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YURI TAMA

From Third Wheel to Trifecta


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Prologue: If She'd Been There with Me

What is true love?

I stared absentmindedly at the tagline displayed prominently on the website I'd found myself on. It was the official home page of a TV drama that had been broadcast earlier this year, from April to June. The show had been incredibly well received to begin with, and then a certain announcement put out roughly a month ago had made it even more famous than ever by extension...apparently.

I say "apparently" because I didn't watch many TV dramas. I barely watched any of them at all, really. In fact, I barely watched any *TV* at all, period. I put the news on from time to time, but only because it usually had the time displayed somewhere on-screen, meaning I could use it as an impromptu clock. For the most part, the flat-screen TV in my living room served as something closer to a piece of interior decor than an actual appliance. That had never especially bothered me, though. It being a flat-screen meant that it didn't gather much dust, so I could usually just ignore it.

But enough about my TV. According to a summary I'd read, the show in question was about "a perfectly ordinary high school girl who finds herself being courted by a trio of handsome boys." Frankly...the first thought that crossed my mind was "How exactly could someone like that be described as *perfectly normal*?" I appreciate that I'm not especially well equipped to judge, given how I hardly watch TV, but I still like to think that my standards of normality aren't *that* far askew from those of society at large.

But, then again...I suppose I can't say it's entirely *preposterous, can I?*

An image of the carefree, entirely unguarded smile of a certain girl drifted through my mind's eye, and I sighed heavily. *She* couldn't

possibly have been any more different from the protagonist of that show—and from the actress who'd portrayed her, Maki Amagi. *She* was a genuinely ordinary girl, so palpably lacking in presence that one could lose sight of her in a crowd of any size... Though to be clear, I don't mean to portray her in an especially negative light. When viewed from a more generous perspective, one could say that she was remarkably friendly, and even decently pretty, in a subjective sort of way...

Why, exactly, am I defending her to myself? What am I accomplishing with this?

Anyway...what I mean to say is that I don't think particularly poorly of her, on the whole. Anyone would end up looking like a bland, uninteresting pebble on the side of the road when compared with an idol like Maki Amagi. She, after all, had achieved almost unimaginable success at a mere sixteen years of age. Despite being only a second-year in high school, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that she'd climbed as high in life as one could go, earning a reputation as a nationally recognized top idol.

Most likely, that TV drama's verisimilitude lay in the fact that Maki Amagi, a girl so special it beggared belief, was playing its protagonist. Of course, the fact that said protagonist was anything *but* "a perfectly normal high school girl" remained as true as ever.

Not to mention that it seems its ending wasn't quite so well received.

I felt strangely guilty for making that assessment, seeing as I hadn't watched the show myself, but a number of reviews had popped up when I ran a search on its title, and I'd learned of the mixed reception entirely by accident. Apparently, the show's conclusion involved the protagonist being pressed to choose one of her three love interests...and ultimately deciding to choose none of them, instead setting out into the world to chase her own dreams.

"Oh, joy. Another main character who can't commit."

"The writers ran away on us just as much as she ran away from picking someone."

"I bet they're just setting up for a movie, or a sequel, or something."

That more or less summed up the fan base's response, on the whole, with the most common complaint being the idea that the protagonist had "run away." I didn't have a particularly deep understanding of that show, but still, I found a part of myself agreeing with that critique. The prevailing viewpoint in our society is that if someone approaches you with romantic intent, and if you return those feelings on some level, the appropriate thing to do is to give them a clear and sincere response. On the other hand, I also found myself viewing the situation from the exact opposite perspective—a perspective based upon the understanding that if one character were chosen, it would inevitably mean that two others were *not*.

To choose something will always involve simultaneously *not* choosing the alternative. Those who are chosen gain all the attention, while those who aren't chosen are left to weep themselves to sleep in the shadows.

I find it very difficult to believe that if the show's protagonist *had* chosen one of her suitors to be with, the fans of the other two characters who weren't chosen would have had a more positive impression of its ending. In that sense, you might even say that the show's choice to *not* choose anyone was all that had saved those fans from greater disappointment...

Yet no one would ever take that logic to its extreme and say that in that case, she should've just chosen all *of them instead.*

There was a third option on the table—or really, a third option that had never been on the table at all. If the protagonist had declared that she would just date all three of the boys who wanted to be with her, there's no doubt in my mind that the backlash would have put all of the *actual* ending's criticism to shame. When viewed through the lens of broadly accepted modern ethics, it would be completely indefensible. Anyone who sincerely argued that it was the one way to make everyone happy would be seen as a lunatic. I would see them that way as well.

However...*she* had done just that. She was a witless, harmless, impossibly irritating, happy-go-lucky blockhead who burst into tears at the drop of a hat...but at the same time, she was a peer whom I

just couldn't bring myself to dislike. And she'd made that choice. It had never been on the table, but she'd left her seat and chosen it anyway.

And in spite of that, the other two girls involved—Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba—hadn't abandoned her in disgust. Far from it. They'd accepted her choice, and happily. Then, as if to make matters even more unbelievable, that very same girl—a girl whose sense of ethics was so hopelessly bugged out that she'd casually made a choice that anyone with sense would instantly condemn—turned out to be someone whom Maki Amagi, the top idol beloved by one and all, was *intensely* attached to.

How, exactly, was she getting away with it? How did she pull it off? I couldn't even begin to guess. I had no idea...but at the same time, a thought crossed my mind.

If she'd been there with me...

In an instant, my memories of the events of two years ago forced themselves back to the surface. I remembered what others had expected from me—as well as the despair and the fury that had followed.

If she'd been there with me...no. If she'd *been* me, then how might things have turned out differently?

It was a choice that wasn't on the table—the worst possible choice—but was taking it the key to ensuring that no one would suffer? That everyone could stay together, hand in hand, with smiles upon their faces?

"Honestly...what am I even thinking?" I muttered, chuckling at myself as I shut off my phone.

There was no real meaning to that fantasy of mine. Reality was unceasing and uncaring of the circumstances of those who lived in it. It would always just keep coming at us, without mercy or pause.

I had answers of my own to find. Actions to decide upon. Choices to make. So...*so* many things to think about.

But for now...I'm too tired.

I closed my eyes as I weakly sprawled out on my bed, pulling my

sheets all the way over my head. I sealed myself into my own little world, blocking out the dark of my room with a deeper darkness of my own...but even then, I still heard a voice in the depths of my mind, blaming and condemning me. No darkness was deep enough to blot that out.

Chapter 1: Trouble Comes Knocking

"It's nice to meet you all. My name is Makina Oda, and I'm pleased to be your classmate from today forward."

The second semester of my second year in high school had just begun—and that brand-new season was kicked off by a certain someone's blindingly brilliant smile.

I really do mean it when I say it was "blinding." The girl who'd introduced herself as Makina Oda had an aura so bright, it was actually hard to look directly at her without squinting. I knew for a fact that every last person currently being bathed in said aura—which is to say, all the students of class 2-A—had immediately had a different name spring to mind the moment they saw her—that name, of course, being Maki Amagi.

Maki Amagi was an ultra-famous super celebrity who every last citizen of Japan, from kids to elders, knew on sight. She was the leader-slash-center of an idol group called Shooting Star, and was also that group's most popular member by a country mile, but she hadn't stopped there. Idolhood had only been the first stop on her road to fame, which had included show-stealing performances on variety TV programs and even starring roles in TV dramas and movies. It really wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she was in the running for the position of top idol on a countrywide scale.

But, all that said...the biggest story about Maki Amagi at the moment wasn't about her many accomplishments. No, it was about the fact that, at the peak of her popularity, she'd announced that she'd be going on hiatus from her work in the entertainment industry.

It only took a glance online to find droves of people devastated by the news, and even a total idol layman like me found myself thinking that it was kind of a shame. Some people had even speculated that the stated reason for her hiatus—a desire to focus on her schoolwork—was just a cover story for something more serious...but her transferring into my very own school, Eichou High, left that theory pretty much dead in the water. Not that her being a student here was public knowledge, of course!

Eichou High was famous for sending the bulk of its students on to high-ranking universities, and wasn't the sort of institution that would give a prospective student a free pass through its admission system just because they were a celebrity, apparently. I say "apparently" because I have no clue whether or not there'd been any precedent for that before now, but at the very least, there definitely wasn't any sort of formal celebrity special-admission program.

In this case, the school's administration had gone out of its way to announce to the whole school—not just the class she'd transferred into—both that she'd be joining us as a transfer student starting in the second semester and that she'd passed the entrance exam with flying colors. And, to make things even *clearer*, the school had made every single class in every single grade level attend a thirty-minute special lecture about personal privacy and internet literacy, complete with super explicit concrete examples of what *not* to do.

Anyway, to make a long story short, the idol Maki Amagi had transferred into class 2-A of Eichou High under the identity of the perfectly ordinary teenage girl Makina Oda, sending waves throughout the whole school in the process. No matter how many steps the school took to prevent trouble before it started brewing—no matter how many announcements and special lessons they gave—the fact of the matter was that an outrageously famous celebrity like her transferring into a school for the general populace was going to be a huge incident regardless. Even in a school like ours that was packed from top to bottom with honor students, people were still going to get pretty worked up over a development like that, and you

really couldn't blame them for it.

"Ooof," I unconsciously muttered as I watched the inevitable commotion play out before my eyes. A swarm of students had descended on the doors to class 2-A. It wasn't just made up of second-years—there were plenty of first-and third-years mixed up in the crowd as well. I'd stepped out for just a second to go to the restroom and returned to find that the corridor outside our classroom had turned into a one-way street. Breaking through a wall of humans between you and your classroom is one heck of a challenge, let me tell you!

A full three days had passed since she'd transferred in, but the crowds still showed no sign of thinning out. It wasn't a huge mystery what they were all here for: They were rubberneckers hoping to catch a glimpse of Makina Oda, the perfectly ordinary schoolgirl. I hadn't seen anyone trying to snap any sneak photos with their phones, probably thanks to that internet literacy course drilling into our heads how big a privacy violation that would be—not to mention how taking pictures without permission would make us liable for violating her likeness rights and risk bringing an actual lawsuit down on our heads... But it seemed all that wasn't quite enough to stop people from trying to *see* her, at the very least. And, thanks to that, the simple act of entering and leaving our classroom had been transformed into a life-and-death struggle.

Then again, I'm sure that this is harder on Makina than any of the rest of us.

Makina was constantly the center of attention, and I don't just mean at this specific moment. Even something as simple as going to the restroom, like I just had, became a huge deal when she was the one doing it. She was on hiatus from her work as an idol, and in theory she was no different from the rest of us now, but that didn't stop the people around her from viewing her as Maki Amagi the idol regardless.

"Hey, did you see them?"

"Yeah! They really do look perfect together, don't they?"

While I was lost in my thoughts—which was code for "standing around in a daze," really—I overheard a pair of very satisfied-

sounding students as they passed by me in the corridor.

"Right?" one of the pair said. "They seriously are *such* a great match. It's crazy that we can just see the three of them, like, *whenever*."

The three of them... I thought as a sinking feeling began to settle in the pit of my stomach.

While the attention Makina had been attracting from our fellow students hadn't tapered off over the past three days, it *had* changed just a little. How so? Simply put, it wasn't *just* Makina who was getting all that attention anymore. Two other members of our class had been wrapped up in the spectacle.

"Ah!" I exclaimed as a gap opened up in the human wall before me. I nervously hunched over and did my best to squeeze through, somehow managing to make it back into the classroom...where I was met with the sight that had drawn the attention of those two students from before.

"Thanks, Momose. I appreciate it."

"It's cool! I mean, really, it was just a piece of pencil lead."

"Ah, Oda—while we're on the subject of things you're missing, you haven't gotten your textbooks yet, have you? Here, I'll lend you mine."

"Oh, you don't have to do that, Aiba! What will you read if I'm hogging your textbooks?"

"I'll just look over Yuna's shoulder. It's fine, honestly."

Three girls were chatting in a corner of the classroom. One of them was the individual I've been talking about this whole time: Makina Oda, an unbelievably beautiful girl with an irrepressibly powerful aura of stardom that was still shining at full force, even though she was ostensibly just a normal person at the moment.

The other two girls she was talking with, however, were no slouches in the aura department either. They were, in fact, somehow able to stand on even ground with her. Their names were Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba, and when the two of them and Makina came together in one place, chatting and smiling away, the combined, unblemished *shine* that they emitted was honestly like something straight out of a cheesy soft-drink commercial.

There were definitely plenty of people in our class who wanted to talk to Makina, but not so much as one of them was willing to step into—and potentially shatter—the perfect, priceless world that those three formed when they came together. That, of course, was on account of a concept that had taken root in our school over the past year and several months: the idea of the Sacrosanct.

Right from the beginning of high school, Yuna and Rinka had attracted a *lot* of attention from the students around them, mostly thanks to their bell-curve-destroying levels of beauty. The two of them had been the best of friends since pretty much the moment they were born. In fact, the bond they shared seemed to be far deeper than something as pedestrian as *friendship*. What they had was more intimate than that—more like the bond between a pair of lovers. They were so perfectly on the same wavelength that they didn't need words to understand exactly what the other was thinking.

That's how they'd become the Sacrosanct: a holy existence that none would ever dare to transgress upon. And, just shortly after they started going to this school, the reverence that their classmates felt toward them had grown so great that a Sacrosanct fan club was born. It was a small, localized sort of fan club, to be fair, and was only relevant in the tiny community of a single high school, but the certain *something* that their classmates had seen in the two of them hadn't diminished at all since then. In fact, their captivating nature had only grown more and more brilliant as time went on.

It made me happy to see everyone acknowledge them like that...but it also made me feel a little lonely. After all—

"Hey, you're in the way. Think you could get a move on?" one of the gawkers in the hallway chided.

"Ah, right!" I yelped before dodging off to the side of the classroom.

I would've liked to go back to my actual desk instead, but I had a feeling that *that* would've irritated the onlookers even more than blocking their view. After all...my seat was right next to *those* three. I sat just behind Yuna, behind and to the right of Rinka, and directly to the right of Makina. If the three of them formed a happy little

circle, then sitting down at my desk would've meant barging my way *right* into it!

Compared to the three of them, I was a pointless, featureless pebble on the side of the road. The people out in the hallway couldn't possibly have had any less interest in me. That wasn't just a theory—it was a fact. None of them were paying any attention to me whatsoever.

If I sat down at that desk, though? *That* would change things in a heartbeat. The sort of nondescript pebble that your eyes glaze over when it's on the side of the road becomes *extremely* attention-grabbing when it's placed in a box of priceless jewels, after all—and *not* in a good way. You really couldn't blame all the people who'd stopped by to stare at the jewels for wanting to chuck that eyesore of a pebble out of the picture.

Anyway, that's why my only decent option was to huddle in the corner until the hallway people saw their fill and went along on their way. Which, uhh, didn't help much when it came to the cold stares of my *classmates*, who were there to see me all the time, but I'd take what I could get.

Anyway... I thought, putting my self-analysis on hold for a moment as I took another look at the center-of-attention trio. Setting aside everything about how they were all hyper-attractive beauties, I had to admit that, at a glance, it really did look like the three of them were part of a perfectly happy, harmonious little social circle. Their conversations flowed so smoothly and naturally, you'd never think they'd only met three days ago, which probably had a lot to do with the fact that Yuna and Rinka didn't seem intimidated or overawed by the prospect of talking to a nationally famous idol at all.

But, all that said...I could tell. They couldn't deceive my eyes—unfortunately! The sparks that were constantly flying between the three of them were *extremely* clearly visible to me!

"Ah, Hazama!"

One accidental glance later, I'd made eye contact with Makina and she'd instantly called out to me with a smile. In that same instant, all those gazes beaming in from the hallway turned to focus

on me.

Augh?!

"U-Umm, err," I stammered. "Did you need something, Oda?"

"Actually, yes! I was hoping to ask you for another favor," Makina said as she walked toward me, then took my hand in both of hers as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. "My textbooks haven't come in yet. Would you mind sharing yours with me again?"

"Ah, uhh..."

"You did hear me say that you could borrow mine, didn't you?" Rinka asked from off to the side.

"Oh, but I couldn't! I'd never inconvenience you like that," Makina replied.

"Well, if *that's* what you're worried about, then sharing *hers* would be an inconvenience too—actually, it'd be an even bigger one," said Yuna. "She's not great when it comes to academics, and she'll have a harder time focusing on our lessons if she has to share her books with you."

"In that case, I'd be happy to help teach her anything she doesn't understand! This might surprise you, but I'm actually quite confident when it comes to my studies. That sounds good, doesn't it, Hazama?"

Yup! Those sparks sure are crackling away, all right! All three of them are smiling, so why exactly do I feel such a crazy chill running down my spine?!

Makina, having only just transferred in, didn't have any of her textbooks yet—and I, being the person who sat next to her, had ended up with my desk pressed up against hers to let her share my books every single lesson, all the while watched over by Yuna's and Rinka's ever-vigilant gazes.

From an outside perspective, I was an unsightly pebble in a box of dazzling jewels. Viewing the situation from *within* the box, however...well, things really couldn't have been more different from how they seemed. I know very, very well just how implausible the story I'm about to tell is, so I'll do my best to lay down the cold, hard facts as calmly and objectively as I can.

First up, regarding the Sacrosanct: The two of them weren't actually dating each other. Both of them were actually seeing someone else...that someone being me.

Yes, that's right. I was dating both Yuna *and* Rinka. In other words, I was two-timing them!

I knew, of course, that this wasn't something I could proudly admit to the world at large. It had just sort of *happened*, honestly. One day both of them asked me out, one after the other, and I came to the sudden realization that I loved both of them to pieces...and, faced with the completely impossible decision of having to pick one over the other, I chose to do something really, *really* ridiculous and stupid instead.

If I couldn't pick one of them, I thought, I'd just pick both—and somehow, the two of them not only forgave me for that egregious crime against decency, but decided to play along with it. I wasn't about to waste the chance they were offering me, and resolved to do my absolute best to be the girlfriend of their dreams and make sure they never regretted making that choice...and, I mean, I've been doing my best!

But then—when I was in the middle of following through on that plan, right around the end of summer vacation—Makina stepped into the picture. That was when I learned that the nationally renowned idol Maki Amagi was, in fact, the childhood friend who I'd spent kindergarten with: Makina Oda! It turned out that Makina had never forgotten the time we spent together, and that she'd even become an idol specifically because she'd promised me that she would. She *also* remembered a certain *other* promise that we'd made back in the day.

"Let's get married!"

When we were kids, Makina had proposed to me...and she'd never forgotten it for even a second from then until the moment she set out to find me again. Now her eyes glimmered with a steadfast determination to convince me to choose her, even though she knew for a fact that I was already in a relationship.

I'm pretty sure she didn't really *transfer into this school so she could focus on her studies at all, actually...*

Not even I was oblivious enough to miss that, after everything that had happened. Makina's goals and her resolve to see them through were clear—and not just to me. Yuna and Rinka had picked up on them just as easily.

Right around the end of summer vacation, I'd ended up going out on a date with Makina. That decision, in the long term, had hurt Yuna and Rinka...and over the course of my apology to them, I'd told them how Makina had opened up about her feelings for me. Just for clarity's sake: I'd told them that she was my childhood friend, and I'd referred to her as Makina Oda. In other words, I *hadn't* told them that Makina was Maki Amagi...meaning that they'd probably only learned that part of the story the moment she transferred in and appeared before them in the flesh.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the equation, I hadn't told Makina about Yuna and Rinka at all. I hadn't told her that I was dating two people either. In fact, all that I'd told her was that I was already seeing someone...and while most people would probably assume I was dating a single guy, judging by the information I'd given, I had a funny feeling that she'd already figured out the truth. Probably. All that experience she'd built up working a real job in grown-up society had most likely made her pretty sensitive to that sort of thing. It really felt like she'd sussed the whole situation out, just by watching the three of our reactions.

I wouldn't have been surprised at all if she'd been totally disillusioned with me the moment she figured out I was in that sort of norm-breaking, two-timing relationship...but not only had she not shown any signs of distancing herself from me, she actually seemed to be *enjoying* the current state of things. If anything, it felt like she was egging Yuna and Rinka on from time to time...

B-But then again, maybe I'm just being paranoid! Maybe knowing the full story myself is making me jump at shadows and assume *she's figured the whole thing out! It's not totally impossible!!!*

Once again, I found myself spouting mental excuses to no one in particular...but that's *super* not the point right now, so let's just move along. The *point* is that I'd found myself caught between the three of them—or maybe "surrounded" would be the better word—

and so far, I hadn't had any luck whatsoever figuring out just what the heck I was supposed to do about it. From a common-sense perspective, I was taken. The right thing to do would be to gently and gracefully turn down Makina's advances...

But then again...

Makina wasn't like Yuna and Rinka. She wasn't my girlfriend...but even so, she was still my friend, and she was still a very important person to me. I could only imagine how hard climbing to the pinnacle of the idol industry was at the best of times, and knowing how introverted she'd been back in kindergarten, it was downright impossible to fathom just how tremendous of a task it had been for her in particular. And then there was everything that had happened with her parents... Anyway, what I'm getting at is that if there was anything I could do to help her, I wanted to do it. I really couldn't help but feel that way, and I couldn't deny it either—which is why when she grabbed my hand like this, I couldn't bring myself to shake her off.

"*Yotsy.*"

"Ah!" I yipped. Makina had whispered right into my ear, so softly and quietly that no one else could hear her.



As a rule, when we were in our classroom—or, really, when we were in front of people in general—Makina made a point of calling me by my last name. That meant that the only times when she called me by my old nickname, Yotsy, were when we were alone or when she was very sure that no one would hear her whispering to me. The one little problem with that, of course, was that the *way* she whispered—the soft, airy tone of her voice combined with the slight tickle of her breath on my ear—gave me such crazy shivers it almost felt like my knees would give out.

N-No! Stay standing! Endure...! If I fall over here, I'll make Makina, Yuna, and Rinka worry, and *I'll attract even more of the bad sort of attention!!!*

"The next class is about to start. Shall we head back to our desks?" Makina suggested, following up her whisper with a full-force smile while I was already just barely managing to stay upright.

Meanwhile, Yuna and Rinka were watching every moment of our interaction with conflicted, frustrated looks on their faces. They both knew that I didn't want to stand out in class, so they didn't say anything in protest, but I could tell how much willpower that was taking on their part.

"Hee hee!" Makina quietly giggled as she glanced over at the two of them. Nothing about the laugh itself made it feel loaded with any sort of hidden meaning or motives...but for some reason, *I* couldn't help but see it as the sort of laugh the villain in a story would let slip.

Makina... Yuna, Rinka...

None of them were letting it show on their faces, and I didn't think that any of the fans surrounding them had caught on, but the air around them was unmistakably fraught with tension. And, of course, the culprit behind that tension was unmistakably me...

I wanted to say *something* to Yuna and Rinka, but the stares of all those people out in the hallway—and, needless to say, the stares of everyone *in* my class too—just wouldn't let me. Enduring the anxious pain building in my stomach was taking pretty much all of

my willpower already.

◇◇◇

Things had been this way nonstop for all three days since Makina transferred in. I'd been on pins and needles, racking my mind for a solution that just wasn't coming no matter how hard I searched. Yuna and Rinka had both told me they were fine when I talked to them on the phone and chatted with them through texts, but I was pretty sure that internally, they were anything but. I mean, come on—when you looked at the whole situation from an objective viewpoint, it was, well...so purely, indefensibly pathetic it made me want to cry, honestly.

And, at the same time, Makina looked as happy as could be. I couldn't resent her for that. In fact, part of me was even happy to see it... All around, I felt so conflicted it was almost like there were two mes inside of me, each sprinting in a different direction.

I know one thing for sure: Yuna, Rinka, and Makina aren't in the wrong. They're not the problem here. I'm *the problem. It's my indecisiveness that's gotten us into this whole mess... Ugggh...*

"All right, everyone. It's time for us to begin today's homeroom."

Before I knew it, all of our classes had shot right on by and we'd reached the final period of the day: an extended homeroom. Our homeroom teacher, Miki—more formally known as Miss Abiko—stood behind the podium at the front of the room and wrote out today's subject of discussion on the blackboard. That subject: our class's offering for the upcoming cultural festival.

"As I'm sure you're all aware, our school's annual cultural festival will take place toward the end of October. I would like all of you to discuss what we, class 2-A, will put forward as our submission for the festival this year," Miki continued.

Oh, right! Summer break's over, which means it's already cultural-festival-prep season, huh...?

"Yotsy!" Makina whispered as she prodded my shoulder. Yuna's and Rinka's shoulders twitched in unison. "What's the cultural festival here like? This will be my first, so I have no idea what to expect!"

"Oh, that makes sense," I replied. "Well, umm..."

Considering Makina had just transferred in, she probably felt like this event had sprung up out of nowhere. I knew how anxious that sort of thing could make a person, and I really wished I could explain it to her...but the truth is, I didn't remember much about the cultural festival at all.

I'd spent almost all of last year's festival prep period doing petty, insignificant chores, since that meant I'd never risk screwing something up and getting in everyone's way. I did walk around to see the sights with Yuna and Rinka when the actual festival arrived, but that was before I'd even considered the faintest *glimmer* of a possibility that we'd wind up dating. In fact, I'd felt like they were doing me a favor by bringing me along, so I spent the whole festival fixated on not ruining their good time and ended up barely having any fun at all myself.

And then, of course, there was the killing blow: the school marathon that had happened right at the start of November! I had never understood how, legally speaking, literal, straight up torture could be part of a school's official curriculum and everyone just acted like that was *normal* somehow, but to make a long story short...it killed me. And by the time I was reborn anew, almost all of my memories of the cultural festival had been wiped right out of my mind!

So, yeah—I wanted to answer Makina's question, but first things first, I'd have to remember enough to *give* an answer.

Hmm... Uhh...?

Just as I was racking my mind...a hand suddenly shot up right in front of me.

"Excuse me!"

Yuna?!

"Seeing as Oda only just joined our school, wouldn't it be a good idea to give her an outline of what the cultural festival's like before we start?"

Yuna...!

Was that ever the lifeline I needed! A perfect, beautiful, gilded, lit-up lifeline shining like a beacon in the darkness!

Miki seemed to understand what Yuna was trying to communicate, and replied with a quick "Yes, that is a fair point." A brief stir passed through the class as well—everyone seemed very impressed by Yuna's thoughtfulness. Rinka flashed her a thumbs-up for good measure, which prompted *another* round of oohs and aahs from our classmates. Those two were the stars of the show, and we were all their audience.

Though, speaking of stars...

"I *see*. Interesting..."

Makina muttered to herself so quietly, I didn't think that even Rinka, who sat right in front of her, could hear it. She almost sounded like a detective right out of a mystery movie, breaking down a criminal's motives with cold and calculating precision. One thing was for sure: While the rest of the class basked in the heartwarming atmosphere created by Yuna's helpful maneuver, Makina was somewhere *entirely* different.

That only lasted for a second, though. Before I knew it, she was wearing the same gentle, way-too-pretty smile as ever.

"I appreciate the thought, Momose," said Makina, "and while I certainly wouldn't want to take time out of everyone's opportunity to plan...would you mind giving me just a little information for reference, Miss Abiko?"

"Of course not," Miki replied before clearing her throat and opening up her notebook. "Eichou High School's cultural festival occurs annually, on the final weekend of October. This year, it will take place on the twenty-sixth and the twenty-seventh. Only individuals with a direct link to the school are allowed to attend on Saturday, while members of the general public are admitted on Sunday, provided they have a ticket."

Those tickets, by the way, didn't cost money or anything, but they also weren't given out willy-nilly to just anyone. Generally speaking, most people who ended up at the cultural festival were the family and friends of current students, people who lived in the neighborhood, or middle schoolers who were considering going here for high school. The whole ticketing system felt a little awkwardly restrictive to me, but apparently, it had been installed in the hopes

of discouraging trouble after a number of unfortunate incidents-turned-learning-opportunities in the past. I could see why the school wouldn't feel any particular need to do away with it, even if it wasn't strictly necessary anymore.

"As for the festival's offerings," Miki continued, "each class and school club is expected to submit a minimum of one item to the program. Generally speaking, festival preparations are prohibited over summer break to ensure that they don't end up eating into time better spent on our students' studies or personal affairs. Given that, the post-summer period—which is to say, now—is when most classes decide upon and begin preparing their submission."

*Which means that our new student, Makina, will get to participate in the whole process from start to finish...*was the unstated meaning that I read into Miki's explanation. She was in her usual cold, expressionless homeroom-teacher mode, though, and didn't say it out loud.

"Now then, in regards to the submissions themselves, they're generally separated into three categories: refreshments, displays, and performances."

"Performances..." Makina muttered. It seemed the word had struck a chord with her, probably because of her work as an idol. Not that I thought there was any chance she'd end up performing onstage for something as minor as our cultural festival, of course.

"Classes that opt to provide refreshments generally do so by either turning their classroom into a restaurant or setting up a stall in the courtyard. Note that cooking with open flames in the classrooms is not allowed, so students tend to either prepare food in the home ec room or only offer food that doesn't require active cooking—which is to say, the sort of simple foods that one could prepare using only a microwave."

In terms of the general vibe of setups like that...I guess they were mostly maid café sorta deals? I was pretty sure I remembered there being one of those the year before. Probably. Anyway, the food always felt like the highlight of a cultural festival to me, but a ton of classes applied to do refreshments, so the competition was tough, managing one was tough, being part of the staff of one was

tough...basically, they were kinda tough to execute in a lot of different ways.

"Displays are generally set up within one's classroom, and typically feature scholarly publications, works created by a class's students, or goods to be put on sale—handicrafts, for instance. Some classic cultural-festival attractions that are set up in classrooms, such as haunted houses, also fall into this broad category. If I were to draw a concrete distinction...I suppose that the simplest way to do so would be to say that any in-classroom offering involving food or drink falls into the refreshments category, while most others can be considered displays."

Doing something that involved serving food meant having to deal with kitchen safety, sanitation, and a bunch of other restrictions and stuff that were just generally a huge pain in the rear. That, it seemed, was why they were officially given a whole category of their own.

My class had done a display last year, by the way. I'm *pretty* sure we put together, like, some sort of modern art piece made up of bits of junk that everyone brought in from home? I mostly just remember the big modern art *thingy* being set up in the middle of the classroom, with a bunch of pictures of the construction process and blueprints and stuff hung up on the walls...or something along those lines.

The upside to displays like that was that even though setting them up could be a huge hassle, once the festival started, you basically didn't have anything left to do anymore. As long as your class wasn't selling anything, barely anyone even had to hang around to keep an eye on the display. It goes without saying that no one caused trouble on the first day of the festival, and even on the second day, the ticket system kept things pretty solidly locked down. There wasn't any need to worry about some outsider barging in and busting up a class's display—things tended to be way calmer and quieter than that. Of course, the downside to those displays was that they could be, well, pretty bland. I don't think anyone came to see ours aside from the family and friends of people in our class.

"Finally, performances typically occur either in one's classroom or

on the stage in the gymnasium, and can involve a wide variety of performing arts. Many classes choose to work together to put on a theatrical performance, for instance. Because the gymnasium stage is so popular among clubs, performances there generally take place on only one of the two days of the festival."

Apparently—and this is *super* secondhand information—a surprisingly large number of groups, from classes to clubs to special units of students who'd gathered up for one reason or another, competed fiercely for a chance to perform in the gym, which was for all intents and purposes the school's only large-scale venue. Performances in the gym stood out, naturally, and the size of its stage meant you had a ton of space to work with, but the odds were also high that you'd only be given enough time there to put on a single showing. That meant that no one wanted to perform in the gym on the first day, when the festival was closed off to outsiders. The gym on day one was supposedly a pretty nice, quiet place to hang out, actually.

Performing in a classroom, on the other hand, meant that your show had to be on a much smaller scale, but could also be put on as many times as you wanted to. Well, in theory, anyway—an awful lot of sound leaked from classroom to classroom, so in practice, all the classes had to coordinate with one another to make sure there wasn't too much noise overlap. It was less a space totally to yourself and more of a shared-airport-runway sort of situation. The classrooms just weren't very well soundproofed, and there wasn't much we could do to change that.

After going over all of those various upsides and downsides in sequence, Miki wrapped up her speech by asking us to take all of them into account as we decided what we wanted to put together for the festival. "That covers all of the major points, I believe. Do you have any questions, Oda?" she concluded.

"No, nothing comes to mind! Thank you for the explanation, Miss Abiko," Makina replied.

"If anything does occur to you, feel free to speak up at any time. The fact that you've joined us partway through the year is no reason to be reserved."

Makina hesitated for just a moment, then said, “All right” with a smile and a deep nod. It really did feel like her every gesture was perfectly choreographed, somehow. *That’s a celebrity for you, I guess...*

With that, Miki stepped aside, clearing the podium for the class representative (who was also part of the cultural-festival organization committee, at that particular moment). The class rep took up position at the front of the room and immediately started soliciting ideas for what we could do for the festival.

“Let’s run a maid café!”

“A haunted house!”

“Wouldn’t making, like, a huge maze be kinda fun?”

Our classmates started rattling off one idea after another. Everyone seemed really into the whole thing, and to be fair, I could understand why. We were in our second year of high school, meaning that this time next year, we’d be smack-dab in the thick of our entrance-exam studies. We most definitely wouldn’t have any free time to waste preparing something for the cultural festival, so really, this was the last year we’d get to enjoy it to the fullest. Part of me was looking forward to really making the most of a cultural festival with Yuna and Rinka as well...but considering how things were going at the moment, I couldn’t even begin to guess how that would turn out.

In the worst case, they might’ve gotten totally sick of me and dumped me by the time the festival gets here. Oh, man, what should I do...?

At that moment, at least, I wasn’t in anything even close to a calm enough state of mind to look forward to the festival. And so, instead of joining in on the merrymaking with everyone else—which, to be fair, I wouldn’t have been likely to do anyway, since I barely had any friends—I sort of just sat there listlessly, waiting for the period to pass by.

And, for a while, that was more or less working out...

“Hey, how about we put on an idol show?!”

...until a new suggestion sent waves throughout the classroom.

“Wha— Seriously, dude?!” one of my classmates shouted in

response.

"You have *got* to be kidding, Miura," said another.

Miura's the one who suggested that? Miura... Miura, uh... What was his first name again?

I knew that Miura was one of the class troublemakers—or maybe it'd be better to call him a class clown? Anyway, he was a really cheerful, attention-grabbing sort of guy. I'd barely ever talked to him, but one of the few times I had, he'd teased me in a way that sort of got under my skin, so I wasn't exactly super fond of him.

"Come on, guys, think about it!" said Miura. "We have an *actual*, real-life idol here! We've *gotta* do something with that, right?!"

A few more people spoke up to chastise Miura, and absolutely no one chimed in to support him. If one of my ideas ever got a reception like that, I knew for a fact that it'd be *years* before I stopped flashing back to it while trying to fall asleep. The fact that he *wasn't* writhing in unfathomable shame really went to show how different we were, mental-endurance-wise...

"Imagine if all of us put on the ultimate idol show! Wouldn't that be, like, the *best*?" Miura insisted. His cheery enthusiasm was infectious, and a few of our classmates were starting to nod and mutter in half-hearted agreement.

The one person whose opinion really mattered here, however, was Makina. Miura's whole pitch was that we could put on a show starring a real idol, which meant that he was assuming she would take center stage. Makina, however, was on hiatus from her work. The whole stated reason why she was here at all was so that she could focus on her studies. The thought of making her put on a performance under those circumstances was pretty beyond the pale. Actually, it felt pretty darn rude of him to have made the suggestion at all...but being the pathological nonconfrontationalist with all the aggression of a terrified bunny rabbit I was, I just quietly huffed to myself instead of saying anything. I don't think that was just me either—most of the class still seemed to be hoping that he would take a hint and drop it, already.

Sure, Makina's still smiling, but there's no way she's actually okay with this on the inside...

"I'd be fine with that," said Makina.

"*Bwuh?!*"

And just like that, she'd blown my expectations completely out of the water! I'd even let out a really weird grunt of surprise...but no one was bothering to look at me. Everyone, Yuna and Rinka included, had spun around to stare at Makina in shock. I don't think *any* of us had expected her to actually agree. It wasn't like we'd been silently pressuring her into saying yes...or at least, I didn't *think* we had been. *So why on earth did you do it, Makina...?*

"But," Makina continued, "umm... I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Ah, me? Miura! Housuke Miura!"

"Well, I believe you said a moment ago that I'm 'a real-life idol,' but I'm afraid the truth is that I'm *not* an active idol, for the time being. Putting on a performance of my own when I'm officially on hiatus might be difficult for me."

"Ah. Right..."

"However, I'd be happy to *participate* in a performance as part of this class."

"Huh?!"

First she picked us up, then dropped us down, then picked us right back up again. She'd really run us through the emotional gamut, but in the end, Miura and the rest of the class all seemed elated at the thought that Makina was willing to participate.

Makina looked around at our classmates...and smiled warmly. "However," she said, "I do have one condition."

"A c-condition? You mean, like, an appearance fee?!" said Miura.

"No, no," Makina replied. "It's just... Seeing as this is a school event, and we'll all be putting it together as a class, it would seem like a shame for me to be the only one who actually performs in the end."

"So, like...you want some of *us* to sing and dance and stuff with you? That's the condition?"

And just like that, every member of our class lost their nerve in unison. Who wouldn't? Makina performing for us would be great and all, but having to be up onstage *with* her would be torture, even if

you were only a backup dancer. No one could possibly look good in comparison to her... *Actually, wait.*

Maybe, just maybe, Yuna and Rinka could pull it off...?

Our school had its very own Sacrosanct duo. Sure, that might not be much of a title compared to "nationally renowned idol," but when I tried to look at things optimistically, it was certainly true that Yuna and Rinka both easily had enough charm to rival Makina's. If anyone could manage it... *Ah?!*

Wait a minute—when did everyone in class start staring at the two of them?! Is everyone thinking along the same lines I am? But that would mean...

"Mh..."

"Ugh..."

Yuna and Rinka were both fidgeting restlessly. They had, of course, realized exactly what everyone was now hoping for from them. This was different from how it had been with Makina. This time, the expectations in the air really *were* silently pressuring them into saying yes. The ultra-famous idol Maki Amagi had already said that she would perform. An unbelievably massive wall had already been cleared, and now it was all up to them to not let it go to waste. I couldn't possibly imagine how much pressure that was putting on them. After all...I was one of the ones doing it. My expectations had been raised as well, even if it was unintentional on my part.

Yuna... Rinka...

I felt a pang in my chest, but I had no clue how to help. All I could do was watch. I didn't have any sort of right to get involved...

A dry *smack* suddenly resounded throughout the room. Its source...was Miki! She'd clapped her hands together, resetting the awkward, oppressive atmosphere in the blink of an eye!

"I believe that's enough discussion for today. We don't need to reach a final decision until the day after tomorrow—that is, until the end of school on Friday—so we have plenty of time to consider our options," Miki said as she stood up and reclaimed her position at the podium from the class rep. "It seems that everyone with an idea has already made their proposal, so we can go home, think our options through, and take a vote in the near future. Does that sound

acceptable?”

Everyone agreed, and with that, our extended homeroom session—and the school day—came to an end.

“Momose, Aiba—may I have a word with you?” Makina asked the moment homeroom wrapped up.

“Sure,” Yuna replied after just a moment of hesitation.

“All right,” Rinka agreed as well before turning to me. “Sorry, Yotsuba. I know I said we’d walk home together, but...well, you heard her.”

“Nah, that’s fine! No worries!” I replied right away. I wasn’t upset at all. Far from it, really...I was too preoccupied by how powerless and petty I was.

I had a pretty good idea of what Makina wanted to discuss with them: the performance that our classmate had proposed. I was curious...but it also didn’t feel like something that I had the right to stick my nose into. *I’d probably just be in the way if I hung around to listen.*

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll, uh... I’ll just head out, then. See you all tomorrow!”

“Later, Yotsuba,” said Yuna.

“Take care on your way home,” Rinka added.

“Thanks,” I said with a nod...and, lacking anything else meaningful to add, I shouldered my bag and left the classroom.

I silently plodded off toward the school’s entryway, unable to shake the murky discontent that was plaguing me. It felt like I’d been doing nothing *but* worry, lately—like the moment I thought I’d finally resolved one issue, another would spring right up to replace it. I wasn’t the brightest bulb in the box, and there were only so many problems I could handle at the same time before I hit my mental capacity and came to a dead stop. Still, even if it *was* totally beyond my means, I wanted to make every possible effort to do right by Yuna, Rinka, *and* Makina.

The second semester of our school year was jam-packed with events. The cultural festival was already kicking off, and the school marathon would be coming up right after it, followed by the school trip that all the second-years would get to go on. We had plenty of

tests to deal with as well, and I was the single person at our school most in need of extra time to prepare for them. And then, even if I managed to get through this year's tests, it'd be time to start preparing for my university entrance exams right afterward, and *that* was sure to put me on an even less flexible schedule than the one I was dealing with now.

But here I am, at a total standstill...

At some point, I'd started biting my lip without realizing it. It felt like I'd break down in tears if I didn't. I knew that crying wouldn't solve anything, though. Moping over my problems was one of my bad habits, and would only make me feel worse about them in the long run.

Just as I heaved a sigh...

Wham!

...something slammed right into me?!

I toppled over, landing on my backside, then looked down. Whatever...or rather, *whoever* had run into me was now latched on to my midsection. I gaped with surprise as I realized who it was.

"E-Emma?!"

"Ugh..." Emma groaned. I couldn't see her face, on account of it being buried in my chest, but her fluffy, brightly colored hair was unmistakable. I had most definitely been tackled by Emma Shizumi!

I remember thinking how cute she looked in her uniform when I ran into her on the day of the opening ceremony, and boy, was I ever right about that... Wait, no! Not what I should be thinking about right now!

"What is it, Emma?" I asked.

"Yotsuba..."

"Yup! That's me, all right!"

Emma tilted her head to look up at me, still clinging to me as tightly as ever. My first impression was that she looked worried. She wasn't crying, but something about her expression made it feel like she might start at any second.

"What's wrong...?" I asked. "And, umm, where's Koganezaki?"

Emma didn't say a word. I really felt like Koganezaki would be way better equipped than I was to help her at a time like this. Emma

considered Koganezaki her surrogate elder sister, for one thing, and she was also really good at taking care of people. She was a friend who I knew I could always count on, all in all...but right now, she was nowhere to be seen.

"Yotsuba," said Emma, "are you free, indeed...?"

"Huh? Ah, umm," I mumbled. That was a surprisingly complicated question. I wasn't *busy*, per se, but considering how much worrying I'd been doing about Yuna, Rinka, and Makina, it didn't quite feel right to make it sound like I was totally unoccupied either.

"Are you busy, indeed...?"

"Nooope! I'm free! Totally not busy at all!" I yelped. One look at Emma's gloomy expression had me reflexively giving her the go-ahead before I knew it! "Heck, I'm always free if you need me to be! Anytime!"

"Indeed...?"

"Indeed!"

Finally, a slight smile spread across Emma's face. Only a *very* slight one, though. Emma was a pure, innocent angel whose smile seemed to come so naturally to her, it was hard to picture her *without* one. Her attitude at the moment felt incredibly subdued compared to her usual self.

Something must have happened, but what could possibly put Emma this down in the dumps...? Wait, did something happen to Koganezaki?!

"I want you to follow me, Yotsuba," Emma said.

"A-All right! Can do!"

Emma took me by the hand and set off, pulling me along down the hallway. We ended up attracting a fair bit of attention thanks to how conspicuous that made us...or, really, thanks to how eye-catching Emma herself was. But for the time being, I did my best to deal with it. I couldn't let myself get all negative this time—that would just make her more anxious than ever, after all—so I tried my hardest to just block out the world around me and focus on Emma and Emma alone.

And, a few minutes later...

"Urgh! Is... Is *this* where we're going?"

"Indeed!"

Emma...had brought me straight to the student guidance room.

O-Oh no. Why would she bring me here? Wait...it couldn't be! Is... Is Koganezaki being held prisoner in there?! No wonder Emma's so depressed, if that's what's happening!

Everyone knew that Koganezaki was an honor student. I mean, she was smart enough to go toe-to-toe with Yuna when it came to academics, and if our school had had a student discipline committee, I was absolutely positive that she would've ruled over it with an iron fist. She would've been feared by students the whole school over!

Ah, no, wait! I know that sounds bad, but she's actually really nice, I swear!

If I had to pin her archetype down, I'd say that Koganezaki was actually a lot like Miki, my homeroom teacher. She seemed calm, collected, and dispassionate at a glance, but deep down inside, she was overflowing with altruistic spirit.

Err, wait. Does that make sense? If her altruistic spirit's overflowing, it wouldn't be deep down inside her at all anymore, would it? Boy, this metaphor's completely gotten away from me, hasn't it?

Aaanyway, the word "unimpeachable" felt like it summed up Koganezaki's image in a nutshell pretty nicely. It would've taken something *really* crazy for her, of all people, to get locked up in the guidance room. Considering how much Emma looked up to Koganezaki, it was only natural that she would want to rush out and find some way to save her as quickly as possible!

What exactly am I *supposed to do about this, though...?*

The guidance room was a singular space—one that ordinary students were unable to encroach upon. Yes, indeed—it was an un-encroachable space! It was so un-encroachable, I felt like I just *had* to say it twice to get the point across...but I'm getting sidetracked again. The *point* is that we were in a real predicament, and I knew it.

Now, I'll admit that out of all the students at our school, I was probably the one most familiar with that particular room. I ended up getting called there by Miki whenever I got a particularly bad grade

on a test, which was pretty often. That, however, is exactly why I knew how terrifying of a place it was. And the fact that my exact polar opposite, the ever put-together Koganezaki—a girl who by all rights should never have had any reason to even dip a single *toe* into that room—was the one who'd been called in there was, well... All I can say is that I couldn't even begin to imagine what might've been going on past that door. Sure, my general policy was to do literally anything that Emma asked of me, but this was a bridge too far, even for—

"Yotsuba..."

"Leave it to me!"

Agggh! Did I really have to throw in the confident chest thump? Was that really *necessary?!*

I know this looks bad, but seriously—when a girl like Emma gives you her perfect little puppy dog eyes while tugging at your sleeve...there's just no resisting it, okay?! I had absolutely no choice, okay?! It was too late for doubts. There was no room for hesitation! Fretting over the situation would've just set me off on another pessimistic tangent anyway, and since I didn't want to make Emma stay sad for even a second longer than absolutely necessary...

"E-Excuse me!!!"

...I shut my brain the heck down and threw open the door to the student guidance room!

And. And, uh...?

"Huh?"

Koganezaki wasn't inside. Neither were any of our teachers. Instead, a girl who I'd never seen before was sitting in the room. I couldn't tell exactly how tall she was because, y'know, sitting, but if I had to guess, I'd say she was maybe a little shorter than me.



Her large, sort of bulky glasses and her freckles gave her a cute, youthful appearance, but in a totally different sort of way than how Emma came across. She also didn't seem even slightly surprised by how I'd just barged into the room. Her arms were crossed, and she had a confident grin on her face.

"I...uh?" I grunted.

Am I in the wrong room...? But I just double-checked that with Emma a second ago, didn't I? And considering how calm that girl seems, she was obviously expecting me to show up... W-Wait. Could it be?!

"Are you...Koganezaki?!"

It hit me in a flash. In short: Everything made sense if I assumed that the bespectacled girl was, in fact, Koganezaki herself! Now, granted, she looked nothing like Koganezaki whatsoever. You'd think they were two totally different people, at a glance...but that was a trap! No, I had to think *outside* the box! Koganezaki suddenly looking like a totally different person was ridiculous and unbelievable...which was *precisely* why Emma had been so freaked out earlier!

The girl—or rather, *Koganezaki*—stared at me through her glasses and blinked a few times. A few seconds passed by, then a few more, and then a few more...and then, finally, she let out a tired sigh.

Ah ha! That's just like how Koganezaki sighs at me!

"Welp, guess I shoulda expected you'd suss it out right away, Hazama."

"So you really *are* Koganezaki!" I exclaimed. "Wait...'welp'? 'Shoulda'? *'Suss'?*"

Is it just me, or is she not talking like Koganezaki usually does? I should also note, by the way, that her voice didn't sound anything like Koganezaki's either. Koganezaki's voice had a very calm, straightforward sort of tone to it, but this seemingly younger Koganezaki's voice was weirdly high-pitched and youthful in comparison. If I had to put it into words, it was the sort of voice that made people ask if you were trying to talk like an anime character.

Koganezaki cleared her throat. "As you've correctly surmised, I am indeed Mai Koganezaki," she said. "Surprised?"

"A-Am I ever! But, wait—how did you end up looking like that...?"

"It's a long story. It all started back at the height of summer vacation..."

"Huh? But we saw each other on the first day back to school, didn't we? You looked normal then, so how could it have started in the summer?"

"Ugh...?!" Koganezaki reeled backward. She shot me a glare that practically (and confusingly) screamed, *You could've said that sooner!* "I-I misspoke, that's all! What I meant was... Right! I meant that I, Mai Koganezaki, consider school days like this so easy to get through, I might as well still be on summer vacation!"

"Oh, okay! That does sound like you."

"..."

Huh, that's weird. I agreed with her and everything, but she seems really disappointed in me now! I wonder why?

"Well, anyway, stuff happened, blah blah yada yada jibber jabber, buncha crazy junk or whatever, and in the end I, Mai Koganezaki, ran smack-dab into this body's owner and the next thing we knew, we were in one of those 'wait, did we get body-swapped?!' sorta dealios. And that's the whole story."

"And, umm, is that also why you're talking so weirdly now...?" I asked.

"'W-Weirdly'...?" Koganezaki (seemingly younger) repeated with a wince. "Well, I guess you're not *not* wrong about that...not!" she added, snapping her fingers and shooting me a wink.

Yeah, okay...something's off here.

I was beginning to doubt whether I was, in fact, talking with the real Koganezaki after all. I was just about positive that normally—and, heck, even if things *were* pretty darn abnormal—she would never act like *that*.

I'd always gotten the sense that Koganezaki was someone who took pride in her sense of individuality. I actually thought that was one of the things that made her cool, and secretly, I sorta wished I could be like her in that respect. The girl in front of me, however, didn't seem to have any of that. In fact...it almost felt like she was someone else altogether.

Which must mean...!

"Wait a minute...you're not Koganezaki at all, are you?!" I shouted, pointing straight at her like a master detective who'd just unveiled the *real* perpetrator!

"Wh-Whaaat?!" Koganezaki (fake) shouted, reeling back in shock!

"I can't believe you! You impersonated Koganezaki and tried to trick me...but too bad! I'm the one person who'd never fall for an act like that! You played yourself, dummy!"

"Grr...! Curses—I never thought you'd catch me! This is the biggest blunder I've ever... Wait. Huh? Hold on a second."

"What?"

"Weren't *you* the one who got the wrong idea and assumed I was Koganezaki in the first place?"

"I... Hm?"

"I mean, look at me. It's all *sorts* of obvious that I'm not her, right? Like, it'd be kinda hard to come up with *anything* I have in common with her, aside from us both being girls."

"No, but, I mean," I babbled before glancing over at Emma, the girl who'd brought me here, in befuddlement.

"She's the president!" said Emma.

"Precedent for what?" I asked apprehensively. *Does that mean things are only going to get weirder from here...?*

"What? No, president. I'm the *president*," said the girl. "As in P-R-E-*S*, not C!"

"You're the president...of the student council?!"

"Non!" the president (fake Koganezaki) said, clicking her tongue and waggling a reproachful finger in my direction. "Perhaps this will clear things up: I'm a comrade in arms of Mai Antoinette!"

"Antoi...? Wait, what?"

"Mai Antoinette. By which, of course, I mean Her Ladyship Mai Koganezaki."

"What part of that deserved an 'of course'?!" I shouted. I did *not* get why, but apparently, "Mai Antoinette" was her nickname for Koganezaki.

Actually, it's kind of crazy that Koganezaki of all people would have a nickname at all... Whoever she is, she and Koganezaki must

be pretty close.

"She gives me the biggest stink eye you'll ever see whenever I call her that, of course!"

"Wait, so it's a totally nonconsensual nickname?!"

"Bwa hah hah hah!"

How on earth can she laugh *about something like that?!* If Koganezaki ever gave *me* a look like the one she was describing, I was pretty sure my heart would shrivel up like a salted slug.

"Umm, okay, but really—when you said you're her comrade in arms, what did you... Hm? Wait. The *president*...? You don't mean —?!"

"Oh *ho*? Looks like you *think* you've put the pieces together, but we'll see about that! I bet this is going to be another crazy misunderstanding, but let's hear it, just for funsies."

"Are you the president of the Sacrosanct fan club?!"

"You actually got it?!"

Okay, I'm not sure why she's so shocked by that, but woo! I guessed right! She's...the president of the Sacrosanct fan club?! The one that Koganezaki's the VP of?!

"Man, just when I thought I'd get to mess with you again, you pulled a fast one on me instead..." the president sighed. "The way you mistook *me* of all people for Mai Antoinette was so ridiculous, I sorta just assumed you were one of those folks who misunderstands absolutely everything. I'll admit it—you got me good, damn it all!"

And now she seems impressed, for some reason...? I mean, I'll admit I misunderstand most *things, but I guess right every once in a while! And this is one of those times!*

"Well, whatever. I think it's time for some self-introductions! *My* name's Akane Hishimochi, and I'm both a third-year at Eichou High and the president of the Sacrosanct fan club! You can feel free to call me 'Mocchi'—I won't mind a bit!"

"U-Uhh, huh...?" I stammered.

You know, I was already starting to catch on to this before...but this person's kind of just a lot*, isn't she?!*

"Oh, but be careful—that's 'Mocchi' with an M, not 'bocchi' like lonely! I know I probably don't look it, but I'm actually *super* great

at making friends and stuff! Like, you wouldn't *believe* how many people come to my birthday parties, and I'm always *drowning* in presents every Christmas and Valentine's Day!"

Drowning in...presents? Huh. Weird, but okay. I wanted to question whether that was a valid way to measure how many friends you had, but I decided to just brush it off and move along instead. It's not like I was in any position to judge someone else's friendship criteria, after all—I mean, I barely had any!

"Oh, and if you're curious about my hobbies, I like games and anime and stuff, I guess. I'd be perfectly happy if you'd think of me as your totally average geek girl, please and thank you kindly," the president added.

"O-Oh. Okay, then. I, uh... My name's Yotsuba Hazama," I said with some difficulty. Every last little thing she said and did was just *so* high-energy that giving her my name took pretty much everything I had left. Not that I even had a nickname to give her, honestly—Makina's "Yotsy" aside—or any major hobbies to talk about. At the very least, I didn't have anything that could match her sheer intensity.

"Oh?" said the president. "What's wrong, Amme? Why're you hiding behind Miss Yotsuba?"

"Wha— Emma?" I said, glancing over my shoulder reflexively. Emma really was cowering behind me, seemingly using me as a shield. *Super* cute, for the record.

"My sister dearest told me not to talk to the president too much, indeed," Emma explained.

"*Zowie!*" the president shouted.

I didn't know people ever actually said that in real life!

"My poor heart, Amme! Oh, how it breaks... If that's true, it would mean that Mai Antoinette doesn't *trust* me, wouldn't it...?" the president said, shoulders slumping as she hung her head dejectedly. That dejection only lasted a second—like, an *actual* second—before she shot right back up again. "Psych! I know that's just how Mai Antoinette shows how much she cares! Bwa hah hah!"

Oh, wow, the positivity! To be honest, I could imagine why Koganezaki would be wary of her. She seemed like the sort of person

who Koganezaki would rather not have to deal with at all, I guess.

"And, now that we've had our little chat, I should probably tell you that it was, in fact, Amme over there who called us together to talk today," the president continued.

"Huh...?" I grunted. "Wait, you mean you didn't ask her to bring me here, Miss President?"

"Hooold the phone! Don't you 'Miss President' me, thank you very much! I may be the president of the Sacrosanct fan club, indeed...but I *myself* am nothing more than an insignificant, utterly plain, perfectly pedestrian anime nerd!"

"'Utterly plain'...? I'd kinda describe you as the total opposite of that, actually," I muttered. She was so powerfully distinctive that I wouldn't be forgetting her for a *long* time. Heck, I sort of expected her to start showing up in my dreams starting that very night.

"Also, didn't I literally *just* tell you to call me Mocchi?"

"N-No, I mean, that'd be rude! You're an upperclassman and all, so..."

"In that case, I'm pulling seniority to *make* you call me that!"

"Gah?!"

Speaking as someone who'd more or less lived her life in solitude, I'd had almost no experience interacting with actual, real-world upperclassmen. I'd never been in a club and gotten to experience that mixed-age, hierarchical sort of community...largely because my policy was to run the heck away from anything that struck me as even a little bit dangerous. My social circle had expanded a little lately, sure, but Yuna, Rinka, Makina, and Koganezaki were all in my grade, and Emma was a year younger than us. Oh, and my sisters were younger than me too, obviously.

The only people I regularly interacted with who were older than me were my parents and my teachers, basically. I felt like I was on relatively good terms with Miki, I guess...but, no, I knew I couldn't let myself forget that to her, all of that was just part of her job. The relationship between a teacher and their students was effectively the same as the relationship between a convenience store clerk and their customers! Getting it into my head that we were somehow close would just put Miki in a really uncomfortable situation!

And...oh, *boy*, did this ever turn into a big ole digression, but what I'm trying to say is that I had effectively no experience with upperclassmen, and *no* clue how to go about interacting with them. The one thing that I did more or less understand was that the mysterious life-forms known as upperclassmen were above me on the social ladder, meaning that if one of them ever gave me an order, it would *probably* be for the best for me to follow it, as long as it wasn't super crazy or anything. Don't rock the boat, and all that jazz. And so, if obeying my upperclassmen's orders was my standard operating policy...then the best choice for me this time, clearly, was to bite the bullet and do as she said.

"Mo... Mocchi?"

"*Woo!*"

Woo?!

"Oh, I *like* it! You've *got* it, girl! That timid, bashful innocence is just *on point*! Seriously, that was some *killer* stuff! Geh heh heh heh...!"

"O-Oh, god, she's a pervert?!"

The president—I mean, Mocchi—was giving me a *really* distressing, leering stare, with a gross smirk to accompany it. My inner alarm bells were ringing at full volume, informing me that I was most definitely in danger, and I took a step back.

By the way...*totally* incidentally, Yuna triggered that same alarm from time to time as well. Usually just moments before she hugged me. Only when the two of us were alone, of course!

"Come on, say it more! Say it!"

"Umm... Mocchi."

"More!"

"Mocchi."

"More, more!"

"*Mocchi!*"

She'd gotten me sort of worked up, at that point. My mind was so jumbled by it all that the "more"s and the "Mocchi"s had started melding together, and I almost couldn't tell who was saying which anymore...but I had a feeling that Mocchi was in the same boat in that regard, so I figured I could probably just call it good.

Anyway...all I've been doing is talking, and yet somehow I'm completely *exhausted. She's just so much, and I've never been great at talking with strangers to begin with. It's not like I've gotten many chances to practice! Ahh, I wish I was home right now. I can't wait to get the heck out of—*

"Psst... Yotsuba, Yotsuba!"

"Ah! Sorry, Emma!"

The conversation had been such a total mess from start to finish that I'd actually forgotten what I was here for! I should've been focused on Koganezaki, not whatever all *that* was!

"Whoopsies! My bad, Amme," said Mocchi. "Okay, let's cut to the chase. Can't keep this room occupied forever, anyway."

"Come to think of it, why *did* you decide to have us meet in the guidance room...?"

"Heh *heh*! Do you really wanna know, Yotsuband?"

"On second thought...? No thanks," I replied. Now, I was both curious about why we'd met in this particular room *and* tempted to object to the aggressively uncute nickname she'd suddenly foisted on me, but I had a feeling that following up on either of those leads would just make this take even longer than it already had, so I resisted the urge.

"I mean, honestly, it's pretty straightforward: This was just the easiest room to sneak into. They'd get *so* mad at us if they realized we were using it!"

"Then maybe we shouldn't be?!"

"Eh, it's fine! Nobody ever comes in here anyway," Mocchi replied with a cackling laugh. And, sure, it wasn't like we were causing trouble for anyone by being in here...but it still felt like I'd been tricked into being the accomplice to a crime, and I really wished I hadn't asked in the first place.

What if the teachers really do catch us in here...? Actually, wait, that's easy: I'll tell them it was all her *fault, then grab Emma and make a clean getaway!* I took Emma by the hand in advance, just so I'd be ready to make a break for it at any moment if things went south. Emma cocked her head in confusion, then squeezed my hand back. *A* literal *angel, I'm telling you...*

"But yeah, you wanted to talk about Mai Antoinette, right? Amme said she wanted me to tell you about her, anyway," said Mocchi.

I paused. "Did you do something to her?"

"U-Uh, *no*? No, you definitely have the wrong idea! I didn't do anything at all! Right, Amme?"

"The president didn't do anything, indeed," Emma said with a nod. "I know that you're the only one who can help my dearest sister, Yotsuba! But I also knew that I wouldn't be able to explain it well, indeed... But the president's a blabbermouth, so I asked her to do it instead, indeed!"

"Ayup! That's me, President Blabbermouth!"

Yeah, if you wanted someone to blabber then you picked the right girl for the job, I thought, rudely. She really did seem to have a talent for talking—or at least, for talking circles around people. And honestly, if Emma had tried to explain it herself, I would've hung off her every word, no matter how awkward or faltering they might've been! It sort of felt like she didn't trust me to understand her, which was a bit of a shock...

"Ahem! May I?" asked Mocchi.

"Oh... Sure. Go ahead," I said. *Right! Koganezaki's our top priority right now! I don't even know how many digressions that makes, but it'll be the last one for sure this time!*

"Well, then... Cutting straight to the point, Mai Antoinette's a touch under the weather," said Mocchi.

"Huh?!" I exclaimed. "You mean, like, she has the flu or something...?"

"No, not quite! I mean she's *psychologically* under the weather."

"Psychologically...? But why?"

"I think the fact that Amme decided I could explain this to you better than she could probably gives you all the hints you need to figure that out for yourself!"

"Wait, do you mean...it has something to do with the Sacrosanct?" I asked. The one thing that Mocchi and Koganezaki had in common, after all, was their involvement with the fan club.

"That's half correct!" said Mocchi.

"Huh? What else is there?"

"What else has caused major changes to the school's environment, particularly involving the Sacrosanct, since the beginning of the second semester?"

"Oh..."

"Exactly: I'm talking about Oda Ex Makina!"

So...she's already got a nickname ready to go for Makina, huh? Even though I'd bet she hasn't even met her face-to-face. Also—and I realize that I was *way* late on the draw when it came to questioning this—it struck me that she'd given pretty strange and inexplicable nicknames to everyone *except* Emma, whose name she'd just reversed instead. It felt pretty simple compared to all the others, I guess...but on the other hand, Emma was already such a perfectly singular existence that she didn't need any other seasonings to spice up her presence, so I could sort of see the logic behind the choice.

"I, meanwhile, was once a diehard fan of a certain idol group," Mocchi continued. "As such, I happen to consider myself quite well informed when it comes to the idol industry...but even *I* was shocked when a genuine idol transferred in."

"Umm, so, what does this have to do with Koganezaki...?"

"Oh, whoops! That's right. We'll save *my* story for some other time."

So we will *be talking about it some other time, then?* I had to admit that I was a little curious—okay, no, *very* curious about what sort of person Mocchi really was, so I was actually sort of okay with that.

"Not to air our inner circle's dirty laundry or anything, but truth be told, the Sacrosanct fanclub is going through something of a schism right now," Mocchi explained. "In short: There's been intense debate on the subject of whether or not Oda Ex Makina should be included as part of the Sacrosanct!"

"If she should... Huh?"

"Some believe it was meant to be, while others reject the claim and assert instead that the Sacrosanct is, by definition, formed by Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba alone. In short, a rift has formed between the reformists and the traditionalists, and it's widening by

the hour."

I thought back to the feeling I'd had in class about how it felt like everyone was watching Yuna, Rinka, *and* Makina as a single unit. Apparently, that phenomenon had morphed into a much bigger problem than I'd realized within the Sacrosanct fan club.

"I can see where both sides are coming from, honestly," said Mocchi. "The reformists think that having one more person to squee over could only be a good thing. It broadens the potential shipping spectrum, y'know? They think that more people and more freedom is always for the better. Why tie yourself down when you don't have to? All you'll do is suffocate yourself for no good reason."

"Okaaay...?"

"*But*, I can't deny that the traditionalists have a point too. Is it really *right* for us to lump Oda Ex Makina in with those two, just like that? After all, what makes the Sacrosanct so perfect and precious—indeed, what gives it form to begin with—is the deep and long-standing bond that the esteemed ladies Yuna and Rinka have been forming with each other since the days of their youth. To usher Oda Ex Machina—a non-native presence—into that relationship would be akin to the releasing of the red swamp crayfish into the rivers of Japan: seemingly beneficial at first, but ultimately devastating to the local environment! It would risk altering the very nature of the Sacrosanct on a level so fundamental, there could be no undoing the damage that might be caused!!!"

I couldn't help but get a little caught up on the bit where she'd called Yuna and Rinka "esteemed ladies," but I decided to just ignore it for now. There were a *bunch* of bits of her explanation that hadn't made any sense to me at all, but what I did understand from personal experience was that the introduction of Makina into our class had begun to gradually alter the previously stable patterns of our day-to-day lives. I could kinda understand how the fan club people would have pretty strong opinions about that.

"Mai Antoinette is a well-respected figure within the fan club's ranks. Both sides of the schism seem to believe that if they can just bring her around to their position, it will give them the pull they need to come out on top—which is why both of the factions have

apparently been giving daily presentations to her on why *they're* in the right and the other side has it all wrong."

In other words, the one most affected by the changes brought about by Makina's appearance—the one most impacted by the discord brewing in the fan club—was none other than its vice president, Koganezaki. It finally felt like the pieces were starting to come together... *But, wait. Huh?*

"Hold on," I said. "What have *you* been doing when they're lecturing Koganezaki, Mocchi?"

"I'm less a lead-by-example, shining-symbol-of-discipline sorta leader and more the sort who gets hyped and causes trouble right along with the rank and file. Getting all those stuffy rules and junk sorted out's more Mai Antoinette's cup of tea, so nobody really expects me to play much of a role in this mess in the first place. Tee hee!"

I'd really prefer if you tried to sound less proud of that. And, wait—does that mean that as things stand, Koganezaki's stuck in the middle between the factions, getting pulled in two directions at once without anyone whatsoever there to support her?!

"Supporting one side would mean the collapse of the other. Their positions are just too contradictory to be anything other than mutually exclusive. At this rate, it won't be long before we have *two* fan clubs on our hands. I'd be basically okay with that if it's what everyone wants, but Mai Antoinette's been racking her mind to figure out a way to keep it from going down like that, and from what I can tell, it's taken a pretty nasty toll on her."

"But Maki... Oda only just transferred in three days ago, and Koganezaki's so tough! How could it already be bad enough to make her sick...?"

"See, that's exactly the thing. The situation's so volatile that everything could easily get flipped on its head in a *single* day. The pace of the changes is so fast you can't keep up with it, can't come up with any good answers, and always know that by the time a new day comes around, everything might've gotten even *worse*. She's a smart cookie, which means that she thinks things through and sees that sort of stuff coming in advance way more than most people

would. Then she convinces herself that she *has* to work harder to think up a solution, and it all just spirals in on itself... She's never been great at letting other people help out with her problems, you know?" Mocchi said, heaving a heavy sigh.

Mocchi did have a point. It was hard to imagine Koganezaki as someone who would willingly accept a helping hand, even in a time of need. In my mind, Koganezaki was strong, tough, and cool as all get-out...though the fact that *I* was always desperately in need of her help might have been coloring my impression of her a little. And it really did seem like Mocchi actually wanted to help Koganezaki, in her own extremely strange sort of way.

"So, umm... I think I understand what's going on in the fan club, more or less," I said. "But I still don't know the most important part. Where *is* Koganezaki right now?"

"I think this'll go quicker if you ask Amme that part," said Mocchi.

I looked over at Emma...and found her once again despondently staring a hole in the floor. "My dearest sister's taking the day off school."

"You mean, because of everything the president just told me about?"

"Indeed," Emma said with a little nod.

So...I guess she's so backed into a corner that she decided to skip school instead of dealing with it? On the one hand, that felt a little overdramatic, but on the other hand, I could sympathize with the sentiment. Sometimes when I was in the middle of solving a problem on a math test, my mind would get tied up in a knot and I'd *completely* forget where I was in the formula. I'd be all, "Wait, what was I doing just now? What am I supposed to do next?" and just keep spiraling until my thought process would come to a total standstill. That was a pretty regular experience for me, honestly.

At times like those, I tended to end up giving up on solving the problem altogether. While I wasn't convinced that the current situation was *perfectly* comparable to that, I had a feeling that Koganezaki had probably needed some sort of way to run away from the fan club problem, and that taking the day off school had been the only method she could find.

"I know I don't look it, but I'm actually pretty worried about her," said Mocchi. "Unlike me, she's not the type to play hooky on a whim."

So Mocchi is *that type, huh...?*

"I could try calling her, I guess, but she's also not the type to open up to someone just because they asked her what's on her mind, right? Sure, I'm technically her commanding officer, but even if I ordered her to fess up, she'd definitely just lie and say she's fine. Same goes for her cute little underclassman Amme."

"Indeed..." Emma chimed in sadly.

"And that's why we're passing the baton off to you, Yotsuband."

"Wait, why *me*?"

"Well, from what I've heard, she's already opened up to you quite a lot. Hasn't she?"

"D-Do you really think so...?"

I mean, yes, I felt totally safe calling Koganezaki a friend, at that point...but did she really trust me enough to open up to me about her problems? I had a pretty hard time imagining that. In fact, it felt more like *I* was always talking to her about *my* issues, causing her trouble, and exasperating her in all sorts of new and creative ways. And yet...

"I know you can help her, Yotsuba!" Emma declared. She was giving me a look of pure, unvarnished expectations, and I couldn't help but want to live up to them.

If Koganezaki was in trouble, I wanted to help her, even if I wasn't the first person who should've been stepping up for the task. I didn't have any confidence that I *could* help, but I still genuinely wanted to try. And although Makina's arrival had given rise to a few problems of my own that remained unresolved as well, I had a feeling that if Koganezaki and I thought it all through together, we'd definitely be able to come up with some sort of solution—or at the very least a start to one!

"I... I'll do it," I said. "I don't know *what* I'll do, exactly, but I'll give it a shot and see what happens!"

"Thank you indeed, Yotsuba!"

Bwaugh! I thought as Emma hugged me, sending my

consciousness soaring into the upper atmosphere. In a good way, of course...not that I could explain what that even means, or why it would be a matter of course at all.

"Hey, Amme—don't you think a certain club president who did her best to explain everything deserves a thank-you hug too?"

"My sister dearest told me not to talk to you too much, indeed." Emma huffed, turning away from Mocchi.

"*Zowie!*" Mocchi shouted, reeling in shock.

Okay, I have to say it: Isn't her choice of exclamation there just a little too dated...?

"Just kidding! Thank you indeed, president!"

"*Gah!*" Mocchi and I shouted in unison as Emma pivoted on a dime from a pouty frown to a perfectly angelic smile! And the fact that we were in a moment of crisis made that smile look several times brighter than it usually did! Even *my* heart skipped a beat, and it wasn't even aimed at me!

Who knew that she could pull off such a high-level technique...? That was downright devilish! Emma's devil side has suddenly taken center stage!

"To think I'd live to witness such a wonder... I can die happy now!"

"M-Miss President...?!" I yelped.

Mocchi gazed up toward the heavens, a look of purest tranquility upon her face. For a moment, it almost looked like she was crumbling away into ash.

"Yotsuba!" said Emma. "We should go, indeed!"

"Huh?! You mean, we're just leaving Mocchi here...?"

"My dearest sister is more important right now, indeed!"

"Right... Yeah, you're totally right!" *Of course she is!*

And so Emma pulled me off by the hand, leading me out of the guidance room. How the ashen remains of the president made their exit afterward, none could say. She might very well have been caught by a teacher and chewed out for using the room without permission...but if she had, then that fact was lost to the darkest annals of history.

If I don’t see it happen, it might as well have not happened at all!

Chapter 2: The Koganezaki Rescue Committee

To make a long story short: Emma and I, having founded what I'd started thinking of as the Koganezaki Rescue Committee, made our way straight to our target's house on the double.

"Bwuuuh...?" I grunted in a stupefied daze as I stared up at a very literally towering high-rise apartment building. I'd ended up asking Koganezaki for advice about my little sisters over the past summer—after running into Emma by pure coincidence, actually—and at the time, she'd revealed that she was currently living alone in a luxury high-rise that her grandfather had rented for her. Seeing it now shouldn't have been a huge surprise, considering I'd already known the building would be huge, but having it right there in front of me like this really drove in the fact that Koganezaki was *the* prototypical young woman from a wealthy family. There was something just plain elegant about the building she lived in, even from the outside.

"Yotsuba? What's wrong, indeed?"

"Nothing, really. Just a little nervous..."

"Nervous?" Emma parroted. She'd been walking in front of me, and now spun around to face me. Then she reached up to pat me on the head...or, well, the forehead, at least. "It's all right, indeed!"

"Emma...?"

"This is what you do when someone's nervous! Head pats make it all better, indeed!"

Gaaah! Her sincerity! It's melting all my negative emotions away in an instant! And also, holy moly, the power *of that head pat! No wonder all the members of the Worldwide Emma Fan Club* (current membership: me) *are so devoted to her!*

I was extremely prone to falling into deep, dark pits of

pessimism, so part of me wanted to ask if Emma would be willing to pat my head on a regular basis—say, once an hour or so—as a part-time job. She probably wouldn't, but I was awfully tempted.

"Do you feel better, indeed?"

"Sure do! I feel so, so, so, so, so, so, so, *so* much better!"

Agh! I'd ended up feeling so much better, I spent way too long saying it out loud! And I did it in a frantic, heavy-breathing-laden rant, with what felt like pretty severely bloodshot eyes and a series of nods that were just *way* too enthusiastic! *Surely even Emma would be freaked out by—*

"That's good, indeed!"

Uhhhhhhhhh...?

Instead of being grossed out, Emma flashed me an impossibly bright smile. Not a hint of distaste to be seen!



Her sheer, shining aura of purity blotted out the world around me. I felt myself fading away into the light—and a moment later it consumed me whole, wiping me clean off the face of the earth.

Thank you, Emma. You really are...the best...!

◇◇◇

So anyway, I lost consciousness and transformed into a human chatbot dedicated exclusively to spamming "Emma is an angel" nonstop for a bit. By the time I'd come to my senses and reverted back to plain ole Yotsuba Hazama, Emma had pulled me by the hand all the way to the door of Koganezaki's apartment. I'd definitely walked from the building's entrance to here, but I couldn't remember the path we'd taken to save my life. We *probably* rode an elevator at some point, but that's the best I had—the rest of the experience had been completely overwritten by how darn *soft* Emma's hand was. Also warm.

Ahh, Emma, Emma, Emma, Emma...

"Yotsuba? Are you all right, indeed?" asked Emma.

"Y-Yup! Same as ever!" I replied—which was, tragically, the complete and total truth. *Same as ever, yessiree.* "So, umm, did you tell Koganezaki that we were coming?"

"Indeed no!"

"Huh?! So we're barging into her room unannounced?! Is that really okay?!"

"She would say no if we asked, so I didn't, indeed."

What am I, a stray dog Koganezaki wouldn't let Emma adopt if she asked?

I could very easily visualize Emma promising that she *would* take care of me, *honest*, while Koganezaki put her foot down and told her to put me back where she found me. Koganezaki would eventually give in, though, and I'd join the Koganezaki family as their newest pet, but Emma's free-spirited nature would rear its head every once in a while and she'd forget to take care of me! Then Koganezaki would shake her head, mutter, "Honestly, that girl," put a collar around my neck, and take me out for a walk. Et cetera, et cetera.

Beep!

And while all *that* was running through my head, Emma had unlocked Koganezaki's door. It had one of those super near-futuristic-feeling fingerprint sensor thingamajigs on it, which Emma's prints were apparently registered to.

I wonder if they'd register my fingerprints too, after they adopted me...?

"Wait outside for just a little, Yotsuba!"

"Huh? Uh, I mean, sure."

Apparently, Emma had to go in on her own first. It seemed I wouldn't be finding out what the living room of a luxury high-rise apartment looked like just yet, after all...and I was also starting to feel more and more like I was *actually* being treated like a stray dog Emma had picked up off the street somewhere.

This, incidentally, meant that I'd been left alone in the hallway of a building that felt like it should've been inhabited exclusively by the upper crust. I felt *deeply* out of place, which made me feel even more isolated than being left on my own normally did. No one was around, which was nice and all, but if someone *did* show up and saw me spacing out in the hallway, I was pretty positive they'd think I was some sort of creepy intruder or something!

I have to act natural! Gotta find something I can do to blend in... Think, think, think! Where's that light bulb popping up above my head when I need it the most?!

"Wait... I know!"

I quickly rifled through my bag, pulling out a notebook and a mechanical pencil. A normal pencil would've hit the aesthetic I was going for better, but beggars can't be choosers!

"Oh *ho*! What fascinating designs! I see, I see...!" I muttered, humming with feigned interest as I stared at the walls and their...I dunno, decorations, I guess? I think "filigrees" might be the word for it? Anyway, the point is that I was pretending to be an industrious youth who aspired to be a wall-decoration craftsman when she grew up! I'd made my way into the hallway of a super ritzy-looking high-rise apartment building to study and sketch its designs for future reference!

Heh heh heh! Now nobody will think I'm suspicious at all!

I had a clear and obvious reason to be in the building now, so no one would mistake me for a burglar and call the cops on me. That was one disaster averted in advance! My plan was flawless—my camouflage, impenetrable! I was starting to think that I might have the makings of a spy or a phantom thief slumbering away deep within me!

"Hmm... Indeed!"

"Gah! E-Emma?! When did you get back?!"

"What were you looking at, Yotsuba?" replied Emma, who had—*again*—silently snuck up next to me without me realizing it at all. She was squatting down, watching me study the wall's decorations. "There's nothing interesting there at all, indeed," she added with a cock of her head.

Yeah...there sure isn't. Suddenly, I felt extremely embarrassed about how excited I'd been about my plan. I mean, "an industrious youth who aspired to be a wall-decoration craftsman"? What did that even *mean*? I had *no* clue what the me from a few seconds back had even been thinking!

"Ah, umm, well," I babbled. The me who could make sense of my logic was gone, and all that was left was a me with an extremely pitiful attempt at a sketch in her hands. Well, that and Emma, who was gazing straight at that pitiful me, trying to understand what exactly I was doing.

I have to rise to meet her expectations! I have to come up with some way to explain this! And so...come on, light bulb! You have another job to do!

"Well, Yotsuba doing weird things is normal, indeed," Emma said with a satisfied nod.

"Umm?! *Emma?!*" *Is that really how she sees me?! If so, I* absolutely *brought it upon myself, but still, that kinda hurts!*

"More importantly, the preparations are all ready!" Emma continued.

"Huh? Preparations?" I repeated.

"Indeed!"

Once again, Emma pulled me by the hand...straight into

Koganezaki's apartment?! *Is it really okay for me to just casually walk in here like this?!*

"E-Excuuuse me," I anxiously called out as I stepped inside. It was pitch black—or at least, the entryway was—and the low near-whisper I spoke in almost made it seem like I was sneaking into someone's room to pull a prank on them.

W-Well, I'm inside now. I hope this is okay, because it's too late to take it back! This is *okay, right?!*

"This way, indeed!" Emma said. She opened up a nearby door and ushered me into...a changing room?

W-Wait, a changing room?! But why*?!*

"Umm, Emma? What are we...?"

"Change into this, indeed!"

"Huh?!" I grunted as Emma handed me some sort of outfit. *Is this what she had to get ready for me?* "Umm... Okay, but why am I changing clothes?"

"Because you're wearing your school uniform!"

"Er, right. We came here straight from school, so..."

"That outfit is *this room's* uniform, indeed!"

Wh-What?! Now that's *an ultra-high-class high-rise apartment policy if I've ever heard one! I can't believe this place even has its own uniform!*

On the other hand, I probably shouldn't have been surprised. I'd heard that fancy restaurants had policies about guests having to wear certain types of clothes too—y'know, like dress codes, or whatever? And then there was how prim and put-together Koganezaki always seemed to be. Like how when I saw her during summer vacation, she went to the trouble of putting on her school uniform even though we didn't go anywhere *near* the school grounds, for instance. Considering how strict about that sort of thing she was with herself, Emma's claim that her house had a uniform associated with it made total sense! In fact, it would've been weird if it *hadn't* had one!

Well, you know what they say: When in Rome, uhh, something something, can't build a uniform in a day without breaking some eggs!

"O-Okay, got it," I said. "Thanks, Emma!"

"Indeed!" Emma replied with a spirited nod before stepping out from the changing room. Now left alone, I finally got around to unfolding the outfit she'd handed to me...

"Bwuh?"

...and let out an undignified grunt of utter bafflement.

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"Yotsuba! You look wonderful! Adorable, indeed!"

If there was one saving grace to this whole situation, it was the fact that Emma's Latin species name was *Angel angel*—and her taxonomic family? Also "Angel." I was pretty sure there wasn't a trace of malice to be found in that girl's mind, and for some reason she was also incredibly attached to me. I just couldn't bring myself to believe that her perfect, adorable smile was a front, or that she had any intention of making a laughingstock of me. In other words, her intentions were one hundred percent innocent. In fact, she probably wouldn't have understood why I'd question her intentions at all—to her, making me wear this was simply the natural, sensible action to take. I was pretty positive of that, actually.

"N-No, I definitely don't," I moaned.

I hadn't wanted her effort to go to waste on my account, so I *had* put on the outfit she'd given me...but honestly, it already had me on the brink of complete psychological collapse. She could've complimented me all day and I still wouldn't have believed that those clothes *actually* suited me. If clothes could cry, these ones would've been bawling at the thought that *I* was wearing them. Outfits like this were for people who were *way* cuter than me—like, for instance, someone like Emma herself. She was wearing one as well, and was living proof that people like *her* were the ones who gave outfits like this their value.

"If anyone looks good in these clothes, it's you," I added.

"Indeed?" Emma said, cocking her head. The white ruffles of her little headband bobbed in the air.

Cute!

"But them looking good on me doesn't mean they don't look good on you...indeed!" Emma said, pressing her fingers into her temples as she pondered the matter. It didn't feel like she was trying to reassure me—she was *actually* having trouble following the logic of my response.

But, okay, look, I know this isn't just me. Anyone would've said the same thing!

Anyway...it's probably time for me to stop beating around the bush. The clothes that Emma and I were wearing...featured black and white elements that stood in truly exceptional contrast with one another, and were known far and wide as the reigning champion of the cosplay world.

They were maid uniforms!!!

They're...maid uniforms...

I, Yotsuba Hazama, at the age of sixteen, had just put on a maid uniform for the very first time in my life, at the least likely moment imaginable. And as if that wasn't bad enough, I'd done it with a shining example of the *ideal* maid-uniform-wearer standing right in front of me!

"I think you look very cute indeed, Yotsuba!" Emma said...but I just couldn't take it seriously with her standing right there, providing an *incredibly* stark contrast between the two of us. Comparing the degrees to which we were pulling off the outfit was like comparing heaven and earth. Emma had the blood of the Swedes flowing through her veins—her lineage traced back to the very homeland of maidery, and the uniform looked impossibly perfect on her as a result!

To be honest, Emma's ability to pull off outfits was so high-level that she could've worn anything and looked great in it. That said, the concept of maids had permeated modern Japanese society so widely and thoroughly that "a maid café" had been one of the first suggestions during today's discussion about our class's cultural-festival submission. Maids were *big*, and a classical, authentic example of one like her held a jaw-dropping degree of value.

Indeed: The one thing that modern Japan faced a dire lack of, above all else...was Emma. There'd be no talking me out of *that* opinion. I could argue it so passionately and persuasively, it would get me elected prime minister if I picked it as my core issue to run on!

Hm? How did *I* look in *my* maid uniform? Simply put: I looked like I'd dressed up for a practical joke on a student-level budget, at best. It didn't help that Emma's uniform was a long-skirted, very traditional sort of deal, while mine was—for some reason—one of the super played out miniskirt ones... But actually, no, I shouldn't try to pin this on the miniskirt. Miniskirt maids don't deserve that sort of shade. The problem was that I didn't have what it took to *be* a miniskirt maid, that's all.

"Wait a moment, Emma," I said. "Am I understanding this right? This is the official uniform for Koganezaki's house?"

"It's the uniform for the people who take care of my dearest sister, indeed!"

"O-Okaaay, then," I replied. This was total conjecture on my part, but I was starting to get the feeling that Koganezaki had had precisely nothing whatsoever to do with these uniforms becoming a thing.

"All right, let's go, indeed!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

But anyway, it was time for "When in Rome: Part Two"! I'd already waded into the situation up to my knees, and at this point, my only option was to just go with the flow and hope for the best!

And so I set forth into Koganezaki's living room, trusting that Emma would educate me on the rules of the household.

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Koganezaki's apartment ended up being a lot cleaner than I'd expected it to be. To be brutally honest, considering how perfect and put-together she seemed from the outside, I'd sort of suspected that she'd be surprisingly sloppy when it came to keeping her place tidy...but nope! Wasn't true at all! It was a *little* dirty here and there,

sure, but in a way that only really told me that she didn't clean on a literal daily basis. That level of mess was well within the permissible range, by my estimate. You would've had to nitpick something fierce to criticize her for it, that's for sure.

That said, there was one slight exception: the place's atmosphere. The weird, gloomy darkness that I'd felt in the entryway—heck, from the hallway, even—was very much still present in the living room.

"So, where's Koganezaki?" I asked.

"My dearest sister...is mushroomed," said Emma.

"M-Mushroomed?"

"It happens often, indeed. But it's been a long time since the last time, indeed."

"O-Okay...?"

Emma's explanation had suddenly gotten a lot less comprehensible...or at the very least, a lot more abstract.

Okay, so, lemme get this straight. There's a state of being called "mushroomed," and Koganezaki ends up in it pretty often, but it hasn't happened recently? And since it happened again today, for the first time in ages, Emma ended up getting worried and asking me to come over with her...I guess?

"This way, indeed."

The perfect maid—by which I mean Emma—pulled me by the hand yet again, leading me from the living room toward the next room over. That, I assumed, was Koganezaki's bedroom.

"Sister dearest...?" Emma called out as she peered into the bedroom's pitch-black depths. Her voice sounded so fearful and timid—so close to tears—that it was almost hard to believe it was coming from her...and it hit me *right* in the feels, that's for sure. A response, however, never came.

"K-Koganezaki?" I tentatively called out next. Again, no one responded...though when I perked my ears, I realized that I could just barely hear someone breathing. "I'm coming in, okay...?"

I still wasn't sure what was going on, but I stepped into the room, reached for the wall, and groped until I found a light switch.

"I'm turning the lights on, okay...?" I asked, just in case, but once

again my question went unanswered. That wasn't a no, so I went for it and hit the lights. "Ah..."

I found myself in a bedroom, as expected...but there was no sign of Koganezaki. I *could*, however, still distinctly hear someone breathing.

"Sister dearest!" the maid—sorry, Emma—exclaimed as she trotted into the room, leaned over the bed, and started shaking a mound of piled-up blankets.

I did *think there was something weird about that pile...but, really? Is Koganezaki actually under there?*

"Sister dearest? It's already evening, indeed!"

"Nooo..."

"Nooo"?! Did I hear that right?! Because it sure sounded like someone a lot younger and a lot more spoiled than Koganezaki was just pouting at us from under those blankets!

"H-Hey, Emma?" I said. "Are you sure we have the right person here? That can't possibly be Koganezaki under there, can it...?"

"It's right! My dearest sister is under there, indeed!" Emma said. Then she took hold of the blankets and yanked them right off the bed, without a hint of mercy or hesitation!

"Mngggh...!"

The blankets' former inhabitant let out a pitiful moan, probably on account of the glaring light that she'd suddenly been exposed to. Now that I'd gotten a good look at her, there was no room left for doubt. The girl under the blankets...really *was* none other than Koganezaki!

Well, I guess she could be someone else who just happens to look *like Koganezaki...but no, that can't be it. I'd never mistake someone for one of my friends like that!*

"Noooooo," Koganezaki groaned. She was curled up in a ball on her bed, dressed in pajamas and throwing a very quiet tantrum.

She's almost like a baby... But, wait! How'd she end up like this?!

"Mushroomed, indeed," said Emma.

"Huh...? Oh! Are you saying she ate some sort of poisonous mushroom, and it's making her act all weird?!"

"She thought so much, it made mushrooms pop out of her head,

indeed!”

“Uh...?”

When she put it that way, I’d rarely—and I do mean *rarely*—seen characters in comics get depicted with mushrooms popping out of their heads, as a sort of visual symbolism for overthinking something. Was *that* what she was talking about? Koganezaki didn’t actually have mushrooms on her head, of course, but maybe if I could see the scene through Emma’s eyes, her head would’ve looked like a little mushroom garden. Again, *I* couldn’t see them at all...but watching Koganezaki of all people grumble in her sleep like that made it hard not to take the situation just as seriously as Emma did.

“I’m done... This sucks... Don’ wanna go to school...”

“She’s saying the sort of stuff *I* usually say!”

Now *this* was a shocking development. I almost thought I’d wandered into a parallel world for a moment. Koganezaki was squirming on her bed, mumbling complaints that I *absolutely* would’ve thought were beneath her. This Koganezaki felt even further separated from my image of her than the fake Koganezaki act that Mocchi had tricked me with earlier!

Emma let out an exasperated sigh as she looked down at Koganezaki.

Th-They’ve completely swapped roles!



"So, umm...what's wrong with her?" I asked.

"She's mushroomed," Emma sadly replied.

I got that part, thanks!

For the time being we headed back into the living room, on account of it being sort of painful to see Koganezaki in that state. That didn't prompt any good ideas, and I *was* wearing a maid uniform and all, so I ended up keeping myself busy by doing a bit of quick cleaning while I prompted Emma to explain what was going on in just a little more detail.

"Umm, indeed," Emma began before launching into an explanation that contained *way* more words than actual, pertinent information. Deciphering it was a bit of a task, but when boiled down to its essentials, it went something like this.

First: It turned out that Koganezaki *wasn't* actually as mentally tough as she came across—or at least, it didn't come naturally to her. She did her best to project a tough image when she was at school, but was apparently much more sloppy (on a relative scale) when she was at home. She'd walk around barefoot, fall asleep on the couch, not take a bath after showering because she couldn't be bothered, and spend every New Year's Eve lounging around until midnight in the comforting heat of her kotatsu... All of which, to be honest, sounded totally normal to me! I had to admit, though, that when I pictured Koganezaki doing any of it, it seemed weirdly ill-matched in a way I couldn't quite put into words.

It seemed her family had decided to let her live on her own because they trusted her to be responsible. That was crazy for me to even consider—not only did she have to keep up at school, she also had to take care of herself in every way, day after day. Speaking as someone who couldn't do *either* of those things, the fact that she'd seemingly managed both for so long was incredible on its own. Then came the second semester of our second year in high school. Things always got busy around this time of year, and then Makina had transferred in, adding a huge, school-shaking incident on top of it all.

From that point onward, everything had apparently gone pretty much like how I'd heard in the student guidance room. A schism in

the fan club led to it teetering on the brink of a split, and Koganezaki found herself being pestered and pressured by both sides of the conflict to see things their way...which triggered her breakdown and subsequent transformation into Mai-take Koganemushroom.

Actually, no—saying she broke *is going a little too far... But still, the fact that she's psychologically fragile enough to skip school's probably not a good sign.*

If nothing changed and Koganezaki went full truant, her family would probably start to worry about her. She might end up not being able to live on her own anymore, and could even be forced to transfer to another school. That would mean she'd be freed from the pressures of the Sacrosanct fan club, so in a certain sense it would probably be a happy ending for her...but *I* sure didn't want it to turn out that way. I'd finally made a friend, and I didn't want to lose her.

Well, a friend who never opened up to me enough to show me how she acts outside of school, anyway...

"Yotsuba?" Emma said, tugging anxiously at my sleeve just before I could heave a sigh. "I'm worried, indeed."

"Emma..."

"The truth is, this has happened once before."

"Before, as in...when you were in middle school, maybe?"

Emma nodded. That one time when Emma kidnapped me and tied me up on the rooftop, I'd heard about how the two of them had gone to the same middle school. Supposedly it was one of those fancy schools for upper-class girls too. At the time, I'd just seen it as an interesting bit of trivia, but the more I thought about it afterward, the stranger it started to seem.

This is just my vague mental image of how schools like that work, so I could be wrong, but I'd always thought they were the sort of place that you went to all throughout middle *and* high school, automatically entering one the moment you graduated from the other. Koganezaki, however, had enrolled in Eichou High instead, and Emma had gone out of her way to transfer in as well just a little while after the start of the year. I had to admit, I was pretty curious about how all of that had come about...but I had no idea whether or not it was a subject best avoided.

"Hey, Emma...? Did something happen back then?" I eventually worked up the nerve to ask.

Emma just hung her head, and didn't say a word. It seemed like she didn't want to talk about it...but I had a feeling that the similarities between what had happened then and what was happening now could give us the hint we needed to snap Koganezaki back to her senses. I couldn't just *force* her to tell me everything, though...

It's like Koganezaki's shut up in her own little world, too scared of the outside to let anyone or anything in...and I can kind of relate to that. I've been in pretty much the same place plenty of times.

That wasn't a place you could stay in for long, though. Hiding away from the world to protect yourself took a lot more energy than you might expect. It's like how if you got in a fight with your mom, declared you didn't want dinner, and shut yourself up in your room, you'd eventually be foiled by your own empty stomach. The world would wait you out, one way or another.

The best thing we could do would be to find some way to lower Koganezaki's guard...or maybe something to help her relax?

"Oh... Of course!" I exclaimed. I'd just thought of the perfect thing we could do for her—something totally mundane but incredibly relaxing that always prompted me to have all of my best ideas! "Emma!"

"Indeed?"

"I need your help with something! Would you mind?"

"Indeed not!"

Emma and I got to work right away. When you didn't know the right solution to a problem, you just had to try every idea that came to you, one after another, until something worked out... Though of course, if I'd told Koganezaki that when she'd been her normal self, she might've chewed me out for not thinking ahead.

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"Heave, ho, heave, ho...indeed!"

"Are you ready in there, Emma?"

"Indeed!"

"Okay, then... Deep breaths, deep breaths... Pardon me; coming in!"

Even after Emma told me everything was all ready, and even though I was the one who'd come up with this idea in the first place, I still had to take a second to work up my nerve. I took a few long, deep breaths...then flung the door open! A burst of hot, moist air surged out to greet me, and when the steam cleared, there she was, sitting in a vacant, half asleep sort of state.

"Oh jeez, oh *jeez*," I muttered under my breath. Again: I fully appreciate that I was the one who'd suggested this, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that this was absolutely *not* something that I was supposed to be doing at all.

I'd never forget that day, toward the end of summer—the day I went on a date with Makina without telling Yuna and Rinka in advance...and the day they used "punishing me" for that indiscretion as an excuse to teach me whose girlfriend I *really* was, in a very physical sense. To be more specific: We'd all gotten together in my room...and taken our clothes off!!!

When I was really little, my mom told me that the only people outside my family I should let see me naked were people who were really, particularly special to me. I saw adults get into bed in the nude together in movies or TV shows from time to time, which I assumed was what she was talking about. Like, it didn't feel like being nude in a public bath or a locker room was quite the same thing... But anyway, exceptions aside, the point is that I'd always figured that seeing someone naked more or less meant that you'd become an adult.

As for right now...well, we *were* in a bathroom, so maybe it was another exception to my mom's rule. It wasn't a public space like a bathhouse, though. It was the bathroom in a friend's apartment, and that felt like it was straying dangerously close to the line. Plus...I was in that bathroom with a girl I *thought* was my friend: Koganezaki.

Yup. That's right. I was in Koganezaki's bathroom...and she was

in there too, in the nude! Sitting on a bath chair, spacing out, naked as the day she was born!

N-No, wait, it's not what you think! This is not *cheating! That's definitely not what's happening here!!!*

I stepped into the bathroom, bellowing out frantic excuses to Yuna and Rinka in my mind at the same time. Incidentally, Emma and I were still wearing our maid outfits. Emma had told me it wouldn't be a problem if they got wet, which was good, because we weren't here to enjoy a friendly bath with Koganezaki. No, we were here to do our duty as maids and *attend* to her during her bathtime!

People say that a nice bath doesn't just clean up your body—it cleans up your mind too. By washing and purifying your body—by enveloping yourself in water just a touch warmer than your own natural temperature—you can achieve a state of physical *and* mental relaxation, washing your troubles, fatigue, anxiety, and sweat right down the drain together. Bathtime is a moment of peace, and that's exactly what I thought Koganezaki needed right now above all else.

So this is absolutely not, by any means, in any way, even slightly something that I need to feel guilty about at all... And oh, wow, she really is *pretty...*

However many excuses I told myself, reality stubbornly refused to conform to them. Yuna and Rinka had looked really, really incredible naked too...which is one of those things that I *know* makes me sound like a humongous perv even as I'm saying it, but it was just plain true. Speaking as a girl, seeing them like that made me extremely aware of how I just wasn't any sort of match for them. And now, seeing Koganezaki...well, honestly, all I could say was that she was on the same level.

Now, to be fair, it's not like I'd seen *many* people naked. The whole list was basically just my mom and dad when I was little, and my little sisters more recently. I wasn't exactly approaching this with a trained and discerning eye, but still, I could sort of just *tell*. Something about the way they didn't have the slightest bit of flab, but were still *just* filled out enough in a muscular sort of way to not look underweight. Something about the smoothness of their skin, and how it seemed so darn flawless I was almost afraid to touch it.

It really was perfect—completely unblemished, as far as I could tell. And I just knew that if I asked them how on earth they kept their bodies in such incredible shape, they'd tell me "nothing, really," in a complete deadpan. It was stuff like that that let me just *know*.

Wait. I'm staring way *too much right now, aren't I?!*

I shook my head frantically and somehow drove away my less-than-pure thoughts. Well, more or less. I *tried*, anyway.

"All right, Emma. We'll give her a quick wash first, then shove her in the tub!" I said.

"Yes, indeed!" Emma enthusiastically agreed.

"Okay, Koganezaki. Let's get you nice and clean! Hands up!"

"Don' wanna..." Koganezaki groaned, seemingly still in a half asleep daze, but I steeled my heart and ignored her.

I was pretty sure that Koganezaki hadn't even *really* registered that I was there yet, most likely. She'd pushed her mind to its limit, exhausted herself, grown so weak she wanted to just escape from reality entirely, and in the end she'd shut everything else out...which was a state that I was intimately familiar with.

But still...totally ignoring your friend after she comes over to your house is kinda mean, isn't it?! Even if I did *show up totally unannounced!*

"You've earned yourself a washing! I hope you're ready for this!" I said as I soaped up a foaming mesh, getting the suds nice and frothy before squeezing them out and smearing them onto Koganezaki's arms.

"Hyeek?!" Koganezaki yelped with a little jump. Apparently, that had really surprised her.

Is she finally coming to her senses...?

"...Tickles."

Nope!

Koganezaki had started squirming, but that was about it. If I were judging purely from how her voice sounded, I probably would've guessed that she was a second-grader in elementary school or so. That was adorable and all, but the goal was to get her back to her normal self, and that clearly wasn't going to happen instantly. I'd have to carry on!

Wait... Carry on? To where? I got her arms all soaped up, so the next place would be...h-her chest?! Her boobs?! But...I've barely even touched Yuna's and Rinka's *a little so far! W-Wait, no! That's not what this is about! I'm* helping *her! Yeah, that's right! This is all about helping her, so it's not weird at all!*

I belted out one silent apology after another in my mind, even though they'd never reach their intended recipients. I really *was* just trying to help her, honestly. It was like how touching someone's chest while performing CPR on them wasn't weird or inappropriate at all! I felt *nothing* about touching her! Not! One! Thing! So it was fine! Totally benign!!!

"Ah..."

Excuuuse me?! What was that noise she just made?! I barely even skimmed her with my fingertip!

"Gah! S-Sorry!" I yelped. One way or another, an apology definitely felt like my first order of business. B-But not because I was getting worked up over the situation or anything!

"Should I scrub harder anywhere, indeed?" Emma asked.

"Mnhh..." Koganezaki vaguely grunted.

Emma had ended up in charge of shampoo duty, and she seemed awfully familiar with it...but now I was starting to think that *I* should've taken on that job. On the other hand, if I'd done a terrible job of it and messed up her cuticles, then even if we *did* bring her back to her normal self, I would incur her wrath for sure...so, really, it was kinda moot in the end.

"Yotsuba, you've stopped scrubbing, indeed!" my maid overseer—sorry, I mean Emma—scolded.

"S-Sorry, ma'am!" I yelped as I frantically got back to washing away.

That's it. I have no choice... It's time to carry out Operation I'm-Not-Touching-You!

Allow me to explain! Operation I'm-Not-Touching-You was a plan I'd devised to ensure that if Koganezaki started getting mad at me after she eventually snapped back to her senses, I'd be able to honestly tell her that I *did* wash her, but *didn't* touch her in the process. In other words, it was my ultimate get-out-of-trouble

technique! How, specifically, would I pull that off? Well, I'd just pile soap suds up in my hands, then slather them onto her, just like usual...only *this* time, I'd be super careful to make sure that only the *soap* touched her, and my hands remained a slight but safe distance away.

Part of me wondered if just spreading soap bubbles over her *might* be totally ineffective when it came to actually *washing* her...but, eh, I figured it'd be fine. Think about how washing dishes works: If you just fill a pan with water, squirt some detergent in, and leave it alone for a while, by the time you get back to it all that caked-on food will wash right off without even having to scrub it with a sponge! I just had to believe in the persistent progress of modern soap science!!!

Careful, caaareful, I thought as I started soaping her up so excruciatingly slowly and deliberately, you'd almost think I was putting the finishing touches on a ship in a bottle. The thing is, the thought that I *couldn't* touch her no matter what, but still had to go as close to that limit as I possibly could, was making my hands tremble with nervousness...

"Mh... Ah..."

...and every once in a while, for a fraction of a second, one of my fingers would just barely graze her. Every time it happened, Koganezaki would let out a weirdly erotic-sounding sort of sigh...and that, of course, just set my heart pounding faster than ever.

O-Okay, her stomach's all soaped up...and since I'm definitely *passing over her more private areas, now I just have to handle her legs, and I'll be all—*

"Quit teasing me."

"Huh?"

The very moment I thought that the finish line was finally in sight, I heard Koganezaki quietly mutter something. Then, an instant later, she grabbed my right hand.

"Uh?" I grunted, freezing up in shock.

"Right here..." Koganezaki said, pressing my hand to...

O-Oh god, to her chest! She's using it like a sponge!!!

"Mhh, ahh..."

"K-K-K-K-Ko— Ko— Koganezakiiiiii?!"

Judging by the sensation in my palm, Operation I'm-Not-Touching-You was in tatters. I was picking up a smoothness, and a distinct bounce as well...and even though touching *mine* wasn't that different or anything, it felt really, I don't know... Really...

Really nice...

"Feels nice..."

We're thinking the same thing?!

To make matters worse, Koganezaki's tone of voice was full of desire and alluring in a way that was starting to make *me* feel more and more hot and bothered by the moment.

B-But, no! This isn't me cheating. It's not...

She pressed my hand harder against her chest.

This... This isn't...

"Mh! Ahh..."

Okay, this might count as cheating!!!!!!!!!

I'd never gotten *this* solid a handful of Yuna's or Rinka's boobs before! Not my sisters' either, as if that needed to be said! This was something you only did with someone you were in a relationship with—not with your family, and most *definitely* not with a friend who was only questionably conscious! Not to mention... *Wait, gah?!*

"Staaare...indeed!"

Emma-sama Is most definitely Watching Over Me!!!

"Mhh, ahh... More..."

"My dearest sister looks like she's enjoying this, indeed!"

"N-No, Emma, this isn't what it looks like! I just, umm..."

"Are you a natural-born masseuse, Yotsuba?!"

".....Yup!"

Oh, thank goodness! She thinks this is all just part of a massage!

Or, well...honestly, it sort of felt like this *was* basically just a massage, and like I was just overreacting to a kind of major degree.

Yeah... I know this might not be convincing coming from me, but there's no way I'd do anything that lewd with a friend of mine! This is just a massage! Squeezing your friend's boobs just a little isn't weird at all if you're giving them a massage! It's just part of the process! If health insurance covers it, it can't be weird at all!

"Mh..."

"Huhwhaaa?!"

Gah! Of all the times for her to change up her behavior!

Koganezaki had pulled my hand away from her chest...and was leading it down toward her lower regions instead!

N-Nooope, absolutely not! That's *not somewhere you're supposed to touch unless you're dating...scratch that, unless you're* married*! That does it—desperate times, desperate measures!*

Before Koganezaki could lead my right hand to its presumed destination, I used my *left* hand to finish sudsing up her legs at the (figurative) speed of light. And then...

"Emma, now!"

"All right, indeed!"

I gave the signal to Emma, who'd finished shampooing Koganezaki's hair ages ago! Without wasting a moment, Emma grabbed the plastic washbowl lying nearby, scooped up a bucketful of hot water from the tub—and poured it *right* over Koganezaki's head!

"Eeek?!" Koganezaki yelped with shock as the water splashed over her. She relaxed her grip, and in that split second I yanked my hand free, grabbed the shower head, and took aim!

"Huh?! Wh-What in the—?!"

I sprayed her down, washing all the soap suds into the drain...

"Okay, that's good! Let's put her in!"

"Yes, indeed!"

"Gaaah?!"

...then lifted her up with Emma's help and tossed her right on into the bathtub!

"Phew... Mission accomplished!" I said with a sigh of relief.

"Not yet, indeed! We still need to apply conditioner to my dearest sister's hair!"

"Ah, right! I forgot!"

While Koganezaki sat in the bathtub, blinking rapidly in a bewildered daze, Emma carefully scooped up her hair, patted it dry with a towel, applied some leave-in conditioner, then wrapped it all up in another towel atop her head.

Th-That was perfect! She handled Koganezaki's hair so quickly and efficiently, I'm almost starting to think she has an extra pair of arms that I just can't see! She really must be used to this! No wonder she's the head maid!

"All right," I said. "Now if we just let her relax in the tub for a while, she'll go back to the usual Koganezaki on her own in no... Wait. Huh?"

Suddenly, a thought struck me. *When we threw Koganezaki into the tub a moment ago... Actually, no, I think it was a little before that. Didn't it seem like her vibe sorta changed right after Emma dumped that bucket of hot water on her? I mean, she sounded surprised, but not in that innocent, presumably-a-second-grader sort of tone from before. Her voice seemed way clearer, almost as...if...*

"So. I have *quite* a few questions that I'm going to have to ask you..."

"Huh?"

"But to start...perhaps you'd like to explain what, exactly, is going on here?"

"I...have *no* idea."

There in the bathtub sat not Little Miss Koganezaki the presumed second grader, but rather Koganezaki the full-grown high schooler, glaring *right* at me with a noticeable, irritated twitch to her brow. Whether I should've been happy or terrified about that was up to question...but before I could even start sorting that out, I decided to get down on my hands and knees and apologize like my life depended on it.

Chapter 3: Reality Sets In After a Happy Ending

She's baaack! Mai Koganezaki is back in action!!!

Thank goodness. It's a happy ending! Peace of mind for her, and for me too! That's one job well done, so time to make like a tree and —

"Not so fast, *you*."

"Augh!"

I was making a beeline straight for the front door when a hand fell on my shoulder, holding me very firmly in place. Needless to say, it belonged to the recently resurrected Koganezaki. The girl who stood before me couldn't have been more different from the Little Miss Koganezaki (age: three) I'd been dealing with up till just a little while ago. No, now I was facing down a Koganezaki dressed very properly in a set of perfectly ordinary clothing and giving off exactly the sort of tense, dangerous aura that I'd expect from her—actually, no, even *more* so than I'd anticipated.

Now, you might think that if I'd *really* wanted to get the heck out of there, I should've made a break for it while Koganezaki was getting dressed after her bath...but unfortunately, it just wasn't that easy on account of one simple fact: I'd still had to change out of my maid outfit! The uniform that Emma had made me change into had spelled my doom at the last second, leaving me to reflect on how sometimes, it felt like the world really was perfectly engineered for the sake of dramatic irony.

Emma, incidentally, had been extremely relieved by Koganezaki's return to usual form and was currently powdering her nose, shall we say. Indeed: Angels *do*, in fact, powder their noses too! *Really wish she was here to help me right now, though! Save me, Emmaaa!!!*

"What?" said Koganezaki. "Oh, stop shaking like that. I'm not

planning on chewing you out, if that's what you're so terrified of."

"Huh?! You're not?! Really?!" I yelped with shock. I mean, I'd been *convinced* I was about to get the scolding of a lifetime!

Then again, now that I was taking a second, less panicked look at her, Koganezaki wasn't showing all of the signs of fury that she usually did. A few of them, maybe, but not *all* of them. In fact, if anything, she was acting more awkward than angry.

"The fact that you're here at all more or less tells me what happened," Koganezaki continued. "I ended up...in *that* state again, didn't I?"

"I guess you weren't really self-aware throughout all that, huh?" I said.

"The best way I can describe it is that it's like being completely drained, losing all motivation, and ending up stuck in a perpetual dream...more or less. It happens on occasion...no, on *very rare* occasion. And every time it does, Emma ends up worrying herself sick about me."

Oh, I get it. If I was understanding this right, then going into that state was something Koganezaki had no control over at all—like her emotional core sprang a leak and completely deflated. It seemed sort of like a form of self-abandonment. *I guess that just stands to reason, though. If she actually* remembered *how she was acting like an adorable, willful little toddler, there's no way she'd let any witnesses leave the scene alive,* I thought, betraying more than a few of my own biases in the process.

"But, wait," I said. "When did you turn back to your usual self?"

"At the point where you dumped a bucket of hot water on my head. I suppose that snapped me to my senses."

"Oooh, gotcha! Cool, cool!"

Koganezaki paused. "Wait a minute," she said, her eyes narrowing. "Why did you seem relieved to hear that?"

"Bwuh?"

"That was the sort of reaction I'd expect if you were worried I'd found out about something inconvenient, but just learned that I did not, in fact, catch on after all."

"Wha? No, I, umm...?"

C-Code red!!!

If Koganezaki came back to her senses when we poured water on her, that meant that she *hadn't* noticed all of those things we'd done—and nearly done—that you were only supposed to do with someone who you were dating and/or married to...but then she'd picked up on my moment of relief when I'd realized that wasn't the case!

"Also, you helped put me in the bath, didn't you? Now that I think about it, it certainly seemed that I'd already been washed by the time I got ahold of myself..."

"*Ahhh!!!* By the way, I sure was wearing a maid outfit, wasn't I?! Did you see it?! What'd you think?! *I* think it suited me pretty darn well, if I do say so myself, yup yup!"

It was time for another of my ultimate techniques: Operation Override One Terrible Conversation With Another, Equally Terrible Conversation! The moment before Koganezaki could open up Pandora's box, I plopped the freshly minted moment of personal shame that was me in a maid uniform right onto the table for us to discuss! *Please let this throw her off the trail!*

"Now that you mention it...I suppose you were. I barely remember it, though."

"Wh-Whaaat? No waaay! How could you *forget*?! It took a lot of courage to wear that outfit, but I heard it was this house's uniform, so I didn't have a choice!"

"My home absolutely does *not* have a nonsensical policy like that in place. That was entirely Emma's preference."

"E-Emma's preference?! O-Oooh, *that* explains it! Boy, she sure had me going! Sheesh, that crazy ole Emma and her silly little pranks!"

"At this particular moment, I couldn't care less about that."

Just like that, the conversation snapped right back on topic! *And I thought it was going so well for a minute there!*

"You used my being indisposed as an opportunity to do something to me, didn't you?"

"N-Nooo...?"

"You *animal*."

"Bwaugh?!"

Now that *was a verbal body blow! Hazama's been knocked a full five meters into the air and straight out of the ring!*

"I *do* appreciate the trouble it's clear you went through to cheer me up...but that is most certainly no excuse for you to have done anything lewd to me while I was, at most, partially conscious."

"O-Of course! I know that!"

"Then spit it out. Tell me exactly what happened, in complete honesty, from start to finish, sparing no details whatsoever!" Koganezaki insisted as she grabbed onto my shoulders, a lethal intensity burning in her gaze. If I had to describe the sensation, I'd say it was probably how it'd feel to have someone hold a knife *right* up against your throat.

I-I think my knees are about to give out...b-but still!

"A-Are you sure...?" I said.

"Excuse me?"

"For all you know, learning the whole truth of everything that happened could be a lot worse for you than it'll be for me, right?!"

"Oh? So you, the perpetrator, are trying to threaten me, the victim? I suppose that's exactly the sort of move I should expect from a seasoned criminal."

"Huh? N-No, that's not what I meant at all!"

"No need to clarify. That works just fine for me—do your worst. If you'd like to crack your knuckles, now would be the time."

"Why are you acting like this is about to turn into a fistfight?!"

"The way I see it, you should be grateful that I'm willing to let it drop with just that. Think of it as my consideration for the fact that you're an acquaintance...or rather, for the fact that we both attend the same school."

"And now you're acting really, really distant!"

I could tell that keeping quiet was only going to make this worse in the long run...but still, it was hard to go through with the alternative. It'd be one thing if *I* was the only one who'd suffer thanks to what I'd be revealing, but I was absolutely positive that Koganezaki would be grievously wounded by the truth as well. That said, she would also most definitely see through any lie that I could

ever think up...so I had no choice.

"All right, Koganezaki," I said. "I'll tell you everything that happened. Start to finish. The whole kit and cannoli."

"I assume you mean 'kit and caboodle.'"

"The whole kit and poodle."

"Caboodle. Did you misspeak, or did you mishear me entirely?"

"*Anyway*, I'll talk! Just take a moment to prepare yourself for what I'm about to tell you."

"Go right ahead, *please*. I've been prepared this whole time. Which is to say, my arms are warmed up and I'm ready to turn myself in to the authorities, if it comes to that."

That's a whole lot more prepared than I was hoping she'd be!

And so I told Koganezaki the whole, complete truth of what had happened that day, trembling all the while. I laid it all out—the whole nit and noodle—without sparing a single detail. I told her exactly how Koganemushroom had grabbed my hand and exactly what she'd tried to do with it afterward, trying desperately not to pay attention to how the color gradually drained from her face over the course of my story...

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"That's much better, indeed! Hm...? Sister dearest? What's wrong?" said Emma as she returned from the restroom, cocking her head at Koganezaki, who had unclenched her fists, buried her head in her hands, and crouched down in a sort of squatting fetal position. "Oh, no...did she mushroom again, indeed?"

"No, I think this is a little different," I replied, giving Emma a pat on the shoulder that I hoped would get the idea across that we should just leave Koganezaki alone for a little while.

She wasn't mushroomed anymore, and even if she went through something pretty nasty, I had a feeling she wouldn't mushroom again for quite some time. After all, she'd just learned that doing so would put her at risk of losing—or at least coming *darn* close to losing—something far, far more important in exchange. I, meanwhile, had a feeling that I wouldn't be forgetting the quiet,

feeble little "...me. Just kill me..." she'd let out after I finished my story, *or* the sensation of her silky-smooth skin, for the rest of my lifetime.

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About one hour later...

"I believe I owe you an apology, Hazama. And I'm sorry for worrying you as well, Emma."

At long last, after going through her second resurrection of the day, Koganezaki had gathered herself enough to give the two of us a formal apology. In the meantime, for lack of anything better to do, Emma and I had appropriated a hair dryer, dried off the maid outfits (which had gotten a bit wet in the bathroom), changed back into them, and gotten a few random household chores done. I didn't *really* think that changing into the maid outfits was a super necessary part of that whole process...

"It's important to dress properly, indeed!"

...but Emma had been very insistent to the contrary, and I'd given in pretty quickly. She was, after all, the single most important source of guidance to be trusted and respected in the world, with "the law" coming in a close-ish second.

So anyway, we waited for Koganezaki's glorious comeback, then gathered up once more in the living room and sat down at the table for a nice, calm chat. I was sitting right across from Koganezaki, while Emma was next to her, leaning onto her like a little kid would cling to their parent. *Cute!*

"I appreciate how thoroughly I've humiliated myself in front of you, and I apologize for subjecting you to that, Hazama," said Koganezaki. "I have no one but myself to blame for how I misunderstood what happened earlier..."

"N-No, don't apologize! I don't mind at all! This sort of thing happens to everyone from time to time!" I exclaimed. *Especially me! I screw up so often, my cumulative record has more failures than successes!*

From Koganezaki's perspective, this incident probably felt like a

tremendous, earth-shattering disaster, but when you thought about what it had actually *cost* her, it really just came down to a single unexcused absence from school and some minor embarrassment in front of me and Emma. *Yup! That's barely anything at all!*

"I'm just glad you've gone back to your usual self!" I added.

"My usual self...? Hmph," Koganezaki said with a bitter smile, her gaze falling to the floor. "President Hishimochi explained the circumstances to you, I assume. Surely even *you* must be disappointed in me...? A single student transferring into our school is all it took to drive me to my wit's end and force me to lock myself up in my home."

"That's not true at all! If I'd been in your position, I definitely wouldn't have lasted a single day!"

"I'm not so sure. Somehow, it's easy to imagine you sorting out the whole mess without much difficulty at all."

"Nuh-uh, no *way*! I'm absolutely positive about this. I mean, I've *never* been the center of attention, so if everyone suddenly started noticing me and asking me to represent them or whatever... Gah, just *thinking* about it's making me feel like I might barf!"

"It's remarkable how confident you sound when you're talking about vomiting."

"Well, it's true!" I insisted. I'd been keeping so many secrets lately that telling the truth like this felt weirdly unfamiliar. Koganezaki seemed exasperated with me...but she also cracked the slightest hint of a smile. "Anyway," I continued, "has Makina transferring in really made that huge of a difference?"

"It has, yes...to the point that the semblance of order I've worked so hard to build feels liable to come crashing down at any moment."

"It's *that* bad?!"

"Yes, because it's not as simple as choosing a side and being done with it. If I declare either side to be in the wrong, it's inevitable that they won't take that decision lying down—and if it comes to open rebellion, I can't say with certainty that I'll be able to protect Momose or Aiba...or, for that matter, Oda."

Oh, I get it. If the fan club's rules broke down, then all bets were off. Even though Eichou High was a prep school full of honor

students, we couldn't necessarily guarantee that no one would fly off the handle if all the safety rails were lowered. Someone might even get hurt, in the worst case...maybe. There was no way of knowing how it would turn out until it actually happened, and by that point, it would be too late to stop it.

"The biggest problem, however, isn't quite as readily apparent," Koganezaki added.

"It isn't?! Then what on earth *is* it...?"

"That would be..." Koganezaki began before pausing to stare straight toward me.

I spun around, looking over my shoulder to see...nothing in particular, actually.

"No. You. I mean *you*. *You're* the factor that could trigger disaster."

"Huh?" I grunted.

"We met over summer vacation, remember? All three of us, in fact."

"Oh, umm... You mean at the aquarium?"

"The aquarium, indeed! That was so much fun!"

"Emma? We're discussing something serious at the moment, and I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't interject."

"Indeed..." Emma sadly murmured. Her face had lit up the second the aquarium was mentioned, but she drooped right back down again as Koganezaki scolded her. That said, Koganezaki quickly patted her on the head to make up for it, and before I knew it Emma was lying down with her head in Koganezaki's lap.

She's a mother! I'm witnessing a professional nurturer do her thing!

"Let's get back on topic, shall we?" said Koganezaki.

"Ah, right," I replied.

"At the time we met at the aquarium, you and Oda were out on a date. I had the opportunity to observe the two of you for more than long enough to conclude that she is, to put it mildly, more than a little attached to you."

"Ah. Right..."

I hadn't actually believed Koganezaki at the time, but in the end,

it had turned out she was completely right. Makina really *did* have feelings for me that were far deeper than what you'd normally expect from a childhood friend. There was no denying it at this point, but still...

"How does that make me the biggest problem...?"

Koganezaki sighed heavily. "You really are as dense as lead sometimes," she muttered.

Yeah. Sorry about that.

"Given that Oda is in love with you, if she were to realize that you're dating Momose and Aiba...it would mean that she would hold an incredibly powerful card to play against you."

"Bwuh?"

"Imagine, if you will, that tomorrow, the truth that the Sacrosanct were being two-timed was spread all throughout the school. Haven't you ever considered that possibility?"

"No way! You're saying you think that Makina would spread rumors about us?!"

"I'd prefer not to disparage your friend, of course, but we're talking about a woman who worked up incredible momentum in the entertainment industry, only to pull the emergency brakes, take Eichou High's notoriously difficult transfer exam, and pass it with flying colors, all for the sake of going to school with you. The way I see it, it's only a matter of time before she makes her move...and it's only natural to assume that right now, she's just waiting to determine when and how that card would be best played."

"But..."

"*Makina would never do something like that!*" was what I wanted to say...and how easy all of this would be if I *could* say it so confidently. When I tried to think of reasons *why* she'd never do something like that, though, I came up with "because we go way back," "because I trust her"...and nothing else. Those were all the rebuttals I had on hand. And the one thing that I *could* say with great confidence was that Koganezaki had a far broader and more developed perspective on the situation than I did.

"If the fan club's ideological issues were the only major facet of this problem, I'd have no end of options to cope with it. The *other*

factors involved, however, complicate matters in a way that I can't even *explain* to President Hishimochi, much less ask for her help with. It honestly feels like... How to put this...? Like you're the single greatest irregular element in my life, and whenever an issue centers around you, I lose all ability to predict what might happen."

"The *single greatest irregular element in your life*?!" I knew for a fact she hadn't meant that as a compliment—and, when it came down to it, I knew it was a pretty reasonable conclusion. Her mushroomification was entirely my fault when you traced the origins of the incident back far enough, after all.

"This could end ideally or catastrophically...and that outcome will be determined entirely by the decisions you make. The problem is that, in this instance, I have no idea what an ideal outcome would even look like. What I *do* know, and knew from the start, is that all that telling you this will accomplish is making you worry. And so..."

"Ah," I quietly gasped.

Koganezaki had been worried about me. My very existence was a constant source of stress and concern for her, but still, she'd gone out of her way to look out for me—and in doing so, she'd put *herself* in a harder spot than ever.

And I seriously thought I could try to help her...? I'm in no position to manage anything like that.

It was absurd when it all came down to it. One little request from Emma, and I'd suddenly convinced myself that somehow, I could make a difference. I'd thought I had a handle on the fact that I was a dunce, but as it turned out, my stupidity knew no limits.

"But...it's hardly fair for me to tell you all of that, much less to your face. Taking that bath has made me drop my guard, I think. Forget I said anything," Koganezaki continued, awkwardly breaking eye contact as she spoke. To be honest, I wasn't really sure if she'd accomplished anything by opening up to me about all this either. "I believe there's little to nothing I can do, at this point, but that doesn't mean that I can simply stop thinking about it and run away. *That* won't change anything at all...and in the worst case, it could lead to me falling victim to you and your poisonous wiles."

"You think I'm *poisonous*?!"

"I'm shocked you have the nerve to question it."

"Harsh!"

I mean, yes, I *had* told Koganezaki about how Little Miss Koganezaki (age: three) had used my hand as a sponge, and that *had* done some nasty damage to her psyche...but I'd thought that we'd reached a tacit understanding that neither of us were *completely* responsible for what happened back there. *Which, err, means that I* was *actually* partially *responsible, I guess. Whoops.*

"In any case," Koganezaki said, moving us along, "regardless of whether you trust or distrust Oda, I'd highly recommend that you keep an extremely close eye on her."

"Will do. Oh, actually, now that you mention it..."

"Of course you'd already have noticed something. What?"

"Umm, well... The thing is, our class talked about what we'll be doing for the cultural festival today."

"Oh, yes. I suppose it would be the season for that."

"What's your class doing, out of curiosity?"

"Don't change the subject."

I winced. "S-Sorry!" The second I prompted a digression, Koganezaki knocked us right back onto the rails. *I'm so curious, though... Maybe they'll do a maid café, and I'll get to see* her *wearing a maid uniform this time!*

"So?"

"Ah, right! Well, umm, one of the things that people brought up as an option was putting on an idol show."

"That...must have been proposed by someone who is utterly fearless, in the worst sense of the phrase."

"Yeah, but Makina said she'd actually be okay with it, as long as she's not the only one up onstage."

"As long as she's not alone...? Are you trying to tell me that she nominated *those* two to join her?"

"N-No! That's not it—she didn't name anyone at all. But, well...when it comes to people in our class who have what it takes to perform next to Makina and not get overshadowed, it seemed like Yuna and Rinka were the only ones who came to mind for everyone...including me, honestly."

Koganezaki fell silent, a pensive expression crossing her face. I'd been struck with a thought as I explained the situation as well: Just because Makina hadn't *directly* said she wanted Yuna and Rinka to perform with her didn't mean she hadn't known that was how things would turn out. In fact, I was sure she'd known that the moment she told everyone her terms, the whole class's expectations would turn to the two of them. That might have been why she'd made that her condition in the first place.

But wait. Why? What would make Makina want to perform with those two in the first place?

"Surely this must be about you again?" said Koganezaki.

I hesitated. "About...me?"

"Imagine if, having seen through the fact that you're dating the two of them, Oda decided that a performance at the cultural festival would be her opportunity to prove that she's superior to them, fair and square."

"No way! She'd never!"

"That was purely a baseless guess on my part. No need to take it so seriously."

"Ugh..."

"But I *also* can't guarantee that my guess was wrong. We just don't have enough information to work with."

I mean, she's definitely right about that...but I really hope those three don't end up competing like that. It'd basically mean they were fighting with each other. I wish there was something I could do that would let everyone get along...

"B-But all of this is assuming that Makina really *has* realized that I'm dating both of them at once!" I said. "If she *hasn't*, then—"

"She has. I'm certain of it."

"Bwaugh?!"

"She isn't stupid, Hazama. I'd think that working in the idol industry—living in the adult world—has given her a degree of insight on that front. I've seen the way she looks at her peers. It's like she can see right through us...and to such an extent that it's almost hard for me to believe that she really is the same age as us," said Koganezaki. Apparently, the brief exchange she'd had with

Koganezaki at the aquarium during summer vacation had been enough for her to pick up on all that. "Not to mention that if she *weren't* aware that you're in a relationship with the two of them, she would have no reason to engineer a situation where they would be forced to perform with her. It would make her motives incomprehensible."

"Oh. That's true..."

"I suppose you could argue that she's simply trying to make as many memories as she can during her time as a student...but if that were the case, I'd think *you* would be the one she'd be coaxing onto the stage."

"Huh?! *Me*?! N-Nope, no way! That's *totally* impossible!"

"True enough," Koganezaki said with a shrug. "And again, this is all just guesswork...but I still firmly believe that her singling out the two of them is concrete proof that your philandering has been exposed."

She said it was guesswork, sure, but Koganezaki's tone and phrasing gave me the sense that she was all but entirely convinced. Plus, even though I'd *tried* to argue against her in every way I could, to be honest...I was pretty sure that she was right. Judging by Makina's attitude, I had a feeling that she'd realized what was going on between me, Yuna, and Rinka the moment she introduced herself on her first day after transferring in. She'd figured it out solely from our reactions the instant we saw her, and the three days since had given her plenty of time to turn that suspicion into certainty.

"I'd like for this to end quietly and peacefully, if at all possible...but it's hard for me to imagine it turning out that well," Koganezaki said before heaving a very deep sigh. It'd only been a few minutes since her revival, and it seemed I'd already gone and put another hefty weight on her shoulders. Hers *and* mine, really...

What's Makina trying to accomplish? Does she really feel so strongly about me, she's willing to antagonize Yuna and Rinka over it...?

I didn't understand her. I wanted to, but I couldn't, even though she was my oldest friend. In fact, it felt like I understood her less and less as time went by. And the part that I understood least of all

was just why on earth she loved me this much...

The next day, as if to validate Koganezaki's concerns, Yuna and Rinka agreed to be part of our class's performance. Class 2-A would officially be putting on an idol show starring Makina Oda, Yuna Momose, and Rinka Aiba.

Chapter 4: A Date. Another Date. And Then...

Now that our class had settled on our submission to the festival, we had to follow through and put the performance together. We'd be working on our preparations during our afternoon breaks and after school, in theory...but so far, the atmosphere in class 2-A had been so relaxed about that prep work, even *I'd* picked up on it.

"Man, I still can't believe *those* three are gonna be performing together!" I heard one of our classmates say.

"We've basically already won, right? Everyone'll vote for our class for sure!" another replied.

Conversations like that had been happening from time to time all throughout our classroom. *Some* of us were busy, sure—our trio of actual performers, for one thing, plus the people who were in charge of helping with their costumes and dance choreography—but the rest of the class's population, me included, had a whole lot of time on their hands and nothing in particular to do with it. That was true of after school as well as our breaks. Plenty of people went home right away, and those of us who did stay behind just hung out and chatted, for the most part.

"Ugggh..." I groaned as I stepped out into the hallway to get to work. Everything that was happening had put me in a state of sort of hazy, pent-up anxiety. I would've felt really bad about leaving on my own while Yuna, Rinka, and Makina were all working their hardest, though...so I'd been applying myself by making a bunch of little decorations that I wasn't even sure the performance *really* needed. In other words: I'd taken on a random chore.

At the moment, I was folding up and stapling sheets of colored paper in a way that made them look a little like flowers. It was better than not doing anything at all, at least, but I wasn't making

very good progress. I'd somehow found a simple, repetitive job for myself, and I couldn't even get *that* right.

"Umm... Can I sit here, Hazama?" a voice rang out.

"Oh, Mukai! S-Sure, go ahead!" I replied.

The girl who'd talked to me was a classmate who was also on flower-making duty: Chiaki Mukai. Mukai was, well... Okay, so I know that this is going to feel *really* rude coming from me in particular, but she wasn't someone who really stood out much in class. It felt like she was more or less always on her own. It was like...well, again, this is going to sound super rude, but I sort of felt like we had a fair bit in common.

I bet having a girl like Mukai as a friend would be really relaxing, huh, I thought to myself. I'd thought that a bunch of times, actually, but in truth, I'd barely ever talked with her. How could I? I was the class's notorious near-dropout of a problem student! There was no way *she* would want to be around me, considering... Plus, the fact that I thought she'd be easier to talk with than the other kids in class sort of felt like it meant I was looking down on her... And I had to wonder if someone like me even had the right to want to be friends with someone like her in the first place...



"This has all ended up getting a little crazy, hasn't it?" Mukai said, taking advantage of the conversational opening my internal ramble had left to bring up a topic of her own. "You're friends with those two, aren't you, Hazama?"

"Huh?" I grunted. "Ah, yeah... Well, not friends so much as, well..."

From an outside perspective, Yuna, Rinka, and I probably *did* look like friends. We were on a first-name basis with one another, after all. The problem was that there were plenty of people in our school who weren't exactly happy about that. From their perspective, I was an irritating hanger-on to Yuna and Rinka's duo.

"This must be hard on them, right?"

Oh, I get it. Mukai wasn't interested in me—she was thinking about the two of them. I wasn't offended by that at all. I was super used to it, and actually, it was sort of relieving to know why she was talking to me all of a sudden.

"I dunno," I said. "It's kind of hard to ask."

"Oh, really?"

"I mean, I don't know the first thing about any of the stuff they're doing right now. Anything I could say about it would come out sounding really superficial, and I know there's nothing I can do to help, so it feels like it'd be weird to even bother asking..."

"Ahh, right..."

It was the most pessimistic flower-making session I'd ever seen. Mukai seemed to understand what I'd meant, but didn't say a word afterward...so we just worked in uncomfortable silence. The cheerful chatter I could hear from the classroom just made our lack of conversation even more painful.

"B-But you know, I'm really impressed with you, Mukai!" I finally blurted out.

"Impressed? Why?"

"Well, you stayed after school, didn't you? And you're helping out with the chor—I mean, with the work too..."

"It's...not really like that," Mukai said, her voice growing gloomy.

W-Wait, did I just touch some sort of nerve?!

"The only reason I stayed behind...is because I thought I might

stand out in a bad way if I was the first one to leave. Sitting in the classroom with nothing to do felt awkward, though, so I decided to look for *something* I could help with, even if it was pointless. That's really all there was to it," Mukai explained, muttering so quietly it almost felt more like she was talking to herself than to me. Then she jerked her head up. "I-I'm sorry! I don't know why I'm telling you all this—"

"I *so* get that!"

"...Huh?"

I was so weirdly happy, I couldn't contain myself. I just...I just really, *really* got her!

"All the popular kids in class always end up being at the center of events like this, and if you don't play along, it feels like you're totally spoiling the mood, but if you *do* try to really get in there and participate, it feels like everyone'll be all, 'What's *she* doing here lol,' and make fun of you for trying to steal the spotlight! These things are so hard to handle, right?"

"Huh?" said Mukai. "You really feel that way too, Hazama?"

"I *so* do... I'm feeling it literally right now!"

Granted, I was the friend—no, the *girlfriend*—of the Sacrosanct, a pair who sat upon a throne placed on a pedestal located at the very pinnacle of the school's social caste system, but that didn't mean *I* had the right to inhabit the same blessed realm that they dwelled in. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow, as they say, and I'd always been a shadow-dwelling outcast by nature. That was a truth so fundamental, it was probably written into the very rulebook of reality!

"I'm a little surprised...but, well, not that much," said Mukai.

"That sure was frank!"

"Well, you always seem like you're having so much fun when you're with those two, but it also seems like the way people stare at you bothers you a lot... Plus, it's like you completely fade into nothingness when you're *not* with them, I guess..."

"Nothingness?!" *I mean, sure, I try to keep a low profile when I'm not with them. Or, really, it's more like I don't have a profile to raise at all, so...yeah...*

"Ah, sorry! That was really rude, wasn't it?"

"Nah, it's okay. It's probably true, after all."

There's an old story about a donkey who borrows a lion's skin to take advantage of its intimidating presence, but personally speaking, I'd say that donkeys stand out well enough already. *My* baseline presence was so weak that I wouldn't have stood out no matter what sort of skin I borrowed...

"I-Is that really something you should agree with that easily?" asked Mukai.

"It's so true that it doesn't feel worth trying to argue against, honestly."

Indeed...

After that point, our conversation carried on almost astonishingly naturally and easily. It sort of felt like we had similar self-images, in a way. It was like I didn't have to put up a front with her, or worry about dancing around sensitive issues. Within just a few days—which is to say, a week after our festival submission had been decided on—hanging out with Mukai after school to chat as we did busywork became a part of my routine.

Yuna and Rinka, meanwhile, spent every day after school on practice, practice, and more practice. They seemed totally worn out during our actual lessons, and were way less engaged than usual when we texted in the evenings, responding at odd times or even forgetting to reply at all. It felt a little like we were drifting out of contact, which wasn't the nicest thing to think about. I was lonely...but I was so afraid that butting into their business without actually having anything helpful to say would do more harm than good, so I couldn't work up the nerve to try.

"Um... Hazama?"

"Huh...? Oh, sorry! I guess I spaced out for a second."

"You should probably put down the stapler if you're not paying attention. You might hurt yourself."

"Yeah, no kidding. Thanks, Mukai."

If Mukai hadn't stopped me, I might have absentmindedly stapled a flower to my own finger. The truth was that I hadn't been sleeping super well, probably because of all the stuff I'd been overthinking

lately. I was worried about Yuna and Rinka, for one thing, and everything Koganezaki had told me weighed on my mind as well. Oh, and the part of me that kept chewing myself out for pointlessly fixating on all of it when I obviously wasn't going to come up with any solutions anytime soon wasn't helping either.

"Are, umm... Are you okay?" asked Mukai.

"Y-Yeah," I said. "Just a bit sleep-deprived, that's all. Tomorrow's a day off, though, so I'll sleep in super late and be all better again!"

"Oh...?" Mukai said, cocking her head.

My overblown enthusiasm had probably come across as pretty weird, considering how mundane the subject was. I had a feeling I might've seriously miscalculated that response.

"What do you usually do on the weekends, Mukai?" I asked.

"Huh? Me?"

"Yeah. Well, I mean...only if you want to talk about it, of course."

"I, umm...like to draw."

"To draw? Like, pictures?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Really?! That's awesome!"

She draws! She's a real live artist! I've never met one of those before!

"'Awesome'?" Mukai repeated. "But you haven't even seen my art..."

"Okay, then show it to me!" I replied, realizing a second later that I was probably crossing a line. I'd already asked, though, and taking it back would've just made things even weirder.

Mukai flinched back a little at my sudden request...but at the same time, she didn't seem completely unhappy about it. "You...promise you won't laugh?"

"Of course I won't!"

"In that case..."

Mukai nervously pulled out her phone and turned it to me, revealing a picture that...well, all I could say was that it was amazing. It was a beautiful drawing of a very cute girl, turning to face the viewer with a townscape in the background. When she said she drew, I'd jumped to the assumption that she was talking about

more classical paintings and stuff, but this was *way* more of a modern, digital-age sort of piece!

"Oh, *wow*!" I said, so impressed that my vocabulary abandoned me. I had *no* clue what sort of professional illustrators were popular in the world at large these days, so I couldn't exactly compare her work with theirs, but from my total layman's perspective it was *really* impressive. It was way, way better than anything I could ever draw, anyway!

"It's nothing special," said Mukai.

"You think? I really like it, though!" I replied.

"Th-Thanks..." Mukai bashfully muttered as she pulled back her phone.

Aw, too bad. I wanted to look at it a little longer.

"So, how'd you even draw that?" I asked.

"Oh, the normal way. With a tablet, and all."

"That's *normal*...?"

Tablets. I've heard of those. They're, like, really big smartphones, right? I didn't have one, so I wasn't totally sure, but I *thought* I'd heard about people using them to draw and stuff, when she put it that way.

"Oh, huuuh!" I said. It felt like I'd gotten a glimpse into a world I didn't know the first thing about. "Hey, can you show me more of your drawings? I wanna see!"

"Huh...?"

"Oh, and this is just a random thought that hit me just now, but...do you think maybe we could use your art to advertise our performance for the festival?"

"*Huh*?!" Mukai exclaimed, her eyes wide with shock.

She probably thought that my suggestion was completely insane, but I wasn't just saying it to flatter her or anything. From my perspective, her drawing was easily amazing enough to stand alongside Yuna, Rinka, and Makina's performance as part of our festival offering.

Mukai, however, didn't seem to have nearly as much confidence in her art as I did, and frowned deeply. "I-I don't think that would ever work out," she said. "I'm not good enough at all...and I'm sure

that other people in the class will handle all the posters and stuff, so..."

"I think you're plenty good enough! But, yeah, I guess that makes sense about the other people," I admitted. Not to repeat myself, but the cultural festival was an event for social butterflies. It just wasn't the sort of space where people like *us* could let ourselves be assertive in any real way.

But still, it feels like such a waste...

All questions of using her art for advertising aside, I wished she could've had a little more confidence in herself. The picture she'd shown me was cute, beautiful, and above all else, communicated a sense of liveliness that made it really clear just how much she loved drawing, even to someone like me. She had something really special, and seeing her curl up in a corner and hide it away just felt like, well...I don't know what to call it other than a waste.

Isn't there something I could do...? Wait, I know!

"Okay, then how about this? You don't have to talk to the class about it at all, to start—you can just draw something that you think would fit our class's performance, and we'll see how it goes from there!" I suggested.

"Huh?"

"Like, I mean, you could just do it for fun, to start... Oh, not that I'm trying to say you're *just* drawing for the fun of it or anything! I didn't mean to make it sound like your art's not serious! Just, well..." I babbled. I was doing a really bad job of finding the right words to express myself. I'd come up with this idea off the cuff, and now that I had to elaborate, I'd run straight into a brick wall.

"You mean...I could draw something as practice?"

"Yeah! That!" I exclaimed, leaping on her explanation in a heartbeat! *Nice save, Mukai!* "Honestly, I just really want to see more of your drawings! I'll do whatever I can to help! Which, uh...probably isn't going to be a lot, honestly. I think I'll be pretty useless."

"No...I don't think so," Mukai said with a shake of her head. "I've always drawn alone, so just having someone who's willing to help at all is incredible. Are you sure, though?"

"Of course! This'll be our way of actually enjoying the cultural festival!"

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right! I'll give it a try, Hazama!"

"Great! Let's do it!"

And that's how, in a quiet corner of the hallway, we put together our secret master plan. We'd rise up against the social butterflies... Well, no, that would be *way* overstating it, especially considering that the most we were capable of would probably be something so petty that no one would even notice it at a glance. But still, we'd at least found something that would make this a festival worth looking forward to.

I still had Yuna, Rinka, and Makina to worry about. *That* ulcer-inducing problem was as present as ever...but somehow, I felt maybe just a little bit better about it anyway.

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Well, I guess I'm just going to have way fewer chances to talk with Yuna and Rinka in the near future, I thought...and then Saturday happened.

"Hey, Yotsuba! Come on in!"

"S-Sure! Thanks for having me."

The weekend had come, and Yuna had called me over to her house first thing in the morning. Rinka had arranged for me to go over to her place on Sunday as well, by the way...and something about *that* whole setup had me feeling like I'd been through this before, just recently.

They'd apparently played rock-paper-scissors to decide who got to have me over first, by the way. Hm? Didn't *I* have a say in that...? I mean, it's not like I was busy regardless, and even if I had been, I would've forced my schedule open to meet with them one way or another!

"My parents are out today, by the way," Yuna said as she led me inside, dropping a *very* attention-grabbing key phrase right off the bat.

"O-Oooh...?" I rather less than eloquently replied.

Oh, okaaay. Her parents are out, huh...? It was weird. For some reason, that one phrase was all it took to conjure up some unspeakable fantas—*ahem ahem*, a strange sort of anticipation in my mind. *But...nah. As if. There's no way this is going in* that *direction, really. I mean, Yuna's probably exhausted right now.*

Ever since they'd agreed to perform with her, Makina had been putting Yuna and Rinka through the wringer. The very next week after our plan had been settled on, she'd started keeping them late after school to learn the fundamentals of performing as idols. Rinka was an incredible athlete and seemed to be doing just fine in that regard, but it had been rough enough on Yuna that she'd actually grumbled about it in front of me from time to time, even if just a little.

I got the sense that Yuna was totally worn out today as well. The way I saw it, it would've made way more sense for her to use this time for herself than to dedicate part of her schedule to someone like *me*. I found myself preoccupied with that thought, and as I stepped into Yuna's room...

"Hey, Yuna? I— *Mmph?!*"

...she stole my lips before I could even raise the issue!

"Mmh...? Mnh..."

"Ahh..."

Y-Yuna?!

Yuna grabbed me by the shoulders, pulling me closer as she kissed me with everything she had. I was *completely* befuddled, but still more or less managed to kiss her back. I just wasn't prepared for it, like, at *all*. *O-Oh, jeez, I think my knees are gonna give out!*

"Ah," I gasped as, a moment later, my knees actually *did* give out. I slumped to the ground, but rather than break away, Yuna followed me, her lips still pressed firmly to mine.

The day had only just begun, and there we were, filling the room with the remarkably loud sounds of lips smacking and heavy breathing. My head was spinning, and I opened my mouth wide to try and take a deeper breath, but Yuna took that as her chance to slip in her tongue...and, well, the sensation was so shockingly electric that I forgot all about breathing for a moment.

I'm dying... This is it for me...

My fingertips were trembling—possibly from oxygen deficiency—but it just felt so incredible, I almost didn't mind that my consciousness was slipping away from me...

"*Bwah!*"

But then, when I was just seconds away from suffocating my way into a very pleasant slumber, Yuna finally broke away from me.

"Ahhh," Yuna sighed. "I *finally* got a chance to recharge my Yotsuba-batteries!"

And now she's starting to sound like Aoi! Aoi would usually just *hug* me whenever she said that sort of thing, though. Apparently, Yuna was a lot more intense when it came to her recharging protocol. She'd stopped kissing me at that point, but she still had her arms wrapped around me and was leaning in, almost resting on me. It sort of felt like she was using me as a body pillow.

"You really are tired, aren't you, Yuna?" I asked, hugging her back.

"Yeah..." Yuna muttered in a sort of pouty tone. "She keeps drilling in the basics, day after day... And, I mean, sure, we're both amateurs, so maybe that's just how it has to be, and having someone like *her* give us really specific advice like this is kind of a luxury, but still!" Even when she grumbled about Makina's lessons, I could tell just how much Yuna respected her skills.

"By the way," I said, "why did you and Rinka agree to perform, anyway?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, you both looked like you really didn't like the idea at first." They just hadn't been able to say so when it came up in our meeting the Wednesday before last, thanks to the silent pressure of our classmates' expectations...or at least, that was the impression I'd gotten. The very next day, though, they'd agreed without even a hint of reluctance. That had really surprised me, especially after the whole conversation I'd had with Koganezaki about it.

"Because," Yuna began, only to hesitate. I felt her grip slacken ever so slightly. "Actually... Not telling."

"Huh?"

"And, I mean, come on! It's not like it's *that* big of a deal, anyway!" she continued, brushing my concerns aside with a smile.

She hadn't really needed to dodge the question. If it was a secret, I didn't want to pry—especially considering that I wasn't exactly in any place to complain about secret keeping. I was totally fine with it, honestly...

"Oh, right! Hey, Yotsuba, take a look at this!" Yuna said. She untangled herself from me, rifled through her bag for a moment, and pulled out a plastic folder.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Heh heh heh! Oh, just the design proposal for our costumes, that's all!"

"What?! Is it really okay for me to see that?! I thought they were on a need-to-know basis, even *in* our class!"

"You've got lifetime need-to-know access when it comes to me, so no worries there!"

"*Lifetime!*" I gasped. That didn't *quite* feel like it checked out, as far as how need-to-know stuff worked by society's standards, but I was so happy about that one little word she'd slipped in that turning a blind eye to the rest of it was easy as pie.

Yuna opened up the folder and pulled out a series of printouts with the costumes' designs drawn on them. They looked like they'd been modeled after the uniforms from Makina's idol group, Shooting Star, but with a few original twists and tweaks added in. They seemed really stylish and flashy—like the sort of clothes you'd wear to a party—and were all colorful, and frilly, and girly...and that's about as far as my vocabulary could go when it came to describing them! *I think someone from the home ec club was in charge of designing these, right?*

"Oh, wooow," I cooed.

"They're still in the design stage, so they're not set in stone or anything, but they're pretty cute already, right?"

"You'd look *so* good in this..."

"Heh heh! I know, right?"

Yuna was very aware of how cute she was, in the least offputting sense of the phrase possible. She knew exactly what sort of clothes

would suit her and exactly how to show them off *just* right. I'd been dazzled by her skills plenty of times, so I knew that very well. Considering how confident she was that she'd pull that outfit off, I had a feeling she'd look even better in it than I was imagining—and I was imagining an awful lot!

"I haven't had many chances to wear idol-style clothes like this," said Yuna. "I'm actually really looking forward to it!"

"You're going to get *way* more fans after this, for sure," I said.

"Oh? Well, personally, I'd be fine if *you* were the only one obsessing over me," Yuna said, defying at *least* a few severely enforced idol-culture norms as she nuzzled her head up against me. It was really cute and she smelled *really* nice...but also, some part of me was uncomfortably aware that we'd be burned at the stake of public opinion if this ever got out. Well, more *me* than we, really. Then she said, "Hey, speaking of our costumes, what do you think we should do if I get to take it home after the festival?"

"Huh? They're gonna let you?"

"Oh, no, I don't actually know for sure yet. But it's not like they'd have any good reason to keep them around at school, and it'd be sort of freaky if they ended up getting handed over to some total stranger, right? That last part's a bigger deal for Oda than it is for me, though."

"Ahh..."

I'd heard that every once in a while, outfits that celebrities had worn in their youth would get put up for auction and stuff. An outfit that Makina wore just one time for her cultural festival would probably be ridiculously valuable in that sense, even if it *had* been made by a bunch of high schoolers.

Okay...but just because they're not celebrities doesn't mean that Yuna's and Rinka's outfits aren't super valuable too!

"You should definitely talk them into letting you keep them!" I said.

"I'm guessing they'll ask us to pay for the material costs, but that's not a huge deal. And it's kinda exciting to think about, isn't it?"

"Exciting? What do you mean?"

"Once the performance is done and the cultural festival

ends...you can call us over to your house again," Yuna said, cuddling up even closer than before and leaning forward to whisper into my ear. "And then we can do something a little *sexier* with those costumes, if you know what I mean."

I took in a *very* sharp breath.

"We'll put on a public show for everyone in them, then use them again to put on a *very* private show just for you. For one night, I'll be your very own personal idol—ha ha!"

It was such an appealing suggestion—so powerfully appealing it was downright scary—that I was left completely speechless. I couldn't even *grunt* at her.

"Hee hee! You're beet red," Yuna playfully chuckled before giving me a quick peck. She was already the perfect idol, no doubt about it, and she had my heart in a vise grip! "All right! As for today, I think it's time for a pre-festival pep rally!"

Then she pushed me to the floor. The clothes stayed on this time, but there was *plenty* of very up close and personal touching over them. I mean a tantalizing, ticklish, and incredibly pleasant sort of contact...and as I squirmed and moaned in reaction, Yuna chuckled happily all over again.

"I hope you came prepared, because I'm not planning on leaving anything left over for Rinka tomorrow," Yuna said, giving me a look as she licked her lips. She'd always had a calculating side, but there was something about her now that seemed even more so, with a dash of maturity that I hadn't seen from her before. It was still her, but more *her* than ever, somehow!

And that's how I got an up close and personal peek at just how much Yuna had learned from her idol training already.

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And then, the very next day...

"Hey there, Yotsuba. I hear you had an *awfully* fun time yesterday."

Hyeek!

Rinka greeted me at her door with a smile so laden with hidden

meaning, I froze up on the spot.

"Yuna was bragging about it *all* evening. I ended up sleep-deprived thanks to her," Rinka said.

"H-Ha ha," I weakly laughed.

"And that's why I'll be having my fill of you today too...enough to make you forget all about everything you did yesterday."

"Bwuh?!"

"Kidding, of course," Rinka added with a wink.

I wasn't buying it, though—she *really* didn't sound like she was kidding at all. She and Yuna were still shining as bright as ever, but that shine had taken on a dangerous glint lately in, like...I dunno, a carnivorous sort of way, I guess?!

"Well, come on in. My parents are out, by the way...though there's no telling when they might get home."

"Oh, really?" I said.

"They're out on a two-day, one-night hot springs trip with Yuna's parents, actually. Today's the day they get back, which is why I would've really preferred to have you over yesterday," Rinka said with a slight pout.

Oooh. That explains why they played rock-paper-scissors to see who'd get to have me over first.

"Well, it's part of the reason. I also just wanted to see you as soon as possible."

"Eeep?!" I squealed as Rinka suddenly embraced me! We hadn't even made it past the entryway! "Uh, Rinka?! Shouldn't we go to your room first?!"

"Why bother? We're all alone for now, after all."

But you said you don't know when your family's getting back, didn't you...? I mean, sure, most people wouldn't go out of their way to get home from a trip in the morning, but still!

"Ahh, I've missed this... Just feeling you in my arms makes me happier than anything," Rinka muttered.

Something about getting hugged right in her house's entryway made me feel really bashful...or, well, like I was doing something wrong, in a weird sort of way? If anyone happened to open the door, they'd see us before we had time to react for sure—and even if no

one opened it, I was still keenly aware that that one door was all that stood between us and the outside world. That knowledge made it impossible for me to *not* fixate on each and every little thing we were doing.

"Sorry for making you wait, Rinka," I said, giving her a comforting pat on the back—which involved reaching up, seeing as she was taller than me.

"Don't apologize. It's fine," Rinka replied.

Her grip gradually loosened, and she pressed her face into my shoulder. It seemed like she was embarrassed, adorably enough.

"Yotsuba..."

Embarrassed, yes...but not enough to stop her from satisfying her desires. She lifted my chin, leaned in, and stole a kiss. It felt like she couldn't possibly restrain herself, just like Yuna the day before.

"Sorry, Yotsuba. I've just been holding myself back for so long...and I don't want to wait even a second longer."

"Rinka..." I said as, very slowly, we sank to the floor. Again: still in the entryway. A place where she'd probably chat with her family on any other day!

"This is a little exciting, isn't it? I'm almost nervous," Rinka muttered as she leaned over me. She sure didn't *look* nervous, though. She seemed like a proud, majestic hunter, if anything—which would, of course, mean that I was her prey, and the glint in her eyes told me she was ready to finish me off. "What am I supposed to do from now on, Yotsuba? After this, I'll end up thinking about kissing you every single time I walk through this entryway."

"R-Rinka," I stammered once more.

"I haven't had nearly enough time to spend with you. I want more. I want you to leave such a mark on me, I'll never be able to think of anything at all other than you..."

Between each kiss, Rinka paused to whisper sweet, mind-melting nothings into my ear. Kissing her back was about the closest thing to a response that I could manage, but judging by her dashing grin, that was more than enough to satisfy her.

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Quite some time later—by which I mean, well after noon—we finally managed to reach Rinka's room.

"There's something I wanted to show you today," Rinka said. I didn't know if they'd planned it out in advance or if this was just a coincidence, but things were progressing in exactly the same way they had with Yuna the day before. Rinka, however, pulled out her phone instead of a sheet of paper. "It's a video we took of our dance lessons."

"Wait, really? You don't mind if I watch that?" I asked.

"You're the only one who's allowed to see it, in fact—it's a special privilege just for you. Though I *did* just start learning a little while ago, so try to keep your expectations low," Rinka replied before pressing the play button.

Makina seemed to be off to the side somewhere, clapping her hands and counting out, "One, two, one, two!" at a regular rhythm. I couldn't see Yuna either, so I figured she was holding the camera, most likely? Rinka was the only one on-screen, standing in the center of an empty classroom that they must have claimed for practice.

"It wouldn't feel quite right to show you the others when they're not here, so we'll have to stick to me," Rinka said. She sounded a little bashful about letting me watch, but the video was proving how athletic she was all over again. Her movements were swift and precise, and from my total amateur's perspective, she looked like she was really capable already...but I could tell that her spirits were sinking further and further the longer she watched herself.

"What's wrong, Rinka?" I asked. "I think you already look amazing, personally."

"Thanks... Hearing that from you almost makes me want to take it seriously."

I did *actually mean it, you know?!*

"Oda's found plenty of flaws to point out in my dancing, though," Rinka continued. "I have the choreography down well enough, but right now I'm just imitating the movements. I'm not really *expressing* myself at all. She keeps telling me about how I need to pay more attention to my tiniest movements, down to my fingertips,

and how I should focus more on the camera—or rather, the audience."

"So, she thinks you need to work on your showmanship?"

"Right. That's actually why we recorded me—so I could see what I looked like from the audience's perspective. And, well, looking at myself that way... I hate to admit it, but Yuna has me beat," Rinka concluded with a deep sigh as she stopped the video.

From my perspective, Rinka really did look incredible. I could've kept watching her forever without getting bored, but if she thought that her dancing needed improvement, I wasn't about to argue with her. She was facing her challenge head-on, and by showing her struggle to me, she was exposing one of her very few weaknesses.

"I know you'll make it work, Rinka!" I said.

"Huh?"

"Ah... Sorry. I don't really have any specific reasons why I think that, or anything...and it's probably not reassuring at all to hear that from me, but still."

"No, that's not true at all. Hearing that from you is all the encouragement I could ever possibly need," Rinka said before setting her phone down on the ground and leaning onto me. "Nothing calms me down like being with you, you know? I really do feel like I could do anything, as long as it was for you."

"Rinka..."

"But right now, what I'd really like is a kiss."

"Yeah... Go ahead."

I don't know how many kisses that made today alone, and it felt a little unfair for her to ask like that after all the others, but saying no was never an option. I caught her in my arms as she leaned farther toward me, catching her lips with my own at the same time.

"I don't know when my parents will be back...so we should try to be as quiet as possible," Rinka said, but she didn't loosen her grip on me for even a moment. And although we did end up saying our goodbyes before her parents got home, it's pretty safe to say that she'd thoroughly recharged her me-batteries by the time we did.

Come to think of it, I still haven't introduced myself to either of

their parents... But what exactly am I supposed to say when I do *finally meet them? "Hi, I'm Yotsuba Hazama, and I'm dating both of your daughters?" They'd definitely beat me up or something, right...?*

Life sure is rough sometimes...

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I left Rinka's house, made my way back to my own home...and found such an impossibly pretty girl standing in front of it that seeing her *still* made me wonder if I was having a particularly vivid dream.

"Ah, Yotsy!"

"Makina...?"

She was wearing her usual disguise—a hat and glasses—but that disguise was as ineffective as ever, and I recognized her in an instant. Honestly, it was so useless at hiding who she was, I thought it was a little weird that she didn't get mobbed by fans who happened to see her while passing by...but then again, maybe it was just easy for me to tell because I already *knew* it was her. Most people never would've thought that a celebrity like her would be hanging around like this in the first place, so it'd be harder for them to put the pieces together.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I wanted to see you, so I decided to wait until you got home," Makina replied.

"Oh, okay... Wait. Huh? How did you know I was out?"

It would've made sense if she'd asked my sisters where I was, but then you'd think she'd have waited inside instead of loitering around on the street. Plus...the two of them were *big* Maki Amagi fans. If she'd showed up at our front door and introduced herself as my childhood friend, they would've kept my phone in constant vibration mode no matter *how* long it took me to pick up.

"Oh? You're curious how I knew? Well..." Makina began before stepping up so close to me, I almost thought she was about to hug me for a moment. Then she leaned in, just far enough to sniff the

crook of my neck. “I knew it... I smell Aiba on you for sure.”

“*Huh?!*”

“She and Momose were so restless last Friday, I had a feeling they’d made plans with you over the weekend. Looks like I was right,” Makina said with a smile that made *something* shoot down my spine. Terrified chills? No, not quite, but something close to that.

All it had taken was a few tiny (or, well, maybe not so tiny—I couldn’t say for sure) changes in Yuna’s and Rinka’s behavior for Makina to accurately guess exactly what their plans for the weekend were. Plus, most amazingly of all, she had such total faith in her intuition that she’d acted on it without hesitation. She hadn’t asked me if I was out, or even knocked on the door to make sure I wasn’t actually at home—she’d just waited outside, trusting that I’d be back eventually. Oh, and of course, this also confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was perfectly aware I was dating Yuna and Rinka.

I didn’t even know where to start. I couldn’t have even *dreamed* about pulling off even part of that myself. This was a very clear reminder of just how incredible a person Makina really was.

“I didn’t want to just sit back and spend the weekend doing nothing, though,” Makina continued. “You can imagine how frustrating that would be, right? So I decided to come see you.”

“Oh, huh,” I said.

“Am I bothering you by being here?” Makina asked, furrowing her brow with concern as she peered at my face.

“N-No way! Not at all!” *Aggh, how is it even fair for her to be this cute?!*

I’d felt guilty about how this was happening right after I spent the day with Rinka, uncomfortable with how sweaty I thought I might be, and awkward about how I’d made her wait, all at once—but then every single one of those conflicting feelings had been blown away by that one little almost flirtatious gesture of hers. *Is this the power of a real-life idol?! An average high schooler like me isn’t equipped to handle a move like that!*

“Anyway, Yotsy, I have a request for you,” said Makina.

“Umm... I mean, if it’s something I can do, I guess...?” I replied.

"It's something *only* you can do," she said in an almost scolding tone, punctuating the sentence with a dangerously cute arched eyebrow.

I guess she wouldn't bother asking me for it if it wasn't something I could do, on second thought. Makina was a capable enough person to judge what I was and wasn't capable of, no question about it. On the one hand, that was a relief, but on the other hand, it just made the potential disappointment if I *didn't* measure up to her expectations feel all the more worrying...

"I've finally more or less settled in from my move, so I was thinking this would be the right time for me to say hello to your family," Makina continued.

"Huh?!" I blurted in shock.

"Is that a no? Your parents were so good to me when I was little, so I'd love to greet them. I bet Sakura and Aoi don't remember me, though."

"Actually, depending on how you look at it, they might know you even better than I do..."

"Do you mean they know about my idol work?"

"I don't think there's even a single person out there who *doesn't*!"

"Oh, you're exaggerating. Just think...*you* barely knew about it at all, right?"

"Ugh!" I grunted, glancing away reflexively as she gave me a look. I'd backed myself into a bit of a hole, and one that made it really hard to turn her request down. Of course, I'd never really had a good reason to say no to begin with, except for the mildly concerning question of just how my sisters would react.

"So, what do you think, Yotsy?"

"C-Can I go inside and check in with everyone first?"

"Of course!"

By that point, I'd pretty much already caved. Such was the power of Makina—all I could say was that she was incredible. *But, then again...*

"Hey, Makina?"

"Yes?"

"You know you don't have to be so *on* all the time around me,

right?" I said, realizing even as the words left my mouth that I was overstepping.

"Huh?"

"Ah, umm, I mean... I just know that you've probably got a crazy ridiculous amount of stuff on your mind—like, *way* more than I could ever imagine! And I just thought that it'd be tiring if you didn't let yourself cut loose a little at least every once in a while, that's all."

Makina's eyes widened, and for a moment, she just stared at me. I didn't think I'd said anything *that* unexpected, but judging by the length of the pause, it felt like her thought process had totally shut down for a moment.

"You really are just so *you*, Yotsy," Makina finally said. "Nobody else is blockheaded quite like you are."

"Wha?"

"Do you *really* not understand why I'm always putting in so much effort?"

Makina took yet another step closer, peering directly into my eyes. *Hers* were so beautiful, it felt like they might swallow me up entirely. She was so close, I could clearly hear her breathing—so close that it almost felt like she was about to...to k-kiss me, just like Yuna and Rinka had done more times than I could count over the past two days.

"Hee hee! You don't have to be so tense. I wouldn't do anything unless you said it was okay first."

"Huh...? O-Oh—right, yeah, duh!" I yelped. *Right, of course! I've been kissed out of the blue so many times lately, I totally forgot about the asking-for-consent stage of the process! But, wait... Huh? It still sort of feels like we're in typical kissing range with each other right now, though...?*

"Well, go on, Yotsy! You have to check with your family, don't you?"

"O-Oh, yeah! Just a second!"

I hustled off into my house in a fluster, leaving Makina outside for the time being.

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So I went inside to tell my family that I had a friend I wanted to introduce them to! And, well...

"You? A *friend*?"

"Are you *really* sure she's just a *friend*, Yotsuba...?"

Sakura and Aoi reacted with immediate, undisguised suspicion. I *wanted* to say that was rude, but the truth was that two out of the two friends I'd introduced them to in the past had turned out to *not* be "just friends" at all, so I wasn't really in any position to complain. This time, though, I really could say with confidence that she was a genuine, for-real friend and nothing more... I mean, mostly. Okay, so that might've actually been a little dicey too. She *had* told me she loved me, after all—actually, she'd straight up proposed to me—and I technically still hadn't given her an answer to that. *Sorry your big sister's always so wishy-washy, you two...*

"You brought a friend over? That sure is rare," said my dad. I was pretty sure that in his case, it was actually a first.

"Would this be one of the girls you've said you made friends with at school?" asked my mom.

Nope, neither of them, actually! They're a whole different can of worms—not to mention secrets. So, uhh...sorry about that, I guess.

And so, an unexpectedly large amount of psychological damage later, I got the confirmation I needed and invited Makina into my home.

"Hello! It's nice to see the two of you again," Makina said to my parents. "Oh, and you two as well, Sakura and Aoi! I don't suppose either of you still remember me?"

"Uhh... *Huh*?"

"Wha— But— *Wha*?!"

Sakura and Aoi were both left in a bug-eyed state of speechless petrification. My mom and dad weren't quite as bad as the two of them, but still looked pretty surprised as well. I was one hundred percent positive that the name "Maki Amagi" was flashing through all four of their minds.

"Umm, so, this is Makina Oda," I said. "I played with her all the time back in kindergarten, remember?"

"Wait—Makina?!" exclaimed my dad.

"Oh, wow! You've grown up so much!" my mom added. Dropping her non-stage name had finally brought my parents up to speed.

Makina gave the two of them a nod. "It's been a long time," she said. "I just moved back into the area recently, and I transferred into Eichou High, so Yotsuba and I are classmates again."

My parents were probably still acutely aware that they were speaking with Maki Amagi, but on the other hand, they also now had an image of Makina Oda (circa kindergarten) firmly in mind. The guards they'd reflexively raised when a mega-celebrity stepped into their living room out of nowhere gradually lowered again, and before I knew it, the two of them were all smiles like usual. At times like these, I had to be impressed by how bold the two of them could be. *Is this some sort of recessive trait that I just didn't inherit...?*

My sisters, on the other hand, were a whole different story.

"Wh-Why is Maki *in our house*?!" Sakura stammered.

"And she's going to Yotsuba's school?!" Aoi added.

The two of them, in other words, were still just as gobsmacked as they'd been when Makina walked in the door. It was time to offer a helping hand! *Big sister's here to save the day!*

"Have you two forgotten about her? I guess I *was* in kindergarten back then, so both of you were really little!"

"So, umm... Is she a Maki Amagi look-alike, or...?"

"Not quite, Sakura. Her real name's Makina Oda, but she goes by Maki Amagi as her stage name," I said, doing my best to explain the situation as casually and naturally as possible.

"I remember how you and our kids used to watch idols perform on TV all the time, back in the day," said my dad.

"And now you're a real idol yourself... Time really does fly sometimes, doesn't it?" my mom chimed in.

"Hee hee!" Makina chuckled. "I remember that like it was yesterday."

"She's actually the real Maki...?! Wh-What now, Sakura?! We have to get her autograph, right?!" said Aoi.

"B-But wouldn't it be rude to ask for it...?" Sakura replied.

"Oh, no, that would be perfectly fine. No need to worry about

offending me at all," said Makina.

O-Oh, wow! She jumped straight into the conversation like it was the most natural thing in the world, and she's even keeping up with both sides of it at once! She's like the chef who stands in the middle of a conveyor belt sushi restaurant and pays attention to every single customer's orders, all at the same time!

While I just stood there and gaped, spellbound by Makina's master-level conversational skills, Sakura slipped out of the group and made her way over to me.

"H-Hey, Yotsuba!" she said, grabbing me by the arm to pull me aside. "What the heck is going on here?!"

"Umm, well... My old kindergarten friend turned out to be an idol...I guess?"

"And it never occurred to you to *mention* it?!"

"I-It took me a really long time to notice!" *Honestly, who would ever expect that their old friend who moved away would end up in showbiz? That sort of thing just doesn't happen in real life!*

"But she transferred into your school, right? You could've said something after *that*, at least!"

"W-Well, umm," I muttered, breaking eye contact. I honestly couldn't argue with that one.

It wasn't like I hadn't had *any* reasons. The day Makina showed up was also the day that her hiatus from her work was announced. Sakura and Aoi had been really torn up about that, so I'd figured that telling them would just confuse them...and, well, by waiting back then, I sort of missed my chance to tell them at all. It just never felt natural past that point. But considering how confused they'd ended up being anyway, that really didn't feel like a very good excuse right now.

"You're hiding something from us again, aren't you, Yotsuba?" said Sakura.

"Huh?"

"Don't tell me she's *another* victim of your poisonous wiles...?"

"Rude?!"

First Koganezaki, and now Sakura too?! Why's everyone acting like I'm some sort of venomous snake all of a sudden?! I have the

best of intentions, I swear! I'm a corn snake, at worst! No venom here at all!

"N-No way... W-We're just friends," I began, but before I could even finish mumbling out an excuse, we were suddenly interrupted.

"Really?! You bought back the exact same house you used to live in?!" my dad said.



"Idols really are something, huh...?" my mom followed up.

For some reason, their shocked exclamations made Sakura give me a sharper glare than ever.

"Wh-What...?" I said.

"It sort of sounds like she bought a whole house *just* so she could live near you again, if you ask me."

"What part of what they just said sounded like *that*?!" *But she's right! You're a sharp one, Sakura...*

"Aoi and I have talked about this, you know. We've both figured out that any girls who end up hanging out around you are trying to win you over. There's no doubt about it."

Ah, no, wait! This isn't her having sharp instincts—it's her projecting! She just loves me way too much, that's all! She loves me so much, she sees absolutely everyone as a rival for my affection!!!

"Heh heh heh..."

"Why're you patting my head now?!"

I'd tried my best to cram all the "Your big sister loves you too!" energy I could into that head pat, but Sakura just snapped at me. *That's fine, though. You're cute when you're snappish too, Sakura!* I thought, my inner voice momentarily shifting to the sort of tone you'd hear from an obnoxiously hot rom-com protagonist.

"Sakura, Sakura, look! She signed my— Ah! Why's Yotsuba patting your head? No fair!"

And now Aoi's joined the battle?!

Aoi was all ready to brag to Sakura about how Makina had signed a CD of hers, only to end up getting jealous herself instead. Loving me way too much, after all, was a trait that my beloved little sisters shared. Our parents, meanwhile, were watching over us with maybe *slightly* less than perfectly warm looks on their faces...and, well, I guess I could just be thankful that they were willing to tolerate our unique little sisterly dynamic. Though they *probably* would've been a lot less tolerant if they'd known about the part where we'd kissed in the past.

Anyway, the point is that my parents were used to this. The only one present who was surprised, most likely...was Makina.

"Sh-She patted me on her own, okay?!" yelped Sakura.

"Then do it to me too!" insisted Aoi.

"S-Sure, that's fine... But you know Makina's watching, right?" I asked.

"Oh, don't mind me. Actually, why not pat my head too while you're at it, Yotsy?!"

"*Why*?!" Sakura, Aoi, and I shouted in perfect sisterly harmony! Aoi jumping on the physical-affection bandwagon was nothing new, but I hadn't expected Makina to join in at all!

"This really takes you back, huh?"

"Yotsuba and Makina always acted almost like they were real sisters back in the day, after all."

And now our parents are getting all nostalgic over it! Sure, Makina used to be a quiet little wallflower while I was a rambunctious wild child, and I ended up seeming sort of like her big sister more often than not, but these days our roles had totally swapped in that regard! Makina was way, way, way, way, *way* more mature than me, to the point that no number of "way"s could do it justice!

"Come on, stop teasing us, everyone!" Aoi pouted.

"Oh, we didn't mean it like that at all," our mom said with a smirk much like the one our dad was wearing.

"Hee hee!" Makina chuckled. Sakura heaved a sigh in the background.

It felt like the social structure of the Hazama family had been laid out in very clear, very direct visual form right in front of me. *Yup, that's me! Yotsuba Hazama, the family chew toy!*

"Oh, I know," said our mom. "If you're living alone now, then why not join us for dinner tonight, Makina?"

"Huh...? You wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not! That's only if you don't mind home cooking, of course. We don't make much fancy food here, but you're welcome to stop by to eat with us whenever you want from now on."

"In that case, I'd love to! Thank you!"

Our mom had taken a break from poking fun at me to earn some points in Makina's eyes...not that I thought she had any ulterior motives for making the offer or anything. Still, considering how

happy Makina seemed about it, it had clearly been a huge success no matter what she was going for. *Well played, mom.*

"Can you help me get dinner ready, Yotsuba?" my mom asked.

"Sure," I replied.

And so commenced one of the very few opportunities that I had to show my eldest-daughter skills in the Hazama household: dinnertime! *Heh heh heh—just you wait, Makina! I'm about to show you exactly how good home cooking can really be!*

"Oooh, in that case, you should play games with us while we wait, Makina!" Aoi exclaimed.

"Oh, sure," said Makina.

"You too, Sakura! And dad can join in too so we have a full set of players!"

"I mean, if you insist," said Sakura.

"I'm just filling space, huh...? I guess it'd be weird for a guy like me to play games with a bunch of girls for any other reason, though," my dad commented.

Wait, that sounds fun too! Now I'm jealous.

"Don't let them lure you in, Yotsuba," my mom chided.

"Ugggh," I groaned. It was indeed the fate of the eldest daughter to do housework on the sidelines while watching your little sisters have a blast. I gritted my teeth and set about helping my mom make dinner for us.

Huh? I could've swapped places with my dad? Nope, not an option. The very first item in the Hazama household's family bylaws was to never let him or Aoi into the kitchen under any circumstances. That rule was set in stone, and I wasn't about to break it!

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"Sorry for keeping you out so late!" I said. "When my parents start talking, there's just no stopping them."

"That's fine... In fact, I'm sorry too. I didn't mean for it to turn into all *this*," Makina replied.

Dinner was over, and I'd stepped out to walk her home—though

of course, seeing as her home was right next to ours, it wasn't really much of a walk at all. We ended up stopping to chat on my doorstep, more or less.

"I thought I'd just step in for a moment, say hello, and go on my way," Makina continued.

"Ahh, sorry. This really was a bother, wasn't it?"

"No, not at all! If anything, I feel bad for how far out of their way everyone went to make me feel welcome..."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that. Mom and dad were super glad to see you—you remember how they said you could come back anytime, right? And my sisters have been fans of yours for ages!"

"Your parents were one thing, but I felt like Sakura and Aoi were both a little on guard around me."

"Huh?! Y-You think so?"

"I'd almost forgotten just how *fond* of you those two are until I saw them like that, actually."

"H-Ha ha ha..."

Yup, Makina definitely has an eye for these things! It wouldn't be surprising no matter *how* much of our relationship she'd managed to figure out already. I mean, I'd be surprised anyway, but it *shouldn't* be surprising.

"It feels like it's been forever since I've been around a real *family* like that," Makina added.

"Oh. Right... Your parents..."

"It's fine. Those people don't matter to me at all."

Makina's tone was as cold as ice...but I could hear a certain sadness in her words as well. She'd told me all about her family's circumstances, and just thinking about them made my heart ache. Maybe from her perspective, my family looked like it didn't have any issues at all...?

"I already owe your parents a lot," Makina continued. "They helped me out so much, even when I was little—when I lived here, I mean."

"I don't think they did anything *that* crazy," I said. "I mean, I guess you did eat over at our place pretty often. It's a lot more

hectic these days, now that Sakura and Aoi are grown up."

"Maybe, but still, it felt just like it did back then. It felt so...so warm. It made me think, 'Oh, I get it. This is how families are supposed to be,'" Makina said, laying a hand to her chest. The look on her face was peaceful, almost.

This probably wasn't anything to celebrate...but it felt like we *were* Makina's family, at least in her mind. No one would be there to greet her when she went home after this—she'd be all alone in that house of hers. I knew that if I invited her to spend the night at my place, there was a good chance she'd be eager to agree...

But...I just can't.

Unfortunately, I knew how Makina felt about me. I hadn't given her a real response...but I knew that, no matter what happened, I'd never be able to bring myself to betray Yuna and Rinka. I wanted to be good to my childhood friend. I wanted to give her what *she* wanted. But spending the night together felt like it was something special. It felt like a line I couldn't cross, especially since it would probably raise her expectations in a way I definitely didn't mean to.

"Hey, Yotsy?" said Makina. "You really have a great family, don't you?"

"Huh?"

"They're all so happy, and so lively. They never fight or get mad at one another."

"W-We fight sometimes, actually! And mom's super scary when she chews us out."

"That's not what I mean. I'm talking about...well...it's a little hard to put into words," Makina said with an awkward smile. That was really rare, from her. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her at a loss for words. "My everyday life was one fight after another."

"Huh?"

"If you want to gain something, that means that someone else is going to have to lose something for it to happen. That's one of the things that I learned working as an idol," Makina muttered as she stared up into the sky. It felt like she was talking to herself as much as she was talking to me. "I know how glamorous show business looks from the outside, but from the inside, it's a constant fight to

survive. Only one member of an idol group can be the center. Only one actor in a drama can be its star. There's always a limited number of places, and everyone fights for their lives to claim one...and even when you win, if you can't produce the results you're supposed to, it's over for you. You work as hard as you can, pushing and pushing and pushing... When it all works out, it's a relief. But when it doesn't, it feels like the world you live in is denying everything about you. Like it's telling you you're worthless... And it feels like the only thing waiting for you in the future is darkness."

As Makina spoke, her expression faded away. It seemed like her spirit was being gradually worn down, piece by piece, until nearly nothing was left.

"Being with you puts my mind at ease, Yotsy. That's all I need to be happy, and even if I had to lose everything else for it, I wouldn't mind. Nothing's important compared to you. You're the sun that shines light into my world... But I guess that's probably going a little too far, isn't it?"

I knew I wasn't anything special—certainly not as amazing as she was making me out to be—but I couldn't bring myself to say it. It was like Makina was standing on a stage, bathed in spotlights and acting her heart out...while I was sitting in the audience, just watching from afar. I couldn't say that she was wrong. I couldn't agree with her either. I couldn't do anything at all other than *be* there.

But then—in the blink of an eye—Makina stepped down the stage, making her way into the stands and coming to a stop before me. She smiled, reached out a hand, and stroked my cheek. And then...

"So...I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

"I take back what I said earlier today."

Makina apologized, closed her eyes...

"Wha...?!"

...and kissed me, forcefully, before I could react.

“I need you, Yotsy. I want you, no matter what it takes. And so...I promise I’ll win your heart. Even if that’s not what you want at all, I’ll do it,” Makina said, giving me a powerfully intense stare.

It was strange, though. No matter how strong, no matter how confident she acted...I couldn’t help but see the old, little Makina in my mind’s eye. I saw her cowering, brought to the brink of tears by loneliness. It wasn’t a face I ever wanted to see her make.

And by the time I came to my senses...she was gone. I slumped to the ground, not even stopping to consider the fact that I was still outside, and sat there, paralyzed...until I looked up at the sky, like Makina had just moments before.

There was barely a star to be seen above me. The night sky was a vast, pitch-black void.

Interlude: Something I'll Never Give Up

Rewinding to after school on the day Yotsuba's class discussed their cultural-festival activity...

"I appreciate the two of you making time for this," Makina said as she locked the classroom door, then turned and nodded to the two other students who remained inside with her. Her behavior was perfectly professional and courteous, but the pair she spoke to, Yuna and Rinka, were plainly and openly suspicious of her regardless.

The sky outside had already begun to fade into the reddish glow of dusk. School had ended quite some time ago, and the only students who remained on campus were those particularly dedicated to their club activities. Waiting that long had been a matter of practicality. Yuna and Rinka simply drew too much attention unless the school was all but abandoned, and if they'd made it clear that they planned to linger in the classroom with the new transfer student, a whole crew of other students would have likely waited with them in the hopes of eavesdropping.

Telling the other students that they had something private to discuss and asking them to leave wasn't really an option—this was, after all, everyone's classroom. Meeting at one of their houses could have been an option, in theory...but in practice, they weren't on close enough terms for any of the involved parties to feel like proposing the idea. Neither Yuna nor Rinka knew exactly why Makina wanted to talk with them, but they had a fairly good idea what—or rather, *who*—the conversation was likely to revolve around. They also had a pretty good idea that it wasn't going to be pleasant.

"This is the first time the three of us have talked in private, isn't it?" Rinka cautiously prompted.

“Hee hee! I suppose it is, Aiba. We do seem to have a way of gathering attention, after all,” said Makina. *Her* smile, in contrast to Rinka’s apprehension, seemed as natural and sincere as could be. It was a broad smile that easily reached her eyes, and judging by it alone, one would think that Makina had nothing but the most innocent of small talk on her mind.

Makina Oda—or rather, Maki Amagi—was an actress whose talent had dazzled the nation. Mere high schoolers like Yuna and Rinka could never hope to see through to the true intentions that lay behind her perfectly constructed smile...but at the same time, the more she displayed her acting ability, the clearer it became that she was taking the conversation very seriously. That, in turn, made Yuna and Rinka keep their guards up.

“So, I hear you and Yotsuba go way back,” said Yuna.

“We certainly do, yes. Did Yotsy tell you about me, Momose?”

“She did, yeah.”

“She can be so mean sometimes, honestly. She didn’t even say a word to me about how she’s dating the two of you, you know?” Makina casually added, her smile never faltering for a second.

That settled it. She knew. Yuna and Rinka had already suspected as much, but having their suspicion confirmed so nonchalantly, as if it were a given, still rattled them. Yuna flinched as she gritted her teeth, and Rinka stepped forward, as if to protect her.

“You’re quite perceptive,” Rinka commented.

Makina ever so slightly narrowed her eyes. “You’re not going to play dumb, then?” she asked.

“Why would we? It’s the truth,” said Rinka. “You already knew that she was seeing *someone*, didn’t you, Oda?”

“I did, yes. I didn’t think she was dating a girl at first, though, much less two of them. That girl is just full of surprises, isn’t she...? Which is just another thing I love about her, of course,” said Makina. Even knowing that Yuna and Rinka were dating her—even with this truth fully out in the open—she made no attempt to conceal her own feelings for Yotsuba. “But it wasn’t hard to figure out, after seeing how the three of you acted. The two of you were one thing, but Yotsy couldn’t have made it more obvious. Oh, but don’t worry! I’m

not planning on exposing you to anyone, rest assured."

That promise was not particularly reassuring. If anything, it only emphasized that Makina had blackmail material ready and available. A moment later, however, a very rare scowl came across her face.

"I don't make a habit of spreading other people's secrets around, and if your relationship were exposed, Yotsy would be the one who'd take all the heat for it, wouldn't she? She's the one two-timing the two of you, after all. I'd never do anything that would put her in danger," Makina said. This time, it was much easier to believe that she genuinely had no intention of using the dirt she had on them.

"Oh...? I guess we'll take your word for it," said Yuna.

"Though if that's the case, I'm curious what exactly you *did* call us out to discuss," Rinka asked.

"Hee hee!" Makina chuckled, seemingly amused by their reactions.

"What's so funny?!" snapped Yuna.

"Oh, pardon me! I didn't mean to belittle you. I just thought it was charming how perfectly in sync the two of you are."

"What're you insinuating?" asked Yuna.

"Nothing whatsoever. Or at least, nothing that everyone in our class hasn't told me. The two of you have been friends for as long as you can remember, haven't you? They say you're so perfectly suited for each other, some people even say your relationship is 'Sacrosanct.'"

Yuna and Rinka fell silent. The way their classmates perceived them as the Sacrosanct was the result of a scheme that Yuna had proposed in the hopes of keeping particular sorts of undesired attention away from them. Now that they were dating Yotsuba, however, that self-made image had come back to bite them. Yotsuba had always been painfully aware of the attention that hanging out with the Sacrosanct earned her, even before she started two-timing them, and in the long term, that attention had done terrible things to her self-esteem at school.

If they could have, Yuna and Rinka would have both openly declared without a second thought that they were dating Yotsuba. That might have disillusioned their fans and driven away their peers,

but as long as they had Yotsuba with them, they were confident they'd be perfectly happy anyway. The problem, however, was that Makina was right: Their three-way relationship was something that society at large would never accept either. They were violating a very clear taboo, and even their families would almost certainly be horrified to learn the truth. In fact, Yuna and Rinka knew all too well that Yotsuba's sisters catching on to what she was doing had almost ruined her relationship with them.

Even if Yotsuba, Yuna, and Rinka were all happy with their relationship as it stood, they couldn't delude themselves into thinking society would feel the same way. There was a constant feeling of unease, like they were doing something wrong, that made it very difficult for the two of them to directly confront Makina about her open interest in Yotsuba.

"I happen to think that the two of you make a wonderful pair as well, by the way," said Makina.

"*Excuse* me?!" said Yuna.

"What are you getting at...?" added Rinka.

"Please, don't get me wrong! I'm not trying to imply anything malicious at all. All I'm trying to say is that the way you feel so perfectly in sync goes to show how deeply the bonds you've cultivated over those many long years of friendship run," Makina said. She almost sounded jealous...but only for an instant, and a moment later, a trace of hostility finally began to shine in her eyes. "Yes—you share an incredibly strong bond. And so, I have to wonder...why is it that the two of you are so obsessed with Yotsy too?"

"Huh?"

"*Why*...?"

Makina's tone of voice was far too heated for Yuna and Rinka to take her question at face value. In fact, it almost came across as an insult. They didn't know how to reply. Makina's hostility toward them was so great it had broken through the actress's mask she wore, and the two of them couldn't help but flinch in the face of it.

"On second thought...I suppose there's no point in questioning you about that now," Makina added, dismissing her own question

before Yuna or Rinka could answer. It felt like she was afraid they'd notice the emotion that had, apparently by accident, permeated her words. "Let's get back to the point—by which I mean, the reason why I called the two of you here."

It didn't escape Yuna and Rinka's attention that Makina was hurrying the conversation away from the last subject, but neither of them called her out. It didn't feel like the appropriate moment to interrogate her, for one thing, and for another, neither of them liked the thought of the answers they might receive if they dug deeper.

"I was hoping to speak with you about one of the proposals for our cultural-festival performance," Makina continued.

"You mean the one about putting on an idol show?" asked Yuna.

"Yes. As I said during the meeting, I'm not opposed to being a performer for the festival."

"But not unconditionally, right? You said that you didn't want to be the only one onstage."

"Like I said, it would feel like a waste. This festival is for all of us, and I'd feel lonely singing up there all on my own," Makina replied with a beaming smile. It seemed possible she was being at least partially sincere, but it was very obvious that that wasn't her *real* reason.

"Don't tell me...you're planning on making Yotsuba perform with you?" asked Yuna.

"Hee hee! That *would* make for a wonderful memory in its own right."

"You've gotta be kidding. Yotsuba, onstage...? She'd literally shrivel up and die of shame!"

"Settle down, Yuna," Rinka said, catching Yuna's shoulder just before she lunged to grab Makina.

"No, really, just think about it," said Makina. "Imagine her up on the stage, shivering like a scared little rabbit as she's bathed in the audience's gazes, but determined to do whatever she can to meet their expectations in spite of her stage fright... Doesn't that sound just adorable?"

"I...have to admit, it does," Rinka said in spite of her better judgment. An image had just sprung into her mind of Yotsuba in a

frilly idol costume, fidgeting nervously with a strained, twitching smile on her deeply blushing face...and, in complete honesty, Rinka *did* sort of want to see that.

"Then when the performance is over and she's danced her heart out, Yotsy comes backstage and you throw your arms around her. She hugs you back as the tension drains away from her, a look of relief coming across her face... And then she looks up and mutters, 'I did my best' with the cutest little blush. Even in my imagination, she looks so cute I could just scream! She's the best... I'd watch her perform every day if I could..."

"I *so* get that!" exclaimed Yuna. "But also, wait, how are you *this* good at analyzing what she'd do?!"

"Well, we're childhood friends, after all."

"Ugh... Okay, but for your information, none of that changes the fact that Yotsuba's *our* girlfriend!"

"That's true...for now."

"*Huh?!*" Yuna indignantly exclaimed.

"You're making it sound like that's going to change," Rinka noted. She was clearly just as displeased.

Makina, however, didn't waver in the face of their hostility. In fact, it only seemed to make her dig her heels in more than ever.

"Well... Let's set that aside for now," said Makina. "Back to the point at hand. We were talking about the performance."

"Fine... Back on topic," said Yuna. "Otherwise we'll never get to go home."

"I should say in advance that if you really are planning on making Yotsuba perform, I'm firmly against it," said Rinka. "I'll admit that she's adorable, and that I'd love to see her dressed in an idol outfit, but sacrificing her comfort and well-being for that sake would be putting the cart before the horse."

"I couldn't agree more, Aiba," said Makina. "My intention is absolutely not to put Yotsy in an uncomfortable position. Plus...if she really *did* perform, I'd have to be there onstage performing with her, backstage supporting her, *and* in the audience cheering her on all at once! There would have to be *three* of me, or it would all be pointless!" she added, her fists clenched tightly. It was the least

actress-like, most genuine expression she'd shown all day, much to Yuna and Rinka's bemusement, and it sent a very clear message to the two of them.

I knew it, thought Yuna.

She really does love Yotsuba, Rinka concluded as well.

This was a point of common ground that the three of them shared: They'd all had their hearts stolen by Yotsuba. Makina's feelings for her weren't driven by a celebrity's idle whim or a childhood friend's sense of obligation. She was motivated by genuine love, plain and simple. That explained in an instant why the expression Makina had on now was so different from the ones she'd shown initially—from the expressions that Maki Amagi let herself wear. Needless to say, though, the fact that Rinka and Yuna were dating Yotsuba made understanding and acceptance two very different matters.

Makina cleared her throat. "Pardon me," she said, pausing to collect herself. It seemed she'd let a little more of her true feelings slip through than she'd intended. "Momose, Aiba. I believe it would be best for everyone if the two of you agreed to perform with me."

"Huh?!" grunted Yuna.

"You want *us*...?" asked Rinka.

The two of them had noticed that their class expected them to perform, but they hadn't thought that Makina would feel the same way.

"I do, yes," said Makina. "Perhaps this is overly simplistic of me, but I believe that the two of you would look wonderful up onstage—though I have to admit that I mostly mean that in a visual sense."

Yuna and Rinka were aware that they were attractive, and having a top-class idol compliment their looks was honestly quite flattering...but it wasn't enough to convince them that they had what it took to perform alongside said idol. That was a *very* different question.

"Do you mean...you want us to be your backup dancers?" asked Rinka.

"No, no. I want the three of us to form a proper idol unit together. No backup dancers, and no single one of us in front either.

The three of us would stand on equal ground."

"Are you kidding me?! You know that's totally impossible!" shouted Yuna. Her appalled disbelief kicked in far too quickly for her to feel happy about the proposal at all.

"We're high schoolers," Rinka followed up. "We can't just climb onstage and perform on your level that easily. You know that better than anyone, don't you?"

It was certainly true that the class had high expectations for all three of them, and even if Makina outshone Yuna and Rinka, they still stood a chance at making her look better by comparison just by being there. That, however, wasn't an easy role for them to accept.

"I wouldn't say that at all, actually," Makina replied. "I'm as much of a high schooler as you two, after all, and we're the same age at that. Not to mention that I believe the two of you have what it takes, though I can understand why you'd doubt that, seeing as I've only known you for a matter of days."

"We have what it takes...to be idols?" Rinka asked, clearly baffled by the idea.

"Exactly, Aiba. I can tell that the two of you have that certain something that draws people's attention. You'd never have ended up being called something as grandiose as 'the Sacrosanct' otherwise," Makina explained.

Yuna and Rinka had both been approached by talent scouts on a number of occasions. They'd never felt particularly drawn to the entertainment industry, though, and there was always a chance that the people who spoke to them were actually con artists, so they'd never taken any of the offers seriously. Now, however, they were hearing one directly from a genuine top idol. Her words carried a weight that none of the previous solicitations had.

"You're exceptionally athletic, Aiba. Your dancing is remarkable, and I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that you have the potential to dominate any stage you step onto. And you, Momose, are very clever. You know exactly how to leverage your charms most effectively. Frankly, I would almost say that you were born to be an idol."

"U-Umm..."

"I'm not so sure about that..."

Neither of them knew how to react to Makina's direct, unreserved compliments. They couldn't admit it, considering the circumstances, but the truth was that both of them were rather flattered once again.

"As I said, you both have the potential. There's plenty to work with...which is exactly why I can make this proposal."

"What proposal?" asked Yuna.

"I would like the two of you to perform onstage with me at the cultural festival...and I would like us to use that performance to settle things between us."

"Huh?"

"*Settle* things?!"

"It would be quite simple to arrange. We'd distribute a survey to our audience after the performance, and whoever received the most positive feedback would win. That sounds reasonable enough, doesn't it?"

"H-Hold on a second!" shouted Yuna.

"There's so much about this that's *un*reasonable, I don't know where to start," said Rinka.

"I'm willing to go a little easy on you, naturally—but of course, I can't do it by holding back on my own performance without spoiling the fun for everyone. Instead, let's say that the two of you can pool your scores and compete against me together. We can consider weighing the votes you receive more heavily if it seems necessary as well."

This, clearly, was the discussion that Makina had actually brought them here to have. On the one hand, it was good to finally understand where this was going, but on the other hand, they couldn't shake the feeling that they would be at a distinct disadvantage in this challenge. The two of them taking on Makina in a song and dance contest would be like little kids trying to take on an adult in arm wrestling—assuming that the gap in ability wasn't even greater than that. No advantage that Makina could offer them was likely to make up for that fact.

"And needless to say, the prize we'll be wagering in this

contest...is Yotsy," Makina added.

Yuna and Rinka both drew in a sharp, alarmed breath. Yotsuba being on the line changed everything. This was no longer something they could brush off as a joke.

"I really hope you're not trying to say that we have to break up with her if we lose!" snapped Yuna.

"We have absolutely no obligation to accept a challenge like that—and it's also not something we could wager in the first place," added Rinka.

"Hee hee! Of course that's not what I meant," Makina replied. "If I wanted to make you break up with Yotsy, she'd have to be here for the conversation too...but I'm sure she'd be horrified if she learned that we were at odds with one another. That's why I'm hoping that we can keep all of this between the three of us."

"You do realize that we haven't even said yes yet, right?" noted Yuna.

"And how exactly would we wager Yotsuba in a contest that she doesn't even know about? This doesn't make sense," said Rinka.

"It's simple, really. If I win, I'd like the two of you to refrain from interfering at all whenever I try to make a move on her."

"Wha—?!" Yuna gasped.

"Needless to say, you're free to keep dating her. As to whether you'll stay together in the long term, though... Well, I suppose that will depend on how much effort you're willing to put in."

It was obvious that Makina was trying to provoke them, but it wasn't a provocation that either of them could brush off. Very few people would be able to stay calm and quiet after hearing someone openly declare an intent to steal their lover. Even as the atmosphere in the classroom grew tense, Makina kept wearing the same smile she'd started out the conversation with...though now, it looked inflammatory to Yuna and Rinka in a way it hadn't before.

"What if we refuse your challenge?" asked Rinka.

"Then nothing will change whatsoever. I'll do everything I can to make Yotsy mine, and of course, the two of you are free to interfere with me. You *are* her girlfriends, after all."

"We're 'free to interfere'?! You seriously think you have any right

to say that after straight up *telling* us you're going to try to steal her?!" snapped Yuna.

"I'm well aware of how unreasonable I'm being. What you need to understand is that Yotsy's just that important to me. The fact that she's in a relationship could never be enough to make me meekly back down and give up on her...even if pursuing her means burying my own public persona."

Makina's resolve was greater than she could express through words. Her desire to be with Yotsuba, and the degree to which she considered Yuna and Rinka obstacles to that goal, were so powerful that they nearly made the two shiver.

"So, what if we win?" Rinka asked. There was no way they could decide whether to accept the challenge without that piece of information.

"If I lose...I swear I'll never approach Yotsy again, in the romantic sense of the word."

"And...you could live with that?"

"Whenever I've wanted something in the past, I've gone out and won it through my own power. That's exactly what I intend to do with Yotsuba as well—to claim her with my own two hands. If I can't, it just goes to show I was never worth much to begin with," Makina said, as much to herself as to the others.

That was simply the reality of the life Makina lived. Whether in her conflict with her parents, her splitting apart with her beloved childhood friend, or even her accomplishments as an idol, Makina's circumstances had forced her to lose things that were important to her time after time. The stress of hearing her coworkers whisper about her behind her back—of reading brutally unkind comments by her haters online—was unfathomable, but still, she fought with everything she had. She stood tall and proud as she strove for victory, doing all she could to ensure that no one could argue with her results. By this point, almost no one knew that Makina Oda was a timid, pessimistic, and fainthearted girl by nature.

That was exactly why Makina felt obligated to offer her challenge. The fact that the challenge's nature suited her so well was partially a stroke of luck, thanks to her classmate's suggestion...and partially,

perhaps, a sign of just how attached to Yotsuba she really was.

Yuna and Rinka were silent. The strength of Makina's determination was overwhelming, but that didn't mean they'd been scared into submission. In fact...the truth was quite the opposite.

"All right, then," Yuna said. In the end, she was the one who made the call. "You're on. You're in too, right, Rinka?"

"Right," Rinka agreed with an emphatic nod.

Makina's eyes widened with surprise. "Really...? You're sure about this?"

"If we back down here, there's no way you wouldn't look down on us for it, right?" said Rinka. "Well, speaking as Yotsuba's girlfriends, that's an outcome we can't tolerate."

"But we're also amateurs, and like you said, nobody wants to see us put on a sad, half-baked joke of a show... So our condition's that you have to train us, and do it right! If you start slacking, the deal's null and void!" added Rinka.

"Of course. I was already planning on it," said Makina.

There was more on the line in their contest than just its stated reward. The two sides—Yuna and Rinka versus Makina—were also each using it as an opportunity to evaluate the other. They all knew that in order to achieve a perfect, complete victory, they would have to prove that *they* were the ones truly worthy of Yotsuba's affection.

"I'll make sure that both of you put on a perfect performance...and then I'll exceed it," said Makina.

It was a contest between a nationally renowned idol and a pair of ordinary high schoolers—the equivalent of a pair of ants teaming up to take down an elephant. Makina, however, was far from complacent. After all, her compliments had been sincere: Her opponents really did have a very special sort of appeal. The look in their eyes made it clear that their foe's sheer skill didn't scare them in the slightest. That exact sort of fearlessness, above all else, was the trait that had allowed Makina herself to rise to the heights that she'd reached. And of course...

Yotsy...I'll win, no matter what. I swear it.

...more than anything, Makaina was driven by the intense pressure that she had placed upon herself—pressure so great, it had

her clenching her fists as tightly as she could without even realizing it.

Chapter 5: Yotsuba Becomes a Model!

"*Ugh...*"

Boy oh boy, had I screwed up this time. At long last, I'd gone and done it. I'd *kissed* Makina!

Okay, sure, it was more like *she'd* kissed *me*, and in a pretty pushy way that didn't involve asking for permission...but that didn't feel like it meant I could just say I hadn't done anything wrong and get off scot-free. I'd been surprise-kissed by Yuna, Rinka, and Aoi in the past, and I'd been surprised every time, but I'd never been upset or put off by it at all...and the unfortunate truth of the matter was that Makina's kiss had been no different.

Just how easy am *I, honestly...?*

Part of me really wanted to take myself to task for my absurdly loose standards, but then another part of me rose up to ask why *this* would be the straw that broke the camel's back after everything *else* I'd already done. And that, of course, was just further proof that I was straight up the worst.

"Hazama...?"

"Huh? Ah, sorry! Did you say something just now?"

"N-No, I didn't. I was just thinking that you looked tired, that's all," Mukai said with a concerned cock of her head. We'd found a quiet spot in a corner of the hallway to work together that day, as usual. "Did catching up on sleep over the weekend not work out after all?"

"Yeah... I barely got any rest at all in the end, actually," I admitted. By my standards, the weekend had been downright packed, and then a certain event right at the end had thrown me for a *total* psychological loop. I was pretty positive that I'd come out of the weekend more exhausted than I'd been going into it.

"Umm, well, you know that you don't have to stick around with me if you don't feel like it, right?" said Mukai.

"Nah, it's all good! I'm totally fine! Heck, *you're* sticking around with *me*, the way I see it!" I replied.

As we'd plugged away at our busywork, we'd also been talking about the drawing that Mukai had decided to make. She'd spent her weekend brainstorming, and had actually brought the tablet that she used to draw with her to school today. She showed me a few drawings—rough drafts, or sketches, or whatever you call them—of ideas she'd had for designs that could work as advertisements for our performance...

"Hmm..."

...but judging by the frown on her face, Mukai wasn't satisfied with her own efforts so far.

"They just don't feel quite right," said Mukai.

"You think so?"

"Yeah. There's something about the composition that just doesn't feel realistic, I guess..."

Frankly: I couldn't tell, like, at all. I had a *terrible* track record when it came to the arts, so no surprise there.

"Normally I'd use a drawing mannequin or pictures I found online to check the poses. I pose myself for reference as well, sometimes... But I just can't come up with a concept that fits all *three* of them together in one image just right."

"I see," I lied.

Mukai showed me a few more images after that, none of which she seemed satisfied with either. *I* thought that they were all super cute and pretty, and I really liked them quite a bit...but it struck me that she really did seem to draw just *one* girl in most of her works. It seemed like the more people there were in a drawing—or really, the more *things* there were in a drawing in general—the harder it would be to make, though it's not like I had any clue what I was talking about, so who knew if that was actually true or not. I mean, if *I* tried to draw even a single person, I knew for a fact that their limbs would end up all unbalanced and out of proportion with one another for sure. I couldn't even handle the most basic level of consistency

when it came to figure drawing.

"Some people can figure all of this compositional stuff out intuitively, but I've just never had that sort of talent," said Mukai.

"Oh, huh... Maybe we could ask the three of them to model for you, then?" I suggested.

"Th-That would be incredibly helpful...but I don't think it's possible, considering."

"Yeaaah, true enough."

Mukai was drawing a picture of Yuna, Rinka, and Makina. Having the three of them pose together and using them as the basis for her drawing might have given her the sense of realism she was hoping for, but we were working on that drawing behind the scenes. It was a personal project with no official association with the cultural festival—for all intents and purposes, she was just drawing it for fun. Pulling the three of them in to help with a project like that just felt like cheating, somehow.

"Okay, so what if you found other people to model in their place?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Like, I dunno...m-me, maybe?"

The second I said those words, I was overcome with embarrassment. It felt *super* self-centered to suggest that I could be a model, but on the other hand, I'd told her that I'd do anything I could to help, and why would this be an exception? It felt like the words "But it's totally fine if you don't think I'd be up to snuff!" were lurking in my throat, ready to leap out my mouth the second my negativity overcame me.

Mukai, however, responded before I had the chance to spit them out. "You'd do that?! That would be a huge help!" she exclaimed without missing a beat. "But there would still only be two of us, then. We'd need a third."

"O-Oh, right," I said.

"And since I'd ideally be taking reference pictures the whole time, it'd really be best if we could get *two* people other than you. Preferably people who have the same relative heights with you as Oda, Momose, and Aiba do with one another. *That* would be

perfect.”

“O-Okaaay...”

If you lined the three of them up from tallest to shortest, Rinka would be first, Makina second, and Yuna third. I didn’t think that she’d need people who *perfectly* matched each of their heights, but I could definitely see it being useful to have a noticeable difference between each of us. The question is, who would fit that bill...?

“Wait... Hm?”

“What is it, Hazama?”

“I think I might actually know just the right pair!”

I’d thought through my whole circle of acquaintances, minus the three performers...and surprisingly, I *did* know two people who seemed like they would work nicely. I wouldn’t know exactly how our relative heights stacked up until we all stood next to one another, of course, but it felt like it at least had potential.

“A-Are you sure we wouldn’t be imposing, though...?” asked Mukai.

“It can’t hurt to ask, right? I’ll check right now!”

“O-Okay...”

It was strange. I’d thought that Mukai would be happy about this, but she actually seemed sort of downcast. *Oh, wait...*

“Is this actually something you’d rather not do...? S-Sorry!” I said. “I’m really bad at picking up this sort of thing. If I’m ever bothering you, you can go ahead and tell me, okay?! Seriously, don’t hold back!”

“No, that’s not it at all!” said Mukai. “It’s just that...I can’t understand why you’re going so far to help me, that’s all. We’d never even spoken until just recently.”

“O-Oh, umm, honestly? It’s really simple. I just like your art, that’s all.”

“There’s no way it could possibly be *that* good,” Mukai said, hanging her head as she spoke.

It hit me that my positivity about her art might have actually put quite a bit of pressure on her. Mukai might very well have thought of her art as nothing more than a simple hobby. She’d told me about it on the spur of the moment, and I’d gone and made a *whole* massive

thing out of it. No wonder she felt uncomfortable.

I really did think that the two of us were similar, in a number of ways. This might come out sounding rude, but we were both people who valued our alone time more than hanging out in a big, noisy, high-energy group...or something like that, I guess. In my case, though, I was mostly just scared that the closer I got with people, the more likely it was that I'd get hurt. That meant that when I found someone who I *did* feel comfortable and safe around, I actually *liked* spending lots of time with them. I hadn't known Mukai for very long, sure, but she'd already entered that category for me. I sort of hoped that I was in a similar position for her as well, though I knew that might've been awfully presumptuous of me.

"So...I'm pretty good at cooking," I said.

"Huh...?" Mukai grunted, furrowing her brow. My sudden conversational left turn had caught her by surprise.

"Ah, but I mean good in a relative sense, you know? Like, it's one of the very few things that I'm not terrible at... I can't make anything even *close* to restaurant-level food, for the record! I'm a *super* amateur home cook, basically!"

I'd never liked saying that I was *good* or *skilled* at stuff. After all, there was always a chance that results that seemed remarkable to me could be totally hopeless from someone else's perspective. I didn't want to build up people's expectations only to let them down in the end, and while cooking was the one thing I thought that I was actually good at, the mortifying possibility that my cooking wasn't *really* all that special was always there in the back of my mind. But, still...

"Compared to people who really know what they're doing, my cooking's probably super laughably petty...but my mom, my dad, and my little sisters always tell me that it's really good, at least! It's always really nice hearing their compliments...and it makes me want to keep cooking more."

I was probably putting her on the spot with this random lecture I'd jumped into, but Mukai just sat there, attentively listening to me. The whole personal story was just a lead-in to what I'd actually wanted to say this whole time, of course.

"I really like your art, Mukai. I'm totally worthless at drawing myself, so I can't really explain *why* I like it in any sort of detail...but whenever I see your drawings, I just think, `*Wow*, that's so good!' I have no idea what parts of your drawings are technically impressive, or even what it is that makes them so nice to look at, but I *do* know that I want to see more of them, and that if you really do draw my, um...my friends, I'd want to see that no matter what!"

Those were my honest feelings, expressed as well as I could manage. I knew that my reasons for wanting her to draw were selfish, but I couldn't help but feel that way, and I felt like I *had* to tell her. It might've been irresponsible of me to dump all that on her out of the blue, but if there was any chance that she was like me—that her isolation was something that pained her rather than something she wanted—it was a risk I had to take!

For a moment, Mukai didn't say anything. Eventually she hung her head once more...

"Hee hee!"

...but this time, it was a little different. This time, she was trying—and failing—to hold back her laughter.

"Well, that was a little embarrassing to hear," Mukai finally said.

"S-Sorry..."

"But I'm glad. This is the first time anyone's said anything like this to me...and it's really nice to know that someone could care that much about my art."

"But I already said how much I liked it back when you first showed it to me!"

"I thought you were just being nice! And back then, I... Actually, no, never mind."

Back then she what? I was a little curious, but I decided to let it drop. No point trying to rewind the conversation now!

"You're a really straightforward person, aren't you, Hazama?"

"Huh?"

"I mean how you're so frank, and innocent, I guess... But anyway, I'll do what I can! Just watch me!"

"Mukai..."

"So, umm, about the people you thought might model for me...

Would you mind...?”

“Of course not! I’ll ask them right away!” I agreed on the spot.

I didn’t think the chances of this working out were super high, to be honest—like, I would’ve given them less than a fifty percent chance—but I couldn’t let Mukai’s newfound motivation go to waste! I’d convince the two of them to play along, even if I had to bow deep enough to press my face into the pavement to make it happen!

◇◇◇

That Saturday afternoon, a host of warriors answered Yotsuba Hazama’s call, gathering at her behest to prepare for battle!

“...”

“Ow! Ouch! Cut it out! No karate-chopping, please!”

“I couldn’t help myself. Seeing you smile *that* smugly touched an extremely irritating nerve.”

As I endured a brutal assault courtesy of the first of said warriors, Mai Koganezaki, I glanced around the room.

“Yotsuba’s little sisters?! You two are adorable, indeed!”

“Wha— Wait, aren’t you supposed to be *older* than us...? How are you *this* cute?!”

“Umm, excuse me! Can I pat your head, please?!”

“Please do, indeed!”

Where there was light there was shadow, and where there was Koganezaki there was our very own real-life angel: Emma! She was getting *very* comfortable over on the couch, along with my own personal pair of angels, Sakura and Aoi, who’d been completely taken in by her charms! And *that’s* not even all!

“Ahh, umm, err... Hazama? How on earth do you *know* all these people?!”

That’s right: Our roster was rounded out by Mukai, who was currently terrified and trembling in a corner of the living room! In other words, counting me, a grand total of...*err, one, two, three...*six! *Six* warriors had come together beneath my roof to form...*the Yotsuvengers*! Duh-dun-dun-duuun!

“Quiet, you.”

"*Ow!* But why?! I didn't even say anything!"

"Your face was loud."

"Come *ooon*!"

That's not a fair reason to hit me at all! I thought, though since I couldn't guarantee that the smirk I'd been wearing in my imagination hadn't made its way onto my real-world face, I couldn't really argue the point. *Boo.*

"U-Umm, Hazama...?!"

"Hm? What's wrong, Mukai?" I said.

"What do you *mean*, what's wrong?! What in the world have you dragged me into?! I mean, okay, so I came along willingly, but still!" Mukai wailed, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes.

I knew *exactly* how she felt. I'd been bewildered as all get-out the first time *I* was brought here too. "Here," by the way, was Koganezaki's place. That's right: We'd gathered up in her luxury high-rise apartment! It had taken quite a lot of doing on my part to get permission to make this our meeting place, but it seemed like the perfect venue for us to tackle today's objective, so I went the extra mile for it...and unfortunately, that effort had led to Mukai shriveling up into a husk of her usual self.

And, uhh...in retrospect, that sort of made sense. I might've reacted in exactly the same way, if I were in her position.

"I didn't even have a clue that you were on good enough terms with the Empress to visit her house," Mukai added.

"The Empress?" I repeated—but, really, there was only one person here who *that* could've been describing. "Do people call Koganezaki that?"

"Umm, well, I don't really know the details...but I've heard people say something along those lines, at least..."

"Huuuh... I can kinda see it, actually. It suits her perfectly. Maybe I should start calling— *Ow*, ouch, jeez!"

"You *are* aware that I can still hear you, Hazama?" a voice rang out from behind me as a hand fell upon my shoulder, gripping it very, *very* firmly. That hand, needless to say, belonged to the Empress herself! It sort of felt like she was trying to make it clear that she *wasn't* upset with Mukai—she'd gone out of her way to say

my name, after all—but Mukai still ended up trembling at the sight of her. The yelp of pain I'd let out probably hadn't helped with that.

"A-Anyway... Right, of course! We should all introduce ourselves! Most of us haven't met one another yet, after all!" I shouted, pulling a new subject out of thin air in the hopes of escaping the Empress's superhumanly strong grip. I'd come up with that one *completely* off the cuff, but when I stopped to think about what had just sprung from my mouth, I realized that it was actually a pretty great idea by my standards!

"That's a surprisingly decent suggestion, by your standards."

See?! Even the Empress gave it her royal approval!

"Okay, then—let's all gather up! That means you three too!" I said to Emma and my sisters, the latter of whom were totally preoccupied with the former. A moment later, all six of us had joined one conversation. "Okay, so, introductions...who do you think should start?" I asked, turning to Koganezaki.

"Why would you ask *me*?" she replied.

Because I've never been in charge in a situation like this before, that's why! My desperate attempt to appeal to her for help had only earned me a very exasperated glare. *Come ooon!*

"Oooh, okay! In that case, we can go youngest to oldest so I can start!" Aoi, my own sister and the greatest extrovert among us, piped up!

Volunteering yourself without a hint of fear or hesitation, even when you're surrounded by your elders, and sounding as cheerful as could be while you do it...? You're a hero, Aoi!

"I'm Aoi Hazama, and I'm a second-year in middle school! And I like...my older sister Yotsuba!"

Wait, we're listing a thing we like now?! I thought we'd just start with names...

"Hee hee!" Aoi giggled, shooting me a grin. "I thought that if we ended up learning that we had something in common, it might help us all get along!"

Oh, I get it... That's a good point! And making it specifically about stuff we like means that any conversations that spin off from it should be nice and fun! Slight problem, though, Aoi: If that's the

goal, then doesn't picking your older sister sort of defeat the whole purpose?

"Okay, and after me is...you, Sakura!" said Aoi.

"I-I know, okay?" Sakura said before clearing her throat and taking a step forward. "I'm Sakura Hazama, and I'm a third-year in middle school. I like...m-my older sister."

Sakuraaa?! Did hearing Aoi's declaration make you feel like you had to compete with her or something...? You basically never *say you like me that directly! I mean, I know you do, but still!!!*

"Your sisters really love you, don't they, Hazama...?" commented Mukai.

"Ah, no, umm... I think they're just buttering me up, basically," I whispered back.

See?! Now we're making Mukai feel like she's out of the loop, and weirding her out while we're at it! I'd *tried* to salvage the situation, but it felt like I'd ended up looking like I was trying to be humble and it didn't take at all. *B-But it's fine! We've cleared the little-sister zone! Next up is... Augh?!*

"I'm Emma, indeed!"

Emmaaa?!

"Emma Shizumi! I'm a first-year in high school, indeed! I like my dearest sister and..."

And?

"...Yotsuba, indeed!"

Silence fell.

Ahhh! Mukai's even more out of the loop than ever! I think I just saw her flinch away from us! And Sakura's and Aoi's smiles feel sort of scary all of a sudden!

And, I mean, come on, Emma...you could've just stopped at Koganezaki! That was plenty! Why'd you have to say my name too...? N-Not that I'm not happy about it! It's really nice to hear, honestly! It makes me wanna pat you on the head and take you home with me...but now's not the time for that!



"...I suppose I'm next," said Koganezaki. It seemed that between Mukai's horror and my flustered panic, she'd decided that she was the only representative of the high-school-second-year division ready to step up to the plate.

S-Surely she can fix this, right...? If anyone's capable of making this situation less agonizingly uncomfortable, it's her!

"Mai Koganezaki. Second-year high schooler. I..."

Koganezaki paused and glanced at me.

N-No way. Koganezaki, would you really?! Surely you're not going to say me*...?!*

"...don't have particularly strong feelings regarding Hazama."

"Koganezakiiiiii!!!"

You got my hopes up! You got them way *up!!! I really thought there was a chance that you'd go with the flow and say you liked me for a second!*

"What?"

"Nope, nothing, never mind," I said. I wasn't about to run my mouth and get the shoulder grab of doom again.

"Ah, u-umm, I-I'm Chiaki Mukai. I'm a second-year in high school, and...I, umm, I like..." Mukai said, judging that this was the moment for her to make her introduction—but for some reason, she paused and anxiously glanced over at me partway through. "I-I'm sorry! I consider you a friend, but I don't think I like you in the same sort of sense that everyone else meant..."

Sh-She apologized*?*

"Th-That's fine, actually?! I don't mind at all!" I yelped. *Everyone else was being weird by listing me as the thing they like, Mukai! You're the only one here who's totally normal!*

...But, okay, now that I'm thinking about it, hearing her say that she "doesn't really like" me actually does *kinda sting. Weird, that.*

"So, I, umm...I like to draw," Mukai concluded as she flinched away from the rest of us once again.

With that, there was only one person left to take the stage. It was finally my turn!

"Ugh...?!" I grunted as I glanced around. Aoi and Emma were gazing at me with looks of eager anticipation. Sakura's gaze wasn't

quite as openly excited, but her fidgeting filled in that gap nicely. Koganezaki was shooting me a frigid, evaluating sort of stare, and Mukai's gaze couldn't have been more awkward. Everyone's attention was focused directly on me, and I flinched in the face of it all. I knew what they were waiting for. They were waiting to see who I would say I liked at the end of my self-intro!

How did it come to this...? This was supposed to just be a nice, friendly way of getting to know each other!

Before I could shout all that out loud, though...I reconsidered things. It had suddenly struck me that, looking back on my lifetime, I'd *never* made it through a self-introduction session like this unscathed. To someone like me—which is to say, someone who looked at the world through the perspective of a hermit crab without a shell, always assuming you were surrounded by enemies who'd pick you out as a small fry within seconds of you opening your mouth—self-introduction sessions were an actual, literal hell.

You *had* to make yourself look tough in a self-intro. If you didn't look tough, you'd look like a target. Unfortunately, the more I'd fixate on that fact, the more I'd start trembling as my courage drained away from me at a rapid pace. My mouth would freeze shut, and my brain would shut down. I'd start wishing that everyone would just talk with one another and ignore me entirely. I'd hear them jeer at me. Some of them would cheer me on. This one time—though I can't even really remember when—it all overwhelmed me so much, I actually collapsed partway through my class's self-intro session and ended up getting carried off to the nurse's office.

I-It's fine. I just have to say my name and something I like. That's all. That's all there is to it...!

If I let how shaken I really was show on my face, then everyone would worry about me. They were all nice like that—I mean, come on, most of them had just straight up said they liked me! They'd all gathered up here just for me!

"That's exactly right, Yotsuba."

Ah! My inner angel!

"You have no enemies here, Yotsuba. Everyone's on your side!"

Yeah, you're right! You are...right...?

"You were literally just *thinkin' that yourself, weren't you?"*

And my inner devil!

"Look, you just gotta say your name, your grade, and a thing you like. Easy as pie, right?"

I mean, mostly...but everyone else's acts for the "saying a thing I like" part were really tough to follow...

"So, what? You tellin' me you don't believe in them?"

Wait. What?

"Think about Sakura and Aoi! They're your precious little sisters, aren't they? They know how big of a loser you are, but they love you anyway! They've never given up on you, have they?"

I guess they haven't. I've never been the amazing, awe-inspiring older sister I want to be for them, really...but they still look up to me anyway.

"Then there's Mai Koganezaki and Emma Shizumi. Those two know you're a total drip too, but that hasn't stopped 'em from reaching out to you!"

No, because they're just that nice. They're always willing to lend a hand and lead me along the right path. They're wonderful people.

"And then there's Chiaki Mukai," my inner angel chimed in. *"Do you realize how much courage it took for her to come here? She did it because she believes in you!"*

That's right. If anyone's having a hard time right now, it's Mukai! She's surrounded by strangers. I'm the only one here who she knows, so what's she supposed to do if I'm *a nervous wreck?*

"None of them are the sorta people who'd give up on you for flubbing a stupid self-intro, are they?! Get a grip, girl!"

"All you need to do is be your true, authentic self. Every one of them is sure to accept you."

"Yeah, sure, self-intros are a living hell for you—but nowhere with those five around could ever be a real *hell! Not by a long shot!"*

"This is a golden opportunity, Yotsuba. You've trapped yourself in a hell of your own making, but this is your chance to turn it into a one-way ticket to the heavenly realm of success! The means to do so are already within arm's reach... No, they already lie within your grasp!"

"So get off your ass and do it*, already! Nothing's stopping you!"*

Inner Angel, Inner Devil...you're right. You're exactly right! I'll do this! There's nothing stopping me from pulling it off at all! I'll give the best self-intro that anyone's ever seen! I'll knock this out of the park*!*

"Oh, but be natural, okay? Don't go overboard with—"

"Wait, no, back it up. You gotta relax before you try—"

I took a step forward, looked around at everyone's faces, then spoke with such force, it felt like I was shoving all the air out of my lungs at once.

"I'm Yotsubhwaugh! Gah, ahauwgh!"

Oh god, what happened to all my air?! And...agh! My sudden coughing fit had made Aoi and Sakura start giving me an extremely concerned sort of look! *I-It's fine, you two! I'm all right! And I can't possibly let you two suffer through any more embarrassment on my behalf! Not after you came out and said you liked me!*

There was no time for me to pause and take a deep breath. I smacked my chest with my fist, willing my heart to stop pounding *quite* so intensely, and raised my spirits once more!

Just watch me! This is what your big sister's really made of!

"YOTSUBA HAZAMA SECOND YEAR! I l-like, uh, um, uhh...*world peace*!!!"

Ka-shiiing!

It was incredible. I actually *heard* the atmosphere in the room freeze solid.

"...Well. That's...a worthy cause."

Koganezaki's valiant effort to cover for me had broken the unbearable, bloodcurdlingly extended silence, but that, unfortunately, was what dealt the final blow. Yotsuba Hazama dissolved into a fine mist, sublimating into the atmosphere before being sucked into a high-efficiency air purifier and eradicated without a trace.

The End. A new series from Ms. Hazama is probably not coming

soon, so please keep your expectations tempered.

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So anyway, all of us—aside from Mukai, I mean—stood in line, ordered from tallest to shortest.

...Hm? Self-introductions? No, we never did any of those at all. Get the picture?

"Hmm," Mukai hummed to herself as she inspected us, her chin resting in the palm of her hand. At the moment, she was picking out the models who she'd use as visual references for her illustration. Once she'd decided which of us would be the best approximation of Yuna, Makina, and Rinka's height gradient, she'd pose us, take a bunch of pictures, and that would more or less be that.

Heh heh heh! I chuckled internally from my spot between Sakura and Koganezaki. Truth be told...I was prepared for this moment. I had a *plan*. Yes, indeed—a plan to ensure that I would *not* be chosen as one of the three models!

There's no question who'll be playing the part of Yuna and Rinka. Those have *to be Emma and Koganezaki,* I thought. They had the biggest and clearest height disparity out of all of us. Emma was probably a little *too* short, all things considered, but I had faith that Mukai could cope with that somehow.

The problem, then, was the role of Makina. If you were to average out Yuna's and Rinka's heights, you'd probably end up with something pretty close to Makina's, and when you looked for an equivalent average between Koganezaki and Emma...you basically got me. But I really, *really* didn't want to end up playing that big of a role in this whole thing! (Why? Because I'd *definitely* screw it up!) And so, that was exactly why I'd invited Sakura and Aoi—two people who were pretty close to my height—to participate. Now my odds of getting picked were only one out of three!

And most importantly of all: Sakura and Aoi are both way *cuter than I am! That means that the* actual *odds of me getting picked are even lower than they seem! Heh heh heh...it's the perfect plan!*

Sure, this was my plan, but it's a plan-maker's solemn duty to

give up her role in the operation if someone better suited for it comes along. It just had to be this way! No choice! What a shame!

"All right, then—if you wouldn't mind, I'd like the Em...I mean, Koganezaki, Emma, and, umm, Hazama...er, I mean, and Yotsuba to be my models, please."

"Huuuh?!"

Wait, she picked me?! But why*?!*

"Resign yourself," Koganezaki said with a smile as she grabbed me by my shoulder. Clearly she'd known that *her* getting picked was inevitable.

"I'm excited indeed to do a photo shoot with Yotsuba and my dearest sister!" Emma added in an elated, singsong tone.

"Aww. I wanted to take some pictures with her too," Aoi pouted.

"Well, of *course* she got picked. Who could possibly make a better model?" said Sakura, who seemed almost proud for who knew what reason.

"I, umm, just thought you would be a good fit, that's all," Mukai apologetically explained. Considering she'd also picked Koganezaki, who was obviously just as unexcited about all this as I was, it seemed clear that Mukai had sincerely chosen the people she thought would work best. There wasn't any sense in grumbling about it now, unfortunately.

"All right... If that's how it has to be, I'll be the best model that you've ever seen!" I said, thrusting a fist into the air!

"Indeed!" Emma chimed in. Koganezaki rolled her eyes in a way that made it pretty clear she thought that my being motivated could be just as annoying as the alternative.

"All right, then—I'd like to start by having the three of you stand in a line," said Mukai. "And thank you so much for your help!"

"N-No problem!"

"Indeed!"

"...You're welcome."

With that, it was finally time for today's objective—the photo shoot—to begin in earnest.

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"I appreciate that I owe you, but this is most certainly not *how I'd hoped you'd ask me to repay that debt,"* was Koganezaki's knee-jerk reaction when I first asked her to participate in this plan. Well, that, plus a very unhappy scowl.

I hadn't actually been under the impression that she owed me at all, and assuming that she was alluding to how I'd recently helped pull Koganezaki (age: three) back into a functional state, I really didn't think she needed to bother paying me back. Still, if this helped square away her self-imposed debt in her mind, I figured that worked well enough for me as well. We'd get to help out Mukai this way, after all, and if Koganezaki was involved, that meant that Emma would almost definitely be excited to join in too!

It would've been perfect...if it weren't for the fact that I'd *severely* underestimated how challenging being a model would actually be.

"Hazama? A question?"

"Yes...?"

"Just to confirm: We *are* standing in for Oda and the other two, aren't we...?"

"Yup. So she can use the pictures she takes as visual references for her—"

"Excuse me, Koganezaki? Smile, please!" Mukai cut in.

"Y-Yes, of course. Excuse me," said Koganezaki.

"You too, Yotsuba! C'mon, give us a smile!" said Aoi.

"R-Right! How's this?"

"You're *so* cute, seriously...!"

"Th-Thanks, Sakura."

The single cameraperson I'd expected had, somewhere along the line, turned into three, all of whom demanded we look their way and strike pose after pose with barely any time to rest in between. Koganezaki and I ended up completely worn out in no time... *Huh? What about Emma?*

"Emma, can you hug Yotsuba's waist for the next one, please?"

"Indeed! ♪"

"Oh, that's perfect... Ah, Hazama, your smile's slipping!"

"S-Sorryyy..."

"You too, Koganezaki! Try to look a little more, I don't know—chummy, if you can?"

"More *chummy*...?"

Emma's smile hadn't slipped for a second. In fact, she was livelier than ever. I, meanwhile, was about to pass out, while Koganezaki was having a really hard time even interpreting half of the instructions she received. Mukai had given most of the directions starting out, by the way, but Sakura and Aoi had gradually started adding in their own input as time went on, most of which Mukai enthusiastically approved. In the long term, all three of them had ended up barking out orders at us.

I'd thought that we'd just take a few pictures and be done, honestly...but at the rate things were going, I wasn't sure my body would last. It'd been over an hour since we started our shoot, and striking an endless series of poses was just too much for an unathletic twig like me.

"Phew! All right," Mukai finally said. "With this much material, I think I might just be able to put something together!"

"'Kay. G'night," I blearily mumbled. By the time she (and also my sisters) was satisfied, I was only just barely able to stay standing upright. *My poor, aching sides...*

"Yotsuba, Yotsuba!"

"Hm...? What is it, Emma?"

"Weren't you supposed to cook, indeed?"

"Ah! That's right..."

There was just one thing that Mukai had specifically asked for in regard to this session: She wanted a chance to eat my cooking. I'd told her about my one single skill during my attempt to encourage her, and apparently, that little speech had caught her interest. I'd quickly agreed, partly on account of the fact that I was the one who'd brought it up out of nowhere in the first place.

But I hadn't realized that I'd be this *exhausted at the time...!*

I wanted to go back in time to last night and punch myself for being stupid enough to think that having a bunch of people over was the *perfect* opportunity to make a kind of elaborate pasta dish and surprise everyone! I'd already done my shopping, though, so there

was no turning back now...

"Hey, Hazama?" Mukai said. "I'm feeling really motivated all of a sudden, so I'll be doing some rough sketches while you're cooking, if you don't mind!"

"S-Sure," I replied. Her eyes were so brimming with excitement, I just couldn't say no. Not that I was in any position to complain anyway, considering I'd slumped to the ground somewhere along the way.

Mukai pulled on a pair of headphones to block out all noise from the outside world, then got to work on her tablet. She looked like a genuine artisan...which meant that I had no choice but to apply myself to my work as well. After all, she'd said that she'd do sketches while I was cooking, which meant that unless I managed to put a meal together for us all, she'd be stuck sketching forever!

"Hey, Koganezaki? You'll lend me a hand, right...?" I said.

"I'm not sure why you picked a phrasing that makes it sound like you're assuming I'll say yes," Koganezaki replied. "I'm not much of a cook myself, for the record."

"Please! Just being there's a huge help on its own!"

"A-All right, all right! You've made your point! Stop clinging to me!"

I can't be in the kitchen alone when I'm in this state! What if I slip, fall, hit my head, nobody notices, and I just die on the spot...? I really can't rule it out! I'm seriously desperate here! I need *somebody around, no matter what!*

"Yotsuba..."

"I'm not so sure that most people would hug someone who's *just a friend* like that, you know!"

"Gah!!!" I yelped. Sakura's and Aoi's piercing gazes were boring into me all over again!

"I swear, Yotsuba—why does it always turn out like this every time you call someone a friend...?"

"Turn out like *what*, Sakura?! It's not what you think, I swear!"

"Maybe *we* should try 'starting off as friends' too?"

"Nooo! Stay as my sisters! I know I'm being a sorry excuse for a sister right now, but still!"

For some reason—okay, no, for a very clear and obvious reason—calling someone my friend was all it took to put my little sisters on guard. I'd told them over and over and *over* that Koganezaki, Emma, and Mukai really were actual, genuine friends, nothing more and nothing less, and they'd *finally* seemed to mostly accept that...only for me to ruin it and make them doubt me all over again!

"..."

Ahh! And now Koganezaki's shooting me a really angry glare! Scratch that, a death glare! What now?! I'm completely stuck between a rock and a hard place!

"No helping it, indeed!"

Wha— Emma?!

"My sister dearest is simply too openhearted for anyone to resist, indeed!"

Wait, what are you even talking about?! U-Umm, okay, gotta break out my internal Emma-to-Japanese dictionary...

"Oh, I get it!"

Sakura?

"You're saying that Koganezaki's sororal aura's driven *our* sister a little bit loopy, aren't you?!"

"*Sororal?!* As in, like, maternal, but for sisters?!"

I'd never heard that word get used like *that* before, and was about to question Sakura a little more deeply, but then... *Huh? Wait, why are Emma and Aoi nodding? Am I the only one who doesn't get this?*

"A strong enough sororal aura can make anyone a bit stupid, Yotsuba. They're really, really dangerous!"

Err, Aoi?

"It always starts out so casual. You happen to come across an older sister out on the street, and give being a little sister a try, just for fun. But then she leaves, and the withdrawal kicks in, and you get *so* lonely, and you want to see her so badly you can't help yourself! When you're with her you feel so fulfilled, but the more time you spend with her, the less it seems to satisfy you. Before long, you end up not being able to think about anything else at all... And *that's* the true danger of a sororal aura!!!"

"Indeed. Indeed!" Emma said, emphatically nodding along to Aoi's explanation.

What sort of understanding have those two reached here?!

"You just don't understand because you're the oldest, Yotsuba!" Sakura insisted.

"But then you met Koganezaki, and got your very first taste of someone with a real sororal presence... It explains everything," Aoi agreed.

I really didn't understand what they'd all talked themselves into at all...but it seemed like the suspicions they'd had about me were all cleared up, so I decided to just let their assumptions stand and not question it.

"...Strictly speaking, I'm actually a younger sister."

Oh, right. Koganezaki did *say that she had a brother who's a lot older than her, didn't she?* Her muttered words, however, were summarily brushed off by everyone present.

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I left Sakura and Aoi to bond with Emma over their mutual sisterhood and retreated to the kitchen with Koganezaki in tow. She hadn't exactly been enthusiastic about agreeing to help me cook, but considering that staying in the living room would've one hundred percent involved getting teased about her big-sister status, she chose the lesser of two evils.

"Let the record show that I genuinely can barely cook at all," Koganezaki reiterated.

"Oh, that's fine!" I replied as I did a quick check through her kitchen. It was a full, very well put-together kitchen—exactly as you'd expect from a luxury apartment building—and she had a pretty complete set of pots, pans, and knives, most of which showed virtually no signs of use whatsoever. I could tell at a glance that even though she had all the essentials she needed to cook, she probably ate out most of the time instead. Fortunately, I'd brought all the ingredients and seasonings we needed, so there'd be no issues on that front!

"You can just stick to the sidelines and keep watch to make sure I don't do anything wrong, okay, Koganezaki?" I said.

"Anything 'wrong'...? I certainly hope you're not plotting to do anything nefarious to my kitchen."

"N-No way, not at all! I meant that, like, there's a nonzero chance I might accidentally break one of your house rules, or something!"

"I don't have any of those in particular to begin with...but if me keeping watch makes you feel at ease, then I suppose I can manage that."

"Thanks..."

I'd barely ever cooked in someone else's home before...or, really, this was the very first time I'd done it at all. I was actually pretty nervous about that, and having said home's owner standing guard to make sure I didn't somehow manage to do something that'd upset her took a big load off my mind. Not that I wasn't planning on being way more careful than usual anyway, of course!

"Okay, I'll start by prepping the vegetables... Oh, right! Hey, Koganezaki?"

"Yes...? Actually, shouldn't you put your knife down before you start talking to me?"

"Oh, it's fine! I'm used to this," I replied. I'd started peeling and slicing the onions as I spoke with her. "Anyway, I know it might be kinda weird to be all formal about this, but I just wanted to say thank you for today."

"You're right. It *is* weird for you to do that."

"And I'm not just talking about how you let us use your place for this meeting! Like, you really didn't have to help at all, considering this isn't even for your class, and doesn't have anything to do with the Sacrosanct..."

"I'll admit that when you asked me to model for a drawing, I *was* quite surprised at first. I couldn't comprehend what bizarre train of logic had led to you asking *me*, of all people. That said, I wouldn't say that it has nothing whatsoever to do with the Sacrosanct. The whole purpose of this drawing is to advertise their performance, isn't it?"

"I mean, I really don't think it's actually gonna get used for that

in the end... We're just doing it for our own sake, more than anything."

"For now, perhaps. In the long term, though... Okay, no, really—you *are* good at that."

"Oh, thanks!"

Hee hee hee! I got a compliment! I moved on from the onions to get some spinach, shimeji mushrooms, and bacon all ready for the recipe as well. Since I was feeding a whole bunch of people this time, I decided to blanch the spinach in salted water—it'd make it a little less nutritious, but it would also help the leaves keep their vivid green coloration throughout the cooking process, and also get rid of this one sort of acid that the spinach would taste a bit better without.

"So, I've been thinking," I said. "I'm not so sure if things can keep going the way they have been..."

"What things, going in what way?"

"Well, so, last weekend I spent some time with Yuna and Rinka for the first time in ages. One-on-one, I mean—not all three of us together..."

"Oh, so you're bragging now?"

"N-No, I'm going somewhere with this! I mean, yeah, it *was* really great and all...but they also felt, I dunno—a little tense, I guess?" I said.

Thinking back on it, it felt like both Rinka and Yuna had been preoccupied with outdoing each other. They'd both talked about doing one thing or another *more* or *better than* the other to a strange degree. Maybe I was making a mountain out of a molehill, but for some reason their comments had made a really distinct impression on me. And that wasn't even starting on Makina. She seemed, well...sort of panicked, I guess, in the same sort of way.

"I can imagine that," said Koganezaki. "Maybe the appearance of a rival in the form of Oda has made the two of them realize that they'd prefer *not* to share you after all?"

"*Huh?!*"

"Surely it's not that surprising of a concept? I'm sure you're well aware that the fact that they were willing to accept your two-timing

makes them a very rare and unusual exception?"

"I mean, yeah, I know that...but the three of them are all teammates right now! They're working *together* to put on a show, so isn't it weird that they'd be all tense about one another *now*?"

"Quite the opposite, actually. Collaborating on a creative project is one of the easiest ways to foster anger, resentment, jealousy, and disappointment in someone."

"No way! That's... I mean... Okay, so maybe that is sort of true..."

My mind jumped straight back to the sports days I'd been through in the past, where I held my team back and earned everyone's disdain. Working in a group to accomplish something brought about a feeling of unity. It could make people who'd been total strangers just moments ago feel like they were a part of yourself in an instant—which meant that someone else's failure could easily become your own. That's why screwups like me were ostracized more than ever in that sort of situation. I don't even know how many times someone told me that something was all *my* fault... And, well, it left a real impression on me.

I had to wonder: Was the same sort of situation playing out between Yuna, Rinka, and Makina? Was an invisible rift beginning to open up in Yuna and Rinka's previously close and harmonious relationship?

Speaking as their girlfriend—heck, even speaking as a classmate—I should be able to help them somehow...but I just can't. I had no idea what could be done, and even if I *did* have a better idea in that regard, I was very confident that any solution would be beyond me to pull off.

"It's hopeless for me. I'm totally useless..." I muttered.

"I wouldn't say that," said Koganezaki.

"Huh?" I grunted in surprise. It almost felt like she'd seen right through my innermost worries and stepped in to head them off.

"I'm certain that there's something you can do for the two...no, the *three* of them. Even what you've done today will be meaningful in the long run."

"It will? You're sure...?"

"Frankly...? No. It might just be wishful thinking on my part. But

then again, knowing you, I wouldn't be remotely surprised if you managed to find a solution that satisfies both the Sacrosanct duo *and* Oda as well."

"That's just crazy... You're giving me way too much credit."

"I might be, yes. We'll find out soon enough, one way or the other," Koganezaki said with a smile that seemed oddly resigned and relieved at the same time. "You know...I made a terrible mistake once."

"Huh?"

"I failed to understand that affection can be as much of a curse as it is a blessing. The decisions I made back then had consequences for people I didn't think were involved in the first place. It ended up hurting them...and that's a fact that I regret to this day."

Is she talking about something that happened when she was in middle school...? I wondered. Maybe this had something to do with why she was so dedicated to protecting everyone, she'd made herself into the fan club's vice president to do so?

"...If you're waiting for me to share the details, for the record, it's not going to happen."

"Awww!"

"I would prefer not to subject myself to that sort of embarrassment, thank you very much. I'm in no way interested in turning this conversation into a pity party."

But you dropped so many interesting hints! That's not fair at all! I'm so curious *now!*

"That said...it wasn't that terribly far off from the situation you're in now, from a certain perspective."

"Huh?"

"That's exactly why I fixated on it so much. Exactly why I indulged in the stupidest, least productive sort of escapism...but now that you've dragged me back to reality, I've simply given up on it all," Koganezaki said, flashing me a smile that seemed much less conflicted than before.

She'd always seemed so much more mature than me, even though I knew we were the same age...but the smile she had on

now made her almost seem *younger* than me, in a strangely innocent sort of way. It almost felt like she'd finally regained some part of her emotions that she'd lost somewhere along the way...though it was totally possible I was just imagining that.

"Maybe if you do find a way of resolving your current predicament, *I'll* finally find an understanding of what makes you the way you are. And on the other hand, if you fail and everything turns into more of a mess than ever...at least it will mean that I'll have someone with the same sort of emotional wounds as mine. It works out nicely one way or the other, wouldn't you say?"

"I really wouldn't, actually! That's not funny!"

"Oh? Is the idea of ending up on a route where we become best friends really that unpleasant to you?"

"We can be best friends even if I *don't* totally screw everything up, you know?!"

"I think not. I have no interest in being best friends with a cheery, carefree mess of a girl who *somehow* manages to blunder her way with ease through every problem that life throws at her."

"Mean!"

So...things got a little heated, but long story short, I kept on cooking. I stir-fried some garlic and chilis in olive oil, then gradually added in other ingredients one after another, making sure they were all fully cooked through.

"The way you handle the frying pan itself is surprisingly adept," Koganezaki noted.



"I know, right? Feel like being my best friend now?" I replied.

"Frying-pan skills are not the basis by which I choose my close friends, I'm afraid."

"What if I said I knew how to flambé food too? I won't be doing it for this dish, though!"

"That...is something I'd like to see, I have to admit."

Heh heh heh—I bet you would! It's one of the most impressive cooking techniques to watch live, after all! It was pretty simple, really—you just added a bit of high-proof alcohol to the pan to impart a fragrant sort of flavor into the meat or fish or whatever you were cooking—but since you then had to burn the alcohol off, it involved a really impressive-looking amount of fire.

I'd put in a ton of practice after watching someone flambé something on a video-sharing website and getting it into my head that I'd be *super* popular with all the kids in my class if I could do it too. Unfortunately, the fact that it involved using hard alcohol alone made it a pretty rough technique for a minor to get into, and my parents only ever let me try it when they were around to keep watch, so you might call it something of a forbidden technique. As for how my popularity in my class turned out long term... (The note ends with ominous abruptness.)

Anyway, bringing booze into Koganezaki's home felt like it could pose problems for her, even if it *was* just for the sake of cooking with it. That's why I'd made sure that the closest thing to it in the recipe I was making today was a little bit of cooking sake. I, Yotsuba Hazama, was a girl who could see problems like that coming and head them off in advance! Look upon me, everyone, and appreciate my risk-avoidance skills!

"All right! I think this is looking good," I said.

I turned off the burner, mixed in a bit of flour, then added some milk and soup stock as well. Then I turned the burner on again and kept stirring! I could've kept it on as I added the flour, if I'd wanted to, but turning the heat off made it way less likely that I'd accidentally move too slow and let the roux burn. That's a cooking fun fact for you! Heh heh heh!

"Oh...? That's a white sauce, isn't it?" said Koganezaki.

"Oh, you figured it out? Figures you'd know what it's called!"

"You're mocking me, aren't you? Not to mention pushing your luck."

"Whaaat, no waaay!"

Okay, that was close... If I wasn't cooking right now, she definitely would've kicked me.

"It *does* smell nice, though," Koganezaki continued. "This might sound strange coming from me, but I thought it would be years before anyone used this kitchen to cook anything this appetizing."

"You've never thought about cooking for yourself?" I asked. "You've got such a nice kitchen, it feels like a waste not to!"

"I can't disagree with that...and I *have* done some very basic practice, but there's no telling what sort of accidents a total beginner could get into experimenting on their own, so the unfortunate fact of the matter is that I'm better off not attempting the bulk of techniques."

"Oooh? Was that a *super* roundabout way of asking me to teach you how to cook?"

"*Ugh*..."

C'mon, let me have this! If ever there was a time for me to push my luck and get a bit cocky, it's now! When you're in a kitchen, the people who know how to cook reign supreme! And anyway, the second we leave *the kitchen, we both know I'll be back to groveling and licking your shoes before we know it...*

"I do have to admit that you have a point," said Koganezaki. "I'm ashamed of how much I've eaten out ever since I started living alone, and I *would* like to make an effort to cook for myself, at least."

"Oooh, *reeeally*?"

Next, I filled a pot with water! Then I brought it to a boil, salted it, threw in the pasta, and set a timer! All I had to do now was wait for it to finish cooking, and... *Ouch?!*

"Hey, stop! No pinching my sides, please!"

"Blame yourself for being so irritating."

You know I'm cooking with an open flame right now, right?! Am I seriously irritating enough to make that sort of risk feel worth it?! I

did note that she'd waited until I wasn't touching the pot to start pinching, though, which was exactly the sort of thoughtfulness I'd learned to expect from her.

"Okay, listen up: No horseplay when the burners are on!" I said.

"Says the woman who's been chatting while she cooks this whole time..."

"*I'm* used to it, so it's fine when I do it!"

"They say that complacency is far more dangerous than inexperience when it comes to these things."

"That's...actually true, yeah."

My mom had scolded me for more or less the same thing plenty of times, and I had to admit that she and Koganezaki were right. *Is cooking with a friend getting me a little too hyped up for my own good, maybe?*

"But, again, I have to admit...that might not be such a bad idea," said Koganezaki.

"What might not be?" I asked.

"Having you teach me how to cook."

"Really?!"

"Yes...though it's a little concerning that you seem *that* inexplicably happy to hear it. I certainly hope you're not planning on charging me an exorbitant fee for your lessons."

"Nah, you don't have to pay me at all! I'll put you on a fully funded scholarship!"

"The thought of you doing it for free is actually terrifying in its own right."

Why is she always this on guard around me, anyway? It's not like I'm plotting anything! My motives are one hundred percent pure and innocent!

"Then again, I suppose that *after* you've entirely self-destructed, I'll be able to ask for your help without reservation..."

"What sort of assumption is *that*?! And why would that be what makes you ask for help?!"

"Well, at that point you'd have no one left to rely on other than me, wouldn't you? In other words, you wouldn't have the option to betray me or toy with me, whether you wanted to or not."

"I'd never want to do any of that in the first place!"

She doesn't trust me at all! Are you trying *to make me cry into the pasta water, Koganezaki...? It's gonna end up way oversalted at this rate!*

"If you're going to have expectations for someone, you should also be prepared to take responsibility if they fail to live up to said expectations," said Koganezaki.

"I mean, that's a really admirable mindset, but, y'know..." I muttered.

"Quite. My point being that I have high expectations for you. You, and your cooking alike," Koganezaki said as she flashed me a grin.

I felt confident that she wouldn't be running away from reality and regressing to infancy again anytime soon. There'd be no need for that, since she'd decided to leave the whole matter in my hands. The one problem was that, at the end of the day, I still had no idea what I was supposed to do about Yuna, Rinka, and Makina. I had *no* ideas. The three of them were working so hard, but no matter how hard I *wanted* to help them, I just couldn't think of a way I could do so. Maybe that was why I'd gone so far out of my way to help Mukai—as a way of distracting myself from how useless I was on other fronts.

There's something that's been bothering me. It's been eating away at me deep down for a long time now, but I just can't put my finger on what it is...

The way Koganezaki said she had high expectations for me made it sound like she was putting me and my problems at arm's length, but I knew that if I just asked, she'd step in to help in an instant. That was exactly what she'd done today, after all. Still, though, I felt like I had to do *something* on my own before turning to her like that...and figuring out what that something was would be all on me.

I wish we didn't have to have a cultural festival at all.

At the end of the day, Makina, Yuna, *and* Rinka all felt further away from me than ever. I couldn't let my gloomy feelings get the better of me, though, so I shoved them back down inside of me and

forced a smile instead.

◇◇◇

Shockingly enough—or, well, maybe it wasn't *that* weird, I guess—the mushroom cream pasta that I made was very well received in the end.

First up for reactions: Sakura and Aoi! Those two were already avid followers of my cooking. They ate it on a daily basis, and were particularly fond of the pasta dishes that I made, so it wasn't much of a surprise at all when they gave the dish their unreserved compliments and cleaned their plates.

Next: Koganezaki! She'd watched the whole cooking process from start to finish, and seemed genuinely impressed by my skill in the kitchen. It sort of felt like I'd already cleared her hurdle at the point where she'd admitted that I was pretty good at this. She said the food was very good, in the end, which was the highest praise I could've asked for. I mean, by Koganezaki standards, the fact that she used the word "very" means she might as well have said, "I would pay money to eat this again"!

And, next up: Emma! She, of course, was a perfect little angel who'd never expressed a single negative sentiment in her life. She said it was "delicious indeed," and polished off her helping in no time before asking if she could have seconds. I'd already served everything I'd made, unfortunately, and when I told her that, she slumped her shoulders and muttered, "I wanted to eat more of your cooking, indeed..." which was just...just a *perfect* hundred-out-of-hundred on the reaction scale! As I burned every last detail of said reaction into my mind to savor forever, I reached an inescapable conclusion: Hunger was *not*, in fact, the best seasoning of all. No—*Emma* was the best seasoning!

Maybe someday, hundreds of years in the future, everyone will understand that. Maybe it'll be totally natural for every household in Japan to have an Emma of their own!

Last but not least: Mukai! Honestly, her reaction was the one I was most concerned about. I'd made this meal at her request, after

all! I'd asked everyone who'd be attending if they had any allergies, of course—that was just common sense when you were cooking for a group—but I'd *also* gone out of my way to learn what sort of foods Mukai liked and disliked while I was at it. In other words, I'd chosen to make pasta with a mushroom cream sauce specifically because I knew it was exactly the sort of food that she was into! I was aiming *straight* for the smack-dab-middle of her preferences!

That being said, making one of someone's favorite foods for them meant that their standards for your cooking would be elevated higher than ever. I had confidence, however, in the fact that I was at least a perfectly middle-of-the-road, average-level cook. I wasn't expecting *rave* reviews from her, but as long as she said that my food was decent, I would've been totally satisfied. And yet...

"This is...delicious! Honestly, it tastes incredible!"

...she couldn't have been happier! And she gave me the biggest smile I'd seen from her since we'd gotten to know each other!

You've done it, Yotsuba! Congratulations! You've earned your happy ending!!!

I ended up being in such a fantastic mood as I cleaned up after the meal, I actually started humming to myself. Sakura and Aoi, meanwhile, were playing video games with Koganezaki and Emma at their invitation—specifically, a game from a popular series where all the players travel around Japan on trains earning money.

I was a little jealous, honestly. Koganezaki didn't seem like she played video games much, and I just knew that she'd be awkwardly trying her hardest to keep up with the other three, which sounded really fun to watch. I ended up feeling just a little lonely washing dishes all on my own...but everyone had complimented my cooking, so eh, it had all worked out for the best!

I'd never been super fond of post-meal cleanup, but it turned out to be the perfect chance to bask in the happiness of knowing that my cooking had gone perfectly. The work, after all, was totally mindless and repetitive!

Sometimes it's important to have a little cooldown period like

this...so, nah, I'm not lonely at all! Nope! Not a bit. Not even a little... I am not *lonely!*

"Hazama!"

"Hwaugh?!"

Just as I'd finished hypnotizing myself into believing that I wasn't lonely, a cheerful voice saying my name snapped me right out of it! For a second I couldn't imagine who it might've been...and as it turned out, it was Mukai.

"Oh—are you busy right now?" Mukai asked.

"N-Nah! Not at all! What's up?!" I replied as I spun around, now shifting my auto-hypnosis protocol toward convincing myself that I *wasn't* freaking out a little.

Mukai excitedly turned her tablet around to show me its screen. "I finished my sketch!" she said.

"Huh? Already?"

"Something about eating your food made me feel like I could do anything...so I put a little extra work in," Mukai explained with a bashful smile. It looked like she was just now starting to come down from her emotional high.

I dried my hands off, then took the tablet. Mukai's sketch...well, it left me speechless. I've lost count of how many times I've said this, but I was a *total* amateur when it came to art. Still, even though her drawing was clearly unfinished—I mean, that was what made it a sketch—it had, just...a *feel*, I guess, that came through extremely clearly.

"They're so *cute*," I muttered.

The picture featured a trio of girls standing together in a happy little group. Their poses felt really lively, as far as I could judge, but what drew my attention more than anything was their expressions. All three of them were drawn in perfect detail, with all the little features that made them distinct rendered really nicely, but the strange part was how the looks on their faces expressed a sense of affection for one another that came through *really* clearly. So clearly, in fact, it was almost a little embarrassing to look at.

"This is amazing... It's so good, Mukai!" I exclaimed.

"Hee hee! You think so?"

"Yeah! It's really Momose, Aiba, and Oda! I mean, like, it feels like you're super close to drawing the *real* them already... I can hardly wait to see the finished version!"

"I mean, you say it's really them...but the truth is, it's not *them* that I drew at all."

"Huh?"

"The expressions and the atmosphere around them was all you, Koganezaki, and Shizumi," Mukai explained. "Your dynamic was so perfect, I drew it just as is."

Huh...? Wait... Huh*?! She based the* expressions *on how we looked while we were modeling too?!*

That just wasn't possible. There was *no* way that Koganezaki would ever look at someone with a gaze that full of pure and unreserved affection—or at least, not at *me*, anyway! And the same for me, honestly. Sure, I'd done my best to follow the instructions that everyone had given me, and I didn't really even remember *what* sort of face I'd been making at the end of it all. Heck, my expressions were basically totally unconscious by the time we finished...

But regardless, she's saying that this *is how I looked to her...? Really?!*

"Well, I *did* also do a little reinterpreting and embellishing here and there."

"No kidding!!!"

Ahh, now that's *a relief! She just meant that she used the pictures of us as a* basis *for the expressions and stuff! I mean, sure, it'd be nice for me, Koganezaki, and Emma to all get along really well, but it would be way* less *nice if people*—especially *Koganezaki—got the wrong idea about things! That would be* terrifying*!*

"It really does look incredible, though," I continued. "I can tell just looking at the sketch that the finished piece is going to be *so* good!"

"Thank you for saying so," said Mukai. "I...actually really like it too. I like it so much, I'm a little worried about whether or not I'll really be able to finish it," she added. As pessimistic as her words were, her eyes still shone with an enthusiastic light. I could tell she

wanted to get back to drawing right away. Her pure and earnest passion for her art was obvious. “And it’s all thanks to you, Hazama. You gave me the courage I needed.”

“Huh? Courage?”

“That’s right. If you hadn’t suggested that I draw something to promote the performance, I never would have made an effort on my own. Plus, it’s all thanks to you that I had the chance to get such perfect reference material today, and I never would have ended up with such a good basis for my piece without it! Not to mention that eating your cooking gave me so much motivation—if I hadn’t been so driven by wanting to make you happy in exchange, I don’t think I would’ve been able to take my work nearly as seriously as I did!” Mukai rattled off at an astonishingly fast pace. I was so surprised by the barrage of words that I sort of lost track of what she was saying halfway through, but I *did* get the gist, that being that she felt really grateful toward me.

Honestly, though, *I* felt grateful to *her* for playing along with my wild idea in the first place—and I also thought that it would be a huge waste if this was where her picture’s story ended. It was just such a good drawing, and while I was definitely more than a little biased for more than a few reasons, I still thought that it was wonderful from as objective of a standpoint as I could manage. For a moment, I thought about how great it would be if we could just get our class to use it to advertise for the show...but then I realized that wasn’t quite right. There had to be something else—something important that we could do with it...

But if it was that easy to figure out what that sort of thing was, life would be a whole lot simpler, huh...?

I sighed internally as I handed the tablet back to Mukai. She took it from me...and then, for some reason, a mirthful grin spread across her face.

“Mukai?” I said. “What is it?”

“Huh?” Mukai grunted. She must not have realized what sort of face she was making, and her smile was quickly replaced by a look of surprise, followed by one of embarrassment as she hung her head.

Oops. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything...? I thought, regretting the choice a little. Mukai's next words dispelled my worries right away, though.

"I'm just having fun, is all," said Mukai.

"You are...?"

"I've never been able to really *participate* in a cultural festival before, or anything like it. I'm really shy, after all, and clumsy too... I know that I'm not exactly participating this time either—not directly, at least—but thinking up plans with you and drawing this sketch...it was just really, really fun."

A blush spread across Mukai's face as she tried her hardest to explain herself. She'd ended up talking a mile a minute again, but this time, I heard every word that she said. Not only did they all hit home with me—they also made me finally realize what it was that had been bothering me for so long.

"Oh," I said. "I get it now..."

"Hazama?"

"Thanks, Mukai! I finally figured it out! I know exactly what I want to do...no, what I *have* to do!"

"Huh?"

For ages I'd been trying to figure out what I could do for everyone—for my girlfriends, Yuna and Rinka, and for my oldest friend, Makina. I didn't know what had driven them to take to the stage for the cultural festival...but I *did* know that the festival wasn't theirs and theirs alone. The three of them were such perfectly special girls that all it took to make it feel like the world revolved around them was them stepping into a room, but that didn't mean that the feelings of everyone else in our class—the feelings of Mukai and everyone like her—weren't important too.

I'd had a strange, unpleasant feeling in the back of my mind ever since the day we decided that class 2-A would put on an idol show, and now, at long last, I finally knew why.

"Mukai!" I shouted.

"Y-Yes?" said Mukai.

"I have a really, really rude favor that I'd like to ask...!"

I grabbed Mukai by the shoulders and frantically, desperately

made my appeal. She looked completely confused and more than a little taken aback...

"All right. I'll give it a try!"

...but in the end, she agreed with a smile.

Chapter 6: The Supporting Characters' Crusade

The next Monday, our whole class—with the exceptions of Makina, Yuna, and Rinka—gathered in our classroom for a meeting. That meeting's subject? Our advertising plans for our cultural-festival performance.

Before I jump into that, though, I should definitely explain some of Eichou High's rules regarding the cultural festival, which were put into place to make sure it wouldn't be too much of a distraction from our studies. The festival took place on the last weekend in October, and as Miki had explained during our first meeting on the subject, we weren't allowed to do any planning or preparations before the start of September. The idea was that letting cultural-festival prep spill into summer break could cause all sorts of trouble, basically.

That being said, the start of September wasn't the only start date relevant to the festival. There was a second one as well, just as relevant as the first: the day that students were allowed to start advertising for their events. Every class would want to lure in as many customers as possible, and we were only allowed to start working to make that happen at the start of October.

The moment October kicked off, classes would immediately start posting flyers on the school's bulletin board, making announcements over the PA system during our lunch breaks, and carrying out other advertising activities. If that were all there was to it, then the prohibition on advance advertising would feel a little excessive, but I distinctly remembered how last year, social media had also played a big role in the promotion campaigns. That was the big reason why the faculty had worried that students would be too involved in advertising their events to focus on their schoolwork, supposedly.

There were other good reasons to hold off on starting up the ads

early, of course. For one thing, if you started promoting your event right after picking its theme, there was a chance that what you actually put together in the end would drift far from that initial premise...or so Koganezaki claimed, anyway. I, of course, hadn't put any thought into all that complicated junk whatsoever!

My understanding of the situation? "Rules are rules, and we've just gotta follow them," basically. My personal policy was to always assume that if a rule was in place, there was probably a good reason for it. You might say my conduct was impeccable, in that sense!

So, anyway, the restriction on cultural-festival advertising was due to be lifted in the immediate future, which was why we'd come together as a class to decide how we'd go about promoting our performance! (Miki, by the way, was also in attendance. Ever a key figure, our teacher. Mi-key.) Why weren't the three most important players in our whole project present at a meeting like that? Apparently, because people thought it wouldn't be fair to waste their precious time on something this relatively petty. The idea was that we'd inform them of the conclusions we'd reached after the meeting was finished.

It all sort of felt like something that would happen in one of the TV dramas I'd seen in the past. Like, underlings holding a meeting, then delivering the results to the bigwigs later on, y'know? And, yeah—they were the Sacrosanct and a top-class idol. They really *were* special, it was true...but they *weren't* our superiors. Our class wasn't a company, and they weren't its board of directors.

"I'm telling you, we've gotta go all in on showing them off with pictures! Big, flashy, in-your-face ones! We can put a bunch of behind-the-scenes photos up all over the place too!"

"But wouldn't a video be even better than that?! We should make one of those! It'll spread like wildfire if we put it up on a website somewhere!"

At the moment, those were the two major positions that our classmates were split between. The former plan, proposed by a boy named Akashi, involved us handing out flyers and putting up posters featuring Makina, Yuna, and Rinka all over the place to get

everyone's expectations for our performance as high as possible. The other stance, advocated by a girl named Serizawa, was that we should use a song that Makina had composed in the past—a song, incidentally, that was good enough you'd think it had been made by a professional composer—to put together a stylish trailer for the event, then post it online in the hopes that it would go viral.

Both plans were flashy, and I was sure they'd both drum up a lot of attention. Maki Amagi, after all, was supposed to be on a hiatus from show business. The fact that she'd be performing onstage with a pair of beautiful girls who weren't in her idol group would be huge news. Honestly, to put it bluntly...it didn't matter *what* sort of announcement we put out. It was sure to be huge regardless.

I bet that's what everyone's thinking, anyway.

When I looked around the classroom, I got the sense that about half of the students weren't even really listening. My gaze eventually met Mukai's. She looked like she was worried about me...and in spite of my own nerves, I managed to flash her a smile. It seemed I hadn't *completely* lost my cool just yet, at least.

The two sides of the debate kept talking past each other for quite some time, and as their quarrel dragged on, the disinterested atmosphere in the classroom grew stronger and stronger. Everyone was optimistically assuming that our efforts would be a success regardless, and which option we picked wouldn't make much of a difference for the majority of them.

Whether our offering for the festival was a success or a failure was entirely on the trio of performers' shoulders. We were all just supporting characters in their storyline, and there was nothing we could do to contribute to it. Even the small number of people who cared enough about the current suggestions to argue probably saw it that way. That was exactly why it was so hard for them to come to a consensus—because in the end, no one *really* had any expectations for us at all.

Not that I have any right to get up on a high horse and judge them for it. But still...

I knew that doing things this way wouldn't make anyone happy in

the long run. And I don't just mean everyone in the classroom—it wouldn't help Yuna, Rinka, or Makina either.

"It seems clear to me that we've reached an impasse," Miki finally said, breaking the deadlock that the meeting had fallen into. Our class rep, who'd been standing behind the teacher's podium this whole time and clearly had no idea what to do, breathed a sigh of relief. "Assuming no one else would like to submit a proposal, we'll decide a plan of action by majority vote. Though, of course, we'll also need the performers' approval before any plans are finalized."

Miki had made it clear that she intended to leave all decisions regarding the festival up to us students, as long as we didn't go overboard and force her to step in. In truth, though, I was pretty sure that she was opposed to having this meeting without Yuna, Rinka, and Makina present. If she'd given the order for us to change how we were doing things, the class would have had no choice but to obey—but that would have betrayed the core philosophy that the cultural festival was supposed to be by students, for students. At the rate things were going, nothing would change.

"So, then, does anyone else have an opinion they'd like to express?" Miki asked as she took her place at the podium once more. She glanced around the classroom...and her gaze settled on me.

Thank you, Miki, I thought. She'd given me the best, most natural opening I could have asked for. I did my best to ignore the sound of my pounding heart and raised my hand.

"Yes, Hazama?"

As Miki said my name, everyone else turned to look in my direction. The sentiment packed into the gazes directed at me...was something that I went out of my way *not* to pick up on. I mean, I was on the verge of cardiac arrest as it was! I didn't have time to stop and take a deep breath, though. I launched into it, driven by pure momentum alone!

"I-I'm against *both* suggestions!" I shouted.

"*Huh?!*" A multitude of indignant voices rang out in unison. That reaction wasn't much of a surprise. After all, I—a girl who existed at the base of our class's social structure and who was usually perfectly

content to sit quietly on the sidelines—had just put forth an opinion that set the whole debate back to square one. No one was ever going to be *happy* about that.

Miki, however, spoke up right away, shutting down those protests in the process. "It's perfectly all right for you to object, Hazama," she said, "but if you intend to oppose both of our current proposals, I would hope that you have an alternative to offer. Is that the case?"

"I... I do, of course," I replied. I felt like I was about to start trembling, but I clenched my fists and held it back.

Almost everyone else in the room was against me. That went without saying for the people who'd been pushing for their own proposals, of course, but also for the people who'd been sitting by and observing. They didn't care who got their way—they just didn't want even *more* of their time to be wasted by someone getting it into her head to throw an already overlong meeting into chaos.

But that wasn't everyone. I had allies too.

"I know there isn't much else I can do to help...but I'll put my everything into this, at least!"

I had Mukai.

"I understand your perspective, Hazama. And while it may be unprofessional of me to support the position of one of my students in particular...I wish you the best."

I had Miki.

"I'll make sure you get a proper burial when all's said and done, so feel free to self-destruct as catastrophically as you please."

And, although she wasn't here, I had Koganezaki as well. I was only standing up for what I thought was right thanks to all of their help. I wasn't alone. That fact put more pressure on me than ever, yes...but it also gave me strength.

At Miki's urging, I took her place at the podium. *It's all right. It's fine. I'm fine,* I told myself as I looked out at my classmates.

"First, I want to explain why I'm opposed to these suggestions," I said. "I'm against both of them because..."

I paused and looked around the room, staring intently at everyone who was watching me. Then I straightened my back, held

my head up high, and stood tall!

"...this cultural festival is supposed to be for *all* of us!"

And then I told them everything. I opened up about the uncomfortable, stifling feeling that had been bothering me this whole time.

Class 2-A's cultural-festival offering would be an idol show. The biggest problem with that plan was plain to see: The three students who'd be performing onstage would carry *way* too much responsibility for the event's success.

Three of us would be in the public eye, and the rest of the class would be backstage. Even the music and direction of the show was left to Makina, whose experience as an idol made her the one best suited to handle it. That meant that the rest of us were left with nothing to do whatsoever.



We could sit back and relax, and the event would still be a success. That was obvious to everyone involved. In other words...we hardly needed to be part of it at all.

"It feels like that attitude's been making its way through the class ever since we decided to do the performance...and it's felt really uncomfortable to me this whole time," I said.

A few of my classmates' gazes had turned to the floor. Others were looking away awkwardly. If even *I'd* been able to pick up on that atmosphere, then there was no way that all of them had missed it.

"And I'm sure the three of them feel the same way," I continued.

"Huh?" grunted Serizawa, the girl who'd been arguing for one of the promotional plans earlier.

"I know that all of us think that Momose, Aiba, and Oda are special, and amazing, and can do anything they set their minds to...but they're still high schoolers. They're second-years, just like the rest of us. There's no way they could handle all the expectations we've been piling on their shoulders and come out of it totally fine."

I knew very well that Yuna and Rinka had been talking with each other less and less lately. Makina had seemed absent-minded during class as well—sometimes when our teachers called on her, it would take her a moment to collect herself enough to react. Yuna and Rinka had never taken singing or dancing lessons before, and Makina probably hadn't taught amateurs like the two of them—amateurs with potential, sure, but still amateurs—often, if at all. All three of them were plainly worn out, if not exhausted.

Maybe since I sat so close to the three of them—since they were my girlfriends and my childhood friend—it was easier for me to notice that...but this wasn't some tiny, easily missable change. No one in our class could've missed it. We *all* knew.

But still, the three of them were special. The rest of us were just so *ordinary* compared to them. It felt like it'd be rude for us to stick our noses into their business, so we told ourselves that they'd be fine and turned a blind eye to their struggles.

"I think that Serizawa's and Akashi's ideas would be really attention-grabbing, and would get our performance a lot of good

publicity...but how do you think *those three* would feel about it?" I asked.

Akashi glanced up at me with a start. "W-Well, uh," he stammered.

"I know how special Momose and Aiba are, but they're also still just normal high schoolers. Imagine what it would be like for them if people started talking about how they were part of Maki Amagi's new idol unit..."

I didn't even want to speculate about how that would turn out. Even if just a single image of them got out, it would make the rounds in the rumor mill before we knew it, and then the world at large would start searching for them. Fans and haters would flock to them in droves, and the media would hassle them day and night. Their lives would be upended, whether they liked it or not—and I was positive that the direction they would shift in would *not* be a good one.

"And...I'm sure that Oda would feel the same way," I added. Maki Amagi was an idol, but that didn't mean she wasn't allowed a private life. She had the same right to control how her likeness was used as everyone else. "She transferred into this school because she wanted to focus on her studies. That was important enough to her that she put her career on hold for it. Is getting up onstage again for a cultural festival *really* something she'd want?"

"But she said she was fine with it!" said one of my classmates. "She's the one who made the call in the end..."

"Yeah, I know, and I've been thinking about why she did that. Why did she say she'd perform...? Why did she *agree* to perform?"

I still didn't understand what Makina was after, but the more I thought about her feelings, the closer to an understanding I seemed to get. After all, no matter how special she was, she too was just human—just a high schooler like the rest of us.

"Most likely...I think that Makina just wanted all of us to accept her."

This was pure speculation on my part. Maybe I was totally wrong, and she really *had* wanted things to turn out this way. Maybe Koganezaki had been right, and she was carrying out some sort of

underhanded scheme revolving around me. Before those doubts could overwhelm me, though, the Makina within me—the Makina I'd known back in the day—tracked me down and blew them all away with a smile.

"I know how exciting it was when Makina transferred into our class. I was happy too! But that doesn't mean that *everyone* was over the moon about it. Some people probably thought that all those net-literacy lectures were a suffocating waste of time, and some people were probably worried that the media would make our school lives miserable if word got out that Maki Amagi was a student here. Some people who don't care about idols at all have probably felt out of place ever since all this began...and some of them might even be here, in this classroom. But I don't think that's wrong of them at all. It's not like it's hard to understand why all of them would feel that way, right...?"

Maki Amagi was Makina Oda. She was an old friend who was very important to me...but what if she hadn't been? What if some idol I'd never heard of transferred into my school and everyone started making it into the biggest deal ever? How would I have felt about *that*? Would I have been able to welcome her sincerely, from the bottom of my heart? Would I have been able to accept the presence of a profoundly special girl, far more exceptional and dazzling than I could ever be, who was beloved by the whole wide world? Would I be able to confront the reality that she was worth far more than I'd ever be—a reality that would make me feel ashamed to even be alive—and not resent her in the slightest for it?

The answer was obvious. I didn't even need to think about it.

"But it's not Makina's fault either!"

She spent every day in the public eye. Whatever resentment I had to deal with was probably nothing compared to hers. It must be suffocating, and isolating...to the point that it'd be impossible for her to even tell who was and wasn't on her side. However special she might've been, she was still just human.

"You all remember what she said, right? She said that she'd be willing to perform, but only if she didn't have to do it alone. She's not getting up onstage as Maki Amagi... She's performing as Makina

Oda, a student in Eichou High's class 2-A! She's doing it so that she'll be accepted at our school—accepted as a member of our class!"

I felt like I was choking. I was so worked up that just breathing was a challenge, but I couldn't stop. I still had something left to say.

"That's why I want to support Makina. And not as some backstage helper doing chores that don't *really* need to be done at all—I want to help her as an actual member of her class. I want all of us to show everyone what an amazing person's transferred in to join us!"

I'd let Makina be isolated. I was her oldest friend, and I should've been her closest ally, but all the attention she received had led me, on some level, to avoid her. It made me think that I didn't *belong* anywhere near her...that I had to be careful not to let anyone catch us talking like we were friends. I didn't think that saying all of this would make up for that mistake, but now that I'd realized what I'd done wrong, I didn't want to run away from it any longer.

"And it's the same for Yuna and Rinka. They're the cutest, coolest pair ever...and they both worked up the courage to agree to perform for us. That means we have to do everything we possibly can to support them! We have to carry the burden with them so that when it's over, we can say we *all* did a great job! After all, it's *our* festival!"

I didn't want to be left by the wayside, and I didn't want it to happen to anyone else either. Even if it made me look ridiculous, and even if I wasn't anywhere near as special as the three of them...even if I could never be anything like them...at the very least, I wanted to help support them.

"So...please. I want all of you to help!" I said with a sniffle before bowing deeply. I had to plant my hands on the podium—I probably would've fallen over otherwise. My heart was beating like crazy, and all I could hear was my own heavy breathing...but it took me a minute to realize that it wasn't because I was panting just that heavily. It was because there wasn't anything else to hear in the first place.

The classroom had gone so terribly, painfully silent, you literally could've heard a pin drop.

All the momentum that had propelled me through my speech had drained away. I felt like I could hear my classmates scoffing at me—asking, "Seriously, what's she even *talking* about?" I knew I was just imagining it, but it was still hard to ignore.

But no! I'm not *wrong about any of this! And if they do make fun of me, or hate me for this... Well, my request wasn't for people like* that *in the first place, and I'll just take it back!*

One second I was worked up, then the next I was cowering, and then a second later I worked myself right back up again. I'd ended up in a busy little cycle of emotional turmoil, but throughout all of it, I just couldn't bring myself to look up. I was petrified, steeling myself for the wave of ridicule that could start at any given moment. And when the silence was finally broken...

"I think Hazama's right. She's right about all of this."

...the last voice I would've expected did the honors.

"Wha...? Miura?" I mumbled. The student who'd spoken up was Housuke Miura: the very same boy who'd suggested that we put on an idol show in the first place.

"The truth is...this whole time, I've regretted it. I was the one who brought this up, and honestly? I thought it'd just be a big, stupid joke, and we'd all move on, or whatever. Like...I wasn't *serious*, but then everyone took it seriously anyway and started talking about how it would be the best cultural festival ever. It felt nice...and I ended up thinking it was actually a good idea too."

Miura didn't seem like his usual troublemaker self at all. His voice was so subdued, I got the sense that he'd been agonizing over all of this just as much as I had.

"But then when we got to work, things started feeling all gloomy in the class. It was like we were all splitting apart, and the more I felt that way, the less and less I felt like doing any work at all. I started thinking that I never should've suggested the show in the first place," Miura said as he looked up at me. He looked me straight in the eye for what was, most likely, the very first time since we'd ended up in the same class. "But thanks to Hazama, I get it now. I was just running away, and foisting all the responsibility for all this

on those three at the same time. It's *really* friggin' embarrassing to admit that I was moping and regretting the wrong thing all this time...but, like, everything Hazama just said! About showing everyone how awesome our new classmate is, and stuff! That all hit *so* hard! That's what I wanna do now too!"

Suddenly, Miura's voice had taken a turn. One second he sounded as gloomy as could be, and the next, his words were powerful and impassioned.

Oh, wow... He's such *a good public speaker!*

"Akashi, Serizawa, and everyone else—what do you all think? Because *I* think that Hazama's right. Shouldn't all of us be working as hard as we can to support Oda, Momose, and Aiba? We're all part of the same class, aren't we?!" Miura said, appealing to the whole class by more or less directly quoting my argument. He *also* made me realize just how over the top and pretentious a lot of my word choice had been. Hearing someone else parrot all my worked-up, impassioned talk about hard work and coming together as a class was *kiiinda* making me want to shrivel up and hide behind the podium a little!

"Yeah...you're right. I wasn't thinking about Momose or Aiba at all, honestly," said Akashi. "Seriously, imagine how much it might've messed up their lives if we'd actually put pictures like that of them out there... I'm really glad someone stopped us."

"I'm sorry, Hazama," added Serizawa. "It wasn't just Akashi. *None* of us were thinking about them, really."

"Ah, umm... I wasn't really looking for an apology or anything, so, uhh..." I babbled. If I can be frank for a second, Miura, Akashi, and Serizawa were all people who really stood out in class, and, like...I mean, I'd never even *talked* with *any* of them before. I was a little flustered, to say the least. Like, I was *way* more nervous than I got talking with Makina, even!

Thanks to Miura's vocal support, though, my dubiously delivered speech seemed to have somehow landed with my classmates. I was *incredibly* relieved, and as I looked across the classroom, I saw Mukai nodding vigorously with tears pooling in her eyes.

"Okay, then, Hazama. You said you have an idea, right? Let's hear

it!” said Miura. Akashi, Serizawa, and the rest of our classmates seemed eager to hear me out as well.

I’d been seconds away from collapsing from sheer relief, but I resisted the urge and pulled out the papers I’d been keeping in my bag for exactly this purpose. “So, umm, I brought enough printouts for everyone...”

“Whoa, for real? Here, lemme help pass them out!” said Miura. The simple pamphlets that I’d stapled together myself were quickly distributed to my classmates.

All right. I’ve cleared the biggest hurdle already, but if I can’t sell this idea to them, all that effort will go straight down the drain. Just one more push! You’ve got this, me!

“Pass a few copies over for us too, Yotsuba!”

“Oh, sure! One second, I’ll...*bwuh*?!” I grunted in response to...*Yuna*?! Who was standing right next to the podium with Rinka?! I hadn’t even realized they were there, and apparently I wasn’t alone on that front, since the whole classroom suddenly broke out in a commotion!

“Ha ha ha! Sorry,” said Yuna. “I know you all said that we didn’t have to be here for this...”

“But a certain someone who was feeling *juuust* a little nosy dragged us here anyway,” added Rinka.

A certain someone who was feeling nosy...? No, wait—does that mean...?!

“Y-You heard everything...?” I stammered.

“You bet we did,” Yuna whispered with a grin.

“You were incredible, Yotsuba,” said Rinka, also quietly enough that no one else could hear her and also sporting a big ole smile.

O-Oh, wow, this...is so *embarrassing!*

“And it wasn’t just us, of course,” Yuna added.

A moment later, the classroom’s back door slid open and Makina stepped inside. I wasn’t as shocked this time. If Yuna and Rinka were here, it only stood to reason she would be as well.

“Ah,” Makina grunted as she saw me. She opened her mouth...but then closed it without saying a word, gave me a quick nod, and took a seat at her desk. She didn’t seem like she was mad or

anything...but she might've felt a little awkward?

"Don't worry—it's fine," said Yuna.

"Yeah. Everything's all right," Rinka agreed.

The two of them must have seen through to my anxiety, and patted me lightly on my shoulders before returning to their desks as well.

It seemed, then, that I hadn't upset Makina after all. That meant that it was time for me to hold my head high and carry on.

"So, basically, my idea is that we should all work together to really make this performance our own," I said. "That means I think *everyone* should get to bring up ideas for how it should all happen...but as far as advertising goes, I was thinking that we could give out pamphlets. They'd feature art that Chiaki Mukai has volunteered to draw, and we'd give them a sort of handmade feel and be really careful to make sure that they didn't expose anything too personal about the performers as well...more or less? I thought something along those lines could be nice!"

To make a long story short, our classmates were dumbfounded by Mukai's incredible illustrations, and she ended up blushing vividly before I knew it. As I saw the look on her face, a wave of relief washed over me all over again.

I wasn't any sort of leader. I'd never had what it took to fill that sort of role. I was glad, though, that just this once, I'd worked up the courage to step up to the front and speak my mind.

October was right around the corner. It might've been too late for us to start working on our project together again...but we *were* working together now, at long last. I didn't know how that would turn out, or what sort of performance it would end up being, or even whether or not our audience would like it at all—but whatever happened, I knew that it would end up being an incredible memory for every member of our class. And, at the same time, I had faith that it would lead toward a happy future for Yuna, Rinka, and Makina as well. Looking out over my class and seeing how much brighter and cheerful its atmosphere was made me feel certain of that...which meant that now, finally, it was time to do something I'd

been meaning to do for ages, and do it with everything I had!

Pheeew... Thank goodness *it all worked out,* I thought as my legs gave way beneath me.

Epilogue: If You'd Been There for Me

"No, no, this won't work. This wouldn't do it at all," she said before tearing a sheet out from her notebook, crumpling it into a ball, and tossing it to the ground. I'd lost count of how many sheets had met that same fate before it.

I paused midway through the sentence I'd been typing on my laptop, plucked the wad of paper up off the ground, and unfurled it. "I don't see why this wouldn't suffice," I said as I skimmed what she'd written...but she just sadly shook her head.

I hesitated for a moment, resisting the urge to sigh, then gave the paper a second read. It wasn't *bad*. In fact, I would have given it a better-than-passing grade. Still, I could understand why she wasn't so easily satisfied. After all, there *was* no definite, ready-made method for what she was trying to accomplish.

If I had to sum up her mission in metaphorical terms...I suppose I would say that it was like punching a hole in the hull of a boat made of mud, then convincing that ship's passengers to abandon it in favor of a vessel of her own.

A number of problems stood in the way of that objective. For one thing, the mud ship, as far as its passengers were concerned, was a splendid boat indeed. Its sails were vast, its figurehead was gilded, and it was even equipped with a state-of-the-art autopilot system. The passengers were sprawled on its deck, napping and happily basking in the sunlight. They were dreaming away, never so much as considering the possibility that their ship was actively disintegrating beneath them. She would have to wake the passengers up from their stupors before anything else, and that was why she had to punch a hole in the hull: to alert them of the danger

before it was too late for them to stand any chance of escaping it.

The second problem: Even if she brought in a new ship and urged the passengers to board it, the fact would remain that the new ship's captain—which is to say, she—was hardly the most reliable of pilots. Moreover, the ship she was capable of readying was far from the most impressive vessel to ever sail the seas. It wasn't actively sinking, sure, but it lacked sails, a compass, and even a set of sea charts. Its crew would have to take to the oars, paddling away with everything they had in hopes of crossing the vast ocean and reaching their goal. No one would *want* to board a ship like that, barring the most desperate of circumstances.

Then there was the matter of the captain herself. Her intent was to wake up the passengers, coax them into boarding her ship...and then immediately vacate the helm, allowing someone else to take her place of leadership and becoming just another laborer. She just didn't have the confidence to lead, nor even a fraction of the charisma necessary to draw people to her. Still, her ship—and its captain—were, on a basic level, reliable. Maybe they couldn't guarantee the passengers that they would sail straight to their goal without fail, but at the bare minimum, they would embark upon a voyage that would leave everyone without regrets.

But of course...I suppose I can only say all of this in the first place because I have a total outsider's perspective on the issue.

I digress. The point I'm trying to make is that no matter how many times she thought through her plan—no matter how many sheets of notebook paper she wasted—I believed it was all but guaranteed that she would, ultimately, fail. And yet, in spite of that prediction, I chose to accompany her in her endeavor. That was partially because she'd requested my help, but also because I *wanted* to help her achieve her goals...or so I'd claim, but perhaps that would be casting too favorable a light on the matter. A more practical way of putting it would be that I'd visualized what it would be like to go down in flames alongside her, and had decided that I was more or less all right with that.

"I think now might be a good time for you to take a break," I

suggested.

"Ugh... Sorry for making you put up with this, Koganezaki," she replied with an apologetic bob of her head.

"I'll pour some tea," I said. I hadn't meant to make her apologize. My intent wasn't to accuse her of anything at all.

I stood up, stepped into my kitchen, and opened up a plastic bottle of tea. As I filled a pair of glasses, I thought back on the pile of papers that she'd been gradually adding to with almost assembly-line-esque efficiency. From a certain perspective, one could see that pile as physical evidence of how earnestly she'd been writing down every scrap of an idea that popped into her mind. There was, however, one trait that every single one of the scripts she'd put to paper so far had shared.

"I'm sorry. I apologize."

Every speech, without fail, had included some form of apology. It was the embodiment of her lack of self-confidence—a condition that, in some ways, almost felt more like a curse. Had she been cowed into the constant state of diffidence she lived in by someone else's actions, or was it she herself who'd perpetrated her own abuse? I had no way of knowing, but one way or another, her emotional wounds were far beyond my ability to treat.

"Here you are," I said as I set a glass down in front of her.

Even that most benign of gestures made her slump her shoulders remorsefully. "Sorry..." she said.

"I believe you mean 'thank you,'" I replied. "It pays to be precise with your word choice."

"Sor— I-I mean, thank you."

I'd corrected her reflexively...which, I knew, wasn't to either of our benefits. I was just being pedantic. I was objectively aware that I was broadly considered to be a rather intimidating person, and it showed in her attitude toward me. I'd never implied that she should walk on eggshells when she spoke to me, but she did so all the same, presumably because she feared some sort of reprisal if she let herself be too casual with me. And yet, in a bafflingly inconsistent turn, she was *also* remarkably pushy when it came to asserting the idea that the two of us were friends.

How irritating, I thought as, on a whim, I reached out to gently touch her hair.

"Huh? Koganezaki?"

Ignoring her confusion, I parted the strands I'd touched, then pinched her newly exposed ear.

"Hyeeek?!" she yelped, pulling free of my grasp. "Wh-What're you doing?!"

"You looked gloomy," I replied. I was perfectly aware that said reply didn't amount to any sort of explanation, but I said it with the sort of confident tone that made even nonsense hard to argue with.

Lo and behold, she didn't pry further. My little prank was swept straight under the rug. "Sorry..." she apologized once more. She was clearly losing confidence at a rapid pace.

Again, I hadn't meant to criticize her at all...or, well, in this case, maybe I had. Calling someone "gloomy" certainly wasn't a compliment, at the very least. *But I suppose my motives are hardly the most important factor here, are they?*

"Do you think it's about time to stop?" I asked. I was rather surprised by how much affection I could hear in my own tone—though at the same time, I could tell that I was offering her a temptation that she by no means needed. And, even more so than that, I was shocked by how sincerely I'd meant it. After all, that sincerity was a sign that *I* was taking this matter quite seriously, myself.

She took in a sharp breath and looked up at me. I could see the determination in her eyes waver for just a moment...but then she looked away again, said, "I'll keep trying just a little longer," in a faint, weak tone, and smiled. "So, umm... Sorry for making you stick around with— Augh?!"

"Then less talking, more writing," I said, cutting her off before she could finish a thought I very much did *not* want to hear the end of. I did so, by the way, by laying a hand on her head and pressing down. I pressed quite hard, in fact, which made the way she smiled in response more than a little confusing.

"Hee hee... This must be what having an older sister feels like," she said.

"You're the only older sister here," I replied.

"Sure, but you *feel* like an older sister, Koganezaki! You suit the ideal perfectly."

"The ideal..."

An ideal—in other words, *not* a reality. The trait she saw in me was one that others had once sought from me, and one that I, in turn, had attempted to present myself as possessing. In the end, however, an ideal was just an ideal. A fake was just a fake. I felt that truth more keenly than ever, being in the presence of the real deal.

"Thanks for this! I think I can give it one more push!" she said with an innocent, beaming grin.

I gave her one more gentle smack on the head, then turned my back to her.

If she can give it another push, that's because she wants to—not because of anything I did.

I *wanted* to say that exceedingly obvious fact out loud. I didn't want to smack her head—I wanted to pat it, slowly and gently. I wanted to praise her and give her a hug. Those, however, were selfish desires that I suppressed. Following through on them would be a mistake, and I knew it. I knew it excruciatingly well.

The part of me that was like an older sister was utterly, hopelessly fake...but then again, I still couldn't help but think that for that fake side of me, *she* might very well have been the ideal younger sister.

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When I was in middle school, I attended an institution known as the Seiran Academy for Girls: an isolated little world of its own that I carried out the bulk of my existence within. It was a school that boasted a history of refinement and tradition, attended only by the wealthy and privileged...or at least that was the reputation it held for the public at large, which I only learned of after I'd departed from it. It never occurred to me at the time to think of how people would view it from the outside, because to me, that school was everything.

"Good morning, elder sister!" other students would greet me, giving me polite curtsies as I strolled through the school's halls.

"And good morning to you as well," I would reply with a slight smile. Embarrassing though it is to admit it, at the time, I could participate in such gestures without feeling the slightest hint of shame. I was a third-year in middle school—a mere fourteen-year-old child—but I felt as if I were already as grown-up and mature as one could be.

I had always been tall, relative to my classmates. Adding to my recognizability was the fact that my surname, Koganezaki, was uncommon—even within a school like that one—and thus stood out. With every grade level that I ascended, I was treated more and more like an adult by those around me. To make matters worse, a long-standing tradition—or, some might argue, a deep-seated mistake—at Seiran Academy was the manner in which younger students referred to their seniors as their older sisters. That was why my underclassmen, and for that matter a number of my peers, called me "elder sister," conveying the high esteem they held me in.

I, believe it or not, took pride in that treatment. It made me feel a sense of responsibility, and so it felt like a matter of course when I was chosen to be my class's representative. I would stop by to look in on my underclassmen's activities on the regular, and proactively helped my teachers in every way I could. It was a very mundane way of lobbying for my own reputation, in a sense, and before I knew it, far more students at my school had begun to look up to me than I even realized.

Among those many students, there were three in particular who I got along with especially well. One of them was named Ritsuka Shinomoto: a girl in my class who I'd been friends with since we were very young. She was cheerful and sociable, and was consistently embarrassed when other students called her "elder sister." She was also one of the few who didn't treat me like I was special. She would always greet me with the same smile as ever, acting like we were on even footing. I don't mean to make it sound like being looked up to by the other students was a profound source

of repressed stress and anxiety for me, or anything nearly that serious, but it *was* somewhat tiresome from time to time, and she was the only one who I could vent my pent-up exhaustion to when I felt the need.

Another of the three was Emiri Shirahama. She was one year younger than me, and idolized me to a special, remarkable degree. She was also impeccably polite and ladylike—the quintessential refined young woman who people assumed attended schools such as ours. With me, however, she displayed an adorably immature sort of attachment. When other girls would talk to me, for instance, she would always pout over it. I found that petty jealousy charming, and was happy to be the subject of her affection. Affection, in fact, was one of the relatively few rewards that I received for my efforts. It made working so hard to play my role—hard enough for it to be a source of stress—feel worthwhile. It felt like proof that I was needed. It became my reason for being.

And so...I wound up under the misapprehension that I was infallible.

"Hey, Mai? I have to tell you something. I...I love you. Not, like, as a friend. I mean I *really* love you."

"I adore you, elder sister! Would you please consider starting a relationship with me?"

Then Ritsuka and Emiri asked me out. Both of them. And miraculously enough, they did it on the very same day.

"*What...?*"

At first, the only reaction I could muster was stiffening up in bewilderment. Ritsuka—who opened up about her feelings for me first—had been my friend for years, and never over all that time had I so much as considered the possibility that she had romantic intentions toward me. It was a bolt from the blue. While Emiri having feelings for me was less of a surprise in and of itself, the fact that she chose to express them immediately after Ritsuka had was such a preposterous coincidence, it left me flabbergasted.

What I could say, in both of their cases, was that I'd never felt

the sort of romantic attraction toward them that they felt for me—and in fact, that I had yet to ever feel that sort of attraction for anyone at all.

I'd always felt that honesty was the best policy. That was doubly true when it came to romance, a world that I knew nothing about whatsoever. Beginning a relationship founded upon a foundation of lies struck me as nothing less than suicidal. Ritsuka and Emiri were no exceptions—I felt that way even in the case of my closest of friends. Or perhaps that was backward. Perhaps it was *because* they were among my closest friends that I felt an obligation to reply with total sincerity.

"I'm sorry," I said with a remorseful bow. "I have no intention of going out with anyone at all, for the time being." I didn't know where I'd learned that method of turning someone down, but I used it twice, verbatim.

"Oh... Got it. Yeah, fair enough! Ha ha—sorry about this. Where the heck did that even come from, right?" Ritsuka had said, laughing it all off before going along on her way.

Emiri, in contrast, was not so understanding. "What? But... But why? What about me isn't good enough for you?!" she'd practically begged.

"Nothing's wrong with you. It's not *you* at all. I just..." I'd said, trailing off.

What was the right thing to say to her? How could I ensure she wasn't hurt? I frantically sifted for an answer through all the knowledge my fourteen years of life had granted me—but unfortunately, I was also without question more confused than I'd ever been throughout all fourteen of those years. My mind felt addled. I actually felt dizzy, even.

In the end, I believe that I did say *something* to her. I strung together a series of awkward, stilted words that I hoped would neither hurt her nor lead her along with false hope that I'd return her feelings. I can't remember exactly what I said. The words that came out of my mouth were so hopelessly flimsy and unreliable that it felt like they vanished into nothingness the second I spoke them.

The next thing I knew, Emiri was gone. When I touched my

chest, however, I could still feel a trace of dampness from where she'd buried her face. A trace of her tears.

Looking back, I can't help but think that *I'd* had just as much of a reason to cry as she did.

It took almost no time at all for rumors to start floating around. Specifically, rumors that Emiri and I were a couple.

"So? Explain yourself," Ritsuka said, glaring at me with pure humiliation in her eyes.

"I-I..." I stammered. I wanted an explanation just as much as she did. The rumors were baseless. I was certain that I'd turned Emiri down, quite clearly.

"You said you weren't gonna date anyone, didn't you?!"

Had I lied to her? Had I not had the decency to respond to her sincere emotions with a sincere reply of my own? She'd started to cry—tears of rage, and at the same time, of shame.

"Elder sister," a terribly calm voice rang out, pounding into my eardrums. It was Emiri, and she was smiling. A smile I'd never seen on her face before.

"*You*..." Ritsuka growled. The target of her fury had suddenly shifted.

"Oh, my, if it isn't Shinomoto! Good day to you," Emiri said with an almost pitying sneer.

It wasn't the sort of expression one was ever supposed to direct toward an upperclassman. It was, in fact, an obvious attempt at provocation—which Ritsuka fell for hook, line, and sinker. She was livid.

Frankly...I don't remember the specifics of the conversation that followed. What I *do* recall is how both of them verbally abused each other in ways that, under ordinary circumstances, I never could have imagined either of them sinking to. I, meanwhile, was caught between them, left to shiver in silence as a pounding headache tested the limits of my endurance.

It all happened so quickly. Before I knew it, the false rumor that I was dating Emiri had another, even more malicious layer added onto it: that I had toyed with both her and Ritsuka's emotions, wounding them in the process. This particular rumor, it seemed, hadn't been spread by either of them. Rather, it was the work of other girls at our school who held the two of them in high esteem. Both of them stood out, and were well liked and trusted by their peers. It was only natural that no small number of other students would feel about them the same way that they felt about me.

Naturally, I soon became those students' unambiguous enemy. They wanted to drag me down from my pedestal, fling me to the ground, and bury me alive in mud. It felt like I was drowning in their unbridled hostility.

If there was one silver lining to the situation, it was the fact that all of this had occurred just shortly before I was due to graduate from the academy's middle school division. Once I had graduated, a degree of distance would naturally form between me and Emiri. Ritsuka, however, would remain my classmate.

In the wake of all that chaos, Ritsuka apparently ended up dating one of her underclassmen. Even then, I would notice her from time to time, always giving me a look of either contempt or pity. I could never quite tell which.

I, meanwhile, was completely isolated. I never found concrete evidence that word of my damaged reputation had made its way to our teachers, but one way or another, they all wound up avoiding me as much as possible, just like my peers.

Well, no—that's not strictly true. There was just one exception, I suppose.

"Elder sister!" she said, her perfectly fluent Swedish words almost caressing my ears. "I've been searching everywhere for you!"

"Emma..."

She was the third classmate who was particularly attached to me—though I suppose at that point, she was the *only* classmate who was attached to me at all. She was also a girl of astonishing beauty, like she'd fallen to earth straight from the heavens. She was of mixed Japanese and Swedish ancestry, and while her name had a

rather Japanese feel, she'd lived in Sweden since she was very young. My parents were friends with hers, as it happened, and we'd met several times in the past, but were never especially close...until, that is, she transferred into Seiran Academy's middle school division.

"You shouldn't talk to me like this, Emma," I replied in Swedish.

"Whatever for?"

"Because... Well, you've heard the rumors, haven't you?"

"I just want to be around you, that's all!"

She was also, at the time, not even remotely fluent in Japanese. I couldn't tell if she was kidding or if she really was as unaware of the rumors as she seemed, but one way or another, she flashed me a brilliant smile and embraced me.

Emma was a very strange person. It felt like time flowed differently for her than it did for everyone else, somehow. That, perhaps, was why no matter how free-spirited she was—no matter how outlandish her behavior—the people around her broadly accepted it all as just her characteristic quirkiness. That was a sort of freedom that I was not permitted, and I'll admit, I was envious...but on the other hand, I knew it probably led to its own sort of struggles as well.

"Tell me, Emma..." I began again in Swedish.

"Yes, elder sister?"

"What would you say...if I told you that I wasn't planning on advancing to this academy's high school division?"

"That in that case, I won't either!" Emma replied with a smile. She hadn't even hesitated. Apparently, it was the easiest answer in the world for her.

I had to assume that our family circumstances were just different. I had already put plenty of thought into how I would fund my transfer into a totally different school. After everything I'd been through, my spirit was simply worn out. Something deep inside me had all but snapped in two. I wanted nothing more than to escape from the isolated little world that I lived in. That was why I had negotiated with my parents, brought my grandfather onto my side, and secured an agreement: So long as I was able to gain entry into a high school with even higher average test scores than Seiran

Academy, I would be allowed to transfer. How would Emma's situation compare? I didn't know, and didn't feel that it was my place to butt in regardless.

"Elder...sister?"

I sat up with a start. I hadn't even realized that I'd hung my head until Emma spoke to me—and did so in very broken Japanese, a language that she'd only just begun to study.

"Elder...sister...together...always...indeed!"

"Emma..."

Tears welled in my eyes. At that moment, nothing could have made me happier than hearing that someone wanted to be with me—that someone still valued me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll have to leave you on your own, for a time."

She called me her elder sister, and at the bare minimum, I wanted to be someone worthy of that term of endearment. That way, even if I ran away—even if I lost everything—I could know that someday, she would surely find me again.

And so, I transferred into Eichou High: a school with an esteemed enough reputation to satisfy my parents. That meant leaving my family's home, but my grandfather facilitated my move, allowing me to live in one of the rooms in a high-rise apartment building he owned. As soon as I graduated from middle school, I moved out to begin living on my own...and as soon as I began high school, I encountered *them*.

"Hey, did you see those two?"

"They're so pretty... And don't they look, like, just perfect together?"

The two of them were transparently special. They had a remarkable sense of presence as individuals, of course, but when they were together, the feeling of harmony and intimacy that they exuded was like nothing else. It made each of their individual merits shine all the brighter.

The rest of the students in our incoming class viewed them with an innocent sort of awe. I, however, saw things differently. *There's no telling when those innocent stares will turn into something far*

more dangerous, I thought. Someday that admiration could turn into envy, and even hostility...and despite not knowing them at all, I couldn't simply stand by and watch it happen.

That was why I made a choice. I decided to protect them. Perhaps that was conceited of me, but I would do it nonetheless. It would be my way of taking responsibility for the girls who I had hurt—my way of punishing myself for having been able to do nothing more than run away from them.

I felt no need to stand in the spotlight. Operating from the shadows suited me just fine. I would do whatever I could to support them, never expecting those efforts to be acknowledged in the slightest. That was simply the role I'd chosen for myself.

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I could tell I was being stared at. A pair of suspicious, wary gazes pierced me from behind—gazes that belonged to Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba. I'd barely spoken with either of them before now, but clearly, they were both aware of me...and needless to say, that awareness was *not* of a positive nature.

I hadn't promised *her* that I'd take action like this. In fact, I was acting entirely independently. I wasn't doing it for Momose or Aiba either, this time. If I had to say who I *was* acting on behalf of...I supposed I'd have no choice but to admit that I was doing this for myself. I had no idea how it would play out, but I knew that I wanted to see the results with my own two eyes. In other words, I'd been driven by my own purely selfish desires when I chose to approach them.

"So? Where're you taking us?" Momose asked, making no effort to hide the displeasure in her tone. "We're actually pretty busy right now, if you hadn't noticed."

"This will only take a moment," I replied. "I thought it would be best for the two of you to know."

"To know *what*?"

"You'll just have to find out."

I was not friends with them by any means. I had every intention to protect them, but not the slightest intention to get along with them. Moreover, to them, I was the vice president of the Sacrosanct fan club. In other words, I was a presence that made their lives—the lives of both them and *her* as well—more stifling than they would otherwise need to be. In short, to them, I was an antagonistic force. Under normal circumstances, I'm sure they would never have agreed to follow me anywhere, and under normal circumstances, I would not have persisted. This time, however...

"Excuse me, Koganezaki?"

I hesitated for just a moment. "Yes, Oda?"

"Are you leading us to class 2-A's room?"

Ever since she'd transferred in a few weeks prior, Makina Oda had been the largest source of stress in my life...but she was also the one who'd first agreed to come along with me. Her thought process was completely opaque to me—more so even than those of the Sacrosanct duo—but a strangely coincidental set of circumstances had led to us meeting before, during summer vacation. Emma and I had bumped into Oda while visiting the aquarium together. Specifically, we'd bumped into Oda and *her*, out on a date.

On the one hand, we *had* technically watched a dolphin show together, which made us sound reasonably close, but on the other hand, we'd barely spoken at all over the course of that experience. Oda only had eyes for *her*, who had also happened to dominate my attention, albeit for an entirely different, much less positive set of reasons. Oda did seem to have at least remembered my name, though, and had formed a mental association between me and *her* on top of it. That was probably why she'd been able to intuit that class 2-A—*her* class—was my destination.

"Wait, our class?" said Momose.

"I think they were supposed to be having a meeting about promoting our performance today," noted Aiba.

"Correct," I said. "A meeting that your presence was not requested for."

"Okay...and why's that any of your business? You're not even *in*

our class," said Momose.

"I wonder?"

"*Look*, you little—"

"Yuna," said Aiba, cutting in before Momose could lash out at me. Momose was acting like a crazed guard dog, and while Aiba held her back, Aiba was clearly still deeply suspicious of me as well.

They really do strike an impressive balance with each other, I reflected. That being said, at the moment, they both felt oddly high-strung. Were they simply anxious about having to perform onstage with a popular idol like Oda? Or did this have something to do with *her* as well?

"I believe that the plan was for us to be informed about the decisions made at the meeting after the fact?" said Oda.

"True," I replied, "but there wouldn't be any harm in you watching quietly from the sidelines, would there? And in the unlikely event they do accuse you of eavesdropping, all you have to say is that I dragged you there against your will. That should serve as a decent enough excuse to assuage any tension."

Oda fell silent—as, for that matter, did Momose and Aiba. All three of them had to be curious about the meeting's content, but they also understood that their presence in the room would only be an obstacle. They'd deliberately refrained from participating so that the meeting could run smoothly, perhaps out of consideration for their classmates, or perhaps because it was simply more convenient for *them* that way as well.

No... I need to stop that. Why is it that I seem to always feel the need to doubt people's intentions?

At times like these, I could tell that my lifestyle over the past year and change had begun to have a distinct effect upon my personality. It was like I could only ever trust that I understood someone when I learned about the deepest, most well-hidden aspects of their personalities—and upon learning about someone's less-than-savory traits, I immediately leaped to the conclusion that *they* were the whole of that person's true nature. I knew that it was a regressive manner of approaching socialization that would only earn me enemies, but I couldn't help myself.

We arrived outside class 2-A just in time to hear a heated debate leaking out from within the classroom.

"I'm telling you, we've gotta go all in on showing them off with pictures! Big, flashy, in-your-face ones! We can put a bunch of behind-the-scenes photos up all over the place too!"

"But wouldn't a video be even better than that?! We should make one of those! It'll spread like wildfire if we put it up on a website somewhere!"

"Wha...?!" Momose said, flinching backward.

"They can't mean...?" Aiba muttered as she furrowed her brow.

Oda, meanwhile, didn't say anything at all. She did, however, look like she was thinking very deeply.

This would certainly be hard to accept, if I were one of the people involved, I thought. *They must feel like their class is treating them like playthings.*

Of course...considering that I was a key player in forcing Momose and Aiba into the framework of the Sacrosanct, strictly controlling the environment around them, I most certainly did not have any right to talk on such matters. Nevertheless, I knew very well that it couldn't have been a pleasant sort of subject for them to hear discussed out loud.

As an outsider, I could see that the class was entirely unaware of how malicious they were being. They were the chefs, and the trio of performers were their ingredients. The final dish was the only matter of concern. What pain the ingredients might go through and what bills would have to be paid following the meal weren't up for consideration. How chilling must it have been for the three of them to realize they'd been laid out on a cutting board? Would they be chopped? Minced? Fried? Or maybe, after the chefs had had their fill of toying with them, they'd be deemed a failed experiment and dumped in the trash can.

That was precisely why someone needed to snap the class out of its stupor.

"I-I'm against *both* suggestions!"

Momose, Aiba, and Oda all gasped. I, on the other hand, felt a

smile creep across my face.

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"Nuh-uh, no way*! I'm absolutely positive about this. I mean, I've* never *been the center of attention, so if everyone suddenly started noticing me and asking me to represent them or whatever... Gah, just* thinking *about it's making me feel like I might barf!"*

She'd made that claim to me not long ago. She'd said it frantically and earnestly, in a manner that left no doubt that she was speaking from the bottom of her heart. It was exactly what I would have expected from someone as pathologically timid and skilled at self-flagellation as her, and at the time, I didn't doubt her in the least. Everyone had their own talents and weaknesses, and she simply wasn't the sort of person who could stand before a crowd and bear a cause's standard.

Now, however, I was beginning to reconsider. As I listened to her speech through the classroom's door, it felt like I was staring my past self in the face. Yes, she was timid. Yes, it was entirely possible that she was currently midway through the process of inflicting an emotional wound upon herself. And yet, in spite of everything, her tone was powerful. It felt like her words were piercing straight through to my heart, perhaps thanks to the absolute sincerity they were laced with. I could feel an ardent heat begin to spread through my body, in spite of myself.

I had thought that she didn't have the slightest trace of charisma in any of the many forms it could take...but if that were the case, then why would girls with charisma to spare keep flocking to her side, one by one? How could she deliver a speech like this—one that brought a tear to the eye of everyone there to listen to it? Maybe it wasn't that she lacked charisma. Maybe it was that the way her charisma manifested was simply unlike any form that I knew how to recognize.

"So...please. I want all of you to help!"

With those words, her speech reached its conclusion. Silence fell. Not a voice could be heard from within the classroom...and I imagined that right about now, she would be worrying herself to death about the fact that no one was reacting.

Not that she has anything to worry about, I thought. I knew that very well. I was positive.

"I think Hazama's right. She's right about all of this."

See?

A boy spoke up, and just like that, approval for her ideas spread through the classroom like wildfire. She was probably confused, but there was nothing to be surprised about at all. Her words had been persuasive, plain and simple. She hadn't tried to get her way with logical quibbling—she'd made a direct, emotionally powerful speech that hit right at the heart of the matter. Even *I'd* felt it, so there was no way that her classmates hadn't.

"Koganezaki..."

"Yes, Aiba?"

"Just how much do you know? What do you know about us...?"

"That...is a very good question," I said with a shrug, fully aware that I was being obnoxiously cagey. If I'd given an honest answer, it would have been "Everything, from start to finish." The way things had turned out, however, were entirely thanks to a certain other girl's actions, and it didn't feel right for me to take any credit for those results myself. "More importantly, don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Huh?" grunted Aiba.

"I don't think anyone has any interest in keeping you out of the meeting, at this point," I replied.

"I...guess. Yeah, you're right. Yuna?"

"I know, okay?!" Momose replied with an irate huff. It was a rather endearing gesture coming from her, frankly, but apparently she thought that such behavior was beneath her. She slapped her cheeks a few times, pulled herself together, and stepped into the classroom alongside Aiba.

I was left in the hallway...with Makina Oda.

"Yotsy...doesn't get it at all," Oda whispered, seemingly to no one

in particular. "I'm not the perfect, pretty person she thinks I am. I'm just..."

"Maybe so," I cut in, perfectly aware that my input had *not* been asked for.

Oda glanced up at me. Her confusion and hesitation were quite clear to see in her expression.

"It can be hard to understand your own feelings, sometimes—and by the same token, sometimes it's as easy as can be for an outsider to see through them in a heartbeat."

That was certainly the case for *her* as well.

"I think it's high time you put down your pen."

"Huh? But I..."

"Stop writing. Speak. Tell me how you feel, and I'll write your words down. All you're accomplishing by staring at a piece of paper and shutting yourself up in your own little world is torturing yourself...so I'll do that part for you."

"I... Right! I'll do it!"

Just the night before, we'd written a simple script for her speech together, and also prepared the documents for the method of promotion she was going to propose. It seemed she'd chosen not to read her script word for word, in the end, but I was certain that the time we'd spent sorting through her feelings on the matter had still been valuable to her.

That was something that Makina Oda couldn't have. I could tell just by looking at her. She was an individual who took pride in her independence...or perhaps, who *believed* that she had to do so. For years she'd lived in a world dominated by fierce interpersonal competition, which had surely taught her that at the end of the day, the only person she could ever truly count on was herself.

But if that's the case, then why would she be so preoccupied with her*?*

I almost could have convinced myself that the Oda before me now was a completely different person from the one I'd met at the aquarium. At the bare minimum, I hadn't felt the sort of isolation from her then that I did now—the sense that as far as she was concerned, she was completely alone in the world.

"Nobody is perfect," I said. "It simply isn't possible. That's why we need people who are close to us. People who can support us."

I was by no means a blind optimist. In the end, everyone would value themself more than they valued others. People betrayed one another for selfish reasons on a daily basis. There were countless individuals who'd been hurt and driven to despair on account of their relationships. I understood all too well the impulse to shut out the world and live in one's own little isolated shell.

"If I had to guess...I would say that's exactly what draws them, and you, to *her*. Her straightforward earnestness has captured your hearts."

She never thought about her own benefit at all...most likely, anyway. She certainly gave the impression that she was always more concerned about someone or other than she was about herself. She never seemed to want any reward for the things she did either...and in fact, it almost seemed like she didn't understand the *concept* of being paid back for her actions at all. She could be obsequious in the strangest ways and succumb to the most irrational impulses, but when the time came for her to help someone, she poured her whole heart and soul into the task, to a far greater extent than she ever would for herself. I had a feeling that the moment she began to think of someone as important to her, she instantly lost the ability to ever abandon them. That, surely, was one of her virtues. At the very least, I certainly saw it that way.

Once again, Oda hung her head in silence. I was certain that she was thinking—about who she was to *her*, perhaps, or about what it was that she really wanted to do. I couldn't read that deeply into her thoughts, by any means...but I did feel an impulse to meddle just a little more, one last time.

"Well?" I said. "Go on inside. There's no way you've missed the fact that she worked as hard as she did for *your* sake, in part."

Oda hesitated for just a moment...then nodded weakly. "Right," she said.

She hadn't sorted out her feelings—she hadn't had the time—which was why I suspected that the downcast girl I saw before me might, in fact, have been her actual true self.

It almost feels like I'm looking at myself from back then, I thought. I couldn't help but feel a certain sense of sympathy.

I walked through the halls of our school alone. For the time being, my job was finished. *Her* scheme had succeeded, and class 2-A had abandoned their boat of mud to sail off aboard a vessel made out of scraps and held together by hopes and dreams. Where would it ultimately take them? That, I supposed, was a question that I wouldn't play any part in answering.

In the end, one might say that none of the problems I'd been burdened with had actually been resolved. Not only had I not found an answer regarding the Sacrosanct fan club's future, I'd abandoned my effort to do so, leaving it entirely in the hands of fate. And yet, strangely...I felt unburdened. I felt like humming, or skipping, even...though of course, I never would have actually done anything that unrefined and out of character.

But...I suppose I can do this much.

Whump!

I brought my foot down to the ground slightly harder than I normally would—hard enough to make a sound. That, at least, felt like an expression I could be allowed.

"Yotsuba Hazama..." I muttered. It felt like I'd grown awfully used to saying that name, as of late. It wasn't a particularly strange name, but for some reason, saying it out loud made me feel...refreshed, I suppose, in an odd sort of way.

You know, Hazama...ever since that day—the day that Emma brought you to my home, hoping you could help after I lost myself—from time to time, very rarely, a thought has crossed my mind.

What if you'd been there for me?

What if you'd been by my side, in all your awkward, desperate earnestness, with that ever-carefree attitude that makes me feel like an idiot for always thinking everything through so seriously? Maybe then Ritsuka, Emiri, and I would have all made it through

unwounded. Maybe you would have brought about the sort of miracle that no one else would ever even dream of, saving all of us in one fell swoop.

Or maybe I *would have been the one who ended up obsessed...with* you*.*

"Honestly..." I muttered to myself, smiling ruefully at my own pointless imaginings. Even I could tell how inanely elated the word had come out sounding, but since no one else was around, it drifted off into the glow of the evening sky unheard.



Afterword

Thank you very much for reading *Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta The Fourth*! And, while I'm at it...I'm very sorry for the long, *long* wait!!!!!!!

Although over a year and a half has passed since *The Third* was published, I'm extremely glad that I was finally able to deliver *The Fourth* into your hands. Looking back, the path this series has taken to get to this point has been anything but an easy one. I've been told that the readers' initial response to a series is incredibly important in the light-novel industry, and since the first volume's immediate post-release sales numbers were a little dicey, a week passed following its publication before *The Second* was greenlit—and then *The Third* wasn't settled on until a month after *The Second* came out. *The Fourth*'s publication, meanwhile, took a year to come about, and...wait. Hm? At the rate things are going, doesn't it sort of seem like *The Fifth* won't be greenlit until a decade from now...?

Well, okay, so I already wrote about how tough it can be for a series to continue back in *The Third*, and it'd be pretty pathetic if people started thinking of me as "that one author who never stops harping on how rough the industry is," so I'll leave it at that for now. I only have so many pages to use on this afterword, after all! For the record, enough drama went into it that I could've easily filled at least ten pages writing about it all! Curious? Too baaaaaad!!!

So anyway, it's time for me to write something a little more afterword-ish by offering my thanks to everyone...at double time! Thank you to my illustrator, Kuro Shina, whose art was incredible yet again this volume! Weren't the color illustrations a little crazy this time, though?! Crazy in every sense! I loved them! Also, I love the design of the newest character, Mukai! And I love President Hishimochi! And I love my illustrator!!!

Thank you to my editor! The truth is, the editor who worked with me up until *The Third* resigned, and I've been in the care of a new editor starting in this volume who really helped out in all sorts of ways to make *The Fourth* a reality...and for that, I'm extremely thankful! But also, sometimes you're pretty slow about getting in touch with me, so maybe pay a bit closer attention to me! Who knows what sort of trouble I'll get in if you don't?!?!?!

Thank you to Overlap Bunko, and congratulations on your tenth anniversary! Nobody really reached out to me about it, but I heard it was a blast! I feel a little left out! But mostly, I'm happy for you! I hope that our working relationship stays as strong as ever from here on out!!!

And finally, above all else: Thank you to my readers! This series would have never made it this far without all of your support, and I'm tremendously grateful to all of you for it!!!

As for the series's continued publication, from what I've been told, the growth of the ebook edition's sales has helped a lot, and each and every one of your words of support has reached the editorial department. The publication of foreign-language editions of the series has also brought it to even more people than ever, which was apparently viewed as a big point in its favor. There's no question in my mind that this is thanks not to me, but to all of my readers! Each and every one of your words came together into one big Spirit Bomb of support that blew open a path to publication! I sincerely hope that this volume meets all of your expectations!

Now, you might be thinking, "Wait, that's the end? You're stopping *here*?" right about now...but the cultural festival is a big event, and when I was plotting things out, I just couldn't figure out a way to fit it all into a single volume. Before I knew it, I'd once again wrapped things up in a way that leads directly into another volume, just like I did in *The Third*. I'd been wanting to write Koganezaki's story for ages, though, and I was really glad to finally get the chance to put plenty of it on paper—and when I explained that I just *couldn't* fit it all into one volume, no matter *what* I did, it actually ended up with *The Fifth* getting approved for publication, so

I hope you can forgive me for the cliff-hanger this time! (No, really.)

And so, next up will be *Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta The Fifth*: the conclusion of the "Vs Makina Oda" arc! I hope to see you then, but goodbye for now!


I'd join the Koganezaki family as their newest pet, but Emma's free-spirited nature would rear its head every once in a while and she'd forget to take care of me!
Then Koganezaki would shake her head, mutter, "Honestly, that girl," put a collar around my neck, and take me out for a walk. Et cetera, et cetera.
MAI KOGANEZAKI
YOTSUBA HAZAMA


Okay, this might count as cheating!!!!!!!!!
"Feels nice..."
"Quit teasing me."
"Huh?"


“Ahh, I’ve missed this...”
RINKA AIBA
YUNA MOMOSE
“Ahhh... I finally got a chance to recharge my Yotsuba-batteries!”


MAKINA ODA
"I want you, no matter what it takes. And so..."

Bonus Short Stories

A Night in the Life of Chiaki Mukai

"Chiaki? Dinner's ready!"

"Okaaay!" I called out to my mom, but I didn't actually move an inch. I kept my butt planted firmly in my chair, my gaze fixed to the screen of my tablet and the pen in my hand flying like the wind.

Just a little longer, I thought. I was on a roll, and I didn't want to let my concentration lapse. I'd wrap it up when I got to a good stopping point—or, ideally, when I was totally finished. I'd always loved drawing, but at that moment, something more powerful than enjoyment was driving me to finish my picture. I drew, and drew, and drew...because I wanted to show my work to a certain girl.

"Phew," I sighed as I wrapped up a particularly difficult portion of my piece, then looked over at my phone. I was using a picture as visual reference for my drawing this time—a picture of a girl.

The girl who I was drawing was so remarkable and lived in such an utterly different world from me that just standing too close to her made my legs feel like they might give out...but the girl in the actual picture I was referencing, who'd served as my subject's standin, was the exact opposite of all that. Well, no—that's probably a little too rude. I *should* say that, judging by appearances, she was an incredibly friendly but otherwise perfectly ordinary girl. Her brow was furrowed in what was *supposed* to be a very serious expression, but it had ended up just a little sillier than she'd probably been planning on. I couldn't help but smile every time I looked at it.

"Oh, I know!" I said. I saved the picture I was working on, then opened up a different file.

I'd always drawn single-frame illustrations in the past, but recently, I'd secretly started plotting to draw something a little more

comic-esque. I didn't know much of anything about panel layouts, lettering, or scene composition. In fact, to be honest, I barely understood anything about comics at all. All I knew was that I felt like a single image couldn't contain the character I'd dreamed up. I wanted to see her move freely, however she wanted to...though of course, I was the one who'd actually be deciding all that in the end. It was my drawing, after all.

"Just you wait. I'll make you as cute as you can possibly be!"

That was definitely a pretty conceited promise to make, but I meant every word of it. I wanted to put the girl on my screen into a wonderful story of her own, then show it to the friend I was drawing all of this for. *How will she react...?* I wondered. Whenever I uploaded one of my drawings onto the internet, I worried that people would tear it to pieces, but when I imagined showing my art to *her*, I didn't feel even a hint of anxiety. I knew for a fact that she would love it.

Actually, though... I might be a little embarrassed to show her this one.

"I wonder...would she figure it out?"

As I imagined what might happen, I felt a blush spread across my face. I'd *definitely* be embarrassed if she caught on to what I'd done. I might even end up insisting that she was wrong, and it was all just a coincidence.

But the truth is...my comic's main character is you*.*

I liked idols. I liked how special they were—how dazzling they looked up onstage. If I managed to capture even a little of what made them so brilliant in my picture, then I'd be incredibly proud of it. But, all that said...I also wanted to draw the girl who stood by my side in the audience, looking up at those idols with a smile, just like I did. And so...

"Chiakiii?"

"Ah, sorry! I'll be right there!"

And then my mom called me for dinner again! I turned off my phone in a fluster, then stood up. "See you soon," I said to the kind, smiling girl in the comic on my tablet.

I knew that she was out there somewhere, doing her best at that

very moment—so I'd do my best too. Not because I wanted to compete with her, though. I did it because I thought there was a chance that when everything was over...when we were worn out and satisfied from a job well done...then, just maybe, I'd be able to tell her how I really felt.

That Time I Went Phone Shopping with Koganezaki

One day—a day off school—I was called out by a friend to the big electronics store by the station. It wasn't the sort of store that a high schooler like me had many good reasons to visit. Home appliances were really expensive most of the time, and my allowance wasn't enough to let me drop that sort of money at a moment's notice, so I never had any motivation to stop by.

"Oooh. Hand mixers, huh...?" I muttered under my breath.

I'd caught sight of a flyer about the store's current sales posted by the entrance, and had noticed a bit in the corner that mentioned a sale on hand mixers. Those, in case you don't know, are basically electrical eggbeaters that spin around on their own! They're really useful for certain types of cooking—like, baking cakes and stuff is a lot easier if you have one. I was pretty interested, and they weren't so expensive that I *couldn't* afford one... *Hmm.*

"What are you staring at?"

"Hyeek!"

"...It's not like I snuck up on you."

The source of the sudden voice from behind me was none other than Koganezaki, the very person who'd called me here. She was frowning at me, apparently less than pleased by how shocked I'd been.

"H-Hi there, Koganezaki!" I said.

"Hello, Hazama. Have you found something particularly interesting?" Koganezaki replied.

"N-Nah, not really... Anyway, what was it you wanted to meet up here for?"

"Oh, yes. My apologies for not explaining sooner. It was somewhat embarrassing to talk about on the phone."

"It's something *embarrassing*?!"

"I assure you that it isn't anything nearly as obscene as whatever you're picturing right now," Koganezaki said with a fed up glare.

I didn't even say anything!

"Come along, then. This way."

"Ah, right!"

Koganezaki, never one for small talk, set out at a speedy pace without wasting a moment. I followed along behind her.

What possible reason would she have to visit an electronics shop—and to bring *me* along, of all people? I'd spent the whole trip here mulling over that question, and hadn't come up with any answers at all. Now I was right back to thinking about it, but I didn't have long to ponder. Koganezaki stopped in no time, almost as if she was trying to deny me my thinking time.

"Huh? Wait, is this...?"

"Yes. The smartphone section," said Koganezaki.

I think it's pretty safe to say that smartphones are the most widespread consumer electronics in modern Japan. As such, the smartphone section was naturally located right by the store's entryway. Each carrier had eye-catching displays set up, all for the sake of drawing prospective clients' attention.

"I've decided that it's finally time for me to make the switch," Koganezaki explained.

"Oooh, right! You still have a flip phone, don't you?" I said.

"I don't find my current setup inconvenient, per se, but I *have* heard about how useful smartphones can be. That said, I wouldn't know where to start if I came to a place like this on my own."

"Okay, I get it now. Why me, though?"

I considered Koganezaki one of my very, very few friends, but Koganezaki wasn't in the same sort of situation at all. She probably had tons of people who'd go out to help her buy a smartphone. And yet she'd come to me anyway... *Wait! Does this mean that she thinks of me as a* special *sort of friend? Like, a step up from all her other ones?!*

I fought back to the urge to smirk as I eagerly awaited her answer. *Oh, Koganezaki! You like me! You really* do *like me, don't you?! You can admit it! I'll be ready for you to be nice to me, any day, any time!*

"I assumed that any phone you were capable of operating would be perfectly usable for a beginner like me as well."

"What, because I'm just that stupid?!"

"And here I thought I'd chosen my phrasing tactfully."

"Meaning that if you *hadn't* tried to be tactful, that's exactly what you would've said...?"

Oh, the letdown! The stomach-churning disappointment! I was so glad to know that she was relying on me, but now I can't even be happy about it!

"Heh heh... I was joking, Hazama."

"Huh?"

"Now then, which shall I choose? I'd prefer something subdued and suitable for everyday use, ideally."

"Ah, w-wait! Hold on a second!"

Once more, Koganezaki set off without bothering to check if I was following, and I frantically hurried along after her.

In the end, Koganezaki chose the newest model from the same company that had made my phone. The newest model was the only one they were currently selling, but considering she'd gone for the same brand, I sort of liked to think that if they *had* been selling the exact phone I used, she would've bought it instead.

"What? You're smirking."

"Hee hee hee! Oh, am I...?" I said as I watched her plug my number into her freshly purchased smartphone's contact list. I hadn't meant to grin; it sort of just happened. For some reason, the thought that my number was the first one she put in there—not her mom's or dad's, and not Emma's, but *mine*—sort of just... Well, it made me feel just a little bit smug, maybe.

Sweets with Emma

"Oooh... It looks delicious, indeed," Emma muttered, her big, blue eyes sparkling with glee.

Emma had invited me out today to a store called Anmian, a prototypical Japanese-style sweets café known for serving ice cream with anmitsu—cubed agar jelly topped with all sorts of sugary treats, some traditional and others excitingly modern.

That's right! *Emma* had invited *me* out! *"I'd love indeed to go try it with you, Yotsuba!"* she'd said, just like that! I said yes faster than the speed of light, and so we ended up out in town together!

"Are you a big anmitsu fan, Emma?" I asked.

"I love it, indeed! It's so sweet and delicious!" Emma replied with a beaming smile.

"Hee hee! Yeah, I guess it is!" I said. I *almost* felt a little jealous of anmitsu as a concept, but I decided to keep that to myself. I was happy enough to know she'd gone out of her way to share something she loved that much with me.

"Do you like it as well, Yotsuba?" Emma asked.

"Yeah! I don't get that many chances to go out for it, though, so I'm really glad you invited me."

I'd ordered an ice cream anmitsu topped with shiratama dango, a chewy, traditional sort of rice-flour dumpling often found in sweets, and Emma had gotten a matcha ice cream anmitsu. According to her, she'd been here a few times with Koganezaki in the past. In other words, the store had the Emma seal of approval! I loved sweets, but anmitsu was pretty far out of my area of expertise, so it was nice to know I was in good hands in that regard.

"Well, let's give it a try," I said. My anmitsu was topped with vanilla ice cream, fruit, dango, and red-bean paste. It was so colorful and visually appealing that it almost felt like a waste to ruin the image by eating it. But just as I was about to steel myself and take a bite...

"Open wide, Yotsuba, indeed!"

"Wha— Emma?!"

...Emma scooped up a spoonful of her matcha anmitsu and held it out toward me!

"I mean, I'm curious how yours tastes, yeah...but you really don't

mind? Is it really okay for *me* to have your precious first bite...?" I asked. The first bite of a tasty treat like this was special. In fact, it was no exaggeration to say that it was unique and unparalleled!

"It's precious, indeed. And since it's precious, I want you to have it!"

"Emma...!"

How can she be this adorable? How can she be this perfectly pure? She wants to give it away because *it's the most precious bite...? Just what sort of miracles did she bring about in her last life to be reincarnated as Emma?!*

"Say 'ahh,' indeed! ♪"

"Ahh... Mmh!"

A burst of bitter-sweetness filled my mouth the instant Emma popped her spoon in. The balance between the dish's green-tea flavor and its sweetness was, in a word, perfection!

"That's *so* good!" I exclaimed.

"Indeed!" Emma chirped, smiling so happily that you'd think she was the one who'd just tried it. She couldn't have been more adorably precious if she'd tried.

"Do you like shiratama dango, Emma?" I asked.

Emma cocked her head. "Indeed, I love it!"

"Oh, good. In that case, wait just a second!" I quickly scooped up one of the dumplings, some red-bean paste, a bit of ice cream, and a few agar-jelly cubes onto my spoon. "There we go... Okay, Emma —say 'ahh'!"

Emma blinked. "Indeed? But..."

"You gave me the first bite of yours, and now I want to give you the first bite of mine too! It'll be a first-bite trade! How about it?"

"Yotsuba... Thank you! I'll have it, indeed!" Emma said with a big nod before leaning forward and taking the bite I'd offered her. "It's so deliciously sweet, indeed!" she said with her biggest smile of the day.

I get it now. That really was way better than eating the first bite myself!

"Thank you indeed, Yotsuba!"

"No, thank *you*, Emma!"

And so we had our happy little anmitsu moment, pausing after we were done to promise that we'd come again. And when I say promise, I mean pinky-promise! Emma had been her usual super-ultra-angel self from start to finish, and I was absolutely positive that getting to monopolize her time made me the luckiest person in the world that day!

A Lady and Her Maids

"Allow me to brush your hair, my lady!"

"Huh?"

"My lady! I've brought your makeup, indeed!"

"Huh? Wha?!"

Suddenly, I found myself sitting on a stool with a maid on either side of me. One of those maids was Emma, and *her* presence wasn't anything I felt the need to question. She came to my apartment from time to time, and often amused herself by wearing the maid uniform that she'd left here at some point—without asking permission, mind you. The *other* maid, however—which is to say, the girl wearing a distinctly Japanese-style maid's uniform, complete with frilly miniskirt—was another matter entirely.

"What exactly are you doing, Hazama?" I asked.

"Attending to you, of course!" Hazama proudly replied. This was exactly the sort of absurd, blockheaded attitude that I'd come to expect from her. The way she was brushing my hair, on the other hand, was almost irritatingly skillful.

"Your uniform looks lovely on you indeed, my lady!" said Emma. Somehow, while I'd been distracted, she'd put my uniform on me.

No, really—how on earth did I not notice that?! And why can't I remember what I was wearing up until a moment ago...?

"Your hair's so smooth and silky, my lady! I wish I could keep touching it forever."

"Wha...?! S-Stop that! Have you not heard of personal space?!" I yelped. Hazama had run a finger along the nape of my neck as she brushed my hair, and I couldn't for the life of me tell whether or not

it had been intentional. It was almost perfectly on the line of plausible deniability. And for some reason, despite my protests, I couldn't move an inch...?!

"What's wrong, my lady? Your ears are bright red!"

"Ah! Don't whisper like that...!"

"You're so cute when you're embarrassed, my lady. It makes me want to gobble you right up," Hazama said in a strangely coquettish tone as she laid her hands on my shoulders.

Emma just stood in front of me and smiled, making no effort to stop her at all.

"Oh, my—you're sweating, my lady. Shall I wipe you clean? Or maybe...hee hee! Would you rather I lick you clean instead?"

"Ugh...?!"

My heart had started pounding wildly. *What is this? It's horrible. A nightmare. Utter absurdity.* It was like she was making me into her plaything...but I felt like I was bound hand and foot, and I couldn't budge so much as an inch. Yes—it was like I was paralyzed!

"Don't worry, my lady...or should I call you Mai? I'm your maid, Mai, and that means it's my job to clean every inch of you, from top to bottom..."

"Whaugh?!"

I couldn't move. And that meant...that I was helpless. Much as I hated to admit it—profoundly frustrating though it was—my *only* choice was to sit there and take—

"Hee hee! I think the lady protests a little too much, doesn't she?"

"Ah?!"

The next thing I knew, I was lying on my back in my own bed.

"It was...a dream?"

I was alone. My bedroom was silent. Needless to say, I wasn't wearing my uniform. Apparently, I'd been right about the whole thing just being a nightmare after all...and although I was drenched in sweat, it was still a massive relief to realize the truth.

"I think the lady protests a little too much, doesn't she?"

"Ugh...!"

What was *that? How dare Hazama act that way? Why was she so strangely confident, and touchy...?!*

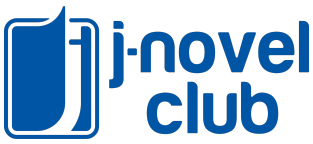
"And so *very* irritating...!" I said out loud, unintentionally, before getting out of bed. It would have been one thing if it was just Emma, but *her* turning up in my dream—especially a dream like *that* — was more irritating than I could describe! "That's it... The next time I see her at school, she's getting a smack on the head."

My own brain was fully responsible for the dream I'd had...but my vengeful spirit crumpled up that inconvenient fact, threw it in the garbage bin, and set it aflame with a raging inferno of righteous fury.

There's no doubt about it. This is that little idiot's fault. She's the one who slithers her way into people's hearts as if she belongs there, tempting you to give in and accept her presence. She's entirely *to blame.*

"Heh heh... Heh heh heh...! My—I'm almost excited now! Maybe I should lie in wait for her on her path to school, even! Just imagine her shock!"

Picturing the look of surprise on her face was all it took to bring forth a wellspring of motivation within me. *Yes, indeed. I think I will! This was the worst way I could possibly have woken up, but... Heh heh heh! I do believe that today is going to be a thoroughly wonderful day after all!*



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