

A Rival Appears!

"Hey, wasn't that Ryuichi down there having lunch?"

I looked out of the window.

Izumi turned as well.

"Oh, oh, where, where?"

"Look."

Izumi squinted, searching for his face in the crowd outside.

"I can't see him anywhere."

"Shinju, do you know if he's out there with someone? You look all pissed off."

"Nah, nothing like that. Just curious."

I decided to take a look outside. Back in the ocean world, I had really good eyesight.

And just like that.

I made a super shocked face, just like Izumi's.

"No way...it can't be...I didn't know Ryouichi would be out there...who is that he's with?"

"I don't remember ever seeing her before...could it be, all this time, he's had someone he likes after all? I mean look, he's staring her right in the eyes!"

"R-really?"

I.

I thought I was the only one who looked into Ryouichi's eyes like that.

I was shocked..

I see.

I guess I really do like Ryouichi.

That must be why I'm feeling so upset.

But.

For the sake of the "Mermaid's Legend", I've got to do my best.

"Hey, who is he having lunch with?"

"I'm not sure - I couldn't get a good look at her face."

Once again.

Outside of the window.

On the lawn.

Staring at him.

Ryuichi ♡

He really was eating lunch on the lawn.

Without thinking, I sprang out the window and ran to him.

“Ryuuchiiiiiiii ~”

I.

I called out his name, shouting and waving my hands.

Glancing up from his lunch, Ryuichi noticed me coming towards him and met my gaze.

He was facing me now.

Or so you could say.

Actually, he seemed to be disregarding me completely.

I'd never been ignored by him before...

But.

So long as I can become the girl Ryouichi likes, I don't mind.

And I know he will.

Huh?

Suddenly, I noticed a girl sitting next to Ryouichi.

I couldn't see her from where I was before, because she was slightly behind him.

She seems quiet and sweet, and she's cute too.

But.

Hold up.

Stop.

Huh?

Was that just my imagination?

The girl sitting next to Ryuichi.

I could have sworn she was there just a moment ago.

And she was staring back at me...

Hmmm.

I don't think I was just imagining it.

She was staring at me.

Hmm.

But it wasn't a regular stare.

She was smiling.

A smile like she had just beaten me at something.

She had long straight black hair.

And dark eyes.

As deep as the ocean.

My grandma would have said that she was a dangerous sort of person.

Like the depths of the ocean.

I took a deep breath.

I wonder,

Why that girl was smiling at me like that.

Like she had won something.

Ahh!

She almost seemed like she was leaning up against Ryuichi while he spoke.

I'll try to see her around again.

Not exactly "try" - I'll definitely see that girl again!

A rival.

In my head.

Those five letters flashed before my eyes.

"Hey, did you see that girl? I heard she's a transfer student."

"Oh Harumi-chan, really?"

"I haven't seen her yet myself, but that's what I heard."

"I bet she'll end up in Ryuichi's class."

"What?! The same class as Ryuichi?!"

Suddenly, I had a bad feeling.

"I saw her lunch box, and it was amazing!"

Haruma suddenly raised her voice.

Maybe that's what the girl's victory while was over - and here I had forgotten all about lunch.

Seriously.

So I took a peek.

It was ultra-luxurious.

Was it this heavy before?

There is tons of food packed in here.

Ryuichi was eating his like it was really delicious.

But...

I don't really cook.

I wonder if I could even do it.

But.

I won't let this get me down.

I've got to succeed because of the "Mermaid's Legend".

"I won't give up. I'll have to learn how to make lunches."

I curled my hand into a fist.

I'll do my best!

I've gotta do my best...

"Shinju, you're strong."

"Huh?"

"You look really positive all of a sudden."

Izumi turned her gloomy face towards me.

"It's only because I have a mission."

"A mission?"

"Oh, um, it's nothing."



It's no good. It's no good.

Without thinking, I almost told someone all about the "Mermaid's Legend".

Ahh.

That's right.

That's a good idea.

Later that day, after school -

"Hey Izumi. Will you please do something for me? ♡"

I held out my hands in front of me like I was praying.

"Do something for you?"

"I want you to teach me how to make a lunch for Ryouichi."

And I bowed.

I lowered my head.

"O-okay. I'll show you how I always make mine."

And Izumi gave a little smile.

Izumi, you're so nice. ♡

That's reassuring.

"Do you want to come over to my house today?"

"Huh, to your house, Shinju?!"

"Yeah! Actually, I'm kind of freeloading over at the Kaidou's house."

"What the heck!?"

"It's fine, it's fine - come on."

I was basically forcing her to come.

Maybe we'd run into the girl who was sitting near Ryouichi while we're there.

And it'll all go smoothly.

And Ryouichi will fall in love with me.

And then, of course, he'd want to kiss me.

But for the time being, I'll settle for a *vow of love*.

Until then, I'll just remain cheerful and hopeful.

Then, I'll strike when the iron is hot!

My bag and Izumi's bag.

Were swaying back and forth behind us as we walked home.

## MERMAID PANIC ①

"Shinju?"

"Let's go, Izumi ♡"

As I said it, Izumi's bag stopped swaying.

I had been walking along pretty briskly.

"Wait a minute, Shinju."

Izumi was almost having to chase me to keep up.

"Hurry up, Izumi, come on, come onnn~ AHHH!!!"

Thud.

"Owwwiiiiieeee"

Dang, that hurts.

I tripped on a rock.

And banged my knee pretty bad.

I crossed my legs and held my knee tenderly while rocking back and forth.

On top of that.

Worse, everything from in my backpack spilled all down the stairs to my house.

And worse.

I had tripped Izumi too, and all her stuff was spilled all over too.

"I'm sorry, Izumi."

"It's okay, I'm fine, are you alright?"

Izumi is so nice.

"I didn't expect that, Shinju, are you really okay?"

"Yeah, I should have practiced more before zooming off like that."

"Practiced more?"

Izumi repeated back what I said to her.

Oh yeah.

It does sound a bit strange to say that you need practice running.

"Oh uh, haha, it's nothing, really! Hahahahaha!"

I didn't feel the least bit exhausted at least.

"I- I see. Izumi, this may sound bad, but the truth is I'm clumsy and fall down all the time. Could you help me? I seem to always trip on stairs."

"It's fine, I'll go."

"Izumi."

"But, Shinju, you hurt your knee when you fell down didn't you? It's all red."

"Izumi..."

Izumi was walking around lightly, step step step, gingerly going down the stairs.

Izumi is really, really, really a good person.

If I could fulfill the "Mermaid's Legend" with another girl, then Izumi would definitely be the one I'd pick.

Awwwww.

Izumi is so nice, it's really made an impression on me.

"Yes."

Before my eyes.

Izumi bent over and picked up my notebook and ruler, which were scattered down the stairs.

"Thank you very much."

She's a really kind person.

I took back my notebook and ruler, and was so moved by Izumi's kindness.

!

Something fell out of my notebook.

A photo?

I picked it up, and it was definitely a photograph.

A photo of Ryuichi.

But how?

How did a photo of Ryuichi find its way in there?

Man, I want to keep this. ♡

I'm lucky I'm in good company when I found this.

Izumi was busy looking in her own notebook.

Izumi seemed like she was waiting for something.

But why?

In an instant, I felt a pang of doubt.

There wasn't a clear answer.

I don't know much because this is my first experience with love.

I love Ryuichi, so I want to keep his photo.

But Izumi likes Ryuichi too...

The person Izumi loves is Ryuichi.

I don't know why I wasn't able to admit that earlier.

But,

Izumi's love is unrequited. And she's a family-oriented girl, exactly the kind he said he'd like.

Maybe Ryuichi doesn't really want that.

But that's what Ryuichi said when we talked about it.

Her face looked so sad and disappointed when talking about her unrequited love.

But.

But.

There's nothing I can say to help exactly...

I wish there was something I could say to help with her liking Ryuichi so much.

But...

I wonder if I'm in the same boat, in love with Ryuichi, carrying his photo around with me.

I can't confess my feelings to anyone, and I can't give up.

I can't confess anything to anyone until this is all over, I think.

And because I can't confess anything, there's no one who can help me.

This really must be love.