
NOVEL
5
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Too
Many
Losing
Heroines!

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Too Many Losing Heroines!


“Yeah, I remember this.
This was my seat, wasn’t it?”
“Was it…?”
MOMOZONO CLASS 3-2


“Thoughts,
Oniisama?”
“S-screw you…”
A MILD ADJUSTMENT


“Whatever
happens, it’ll keep
on growin’.”

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Too Many LOSING Heroines!

Too Many Losing Heroines!

NOVEL 5

WRITTEN BY

Takibi Amamori

ILLUSTRATED BY

Imigimuru

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MAKE HEROINE GA OSUGIRU! Vol. 5
by Takibi AMAMORI
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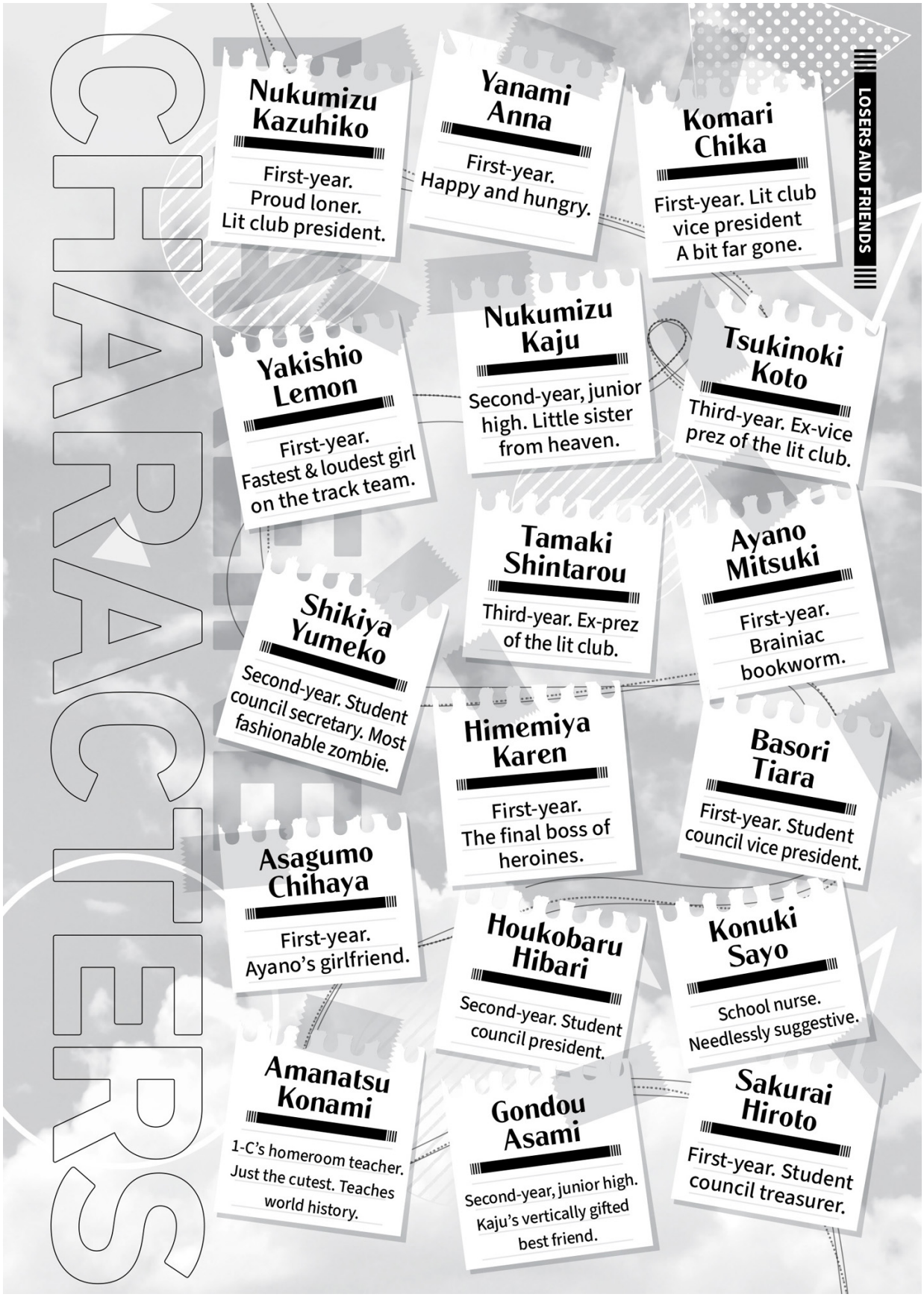
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LOSERS AND FRIENDS
Nukumizu Kazuhiko
First-year. Proud loner. Lit club president.
Yanami Anna
First-year. Happy and hungry.
Komari Chika
First-year. Lit club vice president A bit far gone.
Yakishio Lemon
First-year. Fastest & loudest girl on the track 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. Ex-prez of the lit club.
Ayano Mitsuki
First-year. Brainiac bookworm.
Himemiya Karen
First-year. The final boss of heroines.
Basori Tiara
First-year. Student council vice president.
Asagumo Chihaya
First-year. Ayano's girlfriend.
Houkobaru Hibari
Second-year. Student council president.
Konuki Sayo
School nurse. Needlessly suggestive.
Amanatsu Konami
1-C's homeroom teacher. Just the cutest. Teaches world history.
Gondou Asami
Second-year, junior high. Kaju's vertically gifted best friend.
Sakurai Hiroto
First-year. Student council treasurer.

Foreword

THE SUDDEN PATTERING OF RAIN AGAINST THE LIVING room window yanked me back from the brink of sleep. Stretching my stiff legs out across the couch, I gently shut my textbook.

Finals. We were coming up on the last wave of them, and I'd prepared for them well, but complacency would be my undoing.

"Two more days…"

I stared out at the calendar on the wall. My eyes were drawn to one date in particular—the fourteenth of February. Valentine's Day was the Sunday after next. The day boys got chocolate from family and relatives, and absolutely nothing else. Nope, not a thing.

Usually.

Last Christmas, I'd gotten birthday presents from the lit club girls. And that meant there was a very real possibility I had a respectable haul of obligatory sweet treats coming my way. Not to say my expectations were all that high. This wasn't a contest to me, or about some trite romantic fantasy. It was the nature of the season, and it affected us all, introvert and extrovert alike, whether your SO was flesh and blood or a string of binary. *Everyone* was on high alert when it came to Valentine's Day.

Likewise, though, let it get to your head, and those wax wings of yours were bound to melt. So it was a good thing we had exams to distract us this year. Unfortunately for me, I was pretty much solid on that front.

Light novels were a good plan B. In fact, I had a copy of *100 Days Until It Turns Out This Was an All-Boys School All Along* waiting for me in my room. A fairly self-indulgent series where all the heroines were actually cross-dressing boys that owed its long run to an incredibly defensive and vocal fanbase. Personally, I was only borrowing it from the lit club's collection. Just borrowing.

"I've earned a break," I told myself as I rose to my feet.

Something sweet wafting from the kitchen tickled my nose. My sister, Kaju, was in there stirring something, humming to herself. Her fine, silky hair swayed behind her like a curtain. She was a tiny girl, with a baby face to match. And she looked cute in that apron, if I said so myself.

I sauntered up and peeked over her shoulder. "Whatcha making?"

There was a rainbow of multi-colored bowls in front of her. The one she was working now had some kind of pale greenish substance in it. "Samples for new recipes. For Valentine's Day. Open wide, Oniisama."

She offered a spoonful of the stuff. I tried a bite, and whatever it was, it was sweet. Smelled kinda earthy too. "What flavor's that?"

"Pistachio," she said. "I made it into a paste and mixed in some white chocolate, but I can't quite get the texture right. This is black currant. Open."

I obeyed and was met with something pleasantly bittersweet. "They both taste pretty good to me. Far as I'm concerned, any chocolate made by you is great."

Kaju's lips twisted like she was trying to stifle a grin, but she quickly regained composure, and after clearing her throat she said, "Oh, but you won't need any from me, will you? You'll get plenty at school. Unless…" Her cheeks flushed pink, and her eyes sparkled with anticipation. "*You'll* be doing the giving?"

There she went talking nonsense again. "I don't know what I'll get till the day of. Valentine chocolate's sorta like, y'know, holiday cards and what not. Sometimes you do them, sometimes you don't. It depends on the vibe. Plus, it's on a Sunday." I paused to take a breath. "We'll be at school since it's open house for tours and stuff, I guess, but we just have to see, y'know? Not that I've given it much thought or anything. Those are just the facts."

Kaju grinned. “They make sense to me. I’ll have to consider them myself for the person I intend to give chocolate to.”

She was giving chocolate to someone? Huh. Kaju. Giving chocolate to…someone.

“Kaju, you—”

“Oh dear, would you look at that,” she interrupted, poking her own cheek. “I’ve gotten some oh-so-sweet and delicious chocolate on my face. Would my dearest Oniisama care to help make it all clean?”

As if I hadn’t literally just seen her put it there herself. I glanced around for a cloth or tissue, but those had all mysteriously vanished, so I settled for my handkerchief. “There. All clean.”

“Oniisama,” Kaju pouted, “that is your problem.”

Adolescence. Makes kids incomprehensible.

“Uh, so anyway, you said you were giving chocolate to—”

That time, I was interrupted by a phone. I didn’t recognize the ringtone.

“Oniisama, take this for me!” Kaju shoved a bowl she’d been warming in water into my hands.

“What? What do I do with this?”

“Stir it gently until it reaches a temperature of forty-five centigrade! Please and thank you!”

Phone in hand, Kaju dashed away. Her instructions had not been particularly informative, but stirring was simple enough. I could do that.

Doing so, I took several breaths to settle my thoughts. Kaju had someone to give chocolate to this year. A boy? No. No way. And what had she meant when she said I wouldn’t “need any” from her? Was she not planning on giving me any? Not that I would be particularly upset about not getting chocolate from my sister of all

people, but it was a tradition of hers. She'd been doing it since she was one year old.

Maybe there was a misunderstanding brewing. Best to nip that in the bud.

"Wait, crap. The temperature. Right."

She was gonna have my head for this one. I stuck in the thermometer, and its display read forty-six degrees exactly. Surely that was perfectly within the acceptable margin of error.

I removed the bowl of chocolate from the hot water bath, staring at the door Kaju had disappeared behind. What was I supposed to do now? Was she still on the phone?

I waited a while longer, but there was still no sign of her, so I took the bowl with me and opened the hallway door. "Hey, Kaju."

Poking my head in, I found her standing in the entryway, her back turned to me. "Yeah, but… Mm-hmm. You're right. But are you sure? Gon-chan… I know. I know. It's not about her." She was nodding to herself with the phone glued to her ear. It sounded serious, but unfortunately, the chocolate didn't seem inclined to politely wait around for her to finish.

"Let's talk specifics in person. I hate to do this over the phone." Sounded like she was wrapping up, so I stepped into the hallway. "I know. I'll keep the fourteenth open. See you at school, Tachibana-kun."

That last part froze me to the spot.

Kaju slid her phone into her apron pocket as she spun around. "Oh. Oniisama. How long have you been there?"

"Er, uh, not long," I lied. "The, uh, chocolate did the thing. Forty-five centigrade."

I held the bowl out. Kaju trotted over and took it with a beaming smile. "Thank you, Oniisama. Sorry that took so long." She scurried back to the kitchen, where she next set the bowl in ice

water. “Now we want it to get cold… Oniisama? Something the matter?”

I tore my eyes away from her. “Just, er, who was that on the, uh…?”

“A friend from school. There’s an event we had to discuss.”

A friend, huh? A *boy* friend, by the sound of their name. A friend who she was apparently keeping the fourteenth open for.

Kaju started humming. As she stirred the chocolate, cold sweat rolled down my back. Why *was* she going to the trouble of making samples? Who was that boy? What did they have planned on the fourteenth?

Did I want to know?

“Hey, Kaju,” I said. “Who’s that person you’re giving chocolate to?”

Kaju froze. “Guess,” she replied calmly.

I gulped. “O-one of your girl friends?” My voice betrayed me and cracked.

She twirled around to reveal a playful smirk. “My secret.”



Loss 1:
A Battle of Dimwits

THE FOURTH DAY OF FINALS CAME AND WENT. JUST one left. But that was the least of my worries. I was on my way to the club room after school, thinking back on what I'd witnessed yesterday.

Kaju had a crush.

Now, this was no cause for concern in and of itself. But Kaju was still in junior high, and frankly, that was far too young for her to be handing out chocolates to random guys she fancied. I mean, what if it was mutual?

Please. "What if"? Kaju was adorable. Of *course* it'd be mutual.

I entered the west annex, too absorbed in my thoughts to notice the figure lying in wait among the shadows by the stairs. It snatched my arm and yanked me aside into the dingy dark.

Basori Tiara, student council vice president, backed me into a corner and held me there with her ice-cold gaze. "You've been avoiding me, Nukumizu-san."

"Huh? I don't know what you…"

I couldn't finish that sentence. Something about this girl triggered my fight-or-flight response.

She narrowed her eyes, reading the silence, then cast them down. "I knew it."

"I-I'm not! Really! I've just been busy studying for finals. Was there something you needed?"

The tension left her with a breath. Easy as ever. "I was… wondering if you could help me again in that regard. With studying. Not out of the kindness of your heart, rest assured! This would be a proper transaction!"

Bit late for that, what with the last day being literally tomorrow.

Tiara-san's grades were somewhat of a sore subject, something I learned the hard way during last year's little kerfuffle. Thing was, she didn't want anyone to know the truth, thus her asking me for help. This had become a bit of a common occurrence for us lately, though I wished she'd find a better place to ask for favors than beneath staircases.

"So, tomorrow's mostly social studies," I recalled. "Right. I'm really not all that good at those subjects. But hey, it's pretty much all memorization anyway, so I'm sure you'll manage."

"Not *every* exam is social studies! There's also, um…" She dug in her bag, yanked out a piece of paper, and squinted at it. "Health and anatomy…"

The awkwardness that filled the subsequent silence was palpable.

Tiara-san went red up to her ears, shaking like a leaf. "That's not what I meant."

"I'm aware."

"I didn't mean it like that, I swear!"

"I'm well aware. On that note, maybe we forget the whole tutoring thing."

I started to leave when she suddenly threw her arms out wide and blocked my path. "How am I supposed to have something to thank you for then?!"

My brain gears creaked. She wanted me to tutor her… Specifically so she could thank me?

"Uh, no thanks necessary," I said.

"B-but next week is… You know. You know what next week is." Tiara-san traced the tip of her indoor slippers over the floor in fidgety circles.

Next week? Next week was Valentine's, but there was a snowball's chance in hell that that was what she meant.

"Oh, right. The open house that weekend. The student council gonna help us out?"

Tsuwabuki High School held open houses every so often for prospective junior high students in the city. It was an opportunity for them to get a feel for the culture and the clubs. Which meant our gang had to decide on how best to welcome prospective future members.

The gears stopped creaking. It all made sense now. She wanted help studying, and in exchange she could pull a few strings.

"I'm sorry?" she spat. "The *what*?"

Swing and a miss.

"Not that? Then what—"

Suddenly, my mouth turned to cotton. Darkness darker still than our dim nook crept toward us.

"Bad girl…spotted." Shambling from the void, clad in malice, came the student council secretary, Shikiya Yumeko.

Shikiya-san plopped her barely attached head onto Tiara-san's shoulder from behind. The aforementioned kerfuffle last year had been heavily centered around her and Tsukinoki-senpai. Ever since, though, she was seeming more lively. Pun unintended.

"Senpai?!" Tiara-san sputtered. "Wh-what are you—"

Her senpai waved languidly at me. "Nukumizu-kun… Long time no see."

"Three days, actually," I corrected her with a wave.

"Can you please stop making me into a flirt sandwich?" Tiara-san griped between us.

"We're not flirting… Are we, Nukumizu-kun?"

"Not in the slightest." We shared a nod.

This did not please Tiara-san.

Sensing this, Shikiya-san hoisted her arm up and patted her on the head. “I’ll…tutor you.”

“Huh? But—” Tiara-san jolted like she’d been struck by lightning. Shikiya-san was feeling around her back.

She cocked her head, confused. “Tiara-chan…your bra.”

Hanging her head ominously, Tiara-san let out a confident chuckle. “You thought I’d just lay down and let you keep up your antics, didn’t you?” She spun around and thrust her chest out. “Well, guess what? I switched to front hooks! Just try undoing them now!”

Uh, they knew I was still here, right?

“Oh? This…is not unwelcome.” Shikiya-san’s hand glided forward, and between Tiara-san’s ribbons, through the gaps in her shirt, she slipped her fingers.

“Can I help you, Senpai? Er, wait.”

“Done.”

Tiara-san threw her arms over her chest. “No, you didn’t—you actually did it?!” She froze like a statue and turned to look at me with all the grace of one. “W-were you looking?”

That I was. I nodded thusly. “Not sure what I’m looking *at* exactly, but you might wanna keep your fetishes to yourselves.”

“That’s not what this is! And *stop* looking!”

Well, that was kind of out of my control, now, wasn’t it?

Shikiya-san beckoned to her and whispered in her ear, “Your size is off…”

“Huh?! I-I know my size! I’m not delusional!”

That was some hole she was digging for herself. And all without a shovel.

I started to sidle my way out. Clearly, I wasn’t wanted here. “I’ll just excuse myself. You two enjoy yourselves.”

“Mm,” Shikiya-san grunted. “Bye.”

“Nukumizu-san! You’ve got the wrong idea!” Tiara-san pleaded. “That’s not what this is!”

“Mm-hmm. Not at all. I totally get it.”

I hurried off. I knew the rules. Men had no place in yuri.

If that wasn’t what I’d just witnessed, then I had a few questions.

***

I took a deep breath. There, in a lonely corner of the west annex, was the club room, and just beyond it was an emergency meeting waiting to be held. The timing might not have been the best, seeing as we all had finals, but this took priority.

Kaju was more important than some test.

“Sorry. I’m here,” I announced as I entered.

I found Yanami Anna and Komari Chika inside, side by side, facing the wall, mouths stuffed with huge sushi rolls.

But why, though?

Komari started hacking and placed her half-eaten roll onto a paper plate. “N-no way. I-it’s too big.” She downed some tea and wiped some tears before finally deigning to glare at me. “T-took you long enough. Yours is there.”

Mine? I followed her eyes to another massive roll. Just rolling around.

“One for each of us? Those things are huge.”

“Sh-shut up and swallow. Like a noodle.”

She had to be joking. That thing belonged in its own size class. Yanami-class. Heck, I doubted that even she could— “Whew. Sheesh, you’re slow. We ate without you.”

I whipped around toward the voice just as Yanami was crossing her legs and dabbing her lips with a handkerchief. She'd inhaled her entire roll during the span of my short altercation with Komari.

Fearfully, I went to sit across from her, but as soon as I sat, Yanami pointed her finger at the wall behind me. "This year's ehou is backwards. Chop chop."

So these were ehou-maki. I thought the whole point of those was *not* to chop. It explained them eating them facing the wall like freaks, though. Good luck and all that.

"Wasn't Setsubun yesterday?"

"Yep. Made too much, so figured I'd share." She peeled away the cellophane on the remaining ehou-maki and thrust it at me. "Now less talking, more eating. I stuffed yours with extra sakura denbu."

I hated sakura denbu.

Komari regarded my hesitation with detest. "D-down the hatch."

There was at least half of hers that was visibly not in her hatch.

"Maybe when we're, uh, done here," I said. "Yakishio still missing?"

"Lemon-chan's in remedials," Yanami chimed in.

"Remedials? Exams aren't even over."

Frowning, Yanami started nibbling on Komari's half-eaten roll. Was that bad luck? "The teachers saw her grades for the first round, and now she's got a special task force. They think she might get held back if she doesn't get serious."

Things were that bad, huh?

"All right, well, we'll leave her to her 'task force.' There's an important reason I asked you all to be here."

While I did my best to keep from manifesting a future wherein I had to hear Yakishio call me "Senpai," I took a box out of my bag.

"What's all that?" Yanami chirped.

"Less talking, more eating."

I lifted the lid, and she squealed in delight. Inside, neatly displayed, was a colorful assortment of chocolates. The Kaju Special (attempt number three).

"Oh my gosh, these are so cute. They're for us? For the record, I'm pretty picky when it comes to chocolate." She was picky. Full stop. "These are dark, and I'm guessing these are milk? Oh, these have caramel inside! Come on, Komari-chan, have some before they're gone!"

A truly unpreventable tragedy that would be.

Timidly, Komari tried one. "P-pistachio. Are these h-handmade?"

"By my sister," I replied. "They're samples for Valentine's Day. And this," I picked up a red heart-shaped one, "is what she intends to give to someone who isn't me."

Yanami and Komari froze in place, arms still outstretched.

I glanced between them. "She won't tell me who. What I want you two to help me with is to understand. Understand what a junior high school girl could possibly be thinking, giving chocolate like this to some mystery individual behind her brother's back."

Silence.

"There's stuff in this one, Komari-chan."

"H-hm. Almonds, maybe?"

Chewing.

"Uh, hello? Did you guys hear me?" I asked.

Yanami and Komari exchanged glances.

"She's prob'ly got a crush," Yanami replied flippantly.

"D-definitely a boy," Komari agreed.

They weren't processing the gravity of this situation. I cleared my throat. "Context: She's apparently got plans to meet a boy on the fourteenth, but I think that's a front. That's just not the meta anymore for chocolate-giving. Too overdone. I'm worried this guy might be bad news. What if he's tricking her? What if he gets her wrapped up in some kinda, I dunno, death game or something? She needs to introduce me. I'm her brother. That's just—"

"Yeah, that's crazy." Yanami and Komari started digging out textbooks and notebooks. "Komari-chan, I've got last year's questions for tomorrow's tests. Want 'em?"

Komari croaked. "Wh-where'd you get those?"

And now this was a study sesh.

"Can either of you two take this even a *little* bit seriously?" I begged.

Yanami sighed hard and heavy, twirling a red ballpoint pen in her fingers. "What do you want from us that you haven't figured out yourself? Look, dude. She's probably just a mess of nerves right now. That happens when you're in the early stages. Just leave her alone."

Komari bobbed her head in agreement. "B-be understanding. She'll just d-double down if her family starts c-coming down on her."

"But she was making that chocolate right in front of me," I argued. "What if it was a cry for help, or—"

"It wasn't. You seriously don't know the first thing about romance, Nukumizu-kun."

"N-nope. And he should f-feel bad about it."

Like they had any more experience than I did.

Still, the experts had spoken. If two high school girls thought Kaju had a crush, then objectively speaking, she probably did. And

suspect number one was none other than the enigmatic "Tachibana-kun."

But on the other hand, what was objectivity but the subjective consensus? This was the lit club. Were a couple of feasters of fiction a statistically significant sample size? And what if I was overcomplicating this whole thing? So what if she was handing out handmade chocolate on Valentine's Day. That didn't necessarily mean anything romantic. Was there not a crass saying about assumptions and what they make of you and me?

I went back and forth in my head endlessly. Minutes flew by. I lost track of how many.

Komari glanced at the clock on the wall, stuffed her things in her bag, and stood.

"Heading out?" Yanami asked.

"I-I'm on library duty."

"Ah, today's your day, huh?" The club had a close relationship with the library. They weren't lending books during exam season, but students still used it as a study spot. "Sure you don't need to prep more? Nukumizu-kun can go instead."

I didn't recall volunteering myself.

"I-I can still study. I'll o-only be sitting at a desk."

Komari went on her way. Yanami, meanwhile, reached for more chocolate, turning her eyes back down to her textbook. "What about you? Tests going all right? You been kinda antsy all day."

"I'm not thinking about tests. Kaju could be in trouble. If this guy's dangerous, I need to be ready to step in."

Yanami shook her head wearily, as if I were crazy or something. "Okay. So when's she actually handing over the chocolate?"

"Uh, Valentine's Day, obviously."

"Okay. And Valentine's Day is on a Sunday this year. So she's going out of her way to see this guy on a day off. Which means they're either already dating or they're about to be real soon." Yanami flipped a page.

"What? But she's never mentioned being interested in anyone before, or even acted like she was. She's at home with me pretty much all the time."

"Then they got close at school or something, I dunno. It's probably been a long time coming, so don't butt in and ruin it."

Impossible. I shook my head. "What if they're meeting up as a group? Kaju's not like me. She's got tons of friends."

"Then just ask her. If it's not a date or something personal, she should open right up."

Now she was talking sense. I took my phone out. "Might be something in the calendar. I'll check."

Yanami looked up from her textbook, scrunching her nose. "Why are your sister's plans in your phone?"

"I dunno. We share storage or something."

She scooched her chair away from me. "You're giving me the ick, Nukumizu-kun."

"Hey, she's the one who set it up! And I can't change it 'cause it's password locked."

I pulled up February in the calendar app, then checked next weekend. Valentine's Day was empty.

Well, it'd been worth a shot. I started to close the app, when I noticed something on the weekend before. This Saturday.

‹Toyokawa Inari with Tachibana-kun ♡›

I set my phone face down on the table. Couldn't jump to conclusions. Had to think about this rationally…

Rationally…

…

Yeah, no. Date. A thousand percent, that was a date.

Tachibana-kun was that guy Kaju had been on the phone with. Assuming, of course, they were a guy from the whole "-kun" thing. And you didn't call your senpai that, so he had to be either the same year or one below. Unless he was just weird like that, but assuming he wasn't…

Tachibana. Tachibana-kun. I knew the kanji in your name now, Tachibana-kun.

"Who the hell is Tachibana-kun?!" I clutched my head in my hands.

Yanami tapped the table. "Hi, hello, some of us are trying to study here. Would you get a grip? You're freaking out over nothing."

"It's the exact opposite of nothing! Kaju has a date this weekend!"

I thrust my phone at her. She squinted at it. "A what? How's a study session a date?"

Oh, so we were doing riddles again? I turned the screen back to me, and the previous entry was gone. Replaced with something else.

‹Studying with friends›

What? No. What?

"Hang on a sec, I swear this said 'Toyokawa Inari with Tachibana-kun' literally seconds ago! It had a friggin' heart emoji and everything!"

She must have changed it to keep me from finding out. Which meant she had some kind of reason she didn't want her family to know. Which meant they were up to no good. That was the final straw. Time for Big Brother to step in.

Just then, Yanami's hand came down on my shoulder. How long had she been standing there? "You need a nap, my friend."

"No, I'm serious. She's got a date this weekend, and she's trying to hide it from—" She stuffed my mouth full of chocolate. Black currant.

"Better? Here, have some tea."

"Thanks. Yeah. You're right. Maybe it is just a study group." It had to be. Yeah, that made way more sense. "I had to have been seeing things."

"Yes, sir." Yanami nodded gently.

"I mean, she's only a second-year in junior high. Boyfriends? Dates? She's way too young for any of that."

"For sure."

"Right? Kaju doesn't have a crush. My Kaju is a good, hardworking student. She's on the student council, for crying out loud. You know, I think maybe you and Komari might have had your heads in the clouds a bit." I nodded, convinced with myself.

Someone muttered something along the lines of, "Cheeky little…"

"Hm? You say something, Yanami-san?"

"You know what, Nukumizu-kun, I take it back. I think you were right the first time. She's totally going on a date."

Was she on my side or not?

"It literally says 'studying' on the calendar, though."

Yanami dropped back into her chair and threw one leg over the other. "That's a front if I've ever heard one. You know what your sister's actually gonna be doing? Going on a date at Toyokawa Inari with that Tachibana-kun fella. She's gotta feel things out before the big day. It's the oldest trick in the book."

"No. I was seeing things. It's not a date."

Yanami had no proof. It was all in my head now. And synapses wouldn't hold up in a court of law.

"Sure, tell yourself that. But fact is your sister's a pretty girl and crazy popular. Popular girls go on dates."

And there went my entire argument.

"Fine, yeah, that day will come eventually, but not anytime soon. And you're seriously telling me that I somehow, coincidentally, happened to hallucinate the exact time and place she's going to be? Please. Kaju's not you, Yanami-san. She's an honest girl. She wouldn't do something like that behind my back."

Yanami's brow twitched. "Oh yeah? Wanna bet?" I flinched. She didn't. "If your sister's on a date this Saturday, I win. If she's not, you do."

"Sure, all right. But how do we even figure that out?"

"It'll be at Toyokawa Inari, yeah? We'll be done with exams by the weekend. We can just go see for ourselves."

"All right. Yeah. But I hope you're ready to lose, because Kaju's *not* going to be there," I taunted.

"Oh yeah? How about you put your money where your mouth is." The corners of her lips curled up. "There's a ton of stalls and food places around that area. Loser pays."

"That sounds—" I nearly said "reasonable." I was simple to please. As far as food stalls went, an inarizushi or two was enough to satisfy me. "Wait a minute, that sounds way better for you than it does for me."

"What're you afraid of? I thought you were confident. Heck, I'm the one at the disadvantage, since we could totally just miss her entirely."

"True. That does even things out."

Yanami went back to her notes, humming happily. "There's this place that makes their own inarizushi, and they come in all sorts. I'm thinkin' I could run the gauntlet. I mean, you can pretty much eat 'em in one bite. Oh, hey, you want last year's world history questions?"

"Uh, sure, might as well take a look." I took the papers from her, and then I had a thought. How even were these odds, really? "You know, on second thought, I don't really wanna tail my—"

"Don't forget. This is yours." Yanami thrust the forgotten sushi roll at me.

"But I'm not—"

She beamed. "For luck."

I took it, for lack of another option. And I ate. Facing the wall.

***

Saturday morning. Finals were behind us.

Kaju did a twirl in front of the mirror by the front door and patted her collar down. She wore a light brown coat hemmed with white fluff at the ends, a pair of booties, and a flower ornament adorning her hair. Quite the ensemble for a study session.

Noticing me, she turned and smiled. "Lunch is in the fridge. All you need to do is heat it up."

"Gotcha. Be safe."

She stayed. It took me a few seconds to realize she was waiting for something.

I patted her on the head.

She giggled. "Off I go!"

I saw her off with a wave and, when she was gone, checked my watch. Ten o'clock exactly. I took out my phone and made a call.

It rang only twice. "So?" There was a seriousness to Yanami's tone that infected me.

"Yeah. She went out. And awfully dressed up too, but other than that, she was the same as always. I'm still thinking it's a study session."

"What kinda bag did she have?" she asked for reasons unknown.

"Small one. Hung from a strap on her shoulder."

"Not on your *life* is it a study session. How's she gonna fit a textbook in that?"

That was awfully observant for Yanami of all people. And here I was deluding myself. I didn't like being on this end of the dynamic.

"Maybe," I admitted. "Or maybe they're just going out to have fun."

"Maybe," she humored me. My argument was as wet tissue paper to her. "But that's what we're about to find out. Get ready to move."

"Why do we even need to do this together? I could just go on my own."

"And say what when your sister finds you stalking her?" I choked on my pitiful words. Yanami went for the kill. "Let's go gambling, Nukumizu-kun."

***

My watch read just past eleven. I stepped outside Toyokawa Station and shuddered against the chilly wind that greeted me. It was a biting, dry cold, typical of eastern Mikawa.

"Shoulda worn a scarf," I mumbled. Tiara-san had given me one last Christmas. I'd decided not to bring it. For reasons.

Yanami shivered, tightening her coat around her body. "Where do you think you're going, Nukumizu-kun?" She skipped down the stairs after me, then nudged me with her elbow.

"You were looking at the map. Didn't wanna bug you."

"We're going to the same place, dude. You coulda looked with me." She whacked me on the back. "You're so rude sometimes."

I was starting to regret letting her tag along.

"I'm sorry, okay? Can we go now? It's freezing. I think it's that way." I pointed past some fox statues at a big, torii-esque gate that read "Toyokawa Inari Omotesando," skillfully ending the current topic of conversation. There was a cozy shopping street just past it leading straight to the temple.

As I passed through it, Yanami whipped her finger at me. "You ready for this? Don't forget our bet."

"I know. If Kaju's on a date, you win. If she isn't, I win."

The street was bustling, which I might have anticipated given it was a weekend. I caught myself eyeing couples and scoffed inwardly. What was I so worried about? Kaju? On a date with some guy? Yeah, right. As if she cared about anyone as much as she cared about her Oniisama.

"Hey," Yanami said, "why'd that bookstore we passed earlier have all those masks?" I started to turn to her when she suddenly yanked me by the arm. Was she gonna let me answer her? "Hang on, this drugstore's sign is so cute! Get my picture!"

Whatever her problem was today, she was doing a good job at making it mine. She struck a pose, so I quickly snapped her oh-so important picture.

"You get my good side?" she asked.

The sign's, yeah. She was a little out of frame, but eh.

"It's a sizzler. I'll send it to you later. Can we go now?"

The crowd only thickened as we neared the end of the street and came closer to the temple. How would we find Kaju in this?

We wouldn't. We *wouldn't*, of course. Because she wasn't here. But if she was…

"Hey, Yanami-san—"

But Yanami was gone. I scanned the area until I spotted her trotting back with her hands full of senbei.

"Here, for you. It's fresh."

I accepted, but sheesh, that cracker was huge. Bigger than Kaju's face. "Why for me?"

"I told you we were gonna do the rounds. Better finish that before we get to the next one."

I would have liked to have even a little say in the matter, but sure. She was already more than halfway done with hers.

"Remind me why we didn't invite Komari or Yakishio," I said.

"What? Am I not good enough for you?" Yanami shot me a glare, her senbei already mere crumbs. She said it, not me.

"It's just, y'know, exams are over. Would've been nice to unwind with everyone."

"We're trying to be discreet here. We'd scare your sister off if she saw all four of us bumbling around together." She fiddled with her hair, shyly twirling a lock around her finger. "And I was sorta looking forward to today."

"What? You…"

Yanami had been looking forward to…today? To going out with me?

She nodded. "Toyokawa Inari has a branch in Akasaka, in Tokyo. It's big for people looking to cut ties."

There was the plot twist.

"I'm sorry? What? Whose ties?"

"Keep up. It's like, you go and pray for new beginnings. And since this is the main branch and all, I figured it must work even better, right?"

Was that how the temple hierarchy worked?

"So you're looking to, uh, cut ties with something? Some*one*? Feel free to not answer that."

She exercised that right and simply smiled, wandering off toward an inarizushi place.

Not a chance in hell was I touching that, so I people-watched instead. A wide demographic had come out here looking for their own divine something-or-other. From old folks, to families, to young couples.

And then I remembered how Kaju had begged our mom to paint her nails this morning. She'd forgone makeup, but still, even I could tell she'd put some real effort into her appearance today.

"Uh, Yanami-san?"

She'd vanished on me again. I decided to sit still and nibble on my senbei until she chose to show herself again. It was my first time having a rice cracker this freshly baked, and I had to say, I was impressed. Aromatic. Toasty. Delicious.

Large. Very large.

Yanami'd swallowed the thing like it was made of paper. It took a little more effort on my part.

By the time I finished, I spied her hurrying over with another armful of stuff. Between her teeth, longways, she held a length of chikuwa with a tube of bamboo shoved through the hollow center. The sight reminded me of a dog from some old anime.

"Nuhmzuhn," she garbled, "hakhis."

Based on the way she was jutting her jaw out at me, I could only assume she was asking me to take the chikuwa out of her mouth.

I did, and she exhaled. "You back on planet Earth? I had to get your stuff myself, 'cause you were all spaced. It's a good thing I'm nice."

And yet I hadn't asked.

"Who are you feeding? A village? We supposed to eat all of that at once?"

"I said what I said. We're doin' the rounds." How many, exactly? "I've got lots. Warabimochi, fried inari, tsukune inari—oh,

and this is an Okitsune Burger.”

“An ‘Okitsune Burger’?”

It did indeed look like a burger, but with fried tofu for buns and pork cutlet for the meat. Which was also fried. Never had there been such a perfectly Yanami piece of cuisine since meat-wrapped onigiri.

“I also got this,” she said. “It has ten different types of handmade inarizushi. Figured we could go halfsies.”

I managed to find a box somewhere in the mountain that looked like it probably held what she was talking about. “There’s only five in here.”

“They were real good. Can confirm.” Halfsies it was, then. “Hey, don’t let me keep you. Go on. You can have that chikuwa.”

There was no way she’d carried that thing in her mouth and assumed I would eat it. “I’m good, thanks. It’s all you, Yanami-san.” I held it out for her.

“Sideways, please. Little up. There. That’s good.”

Yanami started nibbling on it like it was corn on the cob. The cob being the bamboo in the center. I was reminded of an experience feeding chickens in elementary school. But feeding a human girl in the middle of the street was an altogether much more humiliating scenario to find oneself in. People were staring.

“Not that I’m against sampling the local specialties, Yanami-san, but can we please go pay our respects yet?”

“The quicker we eat, the quicker we can go.” Bits of fishcake rose on her cheeks as she smirked. “Hope you’re hungry, Nukumizu-kun.”

I took it my involvement was nonnegotiable.

***

Yanami gawked at the grand, stone torii gate as we passed through along the approach to the temple. “Holy jeez, that’s huge.

Guess that's what you get when you're the biggest shrine in Mikawa."

"Toyokawa Inari is a temple, Yanami-san."

"It…it is?"

"Yes."

Might have been good to know if she was gonna be begging gods for favors.

"So we *don't* need to do the money offering thing."

"Yes, we do."

Was this girl born yesterday?

Ignoring her, I tossed a coin into the box and put my hands together. I already knew what to pray for. It'd been the same thing for as long as I could remember: my family.

I glanced aside at Yanami and caught her quietly yet fervently chattering to herself. Part of me wanted to know what in the world she was wishing for, but a much more pragmatic part told me I absolutely didn't.

When she'd finished her curse—ahem, *prayer*, she opened her eyes again.

"So what'd you wish for?" I dared to ask. "Feel free to not answer that."

She exercised the right yet again, evasively spinning around on her heels. That was answer enough for me.

I scanned the grounds from my vantage point at the top of the steps leading to the temple proper. No Kaju.

"What're you all antsy for all of a sudden?" Yanami asked.

"We came here to see if Kaju was on a date, and all we've done is goof off."

Yanami peered at me, amusement in her eyes. "Oh, didn't you say we wouldn't find her here? Having second thoughts?"

"There's always a one-in-a-million chance. You can never be too careful. And if she *is* here, I ought to know. She's too young for dates."

"Look," she said, shrugging, "it's really not that big a deal. You're in over your head, buddy."

And you've never had a boyfriend, I quipped in my head.

"Okay, then what sort of deal *is* a date, professor?"

"Not much, when you get down to it. Just a guy and a girl spending time together, doing stuff together, thinking about how they feel about each other. Figuring out if they click." Yanami started bouncing down the stairs.

I followed. "There's no way it's that simple."

"It literally is. Heck, the way you walk together can tell you a lot, just by how fast they go or how their pace matches yours. It's all one big dance, Nukumizu-kun."

She suddenly stopped dead at the bottom of the stairs. I had to lurch to the side to keep from ramming into her. "Like how guys are supposed to walk on the street side of the sidewalk?"

"Sorta, but not exactly. Not to say being considerate doesn't go a long way." She gave me an oddly accusatory look then. "But also you've got folks like Kawasaki-chan. Some people prefer headstrong types who don't go out of their way for you. Different strokes and all that."

Kawasaki-chan? Who the heck was Kawasaki-chan? Someone who liked headstrong types, apparently.

I thought about this "Kawasaki-chan" while we walked, until Yanami tugged my hand. "Look! Reikozuka! Let's check it out!"

I vaguely recalled there being a hill or something with that name. It was supposed to have like, hundreds of fox statues.

"All right, you don't have to pull me."

We continued down a side path that led to the mound, with Yanami leading the way.

Somehow, we were alone.

About a million nobori flags—long, vertical banners attached to thin poles—flanked us on both sides. It gave the path a surreal, almost otherworldly atmosphere. Like it was a long portal to another world.

I turned to look at the girl now walking at my side. It was easy to forget amidst all the, well, everything, but Yanami Anna was a seriously pretty girl.

Joining the literature club had only been an escape for her. A way to get away from her childhood friend, Hakamada Sousuke, after he broke her heart. But she was spending more and more time with him again these days, and even with his new girl, Himemiya-san. Far as I could tell, she didn't need an escape anymore.

So what was she still doing here, keeping up with our boring little club? Wasting her day off humoring my worries about Kaju?

"Need something, Nukumizu-kun?"

"Huh?" I realized I'd been staring.

Yanami returned the favor. "I know I'm irresistible, but you could at least *pretend* to control yourself."

"I was—I was just looking at your face," I blurted. To my demise.



A sneer spread across her lips. “My face, huh?”

“F-forget I said that.”

“How’s this? This angle work for you? Should I put my hair up? Whaddya think?”

Yanami flaunted her profile. I’d never forgive myself for that little slip for as long as I lived.

She was seriously blowing it out of proportion. I’d admired her as one might a cat video, and not in any other unseemly way. There had been absolutely zero swooning or skipped heartbeats involved. Plus, I was a dog person.

Lord help me, she was bumping me with her shoulder now.

I fled down the path, picking up my pace, and came to the end of it—to Reikozuka. Enshrining a small altar further back, standing vigil, was an ocean of a hundred fox statues, each one an offering left by someone whose wish came true.

Yanami eventually joined me in my gaping. “Whoa, look at them all. Let’s count ’em. You take the left.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“Hey, that one kinda looks like you! That one there. Twenty-fifth from this side.”

“I’m not counting them.”

Nice try, but she wasn’t tricking me into her silly little game. How in the world would *anyone* go about counting all these? There was no rhyme or reason to their placement. No pattern to keep track of.

I found the fox she’d likely meant. The one next to it looked pretty slick, actually.

I leaned over and muttered to her, “Twenty-fifth from which side?”

***

Back on the shopping street, I was sitting idly on a bench inside some manjū shop. Shooting down all of Yanami's horrible names for the fox statues and keeping a close eye on her while she fed some koi fish had left me spent.

"Frankly, I'm offended you think I'd try to eat fish food." Yanami plopped down next to me, handing me a package labeled "Houju Manjū." There she went buying me crap without permission again.

"Then why'd I catch you searching 'koi food safe to eat' on your phone?"

"I mean, come on, they go crazy for that stuff. Haven't you ever wondered what it tastes like?"

I hadn't.

"I can't believe you're still eating after everything we had before the temple."

"We were doing the rounds. We're sitting now. S'different." Yanami opened up her manjū and dug in.

Fair enough. An extra bean bun for her was just one more for the pile. I was reminded of that one foreign tourist who'd applauded her earlier today when she finished scarfing the previous mountain.

My eyes wandered to the window that opened out to the street leading to the temple. Visitors who were here to pay their respects came and went in droves. I searched for Kaju at first but quickly gave up. At some point, the crowds hypnotized me. My eyes glazed over.

What was I doing, coming all this way? On what? A hunch at best. Even if Kaju *was* here, how did we ever expect to find her?

"Guess she wasn't here," I muttered.

"Guess not."

It hit me then. Yanami didn't come here for that. She'd come here for me.

Accepting things is hard. *Really* coming to terms with something takes time. There's no shortcut. You can't rationalize and logic your way to understanding. It takes time. Yanami knew that. She was intimately familiar with the process. She hadn't come here to share in my anxieties. She'd come as an ally. A friend. Just to be there.

She swallowed the last of her manjū. "It's rough," she said quietly. "Realizing you're not someone's number one anymore. It gets better. Eventually."

"You think so?"

"Yep. People change. You can change too. It's just hard, y'know. Finding a new number one for yourself." Yanami smiled. A little sadly. A little wearily.

With complete self-awareness as to how conceited this might sound, I could say with confidence who Kaju's number one had been. Me.

But that would change someday.

I thought I knew that. I did know that. Half of it, anyway. What I hadn't been ready for was how quickly "someday" would come. Yanami must have felt a lot of these same feelings when Hakamada and Himemiya-san…

Wait. Was that the same? *Was* Yanami ever Hakamada's number one? A matter of perspective, I guessed. Either way, probably wasn't all that important at the end of the day.

"You gonna eat that?" Yanami asked, interrupting my train of thought. She was back to her usual self.

"Still pretty full after that senbei."

She raised an eyebrow. "But they're so thin. You work it off pretty much while you eat it. Plus, seaweed's basically nothing. Far as I'm concerned, senbei's calorie neutral."

Another brilliant theory from the mind of Yanami Anna. I doubted its veracity.

I silently handed her my manjū. She happily accepted.

"You could stand to put some meat on those bones, boy," she said. "How much do you weigh anyway?"

It took me a while to remember. I hadn't thought about it in a while. "I think fifty-two kilograms last I measured?"

Yanami croaked. She stopped unwrapping the manjū all of a sudden, then went uncharacteristically quiet. Was it something I'd said?

"What?" I asked. "There a problem with—"

"No problem! Not a single problem with a single thing! Send me the photo from earlier, would you?!"

I didn't deserve this attitude.

I assumed she meant the one of that drugstore sign, so I whipped out my phone and pulled up my photos. I hadn't taken any since, so it should have been the most recent…

"Huh?"

There was a new addition to the folder. It wasn't mine.

"What's up?" Yanami rolled her head to the side and peered over at the screen. She paused. "Nukumizu-kun. Where'd those come from?"

I was wondering that myself. How had a photo of the two of us walking down the street, senbei in hand, found itself into my library? And it wasn't just that. There was one of her eating the burger. Me feeding her the chikuwa. It went as recent as the koi incident.

"Hey, I'm in them too, so don't point the finger at me."

"Then what're they doing on your phone?"

I had a hunch, given there was literally only one suspect. Only one person could have known I'd be here, and that same person had access to my phone storage.

Just then, before our very eyes, a new photo was uploaded.

I jumped to my feet. There was something uncannily familiar about the window and the bench and the couple depicted in this picture.

Because it was of us. In this very shop.

***

I sank into the bath, submerging my shoulders beneath the warm water. It was evening now.

"What a day," I sighed.

Watching the steam form stalactite droplets on the ceiling, I walked through everything again.

Immediately following that last freaky photo, Yanami and I had flown out of the shop, but Kaju was nowhere to be found. There could be no doubt she'd been there. Meaning "Toyokawa Inari with Tachibana-kun ♡" hadn't simply been a hallucination.

"I'll take a draw, though," I muttered.

After all, we had no way of knowing if it had been a date, so we settled on splitting the day's food bill. Which was…reasonable? On second thought, had Yanami played me? I hadn't given it much thought in the moment, but now…

I noticed a figure on the other side of the frosted glass door. "Kaju?" I sat up.

"How's the water, Oniisama?" It was her. That same bright voice as always.

I sank back down. "Perfect. Did you, uh, need something?"

"We're out of shampoo, so I was just bringing you some. I'll leave it here."

The door slowly creaked open. Kaju reached her hand in and placed the shampoo on the floor, and then she stood back up. But the door stayed cracked.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m good over here. You don’t need to hang around.”

No answer. I could see her silhouette standing there, though. Unmoving.

Just as the silence was becoming unbearable, in her usual cheery tone, she asked, “Did you go somewhere this afternoon?”

What kind of a question was that? She knew where I’d been. She wasn’t actually going to be obtuse about this, was she?

I thought about my answer. “I went out with a friend. Why?”

“I was just wondering. You didn’t touch your lunch in the fridge.”

Right, I’d totally forgotten about that. Yanami had gorged me on the way home, so I’d been the furthest thing from hungry all day.

“We ate while we were out. What about you? What’d you get up to?”

I remained casual. Kept cool. But Kaju was cooler.

Without missing a beat, she replied, “I was studying with friends.”

This time, I chose to stay silent.

I saw her hair sway on the other side of the door. “We’re having your favorite inari for dinner tonight,” she said. “You seem tired, so I made them extra sweet.”

The door creaked shut.

“Enjoy your bath, Oniisama.”

Intermission:
A Student Council's IdioSYDcracies

AFTER SCHOOL, IN A CERTAIN STUDENT COUNCIL room…

Vice President Basori Tiara burst through the door. "President! You won't believe it!"

Tiara stormed up to her desk, where she threw her hands down with a mighty *thud*.

Houkobaru Hibari, president of the Tsuwabuki Student Council, looked up and regarded her with calm, dignified curiosity. "Now what's got you so flustered?"

With a face as red as could be, Tiara blustered, "It's Shikiya-senpai! She undid my b…th-the hook! She's done it again! In front of a boy this time!"

Houkobaru puffed amusedly, shutting her textbook. This was the third such incident already this year. But before she could get another word in, a shadow emerged from the ether just behind Tiara.

Secretary Shikiya Yumeko wrapped her lanky arms around the blushing girl, yielding her weight to her. "It doesn't…fit right."

"I-it will fit fine when I grow into it, thank you very much!"

"They'll sag…you know."

"They will be *fine*! Whatever these 'they' you're referring to are!"

Houkobaru waved her hand, not even attempting to hide the entertained grin on her face. "Shikiya is Shikiya, I see. Although, I would like to see her tone it down in front of others."

"I'll do it…in private from now on."

"Very good."

"It's not even slightly good!" Tiara snapped. "The problem is that she's doing it at all! Am I crazy?! Tell her, President!"

She twisted her lips, conflicted. "Yes, well, my concern is whether it's my place to intervene."

"I'm sorry? Is intervening in problematic behavior not literally the exact thing you should be doing?"

"No need to be shy. I see what you and Shikiya are, Basori-kun."

"Uh, we're not?!"

"Love comes in all shapes and sizes. Rest assured, I'll be making it a point to keep an open mind. I want you to know you have an ally in me if you ever need—"

"You are so off base it's not even funny!"

Shikiya shook her head at her. "Cat's…out of the bag."

"No it isn't! What are you—I mean, there's no bag in the first place! *Agh*, now you're confusing me!"

"Tea's ready," came a bastion of calm among stormy seas. "Why don't we all take a break?" Last on the student council team, and its only boy, was the treasurer, the first-year Sakurai Hiroto. He came over with a teapot. "We're having Yumeko-san's favorite. Peach tea. I just opened it up today."

Sakurai-kun set a cup down by her and filled it with the fragrant liquid.

Shikiya drifted toward it, as if magnetized. "I like…peach tea."

"You too, Basori-chan. Have a seat."

"I could certainly use a minute." Tiara pressed her forehead against her palm and collapsed into a chair.

Sakurai-kun began handing out small plates next. "We got some chocolates as a gift, if anyone would like any. Handmade, I

hear.”

“Oh? Handmade? Who do we have to thank?” Houkobaru asked, eyeing the sweets.

The boy filled her cup, smiling. “You know Nukumizu-kun, don’t you? From the literature club. They’re from him.”

“What?!” Tiara’s cup fell from her hands.

Sakurai-kun hurried over. “Basori-chan, are you okay?”

Tiara shot up and ignored the handkerchief he’d offered, instead clutching his wrist. “You got chocolate from Nukumizu-kun?! Did I hear you right?!”

“Y-yes? I gave him last year’s open house materials, and he gave me these in return.”

“I don’t believe him,” she mumbled, her grip tightening. “The president wasn’t enough? He’s got to have Sakurai-kun in his filthy clutches next?”

“What are we talking about?”

“Sakurai-kun. I need you to tell me *everything* he said to you when he gave you—”

Tiara’s hands suddenly shot up to cover her nose.

“Er, Basori-chan? Is everything all right?”

Tiara tilted her head up, nodding ever so slightly. “I just, uh, have a bit of a nosebleed. I got a little worked up.”

“Over…what, exactly?”

Appearing once again out of nowhere, Shikiya put her arm around Tiara’s shoulder. “Let’s get you…somewhere quiet.”

“Right. Yes. Thank you,” she said. “The sofa will be—why are we leaving the room? Shikiya-senpai? Where are we going?!”

“Don’t worry about it… Trust me.”

“Why do I need to trust you?! Why are we—”

The door shut behind them.

Sakurai-kun saw them off with a heavy sigh. “More tea for us I guess, Hiba-nee.”

He turned to find Houkobaru just standing there, holding the teapot’s handle. But no teapot. He then found a mess of shards and tea right around her feet.

“I was only trying to pour you a cup, Hiroto, and the darn thing went and broke all on its own.”

“Are you hurt? It’s fine. Just take a seat while I clean this up.” His forearm pressed firmly against his stomach, Sakurai-kun knelt down and started picking up hunks of glass.

The Tsuwabuki Student Council was a gathering of the best and brightest. Precariously held together behind the scenes by one unsung hero.


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ツワブキ高校
馬剃天愛星

Loss 2:
Two Steps Forward, Three Steps Back

WHAT BETTER WAY TO START OFF THE SCHOOL week than with PE? Laps, no less. On the very first period of the day, no less.

Each pant stabbed my throat with cold, dry air. I was already wiped, and they wanted us to go around the whole campus *three* times? Maybe I could skip one if I let the class lap me, then pretended to finish with everyone.

As I lagged at the back of the pack, my ingenious plan in place, I caught a whiff of summer. Which was strange, given how indisputably winter it was.

A tawny figure appeared next to me. "That all you got, Nukkun?"

Yakishio Lemon was in her element. The class freak. She'd heard "laps," and she was in her gym uniform first thing in the morning. Amanatsu-sensei'd had a few words with her about that, causing her to start changing then and there, right in the middle of the classroom, which then sparked a scolding from the girls.

"It's only first period. Gotta pace myself," I griped. "It's too early to be running marathons."

"Oh, come on, this is awesome! It's never too early to run! Let's go, get those legs moving!" She dipped behind me and started to push.

Someone help.

"What are you even doing here? Girls are supposed to be on the field."

"I finished with them forever ago. Didn't really scratch the itch, so I asked the teacher to let me run with you guys." A walking nuclear reactor, this girl. I couldn't decide whether to be terrified or

impressed. Suddenly, she stopped pushing and brought her face in close. "Yana-chan told me your sister's got a boyfriend?"

Yana-chan maybe told too many people too many things.

"*Might* have a crush," I corrected her. "Theories need tangible evidence, and they only form around observable phenomena. I've yet to observe any boyfriend, so as far as I'm concerned—"

I took a big gulp of air. Right. Running. Hard to talk while doing that.

Yakishio jogged in front of me and looked back. "You sure like those big words. So, what? She only has a boyfriend if you 'observe' him, or…?"

"I'll know…he exists…at least," I panted. She was killing me here.

"Then observe. Easy." My brain was way too oxygen-starved to process what in the world that was supposed to mean, so it was a good thing she kept going. "So, I've gotta write this report on 'community involvement' as part of my retests."

"I don't…remember doing that."

"It's sorta under the table. Amanatsu-chan says retests won't be enough to push me over the line, so she gave me that and told me not to tell anyone or we'd get in big trouble. So don't tell anyone."

Apparently I wasn't "anyone." Noted.

"What does that…have to do with anything?"

"Observation, remember? Momozono's track team asked me to join them for practice, so that's what I'm planning on doing my report on."

Momozono Junior High was our alma mater and where Kaju was currently enrolled.

"So you're…saying…"

"You should come with. Try to pick up a few leads on this maybe-boyfriend guy. Your sister in any clubs?"

"Student…council…" I couldn't keep doing this. Oh god, my legs were getting weak.

"Student council, huh? Wow. Well, I'll talk to the teacher and see what I can do!" Yakishio smacked me on the back, then zoomed off.

Screw it. I slowed to a walk.

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That night, I was stirring a pot back home. Kaju and our parents would be back late, so I was on dinner duty. I switched off the stove, broke up the roux, dumped it in, and then hypnotized myself watching it melt until the door opened.

"Oniisama, I'm home." Kaju came in, her chilled cheeks red from the cold.

"Long day?"

"The student council kept me. So much to do for the students who'll be graduating this year." She trotted over, then threw her arms around me from behind.

"Not while I'm cooking," I scolded.

"I need this. My Oniisama battery is completely drained." She buried her face in my back.

Some things never changed. And yet she had. She had secrets she couldn't share with me now. The someday had come.

"There," she said. "Fully charged. I see you're making curry." She scuttled over to the fridge and opened it. "I'll whip up some salad. Might be a good opportunity to get rid of these pea sprouts."

Same old Kaju.

I leisurely stirred the curry as it simmered. "You're general affairs, aren't you?"

"Vice president, actually, as of last month. Position terms end at the start of the new year at Momozono, remember?" I didn't, really. Kaju pouted as I searched my brain. "You've only been gone a year. Have you already forgotten the sweet memories we shared?"

Memories, I had plenty of. Sweet ones, less so. I mostly remembered all the convoluted measures I had to take to get away from her. "I never interacted with the student council, and I wasn't in a club," I said. "Vice president, huh? What's the president like?"

"His name's Kawai-kun. We're classmates. Why do you ask?"

"Just, uh, wondering."

Kawai-kun, eh? Not Tachibana-kun, then. That didn't rule out the rest of the student council, though. He could still be among them. Or maybe he was a classmate. I couldn't jump to conclusions just yet.

"Oniisama, you should turn the heat down."

Right. I did that.

I eyed Kaju out of my periphery. She hummed a tune while she chopped some lettuce. "You gonna be late more from now on?"

"This week, at least. I shouldn't be much later than today, though."

"Hm."

I kept on stirring, scraping the bottom of the pot. I was going to Momozono with Yakishio tomorrow after school. If Kaju had gotten back a bit before seven today, and that trend continued, then I'd have plenty of time to do my "observing."

"Oniisama," she gasped. "Are you going to be lonely without me?"

"Huh?"

Kaju giggled and ground her head against my arm. "Oh, the burdens of being loved. I'll be missing you too the whole time I'm gone, Oniisama."

"No self-noogies while I'm cooking."

What was I gonna do, correct her?

I threw in a pinch of hatcho miso, my secret ingredient, and then lidded the curry. I had to be the perfect big brother today. It was all part of the plan. Couldn't give her reason to suspect anything, after all.

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I didn't get much time to indulge in the nostalgia of being back at my old school.

"Hey, everyone!" Yakishio shouted across the field. "You guys been good?" She thrust her fist up in the air.

The girls copied her. "Yeah!"

The Momozono girls' track team matched Yakishio's energy decibel for decibel. A few were in regular school uniforms. Retired third-years, I assumed. Turns out Yakishio had a demographic, even if that demographic was "insufferably loud."

"She has a magnetic personality. Angelic, wouldn't you say?"

A forehead glistened to my side. Asagumo Chihaya was the girl genius who'd stolen away Yakishio's childhood sweetheart, but these days they were practically best friends. Thick as thieves, they were.

Still wasn't sure what she was doing here. She hadn't gone to Momozono.

"So, um, Asagumo-san," I piped up. "I know this is a little late, but you tagged along because…?" Suddenly, a couple dozen eyes all locked onto me at once. "H-hi?" I shrank back.

Voices rose all at once, without order, in a shrill cacophony of surprise.

"Senpai, who's that?"

"Is he your boyfriend?!"

“No fair!”

“You can see his bones!”

I didn’t recall my time here being quite this tinnitus-inducing.

I looked to Yakishio for a lifeline. She smirked, then locked her arm around mine.

“H-hey!” I sputtered.

She held even tighter when I tried to run. “You wanna know who he is? You tell me! What do you guys think?”

Another ear-splitting chorus.

“He’s your boyfriend! Your boyfriend!”

“She just came to show off!”

“Lame!”

“I want one!”

I couldn’t keep up with this. Yakishio shot me a wink.

“Wrong!” she declared. “Not my boyfriend. This is Nukkun!”

Was that supposed to be some kind of punchline? I wasn’t laughing. And no way it was gonna convince a bunch of tweens.

“Hi, Nukkun!”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Tutor me, tutor me!”

“Can I count your ribs, Nukkun?”

The tweens were convinced. Some girls giggled. Some waved. These were Yakishio’s people all right.

She stepped forward while I was busy dissociating. “All right, who’s ready to run? You guys all warmed up?”

“Yeah!” they cheered.

Were they finally gonna practice? Took them long enough. The plan was for me to slip away while they were busy with that.

I started to make myself scarce when Yakishio's blazer came flying at me. "Wha—Y-Yakishio!"

She moved to her ribbons next. Right in the middle of the field, she threw them off, one after the other. Then went her blouse. Underneath was her track uniform.

"Relax, Nukkun. I've got clothes on," she said as she lowered the zipper on her skirt.

Congrats on the bare minimum.

Asagumo-san tapped me on the shoulder. I'd almost forgotten about her.

"Hey, you tell her—" I started to say.

"Take these," she interrupted, handing me Yakishio's blouse and ribbons.

"Uh…"

"Lemon-san, we'll fold these for you and leave them over there." She picked up Yakishio's skirt, then headed toward a secluded part of campus.

"You're the best, Chiha-chan!" Yakishio replied. "All right, guys! I wanna see some sweat!"

The girls cheered again.

And I just stood there holding her clothes. Asagumo-san beckoned me, so I trotted over.

She had on a sly grin. "We'll slip away once these clothes are folded, Nukumizu-san. Don't worry. They'll forget we were ever there soon enough."

Wait, that actually made sense. So that was why Yakishio had put on that display of public indecency… Nah, she was just like that.

I glanced at Asagumo-san. If skirts had pores, it would have been sweating bullets at the sneer on her face. "You sure seem, uh, excited about something."

"Mitsuki-san used to come here, didn't he? 'Excited' is only the tip of the iceberg. Oh, the things I could unearth…"

She sped up. I had to power-walk to keep up.

Having an accomplice certainly took a lot of the pressure off, but I still had to wonder… What *was* she doing here?

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I peeked down the hallway from the second-floor boys' bathroom. The coast was clear. With a short sigh of relief, I moved, timidly undoing the hook holding my collar together. I took a deep breath.

This wasn't my usual uniform. Not Tsuwabuki's but Momozono's. That classic, all-black ensemble that all junior high boys wore.

"Just me, or did the sleeves shrink?"

The best place to hide a leaf was in a forest, after all. I would be conducting my investigation in my old getup. Truth be told, it was Yakishio's idea, which was a red flag in and of itself, but secrecy was vital to this mission.

Now how long was she going to take? I glanced at the girls' bathroom, and right on cue, she appeared.

She spun in place, her long dress billowing. "How do I look? Not out of place, I hope." Asagumo-san was in the girl counterpart to my uniform.

"No, you're fine. You look like a junior high schooler to me."

"I'm flattered." Her forehead gleamed, and she smirked. "But I feel obligated to inform you that that isn't the compliment you think it is."

I thought girls wanted to look young. Had the internet betrayed me yet again?

"Shame I had to borrow Lemon-san's. It hangs a bit low," she said. "See? The sleeves go past my arms." She dangled them out in front of her.

"Yeah, but you hardly notice if you're not looking for it."

And hey, baggy sleeves wasn't a bad look. Not at all. The lit club technically had its own resident runt, but she didn't count.

Asagumo-san clenched her fists at her chest. "Now, let's get this investigation rolling. Where's class 3-4?"

"My sister's a second-year, not a third-year."

"I'm looking for Mitsuki-san's. I'd be remiss to not take the opportunity to learn more about him."

Why was this girl here? What was her purpose?

"I was class two," I said. "Dunno what to tell you." Or wait, that might have been during my second year.

"Do you know where I can find the third-year classrooms in general?"

"Not sure. Third floor? Or they might be in the new building. Are we in the old building now?"

"Did you or did you not attend this school, Nukumizu-san?"

Everybody's a critic. My memory was just a bit fuzzy.

Asagumo-san dropped it and pointed down the hall. "Let's try that way. The first-years are on the second floor, so we can logically assume we'll find the third-years on the fourth." She scurried toward the stairs.

"Works for me. Just hope I don't run into anyone who knows me."

"Do you actually know anyone here?"

"Uh, no."

Asagumo-san said no more and climbed the stairs. I followed.

As we climbed past the first flight and moved along to the fourth floor, it started to come back to me. A conflicting mix of nostalgia and incongruence. Memories reformed themselves before my eyes.

I used to skulk up these stairs every morning. On the seventh step was a strip of nonslip material that had been peeling for as long as I could remember. It was fixed now.

We made it up, and I was only a little out of breath. I stared down the empty hallway, the evening sun casting sheets of orange through the windows. It had only been a year, and yet it felt so surreal to be back. Like I was standing in an old photo.

"Mitsuki-san's old classroom must be down there. I'll be right back." Asagumo-san dashed off, eyes (and forehead) twinkling.

I went at my own pace, stopping beneath the plaque that read "3-2."

This was me. My old class.

The sounds of footsteps climbing the stairs cut my sentimental brooding short. I couldn't stand around waiting to be caught, so I checked that nobody was inside, then took refuge in the classroom. I looked for my seat. Third from the back, window side. A moment's hesitation, and then I sat. I could still see city hall from here. That hadn't changed. But everything felt so much smaller now.

"Only a year…"

I used to sit here every day and stare out through this window, thinking about how little I fit in. How I didn't belong here. How I felt no more connected to my own classmates than the nameless faces down on campus.

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Third-year Momozono Junior High School student of class two —Nukumizu Kazuhiko.

Or so they call me. That whole first part is only until March. Everything's temporary. Fleeting. Just another reason why friends have never really mattered to me. Not once.

I rest my elbow on my desk and open up a book I borrowed from the library. I've been really into *The Lapis Kingdom* lately. It's about the adventures of a high school girl named Ryouko who gets sent to a Chinese-style fantasy world. The newest arc just started in volume seven, and it centers around Ryouko being proposed to by the emperor of an enemy nation. Frankly, I'm on the edge of my seat.

Come on, Ryouko. What are you doing, making eyes at some mysterious hot guy just because he's nice to you? You know that tsundere general back home's only playing hard to get!

I start to turn the page, but freeze.

"I'm serious!" the girl in the desk next to mine shrieks. "It was five! Five whole times!"

That's Yakishio Lemon. A classmate. She strikes a pose with her long, tanned limbs and spins like some ballet dancer, throwing herself right against my desk.

"Oh, my bad!"

"S'fine," I mumble, closing my book.

"What are you doing, Lemon?" one of her friends ribs.

"Sit down, crazy," says the other.

"But…" She sends me an unwarranted glance. I wish she'd leave me alone. I'm perfectly content going unperceived. "I'm real sorry!" She puts her hands together apologetically, then returns to her seat.

Back to my book. I open it again and resume reading, but my focus is ruined.

Yakishio Lemon. She's captain on the track team or something. They talk about her a lot at assemblies.

Sporty. Popular. Attractive. She's everything I'm not. I wouldn't be surprised if I go the entire rest of my life never speaking another word to her. She reminds me of something, actually. Her tawny face. The way her dress hung from her body when she spun like an idiot.

"Cute mushroom," I mutter to myself. And then I look up, and what do I see but a remarkable specimen of pleurotus eryngii.

Except it's Yakishio.

"Mushroom?"

"Wha— I, er…!"

She gets in close and studies me. "You a book guy, Nukumizu? Whatcha readin'?"

"It's, um, from the…"

"Lemon!" one of the girls shouts over me. "We're going!"

"Be right there!" she shouts back. "Sorry for buggin' you, Nukumizu."

"O-okay," I reply.

She knew my name.

She dashes off like the wind, and silence finally returns to the classroom. Now I can get back to what really matters—Ryouko's struggle to maintain peace in the land.

…

It's awfully quiet. I look up and realize that I'm alone.

"Wait, we've got music next."

I fish my recorder out of my bag, then hurry to the music room.

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I looked around the room. My time here hadn't been much. I stared out a window. Read novels. Sometimes textbooks. I didn't regret it, per se, but I did understand something now, looking back.

However I might have felt in the moment, I was never out of place. I had belonged here.

I found a bit of amusement in the knowledge that past me would have probably had an aneurysm if he heard about the place I belonged to these days.

When I glanced outside, I noticed I couldn't see the track girls anymore. Maybe they'd gone off campus. "Please, for the love of God, Yakishio, don't make things complicated."

"You called?" Scaring the absolute hell out of me, Yakishio pulled the seat back from the desk next to me and sat down. I could see wisps of steam rising from her sweaty, extremely underdressed body. "Whew, that was a good run. It's nice to see the next generation can hold their own."

"What, uh… What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be with the girls?"

"They're busy playing tag. Told 'em drinks were on me if they could catch me."

"Tag. Indoors?"

Complications: burgeoning.

Yakishio fanned her face with her hand and faced forward, toward the blackboard. "Yeah, I remember this. This was my seat, wasn't it?"

"Was it…?" Didn't want her thinking I was creepy for remembering something like that when we'd barely talked.

"Come on, you remember. We sat right next to each other."

"You knew I existed?"

"Of course I did. Never could figure you out, though. You were always on your own reading books."

Couldn't really argue with that assessment.

"So I was just the loner guy who reads books, then."

"No, there was more. What was it?" She crossed her arms and pondered that quandary. Then she clapped once. "You were a stalker!"

I could argue with that one!

"I was not!"

"Or maybe you were *being* stalked. I forget. Sorry."

As she should've been. Wait, what? "I had a stalker? Since when?"

"It was this tiny girl with long hair. Ring a bell?"

It did, actually. I regained a measure of calm. "She was around me *that* much?"

"Pretty much every free period, yeah. Heck, she'd be peeking during class sometimes." And I'd been none the wiser. "Talk about obsessed. You ever notice her hanging around your home?"

As a matter of fact, I had. We lived together.

"I'm gonna go out on a limb and say that was probably my sister," I confessed.

That made Yakishio of all people cringe. "Why was your sister stalking you, Nukkun?"

A fantastic question.

"Don't worry about it. She's one of the good ones."

"I didn't know there were good stalkers. Huh."

There weren't. Damn it, why'd she have to believe me with those innocent eyes?

"You met her at the festival, remember? She came to visit that one time."

"Oh, right. I forgot. Yeah, now I'm sure. She was totally the one stalking you." Her eyes suddenly narrowed, like she just realized something.

"What?"

"You're the stalker today."

That, I could not deny. But it was for a good cause. My sister's safety was on the line. I wasn't just some stalker. I was a stalker for justice.

"Yakishio, aren't you playing tag right now? Should you be sitting around here?"

Right on time, a group of girls in track uniforms appeared at the door.

"Senpai located!"

"She's over here!"

"And they're flirting!"

Yakishio bolted up. "Yikes, gotta go!" And then she flew through the other, unguarded door on the opposite end.

The girls gave chase.

I got up next, at a slower pace. This was no time for directionless trips down memory lane. I had an investigation to conduct. I considered regrouping with Asagumo-san, but then again, subtlety wasn't exactly her strong suit.

Right on time yet again, she poked her head into the classroom. "You were flirting."

"I don't need you bullying me too, Asagumo-san"

"I'd do no such thing. Anywho, I've gotten what I came for. Shall we?" She waved me over and started walking.

"Where are we going exactly?"

"I didn't want to interrupt you two, and so I went on a bit of a walk. I happened to stumble on the library."

"Wouldn't the librarian be there? How'd that go?"

"Oh, we hit it off. I've seen campus maps, class rosters, and even gotten a rundown of the clubs. I know every student by name."

Excuse me? Who was this woman? I lagged behind her as we started down the stairs. “Every single student? That fast?”

“There’s a trick to it.” She put a finger to her big forehead. “I memorized the pages as images, so all I have to do to recall them is flip through them in my head. It’s much more efficient that way.”

How did that simultaneously make all the sense and absolutely none whatsoever? Asagumo-san wasn’t human. It was the only explanation.

She turned to me and beamed. “I’ve even looked into the relationship between your sister and Tachibana-san. There’s only one person in the whole school with that surname, including faculty.” When we reached the bottom, she twirled fully around, the hem of her dress fluttering. “Tachibana Satoshi, second-year, class four. Member of the gardening club. Male.”

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The gardening club was apparently around the back. “Apparently,” because this was, in fact, the first I’d even heard of such a club’s existence. Asagumo-san had memorized all of campus, and at this point she probably knew Momozono better than I did.

She lightly bowed to some third-years as we passed them by in the hallway. “The library really was something. Larger than even Tsuwabuki’s, I want to say.”

“It got combined with another room during renovations or something. The school got picked for some education initiative, so I guess they wanted to make it big or something.”

Or something.

Asagumo-san stopped and pointed out a window. “That’s where the gardening club conducts their activities. Just next to the greenhouse.”

I looked. I saw the greenhouse, and next to it was a garden about half the size of a classroom. A boy in a blue jersey was

walking around it, spreading this white powder from a bag he needed both arms to carry.

"And that's Tachibana-kun," she said. "I saw his photo in this year's club registrations."

So that was the guy. I gulped.

He looked short, even for his age. He was slim and kinda small, but that was to be expected for a junior high kid. And he didn't look half bad. His eyes were sharp. There was this quiet allure to him that was hard to describe. Here was a guy who could pull whoever he wanted.

Guys like that were trouble. Objective truth. Time to get cracking.

"Let's go, Nukumizu-san."

"Huh? Wait."

Asagumo-san went outside and straight up to him. It took me a bit longer to work up the courage.

"Hello," she said to the boy. "Do you have a minute?"

"Uh, sure. Need something?"

Asagumo-san put her hands to her chest and bowed. "We're the Watanabes. We're first-years, and we were wondering if we might observe the gardening club for a while." *First*-years? She could not be serious. And *we're* the Watanabes? She sent me a sly glance. "We're fraternal twins. Isn't that right, Kazu-kun?"

"Huh? Uh, y-yup. Sure are, Neesan."

Did we need the convoluted setup?

Tachibana seemed to only barely buy it. He set the bag on the ground. "By all means. I'm Tachibana, a second-year. So you're interested in gardening?"

"We have been for a long time," Asagumo-san said. "What were you doing just now?" She eyed the ground at his feet.

"Getting ready to plant some cabbages. We've got some seedlings we've been raising in the greenhouse if you wanna take a look."

"We'd love to."

The one called Tachibana started that way, and Asagumo-san made to follow, but I grabbed her by the arm. "Twins? What's that about?"

"There are six Watanabes here. I thought it made a good cover, myself."

"What does that have to do with being twins? No way that lasts."

"Should I have gone with fiancés then? Taken a romantic comedy angle? I admit, that would be exciting, wouldn't it, Kazu-kun?"

Why was she so into this?

The inside of the greenhouse was fairly small, but well-kept. "We raised these here from seeds," Tachibana said. "They're just waiting on their last pruning now."

He smiled at a large worktable in the center. An arm-sized tray sat there, packed with pots. Miniature ones made of plastic. Inside those were several leafy seedlings each, presumably waiting to be transferred to the garden outside.

Asagumo-san studied them with intense curiosity. "You mean to remove the leaves, yes?"

"Leaving the biggest ones. We want to thin out the less desirable sprouts of the bunch. Wanna give it a try?"

"Absolutely." She wasted no time getting to work.

"Asa—Neesan," I interjected, "you're awfully into this."

"Some things can't be memorized from textbooks, Kazu-kun. Think about it. What constitutes the 'biggest ones'? There are so many factors to consider, like height, stem circumference, and leaf

width. Give it a try. Work that head less and move those hands more."

Was it just me, or was this role consuming her?

"You're her brother, right?" Tachibana asked. "We could use the help."

And now the junior high schooler was treating me like a kid.

"What do you need me to do exactly?" I conceded.

"Start pruning this row here. Take it slow. No rush."

But leave the biggest ones. Right. I picked one. Or wait… Maybe that one. But that one had really cool leaves.

"No need to think too hard," he said. "Go with your gut."

"Won't they, like, wither or something if I prune the wrong sprouts?"

Tachibana laughed. "There are no wrong sprouts. It's about seeing what happens and learning from the experience. That's what clubs are for."

Was this guy more mature than me? Definitely more than Yanami. That required no debate.

After we'd been at it for a good ten minutes or so, Asagumo-san wiped the sweat from her sizable brow with a beaming smile. "Whew. I think I'm done, Senpai."

"Just finished myself," Tachibana replied. "How's little bro coming…along. Good. Looking good."

Said no one ever when it was actually looking good.

He hoisted the tray onto a shelf, then dusted his hands off. "We'll be planting them next week. You should definitely come visit us again for that. What class are you?"

"Er…" I had not been informed of this.

Before I could make a fool of myself, Asagumo-san grabbed my arm. "We should be going to see the teacher soon, Kazu-kun. If

you'll excuse us, Senpai."

"Oh, okay. No worries," said Tachibana. "Well, someone's always here after school, so feel free to stop by whenever." He flashed a debonair grin.

"I assure you, we will. Thank the kind man, Kazu-kun."

"Uh, th-thank you."

With a low bow, we hurried away. I could feel the guy watching us all the way back to the building.

Once inside, I could finally breathe and weasel out of Asagumo-san's grasp. "Wasn't exactly natural, dipping as soon as he asks what class we're in."

"What else were we supposed to do? And Lemon-san's contacted me anyway." Reading my confused expression, she flaunted her wrist at me. "Your big sis invested in a smartwatch!"

I'd heard of those. They could connect with your phone and share functions and stuff.

On the screen was an odd message from Yakishio: "Class-S inbound."

Asagumo-san waved her finger disapprovingly at the furrowedness of my brow. "Come now, Kazu-kun. Lemon-san hasn't been running around here and there just for the fun of it. She's been scouting around campus for us, keeping an eye out for a particular target."

And Class-S was this target. S for "sister," I supposed.

"If Kaju's on her way, we've gotta get out of here." I turned and ran, but nearly crashed into someone directly behind me. "Whoa! Sorry, wasn't looking."

"My bad. You okay?" a girl asked. A very tall girl with a hoe across her shoulder.

I knew her. I swore I'd seen her somewhere before.

"Gon-chan!" came a voice I *definitely* knew. "Are you there?!"



I snatched Asagumo-san by the hand and bolted, dipping around a corner and hiding in a shady corner. From there, I witnessed a minuscule girl run toward exactly where we'd just fled from. There could be no mistaking that long, swaying, black hair. Or that tiny face and tiny stature. Or that manner of scuttling.

"Nuku-chan," the tall girl said. "What's up?"

"The teacher told me you were on your way to the gardening club," said Kaju.

I could hardly make out their conversation, so I leaned forward as far as I dared, straining my ears.

"Got that new hoe, so I was just off to give it to Satoshi."

"I need to talk to Tachibana-kun myself. Mind if I join you?"

"Fine by me, but what about?"

"Our plans for the fourteenth. The classroom just isn't the best place for, well, you know."

Valentine's Day. I knew it. Whatever they had to discuss, why couldn't they discuss it in the classroom?

Shoot her down, Gon-chan. Do it now.

She hummed. "Yeah? How's about I just hoist this hoe on you. Mind?"

"Huh? Don't you need to see him?"

"Nah. Here. She's all yours."

"If you insist. Consider it done!"

Gon-chan had betrayed me. They had their private rendezvous now. The tall one vanished in the direction Kaju had come from.

I stayed and stared a while longer. When I peeked back the other direction, Kaju was gone. I nearly went after her, but there hadn't really been any good places to eavesdrop from at the gardening club. No way I could get close enough to hear them.

Asagumo-san tilted her head at me. “Kazu-kun, was that tall girl a friend of your sister’s?”

“Yeah. She’s, uh, been over to our house a few—okay, can we drop the act yet?”

“I was quite fond of it, personally. Anyway, one moment while I tune in.”

Tune what? She started fiddling with her smartwatch, fire burning in her eyes.

“Did you bug the gardening club, Asagumo-san? I thought you promised you were done with those.”

“I promised I was done with *GPS* trackers. Which, upon reflection, I now understand are a breach of privacy and trust. I deeply regret what I did.”

Okay. Good start.

“Then explain.”

“First, a thought experiment. Were someone to overhear us right now, would that person be at fault?”

I glanced around. We were alone. It was just us and the distant sounds of practicing sports clubs.

“Not really, no,” I said. “It’s a public space.”

Asagumo-san nodded firmly. “Exactly. Just as public buildings are free for viewing, public conversations are free for hearing.”

Why was this actually convincing me?

“So basically, you bugged the gardening club.”

She shook her head. “Semantics, Nukumizu-kun. It’s not a bug. It’s a *smart* bug.”

Oh, well, that sounded way cooler.

“In short, it is completely ethically neutral for us to listen in on someone’s conversation right now. Am I following?”

“Precisely.”

"Awesome. Maybe don't tell anyone else what you just told me, though."

"It'll be our secret."

We leaned our ears in to the now-tuned smartwatch.

"…so…how…"

That was Tachibana, but the background noise made it almost unintelligible. Asagumo-san and I shuffled to the window. The white noise faded away.

"As planned, then?"

That was definitely Kaju. I held my breath.

"If that works for you. Sorry you had to come all the way out here."

"I don't mind. It's a little embarrassing to talk about this in front of people anyway."

Embarrassing to talk about? What was so embarrassing about it?! But I couldn't jump to conclusions. There were tons of embarrassing things that were totally platonic. Like that time I called a teacher "mom."

Luckily for me, I wouldn't be cringing at myself long, because what came next shook me to my core.

"So, your brother…"

Kaju giggled. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him. The fourteenth will be our secret."

It was embarrassing *and* I wasn't allowed to know about it?!

"Over my dead body!" I shouted.

Asagumo-san jumped. "Nukumizu-san, they can't hear you from here."

"Then I'll say it to their faces."

"You'll blow our cover. Are you sure that's a good idea?"

No. It wasn't. Calm. Peace. I put a hand to my chest and breathed.

Kaju had come to talk to the boy called Tachibana about Valentine's Day. So what? It was just a little embarrassing. So what? And it had to be kept a secret from me.

"None of this makes literally any sense," I said. "Don't you think so?"

"I'm inclined to believe you're the only one without any sense right now, Nukumizu-san."

Maybe, but that didn't help my wobbly knees any.

Those two were close. At least, they sounded like it. It remained to be seen whether they were dating or not, but I'd sooner believe pigs could fly than that there was a boy on Earth capable of existing in close proximity to Kaju without developing a crush.

"I've got a little brother," I muttered. "I'm bro-squared."

"All right, that's enough." Asagumo-san took my sheet-white cheeks in her hands.

"I, uh—"

"Breathe. Ready? In…"

"I-in." I inhaled.

"Now out."

I exhaled. We repeated this three more times until I was finally calm again.

"Listen to me," she said. "Your sister was just having an intimate moment. Like the ones you've shared with your big sis. Remember?"

"I don't, actually."

And she wasn't my sister.

"We'll fix that later. Now look sharp. We've got to regroup with Lemon-san and go on home, Kazu-kun." She reached for my collar

and re-hooked it.

Maybe… Maybe she was my big sis. Maybe… Maybe I *was* Kazu-kun. I am…Kazu-kun.

As I stared deep, deep into the shiny forehead before me, a minuscule girl walked by us. But then she stopped, eyes as wide as saucers. "Oh? Oh?!" She grabbed my hand and started hopping in place. "Oh my goodness, Oniisama?! What are you doing here?! Have you re-enrolled?!"

Oniisama? Who was that? Wait. Yes. I had a sister. This…was my sister. "Kaju, is that you?"

She dove into my personal bubble. "Ohmigosh, ohmigosh, you look positively stunning in uniform! Please, you have to take our pict…" Kaju froze with her phone held out. She blinked. "Oh. You've visited our house before. Asagumo-san, right? What are you doing in our uniform?"

Asagumo-san grinned. "Hello again. Being the best big sis I can for my dear Kazu-kun, of course."

Not helping.

Kaju's eyes glinted at those words. "Oniisama's big sis…? No fair! I wanna be a big sis!"

And there it was. Kaju threw my arm up and down in a fit.

"Let's all just take a minute," I pleaded.

"No! A minute's not even close to enough time to feed you and change your clothes and give you a bath and cuddle—*agh*, there's not enough time in the whole *day*!"

None of those were things big sisters typically did. But they were things Kaju already did.

"Okay, okay, pause. Eyes on my fingers, Kaju." I held an index finger up on each hand. "See them go? One chases the other. Tag. Then it's the other finger's turn."

She followed them with her eyes. “It chases the other. Tag.” Then she cleared her throat, her head straight again.

“Better?”

“Yes. However, this situation still begs an explanation, Oniisama.”

“Uh…”

Hadn’t thought that far ahead. I tagged Asagumo-san in.

She nodded and stepped forward. You go, big sis. “Kaju-san. There’s a very simple reason for Kazuhiko-san and I being here in the state that we are.”

“And that is?” Kaju questioned.

“Because we’re into it!”

There went all my hopes and dreams. Kaju and I choked in unison.

“Be realistic,” she went on. “What is sneaking into your alma mater, wearing clothes that don’t fit you anymore, and pretending to be brother and sister if not debauchery in its truest form? Why, for what other reason would we commit such an act? Undercover reconnaissance? A ridiculous notion!”

She shot me a smug, sideways glance. It told me that this was indeed the best she could come up with. And that saddened me.

Kaju’s mouth flapped like a suffocating fish for a few moments before she cleared her throat again. “I-I’ll have to ask you to come with me then. The guidance counselor will see you.”

Asagumo-san made a face of genuine confusion. “We haven’t come to conduct any sort of espionage, I assure you. It’s purely a gratification thing.”

The eyes Kaju made at me were worse than any kind of torture. Wasn’t looking forward to the family meeting tonight.

But then, something swept her off her feet. She yelped.

“Vice prez acquired! Meat bun secured!” Holding Kaju in her arms and grinning like a knight in shining armor was none other than Yakishio.

A mob of track girls came barreling around the corner.

“She’s getting away again!”

“Slow it down, Lemon-paisen!”

“This ain’t over yet!”

Yakishio turned to face them dauntlessly. “Heh! Snatch the girl, and the meat bun is yours! If you can keep up, that is!”

“Yakishio,” I said, “what are you—”

“She’s in good hands!” She winked at me, then bolted.



A river of girls gave chase.

"Meat buuun!"

"Circle around that way!"

"I'll cut her off from upstairs!"

Yakishio and the Mini Yakishios zoomed off into the distance, leaving me and Asagumo-san in the literal and figurative dust, wondering what in the world had just happened.

Asagumo-san prodded my shoulder. "I think we should probably go?"

Kaju *had* been kidnapped and all, but Yakishio told me she was in good hands, so…she was probably fine.

I nodded and unhooked my collar.

*****

I don't remember much from when I was a baby. Supposedly, most people don't, because we forget when we get to a certain age. What stays gets locked away somewhere.

I was only a year and a half when Kaju was born. Still right around that hazy period that I shouldn't remember. These are some of the memories I do remember, substantiated with anecdotes from my parents.

Apparently, I didn't take too kindly to losing the spotlight. It makes sense. I was just taking my first steps, and all the while my parents were busy trying to take care of my newborn sister whose name I could hardly pronounce. There was a new sheriff in town, and the lack of attention made me lonely. Frustrated.

When my second birthday came around, I finally got to be the protagonist again. But even then, once Kaju started crying, Mom leapt into action and was all over the baby instead. I threw my

paper crown away, stormed off to my room, and then fell asleep curled into a pouty ball.

I wasn't out long. When I woke up, there was a blanket on me. And Mom was there. Smiling.

"Good morning, Big Brother," she said.

That ticked me off again, and I went back to pouting. She hugged me anyway.

She carried me to Kaju's baby bed. I remember that part. Looking down and wondering how a person could be so small yet so like me.

"Kaju's up too. Tell your brother good morning, sweetie."

Kaju reached out to me with her tiny little hands. I touched them gently, and she grabbed hold. Tiny little hands. But warm. And so much stronger than you'd think.

I didn't know how to react. Kaju did, though. She looked up at me and smiled. That's when it really hit me for the very first time.

I was a brother.

Everything after that's a bit of a blur up until I turned three. Kaju's been the same ever since. Even when she started junior high, she never wanted to let go of her big brother. Maybe that's why I never wanted to let go of her.

It had to happen someday. But today was never that day.

*****

The sun had snuck away, and the city went dark. I had to keep my eyes trained on the flagstones in front of me just to keep from misstepping. They terminated at a crossing illuminated by a lonely streetlight.

As I went to cross, someone yanked me back. "Nukumizu-san, car coming!" Asagumo-san, back in her high school uniform, gave me a worried look. "Um, where are we going exactly?"

“Home?” I said as if it were obvious. But one look around, and it was plain to see this wasn’t my neighborhood. I’d somehow wandered to Toyohashi Station. “Sorry, didn’t realize you were following me. I can make it on my own.”

She shook her head. “I can hardly leave you alone right now. Let’s find somewhere to sneak off to.”

With that suggestive phrasing, she took me to an old bakery called Matterhorn. My family had bought from them tons of times, but it was my first time actually sitting in their café.

Asagumo-san showed me her phone while I took in the classy ambiance. “Yakishio-san’s said goodbye to the girls and is on her way.” I quietly nodded. A waiter appeared and set a drink in front of me. “Is that all you wanted?”

“Don’t have much of an appetite.”

She leered at the fruit juice and cake before her but quickly wiped her expression clean. “I’m only replenishing my glucose levels, of course. Sugar’s best when the brain is tired.”

“I know, I know. Sorry I ran you ragged.”

I dumped some sugar in my coffee and began to stir when Asagumo-san held a forkful of her cake out to me.

“Open wide.”

“What? In public?”

“I told you we’d share an intimate moment later. Big sis keeps her promises.”

Were we still doing that?

She wouldn’t quit until I humored her, so I bit, literally, and a familiar sweetness filled my mouth. She’d ordered the namesake Matterhorn, a light sponge cake with chestnuts mixed with cream and—hold on, this stuff was *good*. It’d been so long since I had this. I’d been on a sort of chocolate kick lately, but maybe it was time I came home.

I reached for my coffee and noticed Asagumo-san smiling at me.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Yeah, actually. Thanks." It would just be in bad taste to keep up the gloomy act when someone was trying so hard to cheer me up. So I returned her smile with the best one I could muster.

Just then, a big sports bag landed in the chair next to Asagumo-san. "The heck're you guys doing?" Yakishio stared down at us with big, wide, brown eyes. Talk about awkward timing.

Asagumo-san clasped her hands together happily. "I'm being Kazu-kun's big sis."

"Hey, that sounds fun! S'cuse me!" she called to a waiter.

Apparently, that was good enough for her.

Only after placing her order did Yakishio finally plop herself down next to Asagumo-san. "I came 'cause I heard you were down in the dumps, but you seem plenty fine to me." She thunked an elbow onto the table. "Fine enough to make eyes at girls, at least."

The last thing I wanted was another misunderstanding with Ayano, so I veered to another topic. "What happened to Kaju, by the way? My sister, I mean."

"Your sister? Oh, she was pretty surprised."

No duh.

"I mean, did you, like, leave her somewhere?"

"I carried her to the student council room. It's all good. And I won!"

At what, I did not know. Oh well. Long as no one got hurt.

I sipped some coffee. Meanwhile, the waiter came with Yakishio's tea and chocolate cake. The cake itself was checkered with squares of vanilla, and it had chocolate coating around the outer surface. It was a popular menu item.

"Y'know," Yakishio said, digging her fork in, "I really think your sister's gonna be fine."

"You talked?"

"Not much, since I was runnin' and all, but seemed to me like she's got tons of friends. She just seemed, I dunno," she took a bite, "*fine*, I guess. Like she's got it together. She knows who she is. I get why you're worried and all, but have a little faith in her." She scooped up a corner of her cake and held it out to me. "Say 'ah,' Kazu-kun."

"Not you too." I ran from her with my eyes.

Yakishio leaned in harder. "What, so Chiha-chan's fine but Lemon-oneechan's no good?"

"Well? Is she?" Asagumo-san pressed.

I ate the freakin' cake.

Yakishio smiled, pleased. "All right. Everyone's happy. The end. Now let's eat our sweets."

Everyone most certainly was not. And this was most certainly not the end. But she was right. I did need to have more faith in my sister. For starters, a bit of flirting didn't necessarily mean she was dating anyone. I was living proof of that. Right?

Asagumo-san looked outside the window and shifted in her seat. "It's awfully late. Nukumizu-san, do you think your sister made it home safe?"

"She's probably still at school doing student council stuff. Said she'd be late this week."

"Oh, that's perfect then."

Did I want to know? Asagumo-san presented her smartwatch yet again.

"What's that?" Yakishio asked.

"A smartwatch. With this, we can listen in on the bug I planted at—"

"Asagumo-san!" I interrupted.

She nodded. "The *smart* bug. The smart bug I left. Which is not an eavesdropping device."

Lovely lampshade.

Yakishio lit up and examined her wrist. "No way, that sounds awesome! Is it like some super-secret detective gizmo or something?"

"It is indeed. With it, my deductive powers are extended many times over, and I can hear things without even being there. Such as the goings-on in front of the student council room, for example."

Her deductive powers were perhaps morally dubious.

"Wait," I said, "we're nowhere near Momozono right now. Will the signal even reach?"

For every dumb question, there was a dumb answer. "That's exactly why I left a portable router behind, to serve as an amplifier."

"Did you sign up for a hot spot literally just for today? Please tell me you didn't."

She simply smiled and got to tinkering. Sometimes I wondered why I even bothered to care. This was one of those times when I decided it was no longer worth the effort. Deduce away.

"What's it gonna do, Chiha-chan? Is it gonna light up and stuff?" Yakishio interrogated.

"I'll install LEDs for next time," Asagumo-san said. "We're connected."

We all huddled around the watch. We couldn't hear much other than some kind of rustling noise.

"Think we missed everyone?" I asked.

"I think I heard something!" Yakishio hissed.

I had too. We held our breath and strained our ears, but that little blip was all we got.

Suddenly, Asagumo-san looked back up. “It’s not connected to Wi-Fi. It’s picking up the bug’s raw signal right now.”

“Smart bug,” I corrected.

“Smart bug.”

Good. Anyway, if there was a bug that close to us… “Does that mean there’s someone nearby using the same device?”

“No. It has to be manually linked with the app.” She waved her arm all around but stopped at me. She stared.

“What?”

“Nukumizu-san. What’s in your bag?”

“Uh, just the uniform I wore earlier.” I unzipped it.

Asagumo-san’s forehead gleamed. “The signal just got stronger. There’s something in there.”

But that was ridiculous. I yanked out my coat and fished around until something fell out from the inside of the collar. I picked it up. It was a small, black chip about the size of my thumb nail, and there was something written on it.

“‘No. 1’?”

“That’s the smart bug I planted on the student council room door. But wait. The signal’s still…” Asagumo-san dug inside her bag next. It didn’t take long for her to produce the same black chip as the one I’d found. “No. 2, the one I stuck on your sister.”

You had to be kidding me. This crook was out of control. And for the record, I personally felt “crook” was putting it mildly.

Yakishio glanced between us with her fork hovering in midair, not fully grasping the situation. “So what’s that mean?”

Asagumo-san rested her index finger against her chin. “It means big brother Watson has been had by a cute little Moriarty.”

“Last I checked, Watson had a big sis,” I quipped back.

“Whatever you guys say,” Yakishio said. “Cake was good.”

Intermission:
Ruminations with the B-Team

THE CLUB ROOM WAS QUIET. YANAMI AND KOMARI minded their own business, neither motivated enough to strike up a conversation.

Yanami lazily perused a magazine, using her arm as a pillow, until a page caught her attention. "Hey, Komari, doesn't this look yummy? Chocolate mochi."

"Wha…? Ch-chocolate *mochi*?" Komari nestled a bookmark in her book. The thought made her grimace.

"Yeah. Like mochi, except chocolate flavored."

"Th-that's neat I guess." Uninformative, though, she noted.

"I'm thinkin' Valentine's here. It's coming up, you know. You remember talking about trading chocolate between us girls, don't you?"

"N-not really."

Yanami got halfway onto her high horse before doubting herself. "Wait, you're right. That was in my head."

"O-okay." Komari opened her book again.

Yanami lost interest in her magazine and flipped it shut. "The open house is this weekend, yeah? We have anything planned for that?"

"O-our new president's sort of MIA."

"That he is. Nukumizu-kun's the worst kind of helicopter brother, I swear."

Now was about the time when they should've been prioritizing putting something together for prospective members. Past turnout

records proved that the lit club could garner itself a healthy amount of attention.

"What a total jerk, right? Leaving us all alone to do all the work for him." Yanami whipped out her phone. "Not cool, Nukumizu-kun."

Komari blinked at her. "H-he's with Yakishio. Didn't you kn-know?"

"No." Yanami grimly dragged her head off the table. "I did not."

"Th-they said they were g-going to Momozono," Komari whimpered.

"The junior high? Lemon-chan flunk so hard she had to go back?"

Komari thought to herself that maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. "N-no, they went to st-stalk his sister."

"Oh, right. They were classmates." Yanami shrugged. "That boy and his sister. Well, if you can't beat 'em, eat 'em." She pulled out a packaged Choco Cake, a sort of chocolate wafer snack. "I've been super addicted to these lately. My favorite part is that there's two per pack." She tore it open and pulled out both wafers. "You want some?"

"M-maybe one."

She reached out just as Yanami stacked the Choco Cakes on top of each other and bit into both at once. Komari froze in place.

Yanami dropped a whole new pack into her outstretched hand. "They're super good two at a time. You should try it."

"I-I'm good."

After her third pack, and Komari's first wafer, Yanami got up to get some tea. "Guess we'll just have to pick up the slack while Nukumizu-kun's busy being a deadbeat. He mentioned printing another club journal, but no one's submitted anything yet."

"I-I wrote something," Komari commented between nibbles of her second Choco Cake.

Yanami paused for a moment. "But what kid in junior high comes to open house and gets excited over a *periodical*?"

"I-I think some do," Komari feebly protested.

Yanami thunked her tea cup down. "We're *high schoolers*, Komari-chan. It's time we act like it and show these kids what they're missing."

"Wh-what are they missing?"

With a graceful swish of the hair and a cross of the leg, Yanami sat. "Women."

Loss 3:
Dividing and Conquering, but It's Long Division

I WAS AT MACHIKANA LIBRARY AFTER SCHOOL, NOT far from the station. It was a fancy place where the second and third floors were all one open space. There were even cafés, and the stairs could be turned into makeshift seating for events. Honestly, it was almost too trendy for me, but it was a library first and foremost. One where energy and calm could somehow coexist. I liked it decently well.

I found a booth, took a seat, and opened a book. Yesterday rushed back to me. Our little incursion into Momozono Junior High.

We'd learned one important thing of note: Tachibana-kun did, in fact, exist. Which was already enough to grapple with without having also heard him and my sister act all coy together. Thankfully, I wasn't the clingy type and so hadn't evaporated on the spot, but I still hadn't recovered fully from the shock of it all.

Kaju was a second-year. She had friends. Probably male ones. I mean, I never had any friends of the opposite sex when I was her age, but Kaju was different. She had friends. Tachibana-kun was probably one of them. And that was all there was to it.

With that settled, I shifted gears to this weekend's open house and flipped through the reference I was using for my story. This wasn't escapism, because I still hadn't written anything for the journal, and escapism would imply I was trying to ignore reality. How could that be when the journal was very real?

When I went to make a note in my idea book, I peeked at my phone. I had a LINE message from Komari.

"You're in a club, FYI."

Silly Komari. This was *for* the club. Could she not see? I replied to her saying I was working on a draft at the library, then flipped my phone over. I had a short story to brainstorm. The hook was a mysterious and beautiful girl suddenly appearing before the protagonist, but who would the all-important heroine be?

"Sure wish ideas weren't so hard to come up with."

I shut my reference, stretched, and looked out the window. Through the blinds, I could make out the plaza down below and the high school uniforms scurrying around it. And all the couples…

It occurred to me then that my booth was for two. In front of and behind me, in the adjoining booths, were more couples.

As I pondered a theoretical fiscal policy wherein we might levy a tax on such hoarders of romance, a Tsuwabuki bag came down on my table. "Komari? What are you doing here?"

Komari Chika glanced left, then right. "Sc-scooch," she whispered. I slid closer to the window, and she plopped down on the edge of the seat. "And I'm d-doing you a favor. D-did you forget the open house this Sunday?"

"What do you think I'm working on this draft for? I was trying to find inspiration for the heroine, but nothing's coming to me."

Komari grabbed the book I'd been using. "From a m-microbiology encyclopedia?"

"My gut tells me weirdos are in. Was hoping I could unlock the secrets."

She skimmed a few pages, but quickly thumped it shut, shaking her head. "As i-if you can even decipher any of this. G-get real."

Perhaps she had a point. Screw it. I could always just go with a cat-eared glasses maid. Couldn't underestimate the value of self-indulgence in fiction.

"I assume the critic's already finished her draft?"

"A c-continuation of the Mishima and Dazai isekai."

Wasn't that Tsukinoki-senpai's? "She pass the torch or something?"

"I-I didn't ask. Since M-Mishima's the top."

A canonical switch, huh? Bold.

It was getting harder and harder to get a hold of the third-years anyway. Tsukinoki-senpai had already applied to five colleges and gotten rejected by one. Tamaki-senpai was done with his Common Test and neck-deep in studying for the next phase of exams. Last I heard, he was cutting it close but feeling good.

"I'll have my submission done by Sunday. Don't worry."

"Wh-when are we printing?"

I scratched my cheek awkwardly and looked away. "We can, uh, do yours and Yanami-san's first. I'll print mine on my own time. Then we can have visitors do the binding."

"E-excuse me?"

I smirked. "Give 'em a taste of the club experience. Smart idea, eh?"

"O-or you could finish your st-stupid story on time."

Always so mean to me.

"Why do you think I'm not in the club room right now? Tomorrow's a holiday, but I'll show up Friday, okay? Sheesh." I dismissed her by making a show of returning to my notes, but she stayed. Twiddling her fingers. "What? Can I help you?"

"It's, um, Yanami. She wants to do something besides the journal."

That could only mean one thing. "I'm sure it's nonsense. Pretend to hear her out, give her some gum or something, and she'll forget she ever mentioned anything." This strat was field tested. But Komari kept twiddling. "If gum doesn't do it, offer fried rice instead, or—"

"O-open house is on Valentine's Day, so sh-she wants to make chocolate."

I'd almost forgotten that was this weekend. Kaju had taken up my entire brain, which was ironic considering Valentine's chocolate was the source of all this.

"And what's that got to do with open house?" I asked.

"Sh-she wants to hand them out to visitors. To…'kill them with femininity.'"

That was an interesting idea coming from a girl in the lit club. Because literature clubs were overflowing with womanly charm. Yanami would sooner kill herself inhaling chocolate than any visitors.

"Actually, chocolate's not a bad idea. Roll with that."

What could go wrong with Komari around? I went back to work.

She sidled in closer, head hung low. "A-and I heard about your…stalking. Yakishio told me."

I sighed and put my pen down. Word had spread. "Even if it *was* stalking—which it wasn't—it was for justice."

Her eyes darted left and right again. Then she lowered her voice and said, "D-do you wanna know more? About your s-sister's crush."

"Huh?"

Crush? Who said she had a crush? But after yesterday, I couldn't deny the possibility, and now I had to face it head-on. I gulped. It echoed in my ears.

"Talk to me," I said, lowering my voice to match hers.

Komari quietly set a book down on the table. *How to Make Them Open Up*. And…?

She thrust her chest out proudly. "I-I'll use my conversational skills to g-get her to spill everything."

Not likely, but I decided to let her dream. Because that was the mature thing to do.

I took the book and flipped through it. The author had apparently studied something psychology-adjacent in the U.S. and worked as a consultant for some foreign company. Most of her accomplishments went over my head, but she sounded qualified to me. And she looked hot in her headshot.

"Sure," I said, "but how are you even gonna get in the same room together? You've never met."

"W-well, um…" Komari put a hand to her chest and breathed. "Th-the chocolate we ate the other day w-was good. I w-wanted her to teach me the recipe." Her expression softened as soon as the final word left her lips.

So that would be the cover. The true goal, meanwhile, would be to fish for info. Only problem: The fisher was Komari.

"For the record, she's, er, pretty intense." That was putting it lightly. "Think you can handle that?"

Komari heeded not my warning. She puffed up again. "I-I have experience with little sisters."

But with a little sister as experienced as this one? I had my doubts. But hey, she was offering. "Where do you wanna do it at?"

"I-I was…hoping your…your house would…" Komari's fingers transcended twiddling and went to twirling. She never finished her sentence.

She wanted to use our house, I assumed. Convenient, since my parents would be out for the holiday to go see a movie together. "Sure. My mom and dad'll be gone, so how's tomorrow sound?"

Was that perfect or what?

Komari nearly jumped straight up in the air and squawked. "N-no…parents?!"

Last I checked, that is what a mom and dad were. What was her problem?

"If getting that recipe's your cover, we've got a kitchen that's all yours, and there won't be any distractions. Pretty much ideal for you and my sister."

"Y-your sister? Right. Sh-she'll be there."

"Isn't that the whole point?"

"D-die."

Why?

Honestly, her timing couldn't have been better. I hadn't said more than a few words to my sister since yesterday. I figured she'd have a few more to say after the whole eavesdropping thing got busted, but she was the same old Kaju. Now I was the one making things awkward, and the longer I put off addressing it, the harder it became to move on.

"I'd really appreciate you having a chat with her," I said. "I'll make sure we've got all the ingredients you'll need. You just bring yourself."

"M-myself?! D-do you have a-any idea how that sounds?!"

I did not. "Relax, will you? I've got a draft to work on. You gonna do something or keep freaking out?" I handed her a book.

"I-I'll read!" She snatched it and threw it open. Those brain games would come in handy tomorrow.

A few moments later, and she was absorbed. That was a good sign for…wait, that was the encyclopedia.

"Sorry, Komari, didn't mean to—"

Komari didn't so much as glance at the how-to book. She was muttering something under her breath. "B-Bosminidae… Volvox… C-Campylobacter…"

She chuckled to herself. At least she was having fun. I left her to it and picked up my pen again.

Literature Club Activity Report, Bonus Issue: Komari Chika—The Tainted Sorrow of Another World

There are those in this world who don't belong. Irregularities with powers known as "skills" that defy all known laws of reality and magic. They are those who died and were reincarnated. And now they wander endlessly.

It was a dark night at the Zavit Royal Academy for Magic. The cold wind ruffled the eastern man's robes as he strolled along a deserted path behind the school building. He rummaged around his breast for a small bottle, then popped the lid.

Dazai shrugged. "Meningitis couldn't keep you down, could it?"

A moment later, a figure revealed itself from the shadows behind him. A small man with a felt hat and a black cloak. "Clearly you were no more worth Death's time than I was. You still look like a mackerel who forgot it couldn't fly." The man called Chuuya scoffed at Dazai's unamused expression. He approached. "Believe me, you're the last person I want to see, but the geriatrics with the Guild are asking for you."

Dazai's face hardened. "I'll have to disappoint them. Send them my apologies."

Chuuya extended his hand anyway. Dazai swatted it away, a purely reflexive action, and the next instant the man was gone.

But what shook Dazai wasn't just that. It wasn't just Chuuya that was gone. The building he should have been standing next to had vanished as well. They weren't on campus anymore but in a forest reserve that was at least an hour away by foot.

"What's the meaning of this, Chuuya?"

“Good drink you’ve got here.” Chuuya took a long swig from a bottle. “Finally trying a leash on for size?”

“That’s mine!” But how had he gotten it? It had been in Dazai’s hand only moments ago.

“You should reconsider. Come with me, and the Guild’ll open your eyes like it opened mine. It isn’t like our old world. The people there understand and appreciate my poetry.”

“I was never particularly lacking in—”

Chuuya reached for Dazai’s hand again, but before they could touch, a flash of light blinded them. The bottle split in two. Its amber contents shimmered in the moonlight.

“My booze!” the men harmonized.

Suddenly, a third man stood before them. A man in a military uniform. His sword was drawn. “Get away from him, Dazai-san.”

“Mishima-kun! You don’t have to tell me twice. I was just considering how I might do that myself.”

Mishima adjusted his blade so that he would next strike with the dull edge.

Chuuya cast ungracious eyes at him. “You must be his guard dog. Have any bite to back up that bark?”

Mishima swung, sending a blade of light at his opponent—a technique he’d learned during his time as an adventurer. It only grazed Chuuya.

“Go on! Get him!” Dazai cheered. “Bruise him up a little. It’s only the dull edge!”

“I assure you, that’s the goal, Dazai-san. So why…?”

Chuuya huffed, insulted. “Is that supposed to be your skill? Enlighten me. I’m confused.”

“Conviction. So long as the wielder of my power never falters, so too will my blade. There is nothing I cannot cut, should I believe

it to be so.” Mishima took aim, holding his blade out toward the man’s eyes. With the sharp edge.

“That’s a shame.” Chuuya sneered. “Because *my* skill, Inebriant, means nothing can touch me. No matter what you believe.”

The military man struck again and again to no avail. Mishima was in a waking nightmare. Chuuya casually passed him by while he was stunned.

“Wait!” Dazai pleaded. “We can talk about this. How’s about we all parley a moment?”

“Parley? Let’s parley. You come with me, and I’ll forget Mishima’s little stunt here. How’s that for parley?”

Dazai turned and bolted. Sneering, Chuuya gave chase.

“Not so fast!” Mishima lunged at him bare-handed, his sword cast aside, but a dizziness beset him as he came close.

That was when Dazai came. Instead of continuing his escape, he’d about-faced and tackled Mishima back. They tumbled together in a tangled ball.

“Dazai-san?! What are you—” Before he could finish, Mishima saw it. The bottomless pit he would have thrown himself down if Dazai had not stopped him. “What in the world…?”

Dazai offered his hand and stood him up.

Chuuya pinched the brim of his felt hat and spat. “A second later, and you’d have gone over like a carny on a broken trapeze.”

“I see your trick,” Dazai muttered calmly.

“Why don’t you tell me what you think you see.”

“Your skill—Inebriant—it’s not as simple as you make it sound. Things don’t just skirt around you. You’re altering everything from our perceptions to reality itself. The trigger? I’d wager it’s anytime someone moves to attack you.”

Chuuya fell silent. Then he clicked his tongue in irritation. “What tipped you off?”

“Why, my cowardice. I happen to come with a little more liquid confidence than I think I’ll need.” Dazai produced a second bottle of alcohol from his breast. “See, Inebriant only seems to work on those not already inebriated. How very considerate of us lonely drunks.” He retrieved Mishima’s sword and returned it to his grasp. “Feel free to do more than bruise. You have my permission.”

“But how?” he questioned. “His skill will trigger.”

“That’s the beauty of it. You know it will. You have Conviction. Skills aren’t like magic. They don’t abide by natural laws, so when two skills butt heads, the mind decides the victor.” Dazai took a swig. “Believe that you’ll win, and you will, my friend. Oh, but remember to turn your blade up. Nothing sours booze like the sight of entrails.”

Chuuya growled, keeping his eyes glued to the sword. “Clever. But not clever enough. I know you have the Liar skill. A nobody like you would never know those mechanisms.”

“The great Kawabata kept them under strict lock and key, yes. It took quite some coaxing, and a change of bedsheets, to squeeze it out of him.”

He opened his mouth to continue, but Mishima stepped forward. “I’ll handle it from here, Dazai-san.” His blade faced down.

Chuuya’s glare faltered, and his shoulders slumped. “You’ve made your point. This pup can bite.” Dusting off his cloak, he turned his back to them. “You win this round.”

Mishima made to follow, but Dazai stopped him. “Leave it. Who knows what tricks he might have up his sleeves.”

Mishima stared into the darkness Chuuya had vanished into and sheathed his sword. “An acquaintance of yours, I take it?”

“Chuuya? In another life. Now, let’s away. I’m sobering up.” Dazai started off, ruffling his hair. “You’ll join me for drinks, won’t

you?” But the next second, he was against a tree, Mishima gripping his collar. “Something on your mind?”

“You told me nothing happened with Kawabata-san.”

“You think I meant what I said? I was bluffing, Mishima-kun. Whoa, there. Do you have cotton in your ears?”

Mishima wrapped his big, burly arms around Dazai’s waist. “You filled them yourself. You’re a two-faced man, Dazai-san. I’m forced to grasp for the truth with my own hands.”

“Do you have any idea where we are right now?”

“Alone. As utterly, completely alone as we were in bed last night.” Dazai’s exposed chest glistened in the moonlight. Mishima took him by the chin and forced his eyes to meet him. “You’ve made this one yourself. Now lie in it.”

***

The next day, Thursday, was National Foundation Day. So no school. Kaju, the one variable in our plan, happened to be free, so Komari would be over to learn that chocolate recipe this afternoon. I was on my way home from buying ingredients.

I turned my eyes down from the blue sky to the white powder sprinkled on the ground. I’d almost forgotten what day it technically was.

Oni Matsuri was a local Toyohashi festival spanning all the way back to the Heian period, and was even officially recognized by the government as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property. The onis always came to our neighborhood, so Kaju and I would go out to see them when we were kids.

I noted a few people walking around now with that tell-tale white powder. Which sounded weird at first, but it was all in the spirit of the festival to let a few costumed actors toss a couple of handfuls at you. Sometimes you got candy for your trouble. There

was even an app these days that let you track where they were, for optimal oni routing.

A cute shriek cut through the air. Some girl getting powdered, no doubt. I would've liked to join in if there weren't more pressing matters to tend to.

I adjusted my grip on the bag of groceries and got a move on. Komari would be there soon.

***

When I got home, I only saw Kaju's shoes at the front door. I'd beat Komari.

"I'm home."

A brief moment of silence. Not long later, the living room door opened, and Kaju flew out. "Welcome back, Oniisama!" She scurried over and relieved me of the groceries. "Your friend will be here soon. Let's make sure we're ready to welcome her!"

"R-right."

Same old Kaju. There were times when I thought things were tense lately, but I suspected it was all in my head.

Watching her scamper off out of the corner of my eye, I slid my shoes off. Then the doorbell rang.

Komari. Annoying timing.

I immediately slid my shoes back on and opened the door. There she was. Not a hair out of place. Except for the powder covering her from head to toe.

"What happened to you?!"

"I-I tried to get a closer look at the onis and g-got swallowed by the crowd." She coughed, surrounding herself in a powdery cloud. It was honestly impressive that someone could manage to get *this* dirty.

Someone yelped behind me. “Komari-san?! Oniisama, run a bath, now!”

“Oh, uh, on it.” Kaju was right. She probably didn’t appreciate me standing around staring. I hurried to the bathroom.

“You get ready to hop in,” I heard Kaju tell Komari. “I’ll find you a change of clothes.”

“B-but the powder.”

“Don’t you worry about that. Now go! Hurry!”

With warm water filling the bath, Kaju eventually came barreling into the changing room where she shoved a powder-coated coat at me. “Oniisama, take this. Let’s get the rest off you, Komari-san.”

“W-w-wait! Nukumizu’s still…!”

“Oniisama. If you would.”

Right. Yeah. I did. The door shut behind me.

The whirlwind of chaos died down. I stood there in the hallway, a little dumbstruck, powder-coated coat in my arms. Probably needed to deal with that.

“Hey, Kaju,” I called through the door. “Can you vacuum powder?”

I heard fabric flop onto the ground.

“Oniisama, why are you still standing there?!”

“Uh, just wondering what I should do about her coat. If she’s got any other clothes, we should probably clean them togeth—”

“D-die!”

And that was Komari. Telling me to die in front of my own sister.

I sighed and headed for the front door. Figured I could just dust the stuff off outside.

***

Thirty minutes went by. Kaju pattered down the stairs and to the changing room, carrying a bundle of stuff in her arms.

"Komari-san, I'm leaving some clothes here for you. Feel free to use them."

I stopped wiping the floor.

Komari was in the bath right now.

It hadn't really hit me earlier, but now… Now I was acutely aware of the reality of my situation. A girl I knew was in my bathtub. And it felt weird. Very weird. I wasn't ready for this. I had to cool my head down, fast, so I went to the kitchen to make some coffee. Felt like grinding the beans. Just to get my hands moving. For no particular reason.

As I turned the crank, Komari's coat hanging on the wall caught my eye. I'd given it a good beating outside, vacuumed it, and then ran a brush over it just to be sure all the powder was gone. It was pretty much spotless now. Kaju would be impressed.

I stopped cranking. This was why everyone thought I had a sister complex. But it was at least partly her fault for being so good at making treats. Pavlov would have been proud.

Only when I finished grinding and went to brew did it finally hit me that I didn't actually want any coffee. Just wanted to play with beans. And now I was feeling weird again. Did we have any more? Might as well grind the lot.

The living room door opened while I dug around the pantry. Kaju came skipping in, twirled around, and beckoned to someone out of view. "Come on, Komari-san! Don't be shy!"

"I-in these clothes? Y-yeah, right…"

She'd borrowed some of Kaju's, I figured. Sure, maybe it was a little embarrassing to wear a junior high schooler's clothes, but at her size, pretty much everything was for junior high schoolers.

But then she shuffled in, and I had to do a double take.

Komari wore a black, knee-length dress very reminiscent of gothic lolita fashion. Her knee-high socks were patterned, and on her head was a lacey hairband. Even that was unrecognizable. Her hair was actually kempt, instead of, well, the opposite, and held back by a fancy pin. One side of her bangs had been tied into a small braid.

"Is…that all you had for her?" I asked Kaju.

"I'd never dress a guest in old hand-me-downs. These were the only unworn articles I had. My hands were tied." She tugged me until I stood squarely in front of Komari. "Thoughts, Oniisama?"

Thoughts? On the clothes? *Komari's* clothes?

Her skin was flushed from the bath. She couldn't look me in the eye. Just kept her head down and fidgeted. She reached up to play with her bangs but grasped nothing, which only made her complexion redder, so she clutched her skirt instead.

Was this Komari?

"Sh-she's, uh…cute—" Komari squawked. Her face went the reddest yet. "I mean she looks nice! Good! She looks good in those!"

Not much of a rephrasing.

"I-I look…n-ni—" Komari froze solid. #MeToo part two, here we come.

"You look wonderful!" Kaju cheered. "You know, if you really wanted, I bet you could get Oniisama…" She got too quiet to hear after that and whispered something in Komari's ear.

Whatever it was, it made her squeak and collapse on the spot. Did I need to call a lawyer?

"Hey, er, you okay?" I offered her my hand.

She looked up at me, tears clinging to the corners of her eyes. “Sc-screw you…”

Oh? That was a different flavor of abuse to the usual.

That it reawakened the weird feeling deep in my gut was something I would take with me to my grave.

***

So began Kaju’s cooking class. Finally.

Kaju removed the thermometer from the liquid chocolate, checked the display, and nodded. “Forty-five exactly. Next, we want to cool it down in ice water. Make sure to scrape the bottom when you stir.”

Komari replied with a noise that sounded more like a whimper than words, then did as she said.

Kaju admired her handiwork as she stirred. “You’re good at this, Komari-san. Do you bake a lot?”

“N-not… Just…c-cookie…and cake…”

She was gonna blow a fuse at this rate. I stopped cleaning dishes for a second. “She says mostly cookies and cake, but not really chocolate. Right?”

She nodded furiously.

“Oh, okay,” Kaju said. “We should bake a cake together next time!”

More nods.

How could I have forgotten? Komari was bad with strangers. How was she going to get anyone to “open up” if she could hardly pry her own lips apart? I went back to my dishes and watched on.

“Temperature control is vital when tempering. Just be aware of your cooking environment and the amount you’re working with and I’m sure you’ll get it down in no time. That looks about cold enough to me, so next we’ll heat it up again. This time to thirty degrees.”

Komari bobbed her head, her spirit already broken.

"Lay out some baking paper on that tray there, would you? We'll let half of them harden and turn the rest into truffles."

Komari tossed me a sidelong glance. What she expected me to gleam from it, I did not know. Her eyes darted to the tray, then back to me. Implying…?

"Uh, about the tray," I said.

"What about it?"

I glanced at Komari. Slight nod. On the right track. "Won't filling that thing with chocolate just turn it all into one big bar? What do you do then?"

"We cut it into pieces then do the coating. That's when we'll add a little more flavor and decoration. You'll need lots if you plan on handing them out, won't you?"

Komari looked relieved. Glad I could help, but what I couldn't help was wondering if it might not have been more efficient for her to ask her own questions.

And that was how I ended up practically taking the lesson myself. On Komari duty.

"Is it okay for the cream to get this hot?" I asked.

"We want it near boiling. Then it gets mixed in with the chocolate, we let it cool, and that's it."

"Truffles are that easy, huh?"

Komari eventually found her groove, once our kitchen stopped feeling so foreign to her. I still couldn't get over her outfit, though. The lolita style was never really my thing, but coupled with the frilly apron… It made her look like a maid.

How was that for a pre-pubescent daydream? A girl takes a bath in your house, comes out in a short skirt, knee-high socks, and an apron, then starts cooking for you.

But it wasn't a daydream. It was reality.

Komari returned my stare two-fold. “Wh-what are you looking at?”

“Just wondering if I’ve ever seen your forehead before.”



There I went setting myself up for yet another #MeToo. I braced myself for the berating.

But Komari just kept on baking. “D-do I…look better this way?”

I froze up. What?

I searched for Kaju, but she was on the other side of the room digging around cabinets.

“Well, uh, it’s not bad. I’m just used to your usual look.”

“O-oh. Okay.”

“Yeah.” Again: What? What happened to learning more about our wayward Tachibana? “Hey, you ever get on you-know-what? Kaju mention anything about a crush yet?”

I was at least half-motivated by sheer awkwardness. Just to get us on literally any other subject.

“Huh? O-oh. Right.” She puffed her chest out. “L-leave it to me. I g-got this.”

Did she? Did she really?

All I needed was an opportunity. One to flex my own conversational skills, honed through hours of visual novels. Once we got Kaju on the subject, I’d fish out the info myself.

“What are you two talking about?” Kaju asked, returning with a bag of mixed nuts. “Don’t leave me out.”

Komari and I exchanged glances. She stepped forward. “K-Kaju…chan!”

“Yes?”

This was it. She just had to steer the conversation in the right direction.

She stepped even closer and then, voice cracking, shouted, “D-do you l-like anyone?!”

Uh, hello? Subtlety?

Kaju blinked her big, round eyes. “Do I like anyone?”

“Yes!” we echoed. “We” included me. Whoops.

She giggled. “It’s not exactly a secret, but I don’t think he’d want anybody to find out.”

“So you do have a—”

She pressed her finger against my lips and grinned innocently. “I *would* tell you. But you see, there’s this naughty little fairy that I can’t seem to shake.”

Komari and I flinched.

“I-is your sister always this weird?”

Yes, but no.

Kaju looked at me. Then at Komari. Still smiling. “This fairy—they’re always around every corner for some reason. Shape-shifting. Lying to my friends. Prying into my secrets—open up, you two.” She popped a couple pieces of chocolate into our mouths. “They’re a *very* naughty fairy, you see. What do you make of that?”

She beamed like an angel. In that way she was way too good at. Komari clung to my arm in fear. I could offer no consolation. I was terrified.

“W-well,” I stammered, “that does sound pretty naughty. But what if they mean well? They might be a good fairy. Like a stalker of justice.”

“Th-that doesn’t exist. Y-you’re a creep.” Komari left me and hid behind Kaju. Traitor.

Kaju held my cheeks in her hands and brought her face in so close I could feel her breath. “Naughty boys don’t get what they want.”

***

The days were always short in winter. By the time Komari’s clothes finished drying, it was already dark out.

I shut the door and turned around. Komari was standing beneath the fluorescent glow of a streetlight, looking uneasy.

"Y-you don't have to walk me back."

"Sure I do. It's after dark. Least I can do is take you to your stop." Plus, Kaju would kill me if I didn't.

With a reassuring grin, I took her bag and started walking. But Komari didn't move.

"Oh. Sorry," I said. "I always carry Kaju's."

I handed her bag back to her, but she ignored it. She started walking. "Th-thanks…"

"Uh, don't mention it." I never knew how to react when she wasn't calling me names or cursing my bloodline.

It was quiet then. We passed by silent houses in utter silence.

I couldn't endure it. "Hey, uh, thanks, by the way. For coming out here and all that."

"I-it's no big deal. I d-didn't mind." She played with the braid Kaju had left in her hair.

"Not that we actually got much info out of her," I said with a laugh.

Komari nodded smugly. "W-we were close, though." Were we? Were we really? If she said so. "Wh-what's our next plan?"

Next plan? There was a next plan? No offense to Komari, but after today, I felt pretty confident in the pecking order, and we were at the bottom.

"She's already on to me, so I'll probably just wait and watch for now."

"Y-you're sure?"

"Gotta let the heat die down."

A thought occurred to me then. A question I couldn't shake. I looked down at Komari.

"Wh-what?"

"Why did you go out of your way to help me anyway?"

She croaked. "I-I, uh…"

Yanami and Yakishio didn't take me seriously. That much was obvious. So why was Komari willing to stick her neck out for my sake?

After flapping her lips for a few seconds, Komari finally rasped, "Th-the open house is this weekend. But y-you've been gone."

"Right. Yeah. I've been running around like crazy this week, so __"

"If we d-don't get any new members, th-the club's through. B-be better."

Well. She had me there. Not every visitor would end up at Tsuwabuki, but it was true that now was the time to start thinking about recruiting the ones who did. We had to be sure to leave a good impression.

"I didn't attend last year's open house. How do those usually go?"

"I-I didn't either. I didn't kn-know anyone."

Fair.

Yakishio would be busy with the track team, and Yanami was a tour guide, so she would only be around to help later. Which left the job of socializing with prospective members to the least sociable people in the club.

"You think we'll get many?"

"S-Senpai said they get a lot. People ch-checking everything out in order."

That made sense. There was zero commitment at this stage, so there was no harm in looking. I wasn't confident in handling that kind of crowd, so maybe we could just play cat videos or something until Yanami showed up to rescue us.

Suddenly, there were no more houses. We'd come out onto the main road. Just across the street was the tram stop. This was far enough right? I could leave her here, then I could go home and work on that draft I still desperately needed to finish. I held her bag out for her.

But Komari ran out onto the crossing. "L-light's going to change."

"Hey!" I ran after her, and just barely made it before the signal turned red again.

And now I was going to end up waiting here until the tram came.

My eyes glazed over watching cars pass when Komari shoved her hand into her bag. Which I was still carrying. "What's up?"

"Th-the chocolate." She pulled out a small, neatly packed bag. Inside was the chocolate she'd made today.

"When did you guys pretty it up like that?"

Komari didn't answer and thrust it out at me. "T-taste it."

"Aren't you supposed to do that *while* you cook? All right, all right, relax."

She was aggressive today. She could get like that sometimes.

I took it. It was transparent and held shut by a single ribbon, with four different kinds of chocolate inside. Wasn't sure what exactly I was supposed to be tasting them for, but… Wait. Hadn't they only made three kinds? Milk, dark, and raspberry. But there was a fourth, heart-shaped, red one mixed in. Maybe I'd just forgotten. My memory was all over the place lately, after all, what with all the trauma.

I opened it and tried the heart one. There was a familiar bittersweetness to it. Black currant.

Kaju had experimented with this flavor not long ago. They must have used whatever she'd had left over after that. The only

question remaining was why I couldn't remember them making it. I scraped my brain for a recollection but came up empty.

Komari, meanwhile, was staring at me.

"Yeah?"

"I-I'm not staring!" she squawked.

Except she had been.

"The chocolate's good. You're pretty much set for Sunday."

"S-Sunday?"

"You're trading chocolate with the other girls for fun, aren't you? And doing that femininity thing for the open house."

"Th-that's what Yanami said, b-but I dunno if I'd say it's for…"

"What do you mean?" I interrupted when she got quiet. "They're your friends, aren't they?" I held the bag out toward her. Komari hung her head for a while before nodding and picking a piece for herself. "Good, right?"

"I-I haven't eaten it yet."

She plopped it in her mouth, and a quiet smile spread across her face.

***

I swore I could still smell the cacao on me all throughout the following Friday. The scent lingered all the way to homeroom.

I thought back to yesterday. Those final few minutes Komari and I spent in silence until the tram finally pulled up. Maybe I should have been grateful that I'd gotten off as easy as I did for neglecting my own club.

The phantom aftertaste of black currant spread over my tongue just as Amanatsu-sensei sauntered in.

"We all here? Yes? Good. I've got some stuff to go over for the open house this Sunday." She cleared her throat authoritatively.

"Unless you're a tour guide or you've got a club to help, you've got the day off. Don't gussy yourselves up and waltz in expecting class, only to come whining to me when there ain't any. Whoever's on duty today, hand these out for me."

The designated gofer passed around some papers. Mostly just more details on what would happen on the day of and what needed doing in preparation for it. Looked like it was scheduled to begin at one in the afternoon, with the first half being guided tours, then they'd be free to explore on their own. I wasn't on tour duty, and we had to be ready for anyone who showed up, so I would be on standby in the club room pretty much all day.

Amanatsu-sensei waited for everyone to get a copy before continuing. "Tour guides, you've got an orientation, so head to the gym after this. The rest of you, you're miscellaneous. My class—that means you—will be setting up bulletins and stuff on the first floor. Everyone has a job. Check the roster. Finish it, and you're free to go home." Her spiel ended, she plopped into her chair like a laborer after a hard day's work. "Now, look, I'm sure you guys've heard this a hundred times by now, but this open house is about *you*. It's about showing these kids how Tsuwabuki students do things. We're inviting these people into our *house*, so to speak."

Was I crazy, or did this sound actually genuine? Silence gripped the classroom. This was like striking gold.

"That's also why it's up to the student council to make sure everything runs smoothly, and why we only look for tour guides who *want* to volunteer." Amanatsu-sensei looked over us with a faint smile. "Teachers too." There was no more gold in these hills. A dark, sinister aura emanated off of her person. "Look, I'm not implying anything. Am I a little salty about losing my Sunday and not being compensated for my time? That they use volunteer work as an excuse to not pay us, even though they still want to waste my time with meetings about it? Maybe. But it's an educator's duty to be there for the students no matter—" Suddenly, her fist came down on her desk. "Stop! You're saying the quiet part out loud!"

That was the Sensei I knew.

She planted her face against the hard wood and groaned, "I'm not even done grading finals. I'm gonna spend all Saturday on that, and now my Sunday's shot too. When's a girl supposed to find a minute for herself?"

I felt for her. I really did. But what did she want us to do about it? This was my third semester with her and I still couldn't keep up.

Her students kept staring in awkward silence. And she kept grumbling to herself. "It's not my fault I'm single. How am I supposed to find someone if I can't even get out? Just pick someone and sample the goods like my friend says? People aren't edamame…"

Said friend was Konuki-sensei. I was positive.

"That's all from me, you guys," she moaned, fanning herself with one of her printouts like a dazed drunk. "Stuff's in the printing room. Get to work. Dismissed."

Another rant, another whiplash-inducing transition. The class started to stir, albeit a little confusedly. I joined them and stood. Since I wasn't giving tours, I was apparently on "bulletins and stuff." According to the printout, I was supposed to put up guide signs near the front entrance. The sooner I got that done, the sooner I could double down on the club.

"Hey, Nukumizu. You doing signs too? I'll join ya." Hakamada Sousuke appeared with a winning smile and a hand on my shoulder.

"I thought you were a tour guide."

"Yeah, well, somethin' came up. You know how it is." He made a tired expression that could have only belonged to the truly tormented.

Valentine's did overlap. Anyone going out of their way to volunteer for tour duty on a day like that would have to be a truly loveless individual indeed.

"Hey, Nukumizu-kun." Yanami patted me on the shoulder. "Meetcha in the club room after this orientation."

"I'll be there after this."

"Don't bully him, Sousuke." Lady Loveless left the classroom, waving.

"Nukkun!" And in her place came the loveless Yakishio. She smacked me on the back. Ow.

"Ow."

"I'mma head to the track team when we finish up in the gym."

And she was telling me this why?

"Uh, sure," I said. "You'll be with them on Sunday, right?"

"Yep. But I'll make it up to you guys." She put her hands together, then dashed. "Later!"

Loud. Always so loud.

Hakamada nudged me. "Someone's popular with the ladies."

"I thought you were told no bullying."

"Just messing. But you have to admit, you've changed a lot since the first semester."

I thought about that. Maybe he was right. I gave him a wry smile, and we set off down the hallway toward the printing room.

As we walked, I felt the eyes of every girl we passed by, and it wasn't just my imagination, because some were bold enough to whisper to each other. The Hakamada Effect in action, I deduced.

"Something on my face?" he asked. "You're making me blush here."

I ignored his flirty attempt at a joke. I wasn't attractive enough to return it. "Just appreciating how hard you've got it. Do you always get this much attention just walking down the hall?"

He blinked. "Me? You're the one they're looking at, Nukumizu."

"What?"

How? Had I gone viral overnight or something? Did someone catch me leering at manga covers at Seibunkan the other day? Was that so wrong?

Hakamada cut a shudder short by dropping a hand on my shoulder. "Stand with me over there."

"Uh, okay?"

We went in front of the notice board and waited. Before long, the girls behind us started to whisper.

"Oh my god, look how hot he is."

"No, the other one."

"That one's…fine."

"Yeah. Fine."

Apparently I was fine. Such was my existence. Relativistic. I was flattered to know that the general consensus of women in regards to me was "fine."

Hakamada shrugged when they passed us by. "You've been on people's minds since the thing at the gym."

Thing? That time I'd kept Shikiya-san from falling? Why was that on people's minds? They hadn't felt how soft or how cold she was. Or smelled how good she smelled.

"That was beyond my control. I wasn't harassing anyone. Not sexually or in any other way. Just for the record."

"What? They're saying you've got a situationship with the student council. That you might be two-timing."

A what-uationship?

"It wasn't anything like that," I argued. "If anything, *I'm* the victim here."

"Hey, you don't have to tell me. I know you're a good guy." He nodded. I remembered him saying something like that last semester

too. Which meant I knew what he was going to say next. "I get you, but you really should put your foot down and clear things up at some point. People'll keep thinking someone's getting strung along if you keep giving them reasons to."

"Do you *really* get me?"

"Sure I do."

I wasn't convinced, but Hakamada sure was.

***

The signs went up easy-peasy. Afterward, I went straight to the club room, where Komari and I sat across from each other.

"Y-your draft?" She tapped her finger against the table. It was time to get printing.

I nodded. "Indeed, we'll need that, won't we?"

"W-we're waiting on you. E-even Yanami finished."

Another entry for the convenience store chronicles. I was the only one who hadn't submitted anything yet.

I nodded again. "I understand your concern. It's well-founded. Consider, however—"

"N-no."

Sheesh, let a guy talk.

"Hear me out," I said. "So we're making this journal for kids coming to visit for open house, right? So they can get a taste of what we do here. What better way to impart that than by letting them help?"

"Y-you already suggested that. Still no."

"Gimme a chance, okay? So we print the things out, staple the stories together, and then bind the spine with tape. I'm saying we stop at printing." I took out a piece of paper. "I made these profiles. Visitors can fill them out with their favorite books and stuff, add it to

their copy, we let them bind it themselves, and they'll have their own *personalized* journal."

Komari took the paper and glared at it.

"Think about it," I went on. "If we know what books they like, that's a conversation starter right there."

What better way to get to know someone than talk about their hobbies? I was pretty proud of myself for this one.

Komari didn't look so confident. "Wh-who's having the conversation?"

"Uh…" Yanami didn't read. Which only left two people. "Maybe they'll talk amongst themselves."

"M-maybe."

Well, this took a dark turn. I coughed. "Anyway, long story short, we don't have to print my draft today."

"M-meaning?" Her eyes sharpened again.

I lowered my head. "I'll have it done by Sunday. I promise. Just gimme some more time."

"L-lead with that."

Some would consider this humiliating. Those people were shortsighted. If a little prostration was all it took to get some leeway on that deadline, I'd be kissing boots every time. I let slip a secret smirk while my forehead was still pressed against the table.

Then the door opened. "Excuse me, is Nukumizu-san here?" Basori Tiara took one look at us and retreated a step. "Am I interrupting?"

"No. Need something?" I rose from my chair. Perfect. A new topic.

Tiara-san scowled. "To teach you a lesson. Could I borrow you for a moment?"

No thanks. “Ah, shoot, we’re actually busy right now. Real important meeting we’re having.”

“It didn’t look like a meeting to me.”

“You’d be surprised. The table’s nice and cold. Good for the head. Keeps your wits sharp. Doesn’t it, Komari?”

I looked to her for backup but found her making like a statue in the corner. Wow, she was good at that.

Tiara-san started to shove. “Come with me.”

“Hey, wait a sec!”

She didn’t until we were out in the hallway together. She put her hands on her hips, and her eyes became daggers. “Care to explain to me why you weren’t at orientation?”

The one for the tour guides? “I never volunteered. I’ll be here, but just for club.”

“Oh, for the love of… I told Amanatsu-sensei to make sure you went.” Her fault for expecting Sensei to remember anything. She seemed to believe the confusion on my face and let out a sigh. “A miscommunication then. Fine. Here, you’ll need this.” She handed me a booklet. “You’ve been volunteered. I apologize for the lack of warning.”

“We can *be* volunteered?”

“If an acquaintance happens to ask for you specifically or someone wants to learn more about particular clubs. We make an effort to meet demand.”

I definitely didn’t have any acquaintances still in junior high that would do something like this. Maybe someone was just crazy for books.

“Who was it?” I asked. “Please tell me someone nice.”

“*You’ll* be expected to be nice to *them*, in case that went over your head. And so you know, it wasn’t easy updating the roster on such short notice.” She pointed to it in the booklet.

Apparently, I'd been signed up to guide group five, from Momozono. There were three names attached—Gondou Asami, Tachibana Satoshi, and Nukumizu Kaju.

Literature Club Activity Report, Bonus Issue: Yanami Anna—A New Year's Keepsake

I'm having breakfast at the usual place. My friend at the eating area this time is char-grilled chicken (with salt). Why? Don't worry about it. But for those who do anyway, check the nutrition facts. The carbohydrates specifically. I forget how much it is. Really low, I think.

And I don't have my usual latte either. Just plain coffee. Black. Also low. That's two in a row. I can't be stopped. You can pick how strong you want it to be, and today I went hard just because.

I've stopped trying to make it here early, so I don't see ***-kun outside anymore.

"No meat buns, A-ko-san?" says XX-kun, my classmate, without any regard for human decency. He's around a lot lately.

And for the record, they weren't just meat buns. They were pork buns. Amateur.

He sits two seats away again, just like always, and it's still just as cringe. He always is, but he's looking especially lame this morning with that stupid corn dog in his dumb mouth.

A typical corn dog has thirty grams of carbohydrates per serving. I want one. And he's got a latte. I want that too.

Before I can ask for a sip, a girl from our school calls out to him. They start whispering to each other, then the girl takes a bite of his corn dog, and she leaves. I don't know who that was, but she's got some nerve to try to snatch other people's food.

I'm playing with the skewer from my chicken when XX-kun smiles at me. "Still hungry?"

He seriously wouldn't know tact if it slapped him in the face. I ignore him, but then he holds something out to me. It's a tofu bar. Yuzu and pepper flavor. Ten grams of protein with a nice, chewy texture.

"For you. I hear you're on a diet."

I think about testing my slap theory.

While I eat my snack, I have another thought. A tofu bar's a lot better than one measly bite of a corn dog. Three for three. But it doesn't feel like a win.

***

After the printing, I went to a nearby bakery. Yanami had summoned me here before I could go home. She'd fed me their bread plenty of times in the past, but I'd never gone in person.

One more scan of my surroundings and I entered just as Yanami was checking out. "Heya, Nukumizu-kun. Gotcha somethin'." She handed me a sandwich—two slices of bread with a sweet, red bean filling in between. A mainstay of her diet. When she was in a good mood, she could down eight of these a week.

"Thanks. I'll grab drinks. You good with milk?"

"Yep."

She went to grab us a table. They had a whole section for eating in. I followed as soon as I had that milk and sat opposite her.

Yanami tore open the package, smirking. "They grow up so fast."

"Who? Me?" I stabbed a straw into my carton, bracing myself for absurdity.

"Half a year ago, you'd already be griping at me to tell you what I want, and it's like I can actually *talk* to you now." She bit into

the same red bean-filled ogura she'd given me.

I doubted whether that was me growing or just learned helplessness. Things were never simple with her.

"Well, now this is awkward, but why *did* you ask me to come here?"

"Uh, 'cause I was hungry?"

See? See? It was always like solving a riddle.

I stifled a sigh and opened up my own sandwich. "When are you not hungry? Look, I assume you wanted to meet because you have something to talk about."

Yanami took out a small booklet, cheeks bursting. "Godhisfu cuzyudncom."

Still learning not to talk with her mouth full. I recognized the booklet, though. "That's the instructions for tour guides, isn't it? You grabbed one for me?"

She swallowed. "Your name was on the roster, but you didn't come. Was gonna go over stuff for you."

"Basori-san beat you already. We're meeting at one in the gym, right?"

"Wha?" Yanami's hand froze with her straw halfway to piercing her milk carton. "She did? She went out of her way to talk to you specifically?"

"I mean, it's sort of the student council's responsibility. I wasn't there, I didn't get the info I needed, so she came to make sure I had it."

That earned me a look. When she was done judging, she shrugged and opened the booklet. "Whatever. So Tachibana-kun's that kid who went on a date with your sister at Toyokawa Inari, right?"

"We don't know that. Kaju was there, but we never saw Tachibana-kun." I sat up straight, frowned, and looked her dead in

the eye. “Ever heard of Schrödinger’s Cat?”

Yanami took her lips off the straw and cocked her head. “You mean the thing where you open the box and the kitty dies?”

So close.

“I’m talking about how phenomena can’t be confirmed until they’re observed. Kaju and Tachibana-kun are friendly—that much I’ll grant—but I’ve yet to see a scrap of evidence to suggest that they’re dating.”

“You’re still on that?” She shook her head. “Lemon-chan told me all about what happened at Momozono. They were all over each other. And they’re going out on Valentine’s Day, for crying out—” Suddenly, she went bug-eyed.

“You’ve figured it out. That thing they’re doing? It’s the open house. Just a group of friends coming to visit a potential high school. Totally normal.”

“But why’s that so embarrassing they have to talk about it in private?”

“Kaju’s at a delicate age. Maybe she’s just shy about requesting her brother to be her tour guide.”

“Would she be shy about that, you think?” I wanted to believe. Yanami rested her head in her hand. “What about the handmade chocolate?”

I winced. Was hoping she wouldn’t touch on that. I sipped some milk for that nutritious calcium. “I mean, you can give chocolate to friends. Don’t get me wrong, I know it’d be totally natural for her to have a crush or two. I just don’t want to jump to conclusions until I hear it from her own lips.”

“Sure, sounds good to me.” She slurped up the last of her milk. “Just don’t get too up your own butt about it. You want her to know she can go to you if she needs you.”

“I guess you’re right, yeah.”

"I am. People date in junior high. It's part of life, dude."

My gut told me she was the last person I wanted to argue this point with.

"Nothing's set in stone, though," I reaffirmed.

"God, you are stubborn."

She could call me whatever she wanted. I took a bite out of the corner of my sandwich.

"Why're you eating that like a squirrel?" Yanami asked.

"Just not sure I'll be able to finish it. And I'll spoil my dinner if I eat too much."

"You won't," she declared infallibly.

"I—"

"Believe in yourself, Nukumizu-kun. If I can buy two of those at once on accident and still have the self-control to only eat one, anything is possible."

Here I'd thought she'd gotten me this out of the kindness of her heart. Silly me. Her eyes were trained on what was left of it, and they weren't leaving.

"You, uh, wanna split it?" I offered.

She held her hand out and beamed like this was the best thing to happen to her all day. "Oh, fine."

Intermission:
Friends at Dusk

AN OLD AND BUZZING FLUORESCENT BULB ILLUMINATED Momozono's greenhouse. It was after hours now, but the gardening club hadn't gone. Not everyone. Gondou Asami, second-year, class one, still lingered, facing a small potted tree.

A pair of pruning shears in hand, she was calm as a lake. Unmoving. Without taking her eyes off her work, she muttered, "You know no one's allowed in here, Nuku-chan."

Nukumizu Kaju's long dark hair swayed. She smiled. "Not unless they have reason to be. Here's this month's newsletter, Gon-chan. Courtesy of the student council."

Gon-chan emptied her lungs and set the shears aside. "Thanks. Late again, eh?"

"Being vice president's a lot harder than I thought, I'll admit, but it's for a good cause. I want to see our graduating students off right." Once her friend had the newsletter, she leaned in for a closer look. Little, handlike branches jutted this way and that. "Another bonsai tree?"

"Our old supervisor, Takamatsu-sensei, retired last year. Left this behind." She took up the shears again and examined the branches.

Kaju watched in silence for a while, gathering her courage. "You're sure about this?"

"About what?"

Another moment for courage. "Tachibana-kun. You're close, aren't you?"

"Went to the same youth club. We're close, I guess. Friends. Family. Hard to describe." For an instant, she seemed to remember

something fondly, but the instant passed and stoicism ruled her expression again.

"You're my best friend, Gon-chan. That's why I came to you when he told me how he felt. I didn't know how to process it on my own."

Kaju waited for a response. And waited some more.

When it was clear she wouldn't get one, she gathered yet more courage and continued, "You're seriously, genuinely okay with it if things work out?"

The shears cut air. "They haven't already?"

Kaju faced her friend. She was a hard nut to crack, that was for sure. "I think he's going to confess. The day after tomorrow. The fourteenth."

"And the world'll keep turning. For me and Satoshi both."

Kaju nodded. She had a point sometimes.

Loss 4:
The Courage to Let Go

THE OPEN HOUSE WAS HERE. THE CLOCK READ twelve-thirty, and all four members of the lit club sat together in the club room, the girls sending endless glances between each other.

Yakishio ended the charade, throwing down a box on the table. "I'll go first! This was my best batch." She opened it, revealing a mish-mash of vaguely chocolatey blobs.

Yanami and Komari sent two more glances my way, pressing me for a comment.

"Looks good," I said. "I see you remember those amoebas we learned about in biolo—"

"This one's a tsuwabuki, like the flower, and this one's a leaf. Wait, Nukkun, were you saying something?"

"Nope. Gotcha. Yeah, that's a pretty flower."

"That one's a leaf."

"I meant this one."

"That's also a leaf."

What was this, the ultimate CAPTCHA?

Yakishio glowered at me. "You're being really rude, you know that?"

My bad. But hey, there was more to chocolate than met the eye. I picked up a slightly gelatinous mass and tried it. It was sweet. So sweet, in fact, I could literally feel the grains of sugar on my tongue. It tasted like it had been sitting in her bag for half a year.

"It's, uh, good," I said slowly. Carefully. "It has a…fermented aspect to it."

Yakishio threw a piece into her mouth. “Really? I think they’re kinda nasty. Different strokes, I guess.”

Screw me, I guess.

Yanami, her curiosity piqued, tried one herself. “You know what? It’s a temperature thing. I can tell. But I can see the appeal. It’s got this muddy texture that really takes me back.” And then she ate another.

I refused to question why mud made her nostalgic.

“H-here’s what I made,” Komari stammered as she produced a tupperware container. Inside were the chocolates she’d baked at my house. Three kinds—milk, dark, and raspberry.

“Where’s the heart one?” I asked. Komari froze like she’d been struck by lightning. “What?”

“W-we could only make one! N-not enough i-ingredients!”

Ah, right. They’d used leftover stuff, after all. That made sense. But what did she have to get all red in the face for?

After demolishing half of Yakishio’s contribution, Yanami set her sights on the next.

“Some of these are for the visitors,” I reminded her firmly. “Restrain yourself.”

“I know, I know. Relax,” she insisted. “I brought my own anyway.” She rifled through her bag, puffed up with pride.

“What kind didja make?” asked Yakishio, munching on Komari’s confections.

“The kind that makes dreams come true. Because that’s what I packed into this baby. Hopes and dreams.” Pretty melodramatic for chocolate. She pulled out a box—a slightly tall one meant for a small cake—and threw it open with grandiose flair. “Here she is! Chocolate a la Yanami!”

It was a ball. A single, softball-sized sphere of pure chocolate. Nothing else.

No one said a word.

"Is it just the one?" I spoke up on behalf of us.

"Sure is. I jammed all the ingredients I had into it, and lemme tell you, it was *not* easy getting it to stay this round."

"So how do you eat it?"

Yanami looked genuinely confused that I would ask such a question. "Bite into it? How else?"

She demonstrated, then handed it to Yakishio, who followed suit after some hesitation. Then it was Komari's turn. Then it came around to me. Carefully measuring the farthest point I could from their teeth marks, I took a small bite. It tasted of chocolate with hints of chocolate.

"We're not giving this to people." I sealed it away back in its box.



Yanami pouted. “Okay, if my chocolate’s so bad, let’s see yours.”

“What? Was I supposed to bring some?”

“Uh, yeah? I—okay, well I never told you, but you were supposed to figure it out on your own. Use context clues. Come on, man, get it together.”

Note to self: Never be employed under Yanami.

Then I remembered. “Okay, well, I actually got some this morning. Not that it’s handmade or anything.”

I took out a box of my own, and the girls went wide-eyed.

“Wh-who gave these to you?” Komari demanded.

“He totally bought them himself,” Yanami said. “That’s from Kalmia, yeah? They’ve got good stuff.”

I didn’t deserve this.

“I said I *got* these. Not even I’m pathetic enough to lie about something like that,” I said.

Yakishio took the box from me and held it up. “Damn, look at you. You know her name?”

“I’d hope so, because it was my mom.”

Yanami and Komari, who were starting to stand, sat back down with a pair of sighs.

“Th-there it is again,” Komari groaned.

“That right there, Nukumizu-kun,” Yanami agreed.

And then they started to eat my chocolate. As if the verbal abuse hadn’t been enough.

“Okay, she told me to share, but that doesn’t mean it’s all for you,” I warned Yanami. “You listening to me?”

I confiscated the box and shifted mental gears. In not too long, we’d be leaving Komari here to meet visitors at the gym. After

the tour, they were free to wander, which was my cue to get back to the club room. Komari would have to fend for herself if anyone happened to pop in before that for whatever reason, but until then she'd be alone.

All alone.

"Wh-why are you staring?" she snapped.

"No reason."

It occurred to me that I'd never told her I was a tour guide now. I distracted myself from the inevitability of that aftermath by reading over some papers.

Yanami wiped her mouth and stood. "Lemon-chan. Nukumizu-kun. We should probably get going."

"True," said Yakishio. "Get a move on, Nukkun."

I made to stand, and Komari started to panic. "Y-you're going too?"

"Yeah, someone volunteered me," I said without looking at her. "I'll be back later. Hold down the fort for us."

She grabbed my sleeve before I could escape. "I-I can't do this a-alone!"

"I don't know what you want me to do. I gotta go. Yanami-sa—" The jerk. She was already gone. She and Yakishio both. "Saw their opportunity and took it. Hey! Quit tugging!"

That was when I noticed a familiar face in a white coat poking her face around the door.

"Sensei!" I shouted.

"Need some help?" Konuki Sayo, the school nurse and our supervisor, strutted in. She was kind of a lot, but beggars can't be choosers.

"Yes, actually. I have to go give a tour. Could you stick with Komari and help deal with anyone who shows up until I get back?"

Komari let out a tiny squeak and fled to a corner.

Konuki-sensei ever so slightly licked her lips, then sat herself down in a chair between Komari and her only way out. “I very much can. And you can rest assured knowing I won’t do a thing to our young guests.”

Always a good thing to specify.

“Thanks, Sensei. Komari, be good and do what she says.”

“D-die!”

I left her to her trembling and exited the room.

Kaju had been making Valentine’s chocolate yesterday. Not for me. But for someone else. And that someone was…

I shook my head. I couldn’t fool myself anymore. I knew who the someone was. Were they dating already? Or was today going to be the big confession?

I pinched my cheeks and picked up the pace. No use agonizing now. Too late for regrets.

***

It was chaos in the gym. There were enough kids in a myriad of uniforms to make up their own graduating class. Some of them would be part of Tsuwabuki’s one day. My own kouhai. From what I could tell from my spot along the wall, the student council was grouping everyone up by school.

I was here because Kaju wanted me to be. Tachibana-kun being with her probably meant she wanted to introduce me. Perhaps Gondou would serve as a mediator if things came to blows? My sister knew me well. I got clammy around girls I wasn’t familiar with.

Suddenly, I smelled flowers. The familiar prelude to a character theme played in my head. “This spot taken?”

“Don’t think so.”

Himemiya Karen stood next to me. The winner of the duel. Hakamada Sousuke's girlfriend. But her being here didn't make sense.

"Not with Hakamada?" I asked.

She giggled. "He's cooking for me back at my place. It's supposed to be a surprise."

That explained his absence.

"I take it it's not much of a surprise anymore."

"He's awful at keeping them. Isn't it adorable?" Not here thirty seconds and she was already giving me heartburn. She glanced around. "By the way, you know what day it is, don't you? Have you gotten anything?"

There it was. It was ever the fate of the introvert to be the plaything of the more socially gifted. I raised my mental defenses. "From my mom."

"Hm. Not from Anna?"

"No, why?"

That *thing* at the club room sure didn't have my name on it Himemiya-san looked disappointed. Her character theme seemed to quiet down too. "We baked together yesterday." She'd made that OOPArt of a concoction in Himemiya-san's presence? She gave a toothy grin and peered at me. "She worked super hard, so I could've sworn it'd be for that special someone."

So Yanami was the type to give orbs to her crushes. At least, Himemiya-san seemed to think so. I wasn't about to argue, but I did feel a little bad for her that it was so believable.

"We're, uh, handing out chocolate at the club. That's probably what it was for. You're talking about the ball, right?"

"Yeah, the ball. Huh. So you're giving it to visitors."

"Well, I dunno about that. I tried it myself, and I'm not sure we'll be including it."

"Why not?" She tilted her head all cutesy at me.

I could think of three teeth-shaped reasons.

"It'll be a cold day in hell before I give her chocolate to anyone," I said.

Record scratch. "You… Does that mean what I think it means?!"

"I mean, it means what it sounds like it means."

Her eyes widened. "Wow. I had no idea you could be so passionate."

"I don't know if I'd call it passion. Just common sense. I have a responsibility and all. Can't exactly go back on it now."

Not letting other people eat after our club members surely fell somewhere within the bounds of my duties as president.

Himemiya-san's eyes went somehow wider. "A *responsibility*?! When did it get so serious?!"

Any wider, and she might've needed help pushing them back in. I guess it made sense she wouldn't have heard about me becoming president, but was it that surprising? Should I have been offended?

"I mean, it just sorta happened."

"O-oh, wow… I had no idea. Life comes at you fast, huh?"

I guess it did. Himemiya-san was confusing me. But what else was new?

We stood in awkward silence for a while before Student Council President Houkobaru took the stage. "Welcome, everyone, to Tsuwabuki High School."

Her deep, confident voice commanded silence over the gym. The junior high students stopped chatting. Even I stood at attention.

She looked us over. "I extend that welcome equally to those of you we'll see again, and those of you we won't. It's my hope that

you'll experience what we have to offer and go home having learned something, whether you're decided or not. If that happens to be what pushes you to join us in these halls, all the better. It would be my greatest honor to welcome you all over again next year." Then she switched the mic off and bowed.

When we were all done swooning, Tiara-san boomed, "Guides! Make your ways to your respective groups now!"

That included me. At the front of each line was a kid holding a sign with the name of their junior high. I was Momozono. Group five. I continued searching, eyes peeled for Kaju, but it wasn't her that I spotted first. A face that I recognized stood above all the others.

"You're Nuku-chan's brother," said the tall girl in a Momozono dress. She'd been over to our house a few times. "Long time no see."

"You're, uh…"

"Gondou. Thanks for havin' us today."

"Er, no problem."

The small one approached next. "I'm Tachibana. Nice to meet —" He seized up. Uh-oh. "Watanabe-kun?"

"Er!" I had not thought this far. I seized up too. Couple of rusty animatronics, we were.

Kaju hurled herself at me. It was more tackle than hug. "Gotcha! It was all a prank! Wasn't it, Oniisama?"

"Huh? Was—" She pinched my back. "Ow!"

"He went all the way to see you just because he was so curious to know who he'd be guiding today!" Kaju rambled. "Isn't that crazy? I told you he's a good guy, Oniisama."

I picked up on the fact that she was throwing me a bone, and I took it. "Y-yeah, well, y'know. Sorry about that, Tachibana-kun. Hope you don't take it personally."

He still looked a little nonplussed but bowed anyway. “Not at all. I was the one who insisted. I really appreciate you going out of your way to do this.”

Tragic: Tachibana-kun *was* a good guy. And I was a stalker. One of the good ones, of course, but still. Parallels.

Gondou prodded Kaju, her patience worn thin. “What’s going on? They know each other?”

“I’ll explain later,” Kaju said. “Anyway, we’re wasting time! Let’s get going!”

“Hey, Nuku-chan!”

Kaju grabbed her hand and got moving. Tachibana-kun and I shared a look before following them out of the gym.

“I’m sorry, by the way,” he spoke up. “I know this was sudden.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” I reassured him as affably as I could. “So, there anywhere in particular you wanna go?”

He shyly opened up his pamphlet. “The, um, class in 1-C, actually.”

That was mine. Amanatsu-sensei liked to complain, but she was nothing if not dedicated. The pamphlet said they were doing classes for visitors to sit in on and loathe as I was to chance exposing her to the public, she did teach pretty well.

As we passed through the breezeway, I said to everyone, “So we’re going to the sit-in class, but we’ve got some time before then. Anywhere else we feel like going?”

Kaju turned to face me, arm still linked with Gondou’s. “All your favorite spots!”

“My favorite spots? They won’t be very fun, you know.”

“I want to know what you get up to at school,” she pouted. “You never tell me anything anymore.”

Because there was nothing to tell. Where would I even take them other than the fire escape?

"All right, I'll give you guys the tap water—"

"Anywhere else, Oniisama."

"You sure? The spout in front of the art room's got a pretty unique shape."

"Literally *anywhere* else, Oniisama."

I hated how scary she could be sometimes. What else was there?

"Guess we could go to the literature club," I said. "But you guys probably aren't interested in that."

Kaju lit up. "There! Take us there! I actually wrote my own story just for today!"

I didn't recall us taking submissions. "Uh, why?"

"I've always wanted to publish something with you in your journal. Imagine seeing both of our names next to each other in the table of contents. Like our very own labor of love."

"Not sure where the love comes in, but we actually are letting people make their own today, so that works out."

"Really?! Gon-chan, Tachibana-kun, does that work for you?"

Gondou shrugged with a grin. "Fine by me. Satoshi?"

"As long as we make it to the class on time, that works for me," he said. "The…literature club, you said? That could be interesting."

All right, so Tachibana-kun was absolutely not interested. I was reminded of a time when a certain someone had gotten literature and horticulture confused. However, this gardener had a little more sense. At least he was polite.

My current estimation of him was just that. He was polite. Honestly, he probably had a better head on his shoulders than me. Better social skills. Softer demeanor. But I was taller and older. And my blood type was A, which made me a better pick for blood transfusions.

I called it a draw.

Tachibana-kun, unaware of the contest in which he was embroiled, smiled softly. "I hear you're the president, and you're only a first-year. That's amazing."

"Huh? Well, I mean, someone's gotta do it. It's a responsibility, y'know."

I scratched my cheek. Damn. He was a good guy.

I hardened my melting heart as we entered the building. He was gonna have to try harder than that.

***

In a corner of the west annex, I placed my hand on the club room door handle.

And then I stopped. Inside was Komari and Konuki-sensei. And nobody else.

"Oniisama?" Kaju looked at my frozen hand.

"Just remembered something. You two are in the same year as Kaju, right? Everyone's fourteen?" Past this door was perhaps Tsuwabuki's most unhinged faculty member. I had to be sure.

They nodded. I reached for the handle again, praying.

"It's Nukumizu," I announced. "I've got visitors."

The door creaked open. I saw Konuki-sensei crouched in a corner, her back to us. In front of her, wielding a chair as a shield, was Komari in ball form. Sensei was waving a cat toy at her.

"*Pspsps*. Come on out, Komari-chan."

Hiss.

This was acceptably PG. I waved the others in. "You guys can sit. I'll get some tea."

"Oh," Konuki-sensei said. "Visitors? Welcome. Come on in."

But they didn't.

"Why," Kaju timidly asked, "is Komari-san doing that?"

A fair question. I looked at Konuki-sensei.

She nodded. "I'll spare you the details, but I was only trying to forge a bond between us and, well, here we are."

Maybe she could have left in a few of the details. But context and Konuki-sensei were strangers.

The visitors shuffled in, and I served them tea and chocolate.

Gondou surveyed the room. "So what is it this club gets up to?"

"Mostly writing short stories that we publish in journals. Sometimes we talk about books and stuff."

"There's a lot of those, I see."

"Yep. There are." Discussion over. I was already backed into a corner, but this was precisely what I'd prepared for. "So, if you guys could fill out these profiles, we'll bind it together with a journal that you can take with you."

Perfect. Exactly as rehearsed. Maybe a little fast.

Tachibana-kun studied the sheet, then looked up. "I don't read many novels. Are magazines or manga okay?"

"Totally. Movies, anime, games—as long as it's stuff you like, write down anything."

The period of silence we got while they wrote was an excellent bonus. Except Kaju wasn't writing anything.

"Don't have any ideas?" I asked her.

"Do I give you my story now or later?"

I'd nearly forgotten about that. I gestured for it, and she shyly handed over a folded sheet of paper. Two, actually.

"You never told me you were writing anything," I said. "How long have you been working on it?"

"I did it just last night. I couldn't sleep and had an idea. It's my first time, so I'm a little embarrassed, to tell the truth."

It was her first story, and she'd written it overnight on a whim? We'd have to see just how good it was. I happened to have a few months of experience in writing myself.

I settled my nerves and unfolded it.

Literature Club Activity Report, Bonus Issue: Nukumizu Kaju—A Work of Art Best Forgotten

The dim dining room was pregnant with a frigid silence. A melancholy portrayed only in old, forgotten works of art. At six, I entered the frame and prepared breakfast.

Chop. A fish's head came off. Next went its innards. Chop. Chop. Chop. Six more times, off went their heads, and then in they went to a pot of water. While that simmered, I started on a side dish. The only one we'd be having this morning. Thinly sliced ginger dressed with sesame and shiso—his favorite.

We were coming up on our tenth year living together, my brother and I. We were lucky it had lasted this long. That this routine had become so ingrained.

But no more.

Half past six. He would have normally been in his seat at the table by now, newspaper in hand.

Impatience. Fear. I quieted them both with my footsteps as I entered the hallway. Upon sliding back the bedroom door, I found him standing there in the middle of the room. He was dressed already. At his feet, a single travel bag.

"Niisan, breakfast is almost ready."

He only nodded.

I returned to the kitchen and switched on the gas stove. He came shortly after with his usual newspaper, flipped the television on, and found his spot at the table. He watched and read at the same time, as if fact-checking each thing the news anchor said, and in the meanwhile I made miso soup. Tofu. Diced. Seasoned with hatcho, which gave it a reddish hue.

At seven exactly, we would eat. Just as we had yesterday. And the day before. For a full decade. This was our tradition, and nothing came in the way of it. Not even New Year's Day. I couldn't help but smile.

But there was one day, actually. One day when the routine changed. It was the first morning he and I woke in the same futon. I'd refused, stubbornly, to leave, so he took it upon himself to do so. I found him in the kitchen, unperturbed as ever, and to my shock, he began to cook. By seven, we were having miso soup. Ever since, I hadn't once relinquished the duty again.

I watched the cerulean flame as I carefully adjusted the knob on the stove. I could not let it reach a boil, no matter what. The fish had to simmer so that the flavors could infuse properly. Then the tofu would go in, and that had to be delicately cooked as well. Heat control was everything, so I paid extra close attention to the size of the flame. The entire process took thirty minutes at least.

He liked to listen to it. The clattering and the bustling.

Once satisfied with the tofu, I made to turn off the stove—but my fingers flicked the knob in the opposite direction. The cerulean flame seared the bottom of the pot, and the tofu began to tumble. Among them, I saw the last decade. These past ten years of neither complaint nor comment, melting away before my eyes.

I looked up, but his attention was still with fact-checking the news. I felt silly.

I turned off the heat and melted the miso in the water, and then the clock struck seven. We sat, my brother and I, and another

day began.

He slipped his feet into leather shoes and took up his travel bag. His ten years fit into it just fine. What wasn't inside of it would stay here. What was, would go. Never to return. My brother included.

Distance. That was what he'd called it. A passing, nothing comment. We needed "distance." That was all that had preceded this day.

With that same vapidness, he finally spoke. And what he said was, "Will you be okay on your own?"

I hated that he asked. The answer didn't matter. The decisions had been made for me, and they would be carried out without me. For the first time in my life, I felt anger toward him. I looked at him harshly. And he looked back. Worriedly.

I breathed, and I put my hand to my belly. I felt the bump there. How it had grown.

"I'm not alone."

His gaze turned curious. I returned it with an ethereal smile.

He was leaving. But we would never be apart, my brother and I.

***

I set the papers down. I was now faced with the unfortunate task of reacting to this in front of my real, actual sister.

Kaju furrowed her brow. "How was it? Personally, I find it amateurish compared to your work."

"It was actually really well written. Especially for your first time."

She lit up. "You think so?!"

"So what's your pen name? You sure you wanna go with your actual name?"

"Yes! I am!"

Well. All right then.

Komari had crawled from her sanctuary at some point and was reading the story now. It wasn't long before she was staring at me with a deep, primeval disgust. "T-turn yourself in."

"There is absolutely zero real world basis to any of that." I snatched it away from her. "Guess we'd better get this copied. Hm…"

The nearest convenience store was pretty far, and we'd used up our allowance on the school printer.

Throwing her hair over her shoulder, Konuki-sensei stood. "I'll use the staff copier. Let me see it."

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all. I'll have you know I'm your supervisor. Or have you forgotten that little tidbit?"

"Sometimes I do."

She started to head out but quickly turned back around. "You won't leave while I'm gone, will you? I'll ugly cry if I get back and everyone's deserted me."

"At the very least, Komari will be here."

"Excellent." With a wink her way, the nurse went on.

"Okay," I said, "everyone finish those profiles? Stop kicking me under the table, Komari." I took a peek at everyone's work. Gondou-san had a thing for period pieces, by the look of it. "Huh. I didn't know *The Unfettered Swordsman* was based on a book."

"I got into it after watching the show. I have all the DVD box sets from '78 to '89. Only half to go." She puffed her chest out. Something told me she had more than a "thing" for period pieces.

"Asami's obsessed with Ken-sama," Tachibana-kun explained.

I vaguely recalled that show starring someone who was from Toyohashi, come to think of it. He was a prolific actor and even appeared here in his hometown for festivals.

"Who was it that danced to his Samba song at our youth club Bon festival?" Gondou-san shot back. "You couldn't remember the steps and I had to teach you."

"Oh god, don't remind me." Tachibana-kun put his face in his palm.

"So, uh, you guys old friends?" I asked.

They looked at each other.

"We were in the same commute group in elementary school."

"Which was also the same one Ken-sama went to," Gondou-san added.

We had another Yakishio and Ayano situation on our hands. I glanced at Kaju, who was off in her own world filling out her profile, minding her own business—or so she'd lead one to believe. Another might say that there were two types of women in this world: besties and bitches.

Of course, going to the same elementary school didn't necessarily equate to besties status. It was too soon to say which B the Nukumizu house had produced.

I was considering this and more, weighed against my extensive (two-dimensional) romantic experience, when Kaju handed me the paper. "I'm finished, Oniisama."

What was she reading these days? I wasn't actually sure. According to her profile, more than just light novels. There was some shoujo manga and romance stuff mixed in.

"Oh, you're reading *The Lapis Kingdom*? You borrow that from the library?" I asked.

"I am. The assistant recommended it to me."

Actually, on closer inspection, a *lot* of my old junior high favorites were on this list. Like, a lot. In fact, it seemed to be the entire list. She very well could have checked the records for loan history, assuming this wasn't just some crazy coincidence.

"Hey," I tentatively began, "so, your taste here…"

"What about it, Oniisama?" She let her head fall cutely to one side.

"It's good. No notes."

"I think so too."

Something something sleeping dogs.

Everyone finished their profiles before long. Komari laid out copies of each member's draft on the table.

"So you stack them all in order," I said. "Then you'll staple the spine like this. Make sure your profiles are just behind the cover—"

"Wh-where do we put your sister's indictment?" Komari interjected, prodding me.

I'd genuinely forgotten. Also, fiction. Not an indictment. Fiction.

"We can put hers before mine," I said.

"Is this yours here, Nukumizu-san?" Tachibana-kun pointed to one titled *My Girlfriend Has a Boyfriend, and He's Not Me*.

I nodded with pride. It was a true love story with heavy NTR elements, and well worth the wait. "Put a sticky note there and we'll add Kaju's when hers is done printing."

Now we waited.

Tachibana-kun started fidgeting and shooting looks at the clock. Right. He wanted to go to that lesson they were holding in my class.

"We're going to 1-C, right?" I asked him. "We can put the journal off and head there if you want."

He shot to his feet. “Yes! Thank you!”

As I stood, Komari grabbed my sleeve. “Y-you can’t leave me alone a-again.”

“You won’t be. Konuki-sensei’ll be back soon,” I assured her.

“Th-that’s what I meant.”

I wasn’t unsympathetic, but she had to be a big girl for now. And yet she would not let go. Time to negotiate.

“Hey, Yanami-san’ll be back soon. Literally any minute. We talked, and she said she’d wrap up right around now.”

“L-liar.” Dang, she was good. I averted my gaze, but she did not. “Y-you start looking a-actually nice when you’re m-making crap up.”

She’d figured me out. No choice, then.

“Look, c’mere. Just for a sec. No funny business. Promise.”

She squawked. “Wh-what?”

I took her to a private corner of the room. “This is about the club, Komari. We need members for next year, and showing these guys a good time means we’ve got a better shot at getting some.”

“Y-year after next. They’re s-second-years.”

“Right…”

“A-and we’re about to start getting people wh-who are checking out art clubs. Sh-showing *them* a good time’s more important. Also, p-personal space.”

Excellent points. Boy, were we lucky to have such a smart vice president.

“Okay, but I can’t just ditch them. Work with me here. Divide and conquer.”

“I-I said back up!” She shoved me away.

“You want them to hear us? Keep it down.”

"Th-they're already gone!"

I whipped around. They sure were. "Where the heck did they go?"

"Y-your sister said they were g-going on ahead." Komari showed me her phone. A message on the screen corroborated her claim.

Kaju had been to my class before, so she probably knew the way. Which meant I was whispering in Komari's ear with her back against a wall for no reason. That was bad. But Konuki-sensei wasn't here to jump to conclusions, which was good.

A horrible sense of déjà vu washed over me. I turned and found the devil herself peeping through the door.

"Don't mind me," she said. "I'm just refereeing to make sure no lines are crossed. Toe it to your heart's content."

There would be zero footsieing of any kind on my watch. I pulled away from Komari and straightened my blazer. "I've got a tour to give, Sensei, if you don't mind—" Just then, Komari jammed her phone into my back. "Ow! What the hell?"

"Y-you never learn!"

"That hurts! Stop! I said stop! Sensei, do something!"

Sensei crossed her arms, satisfaction written all over her face. "Very nice. I can get behind this."

I wished she'd get behind saving me.

***

I hadn't deserved that. Okay, maybe a little just for the whole invasion of personal space thing, but methinks the punishment did not fit the crime.

Jogging out of the west annex, I found everyone just about to enter the new building from the breezeway. "Hey! Sorry I'm late, guys."

"You left Komari-san?" Kaju asked pointedly. She continued walking. Faster this time.

Now *she* was mad? What for? I trailed behind her, unwilling and too scared to ask that question to her face.

Tachibana-kun came up next to me. "Sorry we ran off without you."

"No worries. Sorry it took me so long. Things are a bit—"

Wait, what was that supposed to mean? So help me God, if he was phrasing it like that to ease me into the idea of elopement…

I was sweating bullets internally, but Tachibana-kun was unfazed. "Thank you again for being our guide today."

I did the usual dance of humility. All the don't-worry-about-its and it's-my-pleasures, all the while never taking my eye off of Kaju and her friend in front of us. They were chatting to each other and paying us no mind.

"Tachibana-kun." I started to ask how he felt about Kaju but stopped short.

"Yes?"

I grinned like an idiot. "You, uh, wanna go to Tsuwabuki?"

"I've definitely thought about it. But I just don't have the grades that Asami or Kaju-san have. I think it's out of my reach."

He *wasn't* aiming to go to Tsuwabuki? "Then what brought you to the open house?"

He turned away, flustered. "I…wanted to say something. Face-to-face."

That clinched it. I gulped. Straight to the point, then. "And it has to do with love, I assume?"

He froze in place. "Did Kaju-san tell you? Sheesh, okay. It was supposed to be a secret."

"So you came to do it."

He nodded. “That’s right. I’m going to take a chance and tell her how I feel.”

So they weren’t official yet. Maybe too early to start counting chickens, though.

“They’re about to start,” Kaju called out, pulling me back to reality.

We were at 1-C. Kaju and Gondou-san were waving to us from the door. Tachibana-kun waved back, anxiety writ on his expression.

So this was it, then. I’d read too many rom-coms to miss what I knew this to be. This was the climax of the story. *Their* story.

The confession.

***

All the desks and chairs had been pushed along the wall. Seating instead consisted of a bunch of roller chairs and was first come, first served. On the window side, a big whiteboard had been wheeled in.

Kaju and the others found seats while I stood a ways back, by the door, wondering about the practicality of all this. Wasn’t this supposed to be about getting a feel for actual lessons? Didn’t all this extra junk take away from that? Speaking from experience, we never got anything this fancy.

Amanatsu-sensei waited until about a dozen or so seats were taken, then approached the whiteboard. “So, er, I’m Amanatsu. I teach world history here.” All eyes were on her. She coughed awkwardly. Mentally, I was on my knees. Please don’t screw this up. “So you’re probably thinking, ‘World history? Isn’t that just memorizing dates? How’s that gonna help me get a job?’ Well, *I* think some people aren’t worth the oxygen they breathe.”

This: currently being screwed up.

“To those people, I ask,” she went on, “what about PE? Do you do jumping jacks at your nine-to-five? Gonna get that raise if you

can do the splits? Didn't think so. But that's just my opinion. See, I *have* a job, so I have better things to do than to whine about stuff like that. Anyway, let's start the lesson."

She popped the cap off of a dry-erase marker. At least it was out of her system. Now we could move on to more normal— "I spy a literature club president," she said. "Nukumizu!"

"Er, yes?"

"What's the oldest book you know?"

Now the eyes were on me. "Um, *The Tale of Genji*?" I croaked.

Amanatsu-sensei nodded and started scribbling on the board. "Good. Many scholars say *The Tale of Genji* is the first novel ever written, dating all the way back to the early 11th century. Back in Eastern Europe, that's right about when the Byzantines were at the height of their reign." She kept on scribbling, unabated. "In Japan, we call that era the Heian period. The age of the anonymous, female author and raunchy vignettes. They were all the rage, read the country over, even by the emperor. Meanwhile, Byzantium had just won the Battle of Kleidion and was busy blinding thousands of prisoners of war to send a message back to—"

She was in teacher mode. We were safe. She went on, remembering to include her audience in the lesson. The theme seemed to be shifts in ideas and ways of thinking over time.

Right about when the ice had been broken, she divided the audience into two groups. "Now, remembering what I just taught you, this side will be 14th century peasants from Paris. This side, pretend you've just gone back in time and try to hold a proper discussion with your French ancestors." She crossed her arms in the middle of both with an autocratic air. "I'll be the mediator. A grizzled conspiracy theorist from the 23rd century."

What about that was conducive to any of this?

Apparently conducive enough, because things went smoothly. Amanatsu-sensei managed to get everyone talking at least a little

bit, even the quietest ones. I felt a flicker of pride for my homeroom teacher.

A camera shutter clicked next to me. I turned and saw Shikiya-san holding up her flamboyantly glammed up phone. "Student council doing photography too?"

"Taking record…for the report." She checked the photo she'd just taken, then nodded, satisfied. Her pale eyes returned to the lesson in progress. "Amanatsu-sensei is…a good teacher."

"Despite appearances."

"Despite appearances…" Shikiya-san stayed, swaying at my side.

The role-play went on. A student playing a modern human was listening intently to 14th-century-Paris Kaju passionately detail the various medicinal applications of herbs. It sounded pretty convincing, to tell the truth.

"Do herbs actually work as pest repellent?"

"No," Shikiya-san rasped. Another shutter click. This time, her phone was pointed at me.

"Uh, why did you just take my picture?"

"For someone…who might want it." She started poking at the screen.

"I guarantee there's no demand for me," I laughed. "Maybe for you."

She stopped poking. "You want one…of me?"

"Uh…" I stared at her, and she stared back at me, the dumb look on my face captured in her ghostly, white eyes. "I just meant, like, in general. Like, I figure there's probably lots of people who'd want one of—"

Shikiya-san turned away from me, leaned against my shoulder, and held her arm out. A third click.



"Sending to you," she whispered. "On the house."

My phone buzzed. It was the photo she'd just taken of us. "Oh, er, that was…for me?"

She bobbed her head.

Blushing, I turned away. Just in time to witness the darkness emanating off of Amanatsu-sensei. "Excuse me, are we interrupting? Need a room? Find a different one."

Bad. Stay. Down. Not in front of the children.

Her rage quelled, she soon resumed the lesson. Thank god. Shikiya-san and I went back to quietly watching.

It hit me that this was kind of our first time talking one-on-one like this since Christmas Eve. I still thought about that night. The makeup she'd worn. The smell of her perfume. Her smile. The way she glowed in the candlelight. Sometimes I wondered if maybe I'd dreamed it all up. If it had even been real.

We waved to each other in the hallway these days, but did that make us friends? Sort of. But not quite. Acquaintances? More than that. It was hard to pinpoint *what* we were exactly.

"So, how've you been?" I asked. Quietly, so as not to rouse the Amanatsu.

"Busy," she whispered back. "Studying. Working. Haven't… played much."

Shikiya-san was a model student. Physically and metaphorically, her head might have seemed a little poorly attached, but she still had her feet on the ground. Mostly. I wanted to invite her out for games again, but how?

"They got a new board game," she breathed. "I think…you'd like it."

For a second, I thought I might have been thinking out loud. "At the café, you mean? Maybe we can get everyone together."

"It's…two-player."

Well, there went that idea. No reason to bring the whole gang then. And I seriously doubted Yanami knew how to wait her turn.

"We could go again, if you want. The two of us?" I suggested.

"Yeah."

I scratched my cheek. Didn't know what else to do. God, this was weird.

"So, my sister went to a student council meet last summer. Were you there?" I asked out of desperation.

Her eyes darted to the side, at me. "I was. Nukumizu Kaju… You're alike."

"Well, I mean—wait, we're what?!" I turned those words over in my head. We were "alike." A simple observation. But one I hadn't heard anyone make in a long time. "We *are* siblings, I guess."

Back in the role-play, modern-day Tachibana-kun was in the middle of describing infection vectors using plant diseases as examples. 14th-century Kaju seemed very intrigued.

Eventually, the lesson winded down, and the role-play came to a close. Amanatsu-sensei began her summary, and Tachibana-kun listened intently. I'd gotten to talk with him a little today. He wasn't a bad guy. He was a good guy, in fact.

I still couldn't shake it, though. The reluctance. Kaju was too young to date. Simply too young. But if she *had* to date someone…

Amanatsu-sensei started to wipe down the whiteboard. Time was up. "That sinkin' in for everyone? It's not just time that affects philosophies and ideas. It's culture and social position too. Whenever you look at things in the past with the benefit of hindsight, ask yourself why those people did what they did. What could have motivated them? This is important stuff, because eventually you'll all face your own problems in life, and you'll have to be able to ask yourselves the same questions."

The board clean, she twirled around to face everyone one last time. "Anywho, that's about how I teach. Completely normally and

all perfectly according to curriculum with absolutely no deviations whatsoever. If you liked what you saw, we'd love to have ya at Tsuwabuki!"

It wouldn't be an Amanatsu lesson without a completely unnecessary non sequitur.

A second later, someone clapped—Kaju. The others soon followed suit. Amanatsu-sensei gave them the cold shoulder and feigned disinterest, wiping the blank board for a second time and mumbling something about flattery and the lack of places it would get people.

Now to gather the squad and get back to the club room. I had to wonder whether Komari was still alive or not.

Amanatsu-sensei whipped back around. "Almost forgot! Need someone to help move the whiteboard and all these chairs. I stole 'em from the meeting room, so I gotta put them back before someone yells at me."

This was the part where she singled me out.

But Tachibana-kun's hand shot up first. "I'd love to!"

What a good guy. I started to leave.

"Perfect. Nukumizu, you come too." Amanatsu-sensei had an evil look in her eye. "Got time to flirt, you got time to work."

I knew better than to be disappointed at this point.

***

The social studies room was bursting with books and papers and other various mountains of teaching materials. Shikiya-san had gone on to her next photoshoot, and after finishing up with the moving, the rest of us were sitting at a table in the center of said social studies room.

"Thank you, guys, for the help. Have some tea before you go. I've got snacks too." Kicking shut a low mini-fridge, Amanatsu-sensei

thunked a two-liter bottle down.

"I'll get the cups," I said.

As I passed them around, I kept my eye on Kaju. Normally, she'd have been the first one on her feet, but she was planted to her seat with an antsy look on her face. Gondou-san wouldn't even raise her head. Tachibana-kun was jumping at shadows. Why in the world was everyone so tense?

Unless…the confession was about to happen? Was I the one who'd screwed up this time? Where had I picked the wrong dialogue option?

Completely oblivious to any of this, Amanatsu-sensei handed out Pyraenes, a locally made sponge cake with cream in the middle. And they rocked. Points to Sensei. "Don't be shy. Eat up. I don't hand these out every day, you know."

She couldn't read the room if it was in bold, but right now that was exactly what I needed. Together, we could avert this entire romantic subplot through sheer thoughtlessness.

"You didn't have to do that," I said. "Did you bring them just for this?"

Amanatsu-sensei made a *nyeh* sort of noise. "They're for the meeting later, actually. But what they won't know won't hurt 'em." She chomped into her Pyraene.

We were accomplices, then. I stuffed my mouth with the evidence.

She glanced at Kaju and the others, a dab of cream clinging to her lip. "Those Momozono uniforms? That makes you kids my kouhai."

"You went to Momozono?" I asked.

"Yup." Sensei nodded. "And Aoki for elementary. You too?"

"Not me or my sister, but…" I looked at Gondou-san and Tachibana-kun.

The latter perked up. “I went there! I went to Aoki!”

“Oh yeah? Maybe we passed each other in the hall,” Amanatsu-sensei joked.

“I remember you,” Tachibana-kun replied with sincerity. “It was six years ago. You worked there as a student teacher.”

“Was it that long ago?” Sensei sipped her tea.

What was happening right now?

“I’m sure you don’t remember, but I’m Tachibana. You were assigned to my class.”

Amanatsu-sensei stopped sipping. “Oh. Yeah. Y’know, that rings a bell.”

“It does?! You remember me?!” Tachibana-kun leaned forward.

“Well, uh…how could I forget?”

Her tone. Her averted gaze. Yeah, no, she didn’t remember squat.

Again, though. What was happening right now? I glanced toward Gondou-san for a clue. She’d have gone to Aoki too, wouldn’t she?

She suddenly bolted to her feet. “Gonna run to the bathroom.”

With a sidelong glance Tachibana-kun’s way, she stormed off. What was *that* about? We were down a whole cast member for the big event now.

Amanatsu-sensei blinked in her direction, then reset the mood with a clear of the throat. “Anyway, you in any clubs these days, Tachibana-kun?”

“The gardening club, yes,” he said. No one questioned the sudden change of subject. “I’ve always loved plants. I used to take care of them in elementary school. Plant flowers too. People would make fun of me for being girly. Being so short didn’t help much.” His lips curved into a smile. “But you stood up for me, Amanatsu-sensei. I can’t tell you how much that meant to me.”

"I sure did that, huh?"

"You did. It was breathtaking, the way you held your own. Even in class. You're small like me, but you have such a presence."

"B-breathtaking?! Me? Well, hey, it's a teacher's job to make sure her students flourish and all." She cracked an ugly giggle. "Breathtaking. I get that a lot actually." Someone wasn't used to compliments. She clapped her hands together suddenly. "Wait, were you the one always leaving flowers on my desk?"

"It was! I'm so glad you remember!" Tachibana-kun beamed. "It made me sad that they kept disappearing so quickly, but I'm so happy you liked them."

"They were a highlight of my morning, and so gosh darn pretty I'd bring them to my family altar back home every…er, forget I said that."

I was beginning to pick up on what was happening right now.

"Two years ago, I saw your name in the newspaper when you transferred schools. And then I heard that Nukumizu-san's brother went there, so I asked a favor. I came to this open house to see you."

"Oh yeah? What'd you go to all that trouble for?" Amanatsu-sensei just sat there with her mug in her hands, totally innocent.

She knew, right? She knew what was happening right now?

It was just me, him, Kaju, and Amanatsu-sensei in here. The event was in motion, and with no cutscene skip in sight.

Tachibana-kun shot up, determination filling every wrinkle on his furrowed brow.

This confession wasn't for Kaju.

"You're everything to me! I'm in love with you!"

It was for Amanatsu-sensei.

Faced with the pointy end of reality, and an entirely too dramatic choice of words, Amanatsu-sensei had only one response.

"Hwuh?"

Time slowed to a crawl. What felt like an eternity went by before I whispered to Sensei, "You should probably say something."

"Huh? Me?!"

Indeed.

A few more moments of bewilderment was all she needed to finally grasp the situation. She stood up and approached him. "Tachibana Satoshi, was it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm flattered, but I'm a teacher. I'm afraid I can't give you what you're looking for."

"I know," he said. "I just wanted to say it."

"Okay. Well. I'm sorry." Amanatsu-sensei gave him a gentle smile. He smiled back.

I was witnessing something special. The beginning and the end of a boy's first love. It was a bittersweet feeling, but oddly enough, more sweet than bitter.

Amanatsu-sensei dropped her hand on his shoulder. "But if you've got an older brother—"

"Sensei! Don't you have a meeting?" I blurted. What the hell was her problem?

"Oh, right. Gotta hurry. Room's all the way on the fourth floor. I swear they're trying to kill me." She sighed. "Anyway, gotta go. It's all you, Nukumizu."

"Uh, right," I replied.



Before going, she patted Tachibana-kun on the shoulder one more time. “Four years off,” she muttered to herself on her way out. I didn’t care to find out what he was four years off of exactly.

And then there were three.

“You good?” I asked Tachibana-kun.

“Yes. I apologize for spoiling the open house for everyone.”

“Hey, no worries. I’m guessing the others already knew?”

He nodded.

Just like that, the fog lifted, and everything made sense. Amanatsu-sensei was my homeroom teacher, Tachibana-kun had feelings, but he couldn’t hope to enroll at Tsuwabuki. This was his only shot at expressing them.

Maybe it was too soon to say *everything* made sense, though. Why was Kaju here? And where did Gondou-san fit in? Speaking of Kaju, she was uncharacteristically quiet.

I turned to her chair. But she was gone.

***

Tachibana-kun and I talked on the way to the school gate. But really it was more him talking *at* me about Amanatsu-sensei. According to him, she was a free spirit. Assertive. A little blunt at times, but delicate all the same. I didn’t disagree with his assessment of her, but he put it all in a way that almost sounded actually appealing.

“It feels like my head’s spinning,” he said. “All these years, I’ve lived with these feelings under wraps. How do I live with them out in the open?” He hung his head. “I’m sure I look like an infatuated kid to you, don’t I?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Love and infatuation aren’t mutually exclusive, in my opinion.”

“You think so?”

What he felt definitely straddled an ambiguous line between the two, but did that really matter? Whatever it was, he'd felt it. And he would remember it. Wasn't that what young love was all about? In the end, it was all just practice for the heart. For the elusive "One" it would eventually settle on.

We arrived at the east gate. Tachibana-kun lowered his head to me. "Thank you for everything."

"Don't mention it. You sure you don't want me to walk you to the station?"

"I'll be okay." There was something in his words that meant more than what they said. "It's about time I took off."

"Hey," I blurted. I scared even myself. "You and Kaju. Are you, uh…?"

"Kaju-san?" Tachibana-kun looked taken aback. "She and Asami are good friends." He seemed to struggle to find the right words. Then he settled his eyes on mine. "I…like that they're good friends."

Vague. Still, I felt the tension leave me. I didn't ask for clarification. "Look out for her for me, will you?"

If Kaju ever did fall for someone—if she did have a crush—she could do a lot worse than this guy.

***

Tulip trees stretched over me. The cries and shouts of sports clubs echoed across the athletics fields in the distance. I glanced over just in time to see Yakishio and the rest of the track team jogging between the baseball and soccer clubs. This wasn't the goofy Yakishio from back during our Momozono trip either. Even from afar, I could tell she was taking stock of the potential new blood with incredibly focus. Come April, some of them would be calling her senpai.

We were gonna have to recruit people before I could claim the same, but there was currently an obstacle preventing me from prioritizing that. Namely, Gondou-san and Kaju's disappearance.

Something told me they hadn't just stepped out for a quick bathroom break, and whatever the truth was, it revolved around Tachibana-kun. Maybe it was none of my business, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was an angle to all this I was missing.

"Well, well, look who it is. Your sister and her friends leave?" Yanami called out to me just as I finished swapping shoes at the cupboards.

"Uh, sorta. You done with your tour?"

"They split off to check out clubs. But actually, Basori-san's been looking for you."

"The student council? Why?" I tried to remember if I'd done anything deserving of one of her ear-lashings.

Yanami scrutinized me. "You tell me. You guys've been sneaking around for a while now. What's up with that?"

"Nothing's up with anything. It's probably about the open house."

She didn't need to know about our secret tutor sessions. I put on my most innocent face and ignored her suspicion.

Yanami shrugged. "Then come to the club room with me. Apparently, Komari-chan's fighting for her life." She produced a small box.

"More chocolate? Who's that for?"

"Naive, naive, Nukumizu-kun," she smugged smugly. "Valentine's chocolate doesn't have to be for giving. It's also for buying."

"I mean, giving usually implies buying."

She shook her head in vehement disappointment. "I'm talking about seasonal flavors. Limited stock. Those aren't for giving. Those

are for me. These things are rare, you know. Ever heard of supply and demand?"

Valentine's Day must have been quite the religious holiday for gluttons.

Yanami opened the box, plucked one out, and held it out to me. "Perhaps a demonstration is in order. Go on. Have one."

Refusing her would open a whole other box of the Pandora variety, so I took one. Not the one she offered but an untouched one. It was small and round, about the size of a hundred-yen coin, with cocoa powder dusted over the surface. Just a plain old truffle. Ostensibly.

The first flavor to greet my tongue was the cocoa powder. Then the chocolate hit me. A bit more chewing and I picked up on hints of chocolate. There was a bit of a chocolatey accent too. And oh, was that chocolate I tasted?

It was chocolate.

"Thanks," I said. "What are you doing?"

Yanami never stopped holding the truffle out at me. Only she looked much angrier now. "You blind or just rude?"

"You're touching it," I argued. "I didn't bring this up in the club room, but you guys really need to consider how gross it is to eat stuff other people have had their hands all over."

Yanami ate the truffle in silence. Her frown did not change. Her problem, not mine.

"Anyway, I'll let you deal with the situation in the club room," I said. "Kaju's run off somewhere, so I'm looking for her."

"Your sister's missing? Hm. I knew something was up." She took out her phone.

"What? Do you know something?"

"Nope. But that guy we thought your sister was dating was in your group, wasn't he? Doesn't take a genius to figure something

happened.” She put her phone away and glared at me. “Like I don’t have a stake in this. You’re the one who made it my business.”

“I’m sorry about that, but I really can’t tell you much. I’m not sure what happened myself. That’s sorta why I need to find her.”

Before I could decide how much to divulge, a small girl with long, swaying hair came running down the hall. “There you are, Nukumizu-san.” It was Asagumo-san. She held out a long box with a ribbon around it. “For you.”

I took it, and then it hit me. My eyes bulged. “Is this chocolate?!”

“As a thank-you for all you’ve done.” She beamed, then twirled. “Anyway, that’s all. I should get going. Mitsuki-san and I are going on a date.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Asagumo-san left. I was glued to the spot, my eyes stuck on the box in my hands. I’d been debating internally about whether or not to count the stuff from the club room, but now it didn’t matter. I, Nukumizu Kazuhiko, at the tender age of sixteen, had received my very first chocolate from someone other than family.

“Yo.” Yanami’s elbow planted itself squarely in my ribs.

“Ow! Come on, I was in a good mood just now.”

“Didn’t hear you say anything about *my* chocolate.”

And that was worth ruining my moment over? I swallowed a sigh and stowed Asagumo-san’s box in my pocket. “It was chocolate. Very chocolatey.”

“Good chocolate?”

“As far as chocolate goes.”

Another elbow to the ribs, then she turned her back to me. And after I’d complimented her taste and everything.

Yanami waved her phone over the cold front that had just rolled in over her shoulder. “Do you or do you not wanna know

where your sister is?”

“You found her? How?”

“I messaged the class group chat and someone got back to me.”

Wait, that was actually smart. Kaju had shown up during the last festival, so people probably remembered her. If only I were actually *in* that group chat.

“Thanks. So where—” I reached for her phone, and she pulled it back. “So, uh, you gonna tell me where she is?”

“That depends. You got anything to say to me?”

“I already said thank you.”

Yanami pouted harder. What was it this time? I genuinely had no idea. She got mad at loads of things, but often those things were mysteries. I started at the beginning.

“Is this because I didn’t take the truffle from you?” Her eyebrow twitched. Bingo. “Look, you know the flu’s been going around. I didn’t mean anything by it. And we’ve got all these outside visitors. I’m just trying to be extra careful.” I watched her closely, like taming a lion. “It was just a precautionary measure. It’s not your body’s natural microbiome I have a problem with. In fact, I think it’s great. It helps suppress infections from foreign bacteria, so what’s not to love?”

“That’s…not what I expected you to say.” Yanami finally looked at me again, anger replaced with confusion. “But I’ll take it, I guess. I get what you’re *trying* to say.”

I sure didn’t, but hey, all the better.

She pointed outside. “Someone saw her at the archery club with someone else from her school. You probably wanna hurry.”

“Thanks. I will.” I turned and started to leave but stopped. “Hey, can I have another one of those truffles?”

"Hm? Sure." A smirk spread across her face as she held the box out. "Pretty good, right?"

"Weirdly addicting." I popped one in my mouth then stepped outside.

That other person with Kaju was probably Gondou-san. It was good they were together, but that wasn't enough to assuage all of my worries. After all, happy endings were a luxury.

***

The archery club had their range on the far end of the old building, tucked away in a shady corner surrounded by trees. I circled around the fire escape and headed in that direction.

But someone around the corner had the same idea, and we nearly collided. She yelped.

"Sorry—oh. It's just you, Tiara-san."

"Just *who*? I know you didn't just call me by my name." Tiara-san took a breath, then straightened her bangs. "Anyway, this works out. Do you have a moment?"

"I don't, actually. I'm looking for my sister." I hurried off without waiting for an answer.

She followed. "Perfect. I have business with her too."

"With Kaju?"

My guard went up. What did that mean?

Tiara-san played with her bangs, unbothered. "We met at the meet last summer, and she expressed an interest in our student council. I wanted to invite her to come have a look."

Oh. That made sense. Now was kind of a bad time, though.

"Sorry, but could you—"

"The president speaks very highly of her."

"She does?"

Tiara-san nodded. Maybe I could hear her out. Just a little. "She took charge when she needed to, and among a group of strangers no less. When others fell behind, she picked up the slack. I was impressed by her ethic, her enthusiasm for joining Tsuwabuki, and above all," she paused to grin, "her deep love for her brother. Imagine my surprise when her 'dearest Oniisama' happened to be you of all people."

Compliments from Kaju were not unwelcome. I could see why she was anxious to sell her on the council, though.

"But she's two years younger than me," I pointed out. "You won't be working together much."

She surveyed our surroundings for listeners. "I intend to run for president next year."

"Okay."

"And when the time comes to pass the torch, I intend to throw my full support behind your sister." She grinned at herself. "Assuming I get elected, that is."

I was more worried about the next twenty-four hours than anything, and here she was planning two years in advance. She probably could have used a vacation. In any case, I had to shake her somehow. There wouldn't be time for any of that when we had love matters to discuss.

The archery range was in sight now. I stopped and turned to her. "Listen to me, Basori-san. I've got something very important to tell you."

"Do you, now?" We'd ended up at the dark and dingy backside of the old annex. As soon as she realized that, Tiara-san went as red as a tomato. "W-wait, what do you mean 'important'?! Is this what I think it is?!"

"Probably not, no."

"It's not?!" she blustered.

Why did that make her mad? Why was she like this? I didn't have time to find the answers to those questions, because I could hear two girls over by the trees. It sounded like they were arguing.

I recognized one of the voices instantly. It was Kaju.

"Sorry, gotta go!"

"What? Nukumizu-san!"

I dashed toward the voices. Once I got into the thick of the trees, I finally saw them. Gondou-san and Kaju were fighting about something—that much was clear—but what?

I ran forward.

***

Sometime around when Nukumizu was busy placating women, all was quiet at the archery range. Gondou Asami, second-year Momozono student, stood among the trees in a daze, dipping in and out of reality, brought back in brief flashes whenever a bowstring thrummed or an arrow struck its target.

She shuddered against the ribbons of cold wind that managed to weave their ways through the trunks and looked up at the school building. She wanted to believe it was the wind that chilled her and not the memory of what she'd just fled from.

And then came clumsy footsteps. Nukumizu Kaju, classmate, vice president of the student council. She was good at just about everything. Smart, popular with boys. Running, though, was the one thing that didn't come naturally to her. And it really was the one thing. She even had a fan club, which was as ridiculous as it sounded.

Kaju slinked around trees until she came right up to Asami. "Gon-chan," she wheezed, hand pressed against her chest. "There you are…"

"How'd you find me?"

“You like quiet places. With lots of nature.” Kaju tried to smile but couldn’t quite manage it. “About Tachibana-kun—”

“Thinkin’ about what club I wanna join when we’re in high school,” Asami interrupted. She looked to the range. “Archery might be fun. Would feel pretty sick to do something like that, eh?”

“Gon-chan, listen to me for once!”

“Did she let him down gently?”

Kaju’s mouth hung open. The beginnings of words clung to her lips, but nothing stuck. Eventually, she managed a nod. “He confessed. He told Amanatsu-sensei how he feels.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Kaju pressed her lips together at her cold indifference. “No, you don’t. You ran.”

“Satoshi didn’t. Did he?”

“No…”

Asami smiled like she’d won a prize. A prize she did not want. Kaju didn’t know how to interpret it.

“You’re fine with this?” she asked.

“Leave it.”

“But you can’t just ignore the way you’ve felt for—”

“I said leave it, would you?” she snapped. Finally, emotion. “You think I’m just gonna cozy up to him and soothe his achin’ little heart now that it’s broken?” Asami turned away and lowered her voice. “You think I’m that pathetic?”

The wind nearly carried it up and away, through the branches. Kaju stayed quiet for a long while before deciding what to say next.

“He wouldn’t think that.”

“I know. But I would.” She gave Kaju a half look over her shoulder. Maybe she didn’t have to be so harsh about it. “I don’t necessarily want us to date, to be clear.”

"No? But he's so nice."

"I don't want anything more than what we've got now. He could find himself a girlfriend and I wouldn't really care."

"Then why did you run away?"

"I…" Asami finally turned back around and faced her. Her lips moved but no words came out. She could not find them.

"You knew she was going to turn him down, didn't you? So why didn't you stay?" Still, Asami said nothing. "You say all these things like you don't care, but one of these days it's going to be too late. You're not even going to the same high school! You *can't* have what you've got! Not forever! And you're just going to let it all slip away?!"

"I'm okay," Asami finally said. "I'm okay just playing with plants and talking about the weather together."

"It won't last."

"Why not?"

Kaju folded her hands over Asami's. "If Tachibana-kun does find a girlfriend, that means no more together. What if she joins the club? What if she's already *in* the club?" She took a breath.

But before she could continue, Asami interjected, "This is about your brother, isn't it?" Kaju went quiet this time. "You're always going on about girlfriend this, and girlfriend that. Once you start high school, you'll only be together a year. That's not going to last either."

"I know." Kaju squeezed. "That's why I'm telling you these things. I don't want you to spend this last year together, go your separate ways, and then wish you could have done things differently."

"You're projecting, Nuku-chan." Kaju twitched. "You want me to do what you can't. Because you're too scared to. You don't want your brother to find someone at all. You want him all for yourself!"

"I…"

Asami bore down on her, deep into her eyes. "You're the one who's in love! You're the one pretending not to care!"

"What am I supposed to do?! I'm his sister!" Kaju threw her hand away and retreated. "It won't last! Family grows up! They live their own lives! My Oniisama's going to find someone special, and he's going to be with them forever!" Tears filled her eyes. These words were for her. "There's nothing I can do about that! I'm happy if he's happy! I have to be!"

"You keep telling me I should just say what I feel, but you won't either! Just tell him!"

"I *can't*! I'll only upset him! He loves me like a sister!"

"How do you know that if you won't say anything?!"

"Because! He's already in love!" Kaju put her hands to her chest and breathed deep. "He's in love with a man!"

***

I froze. I'd missed most of whatever was going on, but the last bit had me doubting my own ears, nonetheless.

I was in love—with a man?

Kaju, noticing me, immediately went pale, and kept getting paler. "O-Oniisama?! H-how—how much of that did you hear?!"

"Uh, well, somewhere around the being in love part?" Question marks littered my brain to the point that they were probably spilling out of my ears. "What was that about?"

"I-I think I left the stove on going home now bye!" Kaju bolted.

"Wait!"

She did not, and so none of my questions went answered. What were they even fighting about? Why was I in love with a man?

Why were they talking about me at all? How was literally any of that even remotely connected?

Not long later, Tiara-san finally caught up. She came over with a handkerchief pressed against her face and crouched next to me.

"What happened to you?" I asked her.

"N-nosebleed."

Another question for the pile.

"You gonna be okay?"

"Y-yes! Perfectly fine!" she insisted as the life visibly drained from her eyes.

"Hey, Gondou-san, think you could—"

But she was gone. Meaning I was alone in this thicket with an insane girl currently in the process of bleeding out. Just an average Sunday.

"Can you stand? I'll take you inside."

"D-don't mind me. Go after your sister."

"My sister's not the one bleeding. I'll see her at home." I offered my hand, and she shakily accepted.

I liked her better docile.

***

It took longer than I thought to get Tiara-san back to the student council room. I didn't make it back home till just before sundown. I'd told the lit club over LINE that I was leaving early, but all that got me was a torrent of colorful abuse from Komari. Currently debating skipping club tomorrow.

I sighed and looked up. The orange peering over the horizon threatened to turn purple, urging me to take the next step. The sensor detected me as I did, and the light at the front door switched

on. I used the last few moments I had to think over what I would say to Kaju.

This story started with Tachibana-kun and Amanatsu-sensei. And it would continue with Tachibana-kun, Kaju, and Gondou-san. So why had they been talking about me?

Maybe this story *wasn't* about them. Maybe there was something I was missing. Maybe this was so much simpler than it seemed.

I opened the door. Kaju's tiny shoes sat inside in a neat line. I didn't see my parents', and the first floor was deathly quiet. It took all of my courage to make it up the stairs and to Kaju's room.

I knocked. No reply. A moment's hesitation, and I opened the door. It was dark. With only the hall light to see, all the pink wasn't quite as blinding as usual, and I noted she'd added a few new posters of me to her walls…

Kaju was curled up on the floor next to her bed, hugging her knees, sleeping. I saw her shoulders move slowly up, then back down. Finally, the tension left me. She needed the rest after how little she'd gotten last night.

Feeling around the wall, I switched on the light and saw that she had an album open in front of her. I sat next to her and took a look. The photo she'd left it on was one of us, back when we were still little. Our Shichi-Go-San, actually. Me in my hakama and Kaju in her kimono. We were all smiles. I remembered eating too much chitose ame, a classic candy for the occasion, and giving myself a toothache at the time. Kaju tried to be my dentist, and that went about as well as one would expect.

There was nothing different between her and the girl sleeping next to me. She'd always be that same cute, little girl to me. My sister. But she wasn't so little anymore. She'd go on to make her own photo albums one day. And fill them with photos that I wouldn't be a part of. All I could do was hope she'd be smiling in them, even if there was a little crying off camera. And no doubt she'd do that

crying in someone else's arms. All I could do was hope she'd remember I'd always be here if she ever found herself short a pair. Because we were family.

I gently lifted the page, trying to turn it, and it crinkled as I did, prying Kaju from her dreams. She started to stir and moan. Her eyelids twitched.

"Awake?"

"Oniisama?" She rubbed her eyes, still getting her bearings. "I think I fell asleep… Wait, Oniisama?!" She floundered a bit before throwing herself at me and gripping my clothes. "A-at school! How much exactly did you hear?!"

"Uh, the part about how I'm in love with a man."

"But before that! Did you hear anything before that?!"

"No?"

"No…? You didn't?" Kaju heaved a sigh. "Oh, thank goodness."

Now I was curious about what exactly I wasn't supposed to hear.

"Wait, first of all, what did you mean about me being in love with a man?"

Kaju pouted her lips. "Don't play dumb with me. I saw who you were with at that café on Christmas Eve."

In what universe other than fanfiction was Shikiya-senpai even remotely…?

"Are you talking about the guy I was with first? My senpai?"

"You were sharing a drink together and everything. It seemed like you were hitting it off." She looked away from me, pouting some more.

"I was just doing him a favor," I explained. "He had someone cancel on him. That's all that was."

"Why were you sharing a straw, then? Explain that."

"Look, my hands were sort of tied. You'd have done the same in my shoes."

"I don't think I would have."

Fair.

"Point is, I'm not interested. He's got a loving girlfriend. I was just subbing in."

"Really?"

"Really."

Kaju studied me, searching my eyes for lies. When she finished her investigation, she let out a complicated sigh.

"Anyway," I said, "Tachibana-kun."

"Yes. It's a shame." Her expression darkened. I couldn't blame her. Seeing your crush get shot down had to be conflicting, and knowing Kaju, she was probably still stuck in her head about it. So why didn't everything click yet?

Because it hadn't just been Kaju in that thicket behind the school.

Gondou Asami.

She was Kaju's best friend. Apparently, she had a history with Tachibana-kun too. Amidst all the convoluted threads criss-crossing in my mind, she alone remained unconnected. But she'd run from the confession. She'd fought with Kaju, who ran herself. She was a part of this story.

And it was a story I knew all too well.

"I'm sorry, Kaju. I was wrong."

She shook her head. "You didn't do—"

"I thought you had a crush on Tachibana-kun all this time. But I was wrong." Kaju jumped slightly. I held my hand up before she could speak. I wasn't done. "Gondou-san's in love with Tachibana-

kun. That much is obvious to me. Which means it was obvious to you. And that didn't sit right with me."

"What do you mean?"

"It wasn't like you," I continued. "You're not the kind of person to fall for the same person as your friend and think nothing of it. It would have eaten you up inside. You'd have torn yourself to shreds worrying about it. You'd have taken the loss so no one else had to." I put my hand on her head and stroked her hair. "That's how I know. If Gondou-san likes Tachibana-kun, there's not a chance you do. Is your big brother smart or what?"

"Yes, he is." Kaju hung her head like a child who just got in trouble. "Tachibana-kun is just a friend to me. I don't think of him like that."

"I know you don't. Your plan today was never about Valentine's Day. It was just the open house."

She nodded meekly.

"So what was Toyokawa Inari about?" I asked next.

"Gon-chan was supposed to go with us. We were going to buy good luck charms for our senpai, since entrance exams are coming up."

Which meant that was yet another ghost I'd been chasing. I cracked a self-derisive smile. "Then what was up with all the leading me on?"

"Well…" Kaju took a moment to decide what to say. "You know about the phone call with Tachibana-kun that day I was making chocolate, right?"

"I remember."

"I saw what you were thinking, and I had a mean idea. I decided to let you keep thinking it. I wanted you to misunderstand." She averted her eyes shamefully.

"Why would you do that?"

"You didn't used to have friends. Ever since I was little, you were always with me. No one else. I was beginning to worry it was my fault no one ever talked to you."

"I guarantee it was a hundred percent my fault."

Kaju laughed, but I wasn't joking. "So when you started high school, and you began to meet all these people, and you joined the literature club—I was so, so happy for you. It was just a matter of time until you found someone special, and then they'd do all the things I used to do for you. But that…made me sad." She turned a page in the album. "For as long as I can remember, we've been together. In good times and bad, you were a constant."

She slipped a photo out and held it close. It was from my first day at elementary school. I was standing around by the front gate looking distracted, and four-year-old Kaju stood next to me, her eyes red and swollen. I remembered that day.

Kaju giggled. "I thought going to school meant you'd live there and I'd never see you again. The way I bawled."

"I remember. You were glued to me all night."

"Because I thought I'd never get you back if I let go."

She returned the photo and turned the page again. What she stopped on next had to have been at least three years or so later. We'd gone to the beach together as a family. Kaju was chasing me with a starfish, and I was running like my life depended on it.

"That was pretty mean," I said.

"You liked actiony stuff like sentai, so I thought you might appreciate it."

Starfish did look sorta like weapons.

Kaju went on, next stopping on one of us in our Momozono uniforms. It was her first time wearing hers. She was beaming ear to ear, arm linked with mine, while I tried desperately not to care.

"Do you remember this?" she asked. "You threw a fit because you didn't want to take a picture together. We got into a huge fight."

I remembered it like yesterday. I didn't mind not having friends in junior high, but a part of me was reluctant to let Kaju see me like that. Kaju had been over the moon about getting to go to the same school as me, and I couldn't let her have that.

"I was such a kid," I laughed.

"I still am. I'm happy that you're growing up, but sometimes it gets a little lonely being the only one." She leaned her head on my shoulder. "That's why I did it. I wanted you a little longer." Her dark hair spilled over and onto my hand, tickling my knuckles.

I knew this weight. I knew it well. It never changed. But it would. Kaju and I would keep on growing and becoming our own people. And, inevitably, those paths would diverge.

"So what about Gondou-san?"

"Gon-chan?"

As nice as it would have been to tie a bow on all this and call it done, there were still things left unfinished.

"Was she for all of this? Tachibana-kun's confession?"

"Not…exactly."

"She knew it would happen, though. Tachibana-kun's allowed to love who he wants, but making Gondou-san a part of that…"

"But he was in love with a teacher," Kaju argued. "Amanatsu-sensei is a responsible adult. It was obvious she'd turn him down." I wasn't so confident. Guy was apparently only four years off. "Gon-chan says she doesn't care. She says she doesn't want to tell him how she feels. She doesn't realize how many girls have their eye on him."

Kaju was frustrated. Something didn't sit right with her. I could relate, but why was she so invested in this to the point of ignoring her own friend's wishes?

"Maybe you should take her at her word," I said.

"You really think I should?"

I simply nodded. Kaju's eyes danced, unconvinced. "But we'll be third-years in April. Time's going to fly. We'll have exams, and so much to do, and they can't be together forever." She clasped her hands. "Gon-chan's going to regret this. They're going to different high schools. This is her only chance. I know that people break up all the time, but still."

I patted her on the head. "And that's why you included her. To light a fire under her."

Kaju's shoulders twitched. "I just want her to be happy. I'm scared of seeing them slowly grow apart until they become strangers to each other."

It finally hit me. It wasn't about them. It was about us. Me and Kaju. Kaju and me.

Our parents both worked, so it was no exaggeration to say that I was the person she'd spent the most time with in her whole life. But now she was faced with the reality of shifting priorities. Who they would one day shift to, I couldn't say, but I'd be a liar if I claimed to not be scared myself.

"Nervous about the future?"

"Mm-hmm…"

I patted my lap. She scooted onto it. "I am too. I'm scared of change. I wish life could just go on like this forever."

"You too?"

I patted her head. "But I'll tell you what'll never change. These past fourteen years. The life you've lived up to now. Every second we've spent together will always be there." Kaju quietly looked up at me. "When I put my hand on your head earlier, that's the past now. Set in stone. No one can take that moment from you." I gave her a noogie for emphasis. "Our time together is ours. No one can ever

change that. No matter how far apart we grow. No matter who we fall in love with. Our pasts are ours."

"Okay," she rasped weakly.

"Gondou-san and Tachibana-kun have their own. And it's no one's business but theirs."

"But what if she regrets all of this later?"

I shook my head. She wanted a perfect answer. But there was no such thing as perfect. Not where other human beings were involved. We were flawed, each and every one of us, and we lived lives of constant apology and forgiveness. And so the world went round.

"Maybe you're right, Kaju. Maybe she will regret it. But the right thing to do isn't always the best thing to do." She started to speak, but I gently stopped her. "Gondou-san is your best friend. I think you just need to talk."

"I will. Tomorrow at school." Kaju stopped arguing and leaned against my chest. "Oniisama. Will you hug me like you used to when I was little?"

Like how? I couldn't say I knew what she was talking about, but neither could I up and admit that. Not without spoiling the mood. So I just wrapped my arms around her and hoped for the best. She placed her hands over mine and giggled like a little kid. She was warm.

"Hey, come to think of it, whatever happened to the chocolate you made? Did you give it to someone like you said? Who?"

"You didn't need any from me. I'm sure you got plenty at school." She pouted again, poking me with her elbow. "I'm not so desperate that I'd waste my time diluting your pool of secret admirers. I have my pride, Oniisama."

"Secret admirers? Like who?" I made a crooked smile. Kaju and her delusions.

She opened her eyes up wide. “Are you telling me you didn’t get *any* chocolate? Not from anybody? Not even Komari-san?”

“I mean, technically I did, but those were for the open house visitors. Except for one, I guess.”

“I knew it! Who was it from?!”

It took both hands to keep her back. “Asagumo-san, who has a boyfriend, so I’m like 99.9 percent sure it was completely platonic.”

“Not a hundred.”

“I can dream. People buy lottery tickets because they like to fantasize about what would happen if they won. Never doubt the power of that tenth of a percent, Kaju. What if, say, she was actually Asagumo-san’s identical twin?”

“I…see.” She put her index fingers to each temple and did her best to understand. Didn’t look like she saw anything.

Giving up, she stood and took something from a desk drawer. She hid it behind her back as she returned to the floor in front of me.

“So, just to be absolutely clear, you haven’t gotten *any* love-related chocolate.”

“Nope. Not a one.”

Kaju fidgeted for a while, then revealed a cutesy gift bag. “Then consider this your first!”

The bag was transparent. And sure enough, it was filled with her handmade chocolate. I hesitantly accepted. “I thought you weren’t giving me any this year.”

“Well, if no one’s going to give you any love this year, then I think there’s plenty of room for a sister’s. Don’t you?”

Sister chocolate. Out of the way, friend chocolate, a new word salad was in town.

Kaju was red up to her ears. I patted her on the head.

"Thanks. I'll savor every bite."

"Please do!" Her voice was bright again. Colorful.

A car engine purred just outside the window.

"Sounds like Mom and Dad," I said.

"We ought to start dinner then."

Kaju gave my hand a squeeze, then stood again. *Now* it was over. Tachibana-kun experienced love. Kaju was smiling. Amanatsu-sensei had her moment in the spotlight. All's well that ends well. Once the Valentine's Day atmosphere permeating society cleared, we'd be back to business as usual.

I followed her to the door, but she suddenly stopped there, gripping the knob. "You okay?"

"You said that I'd take the loss if I ever fell in love with the same person as a friend." She kept her back to me as she spoke.

"Uh, yeah. I did."

"You were a little off the mark."

Off the mark?

Kaju suddenly whirled around, stood on her toes, and touched her lips to my cheek.

"Kaju?! What's gotten into you?!"

It lasted only an instant. A second later, and Kaju was poking me where her lips had just been. "You had a bit of chocolate on your face. Cleaned it up for you."

"There are a million better ways to do that."

She giggled. "Don't tell Mom."

I shook my head. Sometimes being a brother wasn't fair. All she had to do was smile, and she could get away with anything.

***

A gentle, westerly wind blew the following Monday. Ribbons of low-hanging clouds still rolled across the sky to the north, but not so much that the sun could not shine its rays into the Momozono Junior High greenhouse. There, Gondou Asami faced a small, potted tree.

Her shears snipped the air. A satisfying sound. Gon-chan moved to make her cut.

That was when the door creaked open. Nukumizu Kaju poked her head inside. “Gon-chan? Do you have a second?”

“Watch the fertilizer on the floor.”

Kaju stepped around it, carefully approaching her. “Um…”

“Bonsai is about emulating nature,” Gon-chan said, unprompted. “Making your own little pot-sized world. Here, look.” She beckoned.



Kaju edged closer and peered at the tree. “Like miniature models?”

Gon-chan looked up in thought. “Close, I guess. Bonsai’s a little more abstract. The branches and the leaves grow in ways meant to capture certain aspects of nature.” She studied a branch that jutted far off to the side. “We’re about the same age, me and this guy.”

“It’s fourteen years old?”

Gon-chan nodded. Neither of them knew how long or short such a span of time was. To them, it was simply everything. “According to the teacher who gave it to me. I’ve been trying to get it to look tree-y, but the fella doesn’t wanna cooperate. But y’know, sometimes even the unruly branches turn out fine in the end.” Snip.

She abided in silence for several moments before setting the shears down. “I think I’d probably care if he found a girlfriend.”

“Then—”

“But I stand by what I said. I’m not really interested in dating.” Kaju started to talk but held her lips shut. Gon-chan shook her head incredulously. “Satoshi, the idiot. He’s loved her since the day he met her, and it hasn’t waned a bit. He’s got a one-track mind. I’m not gonna be the one to change it, ’cause that just isn’t Satoshi.”

“So, you’re on different wavelengths?”

Gon-chan thought about that. “Maybe that’s a good way of putting it. That’s why I want to just leave it alone.”

“Okay. I’m sorry, Gon-chan.”

“Sorry if I was a pain.”

The sun reached its peak and light flooded the room. Kaju surveyed their surroundings, then stepped closer. “I, um, have something for you. If that’s okay.” She waited for her to nod, then held out a pretty pink box. “I made this. It’s friend chocolate. If you, well, want it, that is.”

"That's for me?"

"Yeah. I want you to have it."

Gon-chan took it, in turn placing the shears in Kaju's grasp. "Give it a try. Just give the branch here a trim."

Kaju timidly accepted. "Are you sure I should?"

"Why not? Mistakes are the spice of life." She put her hand on her shaky friend's head. Her nerves remained taut.

"Why are there wires around the branches?"

"To keep them in the right shape, for proper sunlight and wind exposure and all that. We do it in the cold months when it's dormant."

"Every year? So that's how you got it to look like this."

Gon-chan brushed some of the leaves. "It's not all the wires. You can't bend it into shape."

"No?"

Her eyes wandered lazily down to the curves and ridges of the trunk. "It takes time. Lots of it. Sometimes things go right. Sometimes things go awry. It's a product of a long past that you're lookin' at here."

"A product of the past…"

Kaju felt something snap into place in her mind. Every future—every possibility—was a direct result of all the trivial twists and turns taken along the way. It was the same for her and her brother. They would one day travel different paths. Take their own unique twists and turns. But behind them would always be the past. Forever theirs.

"I think I like bonsai," she said.

"Oh yeah?" Gon-chan perked up. "My door's always open if you're interested."

Kaju smiled at her, then faced the tree again. “So should I cut here?” She placed a branch between the sharp blades.

“Hold it straight,” Gon-chan interjected frantically. “Make sure it’s a clean cut.”

“Like this?”

“Little this way.”

Kaju backed off and put her hands on her hips. “Are you cutting the tree, or am I?”

She had a point. Like it or not, Gondou had made a decision. She could regret and cry about it later, but the die had been cast.

“You’re right, you’re right. Sorry.” Gon-chan held her hands up in defeat. “Whatever happens, it’ll keep on growin’.”

Epilogue:
Past and Future

THE DAY AFTER THE OPEN HOUSE WAS MONDAY.

Yes. Monday.

Waking up for school the day after a wasted weekend made for a very lethargic morning. I was beginning to understand how people turned into Amanatsu-sensei. Homeroom pretty much went in one ear and out the other.

"That's all for announcements," the peon herself said. I stopped slouching just in case she was in the mood for bullying, but she actually seemed pretty chipper today. "So we had quite the turnout at yesterday's open house. Saw a lotta bright minds. And more." She leaned against her desk with an ugly grin. "It ain't easy being a teacher, lemme tell you guys. Just like it ain't easy going through puberty. I get it. We're only human."

She was *not* talking about this. To her credit, it probably didn't happen to her often. I allowed her a moment of jubilation.

"Now look, you guys, we all have our fantasies, but you're all outta my strike zone. Everyone got that?" Amanatsu-sensei cackled. And on her thinly veiled bragging went, to little interest from the class.

Instead of listening to her ramble, I decided to think about what a whirlwind Valentine's Day had been. I'd gotten chocolate. *Chocolate*. Only once, and purely as a thank-you, but still. That was a win. The lit club girls had been a lost cause, but that was a blessing in disguise, because having to get return gifts for them would have been a nightmare.

"Not long now till you guys say goodbye to the first-year life," Sensei went on. "You'll be in new classes taking different lessons.

And you may think you've got all the time in the world, but blink and you'll be third-years, and then you're outta here. You all remember that and savor the time you've got. You don't wanna grow up hoping they'll invent time travel like me, do you?"

And now she was down in the dumps. The jubilation did not last long.

Amanatsu-sensei smacked her desk with the class roster. "That's all from me! Now hunker down! Got a lot to cover this week!"

***

After school at the club room, I gave the gang the rundown of yesterday's events. I wasn't sure they believed me at first.

"Amanatsu-sensei," Yanami muttered. "Wow. Who woulda predicted that." She munched on some kaki no tane—mixed senbei and peanuts. "Sucks."

"Tachibana-kun's that kid you were walking with, yeah?" Yakishio asked, squeezing one of those grip strength workout thingamajigs. "Can't judge a book by its cover, I guess."

Komari glanced between them. "Sh-should we be worried?"

"Nah, Amanatsu-chan's a good teacher. Usually," Yanami clarified. Remembering I existed, she shook her kaki no tane at me. "Want some?"

"I'm good. Should *you* be eating those after all those sweets yesterday? You keep going on about how you need to start dieting."

"I *am* dieting." More nuts down the hatch. I sensed the burgeoning of yet more brilliance from the bright mind of Professor Yanami. "Plus, I skipped breakfast and lunch yesterday. Cancels out."

"I'm not sure it does if you replace them with candy."

Yanami shrugged. "Oh, Nukumizu-kun. You've much to learn about the art of nutrition. I'm accepting students if you'd like to

enroll.”

“Do enlighten me.”

She smirked, accepting my challenge. “Lesson one: Dieting is about outwitting your own physiology.”

I was not disappointed.

“And how exactly do you do that?”

“You don’t give your body time to gain weight. When you skip meals, you fool it into thinking it’s not going to get to eat, and then you snack. And that’s not a real meal, so you’re basically fasting.”

We were rapidly departing pseudo-science and entering science-fiction.

“But if you’re eating the calories of a meal, how is it any different?” I attempted to point out. “Doesn’t the irregular food schedule just slow your metabolism, which would make it *harder* to lose weight?”

“Hey, I’ve tested this theory five whole times and it worked twice, I’ll have you know.”

Confidence-inspiring odds. But negative reinforcement was fragile at best, so I let her have this.

“N-Nukumizu,” Komari said. “R-remember to bring your sister her j-journal.” She handed me the three that her group had left behind. We never made it back after leaving yesterday.

I tried to take them, but Komari held firm. “Uh, there something else?”

“Wh-what happened with her?”

“I just told you what happened. She was helping Tachibana-kun meet Amanatsu-sensei.” I snatched the journals while her guard was down.

I hadn’t told them about our short conflict. None of them would understand, and it wasn’t their business anyway.

“Actually, she’s got a point,” Yakishio chimed in. “Thought you’d be a lot more excited about her not having a crush.”

“I mean…”

I opened the journal, fleeing from her inquisitive gaze, and it just so happened to be on Kaju’s story. The siblings in it went their separate ways. The brother would go on to a new life, while the sister was left all alone, but the time they’d spent together wasn’t going anywhere. Suddenly, with the context of Kaju’s anxieties about the future, the subtext made a lot more sense.

Then the door flew open. “Oniisama! Kaju has arrived!”

She beelined straight for my lap, where she plopped right down before anyone could parse a single thing. She threw her arms around my neck.

“Wh-what are you doing here?! Shouldn’t you be at school?!”

Completely unfazed, she flaunted the badge dangling around her neck. “Look, look!”

In big letters was the word “VISITOR.” And next to that was the issuer—the student council.

“They gave that to you? Why do you have that?”

“I’m going to be shadowing the Tsuwabuki Student Council from now on. To learn the ins and outs.”

“You mean just for today. Right?”

Her arms tightened around my neck. “The president really likes me, so she says I can stop by whenever I want!” Oh dear god. “Now we’ll be together forever, Oniisama.” She nuzzled my cheek with the top of her head.

So she was just going to be popping up at random now? This was going way too fast.

“Let’s take a second and calm down.” I pulled her off of me.

“It’s been a second, and I’m already calm.”

"Then just listen. You have your own student council to worry about."

"And I'll learn to juggle them both."

That'd be some circus act. I wasn't getting anywhere with this.

Kaju peered up at me, beaming. "What you told me yesterday opened my eyes."

"Opened your eyes, did it?"

"Widely, yes. To worry myself so much over the future is to lose sight of the present. Every second that passes defines the next. So I want to spend every single one with you while I still can. While there's still a past I could be building."

"You do, do you?"

"I do, yes."

Well, this was a pickle. I looked to Yanami, Yakishio, and Komari for help. Unfortunately, they were busy cringing. Hard.

"Easy on the PDA, Nukumizu-kun."

"Uh, congrats?"

"D-die."

An entirely predictable response. Still made me sad, though.

Kaju smiled at them. "Oh, I baked madeleines for everyone!"

"Welcome to the club!" And down went Yanami.

"Komari-san, I hope you'll come over again sometime. I'll make sure we stock up on some new bath soaps."

She croaked and hung her head. "Uh, o-okay."

Wrinkles manifested on Yanami's brow instantly. "Bath? Did you say 'bath'? Komari-chan, I'm gonna need details."

"I-it's not what it sounds like! N-Nukumizu ran one for me, s-so…"

"I what?" I never signed up for hot potato.

Yakishio’s eyes turned deadly. “What’d you do to her, Nukkun?”

“She’s making it sound worse than it was! Tell them, Kaju!”

My dear sister nodded, understanding her task perfectly. “My dearest Oniisama can do no wrong! Anything that occurred or will occur has my seal of approval!”

“What did you do?!” the girls snapped together.

I didn’t deserve many things, but this least of all.

But like, actually. I actually hadn’t done anything this time.

I stood up, Kaju still clinging tight. “Forget all that! I hereby call today’s club meeting to session! Let’s go over the open house.”

“You’re gonna go there? Really?” Yanami glared over a madeleine hanging from her mouth.

A necessary sacrifice. This was all to get them to forget the bath thing, which I knew Komari would be eager to do as well. Then we could get back on track for real and I’d be— “R-really?” she stammered. “D-die.”

“Kinda insensitive, even for you,” Yakishio added.

The plan had backfired. Now everyone was glaring at me for an entirely different reason.

Why? Why always me? What had I done to deserve this?

As I stared up at the ceiling in despair, Kaju whispered in my ear, “Together forever, Oniisama.”

Bonus Story:
No Rest for the Wicked

TWO TSUWABUKI STUDENTS FOUND THEMSELVES AS drops in the Kalmia Mall crowds. Albeit, Yanami Anna and Himemiya Karen made for rather eye-catching drops. After securing drinks from the Yamayasu juice bar, they found a couple of spots at the counter by the window.

Yanami watched station-goers come and go for a few seconds before holding up her cup. "Here's to hard work. Cheers."

"Cheers!"

They drank. The mellow sweetness lifted the fatigue from Yanami's body.

Karen eyed Yanami's luggage, sipping on her avocado milk. "That's a lot of chocolate, Anna. Do you have that many people to give to?"

"My mom asked me to pick up some for her coworkers."

"Oh, yeah, she works at city hall, doesn't she?"

Yanami nodded and siphoned her matcha banana smoothie until it was just about gone. "Plus, I had to get stuff for the lit club. Where'd I put it? No, not that. That one's for me."

"Anna," Karen gently interrupted. "I've been meaning to say something."

Her cheery friend paused her investigation and looked up. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

"You just bought inari, right? The, um…"

"From Tsuboya. That's my Karen-chan. Girl knows how to pick 'em."

“That’s okay. You can put it away. I was just going to say, well, you remember how you tried to eat it right there at the check-out?”

“It’s nice and bite-sized. Good for when you’re on the go. I forced myself to only get six takoyaki earlier, so I was a wee bit peckish.” The smile Yanami wore as she held that package of inari shone brighter than the sun.

Karen put a hand on her shoulder, her expression sober. “What I’m trying to say is, we’re girls, Anna.”

“Uh, duh. What’s your point?”

She breathed deep and stared directly into Yanami’s eyes. “Listen to me closely. Girls do not—I repeat, girls do not walk around Kalmia eating inari.”

Yanami blinked. “But we had takoyaki downstairs just now. How’s that different?”

“Well, first of all, takoyaki is a snack. Inari isn’t.”

“How is it not?” She cocked her head in genuine confusion.

Karen put her face in her palm. “No. You’re right. You’re right, Anna.”

“Whatcha so sad for? Here. Have some chocolate.

“Later. Wait, didn’t you say that was for Valentine’s Day? Why did you just open it?”

“Uh, good question.” Yanami considered the consequences of her actions for the briefest of moments before beaming wide. “Eh, this was for the lit club anyway. No harm done. Want one?” She simply shook her head, then hung it low. “What’s wrong? Tummy ache?”

“No. No, Anna, I’m sorry. I was just about to say something I definitely should not have.”

“What? About me?”

Ever hungry was Karen’s friend. But she was still her friend. Appetite and all.

She clenched her fists. “Anna. Let’s bake!”

“Like, chocolate?” Yanami muttered back, sufficiently distracted enough to look away from the treats calling her name then and there.

“Exactly. We’ll have a femininity training camp. I live alone, so we could do it whenever. I’ve been talking about wanting to have a girls’ night anyway, remember?”

“Chocolate camp, huh? Sounds fun. Saturday good?”

“Perfect!”

“We can bake up some treats and stuff ourselves while watching movies. It’ll be chill.”

“Good grief, Anna, how are we going to give the chocolate to anyone if we eat it—” Karen suddenly gasped.

“What?”

“I…just remembered,” she said slowly, twiddling her thumbs. “I-I don’t think Saturday night will, um, work.”

All semblance of emotion instantaneously vacated Yanami’s expression. “Message received.”

Karen waved her hands in a panic. “It’s not what you think! I’ve just been planning to, er…study! I’ve been planning to study that night for a while now! We’re gonna be up *all* night going over finals, gosh!”

“He’s spending the night, huh?”

“Um!”

Yanami offered the gentlest of smiles, then turned her gaze outward.

Handmade chocolate. There was an idea. Maybe she could even get one over on a certain someone who needed regular reminding of her womanly charms.

She sipped until her straw choked, threw back some ice, then bit.

Kill ’em with femininity.

Afterword

Welcome to the afterword of *Too Many Losing Heroines!* Volume 5! Which, I can't stress enough, only exists because of you. My gratitude is endless. Just as it is for the great Iwaasa, my editor, who I have continued to make trouble for. *Continuing* to make trouble for. Because it's ongoing. No, I'm still not done with my work, even as I write this. Classic.

I could have sucked it up and made a decision at the first draft. Heck, I could have done it on the second. But here I am, ruining Iwaasa-san's sleep schedule yet again. Which I am deeply sorry for.

Anyway, the afterword, so I assume you've probably seen the cover. No? We got a wise guy here.

Imigimuru-sensei's Kaju-chan is truly transcendent, isn't it? Compare it to the first volume's cover. Really, the range of emotions you experience is indescribable. On one side, the pinnacle of cuteness. On the other…hang in there, Yanami. We're all rooting for you.

So the story this time takes place around mid-February, set around Valentine's Day. The helicopter brother learns about a secret his clingy sister's keeping from him, and all pandemonium breaks loose from there. Meanwhile, Yanami, Yakishio, and Komari are doing their failgirl things on full throttle. They don't have much longer as dewy-eyed first-years. Stick around, or you just might blink and miss it.

In other news, as of this writing, the first volume of Itachi-sensei's manga adaptation is now on sale, and we're getting pretty good reviews on the web release here in Japan. If you liked what you read here, you'll love that version!

In other other news, we've got a new collaborative project with the city of Toyohashi itself! Immediately following the Japan

release of this volume, Toyohashi Station's very own Kalmia Mall will be hosting an event with Central Japan Railway! I've gotten a sneak peek at some of what they have planned, and the scale seriously blew me away. Rest assured, there will be more of glorious Imigimuru-sensei's artwork to enjoy.

As a personal note, by a twist of fate, the fifth volume of *Damonde Toyohashi ga Sukitte Ittorujan!* will be releasing just a day before this volume. Don't forget to check that out too! Kalmia and the whole station are home to many places that have appeared in both *DamoToyo* and *Losing Heroines*, so you'll have plenty to hunt for. The collab with Nonhoi Park is just about to wind down too, so why not take the train one station down and have a look at that while you're at it?

Now. It's on my mind. It's on your mind. Yes, I got them to let me write more. Flip back a few pages and you'll find a little vignette into the relationship between the ultimate winner and the ultimate loser. An age-old question will absolutely, positively, unambiguously be answered.

Are they even friends?

About the Author

Takibi Amamori

It’s thanks to every single one of you that we’ve made it all the way to Volume 5. Put this next to your copy of Volume 1 and compare the covers. Trust me.



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