

Idol Crisis

By Frenzy & Rabits

Prelude

Tonight, the waltz upon the seafloor begins again.

A certain idol tastes the sea breeze upon her lips, along with the lingering scent of a diluted Earl Grey. The scent of cinnamon rolls, a gentle vanilla glaze drizzled over them, was what she forced herself to think about, but that one thought was too overpowering. A soft, yet sharp wind pierced her senses, like the perfect storm she felt was building up over time. A surge of attention had been directed to her agency, false accusations were rampant, and yet, everything seemed so close by.

"You wouldn't think she's missing, right?" her companion clad in purple wonders out loud. "Like, gotten squidnapped? Or got hurt in a back alley? Or-"

"Please, only Maki would think something that stupid," that certain idol retaliates, breathing out a sigh. "Even so, you have a little bit of a point. She's been gone for weeks, months, and not a text or an answer to her door. It worries me, just a pinch." She adjusts the white beret on her head, and yawns.

Vicious fangs, ravenous and relentless hunters of the deep sea of drama, she could feel every movement sinking into the back of her neck. As the night blossomed into a faint hint of dawn, the spring wind she could feel was changing, too. That spring wind, a wind that brought change and new beginnings, was fading.

"I mean, to be fair, if she quit, I wouldn't care," the idol says sharply, to the disdain of her companion. "The industry's a tough place. I'd rather have her quit than have those childish dreams of hers shattered by reality."

"Still, though... It's been months, almost half a year now. Don't you think it's a bit strange we haven't got a 'why' to any of this?"

Chapter 1

MakoMart

8:30am

Hiya! My name is Paula Lizulie, new employee of MakoMart. I applied to this job because I need the extra cash to pay the bills. Right now, I'm instructed to stock empty aisles.

I pick up a box from the back room and get to work. I start stocking shelves with jam.

Labi: "There you are."

Paula: "Oh hi, Labi."

That's Labi. She's an employee here like me, but more experienced. I met her at The Cephalorocks. She's not very talkative, but I like her "I don't care" vibe. I think she's cool.

Paula: "Thank you for helping me get this job."

Labi: "I came to tell you aisle 3 need restocking immediately."

Paula: "I'll be right there when I'm done."

Labi: "No, like, right now. Get over there."

Paula: "Oh, sure."

I follow Labi to aisle 3.

Paula: "H-Huuuh?!"

What I least expected, the entire aisle is completely empty! Not a single thing.

Labi: "I'm too exhausted from dealing with those raiders. Good luck."

Paula: "W-Wait, I can't do this by myself. It'll take too long."

Labi: "Welcome to the early shift." She leaves.

I see why there aren't many employees this early. No, I can't give up now. If I pull this off, the manager will admire my hard work and dedication to this job. I might even get a raise. Yes, I'll do it for the paycheck!

1 hour later

...My legs burn from walking back and forth from the storage room to here. And I've only completed a quarter of this monstrous task.

Labi: "Oh, you're not done yet?"

I turn around and see Labi.

Paula: "No, but I'll see to it."

Labi: "Anyway, we need more milk in stock."

Paula: "I'm sorry, but isn't there someone else who can do it?"

Labi: "Nope. The rest of the stocking crew check up at 12pm. You're weird for working this early."

I sigh.

Paula: "I'll go get the milk."

I leave aisle 3 and go to the freezer section. I look at what kind of milk we need more in stock.

Paula: "Hm?" I take a milk carton out because it sticks out with the rest of them.

On the left side the carton, someone sketched an Inkling on here. There's words that go with it.

Paula: "'Missing pls call...'" I read the words and the phone number. Should I call them?

Paula: "Hmmmm...It wouldn't hurt to call them."

I punch in the number. I wait for someone to pick up.

[Perky Voice]: "To talk to a customer, please press 1! Don't actually press 1."

Paula: "Huh?"

[Perky Voice]: "No, seriously. Whatcha need?"

Paula: “I’m here to call about the missing person on a milk carton. It doesn’t have a name on it. Did you draw it yourself?”

[Perky Voice]: “Thank you for noticing, in fact, I did! But since you’re here now, um, hm, let me get someone else on the line.”

Paula: “Okay.”

I wait for a response.

[Low-Pitched Voice]: “Hello, who is speaking?”

Paula: “Paula Lizulie. Employee of MakoMart.”

[Low-Pitched Voice]: “This is Kazuki Shiraishi. Yes. That Kazuki, from Yukipro. Thank you for taking an interest in our missing persons case.”

Paula: “Oh, you’re welcome. I was lucky to find it on a milk carton. Apparently, it’s only one drawn with a marker.”

[Kazuki]: “That’s totally Maki’s fault...” she mutters quietly.

Paula: “Who’s the missing person?”

[Kazuki]: “Hmm, how shall I explain... Perhaps you know of an idol by the name of Suwa Terasawa?”

Paula: “Suwa Terasawa...?” It sounds familiar. Maybe Pott mentioned the name to me. She does love talking about idols and their music. “I think I’ve heard of her.”

[Kazuki]: “Poor girl, you haven’t been around enough. It’s all over the internet. You know, Kawashima Production’s Suwa Terasawa went missing maybe, a couple months ago. She’s new, she doesn’t have a *ton* ton of attention but you’ll see it in the news.”

I look up the name while we’re on the call. It’s as she said, Suwa Terasawa is missing.

Paula: “Are there any leads?”

[Kazuki]: “Well, no. Not really. Surprising how not even the most diehard fans have found anything after five months.”

Paula: “Five months?!” This sounds serious. “Where was she last seen?”

[Kazuki]: “At an open live show venue. Just Fruits Parlor, us, singing on stages and whatnot. We had an after-party, she went home, and no one ever saw her again.”

Paula: “What’s her address?”

[Kazuki]: “I’ll send you it over message, but really, it won’t do you any good. At all. This isn’t the kind of thing idols can say in public, after all.”

Paula: “Don’t worry, I know a group who can help me along the way.” The New Squidbeak Splatoon.

[Kazuki]: “Well, all help is appreciated. I’ll send you a place to meet up. If it looks like a shady alley, don’t question it. Later you’ll understand. Get your friends, Paula. We’re going on a trip in our favorite rocket ship.”

She sent me the address where to meet before she hung up.

When I’m done with my shift, I’ll get my friends together and meet with Kazuki at the place.

Labi: “You’re not slacking off are you?”

Paula: “Huh?” I get spooked by Labi behind me.

Labi: “Slacking off will not be tolerated here. Get back to work.”

Paula: “Y-Yes ma’am.”

5:10pm

I gathered my group with me. Gilbur, Nishi, Pott, Kudu and Reylie. We have our casual wear on, except Reylie. She always wears her agent gear. We’re almost to the location.

Reylie: “Paula, I admire your concern about this missing person, but this isn’t the kind of thing we do.”

Paula: “B-But what if the Octarians are behind it.”

Kudu: “I don’t see why the Octarians would want with an idol. Let alone an unfamiliar one.”

Nishi: “Pott knows her, right?”

Pott: *Nods*

Gilbur: “Famous or not, she’s an idol. Lots of people must be worried sick about her. You said she’s been missing for five months, right?”

Paula: “That’s right.”

Gilbur: “Then let’s see what we can do to help. No idol left behind!”

Well spoken, Gilbur.

We arrive at the shady alley. A couple Inklings in casual clothing are standing around.

????: “It’s been ten minutes, maybe they got held up. Oh well. Probably lost, which I can understand.”

Paula: “Um, excuse-me?” I call out. “Are you Kazuki?”

????: “Yes, and you’re Paula. I know.” She looks up once, and goes back to checking her phone. “Today, again, too...”

Paula: “So how are we going to start finding Suwa?”

Kazuki: “Hm. I have a feeling we might not really find her, but I could just be a pessimist.” She closes her phone. “You lot. Introduce yourselves, and make it snappy.”

Gilbur: “Oh um, I’m Gilbur Watashi.”

Nishi: “Nishi Kobota.”

Kudu: “Kudu Ottozu.”

Kazuki: “Hm, never mind. All names I have heard before. No thank you, Nazuna.”

Reylie: “You’ve heard of us before?” She raises an eyebrow.

Kazuki: “Well, not YOU. The other, hmm, four plus one, yeah, basically.”

An Inkling in purple quietly taps on Kazuki’s shoulder.

????: “Kazuki, you really don’t have to be so harsh...”

Reylie leans into my ear.

Reylie: “I’m not sure we should trust them.” She whispers.

Paula: “I trust them.” I replied. “Where did you hear from us, Kazuki?”

????: “Well, there was this whole kidnapping thing and your names were there... I think that purple one? Maki mailed you a random letter. The one that says ‘Dear Customerfan’.” She laughs a little, and goes back behind Kazuki.

Reylie sighs.

Reylie: “Look, are we going to get started or what?” She sounds impatient.

Kazuki: “Hm. Let’s see. How many of you are skilled at watching people through a window? That’s a pretty stupid question, huh...”

I raised my hand anyway.

Paula: “I am.”

Kazuki: “Thiiiiis close to questioning it, but good. Here’s her address. I can’t really say it out loud, this is such an inconvenience...”

I take the address written on paper from Kazuki. I read it carefully.

Paula: “We’ll get to it.”

Kazuki: “If the back window is covered by a blind, well, then I can’t help you. Probably want to get Kach and her friends. I know as much as you do.”

Kach-?

Kazuki: “Go on, go, go. Call Maki’s number if stuff turns up or not.”

Gilbur: “Wait, but who’s Kach?”

Kazuki: “Some girl in Maki’s theater class. Heck, not even I know, but I hear they’ve got some friend, a tiny one, with ‘breaking-in-and-entering’ skill, whatever that means.”

????: “You totally sound like you’re sending them off to do errands!”

It’s that perky voice from before.

Paula: “Aren’t you the girl who picked up my call?”

????: “Yes I am! I’m Maki Iwasaki! I’m an Inkling idol but I also specialize in kicking!”

Nishi: “If you’re Maki, you can just take us to Kach, right?”

Maki: “That I can, my dear!” She pats Nishi’s head, spins around, and giggles. “Ten points for Nishi!”

Reylie: “Then let’s not waste anymore time. Lead the way, Maki.”

Maki: “Was about to say, ‘Oh, aren’t we watching Suwa through a window?’ No, we’re not! Too bad, Kazuki! Follow me! Except you two.” She eyes Kazuki and what looks to be Nazuna with a mischievous grin.

Maki walks on ahead as we follow her.

Maki: “One, two, six, that’s totally them.” She stops in front of... a bakery?

The rest of us look a bit baffled.

Kudu: “Does she work here?”

Maki: “How dare! She lives here! Well, above it, at least. Right, I’ll leave you to that. Over there are her friends, one of them can help you. See ya!”

And in a flash, she’s gone. Like she dissolved into thin air...

We approach the idling group Maki pointed out.

Paula: “Excuse me, are one of you skilled at um... ’breaking-in-and-entering’?”

Nobody moves or says a word, and then they all point to a boy in a denim cap, who raises his hand.

????: “....me. Why?”

Reylie: “A friend of yours mentioned you can help us. We’ll need your help to get into someone’s place.”

????: “Wow, Teo. You found a use outside of murdering people in ranked.”

An Inkling with long hair and a tie laughs a little, and goes back to sipping her coffee.

Gilbur: “Can you help us? It’ll be for a good cause.”

????: “Like... what, exactly? You know breaking and entering is illegal, right? Or you mean Teo just finding out random stuff about people’s lives.”

Shoot, is it alright if we tell them?

Paula: “It’s to help find a missing Inkling. If you lock pick their door for us or something, we can find clues there.”

????: “Um... One moment, please.”

A tiny Inkling walks into the bakery. Not long later, she comes out with another Inkling not much taller.

????: “Oh, I know exactly what this is about... I think.” She squints at us. “Wait... Who ARE you, anyway?”

Gilbur stepped in with a smile of excitement.

Gilbur: “We’re Team Set-Go! On a mission to find a lost idol!” He does a peace sign.

He’s been wanting to do that for a long time. After that embarrassing introduction, we all tell them our names.

Gilbur: “...and that there is Pott Hanaki. She’s mute, but her actions speak louder than words.”

????: “Pott, huh... if we put a flower on her head, would it be normal?”

????: “Please, shut up, Mao.”

The boy named Mao smirks a little, and sits back down.

Paula: “May we get that person’s assistance?”

The boy with the denim cap, probably Teo, nods.

????: “Umm... sorry about Onii-chan. he just, well, he doesn’t like talking a lot.”

Nishi: “Is there going to be a catch to this? I can smell one.”

????: "...Wow, that is the stupidest thing I've ever-"

A girl who looks identical to her slaps her cheek.

????: "Kaitlyn, be quiet... No, I can guarantee you."

Reylie: "That saves us the trouble then. What's your name, lock picker?"

Teo: "...Teo. Nice to meet you."

Paula: "Nice to meet you too, Teo. We'll take you with us to the place. Follow us."

Teo: "...Lychee. Let's go. Don't be scared."

Lychee: "Huh?! Um, sure, well, okay. Okay."

The tiny Inkling holds onto her brother's hand, eyeing us suspiciously.

????: "16-second introduction! Girl in the dress is Kach, sweater guy is Mao, those twins, Kaitlyn and Kotori, and I'm Claire! We clear? Okay? Okay!"

Kudu: "Lovely to meet you all, but we need to be heading out. Lead the way, Paula."

Kach: "Right, let's go."

Chapter 2

"I'm back, Kazuki, Nazuna."

Maki turns around the corner, where her fellow idols are waiting for her. "Welcome back," Nazuna says in between breaths. "We uh, kind of had to outrun some fans. Sorry, Maki." The blue-haired Inkling giggles, and hugs the both of them. "Noooo problem! We found help, we got em to Kach and friends, they're gonna have a fun time!"

"Hmm, I wouldn't say fun time, but okay," Kazuki replies quietly, letting go of the hug. "Very smart of you to disappear instantly. It was already risky for you to be out in the open." Maki stretches, and rests herself on a wall. "Well, we have help now. Soon, we'll be able to resume idol work as Fruits Parlor!" Nazuna looks around, and then looks down at the ground. "Hmm... I feel kind of bad. There's not much we can do as idols, walking in the open is already a magnet for attention. But, well, I guess."

"I just hope they'll be alright..."

Paula's perspective

Paula: "This is the place."

We all stopped at an apartment. It's the same address as what it says on the paper.

Reylie: "Teo, try to lock pick this quickly. We wouldn't want to be seen."

Teo: "...Mm. Not sure anymore."

Reylie: "Hm? You changed your mind?"

Teo: "...Mm. This is Suwa's place. Bit scared."

Nishi: "Don't worry, she'll understand once we find her."

Teo nods, and fiddles with the lock, assisted by Lychee and Kaitlyn. With a click, the door opens.

Teo: "Done. See ya."

Paula: "Thank you so much, Teo."

Teo: "...Okay. Bye."

Mao: “Dude, I don’t think they wanted you to pick the lock and go. You sound like a terrible friend.”

Teo turns around and rejoins the group silently.

We walk into Suwa’s apartment. It looks as neat as what you see in an interior magazine.

Kudu: “So what should we look for exactly?”

Paula: “Anything that looks suspicious.”

Kotori: “Well, you know... Maybe Suwa might not even be home. I don’t hear a thing.”

Nishi: “She wouldn’t be cooped up here for 5 months and been reported missing over it. Of course she isn’t here.”

We split up to search in different parts of her place.

Lychee: “...She’s definitely home. No need for a split-up.”

Gilbur: “What makes you say that?”

Lychee: “Be quiet, and you can hear her breathe from down the hall. Come, this way.”

We followed Lychee down the hall and pointed to a direction. She was right! Suwa is right there, slouching on a futon.

Suwa: “Umm, hmm, hi, welcome-”

Kaitlyn: “No offense Suwa? You look so *dead*. Like you’d fall over in the next second.”

Nishi: “You gotta be kidding me, you were missing for 5 months and no one even bothered to check her apartment?!” She facepalms.

Gilbur: “Case solved, then?” He anxiously chuckles.

I turn my attention to Suwa.

Paula: “Suwa, were you here the whole time?”

Suwa: “Well, yeah... It’s a bit strange, though. I-”

She breaks mid-sentence to cough, breathes in and out a couple times, and laughs it off.

Suwa: “Well, I just wanted to quit being an idol. The attention got to me, I guess. Funny though, this turn of events, I mean.”

Kudu: “There are people worried sick about you. They sent us to find you.”

Reylie: “That’s pretty selfish of you, running off without saying a word. Have you thought of how much it’d impact others?” She lectured. “I had to take my time off of my schedule for this.”

Claire: “Reylie, Reylie dear, please, keep your mouth shut for a couple seconds. I have a feeling that’s not the end of it all.” She goes on to pat Suwa on the head. “You’re doing great, Suwa. We’ve got this.”

Everyone stares at the two in confusion, like Claire has any idea what she’s talking about.

Paula: “If it’s not the end, then what else is there left?”

Kach: “I mean, Claire has a point,” she says, before stepping backwards. “Suwa’s kind of... uncultured? She doesn’t have social media, has never seen a meme, I don’t think she’s ever seen the Internet. How could she possibly know about the attention she gets?”

Mao: “Never seen a meme? That’s kinda low.”

Kotori motions for him to shut up.

She never even touched the Internet before?! Claire has a point, how *does* she know about the attention she gets?

Paula: “S-Suwa, how did you find out about the attention you attracted?”

Suwa: “Ahaha, long story-”

She stops to cough again.

Kaitlyn: “Suwa, open your damn mouth and say something! We’re trying to get you safe and okay and all things nice!”

Kotori leans into my ear with a worried look.

Kotori: “Sorry, this kinda happens...often. Suwa not saying stuff, I mean.”

I nod and wait patiently for Suwa to answer.

Suwa: “Promise you won’t say anything?”

Some of us hesitate...we all agreed to keep that promise.

Suwa: “I was told by a third party through a letter in the mail, not to continue idol work some months ago. I didn’t, but I still went to school and stuff like that. Then I started getting sick... Not sure how it’s lasted for so long. It feels like, mm, something like a very long fever...”

Mao: “You had a fever for *five months*?”

Suwa blinks once, and nods. No one says a word.

Reylie: “...Did you go to a doctor?”

Suwa: “Yes, I have medicine and stuff like that but it’s a bit strange. Fevers last a couple days, but every time my symptoms get better, they go right down the next day... odd, isn’t it?” She laughs it off like it’s no big deal.

Teo: “...Definitely an intentional poisoning. If it isn’t, there’s no way it’s accidental.”

Kudu thinks.

Kudu: “This may be off topic, but may I cook you something up, Suwa?”

Suwa: “Oh- You don’t have to, but you can! Thank you. Ahaha, i-if I could properly make you feel at home, I would-”

She falls over, managing to catch herself on the floor.

Pott: *Carries Suwa back on the futon*

Kudu: “I’ll see what I can find in the kitchen. We’ll help you get better one way or the other.” He leaves to the kitchen to find what he can make.

Kach: “Kudu seems like he’s pretty good at cooking, I think!”

Nishi: “Oh, you don’t even know!” She shouts to Kudu. “Make us all a meal, Ramen Boy!”

Kudu ignores her.

Gilbur: “So...what should we do now? Tell the other idols she’s not missing?” He turns to Claire.

Teo: “...No. I’ve got a better idea.”

Lychee: “Onii-chan, isn’t this-”

Teo: “Shh, shhhhh. Yes, funny coincidence.”

Paula: “She was missing for five months and was found now with a non-stop fever, right?” I replied.

Teo nods, and looks back at his phone.

Teo: “A fever that lasts months is poisoning. If it wasn’t Suwa would probably be dead by now.”

Nishi: “If it wasn’t poison, then what would have killed her?”

Mao: “You’re actually asking what would have killed her? Really? Pneumonia, or maybe a lung infection. Duh.”

Nishi: “Do you think she got injected with something?”

Teo: “Poisoned through her food is a more likely guess. A not very severe poison, but one administered over time without her knowledge.”

Paula: “W-Who would do such a thing?” An idea bolted in my head. “W-Wait a minute! Suwa, didn’t you say you got a letter from a third party? Do you still have it?”

Suwa: “Yes, actually... It’s- it’s in the cabinet next to the piano. The really big one.”

I walked to her piano and picked up the biggest letter there. I begin reading it. It sounds like they’re seriously suggesting to quit being an idol.

Paula: “Do you guys think this could be connected to the poisoning?”

Lychee: “You can’t rule it out- well, I mean, I’m almost certain, uhm, I mean-”

Claire: “Lychee, dear, you’re doing great. They get it.”

Paula: “What I think is since Suwa didn’t take their word on quitting, someone had to do it with their own hands. They poisoned her to wipe her out of the picture, possibly along with her idol allies together.”

Gilbur: “I think we’re onto something.”

Pott: *Checks Suwa’s temperature*

Kaitlyn: “Jesus, 100... What did they *do* to you?”

Reylie: “Don’t think about confronting the third party. If they really are behind it, they’d likely lie they have nothing to do with it. We’ll need someone in there to dig through dirt to find any evidence.”

Kotori: “...Teo.”

We all turned our eyes on Teo.

Reylie: “Hey kid, you think you’re crafty enough to sneak in there?”

Teo: “...Not alone.”

Kach: “We could go in as a group, but maybe just a couple. The others can watch over Suwa.”

Paula: “Let’s go as a group of four. Who’s coming with us?”

Kudu: “I’m staying behind to finish cooking, obviously.”

Nishi: “I’m staying too. Can’t let that food go to waste.” She imagines Kudu’s cooking to get done.

Reylie: “I’ll go. You could use the protection.”

Gilbur and Pott agree to stay.

Paula: “So that makes me, Teo and Reylie. Who else?”

Kaitlyn: “I’ll go.”

Kotori: “You? You’re probably too loud to go... Have like, Kach or Claire go, but not you.”

Claire: “Nope. I’m staying here.”

Paula: “Do you wanna go, Kotori?”

Kotori: “Well, I wouldn’t be against it. Kach would probably be too scared,ahaha.”

Kach: “Nooooo!! How dare you! I’d be terrified!”

Mao: “Kach, you’re not helping your case.”

Reylie: “Mao then?”

Mao: “I mean, I could-”

Everyone immediately rushes to Mao and tells him to shut up.

Teo: “...You’d rather take Kaitlyn.”

Mao: “*Thanks, Teo.*”

Paula: “Kaitlyn it is then. Welcome aboard!” I cheered.

Kaitlyn: “Niiiiice.”

I think that was sarcasm. But anyway, we start making our leave to the address from the letter.

Chapter 3

7:00pm

Paula's perspective

We arrived at Kawapro. The company Suwa works for.

Paula: "Hmm...we could just walk through the front door...or we can just find a back door or something."

Reylie: "Backdoor. There's no way they'll let people like us in anyway."

We start circling the building for another entrance.

Paula: "Ah, there's one." It's a backdoor next to a dumpster.

Reylie: "Make quick work with it, Teo."

Teo: "...Sure."

It takes a while longer than at Suwa's house, but a little while after, the door opens. Too loudly, actually.

We sneak up the staircase.

Paula: "Which floor?" I whispered.

Teo: "Um... Not sure."

Kaitlyn: "Five, Teo. There's no 4th floor in this building."

While climbing the stairs, we walk on the 5th floor.

Reylie: "What do you expect us to find, Paula?"

Paula: "Ummmm...I didn't think we'd get this." I nervously chuckled. "But um...that empty office there looks promising."

We sneak along the walls and tiptoed inside.

Kaitlyn: "You don't really think the people who sent her that letter were the people she works for? She's so popular."

Reylie goes ahead and searches through files from a drawer.

Paula: "It's only a possibility."

Kaitlyn: “Well, I-”

...?

????: “Someone’s here. I thought Kawapro let us keep stuff here.”

Shoot! Someone’s coming!

Paula: “Hide behind the curtains!”

We all scurried behind the corner, covering ourselves behind the curtains. I pray they won’t see our feet.

????: “...Three? Maybe, four or five in this room... I’ll just pretend like they don’t exist. It’s not like we’re hiding some big scandal or anything.”

A familiar, low-pitched voice.

????: “Those are both true... Well. Whatever the case may be, we gotta find as much information as we can. Who knows, Kawapro might be behind all this.”

????: “They’d lose money, but okay...”

Things shuffle from cabinets and folders. Peeking from behind the curtain, about three of them are going through files, before a drawer crashes to the ground.

????: “How- Iwasaki, how did you topple over a whole drawer?”

????: “Sorry! Sorry! I’ll- uh, I’ll put all that back.”

Iwasaki...? Hold on a minute. I widen my peeking, and there they are. The three idols I’m working with.

Paula: “Pssst, hey.” I reveal my face from the curtains.

????: “Oh my cod! A-Azuki, there’s a ghost!”

????: “That’s ‘Miss Shiraishi’ to you! And ghosts aren’t real, Iwasaki.”

????: “...Paula?”

Me and my team come out of hiding.

Paula: “We snuck in here looking for answers.” Perhaps it’s best to not tell them we found Suwa yet. “We have an idea that someone in this company had something to do with this.”

Nazuna: “Hehe, what a coincidence. We came here for the same purpose.”

Reylie: “Did you sneak in too?”

Maki: “We’re allowed to be here-”

Kazuki: “You *broke in*?” She pulls out her phone. “I should probably call security then, hm?”

I begin to panic.

Paula: “Nonono, wait! It was for a good cause!”

Reylie: “We’re on your side, remember? Besides, you lent us Teo so we figure it’d be easier to get here.”

Teo: “You sound like I’m an object... just saying.”

Kazuki: “I’m kidding, you poor children. Ahaha.”

Nazuna: “Azu- um, Miss Shiraishi, I don’t think they knew that.”

I calmed down. What a relief.

Paula: “What did you girls find so far?”

Maki: “Oh, lots of stuff! Addresses of people Kawapro is affiliated with, and companies, and hmm, what else? Oh! And phone numbers and records of mail sent and received-”

Kazuki: “Iwasaki? Shut your mouth. You’re talking far too much for what we currently know.”

Reylie: “Anything related to poisoning?”

All three of them look puzzled.

Nazuna: “Poisoning...? No, poisoning isn’t in Kawapro records. Or any production company’s records, for that matter. Why, are you implying Suwa was poisoned?”

Maki: “You’re sooooo stupid, Nazunyan! Suwa wouldn’t fall to poison!”

Well...I wouldn’t blame her if she did.

I think of any other question on what they found. I feel like a detective.

Paula: “Are you familiar with this company’s opinion on Suwa? What do they think of her?”

Kazuki: “It’s very high, for an amateur like her.” Her expression hardens, and she scoffs. “Please! How she’s an idol I don’t even know! But, you can’t deny she receives a lot of attention, and her amount of offers for shows make her very valuable.”

That’s strange. If the company likes her so much, then why would the third party want her sent away?

Paula: “Did you dig anything up from this company’s third party?”

Maki: “Paula, there’s like a thousand. Production companies are affiliated with a lot of other companies. Which one?”

Paula: “Wait, huh...? There’s more than one third party?” I didn’t know this.

Maki: “No- well, you’re right. That’s how a production company works sometimes. It just so happens one of those parties affiliated with Kawapro has some plans with Suwa’s career.”

Paula: “What are their plans now with Suwa missing? I’m sorry for all the questions.”

Kazuki: “How should we know? That’s not in records. However, you might find this interesting. A certain company’s orders.”

...Poison. Kazuki showed us a bottle of it.

Kazuki: “It’s some kind of... liquid poison? Administered in small doses, it can cause a fever, but not a very strong one. It’s not that bad. Maybe you’re looking for this?”

Paula: “Yes! That’s what we need!” I piped in joy. “Can we have it?”

Nazuna: “No offense, but um... No? It’s a poison, are you going to poison someone?”

Paula: “We’ll look for fingerprints.”

Reylie: “A better question is where did you find it?”

Two look to Nazuna, who looks to her side nervously.

Nazuna: “Um... uh, I ordered it. Had a theory Suwa might’ve succumbed to poison, or something, so I uh, did some research.”

Kazuki: “Research that almost got you killed! Hanasato, you really can’t just order poison as an idol and expect to get away with it normally!”

Nazuna: “It was for a good cause!”

There goes the idea for fingerprints.

Paula: “Well, to put us on the same page, we both think she’s been poisoned too.”

I grip the third party letter in my pocket. Maybe I should show it to them. Sorry Suwa...this is for a good cause.

I pull out the third party letter and give it to Kazuki.

Paula: “I found this in Suwa’s apartment. It says those people want her to leave.”

Kazuki snatches the letter away, and the three idols read it carefully.

Maki: “Paula, you and your friends, you’re all so shady! It’s kinda funny!”

Kaitlyn: “Shady?! Please, you acquired a bottle of poison!”

Reylie: “Not to mention, you wanted us to break into her apartment.”

Kazuki: “Mm, I knew breaking through the front was a better idea, but there would be too much noise...”

Kaitlyn: “Lady, you’re not helping your- Never mind. Thanks for the poison, know who ordered it?”

The three look at us, then each other, refusing to say a word.

Paula: “Does the letter at least specify the third party?”

Kazuki: “Can’t you read? There’s no return address, there’s nothing but a long letter about people wanting her to stop. Are you-”

Nazuna: “Azuki, Azuki, calm down, patie-”

Kazuki: “I am calm, Hanasato!”

Maki pushes the two aside with a smile, and proudly shows a piece of paper, to her seniors' disdain.

Maki: "One Ikeda Corporation! Might not wanna deal with them though. Information brokering is always shady, but well, welcome to the idol world!"

Teo: "How'd they- no, why'd they poison Suwa? How would they know how to?"

Maki: "That's easy! You look up sources of information! For example, one Nina Katachi, Rinko Watanabe, Mao Kiritani-"

Mao Kiritani...?

Paula: "What did you find about Mao? I don't see him related to the poisoning."

Maki: "Why would you wanna know some rando's information? Well, general information on Suwa Terasawa, Suwa's interests, her taste in culture and food, vague points on her residence, nothing important. Why?"

Kaitlyn: "Ohh, everything is starting to make sense. Cod, I am going to beat that squid into the ground!"

I turn to Kaitlyn.

Paula: "Are you saying that Mao poisoned her?"

Nazuna: "Heavily unlikely, but might've assisted in it."

Reylie: "Then we know just who to go to for answers. You three coming along?"

Kaitlyn: "Yeah! I wanna pummel that kid to the ground!"

Teo merely nods, and walks out of the room.

Chapter 4

Paula's perspective

Suwa's apartment

We opened the front door and welcomed ourselves in. Everyone is just chilling and eating pasta. I assume that's what Kudu cooked.

Gilbur: "Hey, you're back. Did you find anything?"

Paula: "Oh we did. We have a hunch who else is involved in this."

Reylie locks the front door.

Nishi: "Who?"

I moved up to Mao.

Paula: "Anything you want to say about this, Mao?"

Mao: "What the hell are you talking about?"

Paula: "On the way here, Kaitlyn told me how much you liked messing with people. Sometimes you don't think beforehand and you just stick to your actions."

Mao looks confused.

Paula: "What I'm saying is did you do anything that involved poison?"

Mao: "Poison? I've never seen a poison in my life. Really, what the hell are you talking about?"

Reylie: "We found a lead on an Ikeda Corporation. Your name popped up in it. Now we're not saying you did it for intentional harm, but you were involved in it. Maybe you didn't know what you were doing or something."

Mao blinks once, twice, and sighs.

Mao: "I'm sorry, what'd I do? Sorry little lady, but I have zero clue on what the hell you're talking about."

Kach: "You've said that like five times."

Paula: "Are you *sure*? This is the only lead we have and it went to you."

Mao: “I asked what I did, not if I knew what I was doing.”

Kaitlyn: “Well, listen up, because some chick told us you fed information to some company about Suwa! Poison? I don’t think so. Information? Yeah, pretty sure.”

Mao: “Oh, that. Yeah, I did. Why?”

Paula: “Do you still have contact with them? We need to find them.”

Mao: “Contact? Why the hell would I share contact info with some random lady on the street?”

...?

Lychee: “Wait, who did you give info to? Huh? Paula’s saying a company, you’re saying some random- oops, I should probably stop talking.”

Teo: “...You’re OK.”

Paula: “Do you know when you talked to that lady?”

Mao: “Um... I forgot. Maybe uh, half a year or so back? Some random girl asked me stuff about Suwa. Stuff about her life outside of idol work. I just said random stuff.”

That’s suspicious. How would that lady know who to go to for those questions? I think hard for another question.

Paula: “Do you remember where you talked to her?”

Mao: “No...?”

Well shoot. I’m out of ideas.

Paula: “Um...does anyone know how to find this lady?”

Claire: “Honestly? Don’t think that really matters.”

Paula: “Oh um...what now?” I feel stumped.

Nishi: “Pfft, you were full on detective for a moment and you’re back to your ditzzy self.” She laughs.

Paula: “H-Hey...!”

Nishi: “It’s cute on you, Pumpkin~.”

I blush a little.

Kudu: “What can we do now?”

Claire: “You said some Ikeda Corporation, right? That lady’s gotta be associated with them. Doesn’t matter who she is. We find the Corp., raid em, done.”

Gilbur: “If she’s from a Corp., wouldn’t she have given Mao a business card? I do it all the time when I do a collab shoot.”

Claire: “Well, let’s see. If someone looking for information intends to poison their target, wouldn’t they not give a business card?”

Gilbur: “Oh, good point.”

I take a seat to think. Every idea I think of will just lead us to circles. It’s pretty frustrating. I sigh.

Paula: “...I got nothing.”

Kotori suddenly stands up from her chair, knocking over her cup of water.

Kotori: “Well, for starters- oops.” She kneels down to clean up, but continues talking. “We sneak into the Corp. and see what stuff we can get out of it. Mao just looks like a red herring.”

Paula: “Do we even know where that Corp. is?”

Kaitlyn: “....Bruh. It’s an information brokering company. You’ll find it if you search it up, there has to be something.”

There I go again being dumb.

Claire: “Paula, you sound like you haven’t seen the internet before. Well, I mean, have you?”

Paula: “Umm...I use it for memes.” I shyly chuckled. “But um, can one of you guys search up the Corp. for me?”

Claire: “Memes, you say...?” She raises an eyebrow before being dragged away by Kach.

Kach: “That’s enough for today, memelord.” She chuckles, and releases her grip. “I think maybe one of the Asakawas can do that. They’re pretty good at searching up stuff about randoms.”

Teo and Lychee look at each other nervously.

Paula: “Asakawas?”

Lychee: “Um- me. And Onii-chan. Wait, never mind. Forget I said anything.”

Teo: “...Lychee, calm down. It’s not a problem.”

Within seconds Teo moves his attention back to his phone, tapping at a terrifying speed at who knows what.

While he taps away, Nishi has something to share.

Nishi: “I was looking forward to searching this apartment before we found Suwa here.”

Kudu: “Why’s that?”

Nishi: “Digging through dirt about an idol is super exciting! Like their favorite food, places to hang out and untapped secrets.”

Mao: “Nishi, for cod’s sake, Suwa is literally a normal girl. She doesn’t even know about her idol life, well, her fans at least. You could search her whole apartment and you’d find normie stuff.”

Nishi: “Hehe...what about her lingerie preference? I’m sure you’re as curious as I am.”

Gilbur: “Nishi, stop that! Suwa’s right there.”

Kach: “I mean, she’s been asleep for a good deal of time, but hey, you never know...”

Nishi looks at Suwa.

Nishi: “Ooohh, you’re right! Let’s check out the goods while she’s asleep!”

Pott: *Bonks Nishi on the head*

Nishi: “Ow, ok ok! I’ll stop.”

Paula: “Teo, did you find anything yet?”

Teo nods, and keeps tapping violently with the calmest expression.

Teo: “A 10-minute train ride. Not far, at all. Might have to go in unauthorized, and in a small group again.”

Gilbur: “Can I come along? I want to help out more.”

Paula: “Sure, anyone else?”

Lychee slowly raises her hand, and quickly puts it down.

Reylie: “Hm? You have something you wanna say, Lychee?”

Lychee: “No, no. Never mind.”

Paula: “Anyway, we’ll still need you with us, Teo. For lock picking and stuff.”

Teo: “...Right.”

Kach: “If you don’t mind, can I come?” She chuckles nervously, and looks away.

“That is, um, if you don’t it’s fine.”

Paula: “Of course, that makes four. Let’s head out, everyone!”

Tale of the Crane's Garden

The crane lies on the ground not yet clear, in her fantasy flower garden, different blossoms surrounding her, like the different melodies she sings to the passerby.

In a faraway world much like your own, a garden of flowers has spiritual meaning. What it means is different to each person. In one hand is a plum blossom, in the other is fresh willow. Will you take this offering of peace and promise, or will you make it into a symbol of lost memories?

A girl with long hair tied back, in a pink idol dress, lies helplessly on the floor, covered in not-yet healed scars, cheeks flushed, tracing her hand on imaginary piano keys, playing that familiar melody of a crane wife as a boy not looking much older looks at her. Fear, shock, worry, no movement lay in those still blue eyes.

That's up to you to decide. In the end, I am not a person, but rather the princess of cranes, fluttering away with the wind.

That reminds me, what's your name? Care to say?

...Gilbur, is it? That's a lovely name. Sounds like a certain flower I know. I am Near. I am what you wish not to happen. But perhaps, maybe it has already happened. You may do nothing more but prolong this time you have, and by a miracle, create a new world for a friend.

Your name, Gilbur, it sounds like a certain small flower. You are just a little bit shorter than me, so it would fit very well. A certain flower called a goldenrod fits you very well. It's a small, summery golden flower symbolizing an encouraging and careful person. Are you a summer person? How are you, Gilbur? What happened in your life as of right now?

A friend fell ill with a never-ending fever, and that I look just like her... Ehehe. How strange your imagination is. Or perhaps, this is what you wish not to happen to this friend of yours. A girl lying helpless on the floor, having succumbed to her illness, covered in physical and emotional scars, currently having that final grasp of the undying, escaping death with her last wish. Perhaps, Gilbur, this is your worst nightmare as of now, having failed to prevent the death of a friend.

In one hand, a branch covered in plum blossoms. The dawn of spring lies near, a new beginning is blossoming like the flowers on trees, like a crane in flight, like this future that is yet to happen. New promises, new possibilities, the world opens up to you.

In another, the branch of a willow tree. A symbol of wasted time, the death of something close, the end is nigh. Weeping like the tree that looks like it, the world is still recovering from its melancholic melody, like every winter's first snow.

She stands up, and with a swift movement of her finger, the glass garden fully blooms, a crescendo in celerity. Every touch of the garden is silky and smooth, every leaf, petal, and branch feels as natural as can be. Perhaps, in this dreamlike state, there would only be room for tranquility.

Such is not the case, Gilbur. The world waits for a symphony of cranes, it waits for the weaver to fly away, it waits for its princess to create a new world. Such things, only in fairy tales, would never happen if all the foxes waited for their prey. This future, shaped by the people of this world, won't have patience for the slow. When the husband fell ill, his crane wife tirelessly worked for his health, until all her feathers disappeared, until she was no longer human, until she had lost everything.

The crane girl places three flowers in the boy's hair; a plum blossom, a small branch of willow tree, and a goldenrod. May you carry with you these three blessings in the next world, and forevermore.

Adagio, child. Perhaps, in a certain place where the world waits for its first spring of the year, perhaps you will be the crane to herald it.

And the boy woke up, with three flowers in his hand.

A goldenrod, a plum blossom, and a branch of willow.

Chapter 5

Gilbur's perspective

I feel tapping on my shoulder as a voice faintly reaches my hearing.

Paula: “Gilbur, wake up.”

Gilbur: “Huh, hm?” I blink my eyes open. “Oh...was I asleep?” I fall asleep easily on train and car rides.

Teo: “It sounded like you were talking in your sleep.”

Gilbur: “Was I?”

Kach: “We’re at our stop. Let’s get going.”

I pick myself up from my seat and follow them.

Gilbur: “H-Huh?!”

I just noticed I’m carrying three plants in my hand. A goldenrod, a plum blossom and a branch. Wait a minute, wasn’t I dreaming about these things? I start to recall my dream. If I remember correctly about my dream, I was talking to...Suwa? She was explaining to me how I don’t want her to die. I felt scared, but not just scared. I felt like I was going to die too. And um...she said I’m able to stop it somehow with these plants? Whatever the case that was, it felt like my dream was depending on me to cure Suwa.

Paula: “Gilbur, are you crying?”

I felt a tear slipping down my cheek.

Gilbur: “Hm?” I whip off that tear with confusion. “Oh um...I’m fine.”

Paula: “Are you sure?”

Gilbur: “Y-Yeah.”

Why do I feel as if Suwa just died? She’s still fine right now...right...?

Gilbur: “G-Guys?” I grab their attention. “I need to go back to check up on Suwa!”

Teo: “Um, whhhyyyy...?”

Gilbur: “I feel like she needs me right now.”

Kach: “Are you playing Romeo right now?”

Gilbur: “N-No. It’s hard to explain, but I feel like I need to see her as fast as possible. Please go on without me.”

They all look confused at each other.

Paula: “You can go, Gilbur. Knowing you, you follow what you feel.” She smiles.

Gilbur: “Thank you!”

I ran back to the subway station to get the ride back. I have a good feeling these plants will make her feel better.

After 20 minutes, I arrived at Suwa’s apartment. The others look questionable.

Nishi: “What are you doing back?”

Gilbur: “I came back to see Suwa. Is she awake?”

Mao: “Well, yeah, kinda? Just going in and out of sleep. Her fever isn’t getting better.”

I was afraid to hear that. I walk up to the iller Inking on the futon.

Gilbur: “Suwa, I got you something.” I show her the plants, hoping for a positive reaction from her.

Suwa: “Oh...plants? Where’d you get these?”

Gilbur: “I uh...found them.” If I told her the truth, she’d think I’m crazy. “I thought these look nice and cheer you up.”

Suwa: “Thank you. Here, um, let me get something.”

With a step and some stumble, she gets up from bed and walks out of her room. Soon, she comes back with a clear vase filled with water. She puts the plants in the vase.

Suwa: “Here, now, they shall live forever by my side, as a reminder of you all. So, thank you.”

Oddly, I feel very achieved. At least she has the strength to walk around.

Nishi: “Is this one of your ‘Help a lady in need’ senserios, Baby Face?”

Gilbur: “In a way, I guess.”

Pott: *Hugs Gilbur*

That reminds me...

Gilbur: “You know, Suwa. We’re almost alike when it comes to being recognized in the media. I’m the part-time modeler of a fashion brand, Starlight.”

Suwa: “Hm, what’s that? I’ve never heard of it before... Maybe Kazuki has said it once or twice, and I never really paid any attention.”

Oh right, she’s uncultured. Unless...

Gilbur: “Surely you’ve heard of Off the Hook. You can’t go around Inkopolis without seeing their faces at least once.”

Suwa: “Oh, them! I’ve seen them maybe, once or twice, I think. Never paid attention to them though.”

Gilbur: “Haha, that’s good.”

Paula’s perspective

We sneak around inside the Corp.

Paula: “Teo, this office is locked.” I whispered.

Teo lock picks and opens the dark, empty office. We sneak inside.

Kach: “Y’know, I’m juuuuust a bit scared...”

Paula: “We need to keep the lights off or someone would think we’re in here.” I turn the flashlight on my phone. “Teo, are you good at hacking?”

Teo: “...Somewhat?” He nervously looks around.

Paula: “See what you can do on that computer while Kach and I dig through stuff.”

Teo nods, and silently fiddles with a computer on a nearby desk.

Kach: “The nervousness is real. Oh my cod, please, oh dear, I feel like something bad is going to happen.”

Paula: “Don’t worry, if anything happens, I’ll protect you.”

Kach: “Ahaha, thanks.” She keeps digging through files, her shaking not as extreme.

Paula: “Hey, look at this.” I pull out a folder with nothing but pictures. I shine my flashlight on it to take a better look. “Waaait a minute...is this Suwa?”

I give one of them to Kach for her to see.

Kach: “...? Yeah, it is. It looks, maybe a year or so old. Why?”

Paula: “I’m making sure. It looks like she doesn’t notice the camera.” I dig through more. “Uhhh...does Suwa take shoots of herself sleeping?”

Kach: “No, she rarely uses her phone. It’s kind of strange if Suwa has any photos at all...”

I flip through the rest of the photos. Each one is a picture of Suwa. Some make me feel uneasy. I doubt Suwa knows about this. I take the whole folder with me.

Paula: “Idols like her do *not* take creepy photos like these. We’re taking them with us.” I look through more files. “Did you get that computer open yet, Teo?”

Teo: “...That’s a lot of...wow. This company has some vendetta over Suwa. Even before her idol debut, there’s pictures dating from two or three years ago. Creepy.”

Kach and I rushed over to see what he was reading. All the things typed in there aren’t just vendettas, these are threats!

I start rummaging through a drawer to find a hard drive. Luckily there’s one in there. I plug it into the computer.

Paula: “Quick! Download all of that into the drive and bail.”

Teo: “Gotcha.”

Miscellaneous photos of Suwa Terasawa, from her sleeping to eating to doing normal things, along with a couple text files on what she does daily... What kind of person has this much against an ordinary girl? Once it got full, I yanked it out.

Paula: “Ok, let's leave.”

We both sneak out the door. We'll need to take the stairs down to-

Employee: “Excuse me. Who are you three?”

Carp! We've been spotted. Kach panics on the situation.

Kach: “I- uh- we, we're just here for some research...?”

Kach, no!

Employee: “Research...?”

Paula: “Y-Yeah! We're doing a school project on Suwa Terasawa's biography.”

Smooth move, me. A school project on a missing idol, in enemy territory. At least the cover holds some water. Probably.

Employee: “Who let you kids in here?”

Teo: “...we are so screwed.” he mumbles, and quietly hides the drive in his back pocket.

No no, we can still get out of this...!

Paula: “Someone from the front desk told us to wait for someone to interview us about our project. We kept waiting for hours and nobody came.” I looked at Teo. “But then my friend said we should stop waiting and just look for someone ourselves.”

Teo: “Yeah, that.”

Paula: “Oh! You, sir. May we borrow a few minutes of your time?”

Employee: “I’m not allowed to talk about our Idol to people outside our company. Nor anyone in here at that matter.”

Hopeless? No, possibly not, if we can pull something off.

Kach: “Oh- sorry, then we’ll come back another time? Maybe, for another project. Sorry for bothering you, sir.”

Employee: “Hmmm...Alright I’ll let this one slide. Oh, and I suggest you do switch your project out of a missing Idol.”

Kach: “Thank you, sir. We won’t be here any longer now. Come along, both of you.”

She motions for us to follow her outside, and we all walk outside the building, now a ways away from any stress.

Kach: “That was too stressful for me, oh my cod, I’m going to pass out, I was so scared-”

Teo: “Oh, no. You might want to still be scared.”

Paula: “What do you mean?”

Teo: “It’s info brokering. You think they’re not going to have security cameras littered all over the place? When planning a heist, you have to take into account everything that can stop you.”

Uh oh!

Paula: “Then let’s run!!”

Teo: “Shh. Not so loud. Act natural. Once you hear things dying in the back, then you can consider running across the streets.”

Kach: “Teo? I um, really think you should look behind you.”

I look behind Teo to see what it was.

Kach: “I um, don’t think we have time for acting natural. They’ve found out, and I’m kinda scared.”

I’m getting scared too.

Paula: “Can we just run already?”

Teo: “...yeah, good idea.”

We started running for a chance to lose them.

One chase later

We were able to lose them when we hopped on a subway. I start calling Maki’s number and wait for her to pick up.

Maki: “To talk to a customer, please press 1!”

I press 1 and wait for a response.

Paula: “W-Wait a minute. Are you messing with me again?”

Maki: “Maaaaaybe?”

Paula: “I found spot-on evidence of ‘you know what’. Where can we meet?”

Maki: “Oh sh- Hmm, not that alley. Nearly got killed escorting you to Kach’s place. Mm, Suwa’s house? It’s still locked to my knowledge, but-”

Paula: “Perfect! We’ll meet you there! Get here asap.”

I hang up.

Teo: “...Where?”

Paula: “To Suwa’s apartment. We’re taking one step closer to the truth!” I sounded a bit loud. I’m just too excited to solve this case.

We arrived at Suwa’s apartment. I told everyone that the three idols are coming. We’ve been waiting for a while now.

Nishi: “Hey, Suwa. You’re gonna see your friends again.” She smiles.

Suwa: “Is that so...? That’s good.” She chuckles a little before breaking into a fit of coughs and sneezes.

Claire: “But y’know, holding a vendetta against a girl for 2 years with photos and such... Cod, that’s so low.”

Kudu: “They’ll receive judgement when this is over.”

Someone starts knocking on the door.

Gilbur: “Oh, I got it.”

Gilbur helps himself up and opens the door. He comes back with the idols.

Paula: “Glad you can make it.” I give them the evidence. “Here are creepy photos and vendetta documents on Suwa Terasawa. All made by a sketchy Corp. we just raided.”

Kazuki: “Dear cod, we haven’t settled in and it looks like we’re going to file a lawsuit.” She sighs, and snatches all the evidence away. “Hehe... I sure would like to bring all the perpetrators to ruin, y’know.”

Nishi: “Sooo...we did it then? We found Suwa and discovered she was poisoned by a Corp. that hates them.”

Gilbur: “B-But how are we going to cure Suwa?”

Kudu: “Not only that, but we haven’t learned *why* they did it.”

Lychee: “...well, if they- no, never mind. Just a silly idea.”

Paula: “Any idea could be possible. May you share it with us?”

Lychee screeches, and squirms in her seat. It’s not the most deafening scream, but it’s certainly up there.

Lychee: “I- um, well, you see, I, well, ummmmm...”

Kotori: “Lychee, calm. Calm down.”

Nishi: “Spill the beans.”

Lychee: “What if- um, well, what if Suwa isn’t really the target after all?”

Paula: “Huh? What do you mean?”

Lychee: “Well- um, well, here, let’s see, um, like... It might not explain the lengthy amounts of time, but what if all this stuff is something like blackmail? Maybe, maybe the perpetrators predicted this would happen?”

Kaitlyn: “Which would mean we’re all screwed.”

Lychee: “Um, yeah, we are.”

Reylie: “What do you think, Kazuki? Is she making sense?”

Kazuki: “It’s possible, but highly unlikely. You target an idol, what other normie could you possibly target?”

Paula: “If that’s not the case then...mission accomplished?”

Nazuna: “...Don’t think so. Lychee’s theory is completely plausible. Your escape, it seemed... too easy, don’t you think?”

Mao: “To be fair, to be fair- I really think we should figure out the ‘why’ now?”

He has a point. My best guess is the Corp. is jealous of her.

Gilbur: “Did they do it to make some profit out of her or something?”

Claire: “I was born in 2003. I have no idea what that is.”

Nazuna: “Actually, that’s the best theory we have. Good on you.”

Gilbur: “Y-Yeah. Like those pictures you guys found. I work in the modeling industry and I’m sure anyone would buy pictures like those. Possibly fans who’d spend thousands on them.”

Kazuki’s eyes thin into a squint at Gilbur, but she doesn’t say anything and keeps checking the documents.

Kazuki: “Hm. That *would* make sense, especially for a well-known information brokering business. Case solved.”

Gilbur: “D-Did I just figure it out?” He looks surprised.

Mao: “And? If there is no better idea, then you sure as hell did!” He pats Gilbur on the back, although it seemed more like a slap considering how loud it was.

Paula: “We did it. Great job, everyone!” I cheered.

Lychee: “Nicely done!” she shouts in her high-pitched voice.

Reylie nods.

Reylie: “I’ll ask you to exclude our names from all this, Kazuki? Me and the rest of my friends are meant to be something secret.”

Kazuki: “Ehehe. And what if I don’t-”

Maki casually pushes her aside to the ground, knocking the smaller idol down.

Maki: “I’ll make sure of that, don’t you worry Reylie!”

Reylie: “Thank you.” She opens the front door. “I’ll be leaving now and get back to what I was doing before. A pleasure working with you all.” She leaves.

Reylie is busier than I thought. Then again, she is a workaholic.

Mao: “God, that lady needs to chill, just saying.”

Gilbur stretches.

Gilbur: “Welp, just another crazy day.”

Teo: “...Just another?”

Gilbur: “Yeah...I’ve been through a lot ever since I’ve moved to Inkopolis. I wish I can tell ya all of it, but most of it is secret.”

Nishi: “What isn’t secret is we dressed him as a fairy for Splatoween and he got a modeling job out of it.” She laughs.

Gilbur: “H-Hey.”

Kudu: “Can’t forget about that crushing debt he has to pay off from Annalise.” He chuckled a bit.

Paula: “And Roland wanting to fight you a lot.”

Gilbur: “W-What is this?! Why am I being cornered here?”

We laugh.

Claire: “Your lives sound very, very interesting, to say the least. Ours are kinda boring... well, Suwa is an idol, Teo’s gotta be on a couple hit lists, and Kach is literally an RPG goddess. We’re uh, normies.”

Kach: “W-wait, that’s a secret.”

Claire: “Too bad.” She smirks profusely.

I notice Pott looking sleepy. I check the time and it's 9:48pm. Time flies when solving a case.

Paula: "We should be going home now."

Nishi: "Yeah. Bedtime!"

Gilbur gets close to Pott.

Gilbur: "Let's go, Pott."

Pott writes on her whiteboard.

Pott: [Carry me~?]

Gilbur: "Oh...ok then."

Pott turns into octopus form and Gilbur picks her up. Gilbur looks embarrassed to be seen like this.

Kaitlyn: "Oh, young love. You're so cute. If only *someone* were as lucky as you."

Kach: "Kait, I swear to cod, it's going to happen sometime. Maybe never. But sometime."

Kotori: "Wow, we collectively sure like teasing Kach."

Mao: "Duh. She's more accomplished than the rest of us combined minus Suwa and Teo."

Kudu: "Good night everyone. And get well soon, Suwa."

We all depart from the apartment. Another job well done by the New Squidbeak Splatoon.

"...Should we tell them about your high scores at Ancho-V Games?"

"No. That's supposed to be a mystery."

Epilogue

A certain breeze passed over a certain stage. That dwindling summer heat had now faded, and an idol donning a pink dress looked out at the masses who missed her. For once, she became aware of her impact, the songstress' melody reaching far and wide, although she was still new to this thing as a whole. Kazuki Shiraishi's post with Ikeda Corp.'s treachery received thousands of likes, shares, and loads of comments. Not very nice comments, but Suwa wouldn't know. Suwa had never seen social media, ever.

So that certain venue, upon the outdoor stage where four plus one idols stood, shining radiant in the dawn of blue mornings, and in the quiet of cloudless skies and motionless crowds, waiting for the members of Fruits Parlor to arrive on that pastel-colored stage. The four idols of that group, unbeknownst to the industry? Suwa Terasawa, Maki Iwasaki, Kazuki Shiraishi, and Nazuna Hanasato. The audience, plus one. Four idols plus one, their supporters.

And the crowd fell silent. The songs of bluebirds, singing of a mistletoe where souls lie down, started their opening act, and then the cheer of fans, a phoenix's herald of the dusk. Four girls stood upon that shining stage, twinkling in the sun. Two newbies, two veterans. A perfect group.

And in the crowd, were certain figures that they recognized. Two Inklings, three Octolings, who had helped those four idols stand on the stage they are now.

It would be an understatement if idols, especially freelance idols, were able to stand on a stage through their own hard work. Rather, the help of others, the will to change lives and worlds, were the magic of idols.

Tap tap, one and two. A shrill sound from a mic, and a couple people chuckle in the audience. Such is the charm of Suwa Terasawa, the ditz of Fruits Parlor, a charm point that her fans must have missed dearly. "Thank you for coming to our live today. I'm sorry I had to worry you," Suwa's gentle voice reaches through the crowds. "But now, I'm feeling better, and I'm sure you've heard the story, but really, never mind that now!" Her smile radiates that one warm feeling. A feeling the Square had been deprived of for a long time.

"Right then! Music: start!"