in her to be an idol."

"Do you think I *enjoy* shutting her down and telling her she's not able to be an idol?" said Ema's mother, her eyes running. "I want her to be happy, and being an idol will just lead her to misery, like it did me!"

Staring for a moment, Hinata's face relaxed a bit. "So *that's* why."

"Yes, that's why! I never want my daughter to suffer the same awful experience I went through...!"

"That's hardly your decision to make, is it?" Hinata said in a low tone that caught Ema's mother by surprise. "She's perfectly capable of working towards becoming an idol while still job searching, and as an idol she'll even be earning some money. I can tell you this: she absolutely has it in her to be a damn good idol!"

Hinata took a step back as she realised she was virtually face to face, and calmed herself. “Did you even stop to consider how Ema might feel, knowing her *own mother* thinks so little of her ability that she doesn’t think she can be an idol?”

“I...”

“My mother tried her best to help me find a direction in my life, even if her ideas weren’t actually that great. What’s your excuse? That just because you failed you think your daughter’s doomed to repeat it? Or maybe you’re worried that Ema *will* succeed and make you feel even worse that you didn’t?”

“That’s not...!” Ema’s mother croaked, her eyes awash and voice barely registering. “How could I...?”

Ema’s father appeared from behind and pulled his wife into a strong embrace. “That’s enough for now. Thank you, uh...?”

“Hinata,” Hinata said, bobbing her head and looking a little embarrassed.

“Thank you, Hinata. Can you give me the details of your event?” he added, handing his phone over.

Hinata did so and handed it back. “I really hope you’ll come. Maybe you’ll see a new side of your daughter you never knew existed.” She backed away, gave them a brief head bob, and ran for the venue; she would be cutting it fine, that was for sure, and it would be a bit hypocritical of her to not be there for Ema when she was needed after *this* little stunt.

Now she just had to hope they would come and watch.

Chapter 21: Dreams Are Made For Fulfilling

Hinata arrived at the venue with a few minutes still to spare before Ema's debut was due to start. Dozens of live houses, basements, and other venues lined both sides of the street, with hundreds of people walking back and forth, almost all of them what Hinata might call *extravagant*, even putting some of the more flamboyant idols to shame.

Crazy haircuts which looked like they came right out of some mad, post-apocalyptic movie greeted her. Vibrant colours abounded in not only hair but also clothes, with rips and tears, safety pins and studs, and more besides.

"Yeah... this is Shibuya, all right," Hinata murmured, stifling a laugh.

She didn't have time to be gawking, however, so she rushed over to the underground venue situated below a bar whose name was displayed in bright red neon lettering above the door, spelling out *The Crimson Firefly*. The bar itself was already busy, but it was a stairway down beside the building that Hinata was interested in.

Heading down, she opened the door and dashed inside, where she immediately ran in the direction of the dressing rooms. The main stage area was already fairly busy, with a small band putting on a show and a covering of smoke giving it a hazy atmosphere in combination with potential earache from the volume of both the band and the audience.

As Hinata approached the door leading into the backstage area, she was accosted by a young woman with brunette hair worn loose, with streaks of shocking pink running throughout.

"Can I help?" the woman asked.

Hinata smiled and pointed at the backstage door. "Here with Ema, I'm Hinata from Sakura-P."

"Oh right, she mentioned you were coming. In you go, then," said the woman. "I'm Tara, by the way, always nice to meet new girls. You ever need a good venue for an event, hit me up."

“I’ll bear it in mind, thanks,” Hinata said, and continued her jaunt until she reached a small dressing room.

Inside, Danika and Kirsten were fussing over Ema, applying some light makeup while Lucy loitered in the background.

“How’s it going?” Hinata said, entering and giving the agency girls a nod and a smile.

Danika left Kirsten to it and ran across. “Hinata, right? Great to meet ya!” She went on to introduce herself and the other two.

Stepping forward, Lucy looked Hinata up and down. “So you’re the rival Ema’s mentioned?”

At her seat before the wall-length mirror, Ema blushed. “L-Lucy! I wasn’t going to tell her that yet...”

“Oh, sorry, Ema,” Lucy said, stifling a laugh. She returned her gaze to Hinata. “Unlike some agencies, I have nothing against the big corporate guys. They both have their place, and I prefer to focus on building my business up rather than trying to tear corporations down. That said... look after my newest girl, it’s always good to have a solid rival and training partner.”

“I owe Hina a lot already,” Ema said, catching her rival’s eye in the mirror.

“The only thing you owe me is becoming a good idol,” Hinata said, nodding at her.

“I’ll give it my best shot,” Ema added. She looked around the shelf. “I’ve lost my ribbon.”

“Here,” Kirsten said, handing it over.

“Ah, thanks,” Ema said, dithering a bit. “Now I’m here, I’m feeling super nervous.”

“Just remember that we’re there with you,” Kirsten said, standing back and admiring her handiwork; enough make-up to accentuate Ema’s natural features, but not so much that she looked like a perambulatory cake. Some new idols made that mistake and it could haunt them for the rest of their career. “Maybe not in person, but certainly in spirit.”

“I’ll do my best to remember that,” Ema said. She looked at herself in the glitzy mirror; a pure, happy, and genuine smile stared back at her.

Hinata saw this and matched her friend's smile, happy at her protégé's progress.

Getting to her feet, Ema stood before them, looking a little embarrassed. "H-How do I look?" Her coord involved a sleeveless T-shirt, surprisingly sexy hotpants, and knee boots, all in a red and white motif. And the aforementioned ribbon, which now adorned her head at a jaunty angle.

"Fantastic," Hinata said.

"Mm, looking great indeed," Lucy said. "Now, get out there and knock 'em flat!"

Tara chose this moment to poke her head around the door. "You ready, Ema?"

"I think so," Ema said to her.

Tara nodded and disappeared again.

As Ema walked past, Hinata touched a hand to her shoulder. "I'll be watching... rival."

This made Ema shiver. She managed a smile, locked eyes for a second, then exited.



On the stage, the realisation of what she was doing set in. Ema looked out over the crowd, noting pretty much everyone there was roughly of an age with her. Dozens of pairs of eyes bored into her, the pressure of her situation grinding down her already shaky confidence.

She could at least see Hinata and the others, who had managed to fight their way to the front of the crowd, but they were *over there* and Ema was *over here*, all by her lonesome on this stage which suddenly looked *so much bigger*.

Her confidence slipped further as she desperately tried to remember all the dance moves and lyrics she had practised since becoming a new idol at Starlight Productions. The mass of people before her had performed an efficient memory wipe of her brain in this briefest of instants.

Was she *really* cut out to be an idol? Hinata seemed to think so, but Hinata was an idol at a big agency, could she truly understand Ema's position here, tonight? Had her mother actually been right all along? The jelly her legs had turned into told her that this was a mistake, that she wasn't made for a life of stardom, or even semi-stardom.

As her legs, conspiring with her treasonous brain, continued sending urgent signals that she should just run away and forget this whole idol business, Ema spied someone unexpected in the crowd. Two faces she knew and, for all that her mother sometimes angered her, loved a great deal.

"Mom? Dad?" she whispered. She caught her mother's eye, expecting an expression of anger and disgust at defying her. Instead, she received a warm—and surprisingly embarrassed—smile and a nod, telling her all she needed to know without a single word being said.

The instant of terror at forgetting everything she had committed to memory was replaced by excitement as the opening beats of the song kicked in and her body's muscle memory took over. Her parents had somehow come to see her debut and a number of encouraging yells from the crowd, from Hinata and Danika primarily, had solidified her resolve.

Today was the start of her dream.

In the crowd, Ema's parents stood rooted to the spot, surprised and shocked that this seemingly confident girl performing by herself in front of so many people was really their daughter. Ema's mother smiled as the understanding that maybe she had been a bit *too* stern, a bit *too* harsh washed over her, watching in awe at her daughter being something she had thought her utterly incapable of.

And on the stage, Ema exulted. But not the exultation of arrogant pleasure at proving her mother wrong. No, this was the exultation of sheer joy that her mother had come to see her perform, the feeling of acceptance and knowledge that here, tonight, she was choosing a new path for her life, and no longer needed to keep it hidden.

The song wound down and Ema came to a halt, panting and sweating. Her gaze swept across the audience, lingering on her friends, her rivals, her parents.

She locked eyes with her mother for the briefest of moments, gave her a genuine smile of absolute satisfaction, and thanked the crowd for their support. Then she dashed off backstage before her legs gave out.

Chapter 22: Making Up

Collapsing on her stool in the dressing room, Ema leaned back and sighed.

“Haha... I did it!”

“Yep, you did great!” came Hinata’s voice, arriving with Ema’s parents.

“Lucy and the others are waiting outside. Figured you might want a moment alone first.” She exited again, quietly closing the door behind her.

“Why...? Actually, *how*...?” Ema began, but was cut off as her mother rushed forward to hug her.

“We’re here because of your meddling friend out there, who decided to stick her nose where it doesn’t belong. And I can’t thank her enough!” said her mother. “I... suppose I have a little explaining to do, don’t I?”

Ema disentangled herself and stepped back, tilting her head. “Um, pretty sure I have an apology to make first.”

Her mother shook her head. “No, I’m the one who needs to apologise. I stopped you from doing something you wanted because of something bad that happened to me, and for that I’m sorry, Ema.”

“Something that happened...?”

“It was before you were born,” her mother continued. “I met someone at a party, became friends, and soon discovered that she was a producer for a small idol agency. They’d only just got up and running and were looking for new talent. This was back a couple of decades ago, you see... back when idols were still new and fairly unknown. The agency had big dreams of putting themselves on the stage as the best agency in Japan.”

She let out a heavy breath. “Needless to say, the big dreams were *too* big. I joined the agency and did okay for a little while, made a bit of money and a few fans. But pretty soon the company started having problems, lost one of their trainers to an upstart rival, and had to cut the number of idols they had.”

A shrug this time. “I was one of the ones they cut. I kept trying to be an idol, of course, it was something I’d grown to be incredibly passionate about since my

friend gave me the idea. But eventually... I gave up. Agencies at the time were all struggling to figure things out, so I wrote the whole thing off as more hassle than it was worth.”

Noting that her daughter’s eyes were filled with tears, she pulled her into another tight embrace. “I’m sorry for how I treated you these last few years, Ema. It’s just... as time went by and you started showing that same interest in idols, I began thinking of my own experiences and how much I didn’t want you to suffer the same.”

“I get that you were trying to protect me from pain,” Ema said. “I just wish you’d have told me *why*.”

“Honestly... I think it was less for your sake and more for my own,” her mother whispered.

“Mom?” Ema said, pulling away with a surprised look.

“I couldn’t handle the idea that you might succeed where I failed miserably. As the years went by, my desire to protect you changed into a resentment of the very idea that you might become a successful idol,” her mother said, clenching her hands and shaking with anger at her own weakness. “I’m sorry, Ema, I’m a terrible parent, aren’t I?”

Ema shook her head, giving her mother a warm and affectionate hug in return. “I’m happy you were looking out for me. But I’m old enough now to make my own mistakes. And chase my own victories.”

This resulted in her mother laughing, a happy and full-throated affair Ema hadn’t heard from her in many years. “You’re quite correct. Coddling you isn’t going to help, is it? Your performance was wonderful, Ema, and you seem to have found some equally wonderful friends. Pursue whatever dream you think will make you happiest, you have our full support.”

Ema’s father inserted himself into proceedings and gave them both a hug. “You’ve made a decision that you want to try being an idol, yes?”

“Yeah, tonight was amazing, I want to do it for real!” Ema said. “It’s official now I’ve debuted, so I want to make Lucy and the girls proud. And you, of course!”

“In that case, how about you come home and tell us all about it?” he continued.

“Oh, uh... I kind of wanted to spend another night at Hina’s place,” Ema said

Her mother giggled. “You’re grown quite attached, haven’t you? It’s fine, go spend the night with her. We’ll be waiting for your return in the morning.” With that, they gave their daughter a hug and a kiss, and disappeared into the cool evening.

“Okay!” Ema said, waving them out of sight, at which point she rushed into the hallway outside, where she jump-hugged Hinata. “So that’s what you were doing earlier, was it?”

“Yeah, figured it might help if your mum saw you, so...” Hinata said, rubbing Ema’s back.

“Thanks, you’re the best friend I could ever have met,” Ema whispered, again tearing up a little.

“What was that about staying with me tonight?” Hinata said, breaking away, her expression saying all the naughty things she didn’t feel like directly vocalising.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not,” Hinata said, shaking her head. She smiled, found her resolve, and hoped like hell this went as she wanted. “Ask me out.”

“What?”

“Ask me out. Right now.”

“By ask out, you mean...?”

“You’re interested, right? So am I. You just went and got the wrong idea about Michelle, though I certainly didn’t help there,” Hinata laughed. “We’re... casual, let’s say that. I’m looking for more than casual, though.”

Ema’s face lit up. “You’re not together!?! In that case... please go out with me, Hina!” She bowed her head.

“What are you being super polite for? Didn’t I tell you about that when we first met?” Hinata said, lifting her partner’s chin. She leaned closer, closed her

eyes, and ever-so-gently, like a leaf touching the surface of a pond, kissed the girl she liked.

“Mm...” Ema murmured, accepting this wonderful gift. On top of all the other wonderful gifts she had just received this evening, she wasn’t sure she could cope with all the wondrous wonderment.

Standing up straight and letting out a happy sigh, Hinata opened her eyes and smiled. “I hope that answers any questions you have remaining?”

Ema shivered with delight, keeping her own eyes tightly shut in hopes that this moment might last forever. “M-More than adequately...” She leaned in to peck her new girlfriend’s lips in return, then beamed. “So... it looks like we’re rivals as well as girlfriends now?”

“Mm, yeah, I guess that’s about right,” Hinata said with a wink. “I was happy when Lucy mentioned that, incidentally. The fact you consider me a worthwhile rival makes all my own hard work feel that much more rewarding.”

“Um, does that mean I can’t ask for help any more?”

“Why would it? Rivals aren’t enemies, Ema,” Hinata said. “I’ll help however I can, but don’t forget I’ll be trying my best to beat you, too. Well... everywhere except in the bedroom.” She coughed and averted her gaze.

Ema laughed, giving Hinata the perfect gift of a relaxed smile. “I’ll remember that. I want to stand on stage with you one day, even if it’s as rivals.” She shook her head. “No, *especially* as rivals!”

“Music to my ears,” Hinata said. She gave her new rival a hug. “Can’t wait to see how you grow, Ema, make us proud!”

“I will!”

With that, they headed out to find Lucy and the others waiting for them. Pausing in the street, they gave their farewells for the evening, then headed off to wherever they needed to be next.

For Ema, this was to her new girlfriend’s place to enjoy whatever might end up happening, happier and more buoyant than she had felt in some years. After all, she had a new dream to fulfil and was eager to get started.

Chapter 23: Waking Dream

Upon making sure Michelle wasn't going to be in the room that night—mostly as a result of Hinata bribing her with the promise of cakes and alcohol at a later date—the two of them entered and loitered near the low table in the centre, unsure who wanted to make the first move, or what that move might be.

“So...” Ema said. “I probably need a bath before anything... else.”

“I'm easy either way,” Hinata said. “You wanna grab a bath while you're here, I'm more than happy to occupy myself with a book.” She glanced at her new lover and raised an eyebrow. “As long as I'm getting some action later?”

“Maybe I should leave the bath until we're done...” Ema muttered, laughing as she wandered off to the en-suite. She called back through, “And you're definitely getting lucky, Hina!”

This made Hinata crack up, a full-throated laugh the likes of which Ema had never heard from her before. “That's my girl.”

In the bathroom, Ema settled down into her steaming hot bath. As she soaked, she considered the last couple of weeks, during which time she had seen Hinata a fair number of times, often briefly, occasionally for a little longer, and always enjoyably. It was amazing how quickly her life had changed from just that one meeting. How many more might she enjoy yet? And how many more of them would be beside her new girlfriend?

Ema shivered once more. Something about calling Hinata her girlfriend very much agreed with her. Yes... very agreeable indeed.

Two weeks was barely any time at all. But similar to how a few simple words—*‘I love you’*, *‘we're breaking up’*, *‘I like pineapple on pizza’*—had the ability to ruin someone emotionally, whether in a positive or negative way, a mere couple of weeks were more than enough to become very attached, if it was the right person.

Clambering out of the bath before she turned into a living prune, Ema dried herself, wrapped a towel around her body, and wandered back to the room. She

returned to see Hinata seated demurely on the edge of the bed with a leg up, reading a book on her phone. The top light had been turned off and Hinata had switched on a small lamp beside the bed, giving the room a soft and romantic atmosphere.

“What are you reading?” she asked, sitting next to her.

Hinata looked up. “*101 Ways to Seduce Cute Girls.*”

“As if you need a book for that,” Ema said, stifling a laugh.

“It’s actually a collection of a dozen short romance stories.”

“Do I even need to ask if all the characters are girls?”

“Probably not.”

“Figures.”

Ema’s hair still needed some drying, so Hinata disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a hairdryer and brush, plugged the dryer in, and waved it back and forth, brushing it out as she went. Ema fidgeted. Heavily.

“Something wrong?” Hinata said.

“No, I’m fine... fine!” Ema said, plainly indicating that she wasn’t, in actual fact, fine at all.

Hinata laughed. “You don’t seem fine, you’re fidgeting like mad.”

Ema froze, eyes closed. Breathing heavily. Thinking, considering, deciding.

“Wa—!” Hinata yelped as Ema turned and pushed her down on the bed. “Oh my, unusual for you to be this aggressive.”

“I promised you were getting lucky tonight, so...”

“Music to my ears.”

Aggressively, passionately, much more sexy and determined than ever before, Ema kissed Hinata all over, losing control to the point of sliding her partner’s skirt zip down and stroking her somewhere intimate. Returning to reality, she stopped, eyes tightly shut, her laboured breaths warm against Hinata’s lips and her hand gently cupping her lover’s crotch.

“I get the feeling this is going to be a fun evening,” Hinata whispered.

“Ah, yeah, it uh... it seems having my hair brushed gets me going,” Ema mumbled, her body feeling like it was on fire with lust.

“I noticed.” Hinata chuckled and held Ema tightly, enjoying the feel of her body lying lightly on top of her, the rapid beating of her heart indicating extreme excitement.

“Okay, I’ll try and control myself this time. Please, carry on,” Ema said, sitting up and putting a modicum of effort into making sure her towel stayed in place. For now, at least.

“Feel free to do it again if the mood takes you.” Hinata continued brushing, waving the hairdryer back and forth until Ema’s hair was dry. She placed the dryer and brush on the desk beside the bed. “There, all done.”

Ema heaved a sigh of relief at that minor ordeal being over. All that remained now was to head to bed.

Wasting no time at all, Hinata jumped off the bed undressed, slowly sliding her top up and over her head before tossing it over to Michelle’s bed. The skirt went next, leaving her in her sexy charcoal black underwear. She posed.

This made Ema, whose towel had fallen away to reveal her slender form without her even realising it, blush like mad. She’d seen Hinata with *nothing on* before, and yet seeing her like this made her glow. Ema wasn’t sure how that worked.

Hinata grinned and pointed at her. “Just evening the score a bit.”

Looking down and finally noticing how much she was showing, Ema moved an arm over her breasts and covered her lower region with the other hand. “It’s amazing how I can be this self-conscious after what we did before.”

Hinata couldn’t tear her gaze away from this vision of perfection. “Just like being an idol, it takes practice.”

“How old are you again?”

“Twenty.”

“Only a year older than me and yet you’re so sexy,” Ema said, taking in this glorious sight.

“I prefer cute over sexy,” Hinata said, and danced back across, jumping into bed and pulling her girlfriend down. Stroking over Ema’s smooth skin, this time with nothing to get in the way, she purred and snuggled as close as she could.

“Mm, this is more like it.”

Emma was almost minded to make a vague complaint, given she was naked and her lover still had her underwear on... but then she remembered that it was the reverse last time and decided that they were even. She became aware, thanks to a degree of suspicious movement under the sheets, that her partner was probably *busy*.

"Hina... what are you up to?" she asked. A suggestive giggle was all the response she received, resulting in her cracking up. Lifting the sheets a little, she peered down into the dim depths, where her partner was playing with herself, a hand stuffed down the front of her panties. "Getting started without me?"

"Have I ever told you I *love* being watched?" Hinata murmured.

"You have not..." Emma said, transfixed by her partner's fingers moving around under the material of her panties, like a cat attempting to escape a duvet. "Is this how you normally...?"

"Play with myself? No, not even close. This is how I do it for a partner," Hinata said, pushing the sheets back over to the side and sliding her panties down. She used a foot to drop them on the sheets, then placed a hand flat over her pussy, playing coy.

Emma swallowed. Hard. "So you'd like me to watch you m-masturbate? We seem to be making a habit of, um... self-service."

"I don't hear you complaining," Hinata whispered, lifting her hand and using a single finger to slide up and down her wetness, staring all the while into her partner's embarrassed eyes.

Emma's pulse pounding heart was testament to the current hotness levels in her room, and she was forced to concede that her girlfriend had a point; she wasn't complaining. Not at all. She shuffled her way down the bed and sat, legs crossed, between her partner's legs. "O-Okay, give me a show!"

"With pleasure." Hinata ramped up her action, her gaze continually locked into Emma's as she rubbed and fingered and stroked, using circular motions over her clit, pressing fingers deep inside, sliding up and down the entire length of her wetness...

"This might be the sexiest thing I've ever witnessed," Emma murmured. "Though I suppose that's not saying much."

“Let me see you, too,” Hinata mumbled, shuddering a little as she enjoyed a near miss, stopping momentarily and letting her bits settle down again.

Nodding, Ema went up on her knees, legs spread apart, lifting herself high enough for her partner to have a good view while maintaining her own sexy vista. Her fingers went to work caressing and fondling, splashing her lover’s legs with a few droplets of pleasure.

Delighted moans filled the air as two beautiful and cute girls brought themselves closer to joint climax, and before long Ema simply couldn’t resist being more involved with proceedings. “Sorry, Hina, I really want to try this!” She dropped down and laid herself back, manoeuvring to touch her own pussy to Hinata’s. Then she proceeded to grind like her life depended on it.

Wrapping her legs around Ema’s and accepting this delectable position change without a word, Hinata did all she could to align herself, creating a sexy, rhythmic gyration and using her fingers for additional stimulation. “You been doing some research, my girl?”

“M-Maybe a little...” Ema managed to say between laboured moans. She already felt an eruption fast approaching, speeding up her action as much as possible until finally, virtually in sync with her girlfriend, she enjoyed an explosive orgasm. The sort that knocks you flat for the next half an hour, the sort that seems to go on for approximately an eternity and a half, and the sort that results in a great deal of post-coital clean up.

Hinata cried out as her own finisher hit, equally as powerful, her back arching and legs shuddering as she came once, twice, three times in rapid succession and feeling like she might pass out from sheer pleasure overload.

After a few minutes of rising and falling chests, much panting, and a general glow of euphoria, Ema managed to crawl around and up the bed in order to collapse with her wonderful and amazing and incredible lover, snuggling close. “Better?” she whispered into Hinata’s ear, once she had calmed down sufficiently to process speech again.

Hinata gave a single crisp nod. “Mm, you better believe it. Ah, that felt amazing. Truly an evening of delicious tribulations.” She gave her a wet kiss, before slumping back and staring at the ceiling.

Ema's eyebrows arched upward. "Tribulations?"

"Never heard the term '*tribbing*' before?" Hinata asked, stroking her fingers through Ema's hair. The *clean* hand's fingers; while she was a naughty girl, she was also a thoughtful one.

Ema shook her head. "Can't say I have."

"It's what we just enjoyed."

"The grinding thing?"

"The very same."

"Huh, had no idea there was a special word for it. Nice to know," Ema said, nodding thoughtfully. It seemed it wasn't just the idol world she had to learn about.

Hinata snickered. "There are many fun words for our enjoyable activities. Feel free to ask Michelle about some of them, I'm sure she has every single one memorised."

"I'm sure!" Ema laughed.

Lifting her head, Hinata searched for something downstream. "Where'd my panties go?"

"Uh, pretty sure I might've been sitting on them, sorry." Ema sat up and retrieved the damp items, handing them over.

"No problem, I'm going to make them wet anyway," Hinata said, taking the items and using them to clean herself up. "There, now I can sleep in comfort." She noticed her lover staring. "You appear to be interested in my underwear... which is an entirely fair reaction. I'm just wondering why?"

Ema was again transfixed, this time because Hinata was now dangling her panties from a finger, swinging them back and forth. "Of course I'm interested, they belong to you. But I was just thinking about Michelle when we, um..."

"Had an accompanied flight?" Hinata suggested.

"Right. A-Anyway, she seemed to enjoy my panties, and I was curious about it."

Hinata grabbed her wet panties in one hand, then used the other to slingshot them across, where they landed on her girlfriend's head. "Breathe deep, Ema. That's what Michelle likes."

Doing as asked, and inhaling as though she had never tasted oxygen before, Ema was beyond relieved that the panties on her obscured her burning face. Though she also worried she might set her girlfriend's underwear on fire...

"Your face..." Hinata said, cracking up. "I can see we'll have to practice a lot so you're more comfy with naughty things."

Gingerly removing the panties, Ema nodded. "I... think I'm okay with that. And I admit, there's a certain something to how these smell."

"Right? That mixture of scents is unique to me," Hinata said, and patted the mattress next to her. "Personally, I'm more about getting it straight from the source, if you know what I mean."

Ema pointed at her mouth. "You mean...?"

"Yep. Maybe we'll try that next time. Trust me, once you've had tongue, you won't want to go back," Hinata said.

With a happy—if embarrassed—giggle, Ema dropped the panties over the edge of the bed, slid up to lie with her lover, and pulled the sheets over them both, shuffling closer until their noses touched. "I think today might've been the best day of my life," she murmured.

"I can't disagree with that," Hinata said, closing her eyes. A smile appeared on her lips. "But the thing about being an idol is that you're always running towards the horizon, one hill at a time. We're never satisfied with today being the best, when we know tomorrow could be even better."

"Wouldn't that mean you're never satisfied?"

"Exactly. The moment you're satisfied with where you are is the moment you stop growing as a person." Hinata opened one eye and took in the features of her beautiful girlfriend. "You said we're rivals now, yes?"

"If you're okay with that."

Hinata closed the eye again and nodded. "Rivals are there to push you both to new heights. So I'll be relying on you from now on... partner."

Snuggling even closer, Ema gave Hinata a tender kiss. She understood Kirsten and Danika's synergy now, how they could be so in sync when training. It was because they were always pushing each other to new heights they couldn't reach by themselves, both as idols and lovers.

And now Ema had her own wonderful partner, rival, and lover... she intended to synergise just as hard as she could. After all, practice made perfect.

-END-

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Lily Lancaster