



UNEXPECTED WISH



Kenji stirred beneath the thin cotton sheet, the early morning light seeping around the edges of his curtains. His alarm hadn't gone off—again—but the gentle hum of traffic outside his window was just enough to drag him from slumber. He lay still for a moment, blinking at the ceiling as if it might impart some hidden wisdom.

Slowly, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. The floor was cool beneath his bare feet. A dull ache in his shoulders reminded him that “average” didn't begin to cover his athletic aptitude. He was built neither too tall nor too short, and his limbs had the faintest hint of muscle from the occasional game of basketball in gym class. Still, he couldn't help but feel he blended into the backdrop of life at Seishin High.

Pulling on a gray T-shirt and jeans, Kenji padded down the hall. The smell of frying eggs drew him into the kitchen, where his parents were already gathered around the small table. His father, in a crisp dress shirt, scrolled on his phone; his mother, apron tied neatly, stirred a pot of miso soup.

Morning, Kenji, his mother greeted, lifting the lid off the rice cooker. Steam curled into the air, carrying the sweet scent of perfectly steamed grains. **I made your favourite—tamago yaki.**

Kenji offered a tired smile. **Thanks, Mom.** He settled into his chair and reached for a bowl of rice. Across from him, his father glanced up briefly.

Big test in physics today? his father asked.

Kenji paused, chopsticks hovering. **Uh, no, not today. I—I have history.** He managed an awkward shrug. His father nodded, eyes already drifting back to the tiny screen.

Conversation lapsed into comfortable silence: the soft chop of utensils on porcelain, the occasional hiss from the stove. Kenji swallowed a mouthful of egg roll and felt the warmth of home anchor him—however briefly—against another day of invisibility.

Soon enough, the walk to school began. The morning air sharpened his senses: fresh dew on the grass, distant laughter from neighbour's, and the faintest hint of exhaust from passing cars. At the school gates, he paused to straighten his backpack straps. Across the courtyard, Maya Tanaka—sunlight catching the highlights in her dark hair—chatted effortlessly with half a dozen classmates. She laughed, and the entire circle leaned in to hear her.

Kenji's breath caught. Maya—beautiful, radiant Maya—was everything he was not. Popular, confident, and kind to everyone around her. He pressed his lips together, wishing for the courage to approach her, even just once.

He veered toward the classroom, head down, hoping to slip in unnoticed. But fate had other plans.

Hey, Kenji!

A hard shove sent him staggering against the locker row. Ryu Nakamura stood there, arms crossed, face set in a smirk that had become all too familiar. Built like a linebacker and with grades to match his ego, Ryu delighted in making Kenji's life miserable.

What's wrong, shrimp? You lost your map to the real world? Ryu laughed as Kenji staggered upright. He dusted imaginary lint from his shirt. **Don't choke on your own spit this time.**

A couple of bystanders snickered; Kenji's cheeks burned. He opened his mouth to retort, but no words came. Instead, he spun on his heel and fled down the hallway, Ryu's laughter echoing behind him.

By the time he slipped into Class 2-B, his heart pounded but his face was calm. He sank into his usual seat by the window—third row, far enough back to avoid attention, close enough to gaze at Maya. Today, she was passing out bookmarks she'd made for the school reading festival. Kenji watched as each of her friends accepted one with delighted exclamations; when their turns came, Maya's eyes lifted, and for a moment, they met his. He felt a flutter in his chest—she didn't look away, but a wave of warmth rushed through him before she turned back to the group.

Lessons droned on: arithmetic proofs, grammar drills, and then the quiet tick of the clock hands as the bell signalled lunch. Still, Kenji sat, transfixed by the thought of Maya's soft smile.

That evening, the same routine repeated itself: dinner, small talk, chores. But tonight, Kenji's mind wandered in circles long after he'd finished his bowl of rice. He scrubbed dishes until his fingers pruned, paced the hallway until his father called him back, and tried to lose himself in textbook pages that offered no solace.

Finally, kneeling beside his bed in the dim glow of the bedside lamp, he allowed his thoughts to slow. He recalled Maya's laughter, the warmth of her glance, and the way everyone seemed to hang on her every word. He imagined people greeting him in the hall, seeking his company, valuing his presence as Maya's friends valued hers. A quiet ache formed in his chest.

Lying back on his pillow, Kenji stared into the darkness. **I wish... I wish I could be someone people cared about,** he whispered. **"I wish my voice mattered... I wish someone looked at me the way they look at her.**

His eyes drifted shut, the echo of his own words the last thing he heard.

Next Morning

Kenji opened his eyes in his bed. His body felt... different. He lifted an arm, noticing how the sleeve clung to a slender curve at his side. Heart thudding, he pushed himself up on one elbow and fumbled for the bedside mirror.

The reflection that greeted him was shock itself: soft, delicate features framed by hair that now brushed his shoulders in gentle waves. His cheeks were high and smooth; his lips fuller. Confusion swirled as he craned his neck to see his chest—two small, unmistakable mounds pressing against the thin fabric of his shirt.

Panic rose in his throat. **What... what happened to me?** His voice was softer, higher, and carried a tremor he didn't recognize.



Kenji bolted upright in bed, heart hammering. His lungs burned as he tried to draw a steady breath, but the sound that tore from his throat was nothing like his own voice.

Aah! No—what’s happening?!

He scrambled to his feet, knocking the lamp over as he spun toward the small standing mirror by the dresser. His fingers fumbled at the sleeve of the green hoodie—loose now, draping oddly over a body that felt too soft, too unfamiliar. He caught sight of himself and froze.

Long, light-pink hair tumbled in gentle waves past his shoulders, brushing the small of his back. His eyes, wide with panic, stared out from a face that was delicate, almost ethereal. Beneath the thin fabric of the hoodie, two unmistakable mounds strained against the cloth.

No... no, this can’t be real!

His scream shattered the morning quiet. A moment later, the door flew open.

Kenji?!

His mother stood in the doorway—her hair pulled back in a loose bun, apron still tied over her sweatpants. But the voice that answered her was light, breathy, utterly alien.

Mother (voice trembling): Was that... was that a girl’s voice? Who—who are you? Where’s my son?

Kenji pressed one hand to his mouth, fighting for words. Everything in him ached to shout, but the sound that came out was softer, higher:

Kenji: M-Mom... it’s... it’s me. Kenji.

Her eyes narrowed. She took a tentative step into the room, gaze flicking from his hair to his chest and back again.

Mother: This isn’t funny. Show me my boy.

He swallowed. Tongue thick in his mouth, he reached inside himself for something only they shared—a memory she would never mistake.

Kenji: Remember the summer festival two years ago? I tripped at the fireworks stand, and you scooped me into your arms, saying I was too clumsy to ever catch up to you...

His mother’s breath caught. A single tear slid down her cheek.

Mother: Kenji?

He stepped forward, voice gaining strength.

Kenji: It’s me, Mom. I went to sleep last night... and when I woke up, I—look.

She reached out, fingers trembling, to brush a lock of pink hair behind his ear.

Mother : How is this possible? Why do you look like... like a girl? Is it a wig?

Her words stumbled into disbelief.

Kenji: No... it's me. I swear.

A second knock at the door rattled the frame. His father's voice called from the hallway:

Father: What's all the shouting?

Mother turned, calling back, You need to see this honey!

Moments later, his father stepped inside, coffee mug in hand, eyebrows drawn tight. He blinked at Kenji's reflection, then at Kenji himself.

Father: Kenji? But... how—why—?

Kenji ran a shaky hand through his hair, hoodie sleeves slipping down to reveal the curve of his shoulder. He could feel tears pricking at the corners of his eyes.

Kenji: I don't know, Dad. I just... I fell asleep last night the same as always. And when I opened my eyes this morning...

He let his voice trail off, uncertain how to describe the impossible. His parents exchanged a glance heavy with shock and concern.

—

A little later, the three of them sat in the narrow hallway just outside Kenji's room. His mother clutched his hand; his father rubbed his jaw, staring at the wall as if the answer might be scrawled there.

Father: We believe you, son. But we need to figure out how this happened—and how to change it back.

Kenji swallowed hard, voice small but determined.

Kenji: I don't know if it's reversible. All I remember is wishing... I wished someone would care about me, that people would notice me... and then I went to sleep.

Silence settled around them, broken only by the distant tick of a clock. Outside, the morning sun climbed higher, oblivious to the life-shattering mystery unfolding at Seishin High's unlikeliest hero.

They sat there together, the three of them bound by a secret none could explain, and yet resolved—somehow—to face it as a family.

One week later, the sun rose on the same quiet household, but nothing about Kenji's reflection had changed. Each morning, he slid from beneath the covers, heart sinking as he remembered: still pink hair, still soft curves, still the same impossible body he'd awoken in.

That morning, he sat at the kitchen table in his mother's gentle arms—learning, of all things, how to navigate this body's most basic needs. His mother demonstrated with practiced patience: how to sit, how to shift weight, how to use the toilet discreetly. Kenji flushed twice before he felt he'd mastered it, cheeks burning as his father cleared his throat at the doorway.

Father (setting down a cup of green tea): Kenji, you can't stay here forever. I know this is... overwhelming. But at some point, you have to face the world.

Kenji pressed his palms to his cheeks. **Face the world? Dad, I—do you understand what this is? I'm—**" His voice caught. **"I'm a girl now. There is no Kenji anymore. Who can explain this? Everyone will think we've lost our minds.**

His mother slid into the seat beside him, folding him into a warm embrace.

Mother (softly): We love you, Kenji—no matter what form you take. But hiding won't solve anything. The neighbours will wonder where you are. Your aunts and uncles, your cousins... school—everyone will ask.

He looked up, eyes brimming. **I can't go back to school as 'Kenji.' I can't walk the halls pretending nothing happened.**

His father leaned forward, earnest.

Father: What if we told them you hadn't vanished, but changed schools? You'd be your own person—Kenji's sister. A transfer student. It's not perfect, but it's honest enough, and you'd be able to keep your life moving.

Kenji frowned, thinking of Maya, of Ryu, of every classmate who'd never noticed him until now. **You really think the principal would go for that? He'd understand?**

His mother nodded.

Mother: I'll explain everything to him. I'll show him the medical reports—or lack thereof. I'll tell him we'll do whatever it takes: uniforms, records, everything.

His father gave his shoulder a firm squeeze.

Father: "You didn't have many friends at school, right? It'll be easier for you to start fresh. No one will wonder why your brother went abroad if we tell them that's exactly what happened."

Kenji sat back, silence settling around them like a soft blanket. He closed his eyes, imagining whispers in the hallway, curious glances, smiles from classmates. It would be terrifying—but it was also a chance to be seen.

When he opened his eyes, his voice was quiet but determined. **All right**, he said, voice steadier than he felt. **Fine. I'll do it. I'll be... her. I'll start as My.... sister.**

His mother exhaled, relief flooding her features. His father nodded, pride shining in his eyes.

And so, with hearts bound by love and worry, they set their plan in motion—Kenji's new life waiting just beyond the front door.

The living room was quiet, filled only with the soft ticking of the wall clock and the hum of afternoon sunlight through the curtains. Kenji sat cross-legged on the couch, his green hoodie now dwarfed by his changed frame. His mother paced in front of him, arms folded, deep in thought.

Mother: We still haven't settled on a name.

Kenji (muttering): Can't I just be... Kenji?

His father raised an eyebrow from the kitchen table. And how exactly do we explain a girl named Kenji Takahashi? You need a name that fits.

His mother chuckled. Remember? Back before you were born, your father and I had picked a name in case we had a daughter...

Kenji looked up, wary. What name...?

Mother (smiling softly): Shizuka. We thought it was elegant... gentle. Peaceful.

Kenji cringed, pulling the hoodie over his head. Shizuka? Seriously...? That's so girly.

Father (smirking): You are a girl now.

Kenji: "Don't remind me..."

His mother's smile softened. "You might not like it now, but give it time. It's beautiful—just like you."

Kenji groaned, burying his face in a cushion.

The following week was tense. His father had arranged a private meeting with the school principal, a stern but fair man named Mr. Arata.

Inside the office, Kenji sat nervously in a hoodie and jeans, his long pink hair tied back. His father did most of the explaining—carefully avoiding talk of "magic" or "wishes"—describing it as a rare and inexplicable medical event. Kenji's discomfort, his shifting voice, and the undeniable resemblance to his old self gave the story credibility.

The discussion was long. The principal was skeptical, suspicious even. But after showing pictures, memories, and ID cards, Mr. Arata finally leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

Principal Arata: This is unprecedented... but I've seen stranger things in my years. Very well. Kenji will be listed as... Shizuka Takahashi, a transfer student. But this cannot become gossip. Understood?

Kenji (nodding): Understood...

Eight days later, Kenji stood stiffly in front of the bedroom mirror, arms crossed over his chest. His mother was crouched behind him, tying a neat ribbon in his long, brushed hair.

Kenji (grumbling): Why can't I just wear pants? Or the boys' uniform?

Mother: Because you're going to be Shizuka Takahashi now. And Shizuka wears what the other girls wear.

He looked down in misery at the outfit laid out on the bed: a freshly ironed school uniform—a white blouse with a soft blue bow, a navy blazer with the school emblem, and a pleated skirt that felt criminally short.

Kenji: Why is the skirt so short...?

Mother: That's just the standard. You'll get used to it.

With an exaggerated sigh, Kenji reluctantly dressed. The blouse clung in strange places, the skirt felt drafty, and the blazer felt far too snug.

As he sat on the edge of the bed, his mother stood in front of him, arms folded.

Mother: Let's do a little test.

Kenji: Test?

She cleared her throat dramatically.

Mother: Shizuka!

He blinked. Then blinked again.

Mother (stern): See? Too slow. You have to feel it. It has to be instinct, or people will get suspicious.

Kenji (sighing): Fine... one more time.

Mother: Shizuka!

This time he flinched slightly and turned.

Kenji: ...Yeah?

Mother (smiling proudly): Better.

An hour later, Kenji stood at the front door, bag slung over his shoulder, dressed and presentable—but his knees felt like jelly.

His father gave him a pat on the back.

Father: You're ready, Shizuka. Just... keep your head high. You've got this.

Kenji muttered under his breath. Doesn't make the skirt longer...

They pulled up to the school gates just as the bell rang for homeroom. Students streamed past, chatting and laughing, none of them noticing the quiet girl stepping out of the car.

Father (smiling): All the best, Kenji... or should I say, Shizuka Takahashi.

Kenji clutched the strap of his bag tightly, heart thundering as he turned toward the building.

One last glance at the mirror-like window confirmed it: no trace of the boy remained.

And with a breath, he took his first steps—not as Kenji the unnoticed...

...but as Shizuka Takahashi, the girl no one had seen coming.

The hallway echoed with the familiar shuffle of feet and morning chatter, but everything felt... alien now. Kenji—no, Shizuka—walked stiffly beside the principal, heart pounding in her chest like a war drum. Her pleated skirt brushed her thighs with every step, and the blazer clung to her more delicate frame.

Heads turned. Boys' eyes lingered longer than they should have. Girls whispered.

Boy (whispering): Whoa... who's she?

Another: She's hot... is she new?

Girl (whispering): She kinda looks familiar...

Shizuka kept her gaze locked on the floor, refusing to meet their stares.

The principal, Mr. Arata, walked ahead, hands behind his back.

Principal Arata (casually): Quite the attention already, huh? You'll have to get used to that, Shizuka.

She didn't answer.

Principal Arata: By the way... would you prefer I call you Kenji in private? Or stick with Shizuka?

Shizuka (quietly): ...Just Shizuka is fine. I... need to get used to it.

The principal gave a small nod. Very well.

They stopped at the door to Class 2-B. That same classroom. The same one where she once sat in the far back, quietly watching Maya from a distance.

Now she was stepping inside as someone entirely new.

The classroom buzzed with noise—conversations, laughter, the screech of chair legs against the floor. But all of it halted the moment the door slid open.

All eyes turned.

Maya looked up from her seat near the window, blinking in curiosity. Ryu sat slouched near the back, arms crossed, his sharp eyes squinting at the new arrival.

Principal Arata (clearing his throat): Settle down, everyone.

The murmurs quieted.

Principal Arata: Today, I have an announcement. As you all know, your classmate Kenji Takahashi has left Japan to study abroad for a while.

The students nodded vaguely, a few barely remembering Kenji at all.

Principal Arata: In his place, we are joined by someone new. Please welcome his sister, who will be studying with you from now on. He stepped aside, gesturing to Shizuka.

Every gaze in the room locked onto her.

Principal Arata: Girls, please help her feel at home. Boys—be respectful.

Shizuka stepped forward, forcing herself to breathe. Her voice trembled slightly, high and soft—so unfamiliar to her own ears.

Shizuka: U-Um... Hello everyone... I-I'm Shizuka Takahashi. Your new classmate. Umm... Please treat me kindly and I hope we... become good friends.

The class clapped politely. Some of the boys a little too enthusiastically.

Principal Arata (nodding): Shizuka, you may take your seat.

Shizuka's eyes scanned the room in a panic—where was she supposed to go?

Then, from the third row, a girl waved cheerfully.

Miko (smiling): Over here! You can sit next to me!

Shizuka blinked. Miko?

She knew her. A bubbly, friendly girl who always smiled at everyone, though Kenji had never spoken to her directly.

Slowly, Shizuka walked over and took the empty seat beside her. Her skirt flattened awkwardly as she sat, still unused to the sensation.

Miko (whispering with a grin): Nice to meet you, Shizuka~ I'm Miko! If you need anything, just ask, okay?

Shizuka (nodding, whispering): ... Thanks.

The classroom settled into its routine. But Shizuka's mind was anything but calm. She could still feel the eyes on her—especially Maya's.

She was here. In the same seat. In the same room.

But everything had changed.



CREAM

事ど二莞さる幸わんでなむん

The bell rang for lunch, and the classroom emptied in a tide of chatter. Shizuka slung her bag over one shoulder and followed Miko down the corridor, her heart still fluttering from the morning's introductions.

They reached the canteen, where the scent of curry rice and fresh miso soup hung in the air. Miko's eyes lit up as she pointed.

Miko: You have to try the seaweed and egg rice bowl—it's my favorite! And if you like something sweeter, their azuki bean pastries are amazing.

Shizuka smiled, grateful for the simple enthusiasm. **Okay... I'll try the seaweed bowl.**

They moved to the serving line, trays clattering. Miko chatted about club activities—volleyball practice, upcoming cultural festival meetings—while Shizuka nodded, trying to memorize every tip.

Just then, a tall figure stepped beside them, blocking Miko's path. Shizuka looked up and froze.

Ryu.

He surveyed her from head to toe, brow arching in interest.

Ryu (slow drawl): So... you're Kenji's sister. I'm surprised he never mentioned you.

His eyes flicked over the pink waves of her hair, the neat uniform, the way her shoulders tensed.

Ryu: Well, I guess I know why he kept quiet.

Shizuka's pulse jumped. Anger flared beneath her skin.

Shizuka (bristling): You're not my—I mean, Kenji's friend.

She steeled herself. **He told me how you used to bully him.**

Ryu chuckled, leaning closer as if sharing a secret.

Ryu: Whoa, slow down, cutie. Just because I bullied him doesn't mean you're my enemy." He held up his hands defensively. "I bully the weak so they can learn to be strong. Nothing personal.

Miko stepped between them, arms crossed.

Miko (icy smile): Listen, Ryu, Shizuka is my friend now. So back off and find someone else to flirt with.

Ryu threw up his hands theatrically.

Ryu: Fine, fine. But hey, Takahashi—if you ever want to hang out, you know where to find me. He winked, then sauntered away.

Miko watched him go, then turned to Shizuka.

Miko (rolling her eyes): Ugh, what a creep. You should stay away from guys like that—they're a headache.

Shizuka exhaled, running a hand through her hair.

Shizuka (dry laugh): Believe me, Miko, I know this more than you.

Miko's expression softened, and she patted Shizuka's shoulder.

Miko: Come on, let's get our trays and find a table before the crowd arrives.

As they wove through the bustling canteen, Shizuka realized: this life might be full of surprises, but with friends like Miko by her side, she just might survive it after all.

The lunch trays clattered onto the table as Shizuka and Miko sat down on a pair of stools by the window. Steam curled from the seaweed-and-egg rice bowl, but Shizuka barely tasted anything. Her back was stiff, and she kept shifting side to side, trying to find a position that didn't feel too... revealing.

Miko: Uh, Shizuka—be careful how you sit. Someone might catch a peek of your panties.

Shizuka's cheeks flamed. Internally, she cringed at how every movement felt fraught with danger now. *I even have to think about how I sit*, she thought, crossing and uncrossing her legs until every muscle in her thighs ached.

As she finally settled, her gaze drifted across the crowded canteen—and froze. There, striding between tables with effortless grace, was Maya. Sunlight glinted off Maya's dark hair as she carried her own tray, laughing at something her friends had said. Every head in the room seemed to follow her.

Miko (nudging Shizuka): Hey, you staring at Ms. Popular over there?

Shizuka (blushing, fumbling): “Uh—no, I was just thinking... she's so beautiful.”

Miko beamed. **I know, right? I talk to her sometimes—she's actually super nice. You wanna say hi?**

Before Shizuka could muster a reply, Miko stood and waved enthusiastically.

Miko (calling): Hey! Maya! Come here a sec!

Maya paused, her friends trailing behind, and walked over with a curious smile. Shizuka's heart pounded so loudly she was sure the entire table could hear it.

Miko (gesturing): I want you to meet my friend—Shizuka, the new transfer student.

Shizuka's throat closed up. She opened her mouth, but the only sound was a tiny squeak.

Maya (tilting her head): Really? Hi, Shizuka.” She glanced at the uniform, then offered a warm smile. **“Nice to meet you.**

Shizuka swallowed, voice trembling. **Th-thank you. Uhh... you're... really pretty.**

Maya laughed, a soft, melodic sound Shizuka could have listened to all afternoon. **Thank you! You're pretty too—and your hair! Is that naturally pink?**

Shizuka (nodding): Y-yeah.

Maya's eyes shone with genuine interest. **Wow, it's so cool. And I heard in class that you're Kenji's sister? Why did he decide to go abroad?**

Shizuka hesitated, then launched into the sparse explanation: **Um... he had a scholarship offer? He's always been quiet—maybe he wanted a fresh start.**

Maya nodded thoughtfully. **I get it. Sometimes change is good.**

Miko leaned in, grinning. **So, Maya, will you join us for lunch?**

Maya glanced at her watch. **I'd love to, but practice for the cheerleading team starts in ten minutes. Sorry!**

She waved to Miko and Shizuka, then turned and strode away, heels clicking.

Shizuka watched until Maya disappeared into the sea of students. A flush of triumph warmed her cheeks. *I actually talked to her... she's so kind*, she thought, heart fluttering as though it might take flight.

Miko (snapping her fingers): Earth to Shizuka—are you even listening?

Shizuka blinked, realizing she'd been staring off.

Miko (laughing): “Hurry up and eat. Break's almost over!”

Shizuka : Right... sorry.

She picked up her chopsticks and took a bite, the seaweed bowl suddenly tasting better than anything she'd ever eaten. Outside the window, the school bell began to chime—calling her back to class, back into a life that was as strange as it was new. And despite the awkwardness, Shizuka felt something she'd never felt as Kenji: anticipation.

The final bell rang like a starting pistol, and students poured from the building in a cheerful rush. Shizuka and Miko stepped out into the late-afternoon sun as the air cooled.

Miko (grinning): Hey, you wanna walk home together?

Shizuka tucked a loose strand of pink hair behind her ear. **Sure.**

They threaded through the crowds, shoulders brushing occasionally. The quiet of the street felt comforting after the bustle of the school corridors.

Miko (playful): So... Shizuka, do you have any boyfriend?

Shizuka stiffened, cheeks coloring. Her mind raced: *A boy? No... I—* She forced a laugh. **No, I don't have anyone.**

Kenji inside his mind, The thought of being with a guy... makes me want to puke, he thought, pressing her lips together.

Miko's eyes widened. **Really? I would've pegged you as the type who'd have admirers lined up!**

Shizuka shook her head, shrugging beneath her blazer. **Stop saying these weird things....**

Miko nodded, then paused, peering curiously at Shizuka's profile. **By the way, how was your brother? I never talked to him—he always kept to himself, right?**

Kenji smiled softly, Happy that atleast miko used to notice him.

He's... nice. He's really good once you get to know him. I wish you two had met." Her voice caught. **But now he's abroad, so... not possible I guess haha..**

Miko looped an arm through hers. **Well, thanks to him, I got a pretty cute friend, right?**

Kenji embarrassed being called pretty. a genuine, light sound. **You're too much, Miko.**

They continued down the quiet residential street, the late sun painting gold on the pavement. Around them, families tended their gardens and neighbors called greetings.

When Kenji arrived home, the front door was already open. The comforting scent of simmering broth and sautéed vegetables drifted down the hall.

Mother (calling from the kitchen): Shizuka! How was your day?

Shizuka set her bag by the genkan and slipped off her loafers, padding barefoot on the polished wood floor. **It was... good, Mom. No one got suspicious—they all believe I'm Kenji's sister.**

She paused in the doorway of the kitchen, eyes meeting her mother's warm gaze. **My own sister,** she added, voice soft.

Her mother wiped her hands on her apron and stepped forward, pulling Shizuka into a quick hug. **That's wonderful to hear. I'm so proud of you. Now go freshen up and be ready for lunch.**

Shizuka nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. As she headed toward her room, the muffled laughter of her friends and family felt like the first true comfort she'd known since waking as someone else.

Kenji stepped into the bathroom and flicked on the overhead light. Warm steam curled from the porcelain sink, carrying the faint scent of lavender soap. He hesitated at the edge of the tiled floor, fingertips brushing against the cool metal of the faucet before he turned it on. Water gushed forth, and he splashed his face, every droplet shocking against skin that now felt impossibly sensitive.

He closed his eyes and let the water rinse away the day's grime, though he felt... changed. The simple act of reaching forward to scrub a strand of hair from his cheek sent shivers along his spine. His limbs felt foreign—softer, lighter—and it took an effort of will to remind himself that beneath all this newness, he was still Kenji.

After toweling off, he unbuttoned the school blouse and slipped out of the skirt and blazer, folding them neatly on the counter. He rinsed quickly under the showerhead, the warm spray clinging to his new curves. Every movement—raising his arm to wash under his armpit, turning toweling off his shoulders—felt fraught with self-consciousness. He concentrated on the water's warmth to distract from the way his fingertips traced contours he'd never had before.

Out of the shower, he wrapped the towel around his waist and let his hair drip dry. Once dressed in his usual hoodie and baggy sweatpants, he felt more like himself—he could almost believe he was Kenji again. He ran a hand through his damp hair and exhaled.

Downstairs, the smell of luncheon greeted him: simmered pork and vegetables in a sweet soy broth, rice steaming in a covered bowl. Kenji slipped into his seat at the table, pulling the hood of his sweater over his head.

His mother ladled soup into his bowl and set it before him with a gentle smile.

Mother: Kenji—I mean, Shizuka—don't you think it's time you started wearing more feminine clothes? Hoodies and trousers aren't really... suited to you anymore.

He froze, spoon halfway to his lips. Don't call me Shizuka, he thought. He set down the **spoon.**

Shizuka: What, you want me to wear a skirt at home now, too?

His mother tilted her head, concern in her eyes.

Mother: Not necessarily a skirt all the time, but you should at least wear a proper bra. It'll be more comfortable, and once... well, once they fill out more you might get back pain without support.

He splashed soup into his mouth to hide the way his heart pounded.

Shizuka: I'm not wearing a bra. In these clothes, I feel more like me. If I put on a bra, that feeling disappears.

His mother set down her chopsticks firmly.

Mother: Enough, Kenji. You *are* going to wear a bra. This Sunday we're going shopping—you'll get measured and pick out the right size. And while we're at it, we'll get you some dresses. You can't keep living in hoodies and sweatpants.

He stared at his bowl, heat flaring across his cheeks. The thought of dresses made his stomach twist.

Shizuka (quietly): But... Mom...

She leaned forward, voice soft but unwavering.

Mother: No arguments. I want you to feel comfortable in your own body, and that means the right clothes and undergarments. Now go to your room and start studying. You have exams coming up.

Kenji nodded, swallowing the rest of the soup in one hurried gulp. He rose and slid his chair back, the scrape of wood on floor echoing in the quiet kitchen.

As he climbed the stairs, his hoodie felt heavier than ever. In his room, he dropped his tray on the desk and sank into the chair, head spinning with fabric measurements and bra fittings. He stared at the open textbook—history notes he'd barely glanced at this morning—but his mind rebelled against the words.

He closed his eyes and took a slow breath.

With a reluctant sigh, he flipped to the next page and began to read, determined to hold onto the one thing he could control: his own thoughts, no matter how much his body or clothes might change.

TO BE CONTINUED

NEXT CHAPTER



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