

Yashiro-kun's Guide to

Yashiro-kun no
Ohitori
sama
kouza

Author: Dojyomaru

Illustrator: Kou Kusaka

Going Solo



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Prologue: Food Tastes Just as Good Solo

There are two kinds of people in this world: loners and cool kids. You can either have things your own way, or take a back seat to others. You can either do what you want regardless of what others think, or put other people's desires before yours. At the end of the day, those are really the only choices you have.

So then what's the difference between doing what you want to do when you're in a group, versus doing it by yourself? Won't the end result be the same? If both lead to the same thing, the only real difference is whether or not others are watching.

Maybe you'd feel proud of yourself if you pushed other people's opinions aside, but then they'd just get jealous or hold a grudge against you. You might not get that feeling of superiority if you're alone, but no one would be there to hold it against you either. One isn't really better than the other.

On the other hand, hiding how you really feel when you're in a group because you're worried about what others think isn't much different than doing that same thing when you're alone. People in that first category are usually called "wannabes" because even though they seem popular, they're constantly seeking approval from others and they are looked down on because of it. And if you're actually alone but can't do the things you want because you're *still* worried about what other people think, you're really not so different from them. If you're by yourself, why not do as you please as long as it's not hurting anyone?

"How would you like your ramen?"

"I'll take a little extra garlic."

"Okay. Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all."

I was pretty tired from riding my bike for about thirty kilometers, so I popped into a knockoff of the famous Ramen Jiro chain to get some lunch. I'd been

craving those noodles (so thick they could be udon) and that rich, greasy broth, but I didn't think I could handle the huge portions at the real thing today. Knockoff restaurants are pretty handy for situations like these. If you look around a little bit, you can find a place to order just the right amount of food, although sometimes I do get confused looks when I ask them to *only* add extra garlic.

Another good thing about knockoff chains is that you can customize the ingredients and add as much as you want. When the server asks, "How would you like it?" or "Would you like to add garlic?" you can rattle off a long order like, "Add garlic, extra broth, extra veggies, and extra fatty pork."

This particular restaurant is different from the other knockoffs I've been to because they don't really give you a ton of noodles to start with—just a little more than the average ramen place. So, when you really have an appetite, you need to include extra noodles in your order. Actually, most customers here do just that.

So when I, a teenage boy who should have a big appetite, only asked for a little extra garlic, both the servers and the nearby customers who overheard gave me a look that said, "Really? You came to a place like this and *that's* all you're gonna have?"

It's fine. I came here because I had a craving. I was here to enjoy a meal by myself, so I didn't have to care what anyone else thought, right? All I had to do was order what I wanted and eat however much I liked.

After I waited for a while, my ramen finally came out. The order for the customer next to me arrived at just about the same time. My bowl looked woefully plain next to their glistening and fatty fried pork, mountains of bean sprouts, and sliced roasted pork piled so high you couldn't even see the broth. Their order was probably closer to the norm around here compared to mine.

Time to eat, I said to myself as I picked up a good balance of bean sprouts and noodles, then shoved them in my mouth. It was a pretty standard way of eating at your average ramen joint, but not one you'd see much around here. In the time it takes to get a perfectly balanced bite, the noodles will soak up the broth and swell up. My neighbor was trying to prevent that by taking alternating bites

of vegetables and noodles so that they wouldn't get soggy. But I had ordered the perfect amount of food, so I didn't have to worry at all.

Yeah, that's the stuff. This is what I've been craving. The thick and chewy noodles, the greasy but addictive broth, the fatty pork slices, and a nice helping of garlic... It had a unique, strong flavor that some people might not care for, but every now and then I'd remember and get an intense craving for it. It wasn't the kind of dish you could casually invite someone out for like, "Hey, wanna go eat some greasy ramen?" It's not something you'd choose to eat with someone else, anyway. If you got too caught up in a conversation, your noodles would get soggy. Knockoff ramen was like the poster child of the best food to eat solo.

I shoved the last pork slice in my mouth and finished my water in one satisfying gulp. "Whew!" *That really hit the spot.* Being able to eat exactly how much you want, exactly how you want was so great. This was definitely something I couldn't enjoy if I'd come with someone else.

"Thanks, that was delicious!" I said.

"Thank you, come again!" I heard the employee's enthusiastic reply as I left the restaurant. I thought about that children's song—the one about making a hundred friends, climbing Mount Fuji, and eating onigiri with them. Personally though, I think food tastes just as good when you eat it solo.

Chapter One: How to Spend Time Solo (Weekday Edition)

“Characteristics of Girls with Flowery Names”

“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.”

I have no idea who said that, but I think it’s true. We were sixteen-year-old high school girls, flowers in full bloom. But time is limited, and flowers can’t stay in bloom forever. No matter how we choose to spend this time, it’ll all be over in a few years.

Like how I was sitting here now, watching a TV drama I wasn’t even interested in just so I could talk about it with my friends later. Why was I wasting such valuable time doing things I didn’t even care about? What *did* I care about? The kids who devote all their time to after-school clubs seem to have it rough, but at least it looked like their days were fulfilling. Even if they were just benchwarmers, one day they’ll look back on these days and feel nostalgic for all the setbacks and frustrations that made them into the people they had become.

That’s what I think, anyway. But how would I feel in the future, looking back on me today? Of course there were other people besides me who seemed to be wasting time, like the ones playing card games in the corner of the classroom during breaks, or getting so absorbed in reading their books they couldn’t hear anything going on around them. But they spent that time doing the things they enjoyed, unlike me.

How could I be more like them?



There are three types of people you see when you walk into the classroom first thing in the morning. First are the groups of four or more chatting loudly with each other. Next are the ones in groups of two or three talking quietly in

hushed voices. And then there are the ones who are already off in their own little world, completely oblivious to everything around them. You might feel sorry for that last group, but you shouldn't. Because that big, loud group talking over each other? They're exhausted from having tense smiles plastered to their faces the whole time.

"You're so silly, Chi-chan!♪" Even though I was on the outside looking in, I could tell that the girl who stood out most from the group, with the brightly colored hair, was frazzled. She was smiling, but it just seemed forced.

"Hey, did you guys watch that drama last night? Sho-kun is so hot, isn't he?" She kept bringing up the same old thing they talked about every day. Even though she'd dyed her hair, she still looked like an idol because of her baby face. Her style was always on point and she had a cheerful personality. On the surface it seemed like her life was perfect, so why did she look so drained? I never understood what went on in the minds of the cool kids.

Meanwhile...

I looked at the girl sitting in the last row next to the window, right behind me. Her eyes were glued to her paperback with a superdeformed tiger on the cover, and she was wearing noise-canceling earphones as if to say, "I'm not interested in you, so just leave me alone." It was obvious she was totally immersed in her own world. If I had to describe it, I'd say she had a really strong sense of self.

Well, might as well read my own book. I sat down and took out my hardcover book from my backpack. This author had written several mystery-thriller novels based on historical works of art. A few of them had even been made into movies, so they were generally regarded as being pretty good. Their latest work had just been released in a two-set hardcover version, so I'd brought it to school.

It was kind of a pain to lug the heavy books around, but they were fun to read and a great way to entertain myself during the boring breaks. And the plot was so involved, it did a better job lulling me to sleep on a peaceful day than sleeping pills.

I'm not gonna fall asleep already, though... It's only homeroom period.

"Hey." I heard a voice from in front of me. It sounded like they were trying to

get somebody's attention...

"Hey. Hey, you! I'm talking to you."

Shut up. Whoever she's calling for, just answer already.

"Hey! Stop ignoring me!"

My book was suddenly yanked out of my hands. I looked up and saw the girl with the dyed hair who had been talking at the front of the classroom. She now stood in front of me pouting, my book in her hands.

"Uh, can you give that back?"

"Ah, sorry! I mean, wait!" She slammed her hand down on the desk.



“I’ve been trying to talk to you but you keep ignoring me! Don’t you think that’s a little harsh?!”

“Oh,” I said. “I thought you were talking to someone else.”

“And you didn’t even look up to see who was talking?!”

“I might’ve noticed if you’d said my name,” I said.

“W-well...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes darted around nervously. “I couldn’t remember your name.”

Ohh, so that’s why she just said “hey” over and over.

“It’s Yashiro. And you are?”

“You’re Yashiro-kun, got it. Do you have a hard time remembering names too?”

“Yep.”

“I know I’m not one to talk, but that’s pretty bad!”

It wasn’t like I could help it. I never really paid attention to anyone else, so I was bad at matching names with faces. I could count the number of classmates whose first and last names I knew on one hand.

“I’m Kanon Hanamizawa. K-A-N-O-N!” The girl with dyed hair spelled out her name for me. *Jeez, even her name is dramatic.*

“Okay. What do you want, Hanamizawa-san?” Even though she’d emphasized her first name, I just couldn’t bring myself to call her by that.

“Oh, right. Can you give me some advice?”

“You want advice from someone whose name you couldn’t even remember?”

“I’m sorry about that already! Besides, you didn’t remember mine either!”

“Yeah, because I have absolutely no interest in you.”

“Hey, that’s not very nice! Couldn’t you say it more nicely, like you just had no reason to talk to me?! I’m gonna cry!”

“But why do you wanna ask *me* for advice?”

“Why? Because you’re always alone,” Hanamizawa-san said, fidgeting awkwardly.

“The girl behind me’s always alone too. Wouldn’t it be better to ask her, since you’re both girls?”

“I already tried that, but she completely ignored me!”

“Oh...”

Well, she was wearing noise-canceling earphones. They must have also *canceled* the *noise* that was Hanamizawa-san’s voice.

“So what’s your question? Is it something you can ask me here?” I asked.

She hesitated. “Well... I’d prefer to ask you in private. Does lunch work for you?”

“I have to work in the library.”

“Then do you have time after school?”

“I guess so...”

“Thanks! See you then.”

And with that, Hanamizawa-san went back to her own seat right as the bell rang. A few moments later, the homeroom teacher came in. I turned around and tapped my fingers on the desk behind me. I heard the girl’s book slam shut.



I watched videos on my phone while I ate lunch, and even after I was finished eating I sat there zoning out to more videos for a while. Suddenly, I felt someone stirring behind me. *Oh, it’s time.* I packed up my lunch box and headed towards the teachers’ lounge.

“Hello.” I bowed as I entered the room and grabbed the keys to the library that were hanging next to the door. “Thanks.” I left the room as quickly as I came and walked towards the library, which was on the same floor down the other hallway. I used the keys to open the door, then tossed them to the person waiting in front of the door. “Here.” Out of the corner of my eye, I watched them unlock the resource room next to the library, then headed straight to the

circulation desk. I sat down and turned on the library computer. I heard a window open, then felt the cool autumn breeze blow in. *Mm, that feels good.*

I'd bought some café au lait and unsweetened black tea from the vending machine on the way to the teachers' lounge. I set those down on the counter along with the book I was reading this morning. Just as I was about to open it up, someone set three books down in front of me. *Only three returns today. Well, not many people use the library.*

Nowadays, people could use their phones to read whatever they wanted, plus there were tons of funny videos online to watch if you needed to kill some time. *I wonder if there's even a point in having school libraries anymore,* I thought as I finished checking the books in.

I watched the books being ushered away to be reshelfed, then opened my own book. I slurped my café au lait through a straw as I flipped through the pages. I heard a chair next to me creak.

My lunch break was the same today as it was every day. And I stayed there until the bell rang again, just like I did every day.



Hanamizawa-san came straight over to my desk as soon as last period ended.

"Remember our conversation this morning?" she asked.

"About how you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yeah. Well, should we—" Suddenly she stopped short.

"Wh-What's the matter?"

"Oh! Um, nothing..."

What was her problem? Did she see something that startled her? I was about to turn around, but she suddenly slammed her hand down on my desk and leaned forward.

"Anyway! Will you come with me or not?"

"Uh, sure."

"Let's go somewhere else, then! Okay?"

“F-Fine.” I hastily nodded, intimidated by her threatening attitude. I packed up my stuff and followed her out of the classroom. We walked for a bit as she led me to a spot behind the school building. It was just the two of us there. If someone else happened to see this, they might think I lured Hanamizawa-san here for a shakedown or something.

“Now that I think about it, meeting behind the school like this makes it seem like a shakedown or something.” Apparently she was thinking the same thing. “Uh-oh. Does it look like I’m gonna bully you?” Well, I guess she wasn’t thinking the *exact* same thing.

“Huh? *I’m* the one who’s getting bullied?”

“I mean, I’m the popular girl and you’re like *the* beta male. As if you’d ever try to bully me.”

I stared at her silently. The look on her face said, “Why are you even asking me this question?” *I kinda feel like crying now...*

“So? What’d you wanna ask?”

“Why do you look like you’re gonna cry? Oh, right. The question!” She clapped her hands together and then stared at me. “You’re, like...always alone, right?”

“So now you’re just insulting me? You’re starting to annoy me.”

“Ah, sorry! No! I didn’t mean it like that!” She frantically shook her head. “That’s not it. What I meant to ask is... Can you teach me, Yashiro-kun?”

“Teach you?” I repeated.

She nodded and said with determination, “I want you to teach me how to be alone!”

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“Because, like... I have lots of friends, you know?”

“Now it just sounds like you’re bragging.” Not that I was jealous or anything. I couldn’t imagine myself smiling in a group full of extroverts.

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” she said with a self-deprecating smile. “It’s

hard to feel like you belong in a big group, you know? I have to watch stupid dramas I don't even care about just because some popular actor's in it, and I have to constantly buy new clothes to keep up with the latest trends. It's expensive!"

"Uh-huh." I would tell her to just not keep up with trends, but I guess then she wouldn't be one of the popular kids.

She let out a sigh. "Sometimes I wanna be alone too, you know? But every time I try to be alone, I just don't know what to do with myself! So I was hoping you'd teach me how to get used to being on my own, since you're so good at it."

Was she *sure* she wasn't trying to bully me?

"Just do whatever you want when you're alone. It's not like you're bothering anybody."

"I know, but what do you do when you have an hour or two to yourself?"

"Wander around the bookstore, or study at the library or a study room."

"What's fun about that, though?"

Okay, now she was just being rude. When you don't have many friends, sometimes studying's the only thing you've got.

"Sometimes I go sing karaoke by myself."

"Oooh, I wanna do that! Teach me!" She was suddenly very interested.

"What do you mean, teach you? Can't you figure that out yourself? You literally just go to a karaoke place by yourself."

"Huh? But karaoke's something you do with a group of friends." She blinked at me in confusion.

Seriously? We really lived in two different worlds. "There are lots of karaoke places that have private booths for just one person. It's totally normal. It's definitely not as tough as going to get ramen with extra garlic by yourself."

"Maybe, but going to karaoke by yourself makes it seem like you don't have any friends..."

“That’s a really outdated way of thinking.” Why were popular kids so afraid of being alone? “The people who work there will just think you really like singing, that’s all. Plus, since you don’t get a group discount, sometimes you end up paying more by yourself. They aren’t gonna complain about that.”

“I dunno...”

“It’s true. Stop overthinking it and just go.”

“W-well, will you go with me?” she suddenly asked.

What the heck was she talking about? “Then you wouldn’t be going by yourself.”

“Well, you’re really good at fading into the background, right? So it would basically be like I was alone!”

Maybe she really was trying to pick a fight, treating me like some zero-calorie food.

She pressed her hands together in front of her face. “Please! I’ll pay for you! All you have to do is just stay there, that’s it!”

Oh, she’s paying? Hmm, in that case... I’ll do it. “Just this once.”

“For real?! Thank you!” A happy grin spread across her face as she grabbed my hand and shook it.

Hey, that’s a little too close for comfort. Why did extroverts always invade people’s personal space?

“All right! Let’s go there *right now!*” She pumped her fist into the air excitedly. And that was how I got roped into going to a karaoke joint with a girl.

...I just wanna go home.



“Welcome! How many will there be today?” the karaoke employee asked with a smile.

“Two students for two hours,” Hanamizawa-san said without hesitation. She was definitely an extrovert, speaking to the employee like it was nothing. I bet she came here often with the other cool kids after parties or something, but

maybe that was just a stereotype.

“You sure you need me? You could’ve done that on your own.”

“Oh, right. If I were doing this for real, I’d have to do that by myself.”

She’s suddenly started acting weird. “Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Well... I was just wondering if I could’ve talked to her as easily if I’d come alone.”

“You did fine.”

“I know, but maybe it’s because you’re with me. And I feel more confident because I’m not alone. So...” she mumbled.

The employee handed us some menus. “A two-hour student ticket means you can order one drink.”

“Oh, right! I’ll have a ginger ale. How about you, Yashiro-kun?” she asked in a cheerful voice, regaining her composure.

“An iced coffee, please,” I answered after a pause.

“One ginger ale and one iced coffee, coming right up.”

We filled out a form and went to our karaoke room. The instant we walked inside, Hanamizawa-san grabbed the touch panel remote. “Let’s see here...”

Meanwhile, I adjusted the AC and put my textbooks, notebooks, and pencil case on the table.

“Wait, you’re gonna *study* now?!” Hanamizawa-san screamed at me through the microphone. The *skreeeeeeeeeeeech* of the feedback hurt my ears.

“I usually read or do homework when I go to karaoke places alone.”

“I’ve never heard of that before! What kind of weirdo does that?!”

“If you’re gonna make fun of me, could you at least put the mic down first?” I said, covering my ears. She put the mic down with a gasp.

“But this is a *karaoke* place! It’s literally a place for singing, and you’re not gonna sing?!”

“So by that logic, we can only study at school and nowhere else?”

“That’s totally different!”

“Just think about it.” She was about to make another retort, but I held up my hand. “Besides at home or school, where else can you read or study by yourself, or do whatever you want without being a nuisance to others?”

“Um...the library?”

That was a good choice, but...

“On weekdays, private study rooms at the library are packed with students studying for exams, and old people.”

“O-Okay, but what about a diner or a café?”

“Diners are always full of loud groups of old ladies hogging the unlimited drink bars, and the employees will give you dirty looks if you get too many drinks when you’re alone. Plus, most cafés have signs posted that say, ‘no studying’ or ‘no playing video games’ so people don’t stay there for hours without buying anything.”

“Ugh.”

“At karaoke places, you’re paying to have the room to yourself. What you do with that time is up to you. The employees don’t care.”

“I-I guess that does make it sound pretty convenient.”

“You get why they used to put up those signs at karaoke places that said ‘Karaoke boxes are for singing, not romance,’ right?”

“Because there were a lot of couples who used them to make out or something.” Like I said, you could use the room for whatever you wanted, as long as it didn’t create a nuisance for others. No matter what.

“Yeah. But studying or reading in a karaoke box is totally fine. Most times when I came with someone else, we didn’t even sing and we just studied anyway.”

“Then why did you even come here in the first place? And what do you mean by ‘most times’?”

“One time we were studying and they suddenly remembered we were at a

karaoke place, so they sang a song.”

“So they totally forgot the main purpose of this place?!” Her eyes were wide and she looked half-stunned, half-exasperated. “Now I wanna know what song your friend sang.”

“‘I’m in Love with You Again.’”

“Whoa, by Fuyumi Sakamoto?”

“Nah, the Billy BanBan version.”

“Who’s that?” she asked after a moment of confusion.

That’s rude. They were the original artists! Though I guess Fuyumi Sakamoto’s version of the song is more well-known.

“They really like Billy BanBan, I guess. They also sang ‘I’ve Always Loved You’ by them.”

“Um, choosing those songs...”

“Hm? What?”

“N-nothing,” Hanamizawa-san said, shaking her head. Weirdo.

“Anyway, since you’re paying I might as well make the most of it. That’s why I’m studying, but you can use your time however you want. Why don’t you go ahead and sing?”

“However I want? Honestly, I’m not really sure what I should sing at a time like this.”

I let out a wry chuckle. Apparently she was still feeling unsure. “Isn’t the best part of karaoke being able to sing absolutely anything you want? Just sing songs you like that you might not sing in front of your friends. I’m not gonna be paying attention anyway.”

“Hmm, songs I wouldn’t sing in front of them...” She hesitated for a while, but then suddenly started punching in something on the touch panel.

I figured she didn’t want any attention, so it would’ve been insensitive of me to keep watching. I looked back down at my textbook and was about to resume my studies, when suddenly a jarring intro caused me to jerk my head up again.

Jaan, jara jaaan! ♪

“Huh?!” I looked over at the monitor and saw the words “MaoMao☆Dancin’♥ALL NIGHT” in a big, bubbly font. A *DIVA song*?! DIVA was a virtual idol that had come about from a text-to-speech software, and Kanon had apparently chosen one of their songs to sing. The concept had become more well-known to the average person compared to when they first came out, so it wasn’t just an otaku thing anymore. But it still had that kind of underground feeling to it, at least to the point where I found it strange that Hanamizawa-san would choose that song.

Oh hey, they have footage from a DIVA concert playing in the background. Mao-chan (or whatever her name was) danced among a sea of glowsticks on the monitor.

All of a sudden Hanamizawa-san stood up and started singing, perfectly mimicking the character’s movements. “Maomao, we’ll be dancin’ all night! ♪”

Whoa, she’s in perfect sync. Apparently Hanamizawa-san had completely memorized DIVA’s choreo too. Singing and dancing like that seemed like a bit much, even for solo karaoke. But if she was having fun, so what? After all, I did tell her to do whatever she wanted. I decided to leave her alone and looked back down at my textbook.

After a while, Hanamizawa-san finished singing and plopped back down on the couch, wiping sweat from her brow as she slurped her ginger ale through the straw. “Phew! It’s pretty fun to dance like crazy without worrying about anyone watching you.”

“I bet. I’m surprised you like DIVA songs, though.”

“Yeah, well...” she said with a shy smile. “I used to watch videos of their live performances every now and then. Even though she’s an anime character, she just looks so surprisingly *real*, you know? It’s like she actually exists or something. I got totally obsessed! Plus, her dancing is cute.”

“Yeah.”

“I’d never tell my friends I like her, though.” She let out a little sigh. “Sometimes I wonder if it’s wrong of me to hide hobbies like this from my

friends. Like, do I feel the need to hide things I'm interested in from them?"

I wasn't sure what to say.

"Is it wrong to hide things from your friends? I mean, do they even really think of me as a friend? And do I really think of *them* as friends? Honestly, I ask myself that a lot. Ah ha ha... It's not even funny though, is it..." She gave a self-deprecating chuckle as she propped her cheek on her hand. "Maybe if I made some otaku friends, I wouldn't have to hide hobbies like these. We could share all the things we like and really understand each other. Maybe then I could make *real* friendships," she said.

"That's stupid," I replied bluntly.

"Huh?"

"Just because you're both otaku doesn't mean you'd magically understand each other. Plus, otaku are people who have a really solid sense of self." I set down my pen and looked right at her while I spoke. "Let's say you love collecting plastic models, so you only make friends with people who also love that. Some people only collect Bandai models, and some only collect Tamiya models. And in the Bandai group, some will only collect model cars, or radio controlled cars, or mini four-wheel drives. See how many categories there are just with plastic models? There are countless more when it comes to anime and manga. It's not as simple as just 'sharing things you love' with each other."

"B-But kids at school always look like they're having so much fun talking about that stuff," she said, but I had no idea what she was talking about.

"They're probably having fun just talking about it since they know they're not gonna find anyone who shares their exact interests. They like to listen to others talking about their interests, and they try to get them to understand their own. Sometimes it just turns into bragging about who knows the most, though."

"Seriously? That doesn't sound much different from what goes on in *my* group!" Hanamizawa-san murmured, looking astonished.

I nodded. "Yep. Friend groups are all like that, whether you're popular or not. No one's ever gonna completely understand you. So sometimes you just gotta go along with what someone says, or have them go along with you, and build

up a friendship that way. You'll have to decide whether or not you're satisfied with that relationship."

"Satisfied? How can you be satisfied if they don't even understand you?" She stared at her lap with downcast eyes. It sounded like she was forcing her words out.

"It's impossible for anyone to ever understand *everything* about you. But sometimes you can find that one thing that both of you understand," I said. She looked up with a gasp. "For example, I once recommended this manga to a friend of mine. The main character is an unpopular girl and the story takes a while to get going at first. It's also a long story, so my friend got frustrated with it really quickly."

Hanamizawa-san didn't say anything.

"So I gave my friend the volume where things start to get really interesting, and the volume where it gets resolved. It was like five volumes ahead of where she stopped, but I said, 'Just read these two volumes!'"

"So what happened?"

"After my friend read them she asked, 'How did things end up like this?' She was so curious about the story, she went and bought the other volumes from where she left off. She wanted to see what happened so badly, she even bought the next few volumes. Now we're following the series together, even though at first she said it was boring." I felt myself smiling as I remembered the look on her face when that happened. "It made me really happy that she finally understood why I like that manga so much."

"Oh..."

"Obviously that didn't always happen with every manga I've recommended to someone. But at the very least, someone started liking something I liked too. That's good enough, right?"

"And that's why the otaku look like they're having so much fun?" she asked, and I nodded.

"I think so."

“Oh, I get it now.” She stared at me for a few moments. “Do you like DIVA songs, Yashiro-kun?”

“Hm? Maybe not enough to get up and dance, but I think they’re fun to watch.”

“Oh, okay.” She said with a smile. “That’s good enough for me.”

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“I had a lot of fun today, Yashiro-kun,” Hanamizawa-san said with a cheerful look on her face. Our time at karaoke had come to an end. “It’s really fun to just go all out and do whatever you want. I feel like I could get addicted to this.”

“That’s good.”

She clasped her hands behind her back and started fidgeting. “H-Hey, Yashiro-kun?”

“What?”

“Um... Would you do this again? You know, come with me while I do karaoke alone?”

I flashed her a grin. “Go by yourself next time.”

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A while later...

“Hey, Chi-chan! Look at this video!”

“What? *Another* DIVA concert, Kanon? I mean, she’s cute and all, but you don’t have to show me those videos every single day...”

I saw Hanamizawa-san trying to show DIVA videos to her friend in the front of the classroom. Her friend had a reluctant look on her face like she couldn’t care less as Kanon kept pushing her phone towards her.

“Let’s go to her concert sometime! I’m dying to see her perform live.”

“Huh? But I don’t care about DIVA.”

“I went with you to see the movie adaptation of that shojo manga I didn’t care about, remember?”

“Ugh... Fine. Just this once though, okay?”

Looks like things are going smoothly, I thought. Just then, Kanon noticed I was watching her and waved at me. “Ah ha ha... Whoa!” I waved back out of formality, but suddenly I felt this strange, ticklish pressure on my back like I was being poked in my funny bone or something.

◇◇◇

KANON HANAMIZAWA



btw, should you order food when you go to karaoke by yourself?

I dunno, depends on the person I guess. I don't, though.



yeah i guess singing's the main event. and if you're alone you don't wanna waste time

Do you order food when you go as a group?



well... it depends on when we go and the situation i guess. if i go with close friends, just drinks are enough but if there are other people in the mix i might wanna order food

? I guess I don't understand the difference?



bc it gives you something to do when someone else is singing. it's rude if you're just clearly bored and on your phone. but if there's food there then you can eat while you listen

Oh, I get it...



so basically whether or not you order food is like a measure of your friendship (imo)



Well that sounds like a terrible measure... You really need to go to all that trouble just to not look bored?



yeah bc to us "speech is silver, silence is deadly"

Isn't that the wrong saying?



"tight lips sink ships"

That's also the wrong saying.



"too much silence spoils the broth"

Mm, broth. Now I just wanna eat udon... But that's totally off-topic.



lol! see, if i could talk to someone like this during karaoke i wouldn't need food

Chapter Two: How to Spend Time Solo (Weekend Edition)

“Hey, Yashiro-kun! I need advice!”

“Again?”

I was reading just like I always did during our breaks, when Hanamizawa-san came up to me. She’d been doing that every once in a while ever since we went to karaoke, but we’d only exchange a few words. She hadn’t asked me for advice in a while.

Ever since I taught her how to spend time alone, she seemed a lot more relaxed than usual, and it looked like she was having fun. Anyway, now she was asking for advice and I nodded to give her the go ahead.

“It’s gotten a lot easier for me to do things by myself now, like karaoke and stuff. And when I’m talking to my friends, sometimes I can say how I’m really feeling now.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“Yeah, I guess. But!” She slammed her hand down on the desk and leaned forward.

You’re a little too close for comfort again.

“You know that karaoke place we went to? Well, they’re really rude to solo customers on Saturdays and holidays!”

“Oh, right...”

Karaoke places charged more for solo customers on weekends, and you couldn’t get a refund if you paid for two hours but only ended up using one. They wanted to pack their rooms full of groups on the weekends because it made way more money. I couldn’t blame them for that. Besides, the place we went to treated customers pretty well during the week, so I couldn’t complain.

Hanamizawa-san pressed her hands together and pleaded, “Please teach me how to have fun alone on weekends!”

“Why are you asking *me*, though?”

“Because you’re, like, the master of being alone.”

“I don’t remember ever having that title!”

“Master! Please have mercy on your unworthy apprentice and teach me!”

“I don’t remember making you my apprentice!” I sighed when she pressed her hands together again, begging me. “Plus, if you wanna talk about the *real* master of being alone—” I was about to turn around, but I felt the girl behind me press a hand against my back. It was *absolutely frigid*. Was she always this cold? That icy touch must have been her way of saying, “*Don’t you dare talk about me.*”

“Hm? What’s wrong?” Hanamizawa-san gave me a puzzled look.

“It’s nothing. Anyway, you wanna know how to spend weekends alone?”

“Yep!”

Weekends, huh... The easiest suggestion would be studying at the library. It’s pretty empty if you go in the morning, so we’d probably be able to get two seats. But I wasn’t sure if that was what Hanamizawa-san was looking for. “And studying’s out, right?”

“I think it’s weird that you’re so insistent about pushing studying on me.”

Figures. Hm, where else do I go on weekends... “Oh!”

“What, what? Did you think of something?”

“Is your house nearby?”

“Huh? Um... Maybe, like, twenty minutes by foot.”

“Can you get to the Kawaguchi Kori Station?”

“The station on the other side of the river, right? It’s a little far, but I could ride my bike.”

All right, perfect. “Okay, I’ll give you the address so you can use the navigation

on your phone to get there.”

“You’re coming with me though, right?!”

I looked at her with surprise. She beat me to the punch, realizing that I was gonna tell her to just go alone. I guess her ability to read the room was another reason she was so popular.

She put her hands on her hips and pouted. “This is my first time, so I’m nervous! You gotta come with me and show me exactly how to do it, just like last time.”

“Can you stop phrasing things in a way that’ll make people get the wrong idea? And do I *have* to go?”

“Please! Just think of it as doing me a favor!” she pleaded with puppy-dog eyes. It was really hard to say no to, but...

“It’s the weekend, though. If people see us out together they’ll think we’re on a date.”

“Pfft, ah ha ha ha!” She burst out laughing. Dabbing at the corners of her eyes she said, “We’re just going to hang out! No one’s gonna think it’s a date. You’re *way* too self-conscious.”

Hmm, am I?

“Or is the place you have in mind somewhere weird that would *make* people think we’re on a date?” She said it in a teasing voice, but her cheeks were slightly flushed.

Maybe she was feeling a little self-conscious too. “It’s not, but whatever.” I had a feeling this back-and-forth was going to go on for a while. I scratched my head. “There’s just something I gotta tell you first.”

“Hm? What?”

“You have to bring a change of underwear.”

“Huh?” She froze. Then once she comprehended what I’d just said, she exclaimed, “What?!” and turned as red as a lobster. “U-Underwear?! You said you weren’t taking me anywhere suspicious!”

“Yeah. But you’re definitely gonna need it. Some people take off their socks as well.”

“You have to take off your socks?!”

“Not everyone does. I leave mine on.”

“Ohhh, I see. So you’ve got some kind of fetish!”

Huh? Fetish? Oh... I finally realized that she’d gotten entirely the wrong idea. Her face was bright red and she was fidgeting around all suspiciously.

“Oh, uh... I didn’t mean it like that.” I considered clearing it up, but decided I’d just let her have the wrong idea. Maybe she’d change her mind and say she didn’t want me to come along after all. Besides, it was way more amusing this way. She was being a pain forcing me to come along with her, so this was some sort of payback.

With both hands pressed against her burning face, she hesitantly asked, “Um... Should the extra underwear I bring with me be, like...pretty?”

“Hm? Well, I guess so, since people will be looking at them.”

“They will?!” She wrapped her arms around her body. Yeah, she *totally* had the wrong idea.

“So what do you think? Wanna back out?” I asked, hoping she would say yes. She thought about it for a while and then looked down at the ground, cheeks flushed.

“I-I’ll go.”



The following Sunday, we were supposed to meet up at 11 a.m. at the bus terminal at the Kawaguchi Kori Station. I’d taken my bike, and by the time I arrived, Hanamizawa-san was already waiting on a white Citi bike with a brown basket attached to it. Apparently that’s how she’d gotten here. She looked nice in her dress and white sun hat. I slowed down as I approached her, but she didn’t recognize me at first. But once I stopped in front of her and took off my helmet, her eyes grew wide.

“Huh? Yashiro-kun?!”

“Yeah, it’s me. You been waiting long?”

“No, I mean I did get here early but I haven’t been waiting very long. But...”
She pointed at me. “What are you wearing?!”

“What do you mean? These are cycling clothes.” I was wearing a cycling jersey, bike shorts, a helmet, and UV rash guards on my arms. Basically, I was dressed like a cyclist. It wasn’t all that unusual, since I was riding a flat top road bike today.

Hanamizawa-san pressed a hand against her temple. “It’s weird that you don’t find anything strange about it in the first place! Why in the world would you go meet a girl dressed in full cyclist gear from head to toe?!”

“Because *someone* told me if I was meeting a girl to hang out on the weekend, thinking of it as a date would be too self-conscious. So who cares what I wear?”

“Okay, maybe I *did* say that! But would any normal person really wear something that stands out so much? I mean, I went out of my way to do what you said! You know, about the underwear...”

“Huh?”

“Nothing! What? Are we going cycling or something?”

“Nah, I already did that. About eighteen miles along the river.”

“Why in the world would you do that before coming to meet me?!”

“Well, I wanted to work up a good sweat first.”

“You wanted to work up a sweat before you went to meet a girl?! Listen, I don’t have some kind of body odor fetish!”

“What the hell are you going on about?”

“You’re looking at me like I’m crazy, but that’s *my* line!” She let out a deep sigh, tired of bantering back and forth.

“C’mon, let’s just go. It’s pretty close by.”

“Fine. Seriously though, what’s *with* you?” she grumbled as she followed after me. It took about three minutes to get there by bike from the Kawaguchi Kori

Station. “Th-This is it?” Her mouth hung open as she looked up at the building.

I gestured like a tour guide, revealing my secret. “Yes, right in front of us is our destination: Royal Spa Kori.” In other words, a huge bathhouse. It was about the same size as a gym if it had a swimming pool inside, decorated in a southeast Asian theme with palm trees and flags advertising their natural hot springs. This place boasted about its proximity to the center of Kawaguchi City, but if you dug around a little bit, you could find about four bathhouses that featured natural hot springs in a thirty minute radius by bike. Some were even smack dab in the middle of a residential area, and Royal Spa Kori happened to be one of them.

“Huh? A spa? You mean like hot springs?” She finally snapped back to reality. “B-But what about the change of underwear thing?”

“Well, you don’t want to change back into the same underwear after you get out of the bath, right?”

“What was with the part about leaving your socks on?”

“Any socks you put on are just gonna get dirty again anyways. So I just put the same ones back on. But I guess if you’re a clean freak, you’d probably wanna change into clean socks.”

“You said people were gonna see my underwear!”

“Well, yeah. You’re gonna change in the locker room, right? I’m a guy though, so I don’t really know if girls care what kind of underwear other girls wear.”

“You were confusing me on purpose!” She puffed out her cheeks indignantly. I couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

“Pfft! Everything I said was still true!”

“Well, yeah, but you led me on like that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Heh heh... I mean, you had the—*ha ha*—totally wrong idea!” I couldn’t stop laughing. At first she looked mad, but eventually she gave in and started giggling too.

“Honestly, it’s all your fault that I got so nervous!”

“It’s *your* fault for misunderstanding.”

“But still, what was the deal with cycling before you got here?”

“It feels really nice to take a bath after you’ve worked up a good sweat, right?”

“Jeez...” She finally relented and shrugged. “Anyway, you agreed to teach me how to spend the weekend alone, remember? Won’t they upcharge us since it’s the weekend, like the karaoke place did?”

She was right—a sign nearby said “Entry Fee: 850 yen (Weekends and Holidays: 950 yen),” so it was a bit more expensive on the weekend. That wasn’t a big deal, though.

“That’s why we’re gonna use this.” I took a booklet out of my wallet.

She gave me a puzzled look. “What’s that?”

“A discount book for this place. Buy ten tickets at once for 7,500 yen. You can use them even on weekends.” With one of these babies, you could enter for just 750 yen every day.

However, Hamamizawa-san didn’t seem very impressed. “Huh? So it’s not a spa at all, it’s just like an ordinary bathhouse. Why would a high school student buy a discount book for a public bathhouse anyway? Do you really come here often enough to need a discount on ten tickets?”

“Oh, actually I went in with N— Uh, with my friend for half of the discount book.” So actually I paid 3,750 yen for five tickets. “Anyways, don’t be all uppity about public bathhouses. These places are actually really amazing.”

“H-How?”

“You’ll see when we get inside. C’mon.” I handed her a ticket. To be honest, I didn’t wanna use one of my tickets on her because then I’d be short one later, so I asked my friend to use one of hers. I paid her, of course.

“Thanks. I’ll pay you back the 750 yen later.”

“Gotcha. Let’s go.”

And so Hanamizawa-san and I went inside the Royal Spa Kori.

“Yaaaaw-aaaawn♪...” I couldn’t help but make that noise. I was bathing outside in one of the several open-air baths to choose from. There were two large ones, one made from rock and another from cypress, but I was in one of three smaller round baths, made for just one person to use. You couldn’t stretch your legs out, just like in a regular Japanese-style bathtub, but it was twice as deep so it didn’t seem cramped at all—it kind of reminded me of a rice cooker.

“Mmm.” I stretched out, pushing my breasts out (which were on the fairly large size, if I do say so myself). *I hate to admit it, but this feels amazing.*

Before we split up between the women’s and men’s bathing sections, Yashiro-kun had said, “Obviously I’ve never been inside the women’s baths before, but going by what my friend said, it sounds like it’s not much different from the men’s. So in that case, I’d recommend the round baths in the outdoor area. The water’s from a natural hot spring just like the larger ones, so it’s a good choice when those are too crowded.”

“Really? Don’t the individual baths get taken first, though?”

“Not really,” he’d said with a smile. “They’re surprisingly open a lot. I think the main reason is because you can’t stretch out your legs, like the baths at home. That’s probably why most people like going in the bigger ones instead.”

“That makes sense.”

“They’re a little deep, so it’s hard for the elderly to use. And one of them is an electric bath, so the controls are a bit confusing. Basically, there are a lot of reasons.”

“O-Oh...” I was a little freaked out about how much he knew. He really was a regular here, wasn’t he?

I giggled to myself as I thought about our conversation. *The way he always wants to explain everything in detail makes him seem like such an otaku*, I thought as I moved my right hand from my chest and rubbed my left arm. The orange bathwater felt so nice and made my skin feel so smooth. *Ahh, I’m just melting... It feels so good, I’m just spacing out here... I wonder if Yashiro-kun’s enjoying his bath too?*

I leaned against the edge of the tub and splashed my feet in the water. He said the men's baths are pretty much the same as the ones here, so I bet he was also in one of the individual baths...

"Huh?" Wait a second. How did Yashiro-kun know what the women's baths were like again? I vaguely remember him saying that someone told him. *Wait, was the friend he came here with before...*

That's as far as I let my thoughts go before they melted into the warm bathwater.



It had been about an hour since we got here when I got a message from Hanamizawa-san that said, "*Where are you right now?*" She'd basically forced me to give her my contact info before we split up to go our separate ways into the baths.

"The lounge," I texted back.

"Hey, hey! Guys really do take short baths, huh?" Hanamizawa-san suddenly appeared, looking kinda sexy with her wet hair and flushed skin. Seeing my classmate fresh out of the bath like this made me feel a little naughty. It was a nice change to see her in the subdued colors of the bathhouse's yukata and jinbei. I felt like I was on vacation at a hot springs resort or something.

"You borrowed clothes from the bathhouse? Wasn't that expensive?" I was sure they charged a rental fee here. Normally people only rented them when they were going to get a body scrub or do hot yoga or aromatherapy—basically, if you were going to be here for a long time. Most people who came here just for the baths didn't bother.

She stretched out her arms to show off the yukata and giggled. "There was a sign that said since today is their Ladies' Day special, there's no rental fee! So I couldn't resist! Hee hee hee! Well, what do you think? Does it look good on me?"

"Uhh, yeah. Sure." She did look pretty cute, but I figured she'd get even cockier if I complimented her, so I gave a half-hearted answer instead. She just looked around, not seeming to care either way.

“I didn’t know they had a lounge. Hm? What’s that? It looks really nice!” She pointed to what I was lying on.

“Huh? It’s an afternoon nap mat.” Though I didn’t know what they were actually called, there were several of them folded up around the lounge. I decided to lie down on one while I waited for Hanamizawa-san to finish her bath. I had chosen a manga from the nearly sixty volumes on the shelf in the lounge—this one was about a high school student who was dedicating his youth to bicycle races.

“Wow! I was just thinking about how I’d love to lie down!” Hanamizawa-san grabbed the mat that was next to me and plopped down on it. “Ooh, yeah. This is the stuff. Lazing around right after you get out of the bath is the *best*.”

“You sound like an old lady.”

“So? It’s the best, and that’s why *you’re* doing it too, right?”

“Yeah. You can take a nap, or watch that TV up there, or choose whatever manga you want from that shelf.”

“It’s so perfect I feel like I could waste all my time doing this.” She giggled as she rolled over to look at me. “Oh, you took off that cycling jersey and changed into a t-shirt.”

“I’m just gonna go home after this. Plus, I got all sweaty in that thing.”

“Oh, right. And you just got out of the bath.” She smiled, truly looking happy. “It says there’s a restaurant in here, and a sauna, and you can even get a massage!”

“That all costs extra, though.”

“They really thought of everything. It’s like an amusement park or something! But at an actual amusement park there are a lot of things you can’t do by yourself. Here you can enjoy everything by yourself! It’s so great.”



“Thinkin’ about getting a discount book for yourself now?”

“I’m seriously considering it!” She propped her cheek on her hand and looked at me. “You really know how to enjoy time by yourself, Yashiro-kun.”

“That doesn’t really feel like a compliment.”

“What? It’s totally a compliment! I think it’s great! I...” Her eyes looked drowsy all of a sudden. She was totally half-asleep. “...want you to...show me even more...fun things...”

“You need to start figuring things out for yourself.”

“Whaaat? C’mon, Master...teach me...”

“Students with no ambition should be expelled.”

“Zzz...”

Ah, she fell asleep. She’s so careless. If you come here alone, you gotta hold your belongings close when you take a nap. But I guess I’d have to tell her that after she wakes up. I’d just chill and read my manga until then.

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Monday morning, Hanamizawa-san ran over to me the moment I sat down at my desk. “Morning, Yashiro-kun!”

“Morning,” I answered.

She laced her fingers together and started fidgeting. “H-Hey. Um... You know how I, like, fell asleep yesterday?”

“Yeah?”

“You didn’t take pics of my face or anything while I slept, did you?”

“I wouldn’t do something that weird.”

“R-Right! Good!” She sighed with relief. “I thought I was gonna have to destroy both your phone and your memory.”

“I get how you’d destroy my phone, but how would you destroy my memory?!”

“A baseball bat?”

“If you whacked me with a bat hard enough to erase my memories, I’m pretty sure you’d kill me!” I quipped.

She giggled. Apparently it was just a joke. “Let’s have another ‘how to spend time solo’ class together again soon.”

“That’s a contradiction, you know. Go by yourself.”

“Aww, don’t be like that! We’ve already taken a bath together *and* slept together!”

“Phrasing! Besides, you’re the only one who fell asleep, Hanamizawa-san!”

“You know, you can just call me Kanon, Master.”

“No!” As I tried to hold back Hanamizawa-san, who was suddenly acting strangely attached to me, I thought, “*Ugh, how did this even happen?*” with a sigh.



Huh? Taking baths together? Sleeping together? A girl suddenly perked up when she heard those words from across the room. Those words she had heard her friend say kept echoing over and over again in her mind. Now that she thought about it, Kanon *had* been acting a little weird lately. *Kanon... Did that guy do something to you? Because in that case...* She glared at the sullen boy her friend was talking to.



KANON HANAMIZAWA



i looked it up and there are a ton of hot springs in the area

Well, Japan is the land of earthquakes and volcanoes.
If you dig down deep enough



yeah but if someone said "hey let's go to a hot spring!"
i'd think of like kusatsu or hakone or something

If someone said "Let's go to a hot springs
resort, yeah. That's different.



oh i guess you're right

Wouldn't party people like you prefer a
place like that?



no one says "party people" anyway, why
do you say that?

Your group would skip the hot springs and party in the dining room.



that's a bold assumption. it's more like, if we go to the
beach or the mountains, it's just a bonus if they have hot
springs. that's about it



Spoken like a true outdoors person.



and you're definitely an indoor person. ...wait a sec. actually now that i think about it, you have that sports bike. maybe you actually are an outdoors person?



I like riding bikes, yeah. I just don't like being in a group. I feel more comfortable just wandering around by myself.



Isn't that a little lonely?



I like that, though. I like traveling by myself, too. I don't have to worry about anyone, and they don't have to worry about me. I can just go wherever I want, whenever I want.



you're really mentally tough, huh? i could never



Oh, actually there was this one time when this stranger started talking to me.



Why?



I was resting on this mountain trail by myself and they thought I was gonna kill myself. Apparently it was a popular spot for that.



what a terrible reason to be popular...



Chapter Three: A Loner's Friend

“Characteristics of Girls with Majestic Names”

My friend Kanon has been acting totally weird lately. She's been talking to that boy who sits in the back by the window a *lot*. His name is... Wait, what was it again? Eh, I've never talked to him before so I forget. Maybe I'll remember it if I look in the attendance book on the podium. There should be a seating chart right when you open it up. Let's see here... Ah, here it is! Yashiro. Shigeaki Yashiro.

Anyway, I feel like Kanon's changed ever since she started talking to that Yashiro guy. And I don't mean she's changed in a *bad* way. I've always felt like her smile was a bit tense, but lately it's been a lot more natural.

But I just happened to overhear a snippet of their conversation. And I heard her say something about taking a bath together and sleeping with each other. I wondered if maybe they had started dating, so I asked her about it. But she said, “Huh? Is that what it looks like? No, it's not like that at all,” and she laughed it off. So I guess they're not actually dating. But if that's the case, what the heck did she mean when she said they'd bathed and slept together?

I was starting to get worried she'd gotten caught up in something weird. I silently glared at Yashiro. He was always by himself—a total loner. I *really* hated the trend in recent years that glorified loners. Everyone thought people who always spent their time alone like that guy were strong, and that people like us, who enjoyed being in groups, were weak people who couldn't survive by themselves. That we were powerless against the hell that is peer pressure.

Honestly, sometimes it was tough to always go along with the crowd. But loners had actual communication problems, so why were *we* the ones who were getting attacked? I was beside myself thinking that a guy like *that* could've done something to Kanon.

It was a clear, autumn Sunday. I headed towards Shinjuku Station, then hopped on the Toei-Shinjuku line, and got off at the Jimbocho Station. I left through exit A-6 next to the Iwanami Jimbocho Building and stood next to the information directory. I checked the time; it was 10:45 a.m. and Jimbocho was already bustling with activity.

Streams of people were coming and going in front of me. I glanced up and saw a huge, eye-catching sign that said “Kanda Used Book Festival” in bold print. The event was going on today in Jimbocho. Although the sign said “used book,” they were mainly selling antique books that you wouldn’t see in your average used bookstore chain or secondhand store. Carts were lined up along the side of Yasukuni-dori, Sakura-dori, and Suzuran-dori, all filled with old books. It was the perfect event for a book lover, because it was fun to just walk around and look at all the books.

I heard footsteps in the crowd. I felt my face soften into a grin. “All right, let’s get started,” I said, taking a step forward. But then I paused. *Yeah, I made the right decision in getting here early.*

Seeing all those carts lined up as far as the eye could see was like finding a mountain of hidden treasure. I’d never have enough time to go through all of them, but I did bring a tote bag so I could buy a bunch.

“All right, where to start?” I looked at the map of the event in a pamphlet, marked with a route. *Let’s see here...* First off were the carts in front of the used bookstores on Yasukuni-dori, then the carts next to Jimbocho Book Center on the way to Sakura-dori. Finally, crossing Hakusan-dori to check out the special sales on Suzuran-dori. It was like trying to find the most efficient route to see everything at a comic convention.

“Suzuran-dori’s the last stop? It might be the most crowded there...” I’d started speaking my thoughts out loud. Oh, well. “All right. Let’s get started for real this time,” I said, and took a step towards the book festival.



The following day, during break after first period homeroom.

I was reading a book I’d bought on impulse the day before in Jimbocho about the *Hotsuma Tsutae*, when I heard a haughty voice say, “Hey, you. You’re

Yashiro, right?”

I glanced up and saw a girl glaring down at me. She had a short, boyish haircut and had her hands shoved into the pockets of her sweatshirt. I’d seen her talking to Hanamizawa-san at the front of the classroom a lot. What was her name...

“Who are you, again?” I asked.

“Chikaze Ido. Kanon’s friend.”

Yeah, I knew that. “And what do you want from me, Ido-san?”

“You’ve been talking to Kanon a lot lately.”

“She’s the one who keeps talking to me.”

She slammed her hand down on my desk. Hanamizawa-san did that a lot too. At this rate I wouldn’t be surprised if it got dented. “I heard, you know. That you’ve been doing some pretty sketchy things to Kanon,” she said in a harsh voice.

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘sketchy things’?”

“L-Like you took a bath together and slept together!”

“Ah...!” I knew exactly what was going on here. She’d jumped to conclusions after just hearing part of what actually happened. But what was with the way she phrased it? *I was doing sketchy things to Hanamizawa-san?! “No, you’ve got it wrong. Ask Hanamizawa-san about it and she’ll clear it up.”*

“I *did* ask her, and she won’t tell me! She said, ‘Whaaat? That’s a secret between me and Yashiro-kun!’”

“That little...” Not only had Hanamizawa-san run off at her, but she was also teasing Ido-san, who seemed to have her mind made up about it. And now she had dragged me into it, which was a total pain.

All of a sudden, Ido-san hopped up on my desk. Under normal circumstances, I might be distracted by the fact that her small ass was resting on top of my desk (through her skirt, but still), but I didn’t have time for that. She grabbed me by the collar and yanked me towards her. She brought her face right up to mine and started glaring at me. *Too close for comfort...* Hanamizawa-san also

did that. Apparently popular kids have absolutely no sense of personal space.

“Um... Ido-san?”

“What?” She looked down at me coldly. She’d already decided I was an enemy.



“What do you want me to do about it? If you don’t want me to talk to Hanamizawa-san anymore, then you’re gonna have to go to her and convince her to stay away from me.” *Then maybe I could finally get some peace and quiet again...*

“Huh? I’m not gonna do that.”

“What? Why not?!”

“Cuz even if we’re friends, that doesn’t mean I can just go around telling her who not to hang out with. Kanon can be friends with whoever she wants. Even better if it’s someone I don’t know.”

Huh. So she’s actually got standards? I thought as I straightened my collar. Apparently she had a lot of integrity and was pretty tough, or else she wouldn’t be doing this. And yet she wouldn’t force her ideals on someone else. *Ha ha ha... She’s a good kid at heart.*

“Wh-why are you smiling?”

“No reason.”

“Anyway, I’m worried about Kanon! If you’re not doing something shady, then tell me what it is!”

“I dunno about that...” *Now, what should I do?* If I was honest and told her we just went to a spa and took a nap together, would she believe me? I glanced up at Ido-san. *Ahh, she’s still glaring at me.* In that case, I doubt she’d believe me.

And if I wanted to show her, it’d be hard on my wallet to keep spending an extra 750 yen every time she wanted to do it. It wasn’t fair to the one whose tickets I was borrowing for Hanamizawa-san either. I guess I’d just have to give her a lesson on how to spend time alone.

“Um... How about I show you what Hanamizawa-san and I do together?”

“As long as it’s nothing shady.”

“It’s definitely not.” *Not one bit shady at all.*

Ido-san nodded. “Fine, then.”

“So you’re okay doing the same thing we did?”

She gave me a suspicious look. “Are you *sure* it’s nothing shady?”

How rude. “I promise it’s utterly wholesome. Today after school, okay?”

“Fine.” She nodded without hesitation. I couldn’t say I agreed with her methods, but I couldn’t help but think this might be easier with her than Hanamizawa-san.



I lingered around in the classroom after school and sent off a text message, feeling guilty. The message was quickly marked as read but I got no response. I was just beginning to wonder if they were angry with me when my phone suddenly buzzed.

“Got it.”

Just those two words. I couldn’t read the feelings behind that sentence, and it scared me. *Sorry. I promise I’ll make it up to you.* I heard the chair behind me clatter.

Everyone either went home or left for after school activities. Before long, it was just me and Ido-san left in the classroom. She must’ve said something to Hanamizawa-san today, because Hanamizawa-san had only glanced over at me before she left, not saying anything.

“So will you tell me now?” Ido-san walked over, hands shoved in her sweatshirt.

“I guess so,” I answered after a pause.

“Huh? Why do you sound so bummed about it?”

“Actually, I’d promised someone to go shopping with them for library equipment after school today.”

“Oh, sorry about that.”

Hm, that was quick. She was the kind of person who could give a genuine apology. “Eh, it wasn’t anything heavy, so I’m sure they’ll be fine without me...”

“Really? If you say so. So? What are we going to do?” she asked, and I took my textbook and a notebook out of my desk.

“Sit down in the seat next to me.”

“Okay.”

“Now take out whatever textbook you want, and a notebook.”

“Okay.”

Ido-san was more cooperative than I thought she’d be. I guess she was actually a fairly serious person. She spread out her school supplies on the desk.

“Okay. We’re both going to study for thirty minutes.”

“Huh? What do you mean stu—”

“Aaaand, start.”

“Huh? Ahh!” She seemed momentarily confused, but then started studying.

Once I was satisfied that she was following directions, I looked down at my own notebook. Midterms were coming up soon, so I decided to focus on my worst subject—Japanese history. Since world history was so broad, it was easy to remember important events, but it was tough for me to remember stuff that happened in the Heian, Muromachi, and Edo periods of Japanese history. Plus, it seemed like everyone was named Fujiwara, Ashikaga, Tokugawa, or Matsudaira, and I kept mixing them all up.

I focused and studied for thirty minutes until the alarm I’d set went off. I set down my pen. Ido-san did the same and said, “Phew!” while she let out a sigh. Then she said, “Hey, why’d you make me study in the first place?!” as if the question had only just now come to her.

“Took ya long enough.” She must have impressive concentration and stamina to wait thirty minutes to ask that.

She sandwiched my face between her hands and jiggled it. “I thought you were gonna show me what you did with Kanon!”

“I d-d-did!” I grabbed her wrists and pried her hands off of my face. Then I told her I was teaching Hanamizawa-san how to spend time alone—and made sure to mention that it was at *her* request, of course.

“Kanon asked you to do that...?” Ido-san looked completely astonished, as if

she'd just been slapped in the face. I didn't understand why. "She doesn't like being with us?"

"Oh, I don't think that's it." It sounded like she was taking this in the wrong direction, so I decided to speak up. "Wanting to spend time alone is different from wishing you could just be alone. It doesn't necessarily mean she doesn't want to spend time with you guys in a group."

"Are you sure...?" Her eyes wavered. I felt a vulnerability from her that was a far cry from that strength she showed me earlier. I wondered if the whole tough girl thing was just an act and deep down she was actually really sensitive.

I sighed and looked towards the front of the classroom. "I don't know what you two usually talk about. Whatever happens over there in the extrovert group is like a whole different universe to me."

She stared at me silently.

"And honestly, I don't really care."

"That's being a little too honest, don't you think?"

"Anyway, whenever I glance over at Hanamizawa-san, she always has a smile on her face. But I don't know her super well or anything, so I can't say that I really understand her. What about you, though? Do you think she's smiling to cover up her true feelings lately? Or that she's forcing a smile?"

"No, I don't, but..." It seemed like she wanted to believe that was true, but wasn't entirely sure. That made sense; even if they were friends, you could never be sure how someone else felt.

"You should just ask her, then. I think she'd tell you the truth."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll do that." Apparently that was good enough for her. Suddenly she shook her head as if to switch gears. "Anyway, why studying?"

"Because it's an efficient use of your time when you're alone." I held up my fingers, listing off the reasons. "Number one, you'll look like a hard worker if you study. Because you *are* working hard. So you'll give off this aura that tells people to leave you alone, and they will. It's even harder to talk to someone who's studying than someone who's just reading a book with earphones in,

right?”

“Earphones... Oh, right—that girl in our class. I guess someone studying *would* give a similar impression as her.”

“Then you have the added bonus of learning more and getting better scores on tests, which matters a lot in our school since they post everyone’s score on the wall afterwards. No one’s gonna tease the kid who got the highest grade, even if they’re a loner.”

“Huh? Do you have really good grades, Yashiro?”

“I scored in the top ten in our grade on first semester midterms and finals.”

“For real?! I didn’t know you were so smart!”

“See? The cool kids respect me, like you just did.”

“I guess I *do* have a different opinion of you now, but that cocky look on your face kinda ruins it...”

“You’re never wasting your time when you’re studying, because it’ll help you get into a better school and then you’ll have a better future down the line. You can do it alone, it’ll boost your self-esteem, and it improves your life. Studying alone is like the best thing a loner can do.”

“I feel like you’re right, but it sounds so...well, sad.” She sounded exasperated.

I’ll let that one slide. “I keep recommending it to Hanamizawa-san, but she keeps saying no.”

“Oh, yeah. She *hates* studying. Home ec is her favorite subject.”

“Huh. Never would’ve pegged her as the domestic type based on the way she looks.”

“She’s really feminine. She’s really good at cooking and sewing. So much so that even I’d wanna marry her.”

“Like in a sexy way?”

“Sexy way...? Anyway, she really struggles before tests. She knows we won’t be able to hang out if she fails, so we all study together to make sure she

passes.”

“You study together?” I asked, and she scowled at me.

“What? You think we’re all so weak we can only study as a group?”

“I didn’t say that.” *Is it just me, or is she playing the victim way too much? Maybe she has a short temper.* “I just think you can study a lot more efficiently if you do it alone.”

“Really? I think it’s fun to study together.”

“I won’t deny that, but are you sure you’re actually focusing on studying and not getting distracted by chatting?”

“Ugh... Okay, I guess that *does* happen sometimes.” Her eyes darted away, ashamed. “But we can keep an eye on each other so we don’t slack off, right?”

“Then you can just study in pairs, or study over video chat or something.”

“I-I guess you’re right...”

“If you can actually focus while studying in a group, then you can study alone. And the reverse is true too.” If you can study alone, you can study with anyone. And if you can’t even focus when you’re alone, then I doubt you can focus in a group. “You can do basically anything alone that you can do in a group. If something is fun with a group, you can enjoy it solo just as well. That’s what I think, anyway.”

“Ughh...” Ido-san groaned. She was probably trying to think up a retort. “Oh! I know! Teaching other people can help you study! Because it helps you review the material.”

“Yeah, output is important.” Output was making the things you learned tangible and teaching them to others. You had to understand the topic at hand very thoroughly in order to do that.

She nodded emphatically. “Yeah, that!”

“Hmm... I’m not sure if that’s a sound theory, but I guess it’s an idea.”

“Hee hee. You definitely can’t teach someone else by yourself!” she said triumphantly.

Not too fast. “Actually, you can.” I showed her the notebook I was looking at before. Then I showed her a different notebook, the one I had been writing in.

She gave me a confused look. “Huh? I thought you were reading your textbook?”

“I was using this notebook as my textbook.” I handed her the one I had been looking at.

She flipped through the notebook and commented, “You have surprisingly girly handwriting. Your letters are all round and cute. And you use colored pens?”

“Well, that’s not my notebook.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Those are notes someone else took. I really suck at Japanese history, and the person who took those notes sucks at science. So we swap notebooks before tests to study each other’s notes.”

“Why would you do something like that? Sounds like a pain!”

“What we were just talking about. Output. I take science notes in a way that will be easy for her to understand, and she does the same with Japanese history for me.” That forces me to take neater notes for her sake and focus on the important points, which makes for good review for me too, and she does the same. Then, since her notes are so thorough and neat, it makes me want to study harder to repay her for going to all the trouble, and it forces me to do a better job studying a subject I dislike. I let out an embarrassed chuckle. “It’s the same as teaching each other. See? So you can do it by yourself.”

“What...?” She seemed a little bewildered.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Uh, um, nothing. I was just startled because you had such a tender smile on your face.”

“Did I?” I asked after a pause. I touched my cheeks. I couldn’t tell. “Anyway, this is what I’ve been teaching Hanamizawa-san. Are you satisfied now?”

“Yeah...”

“What are you doing after this? I don’t have to go shopping now, so I’m thinking of staying here and studying for a while.”

“Well, that test is coming up, so I think I’ll study a bit more too.”

And so we continued studying. I didn’t set a timer this time, since I figured we’d both go home when we got to a natural stopping point.

“I don’t like this feeling,” Ido-san murmured all of a sudden. I glanced over at her, but she hadn’t even looked up from her notes. I figured she wanted to chat while we studied. “All I do is spend time with my friends and people point and say we’re just the cool kids who can’t stand up to peer pressure.”

I didn’t say anything.

“What’s so wrong about spending time with people you get along with and having fun? Why do people have to look at me like that? I hate it.”

I glanced over at her again and she was gritting her teeth like she was holding something back. She had such a sad, frustrated look on her face. I could tell there were some intense feelings welling up inside of her that she was fighting to keep contained.

“If you’re having fun being with other people, who cares?” I said, but she glared at me.

“Oh, please. I bet you think I’m just some weakling who can’t do anything alone! That’s why you’re probably just making fun of me! I spend time with everyone because I like it!” All her feelings rushed out as she yelled at me. I was glad it was just the two of us in the classroom. Anyone else probably would’ve thought she was nuts.

I was surprised that’s what had been on her mind this whole time, though. I guess everyone had their own issues they were struggling with. *“That’s why you’re probably just making fun of me!”* Was I?

“I’ve definitely thought it must be hard to always go along with the crowd.”

“I knew it.” She turned her face away in a huff.

“But I never thought you were weak, and I never made fun of you.”

She looked back at me, her eyes wide. “Liar.”

“It’s the truth.” What could I say to make her believe me? “Hmm... All right, so a while back, there were a ton of light novels and manga series that had unpopular kids as the main characters.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Just listen. The main characters would always say something along the lines of, ‘I bet those popular kids just make fun of people like me! They’re probably laughing and talking about what awful social skills we have!’ You know, that kinda thing. Anyway, there was a bigger difference between popular kids and unpopular kids in stories that took place at school. The whole theme back then was basically ‘Cool kids can go to hell!’”

Ido-san didn’t say anything, so I figured I could continue. “Worst case, sometimes a popular kid would be nice to the main character and they’d be like, ‘I bet you’re just feeling sorry for me!’ or ‘You’re so fake! You’re just trying to make yourself look good!’ and they’d never accept anything the cool kids had to say.”

“Isn’t that being a little too self-conscious? Maybe the other person was genuinely trying to be nice?”

“You’re exactly right. They were definitely being too self-conscious,” I said, propping my cheek up on my hand. “And they only realize that later on when they’re looking back at it—that the person with the worst intentions was themselves. That the cool kid was just trying to be nice. But they hurt them, and ended up hurting themselves too. And so now they’re filled with shame and regret.”

“And it becomes, like, their dark backstory?”

“Ah ha ha. Yep, that’s right.” I turned towards her. “Don’t you think that sounds really similar to what you just did to me?”

“What?!” All of a sudden her face tensed up.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little too self-conscious? You never heard the unpopular kids saying any of that. You’re putting words into their mouths, just like those stories I told you about.”

“W-Well...”

“I realize I’m not popular in this class. But I’ve never heard anyone say a bad thing about you or your friends.” I figured that mostly had to do with the fact that the popular kids never bad-mouthed the unpopular kids either. Surely it would be different if they got into a fight or something, but Ido-san and Hanamizawa-san were good people. No one had any reason to talk badly about them.

Ido-san seemed stunned. I looked right into her eyes as I spoke. “I only really learned about how things were for the cool kids once I read those books where there were those conflicts that happened over and over. And I thought, ‘Man, cool kids have it rough sometimes too.’”

She stared at me silently.

“At some point I stopped being jealous of them, and my life got a lot easier because of it. Actually, I feel like cool kids might even have it worse.”

“So the unpopular kids don’t think badly of the cool kids?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah. Just like how the cool kids were only trying to be nice in those books.”

“Oh... I guess I made a big deal out of nothing.” She looked like a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

“In our class, at least.”

“Yeah...” All of a sudden she smiled at me. “Um... I’m really sorry I blew up at you like that. But after talking to you—well, I don’t know how to put it, but I just feel a lot better now. I was so worried this whole time for nothing. It’s such a weird feeling.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it.”

“I understand why Kanon likes talking to you now.”

“I’m *not* glad to hear that!” *I’d prefer if she left me alone.*

She giggled. “Sorry, but we can’t help it. We’re both extroverts who love being with people.”

Now it was my time to be speechless. I turned to frown at Ido-san, who just laughed even harder.

The next day, during break.

“Yashiro.”

I’d just pulled out a book to read when Ido-san came over. “Thanks for talking to me yesterday.”

“Oh. Sure.”

“I feel so much better after talking to you. But there is one thing that’s been bothering me,” she said, taking a seat on my desk. She leaned over, putting her elbow on my shoulder. What was with this suddenly intimate position? “You said if you can do it in a group and have fun, you can enjoy it alone too. But I think I have fun *because* I’m with everyone in a group.”

“Hm... For example?”

“Well, I can’t think of an example right now, but...” She pulled away from me and crossed her arms. “But it’s bothering me, so go with me on this one. I feel like if you have fun *because* you’re with other people, then you won’t be able to enjoy the same thing if you do it alone. So I want you to prove to me that you *can* have fun doing those same things by yourself.”

“I don’t know why I need to prove it to you... Wait, do you mean you want me to prove *I* can have fun by *myself*, or *you* can have fun by *yourself*?”

“Well I doubt we think the same things are fun,” she said, rolling her eyes. *Well, that’s not very nice.*

I had no obligation to go along with her, but I had a feeling she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“A barbecue... You can definitely grill meat by yourself. Solo camping is definitely getting more popular lately... Hm, I guess I can’t think of anything. I’m stumped.” She was really getting worked up over this.

Just then, Hanamizawa-san came over. “Hm? What are you two talking about?”

Ido-san looked at her and laughed triumphantly. “Nothing. *‘It’s a secret between me and Yashiro!’*”

“Grrrr! Are you trying to get back at me from before? C’mon, Yashiro-kun! Tell me!”

Ah, jeez. Here we go again. All I wanted to do was read my book in peace. Why did this have to keep happening?

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CHIKAZE IDO



btw, kanon's been trying to get me to watch these weird cgi idols lately... is that because of you?

I think she always liked them, but thanks to our talks she feels like she doesn't have to hide her interests anymore.



i don't care if kanon likes one or two otaku-ish things or whatever, but she just won't quit! i'm getting so fed up

She's probably just caught up in it because she doesn't have to lie to herself anymore. I'm sure she'll give it up eventually.



maybe

What about you, Ido-san? Do you have any "otaku-ish" interests?



hmmm... not really... oh! i have two older brothers so I like shonen manga. g*ndam and stuff like that. and the one where they collect those dragon balls and the one with the ninja who uses chakras

I guess it's pretty common for girls to like those lately. What about shipping?



what, like slash fics and stuff? plz, i'm not like that. i just like how dramatic shonen stuff is.



Dramatic how?



lines like "you go on ahead. i'll take care of them."



Oh, like how when you think a character is dead but then all of a sudden they show up to save the day in battle?



yesssss! or when, like, their mortal enemy suddenly calls a truce and then fights alongside them! i love how passionate it gets



Hmm...



ohh & i like it when the main character takes over for the previous generation. well, i guess it didn't work out in the dragon ball story after he took over for his dad, but it went pretty good in the ninja one.



O-Okay...



but now that i think about it, things were also pretty messed up between g*ndam seed and destiny. and if the conditions are different for each generation, then maybe something happens *after* destiny too



...I think you're more of an otaku than any shipper and definitely more than



Chapter Four: Riding Solo (One-Shot)

“Hey, Yashiro.” Someone came up to me as soon as lunch break started. Looking up, I saw a good-looking guy with a short haircut whose style screamed “athlete.”

“Uhh, you’re Hadori-kun, right?” Yukito Hadori—so popular at our school even I knew his name. He seemed to be the leader of Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san’s group of cool friends, and was a central figure in our class. He was a member of the kendo club, and even though he was just a first-year like the rest of us, they had high hopes for him to perform well at tournaments. He was the kind of person who would rather take charge of an event than be a committee member. Lots of girls had crushes on him, and I’d never heard a mean word about him from the guys. We lived in two completely different worlds.

“Just Hadori’s fine. When people use ‘-kun’ with me it makes my teeth itch,” he said, smiling broadly with a gleaming white set of said teeth. *Jeez, he even has a “hot guy” personality.*

“Sorry, force of habit,” I said.

“You can even call me by my first name if you want. I don’t mind.”

“That’s definitely taking it a step too far. Anyway, did you need something?”

“Yeah, but I can’t really talk about it here... Sorry, but do you mind coming with me?” Hadori-kun jabbed his finger towards the door. His tone of voice was friendly enough, but I could tell he wasn’t going to take no for an answer. Just as I was thinking how I probably wouldn’t be able to get out of this, I heard the chair behind me clatter.

“All right,” I agreed, after a bit of hesitation.

“Great. C’mon.”

I followed Hadori-kun out of the classroom. Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san spotted us and said, “Huh?” and “What’s going on?” but Hadori-kun just brushed them off, saying, “It’s a guy thing.”

He took me to the landing of the staircase that led up to the roof. Since that's where the tennis courts were, only club members were allowed up there. No one else was around. It was cramped, but brightly lit by the southern wall made of windows.

Hadori-kun faced me with his back against the windows. I looked at him, thinking his back must be burning up in the heat of the midday autumn sun.

“There's something I've been dying to ask you.”



“What’s that?”

“Well, you’ve been talking to Kanon and Chikaze a lot lately, right?”

Who’s Chikaze again...? Oh, right—Ido-san. I rubbed my temple. “Seriously... This again?”

“Hm? What again?”

“After Hanamizawa-san started talking to me a bunch, Ido-san got suspicious and accused me of doing something shady to her.” When I explained what had happened with her, his eyes went wide. Then he burst out laughing.

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, that sounds like Chikaze.”

“Hey, it isn’t funny. Isn’t that why you want to talk to me?”

“No, no.” He waved his hand in front of him. “They both seemed really stressed ever since the end of the first semester. Kanon seemed exhausted, and Chikaze was always on edge worrying so much about what other people thought of her.”

As I listened quietly, I realized that even though he looked like a dumb jock, he was actually pretty observant and had picked up on their problems.

He glanced at me and gave a self-deprecating chuckle.

“Sure, I may have picked up on it, but I couldn’t *do* anything. I thought that if just being around us was so hard on them, the best I could do was to pretend not to notice they were struggling.”

“I think that was probably the right decision.” I doubted the most popular kid out of the entire group of popular kids would have been able to solve Hanamizawa-san’s desire to be alone sometimes or Ido-san’s self-consciousness. If he’d said something, that might have just made it worse. “I’m sure they both appreciated that.”

“Ha ha. Thanks,” he replied, looking a little shy. “But once second semester began and they started talking to you more, they looked more relaxed, or like they had some weight lifted off their shoulders. I dunno, it’s hard to explain. But it was a good change. And I think it’s all thanks to you.” Hadori-kun gave me a good (and somewhat painful) whack on the shoulder. “That’s why I wanted to

talk to you today. I got a favor to ask.”

“A favor?”

“Yeah. Please don’t be so cold to those two.” He placed both hands on my shoulders and bowed his head. “You did what I couldn’t. I know this might be a pain for you, but I’m asking you to be friendly with them.”

That’s why he wanted to talk to me? And he was even bowing his head?

“Why would you go to all this trouble?”

“‘Cuz they’re my friends. When they’re sad, I’m sad!” He looked up and grinned at me.

I swear, this guy... “You’re a pretty nice guy.”

“Aw, knock it off. I’m just doing it for my own satisfaction.”

He bashfully laughed it off, but I really meant it. The reason he was the most popular kid in school was *because* he was such a good guy.

“No, for real. You’re a nice guy,” I said firmly.

Hadori-kun laughed. “And you’re a weirdo. Honestly, at first I thought you were following them around and causing them trouble, so I might have had to give you a good whack with my kendo sword.” He gave me a demonstration, swinging around an imaginary sword. Who was the weirdo now?

“That seems dangerous.”

“I don’t mess around when it comes to stalkers. And if you ever do anything shady to them, I *will* hunt you down.”

“I won’t.” I sighed, shrugging my shoulders. Then I looked into his eyes. “Since you’re such a good person, I’ll let you in on a little secret.”

“What’s that?”

“Proof of why I won’t ever do anything bad to them.” I looked around to make sure we were alone. And I told him.

He looked shocked for a moment, but then burst out laughing. “Pfft, ah ha ha ha!” *Okay, it’s not that funny.* “Yeah, that’s pretty good proof. Heh heh.” He laughed so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes.

“Don’t tell anyone else.”

“I won’t. Anyway, take care of those two.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I’d say my chat with Mr. Popular went as well as could be expected.

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The next day during break, Ido-san and I began our back-and-forth.

“I’ll name some activities and you give me answers,” she said.

“Gotcha.”

“Bowling?”

“There are people who do that alone.”

“What about baseball?”

“You can go to a batting cage.”

“What about futsal?”

“It’s hard to play games with rules like that even with friends, don’t you think?”

“Competitive video games.”

“Lately you can play against the best gamers in the country online.”

“How can you evolve Graveler and Haunter without trading with someone else?”

“Just buy both versions and trade with yourself.”

She was trying to offer up activities that you wouldn’t be able to enjoy unless you were in a group, and I had to explain why you *could* enjoy them solo, or convince her that you didn’t necessarily have to do them in a group. Ever since that first day we talked, she’d been doing this a lot.

“You’re really stubborn about this, Chi-chan.”

“Shut up, Kanon!”

“Okay, okay.”

Meanwhile, Hanamizawa-san was enjoying our exchange from the sidelines. She certainly had a sadistic streak, having so much fun watching her friend squirm with frustration. Were they *actually* friends?

Finally, Ido-san let out a sigh. "I guess there aren't many things you can't enjoy alone after all."

"See?" I said.

"Ugh, this is so frustrating!" She crossed her arms over her chest and pouted. "Hmm... What about talking like this? You know, chatting and having fun with a friend. If you did it alone, you'd just be talking to yourself."

"Yeah, but that's pretty fun, actually."

"Grr! Well, how about—"

"Are you and I friends, though?"

"H-Huh? Well..." she trailed off. Apparently she didn't have a comeback this time. If she didn't think we were friends, this probably would've made her angry. But since it didn't, I wondered what she actually thought of our relationship. We really only talked during breaks like this.

Plus, when do friendships start, anyway? I guess it's when you think of someone as a friend, and they do the same—when the feelings are mutual, I guess.

"Ooh, pick me! I think Yashiro-kun's my friend!" Hanamizawa-san raised her hand and started hopping around.

"What? Seriously?" I asked.

"Hey, that's cold! After we took a bath together and everything!"

"Will you stop saying things that can be taken the wrong way?! We just went to a spa together!"

"Everything I said was still true!" She stuck her tongue out teasingly.

Honestly... I leaned back in my chair and sighed. "Anyway, Ido-san. I enjoy talking with you, whether we're friends or not."

"R-Really? Hee hee..." She seemed a little shy now.

I nodded. “Yeah. I like watching your wheels turn when we argue.”

“Huh? Really?!”

“I totally get that,” Hanamizawa-san piped up, nodding her head.

“Don’t you get started on that too, Kanon!”

“I think you’d have better luck coming up with things you wouldn’t enjoy doing solo that *aren’t* group activities. Then Yashiro-kun can teach you how to enjoy them!”

“Oh, I guess that’s a good point.” Ido-san agreed with Hanamizawa-san, then looked as if she were deep in thought.

Now that Ido-san was quiet, Hanamizawa-san spoke up. “I was really surprised, by the way.”

“Hm?”

“You know, the day we went to the Royal Spa together. Remember how you showed up covered in cycling gear? I totally thought you were more of an indoors kind of guy,” she said.

“Hm? Cycling? Like a sports bike?” Ido-san jumped back into the conversation. “Hey, I ride a sports bike! It’s a good way to stay in shape and build muscle, so I’ve been using the biking trails along the river in my neighborhood lately.”

“I’ve been doing pretty much the same thing.”

“But since I’m doing it just for exercise, it doesn’t really feel fun to me, you know? I bet it would be fun to go on a long bike trip with a friend or something, but I don’t know anyone else who has a sports bike. I tried inviting Kanon to come with me, but...”

“Did you see the price tag on one of those bikes?! It’s not like I can just buy one out of the blue!” Hanamizawa-san shook her head.

So, judging by this conversation, apparently Ido-san had asked her to buy a sports bike so they could go on a cycling trip together, and the price tag was enough to make Hanamizawa-san recoil. I’d inherited mine from my uncle, but I imagine it’d be pretty expensive for a high schooler to buy one.

Just then, Ido-san whacked my desk. “I know! Why don’t I see if I can enjoy cycling by myself? What do you think? I’m sure I’d have fun with friends, but I wanna learn how to do it solo!”

“You want to see if you can have fun cycling alone?”

“You have fun doing it alone, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah.” I always had a great time cycling by myself.

“Then prove it to me. Let’s do it this Sunday.”

“*Let’s*”? “I’ve got plans on Sunday. But if you go by yourself, I can help you plan things out. I don’t mind doing that...”

“Okay! It’s decided, then!”

“Darn, I have a family party I gotta go to this Sunday, so I can’t make it,” Hanamizawa-san said, looking very disappointed. Honestly, I didn’t want to go either, but I didn’t think Ido-san would take no for an answer. Besides, Hadori-kun had asked me to be friendly, so I might as well do it.

“Fine. But...there’s something you have to prepare ahead of time.”

“There is?” Ido-san gave me a puzzled look.

I nodded. “Yep. I’ll bring it tomorrow.”

The next day, I spotted Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san laughing and talking at their seats in the classroom. I fished around in my pocket and walked over to them.

“Oh! Morning, Yashiro-kun!” Hanamizawa-san greeted me with a smile.

“Morning, Yashiro.” Ido-san also said hello, albeit somewhat awkwardly. Still, it was a considerably softer reaction than before, when she treated me like I was her mortal enemy.

“Here you go.” I took the thing out of my pocket and handed it to her.

She stared at me blankly for a second and then took it. “A music player?”

“Yep. I don’t use it anymore, but will you listen to the music on here and keep it on a heavy rotation until Sunday?”

“This is what I have to do to get ready?” she asked. I nodded.

“Yep. It’s a little trick to enjoy cycling by yourself. Well, I’m not actually sure if it’ll work on someone else yet.”

“Hmm...” She turned the music player around in her hands, examining it.
“Where are the headphones?”

“Oh, I know some people don’t like using someone else’s headphones, so I figured you could just use your own.”

“I guess there are people like that! They don’t mind borrowing someone else’s headphones, but they think sharing earbuds is gross. And if they’re really clean freaks, they won’t even share headphones!” Hanamizawa-san nodded emphatically. There *were* all kinds of people in this world.

“I don’t mind... But I don’t have any headphones with me, so I’ll have to listen at home.” Ido-san put the music player in her pocket and stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

“Are you going to the bathroom, Chi-chan?”

“Why do you have to ask if you already know the answer?” Ido-san blushed slightly and left the classroom.

“Have fun!” Hanamizawa-san called after her. Once she was gone, Hanamizawa-san turned towards me. “So what kind of songs are on the player?”

“Hm? Mostly songs from Adiemus.”

“Adie-who?”

“Adiemus. How can I explain it... It’s like a cross between orchestral music and African tribal music. It’d be easier to just listen to it.” I got out my phone and let her listen to an Adiemus song. It was the theme song to a show called “Beyond the Century” that was broadcast on NHK, and it was used in some other things too, so I had a feeling she’d recognize it if she heard it.

And just as I expected, she said, “Ohh, I think I’ve heard this somewhere before! But why are you making Chi-chan listen to Adie-whatever?”

“There’s a lot of songs that sound mysterious and spiritual. You know, ones

that make you think of nature and spiritual things. So that's why I want her to listen to those kinds of songs until Sunday."

"And that's how she's going to prep for her trip?"

"Yep. I'd also like her to listen to some songs by the voice actress Sakura Tange. Her songs make you feel like you're daydreaming, or excitedly wandering around unexplored territory. Like 'metropolis' or 'inner space trip' or 'Fantasy~wanna get lost in the white night sky.' Songs like that."

"H-Huh? Sorry, I've never heard of that person or any of those songs before."

"Figured. That's why I wanted to start with Adiemus," I said with amusement.

She gave me an exasperated look. "I don't know what you've got up your sleeve, but it's definitely *something*..."



Sunday, 11 a.m. JR Akabane Station, south gate.

I got all decked out in cycling clothes (complete with a windbreaker) and rode my sports bike to meet Yashiro. He was already there waiting for me once I arrived, leaning on a thick column while reading a book. *Hmm, so that's what he looks like when he's not wearing his school uniform.* I figured he'd just show up in a sweatsuit or something, but he was wearing a sports coat. It was refreshing to see him in that instead of his uniform.

"Sorry I took so long, Yashiro," I called out.

He looked up. "Hey, good morning. Don't worry, I haven't been waiting that long."

"I *did* keep you waiting though. Anyway, why are you dressed up? I figured you'd just roll out of bed and head over here."

"I told you I have plans after this, remember? I'm meeting someone later."

"Oh, right. Sorry about that." So that's why he was dressed like that. I felt bad that I'd dragged him away from his plans, but he just gave me a smirk.

"It's fine. I already told my friend about it."

"O-Oh? Anyway, here you go." I reached into the pocket on my back—most of

the pockets on cycling shirts were on the back—and returned the music player he'd lent me. "I listened to it over and over again. I thought the songs were kinda mysterious. They had this, like...spiritual, world music-type feel to them."

"Yeah, I think that's accurate." He nodded, looking satisfied. "All right, so about your cycling trip today—I want you to go to Asukayama Park outside of Oji station."

"You want me to go to Oji from Akabane? That's not that far."

They were two stops apart on the Keihin—Tohoku Line. It wouldn't even take me half an hour to get there on this bike.

Yashiro smirked, as if he'd been expecting that reaction. "It would be boring if you went straight there, so I'm giving you a specific route. Do you know that big university hospital by Jujo?"

"Yeah. Right along the river."

"I want you to ride along the river near that hospital. Avoid main roads as much as you can and use back roads instead. Follow the road you can see from here." He turned and pointed at a road that stretched out from the viaduct. "And you can't use your phone to look at any maps, unless it's an emergency."

"So I have to try to find the correct route myself."

"Exactly."

Well, there was only one station between here and Jujo, so I doubted I'd get lost. Once I figured out which direction to go, I was sure I could find it eventually.

"Text me as soon as you get to your destination."

"Roger."

"Oh, and make sure to take in the scenery as much as possible," he added, seemingly meaningfully. He smiled and then waved. I felt like he was making fun of me a little, so I decided to get there as fast as I could and text him. I mean, it was only two stations away!

I thought it would be simple.

I started off in the direction he'd pointed towards. The road curved west, so I turned left down a back road instead. Jujo should be southeast from Akabane. So if I basically headed south towards the sun and turned left occasionally, I should make it. At least, that's what I thought.

"Ughh..." But suddenly I arrived at a steep hill that must've had a thirty degree slope. I didn't think I could make it up there even if I put it in the highest gear and pedaled lightly. I knew I'd been beaten, so I got off my bike and started pushing it uphill. *Jeez, he's sure making it tough right from the start!*

I was panting a bit when I got to the top of the hill, but I got right back on my bike and started pedaling towards the sun. I came to a crossroad and turned left. *Huh?* But for some reason, the road began to curve in a U-shape. *Wait, won't this take me back the same way I came?* I wondered, but if I backtracked and tried a different path, I would have to go down that hill I worked so hard to climb. Then I'd end up coming to stairs I couldn't get down with my bike, and a bunch of other places that would lead me in the opposite direction of where I wanted to go.

What the heck is going on?

There weren't any houses or any other distinguishable buildings around, and all the roads crisscrossed at various elevations. It was like I was in the middle of a maze. I finally saw the road I needed to go on—below netting designed to prevent falling rocks. Just how in the world was I supposed to get down there?

At last, I realized the reason behind Yashiro's smirk. *He knew this was going to happen!* He knew I was going to get lost. And I was lost. I was *totally* lost. Of course, at any time I could just pull up the GPS on my phone to figure out where I was. It wasn't like I was up in the mountains somewhere with no cell phone signal. I was somewhere inside the twenty-third ward of Tokyo. But here I was, a high schooler, feeling like a lost little kid.

So I wasn't *actually* lost, because I could look at a map on my phone and figure out where to go. I could stop being "lost" anytime I wanted. I was in this weird, pseudo-lost state.

"Oh, and make sure to take in the scenery as much as possible." I remembered what Yashiro said, and started looking around to find out how to

get to that road. I wondered if this was how Alice felt when she was in Wonderland. All kinds of thoughts popped into my head, like how it felt like I was in a dream, or I'd wandered into another strange world or fairytale or fantasy. I wasn't usually a girly kind of person, but for some reason now that I was lost, I half expected the Cheshire Cat to materialize out of thin air at any moment.

Although the only animals that pop up out of nowhere around here are tanuki, I thought as I spotted one crossing the road. ...*Wait, what? "Huh?! Tanuki?!"* I squinted, not believing my own eyes. But it was definitely a tanuki. It wasn't a dog or a masked palm civet. *Huh? I am still in the twenty-third ward of Tokyo, right? It looks really healthy too.* I just saw a tanuki in the middle of the city. Was someone pranking me? *I gotta take a pic!*

I went to take out my phone, but the tanuki plodded off into a hedge and disappeared right at the last moment. *Darn it, I missed it!* I was totally bummed. Just then, my phone vibrated. I checked the display. Kanon was calling?

"Hello?"

"Oh, Chi-chan? I was just wondering what you were doing."

"I just saw a tanuki."

"Huh? Are you in the mountains?"

"No! I swear I saw one!" I tried to convince her, but she didn't seem to be buying it. (Later, I looked it up and discovered this was a popular place for tanuki sightings.)

"Well? Are you enjoying cycling alone?"

"I guess? I'm lost right now, though."

"Uhh, are you okay?"

"It's strangely thrilling."

When you're lost, you feel super anxious, but at the same time, it was exciting to be in unfamiliar territory. But again—I was just pseudo-lost. I could pull up a map and find my way at any time, so I was mostly just feeling excited.

Suddenly I heard Kanon giggling on the other end. "Well, I'm glad you're

having fun, Chi-chan.”

“I-I didn’t say I was having fun *yet*.”

“Yeah, yeah. See you at school tomorrow,” Kanon said, and she hung up.
Honestly, that girl...

I put my phone away. I didn’t think I’d be able to find my way even from this high up, so I gave up and decided to go back down the hill. Once I was at the bottom, I went out onto the road. Looking around, I saw a sign for the department store in front of the train station.

Huh? After all that, I never even got that far away?! Feeling bummed, I decided to take the lower road that stretched out to the side. The scenery there was basically the same as it had been on top of the hill, but this path seemed to go a lot straighter to the southeast than the other one. I kept following it until I finally ended up at the intersection of the Kanjo number seven line.

Finally, a place I recognize...

Now I was close to my first destination. Yashiro had told me to avoid major roads, so I crossed the intersection and arrived at the Shakuji River near the hospital. I decided to call him with voice chat. “Yashiro, I’m at the Shakuji River.”

“Great job. Now can you follow the river upstream? If you keep going you should see a bridge called the Ita Bridge. Cross it and then head out onto a road called Nakajuku-dori.”

“Cross the Ita Bridge and go to Nakajuku-dori. Are you sure I’m not gonna get lost again?”

“Ha ha. You sound like you just fought your way through Inatsuki’s labyrinth.” He sounded incredibly amused. Yep, he did it on purpose. “Don’t worry. You’re not gonna get lost there.”

“If you say so.”

“But wasn’t it fun getting lost?”

“Well...yeah.” I hated to admit it, but I *did* have a lot of fun.

“It’s really sunny today, so I think you’ll like Nakajuku-dori at this time of day.”

“Hm? What’s the time of day have to do with anything?”

“You’ll see. Call me back when you get to Nakasendo Highway.” He hung up on me.

I decided to follow his instructions, and rode my bike upstream along the river. It was easy to ride through the vegetation there, and it felt nice too. After a while, I came to an old wooden bridge—the Ita Bridge—and then saw a sign for Nakajuku.

“So I guess I just gotta go along that road?” I pedaled across the bridge and arrived at the road. It was long and rolling, with easy slopes. With a sports bike, you could switch gears a little and make it up the hills with no problem. There were cars going up the road as well, but they were going slow since there were shops on either side, and lots of people were milling about.

I took my time and went slowly up the hill. The white afternoon sun was almost blinding. But just then... *Huh? What’s going on?* All of a sudden I experienced a strange feeling. With the white sunlight and feeling of weightlessness thanks to my bike carrying me effortlessly up the hill, I suddenly felt like I was floating. Like I had wandered into the world of daydreams. Suddenly I heard the melody from a song Yashiro had let me borrow start to stream through my head. I was pretty sure it was called “Chorale VI Cantus - Song of Aeolus.”

I thought I’d heard it in a commercial or something, so it had left an impression on me. When I listened to it, it made me all relaxed at first, like it was lulling me to sleep. But then in the middle, the melody abruptly changes, making you feel like a gust of wind blowing across the plains. It turns into this really grand, energizing song. That part was going through my head right now.

This felt completely different than when I was pseudo-lost. It was such a strange feeling.

I pedaled my bike through the midday sunlight. That’s all I was doing, and yet it felt like I was in a fantasy world. It was the dreamiest sensation, as if I had become the wind itself.

Huh? The next thing I knew, I’d come out onto Nakasendo highway. It hadn’t even been ten minutes. But it had felt so much longer than that. It all felt so

strangely bewitching that I immediately called up Yashiro.

“Yashiro?”

“Oh, Ido-san. How was it?”

“Totally mysterious. One of the songs you had me listen to was playing in my head. I don’t even know how to explain it...” I said, and just then—

“A young girl pretended to be a shrine maiden...”

I heard a soft, quiet voice that didn’t belong to Yashiro. *Huh? Who was that?*

“...After night fell and the town grew quiet, she beat on a drum—ton, ton, ton—and said in a beautiful, clear voice, ‘This doesn’t matter. Nothing really matters...’”

I had a feeling it was from some classic Japanese story, but I was bad at literature, so I had no idea which one. And I really didn’t understand what it meant either.

And yet...

When I heard it in the middle of the sunlight, it felt like it was right in my ear. Just then, Yashiro’s voice snapped me back to reality. “Oh, from the *Ichigonhodan*? But why... Oh, I get it.”

“Huh?”

“Okay, so there was this critic named Hideo Kobayashi who wrote an essay called ‘Mujo to iu koto’ or ‘Transience.’ He was walking around Mt. Hiei and staring at this stone wall when all of a sudden those sentences mysteriously popped into his head.”

“Wh-Whoa.” No wonder he knew about it, since he was always reading books. I couldn’t keep up.

“That song popped into your head for the same kind of reason, I think. Not as fancy as that essay, but still.”

“Ohh, I get it!” Now I understood. I’d definitely heard the music in my head.

“Anyway, if you’re on the Nakasendo, can you see the hilly road off to the left?”

“Um... I think so?”

“If you go down that hill, you’ll come to the Shakujii River again. This time I want you to go downstream. Then you’ll be by Asukayama.”

“Okay, got it.”

“Oh, and I’ve got a bit of advice for you. When you’re with someone else, it might be easy to focus on that person’s voice. But when you’re alone, you don’t have that distraction. So you can hear your own inner voice much better. And it’s kind of fun to listen to it.”

“Huh? What? What the heck does that mean?”

“Well, I hope you enjoy the rest of your trip.” He hung up.

Listen to my inner voice? Seriously, what did that mean? *Ahh, I forgot to ask him who was talking before!* That reminded me—he did say he had other plans, so maybe it was someone in the background. *I’ll just ask him later.*

Right now I just wanted to see where I was going and how it would make me feel. I did as Yashiro said and went down the hill, ending up at Shakujii River from Kaga Park. Then I followed it downstream like he said. It was hilly and narrow. The road was winding and the terrain was kind of uneven, so I couldn’t go as fast as I wanted to.

But even though I was going slow, I didn’t get tired of looking around. There was so much nature out here, like the Otonashi Kunugi Green Space, the Otonashi Momiji Green Park—just so much greenery. The breeze felt wonderful, and the sunlight filtering through the trees was beautiful. I thought that the Shakujii River went around residential areas, so I had no idea it went this way.

I saw a sign that said “Matsubashi Benzaiten Cave Ruins,” a waterside rest stop, and all kinds of interesting scenery that kept me from being bored. I bet even walking around here would be fun. Riding my bike in a place like this just naturally made my head fill with music.

But it wasn’t the music I borrowed from Yashiro.

It was “Embraced in Softness,” a theme song from a movie I liked as a kid. I

had no idea why I remembered it all of a sudden. Maybe because the melody synced up with how fast I was pedaling? Or maybe the sunlight filtering through the trees reminded me of it?

I liked the movie when I was a kid, but I guess that wasn't actually all that long ago. I'm only in the first year of high school, so elementary school was just four years ago. It's not like I had lived a long life yet.

But...when you remember something you liked as a child, your heart feels all light and it really does feel like you're being embraced in a soft feeling.

Ahh, that's it...

That's what listening to your inner voice meant.

It was something you wouldn't notice when you were around other people—a memory that suddenly surfaces when you're alone. It happens with both good memories and memories that make you wanna crawl into a hole and never come out. But those memories carry that kind of feeling with them. And when I was riding my bike in the sunlight like this, with the wind swirling all around me, every one of those memories felt beautiful.

This feels so amazing...

I really did enjoy my ride to Asukayama.

◇◇◇

"I had so much fun," Ido-san said to me on Monday morning, with a slightly annoyed expression. "I guess it is pretty hard to get lost, wander around, and take a bunch of detours unless you're cycling alone."

"Ah ha ha. So Yashiro-kun wins this round!" Hanamizawa-san taunted. *I'd really appreciate it if you didn't provoke her...*

Ido-san turned away with a huff. "I'm not saying he won."

"Chi-chan, that's what a sore loser says."

"Shut up! Whose side are you on anyway, Kanon?!"

"Of course I'm your friend, but you're so adorable pouting because you lost. I want to see you pout more, so I'm rooting for you to lose."

“What?!”

Man, Hanamizawa-san was shameless. That was some personality...

Ido-san was quiet for a while, but then she poked my forehead. “Fine. I don’t care if I lost this time. But I’m still gonna keep trying to come up with something.”

“Aren’t you gonna say, ‘You’ll pay for this!’ or something, Chi-chan?”

“Knock it off, stupid Kanon!” Ido-san pinched Hanamizawa-san’s cheek and left.

“Wait, she’s gonna keep this up?”

“Ouch... Yeah, probably. Chi-chan’s a sore loser.” Hanamizawa-san grinned as she rubbed her pinched cheek. “For real though, isn’t there *anything* you can’t enjoy alone?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Of course there is.”

“Ah! So there’s something after all!”

“Yeah...things having to do with relationships.”

“Relationships?”

“Sure. Whether it’s friends or a romantic relationship. You can only have those with other people, right? And there are events you can’t do alone. Like celebrating a friend’s birthday at a party, or going on a date with your significant other.”

“O-Oh.”

All of a sudden she clapped her hands together like a light bulb had gone off. “Now that you mention it, it’s pretty simple!”

“Yep. But neither of you realized it before.” I let out a sigh. “Probably because those things aren’t special to you guys. And the fact that those things just come naturally to you is a really wonderful thing. Seriously.”

“D-Do you really think so? Heh heh.” She giggled shyly.

Yeah. I really did.



CHIKAZE IDO



i saw a tanuki

You saw a tanuki?



yeah, there are tanuki in the 23rd ward.

Well, Saitama is just across the river, and I've heard sometimes deer follow the water down there. I guess it's easy for animals to wander over.



when i saw it i didn't even realize it was a tanuki at first. i thought it was a dog and was like, that's weird... but then i was like "ahhhh, it's a tanuki!"

Not too often you get to see them up close.



its tail wasn't striped

That's a raccoon. Tanuki don't have striped tails.



seriously? but doesn't tanuki mario have a striped tail?



That's why everyone gets it wrong.



apparently it's pretty common for people who ride sports bikes to see wild animals. there was an older cyclist at a rest spot who told me that.



Wow.



he said "if you see a bear, run away. if you see a wild boar, run away. if you see a japanese serow, run away"



Jeez, you gotta run away from a lot of things. Wait, a Japanese serow?!



i guess they're dangerous if they charge at you



Where would that ever happen...?



wanna go cycling with me sometime?



Why would I say yes after hearing about the dangerous wild animals?!



Chapter Five: Loners and Cool Kids

“Characteristics of Girls with Celestial Names”

Ever since I was little, I’ve been bad at expressing myself. I know exactly what I want to say in my head, but I just can’t put it into words. And when I finally *do* manage to speak up, I’m so nervous I end up stuttering. Nobody can understand what I’m trying to say anyway, so it seems pointless.

Even now in high school, it’s still the same old story. High school—that time of your life that manga and anime love to show as some glorious era of youth, where characters are always chatting and laughing with their friends. I totally believed I’d have friends like that, and that my high school days would be just as glorious.

I didn’t need to have some big romantic story. It was okay if I never had a boyfriend. I just wanted to make friends who I could reminisce with later on, with smiles on our faces. To look back on those days and say we’d had fun was all I wanted...

So why did reality have to be so harsh? Once again, I was forced into a new environment against my will. I found myself still wishing to be around others, even though I always ended up hurt. Even though being with others scared me.

Another new place. Would this be the one where things finally changed?



A long time ago, there was a clear-cut caste system within the schools. The cool kids, both boys and girls, were always surrounded by friends and had fun both inside and outside of school. They stood tall at the top. At the bottom were the loners, the kids who couldn’t make friends, and the otaku who were just in their own little worlds.

The ones at the top looked down on those at the bottom and called them losers. The ones at the bottom looked up at the kids at the top and wished

they'd go to hell.

But that antagonistic social structure had been turned on its head in just a few years. There were several reasons for this change.

Reason One: The Rise of Otaku Culture

Otaku culture swept throughout the whole world thanks to the rising popularity of anime. Previously, anime movies surpassing Hollywood movies in box office sales was a phenomenon unique to Japan, but it began to happen all over the world.

Anime directors, once backed by a small group of enthusiastic fans, were now experiencing widespread success. 3D anime produced overseas broadened the scope of anime viewers beyond just otaku. Otaku culture didn't just belong to them anymore; it wasn't enough to label someone an otaku based only on whether they watched anime or not.

Reason Two: The Rise of the Otaku's Social Status

Thanks to the rise of otaku culture, their general social status began to rise as well. For example, some people used to use video games as a scapegoat by saying things like, "Playing video games makes you less intelligent" or "XYZ video game was found in the criminal's room" and so on.

But nowadays, there are people streaming or competing in esports who make more money than corporate employees. Anyone who says something against video games would probably be the ones attacked instead, being told they're too old-fashioned and need to get with the times.

There's no reason for otaku to languish in the shadows anymore.

Reason Three: The Encouragement of Mutual Understanding between Popular and Unpopular Kids

There were many stories in anime depicting conflicts between the popular and unpopular groups, and the rise of otaku culture exposed even more of

those conflicts. In other words, anime began reflecting how unpopular kids viewed popular kids. Within these stories, the cool kids were shown suffering under the demands of peer pressure. They would deny parts of themselves in order to fit in with the crowd, be constantly worried about what others thought of them, and go along with everyone else despite their true feelings. They were depicted as people who couldn't survive unless they were part of a group.

Popular kids knew this was all true, but they had tried to turn a blind eye to it. Once the tropes had become popular, it constantly stared them in the face.

And then they discovered that the unpopular kids didn't experience the same peer pressure they did. They were living lives free of the torture they'd experienced. The popular kids discovered what life was like for those people. And how did they view the unpopular kids after that? They saw those loners as tough people who could survive on their own. They saw otaku as tough people too, with a strong sense of individuality.

On the other hand, the unpopular kids could now see how rough the popular kids had it, and no longer felt jealous of them.

Reason Four: The Breakdown of American School Hierarchy

American schools had an even stricter clique social structure, but that broke down even there. One reason was societal uncertainty. No matter how much power someone had at school, they weren't guaranteed a solid job once they graduated.

The people who stood at the top of the American school social system were the star athlete jocks and the fashion queen popular girls. But when they graduated and joined the workforce in this age of technology, they would end up working underneath the geeks (otaku) they'd made fun of all through high school.

Even the great Steve Jobs had to transfer schools because he was bullied so severely. Just that fact exposes how messed up the social hierarchy was in American schools, and showed the ones at the top just how precarious their positions were.

America is a gun-toting society, and there have been many incidents of gun violence originating from the social hierarchy in its schools. Students who were at the bottom and bullied, instead of voicing their concerns to the students at the top, chose gun violence instead. The perpetrators of these crimes either get arrested or die, but every time incidents like this happen, the social hierarchy in schools and the popular kids themselves come under scrutiny.

And so the students at the top have gradually started to think more about the unpopular kids.

Now because that can happen even in American society which oozes with machismo, even more attention has come to the social hierarchy within schools, especially in countries like Japan where it wasn't as rigid.

Because of all these reasons, the world changed greatly. Popular and unpopular kids no longer faced off in the classroom. Popular kids no longer teased unpopular kids, and unpopular kids weren't jealous of the popular kids.

The popular kids were the ones who had it worse.

They were used to going along with the group, but they had no idea what to do by themselves. So they had no other choice but to remain inside that circle of hell called peer pressure. They would be chatting and laughing with their friends, but then glance over at two otaku boys playing a card game in the corner of the classroom.

"I activate my trap card!"

"All right, then I'll chain a removal spell to your activation!"

"Argh, for real?! There's nothing I can do to defend against that!"

And even though the popular kids didn't understand the rules at all, they felt jealous of those otaku who didn't care who was watching.

That was the reality of the world now.

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Whoosh.

I can still remember it clearly. A hand shooting up into the air. A perfectly straight posture. And a calm face, ready to say anything. I never thought there

could be something more beautiful or reassuring.

I fell in love at first sight.

I felt like I had experienced a truly rare moment in life. It was burned so deeply into my memory that I could still remember it as clear as day.

“...up. Wake up...”

I thought I heard a quiet voice. I felt someone shaking my body.

“Huh?!” I jolted upright and my eyes flew open. What time was it? Oh, it was still lunchtime. Apparently, I’d nodded off at the circulation desk in the library. *So much has happened lately. I guess I’m exhausted...*

A month had passed since Hanamizawa-san started talking to me, but I felt like I’d burned an entire semester’s worth of mental calories. And now that Ido-san had joined in, things had gotten even more hectic, which only made me busier and more exhausted. Honestly, what was I going to do about them?

I propped my cheek up on my hand and silently stared at the person next to me, who was reading a book. She just sat here and read while I was sleeping like it was no big deal. She could’ve just let me sleep and ignored me, but she was nice enough to wake me up. I suppose that was proof that she was okay with me being next to her, and that made me happy. “I don’t mind dozing off if it means I get to have you wake me up like th— Oof!”

She dropped a hardcover dictionary onto my head. It was pretty heavy.

“You’ve...”

“Hm? What?!”

“What?” she asked, looking confused.

“Oh, um. Nothing. Yeah.” I just couldn’t believe my own ears. She hadn’t struck up a conversation with me in so long. *Well, I guess that’s not entirely true.*

“You’ve been working really hard lately,” she said without looking up from her book.

“H-Have I?”

“Too hard. It looks like you’re pushing yourself.”

So that’s how she saw it? I couldn’t answer. I guess I *did* have a lot of pent-up exhaustion.

She continued in a quiet voice, “Everyone has their own strengths, but there are still limits; things you can do, and things you just can’t. Confuse the two, and you’ll only end up miserable.”

Her tone of voice was unusually forceful. I gave her a confused look. “Are you telling me to know my place?”

“No. I’m saying that if you understand what kind of person you are, you should only do things you’re capable of. Everyone has something that’s just impossible for them. So...” She looked up from her book and stared straight into my eyes. “I don’t want you to force yourself so much.”

I silently stared back at those serious eyes of hers, but couldn’t say anything in response.



The next morning, Hanamizawa-san came over to me the moment I sat down. “Hey, hey. Did you hear the news, Yashiro-kun?!” The look on her face reminded me of a puppy running back with a ball its owner tossed far away. She wasn’t going to leave me alone until I took the ball back and praised— Er, I mean, until I talked to her.

“Um... No, what happened?”

“Hee hee. You’ll never guess...”

“We’re getting a transfer student.” Ido-san suddenly appeared from behind Hanamizawa-san.

“Chi-chan! Why’d you have to go and spoil it?!” Hanamizawa-san pouted, but Ido-san just shrugged.

“It’s not like it’s some huge secret.”

“A transfer student? At this time of year?” It was already the middle of November, and the second semester was already halfway through. It was incredibly rare for someone to transfer to a new school this late in the year. I

wondered if it was because of their parents' circumstances. Or maybe...

"Well, no matter who it is, I hope we can be friends with them."

"Hee hee. Yeah, same."

Both of the girls were beaming. The fact that they didn't think twice before saying that just showed what good people they were. Because the first thought that came to *my* mind was, "It's got nothing to do with me."

"Would you be happier if it was a cute girl, Yashiro-kun?" Hanamizawa-san teased.

"Do you really think I'd take the initiative to make friends with the new kid?"

"Nope!"

"I bet not even if it were a guy," Ido-san chimed in.

"I can't even picture you saying, 'The name's Shigeaki Yashiro. Nice to meet you!'"

"Ha ha ha. I'd be like, 'Who the heck *are* you?!'"

The two of them were having a great time making fun of me. Jeez... But for some reason, it didn't really bother me. Probably because they knew what kind of person I was, and I knew them pretty well at this point too.

It was finally time for homeroom, and our teacher called the new student into the room. It was a girl with a soft bob haircut. She seemed like a very quiet person. Her hands were folded in front of her with a kind of dreamy expression on her face. I could tell all the guys perked up immediately when they saw how pretty she was. The girls, with Hanamizawa-san at the forefront, all looked incredibly interested and had a welcoming mood about them.

Meanwhile, I was idly musing that I thought she would look better with long hair. It would make her look even more like a doll.

She wrote her name on the chalkboard and then bowed her head. "M-My name is Yuzuki Sato. It's nice to meet you..." she introduced herself, her voice shrinking with every word. "Um, uh... I-I'm sorry." She started to say something but then looked down, unable to get the rest of the words out. I had a feeling she wanted to tell us more about herself, but she was so nervous her mind

went totally blank.

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There was an awkward silence for a moment, but then the homeroom teacher cleared his throat. “I’m sure Sato’s anxious, coming to a new school so late in the year, so I want you all to help her out. Go ahead and sit in that empty seat there, Sato.” He wrapped things up and had her sit in the seat next to the rear door.

“Okay,” she said in a small voice, then quietly took her seat.

During break after homeroom, Sato-san was quickly surrounded by an unusual group of classmates. First there was Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san, along with Hadori-kun. I figured they were giving her the traditional interrogation that transfer students usually endured. So naturally, there was no way I could approach her—not that I would, anyway.

First off, she was a girl. Second, her seat was far away from mine. We’d never have a reason to talk to each other at all. At least, that’s what I thought.



A few days had passed since Sato-san joined our class. And just as I expected, I’d had no opportunity to talk to her. But much to my surprise, I learned a lot about her. And by that, I meant Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san kept coming straight over to me and giving me reports about what they thought about her and things they talked about.

“Apparently Yuzu-chan’s pretty shy.”

“Yuzu-chan?”

“Yeah, her name is Yuzuki, right? So we call her Yuzu-chan for short.”

“Oh, right. I forgot her first name already.” I was terrible at remembering people’s first names.

“You know, you can call me Chikaze, Yashiro-kun.”

“Hmm, I don’t feel right calling girls by their first names...”

“You’re too self-conscious. Why don’t you call me by a nickname like Kanon does?”

“That would feel even *more* not right.” I wanted to reserve nicknames for

people who were special to me.

“Anyway, back to talking about Yuzu-chan,” Hanamizawa-san said, as if just now remembering the topic at hand. Well, I had forgotten too. “So apparently Yuzu-chan is really shy. When everyone was interrogating her, she acted like she had no idea what to say, and she had this tense smile on her face.”

“Weren’t you both part of that interrogation?” I gave them a sideways glance, and their eyes darted around.

“Ah ha ha... Well, we stopped once we realized she was uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, we told the others to go easy on her.”

“Hm, so you’re actually pretty considerate, then?”

“Being considerate is, like, the basics of being a good person!” Hanamizawa-san puffed out her chest. But then her face fell immediately. “But I wonder if we were being too nosy. Maybe she just wants to be alone? Maybe she feels annoyed when people talk to her too much.”

No comment.

“Ha ha. Maybe she’d get along with *you* better, Yashiro-kun!”

“I don’t know about that,” I murmured, looking over at Sato-san. I thought I saw her quickly look away. Had she been looking at me, or was it just my imagination?



I took my lunch box out, telling myself that I’d stalled enough—today I was going to eat my lunch quickly so I’d have time to go to the library.

“Y-You’re Yashiro-kun, right?” But all of a sudden, Sato-san timidly approached me.

“Um... Yes? Sato-san, right?”

“Uh-huh. Um... I had something I wanted to talk to you about...”

“Me?”

“Yeah... But... I’d prefer to talk to you alone,” she said, her eyes swimming around like crazy.

This again, I thought as I looked around. And Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san were staring at us, nodding with serious expressions on their faces. Apparently they were trying to encourage me to hear her out. They were just trying to be nice to her, so I couldn't be mean to the girl.

"Okay... Mind if I eat while we talk?"

"Oh! Um, sure. Go ahead."

I picked up my lunch box and water bottle and left the classroom with Sato-san. I took her to the same landing where I'd talked to Hadori-kun the other day. This was about the only place in school I could think of where you could have a private conversation.

I sat down on the stairs and opened my lunch box. "This okay?"

"Oh! Um, yeah. It's fine." She plopped down next to me and took out her own lunch box. It was much smaller than mine. "Actually...I'm used to eating lunch alone...in places like this, you know." She said it so naturally I wasn't sure how to react.

I tried to think of something to say in response while I chewed my food. Meanwhile, she smiled with a sheepish look on her face. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I'm sure you can tell by now, but at my last school I was basically a loner. I just...didn't belong in my classroom." She took a sip of whatever hot liquid was in her thermos. "Phew... My last school still had terrible cliques, which I guess are pretty rare nowadays. But it was like the cool kids were on top and everyone else was at the bottom."

"I'm surprised there are still places like that." Cliques were a thing of the past in most schools, but apparently there were still some around clinging to the old ways. Schools like that would be made an example of in today's digital age. In a few years it would probably go extinct altogether.

Sato-san laughed weakly. "I still tried really hard during the first semester. But it was just pointless, because nothing ever went right for me. I managed to make friends with a few other girls, but that didn't really go smoothly either, because at some point they started looking down on me too."

I listened quietly to her.

“Then one day during second semester they just kicked me out, and there was no place for me there anymore. Their decision was final, so I basically just ran away and transferred here instead...” She toyed with her hair while she spoke. “Sorry, I know that’s super vague.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure you don’t wanna talk about it, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“Then it’s fine,” I said.

She blinked at me in surprise and giggled. This time she had a natural smile on her face, totally different from the forced ones I’d seen before. “Mmm!” She gave a big stretch. “I feel so much more relaxed at kinda deserted places like this.”

“...Yeah.”

“I had a feeling you’d understand, Yashiro-kun.” Suddenly her smile vanished and a serious look came over her face. “I may be a loner, but I really want to change myself. Sure, it might be easier to be alone, but I really long to be a part of ‘everyone,’ you know?”

“Really?”

Hanamizawa-san, you said “Maybe she’d get along with you better, Yashiro-kun!” but it looks like you’re wrong.

I never think being alone is tough, and I never try to force myself to be with others either, but Sato-san wished she could be with everyone. That’s probably what got her hurt at her last school, and why she wanted it to happen so badly even now.

Our ways of thinking were complete opposites, but there was no right or wrong answer here. “Well, I hope things get better for you, but...why are you telling me this?” I asked, and her eyes darted around.

“Well... I thought maybe you had a similar personality to me, and at the same time you’re close with Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san in the popular group...”

“Am I?” Are we actually close? I felt like they gave me pretty rough treatment, but whatever.

“Sure you are,” Sato-san said with a weak smile. “I’m jealous. I want to be more like you, Yashiro-kun. That’s why I wanted to ask for your advice. How can I change myself to be more like you?”

“Ah, I see.” So that’s what this was all about. In that case, my answer was simple. “No.”

“...Huh?”

“I can’t help you.” Her expression froze, so I spelled it out clearly. “Sato-san. If you really want to change yourself, you shouldn’t try to be like me. So I can’t help you.”

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That day, after school, homeroom was over and I was packing up my stuff to leave.

“Yashiro-kun!”

“Yashiro!”

But all of a sudden, Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san surrounded me with fierce looks on their faces.

“Uhh, what’s up?” I asked.

Hanamizawa-san smacked her hand on my desk and leaned forward. “Don’t give me that! What in the world did you say to Yuzu-chan?!”

“I don’t know what you mean...”

“We saw you two leave the classroom together for lunch, and then when you came back, Sato-san looked totally depressed. We asked her what was wrong and she brushed it off and said, ‘Nothing.’” As Ido-san explained the sequence of events, I finally understood.

They wanted to know what happened today at lunch. “Okay, I get it now. Let’s wait until more people leave though. I doubt Sato-san wants everyone to know her business.”

“Oh, right.”

“Fine.”

Both of them agreed, so we waited until our classmates had left for club activities or went home. Hadori-kun came by and said, “I’m going to LABI 1, wanna come?” Both of them answered in unison, “We’ve got something important to take care of!” and turned him down. Hadori-kun was a bit intimidated by their menacing attitudes, but he glanced at me and winked with a grin. He seemed to be saying, “I have no clue what’s going on, but take care of those two.”

Yeah, yeah.

Finally, the last person left the room, and it was just the three of us. I explained how Sato-san had come to me for advice. I’m sure she wouldn’t want everyone knowing about it, but I thought it would be in her best interests if I let these two know.

“Hm, so she doesn’t wanna be a loner anymore.”

“That’s how she really feels, huh?”

They both shared their reactions once I was finished explaining the situation.

Hanamizawa-san tilted her head to the side. “But why did you tell her no?”

“Because I’m pro-loner here. How am I supposed to help her?”

“Ohh, good point.”

“You didn’t have to be so harsh, though.” Hanamizawa-san frowned at me.

“Yeah, couldn’t you have heard her out in a nicer way?” Ido-san asked.

“No, I couldn’t.”

“But why not?”

“Because if she wants to quit being a loner, she should steer clear of me.” I looked right into Ido-san’s eyes. “She wants to stop being a loner and be a part of the whole group. And if that’s what she wants, then I want to support her. I’m not trying to say what she wants is wrong. And no one should interfere with her wishes. Right?”

“Right.”

“See? So that’s why I can’t get involved.” I leaned back in my chair and let out

a sigh. “I’m the kind of guy who enjoys doing things alone. I feel like there’s absolutely no reason for people to deny who they are just to fit in with a group. What do you think would happen if someone like me tried to help her? What if she starts to think, ‘Maybe I’m better off alone after all’? I wouldn’t be able to deny that, and then I’d just end up ruining her dream.”

Neither of them said anything. They couldn’t. I decided that meant they accepted my reasoning, so I continued. “If someone genuinely enjoys being alone, it’s nothing more than a nuisance if someone tells them they’ve got bad social skills or calls them a loser. Just like how it would be completely uncalled for to look at someone who enjoys being part of a group and say they have no sense of self, or are just a poser. Nothing good can come out of it.”

“Is that what you really think, Yashiro-kun?”

I nodded. “I’ll help anyone who wants to learn how to spend time alone. But I should stay away from people like Sato-san, who want to learn how to be part of the group. Otherwise I’d just be interfering with her wishes.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Ido-san said, crossing her arms over her chest. “But that’s what *you* believe, Yashiro. It’s still okay if *we* help her, right?”

“Of course. Actually, I think she would’ve been better off coming to you or Hanamizawa-san or Hadori-kun for advice first.”

“Well, the answer here is simple.” Hanamizawa-san smiled. “We’ll just have to give Yuzu-chan a lesson on how to spend time in a group, just like you gave us lessons on how to have fun alone!”

“Ooh, that’s a good idea.” Ido-san nodded with a smile. “Sure it can be fun spending time alone, but you can have fun with everyone else too. We just have to show her how!”

The two of them were really pumped about this. I was certain I could leave this one to the girls. “Oh, but don’t tell her that I told you all of this. Keep it a secret.”

“Ah ha ha. Duh.”

“We never heard a word from you, Yashiro.”

Their responses were playful; I just nodded with a slight chuckle.

Now that I was free from the two of them, I headed down to the lockers to get ready to go home. A certain someone was there, leaning against the lockers. Now it was my time to smile. “You waited for me.”

She didn’t answer, but glanced up at my face. I smiled despite myself at her gesture. Apparently I’d have to explain myself. “I’ll tell you all about it while we walk. Promise.”

I changed into my outside shoes and started walking, hearing light footsteps behind me. I slowed down to let her catch up. *It feels good to walk slow like this*, I thought with a grin on my face. But then she kicked me in the shin.



The next day during break, I saw Hadori-kun, Hanamizawa-san, and Ido-san bring Sato-san into their group to chat with her. I don’t know what they were talking about exactly, but I overheard little snippets.

“...Can you believe that? I didn’t know *what* to do!”

“Ah ha ha... That’s so funny.” Sato-san had a forced smile on her face as she listened to whatever dumb story Hadori-kun was telling. Her expression was tense and she didn’t seem to know when to laugh, but she was staying put and not running away. She really *did* want to change.

I silently cheered her on. *Hang in there!*

“Jeez! You keep telling those weird stories and making Yuzu-chan uncomfortable!”

“Yeah! Read the room, Hadori!”

Luckily, Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san were there to give her backup. Hadori-kun seemed to pick up on their feelings and gave an exaggerated pout. “Huh?! I *am* reading the room!”

“I-It’s all right,” Sato-san said timidly.

“It’s okay, Yuzu. Tell him how you really feel!”

“Nobody asked you, Chikaze!”

“Shut it!”

“R-Really, I’m fine. It doesn’t bother me at all.” Sato-san tried to smooth over the situation while Ido-san and Hadori-kun glared at each other. They were both allowing her into their space to intervene. I’d expect nothing less from the superior social skills of the cool kids. Hanamizawa-san grinned as she watched over the three of them.

I’m sure Sato-san will be fine now. She wanted to be a part of the group, and they were letting her. Everything was going smoothly, so it just had to keep going at this pace. I was still a bit curious, but I looked back down at my book anyway.

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“And so then Yuzu-chan agreed to join our booth for the school festival!”

“Yeah, and the boys all started flipping out because we’re gonna wear cheongsam!”

Whether I liked it or not, Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san had come to give me a full report on their conversation. Wait... School festival? Cheongsam?

“Huh? We’re doing the school festival?”

“What?!” they both exclaimed in unison. Looking rather freaked out, I might add.

“Listen, I know you’re not interested in social stuff, but *still...*”

“Right? I’m kind of weirded out that you’re *that* clueless.”

They both looked extremely disappointed in me...but hey, I had my own reasons for all that.

“The committee members are handling all the details now, so the class doesn’t know what we have planned yet.”

“Oh, I see.”

Generally, participation in the school’s festival was up to each class, and they left it up to volunteers or club members to plan their booths on their own. So that meant the other class members sometimes didn’t participate in the

decision-making process.

“What club are you in again, Yashiro?”

“You told me before that you volunteer at the school library, right?”

Hanamizawa-san answered Ido-san before I could.

“Ohh, that tracks.” Both of them giggled. *Hey, leave me alone.*

“So? What’s the library committee gonna do at the school festival?” Ido-san asked, and I shrugged.

“I guess they’re gonna open up the library and have a book café or something. The third-years are in charge of it.”

“Oh, so they’re going with food. Same as us.”

“You still didn’t tell me what our class is going to be serving.”

“We’re having a refreshment stand in the courtyard. Serving fried rice from the griddle.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re wearing cheongsam.”

You can’t serve cold food at school festivals, as a precaution against food poisoning. Most clubs will prepare their food in the home ec classrooms and then reheat it on a griddle in their booths.

“Wearing cheongsam is really going all out, though. None of the girls opposed it?”

“The boys basically forced it on us! The trade-off was they’re going to do all the cooking for us in the home ec room while we serve at the booths.”

So basically, the boys would be in the back chopping up onions while the girls wore cheongsam and served the customers. It was kind of ironic that they wouldn’t even get to see the girls wear them when they’d been so insistent about it.

“Still...cheongsam?”

“You seem really interested in that, huh? Well, I guess you *are* a guy, after all.” Hanamizawa-san grinned and I shrugged.

“Yeah, well.” Maybe if I helped out at the class’s booth, I’d be able to see a

certain someone wearing a cheongsam. Ah— Wait, in that case I'd just end up chopping onions in the home ec room.

Just as those wicked thoughts crossed my mind, I felt someone pinching my back.



A few days later after school, I went to a big-box retail store near campus.

"Hmm, maybe these beans would be good..." We needed more coffee beans for the book café we were running for the school festival, so I'd come to buy some extras. Apparently the teacher overseeing the library committee was very picky about coffee, and insisted we brew each cup from whole rather than pre-ground beans. I checked the shopping list with my cart.

"Yep, that's the brand. Now I just need to get snacks." Although they were picky about coffee, I'd been told to get whatever snacks they sold in a big pack to serve with the tea. Like Lumonde or Morinaga chocolate biscuits. I mean, those were good and everything, but still...

With the coffee beans and snacks, I was carrying quite a lot of stuff. It wasn't heavy, just unwieldy from all the snack boxes. *If only I had someone with me...*

My usual partner in crime for this kind of thing turned me down, probably because of all the things going on lately. I guess it was my own fault for skipping out on shopping with her last time.

Just as I let out a sigh, I spotted a familiar face by the cash register. "Oh, Yashiro-kun!"

"Sato-san?" She was carrying a plastic shopping bag in one hand. "Are you here shopping too?"

"Oh, yeah. I needed to buy frozen seafood to put in our fried rice," she said, showing me what she'd bought. "Y-You're also shopping here?"

"Yep. I had to buy coffee beans and stuff for the library's café."

"Oh, right. I think I'd like that kind of thing," she said with a smile.

"Are you here alone? No one else came shopping with you?"

“Nope. I’m here by myself.”

“Everything going okay? They’re not bullying you, are they?”

“Huh?” She gave me a blank look and then giggled. “Everyone’s really nice to me. Hadori-kun, Kanon-san, and Chikaze-san too. It’s a warm and comfortable feeling, like a big ray of sunshine,” she said in a soft voice. I could tell she meant every word. “It’s such a nice, comfortable place to be. I wanna work really hard to fit in with everyone. Actually, I take that back—I don’t want to try hard to fit in. I want it to just happen naturally. I want them to think it’s just natural for me to be by their side. And I want to feel that way too.”

“Ah...” I said after a pause. Even though I was silently cheering her on, my reply was cold. Sato-san studied my face. “Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Did you say something, and that’s why they’re being so nice?”

“What are you talking about?” I answered quickly. I didn’t remember doing anything in particular. And even if I had, in the end it was up to Hanamizawa-san and the others to treat her nicely. I had nothing to do with it.

She looked like she wanted to say something else, but just shook her head. “It’s nothing. Never mind.” Then she smiled at me. “Well, I’ve got some more shopping to do.”

“Okay.”

“See ya, Yashiro-kun.” She waved and left. After she was gone, I decided to head back to school. Just then, I got a message on my phone.

Nue: ochazuke at the library

That was all it said. Apparently that was her way of telling me to buy her snacks. *Well, if that’s all it takes for her to stop being mad at me...* I was about to go back inside the store when suddenly I heard a voice say, “Hey, look! It’s Sato.”

Three girls with dyed hair surrounded Sato-san.

“Ahh! M-Misono-san!” Sato-san gasped, her face frozen with fear. Rather

than an acquaintance, she looked like she'd crossed paths with a snake.

"So this is where you went, huh? You already left school by the time I got back."

"Yeah... Ouch!" The girl with reddish-brown hair, who I assumed was the leader, grabbed Sato-san's shoulder. She must've grabbed it pretty roughly, because Sato-san's face was twisted with pain.

"Good timing. Come with us."

"B-But I'm busy..."

"Huh? You really think you can say no to us?" The red-haired girl was too intimidating for Sato-san to say anything back.

Uh-oh. This isn't good at all. I started to head over towards the girls but then stopped. *Wait. Should I really be doing this?* I hesitated. It wasn't about whether or not I should help her. But if she wanted to change herself, I just wasn't sure if I was the one who should be helping her.

I remembered what Sato-san had said before. *"I'm sure you can tell by now, but at my last school I was basically a loner. I just...didn't belong in my classroom."* Those girls had to be from her last school. And judging by her reaction to them, they probably weren't friends either.

I wanted to help her...

But I wasn't her friend. If I helped her now, she would remember this moment as just another time people were mean to her. That might make her even more reluctant to reach out to others. Maybe it would ruin her chances of getting up the courage to change.

Maybe she wouldn't ever try to make friends again. And that was just too sad.

"Everyone has their own strengths, but there are still limits; things you can do, and things you just can't. Confuse the two, and you'll only end up miserable." I heard her voice echoing in my head.

"Are you telling me to know my place?"

"No. I'm saying that if you understand what kind of person you are, you should only do things you're capable of."

She was right. I wasn't the person who should be helping Sato-san. This was something I just couldn't do. So in that case... *I'll have to ask someone else for help.* I reached for my phone.

Yashiro: Sorry, Nue. But can you help me?

I got a response immediately.

Nue: What do you want me to do?

"Ha ha ha." I had to laugh. That was just like her. Not "What's wrong?" or "Are you okay?" but "What do you want me to do?" She could probably sense how anxious I was just from my text. I explained the situation to her and she responded right away.

Nue: walnut mocha from isozaki-ya

That was it. I chuckled. She was showing her agreement by declaring the payment.

Yashiro: Five, ten, however many you want.

I started following Sato-san, who was going with the girls.

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About ten minutes had passed. As I ran, I texted both Ido-san and Hanamizawa-san to explain what was going on.

Kanon: i'll definitely come help yuzu-chan

Chikaze: same. i can't believe anyone would be mean to her

Now that they both had agreed to help, I had them wait near our meeting spot. Meanwhile, I went to the second gymnasium at the corner of our campus.

This gym was used for classes which were originally scheduled to be outside but had to move inside due to bad weather. After school, it was used by the karate and kendo clubs, along with the final person who could help Sato-san.

“Excuse me!” I said loudly as I walked inside and searched for the person in question. The kendo club practiced in the back, standing in a line and swinging their swords. It was difficult to tell them all apart since they were all wearing their kendo uniforms, but thankfully their names were written on their belts (later I learned they’re called *tare*), so I found him right away.

“Hadori-kun!” I called out as I weaved my way through the kendo club members.

“Hey! You over there! Watch out!” The kendo club coach was miffed by the sudden intruder and yelled with a stern look on his face.

“I’m sorry! But it’s an emergency!” I yelled, and ran over to Hadori-kun.

“Yashiro? What the heck are you doing here?”

“Sorry! I really need you to come with me!”

“H-Hey...” I grabbed Hadori-kun and dragged him outside to the back of the gym.

“Well? You better explain yourself.” He gave me a suspicious look.

I nodded. “I’ll tell you everything. I just need your help.” I frantically tried to stay calm as I explained what I’d witnessed. At first Hadori-kun seemed confused, but then his face turned serious. By the time I was done...

“You son of a bitch!” He was furious, and he grabbed me by the collar. “And you just left her? You call yourself a man?!”

“Nngh! I can’t...help her!” I peeled his hand off of me and struggled to add, “If I get in the way, it’ll ruin all her hard work!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I don’t know everything that happened to her. But I’ve got a feeling that those girls were the popular kids from her last school.” I was certain of it after I saw how they looked down on her. “I’m just an introvert who thinks it’s better to spend time alone. If I go meddle and save Sato-san from those popular girls, what do you think’ll happen?”

“I don’t know...”

“Sato-san will remember that moment as the time when the loner saved her from the cool kids. Once again she’ll feel betrayed by the cool kids, and she might never try to hang out with you guys again. You know how she’s trying to change, right?”

“Well, yeah. Yuzuki’s been trying hard to fit in with us.” Hadori-kun paused for a moment and then glared at me. “But that doesn’t mean you should’ve just left her alone! What if something happened to— Huh?”

I showed him my phone while he was talking. It was a video of Sato-san looking very uncomfortable in a diner somewhere, surrounded by those girls. It was a live video. “I asked a friend to watch over her for me. She’ll be able to help if something bad happens.”

“You went to all that trouble, and yet...” Hadori-kun trailed off, his eyes wide. His expression filled in the rest: *And yet you can’t save her yourself?*

“It’s that diner closest to the train station. Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san are already on their way. I want you to meet up with them and save Sato-san. Please.” I got down on my knees right then and there, and pressed my hands into the ground.

“H-Hey, Yashiro...” He sounded surprised to see me basically prostrate in front of him.

I didn’t feel one bit of shame at all as I yelled, “Please! I can’t do it! You guys have to be the ones who save her, or else she’ll never change no matter how bad she wants to! It has to be her friends! It has to be the popular kids, the people she likes being with!”

He didn’t say anything.

“Please, I’m begging you!” And that was all I could do—beg, even to the point

of looking completely pathetic.

Finally, Hadori-kun crouched down and rested a hand on my shoulder. “You said you already asked Kanon and Chikaze to help, right?” As I looked up, he grinned at me. “I asked you to take care of them and you said you would. So you kept your promise to me.”

I stared at him silently.

“I asked you to do something I couldn’t. And now you’re asking me to do something you can’t. So of course I gotta help ya.” He helped me up and brushed the dirt off his knees. “The diner by the train station, right? Leave it to me.” He turned around and started sprinting. He took off his pads, but he was still wearing his kendo uniform. He literally dropped everything to go run and help Sato-san.

He’s such a good guy, I thought as I watched him leave. All of a sudden, I felt someone tap my shoulder. I jolted in surprise and turned around to see the kendo club coach. “Ah... Coach...”

“Hey. You done talking?”

“Yes. Um, I’m sorry I interrupted practice.” When I apologized, the coach just let out a deep sigh.

“I realize it was something serious.”

“S-So then...!”

“However! You still put yourself and others in danger when you walked right into the middle of their sparring practice, and it’s my job as a teacher to discipline you for that. Do you remember those students who got too cocky during field day last spring and started sprinting alongside the runners? One wrong step and they could’ve caused an accident! It was very dangerous behavior. Those students got suspended from class for a full week!”

I suddenly felt all the blood drain from my face. “What?! I-Is this going to go on my record?”

“Hrm, well... These circumstances are different, so I don’t think that’ll be necessary. Depending on how I write it up, you might get off with it just being

counted as an absence.”

I stared at him, speechless, and suddenly he laughed. “But you *did* say it was an emergency. Since I’m the coach, I suppose I could let you off with a lighter punishment.”

“P-Punishment...?”

“I think I’ll have you take Hadori’s place and do his training for him today. To serve as an example for the rest of the students, you know. Just like Selinuntius agreed to be executed in place of his friend Melos.” This teacher looked pretty strict, but it seemed like he was actually pretty reasonable.

“I’m not friends with Hadori-kun, though...”

“Hm? What’s that? You want me to write you up after all?”

“No, I’ll gladly take the punishment for Melos! Er, by the way...what *exactly* does this training entail?”

“Practice swinging the kendo sword two hundred times, and then sprints.”

I’d already sprinted all the way here and was pretty tired... But obviously I couldn’t say no, so I resigned to complete the training under the coach’s watchful eye the entire time.

Chapter Six: Mutual Understanding

Why did this have to happen? This always happens to me. Back at my old school, I wanted to be friends with Misono-san and the others...

It wasn't going well during first semester, but I'd thought things were getting better after that. Well, as long as I went along with whatever they said with a smile, anyway.

But when second semester came around, everything changed. It all started because of a love letter someone sent me one day. One of the girls in Misono-san's group had a crush on the person who sent me the letter. Unfortunately, they didn't take it well when they found out about it, and then they blamed me for it.

"Why would you do this when you *know* how So-and-so feels about him?"

"Can you stop being so mean to our friend?"

"I feel so bad for So-and-so! How are you gonna make this up to her?!"

The whole time, I thought I still belonged in their group. But when it came to the unspoken ranks assigned to each of us, I was in last place.

"Apologize!"

"Huh? You call that an apology?"

They kept asking me for an apology, but I was so scared I couldn't even speak.

"I'm *really* pissed off right now! Someone hold her down!"

People could be extremely cruel in the name of sticking up for someone else. Misono-san confused my silence for defiance, and she snapped. She took a pair of fabric scissors out of her sewing box we used for home ec, and...

Snip.

"What?!"

She cut off my pigtails with one snip. My hair fell down to my feet, scattering

everywhere. I was so shocked I couldn't say a word as tears streamed down my face.

"Hey! What are you doing over there?!" A teacher just happened to be passing by and caught what happened.

It became a huge incident. After all, she had used scissors—which could be seen as a weapon—to cut her classmate's hair without their consent. The school took it very seriously and suspended Misono-san for a week, so she didn't come to school for a while.

But it didn't make me happy when I heard she'd been punished, because I knew nothing would change.

"Why'd Misono-san get suspended?"

"It's her fault!"

I could hear the voices from across the room. Whispers so loud I could hear them, smearing my name. The verdict of the class was that it was all my fault Misono-san got suspended. The environment became so uncomfortable for me, my parents got worried and suggested I transfer schools.

So I ran away from my old school, and from Misono-san and her friends. I ran away to a school in the opposite direction and four train stations away. I thought I'd never see them again, but...

"I got into big trouble because of you, you know! I had to write apology letters every single day, and my parents *still* won't shut up about how this'll go on my permanent record!"

"Poor Misono..."

"Right? When it's *her* fault!"

After Misono-san and her friends found me, they brought me to a diner near the train station. They cornered me into a table in the back, subjecting me to a kangaroo court.

I thought they would be violent, but apparently they chose verbal abuse this time. Misono-san must have been wary of doing anything physical since her suspension. If she got caught doing something like that again, she could get

expelled this time. So instead they would attack me with words—it wouldn't leave behind evidence. Not that it mattered to me. I wondered if I should be nice to them. It was painful, hearing all that. I couldn't even taste the coffee I'd ordered.

"Hey, Sato. Are you even listening?" they asked. I didn't want to listen.

I glanced up at them. They were the most popular kids at my old school. The most popular kids at my new school were Kanon-san, Chikaze-san, and Hadori-kun. They were equally popular, so how could they be so different?

The kids at my new school were so nice to me. They tried really hard to include me in their conversations, and if I felt awkward or stumbled over my words they were patient with me. They would just give me a friendly smile. They were really wonderful people.

I wanted to hurry up and fit in with them as soon as possible, and that's why I'd been trying so hard.

But now as I sat here and looked at Misono-san and the other girls, I felt my resolve wavering. They all saw me as an enemy. And suddenly, in the back of my mind I thought, *In the end, all popular kids are the same.*

Of course I didn't really think Kanon-san, Chikaze-san, and Hadori-kun were like that. But they were special. I couldn't help but think... What if trying to be popular would just make me end up like Misono-san and the others?

If I have to go through this, maybe it's better to just be alone... I looked down as these dark thoughts grew louder.

Just then...

"I came to get you, Yuzuki." I heard a voice. Hadori-kun was standing there, wearing his kendo uniform. And Kanon-san and Chikaze-san were with him. Once Kanon-san realized I saw her, she smiled and waved as if to say, "It's okay." Chikaze-san was glaring at Misono-san and the other girls.

What are they doing here?



“Huh? Who the hell are you?” Misono-san spat. Her voice was so harsh it startled me and I couldn’t speak, but Hadori-kun kept a calm and composed expression on his face as he looked at me.

“I already told you. I’m here to get my friend, Yuzuki.”

“Yeah, since it looks like she’s in trouble!” Kanon-san said with a forceful smile.

“And helping someone out when they’re in trouble is what friends do!” Chikaze-san added, an angry look on her face.

Their attitudes only made Misono-san angrier. “So what? This is none of your business, so stay out of it!”

“I told you, she’s our friend. We’re not gonna just leave her here when she’s in trouble. Plus, what’d Yuzuki ever do to you?”

“We were her friends too! Until she ruined everything!”

Misono-san told them what happened at our school before I transferred. I didn’t want them to know about it. I didn’t want them to think I was some annoying kid who sucked at keeping friendships, and I didn’t want them to think badly of me either. There’s no way they would still want to be friends with me after hearing this story. It hurt so much I just covered my ears with my hands.

And a few minutes later, I hesitantly glanced over towards Hadori-kun and the girls. *Huh?* The three of them had surprised looks on their faces. I pulled my hands away from my ears as Hadori-kun tilted his head to the side. “How is any of that Yuzuki’s fault?”

“Yeah, Yuzuki didn’t even do anything!”

“Sounds like you’re blaming her for your own mistakes!”

All three of them agreed.

“Huh?! She doesn’t know how to read the room—she was the one who messed up the vibe of our whole group!” Misono-san screamed.

But Hadori-kun just sighed. “So what’s more important to you? Your friends or ‘the vibe’ of your group?”

“W-Well...”

“I don’t even have to ask you. You wouldn’t even hear Yuzuki out to see how she felt about it. I can tell you look down on her.”

“Yeah, if the roles were reversed, there’s no way she’d blame you!” Kanon-san said with a smile. It *was* a smile, but I could tell she was furious, even angrier than Chikaze-san, who was outwardly mad.

And I realized I’d gotten close enough to them that I could pick up on that.

All of a sudden Chikaze-san banged her fist down on the table. “You’re blaming Yuzuki and bullying her all because your crush didn’t like you back?! And now you’re sitting here ganging up on her! It’s pathetic and you should be ashamed of yourselves!”

“Yeah, that’s all her friendship meant to you guys. All you cared about was some stupid vibe and assigning ranks to each other. The reason everyone turned on her was all because of you guys!” Hadori-kun pointed out.

Misono-san blurted out, “What?! That’s *reality* right now. If anyone can turn on you at any time, that’s all the more reason to stick together with your group!”

“Yeah, right.” Hadori-kun snorted with laughter. “Lately I’ve been talking with this guy who’s an introvert—he doesn’t care about being a loner. And as I got to know him better, it really made me think about things. Not too long ago, loners and otaku were looked down on by the cool kids. It made me wonder what anyone’s problem with them was.” He chuckled to himself.

I had a good idea who Hadori-kun was thinking about right now. A certain someone who didn’t mind being alone, who didn’t care what others thought of him, who said he couldn’t help me when I asked for it—and yet at the same time had a sad look on his face while he said it.

But since Misono-san had no idea who this person was, she was confused. “S-So what am I supposed to do, then?!”

“Are you trying to change anything? Have you and your friends ever gotten together and tried to make a difference about anything? You haven’t, have you? What *they* did was stick to what they liked.”

I knew exactly what he was talking about, because I'd been a loner for so long. No matter what bad things happened to me, I never thought about changing things or tried to get people together to help make a change. I just retreated to my own little world, where things were comfortable.

Hadori-kun's eyes were steady and strong as he continued. "Loners stuck to what they liked, no matter what anyone said about it, and no matter what society thought about them. That's how otaku culture began to thrive. That's all it was." Hadori-kun put a hand on his hip and let out a sigh. "So if people start to look down on us, then isn't it *our* turn to hold on to what's important? I don't wanna be on my own. I feel like there's way more value in being around everyone else. But that's also why I value every single person who makes up my group. Even if they say awkward things sometimes that affects the vibe."

"So what's going to change, then?"

"Not a lot, but..." He thought about it for a moment and then laughed. "If you value your friends who can be real with each other, people will notice that and you'll earn real respect. There are loners who think we're pretty cool too."

Kanon-san and Chikaze-san nodded. I could tell they all really trusted Yashiro-kun. All of a sudden, Hadori-kun linked his arm through mine and helped me stand up. "Anyway, we're taking Yuzuki home now. I'm sure you all don't wanna cause a scene, so you better never come near her again. Because if you do...I've got something up my sleeve, just in case."

Hadori-kun glared at Misono-san and the other two girls, intimidating them into silence.

"Oh!" I realized we were about to leave, so I put some money down on the table to cover the cost of my coffee.

Hadori-kun started to leave but then turned around. "If you guys don't change the way you treat people, all you're gonna do is fall until you can't get any lower." That was all he said before he grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the diner. I'd never seen him angry before. His face looked super scary, but at the same time...

I couldn't take my eyes off of him.



Meanwhile...

I hope everything went all right. I'd completed two hundred strokes of the kendo sword and the sprints while the rest of the kendo club members warmly watched over me. I staggered out of the gym once they'd finally let me go.

I thought I was in good shape from all the cycling I did, but swinging that sword made me use muscles I didn't even know I had. Just lifting my arms a little made them tremble like crazy. My legs were shaking too.

Ugh, this sucks... I'd already been feeling exhausted lately. But now with all that added torture, my body had reached its limits. My engines were stalled. I unsteadily walked over to the western side of the school building and leaned against the wall, slowly sliding down to the ground. Since I was on the west side, I felt warm from the setting sun.

All right. I was conscious, so I'd just overexerted myself. *What the hell am I doing lately?* I thought absently, feeling the wall against my back.

I was sure by now Hadori-kun had met up with Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san to stage some dashing rescue of Sato-san like a prince on a white horse. Meanwhile, I was crumpled on the ground behind the school because I'd swung a kendo sword one too many times and did too many sprints. It was pathetic. But I guess it also kind of suited me. *Maybe I'll just take a little nap. I'm tired, and maybe I'll feel better if I rest a bit,* I thought, and I quickly lost consciousness.



Whoosh.

I can still remember it clearly. A hand shooting up into the air, a perfectly straight posture, and a calm face, ready to say anything. I never thought there could be something more beautiful or reassuring.

It was the first meeting for the library committee. I like reading, so I decided to join. The first order of business was deciding when everyone would work. The job included opening and closing up the library, checking out and checking in books, that sort of thing. It was the typical kind of work for someone who

wanted to join the library committee, after all.

“There are ten shifts—lunch and after school, Monday through Friday. Does anyone care which shift they work?” one of the older students asked. Everyone was basically like, “Eh, I don’t care...” when suddenly a hand shot up.

Wait, I think she’s in my class.

“Um, you’re a first-year, right? Which shift do you want?” he asked.

The girl answered, “I want to work all the lunch shifts.”

“Huh?”

“I was already planning on spending my lunch break at the library. So I can be the one to unlock and lock up when I’m done,” she explained frankly. None of the other volunteers really knew what to say.

I heard them whispering among themselves...

Huh? Is that really okay?

Well, she says that’s what she wants...

It’d make it easier for us if she took our shifts.

Meanwhile, all I could think was...

Beautiful.

She didn’t care that no one else knew what to say. I fell in love at first sight when I saw her hand shoot straight up in the air—when she sat straight up in her chair. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. I felt this sensation like excitement building up from deep in my belly, rising all the way up to my chest. The reason I fell in love with her was because she didn’t care what anyone else thought—with absolute confidence, she spoke her mind about what she wanted to do.

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“Mmm...” When I woke up, I felt a warmth on the right side of my body. Did I fall asleep leaning against something warm? As the foggiess of sleep began to clear, I slowly realized what that warm thing was.

“Nue...?” She was sitting down on the ground pressed up next to me, reading a book. “Sorry, was I heavy?” I asked, but she shook her head. She must’ve

come looking for me after I'd stopped texting her. She'd watched over Sato-san in my place to make sure nothing bad happened, and she was the one who'd been recording that video I showed Hadori-kun.

I yawned and stretched out, wondering how long I'd been asleep. I checked my phone and saw messages from Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san.

Kanon: operation: save yuzu-chan was a success!

Chikaze: hadori went back to kendo club so we'll take the princess home

Well, that was a relief. Things must've gone smoothly. Oh, that's right—I made a promise to Nue. "You wanted walnut mocha from Isozaki-ya, right? I'll go buy some n—"

"No." I started to stand up, but Nue reached out and put her hand on my shoulder, stopping me. I glanced over at her but she was still looking at her book. I took the hint and sat back down.

"Can we stay like this for a while longer?" I asked. She plonked her head on my shoulder in response. We sat there snuggled together in a sunbeam.

This is so warm... It was still late autumn though, and the sun set early this time of year. It wouldn't be long before it got cold. So I decided to enjoy this precious warmth while it lasted.

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The next day, Hadori-kun came up to talk to me the moment I got to school.

"Hey, Yashiro. Can you come with me for a sec?"

"Sure."

We wordlessly walked to the same landing we had gone to before, but this time Hadori-kun's expression was much softer.

"Thanks for telling me about Yuzuki," he said.

I snickered. "I'm the one who asked you to help her. Shouldn't I be thanking

you?”

“Ah ha ha. I guess you’ve got a point there! But I am grateful to you. Just accept it, okay?”

“All right. And thanks for helping out.”

“You bet. If anything else comes up, just let me know.” He whacked me on the chest. I knew I could count on him if that happened.

Now that we’d both thanked each other, a silence fell between us. We didn’t really know much about each other, so we weren’t sure what else to say. We were little more than strangers, so it was kind of a miracle that he’d cooperated with me at all.

The silence felt awkward, so I thought I should probably say something.

“Hey, Yashiro...” But he beat me to it.

“Hm?”

“Are we friends?”

“Not really,” I answered frankly.

“I guess you’re right,” he said, laughing. “It’s not like we’re gonna go hang out together or something. You feel the same way, right?”

“Yeah. It’d be pretty weird if you asked me to join your friend group tomorrow or something.” Sure they were all nice, but the idea of keeping up with that energy sounded exhausting. I didn’t have the same motivation as Sato-san either.

Hadori-kun crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side. “So if we’re not friends, then why do we understand each other so well?”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“And if we understand each other so well, then why aren’t we friends?”

“That’s just how the world works right now.”

There was more mutual understanding between popular kids and loners now, and the walls between them had disappeared. They’d both gotten to know each other better, which led to mutual separation. Mutual understanding leading to

mutual separation may sound contradictory, but that's how things were happening in the world today. *Because* we understood each other so well, we lived apart from each other. It was a result of caring about each other, a conscious choice to not hurt each other. To preserve the other's worlds by staying out of them, by respecting and giving each other space.

Even if we could no longer interact with each other, it was better than hurting each other.

"I don't have the desire to be with people to the point that I'd blindly go along with the group. And you don't really want to be alone, right?"

"Yeah. I feel more comfortable being with everyone."

"I think that we won't really talk much anymore because we respect each other's feelings."

"Yeah, but...that's kinda sad, don't you think?"

"That's just how it is. I don't think it's so bad as long as we can keep reaching out if someone's in trouble though."

"Yeah. But..." Hadori-kun rested a hand on my shoulder. "Maybe someone won't be satisfied with that, and they'll try to bring loners and popular kids together? They'll say it's just too sad to have to stay apart."

"It'll just lead to more conflict, won't it? Then we'll be right back to how things used to be, when everyone was jealous or looking down on each other."

It'd be a vicious cycle. Getting involved, becoming hostile, reaching an understanding, getting involved... Over and over again. It's like history repeating itself.

"Not necessarily." Hadori-kun shrugged. "There are people like Kanon and Chikaze and Yuzuki who can fit in on both sides. Someone neutral like that could really change things."

"Someone neutral, who wasn't a loner or a cool kid?" Hm, he might be onto something. With only the two groups, the cycle would just continue. But if a neutral party appeared... Who knows what the future would hold if someone like that came into the picture?

“You’ll help out again if something happens with Kanon and the other girls, right?” he asked.

“Well, yeah.”

“And so will I. We can both help out if they need it. Isn’t that enough of a connection?”

“Hm, I guess you’re right.” That was one thing we had in common, something important to both of us that still connected us. Even if understanding led to separation, it didn’t have to be the end. Maybe there was something beyond that. I wasn’t sure yet whether it was a repeating cycle or deeper understanding. But just because I didn’t know didn’t necessarily mean it had to be something bad.

Hadori-kun whacked me on the shoulder. “Well, see ya, Yashiro. Keep takin’ care of Kanon and Chikaze for me.”

“Same to you. Take care of Sato-san.”

“You know I will.”

And so we went our separate ways, back to the places we both belonged.

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After second period ended, we found out we had to have third period in the AV room, so I gathered up my stuff. I was just about to leave the classroom when I ran into Sato-san, who was clutching her textbooks and pencil case to her chest.

“Ah!” we both said in unison.

“Um, hey, Sato-san.”

“H-Hi, Yashiro-kun.”

We stared at each other in silence. Yep. We said hello at the same time and then neither of us could think of a thing to say otherwise. Things had been awkward like this between us since I turned down her request for help that day.

Finally, she managed to squeeze out the words, “W-We’ve got class in the AV room next, huh? Let’s go.”

“Y-Yeah. We’d better get going.”

We began to walk side by side, not knowing what to say, as usual.

“Hey...” she murmured all of a sudden. “Were you the one who asked Yukito-kun and the others to come yesterday?”

I didn’t answer. Who was Yukito again? Oh, right—Hadori-kun. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Are you sure?” She studied my face. “You saw me right before Misono-san and the others confronted me, so I don’t know who else it could’ve been. But if you say it wasn’t you...”

“It wasn’t me. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Hmm. Okay, then.” She paused and then whispered, “Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“Hee hee. Nothing. Yukito-kun, Kanon-san, and Chikaze-san saved me. I can’t thank them enough.” She smiled softly. “I want to become the kind of person who can repay someone’s kindness, like they do.”

“That sounds like a noble goal.”

“Yeah!” she replied enthusiastically.

I decided to ask her something I’d been wondering about. “Hey, how come you’re calling Hadori-kun by his first name now?”

“U-Uh...!” Her face turned bright red after I pointed that out. “I’d...really appreciate it if you just ignored that,” she whispered. It was obvious that she was developing feelings for him.

“Got it. I won’t stick my nose where it doesn’t belong. I’m more sensitive than that.”

“Ugh... Hey, that reminds me—are there any girls *you* like, Yashiro-kun?” She was probably just trying to take the focus off herself. In that case...

“Yeah.”

“Huh?” She gave me a look of surprise. She seemed frozen for a moment and then snapped back to reality. “What? Seriously?!”

I let out a laugh and then answered plainly, “Yep. There’s a girl I like.”

Later, at lunchtime, I quickly finished eating as usual and was about to head to the library when Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san came over.

“Thanks for yesterday, Yashiro-kun.”

“Yukito told us what happened at kendo club. Sounds like you had a pretty rough time too.”

They both had warm smiles on their faces. I smiled back at them. “I guess you could say that. Thanks for your help, though.”

“Anything for Yuzu-chan!”

“We didn’t tell Yuzuki that you were involved, but I have a feeling she figured it out. That’s cool with you, right?” Ido-san asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah. You guys should solve your own problems, after all.”

“Hee hee hee. You missed out on your chance to be the hero,” Hanamizawa-san teased.

I shrugged. “I’m not the hero type. That fits Hadori-kun way better than me.”

“Ooh, so are you going to be a supporter who watches over her from the shadows?”

“I don’t really want to get involved with people that much.”

As we had this ridiculous conversation, I realized that if something had happened to Sato-san yesterday that made her close off her heart, we wouldn’t be joking around like this today. So I was really glad that we’d resolved everything peacefully.

If Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san hadn’t started talking to me, I never would’ve connected with Sato-san or started talking to Hadori-kun either. And then we all wouldn’t have worked together to help Sato-san.

Sato-san wanted to change herself, so she came to me for advice and worked really hard to fit in with Hanamizawa-san and the others. You could almost say they laid the foundation for the friendship that saved her.

It all started with three girls. They had crossed the boundaries between loners

and cool kids, got me and Hadori-kun involved, and tied us all together, which led to a better outcome for everyone. *“Isn’t that enough of a connection for us?”*

Hadori-kun was right. Suddenly, those three girls seemed almost glaringly bright to me.

Just then, Hanamizawa-san slammed her hand down on my desk and leaned forward. “Anyway, Yashiro-kun! Let’s go to the spa or karaoke together again sometime. Going alone is fine or whatever, but I think it’ll be way more fun if we all go together!”

“Ooh, I wanna come! I thought of another thing I can’t enjoy alone. Are you free this weekend?” Ido-san leaned forward too.

“This weekend? I’m not really sure it’s a good idea to keep going out with girls like this...” I said hesitantly.

Hanamizawa-san smirked at me. “Don’t tell me you *still* think going out with girls equals going on a date! You’re *way* too self-conscious.”

“Yeah, we do that kinda thing all the time,” Ido-san agreed with Hanamizawa-san.

That’s not what I meant... “I mean, it’s a bad idea to keep going out with other girls on the weekends when I already have a girlfriend.”

“*What?!*” Both of them stared at me in shock.

“Uhh, can you say that one more time?” Hanamizawa-san held up a finger.

Apparently I needed to spell it out for them. “I have a girlfriend and I love her very much.”

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YUZUKI SATO



Speaking of diners...

Yes?



Are you the kind of person who can go out to eat alone?

Yep. I used to a lot when I had more free time.



I had a feeling. That's a difference from Hanamizawa-san and the others.

I didn't have anyone to go with.



Well, that's a sad reason. It doesn't have to be that negative, you know.

When do you like to go out to eat alone?



I like to go right away when they have new menus or promotions. Diners have promotional campaigns a lot, or have different specials with lots of delicious foods.

Oh, I guess you're right. Like if you order a special, you'll get a free folder with a popular anime character on it or something. I got a full set of folders from a popular Jump series.





Oh, do you like that anime?

Nope!



.....Sorry.

What's with all the dots? Anyway, I gave the folders to Ido-san and she loved them.



Oh, right. She likes shonen manga.

She said she'd buy them off of me and tried to pull cash out of her wallet, so I just let her have them.



She's way too serious about this!

Later she said she felt too bad about getting them for free so she gave me some of her lunch. She said if there's another promotion going on like that again we



...Good for you.

Thanks!



Final Chapter: Always Nearby

“What a terrible scene...” I blurted out. Kanon-san and Chikaze-san looked like fish that had washed ashore on the beach; one was slumped over her desk and the other leaned back limply in her chair. *I don't remember them looking like this at the beginning of lunch...*

I had forgotten my own lunch at home today, so I'd gone to buy a bun from the store. But this is what I found when I got back. Their eyes were completely dead.

“Um, Yukito-kun? What happened to them?” I asked him.

He had a sheepish grin on his face. “Hey, Yuzuki. They've been like that ever since they got back from talking to Yashiro.”

Yashiro-kun? What in the world did he do to them? I gave him a puzzled look, and he laughed. “That's what happens when girls find out the guy they have a crush on already has a girlfriend. They didn't even realize they liked him until they found out they didn't have a chance, so now they don't know how to feel.”

“A crush... What?!” They both had a crush on him?! I guess now that I thought about it, they *had* been talking to Yashiro-kun an awful lot. Plus, he told me that there was a girl he liked. And apparently the girl in question was neither Kanon-san nor Chikaze-san.

“They'd better give up on him. He's head over heels for his girlfriend,” Yukito-kun said.

Then all of a sudden the light returned to their eyes and they both exclaimed in unison, “Wait just a minute!”

“How did you know that Yashiro-kun had a girlfriend, Yukito-kun?!”

“Are you sure she's real?! It's not just an imaginary girlfriend?!”

Oof, they're accusing him of having an imaginary girlfriend? That's harsh. Are they really his friends?

“Y-Yeah. A while back, Yashiro-kun told me himself that he was dating someone,” Yukito-kun stammered under their menacing glares. He told me later that when he went to ask Yashiro-kun to get along with Kanon-san and Chikaze-san, he’d said that if Yashiro-kun tried anything shady with them that he’d come after him. And then Yashiro-kun smiled and told him about his girlfriend.

“I have a girl who’s really important to me. I’d never betray her and make a move on another girl, so you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

And apparently that was terrible news for Kanon-san and Chikaze-san. At least he had been honest about it, though.

“No way...” Kanon-san looked beside herself.

“Well, who’s Yashiro’s girlfriend, then?” Chikaze-san flopped back into her chair dejectedly.

Yukito-kun nonchalantly revealed the truth. “You guys already know her. Because,” he said, pointing to the desk behind Yashiro-kun’s, “She was sitting behind him every time you two went to talk to him.”

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“What? You have a girlfriend, Yashiro-kun?!”

“And not an imaginary girlfriend or, like, an anime character or something?!”

“You have a girlfriend even though you’re a loner?!”

Once Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san heard I had a girlfriend, they caused a huge commotion. That told me everything I needed to know about how they thought of me.

“It was totally harsh.”

At lunchtime, I threw myself against the circulation desk and told Nue the whole story as she read a book next to me.

“You’re not an imaginary girlfriend. You’re real. See, I can touch you.” I reached out and touched her shoulder. She swatted at my hand, but she didn’t push it away. Just lightly tapped it, so it must not have bothered her that much. I let go of her and leaned back in my chair. “You know, I’ve been thinking.

Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san have totally the wrong idea when it comes to loners. They think that because they're fine being by themselves, they always want to be alone. But that's not right."

I propped my cheek up on my hand and stared at Nue. "If I'm strong enough to be alone, I'm fine being with other people too, no matter how many there are. If you're okay being by yourself, you don't have to worry about being isolated from your friends."

That's why some loners were okay with not being loners all the time. After all, I had no problem talking with Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san. But I got that strength from the girl sitting in front of me...

"That's why I like spending time with you like this, Nue."

She closed her book with a thud and slowly turned towards me, calling my name. "Hachijo-kun."

Obviously, my name is Yashiro, but she called me Hachijo-kun.

I waited for her to continue, but she turned away in a huff. "I wish you wouldn't say things like that."

"Sorry. Did I interrupt your reading?"

"No... It's just embarrassing." I took a closer look and noticed even her ears were bright red. I thought I was going to laugh.

She didn't really talk that much, but that didn't mean she didn't have feelings or that she was inconsiderate. She just always had a lot of thoughts going on in her mind—too many to express in words.

That was the first thing I noticed about her after we started dating. So when she *did* finally put something she was thinking into words, I knew that she really felt strongly about it.

That's why I fell in love with Nue—I mean... "Tsugumi Torano-san."



Hearing her name, she gave a shy smile and said, “Why’d you say my name all of a sudden?”

“Just felt like it. I wanted to say your real name instead of your nickname.”

“Weirdo.”

She scooted her chair over to me and sat sideways in it, resting her back against me instead of the chair. Whenever she did that, I always thought it was something a cat would do. It reminded me of that tiger on the cover of the book she liked to read.

“Can I...stroke your hair?”

“Do whatever you want,” she replied after a pause.

With her permission granted, I began to gently stroke her hair.

“I do too.”

“Hm?”

“I like spending time with you like this too... Hachijo-kun,” she said with a soft smile.

Midword

Hello for the first time for those of you who don't know me, and hello again for those who do! I'm the author, Dojyomaru. This is my first new series in several years. In this midword I'll be discussing why I chose to write this novel, and various things I realized while writing it.

First, there were two questions I had that inspired me to write this.

1: What would a school romcom look like in a world where cool kids and loners were no longer pitted against each other?

2: Could I write a story without showing the female lead?

I'll expand on that first question. A common theme in school romcoms used to pit popular kids against unpopular kids, in the vein of the phrase "Go away, normies!"

For example, in the manga *No Matter How I Look at It, It's You Guys' Fault I'm Not Popular!* the unpopular kids are jealous of the popular kids. The readers get secondhand embarrassment from watching them go around in circles and self-destruct, but at the same time it's a funny story.

There are too many stories to mention where an unpopular guy meets a popular girl and falls in love with her. In these stories, the popular kids are the unpopular kids' enemies, and the heroine is always an attractive girl who's willing to come over to the unpopular kids' side.

But in recent years, that's all changed in the world of light novels. One might say it was the novels *I Don't Have Many Friends* and *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected* that set the new trends. These books suggested the idea that it wasn't necessary to become popular, but popular kids have their own problems, so it wasn't necessary to pit the groups against each other anymore.

Now, society has embraced inclusiveness and diverse points of view, which make it harder to write stories where only one character drives the narrative

with their own opinions and morals. Before, readers could only see the setting from the main character's eyes, but when you give each character their own feelings, it's necessary to consider the motivations behind each character's actions.

And in the case of stories about popular versus unpopular kids, that means you have to show both perspectives, not just one. The popular characters have to be written in such a way that the readers can identify with them. You can't accomplish that if you depict them as villains who do nothing but abuse the unpopular kids. And if they *do* treat the unpopular kids unfairly, you have to give them a good motive, such as peer pressure or the fear of being left out.

When you begin to show how popular kids suffer, it gets harder to have the unpopular kids oppose them. But when you show the two groups begin to understand each other, there's no longer a reason for them to fight. So I began to think that the next generation of school romcoms might show a world after the resolution of the two groups' opposition, and yet I haven't seen any stories like that come up.

That was a very long explanation for the first reason I decided to write this story—"What would a school romcom look like in a world where cool kids and loners were no longer pitted against each other?"

There were no other stories like this, so I decided to write it myself. I wanted to write a story that showed the mutual understanding between popular and unpopular kids—a school romcom set in a world where the two groups had resolved their conflicts with each other.

And what I came up with was the story you just read. Once the two groups understand each other, it leads to mutual noninterference. That doesn't mean they hate each other, they just respect each other and have decided not to interfere with each other's lives, because that would be better than hurting or discriminating against each other. In the end, they build a definitive wall of consideration between the two groups.

Therefore, since they respect each other's wishes, they can't cross that line.

I discussed this conclusion with someone living in America and they said, "I totally understand that!" They went on to say, "As liberalism has progressed,

the way of life between the two parties has drastically changed. There's such a divide that they just ignore each other. It's so separated that it feels very dystopian."

That made me understand why a story like this hadn't been published before. Anyway, these are all just my own personal conclusions, and certainly there are other solutions. As I said in the story, this isn't necessarily the goal. I'd actually love to read a story written by someone who came to a different conclusion, and I'd love to have a discussion with them about it.

Now, that brings me to my second reason—"Could I write a story without showing the female lead?"

I tried to minimize her presence as much as possible in this story. How did I do? I'm sure there will be mixed feelings about it like, "If you're not going to write about the female lead, then you shouldn't show her at the end either." But I thought that would be a good twist—to reveal her at the end. If you'd like to read a story where the heroine is never revealed, by all means go ahead and challenge yourself to write it. I'd like to see which version is better.

Well, I've said all I wanted to say about the main story now. After this is a series of short stories featuring Nue. She was a character which wasn't written about much at all in the main story, but now you'll be able to discover what she was thinking. When my editor read Nue's stories, they were puzzled and said, "Is this some kind of mystery writing technique?"

Once you've read Nue's stories, go ahead and read this book from the very beginning again if you feel like it; I think you'll see things from a different perspective.

Finally, I'd like to thank the illustrator Kou Kusaka, as well as my editors and proofreaders. And of course, thank *you* for buying this book.

Secret Chapter 1: Nue's Heart

My dad is an avid birdwatcher. According to him, he'd decided that if he ever had a daughter, he'd name her after a bird. The morning I was born, he heard a thrush—a *tsugumi*—chirping on the way to the hospital. I guess the sound of that bird made a big impression on him, so he decided to name me Tsugumi. I think it's a pretty common, but heartwarming story.

Or rather, it would be if my last name hadn't been Torano. So my name is Tsugumi Torano. And if you smash it together in Japanese name order, it sounds a lot like *toratsugumi*, which is a different kind of bird, a White's thrush. Back in the day they used to be called *nuedori*. And those birds have a negative image. It lets out an eerie noise before dawn when it's still dark out: *twee...tuuu...tuuu...tuuu*.

Its call resembles the sound people make when suffering from respiratory problems (or the sound someone makes right before they die) and is associated with a *yokai* named *nue*. It has the head of a monkey, the body of a tanuki, the arms and legs of a tiger, and the tail of a snake. Because of that association, whenever a *nuedori* is mentioned in waka poetry, it symbolizes someone crying in the shadows, unrequited love, a grieving widow or widower, someone crying so sorrowfully they can barely make a sound, and so on. Basically, it symbolizes intense sadness.

I wouldn't exactly say it was *because* my name resembles such an inauspicious bird, but I grew up having problems showing and expressing my emotions to others.

All kinds of thoughts mixed together in my mind, but I was unable to put them into words—or when I did try, it just took too long. In general, when I would talk to someone else, they'd move on to the next subject before I even had the chance to respond. It bummed me out every time it happened, but apparently it came off completely different to other people.

“Nothing ever affects Torano-san.”

“She’s got a really strong sense of self.”

“Yeah, she’s so quiet. She never minds being alone.”

That’s what my classmates always said about me, so I’d just accepted the fact that I was alone. I wasn’t *trying* to be quiet, I just couldn’t ever keep up with their conversations. And now that introverts and loners were seen as having a strong individuality rather than being looked down on, that must be why they thought of me like that. Not that I could blame them.

I wasn’t great at expressing myself, and I didn’t feel like forcing myself to be around others either. If people thought I was fine being alone, then it was just easier for me to go along with it. So I just flew solo for all of elementary school and junior high. My world was complete with just me. That’s what I thought, anyway...until one day in high school.



Today was the first day of classes, not long after my high school entrance ceremony. As soon as I walked into the classroom, I saw a lottery box. Apparently we had to draw numbers to decide our seating chart. Every seat had an assigned number, indicated on the chalkboard.

I don’t care where I sit...

I didn’t know anyone in this class, so I didn’t want to sit next to anyone in particular. I drew a number from the box and checked it against the seating chart on the chalkboard. Among six rows of desks, my seat was in the second, third from the left. Not a good seat, but not a bad seat either.

As I sat down, I saw that my classmates had already formed groups and were chatting with each other.

“Hey, what junior high did you go to?”

“Me? Kamisu Third.”

“Oh, so pretty nearby, then! I went to Aonishi.”

“Nice. My name’s Kanon Hanamizawa, by the way.”

“I’m Chikaze Ido. Nice to meet you, Hanamizawa-san.”

A pretty girl with a beautiful smile was chatting with a cool tomboy in the front of the classroom. Even the air around them seemed to come alive as they talked. Girls with good communication skills could make friends with someone right off the bat. Well, maybe they weren't friends just yet, but they were able to talk to people in a really friendly way, so it was only a matter of time. That was a skill I just didn't have.

That looks like such a pain... At the same time, I'd been thinking how stifling it must be to have a personality like that. Just like how people thought of loners as strong people, those who had a lot of friends—the popular kids—were seen as weak people who couldn't live alone.

It was easier for me to be alone, so I didn't care if other people thought I was a loner, but I'm sure girls like them faced a lot of criticism. I felt sorry for them, but it wasn't like there was anything I could do to help.

Anyway... I took a novel out of my bag. I love reading. It's the best way to spend time alone, if you ask me. I love reading everything, from hardcovers to light novels. I just like stories. I pay attention to the flow of a story a lot when I read. And when you read enough of them like I do, it's easy to see how stories change according to the times. Certain themes are popular in certain decades; for example, a few years ago the popular theme was "imagination." And if a story has a certain ending, the next one that comes out will have an ending that sort of counterbalances that one. I suppose you could say I have a large-scale perspective when it comes to storytelling.

Since I'm human, of course I like some stories better than others, but with the kind of perspective I have, you could find the worth in each one from how it relates to the specific era in which it was written.

I put in my earphones and was about to start reading, when all of a sudden I saw the chair in front of me move with a loud clatter as a boy sat down in front of me.

He looked around and heaved a sigh. Something about that made me feel like he might be a loner like me. That sigh didn't seem like it was because he wanted to join a friend group. It was like he was sad that he *didn't* want to join a friend group.

I felt sympathy for him as I watched him pull a book out of his bag. I guessed he was going to read too.

Oh! I only saw a glimpse of the cover of the book, but I recognized it instantly. After all, I was holding the same one. It was the prequel novel of a movie that had come out a few years ago. Despite it being a popular story, it hadn't done too well at the box office, but I thought the novel was a masterpiece. Now that the world was leaning more towards valuing diversity and inclusivity—in other words, showing more diverse viewpoints—people were favoring stories that had multiple protagonists.

Even if an old shonen manga got rebooted, the protagonist was always ridiculously strong and could defeat a powerful enemy single-handedly, but lately they'd resolve the situation by having him and all of his friends work together.

Anyway, out of all the multi-POV stories I'd read, I thought this novel was a masterpiece. It depicted the harsh realities of the world post-2000. There was no central protagonist, but showed how various people were at the mercy of the world around them. The story had an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness and was presented in an omnibus format, but it beautifully showed how people were connected by a thin strand of hope. Unfortunately, that part was absent from the movie version of the first book.

My brain was bustling with my opinions on the story. I thought it would be nice to talk about the novel with the boy in front of me, but even if he said something, I probably wouldn't be able to respond. I'd just keep thinking all kinds of stuff in my head but nothing would come out of my mouth. And if I did manage to say something, it wouldn't be enough anyway.

Just give it up. There's no use in getting your hopes up over this. No one would ever wait for me to finish my thoughts anyway. Not when I had so much trouble expressing them properly.

I started reading my book. It was funny that two complete strangers sitting near each other were coincidentally reading the same book. I bet someone else looking in would think we'd planned it or something.

Huh? Wait a minute...

All of a sudden I got déjà vu. A boy and a girl reading the same book...

Just like in Samarcande...

Samarcande was one of my favorite books, written by Amin Maalouf. The story is divided up into two parts; the first part follows the life and times of Neyshabur-born tent-maker Omar Khayyám, and the second half occurs eight hundred years later, detailing the efforts of a French-American who tries to obtain the original copy of Khayyám's *Rubáiyát*, a collection of quatrains.

The parents of the main character in the second half coincidentally reading a book about the *Rubáiyát* is what quickly strengthens their bond and leads to him being born in the first place.

Does that mean if I lean forward and ask the boy in front of me, "What are you reading?" that could be the start of my epic romance? Heh. Just kidding.

I smiled and kept reading my book.



We had a long homeroom period to decide which jobs each of us would take. You didn't have to join a club at this school, but you *did* have to at least join some type of committee. I wanted to spend my lunch breaks in the library, so I'd planned on joining the library committee from the very beginning. I raised my hand to volunteer to work at the library and the boy who sat in front of me did the same.

"Um... Okay. Yashiro-kun and Torano-san will work at the library then." With no other volunteers, in the end it was just the two of us.

Apparently his name was Yashiro-kun.

"Guess we're gonna be working together from now on, huh?" he said.

I froze and couldn't say anything back. I'd been told that I come across as unfriendly in situations like this, and I was sure my facial expressions hadn't changed one bit. As expected, Yashiro-kun seemed uncomfortable and scratched his cheek.

"Um..."

I still couldn't say anything. Now Yashiro-kun wasn't sure what to say either,

so he just turned around. I made the worst first impression ever. It always happened like this for me, and I was sure it always would. That was why I couldn't get my hopes up for anything else. After all, I was nothing more than a *nuedori*, and no one would ever notice me crying in the shadows.



That day after school, we had our first library committee meeting. The older committee members gave a simple explanation of our duties, and then said we would decide which shifts we would work opening up the library and at the circulation desk. The library was open Monday through Friday during lunch and after school, so ten shifts in all. I could tell most of the members thought it was a pain.

I don't mind at all...

I loved being surrounded by books at the library. It was comforting to me. But since these days you could read whatever books you wanted on your phone, it was rare for students to actually walk to the library to check out a book. So I had a feeling I wouldn't really have to deal with many of my classmates. That meant I could spend all my free time at school reading books, which sounded like heaven to me.

I can just go home after school, but I'd love to spend my whole lunch break there...

I looked around at my unenthused fellow committee members. None of them seemed to care which shift they worked. And if one of them worked a shift I didn't, I'd have to wait in front of the library for them to open it up for me...

"Does anyone care which shift they work?" an older committee member asked.

My hand shot up.

"Um, you're a first-year, right? Which shift do you want?" he asked me. I decided to just come right out and be clear about it. Everyone always thought I was the kind of girl who didn't care what others thought. I could use that to my advantage.

"I want to work all the lunch shifts."

“Huh?”

“I was already planning on spending my lunch break at the library. So I can be the one to unlock and lock up when I’m done.” I’d expressed my wishes, but I felt confusion from the other committee members. Yashiro-kun was sitting next to me, and even his mouth was hanging open with surprise.

Huh? Is that really okay?

Well, she says that’s what she wants...

I heard them whispering among themselves. But I felt like I’d finally been able to clearly express my wishes. The older committee member scratched his head, looking bewildered.

“Well, that won’t work. What if you get sick or something? We have to choose someone to fill in for you in case you’re absent.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Don’t make that face.”

What face am I making? All I did was look at him, thinking, “Do we really have to?” Maybe if I had made puppy dog eyes or looked at him tearfully I would’ve had a different reaction. I hate looking unfriendly.

But just then, Yashiro-kun suddenly stood up. “I’ll work the shifts with Torano-san.”

“Um... And you are?”

“I’m also a first-year. Yashiro. I’m in Torano-san’s class, and I wanted to spend my lunch breaks at the library too. If we work in pairs, we won’t have to worry about someone else covering us in case of an absence, right?”

“Hmm, I guess that’s fine.” The older committee member seemed convinced. So it was decided that Yashiro-kun and I would take the lunch shifts, while the other members split up the after school shifts. They were pleased that they had more free time than they thought they would, thanks to us.

Once the meeting was over, Yashiro-kun came up to me in the hallway.

“Sorry, should I not have done that?”

I didn't say anything out loud. But I thought, *No, it's okay. Thanks to you, I can spend my lunch breaks in the library.* My mind was filled with gratitude for him, but I just couldn't express it in words. He stared at me, waiting for me to respond. But I couldn't.

And he kept staring.

"...It's fine." After I finally was able to speak, the only thing that came out were those two cold words. What in the world was I doing? That wasn't what I'd meant to say to him.

And yet he gave me a soft smile when I answered him. "Cool," was all he said. A short response for a short answer. And I was just a teeny bit happy that maybe, just maybe, I'd been able to express my feelings to him.

Starting that day, Yashiro-kun and I spent our lunch breaks at the library together. We had a little bit of work to do here and there, but mostly I just sat at the circulation desk relaxing with a book. Yashiro-kun would read too. Most of the time we were completely alone in the library, but I wasn't really sure what to talk about, so generally he was the one who'd start up conversations.

"We had three returns today, huh?" or "Can you turn on the AC?" or "I'll return the keys, so you can go on ahead back to the classroom."

He was always kind and considerate towards me. So much so that I felt bad for never being able to respond to him.

About two weeks into the school year, Yashiro-kun stopped talking to me as much. It wasn't that we didn't get along or anything. In fact, it was the opposite—Yashiro-kun had begun to sense what I wanted, so he didn't need to talk as much anymore. We'd walk into the library, turn on the AC and the computers, and sit down at the circulation desk like clockwork. If there was a doubles team for committee jobs at our school, we'd win first place. Although we'd probably also be the only ones who qualified.

Lately, I could count the conversations we'd had on one hand, and they'd mostly all been started by Yashiro-kun. I liked the quiet between us, but I wasn't sure what Yashiro-kun thought about it. After all, I was the one who wanted to spend my lunch breaks cooped up in the library, and it almost felt like I'd forced him to come with me. I wondered if he thought I was a pain?

I was surprised that such a thought went through my head. *That's weird. I thought I liked it being quiet?* I still had a hard time talking to other people, and I still didn't know what to say in response to others. But I realized I wanted Yashiro-kun to talk to me.

And since he wasn't talking to me as much as before, I found myself missing the warmth that his words carried, the warmth that he conveyed with the gentleness of his words and his expressions. And since I was missing that, I found myself often wondering what he was thinking.

So that was why I made the very unusual move of talking to him first that day.

"Why?"

"What? ...What?!" Yashiro-kun looked startled that I'd spoken to him. Apparently it was possible to do a verbal double take.

"What?"

"Oh, I just wasn't expecting you to talk to me, that's all," he answered, seeming flustered. I couldn't blame him.

Disheartened, I went back to reading my book, but then he spoke up again. "Sorry, sorry. Anyway, what'd you want to ask me?"

"I was just wondering why you went along with this, when I was so demanding." I somehow managed to force the words out, but he gave me a blank stare.

"Huh? Oh, you mean taking the lunch shifts?"

"Yeah."

"Oh..." He crossed his arms and thought about it. Did I ask him something weird? I mean, I guess I was talking about something that happened two weeks ago. I wished I could take it back, but once again I just couldn't say anything out loud. And so the silence continued.

I wasn't sure what to do. Finally he looked at me and smiled. "I'm surprised, Torano-san. I hadn't pegged you as a worrier."

He was right. My cheeks felt so warm I didn't think I could hide it by acting unfriendly anymore.

“If I tell you, will you promise not to get freaked out?”

I didn't say anything, and I wasn't sure whether he took my silence for a yes or a no.

“Sorry. It's because you intrigued me.” He held up both hands as if he were contemplating something.

“What?” I finally asked after a long pause. He was intrigued? By *me*? My mind went completely blank.

Then he said, “The way your hand shot up and you sat there with your head held high, telling us what you wanted without caring what anyone else thought was just really beautiful to me. I thought maybe if I volunteered to share the shifts with you, I'd get the chance to look at you even more.”

I didn't know what to say. But internally I was screaming *Whaaaaaaaaaat?! I* really hoped that wasn't showing on my face.

During the meeting I'd just given up and went for it. But now he told me he thought I was beautiful, that he volunteered to share shifts because he wanted to look at me more, and at the same time I was relieved that I hadn't actually roped him in by being selfish... So many thoughts were going through my mind all at once.

Yashiro-kun continued, probably completely oblivious to my inner chaos. “Sometimes I'll glance over at you while we read. When I see you sitting there reading, not caring about what's going on around you... I don't know, it just makes me happy. I can't explain it. It's this strange feeling like...I just *belong* in your space.”

I stared at him wordlessly.

“Sorry, does that make you uncomfortable?” he asked, with an awkward smile on his face.

Uh-oh. If I was silent for too long, he'd think the answer was yes.

“Not really.” I answered him quickly, but at the same time I was embarrassed so I turned my face away. “Do whatever you want, and I'll do the same.” I was definitely embarrassed, but...it wasn't a bad feeling.

“Um, are you sure?”

I didn’t answer.

“Okay...” he said with a smile. “I’ll do that, then.”

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The days went on like that for a while. I’d read by myself in class, and then during lunch I’d read alongside Yashiro-kun in the library.

“Hey, Torano-san?”

“What?”

The only thing that was different from before was that Yashiro-kun spoke to me more.

“Do you read on the weekends too? Do you go to the library or anything?”

I didn’t answer. Silence fell between us. As usual, I was thinking way too many things in my head and was taking forever to answer. Any ordinary person would just think I was ignoring them or didn’t want to engage them in conversation. But apparently Yashiro-kun had caught on to my bad habit of overthinking, so he just read his book while he waited for me to respond. I really appreciated that, and since I didn’t feel any pressure, it helped me get my thoughts in order.

“Sometimes...”

“Hm?”

“I like to take baths in hot springs.”

“Hot springs? Like somewhere far away?”

“No, there’s a spa across the river that has natural hot springs.” Since I had enough time to think about what I wanted to say, I was able to have a normal conversation. That was because Yashiro-kun was so patient with me when we talked. When I’d told him that once, he had laughed and said, “It’s just like waiting for a video to load.”

He took out his phone and searched for the spa. “Oh, hey. They *do* have natural hot springs. That looks nice.”

“They are. I just...melt into them.”

“It’s kind of expensive on weekends though, don’t you think?”

“I buy ticket books on double point days.” It cost 850 yen on weekdays at that spa, but 950 on weekends and holidays. So on double point days, I’d buy a ticket book with ten tickets in it for 7,500 yen, which lets me use the spa on weekends for just 750 yen.

“7,500 yen, huh? Pretty expensive for a high schooler.”

“Well, yeah...” I’d love to go four times a month if I could, and the ticket books were good for more than two months, but it was pricey to pay for the whole thing up-front. But that’s what I had to pay, it wasn’t like I could split it.

All of a sudden Yashiro-kun clapped his hands together. “Hey, why don’t I go with you the day you buy the ticket book and we can split it? I want to check out the spa too.”

I didn’t answer. Did he mean...take a bath together?! I mean, yes, there were separate baths for men and women, but just thinking about this situation made my heart pound. But also...

“Kanda River...”

“Nowadays you don’t have to bring your own soap that’s just gonna break apart. They have body wash there that you can use, right? And I bet they have blow-dryers so you don’t get all cold with wet hair.” Apparently Yashiro-kun also knew a lot of Showa-era ballads. He chuckled wryly and scratched his cheek. “Sorry, would it make you uncomfortable? I can give you the money and you can just give me five tickets later if you want.”

I think that would be a good compromise. But... I thought about how fast my heart had raced and wondered what it would feel like to go to a spa together with someone. I’m sure it was much more fun than going alone. I was curious, and I suddenly was so bold it surprised myself.

“...Not really.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t mind if you come with me,” I said as I looked at him. His cheeks flushed. “Why are you embarrassed?”

“Oh, um... I just wasn’t expecting you to agree to go with me.”

“You’re not going, then?”

“No, I am! I am!”

And so we made an agreement to go to the spa together on double points day.

We went a few days later, and my overall impression was that since we were bathing in separate men’s and women’s baths, it wasn’t all that exciting. But my heart *did* race when we went to the nap room and lay down next to each other. As I lay there, I glanced over at Yashiro-kun from the book I was reading. He was reading one of the manga from the spa’s bookshelves.

I remembered him saying, “I keep glancing over at you sometimes, Torano-san.”

Now I’m the one looking at you... For some reason I felt embarrassed.

The spa was a place you could enjoy all by yourself. But...I found myself wanting to come back again with Yashiro-kun.



A few days later at lunch...

“Here, Torano-san.” All of a sudden, Yashiro-kun handed me a paper bag. I stared at him blankly as I took it. I opened it up and saw a paperback book inside. There was a cute chibi tiger on the cover. It was adorable.

“What’s this for?”

“To thank you for going to the spa with me. I had a lot of fun.”

You don’t have to thank me. I had fun too, I thought, but just couldn’t get the words out.

“Plus, that character on the cover reminded me of you. You’re kinda catlike, you know?”

I didn’t answer. Catlike? Am I? I guess I didn’t know.

He smiled softly at me. “Most of the time you seem like you don’t care about what’s going on around you and you just do your own thing, but sometimes you

do things that make me think you do care...and it always makes my heart skip a beat. That's why you remind me of a cat."

Th-That's so embarrassing. I had no idea he saw me like that. I was just bad at showing my emotions. I wasn't as easygoing as he thought I was.

"So...it would make me really happy if you hung out with me again sometime."

I didn't say anything. That wasn't fair, because I felt the same way. In fact, I might even feel it stronger than him. I held the book to my chest and took a deep breath. Because I really wanted to make sure that he understood how I was feeling right now.

"...I'll take really good care of this," I said.

He stared at me in surprise for a few moments, and then smiled.

Secret Chapter 2: Nue and Hachijo

“Hey, Torano-san?” Yashiro-kun suddenly said.

“Hm?”

We were both reading at the circulation desk as usual. I glanced up from my book and gave him a puzzled look.

“Would you rather I not talk to you in the classroom? You’re always reading with earphones in and you give off these ‘don’t talk to me!’ vibes, so that’s why I never talk to you when we’re there.”

I knew that already. And it was true; I didn’t really want anyone to talk to me. His seat was right in front of me in class, so there wasn’t much of a difference in terms of proximity to how we were sitting now.

“Yeah.” I said after a pause.

“Okay.” He immediately accepted my answer and we returned to our books. He could usually tell when I didn’t want to talk about something and then dropped it. I guess he was trying to be considerate of me. I appreciated it, but at the same time it made me feel bad, like I was too reliant on him. It was confusing.

“It takes me a long time to respond.” And since I felt bad, I decided to put myself out there a little bit.

He looked surprised, as if he hadn’t expected me to answer. “Huh?”

“I’m sure you’ve figured it out by now, but...there’s too much going on in my head and I’m not great at expressing myself. I can’t react to things either.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured that.”

“So if you talk to me and I can’t respond right away, it’ll look weird. Plus, I’m just not confident that I can talk to anyone else but you.” I didn’t want someone to say, “If you can talk to Yashiro-kun, why can’t you talk to me?” And there was no guarantee that anyone else would be as patient with me. So that was why it

was just easier if I was alone in the classroom.

“Wow, I feel pretty great getting this special treatme— Ow!”

I got embarrassed so I kicked him in the shin. Well, more like I just bumped him a bit. There was no way it hurt that much. “Idiot.” But he was smirking at me as I turned away in a huff, so I kicked him again for good measure. Seriously, he was *such* an idiot.



Some time had passed since then—midterms for first semester had just ended. I was walking down the hallway and saw the test results posted. There were more than two hundred students in each grade at this school, but they only posted the top one hundred scores. I wasn’t interested in looking at the results, so I was about to walk right past it. But then I noticed Yashiro-kun among the group of students looking at it. His eyes were wide with surprise.

I wondered what was going on, but I didn’t have the courage to talk to him in front of people, so I walked past. But then later that day, the first thing he did after we sat down at the circulation desk was say, “I’m shocked, Torano-san. I had no idea you were such a good student.”

“Huh?” I stared blankly at him.

He gave me an equally puzzled look. “You’re third in our grade. That’s amazing.”

“...Oh.” The reason he was surprised was because he had been looking at my ranking. “I’m third?”

“Why didn’t you know that?”

“Because I never really cared about rankings,” I answered. Obviously I always looked at my grades on tests when they were returned to me, but you only knew class rankings if you looked at the posted numbers. And honestly I had no interest in rankings or the desire to push my way through the crowd to look at them either. All I cared about was not flunking.

He let out an exasperated sigh. “I really thought I’d beat you...”

“What number were you?”

“Tenth.”

“That’s still pretty good.”

“Not as good as you.” He propped his cheek on his hand as he complained. “Since I spend so much time alone, all I do is study. People leave you alone if you get good grades, you know?”

I definitely did know. It’s uncomfortable to approach someone who’s studying with their nose in a book and earphones in. I actually thought that was how I’d fostered my good academic skills. *But why is he so concerned about beating me?* I wondered as I stared at him.

He looked defeated and said, “If I got better grades than you, I’d have an excuse to study with you. Then I thought maybe you would want to let me pay more attention to you.”

“...Your grammar is horrible.”

“Sounds right to me.”

I wondered if this was a roundabout way of him saying he wanted to spend more time with me? It was certainly a weird way of going about it, but... I suddenly felt a little shy and hid my face in my book.

He leaned back against his chair and stretched. “Nngh... I know I definitely can’t beat you in Japanese history, though.”

“Are you bad at it?”

“Yep. Everyone’s names sound alike. Like, how many Ashikagas can there be?”

Yeah, I knew what he meant. But in my case, I was interested in people’s stories, so it was easy for me to remember. But if you just tried to memorize names and events it could get boring. Yashiro-kun seemed to like books, so maybe he could enjoy history by reading more about it.

“Well then...”

“Hm?”

“Wanna use my notes?” I blurted it out without even thinking about it first. “I

have lots of facts written down that make it easy to remember.”

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, if you want.”

“That’d be really nice...” He scratched his head as if he were thinking about something.

“Sorry, am I being too pushy?”

“No, no, that’s not it! I really appreciate it, but I just feel bad that I can’t give you anything in return.”

He didn’t have to worry about that. He was such a good person.

“Oh, I know,” he said. “Are there any subjects *you* aren’t great at?”

“Science, I guess.”

“I’ll take notes for science then, and we can swap.”

“Are you sure?”

“I feel like taking notes—knowing someone else is going to read them—will help me learn things better too.”

I didn’t say anything. He had a point, but exchanging notes felt like we were keeping an exchange diary or something. It made my heart pound. I’m sure couples don’t actually keep exchange diaries anymore; they probably just text each other. But as an avid reader of old romance novels, that was the first thing that came to mind.

“Are you *really* sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, then.”

And so I started taking notes on Japanese history for Yashiro-kun, and he took notes on science for me. His handwriting was masculine and heavy-handed and also a bit sloppy, but he took a bit more care to make it easier for me to read. You could tell a lot about someone from their handwriting, and he had the exact kind of handwriting I’d expect from someone as considerate as he was.

“Do you think you can tell a lot about someone’s personality by their handwriting?” he asked all of a sudden while looking at my notes. “At first glance, your handwriting seems a little hard and wispy, but when you look closer, it’s actually pretty cute.”

I was so embarrassed I couldn’t say a word.

We kept exchanging notes like that every day. Even though he sat right in front of me, we never talked in class. We shared our lunch breaks together at the library, only saying a few things to each other here and there. It felt very intimate to me, but...I wondered how Yashiro-kun felt about it.

I wondered if it bothered him to spend his lunch breaks with someone who couldn’t hold a conversation. I’d been holding those doubts inside of me a lot lately. Maybe I was the only one who felt relaxed spending time with him like this. And if that were the case, wouldn’t that make me a horrible person? What was I giving back to him?

“This was really interesting,” he said all of a sudden. He held out a book to me over the circulation desk. It was *Samarcande* by Amin Maalouf, one of my favorite books. Since Yashiro-kun loved reading, I’d wanted to share it with him, so I’d finally mustered up the courage to lend it to him. I took the book back and hugged it to my chest.

“What did you think?”

“I really liked it. I loved the way he described the scenery in the first half. I’ve never been there or seen the place before, but I could picture it perfectly.”

“Yeah...” I knew exactly what he meant. That was part of the reason why I loved books so much. There were no pictures, but the rich descriptions of scenery made it come alive in your mind. The first half was really wonderful, but... *I really like the second half too.* I loved the nineteenth-century romance. Especially the part where—

“Oh, and there was a scene in the second half that I really liked,” he said suddenly.

“What?”

“You know that scene where the main character’s parents are coincidentally

reading the same book about Omar Khayyám's *Rubáiyát*, and that's how they end up getting together? When I read that scene, the intro from that song 'Sudden Love Story' went through my head."

I suddenly heard the strains of an electric guitar pop into my head. *Hey, Yashiro-kun. I don't think you know this, but the same thing happened to us... The first day of school, you and I were reading the same book. If you'd noticed, then maybe we'd...*

Huh? Maybe we'd what? What am I getting my hopes up about?

Suddenly I realized what I was feeling inside. It was a little faint and hazy, but it had heat and substance. *I can't believe I'm...with Yashiro-kun...*

"Hm? What's up, Torano-san?"

I quickly whirled around, hoping he wouldn't see my face.

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Even after I realized how I was feeling, not much changed between us. I didn't have the means to express those feelings, after all, but the time I spent with Yashiro-kun in the library was irreplaceable to me. I needed that part of my day at school, and I didn't want to lose it. And one day, I wanted to thank Yashiro-kun for it. I wasn't sure how yet, though.

"Hey," Yashiro-kun said, looking up from his book.

"Hm?"

"Do you usually study at home? Or do you use a study room at a library?"

I didn't answer. I didn't go to the library except to borrow books. The study rooms were always filled with students studying for entrance exams or old people, so I had no desire to stay there for too long anyway. There was somewhere else I often studied, though. "Sometimes...I study at karaoke places."

"What? Karaoke?" His eyes widened, clearly not expecting that answer.

"Yeah... I get a three-hour pass. If you show them your student ID, you get a discount, so I can study there without having to worry about anyone looking at me. I don't have to feel guilty about it either, like hogging the drink bar at a

diner.”

“Oh, I get it. It’s cheaper than a manga café too. I guess it would be a pretty convenient spot to study.”

“And you can sing when you want to take a break.”

“I’m not sure about taking a break to sing when that’s the main purpose of the place...but I get it.” He nodded, looking convinced.

Suddenly I got an idea. “Well...”

“Hm?”

“Do you wanna...come with me?”

“To karaoke? Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Just to study, though.”

“Oh, okay. Ah ha ha.”

“Huh? Why are you laughing?”

“I’m just happy. I feel like you inviting someone to a karaoke place is a pretty rare opportunity,” he said with a grin.

I started to feel embarrassed so I whacked him in the shin.

We decided to go study at the karaoke place after school that day. Once we got inside, we took out our study materials and started studying. We quietly read and took notes while we listened to the faint sounds of music coming from other rooms, and commercials from TVs that had been left on in vacant ones. An employee came by with our drinks and gave us a look that said, “What in the world are you two doing in here if you’re not singing?”

After we’d been studying for a while, I stood and picked up the remote control and the microphone.

“Are you going to sing something?”

I nodded silently and then chose two songs. They were two songs that I hoped would convey my feelings—Billy BanBan’s “I’m in Love with You Again” and “I’ve Always Loved You.”

After that day, Yashiro-kun and I studied together at karaoke occasionally. And after I'd sung those two songs to take a break (but actually to confess my feelings) several times, he figured out that I liked those songs.

Before long, he'd say he wanted to take a break and queue up those songs, then ask me to sing them. He had no idea he was actually asking me to sing my secret feelings for him every time, so it was unknowingly sadistic of him...but I still sang them.



After some time had passed, I'd finally gotten used to the summer school uniform.

"Hey, Torano-san?" Yashiro-kun said, leaning over.

"Hm?"

I was expecting him to tell me something random like he usually did.

"You've got a really cute name. Tsugumi."

I froze; he'd stepped on a land mine. It must've been obvious on my face because he looked flustered.

"Oh, sorry—is that a sensitive topic?"

I didn't answer. He was staring at me with an apologetic look on his face. Great, now he was concerned. But maybe...maybe I could tell him. "I...don't really like my name."

"What? Why not?"

"Because my last name is Torano. And so my full name sounds like *toratsugumi*."

"*Toratsugumi*...? Oh, you mean *nuedori*." Since Yashiro-kun was an avid reader, he understood what I meant right away.

The *nuedori*—a pillow word for crying in the shadows, unrequited love, and other extreme forms of sadness. Such a sad word was inside of my name. It made me feel like the *nuedori* crying in the shadows was a reflection of myself; it was a harsh reminder that no one would understand my feelings—a name I

could never grow to like. I'd forgotten about it for a while since Yashiro-kun had started talking to me, but once again it had caught up to me.

I wondered what he thought of me, having a name like that?

"Hm, I guess that's where the *yokai* called *nue* came from too."

I knew it. He probably thinks it's creepy...

"Don't you think the name Nue is kinda cute though?"

"Huh...?"

"*Cute*"?! Nue?

Yashiro-kun laughed. "I know the *yokai* looks like a chimera, but the name itself—Nue—is cute. It's like a nickname you'd give a little kid. 'Nue-chan!' You know?"

I was speechless.

"It's like the contrast between that name and yourself. It's intimidating at first, but cute once you get to know it. Just like you."

I'd been haunted by this name my whole life because it sounded so similar to a *nuedori*. And here he was, saying Nue is cute. No one had ever said such a thing to me before. My mind went totally blank.

Oblivious to my racing thoughts, Yashiro-kun continued, "Plus, eventually you'll have a different last name anyway, so I don't think it's something to be too concerned about."

"Huh...?" *I'll have a different last name?* "My parents get along great."

"No, I didn't mean that your parents will get divorced," he said with a wry chuckle. "I meant when you get married, you'll take your husband's last name."

"Ohh..." *Of course.* So if I married Yashiro-kun, I'd be Tsugumi Yashiro... *W-Wait, what am I thinking? Ahh, I'm so embarrassed!* I turned my face away from him to hide my flushed cheeks.

I heard him laughing. "But I really feel like Nue fits you, Torano-san. Can I call you that as a nickname?" he asked teasingly. He really had no clue how I was feeling, did he?

I'd been worried about my name forever, but now it didn't feel so bad. And if he wanted to call me that, then maybe I'd let him. *Hmm, I know.* I suddenly had an idea. "If you want."

"Huh?"

"You can call me Nue if you want."

"Oh, um, it was just an idea. I don't have to if you don't want me to."

"I *do* want you to," I told him, looking right in his eyes. "But then...can I call you Hachijo-kun?"

"Hachijo...? Oh, like a different reading of the characters for Yashiro?" He grinned and nodded. "Sure. Calling each other by nicknames makes us feel closer."

"It's a deal, then." *From now on, you'll be Hachijo-kun.* When I thought of the potential name Tsugumi Yashiro, it dawned on me. *Yashiro Tsugumi...* You could read that as *Hachijo Tsugumi!* And *hachijo tsugumi* were small, ordinary birds you could find just about anywhere. *Maybe one day, you'll turn the nuedori who cries in the shadows into a regular bird...* That faint hope grew inside of me.

And ever since that day, he's called me Nue and I've called him Hachijo-kun.



Finals were over, and it was almost time for summer vacation. I was sitting in the library, feeling worried. There would be no job at the library during summer break. I wouldn't be able to spend time with Hachijo-kun here again until next semester. And that made me feel sad.

I realized that at some point, I'd just come to expect having him by my side every day.

"Hey, Nue?" he said to me suddenly. "Are you the type of person who doesn't like leaving the house during summer break?"

I was hesitant to answer at first. What should I say? I normally didn't like to go out unless I had a specific errand to run, but I didn't particularly *dislike* going outside either. I didn't mind going to the public library where it was cool, for example.

“I go to the library...”

“Yeah?” He sounded relieved. “I was afraid maybe you liked to stay at home all summer.”

“Why?”

“Because we’ve been spending every day together at lunch like this, and the thought of not seeing you during summer break made me sad. Can I invite you out sometime?”

I paused. He’d been thinking the same thing. I knew it probably didn’t show on my face, but I was so happy. “Sure.”

“Great. Oh! Also, there’s one other thing...” For a moment he looked relieved, but then all of a sudden he trailed off, his eyes swimming around. It wasn’t like him to be awkward like this. I wondered what in the world could be bothering him.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well...” He took a deep breath before answering. “I’ve always just gone out to places alone, so I don’t really know much about boundaries with other people.”

I just looked at him and let him continue.

“So I don’t really understand what it means to go out with a girl, or how you feel when you say yes. I’m not really sure how far to take it. I guess what I’m trying to say is, I really want to make it clear where we stand with each other.” He looked right into my eyes. “I think I have feelings for you, Nue.”

“What?!”

“You don’t say much and you don’t show your feelings on your face that often, but when you *do*, I think it’s adorable. And every time I get a glimpse of how you feel, it makes me so happy. I absolutely love spending time with you, Nue. And if we’re going to hang out this summer, I want to do it as boyfriend and girlfriend, without holding these feelings back. That’s how I feel right now.”

I stared at him in silence. *Wait. Wait, wait, wait! He can’t just say something so shocking all at once and expect me to catch up so fast! Hachijo-kun just told*

me he has feelings for me. I'm so happy. He told me I'm adorable. I'm so happy. He told me he wants to be my boyfriend! I'm so happy!

I was overwhelmed with happiness. It truly felt like my head was filled with nothing but sunshine and rainbows. He said, *"If we're going to hang out this summer, I want to do it as boyfriend and girlfriend."* And I felt the same way. I wanted to be special to him. I wanted him to feel like it was only natural for me to be by his side. And I wanted him to be special to me. I didn't want anyone else to have him.

"Well...what do you say?" he asked, looking anxious.

It frustrated me that I couldn't show him how I was feeling right now. "Sure. Okay..." But the least I could do was put it into a few awkward words. "I...think I like you too, Hachijo-kun." When I finally managed to squeeze out the words, his eyes went wide with surprise. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just...I've never seen such a soft smile on your face like that."

I didn't answer right away, but I hoped I was actually smiling right then. I couldn't tell. But if I was... "I think...that's because I'm with you."

"Ah!" Hachijo-kun's face flushed deep red.

Right before summer break in my first year of high school...I got a boyfriend.

Secret Chapter 3: Behind the Story

That was so fun...

On the last night of summer vacation, I hugged my pillow close to my chest as I lay in bed. Hachijo-kun and I had hung out at least once a week all summer. We went to see a movie based on a novel. We spent the day at the library. We did homework at the karaoke place together. Sometimes we just went to the spa and relaxed all day. We didn't go on any trips together, and we didn't go on any real dates like to an amusement park or anything like that. Our biggest excursions were to Ikebukuro to buy some light novels and to Jimbocho looking for rare, old books.

Since Hachijo-kun knew I didn't like to be around lots of people, he was considerate and never invited me to those places. He said he liked to ride his bicycle, so I knew he liked the outdoors even though he didn't seem the type.

But if he did invite me to ride bikes... No, I hated bikes. I wasn't very confident in my stamina, so what if I got too exhausted halfway through the ride and ruined the whole thing? But if he invited me on any other kind of trip, I might go. And if I thought my parents would say no, I'd just keep it a secret.

"Ahhh!" All of a sudden I felt shy and started rolling around on my bed, squeezing my pillow. It was so girly even *I* was surprised. I couldn't believe it. I felt like I was the heroine of some novel. *I wish summer vacation were longer...* Ah, but...

School started tomorrow, but I wasn't sad about it. Before, I never would've felt this way. I was a loner. No one had ever been waiting for me on the first day of school.

But things were different now. *He* would be there tomorrow. And then we could start spending lunchtime together again. *We'll get to see each other every day again, starting tomorrow.* So there was no way I could be sad about summer break ending. *I bet second semester's going to be so fun.* That night, I fell asleep feeling peaceful and happy.



Looking back on it now, I was full of myself. I should have thought things through more. I should have realized the kind of person he was, to have gotten involved with me in the first place. He was surprisingly friendly and had a meddling personality. I should have realized that he could show that kindness to someone other than me.



It was the first day back after summer break, and the start of second semester. As soon as I walked into the classroom, I saw a box on the desk. Apparently it was a lottery to draw seats again, with random numbers assigned to the chart on the chalkboard. We had to pick numbers and then sit in that seat.

We're changing seats... I felt a little disappointed to not be sitting behind Hachijo-kun anymore. But we didn't usually talk to each other in class anyway, and we'd still have our time together at lunch. I pulled a number from the box and matched it to the chart on the chalkboard. *I got number twenty... That's somewhere in the back.*

My new seat was in the very last row, by the window. My vision was fine so it wasn't a problem, but I had a feeling I might doze off on sunny days. I sat down in my new seat, took out a book, and started reading.

The students at the front of the classroom were pulling numbers loudly, going through the whole range of emotions at their results. I put on my noise-canceling earphones so I could focus on my book. After I spent some time reading in my own little world, the chair in front of me moved.

I looked up to see Hachijo-kun grinning at me. I was surprised (although no one could probably tell since I was usually so expressionless) and pulled out my earphones. "How?" There was no way it was just a coincidence.

He showed me his piece of paper. "I switched with someone so they could sit next to their friends."

"Oh..." People who arrived later had the power of negotiation, apparently.

He put his bag down at his desk and took his seat, then twisted towards me

and smiled. “I’m looking forward to spending second semester here with you, Nue.”

“Yeah...” I felt the corners of my mouth tug upwards as I nodded ever so slightly.



Peaceful days followed for a while, but then something suddenly changed.

“...”

Huh? Did someone say something? I felt strange all of a sudden. I’d been listening to music with my noise-canceling earphones while I was reading. I looked up and saw a girl with bright dyed hair walking away. *What’s her name again... Hanamizawa-san?*

She was a cheerful, cute girl who was one of the most popular kids in our class. I could only match names to faces with a handful of my classmates, but even I knew who she was. Well, I knew who she was, but I’d never talked to her before. *Did she just say something to me? No way.* I was curious, but at the same time there wasn’t really anything I could do about it. So I put my earphones back in and continued reading until Hachijo-kun sat down in front of me and tapped on my desk to let me know the teacher was here.

Later at lunch, I poked Hachijo-kun’s back after I was finished eating. He was sitting there looking at his phone. Poking him was my way of saying *I’m done eating, let’s go to the library!* He left the room to go get the library key from the teachers’ lounge. I packed up my lunch box and followed after him. I walked down the noisy hallway and stood next to the library door to wait for him.

And I kept waiting, wondering when he’d show up. It made me feel like I was waiting for my date. The only reason I could feel such anxious excitement was because I was certain he’d come. A few minutes later, Hachijo-kun came walking up.

“Here.” He handed me the keyring and I opened up the library. We walked in together. He headed towards the circulation desk while I unlocked the next door resource room. I opened the window to let some fresh air in and checked the books in the return slot, where people returned books while the library was

locked up. Only three returns today.

After finishing my tasks, I headed back to the desk. There was a carton of unsweetened tea at my spot on the desk. Hachijo-kun must've bought it for me. *Unsweetened. Heheh.* He knew exactly what I liked. I loved tea, but I didn't like adding milk or sugar.

I handed him the returned books so he could quickly check them back in. I reshelfed them and returned to the desk. He was drinking his café au lait from a straw, reading a book. I sat down next to him and put the straw in my tea, then opened up my own book.

It was a lunch break just like any other day. We sat there reading together until the warning bell rang.



The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. We locked up the library together.

"Hey, Nue? Sorry, but I can't go home with you after school today."

"Huh?" I stared at him, wondering if he had some kind of errand to run or something. He let out a dejected sigh.

"I got roped into doing something and it's a total pain."

"Oh..." I murmured, feeling a little disappointed. I wondered if I could help, but before I could ask him, he continued.

"Don't worry about anything here. You can go on home."

I was frustrated with myself for not getting my thoughts out fast enough. Being told not to worry made me even more hesitant to ask for more details. Despite how I was feeling, I didn't want to be some kind of annoying, nagging girlfriend.

I tried not to be, anyway.

But after last period ended, Hanamizawa-san went up to Hachijo-kun and said, "Remember our conversation this morning?"

Wait, is she the one who roped him into doing something? The moment that possibility sprang to mind, an uncomfortable feeling spread inside of me. I

couldn't explain it, but I just didn't like this. She was energetic and cheerful—the exact opposite of me. It was painful watching her talk to Hachijo-kun. I didn't think it was jealousy. If I had to name the feeling, it would be...insecurity.

She was the kind of girl who was fun to just be around and I was worried that he would start liking her instead. If only I had enough courage to say, “Don't steal my boyfriend!” But of course I could never do that.

“Yeah. Well, should we—” At that moment, I looked over Hachijo-kun's shoulder and made eye contact with Hanamizawa-san. I could see the surprise on her face when she saw me. I wondered what kind of look I had on *my* face. It must've been a very sad look. Who wouldn't be surprised suddenly making eye contact with someone on the verge of tears? I couldn't bear being there one second longer, so I gathered up my things and rushed out of the classroom.



The next morning, Hachijo-kun was acting the same as he always did. He read quietly by himself in the classroom without interacting with anyone, and we spent a peaceful lunchtime together in the library. The only difference was that I noticed Hanamizawa-san stealing glances at him all day. Maybe I was just being overly sensitive, but I felt a pit in my stomach.

I knew he had a caring personality, and it was probably the reason he couldn't turn down Hanamizawa-san's request. And I think she had tried to talk to me first. If only I had answered her, maybe she wouldn't have had to ask him instead. I wasn't capable of doing that, though.

“Please teach me how to have fun alone on weekends!” Hanamizawa-san was pleading with Hachijo-kun. “Because you're, like, the master of being alone.”

He didn't seem to know how to respond, but then said, “Plus, if you wanna talk about the *real* master of being alone—” as if he were about to toss the conversation in my direction. *Yeah, that's not going to happen.*

Making sure Hanamizawa-san couldn't see, I pressed my hand against Hachijo-kun's back to send a silent message. *Don't you dare talk about me.* Since I couldn't get up the courage to protest, Hachijo-kun ended up agreeing to go out with Hanamizawa-san that weekend. I was such a spineless idiot.

Not only that, but he was going to take her to that spa. I knew because he asked me later if I'd give him one of my tickets. I didn't want an uneven number of tickets. I bought them so that we could both go together.

"Please?" he asked hesitantly.

I didn't want him going anywhere with Hanamizawa-san on the weekends. But I knew the reason he was going out with me—even though I sucked at communication—was because of his caring personality. If I wanted to stay with him, I needed to be supportive. So I got my ticket book out of my wallet and handed him one.

"Thanks. Here's the money for it. Sorry, Nue." Hachijo-kun had a guilty look on his face while he paid me and took the ticket. I guess he really had gotten roped into this whole thing. But it was okay for me to be a *little* selfish, wasn't it?

"Here."

"Hm?"

I handed him a flyer. It was an ad for the upcoming Kanda Used Book Festival in Jimbocho. "I want to go to this with you," I managed to squeeze out. He gave me a stunned look for a moment, but then a soft smile spread across his face as he took the flyer.

"Of course. I'd love to."

"Hee hee." I couldn't wait.



It was the day of the book festival—a clear, autumn Sunday. I got off the train at the Jimbocho station. I was meeting Hachijo-kun by the information directory right next to the A-6 exit of the Iwanami Jimbocho Building. It was 10:55 a.m., five minutes before we were supposed to meet.

I went out through the exit and immediately saw carts filled with old books. I looked up and saw a sign that said "Kanda Used Book Festival." Nothing was more exciting for a booklover. I glanced over towards our meeting spot and saw that Hachijo-kun was already there, standing in front of the sign and staring

absently out at the people streaming past. I felt warm just seeing him and trotted over.

He noticed me and immediately waved. “All right, let’s get started,” he said, taking a step forward. I went to follow him, but a book on a cart nearby caught my eye. *Ah! I might want to read that one...*

My legs carried me to the cart like a moth to a flame, except I was a moth to a book. Hachijo-kun chuckled when he saw me. “All right. Where to start?” he asked.

I took the pamphlet out of my purse and showed it to him. Last night before bed, I’d traced a path on the map of the route I wanted to take. First we’d go out to Yasukuni-dori and look at the carts in front of the bookstores there, then we’d check out the carts by the Jimbocho Book Center and head to Sakura-dori. After that, we’d cross Hakusan-dori to check out the special sales on Suzuran-dori.

“Suzuran-dori’s the last stop? It might be the most crowded there, though...” Hachijo-kun said, but I shook my head.

Suzuran-dori was really congested during the book festival. I wanted to go there last because I hated being around lots of people. I didn’t care how much I wanted a book or how cheap it was there, I had no desire to claw my way through the crowds to get it.

“All right. Let’s get started for real this time,” Hachijo-kun said, and I nodded in return.



We went out onto Yasukuni-dori and stopped at the first cart there. It seemed like this one was full of oversized classic novels, and the rest were miscellaneous books. I looked at the titles but couldn’t tell what any of them were about, and I didn’t recognize the authors either. That was exciting. That’s when I found it, buried in a pile of those books. *Ah!*

“Hm? Did you find something?”

“Look.” I picked it up and showed it to Hachijo-kun. Chin Shunshin’s *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.

“Ooh, so that’s the *Rubáiyát*, huh?” he said as he took the book from me.

I nodded. “Omar Khayyám is in that book that I love, *Samarcande*. He was a genius scholar from the Seljuk dynasty, famous for his work in math, astronomy, and poetry. The quatrain poems he wrote were collected in the *Rubáiyát*, and the historical novelist Chin Shunshin translated it. He was famous for writing *Gijon Three Kingdoms*. It’s a groundbreaking book taking the side of Cao Cao, who’s usually seen as a traitor. But unlike other works having to do with the Three Kingdoms, Cao Cao isn’t depicted as a greedy usurper, but instead a loyal retainer who was trying to preserve the life of the Han dynasty, or as a politician who was trying to preserve some sense of order in those uncertain, turbulent times.”

“O-Oh.” Hachijo-kun seemed surprised at my sudden talkativeness, but I ignored him and opened up the book. Finding this exact book among so many made me feel like I’d just found treasure. That was the real thrill in going to one of these old book fairs.

I was so excited about my find that when I finally snapped back to reality, I realized I’d been standing there for quite a long time. *Whoops. I’m supposed to be on a date with Hachijo-kun today.* I was worried that he might be annoyed that I’d gotten so carried away and glanced over at him.

“Excuse me. I’d like to buy this.”

“Sure. That’s seven hundred yen, please.”

Apparently he’d bought something too. I glanced over at the title. “Huh? *Hotsuma Tsutae*?”

“Yeah, do you know it?”

“Yeah. I heard it was written in *jindai moji*—a rumored ancient writing system before kanji came to Japan—but I’m not sure if that’s true.”

“Oh, really? The tagline ‘Are the rumors true?!’ drew me in and it seemed interesting, so I thought I’d read it.”

“Like Atlantis and Tokugawa’s buried treasure...”

“What?”

“It would be romantic if this were something like that, but a fun read is about all those books are good for.”

“Ah ha ha. I guess it is that kind of book.” He chuckled sheepishly but didn’t seem to regret buying it. I was relieved. As long as he was satisfied, I could go back to my hunt. And of course I immediately bought the *Rubáiyát*. I checked each cart from corner to corner to see if I could dig up any other treasures.

Hm? I looked up and made eye contact with Hachijo-kun. Apparently he’d been staring at me. I felt a little shy and tilted my head to the side as if to say, “Why are you looking at me?”

“Just thinking about how cute you are,” he said with a grin.

Embarrassed, I looked down and kicked him in the ankle.

“Ah ha ha, ow, that hurts!”

I-I didn’t kick you that hard. Ahh, my cheeks are so hot!

For some reason he started looking through the old toys that were lined up next to the books, at some monster action figures. I guess boys like that kind of thing. I wondered what could possibly attract him to the soft plastic dolls made to look like those creepy creatures.

“What’s that?”

“Alien Icarus and Pandon from *Ultraseven*.”

“What’s that?”

“Hitman Terrible-Monster Baraba. Pretty good design, huh?”

“This one’s face looks like a seal. Is this a monster from *Ultraman* too?”

“Not exactly. This is Peguila from *Ultra Q*, but he does appear in other series.”

I didn’t understand the difference. The only thing I knew for sure is that he must really like these things. Mildly surprised, I tossed the book I bought into the plastic bag Hachijo-kun had brought along, and went back to hunting again.

Even though we had come here together, we barely talked, but it didn’t feel awkward. I was really enjoying our time together. *I hope he feels the same way...*

After we combed through the carts, he suddenly said, “Hey, why don’t we take a break over at that café?” I turned and saw a sign that said “Children’s Books and Café” written on it. *That sounds interesting. I wonder if he’s curious about it too?*

I glanced over at him and he smiled. “Aren’t you just itching to read the books we just bought, even for a little bit?”

I nodded emphatically. I couldn’t wait to dig into the books I’d found, so we went inside the bookstore café.

Wow... The moment we stepped inside, a mysteriously wonderful atmosphere spread out before us. Both sides of the building were lined with shelves packed with children’s books. It reminded me of a library, but a wall of indoor plants in the center of the building marked off the café space. It was like a tea party in the middle of a forest filled with books. I wished the library at school looked like this...

We headed to the counter in the back of the shop.

Hachijo-kun ordered for us. “Café au lait and black tea, please.” We took our drinks and sat down at a corner booth. We both sat on each end, neither across from each other or next to each other. It made me feel a little shy.

Well, now that we’d sat down, I went ahead and took out my books. I decided to start with the *Rubáiyát*, of course.

“Do you have any favorite poems in there, Nue?”

I flipped through the book and found the page I was looking for. I pointed to the poem and showed it to him. “This one.”

*A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, A Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!*

(Translated into Japanese by Chin Shunshin, and into English by Edward

Fitzgerald)



That poem perfectly summed up the way I was feeling right now. I had tea, a good book, and Hachijo-kun. I was perfectly happy in this space. Not even the caliph, who had gathered up all the riches in the world, could feel as satisfied as I did in this moment.

“That’s really nice,” he said with a soft smile after he read the poem.



After our rest at the café, we continued exploring the festival. There were carts full of books lined up on the small road next to Jimbocho Book Center too, and I just had to stop and look. All the books here were so old and yellowed. Not only that, but they were written in Classical Japanese so it was hard to even tell what they were about. And yet I still wondered what kinds of books they were. I felt bad for Hachijo-kun because I was walking at a snail’s pace, but I couldn’t help it—I loved books.

We finally made it out to Sakura-dori and saw a bunch of food stalls set up there.

“How about we have lunch here?”

“Sure.” I nodded. I was pretty hungry, and it was already way past lunchtime. We decided where we would meet each other and then went around buying the things we wanted to eat. *Now, what should I get?* Maybe I should get curry since we were in Jimbocho, but there were vendors who had come from all over for the festival. There were kebabs, steamed buns, Okinawan soba... Wait, Okinawan soba?! *Now that I think about it, I’ve never tried it...*

I knew what it was, but I’d never had the chance to eat it before. So maybe this was the perfect opportunity. I went ahead and bought some, and then went to our meeting spot.

“Huh? Why’d you get soba when we’re in Jimbocho?” Hachijo-kun gave me a puzzled look once he returned.

“Why not?”

“Because we’re in *Jimbocho*. The city of curry! Although they do serve a lot of ramen here lately too...”

“Well...” *I just wanted to try it*, I thought.

“Sorry, sorry. Let’s go ahead and eat,” he quickly apologized. I supposed I could forgive him.

We sat down on a hedge by the side of the road and ate our food. My impression of eating Okinawan soba for the first time was that it was a bit fatty, but overall pretty good. I gave Hachijo-kun a bite and he said, “Oh, not bad.”

See? It’s nice to eat delicious Okinawan soba in Jimbocho instead of curry for a change, isn’t it?

He gave me a bite of meat from his curry in exchange. *Hmm, hmm... Delicious. No wonder they call Jimbocho the city of curry.*



After finishing lunch, we threw away our trash and decided to cross the street to check out the special sales on Suzuran-dori. But when we got there, people were packed like sardines by the book carts. I wasn’t a fan of crowds, so I didn’t last very long.

Ugh...

“Hey!” Hachijo-kun quickly grabbed my hand as I stumbled in the crowd, and pulled me back towards him. “You okay?”

“Y-Yes,” I nodded hastily. We were so close I could hear him breathe. *He’s so close to me... And my cheeks feel so hot!* But at the same time, I didn’t want to pull away. I just grasped onto his arm tightly, urging him to guide me through the crowd.

I wasn’t sure if he picked up on my unspoken request or not, but he said, “You wanna just take a quick look and get out of here?” and didn’t shake off my grip.

“Sure.” I nodded after a pause, still holding tightly onto his arm.

We stayed close as we held hands, slowly walking against the flow of the crowd. I finally felt confident enough to start looking around. There were lots of vendors selling books, of course, but there were also plenty of food carts out here. I wondered if the greasy smell of chicken frying right next to the books would stick to the pages.

When we went back out onto Yasukuni-dori again, we had seen all that we'd set out to see today.

"What should we do? Go back to Jimbocho Station?" Hachijo-kun asked. We'd already done everything I had planned to do today, but I still wanted to spend more time with him.

I hesitated for a bit, then pointed down the street. "I just wanna keep walking for a while."

He gave me a confused look. "You want to walk all the way down to Akihabara?"

Yes, *I do*. I nodded emphatically. After spending the day digging through general fiction and old books, I wanted to check out some brand-new light novels. *Then we can spend more time together...* I tugged on our joined hands as if to say "*Hurry up!*" and we began walking. He didn't seem to mind at all.

"Oh, can we go to the sports goods shop on the way there? There's some kind of sports festival going on and I want to look at the bike stuff they have," he said.

"No." I giggled and shook my head. He had promised to go wherever *I* wanted to go today.

He shrugged with a sheepish grin. "All right, all right. I got it, Princess."

I nodded as if to say, "*Good.*"

All in all, it was a very good day.



I woke up the next morning feeling happy. *Yesterday's Used Book Festival was so fun...*

Hachijo-kun had done a great job escorting me everywhere and letting me do whatever I wanted. Though I still wasn't great at expressing myself verbally, so it was more accurate to say he *guessed* what I wanted and then let me do it. I was starting off this week feeling elated.

"Hey, you. You're Yashiro, right?"

All of a sudden, a girl who looked like she had a really strong personality approached Hachijo-kun. I'd seen her hanging out with Hanamizawa-san a lot in class. She was pretty, but like I said, she came off as really forceful. Her name was Ido-san, I believe? She was one of the popular girls.

Hachijo-kun closed his book and gave her a puzzled look. "Who are you, again?"

"Chikaze Ido. Kanon's friend."

I listened in and learned that Ido-san had grown suspicious of Hanamizawa-san and Hachijo-kun talking so much lately. I could definitely understand that feeling—the curiosity one had when they saw someone close to them interacting with someone else they didn't know too well.

"She's the one who keeps talking to me." Hachijo-kun didn't seem pleased with the implication that he'd started it.

All of a sudden, Ido-san slammed her hand on his desk with a bang. Even I jumped a little from how much it startled me.

"I heard, you know. That you've been doing some pretty sketchy things to Kanon."

"Huh? What do you mean, 'sketchy things'?"

"L-Like you took a bath together and slept together!"

What?! They did?! Oh, wait... She was just talking about how they went to the spa together. Man, that scared me for a second. Apparently Hanamizawa-san had been very misleading when she told Ido-san about it, which had made her concerned. She was such a pain.

After that, they two of them argued back and forth awhile before Hachijo-kun agreed to show Ido-san how he'd been teaching Hanamizawa-san ways to spend time alone. *Um, we're supposed to go buy library equipment together today, though.*

It was looking like once again, Hachijo-kun and I wouldn't be walking home together today. *But he's my boyfriend.* I felt pathetic because I couldn't assert myself by saying that to them out loud.



I was getting ready to go home after school when I got a text from Hachijo-kun. He was sitting right in front of me, but apparently he was still following my wish of not talking to me in the classroom.

His text said that Ido-san had gotten him roped into something after school, and he apologized for not being able to go shopping with me. I already knew all that, but I could tell he was really trying to be considerate of me by telling me so clearly. Relief washed over me as I sat there staring at the message.

Oh, whoops! I better respond. I didn't want him to think that I was leaving him on read.

"Got it." I texted him back, then left school to go shopping alone.

That night, I was working on my math homework when Hachijo-kun texted me. "Can you talk now?" it said. I said I could, and the phone rang right away.

"Hello, Nue?"

"Yes?" Just hearing his voice made me feel relaxed.

"I'm really sorry about today. I promise I'll make it up to you."

"It's... It's really...not a big deal..." I mumbled. I could tell he was smiling on the other end of the phone. That wry smile he always had.

"Well it's a big deal to me. I'll do whatever ya want to make up fer it!" he said in a weird voice.

"Why are you talking like that?"

"Seriously, can't I do something for you?"

"Well..." I couldn't really think of anything in particular, but... "I wanna go out together this Sunday."

"Got it. Is there anywhere specific you want to go?"

"No."

"Huh?"

"There's not really anywhere I wanna go."

“Uh...” I could tell how confused he was.

I giggled. “I just wanna be with you, Hachijo-kun. So it doesn’t matter where we go.”

“Ah!”

He didn’t need to do anything special. I was sure that I would enjoy myself no matter what, as long as we were together. That’s why I only asked for his time.

“Nnnnghhh!” He was making the strangest noise on the other end. “That’s not fair. That’s so not fair, Nue!”

“Huh?”

“I wish I could see you right now so I could hug you and snuggle you!”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” I said after a pause. I had a feeling my heart might explode if he did that. I mean, of course I would let him, but I just wasn’t emotionally ready yet.

“Ugh. All right, if you insist. I don’t want you to hate me, after all.”

I didn’t say anything. I could never hate him. That was impossible.

“Sunday, right? I can’t wait.”

“Yeah...” Neither could I.



But of course life can never be that simple. I’m not sure what he and Ido-san talked about after that, but she began to be *very* interested in him. Every time there was a break in class, she’d go over to his desk and they’d play some weird game about whether something was more fun alone or in a group.

I slightly pulled my earphones out so I could listen.

Even though Ido-san tried to sound like she was too cool to care, it was clear she was enjoying this back-and-forth.

“I know! Why don’t I see if I can enjoy cycling by myself?” she said all of a sudden.

Hachijo-kun was singing the praises of his philosophy that just about any

group activity could be enjoyed solo, so she wanted him to prove it with cycling. I had heard that cycling was much more fun with your friends than alone, so honestly it wasn't a bad suggestion.

"Then prove it to me. Let's do it this Sunday."

Wait, Sunday? That's when we were going out on a date.

"I've got plans on Sunday." He seemed to be troubled by the invitation too. "But if you go by yourself, I can help you plan things out. I don't mind doing that."

Ah... I guess now that I thought about it, we hadn't agreed to spend the entire day together. That should be fine, though...right? Ido-san ended up forcing the issue, so he agreed to meet up with her before he met me.

Finally, it was Sunday, right before 11 a.m. When I got to our meeting place in front of the JR Akabane station, Hachijo-kun was already there waiting for me.

"Hey, Nue."

"Morning, Hachijo-kun. Did you get everything taken care of?" I quickly plodded over to him.

He nodded. "Ido-san just left. I think she'll probably contact me later, but... Ha ha ha... I can't wait to see how long it takes her to get through Inatsuki's labyrinth." He let out an evil laugh. *Honestly...*

"Let's go."

"Ah, okay."

We headed towards a certain chain bakery that was near the station. I wanted to relax in the little café corner they had there. It was a bit early for lunch, but we bought some pastries and café au laits to snack on, then took a seat.

"It's unusual for you to order a café au lait, Nue," he remarked as we took our drinks. "I thought you always drank unsweetened black tea."

"They didn't have any unsweetened tea here, and I have to take my coffee sweet or else I can't drink it at all."

“I can’t take it black either. I need milk, at the very least.”

As we warmed up with our coffees, Hachijo-kun’s phone vibrated. Apparently it was Ido-san. He started giving her all kinds of instructions, like telling her to cross Ita Bridge and head to Nakajuku-dori.

I stared absently at him until he noticed my gaze. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine...” I was going to say it wasn’t a big deal, but I just couldn’t get the words out. My heart felt restless when I thought about how he could talk like this with Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san. I didn’t want him to think I was jealous, so I said, “They really count on you, huh?”

“Hm? Yeah, I guess popular kids have it rough too.”

That made sense to me. It seemed like nowadays the more friends you had, the harder it was. It was easier to be someone like me, who was satisfied with just one person’s occasional company. If I were someone who always needed to be around others or in a big group, then it’d be pretty hard to live in this world.

But lately Hachijo-kun was spending more time with people like that. “Are you sure you’re not overdoing it?” I asked.

“I’m fine. I never take on anything I can’t handle.”

“Oh...”

His phone vibrated again. I’m sure it was Ido-san.

“Can I listen too?”

“Yeah, of course.” He answered and put her on speakerphone.

“Yashiro?” I heard Ido-san’s voice.

“Oh, Ido-san. How was it?” he said towards his phone.

She seemed completely perplexed. “Totally mysterious. One of the songs you had me listen to was playing in my head. I don’t even know how to explain it...”

“A young girl pretended to be a shrine maiden. After night fell and the town grew quiet, she beat on a drum—*ton, ton, ton*—and said in a beautiful, clear voice, ‘This doesn’t matter. Nothing really matters...’”

“Oh, from the *Ichigonhodan*?” Hachijo-kun the book lover immediately got

my reference. “But why... Oh, I get it.”

“Huh?” Ido-san apparently did *not* get it. I flipped over my hand, a gesture that said, *Go ahead, tell her*. Hachijo-kun gave a playful smirk.

“Okay, so there was this critic named Hideo Kobayashi who wrote an essay called ‘Mujo to iu koto’ or ‘Transience.’ He was walking around Mt. Hiei and staring at this stone wall, when all of a sudden those sentences mysteriously popped into his head.”

“Wh-Whoa.”

“That song popped into your head for the same kind of reason, I think. Not as fancy as that essay, but still.”

Correct. I mimicked applause and he let out a shy laugh. After that, he finished giving her directions and hung up. Now that he’d fulfilled his obligation to her, he said he doubted she would call again.

“Now I can just enjoy our time alone together.”

“Yeah,” I said after a pause. That was sweet of him, but I still couldn’t help but worry that he was pushing himself with all this.



And it turned out that he was. His exhaustion had caught up with him a few days later, in the library.

“Zzz...” He had dozed off at the circulation desk. The sudden influx of so many different people interacting with him lately must have done a number on him. Lunch was almost over.

“Hey, wake up. Wake up...” I gently shook him and he jerked awake.

“Huh?!” He lifted his head and looked around.

Phew, he’s awake. Relieved, I went back to my book. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye and saw that he was staring at me.

“I don’t mind dozing off if it means I get to have you wake me up like th— Oof!” Then he said *that* embarrassing thing to me. I grabbed a heavy dictionary and thumped him on the head with it to hide how embarrassed I was. He

must've sensed I did it out of shyness, because he smirked at me and kept the dictionary on his head. It was a strange sight.

Honestly...

"You've..." I started to say.

"Hm? What?!" He seemed startled for some reason.

"What?"

"Oh, um. Nothing. Yeah."

What a weirdo. I continued, "You've been working really hard lately."

"H-Have I?"

"Too hard. It looks like you're pushing yourself."

He didn't answer.

"Everyone has their own strengths, but there are still limits; things you can do, and things you just can't. Confuse the two, and you'll only end up miserable." I wondered if I sounded too harsh. His expression grew sharp.

"Are you telling me to know my place?"

"No. I'm saying that if you understand what kind of person you are, you should only do things you're capable of. Everyone has something that's just impossible for them. So..." I stared him straight in the eyes. "I don't want you to force yourself so much."

He kept staring at me silently. When things were rough, I wanted to be the one he depended on. I didn't know what I could do to help, but I would do anything for him. After all, I was right here.

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Some time after that, we got a new transfer student in our class.

"M-My name is Yuzuki Sato. It's nice to meet you..."

Yuzuki Sato-san. She seemed to be a quiet girl. Once it was revealed that she was a transfer student, she was subjected to curious stares from my classmates. I felt a sort of kinship with her after her timid introduction. I had a feeling she

was a loner.

I watched as she said something to Hachijo-kun. I braced myself, thinking that yet another person seeking advice from him had appeared, but luckily he didn't seem interested in indulging her in whatever it was.

That was an unusual reaction from him, since he was usually so caring. I thought it was weird, but at the same time, I was relieved that he wouldn't get roped into another troublesome saga. He was easily exhausted, after all.

After school, we went to the library to have a committee meeting. The topic at hand was whether or not we should have a booth at the upcoming school festival.

"All right, then. We'll go ahead and have a book café at the school festival," the president of the committee declared after a vote. The other members applauded, showing their approval.

"Ah ha ha..." Hachijo-kun scratched his cheek, giving a vague laugh. He was the one who had suggested we do a book café in the first place. We were all supposed to offer up suggestions, and I had suggested we just open up the library for use during the festival, and he suggested the book café. Apparently he had been inspired by the café we went to on our date to the Used Book Festival, and the other members chose his idea.

"We can decide on who will go buy the supplies at a later date. And feel free to bring anything from home that might fit the aesthetic of the café."

"Oh, I have some dolls and stuffed animals I could bring."

"We don't want anything too fancy. Although now that I think about it, porcelain dolls or nutcrackers could fit the theme."

"I think I have a Japanese doll in a case..."

"Hey, don't bring anything too expensive!"

Since it was the third-years' last school festival, they were excitedly leading the conversation. Just then, the president whacked Hachijo-kun on the shoulder. "Yashiro-kun. Since you were the one who had this idea, we're counting on you too. Got it?"

“Y-Yeah...” Hachijo-kun had an awkward smile on his face.

He just had a bad habit of agreeing to things that placed a burden on him, didn't he?

Once the meeting was over, I went to the shoe lockers by the school entrance and leaned up against them to wait for him. He was still in the meeting room. I had a feeling he was going to have all sorts of responsibilities since he was the one who suggested the theme.

I'd been waiting for a while when he finally showed up. His face broke out into a smile when he saw me. “You waited for me. So then...?”

I stared at his face, silently asking him to tell me about Sato-san. He chuckled, grinning. “I'll tell you all about it while we walk. Promise,” he said as he changed his shoes and started to leave. I followed after, thinking it was kind of sweet how he walked slowly so I wouldn't have a hard time keeping up with him.

Suddenly I realized he was staring at me, smirking. It felt like he was reading my mind or something. I got embarrassed, so I kicked him in the shins.



“Apparently our class is going to be serving fried rice at the school festival,” Hachijo-kun suddenly informed me a few days later in the library during lunch.

“Oh, really?”

“You didn't know either? I had a feeling.”

I was prioritizing the library committee's book café, so I'd been ignoring all the talk about our class project for the festival. It sounded like Hachijo-kun had been doing the same.

“Yeah, I guess the girls are dressing in cheongsam.”

I stared at him. I would be so embarrassed if I ended up having to wear one. He propped his cheek up on his hand and chuckled. “I wish I could see you in one, Nue. We're going to be wearing aprons for the book café, but at the very least maybe I could get you a maid unifo— Ouch!”

I silently dropped a heavy dictionary on his head. It was proving to be quite handy lately. “Anyway...”

“Hm?”

“Who told you about our class booth?”

“Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san.”

“Oh...”

I felt that uneasy feeling inside of me again. But being his girlfriend didn’t give me the right to dictate who he hung out with.

“Oh, that reminds me. I have to go buy coffee beans and snacks for the book café today at the big-box store nearby.” He clapped his hands as if to try to shake the heavy mood in the air. “We’re just going to serve ochazuke, but everyone said they want to test out different snacks to go with it too. Honestly, I think the older kids just want an excuse to eat snacks.”

“Oh...”

“I’m gonna have a lot to carry, so I wish you were coming with me... Ha ha...” he said, glancing over at me.

I smiled and said, “Good luck with that.”

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I changed into my outside shoes by the front entrance and let out a sigh. *Maybe I was too hard on him?* That uncomfortable feeling inside of me just wouldn’t go away, and I ended up pushing him away. I don’t think I could call it a *fight*, per se. I guess I was just being stubborn. And I didn’t mean to come off sounding so harsh about it either...

I wanted to go shopping with Hachijo-kun. But not because I especially wanted to go shopping. It made me happy going anywhere with him, even if it was just somewhere on the way home from school. And going to a big-box store together sounded like something a married couple would do—it was nice. *I really wanna make up with him...* Well, I guess it was weird to say that when we weren’t officially in a fight or anything. I wanted that comfortable feeling we had before, but since I was the one who pushed him away, it was difficult to be open with my feelings. I wasn’t sure how to bring it up in the first place.

Maybe I could text him asking for something. Something really simple, and

then I could use that as an excuse to apologize. Then things could go back to how they were before. I'd just say, "I was being too stubborn and I'm sorry." I decided I'd do that, and went ahead and texted him.

Nue: ochazuke in the library

He read the message right away. Now, would he answer me? I waited restlessly for a while, but he didn't respond. *M-Maybe he's mad at me because I'm being demanding? All I wanted to do was apologize...*

I started freaking out. Then, all of a sudden I got a response.

Yashiro: Sorry, Nue. But can you help me?

I calmed down immediately and answered right away.

Nue: What do you want me to do?

I could tell there was some emergency situation going on that didn't have anything to do with ochazuke. He *always* pushed himself, and I wanted him to depend on me more. And now he was sending me an SOS. I had no reason to hesitate. A few moments later he texted me back with the details.

Yashiro: Someone's here bullying Sato-san. Girls from her old school. They definitely bullied her there too.

Yashiro: They're going somewhere else. I'm gonna follow them, so once I know where they're going can you come watch over them? I'm gonna go get Hadori-kun.

Hadori-kun... He was one of the popular kids in class.

Nue: Can't you help her by yourself?

Yashiro: If I help her now, she's gonna get disillusioned with the popular kids. She's been trying so hard to change. I don't want to ruin it all.

Yashiro: Hadori-kun, Hanamizawa-san, and Ido-san have to be the ones to help her.

Honestly, I didn't really get his reasoning, but apparently he'd thought this out pretty thoroughly. So in that case I should just follow his instructions. I texted him back.

Nue: walnut mocha from isozaki-ya

I figured if I proposed a payment, that would show that I was willing to cooperate and it would make him feel better about asking me this big favor. But secretly, I'd do just about anything he asked me at this point. He replied right away.

Yashiro: Five, ten, however many you want.

And so I sprang into action. First, I met up with Hachijo-kun at the diner by the train station the bullies took Sato-san to so I could watch over them in his place. I ordered a drink and sat down. Hachijo-kun went to go get Hadori-kun. We stayed connected the whole time through video chat so he could see what was going on. I drank a cappuccino while I filmed them.

If the girls made a move like they were going to hurt Ido-san, I would intervene and take her out of there. She looked extremely uncomfortable being surrounded by those bullies, but she just needed to hang in there a bit longer. *Help is on the way.* I waited for about fifteen minutes.

"I came to get you, Yuzuki."

Then the hero—I mean, Hadori-kun—arrived, along with Hanamizawa-san

and Ido-san. He must've come right from kendo club practice, because he was still wearing his uniform.

What happened afterwards was just amazing. The three of them supported Sato-san and rallied around her against the bullies. Then to put the nail in the coffin, they pulled her out to be with them. After having their arguments completely refuted by the popular kids, the bullies were speechless.

I admired people who could be that straightforward. Hadori-kun was as confident as a prince. I could see why he'd stolen Sato-san's heart. It was quite the romantic situation. *But...*

Someone else had set up this scene. Someone who wasn't even here to witness it. He saved Sato-san from the shadows. He didn't do it to win her gratitude. He'd worked hard for her and she couldn't even thank him. Someone I adored, and who adored me.

I basked in a slight sense of superiority as I drank my cappuccino, which had long gone cold. Sato-san paid her bill and Hadori-kun was just about to take her out when he suddenly stopped.

"Hm? What's wrong?" Hanamizawa-san looked at him.

He grimaced and said, "I ran all the way here, so I have to go to the bathroom. I'll just use the restroom here."

"Idiot. We'll go on ahead without you, then," Ido-san said in an exasperated tone, before leaving the diner with the other two girls. After the three of them walked away, Hadori-kun slowly walked over to me.

"Hey. Uhh... Your name's Torano-san, right?"

I didn't answer.

"Don't worry. He told me all about you."

He who? Wait... Hachijo-kun told him?! *Does that mean he knows we're dating? He told him?* I was inwardly freaking out, but all of a sudden Hadori-kun bowed his head to me.

"Thanks for helping Sato."

Wow, this person didn't even know me but he was bowing his head to me on

behalf of his friend. He seemed like a really great guy.

“I...just did what I was asked to.”

“I know. But I still want to thank you. And him.” Hadori-kun gave me a winning smile, just like a star athlete would. “Speaking of him, I think the kendo club’s still got him. He rushed in to get me and was pretty reckless about it. Our coach is nice, but he can be a bit hotheaded, and he’s really strict when it comes to safety. I bet he’s *still* getting lectured.”

“Oh...” I finished my cappuccino and stood up. “Thanks for letting me know.”

I went back to school and peeked into the gym where kendo club practice was held, but I didn’t see Hachijo-kun there. At first I wondered if he had gone home, but he would’ve told me first. Since he asked me to keep an eye on things, I was sure he’d be curious about the outcome.

I checked my phone, but there were no messages from him. I was starting to get worried that something had happened, so I searched around campus. “Oh!” I spotted him sitting with his back leaned against the west side of the main school building. And he looked absolutely exhausted. I was scared that he had collapsed, so I quickly ran over to him. I leaned in very close and looked his face over, top to bottom.

“Zzz... Zzz...”

I realized he was sleeping. He must’ve been *really* exhausted to fall asleep out here. *Honestly! There you go again, working yourself too hard!* I screamed silently to myself. I didn’t say it out loud to avoid waking him up. *But why do you keep pushing yourself like this? Why are you so caring? I know that’s part of the reason why I like you, but...it just worries me.*

I reached out and gently touched his cheek. *I wish you would take better care of yourself, and value your own time more. Because if you don’t, I...*

I leaned closer to him, still cradling his face with my hand. The corner of my lips brushed against the corner of his lips...and I kissed him. I’d have to give him a real kiss when he was really awake.



My emotions were just overflowing inside of me and I wanted to express them to him in that moment. I snuggled up against his right side while he slept. I sat there in the warmth of the setting sun and read the book he gave me, with the little tiger on the front. It felt peaceful and comforting, and I wished this moment could last forever.

“Mmm...” He stirred next to me. He was awake. He looked around, probably still confused from his nap. And then his eyes widened when he realized I was snuggled up against him.

“Nue...?” he said, staring at me with surprise. I smiled at him. “Sorry, was I too heavy?” I shook my head. *You weren’t heavy at all.* “Fwaaah!” he yawned, checking the messages on his phone with a smile. I figured they were from Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san telling him that Sato-san was safe.

Suddenly he gasped and tried to stand up. “You wanted walnut mocha from Isozaki-ya, right?” *Ohh, he just now remembered his promise to me. But...* “I’ll go buy some n—”

I reached out and gently rested a hand on his shoulder, but didn’t press on it. He didn’t brush it away. I could almost hear him think *“Well, now I can’t stand up.”* I didn’t even have to look up from my book. I wanted him to guess what I was thinking too. I wanted him to sense what I wanted him to do. After a few moments, he sat back down on the ground.

“Can we stay like this for a while longer?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I rested my head on his shoulder. *Correct.* We snuggled like that in a sunbeam. *It’s so warm...* The sun set early these late autumn days, and it wouldn’t be long until it got cold. That was why I wanted to savor every second of this precious moment with him.

Final Chapter 2: Nue Crying in the Shadows

I was reading in class before homeroom started when I felt like someone was watching me. I looked up from my book to find Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san glancing at me from the front of the classroom. It was clear they were talking about me, but couldn't decide whether or not they wanted to come over. I wondered what was going on.

"Good morning. What are you doing?" Suddenly Sato-san walked in and said hello to them, giving them questioning looks.

"Oh! Morning, Yuzu-chan..."

"M-Morning... Um, we're just, uh..."

Both of them trailed off evasively. That just made Sato-san even more confused. She realized they were looking at me and slowly walked over. I was embarrassed for getting caught watching them and quickly buried my face in my book.

"Um... Torano-san?" Sato-san addressed me. I looked up at her with surprise. When our eyes met, she fidgeted a bit as she spoke. "Um...about what happened in the diner the other day... Hadori-kun told me that you helped out too, so I just wanted to thank you..."

I stared at her silently. *Ohh, so that's what was going on.* It really hadn't been a big deal. I wasn't really sure how to respond. I wondered if I should tell her I only did it because Hachijo-kun asked me to. *Ahh, wait. He said he didn't want her to know he was involved either.*

"Did Hachi— I mean, Yashiro-kun..."

"Hm?"

"Did he say anything to you about it?" I asked. She looked puzzled for a moment, then shook her head.

"No, nothing. He said he didn't do anything."

“Oh...” So he had stuck to his word and didn’t want her to know he had a part in it. That was so like him. “In that case...I didn’t do anything either.”

“You too, huh?” Sato-san gave me a wry smile. “I swear, this class is full of nice people. And nice people who don’t want anyone to know how nice they are!”

I looked at her silently.

“Thank you.”

“Who are you thanking?”

“Oh, just the certain someones who won’t openly accept my thanks!” she said with a soft smile.

“Hey, what are you two talking about?”

“Yeah, let us in!”

Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san came over. Ido-san poked Sato-san in the cheek, but she just giggled and said, “It’s a secret.”

Hanamizawa-san’s eyes darted around and then she said to me, “Um, Torano-san? There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you...”

“What?” I tilted my head to the side.

She took a deep breath. “Um... Is it true that you’re dating Yashiro-kun?”

I wondered if Hachijo-kun told her. Or maybe Hadori-kun told her, since he found out. It made me feel a little embarrassed to have people know about my love life, but I didn’t want to lie about it either. I nodded my head. “Yeah.”

“O-Oh. So...you like him, then?”

“Yes. I love him,” I answered honestly. It made me feel warm inside just saying it out loud. I didn’t hear any response from them so I looked up.

Hanamizawa-san let out a silent shriek and covered her face with both hands. I could tell she was blushing so furiously even her ears were red. “Omigod...that was intense! Even your words were just dripping with love!”

“The look on your face is so adorable! I thought you were gonna steal *my* heart!”

“You’re so cute. I just want to nuzzle your cheeks!”

Hanamizawa-san, Ido-san, and Sato-san all chimed in with colorful reactions.

H-Huh?

“Yeah, we don’t stand a chance against her. Oh, I know!” Hanamizawa-san suddenly clapped her hands with an enthused smile on her face. “Hey, Torano-san! Since you’re so crazy about Yashiro-kun, do you wanna make him even more obsessed with you? Do you wanna make his heart *really* race?!”

“What...?” Make Hachijo-kun’s heart race? That sounded very tempting... “Yeah...I think I do.” I decided to give into the temptation.

A huge smile broke out across Hanamizawa-san’s face. “All *right!* Leave it to us!”

She explained the plan and told me to ask Hachijo-kun to meet with me after school at three-thirty. Ido-san and Sato-san both seemed completely on board with the plan too. Honestly, I was looking forward to seeing his reaction.

◇◇◇

I was waiting for Hachijo-kun after school in an empty classroom.

“Nue? What did you want to... Huh?” He called my name as he wandered into the classroom and then froze when he saw me. His eyes were trained directly on me...as I wore a cheongsam with a high slit in it.

“We’re gonna try on the cheongsam we’re wearing for the school festival this afternoon, so why don’t you wear one for him to really make him go crazy?!” That had been Hanamizawa-san’s idea.

I wasn’t confident that I could make him go crazy over it, but then she’d whispered into my ear, *“You two are gonna do the book café for the school festival, so this is your only chance to let him see you wear one! Might as well make the most of it, right? Just imagine how he’ll stare at you! Don’t you wanna see that?”*

And that was why I was standing here wearing a cheongsam. I felt totally shy wearing something so sexy. I wanted to run away and hide myself, but the girls surrounded me, leaving no escape route.



“Don’t just stand there, say something!”

“What do you think about seeing your adorable girlfriend in a cheongsam?”

“Torano-san’s waiting for your reaction!”

The three of them prodded at him as he stood there frozen. That seemed to make his mind start working again.

“O-Oh... I definitely wasn’t expecting it, but...you look adorable. Really, really beautiful.” He said it so awkwardly I could tell he meant it from the bottom of his heart. It seemed like our plan to make his heart race had succeeded.

“Thanks...” I nodded and the girls suddenly let go of me.

“You two kids have fun, now!”

“We’ll leave you two alone!”

“Oh, and make sure not to get the costume dirty!”

They snuck in that remark as they scampered away. *D-Dirty how?!*

Now the two of us were left in the classroom alone together. Hachijo-kun shyly scratched his cheek and said, “I guess this is how popular kids have fun?”

“I don’t know.”

“I really appreciate it this time, though.” He walked over to me and gently touched my cheek. “Because thanks to them, I got to see you in this adorable outfit.”

“Did I make your heart race?” I asked.

He grinned and nodded. “Of course. My heart’s pounding like crazy right now.”

“Oh...” I felt the corners of my mouth lift up. Emotions were overflowing inside of me. “My heart’s pounding like crazy right now too.”

The call of a *nuedori* symbolized someone crying in the shadows. But now that I thought about it, it could also mean someone who was unable to hide their feelings anymore.

“Hachijo-kun...”

“Nue?”

I stood on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his neck, bringing my face close to his.

I might be a *nuedori* crying in the shadows, but this was how I felt deep in my heart.



Yashiro-kun's

Guide to

Going Solo

Yashiro-kun no
Ohitori
sama
kouza

Author: Dojyomaru

Illustrator: Kou Kusaka



Kanon Hanamizawa

A popular girl with a bright, cheerful personality who treats everyone equally.

Shigeaki Yashiro

An introvert who loves spending time alone. A member of the library committee and an avid reader.

Chikaze Ido


One of the cool kids. A sporty girl with a strong sense of integrity who cares about her friends.

Yuzuki Sato


A transfer student who wants to change her shy, reserved personality.

Hadori Yukito

The most popular guy in class who can't ignore people in need.



Pseudo-lost girl
in a labyrinth of
back roads



This bath is
great for easing
neuralgia, poor
circulation, and
fatigue.

Bonus Short Stories

Kanon & Yuzuki on Body Types

KANON: you're so thin, yuzu-chan.

YUZUKI: Am I?

KANON: yeah, you're so little! i bet you never have to worry about going on a diet. i'm jealous.

YUZUKI: Aw, you shouldn't be! I'm jealous of your fashion sense!

YUZUKI: Compared to you, I'm just a beanpole!

KANON: hm, i guess the sea is always greener on the other side

YUZUKI: It's "the grass is always greener." Do you live by the sea or something?

KANON: maybe it just has to do with a difference in diet?

YUZUKI: Hm, maybe. I don't eat very much.

KANON: argh... i have a big appetite. when there's a new snack or dish everyone's talking about, don't you just wanna try it?

YUZUKI: Like nata de coco or tiramisu?

KANON: what decade are you living in?! even tapioca is old news!

YUZUKI: How was I supposed to know...? I didn't have many friends until you guys, you know...

KANON: (´Д` sniffle

YUZUKI: (๑´ㅂ`๑)Ehehe. Just joking.

KANON: geez! anyways, why is it that most of the trendy foods are super high in calories? like drinks that have as much calories as an entire bowl of ramen, or something filled with cheese *and* deep fried!

YUZUKI: Yeah...

KANON: i saw a segment on a talk show about spicy fried chicken that was popular with young people. i swear it was bigger than my head!

YUZUKI: Are you sure it was popular?

KANON: no idea. not even i could take on that one.

YUZUKI: I get it now, though. You have so many friends to go out to eat with, that's why you're fleshier.

KANON: don't say fleshier!

YUZUKI: Yeah, but you'd be the one most likely to be sketched nude out of our group, especially since I'm such a beanpole. I bet it's way easier to draw a voluptuous body like yours.

KANON: don't say voluptuous! and i'd never be sketched nude!

KANON: ...but since you brought it up, i actually think hadori-kun would be the best one to get sketched nude.

KANON: since he trains so much he's all muscular and stuff.

YUZUKI: (*w/)Eeeeeek!

KANON:

KANON: ...you just pictured it, didn't you?

YUZUKI: ...Yes. I pictured his Statue of David body.

KANON: you pictured him completely naked?! yuzu-chan, you little per-

YUZUKI: Don't say it!

Kanon & Chikaze on Background Music

KANON: so i was talking to yashiro-kun the other day

CHIKAZE: (°Д°≡°Д°)? and?

KANON: you know how there's always that segment on the evening news about food?

CHIKAZE: oh yeah, sometimes i watch that. they talk about new restaurants downtown or family-run hole-in-the-wall chinese restaurants or something.

KANON: mmm, fried rice is always the best at those places. the kind with fish cakes

CHIKAZE: (°ω°)(。_。) *nod nod*

CHIKAZE: (-ω- ?)hm? So you and yashiro-kun were talking about fried rice?

KANON: ah, sorry. no, i got off track.

KANON: anyway, you know how those segments always have some kind of background music that fits the theme of the food? like they'll play the theme song for curry-pan man during a segment on curry, etc

CHIKAZE: ohh yeah... or like the theme song for ms. koizumi loves ramen noodles when they're showing ramen

KANON: yes! anyway sometimes it's easy to see why they picked a certain song & we were talking about how that makes the food seem even more delicious.

CHIKAZE: what does that have to do with anything? if i listened to the curry-pan man theme song while i was eating curry it wouldn't make a difference.

KANON: yeah but that theme song has like an indian feel

to it, right? don't you think it sets the mood?

CHIKAZE: well...maybe.

KANON: *Tunak Tunak Tun Da Da Da!*

CHIKAZE: shut up!

KANON: so then yashiro-kun and i started naming foods and asking each other which bgm we'd wanna listen to while we ate it. know what he said?

CHIKAZE: no idea. what'd he say?

KANON: he wants to listen to genba tawaraboshi while eating soba

CHIKAZE: ...who??

KANON: i dunno, he said there's a song of his he likes. he's the guy who sang the theme song for the osaka-kansai expo.

CHIKAZE: ooh, i think i know that one!

CHIKAZE: but what's that gotta do with soba?

KANON: i guess the song has to do with the argo?? incident? or raid or whatever? and the lyrics talk about disguising himself as a guy from a soba restaurant to spy on the enemy's house or something?

CHIKAZE: you mean the ako Incident? and the enemy... the kira residence?

KANON: you're so smart, Chi-chan!

CHIKAZE: i feel like most people know this...?

KANON: anyways, he said if he listened to it while he ate soba, he'd feel like he was eating at *that* restaurant. like he used to be a warrior, but now he's working at a soba restaurant to avenge his lord or something

CHIKAZE: that's really weird, haha. definitely sounds

like something yashiro-kun would say, tho.

Chikaze & Yashiro on Sugamo

CHIKAZE: you know how when you go biking a lot, you have spots you stop at every time?

YASHIRO: Oh, yeah.

YASHIRO: Places you always end up when you pass a certain area, right?

CHIKAZE: (*´·ω·)b yeah, that!

CHIKAZE: i like to stop by kitchen toretate when i ride by the arakawa river

YASHIRO: Is that the place in Adachi City Agriculture Park? I've been there before.

CHIKAZE: yesss! it's like an oasis for ppl who ride bikes by the arakawa river

CHIKAZE: when i'm all exhausted from a long bike ride, eating soft serve ice cream and tanuki soba there feels so amazing. it's like five times more delicious than usual.

YASHIRO: I've never had tanuki soba before.

CHIKAZE: they serve it cold in summer and it's sooo good. try it next time you go there

YASHIRO: Okay.

CHIKAZE: so what's the spot you always go to?

YASHIRO: Probably Sugamo.

CHIKAZE: sugamo... wait, don't they call that the shinjuku for grannies?!

YASHIRO: No! ...They call it the Harajuku for grannies. Although now I'm curious what a Shinjuku or Kabukicho for

grannies would look like.

CHIKAZE: still, that place is for old ppl. so why do you go there?

YASHIRO: Because it's convenient. Remember how I had you go to the Nakasendo Highway from Nakajuku-dori? Well, if you continue on the road leading towards the JR Itabashi station, you can go through Koshinzuka to get to Sugamo Jizodori Shopping Street.

CHIKAZE: u-um, really? you...sound like you know the ins and outs of every road around here.

YASHIRO: You make me sound like a criminal or something.

YASHIRO: Anyway, there are a lot of on-the-go restaurants there where you can get food right in the front window so you don't have to worry about your bike getting stolen.

CHIKAZE: ohhh yeah, sports bikes are pretty expensive so sometimes i worry that not even a lock is enough when i have to go into a store.

YASHIRO: (・д・`*(・д・`*) Right?!

CHIKAZE: are there any places where the food is really good there, tho?

YASHIRO: Yeah, a lot. You can get sweet potatoes, honey ice cream, octopus skewers...

CHIKAZE: octopus skewers?!

YASHIRO: You can buy them at the place where you get fish cakes. They have deep-fried fish paste stuck on sticks as long as hot dogs, and there's octopus and red pickled ginger and stuff inside. They're delicious.

CHIKAZE: hmm, i guess that does sound yummy

YASHIRO: They have other kinds like deep-fried shrimp and mayonnaise, too. They're pretty big, so just one will fill

you up.

CHIKAZE: sounds pretty satisfying. i'll have to go there sometime

YASHIRO: I hope you'll like it.

Yashiro & Kanon on Favorite Songs

KANON: hey yashiro-kun, i was studying at the karaoke place

YASHIRO: (-ω- ?) Oh yeah?

KANON: what do you usually sing there? you said sometimes you like to take a break and clear your mind with a song, right?

KANON: so i was just wondering what you sing.

YASHIRO: I don't sing *that* much...

YASHIRO: but when I do, I usually pick upbeat songs by Kaientai.

KANON: who?! (°ω°;)。oo

YASHIRO: It's a group. Tetsuya Takeda is in it.

KANON: ohh, the guy from kinpachi-sensei. all i know is the song "okuru kotoba." like that?

YASHIRO: There's also "Shonen ki," "Ten made todoke," "Sayonara ni sayonara", and "Watashi no naka no ginga."

KANON: i've never heard of any of those!!

YASHIRO: I'm sure you've heard at least one of them.

YASHIRO: They were all theme songs for Doraemon movies when Nobuyo Oyama was still voicing him.

KANON: i guess now that you mention it, i might know some of them...

YASHIRO: I always wondered why the song “Sekai wa guu chokki paa” was the ending theme and “Yume no hito” was just an image song, but once I got older I realized just how great of a song it was. It gets better the more I listen to it. It’s a masterpiece, really.

KANON: u-um, yashiro-kun?

YASHIRO: Because there’s not just *one* world, you know?! Everyone has different values, and if you ignore that fact, we won’t be able to work together to accomplish anything! Seeking diversity but then ignoring the fact that we’re all different creates too many contradictions!

KANON: uh-oh. i lit his fire...

YASHIRO: The old mentality saying we shouldn’t rock the boat, and now the current trend of going overboard to extol the praises of spending time alone, it’s completely unnecessary! Why is it an either-or situation?!

KANON: ...

YASHIRO: Can’t we just accept each other for who we are?!

YASHIRO: ...Sorry, I just got carried away there for a minute.

KANON: ...welcome back.

KANON: well at least i know what kinda songs you like now.

KANON: so will you come to karaoke with me next time?

YASHIRO: For the millionth time, you need to go ALONE!

Yashiro & Nue on Book Genres

YASHIRO: Hey Nue, you like to read everything from hardcover fiction to light novels, right?

NUE: (-w- ?) Yeah

YASHIRO: Since you seem to read popular books as well as more obscure books, I was just wondering if there are any genres you don't like?

NUE: yes

YASHIRO: (°ω°;)。oo(What?!)

NUE: I don't read horror

YASHIRO: Really? You don't like it?

NUE: ...nope. I visualize it way too much

YASHIRO: One of the downsides of reading so much, huh?

YASHIRO: I feel like just reading horror novels wouldn't be that scary, though.

YASHIRO: Unlike movies there's no visuals or sounds or jumpscares.

NUE: that is true

NUE: I feel like there are a lot of Japanese horror movies that are based on novels that focus on family love and are actually quite moving

YASHIRO: Huh? So then why don't you like horror?

NUE: I can't stand the detailed descriptions of dead bodies decomposing

NUE: or books written from the eyes of a serial killer who keeps killing people

NUE: I just can't with those

YASHIRO: Ohh. Yeah, I don't like those, either.

YASHIRO: I'll have to be careful which movies I invite you to, then.

NUE: ...but

YASHIRO: (-ω- ?) Hm?

NUE: I think I can handle any movie as long as we're together. I'm not sure if I'd enjoy it though...

YASHIRO: Nue... ///

NUE: (" /ω/)///

YASHIRO: Let's go to the movies sometime, then.

NUE: Okay. I'd even go to a PreCure or Crayon Shin-chan movie

YASHIRO: Why those two?!

NUE: because even though they're for kids, they usually have really moving stories no one can make fun of

YASHIRO: Hm, I guess you're right. Let's go see one soon, then.

NUE: okay

Chikaze & Yuzuki on Eating Solo

CHIKAZE: hey yuzuki...are you like yashiro-kun and eat by yourself a lot?

YUZUKI: Yes, I do. I didn't have any friends at my old school to go eat with.

CHIKAZE:

CHIKAZE: ...i'm sorry

YUZUKI: You don't have to apologize... Anyway, why do you want to know?

CHIKAZE: don't you think going out to eat alone is normal lately? just wondering if it's all that great

YUZUKI: It's more relaxing, I think. Eating in a group is fun, but there's a lot of pressure about what to order.

CHIKAZE: i just say "i don't care..."

YUZUKI: I think that makes it even worse (^_^;)

YUZUKI: One of the perks of eating alone is you can order whatever you want.

CHIKAZE: hmmm... seems kinda lonely tho

YUZUKI: ...I guess. I have a lot of fun with you, Kanon-san, and Yukito-kun, though.

CHIKAZE: (*^▽^)/□☆ Yay!

YUZUKI: Yay! ☆□\(^▽^*)

YUZUKI: Anyway, you don't have to worry about anyone else when you're by yourself. There are a lot of difficult things about eating out in a group.

CHIKAZE: hm? there is?

YUZUKI: Yes, you know how sometimes people go crazy over special menus to the point where that's all they want to eat for a while? Like that.

CHIKAZE: ohh yeah i guess i can see that

CHIKAZE: i bought a ton of the brioche with nuts at the convenience store

YUZUKI: I was obsessed with the focaccia topped with ice cream and berry sauce at an Italian chain restaurant. It's all I ate for a while!

YUZUKI: But it's hard to invite people out to the same place over and over again.

CHIKAZE: good point! that makes you self-conscious

CHIKAZE: wait, did you really eat it *that* much?

YUZUKI: I'm embarrassed to admit it, but yes. They did a collab with a Jump series and every time you ordered the dish you'd get a free character folder.

CHIKAZE: o-oh yeah? btw what series was it?

YUZUKI: XXX.

CHIKAZE: waaaaaaait just a minute

CHIKAZE wait wait wait. XXX character folders?! Do you still have them?!

YUZUKI: Um, yes. I do.

CHIKAZE: i'll give you a higuchi if you let me have them!!

YUZUKI: You'll give me 5,000 yen?! Sure! I don't need them, so you can even have them for free!

CHIKAZE: no i can't accept that

YUZUKI: It's really okay! I can't take money from a friend!

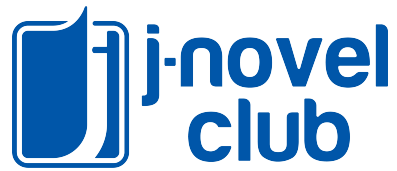
CHIKAZE: ugghh... can i buy you lunch next time at school then?

YUZUKI: ...Well, I suppose that'll be fine. You really like that series, don't you?

CHIKAZE: (σω`o)teehee

CHIKAZE: did you know there's gonna be a collab soon with 00 sushi and YY? *glance*

YUZUKI: Hehe. Noted. (^^)/ Leave it to me!



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