
NOVEL
4
Written by
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Too
Many
Losing
Heroines!

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Too Many Losing Heroines!


“We’ve got some time left, so how about a quick song?”
SONG-SING ONION RING


KEEP OUT
"What?! The president?! A man?!"
GENDER-BENT RPF?


“Shikiya...”
There, she saw the past.
A figure of what once was.

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Prelude to Sixteen

EPILOGUE
Secrets









Too Many LOSING Heroines!

Too Many Losing Heroines!

NOVEL 4

WRITTEN BY
Takibi Amamori

ILLUSTRATED BY
Imigimuru

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MAKE HEROINE GA OSUGIRU! Vol. 4
by Takibi AMAMORI
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CHARACTERS

Nukumizu Kazuhiko
First-year.
Proud loner.
Lit club president.

Yanami Anna
First-year.
Happy and hungry.

Komari Chika
First-year. Lit club vice president
A bit far gone.

Yakishio Lemon
First-year.
Fastest & loudest girl on the track team.

Nukumizu Kaju
Second-year, junior high. Little sister from heaven.

Tsukinoki Koto
Third-year. Ex-vice prez of the lit club.

Shikiya Yumeko
Second-year. Student council secretary. Most fashionable zombie.

Tamaki Shintarou
Third-year. President of the lit club.

Ayano Mitsuki
First-year.
Brainiac bookworm.

Asagumo Chihaya
First-year.
Ayano's girlfriend.

Himemiya Karen
First-year.
The final boss of heroines.

Basori Tiara
First-year. Student council vice president.

Konuki Sayo
School nurse.
Needlessly suggestive.

Houkobaru Hibari
Second-year. Student council president.

Amanatsu Konami
1-C's homeroom teacher.
Just the cutest. Teaches world history.

Sakurai Hiroto
First-year. Student council treasurer.

Foreword

NOT A CLOUD IN THE SKY. THE WINTER FIRMAMENT hung high up like a precarious, crystal-clear glass ceiling. It wasn't long after Tsuwabuki Fest that December had snuck up on us.

My fellow students trickled in at the crosswalk to the east gate while we waited for the light to change. An odd feeling of sonder came over me, imagining myself as one of just a larger crowd.

It was strange, not having the third-years around. Not strange enough to stay the inevitability of finals, mind, but by the time those were over, we had a rhythm going. We got used to it; a lit club of just us. The obligations of reality often force us to move on fast like that.

The crossing signal flashed, pulling me out of my reverie. Never enough time to wax philosophical.

I speed-walked until I caught up with the mob, then settled into a comfortable pace, admiring the naked branches of the tulip trees on the other side of the school fence. The golden-brown leaves littering the pavement reminded me of the festival when they still clung to bark.

I kept walking and nearly crashed into the person in front of me in my distraction. Something—some*one*, actually, from what I could tell peering over the heads—was holding up traffic at the gate.

The student council vice president—Basori Tiara.

Not even a hint of a smile so much as threatened to cross her lips as she barked at passing students. There were others with her, among them, my own class representative.

What in the world…?

I realized what was holding everyone up. People were stopping to reveal the contents of their bags, and only then did I recall my homeroom teacher mentioning they were doing checks now. No skin off my nose. I had nothing to hide.

I half-heartedly flashed the inside of my bag at the inspector and continued on my way.

“One moment, please.”

I recognized that voice. Tiara-san came over and gave my items a much more scrutinous, much more *prejudiced*, inspection.

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

“If you’ll give me a moment, that’s what I’m trying to discern.”

Fair enough. Why had *I* been singled out, though? While other students slipped on by, I remained glued to the spot.

Tiara-san muttered some kind of half-baked apology before stuffing her hand into my bag.

“Hey, *whoa*, what’s this about?”

“All part of the inspection process. The literature club is particularly disposed to bringing inappropriate paraphernalia on campus.” She pulled out a book and, with businesslike poise, flipped it open to one of the color spreads. “And here we are. You’re not the first this morning. We’ll see you in the student council room after school.”

“What? Come on, over some normal old book? Er, wait, can you leave the jacket on?”

“You call this normal?” Tiara-san stared at the cover. And kept staring.

The title: *Ten Plus Ten Is Twenty, So You Can Totally Marry Us!*

The cover: two small girls, naked save for a pair of thin ribbons, with their arms reaching out toward the reader.

“It’s normal for light novels,” I claimed with conviction. “Now can you please put the jacket back on?”

“I don’t see how marrying *two* children makes it more legal. Would you care to explain the logic to me?”

“Look, it’s legal in the setting. Do we really have to talk about this at school? Seriously.”

We were starting to attract attention.

Tiara-san nodded. “A sci-fi. I see. However, that still doesn’t excuse the state of dress these girls are in on the cover. Unless there are specific story details that *do* excuse it, I’m afraid I’ll have no choice but to confiscate this.”

“Just take it.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Please, god, just take it! I’m gonna be late!”

I booked it. This was no longer a safe place to be.

Tiara-san held the light novel up high and shouted, “Wait! Are you sure you don’t want this?!”

Scoundrel. Villain. This wasn’t social suicide. It was social homicide.

I ignored her and kept on running. But then I remembered something she’d said.

I wasn’t the first.

Was there another who’d gotten stopped and searched? I couldn’t help myself and turned just in time to see Komari fall victim to Tiara-san next.

Still unsure of what to make of that, I hurried inside.

Loss 1:
I'll Have You Know

STEAM BILLOWED FROM THE SPOUT OF A KETTLE resting on the club room's portable stove. I pulled my tie loose and turned the page of my book.

The universe had been out to get me early today. It was after school now, and I still wasn't over that bit of public humiliation. And I'd lost my brand-new book on top of it. At the very least I could lose myself in this one.

"Nukumizu-kun," it moaned. "I'm bored."

Yanami Anna made no effort to rise from the table. "It" was a fellow lit club member and classmate. Aside from her status as a losing heroine, having had her heart broken by a childhood friend just last summer, and frankly a few other things, she was as normal as normal could get for high school girls.

She might have been the only girl in the world I could be alone with and feel nothing in particular.

I could hear chewing noises. What was she eating this time?

"What is that purple string hanging out of your mouth?"

"Gummy," she mumbled. "I read that you can lose weight by eating stuff that's super chewy." She presented an empty bag to me. Maken Gummy—a local Toyohashi candy. It was sort of like a long, edible sticky hand, but the hand at the end was in the shape of either rock, paper, or scissors. "Didn't you eat these as a kid? Or what, are you too good for candy?"

Not true. I had eaten it. What I couldn't understand was why she'd started at the hand, effectively turning it into a supersized gummy worm.

Yanami slurped it up like a noodle. "Something about being bored just makes you wanna eat, y'know? I bought a dozen of these, but I already know they're gonna be gone in a few days."

“There’s always homework. We got the same assignments, so I know you have a mountain of stuff to do.”

Yanami did not appreciate the reminder. “Why are you so mean, dude? Uh, hello? Your sweet and lovable friend, who you’ve been slowly warming up to, is in need over here!” She smacked the table a few times with her palm to get the point across. Even threw in a pout for good measure.

“Wow. Those are a lot of words you just put in my mouth.”

I closed my copy of *My Childhood Friend Moved into My Attic So I Bought Some Pesticide*, or *Friendicide* for short, that I’d narrowly escaped having confiscated. I clearly wasn’t going to get much reading done this evening.

The story revolved around the mind games between the protagonist and his parasitic childhood friend. People were calling it the *Home Alone* of light novels. In the most recent volume, the heroine had somehow managed to legally claim residence.

Yanami added a second hand to her displeased table-pounding. “You’re the president, aren’t you? Isn’t it, like, kinda your job to entertain me? If it wasn’t before, I think it should be.”

I disagreed.

“Still waiting on your draft for the journal,” I said. “How about you get on that?”

“I’ll get to it when I get to it. I’ve got the gist already.”

“Famous last words, Yanami-san.”

She decided to make a face at that instead of argue. A bit of quiet melancholy seemed to come over her, and every few seconds, she shot me the most self-pitying glance.

“Is something actually wrong?” I asked, just to be sure. I doubted it. But presidential responsibility and all that.

“So people were talking about doing a class party on the last day after the closing ceremony, right?”

I must have missed that conversation. “That’s on the twenty-fifth, isn’t it?”

Like a tortured soul from hell, Yanami groaned, “Christmas…” Fire filled her eyes as she finally sat upright. Dark and twisted were the only words I could use to describe that look. “And guess who’s leading the whole thing? Sousuke and Karen-chan.”

“Huh? But they’re—”

Yanami glared at me, daring me to finish that sentence. “Christmas *Eve* is couple’s territory, but Christmas *Day* is safe. And since Karen-chan’s parents are in the UK for work right now, she’s got the whole place to herself.” Ah, okay, I saw her point. “They invited me, but I dunno what to actually do. What would you do, Nukumizu-kun?”

“I dunno. I wasn’t invited.”

“Uh, so anyway…” Smooth. “I could turn them down, but then what if that makes things weird? Like, I don’t wanna make it seem like I care about being surrounded by tons of couples or being around Sousuke and Karen-chan after they spent the night together. Or that I might struggle to know what I’d even say to them, because I don’t. Care about that stuff, I mean. Not at all. But if I don’t go, they might think I *do* care. And so I was thinking maybe if *you* went with me, it might make it less awkward, y’know? We can be like safety buddies.”

The ramblings of someone who totally didn’t care.

“Sorry, but it’s my birthday that day. My sister wants to do something for it, so I’ll pass.”

“Wait, your birthday is on Christmas?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Oh. Well *damn*, guess Christmas is canceled this year!” How did that track? She clapped her hands together, eyes sparkling with new light. “All right, screw some dead guy’s birthday, yours is clearly more important!”

Was she for real? I’d never had a friend throw a party for me. I didn’t know what to say.

Yanami grinned at me. “We’re getting the girls together to celebrate. Lemon-chan and Komari-chan don’t have boyfriends, so they’ll be perfect.”

The girls, huh? What was I, some dead guy?

“Yakishio might be going to the Christmas party.”

“And you think I’m just gonna *let* her? Friends don’t let friends make self-destructive decisions, Nukumizu-kun.” She reached into her pocket, produced another gummy, and started to open the package.

“No one’s forcing you to go. Just tell them no. You don’t have to make up some event just so you have an excuse.”

“Sure, but do I really wanna have nothing going on during Christmas? Like, at all? And then do I really want to pretend like I’m busy just to save face?” The light left Yanami’s eyes as she flung the scissors-shaped gummy hand right into her mouth. “No… Just, no.”

The soft mushing of teeth against gelatinous sugar filled the room.

“You should go to the party, Yanami-san. There’ll be plenty of single people there, and you can take Yakishio. You can be her safety buddy.”

From what she needed to be safe, only Yanami knew apparently.

“Oh, I see. Yeah, she could be my fall—er, I mean, I could totally chaperone her and whatnot. I’ll ask if she’s going.”

She started tapping at her phone, and at long last, glorious silence returned. Just as I was savoring it, a *ding* came from inside a bag across the room.

“That looks like Yakishio’s,” I commented. “She leave it here?”

“She’s probably in remedial lessons. Apparently, she failed the finals.”

Had they been on the art of pencil-spinning, she could have aced them.

“Don’t you need to get going, then?”

“Uh, where?” Yanami cocked her head.

“Remedial lessons. Haven’t they already started?”

“Excuse me?! I passed my exams, thank you very much!” Huh. My mistake. “I’ll have you know I’m a *fine* test-taker! Check it!”

She dug through her bag and slapped a slip of paper on the table. It was the rankings for the finals. She stood at a solid 135 out of 228, which wasn’t bad. Not great, but not bad. Was it worth the pomp? Doubtful.

The door opened. Just in time too, because it saved me from an extremely awkward conversation. Creeping out from the half-ajar slit was our very own vice president, Komari Chika. The creature with an attitude twice her size, but for some reason only with me specifically.

Quickly shutting the door behind her, she surveyed the room for danger.

“What’s wrong?” Yanami asked. “Want me to kick the big, scary Nukumizu-kun out?”

“H-he can stay. For now,” she croaked. Suddenly, she jolted and whipped back around to the door. “I-I’m not here!”

“Uh, Komari?” I blabbed.

She dove under the table right when the door creaked open yet again. Konuki Sayo entered, our club’s supervisor, dressed in her trademark flowing white coat. She was also the school nurse and a walking innuendo who usually kept to her office.

“Something we can help you with?” I asked her.

“Hello there. You wouldn’t happen to have seen Komari-san, have you? I could have sworn she went this way.” She peered around the room, her head on a swivel.

Yanami and I exchanged looks. I shook my head. “Can’t say we have. Why do you ask?”

Sensei helped herself to a seat, crossing one long, stocking’d leg over the other. “I was trying to catch her, but she just keeps running away from me. I can’t imagine why.”

“Probably because you were trying to catch her. Why were you doing that, anyway?”

“Why? Because she’s just too darn cute, that’s why. I feel this urge, this *passion* come over me when I see the fear in her eyes. After twenty-seven long years of life, I never thought I’d feel it so vividly again. To think there were still doors just waiting for me to open.”

She needed to lock that one tight and throw away the key.

Yanami raised an eyebrow. “Was there some reason you needed to catch her?”

“I take it you had your bags searched this morning.” The nurse pulled out a small book from her coat pocket. “Vice President Basori-san confiscated this, but she’s returned it to me after deciding the contents were unproblematic. She asked me to pass it along to its owner.”

Ah, I remembered catching that frisk in-progress. The book’s title was *Turn His Head: How to Leave the Friend Zone*. A romance self-help book… Komari never struck me as the type to read something like that.

As I reached out to take it, Komari leapt from her hiding place, nearly toppling the table in her panic. “Th-thank you, I’ll take that!” She snatched it, then retreated to one corner of the room.

“Oh,” Konuki-sensei said. “There she is.”

Komari acknowledged the comment with barely a nod before resuming her huddling and trembling. Sensei turned back to me. “I’m lost, Mr. President. Did I touch a nerve?”

“I, uh… All I can tell you is not any more than usual.”

Sensei ruminated on that for a while before seemingly deciding it wasn’t worth the effort. She stood and waved. “Anyway, I’ll be off now. You visit me sometime, will you?”

“Uh, right. Sure, we’ll pop in.”

With the danger passed, Komari slowly emerged from her shell. “I-is she gone?”

“She seemed pretty busy to me.”

Komari still eyed the door nervously, waiting for it to crash open again, all the while still clutching her love bible to her chest. I

was a little curious about it myself, since I was writing a rom-com.

“You using that for reference?” I asked. “Mind if I check it out?”

“N-no!” She stuffed it securely under her coat. There was frantic, and then there was Komari. “I-I’ve written stuff!”

“Yeah? Wow, you’re thorough. But relax, okay? I won’t steal your ideas.”

The shaking intensified. Her face got redder.

“Komari?”

“Sh-shut up! Die! I’m leaving!” she spat in quick succession, then made good on her promise.

Now what had I done to deserve that?

Yanami shrugged but did not share the answer to my question. “That right there, Nukumizu-kun. Maybe one day you’ll understand women.”

“So you know what that was about?”

“Nope, not a clue.”

Okay, then…what the hell?

I quickly gave up trying to understand and recounted the day’s events. It was obvious that Tiara-san had singled me out on purpose this morning, but it wasn’t necessarily me specifically she had it out for. She’d gotten Komari too. Even though her book wasn’t half as damning as mine had been, she’d lost it anyway. And following that train of logic…

I caught Yanami just before she could finish sizing up another gummy. “Did you make it through the bag check okay?”

“Oh, I ride my bike to school. Didn’t feel like stopping and getting off and then getting back on and *ugh*. So I just rode through.”

Powerful.

“They took a book from me. Which is weird, because it seemed like Komari and I were the only ones who—”

It hit me again. I hadn't been the first. Komari had come *after* me, so who could have been before us? Some other club member?

Another click from the door, so quiet I almost missed it. Was Komari back? Or the devil herself?

The latter, as it turned out, based on the glasses on her scarf-shrouded face. It was Tsukinoki Koto, ex-vice president, and she very much looked like she did not want to be perceived.

We hadn't really seen her since she retired after the festival. And yet, somehow, all that slinking around had me more suspicious than nostalgic.

"Long time no see," I said. "Halloween was two months ago."

Tsukinoki-senpai quietly shut the door, then skulked to a seat. "It's been a while. How have you two been?"

Yanami beamed. "Pretty good! Well, I mean, Nukumizu-kun is Nukumizu-kun. How goes the studying? Good?"

"Not even remotely. But I've got more dire things to worry about than that."

Did she?

I shared a knowing look with Yanami. *What now?*

"Sorry to hear that," I said. "Tea?"

"I'll put some on. Would you like some, Nukumizu-kun?" Yanami offered.

Tsukinoki-senpai raised her hand and stopped us before we could get very far. "Hear me out. You'll wish you had if you forsake me now. Please."

Our escape foiled, Yanami and I reluctantly returned to our seats. "We'll take your word for it," I said.

Senpai's expression turned grim. "I'll be plain. They confiscated a BL fic I wrote at the gate this morning."

Already regretting my decision.

"Where are you finding the time to write about gay men when you have entrance exams coming up?"

She placed a hand on her forehead in dramatic fashion. “You’ve got it all wrong, Nukumizu-kun. It was the exams themselves that drove me to gay men. The stress, the pressure, I was beset on all sides. They were my only reprieve. I’m a victim, you see. A victim of this grand, fabricated competition we call ‘society.’”

“I don’t see how this is a huge problem. Won’t they just make you write an apology letter or something?” Something wasn’t adding up. If losing some BL book was all this was about, then why all the skulking around? “I seriously doubt this is new for you. What exactly about this is dire?”

“It’s a matter of…content,” Senpai confessed with difficulty. It took her some time to get the rest out. “It was RPF. So you can imagine why that could be a problem.”

“RPF?” Yanami parroted.

I spoke up on behalf of the unpoisoned. “It means, uh, real person fiction. As in the story involves actual, real-life people. It’s a fairly common tag in the BL world.” And there was only one reason that would be a problem in this context. “You used people at school, didn’t you?”

Senpai nodded. “You know Houkobaru, the student council president? I may have gender-bent her for BL purposes.”

“*Annnd* there goes the last of my sympathy. Say hello to the consequences of your actions for me.”

Houkobaru Hibari was about as perfect as perfect could get. Smart. Sporty. Beautiful. She had it all—including a couple of loose screws.

A hand shot up. “Um, what’s ‘gender-bent’ mean?”

It was Tsukinoki-senpai’s turn to enlighten Yanami this time. “It means Houkobaru is a boy in my story. No reason. She just is.”

A perfect explanation. I could respect a solid “no reason” when it came to fiction.

Yanami, however, made a face like her gummy had just transmogrified into a worm. “But why would you want…? Actually, never mind. I don’t want to know.”

Excellent. She was on the path to understanding.

“The president would’ve been your underclassman when you were on the student council, right?” I continued. “Just go apologize and maybe they’ll give it back.”

Senpai wagged her finger and tutted. “RPF is for the like-minded connoisseur only. It’s never meant to reach the eyes of those involved. It’s the ultimate faux pas. And, at least for the time being, Houkobaru doesn’t know about it. I’d like to keep it that way and resolve this before the cat’s out of the bag. Ideally, you wouldn’t be a part of this at all, Nukumizu-kun, but what can you do? I’ll settle for one faux pas over two.”

“I can certainly understand wanting to keep thi—” Something inside me snapped. “What? What did you just say? Am *I* in it?”

“Rest assured, I took your inexperience in the genre into account and made you the top. Assertiveness actually comes to you quite naturally, you know. I was very pleased with how well you took to an aloof role.”

Glad to hear at least one of us was happy because it certainly wasn’t me.

“Where is it? Where did they take it? Please don’t tell me a teacher’s already seen it.”

“Presently, it’s in Basori-san’s hands. I’ve already been to beg her forgiveness, but I didn’t get far. She’s not very fond of me. According to her blustering, she intends to turn it in at the faculty meeting after the closing ceremony.”

So our teachers would get the greatest Christmas gift of all: steamy smut of me and a gender-bent student council president.

Senpai clapped her hands together pleadingly. “Please! You have to help me get it back! For the club!”

Honestly, I wasn’t feeling particularly motivated.

“You’re not even part of the club anymore. Seeing as you dug this hole yourself, I don’t think we should join you in it.” Sometimes, leaders had to make tough calls. Not that this was a particularly tough one.

The conversation hung awkwardly in the air for a while, Senpai's eyes darting around the room every so often.

"What?" I dared to ask.

"I may have used the lit club as the official publisher. And your name for approval."

Oh. Oh, she wasn't just stupid. She was *insane*!

"So yeah, expect to go down with me if this makes it to that faculty meeting," she prattled on. "You in?"

I was speechless.

Yanami offered me a gummy. I accepted, threw the rock-shaped hand straight down the hatch, and bit down. Hard.

***

Tsukinoki-senpai left, Yanami and I soon did the same. Me, to go grab something to drink from the breezeway by the courtyard. Yanami because she had nothing better to do than follow along.

"Look at it this way. Isn't it comforting to know that she's the same as ever?" she consoled between gummy chews.

"I wish she wasn't." I moaned about a lot of things, but this time I could claim with absolute impunity that none of this was my fault. Not even a little. "Seriously, why can't Tamaki-senpai smooth things over? Why does she have to get us first-years involved?"

Tamaki Shintarou was our old president and Tsukinoki-senpai's boyfriend. If it was anyone's job to clean up her messes, surely it'd be that guy's.

"You heard Tsukinoki-senpai. She doesn't want him finding out." Yanami dug through her pocket and frowned. Out of Maken Gummies. Sad.

"This is seriously awkward timing for everyone involved."

Tamaki-senpai was bound for a nationally acclaimed university; it went without saying that Tsukinoki-senpai was not. For what it was worth, she did have a healthy sense of urgency

when it came to the future, which of course begged the question: What was she doing writing BL?

“She’s our senpai, Nukumizu-kun. Doing her a solid’s the least you could do. Don’t you want to be a good person?” Yanami wagged her free lunch voucher (courtesy of Senpai) at me judgingly. “And it’s already got the lit club’s name on it, so what else are we supposed to do? They haven’t turned in the resignation paperwork yet either, so they’re both technically still members.”

She had a point, her and her lunch-priced morals. I hated when she had a point, and so I nodded quietly.

Strictly speaking, third-years didn’t *have* to retire. It was the expectation, but you could absolutely make it all the way to graduation while still participating in club activities.

“She was in the student council last year, right?” I thought aloud. “Way I heard it, the current president used to pick up after her a lot back in the day.”

“Can’t count on her if we can’t tell her anything. Maybe try to reason with Basori-san?”

“Not confident about that after this morning. She’s got a chip on her shoulder when it comes to the lit club. And that extends to all of us, not just Tsukinoki-senpai.” And now there was RPF smut with our name on it wasn’t a good look. If that went public… I shuddered. “The bird-watching club just got suspended. Genie’s out of the bottle. Could be us next.”

“Huh? How’d they manage that? It’s just birds.”

“It came out at the last club president meeting that apparently it was a little more than ‘just birds.’ They were sneaking photos of some of the more popular girls at school. Nothing, y’know, *revealing*, but they were even selling copies.”

As it happened, Yanami had sold eight in total. That was half of Yakishio’s sales and a quarter of Himemiya-san’s. As proud as I was for her, I was gonna take this knowledge to my grave.

“Well, we don’t wanna get suspended,” Yanami said. “Where else am I gonna eat snacks and do homework after school?”

“Not what the literature club is for.”

I stopped in front of the vending machine and gathered my thoughts. This was Tiara-san we were talking about. There would be no reasoning with her. She wouldn’t care that Tsukinoki-senpai had gone and used our name without our permission, and that argument already didn’t hold much water because, on paper, Senpai was still a member of the club.

It started to sink in. This could be very bad for the us.

“Hey, isn’t that Shikiya-senpai?” Yanami said. “She’s with the council, yeah?”

I followed her gaze to a lone, cold-looking bench in the courtyard. Sure enough, that was the student council secretary, Shikiya Yumeko. Second-year. The world’s most fashionable zombie.

“What’s she doing out there in the cold?” Yanami murmured. “You should go and see, Nukumizu-kun.”

“You trying to get me killed? One doesn’t simply ‘go and see’ a girl like that.” I pulled out the notebook from my blazer’s inside pocket.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ve made notes. Observations about Shikiya-senpai’s quirks and behaviors. I recognize this pattern.”

“Wow. And here I thought you were done creeping me out.”

“How is this creepy? You ever gone bird-watching before? It’s the same thing.” I opened up my notebook. Very uncreepily. “She starts to struggle to move in temperatures below twelve centigrade. I expect we’ll see that more often this month.”

Yanami’s eyes were dead. “You don’t say.”

I turned the page. “On gentle days like today, she’ll often go outside to bask and increase her body temperature, like she’s coldblooded or something. Similar to reptiles.”

Yanami let out a disinterested hum and looked up. “It’s evening. The whole bench is shaded.”

“In that case, her body temperature could fall so low that she stops being able to move. One could then posit that what we’re witnessing is a kind of stasis or hypothermia-related syncope.”

I thumped my notebook shut and faced the vending machine again. I felt like drinking something cold, just to spite the season. It’d go down well in the warm club room.

“Uh, so are we leaving her? Isn’t that, like, dangerous?” Yanami pointed out.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “Probably.”

I hit the button for a bottle of hot milk tea then trotted over.

***

Yanami, Shikiya-san, and I shared a table at a café just next door to the station. Before us lay a cup of coffee, some cake, and, naturally, a board game.

Full disclosure, this was a board game café; that was the shtick. Shikiya-san had insisted on coming here to thank us for rescuing her.

“Eat,” she wheezed. “My family’s…well off.”

“That’s generous of you,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Awesome! Eating!” Yanami’s cheeks were stuffed with cake before the final syllable left her lips.

It was a cheesecake. Simple, but this place baked them from scratch. One bite, and I could tell that perfect balance of tart and sweetness didn’t come easy.

Yanami beamed, and seconds later, she was already on her last forkful. “Senpai, this stuff is great!”

“Order more…if you want. Eat.”

Those were dangerous words to utter in Yanami’s presence. I braced myself for the avalanche.

I took in the atmosphere while I dumped some sugar into my coffee. Most of the clientele looked on the older side. College

students, maybe, and everywhere I looked, a game was in progress. Where did they get that kind of free time on a weekday?

Shikiya-san began distributing pieces to the game in front of us with the practiced familiarity of having done it a hundred times before.

“What are we playing?” I asked.

“Fjords… Area control.” She did not elaborate.

I kept my mouth shut and waited for her to finish. Lest I push my luck.

Yanami leaned over, eyes locked on my cake, and whispered, “Hey, maybe you should ask about that thing.”

“What thing?”

“The thing Tsukinoki-senpai got confiscated. She’s on the student council. Maybe she can help.”

Another point to Yanami. But were we sure we could trust her?

Shikiya-san’s hands suddenly stopped. “Tsukinoki…senpai?” Her head fell to one side. Ears like a hawk. “What…about her?” Her pale white eyes searched me for an answer. They found mostly fear.

I hesitated. She clearly had a special relationship with the literature club, especially with Tsukinoki-senpai. But was it good? Terrible? That remained to be seen.

I looked to Yanami. She nodded slightly. “Okay, well…” I told her everything.

Shikiya-san listened intently, then let out a small sigh. “Tiara-chan…hates Tsukinoki-senpai.”

She resumed distributing pieces, leaving little room for misconstruction there.

“Tiara-san came into the student council *after* Senpai left, though,” I said. “How can she hate her?”

Shikiya-san finished handing out little wooden houses and people. Next, she produced a set of hexagonal tiles. “We take

turns…placing these.”

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

Something told me her mind was elsewhere, so I played along. The rules were simple and came to me naturally over the course of the game. After creating our terrain and littering it with longhouses, each player took turns placing Vikings around the map to take over territory. Area control. Ah, I got it now.

“I, uh, don’t see anywhere else I can play,” I said.

“Then we’re done,” Shikiya-san breathed. “The one with the most tiles…wins.”

Shikiya-san came out on top; it wasn’t even close. I came in second after Yanami. Which I guess meant I came in third, but eh. Whatever. I’d just been distracted by other stuff and wasn’t locked in. She wouldn’t want to face a locked-in version of me.

Yanami elbowed me. “Nukumizu-kun, focus.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m in the zone now. I’ll get you next time.”

“I’m not talking about the game,” she hissed.

Oh. Right. I looked Shikiya-san in the eye. “So, what we were talking about before. Is there any way you can—”

“Tile,” she moaned.

“Oh. Right. My turn.”

Round two. And for the record, this wasn’t just fun and games. Indulging her was very important for the negotiations to come.

Yanami failed to notice at first and wouldn’t quit grumbling, but soon she too entered the fabled Zone. “Wait, don’t do that! I was gonna go there next!”

“Sucks to suck.”

I was determined to take her down this time. Beating her was all that mattered.

“I understand,” Shikiya-san said out of nowhere. She put down a black Viking piece with a pair of bony fingers. “But Tiara-chan… Tsukinoki-senpai…”

At last, falling action.

“This doesn’t just concern Tsukinoki-senpai,” I said. “The president could lose face too. I’d really like to resolve this behind the scenes. Peacefully.”

Shikiya-san nodded. “The boy… Sakurai would get an ulcer.”

Sakurai who? I felt sorry for his stomach. As well as an indescribable sense of camaraderie.

Yanami reached across the table over to my side. “Can I move for you?”

“No. And hush. The grown-ups are talking.” I took a sip of coffee to quell the developing ulcer in my own stomach. “We were hoping you could help mediate. You and Basori-san get along, don’t you?”

Shikiya-san blinked at that. “Yes…we do.” She froze, two pale hands coiled around her cup, staring off into nothing.

I waited for her to finish whatever it was she was doing.

“You could maybe,”—her lips hardly seemed to move—“bag her.”

It was my turn to blink. “I’m sorry?”

“Make her…yours.”

“I’m sorry?!”

Yanami started hacking on something. On what, I wondered for a split second, before realizing the brat had gotten to my cake.

I kicked up a whirlwind shaking my head. “No, no, no, off the table! Her name’s the only thing I know about her, and you want us to date?!”

Yanami smacked me on the back. “S-slow down there,” she continued to hack into a handkerchief. “No one said anything about dating.” Tears clung to the edges of judgmental eyes.

“What else could she possibly mean? I, uh… I don’t know if I can go along with ‘bagging’ anyone over something like this. As if I could even manage that.”

“Don’t worry…” Shikiya-san’s willowy hands made a heart. “Tiara-chan is easy.”

Honestly, I could believe that.

“Okay, but that doesn’t change the rest of my argument.”

“Stop being weird, Nukumizu-kun,” Yanami chided. “All you’ve gotta do is butter her up a bit until she’s willing to cough up you-know-what. Isn’t that right, Senpai?”

“Why does it have to be me? Wouldn’t you make more sense?” I argued.

“No. She scares me.”

Yeah, no duh. She scared me too. Matter of fact, someone at this very table scared me.

“Senpai, I really don’t see us hitting it off all of a sudden.”

“Just be nice…and she’s yours,” Shikiya-san said.

Basori Tiara, dating sim tutorial girl.

“I still think—” I started to protest.

“Cajole… Manipulate… Guilt-trip… Give no other option.” She clacked another black piece onto a tile. “I’ll help.”

One guess as to who at the table I was scared of. Hadn’t she just said they got along?

Shikiya-san sensed my hesitation. My weakness. “You want the book…don’t you?”

“I mean, yeah.”

Yanami gave me an impatient look. “Suck it up already, would you? You heard Senpai. She’s gonna help.”

“I’m not good with girls, okay? They make me clam up.”

“You’re awfully chatty with me. Can’t say I appreciate the implication,” Yanami grumbled. She slid an empty plate toward me and said a quiet thanks. So glad I gave her permission to eat that. “Besides, it only feels weird because you’re making it weird. You talk to your sister, don’t you? Just pretend Basori-san’s your sister.”

I considered that. The loud-mouthed tsundere was a classic little sister trope. Maybe she was on to something. But would she call me “Oniichan” or “stupid”? That was the question.

I put it to the test in a year-long mental simulation, then faced Shikiya-san again. “Just one problem. Basori-san doesn’t like the lit club. Period. She singled out pretty much every member she could during bag check this morning.” Shikiya-san listened. “As president, I intend to address this. I hope I’m not stepping on any toes by saying that.”

Shikiya-san swayed a bit then gave an unsteady nod. “No… Tiara-chan…overstepped.”

“Good. Then we have a deal. I’ll do everything in my power to resolve this as painlessly as possible.”

I could do no harm to my dear little sister. After all, she’d given me a hand-knit scarf for my birthday. My mind was made.

“I’ll help…where I can. Nothing more.”

Just then, my phone dinged. I glanced at the screen. From Yanami.

‹Yana-Chan: No funny business. You’re not getting a head start on me.›

She was right next to me. Was the message necessary?

Her expression betraying nothing, Yanami made her move and took the final tile, sealing my fate. Last again.

***

What a day.

I let myself collapse onto our living room sofa, the prospect of climbing the stairs to my room too daunting to confront at the moment. So much for enjoying some peace and quiet before winter break.

My eyes wandered for lack of anything better to do while I lamented. They fell on a big, handmade banner on the wall. “8 DAYS UNTIL NUKUMIZU KAZUHIKO’S BIRTHDAY!”

The number looked removable. Presumably for a countdown. Kaju’s doing, no doubt. This got more elaborate every year.

As I pondered the blinding speed of her development, the door opened. “I’m home, Oniisama!” Kaju waddled inside, hands full of grocery bags.

I stood and relieved her of them. “Hey. Out late?”

“Oh, thank you.” She giggled. “Look at us. A couple of newlyweds.”

I refused to comment. Got to stocking the fridge. “This is more than usual. Extra for snacks?”

“Yup. We’ll need lots for your birthday party, and your pre-birthday party, and your pre-pre-birthday party, and can’t forget your pre-pre-pre-birthday party. I was going to start baking a cake every day.”

“Let’s save that for the day of. That’s gonna be a lot of cake going to waste without a Yanami-san here to clear it out for us.”

“Then we should have her over this weekend! Should I extend an invitation?”

I could think of few things more exhausting than Yanami on a weekend. Unless we put her in the foyer. Then we could leave leftovers out for her at night.

“Diet season’s just about rolled around for her, so let’s not,” I decided. “Anyway, Mom and Dad are gonna be late. Want me to make dinner?”

“Would you? I’d love some of your dry curry!”

“Coming right up. We’ve still got ground meat in the freezer, right?” The grin suddenly fell from Kaju’s face. “What?”

“Dearest Oniisama, where were you today?”

“Stopped at a café to deal with—”

Kaju buried her face in my chest and started sniffing.

“Coffee and cheesecake,” she deduced. “And a woman.”

“A *huh*?”

She peered up at me. “There’s makeup around your collar. Yanami-san doesn’t wear foundation at school, which must mean it belongs to someone else.”

How did she even know that? Either way, no doubt it was Shikiya-senpai’s. It’d probably rubbed off on me during our courtyard rescue.

“I had an acquaintance to talk to,” I mumbled.

“It must have been a very physical conversation. How did this little stain get there, I wonder.” Her grin turned to a sneer. I sensed peril.


SNIFF
SNIFF
SNIFF

“I had to help carry her because she was, I dunno, sick or something. Yanami-san was also at the café with us.”

“Oh! Well, you should have said so! I apologize for jumping to conclusions.” Did I want to know what those conclusions were? “Now, we should do something about that stain. Strip.”

She went ahead and threw my blazer off herself, then stared at the makeup mark on the collar.

“Is it really that bad?”

“Nothing I can’t wash out, dearest Oniisama.” Kaju hugged my blazer tight, beaming.

***

The next day after school, I had my eyes glued to the student council room from afar. According to Shikiya-san’s insider intel, it would soon be empty. Whatever her methods, we quickly came to an understanding that I wouldn’t ask, and she wouldn’t tell.

Yanami poked her head around the corner just below me. “Are we doing this or what?”

“Quiet. Any minute now.”

The door clicked open, and Vice President Basori Tiara emerged. Right on time. Shikiya-san followed behind, sending a furtive glance our way.

That was the signal. Yanami and I exchanged one of our own to each other.

We slipped into the room undetected, then shut the door behind us. I scanned the interior. It was filled with long tables, the seat at the head of the room presumably meant for the president. An old yet stately wooden desk and a sizable chair stood there. Bookshelves and lockers lined the walls.

Yanami skipped to the middle of the room. “Feels like we’re doing something we’re not supposed to, huh? It’s kinda exciting.”

“We *are* doing something we’re not supposed to.”

Our plan was simple: wait for Tiara-san to leave with Shikiya-san, find her locker, and search through it. If the book was in there, case closed. If not, maybe she'd have something else we could use to our advantage. Information about her, maybe a secret or two.

"Top half, second from the right," I mumbled in a vain attempt to quiet my conscience. "Here we go."

"Hey, Nukumizu-kun, why did we need to make this all complicated? Couldn't we have just had Shikiya-san let us in when no one's around?"

"Basori-san locks everything up when she leaves for the day. Shikiya-senpai figures she might be hiding something."

I really didn't like getting my hands dirty like this, but needs must. And the clock was ticking.

Aside from the president, there was one other member—the treasurer—but those two were apparently out observing the sports clubs. This was a golden opportunity we couldn't pass up. And no, I was not at all a little giddy about the prospect of seeing the inside of a girl's locker. Promise.

The locker groaned open. Inside was a neatly organized system of books and folders. All business. No magazines or bits or bobs one might expect to find in a high school girl's private space.

Yanami peeked inside. "Stark. I think me and her might be birds of a feather."

"How do you figure?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you? You don't keep snacks in your locker, because you'll just end up eating it all. You keep that baby empty."

Or you can put things that aren't food in it, I thought.

"Whatever you say. Help me out here. I can't go rifling through a girl's things."

"You're fine. Think of it like rifling through a *teacher's* things, 'cause honestly that's the vibe this gives me. Hey, what's in that paper bag?"

“What bag?”

I found it nestled among all the organized chaos. It looked to be from a bookstore, and well used.

Reaching a trembling hand out, I peered inside. It was stuffed with graded test papers.

“This is every exam we’ve taken since April,” I said.

My conscience was practically screaming at me. I put the bag back where I found it.

After another thorough look-through, all I could find were records and stuff exclusively for the student council. Tiara-san was definitely a no-nonsense kind of girl. As if we didn’t know that already.

I shut the locker, honestly kind of relieved.

“Nukumizu-kun, something fell.” Yanami knelt down and picked up a slip of paper.

I’d seen it somewhere before.

The door opened. There wasn’t even time to be surprised when a student entered. Yanami stuffed the slip into my pocket and whipped around.

“Oh,” our visitor said. “Can I help you?”

The boy(?) brushed away the bangs glued to his(?) forehead and offered a polite smile. He *was* a boy, right? The necktie and pants were all I had to go on. He was either a very feminine, very short boy, or a very masculine girl.

Either way, he was more woman than Yanami.

While I waffled between *um*s and *er*s, she came up to bat. “Shikiya-senpai wanted to see us, but she wasn’t here, so we’re just kinda waiting around for her.” She returned his grin with one of her own.

“I see. Hiba-nee, do you happen to know where Yumeko-san went?”

A tall girl entered behind the boy. “Shikiya will do as Shikiya does. Feel free to sit until she’s back.”

Houkobaru Hibari. The moment she stepped in, she commanded the room. She had that kind of presence. But she was also under suspicion of chronic airheadedness.

We sat. Wasn't much else we could do.

The boy started taking down teacups from a shelf. He smiled at us again. "One moment and I'll have some piping hot tea ready."

"Oh, please, you don't have to do that, um…"

I waited for a name. I hadn't seen him at any club president meeting thus far.

The boy, picking up on the hint, smiled more deeply. "Sakurai Hiroto. Treasurer. I guess this is our first time meeting. I'm not much of a people person, you see, so I don't often show my face around big gatherings."

"Oh. Well, uh, good to meet you. I'm Nukumizu. Lit club."

So this was "the boy" Shikiya-san had mentioned. He had a kind of breathy voice that was almost sensual. Not that I was into that. Just calling it as I saw it.

The president sauntered up while he started on the tea. "Please, allow me, Hiroto. I could stand to make my own tea every now and then."

"Hiba-nee, you're holding the can upside—"

Tea leaves were suddenly everywhere. I worried for the state of Sakurai-kun's stomach.

"I'll clean this up later," he said calmly. "First, the tea."

"Hiroto, I've done nothing and yet somehow the kettle's handle broke."

"Okay, well, maybe leave this to me then. You sit down."

"Well, now a cup's gone and shattered all on its own. How did that happen?"

By the third cup, we decided maybe it was sufficiently socially acceptable to excuse ourselves.

***

I rested my elbows on the table, fingers interlocked in front of my face. “That was close. Too close. If they’d seen us rifling through Basori-san’s locker, that would’ve been the end for us.”

Yanami nodded and crossed her legs. “Very true. To say nothing of having snuck into the student council room. It’s a good thing I smoothed things over.”

Recap over. She and I turned to a corner of the club room.

Komari’s eyes darted between us nervously. “Wh-what? Wh-why are you guys expositioning right now?”

“To make you an accessory,” I said.

“Join us, Komari-chan,” Yanami cooed.

Komari gurgled something. “N-no.”

Yanami and I scooted our chairs over to her anyway.

“So that was a bust,” I continued.

“Back to the drawing board?”

I nodded. “Any ideas, Komari?”

“A-about what?! I-I still don’t know what’s going on!”

She was a tough cookie. I cleared my throat. “Remember the bag check at the gate yesterday? They got Tsukinoki-senpai. BL. RPF.”

Komari squawked. She wasn’t short of reaction noises at least.

I studied her closely. She hid behind a book. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about it, would you?”

“N-not a clue.”

“Because she told me RPF is for like-minded connoisseurs only. Now why would she risk committing the ultimate taboo by bringing that book to school?” I paused for dramatic effect. Komari peeked ever so slightly over her literary mask. “It surely can’t be because one such connoisseur exists within these very halls. Hmm, Komari?”

Komari whipped her head back and forth. “W-we’re not like-minded at *all*! I-I’d never make you a top!”

Noted. I guess.

“So you’re the reason she brought that thing. That’s that, then.”

Yanami crossed her arms and nodded. “That’s that. She’s not an accessory. She’s a *co-conspirator*. You know what that means, Komari-chan.”

“I-I don’t, actually.”

“It means we’re in this together,” I said.

The door creaked open agonizingly slow. On the other side, a gleaming pair of pale white eyes glowed in the darkness.

Komari curled up into a ball and trembled like a scared little hamster.

***

The sun had set by the time our strategy meeting wrapped up. I hopped on the train home and immediately thought back on Shikiya-san’s contributions.

Tiara-san had no hobbies apparently. No one had seen her do much of anything, with the exception of student council work and studying, to the point that Shikiya-san worried if she even had any friends. To hear her call anyone “worrying” was kind of rich coming from Shikiya-san of all people.

“Not like she needs me losing sleep over her,” I mumbled as I wandered around, searching for an empty seat.

“Nukkun? Hey. The lit club run late today or something?”

She waved me over from the middle of a long bench. The girl with a smile like the sun and a voice brighter still—Yakishio Lemon. Another classmate-slash-clubmate, although track was her primary mistress.

She gave me a sun-kissed smile and patted the seat next to her. I thought about it, then took the one next to that. “We were having a bit of a meeting. Were you stuck in remedials?”

Yakishio’s smile turned awkward before hopping over to the empty seat I’d left vacant between us. “Yeah, well, they mean business. The teachers keep telling me I’ve gotta get it together or they might hold me back.”

They probably weren’t bluffing.

“It’s a good thing they’re giving you the chance to make up for those tests. So which subjects did you flunk exactly?”

Yakishio looked at me funny. “‘Which’?”

Lord help those teachers. Maybe they needed to do a bit more than bluff.

The train jostled across the river then stopped at the next station, punctuating our conversation as people filed off. Before long, we were jostling along again.

“Come to think of it, why do you take the train?” I asked. A smooth change of subject if I say so myself. “You could totally run this distance.”

“Oh my god, right?!” She took the bait. “I used to ride my bike, but my mama was all, ‘You lollygag too much!’ so now I take the train.”

“How does the train prevent lollygagging?”

“Well, ’cause around when we first enrolled, I took a detour to Lake Hamana on my way home. I was back super late and got in *huge* trouble. So my mama gave me a commuter pass, since that only works within a certain area. Talk about helicopter parent, right?”

Hamana was an entire prefecture over. In Shizuoka. Twenty kilometers from Toyohashi one way. I had to wonder if their famous unagi pie had been the siren call.

“I think your mama has good ideas. Listen to them.”

“*Ugh*, not you too. My senpai on the team keep telling me the same thing.”

Thank goodness her senpai were normal.

“How’s practice with remedials anyway? You’re not allowed to join, are you?”

“Nope. They suspended me.” Yakishio sighed a little too hard to earn much sympathy. “I’m doing what I can to keep myself from getting rusty, but it’s not like I can do much except run.”

As opposed to…? So many quips to make, so little time.

Suddenly, Yakishio smiled. It was that quiet, grown-up one she’d started to wear more often. “But it’s fine, honestly. I’ve been thinking I could use some time to think anyway. The timing worked out.”

“Trouble with the team?”

“Not…the team, exactly. It’s a me thing.”

The PA system warbled out the last stop before I could ask my next question. The train slowed and whined as it pulled up to the station. Yakishio was up before it came to a full stop.

“Anyway, this is me,” she said. “Try to stay out of your head, Nukkun.”

“Huh? Uh, thanks. I’ll try.”

She waved. As soon as the doors were open, she was off.

Stay out of my head? Did I look that anxious? Granted, I *was* anxious about the club-ending smut out there in the world somewhere, but was it really that obvious?

I grinned and shook my head wearily as I exited the train. I reached into my pocket for my phone and my fingers felt paper. I’d nearly forgotten. Yanami had stuck that there back at the student council room.

I pulled it out and read. One semester finals grade report for a Basori Tiara of year one, class B.

***

Lunchtime. I stood in the Tsuwabuki High School cafeteria, food tray in hand. And kept standing.

"*Aaand* nowhere to sit…"

Everything leading up to now had gone smoothly. The guy in front of me had ordered meal A. A perfect template that I then stole to place my own order. But every single table was occupied by established friend groups. Was I seriously gonna have to eat standing up?

Preparing myself for that possibility, I surveyed the cafeteria once more. There, in a dark corner, I found a circular table for four with only one occupant: Shikiya-san.

I weaved my way through the maze and sat across from her. "Sorry. Didn't see you got here first."

"Not…long ago," she puffed.

I'd messaged her last night asking if we could talk. The cafeteria was to be our meeting place. I'd actually never been here before. Frankly, it didn't even cross my mind as a potential lunch option in much the same way one didn't consider playing multiplayer games without friends.

"Not going to…eat?" she asked.

"Oh. Right. Yeah."

I broke some menchi-katsu patties apart with my chopsticks just as the next table over exploded with laughter. I glanced off to the side awkwardly.

Talking to Yanami had (debatably) prepared me for feminine conversations, but still. I was having lunch with not only a senpai but a girl. In a cafeteria packed with people. Food was the last thing on my mind.

Shikiya-san dug into her grilled mackerel, unblinking. "You wanted…to talk."

"Y-yeah. I did." I downed some tea. "We found this in the student council room."

I slid the slip of paper Yanami had graciously burdened me with across the table. Two numbers asserted themselves above all

others: 202 out of 228.

Shikiya-san shot one cursory look at it then returned to butchering her mackerel. “Tiara-chan…has bad grades.”

“You knew?”

“She’s also…bad at hiding things.”

Couldn’t argue with that. I pushed it toward her. “Can you return this to her? Tell her you found it on the ground.”

“She doesn’t like…people knowing.” She picked out a piece of bone and held it up. “Pretend…you didn’t see.”

“So you can’t return it.”

She grunted. “Use it… Get closer.”

I started to put the paper away but stopped. Something hung in my mind and wouldn’t let go. Like a bone stuck in my throat. It had been gnawing at me since yesterday, and now I knew how to put it to words.

“You planned for this to happen, didn’t you?”

“What makes you say that?” Shikiya-san breathed, head lolling slightly to one side.

“Yesterday was just too perfect. Awfully convenient that we did everything you said, got into the room without issue, *and* managed to find something worth using exactly where you told us to look. It makes me wonder if you meant for us to find this slip all along.”

Silence.

“I want them…to get along,” she finally replied. “Tiara-chan. And Tsukinoki-senpai.” Her mackerel in sufficiently edible pieces, she finally put her chopsticks down. “That’s all.”

She was misleading me. She also wasn’t lying. But something told me this was a red herring. Their relationship wasn’t the crux of this.

“What happened between you and Tsukinoki-senpai last year?”

Shikiya-san said nothing. But I could see it. The stirrings of something behind those stark white contact lenses.

Before I could continue pressing, the mood went straight into the trash at the arrival of some surprise guests. "*Heeey*, Yumeko! Thought you said you were busy. Mind if we sit here?"

"Heya! Sorry if we're buggin' ya."

My heart did a backflip. The glitter. The flashy nails. The undone buttons and high skirts. No question about it. The gyaru squad had arrived, and they were flanking me on both sides. Based on their badges, they were second-years. Friends of Shikiya-san, I guessed.

"Feel free," she muttered, all too ready to be done with my line of questioning. "Join us."

"Hey, first-year," one of them said. Let's call her Gyaru-senpai A. Gyaru-senpai A eyed me curiously.

"Uh, m-me?"

"Who else?" Gyaru-senpai B cackled. "So what are you? Her *boyfriend*?"

"Her b-boy—?!" I shook my head vigorously. "No! She's, er, an acquaintance of one of my senpai."

More cackling from both of them.

"Damn, lost to an acquaintance of an acquaintance!" one of them howled. "Can you believe that?"

"No, wait, I totally know this one," the other said. "Watch. Yumeko's gonna go behind our back and start dating him."

"W-we're not...!" I blubbered. "Senpai, do something!"

Shikiya-san clicked her chopsticks, head sagging again. "Are we...dating?"

"Last I checked, no!"

I couldn't win this battle. An introvert against not one, not two, but *three* Gyaru-senpais?

I was so petrified I hardly noticed Gyaru-senpai A plop a sausage onto my plate. "Sorry for teasin'. Have an apology wiener."

“Better eat before the bell rings, future boyfriend.”

“Right,” I sighed.

Speaking of, I hadn’t seen Shikiya-san take a single bite of her fish yet. Only mangle it. Did she even eat people food?

I snuck a glance at her plate, and the thing was picked clean. When and how?

My eyes rose and met hers. She had a cup of tea in her hands now in place of chopsticks. “What?” she rasped.

“N-nothing!”

I retreated to my miso soup. It had gone cold, but not quite as cold as those eyes.

***

I made my way to the student council room after school, quadruple checking that the slip of paper was still safely in my pocket.

I had the perfect plan. Step one: Pretend to pick something up off the ground. Step two: “Well now, what do we have here?” Step three: Someone comes out and I act like I found the grade report just lying there.

“I’m a genius.”

Could someone say foolproof? Especially the “what do we have here” bit. That would really sell it, assuming my voice didn’t betray me after half a day of disuse.

As soon as I rounded the corner, all that went out the window. Basori Tiara, my very target, was already there, pacing down the hallway with a stern expression. She didn’t notice me until we were nearly toe to toe.

“Oh, excuse me,” she yelped just before we collided. Then she looked up. “Oh, it’s *you*. The literature club president.”

What was that supposed to mean?

I bit my tongue for political reasons. “You look like you’re looking for something.”

“I am, as a matter of fact. Thank you for noticing.” She started to skirt past me, then noticed the slip of paper in my hand. The color left her face. “Wh-where did you find that?!”

“This? Just picked it up. Over there. Talk about coincidence, huh?”

Nailed it. Was I a master improviser or what?

Tiara-san reached out, so I extended the slip, but she skipped past that and seized my whole arm instead. “Follow me, please!”

“Huh? B-but why?!”

She dragged me around the staircase to a dim little nook underneath.

Quite literally backing me into a corner, Tiara-san stepped up on me with fire in her eyes. “Did you see?”

“I mean, I caught a glimpse,” I squeaked.

“You saw!”

Another step closer. A sweet-smelling deodorant tickled my nose.

“Sure, okay, I saw, but it’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“It’s *humiliating*!” she exploded. “A member of the student council cannot be barely squeaking by finals! We have an image to uphold! *Nobody* can know!”

“I-I see your point, but can we take a step back? Literally and figuratively. Deep breaths. In and out.”

“R-right. Of course.” Tiara-san put a hand to her chest and took a long drag of air. “Okay. Yes, that’s better. You see, I’m an outlier. Every one of my peers on the council is an exemplary student. It’s an example I’m trying to live up to, but it’s…a work in progress. I just don’t like people seeing the sorry state I’m in now.”

Some student council we had. But wait a minute. “The top fifty students get posted on the public bulletin board, though.

Couldn’t someone just realize your name isn’t there and figure it out?”

She froze.

“Tiara-san?”

“Do *not* call me Tiara!” she snapped. “So you’re telling me everyone already knows I’m not top of my class?!”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.”

“And all the times I inserted myself into the honor student circle. Had they all just been playing along for my sake?”

That was outside my diagnostic capabilities.

Tiara-san visibly deflated. I put the report in her hand and closed her fingers around it. “Hey, no one actually cares about other people’s grades all that much. Anyway, I’m gonna go now.”

Before I could vanish, she cut off my escape. “Wait. Does anyone else know?”

There was murder in her eyes. I knew when I was on the cusp of a Bad End, and now was most certainly one of those times.

“N-nope. Just me,” I stammered out. Tiara-san still held me in her gaze. “Basori-san?”

“Just tell me what you want already.”

“Sorry?”

“What, you brought me to this dingy corner and shoved my grades in my face for nothing?” she spat. Her voice was pure venom. “Fat chance. You want something in exchange for your silence, don’t you?”

Technically *she’d* brought *me* to this dingy corner, but whatever.

Before I could refute all that nonsense, three letters appeared in my mind: R, P, and F. Maybe someone was looking out for me after all.

I cleared my throat. “Well, since you’re offering, you could…”

I trailed off. Tiara-san was biting down on her lip, trembling. This was no negotiation. It was blackmail. Maybe she’d swung at

the lit club first, but two wrongs didn't make a right. I was honestly a little ashamed of myself.

Tiara-san tensed up. "I could what?"

"Y-you, uh..."

She wrapped her arms around her body. "You don't mean... something *untoward*, do you?!"

I did not.

"Look, I don't want anything," my guilt said for me. "If it bugs you that much, I could maybe help you study or something."

Tiara-san looked at me like I was crazy. "*You*? Help *me*?"

"Well, not me specifically, but some friends of mine scored top of our year."

"You expect me to believe the smartest people in our year are your friends?"

Guilt: resolved.

"Believe me, don't believe me, it's up to you, Tiara-san. But I can reach out to them for you if you want."

She considered it for a second, then nodded. "I think I'll take you up on that. Also," she pulled out a flip phone and glared at me, "don't call me Tiara."

***

Twenty-four hours later, location: not Seibunkan's flagship store for once but the burger place just next door. Nuggets and soda securely on my tray, I scanned the second floor until my eyes snagged on the pair in Tsuwabuki uniforms sitting shoulder-to-shoulder by a window. Ayano Mitsuki and Asagumo Chihaya. None the worse for wear after last summer's fiasco with Yakishio.

Ayano spotted me and held his hand up in greeting. I returned the gesture and sauntered over. "Hope I'm not interrupting cram school for you guys or anything."

“Don’t sweat it, Nukumizu. I consider it a miracle you reached out to us at all.” Mr. Sixth Place on the finals gave a genuine grin.

“Although, this did come out of the blue. Who’s this friend of yours that needs our help?” Asagumo-san stared up at me inquisitively with big chipmunk eyes. Here was the number one highest scorer on the finals out of all the first-years, nibbling on apple pie like a rodent.

If anyone knew the path to exemplariness, it was these two.

I sipped on my soda. “She’ll be here in a bit. She’s been having some issues with her studies, so I brought you guys up and she…”

I thought about my next words. I didn’t want them caught up in the web of lies. Not these two.

“Nukumizu?” Ayano offered a french fry that Asagumo-san readily gobbled up. “She what?”

What was I, a PDA magnet? Why every time?

“It’s, uh, kind of a long story if you guys have got the time.”

They nodded, so I got to explaining, starting from the bag check incident. At least now the only secret I had to keep was Tiara-san’s less than stellar ranking.

Asagumo-san’s forehead gleamed eagerly. “I understand perfectly. You’re trying to manipulate her into giving you that what’s-it book back. I think I can help you there!”

At least her heart was, uh, in the right place.

“I do need that book back,” I said, “but today’s not about that. Basori-san’s the one who needs the help.”

“It sounds like you’re about to be in hot water, though,” Ayano pointed out.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to manipulate her. What’s best for us in the long term is to earn her trust. Show her that the lit club isn’t all bad. Granted, that might be wishful thinking.”

Creativity was the bread and butter of the lit club, and that included BL RPF. Tsukinoki-senpai had written it with (albeit idiosyncratic) purpose. The fact that it had extended beyond its

target demographic wasn't entirely her fault. It never would have happened at all had Tiara-san not been so hell-bent on antagonizing us. Which yet again raised the million-dollar question: What *was* her problem with Tsukinoki-senpai and the lit club?

I noticed a fry hovering in front of me and ate it before realizing where it had come from.

Ayano grinned. "I hear you. We've got your back."

"No objections here. What Mitsuki-san said." Asagumo-san looked up at him with admiration.

"The way this'll go," I continued, "I'll technically be the one needing advice, and Basori-san is only sitting in for curiosity's sake. She doesn't want people to actually know she's struggling."

I checked my watch. It was time. And like clockwork, the woman of the hour came up the stairs carrying her tray.

Tiara-san beelined for us, then bowed low. "Evening. I'm Basori, class B. Thank you for letting me join you."

Wait, she was being normal. How come I only ever got the pointy end of the stick?

"Nice to meet you. I'm Ayano, from class D. This is—"

"Asagumo, class F. Sit, Basori-san. Please."

She took the seat adjacent to me. A few pleasantries and comments about the weather later, she sent me a glance that told me to get on with it.

"So anyway," I said, "how about we start with you guys' study habits?"

"Oh, it's nothing special. If you think it'll help..." Asagumo-san gently cleared her throat. The question was technically genuine. I was curious myself. What made a smart person smart? "I suppose I begin with memorizing the corresponding textbook and any related supplementary materials."

To the wind went my hopes. "Like, the *whole* textbook? Every page?"

Asagumo-san nodded enthusiastically. “Including colophons. Other than that, I’d say I’m fairly average. I listen in class, commit to memory everything the teacher says, then review as necessary.”

That day, I learned I was not average. Evidently, Tiara-san had arrived at the same conclusion, judging by her gaping jaw.

“W-was that helpful at all, Basori-san?” Asagumo-san asked timidly.

Tiara-san only stared. At me. Hard.

“Wh-what about you, Ayano?” I moved on out of fear for my life.

“Nothing crazy,” he answered. “Cram school helps, but otherwise I just try to study ahead when I can and review what we learned in class. Here, like in English today,” he took out a notebook, “I made sure to copy stuff from the blackboard in a way that makes it easy to revise. And I jot down anything extra the teacher says, like here.”

“You don’t copy everything?”

“Only the main points. If I miss anything, I can always borrow a friend’s notes.”

I imagined having the social network to make such a feat possible. Fascinating. I sipped some more soda.

Tiara-san stopped fiercely writing things down long enough to look up. “Thank you. And what sort of structure does your cram school take?”

“Right, well—”

Asagumo-san slapped a hand over Ayano’s mouth. “Mitsuki-san’s curriculum is centered around language, including both fundamental and practical principles. I could give you a copy of last month’s schedule if you’d like.”

Where did that come from?

Ayano gently pried his mouth free and held her hand, grinning wearily. “I could have told her that myself, Chihaya.”

“Not as thoroughly. No one knows you better than I do.”

“What about myself?”

“Including yourself. How many times do I have to remind you what your passwords are? I keep telling you to stop setting them so willy-nilly. That’s how you forget them.”

“You’ve got me there. But how do you know all my passwords in the first place?”

Asagumo-san merely smiled at that. Ayano smiled back. What shady crap was she up to now, and did I want to know? Also, how long were they going to sit there holding hands like that? Seriously.

Tiara-san resumed staring at me. I wished she wouldn’t make a habit of it, but I couldn’t exactly blame her this time.

***

After disbanding, I found myself at the Tokiwa Street shopping arcade with instructions from Kaju to buy coffee beans on my way home.

Our meeting with Ayano hadn’t lasted twenty minutes but had been an intriguing one nonetheless, learning about the inner machinations of a so-called honor student. When they weren’t flirting, that is.

Tiara-san hadn’t stopped staring holes into her notebook and mumbling to herself. “Our schedules really aren’t so different. Maybe I ought to consider cram school…”

“Could be worthwhile. There’s plenty around Tsuwabuki,” I said offhandedly before getting a move on. Weirdly enough, Tiara-san did too. Still glued to my side. Like she was following me or something.

Well, now this was just awkward.

Before I could figure a way out, someone’s stomach growled. It sure as heck hadn’t been mine, and that left only one culprit. What I could see of her face, currently hung in shame, was bright red.

“You good?”

“I, um… I-I haven’t eaten since breakfast. Excuse me.”

“We were just at a burger place. Why didn’t you eat there?”

“Chapter three of the school regulations, ‘Extracurricular Activity,’ article four, paragraph three: ‘Students are to return straight home without delay or detour for entertainment purposes.’”

Ah. Silly me.

Tiara-san sighed, dissatisfied by my lack of reaction. “*So*, when I heard we would be meeting at a fast-food restaurant, I skipped lunch. Because while detours are typically prohibited,” she produced her student handbook, flipped through it, and shoved it in my face, “amendment three, ratified as of the turn of Reiwa, adds the following clarification: ‘To a reasonable extent, such that the student’s hydration or general health is not put at risk.’ And I happened to be dying of thirst, thus constituting a sufficient enough emergency to justify our meeting under school guidelines.”

“I see,” I replied blandly. I learned something today. And began to doubt something else. “Say, you have many friends?”

“As a matter of fact, I do! Not that it’s any of your business!”

“Well, I mean, if you’re not allowed to take detours or whatever, how do you hang out with anyone? Do you just get left out?”

“I do not! I go home first, get changed, and *then* meet up!” Which she would have to first be left out of the group in order to accomplish. Tiara-san put a hand on her hip and shot me a bitter side-eye. “And just how long are you going to follow me, by the way? All the way home?”

Who did this girl think she was? “Uh, nowhere. I’m going to get coffee beans at Waltz down here.” No reply. She hung her head again. I would have too. “You can tag along if you want. Maybe you’ll find something to eat there.”

This was my (imaginary) little sister here. Hypothetical filial ties bade me look out for her.

But she refused. “I-I’m fine, thank you! I appreciate the help and have a good day!”

Tiara-san bowed and darted away. She didn’t get far before splatting straight against a pillar.

“Whoa, are you okay?!”

She dropped to her haunches, cupping her face in her hands. She stood again a few seconds later with a pronounced groan. “S-sorry. I was just a little flustered. I’m fine now.”

Was she gonna be okay on her own? It was getting more and more doubtful by the second, but I also didn’t think she’d want me of all people walking her home.

“C’mere,” I said. I brought her to a crêpe shop just by the entrance to the arcade. “They’re not super busy. Wanna grab something?”

“But the rules say—”

“The rules say no detours so long as it doesn’t put your health at risk. And last I checked, food’s just as important as hydration. You haven’t eaten since morning, so I’d say this counts.”

“I suppose…you do have a point.”

Wow. She *was* easy.

I went with strawberry. Tiara-san, after an absurd amount of waffling, went with chocolate custard banana. One bite, the perfect harmony of sweet and sour hit my tongue, and I was convinced all over again that this was *the* place to do crêpes, to say nothing of that crispy dough.

“Not gonna eat?” I asked.

Tiara-san clutched her crêpe, staring at me like she was trying to see through me. “You’re used to this.”

“I’m what?”

“I’m not just one more in a long line of women you’ve smitten with this same song and dance, am I?”

“Basori-san, I can barely *talk* to women.”

“And yet here we are.” She took a bite. Her expression softened immediately.

“Good, huh?”

“Irrelevant. I’m only filling my stomach. But yes. It is good. I’ve never had a crêpe before.” Another bite.

“I thought girls lived and breathed crêpes.”

“Who told you that?”

Anime and light novels. And I quite liked the fantasy world they painted for me.

I watched the shop from across the street. A line was starting to form, and it was a surprisingly diverse demographic. More adults and men than I would have thought. Usually, I only went here with Kaju, so this was technically my first time with anyone other than family.

And now I was nervous.

I glanced clumsily to my side. Tiara-san was already looking at me. “Thank you, by the way. Your friends had valuable insight.”

“No problem. Hopefully it’s helpful.”

“I doubt it. We’re leagues apart.” She studied her half-eaten crêpe for a while before continuing. “I was top of my class in junior high, you know. That’s why I came to Tsuwabuki—to rub elbows and improve alongside people who are like me.” She laughed at herself. “It was silly, looking back. To assume that everyone would have the same starting line. We all passed the same exam, so I thought, surely… But that was never the case. No one’s born equal. My best is someone else’s normal.”

She zoned out for a while, listless, before snapping back to her senses. “I’m sorry, I’m not usually like this. Don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s fine. I get it.”

Getting into Tsuwabuki was nothing to sneeze at. It was one of the best high schools in the Mikawa region. But put a bunch of kid geniuses together and it wouldn’t take long to realize that “genius” was a relative term. Grades weren’t everything, obviously,

but try telling that to a high schooler whose future was on the line. When your worth as a person could be simplified to numbers on a page, what else was one to do but play the game laid out for them?

I soon realized I'd stopped eating, then noticed Tiara-san staring again. "What?"

"What did you place on the finals anyway?"

"Huh? Me? Why?"

"Because you know mine, and fair's fair. Come on, it can't be worse than me, can it?" She gave me a playful grin. It might've been the first time I ever saw her do anything but frown.

"Like, forty-seventh, I think."

"Oh." There went her smile. "Not bad, actually."

"Technically worse than I did last semester, and it's nothing compared to Ayano and his girlfriend."

"Most people are nothing compared to them." Tiara-san finished off the last of her crêpe and started wiping her mouth with a handkerchief. "I think I'll get going now. Thanks again."

"Oh, uh, sure. No problem."

She tossed away her trash, turning her back to me. It didn't seem any more inviting than usual, but maybe the invisible scales between us were a little more even now.

There was, of course, still the matter of the book. I got to finishing my own crêpe while I wondered what in the world we were going to do about that.

When suddenly she hurried back.

"Forget something?"

"Your ranking. You weren't lying to me, were you?"

"You can always check the board."

"I realize that. I don't distrust you. It just hit me that you might be exactly the kind of realistic goal post I need." Was that supposed to be a compliment? Tiara-san made a face that was

halfway between smile and snarl. “I want your help again. *Your* help this time.”

“Me specifically? Why?”

“My dirty little secrets don’t come cheap,” she stated. And then she was gone, this time for good.

I sighed hard and heavy. Words could not describe how little I wanted to keep involving myself, but I couldn’t exactly tell her to buzz off under these circumstances either.

My eyes wandered while I pondered the future. There was a Seibunkan branch by the crêpe shop, and there, behind the glass doors, frozen in time, I saw it. The thing. Tiny was she, the one called Komari Chika.

Bundled up all cozy in her coat, her eyes were fixed on me. What now?

“You smack into the glass and bug out or something?” I said as I swung the door open.

Komari scurried out, temper already on the rise. “I-I was shopping. A-and you have a draft to wr-write. Do it.”

“I’ve got the gist. I’ll get to it.”

“Y-you sound more like Yanami every day, Nukumizu.”

Indeed. She’d make a good plagiarism detector.

“Glass houses, Komari. We wanna have everything ready by the end of the year. Think you’ll make it?”

“I-I’m done. I’ll s-send it later.”

She always was a fast writer.

“Gotcha. I’ll start on mine once I’m home.” I went on my way before she could realize how hard she could dunk on me if she wanted.

Komari grabbed the hem of my jacket. “Th-the student council vice president was with you. A-are you two dating?”

“What? No. It’s because of that friggin’ BL. Feel free to help sort that out, by the way.”

“O-only couples eat crêpes together.”

Where’d she get that from? Anime and light novels?

“They’re just crêpes. Heck, I’ll share some with you, if you want.”

“Y-you… You’re sure?”

“Yeah? Why wouldn’t I be?”

What did the girl need my permission for?

I learned very quickly when she shuffled up, leaned in, and took a big chomp of mine.

“I-it’s…crispy.” Komari’s eyes opened wide as she savored every chew.

“Oh, so that’s how we’re doing it,” I mumbled.

Komari’s face went beet red in an instant. She leapt back with a squawk. “Y-you didn’t…?! I thought…!”

Sensing an impending overload, I played it cool, smiled reassuringly, and offered her more. “Hey, I don’t mind. It’s good, isn’t it? Think of the strawberries. Strawberries good. Yummy treat.”

“Strawberries…sweet.”

“That too. Here, have another bite.”

Komari shook her head. “I-I have to go!”

In her haste, a tiny, palm-sized package fell out of her coat pocket.

“Hey, you dropped something.” I knelt down to pick it up. It was wrapped up neat in green paper and adorned with a red ribbon.

“Th-that’s mine!” Komari yelped, swiping it away from me.

“Yeah, I know. Relax. I’m not gonna steal it.”

“Y-your, um… I h-heard your birthday is on Christmas. Is that true?”

She was all over the place today. “Yeah. Where’d that come from?”


!!
CHOMP

“Well, um…”

I didn’t get much else out of her before she froze up, clutching the package to her chest. Seriously, what was her deal?

“You okay? I’ll give you the rest of my crêpe if you’re hungry.”

That earned me the evil eye. “D-don’t push it!”

And then she dashed off. Leaving me to wonder what I’d done to deserve that.

I looked down at the remains of my crêpe. More specifically, at the little teeth marks lining the very edge of it. I contemplated them long and hard before shutting my eyes and inhaling the rest of it whole.

Literature Club Winter Activity Report: Komari Chika—Single and Ready to Mingle! Chapter 6

Winter came to the duchy with force. The first snow of the year came up to the ankles, and the cold creeping through the halls encouraged haste upon anyone who dared traverse them, as it did me.

I, Sylvia Luxéd, former noblewoman, had graduated from layabout to supervisor of the realm’s finances.

Pushing through the large, heavy doors, I acknowledged the man at the desk on the other side. “A moment, Philip, if you would.”

The handsome young man raised his head, his demeanor softening upon recognizing his visitor. “Sylvia. I thought I received your report yesterday.”

Few could recognize the sincerity behind his smiles, a fault of his perfection. Cold and calculating, down to his physical appearance.

My lips threatened to curve up at the sight of him as I thudded a heavy stack of documents onto his desk. “In which I brought to your attention the reality of our dwindling coffers, as a

consequence of rent exemptions on land. I've outlined several strategies to remedy this. Seeing as we can't rightly neglect maintenance of the highways—"

Philip held his hand up, frowning. "The remedy has been discussed, Sylvia. The contract has been signed."

"And frankly, I still question the wisdom of surrendering a monopoly on ore and salt to the private sector. Think about the ramifications, Philip."

"I have, and while I share your concerns, I'm prepared for the worst of them. The terms explicitly state a duration of only three years." He thrust a bundle of papers at me, a copy of said contract. I took them. "We face an uphill battle after generations of isolationism. You yourself agreed that we ought to seek her aid in opening up the region to trade, did you not?"

"Yes, but..."

The prince spoke true. The routes developed by merchants would serve as vital arteries, bringing food and commodities to a people in desperate need of both. Written-in protections would ensure fairness to those people as well. It was a good deal.

Too good.

Philip smiled at me in an attempt to assuage my worries. "Have faith. Elisa is a merchant second and a human being first. I trust her word. We have a history."

Even more reason to be concerned, I thought to myself.

The opposite party in the contract was an Elisa Volta, the youngest daughter of a count from the bustling mercantile city-state of Nazrt to the south, and an old school friend of Philip's. I'd met her only once myself. She was a beautiful girl, bright with a head of fiery red hair. The way she got on with Philip was reminiscent of a man and his blood brother.

"Now, if you have a moment, I have a report here from the Svere Region," the prince moved on. "Dock tolls are on the decline, and there are concerning rumors of a leviathan having appeared in the harbor..."

In contrast to them, what were *we*? Work associates? I was more than willing to help ease his burden, but I often found myself comparing. They were close friends, while we were superior and subordinate. Elisa had status. Wealth. All the things a duke and prince could want in a partner. I couldn't help wondering whether *they* were the ones meant to be…

I quieted those thoughts. Now wasn't the time.

So I waited until there was a lull before saying, "Philip, I have a favor to ask."

"Ask it."

"I'd like to throw a party this weekend. Could I borrow the parlor?"

Philip scrunched his brow, confused. "Certainly, but I'm not sure we'll have the chefs or entertainment to spare, to say nothing of invitations."

Despite lording one of the realm's most preeminent duchies, Philip was not an ostentatious man. It wasn't long ago that they had endured a famine, after all.

I smiled at him. My turn to assuage his worries. "It'll be a small thing. Just friends. Tea, some snacks. Conversation. We won't need anything superfluous."

"That aside, the end of the year is coming up on us. I can't say I'm keen to create more work as the busy season arrives."

Philip's estate forced its servants to take time off at the end and beginning of the year. He would never admit it, but it served no real practical purpose other than it being a small kindness to them.

"Rest assured, they'll be paid overtime by yours truly, and there is already no shortage of volunteers. Frankly, I worry for my purse."

"Over-what? You and your confusing terminology." Philip smiled and shrugged, defeated. "As you wish. You may hold a modest tea party, if that will make you happy."

"Which you'll be attending, of course."

“Do I look the type to sip tea and gossip to you?”

“In my countr—in, er, books I’ve read, the twenty-fifth of the twelfth month is a time of gathering for friends and family. It would mean a lot to me if you’d join.”

“Sylvia, I…” I flashed what was supposed to be a beaming smile at him, but the nameless anxiety swirling inside me distorted it. Philip seemed to take notice. He smiled back in that gentle way that had smitten me when we first met. “Very well. I’ll set aside time.”

I hurled the shovel back, carving out a comparatively minuscule dent in the snow-logged courtyard. “That should do,” I sighed, wiping away a layer of sweat from my brow.

The way clear, I thrust my shovel into the ground. Nothing like some light exercise to clear the mind.

It had been many months since my family disowned me and I landed in this foreign country, and still Philip and I occupied the tantalizingly ambiguous space between friend and lover. I had begun to suspect that his promise to officially make me his fiancée had been nothing more than lip service.

“I’d prefer to not be dumped twice in a row,” I grumbled to myself. I put my hands on my hips and stretched my pleasantly aching muscles, when a shadow made me jump.

“You did all this yourself, Sylvia?”

“Elisa!”

With a voice like velvet, braided, iridescent hair burning in the sunlight, golden ornaments glistening, and features still somehow twice as beautiful as all of it combined, Lady Elisa’s smile had the power to topple nations. “Willful as always, I see. How have you been?”

“Well, thank you. You too, I hope. What brings you here?”

“Paying Philip a visit. To see if he has any more deals for me.” She winked, wrapped her arm around my waist, and guided both of us toward the estate. “Would you mind showing me to him? How are things with His Grace?”

“Strange, to say the least. Just a few days ago, the estate was in an uproar over rumors flying around that he had a bastard in Granbourg.” Remembering the frantic gestures and expressions he had displayed during his many attempts to explain brought a smile to my face.

“And were they substantiated?”

“Not in the slightest. He was away studying magic at the purported time of birth. There was no way he could have been in Granbourg.”

I looked at Elisa, still chuckling. She wasn’t laughing. “Yes. Yes, I suppose he couldn’t have been.” She stopped and crossed her arms.

“Something the matter?”

“No. Nothing. Anyway, I’ve brought that berghpine sapling you requested. I had your people bring it into the estate, if that’s all right with you.”

“Oh, you found one? That’s perfect! I wanted it for tomorrow’s tea party.”

Berghpines were a type of conifer practically identical to momi fir trees back in my home country. I’d asked her to see about acquiring one last time we met but didn’t expect her to remember.

“A tree for a tea party?” she questioned.

“That’s right. For decorating. And we’ll have snacks and exchange gifts. That sort of thing.”

“Like Christmas,” Elisa muttered. “I see.” She resumed her path to the estate.

I started to follow but instantly froze. Were my ears playing tricks on me? Had she just said “Christmas”?

“Sylvia? Coming?”

“Y-yes. Apologies.”

A trick of the wind, surely. I followed. And the matter of the bastard. Surely my imagination and all was well.

The Christmas party was soon, and there was much to do.

***

Another day, another strategy meeting. Yanami and I were on our way to the club room on Shikiya-san's summons.

I finished apprising her of yesterday's events, which only seemed to sour her mood. She caught some kind of red cube with her mouth in as disgruntled a manner as one could manage. "If you want something done right… Nukumizu-kun, are you *sure* you're not trying to bag her?"

"Of course not. And you're the one who swore up and down it had to be me."

"That does not excuse the crêpes. You couldn't have let me in on those?"

I didn't deserve this. And what, was Komari her snack snitch now or something?

That question and many more filled my mind. Including: "The heck are you eating, anyway? Erasers?"

"Contrary to popular belief, no, I don't eat erasers. Not yummy." She would know. "It's kanten jelly. My gramma had some and I'm addicted now. S'good with hot tea."

She presented a wrapper to me labeled "Jelly Mix" in big, bold letters. I recognized it actually. They were a Mikawa specialty. Little gelatinous fruit cubes sprinkled with sugar, and yeah, they could be pretty addicting.

"I thought you were on a diet," I pointed out. "For the new year."

"Uh, I am. What do you think I'm eating these for?"

Sometimes I wished I could understand her.

Noticing the blatant exasperation on my expression, Yanami wagged her finger at me. "Clearly someone doesn't pay attention in biology class. Don't you know that glucose makes your organs all good and stuff?" Maybe. Depending on what she meant by "stuff." She flipped her hair back like she was about to rock my

world. “I’ve had an epiphany, Nukumizu-kun. As long as I’m walking while I snack, my body will burn through all that excess sugar faster, which means I’m essentially *training* my body to digest better. I can sculpt the perfect metabolism.”

“Can you? Were *you* paying attention in class?”

“I don’t write the textbooks, Nukumizu-kun. I am but the humble learner.”

Hey, she was the expert. I couldn’t tell her anything her scale wouldn’t be saying next week.

Upon entering the club room, we found Shikiya-san already there. On her lap, a petrified Komari.

Something had happened here. Komari, somehow paler than her senpai, flapped her lips at us like a dead fish.

“Sorry we took so long,” I said. “You got here fast.”

“Komari-chan and I were…playing.”

“That a fact? Good for you, Komari.”

“D-die,” she spat.

Yeah, she was just fine.

I took a seat across from them and got to business. “So I actually just met with Basori-san yesterday.”

Shikiya-san nodded. “She told me…about your date.”

“Ah, okay. That saves time then. Also, wasn’t a date.” It felt weird knowing people were talking about me.

“Since when did you two get all buddy-buddy anyway?” Yanami tossed back a couple more jelly cubes, nudging me with her elbow.

I chose my words carefully. How much could I actually share? “She, er, was thinking about starting cram school, so I introduced her to Ayano and Asagumo-san.”

“And then you got crêpes,” Yanami said flatly. She wasn’t gonna let that go, was she?

“Not important. Let’s focus on getting that fic back. Personally, I think we stand a better chance being genuine rather

than antagonizing—”

“Boy,” Shikiya-san interjected. “Are you close yet?”

“I’d say she maybe doesn’t hate me anymore, but I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

“Nearly there… One more push. Tiara-chan is easy.”

That, I didn’t doubt.

“Just one thing.” I sat up straight and cleared my throat. “Obviously Basori-san doesn’t like Tsukinoki-senpai. I get that. And while I think it’s unreasonable, I can also understand how that extends to the lit club as a whole.”

Shikiya-san stared, waiting, forgetting to blink.

I continued, “At first, I was on board with doing whatever it takes to get that book back. Ends justify the means, y’know? But the more we got to talking, the less I felt that way.”

“Guilt…?” Shikiya-san rasped.

“That’s part of it. She’s just so naive, it’s like…she reminds me of a chihuahua.”

“Literally how?” Yanami butted in. “You’ve lost the plot.”

Clearly my genius analogy had flown over a few heads. “Think about it. Imagine a chihuahua named Tiara-chan. Would you pretend to be Tiara-chan’s friend just to steal her favorite toy? No, because you’d feel terrible, wouldn’t you?”

Yanami grimaced. “I’d literally report you to the police, Nukumizu-kun.”

“I-I might kill you.” Komari was out for my blood lately.

I shook them off and faced Shikiya-san again. “All of this comes back to Tsukinoki-senpai. It feels wrong for me to manipulate and play games to fix someone else’s mistake.”

“If you’re sure…” Shikiya-san snaked her arms around Komari and squeezed. She squeaked.

“Not that I intend to throw all the blame on Tsukinoki-senpai. She wrote that book for the club, because that’s what the club does. Whether that was right or wrong this time is for the parties

involved to decide." I met Shikiya-san's pale eyes, piecing my own logic together as I went. "So how do you think the student council president would react if she knew about this?"

Shikiya-san fiddled with Komari's hair. "She would…laugh it off."

There was no bad blood between her and Tsukinoki-senpai. Senpai's tastes and her tendency to go a little overboard weren't secrets. What all this amounted to was a victimless crime.

"You want to…rebuild bridges," Shikiya-san wheezed.

"Right. Well, not in the sense that I want to use her or anything."

There were still a lot of things about all this still bugging me, one of the chiefest among them being Tiara-san's devotion to the president. Did she really mean to make a public incident out of a raunchy, gender-bent BL fic involving her? And at a faculty meeting, no less?

Shikiya-san's interest moved to Komari's ears next. I watched her shake like a leaf while I sorted through my thoughts—and just then, a knock came.

Wow. Someone knocking for once?

"Come in," I answered.

The door opened slowly. "Excuse me, is Yumeko-san here?"

It was the student council treasurer, Sakurai Hiroto. His shoulders sagged in relief upon noticing Shikiya-san.

"Yes, boy…?" she said.

"You must not have checked your phone. We've been trying to reach you. The broadcasting club is requesting a meeting."

Shikiya-san's head fell to one side. "Broadcasting club…?"

Sakurai-kun sighed. "You and Hiba-nee are leading the closing ceremony. Hiba-nee's waiting for you in the gymnasium."

"But…" She stayed where she was.

I attempted to nudge her with a smile. "Don't let us keep you. Duty calls and all that."

“Right… Sorry.” As she strained to stand, she leaned into Komari’s ear and whispered, “Want to come?”

“N-no!” she blurted without a second thought.

“Suit yourself… I’m going.”

Lowering her plaything to the ground, Shikiya-san shambled out of the room, but Sakurai-kun didn’t follow. He remained planted where he was.

“Not joining her?” I asked.

“I wanted to talk with you all,” he said. “Could you spare a moment of your time?”

Yanami stood and dragged a seat over. “Sure thing. Take a seat.”

I searched his bearing for a hint. What could this be about? Yanami, meanwhile, fished out a bag of chips. Salted seaweed flavor.

“Want some?” she offered.

“Thank you, but I’m not much of a snacker, personally.”

“Hm. Okay.” She opened it anyway, down the middle and splayed out for sharing. But why, though?

“So that diet of yours,” I started to say.

“There’s four of us. Split the calories and it’s not so bad. It’s all part of the plan, my friend.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but what did I know?

“So what did you want to talk about?” I asked.

Sakurai-kun grinned uncomfortably. “Yumeko-san’s been a regular visitor, I hear. Hiba-nee—our president, that is, is worried.”

Yanami’s tea-thirsty eyes glinted. Her chip hand kept moving. “You call her that a lot. ‘Hiba-nee.’ What’s that about?”

“We’re cousins, actually. It’s an old nickname that’s stuck with me.” His poker face never faltered, but his eyes did narrow slightly. “Yumeko-san hasn’t been a bother, has she?”

“Oh, well, uh, I wouldn’t go that far,” I stuttered. “We’re sort of the ones who invited her, so I can’t really come down on her too hard.”

“I thought as much,” Sakurai-kun sighed. “She can be…free-spirited, to put it politely.”

“Is Shikiya-senpai that much of a problem?”

He shook his head. “Don’t misunderstand. She’s excellent at her job on the student council. She just comes with a little more… upkeep. Granted, you could say the same about Hiba-nee and Basori-chan. Point being she’s well loved on the council.” His smile wavered a little. Oh, the burdens he must’ve carried.

“Well, I can promise she’s fine for the most part. It’s actually Basori-san I’m more concerned about.”

“Basori-chan? What has *she* done?”

“Er, it’s, uh, complicated,” I sputtered.

Yanami licked some seaweed off her fingers, then interjected, “She got one of our old members at the bag check a few days ago. Basori-san confiscated a fic she wrote, so our backs are sorta up against a wall right now.”

The chips were no more. So much for splitting the calories.

Sakurai-kun cocked his head. “A list of confiscated items has already been submitted to the faculty. I don’t remember seeing any self-published works on it.”

Had I heard him right? That could only mean one thing. “Did Shikiya-san or the president stop her?” I wondered out loud.

“Typically, bag checks are conducted solely by first-years. I don’t think our senpai would have gotten involved.” That explained why neither had been present that day. Sakurai-kun went on, “It’s meant to be a sort of on-hands training to familiarize newer members with the practice of cooperating with those outside the council, divorced from their senpai. They aren’t exempt from potentially being reprimanded, after all.” He emptied the contents of his seemingly bottomless lungs. “Keeping Basori-chan’s feet on the ground has been a task, to say the least.”

“I see.” Then we could be certain Tiara-san was acting as a rogue agent in all this. I wondered whether she ever intended to go public with it at all, or if she was hiding it for some other reason.

“I’ll gladly speak to her if she’s caused you any trouble.”

I rose from my seat, awkwardly scratching the back of my head. “No, I’ll talk to her. Is she in the student council room now?”

“She should be. Just her, I believe. She’s organizing documents at the moment.”

A one-on-one with Tiara-san on her home turf didn’t sound like my idea of a good time, but it had to be done. I was open to arguments to the contrary, though.

***

I breathed in. Out. Straightened my necktie. One more step and I was in Tsuwabuki Student Council territory.

An apology first, for all the sniffing around. Then the book. Straightforward and honest, just like how we should have done this from the very beginning. She and I had talked enough that I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. She’d be reasonable. Surely. I hoped.

I knocked. No reply. I gave it a few seconds, then poked my head in.

Tiara-san looked up from her work. “Oh. It’s you. Thank you again for yesterday. Something I can help you with?”

“I had some things to talk about, if you’ve got time.”

“I suppose I can set some aside.”

Like Sakurai-kun had said, she was alone. It was now or never.

I stepped closer. Tiara-san continued working, unfazed. “Two things: an apology and a favor.”

“I know this is about Tsukinoki-san’s book.”

I nearly choked.

Tiara-san flipped a page. “I also know Shikiya-senpai’s been visiting you at the literature club lately. That day we spoke in the hallway was all part of your plan, I assume.”

“I, um…”

She wasn’t totally right, but she wasn’t totally wrong either. Us meeting in the hallway had been a coincidence. The grade report, less so.

Tiara-san pinched her brow and sighed. “Of all the people to find that slip of paper, it had to be you. And now you’ve got dirt on me.”

“Huh?”

Had she not figured out that her grade report had been planted?

“What do you mean, ‘huh’?” she demanded. “My grade situation is extremely important to me. I’d like to reiterate my request that you don’t go spreading it around.”

“O-of course. So the book…”

Her pen stopped scribbling. “That nasty thing using the president’s likeness.” She shot up, nearly kicking her chair backward. “I don’t think I’m out of line when I say measures need to be taken against the one responsible for bringing *smut* on campus, senpai or not.”

She wasn’t. That, we were in full agreement on. I nodded. “You’re right. But listen—she knows what she did was stupid. And what would the president do? Would she get bent out of shape over this, do you think?”

Tiara-san yielded slightly. “The president is a kind woman. You’re right. She’d let this slide.”

We were getting somewhere now.

“Exactly. She and Tsukinoki-senpai were friends, weren’t they? I really think we can settle this with an apology letter or—”

I screwed up. I’d gotten ahead of myself. Because the moment the word “friends” left my lips, Tiara-san changed.

“*She* was vice president of the student council just last year,” she blurted. Tsukinoki-senpai? That was news to me. The current vice president circled around the table to stand chest-to-chest with me. “But she left. In the second semester of her second year, she fell out with Shikiya-senpai, and she left.”

“Fell out? What happened exactly?”

“I don’t know, and frankly I don’t care. She abandoned her position. She abandoned her people. That’s enough for me to draw the conclusions I need to about her.”

“But the president doesn’t seem to hold a grudge,” I argued. “And I mean, Shikiya-senpai seems anything *but*—”

Tiara-san stepped up to me, heaving like she had a million things to retort. I shut up and waited. But she failed to decide on one, and the fire left her. “You’re right again. I’m alone in this war. She can screw up and screw up and ruin things and everyone will still have her back while I’ll be painted as the villain. Because I hold her responsible, but I don’t have all the facts.”

She turned away and started to pace. “It was Shikiya-senpai who offered me the position. It should’ve been her, but she insisted the vice presidency go to me.” That surprised me. I’d convinced myself she was just following in the footsteps of her beloved leader. “We spent a lot of time together, Shikiya-senpai and I, since Sakurai-kun’s basically the president’s keeper. She took care of me. Things were going well at first. At first.”

Tiara-san showed no signs of stopping. I smelled a trauma dump.

I glanced at my watch. “Gosh, would you look at the time.”

Tiara-san whipped around and stormed back. “Do you know what she did to me?! Before I knew any of this, do you know what she did?!”

“I, uh, couldn’t begin to guess.”

“She put my hair in pigtails! She gave me fake glasses! She said I looked ‘better’ that way!” she raved.

Pigtails. Glasses. Wait a minute…

“Like Tsukinoki-senpai?”

“Like *Tsukinoki-senpai*!” she snapped. “What was she thinking, making me into some dress-up doll?! How do you even begin to unpack all that?!” I couldn’t say. I really couldn’t. “And she’s so handsy. Those *hands*. Did you know she can unhook your bra through your shirt?!”

“Hey, whatever you get up to in your private time.”

“Who said anything about private?!”

Could have fooled me.

Tiara-san cleared her throat and tried to get her trembling under control. A bit of red still clung to her cheeks. “Point being! I have to get it through to her and the president that Tsukinoki-san needs to be dealt with properly!”

Dealing with Tsukinoki-senpai already seemed like their specialty at this point.

“I totally hear you, Basori-san,” I said. “So you want to turn her book in to make a point, basically. Is that right?”

“Basically. I guess.”

I was following then. That left one other loose end. “But the president is a main character. Are you really sure it’s smart to put a spotlight on it?”

“After the necessary elements have been censored to comply with public decency, of course.”

Ah, censorship.

Tiara-san went to the lockers along the wall, stood on her toes, and slid a thin book off the top.

“Is that it?” I asked.

She nodded sullenly. So that was where she’d hidden it.

She pinched it with the tips of her fingers like a dirty diaper. “And another thing. How can she, as a fellow woman, objectify one of her own like this? It boggles the mind. High school students have better ways to spend their time than—”

Something about what she said struck me as odd. It took some time to pinpoint exactly what, but when I did, it hit me like a

truck. “Tiara-san, hold on,” I interrupted her.

“Stop calling me Tiara! And what? I’m not giving it to you.”

“I know. Just, you know there are no women in that book, right?”

“What? Yes, there is. She appears in this story. President Houkobaru Hibari herself.”

“Right, because it’s RPF.”

“RP-what?”

Where do I even begin with this? “So is it safe for me to assume that you’ve looked inside already? I mean, you know the president’s in it.”

Tiara-san twitched. “F-for purely bureaucratic purposes! I had to be sure of what I had! And yes, for the record, I did see damningly inappropriate illustrations! J-just a little bit, I mean! Oh, get on with it, will you?!”

“I’m just saying no women actually appear. I think. It’s all men.”

“You’re confusing me. The president is a woman.”

“Well, uh, so there’s this thing called ‘gender-bending,’ and long story short, the president is a boy for the purposes of that work of fiction.”

“‘Gender-bending’? I’m sorry, I’m still lost.”

Her and most everyone else in the world.

“So that’s BL. Boys’ Love. The president is a man in it, and she gets, y’know, ‘involved’ with other men. In a romantic way.”

“What?” Tiara-san turned her eyes up in thought. And think she did. “What?! The president?! A man?!” She threw open the book. “But then this illustration,” she rambled to herself. “How does that…? What? Wait.”

“Uh, Basori-san?”

There was madness in her eyes. “And what about…?” She gasped. Flipped the page. “Oh. Oh my goodness.”

“Hello?”

“But that can’t go in there.”

Did I have to be here for this?

Tiara-san let out a breath and finally slapped the book shut. “This… This is evil.”

Right. And how’d that apple taste, Eve?

“I hope you understand why making that public knowledge isn’t a good idea,” I said. “Consider the president’s reputation. Let’s settle this nice and quietly.”

My words seemed to go in one ear and out the other as she examined me, still in a bit of a flushed daze. “What was your name again?”

Wow. Just *wow*. I didn’t even know what to say at this point. Other than, “Nukumizu.”

“Nukumizu?!” The book flew open again. “Th-then the shadow leader of the magic academy. He’s…?”

I was the what of the what now? Hadn’t expected isekai.

“So, uh, yeah. I’m technically a victim of this too.”

“So in this scene, *you’re* the one who… Oh. Oh my god.”

She resumed debauching, glancing back and forth between me and my fictional counterpart, occasionally dropping the odd, “Oh my god.” It was a surreal experience, standing in the same room as some girl reading erotica about you. I could have done without it, personally.

“So can I, y’know, have it back now?” I stepped closer.

“Huwuh?!” She hugged the book tightly to her chest and retreated. “Wh-wh-what’re you doing?! What’re you gonna do to me?!”

“What? N-nothing! And keep your voice down before someone hears this out of context!” We were treacherously close to a life-ending controversy here. I held my hand out as a show of trust, but that only sent her reeling against the wall. “I’m not—”

“St-stop! I’m a woman!”

I could see that.

“I’m not going to touch you. The Nukumizu in that book? Different Nukumizu. Not me.”

Gradually, the edge left her glare. And then she slid down to the floor. “R-right. Of course. I lost my cool there. No thanks to you.”

How was this my fault?

Tiara-san collected herself and studied the book’s cover. “You have a point. To call this indecent is a gross oversimplification of the matter.”

“Right. Which is why I’ve been saying—”

She shook her head before I could finish and fixed my eyes with hers. “I’ve changed my mind. Let’s strike a deal, you and I.”

A deal. Did she want something from me? But what? There were a dozen ways this could go, and too many would be right at home in a BL plot.

Without missing a beat, Tiara-san declared, “I’ll return this to you—if you join forces with me.”

I blinked. “Are… Are there forces *against* you?”

“Everyone, really. I have a responsibility to the student council. I’m just doing my job. But they hold it against me like I’m some dictator. Look at yourself. I’m the villain in your story, aren’t I?” The girl had a point. She glanced at the president’s desk. “The president is too kind to have a heavy hand. She’ll let anything slide. And even Shikiya-senpai—talking to her is like talking to a brick wall sometimes. I swear, the number of times I’ve told her to stop feeling my neck…”

“Look, keep the bedroom talk in the bedroom.”

“That’s not what this is!”

Tiara-san collapsed into a chair, holding her forehead. All these mood swings had to be exhausting.

Things had gotten very complicated very fast. I faced Tiara-san in her chair. “It’s easy to say I’ll have your back or whatever, but I need specifics. What are your terms? How long would we be

working together? To what end? I need that book back, but it wouldn't be a very fair trade if I had to sell my soul for it."

"Yes. You have a point." She thought for a moment, then clapped her hands together. "I've got it. I want you to settle things between Shikiya-senpai and Tsukinoki Koto for good, before school lets out for winter."

"What? Why?"

"Because I'm sick of constantly being caught in the middle of whatever it is they have going on. The Tsuwabuki Student Council has four members. No more, no less. It's time we exorcised some ghosts."

"And if I can't do it?"

Tiara-san cradled the book like a tender baby. "I complete a *thorough* inspection of this little item, then turn it over at the next faculty meeting."

Eight days to the closing ceremony. There, at the heart of a whirlpool of external whims and other people's problems, I came to a late realization: I was in too deep.

Intermission:
Thoughts and Prayers

IN THE SHADE OF MOMOZONO JUNIOR HIGH'S MAIN building, a boy and girl stood opposite one another.

"I'm sorry, but I can't date you." The black-haired girl bowed politely.

The boy let her answer sink in, then asked quietly, "Is it your brother? Is he that important to you, Kaju-kun?"

"He is. I mustn't be distracted until my dearest Oniisama finds true happiness."

Her eyes were unmoving. The boy could see that, and he acknowledged that arguing would be futile. "I understand. Sorry for dragging you all the way out here."

"I'm flattered that you feel that way about me, though. I hope this won't affect anything between us and I can continue to count on your leadership in the student council, President." Kaju smiled gently.

If he wasn't sure of his defeat before, the boy was now. "Which one of us is the senpai again? Hey, say I outgrow that brother of yours. If one day I become a better man than him, could I ask you again?" But the boy was not one to take defeat lying down.

Kaju sharpened her gaze to a fine edge. "Impossible."

"Uh, what?"

She stepped closer. "Never has there been nor shall there ever be a better man than my Oniisama! The light of his soul is no affectation, but true radiance born from—"

Before she could dig her hole any deeper, a second girl appeared and grabbed her by the arm. "All right, you've made your point, Nuku-chan! Time to go!"

"Gon-chan? What are you doing here? Wh-why are you tugging me?"

“So sorry, Senpai. Just gonna borrow her real quick.”

Gondou Asami hauled her friend away from ground zero. Once they were alone, she let out a sigh. “Nuku-chan, you’ve seriously gotta learn to pull your punches.”

“But it’s not my fault!”

“Yeah, it kinda is.” Gon-chan bopped Kaju on the head. “That’s the eighth one this year. Would it kill you to let ’em down easy?”

“Well, what am I supposed to say? I have my dearest Oniisama to worry about.” She nursed her noggin, pouting.

“Your dearest Oniisama can coexist with a boyfriend. You could have anyone you wanted.”

“I don’t want just anyone. I have very discerning taste.” Kaju proudly thrust out what little there was of her chest to thrust out.

Gon-chan rolled her eyes. “And what sorta guy suits your palate then, hm?”

Kaju tapped her index finger to her chin thoughtfully. “That is the question, isn’t it? I doubt anyone could match my Oniisama, but they’d have to be at least as loyal.”

“Oh? Do go on.”

“And just as kind, and just as good to me, and a little bit of a softy who can’t leave well enough alone, and someone I feel just as safe with, and someone who sleeps a little messy so I can fix their hair in the morning, and who hugs me in bed because they’re too groggy to realize I snuck in, and whose favorite food is shiro hanpen, and whose birthday is December 25th, and whose blood type is A, and who’s roughly two years older than me. If there’s someone like that, I would have no problem whatsoever swearing myself to them.”

“Oh. I see.”

Oblivious, Kaju’s eyes sparkled. “Do you think they exist somewhere out there? Personally, I suspect they could be hiding in plain sight. What do you think, Gon-chan?”

She didn’t have to think very hard. A certain “dearest Oniisama” came to mind. “Y’know, I just don’t know, Nuku-chan. But I’m prayin’ for ya.”

She stepped forward to stare at the sky with her starstruck companion. A westerly breeze carried a hint of salt from Mikawa Bay. There wasn’t a cloud to be seen.

Winter’s a-knockin’, she thought.

Loss 2:
A Small Kindness

FRIDAY. HOMEROOM. RESTING MY HEAD LAZILY IN my hand, I played through my confrontation with Tiara-san yesterday yet again.

"Join forces with me," she had said. And with every passing hour, the reality of that alliance weighed heavier and heavier on my mind. This whole thing had started with Shikiya-san's insistence that we had to play dirty and get in Tiara-san's business. Now, I was on Tiara-san's side, getting into Shikiya-san and Tsukinoki-senpai's business so I could "settle things."

"Yeah right," I mumbled a little too loudly.

Amanatsu-sensei paused her obligatory pre-winter break speech to glare at me. "Whazzat, Nukumizu? Got somethin' to say? Tell the whole class, why don'tcha? Don't 'vibe' with your 'cringe' teacher telling you not to go foolin' around with chicks? You think I don't have a date this Christmas, do you? Do you?!"

"That's not what I, uh…"

Amanatsu-sensei clicked her tongue and tossed her script away. Could we maybe get an adult for a teacher? "Whatever. You guys can read the rest yourselves. That's all for announcements. So anyway, get this. I got invited to my friend's wedding the other day." The chill that ran through the classroom just then, you'd assume Santa had come early. Sensei beamed. "It was great, lemme tell ya. The bride's speech was just, *oh*, chef's kiss. She said she used to feel *lonely* coming home to an empty house every night. Can you believe that?"

She laughed. No one else did.

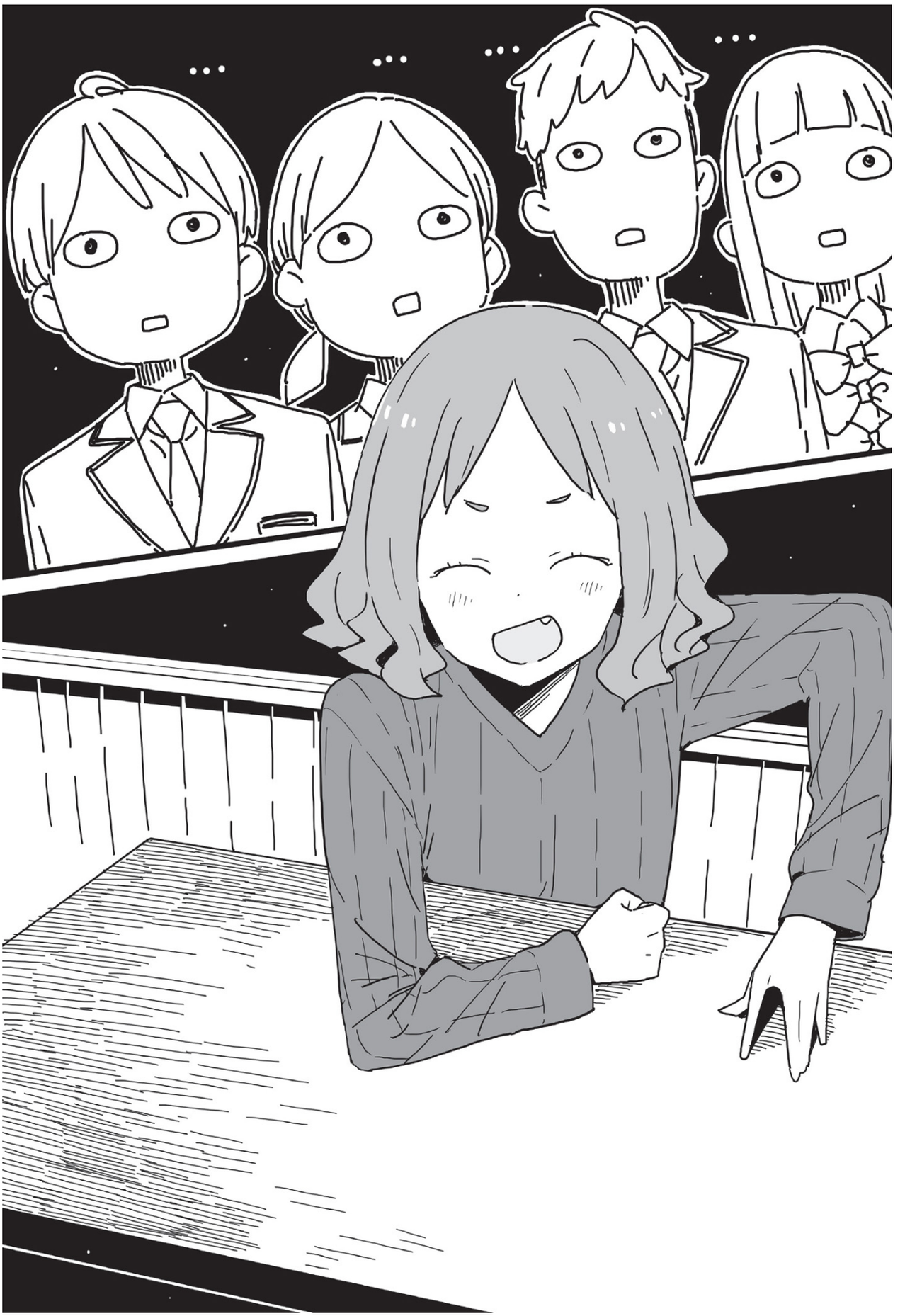
When she had laughed her fill, which took some time, she went quiet all of a sudden. Then she slammed the desk. "Pop quiz, class. How do you think *I* felt, coming home to an empty house after that? All dressed up with my wedding favor. Trick question, you don't gotta think. You'll learn. Give it ten years."

She didn't have to put that on us. But she did anyway.

A few seconds later, she faced us again, acting like the last minute or so had never happened. “All right, all right, simmer down, folks! That’s all for homeroom. I’ll have your report cards comin’ your way soon enough, so sleep while you little gremlins can this weekend!”

What a way to kick it off. I was reminded of that cat Sensei had adopted not too long ago. Wondered how they were getting on.

Once she was gone, chairs and desks started to scoot. I needed to get scooting myself instead of worrying about a grown woman’s private life. Shikiya-san had called another strategy meeting, on account of the last one being cut short. Yanami, by the looks of it, had already split.



I found it hard to work up the motivation, though. I was a double agent now and had to unearth some year-old baggage without letting it slip that Tiara-san was already on to us. How was I gonna manage that? This wasn't some anime. Unless…?

Interrupting my daydreams of a super spy anime version of myself was the gentle aroma of flowers and the sudden appearance of background music. I didn't even need to look up.

"Hey, Nukumizu-kun, got a minute?"

Himemiya Karen—the heroine's heroine who had felled the great Hakamada Sousuke in just two months, a hunk Yanami Anna had tried to conquer for twelve years and failed. Light itself seemed to play around her long, flowing hair, and her smile was bright enough to need to squint at.

"Uh, sure."

"Question: Are you free on Christmas?"

"Huh?"

I knew this trick. If I said yes, she'd sub me in to take her shift at work or something. Anyone as online as me knew that.

"It's against school rules to work, and I'm not in the market for a job," I said.

"What? Oh, Nukumizu-kun, you're so funny!" She giggled into her hand. Nailed it. I guess. "I'm talking about the closing ceremony. That's on Christmas, remember? We were thinking about holding a class party that day, if you wanna go."

Yanami had mentioned that, come to think of it. "Thanks for the invite, but I have plans."

"Plans?"

Technically true. Kaju would bring the roof down celebrating my birthday. Maybe even the neighborhood, considering she'd put out big LED lights with a countdown till the day of on our house, which probably made us seem like the biggest Christmas nuts in town.

"Can't make it?" a boy rumbled. Hakamada Sousuke stepped up next to Himemiya-san, a frown on that perfect face of his.

“Yeah, er, sorry. It’s been set in stone for a while.”

“You don’t have to be on time or stick around or whatever. You could just pop in.”

“Well, I…”

Himemiya-san gasped. “Hold it, Sousuke!”

“What?” he asked.

“Remember Anna-chan saying she might not be able to make it either? Think, silly!”

“Oh. Oh! Oh, crap, and I’m just running my mouth, aren’t I?”

“You do that a lot.” Himemiya-san poked his cheek playfully.

More PDA. More misunderstandings. How could they besmirch my dignity like that? “My being busy has nothing to do with Yanam—”

All of a sudden, the BGM changed. It was no longer bright and bubbly. This was dark and sinister. Shadows consumed Himemiya-san’s trademark radiance.

Only one person was capable of such witchcraft. And she was standing right behind her. “Still…here.”

Himemiya-san yelped and clung to Hakamada.

Shikiya-san shuffled up to me. “Something…came up again.” Her head drooped. “Sorry this…keeps happening.”

I took it that meant no strategy meeting. “Don’t worry about it. See you next week.”

Thank god for that. I made to stand when Shikiya-san flung herself across my desk. She brought her face nose-to-nose with mine.

I sat back down. “Y-yes?”

“Sunday… Free?” I was free most days, so I nodded. She tried to lift herself back up, failed, and then immediately crumpled to the floor, leaving her head resting on my desk. “Stairs…make me tired.”

“This is the second floor,” I griped. “Here, take my hand. Nice and steady. Help me out here, push those legs up.” I was starting

to feel like her nurse.

Eventually, she made it up, but not without me working up a sweat. I patted my pockets for something to wipe it with.

Shikiya-san dabbed me with her handkerchief.

“Oh. Thanks.”

“Sunday,” she breathed. “Same place.” And then she wobbled away.

Wait, what place? The “same” place? Where was that? I’d have to figure that out eventually. And let Yanami and Komari know. And tell them the meeting had been canceled and—for the love of God, would I ever know peace?

I slung my bag over my shoulder and started to leave before noticing the Himemiyas, still in each other’s arms, staring at me. “What?”

“She’s a second-year, isn’t she? On the student council?” Himemiya-san said. “You two seemed awfully close.”

“We’re not, really. She’s just like that.”

Hakamada raised an eyebrow. “She’s like that all the time with you, huh?”

“Almost puts us to shame, doesn’t it?” Himemiya-san chirped.

They snaked their arms around each other’s waists. I decided to keep to myself where I thought they could stuff those grins on their faces.

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The west annex hallway leading to the club room was pretty deserted. I double-checked that my message to Shikiya-san asking for clarification had gone through. She’d replied. Sunday, 3 p.m., at the board game café. She insisted that I didn’t need to worry about money, but letting her pay twice in a row didn’t sit right with me. Maybe I could bring cakes for her as a thank-you gift. Maybe Yanami wouldn’t eat them all this time.

No sooner than I sent her the “OK” did I get another message. Not from Shikiya-san this time. From Tiara-san.

It read, “I need your help. Meet Sunday, 2 p.m., at the karaoke place by Toyohashi Station.”

Karaoke seemed odd, but at least she’d included a URL. Still, that was bumping against my meeting with Shikiya-san a little too close for comfort. I started to tell her so but stopped.

A genius idea came to me. Instead of rescheduling so I’d lose *another* day, I could knock two birds out with one stone and end my meeting with Tiara-san early on account of prior plans. She couldn’t hold that against me, especially if they were plans with Shikiya-san.

I opened the club room door, quickly hiding a most devious smirk. Yanami and Komari had beaten me there. “Hey. Quick update.”

Cutting their heated Pretz versus Pocky debate short, I filled them in on the weekend itinerary. They weren’t thrilled.

“First crêpes, now karaoke?” Yanami pointed a Pretz stick at me accusingly. “Methinks someone is confusing duty with pleasure.”

As far as I was concerned, I was the only one doing anything to get that stupid book back, so she had no right. “Karaoke makes it easy to have some privacy. Don’t want a bunch of people hearing.”

“Wh-why not?” Komari snapped her Pocky in half, eyeing me suspiciously.

I couldn’t exactly tell her the truth, so I mumbled vaguely, “It’s complicated. But anyway, I can’t exactly invite a girl up to my room either.”

“But I’ve been to your room,” Yanami chimed in through a mouthful of Pretz.

Komari croaked, “Y-y-you have?”

“Dude pretty much dragged me there. Which is like, come on, who does that to a girl?”

This was historical revisionism in progress. She seemed quite pleased with herself, though.

“It was summer break, and *she* invited herself in,” I corrected her. “Plus, Asagumo-san was with us too.”

“Oh, right, now I remember. And you didn’t even serve us any tea or snacks. Two pretty girls in your room and no tea or snacks. Can you believe that, Komari-chan?”

“D-did… Did there need to be?” Komari with the common sense.

Yanami nodded confidently as she tore open her next pack of pretzel sticks. “A man is only as good as his dependability. Remember that.”

“Don’t remember that,” I cut in. “Anyway, I’ll be going to see Basori-san by myself.”

“But what about the thing with Shikiya-senpai?” Yanami sized up a pretzel stick with her finger, making faces at it. “Who thinks I can eat this in one bite?”

“Right, that’s at three at the board game place. Also, please eat it like a normal person.”

Komari frowned worriedly. “A-are you not coming?”

“I’m meeting Basori-san around two by Toyohashi Station. I’ll just wrap that up in thirty, then switch over. You guys go on to Shikiya-san.”

“Can’t. Got plans,” Yanami slurred. She had her mouth wide open and turned up like a baby bird.

“Oh. Well, you good to sit in by yourself, Komari?”

“Y-you won’t be late, will you?” she sputtered.

Between getting caught up in talking and train schedules, yeah, I probably would. She was likely gonna have to survive with Shikiya-san by herself for a while.

“Not by a single second. Trust me,” I told her. “Have I ever lied to you before?”

“A-a few times, yeah.”

Well then, what's one more for the pile?

"Just ask Lemon-chan," Yanami said with her mouth full. She'd actually eaten that thing whole.

"Yakishio?"

"She's suspended from track anyway. She'll prolly be free."

She was suspended so she could study. Granted, she probably wasn't doing that either. "Ask her for me, would you? You good with that, Komari?"

"S-sure," she replied.

"Then that'll be the plan. I'll meet Basori-san at karaoke, then meet up with you guys afterward. You and Yakishio just worry about being at the board game café by three."

Talk about convoluted. And we still had that journal to publish by next year, which I'd totally forgotten about. Were we going to have that done in time?

"We really don't have time for goofing off," I complained to myself.

Komari looked at me funny. "W-we're not goofing off."

"Huh?"

Yanami looked at me funny too. "In case you forgot, we still have to get Tsukinoki-senpai's book back."

Right. Yes. I hadn't, of course. Forgotten, that is.

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I stood cross-armed before my bed and the numerous articles of clothing strewn across it. In a few hours, I would be making my karaoke debut, and with a girl from school no less. Even if that girl was Tiara-san.

There was a word for this. I hesitated to bring it to my lips. "Am I peaking?"

"Oniisama," a voice came from behind me, "I brought tea."

Kaju held up a tray of refreshments with a smile. How long had she been there?

“Oh, hey. Thanks. You can set it down there.”

She put the tray down on my desk then looked at me sideways. “Why all the clothes?”

“About to go out. I was just wondering what to wear. This sweatshirt, maybe?” I picked it up. It sported a rather fetching image of an isopod. Pretty snazzy, if I said so myself. “What do you think?”

“Is that a roly-poly?”

“Woodlouse. Less roly, more poly. Their segments overlap different. That’s the easiest way to tell them apart.”

“I see. Fascinating. However, I’d recommend something collared. December isn’t a sweatshirt month.”

Since when? I must’ve missed that memo.

I held up a brand-new shirt. “How’s this? Looks like it’s made of English newspapers, doesn’t it?”

“Let’s go with something simple. Like this here. Graphics and patterns are taboo around Christmas time.”

How many memos had I missed? Fashion was hard.

“I was thinking these for pants.”

“Jeans?”

“Fancy, huh? See the paint splatter? And it’s got this chain coming off the waist—”

“Lovely. But the Oni Matsuri onis will be looking for denim. Chinos would be safer.”

Oni Matsuri was a Toyohashi festival where a bunch of demons went around tossing white powder at locals.

“That’s in February,” I pointed out.

“You never know what TV program might be getting a head start. You wouldn’t want your outfit getting all messy, would you?”

She had a point. I didn’t aspire to looking like a powdered doughnut.

Kaju put aside the dropouts then held a shirt up to my torso. “This and a brown cardigan, I think. I’ll have one out in a jiffy.”

“Why do you have a men’s cardigan?”

She grinned, entirely unaffected by my question. “A good sister never leaves her brother’s appearance to chance. Don’t you remember? The light novel you lent me said so.” Now that she mentioned it, I did remember that particular volume. Couldn’t argue with that logic. “Now, I presume all this is for a woman.”

“H-how’d you figure that out?”

“I knew it!” Kaju lurched forward, eyes gleaming. “Is it a date? Is it with Yanami-san? Komari-san? Somebody else?”

“Whoa, slow down. Not a date. We’re just talking.”

“But Oniisama! A man and a woman meeting in private? Frankly, I think I ought to be there to conduct an interview!”

“That won’t be necessary, because it isn’t a date. I’ve also got a thing right after with multiple people.”

Maybe shouldn’t have shared that last part.

Kaju’s happy face slid right off. “A doubleheader…?”

“What?” Something told me she hadn’t suddenly gotten into baseball without my knowledge.

She shook her head. Slowly. “They can’t keep their hands off you. The world has its eyes on you, dearest Oniisama. I understand. But I can’t advise this course of action. The least they deserve is separate days each.”

Who were “they”?

“We’ve got a lot going on at club. That’s all it is. Now shoo. Big bro has to get changed.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I do. Out.”

It took some animal-handling technique, but she went, mewling all the way.

Much as I hated to admit it, she'd gotten to me a little. All a date was, in essence, was a man and a woman going out together. But then again, I'd done that with Yanami in the past, and "date" was the last word I'd use to describe that outing. Romantic intention was thus vital to classification.

So Basori-san. Did I have such inclinations toward her?

"Nah."

She was a Yanami.

I fastened the last button on my shirt and shot a glance at the jeans laying unused on my bed. *I* thought they were pretty cool.

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The karaoke place wasn't far from Seibunkan's flagship store, and I quickly secured a booth. I checked my watch. Just past one in the afternoon. No way I was going to make my karaoke debut with an audience.

"That was close."

The drinks had been the first pitfall. Foolishly, I'd tried to order a soda at the front desk, and the kind employee had to explain to me how the drink bar worked. And apparently there were different *types* of karaoke? If this had been the real thing, that'd be two strikes already.

I perused the food menu, then noticed a phone on the wall. Was that how you ordered? It was worth a shot while I was still getting my bearings.

I picked it up. Almost instantly, someone on the other side chimed, "Front desk!"

No dial tone, no nothing? Just like that? I'd expected a few button presses at least.

"Hello?" the employee urged. "Can I take your order?"

"What, uh... What's popular? Yeah, okay, I'll do that. Thanks."

I clicked it back into its holder, sweat pouring down my face. I wasn't going to last at this rate.

In an attempt to escape the pain, I slipped out to hit up the drink bar. Someone was already there, so I found a spot behind her to wait and zone out until my turn came.

It didn't. The girl in front of me had two glasses, one full, one empty. While she filled the empty one, she chugged the full one, then swapped and did the same thing with opposite cups. She was an endless hydration machine. The sheer gluttony reminded me of someone. And that half-up, shoulder-length hair. Where had I seen it before?

Soda girl turned around. "Oh, hey, Nukumizu-kun. How's it going?"

I groaned. "What are you doing here, Yanami-san?" Strike three. I hadn't recognized her with her hair all different.

"Your little sis told me you were going out all gussied up. Had a feeling you were coming to scope out the place before your hot date, and whaddya know? Can you say, 'called it'?"

I could have. But I wouldn't. "Not a date, and I've never been to karaoke before. I wanted to know what I was getting into."

"Hey, I feel ya, pal. I used to do the same thing with Sousuke. So where's your booth?"

"Why? I thought you said you had plans."

"'Cause I got time. Stop looking at me like that."

I didn't, the whole way back. Yanami followed regardless, of course. As if this couldn't get any more annoying.

She plopped down on the couch and glanced around. "Sousuke and I went here together one time, actually. Y'know what? I think it was in this booth." Her expression darkened almost instantly. "But that was before...stuff. Right."

"Hey, check out the food menu," I quickly interjected. If she was going to butt in, she was going to have to keep the brooding to herself. "Any recommendations?"

“The french fries are good. Sousuke and I shared a plate. He used to joke a lot about how I ‘eat too much.’”

I considered teaching her the difference between a joke and genuine advice, but then a knock came. An employee entered.

“We’ve got an onion ring tower here!”

It was a sight to behold. Yanami beheld with renewed vigor. “Nukumizu-kun, did you know I’d be here? Or were you just thinking of me?”

“Uh, neither?”

“You softy, you. It’s okay. You don’t have to say anything. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you, but I’m here now.” She wasted no time stuffing her face with fried onions. Certainly not enough for me to actually give her permission to.

“I literally had zero intention of doing this with anyone other than myself.”

“Then why order all this?” she mumbled through full cheeks. “It’s gonna go cold before Basori-san even gets here.”

What I absolutely *wasn’t* going to admit was that I’d picked up the phone, panicked at hearing another human on the other end, and ordered the first recommendation I heard. So instead, I told her, “For you, of course. Figured you’d show up.”

Yanami grabbed her soda and gave me a thumbs-up. “Well said. Now I hope you brought your textbook, ’cause class is in session.” She reached for some sort of remote and started poking the screen with a stylus. “So this is how you control everything. Get familiar with it.”

“You pick songs with that?”

“Songs, check lyrics, change the key, all kinds of stuff.”

I thought it looked pointlessly complicated at first, but now I saw that it was out of necessity.

“What’s this menu?”

“That? Oh, that’s…”

Class was indeed in session. Miss Yanami's instructions and explanations were surprisingly easy to follow. She'd make a pretty good lecturer for senior citizens or something. They'd probably feed her till she popped too. Perks.

"You've learned well," she said at the end of the lesson. "Now you shouldn't look stupid." She stood. "We've got some time left, so how about a quick song?"

I checked the clock. Twenty minutes till two. "I dunno, she might show up early. She's punctual like that."

Yanami gripped the mic with both hands and squinted at me. "So?"

"Look, I'll cover your tab if you go."

"Oh-ho," she droned. Had an owl possessed her?

I hadn't thanked her yet. Maybe that was it. Couldn't forget my manners, even for Yanami. I bowed. "Thank you for the lesson. Don't forget anything when you leave."

There. Covered my bases, *and* I'd included a gentle reminder at the end. Was I good or what?

She kept on squinting.

"Uh, Yanami-san?"

The owl masquerading as my clubmate kept its omnipotent, piercing eyes on me the entire time it went. One more *"oh-ho,"* and she was gone.

I was left to ponder. What had I done to peeve her off? Was it dessert? Should I have ordered dessert first? Either way, it could wait. Tiara-san took priority.

I cleaned up the room and shot her an email with the booth number. I pretty much only ever used email for newsletters or for making accounts, so it felt like navigating foreign land. It took me way too long to find the "send" button.

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The knock came at two on the dot. Tiara-san came in and took Yanami's spot on the sofa.

"Nukumizu-san. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Nah, just got here," I lied, sneaking a glance at her outfit. She wore a white-collared navy dress that would have been perfect for a relative's wedding. Definitely not for a date.

"Why are you staring at me?"

"No reason. Why did you pick karaoke anyway?"

"Privacy and the proximity of help should you try anything funny. I can think of no better place to scheme." She puffed her chest out. That second comment hadn't escaped my notice.

"Okay. Well, there's a drink bar if you're thirsty."

"I brought a water bottle." Was she really doing this again? She returned my confused look with a glare. "The *only* reason I picked karaoke as our meeting place was to avoid prying eyes and ears. We are *not* here to have fun."

She proceeded to neatly arrange a mosaic of colorful pamphlets onto the table.

"Cram schools?"

"You went to the same one as those friends of yours, didn't you? I wanted to get your opinion."

So this wasn't about Shikiya-san and Tsukinoki-senpai? Then again, she *had* made me promise to help her with her studies, but my god. It never ended.

"I mean, I stopped going, so if you want someone a little more informed, I can get in touch with them again."

"I'd rather you didn't. They're good people, but I'd prefer not to be made witness to...that again. A-at least it wasn't on campus! I'll say that much!"

Fair enough. I opened up the pamphlet for my old cram school. "I can't really do online lessons, so in-person classes were a must for me. That's the biggest reason I went with this one. Good study rooms and lots of resources too."

“I see. I was also considering private tutoring. Can you speak on that at all?”

“Never actually thought of it. Not big on strangers, so it never crossed my mind.”

“Are teachers in a classroom not strangers?”

She made an excellent point.

What was it about her today? She seemed less thorny than usual. At school, she was usually mad about something or other, but as we talked she even deigned to *smile* every so often. It was kinda cute. I preferred this version of her.

She noticed me watching her and locked eyes with me. “What?”

“N-nothing. Anyway, we’ve got a little time.”

I reached for the remote. The time had come to make my public debut. Yanami’s teachings echoed in my mind.

RULE 1: Ballads are not for newbs.

RULE 2: No anime songs. Even the popular ones.

RULE 3: Joke songs are situational. Pick them wisely.

RULE 4: Act natural. No one likes a show-off.

RULE 5: I said no anime songs!

She must’ve had some dark, tragic backstory involving anime soundtracks. Unfortunately, those were pretty much the only things I knew the lyrics to.

While I fiddled with the remote, Tiara-san pulled out a textbook on classical literature. “Uh, Basori-san? What are you doing?”

“Studying,” she said. “Didn’t you bring anything?”

“Wait, we’re like, actually studying?”

Tiara-san scowled. “What part of ‘I need your help’ did you not understand? What did you think we came here for?”

To sing, maybe? Frankly, I had no other answer.

She handed me a book of English vocab. “You can borrow this.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I obeyed and got to studying. In a karaoke booth. With some girl I barely knew.

I’d barely memorized my third word before repurposing the book into a shield while I observed her. She had her hair up, just like at school. No accessories of any kind. No hint whatsoever of a blush or a shy glance.

Tiara-san grumbled at her verb conjugation tables with absolutely zero romantic intent.

After some time, she sat up and stretched. “I could use a break. Some music?”

“First, I actually had something I wanted to talk about.”

If this wasn’t a date, I had no reason to hold back.

Tiara-san looked me over then shut her textbook. “The matter with Shikiya-senpai, I’m guessing.”

I nodded stoically. “You asked me to settle things between them.”

“I did. In return, you get your book back.”

“But neither of us has any idea what it is that even needs to be settled. Should we really be involving ourselves in things we know nothing about?”

Tiara-san poured some tea from her water bottle into the cup-shaped cap and breathed in the steam. No one said anything for a long while. Until the exact moment I opened my mouth in an attempt to break the silence. “They don’t hate each other,” she uttered. “As far as I can tell.”

She took a sip.

I thought before replying. “You’re saying they might come to an understanding if they talk things out.”

“Maybe. Or it might just make things worse.” She locked eyes with me. “Maybe they know that. That existing in each other’s periphery is what’s best. It’s not far-fetched when you think about it.”

I turned away. She wasn’t wrong. “One other thing. Why are you so invested in their relationship?”

“I told you already. I’m tired of living in their shadow.”

“That’s nothing you can’t solve by just ignoring them. Tsukinoki-senpai’s graduating soon. She’s got entrance exams. Why not leave well enough alone?”

She exhaled. “You may be right.”

“But that hasn’t stopped you from getting involved. Why couldn’t you look away? What makes this so important to you?”

“I…” Tiara-san looked down at the contents of her cup. “When I think about the way Tsukinoki Koto shut her out… Shikiya-senpai can look so sad.” She downed it, then glared askance at me. “Is that enough of a reason for you?”

It was. “Sorry,” I replied quietly. “I shouldn’t have been that aggressive. But try to give Tsukinoki-senpai the benefit of the doubt.”

“That’s a big ask when she hasn’t given me the slightest reason to have even a remotely positive impression of her.”

“Okay, granted, she can be a little—er, *very* out of pocket, but she…tries to do the right thing. Sometimes she succeeds. On the whole, she’s a good person. For the most part.”

“You’re generous, I’ll give you that.” Tiara-san sighed. “I despise the irresponsible. I despise people who make my senpai sad. But most of all, I despise people who make a mockery of everything I stand for.”

That last part was fair enough. There was no defending that BL RPF, as much as I was willing to defend the act of writing itself. That said, writing and publishing were two very different things. I would have rather she did less of the latter.

“I’ll keep thinking,” I said. “Don’t forget the book. You made a promise.”

“As did you, and I trust you to take it seriously.” She returned her attention to her textbook.

Now to find a way out of here. I pulled out my phone to check the train schedule.

“I was serious about cram school,” Tiara-san said suddenly, flipping a page. “I have a little brother, so I’ve been struggling to make a final decision.”

“Why?”

“He joined a soccer team recently. His away games cost money, and we’re a family of plain old office workers.” She dragged a highlighter over a sentence. “If I ask, I’m sure my parents would allow it, but I want to make sure I do it smart. I don’t want to cause them any unnecessary stress.”

She said no more. For some time, she studied in silence.

“My parents said to tell them once I found what it is I want to do,” I added. “So they could help me, they said. No matter what it is.”

Tiara-san stopped taking notes and looked up. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Just wondering if your parents aren’t the same.”

“You’re one of the lucky ones then.”

“Huh? I mean, we’re not rich. Both my parents work.”

“I’m not talking about money. Not that the Basoris are badly off in either case.” She started to say more before pressing her lips together. Her entire demeanor suddenly softened. “Forget it. I can’t do this.” She locked her fingers together and stretched her arms up. “To be honest, my goal today was to get under your skin.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“You used Shikiya-senpai to try to trick me into returning the book. I think I’m entitled to a little payback.” That was extremely fair. Tiara-san saw the defeated grin on my face and scowled. “Don’t misunderstand me! That was not an invitation to try and cozy up to me in earnest! The school rules specifically state,

‘Relations between male and female students are to be wholesome and respectful,’” she rambled at mach speed, “so I’ll thank you to keep our interaction to the absolute bare… What do you keep grinning for?”

“Just relieved to see the same old Tiara-san again.”

She recoiled. “Wh-what, like I’m not myself unless I’m yelling?! And don’t call me Tiara!” Fuming, she fished a workbook out of her bag. “That’s it. How good are you at math?”

“Decent enough, I guess.”

“Good. Teach me, ally of mine.”

I was cutting it kind of close to my next thing. Did I have time for this?

Tiara-san didn’t wait for me to decide. “I understand the law of cosines and sines but not actually how to put it to practice.”

A problem with her understanding of the law of cosines and sines, no doubt.

I peered across the table at the problem she was pointing to. “Kinda dark to see.”

“Then move over here.” She patted the spot next to her on the couch.

“Huh? There? Like, right next to you? Are you sure?”

“Are you going to tutor me or not? Don’t make it weird.”

Well, now I *felt* weird for being the only flustered one. I relocated and caught a light whiff of makeup. Tiara-san wore makeup? I spotted a mole on her neck I’d never noticed before.

“It’s this one,” she said, scooching the workbook to my side. “Do you understand this?”

Banishing stray thoughts from my mind, I squinted in the dark to get a good look. She’d done that particular problem partway already.

“It’s driving me crazy,” she went on. “I can’t figure out what I’m doing wrong. Is there a typo in the problem or something?”

“It…looks to me like you’ve mixed the two formulas up.”

Tiara-san fell quiet. She scribbled something with her pencil, then flipped the book shut. “I see. The typo was in my brain.”

Happened to the best of us.

That lovely phenomenon known as second-hand embarrassment came with force. I was about ready to get out of there, and stood to do so when Tiara-san grabbed my arm.

“Still problems you need help with?”

Her head was down. “No. It’s something else.”

“Okay?”

She twiddled her fingers, still not looking up at me. “Studying and our senpai were the main goals, of course, but there’s, um, something else I meant to talk to you about. Something that has to stay between us.”

Something that had to be told on a weekend. Where no one could hear. What could it possibly be? Unless… Unless I *was* peaking for real?!

Tiara-san’s delicate lips trembled. Hints of pink began to creep up her neck. I gulped.

“N-Nukumizu-san!”

“Y-yep!”

“Is there—”

Anyone I was seeing right now? My ears were bugging out, but surely that was what she’d asked.

“N-no, I’m not. Not right now.”

“What?” Tiara-san finally raised her head. “I asked if there was a continuation to the book.”

“Book? What book?”

“For god’s sake, the one I confiscated!” she snapped. “Is there a sequel or not?!”

“Uhhh, I mean, she’s studying for college. There probably won’t be one for a while.”

“I see. College is important.” Her shoulders slumped.

“You want a sequel?”

“*What?!* D-d-don’t be ridiculous! It ended on a cliffhanger and I was curious! That’s all!”

Meaning if there was a sequel, she’d want it. To each their own and all, but to have one’s BL awakening with a gender-bent doujin of your role model…that was some pit to fall in. I doubted she’d ever find her way out again.

“D-don’t you dare tell anyone I asked that either!” she sputtered. “*Especially* Tsukinoki Koto!”

“Can I tell the president?”

Tiara-san blanched. “Of course not! Are you insane?!”

No more than you, I admitted inwardly. Probably shouldn’t have gone so hard on the teasing, though, on second thought.

“You’re, uh…kinda close there, Tiara-san.”

“Huh?”

In her panic, she had brought her face right up to mine. And in my cravenness, I’d retreated to the point that we were one stiff wind away from being a sandwich.

Tiara-san shot up, the red in her face reaching her ears, head hung. “Y-you were flustering me! And *stop* calling me Tiara!”

“Right, uh, sorry.”

I’d done it now. A boy and a girl, alone in a room, with *this* mood hanging in the air? I couldn’t. I simply couldn’t. I could handle Yanami much better than this.

A glance at the clock reminded me I had only a few minutes left till my meeting at three. “I should go. Shikiya-senpai’s probably waiting for me.” I didn’t sound very apologetic. I wasn’t.

Tiara-san looked up. “You had plans with Shikiya-senpai?”

“Yeah. Well, some other clubmates are there too, but I gotta meet up with them.”

Komari and Yakishio could hold things down, so I wasn’t in too much of a hurry, but still. Any more of this and my heart would give out.

I started to stand when a wisp of a voice stopped me. “Can’t they wait a while longer?”

I very nearly asked “what for,” but I swallowed the words. Did that really matter? Apparently I was wanted. For “a while longer,” at least.

Tiara-san pushed the workbook toward me again without meeting my eyes. “Don’t let it get to your head. I just have some other problems I could use your help with.”

“All right. Which ones?”

“This one.” She tapped a slender finger down.

I leaned in, straining my eyes against the dim light.

“It’s a picture problem.” Her voice was close that time. Right in my ear. “Will you help me solve it?”

Just how close was she? Was there even enough room to turn toward her? Did I dare…?

Suddenly, the door exploded open. “Heya, folks! Sorry I’m late!”

What was *she* doing here?!

“My bad. I totally got the booths mixed up and walked into the wrong…”

Tiara-san and I flew apart. Yakishio Lemon’s trademark beaming smile gradually shrank until it was a confused shadow of its former self.



“Am I interrupting?”

“It’s not what it looks like!” the two of us blurted in unison, which only seemed to convince her further that it absolutely was.

I rocketed toward her and hauled her to a corner of the room. “What are you even doing here, Yakishio? You’re supposed to be with Komari.”

“But I heard we split up for board games and karaoke. I like karaoke more.”

I had to have a word with Yanami later. A long one.

Yakishio peeked past my shoulder at Tiara-san. “I’m real sorry,” she said to her. “I didn’t know it was like *that*. You want me to leave?”

“W-we’re not—! W-we were just studying! Just having a study session!”

“What she said!” I chimed in. “We just only had one workbook, so we had to huddle up!”

“You were studying?” Yakishio picked up the workbook and flipped through it. “At karaoke? Why aren’t you guys singing?”

“R-right you are! Wanna sing, Basori-san?”

“I guess we could,” she replied.

“Great! That’s what I like to hear!” Yakishio skipped over to retrieve the microphone.

Tiara-san sidled up to me in her place. “So you invited other girls. Is there some part of confidentiality that doesn’t compute with your brain?”

“L-look, I didn’t mean for this to…”

Her eyes turned cold as ice, and with a voice colder still she hissed, “Don’t forget your end of the deal. You know what’ll happen if you do.”

Whatever had just happened between us, it was gone. Not a hint remained in those daggers stabbing my heart.

Where had it all gone wrong?

***

Aichidaigaku-Mae Station. Tsuwabuki High School was only a few minutes by foot. The sun was starting to set, and daylight was running out fast.

While Yakishio and I waited for the walk sign to change, I checked my watch. Just a little past four. We'd only just gotten away from Tiara-san and were an hour late.

"We really coulda skipped that last song," I grumbled. "Missing that train really hurt us."

"Like you didn't love it. You're pretty good at those maracas, Nukkun."

What could I say? It was all in the wrist.

Yakishio nudged me. "Komari-chan say anything to you? My battery's dead."

"A bit."

I checked my phone. Several LINE messages. Texts. Emails. Phone calls. She'd even DM'd me on Twitter. I had replied to exactly none of them.

Yakishio stole a peek and sucked in through her teeth. "Yeah, that's bad. You're bad, Nukkun."

Another message. "Die." Timely.

Yakishio extended her arms out in front of her and stretched. The board game café was right across the street, but it was too far to see inside from here. "Shikiya-san's pretty, scary, *and* on the student council, isn't she? You think Komari's okay?"

"She's getting used to Shikiya-san. An hour won't kill her."

A four-lane highway lay between us and our destination. A busy one too. The light just did not want to change. As I stared idly at the café, I caught a woman with two long pigtails entering. I could've sworn I recognized her.

Yakishio tugged my shirt. “Hey, that was totally Tsukinoki-senpai. Did you invite her?”

I shook my head. We hadn’t told her anything about Shikiya-san’s help in resolving her conundrum. This couldn’t have been a coincidence.

My gut sank.

Every second at the crosswalk felt like an eternity after that. When it finally changed, Yakishio bolted. I hurried a ways behind.

There was history between those two. A lot of baggage. A lot of distance. I’d never seen them close it once. But I’d also never seen them go at it before. They always kept things cordial. Surely, I was worried for nothing. Surely Yakishio had bolted because she was just as paranoid as me.

Surely Tsukinoki-senpai wasn’t as upset as I thought she’d looked.

I threw open the door and entered a little after Yakishio. They’d found each other. Wordless glares danced across the table separating them.

No. That wasn’t true. Shikiya-san was entirely normal, sitting emotionlessly, pale eyes unblinking. Any bitterness that was present came from Tsukinoki-senpai and her towering figure.

I stayed planted by the door. “What happened?” I asked Yakishio.

“I dunno. They’ve been like this since I came in.”

Komari collected herself enough to notice me and came running. “I-I’m sorry. I t-told Tsukinoki-senpai she was here. I-I didn’t know.” Tears were in her eyes. She handed me a small wooden chicken. I questioned its relevance in the back of my mind.

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “What’s going on here?”

“Sh-she’s just been glaring like that. Since she got here.”

So the sparks were yet to come.

Tsukinoki-senpai slammed her hands down on the table. “Where do you get off, Shikiya?”

The smoldering began.

Shikiya-san's head sagged to the side. She didn't even flinch. "Where…?"

"I'm well aware of what you've been up to with my people, but you've gone a step too far this time."

"Have I? They've been…very kind to me." Shikiya-san staggered to her feet, waves of hair swaying. Her eyes darted to me.

Tsukinoki-senpai followed them. Her expression tightened. "What, is Nukumizu-kun next? Is this all a game to you?"

"Games…are fun."

"You…!"

I was "next"? What did this have to do with me?

I inserted myself before things got untenable. "Everyone, relax! I'm the one who asked for Shikiya-san's help. Me. She was just helping us get that book you had confiscated back. That's all this is."

"Nukumizu-kun, is that true? You're doing this for…?" Tsukinoki-senpai trailed off.

"Y-yeah. That's all this is. It's really not that big of a deal."

"President's orders…Senpai," Shikiya-san wheezed, suddenly appearing next to me. "Koto-san."

"That doesn't give you the right to—"

"It's *your* mess," Shikiya-san interrupted her. She leaned in, as if daring her to bite back. "We're cleaning it…for you."

Tsukinoki-senpai met her gaze without flinching. A cold war raged between them.

At what felt like its peak, Tsukinoki-senpai broke eye contact and stepped away. "I'm sorry, Nukumizu-kun. I'm sorry, Komari-chan. Yakishio-chan. It's my fault you got wrapped up in this." She bowed low. Too low. "My mistakes are my responsibility. I'll deal with them myself from now on." When she looked up, she was smiling.

“So please,” she said. “Stay away from Shikiya.”

Silence fell like a guillotine.

I waited for it to rise again. Choosing my next words carefully, I replied, “Is that supposed to be a warning?”

“Maybe an unsolicited one, but yes.”

“Noted. But I feel the need to remind you, Senpai, that you’ve effectively graduated.”

“Nukkun!” Yakishio snapped, yanking my shoulder.

Tsukinoki-senpai bit her lip and looked down. “Right. You’re right. Sorry. Consider this the last time I make my problem your guys’.”

“That said,” I continued, “you’ll always be a part of the lit club, retired or not. That leaves it to us to help out when you’re in trouble. Doujin-related or otherwise. So suck it up and let the new guard do its thing.”

Frankly, I had no idea what I was doing. The right thing? The wrong thing? It didn’t matter. I owed a lot to this train wreck of a senpai. For every whirlwind of chaos she kicked up, I had two things to thank her for, and I hated to see her like this. To see her make a villain out of people. Out of herself. I only hoped even a fraction of that got through to her.

She bowed again. “I’m sorry. And to the café, I apologize for the commotion.” She turned to Shikiya-san and her wide, all-seeing eyes next. Her lips flapped as she hesitated to say anything at all. And we all waited for those magic words that would resolve everything.

“Carry on, Shikiya.”

They never came. With that, Tsukinoki-senpai left.

Komari leapt into action. “I-I’m gonna go after her.”

“She’s all yours,” I told her.

She nodded back, then scurried off. Seconds later, the café got its low hum back as people returned to their own business.

Shikiya-san despondently pulled a bill out of her wallet and dropped it on the table. “Paid… Sorry…”

And then she too shuffled out of the place. I debated following her.

Yakishio gave me a push on the back. “Go on, Nukkun.”

“You think I should?”

Shikiya-san had just been shut out entirely by an old friend. Did I have anything to offer her after being treated like that? Anything at all?

“Sometimes you do just wanna be alone.” Yakishio nudged me again. Harder. “But sometimes that’s when you need a friend the most.”

Somewhere in the deep brown pools of her eyes, I saw something more convincing than words.

Hurrying out of the café, hiding the mysterious blush on my cheeks, I looked up. It was raining.

***

I found Shikiya-san walking by the high school. What little there was left of the early winter sunset was drowned out by the cold drizzle. Only thanks to a car’s headlights did I manage to make out her legs in the darkness.

I jogged up next to her. “Hey, are you okay? Where are you going?”

“Home,” she huffed. I was used to her sounding lifeless, but not this powerless.

“Where is it? I’ll—”

All at once, the drizzle turned to a shower. Still, Shikiya-san kept walking. I had to usher her under the awning of a nearby apartment complex to get her out of the rain. The sun hadn’t even totally set, but it was already dark as night.

Indulging in a short sigh, I glanced to my side. A drop of water trickled from her bangs down her pale cheek. I searched myself for a handkerchief, only to realize I'd forgotten it.

Smooth. Classic me.

"Doesn't look like this is letting up anytime soon. Wait here. I'll go buy some umbrellas."

"Already…called a taxi." She stared languidly down at her rain-splattered phone, the light from it illuminating her face. She looked even more pallid than usual.

"Are you cold?"

"Don't know." Was she that sickly? I was starting to get worried. "Don't know," she repeated, somehow even weaker. "Koto-san…confuses me."

"Oh. She can be, uh, hotheaded sometimes. Try not to let it get to you."

"I guess…" She peeled some of her bangs off her forehead and held them in her fingers. "Am I…a problem?"

"Huh? No, we asked *you* for help, remember?" I managed to find some tissues crammed deep in my pocket and handed them to her.

"Thanks… You're nice." She took one and dried her forehead.

"Dunno about that. It was my sister's idea to bring these."

Only in a rom-com would standards be low enough that a single tissue constituted "being nice."

Shikiya-san brushed her fingers against my hand. "Then… show me nice."

I froze. Another brush. What? Did she want me to hold her hand? But was that a safe assumption? I was one wrong step away from sexual harassment charges. Even a few poorly placed head pats had the capacity for disaster.

"Er, Shikiya-senpai?"

She didn't answer. But I could feel her against my shoulder. Unmoving.

That taxi sure was taking a long time.

Her fingers brushed my hand again. A second of sensation, then nothing. Again. A third time. And then a fourth, and this time the sensation stayed.

Time blurred. Seconds turned to hours. What was probably a very short span of time felt like an eternity.

The sensation left.

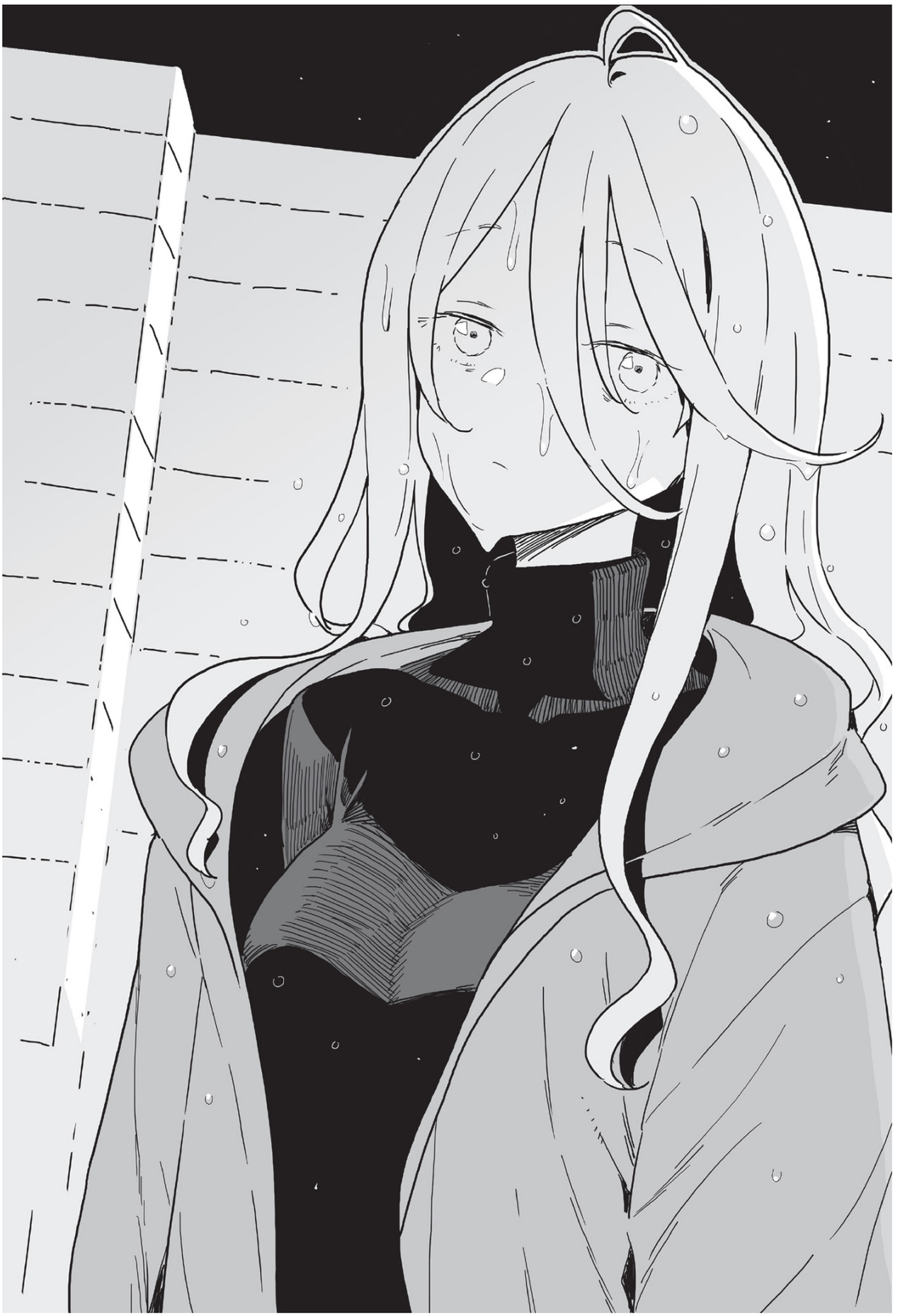
I took her hand in mine.

Cold, bony fingers. They accepted me as gently as they might a baby bird.

There was no love here. It was nothing so complex. Just a desire to exist. To feel another human being. I could feel the pangs of that hunger through her touch.

There was no emotion on her face. There never was. It made me realize something.

You don’t need tears to cry.



Intermission:
His and Her Lack of Circumstances

“I-I’M GONNA RUN TO THE RESTROOM REAL QUICK.”

Nukumizu fled from the karaoke booth like a bat out of hell. Only Tiara and Yakishio remained. Together with the silence.

Yakishio took a sip of her oolong tea, then hopped over next to Tiara. “Hey, Ba-chan.”

“B-Ba? Is that me?”

Yakishio nodded, and so she was Ba. She thrust the mic out to her. “A question for the lady. Are you and Nukkun dating?”

“What?! Wh-what in the world gave you that impression?!” The mic squealed in protest to her squealing protests.

Yakishio only forced the microphone closer. “Come on, I’m not dumb. I saw how cozy you two looked when I came in. That didn’t look like ‘just studying.’”

“W-well, I…!” Tiara snatched the mic. “We only had the one workbook, okay?! So what?! I’m not allowed to study with a boy?! Is there a problem?! Do we have a problem here?!”

Shoulders heaving, she shoved the mic back to Yakishio.

“N-nope. Not with me.” She switched it off.

Tiara downed some cold tea and found her bearings again. “We’ve just gotten to talking more lately and happened to be studying together. Frankly, I’m more curious as to what *you* are to him.”

“Me? We’re clubmates. I got asked to come here, so…” Yakishio frowned all of a sudden. “Wait, was I?”

“What? He didn’t invite you? Then why are you here?”

Yakishio crossed her arms and worked her brain. “Come to think of it, I don’t think *anyone* told me to come here. Not outright, anyway. It just kinda…happened.”

“I see.” Tiara nodded in understanding. “A common bride scamming trick.”

“A whuh?”

“The scammer tries to talk around absolutes. Things that could lead directly back to them. Instead of ‘I want to marry you,’ it’s ‘I *can’t* marry you, because I’m in debt.’ Now, say you wanted to marry this person. What would you do?”

“Well, debt’s no joke. I’d do what I could to help pay i—” Yakishio clapped her hands together as the realization hit.

“See? They lead you to think like that. Make *you* the one who comes up with the idea of sending money under the false assumption that you’ll have a bride after. Nukumizu-san was using these exact tactics against you. And to think he’s only a high school student.”

“Was he, though? I didn’t even talk to him. It was Yana-chan.”

“Whoever this ‘Yana-chan’ is, they’re clearly a catfish being used in his stead. Another common tactic.” Tiara stared daggers at the door Nukumizu had left through just moments prior.

Yakishio didn’t share her enthusiasm. “I dunno, that doesn’t sound like Nukkun. He’s usually just kinda oblivious. A sorta go-with-the-flow kinda dude. I don’t see him masterminding much of anything.”

“True. He’s not at all that attentive, which would be a fatal flaw for any scammer. God, you’re right. What was I thinking? Insensitive little…” She poured some tea from her bottle, grumbling under her breath.

“He do something?”

“More a lack thereof. Look, I know how things are between us, but I’m still a girl, you know? I put in effort.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Yakishio half-heartedly agreed.

“Not that I necessarily *wanted* him to comment on anything. It’s just his general lack of appreciation or sense for the kinds of things girls care about. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, I feel you there. That’s totally his problem. I feel sorry for the girl who ends up falling for him.”

“Agreed. He’s an enemy to women everywhere.”

“Yeah, screw Nukkun.”

The girls looked at each other and giggled.

Just then, Nukumizu timidly poked his head inside. “What? Why’s everyone staring at me?”

“That right there,” Yakishio said.

“That right there,” chanted Tiara.

More girlish giggles. Nukumizu could only sigh.

Loss 3:
Defining the Heart

MONDAY, DECEMBER 21ST. NOT A CLOUD FROM yesterday's rain remained in the sky.

Even though I'd already woken up an hour before my normal time to get to school early, I was still a latecomer compared to the campus's regular early birds. Sports clubs had practice, for one thing, but even the hallways were alive with instruments blaring from the music room—the band club getting ready for the big concert.

That turned to background noise as I entered the west annex. The art room was comparatively quieter, though I could see the light was on. If students were out and about this early, you could be sure the teachers were too.

I stopped at the end of a lonely hallway, in front of the lit club room. Yawning, I checked my watch. On any other day, I'd have been scolding Kaju for trying to help me change right about now.

I heard shuffling on the other side of the door. Bracing myself for social interaction, I opened it.

"Morning, Nukumizu. Been a while, huh?" Former president Tamaki Shintarou, soon-to-be college student and boyfriend to Tsukinoki-senpai, looked up groggily from his science textbook. "Koto told me what happened yesterday. Sounds like it was pandemonium."

I returned his weary smile with one of my own. "Sorry we kept things from you. Maybe we shouldn't have."

I'd gotten in touch with him last night, said we had to talk, and he suggested we do so in the club room. Tsukinoki-senpai and Shikiya-san had a past, and chances were he knew what that past was.

"I'm sure Koto had you on a gag order. Come over here. You can sit." I took the seat across from him. "I've been kinda swamped

lately." He lowered his gaze back to the textbook and marked the page with a sticky note.

"You're switching over to STEM, I hear. How's that going? Confident you'll pass the exam?"

It was no easy thing, applying to a science program with an arts background. Especially in the last semester of your final year in high school. As if that weren't enough, he was gunning for one of the most selective universities in the prefecture.

"Managed to squeak out an A in my last practice test, so that's something. Feels like the only handicap I *haven't* given myself is picking a private school."

"Wow. Impressive. How's Tsukinoki-senpai coming along?"

The smile part of his tired smile vanished, leaving only exhaustion. "Her 'plan' is to pick every private school in Nagoya with her preferred subject and just blitz every exam. Her practice tests have been...fine, I guess."

They were for certain going to be apart, then. I didn't have to ask if they were nervous. That went without saying.

For every high school sweetheart story, there were ten more where the transition to university was a fatal one.

"Sorry for dragging you away from all that," I said. "I'm sure you're busy."

"If anyone should apologize for this, it's not you. I'll talk to the faculty and the student council. I'll get that book back one way or another." He gave a confidence-inspiring grin. The one I returned apparently wasn't quite as convincing, because he then asked, "Something else on your mind?"

"Thing is, the faculty don't know about the book. Neither do the student council. It's just the vice president."

Tamaki-senpai looked taken aback. "Basori-san? The first-year? What's her deal?"

"She's sort of got a bone to pick with the literature club. Specifically, Tsukinoki-senpai." I heaved a sigh it was far too early for. "I've already tried to get it back from her. She made me make a deal. If I want it back, I have to do a favor for her."

“Well, that doesn’t sound sketchy at all.”

It kinda was. Definitely a little bit sketchy.

“You haven’t even heard what the favor is.”

“What is it?”

I paused for dramatic effect then faced Tamaki-senpai dead-on. “Settle things between Shikiya-san and Tsukinoki-senpai.”

Senpai changed. From his expression to his posture.

I leaned forward. “What happened between them?”

He got quiet and shut his eyes, in deep thought. And then he shook his head. “I need some time. I’m sorry.”

“Sure. I understand.”

That spectral elephant in the room was going to have to get comfortable for a while longer. Tamaki-senpai wouldn’t have evaded the question for anything less than an extremely good reason.

I scoffed at myself. Now wasn’t the time. Not yet. The details were the least of my concerns. “I’m still going to need your help, Senpai, if you’re willing to lend it.”

“You know I am, but with what?”

“This problem’s never going to solve itself. It has to be them. I think they need to have a talk.”

Tamaki-senpai balked. “You think they’ll just waltz into a room together because we asked them to? Koto especially?”

“They’d never. Tsukinoki-senpai especially.” And after yesterday? Not a chance. But something had to be done or that bridge would stay smoldering forever. “They’re going to need some kind of push. Something out of the ordinary. A common enemy. Something to get the ball rolling.”

“True, but how exactly are you going to provide that?”

“Borrowing this for a sec.” I took an eraser from his pencil bag and placed it in the middle of the table. “Let’s say you and Tsukinoki-senpai meet up someplace, and Shikiya-san’s waiting at that same place, at the same time, for a different reason.” I pulled

the cap off a highlighter next and stood it up next to the eraser. “Eventually, they’d notice each other. And that’s when we message them, saying we’re going to be a little late.”

“Trick them into meeting up.”

“But they have to know they were tricked. We have to make ourselves the common enemy.”

“Y’know what?” Tamaki-senpai knocked the cap over with the eraser. “It’s worth a shot.”

The cap rolled in an arc, coming to a stop back in its original position.

“It’ll be a gamble, granted,” I said.

“One way or another, though, something’s getting settled. Even if they end up ditching.”

He had a point. Making up was just one possibility out of the multitude that comprised “settling things.” And that was all Tiara-san had asked me to do—put an end to it.

“Question now is how to lure them out.” Senpai pulled out his phone. “This Thursday is Christmas Eve, right? Koto and I are planning to have dinner that evening and see the lights at the station together.”

Christmas lights. Station. That sly dog. “Round two, huh?”

A year ago, before he and Tsukinoki-senpai started dating, he’d made the blunder of a lifetime and screwed up a picture-perfect confession in that very same scenario. Sure, everything had turned out fine in the end, but getting there had been a process. A long and meandering process.

“You could try inviting Shikiya-san to that. That ‘out of the ordinary’ enough?”

“But this is your first Christmas together. You sure you wanna use it on this?”

“As long as we get to have dinner. And there’s always next year. And the year after that.” His lips curled into that weary grin he’d practiced a thousand times before. “Who knows where Shikiya-san stands in all this, but personally, I remember a time

when they were close. If they had to say goodbye on bad terms, I'd just…"

"Feel sorry for them?"

"Guilty, more like." Before I could press him on that, he started to gather his things. "Thursday, 6 p.m. Pedway right in front of the lights. That's where Koto'll be. All you gotta do is make sure Shikiya-san's there."

"Got it. And all on the down-low, of course."

Senpai left, and I stayed to get my thoughts in order. I had to get her to those lights on the twenty-fourth. Couldn't do much else until then.

I repeated that date. December 24th. Christmas Eve.

I was asking Shikiya-san out on Christmas Eve.

***

"I'm off to class. Again."

Yakishio left the club room that evening, shoulders sagging. Only Komari and I remained. I wondered about her being at club when she was technically not allowed to be attending those, but then again it wasn't like we did much but sit around anyway.

I checked my calendar. The big day was on the night of the twenty-fourth. It was the twenty-first now, so I couldn't waste any time making plans. No time to process the fact that I was inviting a girl out on a Christmas date.

"Not a date," I muttered to myself. "Just a thing that happens to fall on the twenty-fourth. Nothing weird about it."

Komari looked at me like I was crazy. "T-talking to your imaginary friends now?"

Now that was just rude. I may have had a habit of blurring the line between delusion and reality, but they were perfectly healthy delusions, thank you very much.

"Thinking, believe it or not. Hey, this Christmas Eve—"

The door opening interrupted my train of thought. Yanami gingerly peered inside. “Hello. I see the gang’s all here.”

“Uh, hi? What’s gotten into you?”

“I, uh, sorta have an apology to make.” She twirled her hair around her finger. Komari and I exchanged confused glances, then Yanami’s head shot down. “I’m sorry about yesterday!”

“Yesterday?”

“With Lemon-chan! She went to karaoke because I muddied things up, didn’t she? That’s what she told me, anyway. She filled me in on everything, and then I felt super bad.”

I’d nearly forgotten. Honestly, there was no telling how at fault Yanami really was for Yakishio’s own misreading of something. “I mean, for what it’s worth, I don’t think Yakishio being at the café would’ve changed anything. I’m the one who should’ve been there sooner.”

Komari bobbed her head. “A-and I told Tsukinoki-senpai I was with the s-scary girl.”

True. That was the source of the blow-up, wasn’t it? “So it was mostly Komari’s fault,” I concluded.

“D-die.”

If she didn’t want me to dig her grave, she shouldn’t have given me the shovel.

I was surprised to see Yanami genuinely apologetic about something. There might have been more to her mistake than she was letting on, but I could investigate that later.

“Hey, Yanami-san, what’re you doing on the night of the twenty-fourth?”

She blinked a few times. “Spending time with family. Why?”

“They’re doing a light show at the station. You should come with me.”

A one-on-one with Shikiya-san would be weird. Multiple people made for a harmless little outing.

“Wha—?! You’re… Huh?! You’re serious?!” Yanami flew off the handle, glancing back and forth between me and Komari.

Okay, it might have been a little sudden, but did she have to overreact like that? “Not forcing you or anything. How about you, Komari?”

The small one jolted with a squawk. “S-screw you! Die! Then die again!”

Sheesh, tough crowd. Christmas Eve was a busy time of year, though. Maybe I was asking too much.

“All right then. Guess I’ll try Yakishio.” I took out my phone.

“What?” the girls harmonized. Even their low, angry tones matched. The next second, they had me cornered on both sides.

Wait, what? Why? What was their problem? Whose blood were they after? Surely not mine.

Yanami loomed over me, arms crossed. “Sit down, Nukumizu-kun.”

“Already am,” I pointed out intelligently.

She pointed her thumb to the ground. “Downer.”

What in the world was going on?

“Can we all chill for a second? Hey, Komari? Help me out here.”

“Y-you have the right to remain silent.”

So much for a jury of my peers. Her glaring at me like I was human garbage was nothing new, but this was a whole nother level of disgust.

“Guys, everyone, calm down. What did I even do?” More disgust. No reply. Was I just going to take this? Me? A man? “Now look here! I, um… Yes, ma’am.”

Real men knew when to cede the field. I got down on the floor and sat on my heels.

Venom filled Yanami’s eyes. “Do you know what you did, Nukumizu-kun?”

That was the big mystery. “I, um, asked you to come to the lights at the station with me.”

“And then you immediately went to Komari-chan. And when she said no, you tried to go to Lemon-chan. Explain yourself.”

What was there to explain? “Well, if I’m going with Shikiya-senpai, then—”

“You’re *what*?! Her too?! Do you have even a single shred of dignity?!”

“Oh, I guess I never told you guys. Tamaki-senpai and I are planning to get her and Tsukinoki-senpai together. I’ve gotta go out with Shikiya-senpai on the twenty-fourth. That’s why I was asking you guys...for...help?”

My explanation seemed to be having the opposite of the desired effect on their moods.

“What?” I pleaded. “What did I say?”

Their faces went red with rage.

“That right there, Nukumizu-kun!” Yanami snapped.

“S-screw you and die!”

And then they turned their backs to me. All I’d done was forget to fill them in, for crying out loud.

“So Christmas Eve...?” I ventured tentatively.

Yanami leered at me over her shoulder. “Unfortunately, I’m having dinner with family. You’ll figure something out.”

Komari leered next. “I-I’m getting cake with the shrimps. S-so die. Alone.”

This was harsh, even for them. No doubt they’d hear about it if I went and asked Yakishio anyway, and then I’d never hear the end of it. Looked like I was in this by myself.

That said, how was I even going to broach the subject after yesterday?

I could almost still feel her cold, willowy hand. I’d never felt anything like it. It wasn’t Yakishio’s, strong and confident like when she’d dragged me along the beach. It wasn’t Kaju’s, small and

clingy. It was like glass. Delicate. Desperate. But not *that* kind of desperate; there had been no love, nor anything even hinting at such an emotion, in her touch. That much I was certain of.

I shut my eyes and tried to remember. What had she thought when she held my hand? What had she felt?

Loneliness. Sadness.

And what had *I* felt?

Those emotions didn't come as readily to me. The harder I tried to identify them, the more convoluted they seemed. Why?

I remembered her face next, soaked from the rain. Tiara-san had been right. She could look sad. Terribly sad. Who knew whether the grief I'd seen matched the one Tiara-san had, but I didn't doubt we'd reached the same conclusions.

My resolve found, I slowly opened my eyes and returned to the club room. Albeit from a lower angle than usual.

How long was I supposed to be on the floor for?

***

I checked the lock on my bedroom door one more time. There'd be no interruptions tonight.

I changed back into my uniform and stood in front of my full-length mirror. Head: forty-five degree angle. Face: aloof. "You. Me. This Thursday. Toyohashi station. Christmas lights?"

Nailed it. The practice was paying off. And I was indeed practicing. As if I'd ask out a senpai on Christmas Eve without a plan in place.

No doubt I had to go about this with confidence, but were the one-, two-word sentences too far? Maybe that was too far.

I cleared my throat and reassumed my pose. More natural this time. "So hey, I heard they've got those Christmas lights up at the station again this year. Wanna check 'em out with me on Christmas Eve?"

Yeah, that was good. Conversational. I could slip that in anywhere.

“Oniisama, might I suggest something a little less direct?”

“If I do that, my concern is she might not even notice that it’s an invitation.”

“If she doesn’t, it’s because she did and is letting you down easy. There’s not a single woman on Earth who wouldn’t understand the underlying implications.”

Seriously? Damn, women.

“So, Kaju, mind telling me what you’re doing in here? I thought I locked the door.”

“No, you didn’t. It was wide open. I came to return one of your light novels.” Kaju beamed and handed said light novel over.

It definitely *hadn’t* been wide open. I had to get that door checked out, because this happened way too often.

Kaju plopped her smug self down on my bed. She wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

I moved to my desk and nonchalantly opened the textbook there. “All right, well, your brother has homework to do. Back to your room.”

“So who’s the lucky girl?”

No dice. She wasn’t letting this go.

I shoved my nose deeper into the textbook. “She’s, uh… someone. Shouldn’t you be in bed? You’ve got to be up early tomorrow.” I started pretending to focus on homework when I heard sniveling and immediately whipped around. Sure enough, Kaju had tears rolling down her cheeks. “H-hey, what’s wrong?!”

“Oh, Oniisama… Not half a year ago, you were friendless. And now here you are. Asking someone out on Christmas Eve. I’m moved. Simply moved.” She trumpeted her nose into a tissue.

“It’s seriously not at all what you think it is. It’s, uh… complicated.”

“To be honest, you had me a little worried for a second there, stringing so many ladies along.”

“Never happened, but okay.”

Kaju stood, wiping her eyes. “But you’ve finally made your choice, and I couldn’t be happier for you. Interviews can come later! In the meantime, I’ll do everything I can to help!” But the interviews *would* come, I noted. Still teary-eyed, Kaju wrapped my head in her arms. “You make sure you knock her dead on that date. I’ll handle the rest. The Nukumizus will be ready and waiting to accept their newest member. Oh, I hope we can cook together on New Year’s. And I’ll have to start considering how to pass on the knowledge from my thirty-plus-volume Oniisama-pedia.”

Oniisama-what now? How many volumes? I decided I didn’t care to hear her repeat that.

“Slow down a sec, Kaju.” I peeled her off of me. “Not a date, okay? We’re just going out together.”

“On Christmas Eve, though.”

“Well, yeah, technically.”

“Then it’s a date. You’re asking her on a date.”

I winced. Suddenly, despite my best efforts to keep it at arm’s length, that four-letter word dominated my mind.

“But don’t worry, Oniisama. On the one-in-a-million chance that she turns you down,” Kaju pulled my head in again, tighter this time, “you’ll still have me.”

“G-great.”

There were three days till Christmas Eve. And I was not doing great.

***

My lunch that day was a humble bit of curry bread. I munched on it as I meandered through the old building.

It was Wednesday. Christmas Eve was tomorrow. And I had yet to invite a certain someone. Which was absolutely not to say I hadn't tried. To what extent was irrelevant. One couldn't rush such things. The important thing was I'd *tried*. Why, just last night Kaju and I had practiced together.

Satisfied with my decidedly reasonable justifications, I opened the door to the fire escape stairs, and got hit in the face with a biting breeze. Oh right, this was why I hadn't been out here quite as much lately.

"N-Nukumizu. Surprised to see you."

I looked up. Komari was perched on the stairs. "It's freezing out here. What in the world are you—"

A better question came to me once I processed what I was looking at. She not only had on earmuffs, a scarf, and a baggy winter hanten, but was swaddled in a throw blanket, and she'd even somehow prepared a cushion to shield her rear against the cold metal.

"Where did you even get all that? You bring it all?"

Komari sneered smugly, pointing at the wall. "A-a little at a time. I put a h-hook in the access hole there. To hang a bag from." This girl had going to her happy place down to a science. "Y-you don't come here much anymore."

She nibbled on some bread. More specifically a flavored bread*stick*, national nutritional hero to the people and picky children the country over. I had no doubts she'd taken it from her rugrats' stash.

There went my alone time.

Before I could decide to take my leave to a different floor, Komari asked, "H-how's the thing tomorrow coming?" The "thing" being inviting Shikiya-san out. She took the silence for my answer and shook her head. "J-just message her or something."

"I considered that, but like, what if she says no? She'll probably say no. It's Christmas Eve."

"P-probably. Especially if it's y-you asking."

Unnecessary qualification.

“What I’m *saying* is that invitations by DM get ignored nine times out of ten. If that happens, I can’t ask in person, because then they’ll be like, ‘Wow, look at this guy who can’t get a clue,’ y’know?”

“Y-you have to ask first for her to reject you, idiot.”

Fair, if not a tad insensitive to my delicate masculine sensibilities.

“I’m not worried about it. I can still run it by her after school. Watch. Future me’s got this.”

“F-future you’s not very far off.”

Living in the moment was an important skill. So I did just that—leaned against the rail and ate my curry bread.

Then, out of nowhere, Komari started getting fidgety, glancing left and right.

“You waiting for someone or something?”

“N-no, I… I-I just—here.” She thrust a small package at me. I recognized that wrapping. It was the thing she’d dropped after Tiara-san and I had crêpes.

“Uh, is that for me?”

Komari nodded almost imperceptibly. I couldn’t see her eyes.

A gift? Where was this coming from?

I gingerly unwrapped it. Inside was a golden, metal bookmark, engraved with an ornate Japanese design. It was pretty fancy. I liked it.

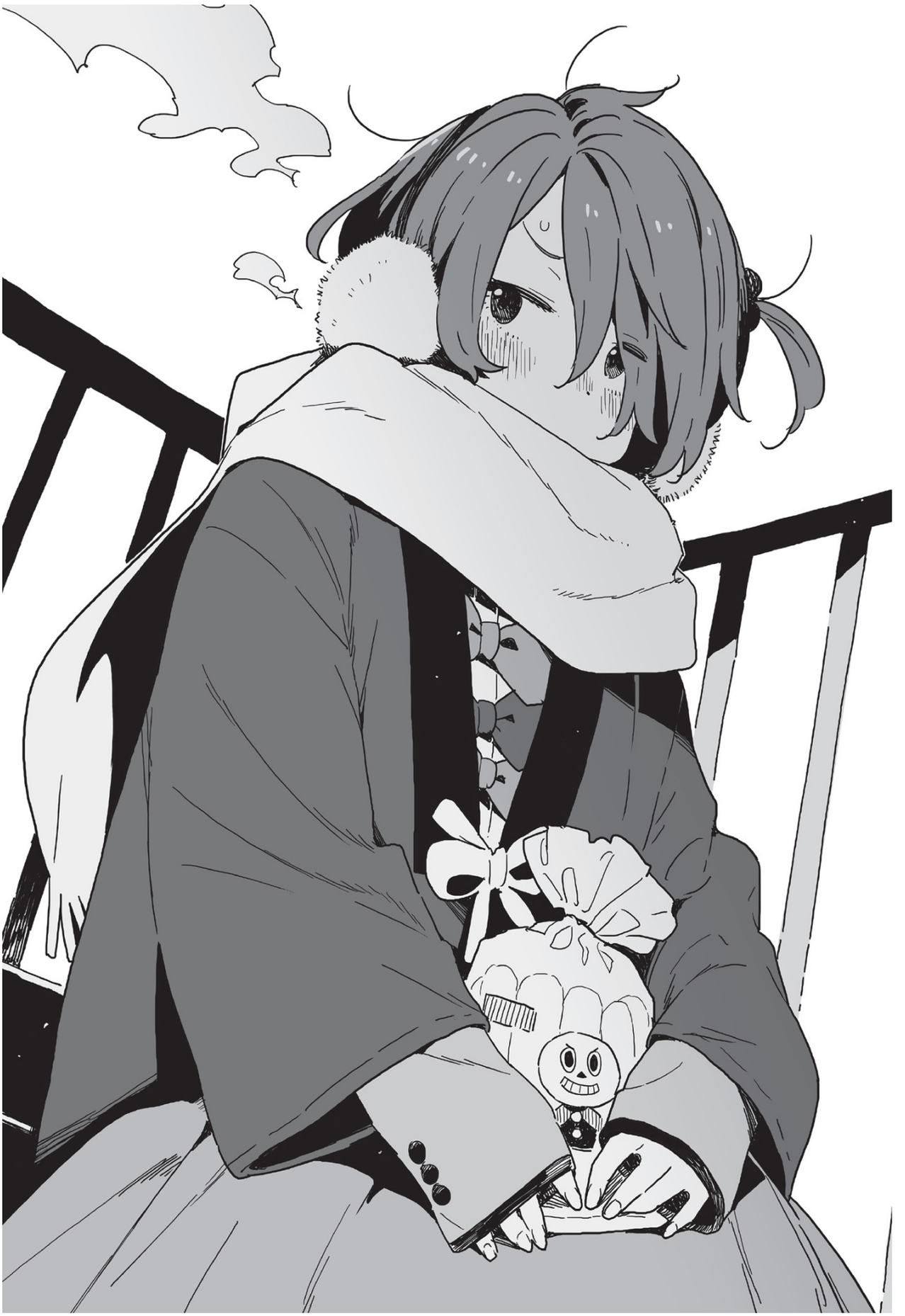
“For Christmas?” I asked. “But I didn’t get you anything.”

“N-no, it’s… It’s just for you.”

“You mean my birthday?”

A birthday present. From Komari. Was hell about to freeze over? I felt on top of the world. Like that moment when the cat finally lets you pet it.

I examined the pattern against the light. “This is pretty intricate. It wasn’t expensive, was it?”



“N-not really.”

“Man, the pattern on this. I see a river, and I think momiji leaves? Is that a…temari ball?”

“Sh-shut up.”

What had I done this time? “Why? What’d I say?”

“I-I said shut up! Y-you never freakin’ learn!” Komari threw the blanket over her head and returned to her bread in private.

I was at a loss. Walking around eggshells was hard when the eggshells were invisible, but that hardly mattered in the moment. I still couldn’t believe it. A gift from Komari. We’d come a long way.

I held the bookmark up against a cloudless sky. It was a nice day out, and the weather said it was supposed to be just as nice tomorrow. I was out of excuses. After school, it was happening one way or another.

Another bite of curry bread.

***

The moment of truth arrived, as it always would.

The student council room was just down the hallway. I stood in the middle of it and clapped my hands against my cheeks. “I’ve got this.”

I did have this. I could do this. It was just a date. Just a Christmas Eve date. Just… Just a date…

A DM was sounding like a decent option again. But then I’d have to sit around and wait for a reply, *if* a reply even came. I didn’t have that kind of time.

“Oh, woe is me,” someone moaned behind me. A pair of hands crept around and over my eyes.

I threw them off immediately and recoiled away. “Konuki-sensei? What in the world are you doing?”

“Grieving.” She pouted. “Someone said they’d come and see me in my office and then never did.”

“I’ve been busy. Sorry.”

Truth was I’d forgotten, but she didn’t need to know that.

“You were such a regular visitor during the festival, though.”

“Because we needed you for things.”

Nurse Konuki edged closer. I shuffled back. “So it’s to the garbage with me as soon as I’ve outlived my usefulness, is that it? When did I raise you kids to be so callous?”

Never. Because she hadn’t raised us.

Ensuring the distance between us remained strictly cordial, I flashed my best, most neutral, adult-impressing smile. “You’re always welcome to stop by the club room. You’re our supervisor, after all.”

“After school is when clubs practice. They make me stay put in my office in case injuries happen.”

The infamous “they” struck again.

“Sounds to me like that’s probably where you should be right now, then.”

“The faculty has a briefing for tomorrow’s meeting… Why do you keep stepping away from me?”

“Because you keep stepping toward me. I’ll get everyone together and come visit you soon, okay? Promise. Have a nice briefing.” I was just about fresh out of professionalism at this point.

“Ah, Konuki-sensei,” rang a deep, dignified voice. “There you are.”

Student Council President Houkobaru Hibaru strolled toward her, hair flowing behind her like water.

“Well hello, Houkobaru-san. How can I help you?”

“I have those surveys for you here. And these are the spreadsheets.”

“Oh, you’re an angel. Come by my office when you have the time so I can repay you.”

“Just doing my job, ma’am. That won’t be necessary.”

I sensed evasiveness much like my own. A kindred spirit? Or my imagination?

I started to sneak away, but Sensei circled around and stopped me in my tracks. “Leaving so soon?”

“I’ve sorta got something to do,” I said. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“They won’t sack me if I’m a few minutes late. Let’s continue our little love talk.”

We’d have to have *begun* our “little love talk” to continue it.

The president swooped to my rescue and took a position at my side. “I’m afraid his business is with me. I had some things I wanted to discuss regarding the literature club. May I borrow him?”

She did? First I’d heard of it.

Konuki-sensei brushed her hair back resignedly. “Oh, fine. I suppose. Remember, Nukumizu-kun. All things in moderation.”

I nodded in understanding I very much didn’t have. Just to satisfy her.

The president wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “You’re free as a bird now. Shall we?”

“Huh? Uh—”

She pulled me along toward the new building. After walking for a good while, she checked over her shoulder. “Unique, isn’t she? But her heart’s in the right place. You can’t deny that, as much as she makes you doubt it.”

She smiled. I was saved.

“Thanks for that.”

“Just doing my job.”

Anyway, how long was she going to have her arm around me? I couldn’t just tell her to knock it off without making it into a

whole thing.

“So, I meant to go see Shikiya-senpai,” I said.

“She’ll be outside, taking inventory in the PE shed. I’ll walk with you.”

All the way to the shoe cupboards? That was awfully kind of her.

Her lips curled up knowingly. “I wasn’t lying, you know. I did want to chat with you. I hear you’ve been seeing Shikiya a lot. You must be close.”

“I-I dunno if I’d say that.”

It was, of course, all in service to the retrieval of a BL fic starring us as the main couple, but I couldn’t very well go and blurt that, could I?

The president waited for me to continue, then chuckled when I didn’t. “You don’t have to be coy with me. I know everything.”

“Y-you do?!”

And she wasn’t fazed in the slightest. Impressive.

She tightened her arm around me. “I’m not blind. You’re in love, aren’t you?”

“I am not.”

She might have been blind.

“Don’t be shy. To have loved and lost is better than never to have loved at all. It’s what young folk do best.”

Glad we were operating under the assumption that I’d already lost. Frankly, I didn’t even have the energy to argue.

“One other thing,” she said, turning serious all of a sudden. “You’re acquainted with Tiara-kun, yes?”

“Yeah?”

“She’s hiding something. I know it. You wouldn’t happen to have a clue as to what, would you?”

“Huh? Wh-why would I?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” The president removed her arm and stepped in front of me. “We are creatures of connection. We are free to love—conditionally. We are free to love so long as we stay the path. Stray from it and, well, is it really love at that point?” Her eyes turned to daggers.

“I, um, don’t follow.”

“There are places in these halls where eyes are few. Not long ago, rumors reached my ears that our very own Tiara-kun was seen in one such place with a boy.”

Oh jeez. That was me. I was the boy. And I did a horrible job at not letting it show on my face.

The president crept closer. “She’s just not been herself lately, you see. Dropping strange words like ‘blessed,’ ‘bottom-only,’ ‘malewife.’ Just the other day, she was looking at me funny with a boy’s lost necktie in her hand.”

Poor Tiara-san. She was in way deep.

“She was just, y’know, giving me some advice. That’s all.”

“Oh? Love advice?”

“Yeah. Yep. Something like that. So are we…?”

“Right, I suppose delicacy is a virtue. I’ll spare you my questions.” She patted me on the shoulder like she understood completely.

She definitely did not.

Just then, a boy came jogging around the corner. “Hiba-nee, I thought you were observing the band. It’s almost time.”

Speaking of blessed, it was Sakurai-kun, student council treasurer, come to save me from this torture.

“And just where do you think I’m headed, Hiroto?” the president replied matter-of-factly.

Sakurai-kun sighed. “Not the band room, that’s for sure. It’s the other direction. Now hurry.” He grabbed her hand, quickly bowed in greeting to me, then hurried off.

He seemed busy. Too busy to help wrangle some of the lit club girls, though? Questions for later.

I got a move on toward the shoe cupboards.

***

The storage shed stood just off the athletics field. Its door was open, but no one seemed to be inside at a glance.

Somewhere in the distance, a bat cracked against a baseball.

I crept into the shed. Hadn't been in here since the *incident* with Yakishio back in July, which, again, could not stress enough how little I had seen. Honestly one of my biggest regrets.

Further in, I found a woman with her back to me. Flaxen hair. Short skirt. Long, pasty legs that could not have been at all comfortable in this weather. That was Shikiya-san, all right. And this was my chance to chat with her in private.

Sucking in a stomachful of air, I stepped forward. "Senpai? Got a minute?" My voice echoed more loudly than intended off the cramped walls.

She didn't move at first. And then all at once, her head whirled around. Jeez, she was creepy. "Nukumizu-kun…" She shut her notebook, then willed her limp body to face me. "What?"

I thought courageous thoughts. I'd come this far. Only a little further now.

"I was just wondering if, um…y-you caught a cold or anything. You know, 'cause of the other day."

Courage eluded my grasp. Call me King Chicken.

Shikiya-san's head wobbled side to side. "No. Thanks…for worrying, though."

"Oh. Cool. Good."

She eyed me and my fidgety figure closer. "Is…that all?"

"Er, well, not exactly." Just spit it out. If I could just spit it out, this whole thing would be over. I strode forward, refusing to break

contact with those pale white orbs. “I was...! I was wondering if you were busy tomorrow night!”

“Not really... No.”

Another step forward. Shikiya-san staggered back against some invisible force. “Will you go see the Christmas lights at the station with me?!”

I’d done it. I’d really done it. I could almost hear my adoring public cheering me on from behind. It was the least I deserved for all the trouble I’d...

“Wait.” I slowly, fearfully pivoted.

A crowd had formed at the shed’s entrance. But when? When?! When and why?!

Shikiya-san planted her hands on my trembling shoulders from behind, and with a hair-raising whisper said, “Sure.”

And then she left. The peanut gallery, various students from miscellaneous sports clubs, quickly made way. One of them stood out, conspicuously dressed in her uniform.

Yakishio.

***

I sauntered onto the downtown-bound train at Aichidaigaku-Mae, the closest train station to school, and plopped myself down into the emptiest seat I could find.

I’d asked a girl out on Christmas Eve. And she’d said yes.

Not that we’d actually be going on a date. This was just to get her to the right place at the right time. But Shikiya-san hadn’t known that when she’d agreed.

As the doors slid shut, a girl with short hair slipped through at the last second—Yakishio. We hadn’t had a chance to say anything to each other at the shed, since her friends had dragged her off after the dust settled.

Things weren't awkward. It wasn't like she'd caught me in the middle of some crime. But also it was a little awkward.

She went straight for me, like she somehow knew that was where I'd be, and took a spot on the same bench. A seat away.

"Hey. Done with class?" I said.

"Yup. I get to go to club again starting tomorrow, so I was just out on the field saying hi to everyone."

That explained her being there in her uniform.

The conversation died there. A few seconds later, Yakishio put on a playful grin. "You're full of surprises, huh, Nukkun? I didn't know you two were like that."

"Like what?"

She reached over and smacked me on the shoulder a couple of times. Hard. "C'mon, don't play dumb. I'm talking about you and Shikiya-senpai. You shoulda told me, buddy! I'd have helped!"

Knew it. A misunderstanding. "We're not like anything. I wasn't asking her on a date, for the record."

"Bro, you're going out together on Christmas Eve. That's a date if I've ever heard of one. She can be kinda scary, but she's definitely pretty. You better sweep her off her feet!"

"I guess I shoulda told you. Sorry, but this is all part of a plan Tamaki-senpai and I put together. I was just trying to handle things on Shikiya-senpai's side."

"Ex-Prez?"

I gave her the rundown. When I finished, she nodded deeply. "So you're trying to get 'em to make up," she summarized.

"That's the ideal outcome, at least. Apparently, they used to be on pretty good terms, so the goal's just to get them to actually talk with each other."

"Huh. Yeah, I had no idea you had that cooking over there." Yakishio's eyes wandered off into nowhere. Her expression kind of darkened. "Not a bit."

I'd left her out. Utterly excluded her. Not on purpose, but the fact remained I'd kept her at a distance. She might have been our school's track star before a member of the literature club, but that wasn't in order of importance. Just because she happened to be both things didn't mean she held one over another.

I should have known better.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"What for?" She smiled. Not in a happy way.

"I assumed you'd be busy with lessons. And I mean, you've got the track team to worry about."

"True. I was, and I do. I'm probably gonna have a lot more to worry about pretty soon." She breathed something halfway to a sigh through her half-committed smile.

"Any trouble?"

"Nah. Nothing like that. Our supervisor's excited for me to take over as captain, actually."

"You made it onto the podium at prefecturals, didn't you?"

"Yup. Third place at the hundred-meter. I'm the fastest on the team at that distance. Probably the rest too, honestly."

"And you're only a first-year. That's insane. I can see why people would be excited for you."

"Yeah, but still not even close to qualifying for nationals. Even if it was, I know I'd get stomped." She leaned over slightly toward me. "It's just a little awkward. Having all this special treatment because of things other people think I can do."

There was that face again. The quiet, mature one. The jaded one.

I looked away from it and out the window. "You're doing your best. You know the lit club's always there if you need a place to relax."

"I know, but I can't write like you guys. Even Yana-chan writes stuff."

"She does. Hasn't missed a deadline yet."

Her latest work was another addition to her ongoing gourmet tour of convenience store food. There was the occasional hint of plot progression every now and then, but largely it was about food and would likely continue to be about food.

“How am I supposed to act like I belong there when it feels like I hardly even participate?” Yakishio lumbered to her feet and stretched as the PA speakers announced the upcoming stop. The train started to shriek. “Lots to think about for next year. Decisions to make.”

Decisions...?

“Yakishio, this isn’t your stop.”

“Feel like running. Hope things go well for you, Nukkun.”

“What ‘things’?”

The train stopped. As she made for the doors, Yakishio tossed something at me.

It danced around in my hands a bit before I grabbed hold of it. A protein bar. Across the wrapper in magic marker were the words “HAPPY B-DAY.”

I had zero doubt she’d settled on “b-day” only after realizing she’d run out of room.

“It’s Christmas,” she shot back. She pointed at me, grinning handsomely. “Make it a good one, big shot.”

I continued to doubt her understanding of the situation as she made her way off the train. She soon vanished into the crowd.

My thoughts went back to Shikiya-san. Her soft hands on my shoulders. Her chilly breath against my ear.

The train resumed rocking. I shifted in my seat and shut my eyes tight. Every attempt I made to escape the physical world ended in failure, all thanks to the protein bar in my hand. I wondered where Yakishio had heard about my birthday. And Komari, for that matter. Maybe Yanami had told everyone.

The thoughts swimming around in my head refused to settle. I shifted in my seat again.

Literature Club Winter Activity Report: Yanami Anna—Just Getting Started?

I'm at the usual 7-Eleven on the way to school again. Christmas songs play from the speakers. Everywhere, Christmas. But everyone's too busy this morning to care.

Again, I'm monopolizing a table at the eating area when someone comes up to me.

"Taking it slow today, A-ko-san?" my classmate, XX-kun, says like it's any of his business. Doesn't he have anything better to do?

"I'm eating breakfast, in case you couldn't tell. Do you mind?"

It's a steamed pork bun this morning. I love those things, from the juicy meat, to the way the skin breaks and the filling spills out when you bite into it. I've got to have at least five a week in the winter.

XX-kun starts to leave, but notices where I'm looking. He looks too and says, "Oh." Like he knows me or something.

I'm watching ***-kun outside the window while he waits for the crossing light to change. He's with a girl.

It's J-ko-chan. She's with him a lot lately. They talk a lot, like they're doing right now. Personally, I think it's a little shameless to be walking to school with a boy.

XX-kun puts a cup in front of me while I nibble my pork bun. It's a latte, a large.

I glare at him for blocking my view, but he sits down two seats away anyway.

"You like those, don't you?" he mumbles all quiet.

It's the twenty-fourth. Maybe it's supposed to be a birthday present. A lame one. I don't really know who this guy thinks he is, but I'm not the kind of girl to look a gift horse in the mouth. Especially now that I can wash down the pork bun with something toasty.

The latte is a little rich at first, but there's something about them that makes them taste better the more you drink.

I ask XX-kun, “Did you put sugar in this?”

“I remembered. Two, right?”

I really don’t know who this guy thinks he is. A large takes three. But I’m mature enough to let it slide this once.

The light turns green. He and J-ko-chan cross the street, smiling and laughing.

My latte is a little more bitter than usual this morning.

***

It was the eve of the twenty-fourth. Christmas Eve.

The front of Toyohashi Station was one big pedway serving as a stop for private railways and trams. The lights were just outside of the station’s east exit, to the right, centered around the circular plaza there. I was situated a ways away, at the top of a flight of stairs leading toward the trams.

Fifteen minutes left till our meeting time at six. It was already pitch-black out, except for the glow of fluorescent street lights. It was hard not to lose myself in the display they’d put out this year, with all the flickering and twinkling will-o-wisps.

“Hey. Sorry I’m late.” Tamaki-senpai appeared looking a little tense. He was wearing a mature, collared coat.

I raised my hand back to him in greeting. “Hey. No worries.” I wasn’t entirely sure how to interact with him outside of school.

He picked something out of my hair. “Confetti?”

“That’d be my little sister, Kaju. Couldn’t quite sneak out in time.”

“You had to sneak?”

An unfortunate reality of my life.

“She got it into her head that I was going out for a date and wanted to be dramatic about it. Honestly, I’m just proud I managed to stop her from hanging the banner out on our balcony.”

“It never ends with you, does it?”

“You don’t have it much better.”

What was better? A crazy little sister or a crazy girlfriend? On second thought, having a girlfriend already made you a winner.

“You’re sure it had to be today?” I asked him, only a little spitefully. “It *is* Christmas.”

“I’m prepared to apologize over dinner until my throat bleeds.”

That counted as a humble brag in my book. Another point to Team Girlfriend. I totally wasn’t jealous or anything.

Tamaki-senpai’s face tightened. “Koto’s already here.”

I looked with him. On the other side of the pedway, I could make out the figure of someone who *sorta* looked like Tsukinoki-senpai. Or maybe it was the girl next to her. I genuinely couldn’t tell when she wasn’t in uniform.

“Stay back,” he told me. “This whole operation is blown if she sees us.”

Wise. That would’ve been the most pathetic way for this whole thing to end. I hid myself in his shadow while I monitored the Tsukinoki-senpai-esque entity.

“Still no Shikiya-san,” Tamaki-senpai said. “Think she’ll pass us if we stay here?”

“Don’t think so. She’s taking a taxi. We messaged not long ago.”

It hadn’t been a long conversation. All I’d gotten was a short, “On the way,” which was something I’d expect from a guy. Certainly not a gyaru.

“We should be fine then. Last thing I want is *her* seeing me.” He glanced around, still not entirely convinced.

I waited, but not long. “Have you had enough time?”

“Time? Time for—” He went quiet. Another piece clicked into place.

“For the longest while, my question has been ‘what happened between them.’” I looked Senpai in the eyes, forcing him to meet me face-to-face. “When it should have been ‘what happened between the *three of you*.’ Isn’t that right?”

He scanned the area one more time and, without looking at me, began, “We were second-years. Koto and I. Tsuwabuki Fest had just ended. Koto was still on the student council back then. She and Shikiya-san were still close.” He spoke quietly. Like he wanted his words to get lost in the crowd. “Not like how she’s close with Komari-chan. It wasn’t anything like that. They were *close*. Closer than I had any right to cut into.”

A tryst with no room for even Tamaki-senpai. It was hard to imagine, knowing those two now, but he clearly knew better.

“And then one day,” he continued, “after school, I was in the club room alone. She came in and…” Something came over him. Something that wasn’t quite anger, not quite sadness. Hesitation.

“And what?” I quietly urged.

Slowly, with trepidation, his lips moved again. “She came onto me. Physically.”

“What?” I genuinely doubted my ears. “Shikiya-san? She *what*?! Are you sure she didn’t *fall* onto you?! What do you mean she came on to you ‘physically’?! Were you two a thing?!”

“No, relax! Nothing happened! I mean, something *might* have, but Koto came in at the last second!”

“So nothing happened except the worst possible thing.”

“Pretty much, yes.”

Well, mystery solved. That would definitely be a friendship ender. I leaned against the railing and heaved a sigh.

But wait.

“Is this a good idea, you think? Won’t Tsukinoki-senpai see her and just assume she’s after her man again?”

Senpai shut his eyes, scrunched his brow, and thought for a second. “The thing is, I don’t think she was ever after me.” I’d have to take his word for it, having lived a decidedly gone-afterless life.

He opened his eyes and stared out at the lights. “Koto and I don’t talk about that day anymore, but it happened. I don’t think we can go on pretending it didn’t.”

The question had been answered, only to be replaced by another. I knew the “what” but not the “why.” What *really* happened? What did it all mean?

“Nukumizu. Shikiya-san’s here.”

There she was, wobbling like a butterfly in a gentle breeze. She wore a long brown coat and a knit toboggan, at least from what I could make out. No doubt that was her, though.

I pulled out my phone. It was up to fate now. Either way, this was Tamaki-senpai’s battle. All I had to do was keep my end of the deal with Tiara-san.

December 24th, 5:54 p.m., Toyohashi Station East Exit Pedway—Plaza

Koto occupied the center of an elaborate light show, where the extravagance on display all over the pedway was densest. A great big glowing heart nearby had been set up for photo ops. Girls giggled and squealed over it. A mother snapped a shot of a young brother and sister. Koto soaked it all in, becoming just one part of the greater festive ambience.

It felt like only yesterday she had come here with Shintarou. Back before they became official. She’d always considered her childhood friend *something more*, it’d just taken some time for the paperwork to clear. That night proved not to be the moment.

Now, she could look back on her sullen trip home and laugh. She very nearly did, turning her eyes down to hide the smirk that had snuck up on her. There, shadows in the shape of snowflakes danced at her feet. A part of her had always been a bit of a romantic—a part she rarely indulged out of embarrassment.

“Maybe this year…”

It was her last Christmas in high school. Her last few moments of certainty. Once they graduated, they would go their

separate ways, and promises of “together forever” would fall apart in the face of reality. Maybe it was jaded of her to think that way at her age, but she couldn’t help herself.

A chime from her phone snatched her from her thoughts. She took it out and saw that it was from the one person she wished she was with.

“Sorry, gonna be a little late,” the message read. “Stay where you are, okay?”

Her first reaction was worry. Her next was confusion.

Stay where she was?

The Shintarou she knew would have insisted she find somewhere warm to wait. That put a suspicion in her mind—a surprise? But that wasn’t like him. Then again, he did have a history of defying expectation.

Koto wasn’t in the mood for surprises. She wanted normal. Traditional. A cliché couple celebrating a cliché Christmas. She wanted to have that experience, to hold onto and remember.

She hung her head, again to hide a smile. She could hardly recognize herself these days. To think she could care so much about someone else. To want something special. Special could wait, though. All she craved tonight was him and his sincerest, most normal self.

That was when she saw them. An innocuous pair of brown boots. Completely benign, if it weren’t for the sinking sensation in her gut that accompanied them.

She recognized that gait. It dug up old memories.

Koto’s head shot up. “Shikiya…”

There, she saw the past. A figure of what once was. Beneath her knit toboggan with a white pom-pom were a pair of eyes whiter still, looking straight through Koto. Her long coat was open at the front, and from a far too short skirt extended a pair of legs that simply had to be freezing in the cold.

“Why are you here?”

“Waiting…”

Curt, even for Shikiya. She didn't know what to make of this any more than Koto did. Her breathy murmur died in the winter air.

"Wait somewhere else then. I'm not supposed to move."

"Me…neither." Shikiya planted her foot down, as best she could without losing balance. "I was told…to stay where I am."

It hit Koto almost immediately.

This was a setup. She'd been lured here specifically to see her.

Koto tightened her lips to keep her irritation from showing and asked, "Who do you happen to be waiting on?"

"The literature club president…" Shikiya cocked her head. A show of pride? "Nukumizu-kun…invited me."

She'd fallen for it too.

Koto pinched her forehead and shook her head. "Nukumizu-kun. That baby-faced fox. I didn't think he had it in him to lead someone on like that."

"What…do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Koto waved her hand dismissively. "They set us up."

Shikiya stared. "Nukumizu-kun…isn't coming?"

"Probably not."

The thought crossed her mind more than once that she could just leave. She didn't take kindly to being tricked, but neither did she appreciate the prospect of admitting defeat. Not to mention the look on Shikiya's face.

That forced her to abandon the notion entirely.

Koto stood next to her and looked up at the lights. "So are you two dating or what?"

"No… Friends?"

"How should I know?"

How long had it been since they talked like this? Once upon a time, Koto thought they'd never speak another word to each other, much less under neutral circumstances.

It came easily, though. Much more easily than she'd always feared it would.

But not everything was under the bridge.

"Do you remember?" Koto asked her. "Last November. In the club room. Do you remember what you did?"

"Mm-hmm…"

It hadn't been easy, splitting her duties between the literature club and the student council, but Koto had done what she could to keep them separate. So when she opened that door, the sight shocked her to her core. Shintarou and Shikiya barely knew each other. Koto would have sooner believed she'd wandered onto a movie set than the reality of the situation. She couldn't process it any other way. It simply didn't make sense. In more ways than one.

Koto breathed in deep. A question played about her lips. Something she should have asked a long time ago. "Did you love Shintarou?"

A simple question. One Shikiya couldn't keep a straight face at. "I…don't know."

"You don't know? It's a yes or no question. Did you or did you not—"

"I'm sorry. I don't know…" Shikiya shrank like a frightened child. "I don't…"

Koto's frustration withered. "If anyone's confused here, it should be me. That wasn't like you, Shikiya. You're not the type to mess around with guys."

"No…"

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because…you loved him."

Koto had waited a long time to hear that answer. A whole year. And still it hadn't been enough to prepare her. Her mouth

hung open wordlessly.

"So you just wanted something you couldn't have? Because you knew it wasn't for you? Is that it?"

Shikiya shook her head, very slightly yet not ambiguously. "I wanted…to be like you, Koto-san."

Another bombshell. It took her a long time to process that one. "Like me?"

"But you confuse me…in so many ways. So much…I don't know." Shikiya swayed on her feet. "I thought that…I'd understand. If I loved…who you loved."

And then she froze, as if she were a machine idling.

Koto repeated those words in her head over and over. Over and over. Analyzing them. Attempting to understand them, until she arrived at what she felt might have been the very fringes of Shikiya's heart. She reached for it but stopped. There were secrets there she couldn't know.

"How would that have accomplished anything?" she said. "What if he let you keep going? What then?"

"Someone *you* love…can't be a bad person."

The lights reflected Shikiya's profile in the most perfect way. For a moment, Koto was struck by her beauty. Doubts flashed through her mind. Stupid, baseless doubts. What if Shikiya *had* fallen for Shintarou?

"Why would you care to be like me in the first place? You're pretty and smart and you have a hundred friends."

"But I can't…smile," Shikiya confessed. The first cracks in the dam. "I think I can want to… I think I can be happy… Be sad. But I don't know… I don't understand." She took a moment to take several quick, shallow breaths. The fissure grew. "You do… You know yourself… You're yourself… It's beautiful." Another breath. Longer this time. Deeper. "That's who…I want to be."

The words were fragile. Given to shatter against the cold wind. Convoluted and uncertain and diffident in essence. But Koto could feel what strength was there. She knew what Shikiya was capable of more than anyone, and this was her utmost.

A gentle smile came to Koto's lips. "I'm not sure I follow completely, but for what it's worth, I do *pretend* to smile sometimes." One corner tilted into a playful smirk. Her usual one. "I'll kiss ass if I have to and laugh if the group laughs. Sometimes that's all it takes to make it genuine."

"It is...?"

"Pretty much. Sometimes it's hard to tell if I'm smiling because I'm having a good time or if I'm having a good time because I'm smiling."

Koto reached for Shikiya's pom-pom and flicked it a few times.

Shikiya watched her, wondering fearfully. "Koto-san... You confuse me. Don't you...hate me?"

"You don't have to smile, Shikiya. We can tell when you're having a good time, when you're happy." Koto demonstrated with a tender, full-cheeked smile of her own. "And no, I like you just fine. Just the way you are."

Genuine words, all of them. Straight from the self.

Shikiya nodded gently. "Thanks..." She found a lock of Koto's hair and played with it.

Koto watched remorsefully. "I'm so sorry, Shikiya," she whispered. "All that time we spent together, and I never really knew how you felt. I don't even know how to count all the times I'm sure I hurt you without—"

Shikiya touched her fingers to Koto's lips, interrupting her. "Smile, Koto-san."

Hesitantly, she did. Shikiya traced its shape with her fingertips. Memorizing it. And then she brought them to her face and drew it over her own lips.

"I'm happy," she said. "When I'm with you."

Shikiya detached herself, and with tottering, almost dancelike steps made her way to the center of the plaza. Koto joined her there.

Shikiya bent the fingers of her left hand in a sort of oblong half-circle shape. “Make a…hand heart with me.”

“Isn’t that for couples?” Koto chuckled. She stood next to her, forming the second half of the heart. “There. How’s that?”

Shikiya tried on her new smile again. “If we look at the big heart…through our small heart. You’ll pass…your exams.”

“No I won’t.”

“No. It just means…we’re married.”

“I can’t think of two people doing this who basically aren’t already.” Resigned to her fate, Koto brought her face in near Shikiya’s and peered through their hand heart. “Happy? Your cheek’s cold, you know that?” She pulled back and turned to her.

Shikiya stole the moment—and her lips.

Koto couldn’t move. Couldn’t think. Only when she felt Shikiya press deeper did her senses finally return to her.

She flung herself back. “Wh-what the hell did…?! Did you just…?! Did that just happen?!”

Shikiya felt her lips and mumbled, “Soft…”

“Did I ask?!” Clutching her head, Koto dropped to her haunches. “Oh my god, we were already pushing it, but I was just gonna move on, and then you just… You seriously just went for it!”

Stoic as ever, Shikiya put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay. I can handle you.”

“I’m good, thanks. And who made you my handler?”

“You have…a handler?”

“I literally have a boyfriend. Why are we talking about this?” The innuendos were getting to her. Groaning, Koto rose to her feet again.

She admired the twinkling lights. That was all they were. A bunch of intricately pieced-together LEDs. A man-made spell casting romance and candidness on everyone and everything they touched.

“The longer I think about this, the more I wanna just say screw it. Shikiya, have you eaten? Want to go have dinner or something?”

“Isn’t…Tamaki-san waiting?”

“Forget him. He’s probably with Nukumizu-kun anyway. Speaking of, I forgot you were supposed to be here with him. You’re *sure* you’re not dating?”

Shikiya tilted her head. “Yes? Why?”

“It’s Christmas Eve. You don’t accept an invitation like that if you don’t feel *something* for the guy.”

“I don’t.” Shikiya wobbled her head slowly, thinking about that a little more. She turned her eyes up to the sky. “But I guess… he is a little cute.”

Koto tried to decipher what that was supposed to mean but quickly gave up. It was none of her business anyway. Whatever decided to blossom, she would be but a passive observer.

She pulled out her phone and made a call through sheer muscle memory. He picked up after only two rings. “Shintarou?” Koto said before he could get a single word in. “Shikiya and I are getting dinner. See you when I see you.” And then she hung up, offering a hand to the girl next to her. “C’mon. I’m gonna spoil you rotten today.”

“You’re sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. What’re you hungry for?”

“Fish…would be nice.” Shikiya accepted her hand like a timid child.

“Fish it is. We’re splurging tonight.” Koto tightened her grip.

She smiled, a lot like she used to, only a little different. Quite a bit had changed in a year.

***

Quiet Christmas tunes played from a music box. Only dim candlelight illuminated Tamaki-senpai, sitting across from me.

“I appreciate you footing the bill,” I said.

“Don’t mention it. Not like I could’ve come here by myself anyway.” Senpai laughed. There was no cheer in it. I felt for the guy, having his café dinner date canceled, but boy did it feel weird being surrounded by couples. “Couldn’t exactly cancel the reservation either. Especially after I worked myself half to death studying so I’d have time to make it…”

He collapsed face-first onto the table. “Where did it all go wrong, Nukumizu?”

Conception, I’d say.

I figured I was at least a little responsible for this course of events, given I was the one who’d gotten him involved. “Hey, cheer up. She made up with Shikiya-san. She can’t be mad at you over that.”

“She sounded pretty mad to me.”

“She’s just shy. C’mon, get up. The drink’s here.”

A waiter appeared carrying a tray with a singular beverage. “One Christmas Special Aranciata Rossa.”

They placed a glass of blood-red liquid in the center of the table, two intertwined straws extending up and out of it. It was, of course, for the both of us to share.

“Sure is festive,” I observed.

“‘Tis the season.” Senpai hauled his torso back up and put his lips to the straw on his end. “Pretty good. You should try some.”

“Right, well, don’t mind if I do.”

Bittersweet. Not bad.

We took turns taking sips, until a light bulb seemed to go off in Senpai’s head. “Hey, drink this with me at the same time.”

“What? Why? No.”

“I’m not thrilled at the idea either, but just humor me. Let’s do it.”

Yeah, that made total sense. Do a thing neither of us wanted to do.

Reluctantly, I obliged. When suddenly, a heart appeared before me. “Oh! The juice turns the straws into a heart when we drink together.”

“Exactly. And only from above.”

While he and I got to discussing the finer points of straw artistry, the waiter returned with food.

“Pardon the wait. Your Christmas hors d’oeuvres.”

Next came a square plate of snowlike foam and a colorful assortment of various appetizers.

“I assume the foam’s edible?” I asked.

“They called it ‘espuma’ or something like that. I think we’re supposed to put it on Santa here then eat it together.”

“That’s supposed to be Santa? Thing looks like an RPG summon.”

Somehow, this pity party was turning out pretty fun. By the time he’d demolished the chicken from our main dish, even Tamaki-senpai looked to be in better spirits.

“You’re kidding.” He gasped, leaning over the table. “Ayu-chan confessed?”

I nodded firmly. “Next week’s episode is gonna be crazy. She’s totally gonna lose. You don’t do a confession like that and not get burned.”

“God, I gotta know what happens next. No spoilers till I’m done with exams, got it?” He wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“Sticking out that anime and manga ban, huh?”

“The Common Test is in January. I’ve still got a lot of ground to cover if I’m switching to science.”

“Speaking of, did you ever decide on a specific area?”

“I never told you? I’m applying for agricultural science. I’m particularly interested in brewing.”

Brewing. Like fermenting miso and alcohol and stuff? That reminded me. “Isn’t Tsukinoki-senpai’s family in the liquor business?”

“Not selling, making. But yeah. She’s the sole daughter to a brewing family.”

That explained his interest in the science of it. Sort of. “You guys are that serious already, huh?”

“No, no, not really. I just wanna be able to support her in whatever way I can, however little it may be.” Senpai took a swig of water, downplaying his evident embarrassment.

I hadn’t given much thought to the future, myself. I figured I’d move out after graduating, but that was about as far as I’d gotten. The idea of living anywhere but here was an alien one, though there was one thing I could definitely picture myself doing in college: eating alone.

“Hoping for the best,” I said.

“I’ve got this.” He gave me a thumbs-up. “Work on those biceps so you can parade me when I’m done.”

I hammed up a grimace. “I meant more in regards to your girlfriend. You mentioned you weren’t a ladies’ man during our summer field trip, but I’m seeing a lot of evidence to the contrary.”

“Shikiya-san hardly counts. And I could say the same thing to you. Seems to me like your star’s rising.”

“Me?” I blurted in disbelief. “How? I’m the furthest thing from popular.”

“Nukumizu,” Senpai replied calmly. “To be popular is not necessarily to be the center of attention.” Nonsense. To claim such a thing would be to spit in the face of every dictionary in the world! Senpai frowned. “You’re the only guy in the lit club right now, yeah?”

“Yeah…?”

“If you weren’t, you’d be surrounded by boys, but you’re not. Same goes for the student council.” I nodded. The logic was sound so far. “Peak dateability isn’t about being the center of attention. It’s about timing and being in a situation where you have

opportunities for connection with the opposite sex. They say everyone finds themselves in that situation three times, but you've gotta watch for them or they'll slip by."

"Wait, so I've got two more peaks left?"

"*If* this is your first. Have you ever had the chance to get close to a girl or two before?"

Friends were kind of a new concept for me, which, needless to say, spoke to my experience with women.

I nearly laughed in his face, when an old memory surfaced. "I did play house a lot with girls as a kid in daycare."

Boys were always too exhausting for me.

"That's number one. Anything else?"

"There was that one friend my sister would have over a lot when I was in junior high. Sometimes I'd hang out with her."

"Nukumizu, is your life a rom-com or what?" He looked terribly disappointed in something.

"I promise it's not that romantic. She was just a bit of a truant and my sister was her only friend. She'd come over even when my sister was out, so I'd play games and stuff with her. In total silence, I should add."

Senpai considered that, then nodded. "That's number two. Barely. That means this is the last peak you'll ever see in your life."

Damn. Guess I was gonna be single forever.

While I made my peace with life alone, the waiter came to clean our table and left us to settle until dessert. I started perusing the menu for my after-meal drink.

Tamaki-senpai jumped to his feet, phone in hand. "Sorry, gotta take this!"

Tsukinoki-senpai had come ringing, I was sure. I could tell even through the window how profuse his apologies were. He just kept on apologizing. And then apologized some more. Funny how people bow when doing that over the phone, like the person can see them.

He came back to the table and put his hands together in yet another apology. “I gotta go! Sorry!”

“Tsukinoki-senpai forgive you yet?”

He started throwing on his coat. “We’re about to find out. No rush. You can chill here if you want.”

Quickly paying at the register, Tamaki-senpai flew off.

My thoughts wandered to Tiara-san. I’d promised to settle things by tomorrow, and while I would’ve liked to say I’d accomplished that, it would ultimately be up to her. I wasn’t looking forward to judgment day.

The waiter came up and grinned politely. “I can have your dessert out if you’ve decided on a drink, sir.”

“Oh, right.” I picked up the menu.

As soon as I did, a chill caressed my neck.

“I’ll have…ginger peach tea.”

I shuddered as her breath tickled my ear. Who it belonged to did not elude me for a second. “How did you know I’d be here, Senpai?”

“Koto-san…told me,” Shikiya-san breathed, removing her toboggan and taking Tamaki-senpai’s seat.

The waiter, in an impressive display of professionalism, faced this abrupt turn of events with poise. “Ginger peach tea then?”

“Uh, yeah. Two, please,” I said.

Off they went to the kitchen. And there Shikiya-san stayed. To say it was awkward was putting it mildly.

Just as I started to say something, she raspily interjected, “You broke…your promise.”

“Well, I actually, um…” What? Didn’t actually invite her out because I wanted to spend time with her? Didn’t technically promise because I’d lied to set her and Tsukinoki-senpai up? Great. Fantastic idea, me. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how I’ll ever make it up to you.”

“This’ll do…”

Shikiya-san slowly, almost hesitantly, brought her fingers up to the corners of her lips and drew them into a smile.

“I, um…”

“It’s a…smile.”

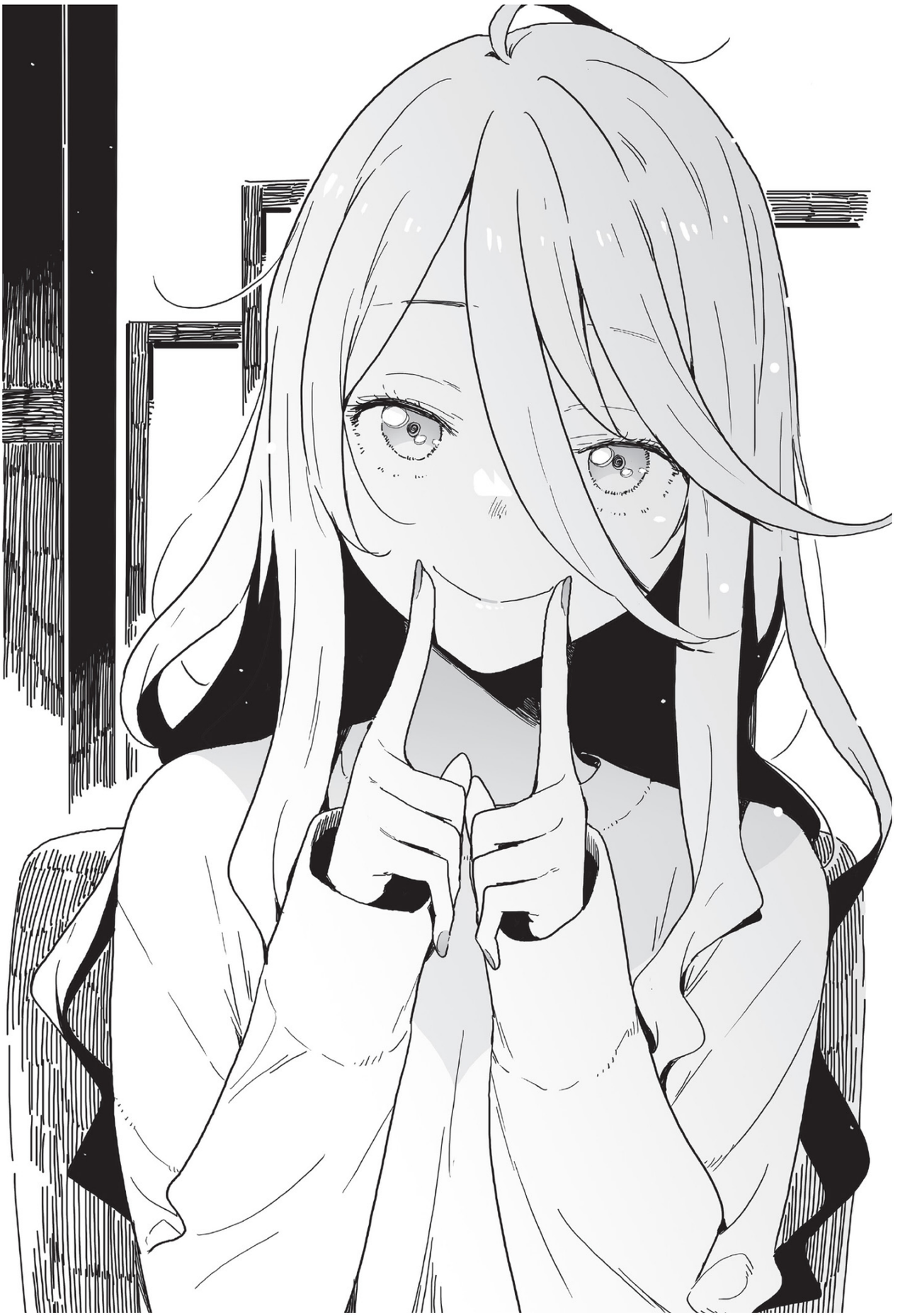
“R-right,” I slurred.

Shikiya-san grabbed her toboggan and buried her face in it. “Never mind…”

“Hey, no, it was great! I liked it! Look, here comes dessert!”

I pushed the plate toward her in a desperate attempt to clear the air. A yule log. Now wasn’t that just Christmasy?

She breathed what amounted to a sigh for her, picking up her cup of tea. “I’m…embarrassed.” I felt mildly responsible for that. She started picking at the roll cake. “Smiling is…hard.”



Shikiya-san swayed, letting the warm steam waft over her face. I'd never considered smiling in terms of difficulty. A lack thereof or otherwise.

"I mean, you smile all the time," I said.

"I do?" She lurched over the table toward me.

I flinched. Just a little. "Y-yeah. Well, not outwardly, a lot of the time. It's just kind of, I dunno, a vibe you give off."

"A vibe…"

Ah, crap. She looked bummed out.

"It's like, you know how people say dogs show emotion by wagging their tails? There's more to it than that. You can tell a lot through their behavior, their eyes, and all sorts of stuff. They've got more than just their tails. Does that make sense?"

I was seriously reaching, but apparently it had landed. Shikiya-san nodded. "I like dogs…"

Good opinion.

With that warm and fuzzy tangent over with, I got to poking around dessert myself, but Shikiya-san didn't look quite ready to relax yet.

"What? Something on my face?" I asked.

"The book… What about it?"

"Oh, that. I'll fill Tiara-san in tomorrow. I held up my end of the deal, so—"

"Deal?"

Oops. Some double agent I was.

I spilled everything. Shikiya-san listened with great interest. "Tiara-chan…is a bad girl."

"I feel obligated to say 'pot meet kettle.'"

"Mmh." She put her teacup down. "I'm bad…too."

Tsukinoki Koto and Shikiya Yumeko. Just what had happened between them under the lights that night? I sure didn't know.

Would probably never know. Had they gotten everything off their chests? Were they on the same page now? Did *they* even know?

I doubted it. Uncertainty was the nature of connection. At least Tiara-san was down one headache, and I could tie a neat little bow on my fifteenth year of life.

Before I knew it, Shikiya-san had cleared the entire dessert. Evidence that she did indeed eat like normal people remained inconclusive.

I took a performative sip of tea while I looked her over. She'd gone light on makeup. I would have believed she was wearing none at all aside from her white contacts. Yanami had warned me against women who claimed to not wear makeup, but I half suspected that was just her petty side talking. In either case, it justified my healthy fear of women well enough.

Shikiya-san's eyes captivated me. Her eyelashes were so long. And everything about her face was framed in this perfect way—it was a mature appeal that Yanami distinctly lacked.

I didn't even realize I'd been staring until she stared back. "What…?"

"Er, just wondering what you and Tsukinoki-senpai talked about."

She traced her lips with her fingers. "Secret…" she whispered, then crossed her legs.

All right, what did *that* mean? "What happened?"

Shikiya-san just kept on swaying playfully.

Something had totally happened. I downed the last of my now cold tea, my thoughts with Tamaki-senpai.

The music box played its gentle melody as Shikiya-san rocked in the candlelight. No one said anything else. I was out of tea, and my cup sat empty. But I lacked the confidence to abide in silence with company like this.

I got nervous. What was I supposed to say? How? When? I couldn't leave either, but I also didn't *want* to leave. The crazy thing was that I didn't hate it. The awkward seconds. The agonizing nothing.

Shikiya-san sipped her tea, and I found myself drawn to her eyes. Unfocused. Seeing things unknowable. Me least of all. Some part of me wished they would.

When they finally found me, she tilted her head. I mirrored her, smiling like an idiot.

Each moment was palpable. Painful in its passing, yet keenly felt in its loss.

I tried to distract myself with a thought experiment.

If I were to give a name to this feeling, what might that be?

Intermission:
Christmas Eve with Tiara-san

ONE CHRISTMAS EVE, ONE BASORI TIARA WAS studying in her room. This subject was perhaps her most intellectually challenging yet as she analyzed the copy's contents thoroughly, her elbows rested intently on her desk.

Tsukinoki Koto's so-called "RPF" was brain-busting. Tiara did not make a habit of judging others for their taste in fiction, but this was something else.

"No way. In public…?"

She jotted something down on a sticky note, then pasted it on the offending page. She was quickly running out of those. For every scene in need of censoring, there were two more waiting. Always more.

Tiara stretched, thinking back to her encounter in the student council room with that boy. The literature club president. That *Nukumizu Kazuhiko*.

He scarcely resembled his doujin counterpart. He seemed to actually carry himself with modesty. But the fact remained he had attempted to accost her while she was busy inspecting contraband. What if she hadn't noticed in time? What if she hadn't retreated to safety? What if he'd been the Nukumizu in these very pages? What if?

Tiara's face burned and sweat trickled down her back. "Th-this is a story!" she blurted, slamming her hand down on her desk. "Fiction!"

"Neesan," a voice groaned behind her, "what's your deal?"

"H-hello?!" Tiara whipped around to find her freshly bathed brother in baggy loungewear, standing at her door. "Takashi?! Ever heard of knocking?!"

"I have, and I did. What're you freaking out over?"

Basori Takashi was a second-year in junior high and, notably, possessed of a normal name. Tiara had yet to interrogate her parents as to why she had not been graced with the same.

Tiara coolly hid the doujin beneath a notebook and regained her composure. “Nothing at all. Now what is it?”

“Mom’s cutting the cake. Come downstairs.”

“I’ll be right—” As Tiara rose, something struck her. She didn’t tower over him anymore. Sometime in junior high, her brother had shot up in height, and every day he seemed more grown up than the last. “Your soccer club. You spend a lot of time with your friends there, don’t you?”

“Yeah? Why?”

“And last Valentine’s. You got chocolate. From one of them?”

“Uh, we’re all guys.”

“And?”

Her mouth had moved faster than her brain. A split second later, it set in just what she had implied. She froze solid.

“F-forget that!” she sputtered, gesturing wildly. The chilly winter air only made the cold sweat colder. “Forget I said anything!”

“You’ve been weird lately, Neesan. Whatever. See you downstairs.” He disappeared, sighing.

Inspired, Tiara heaved a sigh of her own. This was all *his* fault. Did he even intend on making good on his promise? How was that coming along anyway?

Inspired, her phone rang. She flipped the brick open to see the caller was Shikiya Yumeko.

A deep breath. And then she answered.

Loss 4:
Prelude to Sixteen

SUNLIGHT TRICKLED IN THROUGH THE GAPS IN the curtains, mingling with the winter air. It was a cold Christmas morning.

I threw my blanket over my head. I had a holiday, a birthday, and a closing ceremony to deal with all in one day. My alarm hadn't gone off yet. I deserved an extra few minutes in—

"Merry Oniisama! Happy birthday!"

A sonorous party popper cracked noisily.

Credit to Kaju, she always did something different every year.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes. "Morning... Kind of a loud one."

"It's a special one. Up, Oniisama! Up!" She pinched the hem of her red dress and did a twirl.

"New outfit?"

"Yeah! What better aesthetic for Christmas than a Santa aesthetic? How do I look?"

She had a pair of reindeer antlers attached to a hairband on her head.

"Cute. But I thought Christmas was banned."



“That it was. I’ve had quite the chip on my shoulder.” Kaju plopped onto my bed, adjusting to sit on her heels. “I just couldn’t understand why society could be so unabashedly biased toward some holiday when it’s so clearly your birthday too. I sought to challenge the status quo on the war of Christmas versus Oniisama.” Didn’t like my odds in that fight. “But I’ve realized something. What if there *is* no war? What if it’s all actually for you? The lights at the station, those are all for you, dearest Oniisama. I thought all night about this, and I think Christmas and I have come to a tentative understanding.”

“Great. That’s fantastic. Now go sleep.” But wait, how could the truce have only been signed just this morning? “When did you get that outfit, Kaju?”

“This? I found it in Mom’s dresser. Not sure what it was doing __”

“You know what? Forget I asked.” It was too early for this.

“My winter break starts today, so I’ll have something *extra* special for dinner tonight. There’ll be a full Mikawa red chicken and everything!”

“Wow. Yeah, you’re selling me.”

“We can’t have anything less! I’ll admit, I was shocked at first, but today is the first day of the rest of your new life, Oniisama, and we must celebrate accordingly.”

“New what? I guess it’s a landmark age, but that sounds dramatic.”

Kaju clutched her hands together, frowning. “I was shocked last night, Oniisama. Shocked. But I will support you to the end!”

I understood she was shocked, but at what? All I’d done last night was hop in the bath, then go straight to bed.

“What, did you follow me around yesterday or something?” I said jokingly.

Kaju must’ve missed it, because she nodded. “I did. I had to know who your chosen partner was.”

“Wait, you saw all that?!”

“The one you were with was from Tsuwabuki, right? I remember from your summer field trip!”

I’d almost forgotten Kaju had been at the lit club trip too, though for a city-wide student council meetup. Not that Shikiya-san and I had done anything particularly embarrassing, but who wanted family peeping on something like that?

“Before you get any crazy ideas, we aren’t dating,” I insisted.

“But you’ve considered the possibility! I knew it!” A gentle blush came to Kaju’s cheeks as she edged closer to me. “Not everyone will be supportive, Oniisama, but I’ll always be on your side!”

“We’re not like that. Just senpai and kouhai. Now get off my bed.”

“Slow and steady, Oniisama! I’ll give you space, because I’m sure you need it, but I’ll be supporting you from the sidelines! Always!”

Well, that was good news. Kaju opened her mouth and let out a big yawn.

“You were up too late last night. Put dinner off and go get some sleep, will you?”

“There’s simply no time if I want to have that three-layered cake done. And roast chicken just isn’t the same unless it’s freshly slaughtered!”

Uh, how fresh? What in the world was she going to do to that poor chicken?

“Big bro’s good with cake! Let’s do cake! One layer!”

“But Oniisama, that’s paltry! I really think we ought to have some locally sourced poultry!”

“Okay, let’s do plain salt rice balls, natto, and some salad. Boy, I sure could go for rice balls, natto, and some salad.”

Talk about new life; I was gonna go vegetarian for a day.

Kaju pouted. “Arm,” she huffed.

“Huh?”

“I’ll go to sleep if you let me use your arm.”

A firm line had been drawn on sleeping together after Kaju started junior high, but then again, these were extenuating circumstances.

I laid back down and extended my arm out. “Only until you fall asleep.”

“Yay!” She practically dove next to me, giggling. “It feels like forever since we last did this.”

“Not since you were in elementary, so what, two years now?”

“Mm-hmm. Two years,” she echoed robotically.

I didn’t like her tone there. She’d better not have been sneaking under my covers.

Before I could interrogate her any further, she started breathing deep and slow. Unsurprising, if she really had been up all night.

Remembering my alarm, I reached over with my opposite arm to switch it off, so it wouldn’t wake her up. Next objective: Don’t fall asleep myself. As if I’d fall asleep with Kaju on my arm. Heck, I could close my eyes right now and prove it. I’d had a long day and was still groggy.

Was my bed always this warm? Must’ve been Kaju next to me.

Maybe just…a few minutes. A few minutes wouldn’t hurt… would it? My alarm would wake me up…

That day, the very last of the semester, my perfect attendance record became ash in the wind.

***

The closing ceremony began and ended. Maybe a little belatedly as far as the latter went. The principal loved the sound of

his own voice, and by the time he finished he'd given us Amanatsu-sensei's usual pre-break spiel about five times over.

The student council had helped officiate the whole thing with the broadcasting club. Now that it was all over, they were still flying around like bees to tidy things up. Some of them, at least. Tiara-san was working double time, inspecting equipment while Shikiya-san made repeated attempts to harass her. At least they were getting along after, well, everything.

I stared lazily at the congestion at the gymnasium's exit. We were being released one group at a time, starting with the third-years, so I had a bit of time to idle. Which I did, away from my classmates.

Yanami eventually drifted over. "You're never late."

"Bed was too comfortable. I had to hightail it on my bike, but it wasn't enough."

"I forgot you don't usually bike to school. If it's faster, why not?"

"'Cause it's exhausting, hot in the summer, and cold in the winter."

Yanami hummed in feigned interest, then lowered her voice. "So anyway, how'd last night go?"

"Exactly how I told you over LINE. Fine, I think."

"C'mon, quit being like that. Gimme something to work with. What does 'I think' mean? You think *I* don't think about losing weight? How well's that worked out, you *think*?"

Frankly, I did not know what to think about that.

"I really can't say anything one way or the other. Shikiya-senpai kept everything under wraps."

That piqued Yanami's interest. Her eyes narrowed. "Shikiya-senpai? What Shikiya-senpai? I thought she was only there to see Tsukinoki-senpai. Did you two *actually* go on a date?"

"It wasn't a date. Is having some tea at a café a date?"

"Uh, yeah? On Christmas Eve? That's a date, dude. Well, isn't that great for you. While I was reciting pi, you were out having a

grand old time.”

Reciting what? “That how you get your kicks?”

“I’ll kick you in a second.” My question remained unanswered. She gave me a look that could kill. “Why yes, I did buy a chart with a million digits of pi to help me cope with spending Christmas Eve alone. Gotta say, around the halfway point, you stop caring so much about the little things. Highly recommend.”

I couldn’t imagine ever being that desperate for escapism. Except maybe now. Sure was taking a while to get out of this gym.

Yanami sidled closer as the traffic jam at the exit started to clear. “So, after school.”

“The Christmas party thing?”

She nodded. “I still haven’t decided. If I get permission from your sister for you, think you can pop in with me?”

“And do what? I wouldn’t even know anyone there.”

She fulfilled her earlier promise and whacked her shoe against mine. “Nice to meet you.”

Fair point, but it didn’t change the fact that I knew there was going to be this inscrutable energy as soon as I showed up. And I’d be excluded from all of it. And I’d ultimately doom whoever I ended up going with to the same fate.

As I racked my brain for a clever excuse, I spotted Shikiya-san wobbling along the edge of the stage, speaker cradled in her arms. Someone had evidently set her to work, but how smart was that? More than once, her tottering feet came treacherously close to tripping over the cord dangling from the speaker. And what was she doing walking sideways? That was a fine way to crash into something.

She was killing me. Why was she like this?

“Earth to Nukumizu-kun.”

Ignoring whatever Yanami had just said to me, I started to gravitate toward Shikiya-san. Good thing I did too, because as

soon as I picked up the pace out of fear for the inevitable, the inevitable happened—she tripped on the cord.

The speaker crashed heavily onto the stage. All eyes went there. To me, holding Shikiya-san in my arms.

“You okay?!” I blurted.

She batted those long eyelashes. “I’m…okay. The speaker?”

“What? Forget the—” The adrenaline faded with the force of a dart train leaving the station, and what was left was me and Shikiya-san. Posed like we’d just finished a ballroom dance. In front of hundreds of people. “Y-you can stand, right?! I’m gonna let you do that now!”

I tried to free her and back away, but she threw her arms around my neck.

“S-Senpai?!” I sputtered.

“Why…did you come?”

“B-because you were stumbling. And I was worried you’d, um, trip.”

“You were…watching me.”

A faint whiff of makeup.

Through her pale eyes, Shikiya-san stared into mine. “Do you…want to date me?”

The words passed through her lips, caressed my neck, then entered my ears with the gentleness of a kiss. Silence. Then a ripple of quiet chaos throughout the gym.

I turned the words over in my head, detached. Clinically examining their meaning.

I frantically shook my head. “N-no, I was just…! I-I’d never assume…!”

“You…don’t want to?”

“C-correct!” I squeaked, voice cracking.

“Oh.” She seemed to deflate. “Okay.”

The whispers around us grew into a low drone, and Shikiya-san said nothing more to tune them out. The air became almost stifling. What had changed? Had I made a mistake? Sweat soaked my back, threatening to pour off my face.

Weaving through the crowd, Tiara-san lurched forward. “Shikiya-senpai! You are in *public*!” She wrenched her away from me, then gave me the stink eye, assuring me she was not, in fact, my savior in disguise. “N-Nukumizu-san! Have you no shame?! I should have known better than to trust you!”

“Hey, I was helping her!” I argued. “She was about to fall, so I caught her! Tell her, Senpai.”

She nodded slightly and peered into Tiara-san’s eyes. “Your turn…”

“M-me?!” Tiara-san stammered. “I don’t—!”

Well, this was a turn of events. I shrank away.

Shikiya-san gently lifted Tiara-san’s chin. “Will you tell him…? Or should I?”

“Th-that won’t be necessary!” Tiara-san planted her feet in front of me, red in the face. “Nukumizu-san!”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Today after school! I have to speak with you! Keep your schedule open!”

“Uh, okay? Sure.”

“A-and try to keep your mind out of the gutter, got it?! I’ll contact you later!”

Dragging Shikiya-san by the hand, she quickly made herself scarce.

What had just happened?

I knelt down to pick up the speaker, if only to be doing literally anything other than standing around in front of practically the entire student body. It was cold. Like Shikiya-san. But without that distinct warmth that still lingered in my palm.

“Does, uh, anyone know where this…goes?”

My words fell unnoticed into a cacophony of a dozen others. “Cheater,” “catfight,” “love triangle”—to name a few of the many I dared not repeat.

What now? What was I supposed to do? I searched for answers and found Yanami.

She pretended to not see me.

At peak turmoil, with every muscle in my body stuck between fight or flight, I caught a flash of flowing white. Konuki-sensei stepped forward. “That’s enough, everyone. To your classrooms. Homeroom is starting soon.” As they began to disperse, the nurse beckoned to me. “Bring that over here. This way.”

“A-all right.”

Finally, a break. I said a quiet apology for ever having snubbed her.

She took me to one of the side wings, where I stowed the speaker onto a shelf. Konuki-sensei suddenly appeared behind me. “That sure was something. It can’t have been easy. You know I’m willing to lend an ear if the girls are giving you grief.”

“It’s not that, thanks. So, y’know, feel free to give *my* ear some space.”

Maybe a little snubbing was fine. Enough to keep her at arm’s length. Or two.

“You can drop the mask with me. I happen to be a very understanding individual. As a matter of fact, there’s an app that lets you make fake accounts that I could show you.”

“I’m good, actually. Thanks for the help.” I tried to take my leave.

As I did, Konuki-sensei called out, “Nukumizu-kun.” Her tone wasn’t playful this time. It was different.

I stopped. “Yeah?”

“I know what it’s like to be your age. And not to say I didn’t do the best I could at the time, but…” She smiled somberly. “There are things I wish that I’d taken more seriously. That I’d been less afraid of.”

“Sensei?”

She nodded, a show of compassion and empathy. “Bare your heart as you do your body, Nukumizu-kun. Sometimes, there’s more to relationships than—”

“Halfway there because I don’t bare my body,” I interrupted her.

“Oh. Not to anyone? Hm. I can offer advice there too, if you want.”

“I don’t, but thank you for the offer.” Her heart was in the right place. I had to smile. As best I could.

“You’re very welcome. Hang in there, kid.” She flashed a practiced wink, then left the stage.

With perfect timing, my phone chimed. I checked it, kicking myself for forgetting to set it to silent and thanking God it hadn’t gone off during the ceremony. It was an email from Tiara-san.

Subject: “A Word.” The body, too, oozed Tiara-san and read, “After school. Mukaiyama Oikecho Park. I’ll be waiting at the bridge to return the item.”

***

I put down a thoroughly unchanged report card at the last homeroom of the semester. The gym still clung to the edge of my thoughts.

What if I’d said yes? What if I *had* wanted to date Shikiya-san?

I shook the notion from my head. Ridiculous. She’d never. I’d dodged a bullet, of that I was sure.

I glanced around the classroom. At Yanami, goofing off with her friends. Yakishio post-face-plant on her desk. The Himemiyas off in their own little world. Business as usual. All the same sights as last semester. That was comforting, in a way.

What was *not* comforting were the glances I kept getting from my classmates. Was there a ladybug on my head or

something?

Hakamada invited himself to my desk while I messed with my hair. “Pretty wild, what you did.”

“What I did?”

“At the gym. You and that student council senpai seemed to have something going on, but the vice president too?”

Something? “Something” going on? I looked around. My classmates pretended they hadn’t just been staring.

“I, uh, think you might have the wrong idea,” I said. “We’re not like that.”

Hakamada winked and bumped me on the shoulder. “I know you’re not. Sucks, huh? All the rumors. People’ll spread just about anything, seems like.” What was this intense déjà vu I was feeling? “You’re not the kinda guy to play around like that. Gotta say, though, people’re gonna keep thinking you are until you put your foot down.”

And then he went back to his seat. I hoped this would be the last interaction of the year I’d have to compare to a certain pot and kettle.

Once her students had gotten ample opportunity to rejoice or wail over their grades, Amanatsu-sensei clapped her hands and regained their attention. “All right, all right, you’ve all seen your Christmas presents, now sit yer butts down.”

They promptly did. They knew the sooner this was over with, the sooner winter break could start. The clamor gradually settled.

“Sensei had overtime last night,” she solemnly began. “And then Sensei had to book it to the store before they closed. They had a Christmas cake there. Half-off.” And here was the last vent session of the year. Amanatsu-sensei shut her eyes melodramatically. “It made me think. Christmas is today. Bit soon for cakes to go half-off, ain’t it? And what’s a Christmas cake a day or two or three late? What’s so wrong with that?”

No one answered her. A window clattered in its frame as a breeze blew against it.

Unimpeded by the lack of response, Amanatsu-sensei opened her eyes again. “So I bought it. And I’m going to eat it on New Year’s Eve. To prove a point.” A point only her stomach would be privy to. She thwacked her class roster against the podium. “That’s all from me! Don’t you freaks go making a mess over the break!”

The class erupted in cheers.

Thoroughly unchanged. The room. The people. The griping. Thoroughly unchanged.

And yet not at all the same.

I was sixteen now.

***

The Christmas party was all that was on everyone’s lips after class. Most seemed intent on going, while a humble third or so, myself included, recognized there would be no place for them.

I slung my bag over my shoulder and stood. Himemiya-san and Yanami were chatting elsewhere in the classroom.

“You’re sure you can’t come, Anna?”

“Ugh, gosh, I wish I could, but the lit club’s twisting my arm. Sorry.”

She was one of the third then. Wasn’t sure what about the lit club was twisting her arm, though. Did she think we were still having strategy meetings? If she wanted to go that badly, I’d hate for her to miss it on account of a misunderstanding.

I entered the 12K zone. “Lit club’s not meeting today, Yanami-san.”

“Whuh?” Yanami’s expression turned to ice.

Himemiya-san’s innate radiance became incandescent. “They aren’t? Oh, that’s awesome, Anna!”

“Well, uh, we’ve got that periodical and all! That still needs printed.” Yanami winked. “Remember?”

I looked behind me. No one there. Who was she trying to signal?

“We only print those for recruiting or the festival,” I said. “Everything’s good on that end.”

“O-oh. Great.”

“You get to come!” Himemiya-san cheered, clinging to Yanami’s arm. “I’m so excited!”

All’s well that ends well. “I’m gonna get going,” I said.

Yanami grabbed my bag before I got far. Or maybe “yanked” was a better word. She had the eyes of a killer. “Going to the *party*. Right?”

“Already told Basori-san I’d meet her somewhere. Have a good rest of the year.”

She was freaking me out anyway, so I hurried out of the classroom, but not before risking one last glance behind me. Just in time to catch Yanami being whisked away by Himemiya-san, two voids where her eyes should have been.

She *did* want to go to that party, didn’t she? It’d sure seemed like it to me.

Oh, the mysteries of women.

***

Mukaiyama Oike was a sizable pond near the heart of Toyohashi and about a fifteen-minute bike ride from Tsuwabuki. Sizable was right too, because the grounds could fit about three Nagoya Domes. It came with a promenade, a park, and was a popular spot for cherry blossom season, though winter had vacated most of the crowds.

I locked my bike up in the parking lot of a nearby conference center, then headed for the pond. A long bridge—at least a hundred meters in length, I’d heard—spanned its width at the middle, and I had no idea what we were doing meeting there. Sketchy as the contents were, I couldn’t fathom why we had to

make the trade all the way out here. She wasn't trying to kill me, was she?

...Was she?

The promenade terminated at a vast body of water. Extending from there was Oike Bridge, as marked by a low-standing pillar at the edge of it. It began narrow, then opened up near the far end where there were a handful of benches. Squinting, I could barely make out the silhouette of someone sitting at one of them.

I shuddered against the icy wind blowing across the pond. No one else but her was crazy enough to be out here in this weather. With a sigh, I got to crossing.

She had a coat on over her uniform and a red scarf around her neck. She must've noticed me, by the way she kept shifting and hopping like she couldn't decide when was the right time to stand. The closer I got, the more nervous I got myself. It was Christmas, and if this were a rom-com, there would be only one reason we'd be meeting in private on a day like today.

When I made it, she wasted no time. "Thanks for coming."

"No worries, but why'd we come here anyway?" I asked, doing my best to keep my voice from shaking.

Tiara-san smirked and scanned the immediate area. "Privacy. No walls with ears. I can think of no better place for a confidential conversation."

Aside from the fact that we were visible all over the park from here—but she was right that no one would hear us. Unless someone could hear across three Nagoya Domes. I knew no such individual.

"And karaoke isn't anymore?"

"I'm sorry, who was it that invited another woman to that particular 'confidential conversation'?"

"I told you, Yakishio just... I'm sorry, okay?"

Same old Tiara-san. She peered up at me. “I need an answer. What did I see in the gym today?”

“The gym?” Dear god, had she heard Konuki-sensei’s rambling?

“With Shikiya-senpai! Why did she ask you if you wanted to date her?! What was that about?!”

“Your guess is as good as mine. I mean, cut me some slack. You know Shikiya-san.”

“True. That I do.”

That was easy. Much like Tiara-san herself.

“Anyway,” I said, “can I assume you invited me here because I kept my end of the deal?”

“Correct. Which, frankly, I’m surprised you did.” She had no filter, did she? “I just hoped that, considering your relationship, Tsukinoki-san might fill you in a little. I never thought they’d actually reconcile. And I’m grateful for that, but…” She looked down, shuffling.

“But?”

“Shikiya-senpai’s been more clingy than usual. I’m just wondering if anything happened last night that I should be aware of.”

“Nothing you’d care to trouble yourself with, Tiara-san. Rest assured.”

“And just what, in your opinion, *do* I care to trouble myself with? And stop calling me Tiara.” Scowling, she thrust out a paper bag with both hands.

“What’s this?”

“The book. I keep my promises.”

Did a book take two hands to carry? I kept wondering that until I took the bag and saw a package wrapped in red inside.

“There’s something else in here.”

“It’s for you,” she mumbled, eyes averted.

I got dangerously close to asking “why” but swallowed it just in time. Kaju had beaten into me proper gift-receiving etiquette yesterday, which I’d mostly only listened to humor her. Didn’t think it’d actually come in handy.

First step: “Wow, really? Are you sure? Thanks!”

Surprised joy, tempered by modesty.

“D-don’t get your hopes too high. I did the best I could on a teenager’s allowance.”

“Hey, I don’t mind. I appreciate the thought. Can I open it?”

“I-if you want.”

Step two: reiterate joy and express interest in the contents. When opening, open carefully. Kaju had been very insistent that tearing through the paper like a madman was for little kids.

“Uh, then what?” I muttered under my breath.

Tiara-san side-eyed me. “What? What do you mean ‘then what’?”

“Oh, er, ignore me… Oh.” Inside the present was a green scarf. “Wait, this is for me? This is awesome.”

The script went out the window.

Tiara-san blushed up to her ears, and without even looking at me blurted, “I-it’s just a thank-you! I cross-referenced the amount of work you did with the minimum wage in Aichi prefecture and picked something that seemed appropriate!”

Did I get any benefits with that job?

“It must’ve been expensive then.”

“Y-you’re being paid in experience. Partly. Point is, don’t worry about it!”

Good old exposure. Always paying the bills.

“Yeah, I’ll definitely wear this.” Kaju had instructed me that wearables were to be worn immediately. So I coiled it around my neck and grinned. “Warm. Thanks.”

“G-good! It should be! It’s wool!”

Tiara-san wasn't getting any less flustered. Had I messed up the process somewhere?

I studied her, just in case, and noticed her own scarf. "Hey, is yours the same? Other than the color, I mean."

"C-coincidence! These are the only scarfs APiTA sells!"

"I'm not complaining, for the record. Green's one of my favorite colors."

"Oh. G-good then."

She'd stopped shouting, so I figured it was about time to hit her with the closing line.

"Thank you," I recited. "Every time I look at this, I'll think of you, Tiara-san."

Kaju would have been proud. I let my shoulders relax.

Tiara-san, on the other hand, looked like steam was about to come billowing out her ears.

"You okay there?"

"Don't..." I could barely hear her; her voice was so low.

"Sorry?"

"D-don't you get smart with me!" she snapped. She jabbed a finger to my chest, eyes sharp and wet with tears. "This is a *thank-you*, got it?! A thank-you! The only reason it's all wrapped up is because it happens to be Christmas!"

What? Why? Was it something I'd said? Had Kaju's technique failed me? Had I failed it? I knew I should have practiced on Komari first.

"All right, message received. I got it."

"No, I don't think you do! You know what? While I already have you here, we've got a whole heap of things to discuss regarding the literature club's future."

How much was a "whole heap," and how long was this going to take?



Driven all the way to the bridge's railing, I thought it was all over until a familiar melody graced my ears. "That's my phone, if you mind."

Whoever it was, I owed them one. I turned around and checked the screen. The name of my savior: Yanami Anna.

Maybe "savior" was speaking too soon. She was supposed to be at the Christmas party. I had a bad feeling about this.

I answered. Greeting me was an indiscernible din of laughs and what sounded like karaoke music. "Hello?"

No response. People cheered. I was about to hang up when the dark, formless voice of what once was Yanami rasped, "Help."

"What? Hello? Yanami-san?"

Again, no answer. The call dropped. RIP Yanami.

I turned back to Tiara-san.

"Something important?" she asked.

"Not really—"

A chime. Then another. Multiple, in sequence, nearly all at once. All coming from my phone. I glanced at the screen and caught just a few of the messages flying in.

Yanami yet lived.

"Come to the Christmas party." "We're having so much fun." "Would I lie to you?" "Come."

I knew what this was. Nuh-uh. Not biting. But she wasn't done.

"Where are you?" "Hurry." "Get your ass over here."

Uh-huh. Totally not lying to me. Still, ignoring her would only mean paying for it later. With interest.

"Sorry, Basori-san. Gotta go. I'm getting bugged about our class party."

"Oh," she said, all her ire suddenly evaporating. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize I was keeping you."

“Nah, it’s fine. I didn’t wanna rush anyway. Thanks again for the scarf!”

With a showy glance at my watch just to sell it, I hurried off.

***

It had been a long and winding road, but I had secured both the smut and my winter vacation.

As I came off the bridge, I glanced around. Certain the coast was clear, I snuck a peek inside the bag. That ominous bundle of copy paper, protruding with sticky notes like a neutered porcupine, could be none other than Tsukinoki-senpai’s infamous BL RPF. I took it and examined the tiny comments scribbled onto the post-its, then wondered why she hadn’t removed those first.

I deigned to flip through it. The production value was something else. Senpai hadn’t skimped on illustrations.

That guy there must have been me, if I was the top. Interesting. Very interesting…

Ahem. Snapping out of it, I shot Tsukinoki-senpai a quick message to give her the good news. Kaju was waiting on me to get back for my birthday, and I still had Yanami to placate. No time for lollygagging.

Last year, Kaju’d put together review questions for me back when I was applying for high school. She’d helped me work through most of them, but only most. Big brother couldn’t let her have the whole spotlight. I started to take my phone out to update her when it rang on me.

“Tsukinoki Koto” appeared in bold letters on the screen. Already? Didn’t that girl have to study?

“Hello?” I answered. “What’s up?”

“Quite a bit after yesterday, you little snake.”

No manners. I cracked a smirk and lowered my phone from my ear. “Hiss-hiss. That all?”

“No.” She sighed, then chuckled. “Thanks.”

I chuckled back. “I do want to apologize, though. I realize it wasn’t my place to do any of that, but there wasn’t much I could do after you got the student council involved.”

“I’m sure. There’s always another finger to point, so whaddya say I let Shintarou off the hook for cheating on me and we call this whole thing even?”

“Speaking of which, he was beating himself up pretty hard last night. Go easy on him.”

“Oh, I went *plenty* easy on him last night.”

“Keep talking like that and I’ll start charging you by the minute.”

Yeah, those two were fine. I went quiet as I passed a woman walking her dog.

Tsukinoki-senpai indulged in the moment, then said, “I’m serious, by the way. Thank you. I’m gonna do better from now on.”

“We’ll expect it.”

“You’re gonna get it. Trust me. I’ve deeply reflected and came to the genius conclusion that I should’ve included Shikiya, which I just did. I’ll show you later.”

“That doesn’t sound like ‘better’ to me.”

I was a fool for ever believing the witch called Tsukinoki Koto. Sighing, my thumb hovered just over the “End Call” button when Senpai’s flustered pleas stopped me. “Wait, wait, I’ve learned my lesson! Honest! This copy’s not being printed. I even password-locked it. It’s the last four letters of the file name, by the way.”

“Less excuses, more studying. You want your boyfriend going off to university while you sit around at home? So he can realize how popular he is without you?”

“I’ll go study now.”

My job was done. I hung up and stretched out wide. Just Yanami left.

There were times in a man's life when you had to walk barefoot into hell, all in the name of dependability.

Literature Club Classified Activity Report: Tsukinoki Koto—So Wrong Yet So Right

The Zavit Royal Academy for Magic was a vaunted institution. The most vaunted in all the land.

Along the grand, cobblestone road leading to its storied campus, two men strolled. One wore flowing, formal Eastern robes—a hakama. He rubbed his stubble in a disgruntled manner, sending the occasional furtive glance left or right. "Is this wise, Mishima-kun? I hear all manner of man-eating fiends stalk these parts."

"The elves expelled you. If you've a better place in mind, I'm all ears." The man in khaki military garb had lost count of how many times he'd reminded his companion of that fact.

"And damn them for it. Have we reincarnated souls not been awarded basic rights? Expulsion seems a tad cruel to me."

"You threw yourself and one of their women into open water, and you want to claim mistreatment? You're lucky to be alive."

Dazai flicked his nose. "It was attempted murder, if you ask me. How was I supposed to know her kind isn't susceptible to drowning?"

"They're fae. You ought to consider your survival a miracle."

Mishima sighed and quickened his march. He wished he could be surprised, but Dazai could not be trusted around women. They brought out the worst in him. Seeing to it that he controlled himself was the sole reason Mishima had abandoned his freedom as an adventurer and joined him.

Mishima stopped and rolled his head back to take in the view of the sight before him. Two spires stretched upward, piercing the heavens. This would be their home for the time-being, where they would work as instructors on Kawabata's recommendation.

Dazai seemed less than thrilled at the prospect. “Modest. Do they serve alcohol, do you think?”

“Does nothing else occupy your mind? Behave yourself or they’ll turn you into wyvern food.”

“Oh, how I tremble.” Dazai wrinkled his brow. “I’ve seen only men so far. Strange, that.”

Magic was king in this world. Or queen. Gender did not matter. Only aptitude. Yet there was neither hide nor hair of the fairer sex here.

“You will continue to see only men. It’s an all-boys school,” Mishima explained dryly, approaching an impish statue on one end of the road. Upon presenting it a letter from his breast pocket, the figure shuddered.

Only after Dazai had leapt back did he belatedly shout, “Look out!”

The statue accepted the letter in its jaws, then batted its stony wings and took flight.

“Now we wait,” said Mishima, unfazed by Dazai’s charade.

From afar came a metallic, warbly shriek. The cry of some beast, surely.

Dazai’s head whipped in its direction. “They don’t *actually* feed people to wyverns, do they?”

“You would have to ask the victims. That, or behave yourself.”

Dazai was not willing to bet on Mishima’s sense of humor and simply nodded.

The student council room occupied the top floor of the academy. There, two men stood before the tall, lavish windows overlooking campus.

President Houkobaru Hibari cut a tall, lean figure. Some claimed his eyes could kill. At the very least, they could paralyze, thanks in part to the frigid beauty he had been blessed with. “Those are our new instructors? I take it from their taste in fashion they hail from another world.”

“Japan… Showa era,” the boy to his side replied. Secretary Shikiya Yumeji spoke in barely a whisper. His head fell to one end, wavy bangs sliding across his forehead.

“Japan again. Such a peculiar epoch, that ‘Showa era’ must have been.”

The man carrying a blade did not wear clothing all too different from their own, but the second, with his folded robes and binding sash holding it all together, had a very foreign aspect.

For a split second, Houkobaru thought he met eyes with the cowering foreign man. Only a split second. But that was impossible with the magic put in place on the student council room. None could enter, much less see inside.

The boy from before still occupied his mind. Making him paranoid. He scoffed at himself.

Shikiya intertwined his cold fingers around the president’s.

“Not now,” he admonished. “We welcome them first. They’ve much to learn about our ways here, and it’s our duty to impress those lessons upon them. Deeply.” The president grinned at his friend, thinking this another one of his tender little nothings, but then he couldn’t move.

Shikiya’s pale eyes fixed him with their power—binding.

Houkobaru’s face froze in that same grin. “Shikiya… What are you…?”

Shikiya only squeezed his hand tighter. With great effort, Houkobaru managed to free himself from its grasp, but not from his eyes.

Suddenly, clapping came from the other side of the room. “You never cease to amaze me, President. Shikiya’s abilities are not so easily resisted.”

“Nukumizu…?”

The spell on the room was one of twelve masterworks passed down throughout the academy’s history. It was impenetrable—mostly. Unless someone on the inside were to invite them in.

“I do so hope you won’t leave me out of this welcoming party you have planned for our newest teachers.” Nukumizu prowled soundlessly across the plush rug, then slithered a hand around Houkobaru’s waist.

“You snake!” the president spat. “What do you want with me, that you’d stoop to such cowardly measures?!”

“What measures? Shikiya-senpai’s released his hold. You’re in my arms now of your own free will. Nostalgic, isn’t it?”

“You forced yourself on—!”

Nukumizu grabbed his chin and forced it up. “That’s it. I love it when you get that look in your eye.”

Shikiya, lingering just paces away, snapped his fingers. The walls warped and writhed until thorny rose vines extended forth and knotted around Houkobaru’s limbs.

“Shikiya! What is the meaning of this?!”

“Don’t begrudge him,” Nukumizu purred. “He wants to understand you, and I’m simply granting that humble wish.”

Shikiya leaned in close to the bound president, so close their lips were near to touching. “I’m…with you…”

Houkobaru struggled, digging the vines in deeper. He growled. “And you think you’ll get away with this, Nukumizu?!”

“I think you’ll stop caring by the time it matters. See the way you’re shaking?” Nukumizu reached for his chest, softly at first, then wrenched his shirt open. “It’s not out of fear.”

Sadistic hunger filled his expression.

And so a feast began. A feast to prelude the reception to come.

Epilogue:
Secrets

TWO DAYS INTO WINTER VACATION. CHRISTMAS WAS quickly making way for New Year's all over town.

I stepped off the elevator, squinting against the sunlight pouring in through the wide window in front of me. The entire top floor of Toyohashi City Hall was a free-to-the-public observation deck. What was I doing in such a place?

One word: Yanami.

The class Christmas party had taken place at that one karaoke joint. I'd hardly opened the door a crack before everyone's eyes were on me (just my luck, I'd shown up right as a song was ending). Obviously, I tried to run, but Yanami had been faster.

"God, that sucked."

Every class extrovert had been there, on top of a few select *visiting* extroverts from other classes for some godforsaken reason. And there I was, smack dab in the middle of their merry jubilations. To be honest, most of what happened was a blur. All I remembered was counting bubbles in my soda, and the utter absence of any expression whatsoever on Yanami's face while she stuffed it with french fries.

Other than that? It was anybody's guess.

As was Yanami's reason for calling me out here. My personal theory was heavily based on a poster I'd seen on the way in about testing for metabolic syndrome. She *was* looking a little big around the waist lately. Foreshadowing?

I suddenly stopped in my tracks. Someone was at the window I'd been heading toward, bathing in the early afternoon sun. She looked about my age, wore a cute coat, and she swayed in rhythm. To a song? Must have been humming something.

Wow, she's pretty, I thought to myself.

And then she turned, and there were not enough words in any language in the world to adequately describe the whiplash I felt in that moment.

Yanami twirled to me, her coat, different than the one she'd worn at karaoke, fanning out. I couldn't have known. I was a victim. That earlier thought? Never happened. Stricken from the record.

"Hey," I said.

"Oh, hey. Thanks for comin'." She grinned weakly, which wasn't like her at all. Her complexion looked kind of pale too. Maybe her organs weren't doing as good and stuff as she'd hoped.

"You all right?"

"Oh, you know. Still recovering from Christmas." Her shoulders dropped.

"But you were just—"

"You saw, huh? Yeah, I slept real bad, and I've got this insane crick in my neck." She clutched it and popped it a few times. "Can't stand still without it throbbing."

I felt robbed. Was this what I'd nearly swooned over?

I didn't blame her for being traumatized after the party, though. For my part, I had Kaju at home to supplant all those memories with ones from some compilation she'd put together of my past year, which we spent literally all night watching. I'd been spared lasting damage.

"You looked down for the count by the time I got there," I said. "What happened? Himemiya-san announce their engagement or something?"

"Why do you gotta do this to me seconds after 'hello'?" Hey, prepare for the worst, hope for the best. She shrugged. "No, they were normal. Most normal they've ever normal'd."

"Then what'd you need me around for? You had other friends there."

Yanami scrounged up enough energy to glare at me. "You and Shikiya-san've been awfully close lately. And then that thing

after the closing ceremony. You were all over those two."

Were not. If that was what "close" was, I'd be single for the rest of my life.

"You know why I had to hang around them."

"Okay, but literally everyone who saw you guys doesn't. And now there's all these rumors, and guess who has to listen to 'em? Spoilers, it's me."

What did my supposed two-timing with the student council have to do with her?

"What're they saying?" I asked.

Yanami shook her head painfully. "That I got rejected," she groaned. "By you."

Me? *I* rejected Yanami?

My slack-jawed look only seemed to make her angrier. "Like how does that even track?! As if I haven't literally rejected you already!"

"Never happened, but I'd try to ignore them if I were you."

Unbothered, she inserted herself right into my personal bubble. "You realize this is *your* fault for fooling around with the student council, right? That crap at the gym was a total catfight!"

My back forced against the window glass, I was feeling a bit like a mouse myself.

She kept the pressure on until there was nothing left to do but slam her hand against the window just by my head. "Confess to me, Nukumizu-kun."

"Excuse me?"

Her face came right up to mine. Her hand did not move. "So I can turn you down! Then *poof*, problem gone."

Problem decidedly not gone, I quipped in my head.

"Relax. All we gotta do is lay low until it blows over. There's no basis to any of it, so give it time and people'll move onto something else. Yeah?"

“Yeah, *no*! Do you have any idea how insulted I feel?! A little empathy, please!”

Right, because she was a total empath.

I took out a piece of candy and placed it in her free hand. “Relax, Yanami-san. Have a Sugimotoya mini yokan. You like those.”

“Matcha flavor? Really?”

Excuse me, was that not good enough for her?

She tore into it anyway and started nibbling on the candied jelly. “Wait, but this kinda hits. Get me ogura next time.”

Good old glucose, making things all good and stuff.

Now that she’d cooled off a bit, I swiftly steered us toward a different topic. “You’re here for that metabolic testing, right? Better go see reception.”

“What? No. What? We’re here for this.” She dug in her bag and flaunted a slip of paper. The lunch voucher Tsukinoki-senpai had given her. It was for use on the thirteenth floor of city hall, which just so happened to be this one. “You just had a birthday, didn’tcha? Thought we’d grab lunch.”

With the ticket she’d been bribed with. I was touched.

Next, she produced a long and thin box. “Also, just ’cause I’m nice.”

We’d see about that. I opened it, and inside was a shiny, blue ballpoint pen. “Wait, for real? This looks expensive.”

Yanami sent her gaze out the window, twirling her hair around a finger. “That one pen you’re always using was just such a piece of junk and all. It took a while to get this since they do this whole thing where you can have your name printed on it.” Piece of junk was subjective, but whatever. She turned her eyes up at me. “Unless you, uh, don’t like it.”

“Nah, it’s awesome. I’m just surprised. You said my name’s on it?”

I picked it up out of the box. Yanami leaned in too, curious to see for herself.

Along the length, in golden letters, written in English, was the name—Anna Yanami. For some reason.

“Wait, crap!” Yanami snatched it out of my hand.

“Huh? What…?”

“Sorry, forget you saw that! I’ll handle it! Gimme a bit and I’ll get you a new one, ’kay? Promise!”

“Then I’d feel bad. We can just get some nail polish remover or something and cover up the mistake.”

“What’d you just call me?” I was doing my best here. “Okay, whatever, I’ll just have them fix the name! Let’s go have lunch before someone eats it all!” She started shoving me toward the restaurant.

So much for my new pen. She couldn’t have bought one for herself and mixed the two up, could she? Nah, no way. I doubted she’d want matching pens with me. Yanami being inscrutable was nothing new, so I was wasting energy trying to understand her.

She eyed my throat closely as my last sigh of the year left it.

“What?”

“Have you always had that scarf? You weren’t wearing that at the closing ceremony.” She cocked her head. “Were you?”

“I wear it when it’s cold enough, but not really at school,” I replied without thinking.

Yanami hummed boredly, then sauntered through the restaurant’s automatic doors. I followed a little later. After I’d recovered from the shock.

I’d just lied to her.

It was a little one. A white one. But an unnecessary one. What did I stand to gain from it? Nothing. But something had compelled me, and I’d listened.

I stopped. Yanami was staring at me all of a sudden. “Y-yeah?”

She didn’t reply. Only sneered. Then she reached for the scarf and gently, but not at all ambiguously, tightened it around my

neck.

“Remember what I said about head starts?”



Bonus Story:
All-Ages, No Problems

SEIBUNKAN. FLAGSHIP STORE. A YOUNG GIRL STOOD uneasily before one of the shelves, keenly aware of every pair of eyes that might see her. She looked about high school age, and it had taken a lot to get her to stop pacing back and forth. Now, her objective was within grasp.

She stared hard at the spine. Unmoving. Then, resolved, at last she raised her hand.

"School setting. Good taste."

Basori Tiara, first-year of Tsuwabuki High School, nearly jumped out of her own skin. It was a miracle she hadn't shrieked. "Ts-Tsukinoki…san? Wh-what are you doing here?"

"I'm something of a regular. To this shelf specifically." The third-year sported a knowing grin as she rested her hand on Tiara's back. She glanced at the spine she'd been eyeing. "I think you and I'll make good friends. Got a favorite yet?"

"I-I wasn't…! I-I was just passing through!"

"Life's a journey. We're all just passing through something or other. This what you had your eye on?"

Tiara grabbed Koto's hand before it could get far. "My interest is purely out of curiosity! I have no intention of reading this… This *smut*!" she rambled, blue in the face. "Tsuwabuki students ought to hold themselves to higher standards!"

"Fiction's fiction. Consume as you please, think of it however you want. That's the best part. No one can tell you how to feel. Also, I wouldn't call this smut. This is the all-ages section."

"All-ages?"

Koto nodded, her smirk unflinching. "All roads lead to the officially published stuff, when it comes to BL. What you can't get in fanwork, you get here."

"These are different from doujinshi?"

“Doujin’s fanwork, so it comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes your top’ll be a bottom, or it just won’t be your ship. Fanfiction’s a never-ending war, and it can be a dangerous place. Official stuff, though? That’s always safe. So long as you have a favorite author, you always have a home to come back to.”

With practiced motions, Koto pulled a novel off the shelf and handed it to Tiara. The title read, “Student Council Honey Trap ~The Icy President’s Sweet Nothings~.”

“That one’s about a frigid student council president who everyone calls ‘the Emperor,’ but in a man’s arms? Melts like a popsicle.”

“Like a…popsicle.” Tiara gulped. Trembling, she accepted.

“You’re into that kinda thing, huh?”

“What?! N-*no*!” she spat. “Wh-what could have possibly given you that impression?!”

Koto stopped her as she went to hurriedly return the book to its place. “What you need, Basori-san, is your holy grail. Your masterwork. That perfect piece where everything works. No bad vibes. No iffy nuances. Find it, and a world of beauty beyond imagining awaits.”

“Beyond imagining…?” Tiara gasped. “B-but who says this is going to be the one?!”

“In my expert opinion, you stan bottoms. Maybe just domination in general. If that particular novel’s not your speed, you’ll find more perfect-boy-bottoms in school settings around here.” Koto instantly provided many such volumes. “Here. To get you started.”

“U-um…”

“Would you prefer fantasy? Working adults? Voracious. I can respect that. Lemme see what I can do.”

Utterly terrified at how readily Koto started to gather yet more books, Tiara shook her head. “Th-the one will do, thank you!”

And then she bowed and hurried to the register, but quickly returned.

“Forget something?”

“Shikiya-senpai was, um, toying with the idea of a board game night a little while ago.”

“Yeah? Sounds fun.”

“I was just wondering if you’d be, er—once studying isn’t your priority, I mean—if you’d be interested in joining!”

Koto blinked in shock, but quickly recovered and smiled. “You know, that could be fun once I finally get a chance to breathe. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it! Anyway, that’s all!”

Quickly snatching one more book off the shelf, Tiara darted away again.

Koto watched her shyly check out at the counter, her head on a swivel. It reminded her of herself from a time long gone. “One of us.”

Afterword

BACK BY POPULAR DEMAND, *TOO MANY LOSING* *Heroines* Volume 4!

I'm so glad to finally pull the curtain back a little on what makes the enigmatic Shikiya-san tick, though truth be told, I was concerned about her as a character as early as Volume 1. I mean, look at her. I once voiced these concerns to my editor, Iwaasa-san, who had this wisdom to share regarding it:

"It's probably fine."

And so Shikiya-san was born and then given form by Imigimuru-sensei's talented hands. Now here she is adorning the cover of a volume. Without Iwaasa-san's shrewd judgment, it might have been a twin-tail femboy instead. And no one could have stopped me.

As is tradition, I leaned heavily upon Iwaasa-san's guidance throughout the entire process of this publication. Which technically hasn't ended because I'm sitting here still writing. If you're reading this, it means I either did my job or something came up and Iwaasa-san did it for me at the expense of sleep.

Sorry about that. ← buffering apologies like a pro

Yet again, Imigimuru-sensei dazzles us with a stunning set of illustrations, and maybe a little more. Tiara-chan's wild imagination has threatened to awaken something in me. I welcome one and all to join me on this journey.

Also, shortly before this volume goes out, the first volume of the manga will have officially gone on sale in Japan! Itachi-sensei has been gracious enough to bestow upon us yet another viewport into the world of losers, and it would behoove you to take a peek. A personal highlight for me was when Takuya from you-know-what-book had his necktie stuffed into his breast pocket. Inspired. You gotta see it.

One more announcement! As of the release of this volume in Japan, the ongoing collaboration with Nonhoi Park, located within the very real Toyohashi City itself, will be entering its second

phase! The folks in charge of it have put a lot of love and effort into the whole thing, and there'll even be puzzles. I hope it's fun for everyone.

Wait, I lied. It wasn't just one more announcement.

As if Nonhoi Park wasn't enough, we're even getting a special edition map complete with illustrations drawn by none other than Sano Tae-sensei, the author of such manga as *Morita-san wa Mukuchi* and *Damonde Toyohashi ga Sukitte Ittorujan!* I have no words, frankly. Go see it. Please.

Now I know you're dying to know. Am I gonna do it? Are we getting another one?

Yes, I did it. You got another one. There are two characters who never got much of a chance to interact, so flick back a couple of pages to see how they get on in the extra little epilogue.

About the Author

Takibi Amamori

A manga, a collab with Nonhoi Park... The losers just keep getting bigger! Thank you for sticking with them!



Thank you for reading!

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