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GUIDE TO THE PERFECT OTAKU GIRLFRIEND



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ROOMIES AND ROMANCE



1

I was walking home from school with my earphones in as per usual. Just another uneventful day in the life of Kagetora Ichigaya. But if I thought today was going to remain that way, I was in for a huge surprise. When I finally reached the house and opened the living room door, I was met with the strangest sight.

“I’m ba— Huh?!”

In front of me stood a beautiful girl, wearing a black kimono and a cat-ear headband, looking at her reflection in the mirror. I had no doubt that this was supposed to be a cosplay of Yomashiro, a ship girl from *Adore Lane*, but an outfit like that, in real life, was way too sexy.

The kimono, while it had sleeves, had huge holes right under the arms, offering the perfect window to some sideboob. The hem was so high that it revealed a dangerous amount of leg. I couldn’t resist wondering whether or not she was wearing any underwear at all.

“*Eek!* Wh-Why are you here?!” screeched Kokoro Nishina, my roommate.

I took out my earphones in a daze, noticing the loud rap music playing in the room.

“M-Maybe because this is my house?! Why *wouldn’t* I be here?!” I asked as Kokoro squirmed, doing whatever she could to hide herself and her scant clothing.

I knew that staring at all that tantalizing skin peeking out from the sides and bottom of the kimono would make her think that I was some kind of pervert, but, despite my best efforts, my eyes naturally steered toward both.

“Why’d you sneak in here though?!” she asked.

“I wasn’t sneaking! What’s up with this music anyway? It’s too loud! No wonder you couldn’t hear me come in!”

“HypMic released a new single and I just *had* to listen to it!” she explained.

Hypnosis Mic was a rap group formed by male voice actors, and, according to Kokoro, all the girls were listening to them. I already knew that she loved them herself.

“Anyway, what exactly are you doing? That’s from *Adore Lane*, right?”

“I-I was just planning my cosplay for Summer Comiket...”

Summer Comiket? But that’s in August, and it’s still June... Why is she starting so early? And more importantly...

“Are you seriously planning to show up to Comiket dressed like a slut?!”

“What! N-No! Just listen to me, okay? I actually bought Unithorn’s costume, but they mixed up the orders and I got this instead! The store isn’t based in Japan, and shipping this back would cost waaay too much, so they told me that I can just keep it and they’ll send me the right one for free. I could never wear this to, like, an actual event—not in a million years!—but it would be a waste not to try it out... S-So I swear it was just for fun. And the only full-length mirror is the one in the living room! A-Anyway, I’m going to change!” she announced before running, embarrassed, back to her bedroom.

I continued to watch her kimono fluttering up and down as she raced up the stairs.

I-I can almost see her butt...

With a sigh, I thought back to all the insanity that had turned me and Kokoro into roommates. Despite being two unrelated people, under the same roof, of the same age and opposite sex, Kokoro wasn’t my girlfriend.

It all started when I attended the “Otaku Meetup & Matchmaking Party,” an event where I’d hoped to find my otaku dream girl. There I happened to run into Kokoro, from school. It was a complete shock to find out that *she* was an otaku. With her flashy gyaru looks and extroverted behavior, she looked and acted like the complete opposite of one—at least at school.

We argued, of course, until we realized that we shared a common goal: finding our ideal otaku date. She wanted a kind, handsome otaku boyfriend

who liked all that stuff that girls like, while I wanted a beautiful and innocent-looking girl who was into the same stuff as I was. So we promised that we'd help each other out. Only an otaku knows what otaku like, after all. So I'm pretty much the expert.

But our plan hit a bit of a snag—Kokoro's father told her that they had to move away from Japan for his work. So she asked to stay by herself instead of being torn away from her hobbies. Funnily enough, I'd been living alone for quite some time myself, since my own parents worked overseas. I understood how Kokoro felt about having to leave, so I proposed to her parents that she could stay with me. I hadn't expected her dad to take it as a *marriage* proposal.

Kokoro straight-up lied to her parents to get them to say yes, saying that I was her boyfriend and that the reason she didn't want to leave Japan was to stay close to me. Against all my predictions, her parents gave their permission. As it turned out, her father was a hopeless romantic who could never keep his daughter apart from her soulmate.

Kokoro later told me that she needed to find a real boyfriend before she graduated high school, which would more or less be when her parents came back to Japan. That way, she could tell her dad that she'd broken up with me and fallen in love with someone else—or, at least, that was the plan to get us out of our potential wedding. And so, we were not only each other's love advisors, but we also had a deadline to find our otaku dates.

We started teaching each other how to become more attractive to otaku of the opposite sex, trying out different ideas, and in general doing our best to find romance. However, truth be told, we were still pretty crap at this.

Left alone in my living room, I started looking at my phone. I reread a direct message that I'd received on Twitter a few days ago.

"Thank you so much for today ≡ ≡ It was the funnest of fun being with you! If it's okay with you, I'd like to see you again sometime, when we can maybe stay together a bit longer..."

It was from Mashiro Gojo, an absolute angel of a girl that I'd recently met at an otaku meetup. The two of us had been on a date the previous Saturday, but

I'd had to leave pretty abruptly. Despite expecting her to never speak to me again, later that day, she'd sent me this sweet DM.

I was surprised, but I immediately thanked her, apologized over and over, and told her that I'd love to go on another date with her. She wrote that she was looking forward to it, but the conversation was dead after that because I had no idea how to reply.

I was also looking forward to our next date, as I wanted an opportunity to make up for the terrible impression I'd left. So, since last time we went with her idea of shopping in Akihabara, this time I wanted to be the one coming up with an idea for where to go. I also wanted to show her how sorry I was for walking out on her, but I didn't know how to do that.

This was exactly the kind of thing I'd want to ask Kokoro about but, as she didn't seem to like Mashiro, I was afraid that she'd just tell me not to date her anymore. On the other hand, keeping Mashiro waiting for a reply wouldn't do her opinion of me any good either. So I decided that, before the end of the day, I'd find the perfect timing to ask Kokoro for advice.

That evening, it was Kokoro's turn to cook. She'd made fried chicken, sesame-flavored sautéed spinach, and miso soup. How was it that everything that this girl cooked—from egg fried rice to hamburger steak—was so delicious?!

As we ate, Kokoro got a notification on her phone, looked at it, then sighed loudly.

"Bambi just won't quit..." she said.

"He's texting you?!"

Bambi was a pretty-faced cosplayer dude that Kokoro used to be a huge fan of. We'd met him, they'd gone on a date, and, not really to my surprise, we ended up finding that he wasn't quite as attractive on the inside as on the outside. He had, however, surprised me by being a different kind of jerk than the one I'd thought he was.

During their first date, Bambi had pestered Kokoro to go home with him, and, right about then, she'd stopped replying to my texts. Since I was so scared that

she might be in danger, I'd left my own date with Mashiro to go and save her, like some kind of terrible superhero.

There were many stories online of other girls who'd been put in the same spot, so we thought that his reason for trying to get them to follow him home was so that he could lure them into his bed. However, when we read about the experience of a girl who'd actually done just that, we found out that the real reason was very different. He actually wanted to lure them into his wardrobe, where he could show off his cosplays and receive loads of compliments. Much to our amusement, Bambi was a huge narcissist who only wanted to have his ego stroked.

"He's invited me to cosplay and go on dates, like, at least five times since then. I keep saying no, but he just won't get a clue," Kokoro said.

"So you aren't interested in him anymore? At all?"

"Of course not! I mean, a manslut who's just trying to have sex with cosplayers would be out of the question, but so is *this*! I've been asking my online friends for ideas about where to find more otaku guys to date..."

She sure does recover fast...

"And I realized!" she babbled on, "a lot of my school friends met their boyfriends at their part-time jobs! Isn't that a good idea? So, you know, we could both find a job and use those to look for dates!"

"A... job?"

"I was thinking that maybe I should work anyway. The money my parents send me isn't enough for clothes and games and everything, so I've had to dip into my savings. Imagine if I could get *paid* to find a boyfriend! That's, like, two birds with one stone! Mom and Dad never let me get a job, but now they won't find out anyway!"

Finding a job did sound good. I, too, had heard about people meeting at their workplace and starting to date. Not to mention, between the money I'd recently spent on clothes, events, and dating, I was practically broke. The idea of working for the first time made me nervous, but a job that was somehow otaku-related could be fun. I could use the cash, and finding a girlfriend would

be the cherry on top.

“A job where we can meet other otaku would be great!” I agreed. “I wonder what sort of job that would be though...”

“Let’s look it up when we’re done eating. I don’t wanna do anything super boring, you know?”

“Ah...” I said, remembering something important. It was still possible that I wouldn’t need to meet any more girls, after all.

“Hm? What’s up?”

“Nothing really. It’s just that...” I mumbled. *Wait, this is my chance! I can ask her for advice!*

“Well,” I continued, “a-actually, after going on that date with Mashiro... we’ve kind of kept in touch.”

“Oh?”

“I thought she wouldn’t want anything to do with me anymore, but she actually messaged me to say that she wants to go out again. So now I’m wondering where I should take her...”

“For real?! You should have told me sooner! That’s totally awesome!” she told me, surprised, but happy.

“I thought you didn’t like her,” I said, remembering what she’d told me about Mashiro.

“To be honest, I’m just kinda relieved that you managed to stay on good terms with her, you know? After all, it was sort of my fault that you left your date with her... And even if I don’t like her, she’s your ideal girl, isn’t she? I’m here to help you out, and I owe you for last Saturday.”

“N-Nishina...” I said, genuinely moved with gratitude.

“You need to tell me more than that though; like, you were saying that you don’t know where to take her. I know that she likes all that guy stuff, but did you find out anything else about her tastes?” she asked.

“Apart from her liking the same genres as me... Oh! Right, I found out that she

works at a maid café.”

“Is... Is that really it?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

Kokoro sighed. “It’s like I told you last time. That girl is, like, someone an otaku boy made up in his bedroom. That’s kind of weird.”

“So you think she’s hiding something?”

“Hm, I can’t really put it into words...”

To me, Mashiro just looked like a sweet girl who happened to perfectly fit my tastes. Kokoro still seemed to find her suspicious though.

Is this what they call “a girl’s sixth sense”?

“Well, anyway,” she said, “if she’s an otaku, that means there’s some anime or game that she really loves. And for an otaku girl, the nicest thing that anyone could do for you is listen! Listen to her talk about what she loves and be interested in it! That’d make any girl happy, and she’d totally love you for it!”

“I see. That makes sense,” I agreed.

I could definitely get that. As an otaku myself, I knew how good it felt to have someone become interested in the things you love.

“But let me think about where you should take her... Hm, the best place would be one related to her hobbies, I guess.”

“We already went to Akihabara on our last date though,” I said.

“What about Ikebukuro then? There are tons of date spots there! The aquarium, the planetarium, you know?”

“Hm. I’ve been there a couple of times, so I’m familiar enough with it. And also, what would you say would be a good idea to apologize to her for leaving like that? I was thinking of buying her a little gift—something that she’d like. Maybe some character merchandise or an accessory or something like that,” I said.

“Whoa, slow down! There’s no need to buy her anything that expensive. If you don’t even know what she’d like, you risk giving her something she hates! If

you do get her something, just make it chocolates or something like that. Or better yet, just tell her that the next time you eat together, it's on you!" she suggested.

"Oh, of course!"

I was beyond glad that I'd asked Kokoro for advice and avoided doing anything weird.

"Still... that Mashiro girl looks like she'd be super popular. I don't get why she'd be so into you..."

"Hey! W-Well, you do have a point..."

I was offended by what she'd said, but it definitely made sense. Not only had *she* asked *me* out first, which was weird enough, but she even did it again after I'd left her hanging last Saturday. As bizarre as it was, I had to believe that she was into me.

If I play my cards right, it's likely that she'll become my otaku girlfriend eventually... right?

After I was done doing the dishes, Kokoro, who was sitting on the couch looking at her phone, called me: "Ichigaya! I found one! This is totally the right kind of job!"

I sat next to her and looked at the screen. She'd opened a page called "Cosplay Modeling Session Agency: Parfait."

"Modeling session agency?" I asked.

"Yep! The company pays you to model in cosplay, then people pay to show up to the modeling session and take pictures of you! It says they already have famous cosplayers working with them! Anyone can apply as long as they're a cosplayer, and you just need to go through an interview and a photoshoot to find out if they'll book you or not! They have over fifty rental costumes, and some of them are ones I've *always* wanted to try! Cosplaying for money sounds cool, and it even says you can make more than three thousand yen an *hour*! That's a crazy amount of money! They say it depends on how popular you are and stuff like that though..."

“That sounds... sketchy.”

“I’m sure it’s fine! Look, it also says that you can choose which characters to cosplay, so you don’t need to wear costumes that are super revealing if you don’t want to! I mean, I guess it does sound too good to be true... and the guy who owns the company is the only one working for it...”

“That’s even more suspicious!”

“I know, I know, but... I-Ichigaya, can I just ask you for a favor? Would you come with me to the interview? I looked up the company’s address and it’s an apartment, so... I’m too scared to go for an interview in a small apartment, alone with a man I don’t know...”

“No way that’s safe!” I exclaimed.

“I’ve seen some cosplayers on Twitter that work with the company, and the reviews aren’t bad or anything. I think it’s legit, honestly,” she said.

“Hm. Fine then...”

Going to the interview would probably be enough to figure out whether it really was a legit company or not, and I’d much rather accompany Kokoro there than have her show up by herself.

“Oh, also, there’s another little thing, if you’d do it for me? You need a couple of pictures to apply, one in cosplay and one in normal clothes. But they can’t use any filters and they can’t be selfies. I already have the cosplay one, since you helped me out with that before, but can you help me with the other one?”

“Sure, I don’t mind,” I said.

“It says to wear clothes that would be fit for an actual modeling session though... What does that even mean?” she asked.

“People that want to take pictures of cosplayers are probably otaku, right? So what about that virgin-killer outfit you bought?”

“Of course! Why didn’t I think of it? I’ll go put it on,” she said, heading to her room to change.

When she walked back into the living room, I pulled out my phone and immediately offered to help her, saying, “Okay then, let’s take those pict—”

“Wait! I need to fix my makeup!” she interrupted.

“What? But you’ve already got makeup on!” I said, looking at her face which, to me, looked perfectly fine as it was.

“You need to go heavier on the makeup for pictures!”

“You know, I can’t be sure if the customers are otaku, but if they are, I don’t think they like makeup that much,” I said. “What about putting it on so that, in the picture, it looks like it’s very light? Like, a natural makeup look, I guess? Otaku guys don’t like that flashy colorful clown look,” I explained, genuinely wanting to improve her chances at getting the job.

“Wh-What?! You’re sure about that?! F-Fine... You win! I’ll try to make it look natural,” she said, walking over to the mirror while muttering the words “flashy colorful clown” under her breath.

After she was done messing around with her face paint, Kokoro took her place in front of an empty wall so we could start our own photo shoot.

“Okay, here I go...” I said, with my finger on the shutter button.

“W-Wait,” she said, fixing her bangs and putting on a fake smile. “Okay, I’m good to go!”

“Can’t you fake that smile a bit better— Nishina!” I said in surprise, as I noticed a small but very important detail.

“Like this?” she said, still trying to smile.

“Forget about the smile!”

“Huh?”

“It’s showing...”

“What is?”

“Just look in the mirror!” I said, too embarrassed to explain. It wasn’t that obvious, but her bra was showing through her white blouse.

“Okay...” she said suspiciously, moving back to the mirror. “I don’t see what’s wrong with... Ahhh!” As soon as she noticed, her face flushed bright red.

“I-I forgot to wear a camisole under the blouse! I’ll go put one on!” she said, running back to her room.

“Y-You know,” I told her when she was back, “it’s no big deal here, but if you actually start modeling there... be more careful, all right?”

Although I’d told her about it, many people paying to take photos of a girl in cosplay would just thank their luck and start snapping away.

“I-I get it! I just forgot because I was in a hurry!” she replied.

“I bet you’ll run into a lot of sleazy guys doing this kind of job, so don’t let your guard down...”

The way she was approaching this whole thing seemed naive to me. Men with cameras trying to get a lucky glimpse of a cosplayer’s underwear is a tale as old as time. I believed that, for her own safety, she should always be aware of that.

“I-I get it... I’ll be sure to wear a camisole under my clothes... And when I’m in a skirt, I’ll also wear something underneath to hide my underwear,” she shyly replied, surprisingly open to my advice.

I took several pictures, then Kokoro looked through them on her phone, choosing which one to use for her job application.

“I wonder if you’ll really be able to meet guys through this kind of job though,” I said, remembering the reason she was applying in the first place. As I saw it, the only people she was going to meet were other girls in cosplay and middle-aged photographers.

“Some of the photographers could be handsome and genuinely interested in cosplay,” she said, not sounding particularly confident.

“That doesn’t sound very likely.”

“I’ll never know if I don’t try! What about you then? Have you decided what you’ll do?” she asked me.

“Not yet...”

The only job that I could think of where I had a chance of meeting otaku girls was working as a store clerk for an anime or game shop, but it sounded like a

lot of hard work and I wasn't so sure that it would help me find any *cute* otaku girls. I definitely had to do a bit of digging if I wanted to find a better option.

I went back to my room and spent slightly less than an hour perfecting a text for Mashiro. I eventually settled on:

"What about meeting in Ikebukuro next time?"

After a while, she responded saying that she liked the idea, and I couldn't have been more relieved.

This time I can't screw up. I need to impress her from start to finish. I'll do my best and leave her utterly amazed! Since she already seems to like me for some reason, having her become my girlfriend shouldn't be that hard! I thought to myself, realizing that our next date would be decisive. I probably wouldn't ask her to be my girlfriend just yet, but I wanted her to like me more in as short a time period as possible.

You don't meet a girl that perfect every day. I have to do my best.

A few days later.

"This is the place..."

"It just looks like a normal apartment," I said.

After school, Kokoro and I had taken a train to Akihabara and, after walking for several minutes, had reached what basically looked like someone's house.

While I still hadn't even decided what job to apply for, Kokoro had already sent her application and had been invited for an interview.

"Remember what I told you, okay? You're supposed to be my older brother!" she said.

"I know..." I replied.

Truth to be told, Kokoro wasn't the only nervous one. I was worried that the company's owner might be some weird or dangerous creeper, so I had to watch over her by pretending that she was my sister.

Kokoro pushed the company's apartment number on the intercom and introduced herself as Two-Heart.

The gate opened and we went inside, then up the stairs to the apartment. When we found the right place, we rang the doorbell, and a man quickly opened the door.

"Hello, welcome," he said. He was middle-aged, unkempt and overweight, with a deep tan. None of the words that would describe my first impression of him would be very flattering, to be honest. He didn't look trustworthy at all.

"H-Hello! Thank you for having me here!" Kokoro said.

"Hello..." I also said, then we both entered the room.

"I'm Matsubara," the man introduced himself, "and I'm the manager of Parfait. You're... Miss 'Two-Heart'? Is that your cosplay name?"

"Y-Yes, sir!" Kokoro replied.

"I think you should go for something a little easier to read, as a model," he said.

"I see..." she replied, visibly tense.

"And I see that you're in your second year of high school. Would this be your first time at a job like this?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Okay then, let's see... You wrote here that you only want to wear cosplays that 'don't show too much skin.' Hm... I'll be honest with you. If you want to make real money, you'll have to choose something a little skimpier. We have lots of cosplayers here, and the popular ones go for the more revealing outfits right from the start."

"I... don't mind earning less," Kokoro replied.

"Oh, believe me, everyone wants to earn more and be more popular once they start. But you can always change your mind later on. For now, let's take a couple of test pictures of you in costume."

"O-Okay..."

This guy already sounds fishy. It's like he wants to force girls to wear revealing costumes even if they don't want to. Coming here with Kokoro was the right choice after all.

"You're a small, right? The most popular choices we have in that size are... this, this, aaand this," the man said as he handed three different costumes to Kokoro.

"The dressing room is over there," he then said, pointing to a different room.

Kokoro went to change, leaving me and Matsubara alone. As if I wasn't already feeling awkward enough, he started speaking to me.

"So, you're her boyfriend?" he asked out of the blue.

"Huh?! N-No, I'm just her brother..."

"Yes, she told me as much, but who's ever seen a brother accompanying his younger sister to a modeling job? She's your girlfriend, isn't she?"

"What? N-No..."

He already figured out that I'm not her brother!

"Anyway, since she wants to do this, just be supportive of her, okay? This isn't one of those shady companies looking to trick girls, so you have nothing to worry about," he said.

"I-I see."

I think you're already being shady enough, old man, I thought to myself.

I felt my phone vibrate. It was a text from Kokoro: *"Come here!"*

What? She wants me to go in the dressing room with her?! Wh-Why?! Can she not put on the costume by herself?

"Oh, ah... Excuse me," I said, leaving my seat and approaching the dressing room.

"Nishina?" I called as I knocked on the door.

"Come in!"

"Really?"

“Yes! Just come in!” she said, and I nervously obliged.

When I saw her, I could hardly believe my eyes. I was already dead after seeing her in the virgin-killer outfit she’d picked up in Harajuku, but now she was wearing a virgin-killer sweater. Is it possible to die twice?

It was a halter neck sweater that left the wearer’s back and sides almost completely bare. With the lack of shoulder straps, or sleeves of any kind, I could easily see that the pink thing underneath Kokoro’s sweater was her bra.

“What are you...?!”

I meant to ask her what she was *wearing*, but I was so surprised that my voice stopped working correctly halfway through. My eyes had also stopped working correctly, as I wasn’t able to move them away from Kokoro’s beautifully smooth, exposed skin.

“Th-That’s what he gave me to wear. Is *this* his idea of something that doesn’t show too much skin?! H-Hey! Where are you looking?! Why is your face red?!” she asked angrily, not realizing that she was just as red. “Stop it! Th-This isn’t like a *bra* bra! It’s not even really underwear!”

“I-I’m not looking at your bra!”



How is that not underwear? It looks like a bra to me...

This was the first time I'd actually seen a virgin-killer sweater in real life. It looked even sexier than it did in pictures.

If she wasn't wearing a bra I could totally see her boobs right now... Aaaah! What am I thinking at a time like this?!

"I can't wear this while people take pictures of me! And I tried them all out—the others are even worse!" she said, mortified, holding one of the other costumes in front of me.

"Whoa!" was my immediate reaction as I saw the cat-ear headband, tube top with a heart-shaped cleavage window, and accompanying thong. It was basically glorified underwear.

Did she really have to try that on to tell how bad it is?! I thought, trying my best not to imagine her wearing it.

"This is totally not what I thought cosplay photo shoots were about! I can just say that I don't want to wear any of these, right? Or is that guy implying that I have to wear *at least* this kind of thing if I wanna be hired?" she asked.

"So what if he is?! Are you seriously considering wearing that thing while strangers take pictures of you?! Do you need this job that much?!"

"No way!" she said, chasing me out of the dressing room. After a while, she came back to the interview room wearing the tube top under the virgin-killer sweater.

She tried to address Matsubara, but she was quickly interrupted by him.

"About these costu—"

"Oh, no, you got it all wrong! There's no point in wearing that sweater if you're wearing other stuff underneath!" he said.

"But I really don't want to show so much skin..." she replied.

"Maybe you think so right now, but when you see how much you can earn like this, you'll certainly change your mind. I've worked with so many other girls who have done the same. How 'bout we start by just taking a couple of photos?"

We won't publish them until you change your mind. It's the pictures that'll show us how revealing the costumes really are. It's difficult to tell while you're wearing them. You can look at the finished result and, if you still think it's too much, we can just decide not to use them. Don't worry, I'll do it as if we were doing a proper photo shoot."

"No, I really—" Kokoro started, but I couldn't contain myself.

"She said that she doesn't want to do it!" I barged in. "She's told you already that she doesn't want to wear this kind of skimpy thing, not now, not ever!"

He's doing a lot of talking, but he only really wants to take sexy pictures of Nishina!

"Listen, kiddo. Who are you to stop your girlfriend from achieving her dreams? You're the one who told her what she can and can't wear, aren't you? If you do that, you're going to regr—"

"I'm sorry! I'm not interested in this job after all!" Kokoro said, apologizing with a deep bow.

"Huh? What's this all of a sudden?" Matsubara asked, confused.

"I'm very sorry. After coming here, I realized that doing cosplay shoots is not how I thought it'd be, and I don't think I'm up to it."

"Come on now, don't be like tha—"

"I'm going to return your costumes," she said before running back into the dressing room.

I waited for her right outside, and I could hear the sound of the clothes slipping off her. That was... kind of exciting.

"H-Hey, Nishina, are you sure about this?" I asked her through the door. "I should have kept my mouth shut, I'm sor— Ouch!"

The door slammed open, hitting me square in the face. She was already done changing.

"What are you talking about? I should thank you. You said exactly what I was thinking."

We both walked back to the room where the old sleazeball was waiting.

Kokoro and I were on our way out, but Matsubara stopped us.

“Are you really leaving? What about modeling? If you want to hit it big as a cosplayer, you should really come work with us. You’ll be able to have your pictures taken for free, and we can even print you a personal portfolio. Did I mention my connections in the cosplaying world? I introduce my best models to huge cosplaying gigs, and—”

“I’m sorry, I’m just not interested. Goodbye!” she refused a final time.

“Kids these days... She doesn’t know what a huge opportunity she’s turning down...” he muttered as we hurried away.

“That was really something, huh?”

“Was I too naive to think that I could make money while having fun?” a disappointed Kokoro asked, mostly to herself, while we sat together on the train home.

“Wanting to turn your hobbies into work isn’t a bad idea in itself,” I said. The problem was more in that specific job than in her way of thinking.

“It’s a wonder that a guy like that can actually manage a company,” I said, pulling out my phone to look the company up online.

One of the results was an imageboard page: “General Thread for Model and Idol Photo Shoots.”

It was a thread aimed at photographers, starting with a huge list of companies that put on modeling sessions. Each company name was followed by a review, then other comments about the place. I scrolled until I found Parfait in the list.

Parfait: The owner, Matsubara, is a scammer and a pervert. He takes lewd pictures of models and is incredibly inappropriate. Girls range from cute to not-so-cute. The studio is pretty bad and the prices are high.

“Ugh.”

It's even worse than I thought!

"Hm? What's wrong?" Kokoro asked when she heard my disgusted reaction.

"Read this. It's a thread about Parfait," I said, handing her my phone.

"Huh?! He takes lewd pictures of the models?! Oh, and look, there's a link to a former model's Twitter!" she said, clicking on it.

The owner of Parfait forced me to pose for lewd pictures, contacted me privately against my will, and insisted that I go on dates with him. Be careful if you're looking for a modeling gig.

"Didn't you say that the reviews for Parfait weren't bad? These're worse than bad!" I told Kokoro.

"B-But I searched for 'Parfait modeling session reviews' and nothing bad came up..."

"Did you only read the first result or something?!" I asked, astonished that an otaku could be so bad at online searches.

I took back my phone and continued reading the reviews for similar agencies, one at a time. There were other bad ones, but also some good ones.

Blue Sky Photography: Focused on outdoor modeling sessions. Since it's run by a huge company, operation is smooth, the staff is nice, and the models are cute. Mostly outside, so no lewd pictures. Recommended for artistic shots.

Cutie Girls: Focused on cosplay and everyday fashion. The studio is large and you can get decent pictures. No sexy costumes. The staff is always present and stop anyone that tries to touch the models, get too close, get a panty shot, etc. Models are top notch. Idols, gravure models, famous cosplayers, popular maids and such from cafés, etc.

"Some of the agencies sound pretty decent," I told Kokoro, showing her the ones I'd just found.

She started reading, her eyes wide as she read carefully.

“You’re right!” she concluded after a minute, so we got to work looking at the official websites for those agencies.

“Wow, like, just from checking out this place’s website I can tell it’s on another level from Parfait! It’s so professional and detailed! There’s even a list of rules for photographers...”

“So you just happened to run into the sketchiest one out there because you suck at looking up things online?” I asked mockingly.

“What?! I...! B-But...” she started rebutting, but quickly gave up.

I should have helped her look it up in the first place, I thought to myself.

“Are you going to try to apply to another agency? A legit one this time,” I added.

“I could try, but... I think I’ll pass.”

“Huh? Why?”

“You might think I’m a bit late and all that, but I did think about it some more and, like, you had a point. Can I really find a boyfriend doing this kind of job? Probably not... I like cosplaying, sure, but the reason I’m trying to get a job is to find otaku guys, so...”

“You’re right. I do think you’re a bit late on this one,” I agreed.

“So let’s look for a job where we can both find a proper date!” she said. I was always relieved to see how quickly Kokoro recovered.

“Oh, and also...” she continued.

“Yes?”

“Thanks. You, like, totally saved my butt,” she said, smiling shyly.

“O-Oh. No problem!” I replied. I was glad that I’d gone there with her.

“When we get home, I’ll look for more jobs!”

“Yeah! Me too!” I said.

This time, I’ll find a job before she does!

2

The following Saturday.

It was time for my second date with Mashiro.

Since I was still short on money, I had to wear the exact same clothes for a third time. That was the other reason I needed a job, but I still couldn't decide on one. I looked through several postings on recruitment websites and apps, but none of the options looked very enticing. Some jobs seemed fun, and others seemed like they could help me meet otaku girls, but none fit both of these descriptions.

After following Kokoro's grooming advice, I left the house and reached the place where I was supposed to meet Mashiro, with a bit of time to spare.

"Oh, Ichigaya, there you are! Sorry to keep you waiting!" she chirped as she arrived.

"Hi! I... I just got here too!"

Seeing Mashiro in person after all this time—okay, it was just two weeks—made me pretty nervous.

She was wearing a white sailor dress, with her hair up in a side ponytail. Between the hem of the dress and her white knee-high socks there was only about an inch of exposed thigh, but boy what a beautiful inch it was.

Though I was currently sharing my home with an equally beautiful girl, Mashiro's cutesy presentation was on another level.

She's the embodiment of everything I look for in a girl... How could I leave her like that last time? This time, I have to make a good impression!

"Hm? Ichigaya? Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Oh, er, I'm just... I'm so sorry about last time! It was so rude of me to leave you like that..."

“D’aw, don’t worry about it! Let’s just have heaps and heaps of fun today, okay?”

“U-Uh, yes!” I replied, taken aback by the sheer power of her smile.

Why is she so good at making me fall in love with her?! Maybe she was serious when she said that she was looking forward to meeting me again...

“So... let’s head to the planetarium,” I said.

“Yaaay! I haven’t been there since grade school! I can’t wait!”

I’d texted her beforehand asking where she would like to go between the aquarium and the planetarium, and she’d chosen the latter.

After this part of our date, I was planning on taking Mashiro to Animate, so that I could learn more about her tastes like Kokoro had advised. That way, I could get even closer with her.

Of course, the best outcome would be finding out that her tastes really were the same as mine, but I was ready to accept whatever kind of otaku stuff she was into. And whatever that was, there was no way it could be worse than that deranged stuff that Kokoro drooled over.

We entered the planetarium and checked out the programming for the day.

“Let’s see...” I said. “We can watch *Healing Through the Starry Sky* or *Summer Meteor Shower* without waiting too long. The first one is ‘a relaxing show narrated by a famous voice actor,’ and the second is ‘an orchestral show with a soundtrack by a popular composer.’ Which one sounds better to you?”

“Can we watch *Healing Through the Starry Sky*? Can we, can we?!”

“Hm? Sure, of course...”

I personally didn’t mind either way, but I was surprised by how quickly she’d chosen.

“It says the narrator is Soichiro Umehara... Have you heard of him?” I asked her.

“You don’t know about him?!” she suddenly shouted, like she’d just stepped in something bad. “He’s the *biggest* male voice actor right now!”

“O-Oh, sorry, I just don’t know much about male voice actors,” I replied, startled by how much louder her voice had become.

Mashiro looked away shyly, her voice back to her usual squeak. “R-Right, of course! I actually only follow cute voice actresses too, mostly, but you know... I have a friend—that’s right!—a friend who loves voice actors, so I heard about him from her!”

“I see...” I said, relieved that she’d gone back to her usual calm, smiling face. The way she’d yelled at me had me worried that I’d accidentally said something rude, but thankfully that didn’t seem to be the case. I must have been imagining things.

I went to the counter and paid for two student tickets.

“Ah, Ichigaya, here...” Mashiro said, handing me the money for her ticket.

“Don’t worry, I’ll pay for yours too! It’s the least I can do after what I did last time.”

This, too, was Kokoro’s idea.

“But it wasn’t that big of a deal... You don’t need to...” she said, blinking her large eyes at me.

“I insist!”

“RReally? In that case... thank you!” she said with a cheerful smile.

I’d spend any amount of money just to see her smile again, I thought, remembering all the meals and gacha rolls I’d already had to skip just so I could afford this date.

We entered the projection room and took our seats next to each other.

I haven’t been to a planetarium in a while, but were the seats always so close together?!

If I moved my hand to the side even an inch, I could have touched Mashiro. What's more, the seats were already reclined so that we were leaning backwards, meaning that this, essentially, was just like sleeping together.

My heart is going to jump out of my chest... Will I make it to the end of the show?

"Woow, I can't wait for it to start!" Mashiro said.

"Oh? R-Right, me neither!"

I looked over at her and saw that she was staring up at the ceiling, with a huge smile and sparkling eyes. I would never have guessed that she liked planetariums so much.

"I-It's just because I haven't been to a place like this in so long, you know?" she added nervously.

"Hm? O-Okay."

Is it me or does she sound a bit strange?

The room finally darkened and the projection began, accompanied by the narrator's voice.

Mashiro let out a little excited shout, surprising me. Even in the darkness, I could tell that she was holding a hand over her mouth.

Is she really so excited? I wonder what's up with her... I thought, though she seemed to have noticed my gaze. She took her hand away from her mouth and went back to staring up at the ceiling. Puzzled, I fixed my eyes on the projection as well.

"That was so, sooo fun!" Mashiro said once the show was over.

"Y-Yeah, I'm su— it sure was!" I replied. To be honest, I'd not been getting enough sleep lately, so it was a struggle just trying to stay awake in there, but I decided not to mention it.

Whatever the case, I was happy that she hadn't found it as boring as I had.

"I was thinking we could go to Animate next, since it's close by... Would you

like to?" I asked her.

"Aaah yes, I'd love to! That sounds wonderful!"

We left the Sunshine City complex and headed to the Animate just outside.

One of the books in the "recent releases" corner immediately caught my eye.

"The new volume's out already?!" I exclaimed, taking the manga from the shelf.

"Oh, that's that one with the anime that's airing right now," Mashiro said. "I've never read the manga, but the anime is great! You think so too, right?!"

"It really is! And the manga is just as good! I have all the volumes except this one, but... I think I'll pass for today," I said, putting the book back on the shelf. By now, I was close to being completely broke, so I just couldn't afford it.

"But why?" Mashiro asked, curious.

"Well, I'm just... a little short on funds, you know? Haha... I'm looking for a part-time job, actually."

"What?! But I even had you pay for my ticket! I-I'm so, so sorry!"

"No, no, that's fine! Really!" I quickly replied, regretting opening my mouth.

"But maybe I can help! A part-time job, hmm... Oh! I know, I know! The company I work for is hiring part-timers right now!"

"What...?"

She works for a maid café, doesn't she?

"But I'm a guy... I can't work in a maid café," I said.

"No no, I mean, the kitchen is mostly run by men!" she explained.

"Oh, I get it." I breathed a sigh of relief. "That makes more sense."

"The one I work at now is just a normal maid café, but the company is opening a new cat-maid café next week. All the maids wear cute kitty ears, and I get to move there! They needed someone who already had some experience to help the newbies. I'm so, sooo excited to be going there."

“O-Oh...”

I'd never thought about working in a maid café's kitchen, but that's a brilliant idea! I'd be able to work in the same place as the beautiful Mashiro, and I'd also get to meet other cute otaku girls! N-Not that I want to... I mean, Mashiro's my dream girl, after all...

Furthermore, since it'd only be part-time, I could always quit if I needed to.

“They're looking for both men and women for this new place?” I asked.

“Yep yep! Girls to work as maids and boys to work in the kitchen.”

This also meant that I could suggest it to Kokoro. She'd be able to cosplay as a maid for work and even possibly meet otaku guys.

“Thanks for letting me know! I don't know if I'll get the job, but I'll try applying.”

I've never worked before, so I'm kind of nervous, but it's definitely going to be worth it! I can already imagine being surrounded by cute girls in maid outfits... Not that it matters as long as I get to see Mashiro!

“Really?! Yay! Working with Ichigaya would be the bestest thing ever!”

“M-Mashiro...!”

Just how happy is she going to make me?! Who could refuse after hearing something like that? I've got to be the luckiest guy alive... Anyway, for the time being, I need to do my best to get that job!

We continued browsing the new releases in Animate. The more I chatted with Mashiro, the happier I felt. She liked all the same titles as me, and she was shockingly knowledgeable about series which were supposed to be for guys.

I thought back to what Kokoro had told me earlier—that all otaku have something that they're especially passionate about. I wanted to find out just what that was for Mashiro, but I was pretty much already convinced that what she was most passionate about was content for otaku boys...

But, before I could ask her directly, we were interrupted by someone shouting.

“Hey, Mariko!”

Mashiro, for some reason, turned around to look, and, curious, I did the same.

I saw the person who had shouted, a girl, who then proceeded to address Mashiro: “So it really was you! You’re here to preorder Soma’s new album, right?! Awaaaah, we’ve been waiting so long for this! I just preordered my copy too!”

Look, I know I may not be one to talk, but this girl was the quintessential otaku. The glasses, the ponytail, the loud clothes, the rambling... and the most eye-catching detail of all: a shopping bag adorned with an extensive collection of character badges. It was an ita-bag, and a very unapologetic one at that.

Is this a friend of Mashiro’s? She sure has some hardcore otaku friends, huh. But... didn’t this girl just call her “Mariko”? What’s up with that? And who the hell is Soma?

“Huh?! N-No, I, er...!” Mashiro stammered, looking more nervous than I’d ever seen her.

The girl kept speaking, so loud and fast that I couldn’t even hear Mashiro. “I’m so glad I came here on the very first day! It was almost sold out already!”

Mashiro froze. “Almost sold out?” she asked the stranger, who I assumed was her friend.

“Hm? Yeah, I think they only had ten or so left. Wait... You don’t mean you haven’t preordered it yet?! You said you’d work extra hard so you could buy a dozen copies just for yourself!”

Preorder? Work extra hard? Huh?!

Mashiro, looking terrified, turned around to face me, as if she’d just remembered I was there. Flustered, she looked at me, then at her friend, then back at me.

“I-I’m so sorry! Do you mind if I go to the floor where they sell CDs for a second...?” she asked.

“Hm? Of course not, go ahead...” I replied, unable to understand what was going on.

“Oh? This guy’s a friend of yours, Mariko? Nice to mee—”

“Eeek!” Mashiro interrupted her friend as she was trying to talk to me. “N-Naoko, don’t call me by that nam— I mean, don’t call me by that weird nickname!”

“What? I’m just calling you by your n—”

“Eeeeeek!” Mashiro let out a high-pitched squeak as she quickly hopped behind her friend, slapping a hand over her mouth.

What the hell? I’ve never seen Mashiro act like this...

“I’m sorry, Ichigaya! I-I just remembered I have something really important to do! D-Do you mind if we split for today?!”

“What? O-Oh, okay...” I instinctively replied, surprised by how intense she’d suddenly become.

“I’m really, really sorry! I’ll do something to apologize next time! Thank you so, so much for today!” she said, forcing a smile, but she was still obviously freaking out.

Still keeping a hand over her friend’s mouth, Mashiro dragged the poor girl up the stairs to the second floor.

I stood, alone and confused, in the middle of the store.

Mariko? Is that Mashiro’s real name? And what was that about a CD preorder? An album? Why was she freaking out like that? I have no idea what’s going on, but I’m pretty sure of one thing... Mashiro is hiding something from me.

I briefly considered sneakily following Mashiro to see what kind of CD she was trying to buy—since I wanted to know more about her tastes, of course. But that sounded like way too much of a headache, so I headed back home instead.

Around the same time I got on the train, I received a DM from her, apologizing for leaving like that. I immediately replied telling her she didn’t have to worry, since I’d pretty much done the exact same thing to her already.

I was disappointed, since I’d been planning on spending the whole day with

her, maybe even having dinner together, but at least I could look forward to the possibility of working with her.

Still, I can't help but wonder about what that friend of hers was saying. I've been calling her Mashiro all this time because that's what's on her Twitter account but... could her real name really be Mariko?

I already assumed that the CD they were talking about was the new album from a singer she liked, but I didn't understand why she felt the need to hide something like that from me.

I got home, but Kokoro wasn't there, so I had cup noodles for dinner and sat through some of the anime I'd recorded.

"I'm back!" Kokoro greeted me at around eight.

She said that she'd be out with friends today, right? What kind of gyaru comes back home by eight? Her parents must have been really protective for her to grow up like this.

"Oh, hi," I said.

"So, how was your date?"

"It was fun. Mashiro really seems more and more like my ideal girl, but..."

"But what?"

"There's something that bugs me..." I said, and explained to Kokoro what had happened at Animate.

"Then, they started talking about this new album, and Mashiro—I *think* her name is—went to preorder it, dragging her friend with her. That's when our date ended."

"And whose album was that?" Kokoro asked.

"Hm... It was a guy's name. That's all I remember."

"You're telling me you can't even remember the most important part?!" Kokoro scolded me.

"I can't help it! I was so confused by all that happening out of the blue!"

“Well, now we know that Gojo girl is a fan of this mystery musician, or idol, or voice actor—or whatever he is. But, like, she doesn’t want you to know about it.”

“You think so too?” I asked.

“If you find out who that artist is, it could be a chance to get even closer to her. The *real* her!”

“But she basically ran away... I didn’t even get the chance to ask her...”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway though, I think I get her a bit better now. Just as I thought, she’s also drooling after some otaku-industry hottie. Lining his pockets, as we all do,” Kokoro said.

“Don’t phrase it like that!”

I’d have been surprised to learn that Mashiro was into male idols, but that wouldn’t have lessened my opinion of her. I hoped that, on our next date, we could talk more honestly about her tastes.

“Oh, right! There’s another thing I wanted to talk to you about!” I said, suddenly remembering our mission. “Mashiro works at a maid café, right? The company that manages that café is opening a new place, and they’re looking for part-timers. Girls to work as maids, and boys to work in the kitchen.”

“A maid café...?” Kokoro asked, sounding interested.

“Why don’t we both apply? You could meet otaku guys there, and you’d also be able to cosplay for work, like you wanted to!” I suggested.

“Working while wearing a cute maid outfit does sound lovely, and I’m sure that I could meet guys too, but... I don’t think I could work in a maid café. The customers are almost all men, right? I don’t even have that many male friends... I’d probably be too nervous to talk with them...”

“You say that after applying for that modeling job?!”

“But that’s different! You just need to pose without saying anything! And I like having my picture taken in cosplay anyway... But as a maid I’d have to actually, like, talk. Ugh. I’ve never worked before, you know? That’s super hard to do right from the start!”

While she was definitely interested, I could tell that she was probably also scared. It did make sense. I mean, I was scared myself. The only difference was that, in my case, the dream of being able to see Mashiro in a maid outfit dominated my fears...

“Let’s try and take a look at their website, okay?” I said, taking out my phone to look up the soon-to-open café.

“Okay...” Kokoro replied half-heartedly, but her attitude changed as soon as she saw the pictures on the recruitment page. “Wait, they haven’t even opened and they already show the costumes?! Look, maids with cat ears! Ahhh! They’re so cuuute!” she screeched.

“And the pay isn’t bad either. Look,” I pointed out.

“You’re right. Hm... I do want to try it out, it’s just...”

She didn’t entirely sound convinced, but she probably only needed one last little bit of encouragement.

To be honest, I’d be much less anxious starting a new job if Nishina were with me, even though I know Mashiro will be there... I have to convince her...

“And this is just a short-term job, so it’s not that big of a commitment!” I told her.

“Oh, that’s a relief... Let me see what it says... ‘Maids will have to entertain customers by chatting with them and singing on stage.’ They even have a stage, wow... ‘Maids can refuse requests for particular songs.’”

“Maids have to sing?” I asked. I’d only been to a few maid cafés, so I wasn’t that familiar with them.

This is bad... She was already nervous about applying for this job, but if she also has to sing in front of strangers, there’s no way she’ll do it...

“This sounds fun!” she said. “I love singing Vocaloid songs and stuff from anime.”

“RRreally?” I couldn’t hide my surprise. “So, you’re going to apply...?”

“You know,” she went on, ignoring my question, “I wonder if I can really meet potential dates at a job like this. Even if there are guys working in the kitchen, it

doesn't look like we'd have time to talk to each other..."

"Ugh. L-Let's see if we can find anything about that," I replied, admittedly thinking that, unfortunately, she had a point.

After a bit of googling, I found something promising.

"Oh, this is a thread full of people who used to work in maid cafés!" I said, showing my phone to Kokoro.

Former café maid here. Most of the girls working at the cafés are dating boys working in the kitchen or from management. Makes you sad for the customers that spend so much money on them...

"For real now?! Is this real?!" Kokoro asked, her voice rising with excitement.

As with all information from anonymous online boards, I knew that it had to be taken with a grain of salt, but, if it were true, it'd be pretty awesome. *I could end up dating a café maid! That'd be the best job ever!*

"There's another post here," I said, scrolling further down.

Is it true that voice actor "S" is a regular at some maid café? Is he shooting for one of the girls working there?

As soon as she read about the voice actor, Kokoro's eyes began to sparkle, and she emitted a high-pitched squeal.

"Ichigayaaa! What are you waiting for?! Let's apply!" she shouted.

"Whoa! How'd you get convinced so fast?!"

She really can't control herself when it comes to voice actors... And after struggling to decide for so long too! I thought; although, as an otaku, I could somewhat relate.

"It says that in order to apply you need to submit a picture and a cover letter. If you pass that stage, then there's an interview," I explained after reading the details on the café's web page.

And so, it was decided that we'd both try to get a job at the new maid café. Kokoro was already enthusiastically preparing her application.

“It says that you don’t need to send a resume!” she said, sounding extremely relieved.

“Huh? So what?”

“If we had to send one, we’d have to write our addresses on it, right? They’d find out that we live together! And they could get all sorts of weird ideas!” she said.

“Oh! You’re right! I hadn’t thought about that.”

We had to register on the recruitment site in order to forward our applications, so I started filling in all the required fields.

“What?! They even need pictures for kitchen staff jobs?!” I asked, appalled.

“Well, isn’t that standard for any part-time job? You’d put a picture on your resume, right?” Kokoro replied.

“Hm... But do I even have any decent pictures of myself?” I mumbled, scrolling through my phone to find something that I could use. “I don’t think I have... Oh, I have that selfie that Ai forced me to take with him...”

The last time Ai and I had gone out to eat together, he insisted that I let him take a selfie so that he could upload it to Twitter and Instagram, and so on. Since he said that he’d cover my face with stickers, I’d eventually agreed, and he sent me the unedited picture on LINE.

I looked at our selfie. Being side by side with that girlishly pretty face of his made me look even uglier than I actually was.

“He takes selfies with you...? He’s... a boy, right?” Kokoro asked, confused, leaning over to peek at my phone without even asking for permission. I braced myself for her to be disgusted by the sight, but she was staring intently while breathing heavily.

“Is this that otaku friend of yours? He’s so cute... You two are super close, huh?” she asked with a creepy grin. “Hm... I-I see...”

“H-Hey, what are you grinning at?! You aren’t coming up with some elaborate gay fantasy in that head of yours, are you?!” I asked, finally understanding why she looked so amused.

“I-It’s not like I was daydreaming about the two of you slowly realizing that your friendship transcends the boundaries of platonic male companionship or anything! I’m not the kind of fujoshi that ships just anyone, anywhere, anytime, o-okay?!” she huffed, still completely failing to hide her grin.

“Why do you sound like the world’s creepiest tsundere?!”

I thought she only shipped fictional characters! And if she really has to come up with these weird fetishes, can’t she at least choose someone else?!

“A-Anyway!” she said. “More importantly, you can’t send that! It’s a selfie, and there’s someone else in the picture!”

“But it just says ‘a picture that clearly shows the applicant’s face.’ Maybe it’s important if you’re applying to be a maid, but it can’t be a big deal for kitchen staff...”

“They wouldn’t tell you to upload a picture if it wasn’t important, you dunce! If they wrote that, it means that the picture you choose also plays a role in the selection process!”

“Mm... Okay. Then, can you take a picture for me? In front of the white wall there...” I asked.

“Huh? I mean, sure, I can take your picture, but you aren’t planning on taking it like *this*, are you?! In that ugly sweater, with your hair all messed up?”

“That’s... a problem?”

“Of course it is! They’d throw your application right in the trash! I mean, think about it. A maid café’s kitchen is probably a pretty popular place to work at, isn’t it? You can work surrounded by cute girls, the pay isn’t bad, and even high schoolers can apply. So there are going to be a lot of other candidates.”

“Oh... That’s true...”

If this place was good enough to convince even me to apply to work there, it was probably also really popular with a ton of other people.

“I’ll go change then,” I said, going up to my room to put on the only decent outfit I had.

“And I also need to fix my hair, right?”

“You haven’t had it cut in a while, have you?”

“I don’t have the money...”

“If you leave it like that it just looks shabby and dirty,” she remarked.

“Ugh.”

“You need to style it so that it looks decent at least.”

“All right...” I said, going into the toilet and opening my tub of hair wax.

“Wait right there!” Kokoro, who’d followed me inside, asked, “How are you planning on styling it?”

“How...? Just like I always do...”

I was going to do my hair in the “messy” style I’d used for the otaku meetup and for my dates with Mashiro. Actually, that was still the only style I knew how to do.

“No! You can’t use that for a job application! You have to look totally clean-cut and reliable!” Kokoro said.

“And I can do that... with my hair?”

She switched on the blow dryer and pushed on my shoulders, telling me to squat down.

Is she gonna do my hair?!

I silently did as commanded, crouching ever so slightly so that she could comfortably reach my hair. It certainly wasn’t a comfortable position for me, but I couldn’t complain. A beautiful girl was touching my hair. She was standing so close that her pleasant scent reached my nostrils. Even if the girl in question was *Kokoro*, I couldn’t help but get nervous.

“What are you looking at?! Look at the mirror and learn how to do this! I’ll only show you once!” she shouted right into my ear, loud enough to overcome the dryer’s noise.

“S-Sorry, ma’am.”

“It’s my first time doing this too, so it’s far from perfect, but look here. You take these stupidly long bangs of yours and pull them up like this. Then you use

the hot air from the dryer to fix them in place, all right? And then you won't look as messy anymore," she explained, as she showed me what to do.

I followed her every move, trying to memorize the process.

Once my bangs stopped fighting back and remained set where Kokoro had put them, she turned off the dryer.

"Ohhh!" I said, checking out the boy in the mirror, whose new hairstyle was uncharacteristically proper, and more reliable than usual.

"This is incredible! How can you even do this?!" I asked Kokoro.

"I style my own hair all the time, so I can sort of do boys' hair too."

"Whoa..."

"But next time, do it yourself! And hurry up! Let's take this picture before your bangs fall down again."

"Of course! Thanks!" I said, walking way too eagerly to stand in front of the living room wall.

"Your face is all stiff! Smile a little!" she said.

I curled the corners of my lips up and pressed them together.

"Don't force it! Act natural!"

"I can't!"

Since I wasn't used to having my picture taken, making a face that was neither stiff nor obviously fake was quite a challenge. However, after struggling for some time, we managed to get a shot that even Kokoro was satisfied with.

"Whew, am I good or what? I managed to take a picture where you look so good you're barely recognizable! You'd better be grateful!" she said, handing me my phone.

"Wow..." I said, staring down at the screen. She wasn't exaggerating. I really did look kind of good.

After that, we continued with our applications. I used the picture that Kokoro had just taken, and she used the same one that she'd sent in for the modeling session job. As for our cover letters, we helped each other out so that they

were both as charming as possible.

I believe that this job would be an opportunity to create valuable experiences for the otaku community while doing something that I enjoy. As an otaku myself, I want to contribute to the happiness of other people who love anime, manga, and games.

I'd have hired us, anyway.

Two days later.

During lunch break at school, I checked my phone, and discovered an unread email from the recruitment agency. I opened it and clicked on the link inside, holding my breath all the while, and...

"Yes!" I whispered to myself, punching the air with joy. I'd passed the first phase of screening and had been invited for an interview.

My phone buzzed in my hand, notifying me of a LINE message from Kokoro.

"I passed the screening!!! What about you?"

"Me too!" I replied.

Thinking about it, I realized that my success was probably due in no small part to Kokoro's efforts to make me presentable in that picture. I promised myself I'd offer to clean the toilet the next time it was supposed to be her turn.

While I was there, I also sent a message to Mashiro to let her know I'd gotten an interview. I hadn't really messaged her after our last date, so I was worried about whether she'd reply at all, but she quickly congratulated me and wished me luck.

I was already over the moon with her reply, but then she even wrote, *"You can do it, Ichigaya! Go, go! ≡ ≡"* and I was utterly overjoyed.

Of course, if I failed the interview, there was no way I could look the beautiful Mashiro in the face ever again. I'd die from embarrassment. Failure was not an option.

Three days later, it was time for our job interviews. Kokoro's interview was

scheduled for the same date as mine, so there were probably even more people going for their interviews at the same time.

I got up twenty minutes earlier than usual and did my best to style my hair like Kokoro had shown me. I didn't quite look like the handsome young man that she'd turned me into, but all in all it was decent.

After classes were over, we waited for each other by the school entrance, taking care that nobody saw us together, then we went to the station to take the train to Akihabara. We were both extremely nervous.

The interviews would take place in the café where Mashiro worked, but she wasn't there today.

We were greeted by a maid as soon as we entered.

"Welcome back, master!"

"I-I'm here for an interview for the job at the new location! I'm Ichigaya!"

"I'm also here for the interview! My name's Nishina!"

"I see! Please follow me," she said, showing us to a room in the back where three other people were already sitting down, probably waiting to be interviewed just like us.

One of them was somewhat of a pretty boy, probably slightly older than me—the kind who looked like he fooled around with girls a lot. There was also a beautiful girl with dark brown shoulder-length hair, also probably older than me, who looked like the serious, diligent type. The last one was a cute high schooler, still dressed in her uniform, with bright orange hair bunched up in twintails.

Kokoro and I both greeted them, and all three said hello back.

Ugh, they're all too attractive to be otaku! Do I even have a chance at this? Why do I even have to look good to work in a kitchen in the first place?! Nobody will see my face!

A bearded, rough-looking dude appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. "Now

that you're all here, let me introduce myself," he said. "My name is Todo, and I'm the owner."

"Nice to meet you," we all replied, one after the other.

This bling-bling covered guy owns a maid café?! He just needs a dragon tattoo on his back to be the perfect yakuza thug! He's the farthest away from an otaku I've ever seen...

"I want to ask all of you a couple of questions, okay? Let's start with... Kusumi," he said.

"Sure!" the pretty boy replied.

The owner asked him about his work experience so far, which days of the week he was available to work, at what times, and so on. Once he was done with him, he started doing the same with the rest of us.

After hearing how politely he talked with the candidates, I got the impression that this Todo dude, despite his intimidating looks, was much more pleasant than Matsubara, the owner of that modeling session agency.

I practiced selling myself, but the other candidates haven't been asked anything like that yet. Job interviews must be easier than I thought they'd be...

"And next... Ichigaya." The owner addressed me.

"Yes!"

"You wrote on your cover letter that you've never had a part-time job before, but you can work evening shifts in the week and any shift on weekends, correct?"

"Yes, sir! I'm free every day after school at around half past three at the earliest, and five at the latest, since I'm not a part of any kind of after-school club," I said. I'd been trying to point out the advantages of hiring me.

"That's good. Oh, I see that your school isn't that far from here. The train fare must be cheap... I see..."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"And you also mentioned that you cook for yourself at home?"

“I do! I live by myself, so I cook my own meals several times a week!”

“Oh, that’s very nice. We cook everything from scratch here, so being able to cook is a huge plus. Of course, having experience working in a professional kitchen would be preferred, but cooking at home is a good start. By the way, if you don’t live with your parents, does that also mean that you have no curfew?”

“Hm? Yes, th-that’s right...”

“I see... But you’re still in high school. Hm... Now, next up: Nishina!” he said.

What? It’s over already? That’s all he needs to know?! At least I’m glad I mentioned cooking at home...

Kokoro nervously replied to all the questions that the owner asked her, which concluded the interview.

“All right,” Todo said, “you all pass. If you can come in tomorrow, we’ll start with training.”

“Huh?!” All five candidates, including me, were extremely shocked.

Do job interviews really work like this?! He immediately told us that we’re all hired! Doesn’t he care about his café?! Not that I’m complaining...

The others were already thanking the owner, so Kokoro and I quickly did the same before leaving the room and walking back into the café’s dining hall.

The maid behind the counter addressed a man standing not so far from her: “Nishiyama called in sick. Said he can’t come today...”

“Again?! How many times do I have to tell him to give us more notice?!”

“I’m the only one on the late shift tonight! Who’s going to take care of the kitchen?” the maid, who was clearly distressed, asked him.

The only group of customers that were present when we’d first arrived had left, leaving the whole place to the staff. That must have been why the maid could talk so freely in the dining area without fear of being heard.

So even a place like this can be empty at times... It’s a weekday evening and everything.

“Ugh, I have to go to the new café today!” the other man lamented.

They both seemed to be in trouble.

“Are you short on people?” Todo, who had overheard their conversation, asked them.

“Yeah... One of the kitchen guys just called in sick,” the maid replied.

“Maybe we can do something about that. Hey, you,” Todo said, pointing at the attractive guy who had been interviewed alongside me and Kokoro. “You’re Kusumi, right? You said you’ve worked in a kitchen before. Are you free today?”

“I-I... Yes...” the pretty boy replied.

“Could you start right away then? This guy here’s the manager, so he can show you the ropes,” he said, nodding in the direction of the man who had been talking with the maid.

“I don’t mind, but is that really okay?”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s a weekday, so there aren’t going to be so many customers, and it’s not that hard of a job. And also...” he said, looking at Kokoro, “you’re Nishina, right?”

“Huh? Y-Yes!”

“This is your first job, huh? Well, would you like to try your hand at it today? Just for an hour or so.”

“B-But wouldn’t I risk making lots of mistakes if I started right away?” Kokoro asked.

“Nah, today you can just bring the empty dishes back to the kitchen and chat with the customers. It’s easy stuff, but the sooner you get used to it the better,” Todo explained.

“I-I’ll start immediately then...” Kokoro nervously agreed.

“Milk-chan, I’ll leave her in your hands, a’ight?” he then said to the maid.

“Yes, sir...”

Nishina’s already off to a busy start. She’s still nervous though. I wonder if she’ll be okay...

“The rest of you can go home for today. Thanks for your time!” the owner said, and we left. I couldn’t even say “see you later” to Kokoro, since she was already listening to the instructions given to her by Milk-chan, the other maid.

Later that day, as I was finishing up making dinner—it was my turn to cook again—I heard Kokoro come back.

“I’m back...” she said, sounding completely exhausted.

“You all right? How was your first day of work?” I asked her.

“I’m not sure I can do this...” she said, collapsing onto the couch.

“Whoa, was it that hard?”

“The work itself isn’t difficult or anything, and today I was mostly just learning, but... having to talk with male customers is way too much for me!”

That was the reason why she was so nervous about applying in the first place...

“It’s not like I hate talking to men, but starting a conversation is super scary, and I have no idea what to talk about!” she said.

If by some utterly impossible turn of fate I happened to be in the same situation as her—that is, having to chat with girls for work—I imagined I’d be just as scared.

“And how am I going to find a boyfriend if I’m so spent just from talking to customers?”

“Come on, today you were asked to start right on the spot, so of course you were gonna be unprepared. You can always think of some topics in advance next time,” I said as I put dinner on the table.

“Hmm... I guess you’re right. I should do that. But I get so nervous that I’ll probably forget them all anyway...”

“Maybe you could practice here first?” I suggested.

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea! You can be my customer and I’ll try chatting with you!” she said.

“Huh?”

“Won’t you be the customer? Pleeese?” Kokoro stared right into my face with a hopeful expression.

“S-Sure...” I mumbled.

Being part of her rehearsal didn’t sound like much fun, but I wanted to help her in any way I could.

“But is this really going to help at all? It doesn’t seem to make much sense to me,” I said skeptically.

“It’s still better than practicing in my head, don’t you think?” she replied.

And so, with me in the role of a rather confused customer, Nishina’s maid training began.

We ate the food I’d made while it was still hot, then, after doing the dishes, Kokoro went up to her room for some reason.

When she came back into the living room, she was wearing her maid outfit, cat ears and all.

Is that the café uniform...?

“Why exactly are you wearing that...?” I asked.

“I brought it back with me so that I could wash it, but I figured I might as well use it to get into the role! I’d rather practice in the same clothes I’ll be wearing on the job. And I also feel more motivated like this,” she explained.

The uniform was composed of a blue dress, a frilly apron, cat ears, and a long white tail. She honestly looked like the real deal. Shockingly cute too, much more so than the average maid.

Isn’t this just a practice run? Seems a bit like overkill to me...

“Okay, so, you’ll be the customer. Walk in through that door,” she said.

“I have to go as far as *that*?”

“There’s no point if I don’t practice the whole thing!”

“Fine, fine...” I muttered, leaving the living room and immediately walking back in.

“Welcome back, meooowster!” she greeted me.

“...What was that?!”

Having a cute maid meow at me felt weirdly good, sure, but also extremely embarrassing. I could feel my face glowing red.

“Ohhh, come on! We just started! Try to stay in character! The maid café where we had the interview today was a normal one, but the one where we’ll be working is a *cat-maid café*, and we’re supposed to greet customers like this!” she said, flustered.

She’s blushing... This must be embarrassing for her as well.

“Go back out and let me do it again!”

I did as she told me, walking out and in again. She was surprisingly serious about all this, and she probably wouldn’t be satisfied until I properly played my part as well.

“Welcome back, meowster! Would you like to sit in the smoking area?”

“Huh? N-No...” I replied, caught off guard by something as surreal as a girl dressed up as a cat-eared maid asking something so pragmatic.

“Would you prefer a table or a counter seat? Er... Ugh, I forgot! I have to explain the menu and how the café works to customers, so there’s a ton of stuff that I have to memorize... And I already had to say it so many times today!”

After having me go back and forth through the door what felt like a thousand times, Kokoro finally nailed her customer greeting and we could move forward.

“Purrdon the wait. Here’s the omurice you ordered, and an orange juice, meow!”

“Thanks...” I said as she pretended to hand me my order. I felt like a kindergartner at an imaginary picnic.

“And now, I’m going to cast a meowgic spell on your omurice to make it even tastier!” she announced.

“Huh?!”

She curled her fingers like cat’s paws, wiggling them at the wrists.

“M-Meow meow kitty, cute and chummy... M-Make this omelet super yummy!”



What the hell was that?!

“Why are you staring at me like I’m crazy?!” Kokoro shouted at me, completely red in the face.

“I-I’m not...”

What does she even want me to do?! That was so awkward I almost died from secondhand embarrassment!

“I-I *have* to do it like this, you know?! Those are the company rules!” she continued.

“I haven’t said anything! And why aren’t you in character anymore?!”

“Oh, snap, right! Sir! I-I mean, master! Do you visit cafés like this very often?”

“No, this is my first time.”

“I see...”

“...”

“Well... Have fun then!”

“Huh? That’s it?” I asked, appalled.

“What?! That wasn’t good enough? Be honest!”

“Do you honestly think that was good enough?! You weren’t even smiling!”

“Ugh...”

“And you can’t ask me a question like that and bail on the conversation right after I reply!”

“B-But,” she said, “I don’t know what else to say...”

“You didn’t sound like you were having any fun at all—like you were talking to me just because it’s your job! That might be the case but you should at least *pretend* to be interested in what the customer has to say. Most people go to maid cafés just to chat with the maids, you know?”

“But how can I be interested in someone I’ve just met?”

“I don’t know, maybe... just think of what you’d say if your favorite character

came in as a customer! Or if it's too hard to do with a fictional character, imagine your favorite idol, or voice actor, or something! Wouldn't you be interested then?"

"My favorite character or voice actor, huh..." she mumbled to herself.

After thinking for a while, she started slapping my shoulder as a grin crept over her blushing face.

"Haha, that's even worse!" she said. "I'd be so nervous I couldn't speak at all!"

What did she even imagine?

"Then, like... What about a customer who's really your type?" I suggested.

"Oh, maybe that'd work! I can totally use that to fuel my imagination! Let's try it again! *Ahem!* Do you visit cafés like this one often, master?"

"Not really..."

"D-Do you come to Akihabara often then?"

"Yes, I do."

"And what do you do when you come here?"

"Hmmm... I visit Animate, or Toranoana, usually."

"Ah! I go there all the time too!"

Our conversation continued like that for several more minutes.

"I think I get it now! I only thought of the customer as some stranger, but as soon as I started thinking of them as a person I'd actually *want* to talk to, it got way easier!" she said after we were done.

So, basically, the second she imagined having an attractive guy in front of her she let herself go... Talk about shallow.

"Now that I've got this down, let's try the part where I bring you the check!" she said, and so I went on helping Kokoro practice her maid skills for what felt like an eternity.

“Whew. All perfect!” she eventually rejoiced, well past midnight.

“Uh... good,” I said. *Just let me go to bed already...*

“Now I know what to do in every situation, even if I end up on the same shift as some handsome kitchen guy or if someone famous like a voice actor comes to the café!”

“That makes it sound like all this roleplay was just to help you find a boyfriend...”

“Of course it was! I can’t look for guys if I’m having trouble with work, and nobody wants to date a maid who can’t even get her job done properly,” she said.

As always, she’ll do whatever it takes to find a boyfriend... Which is good and all, but why do I have to stay up so late for this? On the other hand though, since she’s starting this job for that, maybe what she’s doing is kind of right.

“That guy at the interview today was handsome too... I wonder if it’s normal for the kitchen staff in a maid café to be so attractive!” Kokoro said, clearly already imagining all the boys her new job would allow her to meet.

“If I can chat with customers like I did just now, I don’t think I’ll have any problem. And I’m getting more comfortable with guys since I speak to you every day, so I just have to get used to the job a bit more!”

“Sure, but by the way... How should I behave at work?” I asked her.

“What do you mean?”

“I want to get closer to Mashiro, but I don’t know whether it’d be okay to talk to her at work...”

“I think you should follow the flow of things, you know? If all the staff chat with each other, then we can do the same, but if they’re super focused on work and don’t say a word, then maybe it’d be better to stay quiet.”

“That sounds about right...”

“And also, I mean, this goes for everyone there, but your priority should be getting your job done properly. You don’t want people to think you suck as an employee...”

I-I hadn't even thought of that!

I had somehow managed—partially thanks to Kokoro—to take Mashiro out on two dates, but if she got the impression that I was a lousy worker, then it'd all have been for nothing. I had to make sure I pulled my weight in the kitchen.

“Oh, and also,” I said, remembering the other maids, “there are going to be girls there other than Mashiro... Do you think it'd be better not to speak with them much?”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because I don't want Mashiro to think I just hit on anyone...”

“It'd just be weird and rude if you ignored the other maids! Again, it depends on the work environment, but it'd be way more natural to talk to everyone we work with,” she said.

“I guess you're right...”

“Of course don't, like, hit on all the maids, or ask them for their LINE, or invite them on dates, and stuff like that. She'd obviously find out about that stuff.”

“Of course,” I said, having no intention of doing anything like that in the first place.

“The best thing would be to make yourself useful to her while working, but that might be hard. She's much more experienced than you, and she's a maid, while you'll be stuck in the kitchen.”

I nodded.

So I need to learn how to do my job properly, talk to all the maids in a way that sounds natural, and try to make myself useful to Mashiro... I thought to myself, already overwhelmed.

Making a good impression on a girl in the workplace wasn't going to be as easy as I'd expected. And I'd never even worked in a kitchen—that was enough to make me nervous. I had to make sure not to screw up, or else Mashiro might not like me anymore...

So my top priority has to be doing my job right!

3

A few days later.

“Order!”

“Okay!” I yelled, taking the order slip and quickly reading through it.

Kokoro and I had our shifts for a little over a month scheduled, and this was my third day of training.

My training consisted of working in the already existing maid café, learning from the manager and the other staff.

Other than the actual kitchen work, I also had to help with opening and closing the place, so there was a lot to remember. I took notes whenever I could and looked over them in my free time, and I felt that I was starting to get the hang of it.

As Kokoro had said, learning how to actually do my job was the first step I needed to take if I wanted to use this as an opportunity to become closer to Mashiro, and I was doing my best to achieve that.

“So... One omurice, spaghetti bolognese, a hot coffee, and a latte...” I repeated to myself.

I didn’t have all the recipes memorized yet—I followed the recipe book I’d been given. In case I needed assistance, I could also ask my more experienced colleague, who was currently in the break room.

Cafés like this normally served premade, reheated food, but that was not the case here. When he was interviewing us, the owner had told us that at his cafés, the staff cooked everything from scratch. He hadn’t been lying. As impressive as that was, it made preparing orders that much slower and harder.

First of all, I had to take care of the drinks, so I made the coffee and the latte. I took two mugs from the shelf, and the powdered coffee.

How many teaspoons am I supposed to use...? Better check...

Having to remember where everything was and how I had to plate the various dishes was already stressful enough, so I was glad that I was actually somewhat comfortable with cooking to begin with. If I didn't often have to cook meals for myself at home, this job would have been even more difficult.

And it sure was difficult...

"You new here, kid? You're so shaky..."

"Oh? Y-Yes, I am! Hahaha..."

For me, this was the most unexpected and challenging part. The kitchen was in plain sight of the dining hall, so the customers sitting at the counter would sometimes strike up conversations with me. I'd thought that only maids had to worry about that, but I was wrong, and I'd been told things would be similar in the new café too.

When a customer entered the shop, they were first asked whether they wanted to sit at a table or at the counter. Choosing the latter meant being right in front of the kitchen, where, except for the occasional veteran maid, there was nobody but us male kitchen staff. Despite this, loads of people still chose the counter and spoke to us. Of course the maids spoke with these customers as well, but most of their time was spent near the tables.

I don't get why these people would choose to sit here given the option. What's so fun about chatting with other dudes?

The manager had also told me to improve my conversation skills. Not only did I have to reply to customers when they addressed me, but I actually had to initiate conversations too...

"S-So, have you been here before?" I asked the customer as I boiled the spaghetti. Having to talk while cooking was hard. One time I even burned an omelet because I was so distracted by the conversation.

"What? Your friends didn't tell you about me?" he replied. "I come here so often I might as well own the place. You'd better memorize the regulars' faces, kiddo."

"Hahaha, s-sorry! I will do my best..."

I came here to make friends with cute maids! Why do I have to talk to these filthy old men?!

Apart from the customers, the only other people I actually spoke to were the manager and the kitchen staff that were training me. As for the maids, we mostly only exchanged hellos. Everything was painfully different from my expectations.

I finally finished preparing the last dish on the slip.

“Order ready!” I called.

“Yes!” Kokoro, who was working with me that day, replied.

Maids and kitchen staff weren’t supposed to be too friendly or close with each other in front of customers, and conversations were limited to what was necessary for work. As a result, Kokoro and I behaved like strangers.

I looked at her as she brought the order to the table, and, despite still not being one hundred percent comfortable, she didn’t seem as stressed out as before about chatting with customers. I could tell how seriously she was taking the job, especially considering how much effort it took her to speak with men.

“Hi there,” Kokoro greeted me inside Akihabara station, where we were going to catch the train home together. Another of the company rules was that maids couldn’t walk around Akihabara together with a man, so even when we were on the same shift, we left the café separately and only met up at the station.

“You managed to chat a lot with the customers today, didn’t you?” I asked her.

“Yeah. It’s gotten easier since you helped me... but the other maids still say I’m a bit too stiff. I was asked for a picture for the first time today, and I did my best to smile, but when I looked at it, it was painfully obvious that I was forcing it...”

“Oh? A customer asked for a picture with you?! That’s great, isn’t it?”

“I was happy, obviously, but that’s nothing compared to the other maids! Almost every single customer asked them for pictures! I’ve got a long way to

go... and what about you?"

"I'm getting used to the job little by little."

"And as for, you know... your real goal?" she asked.

"You mean getting closer to Mashiro? We weren't on the same shift today either, so we're still just texting..."

I'd had three shifts so far, and I still hadn't seen Mashiro at work even once.

Our online conversation had also stopped after she'd congratulated me for getting the job and I thanked her. For some reason, I couldn't shake the feeling that, after our second date, Mashiro had gone off me ever so slightly.

But why? I don't think I did anything to offend her... Could it have something to do with that friend she met in Animate?

I checked the Twitter account she used to post about work, discovering that next week, on the first day I'd be working at the new café, we were going to be on the same shift together for the first time.

Since I'd basically started this job just so I could spend more time with her, it was the moment I'd been waiting for.

With a sigh, I explained my situation to Kokoro.

"I haven't been able to chat with the other maids either," I continued, "so I can't say that I've had any luck so far. What about you?" She couldn't have been doing much better. Most of the customers were way too old for her, and there were only one or two guys at a time working in the kitchen.

"I got this..." she said, handing me a piece of paper. On it, I could easily recognize the scrawl of a LINE account number.

"What?! D-Did a customer give you that?!"

I thought it was strictly prohibited for maids and customers to exchange contact information! If someone found out she did something like that, she could be fired...

"No, Kusumi gave it to me," she replied.

Kusumi? Oh, right, that pretty but unreliable-looking guy who was interviewed

with us. I've never had a shift with him, so it's not like we've talked... He's kind of good-looking, I'll give him that, but he's not exactly Nishina's type. She likes down-to-earth guys, but he seems the opposite of that... Or will she settle for anyone who's handsome enough?

"My first impression of him wasn't so good," she said, "since he looked kind of easy, if you get me. But he's very kind and helpful at work, and he knows how to get stuff done... Maybe he's not so bad. I think I'll add him on LINE, anyway."

I could see a slight smile at the corners of her mouth.

"A-Aren't you lowering your guard just because he's good-looking? He's that guy with the dyed hair and the 'I party a lot' look, isn't he?!"

Unforgivable! She managed to get a guy's LINE while I was busy chatting with old men! But anyone can tell by the way he looks that he can't be trusted... He's just going to toy with her and dump her when he's done!

"I mean, I don't think you should judge a book by its cover, is all," she happily replied.

How naive is this girl? You just need to show her a bit of kindness and she falls for you!

"You say he's kind and helpful, but isn't he like that with the other maids too?" I asked, skeptical.

"Th-That would just mean that he respects everyone, which is a good thing! Why are you trying so hard to find something wrong with him, anyway? Oh, I get it! Someone's mad because I got someone's LINE and he hasn't!"

"Huh?!" I cried, offended. Offended because she was right, that is.

"Look," I said, "if things go well between the two of you, then I'll be happy. But you can tell you're not the only one who thinks Kusumi's attractive, right? I just want to say... be careful. That's all."

"I'm not dumb, you know?"

This is bad. At this rate she'll end up dating someone before me. I have to do my best with Mashiro. I don't care if she's into male idols or whatever—I just want her to be honest with me.

A few days later.

Today, for the first time, I'd be working at the newly opened café. This was also going to be my first day of proper work, as opposed to training. There weren't going to be as many other people watching over me as there had been at the old location. Some people had been transferred from over there, like Mashiro, but for the most part it would only be newbies like me.

And I still haven't got the hang of everything yet... I couldn't be more anxious. Well, at least I have something to look forward to. Today will be my first shift with Mashiro! She hasn't been so warm and cheerful while texting me lately, so I wonder if she'll talk to me as usual...

"Hey, Kagetora, wanna stop by the game center today?" Ai asked me once homeroom was over.

"Sorry, I've got work today," I replied.

"Awww, today too?" he said with a disappointed pout. Since I'd started my new job, I hadn't had much time to see him.

"I was so surprised when you started working without telling me anything, you know? And at a maid café, of all places! You just want to meet those cute maids, am I right?"

"Ugh..."

"I know you aren't having any luck at school, but aren't you trying a little too hard...?"

"I-It's not like I'm doing it just to meet girls! I need the money for my hobbies and stuff."

"Anyway, when are you going to tell me the name of the café?" he pressed.

"Oh, I will... eventually."

If it were just me, I wouldn't have any problem telling him where I worked. But if he came to see me and noticed Kokoro dressed up as a cat-eared maid, the otaku cat would be out of the bag. I felt a little guilty for not telling Ai, but I

had to protect Kokoro's secret.

"There you go again... You're so cold to me lately," he said, puffing up his cheeks.

That's cute and all, but Nishina put her trust in me...

"Hell—" I walked into the café's break room and noticed a girl that I recognized from somewhere. She was the cute, brightly dressed girl with the orange twintails that I'd met during the job interview.

"Oh, hello," she said. I had no idea whether she remembered me or not, mostly because her eyes were permanently fixed in an unreadable, emotionless expression. I wasn't getting much from her tone of voice either.

"Nice meeting you. I'm Iroha, a high school freshman. I start working today."

"O-Oh, nice to meet you too. I'm Ichigaya, and I'm a junior," I replied, surprised that I was only a year older than she was.

"Ichigaya... Let's go with Ichi then."

"Huh? O-Okay..."

Isn't it a bit early for nicknames?!

"I remember you from the interview," the girl said. "I thought you were older, but you're still in high school too, huh? There aren't many of us so young here, so let's be cool to each other. A'ight, Ichi?"

"S-Sure, of course..." I replied, unable to shake the feeling that I'd just been insulted.

The break room door opened and another girl stepped in.

"Good afternoon," she said. I'd seen her at the interview too—she was the serious-looking, beautiful one with cropped brown hair.

"Hello!" I replied.

"Oh, hello, Mikoto," Iroha greeted her, and Mikoto smiled.

So these two know each other despite being newcomers...

“Hi there, Iroha. And you are...?” she said, looking at me.

“Ah, I’m Ichigaya. Nice to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ichigaya. I’m Mikoto.”

Her slight smile gave her an elegantly refined aura.

“A school uniform?!” Mikoto said, shocked, noticing my clothes. “You’re still in high school? Like Iroha?”

“Hm? Yes...” I replied.

“Another colleague over ten years younger than me... Everyone’s so young here...” she mumbled to herself.

Did I hear that right? Ten years? So she’s at least 26?! I thought she was 20 at most!

“Y-You look much younger than your age...” I told her.

“Oh?! N-No, hold on! I didn’t say that so just you’d give me compliments!”

“I just said what I thought!”

“Really? B-By the way... Ichigaya, was it? Keep my age a secret, would you? I’m 27, but for the customers I’m supposed to be 22...”

“O-Of course!”

She’s lying about her age as if it was the most normal thing in the world... 27 though? That must be the oldest girl I’ve ever spoken to except for maybe my teachers...

“Do you mind if I smoke?” Mikoto asked.

“Not at all,” I replied.

“Go ahead,” Iroha said.

Smoking was allowed in the break room, so the manager and the other employees often used it for that very purpose. There were even ashtrays on the table.

“Whoooa, you even smoke. You look so grown-up...” Iroha, fascinated, stared blankly at her colleague.



“I’m sure it must smell terrible to the pair of you—sorry. I try not to smoke before work, but I really needed a cigarette. Just one.”

“Customers smoke all the time, and so does the manager, so the smell doesn’t bother me at all anymore,” I said.

Mikoto, probably trying to be considerate of us, put out her cigarette after smoking only half of it. She then sprayed breath freshener into her mouth.

“Oh, we better get ready. It’s almost time we open,” Iroha said, looking at the clock.

I went into the men’s changing room to get ready too.

I was happy about having a conversation with two of the maids, but, cute as they looked, they were both very... unique.

Kokoro had told me that it would be better to chat with all of my colleagues, if possible. If word got around that I was unfriendly, Mashiro could end up hearing about it too. That sounded reasonable, since I remembered playing a dating sim that worked exactly like that.

Thankfully, both Iroha and Mikoto seemed amicable toward me.

I’ll have to do my best and chat with everyone so that they all get a decent impression of me.

Apart from the human relations aspect, starting today, I’d also have to get used to the kitchen in the new café. I wasn’t expecting an easy time.

“Are those drinks ready yet?”

“J-Just a second!” I called. I was already stressed out trying to keep up with the orders without the maids making it worse by asking whether they were ready.

“Haha! Looks like you’re struggling there, huh, Ichigaya?” Sasaki pestered from the other side of the counter.

Sasaki was one of the regulars at the old café, and he had followed us to the new location.

For some reason, instead of the tables—where it was easier to chat with the maids—he always chose to sit at the counter. We’d already talked at least three times, enough to remember each other’s names. His weird seating choice made me suspect that he was actually gay, and that he came to the café to chat with the male kitchen staff.

Sasaki, however, was not the only one to rub salt into the wound. Iroha, who was on her break, entered the kitchen together with Mikoto just to poke fun at me.

“Get a grip, Ichi! Why’d you start cooking something else after putting ice in the glasses? You’re struggling so much it’s funny, hehe,” Iroha commented.

“Come now, Iroha, don’t be too harsh on him. I’m sure he’s doing his best,” Mikoto said.

“Oh, shut up,” the other girl replied sarcastically.

These two sound like they’ve been friends for years...

I glanced at the clock and despaired. I still had more than an hour of work left before my next break, and I didn’t know whether I’d reach it alive.

Oh, but wait...

Just before completely losing my willpower, I remembered why I’d been looking forward to today so much.

The café’s door opened and an adorably cheerful voice echoed through the dining hall.

“Hello!”

“Oh, hi, Mashiro,” Sasaki greeted her.

This was my first time seeing Mashiro in a while, and she looked as beautiful as I remembered.

“Oh, Ichigaya! Hi! You’re already hard at work,” she told me.

“M-Mashiro...”

She’d addressed me with her usual warmth, and I couldn’t have been more relieved. I’d been so scared that she might be fed up with me, since our last

date ended very weirdly and her texts since then had been nowhere near as cheerful.

That's why I started working here! She's the one I want to talk to! Not some weird middle-aged dude!

Mashiro went into the dressing room and came out shortly after, wearing her maid uniform and cat ears. Thanks to her cutesy, innocent air, the outfit looked better on her than it did on any other maid in the room.

"I'll help you out, I will!" she said.

"R-Really?!"

"Of course! It must be the hardest for a newcomer to manage this big kitchen by himself!"

She's as kind as she is cute! She's a goddess!

Having Mashiro help me made all the difference in the world. Despite being a maid, she was also so skilled in the kitchen that we quickly caught up with all the orders without any problem.

She's kind, cute, and skillful?! Is that even allowed?!

"Mashiro-chan! Can I ask you for a picture?" one of the customers called.

"Oh, of course, Takata, sir!" she promptly replied.

Adding to her huge list of strengths was the fact that she was extremely popular with the clientele. There were a lot of men who looked like they were visiting the café specifically to see her and take pictures together.

I'd seen other maids being asked for pictures too, but Mashiro was on another level. I counted five requests made to her in the last hour alone.

The café had a "stage request" system which meant that customers could ask the maids to do karaoke on the stage. Of course, both picture and song requests cost money, and the maids would get a one-hundred-yen bonus for each request they received.

Mashiro had already been called onto the stage twice that day, first to sing

and dance to an anime opening and again for an idol's song.

I loved her normal speaking voice, but her singing voice was even more adorable—so much so that I couldn't help but get distracted from my work listening to her. Once again, I realized how lucky I'd been to score a date with Mashiro.

Thanks to her help, I even managed to coast through the last hour of work before my break.

Mashiro entered the break room and addressed me.

"Hey, Ichigaya..."

"Oh, Mashiro! Thank you so much for helping me out earlier!"

"It's okay. I just wanted to say something... You should know that I'm so, sooo sorry I left all of a sudden..." she said, pouting at me with wide eyes.

"Huh? Don't worry! I don't mind it at all."

"D-Do you remember what I was talking about before leaving?" she asked me.

"Hmm... It was about putting in a preorder for a CD, right?"

"Y-Yes... You see, I guess it's because my friend keeps talking about it but... There's this voice actor, a guy, that I've started liking lately... Just a little bit! It's not like I'm a big, *big* fan or anything!" she explained nervously.

"Uh? S-Sure..." I replied, noticing that her eyes were staring at me as if to gauge my reaction while she held her breath.

"So..." she said, finally taking in some oxygen, "I guess I just want you to know that I'm reeeally, so, so happy that you started working in the same place as me."

"That goes for me too! It's great! I just hope I won't be a hindrance!"

Her words felt like enough payment for a day's work. I was extremely glad that I'd started working at this place.

"I'll be going back then," she said.

"Okay!"

Did she come here just to tell me that? I thought she was on a break too...

I watched her adorable figure make its way out of the break room.

From now on, I'll be able to see her on a regular basis. I just need to find a chance to invite her on another date, and then, when the time comes... I'll confess to her.

"What's with the creepy grin, Ichi?"

"Huh?!"

I jumped in surprise, noticing Iroha, who'd just come out of the dressing room. She was looking at me with more than a hint of suspicion.

"I-I wasn't grinning or anything... And did you call me creepy?!"

"Oh, sorry. I must have thought that out loud."

"That's the lousiest apology I've ever heard!"

"See you next time then, Ichi," she said, casually.

"Sure... See ya..." I replied, watching as she also left.

I was offended, obviously, but I also thought that being able to speak so frankly to a girl I barely knew was an improvement for me.

Is this because I chat with Nishina all the time? At this rate, speaking with girls is going to become second nature...

After my break was over, I went back to the kitchen, where I worked with Mashiro's help until it was time to close.

I went back to the break room and heard someone speaking on the phone.

"...Yes, I sent the documents yesterday. They should have arrived this morning... Perfect then. Thank you."

It was Mikoto, and, judging from her stiff tone, whatever she was talking about sounded very important.

"Ah, Ichigaya! Good job today," she said when she noticed me.

"That sounded like a work call just now... Do you have more than one part-

time job?" I asked her.

"Not exactly," she replied. "I have a full-time office job, and then I work here part time. But I keep the maid thing a secret from my day-job bosses."

"Really?! That sounds exhausting! May I ask you why you do it?" I said, wondering if money was so tight that juggling jobs was a necessity.

She blushed.

Huh? Did I say something weird? Why is she blushing?

"You know, at this age of mine..." she said.

"You mean twenty-se—"

"Don't say it out loud! I told you it was a secret, didn't I?!" she quickly stopped me.

"Eek!" I squeaked, surprised by her reaction.

You were the one who started talking about your age...

"The people working in this café are all young. Certainly much younger than I expected. So I'm keeping the secret from my colleagues here too. Do you understand?" she said, bringing her voice down to a whisper.

"I-I... Yes, I understand."

"Anyway, at my age, you don't get many opportunities to wear something like *this*," she said, as she looked—visibly embarrassed—down at her maid uniform. "And this job might well be my last chance to do so."

Indeed, a cat-ear maid uniform wasn't the kind of outfit I would normally picture a 27-year-old woman wearing. As she still looked young and beautiful, it fit her perfectly, but the idea that she'd gotten this job just so that she could wear it was terribly weird.

"And why did *you* start working here?" she asked. "I remember that during the interview you mentioned this is your first job."

"Well... I need some pocket money to fund my otaku hobbies, and... I-I kind of wanted to work surrounded by cute maids..." I honestly replied.

I know she's just told me her own secrets and all, but did I really need to be

that open with her? That made me sound disgusting...

“You’re so young and you’re already thinking of that?! You are so grown-up for your age! I have nothing but respect for you!” she replied.

“What?” I said, unsure why she was praising me.

“You’re still in high school, and yet you’re already thinking of finding yourself a partner and putting in the effort to find one in a place like this. I’m sure that the day you have a cute maid girlfriend isn’t that far away!”

“E-Excuse me, but... Is that a good thing? Really?”

“Just... Don’t worry about it. I was telling that to myself more than to you.”

“Now that you mention dating... are you married?” I asked Mikoto, without thinking too deeply about it. If she was, that would make her being a maid even weirder.

Mikoto’s face froze, showing the scariest, most unnatural smile I’d ever seen.

“I-Is something wrong?” I asked.

Did I just press a button?!

“Ichigaya. I have one piece of advice for you... Don’t become like me. Your parents will be sad.”

“I...”

“See you next time,” she said, still wearing that terrifying smile as she went into the dressing room.

The way she replied probably meant that she still wasn’t married, and that her parents were sad about it. I wish I’d been sensitive enough not to ask her about something so delicate, but, on the other hand, I wondered why a woman as beautiful as her was having trouble finding a husband.

Without a doubt, both Mikoto and Iroha were very *interesting* colleagues, but thankfully they were also very approachable. I could never have imagined that I’d ever be able to chat with girls other than Kokoro without my nerves getting in the way.

When I got back home, Kokoro was on the couch, ignoring a TV show in favor of looking at her phone.

“Hi! Are you hungry?” she asked me. Since she wasn’t working that day, she’d been able to stay at home and prepare dinner.

“You bet! I’m starving!”

I went into the kitchen, where a pot of delicious-looking curry was waiting for me. While I warmed it up, I thought that, starting from my next shift, I should take something to work to eat during my breaks. I’d heard that in some workplaces, the cooks would prepare meals for the staff to eat, but this wasn’t the case at the café, even when our shifts ended at 10 p.m. Maybe this was just the owner being cheap.

“How was work?”

“I finally managed to see Mashiro!”

“That’s nice! Did you talk to her?”

“Yeah. I thanked her for helping me with work, and then she apologized for our last date...”

“That thing about the CD... Did she tell you what the deal with that was?” Kokoro asked.

“She said that there’s a male voice actor she kind of likes because her friend is a fan. But she also said that she wouldn’t call herself a major fan though.”

“I see... That *could* be true...”

The curry was finally warm, so I put some on a plate with some rice and started to dig in.

“Delicious! Ah, by the way, I also spoke with the other maids today,” I said.

“Oh! Which ones? I usually chat with all of them.”

“Iroha and Mikoto.”

“Oh, those two? I love them! They’re so fun,” Kokoro said.

“They’re easy to approach, I’ll give you that. I think I did a decent job at staying natural. Anyway, how are things on your side? You know, with the guy

who gave you his LINE and all.”

“Well... I actually added him,” Kokoro replied.

“R-Really?” I said, slightly surprised. I hadn’t expected it to happen so quickly.

“And how did it go?” I asked.

“I’ve been messaging him since yesterday, and we’ve talked about a lot of things. Now we know what kind of otaku things we both like, and stuff like that.”

Speeding through things as always...

“Wait, he’s an otaku too?”

“Oh, yes,” she replied, “you wouldn’t expect it, right? Makes you rethink that stuff about him looking like the type to fool around with girls.”

“What does being an otaku have to do with fooling around? I still think you should be careful, just in case.”

You should never judge a book by its cover... Not that I have any particular reason to doubt him.

“And what kind of otaku stuff does he like then?” I asked, curious. I imagined he would be the kind of wannabe that watches a couple of episodes from a popular anime and starts calling himself an otaku.

“He said he’s into gacha games and dating sims with cute girls,” she replied.

He’s the real deal! Why would he even admit that to a girl?!

“Say, do you think it’d be okay if I asked him to teach me more about his tastes in that kind of thing?” Kokoro then asked me.

“From a guy’s point of view... it depends on how the person asking about it would react. If they’re really interested in the topic, then I’d love to talk about it, but if they are the kind of person who considers those games creepy or disgusting...”

“I don’t! At all! I even play *IMS* myself!”

“Then go ahead, I guess... If he doesn’t feel comfortable speaking about that, I guess he just won’t.”

“Okay, I will! Thanks!” she said, looking anything but disgusted as she began typing on her phone.

Of course meeting a girl who respects your love for dating sims—*especially* the sexier ones—would be a dream for any otaku. But I could only feel nervous, worried that Kokoro was sailing toward her goal much faster than me, who still didn’t even have Mashiro’s LINE.

Dammit! I can’t just stand and watch her get ahead!

The next day, after school, I went directly to the café.

I saw Mashiro, in regular clothes rather than her uniform, leaving the break room. She had probably just finished her shift, which was supposed to end thirty minutes before mine started. I was extremely lucky to be able to see her.

“Ah, Ichigaya, Ichigayaaa!” she called out to me. “I have something for you...”

“Hm?”

“I baked this yesterday... to apologize for last time. I hope you like it!” she said, handing me a cupcake covered with cute decorations.

“Y-You didn’t need to! Really!” I said, overjoyed.

A homemade cupcake from Mashiro? She can even bake?! Oh, but she probably made a bunch and is giving them out to everyone else too...

“Don’t tell the others, okay?” she said, winking at me before saying goodbye and leaving for the day.



When my heart finally started beating normally again, I realized that what she had said meant that this cupcake was baked for me and only me.

I thought that, if she'd go through the trouble of baking that just for me, I must have meant at least *something* to her. If all she wanted to do was apologize, she could have just bought some chocolates from a convenience store and called it a day.

And... did she stay past her shift so that she could hand me this?! Why would such a beautiful, popular girl ever treat me so well? I asked myself, incredulous. That thing about her sounding different... It must have been all my imagination. This cupcake must mean that I have a good chance with her, right?

When I first started working at the café, a small part of my brain thought that maybe, among all the maids, I would find one I liked even better than Mashiro. I was wrong. Mashiro was everything I could ever dream of in a girl, which meant that nobody—not a *single* person—could be better than her.

After her recent change of tone in her texts, I had found it difficult to muster the courage to move things further with her—but not anymore. I promised myself that on that very day, after work, I would immediately send her a message on Twitter, asking for her LINE.

If she's being this nice to me, it's unlikely that she'll refuse... Not impossible, though.

"Hello!" I heard someone greet me from behind in the changing room.

Oh, right, the café gets busier on Fridays, so there'll be two of us working in the kitchen today.

"H-Hello," I said, turning around to see the pretty boy and surprise otaku, Kusumi. It was the first time I'd seen him since the job interview. This was the perfect opportunity to find out more about the guy and, if I found anything remotely suspicious about him, immediately report it to Kokoro.

In particular, I was eager to find out whether he'd make any moves on the other maids.

Is this dude really into games anyway? I thought as I eyed the handsome boy in front of me. Or is he just pretending to be an otaku so that girls let their guard down? But then, why would he go out of his way to mention dating sims? If I wanted to make a good impression with a girl, I wouldn't say that I like a genre of games which are mostly full of sex scenes...

"Oh, I think we met during the interview. I'm Kusumi, by the way. Nice to meet you!" he said.

He sounds like a pretty decent guy... No! I can't let my guard down!

"I'm Ichigaya. Nice to meet you too."

"That uniform... That's from Kadogawa High School, isn't it?" he asked.

"Hm? Yes..."

"I knew it! A friend of mine goes there. How old are you, can I ask?"

"Me? I'm in my second year of high school," I replied.

"That's great! Me too!" He grinned, lowering my defenses with a blinding smile.

"Uh, yeah. Great," I managed to say. He actually looked older than me, so I was kind of surprised to learn that we were the same age.

It was the first time since I'd started my new job that I would be working in the kitchen alongside another new employee. Before then, I'd always been working with the manager or employees from the older café.

"But wait, so this means that you go to the same school as *Heart-chan*?" he asked me.

It was pretty normal in a maid café for the maids to use aliases rather than real names. "Heart" happened to be Kokoro's maid name. She actually wanted it to be "2≡," like her online nickname, but she was told that it'd be better to make it easier for customers to read.

"Yeah, we go to the same school..."

"Now that I think of it, didn't you two also come to the interview together? Are you two friends? Or even... something more?" he asked, biting his lip in

consideration.

“W-We’re just from the same year!”

“Oh, I see. Cool,” he said, sounding relieved. *He must like her quite a lot...*

“So,” I asked, “are you trying to date Nishi— I mean, Heart-chan?”

“Yep!” he said, still smiling. “I tried giving her my LINE, and she actually messaged me! It sounds like a miracle, I know!”

“But there’s no way someone like you would have any trouble finding girls,” I said doubtfully. “Aren’t there any others you like here? Or maybe at school, or someplace else...” I had to find out whether he was serious about Kokoro.

“I wish! The other girls here don’t really pique my interest. And neither did the ones at my old restaurant job. But I was blown away when I first met Heart-chan! She’s just my type! My ideal girl, even!”

“R-Really...?”

I wasn’t sure what to say. He sounded genuinely nice and seemed to only have eyes for Kokoro... I had no choice but to give them my blessing.

I hate to admit it, but I guess that these two are going to get together before I can ask Mashiro out!

Even later, while we worked in the kitchen, I continued chatting with Kusumi.

“I can’t wait for this month’s pay, let me tell you. I’ve spent like a week’s worth of pay on this month’s gacha event...”

“Whoa... I still haven’t even rolled the paid gacha once this month...” I replied in awe.

I learned a few things about Kusumi, but most importantly that he was just as much of an otaku as I was and that, surprisingly, he’d never had a girlfriend before. Now I had absolutely zero reasons to be wary of him dating Kokoro.

I guess I was wrong. Handsome, a virgin, and just downright nice... So otaku boys like that really do exist...

“Hi.”

“Oh, hi,” Kokoro greeted me. She was in the kitchen, watching over a pot of something steamy and tasty.

“Smells delicious,” I said.

“Pork stew!”

“Nice!”

Kokoro started setting the table while I washed my hands, then called me when dinner was ready.

“Oh, by the way,” I said as we started eating, “I met Kusumi properly today.”

“For real? What was he like?”

“He was... a hardcore otaku. No doubt about that.”

“So he wasn’t lying!”

“And also, he sounded like a pretty nice guy all round,” I added.

“See?! I told you!” she said, clearly happy to hear that. “Right now I’m trying to work up the courage to ask him about his favorite dating sim. That’ll help me learn more about him.”

“Okay...” I replied. These two were already on track to start dating each other.

“What about you and Mashiro?” she asked.

“Ah, right... She gave me a homemade cupcake today.”

“What?”

“She said it’s to apologize for our last date.”

“No way! That’s awesome. Girls don’t just go and bake stuff for the first guy they find, you know?”

“You think so?” I asked, secretly dancing with joy inside my heart. “So maybe I should go ahead and invite her on another date!”

“I do think it’s awesome, but... maybe you should wait a bit longer before inviting her.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I was thinking of inviting Kusumi on a date too, you see. But what if something goes wrong and we start hating each other or something? Then it’d be terrible having to work together, don’t you think? And since we have weekend shifts at work it’s difficult to find the right time to go out anyway. So I thought I’ll wait until we’re done with this job. It’s not so long anyway,” she said.

“You have a point...”

Just as she said, we needed to be careful about our interactions with colleagues. And since I could see Mashiro more or less frequently at work anyway, there was no need to take that risk. I could just take it slow.

I’ll wait for my last day on the job, then I’ll ask her for her LINE and invite her on a date at the same time. Until then, I’ll do my best to strengthen our bond while we’re together at the café.

Later that night, I slowly and deliberately savored Mashiro’s cupcake.

That single cupcake tasted so much better than anything I could ever buy from a shop. Anything I’d tasted in my life, in fact. I immediately sent Mashiro a DM on Twitter with my heartfelt thanks and compliments.

“I’m so, so happy you liked it! ≡ ≡”

The wait will be tough, but it’s not that long!

4

The following Saturday was my day off, so I lay around the house watching VTuber videos.

Emily Saionji, one of my favorite VTubers—who I'd recently learned was voiced by Elena, a girl from my school—had uploaded a new video, so I quickly went to her YouTube page to check it out.

Emily's channel was still growing in popularity, but lately I'd noticed a change in the kind of videos she'd been uploading. Just recently, there had been fewer videos where she talked about her personal interests or played her favorite games, and a lot more where she tried out the latest trendy FPS or collaborated with other VTubers.

I was pretty sure that this was some kind of management decision aimed at earning her more subscribers. Personally, however, I thought her old videos were way better. I wanted to see Emily—or rather, Elena—talking about all the things she loved.

Her latest video's thumbnail took me by surprise. It showed Emily next to a real person: an attractive man in his early 20s. Confused, I clicked on the video, which turned out to be a collaboration between Emily and a "real" YouTuber—some dude called Takaya.

The two of them were just chatting with each other, but, for an Emily Saionji fan, it was painful to watch.

I didn't know much about the guy, not even whether he was supposed to be popular or not, but even I could tell that he was dumb, unlikeable, and without a shred of delicacy. He was making fun of the way she talked, asking her sensitive questions like, "Do you really like girls? I mean, real girls?" and making distasteful remarks about how her skirt was too short to properly hide her panties.

As a fan, I was furious, and I obviously wasn't the only one feeling that way.

The video had more than two thousand dislikes, compared to the less-than-fifty on any of her usual videos.

One of the most liked comments was this:

Out of all YouTubers, did you really need to collab with Takaya? The guy's famous for being rude and knows nothing about VTubers! Emily's producers obviously only care about raking in the views, not about her or her fans' feelings!!!

I could definitely see why that guy was well-known for his rudeness. A single video was enough to tell. But I could also see what they meant about the producers: this video *did* have a lot of views, around twice as many as Emily's other videos. There was also a substantial number of comments, including (many) negative ones that insulted Takaya and criticized Emily's management.

This looked like a small-scale scandal. As a major Emily Saionji fan myself, I was also mad at Takaya and her producers. But, even more so, I was worried about Emily... and Elena.

I hope this isn't getting to her too much...

I wanted to know how she was coping with the situation, but, despite having exchanged LINE contacts that day at school, we'd never actually messaged each other. There's no way I could just message her out of the blue asking about something so delicate.

Unable to think of anything I could do to help, I felt completely powerless. I hoped that I'd be able to find the chance to talk to her at school, but it was a long shot. Students from different school years didn't really run into each other that often.

"Are you in there?" I heard Kokoro call as she knocked on the door to my room.

"Yeah?"

"Can I come in?" she asked, not waiting for my reply before she opened the door.

Sheesh! What if I was naked in here or something?!

“Wh-What happened?” I asked her.

“Hehe. This one’s going to surprise you. I bought an adult game!”

“Oh—Wait, what?!” I screeched.

You enter a guy’s room all excited to tell him that?! What’s wrong with you?!

“I downloaded it from Amazon with the credit card my dad gave me! It’ll just say ‘Amazon’ on the bill, so he’ll never find out!” she said. Her dad had given her a credit card with a low monthly spending limit to use for herself. She told me that, by buying this game, she had maxed the card out for the whole month. I didn’t know what was more appalling: the money she’d spent, what she was saying, or the fact that she was saying it with such a proud grin on her face.

“A-An adult game, as in a BL game?” I asked.

“No, a *normal* one! I finally asked Kusumi what his favorite games are! Adult games, that is. Then, I even told him about the fact that I’m a fujoshi, and he was super cool about it! So, since I want to get to know him better, I thought I’d play one of them myself!”

“O-Okay...” I replied, amazed as always by how much effort she was ready to put into things.

“So,” she said, “can you, like, keep me company while I play?!”

“Huh?! Why in the world would I have to do that?!”

“I read your adult doujinshi and stuff, but it’s my first time playing a game like this... It takes some courage, you know? And if there’s something I don’t get, you can explain it to me.”

“Am I the porn professor or something?!”

Why is a high school girl buying adult games in the first place?!

“So... you won’t? But I’ve helped you out with all kinds of stuff...”

“O-Okay then. Fine, I’ll do it,” I replied.

It was true that she always helped me out, and anyway, I just needed to sit next to her while she played a game. It was probably going to be awkward, but

that was about it.

“Okay! Come to my room then! I’m going to install it!” she said.

Despite living together, it had been a while since I last saw the inside of Kokoro’s room. And now that I did, it was to play something so lewd...

“Okay! Setup complete! By the way, do you know this game?” she asked.

“Let’s see...”

I looked at the screen, doing my best to stay calm.

The Secret of Gyarū Model Rina Sakurazaka.

I’d never heard of it. I thought the heroine on the screen kind of looked like Kokoro, but I figured that a thought like that would best be kept to myself. Speaking from experience, the title made it sound like this was a niche, extreme kind of game. I prayed that it didn’t involve any weird fetishes, since this was embarrassing enough as it was.

“Kusumi said that this game changed his life! So let’s start!” Kokoro said excitedly.

She was also excited about reading my doujinshi... Could it be that she isn’t just into BL, but erotic stuff as a whole? Not like I’m going to ask her something like that... I don’t want to die quite yet.

We watched the opening, and then the story began. The protagonist, a university student, was riding a train, on the way to attend a lecture.

That girl over there is so beautiful...

He stared across the carriage at a woman wearing a suit.

The harsh lines of her face, the heavy makeup, the pin heels... I can tell. This one’s a sadist. And I love that. Just thinking about being stepped on by those heels while she insults me is such a turn on...

The game has just started! What’s this guy’s problem?!

I’ve never told anybody, but I’m a masochist. Whenever I

see a tough-looking woman like that, my imagination starts running wild.

He sure doesn't beat around the bush... This is a game for hardcore masochists, isn't it? How did this change Kusumi's life?! Oh, wait, Kusumi... I thought, as I glanced nervously at Kokoro.

"This protagonist is into some weird stuff, huh?" I commented.

"H-Haha... Yeah..." she said, clicking to read the next line. It was a pretty worrying subject, but I kept on reading in silence.

I'm too scared to turn these thoughts into action. The best I can do is indulge in adult material that caters to my fetish.

The image on the screen changed to show the protagonist on his phone, reading a masochistic eromanga during a lecture.

This guy is dodgy, even by my standards. Why is he reading porn during a lecture?!

Will I ever be able to live my dreams?

After his weird monologue, the next scene began. The protagonist was now walking back to the station.

Me: 'Huh?! Where is my phone?! I must have forgotten it in the cafeteria!'

He walked to a phone booth and dialed his own number. A fellow student, a girl, picked up and told him that she'd found his phone. The protagonist headed back to the university, to one of the lecture halls, where she was waiting for him by herself.

I've seen this girl before. She's a model, right? That's why she's so popular here. Her name was... Rina Sakurazaka. That's right.

This girl must have been the heroine. Just as the title implied, she wore flashy gyaru clothes, but her character design was of the sweet, cute kind.

As soon as I saw her, my heart skipped a beat. Her makeup

was colorful, but her expression was tough. I could feel her eyes piercing right through me. At that moment, I was sure that being humiliated and beaten up by this girl would be the best thing in the world.

This protagonist obviously wasn't looking for cuteness. He probably only cared about how much girls could hurt him.

"What is this?! This protagonist is a total nutjob!" Kokoro cried.

Hey, you were the one who wanted to play this thing! Isn't it a bit early to sound so disgusted?

I couldn't really disagree with her, so I kept my mouth shut. Kokoro, however, continued to complain.

Rina: 'So... are you a masochist?'

Me: 'Where'd a question like that come from?!'

Rina: 'I saw the screen on your phone; you hadn't locked it or anything. You were reading a manga with a woman punishing a man who was totally into it, weren't you?'

Rina pulled out the protagonist's phone, showing him the manga that he'd been reading.

Rina: 'Do you like this kind of stuff?'

Me: 'Ugh... Kill me!'

I was so embarrassed that I wanted to die. It was the first time that anyone had found out about my secret.

Wait, so, he's a masochist and likes being insulted, but now he's just... embarrassed? Okay?

Rina: 'You know... I've always wanted to know how it feels to bully and dominate a man. I think we can come up with a mutually beneficial solution here.'

Rina, out of the blue, admitted to being a sadist.

Oh, so it's that kind of game. Both the protagonist and the heroine are huge

perverts.

Me: ‘D-Do you mean...?!’

Rina: ‘How many times do I have to tell you? I’ll bully you like the girl in your manga. I’m a famous model, you know? You should be grateful!’

Me: ‘Really?! Would you really do that for me?!’

It’s only been like ten minutes and we’re already at this point?! I can barely keep up with this game!

Kokoro, now totally silent, clicked through line after line.

“A-Are you going to read all of this?” I asked, knowing very well what kind of scene would follow.

“I-I mean, it’s only just started. I can’t really stop right at the beginning, can I? I don’t get it yet...” she said, her shaky voice hinting that she did, in fact, get it.

She probably didn’t want to believe it until she’d seen the truth with her own two eyes. After all, understanding the fetishes in this game would likely mean understanding Kusumi’s fetishes...

As I expected, a sex scene began just seconds later. Since the protagonist and the heroine complemented each other so well, it was hardly surprising. The couple undressed, then Rina took out some rope—*where did she get that?*—to tie up the protagonist with.

Kokoro, although blushing, was still staring at the screen.

Is she that interested in seeing the naked guy?

Rina: ‘Are you embarrassed? You’re completely naked! Oh, I know! I’ll take a picture!’

Me: ‘Ugh...’

A girl I’ve only just met has made me undress and tied me up like this... Who knows who’ll walk inside the lecture hall?! And she even took pictures! I’ve dreamed about something like this for so long... I’m in heaven...

I've never agreed less with anyone in my life.

"I-Ichigaya..." Kokoro, with her face bright red, said, "I think I've played enough to tell... This is a game for masochists, isn't it?"

"Mm-hm."

If anything, I'm surprised it took you that long to figure it out.

"S-So... d-does that mean that Kusumi is a... you know...?" she asked.

"He's probably a masochist, yeah."

"But maybe he likes a lot of different adult games and this just happens to be one about S&M?"

"That'd just mean that he has a whole collection of weird fetishes, *including* being a hardcore masochist," I replied.

Kokoro's red face turned white as she stumbled for words.

"I-I don't want to believe it! I don't want Kusumi to be a masochist!"

"Is it that big of an issue? First of all, it was you who asked him to tell you what games he liked, so I think it's pretty rude to react like this. And if he's okay with you being a fujoshi, maybe you should let the masochism thing slide."

I agreed that it was a bit unsettling, and maybe hard to accept, but in the grand scheme of things his fetish was a relatively tame one.

"I can't!" she immediately replied. "It's not that I think masochists are disgusting or anything, but if I'm being honest, I like more... aggressive guys, you know? I can't imagine dating a boy who likes to be dominated..."

Oh, that's what she meant.

If the problem was that their personalities didn't match, then there's not much that could be done about it. Now that I actually thought about it, most of the characters popular with girls were closer to being sadistic than masochistic. Maybe that was a thing.

"I have no choice! I have to ask him directly! Like, '*Why did you enjoy this game so much?*'"

"And what are you going to do if it turns out that he's simply a masochist?"

“Well then... Even if he’s handsome and kind, I don’t think we’d be compatible. And that would also mean that he wants me to do things like *that* to him, right? I don’t want to get paranoid or anything, but doesn’t this Rina girl kind of look like me a little bit?” she said, blushing again.

So she noticed...

If I had to be honest, I personally thought that a masochistic virgin was better than a womanizer.

Kokoro messaged Kusumi, who responded after a couple of minutes.

She looked intently at the screen.

“So?” I asked. “What did he say?”

“The message that I sent to him said, ‘I was curious about that game you were talking about and tried looking it up. It looks very unique. I was wondering what you like so much about it.’”

“Okay...”

“And then he replied with, ‘That game is like all my dreams come true in one place!’”

“I-I see...”

He spelled it right out for her...

“Ugh. So I got my hopes up for nothing... again,” she mumbled to herself, with no light left in her eyes.

“Does that mean you’re going to call it quits with the guy?!”

“I’m going to keep talking with him normally as a colleague, but... If he messages me on LINE again I’ll just try to end the conversation as quickly as possible.”

R.I.P. Kusumi.

I felt for him, but he deserved it. It was way too early to disclose his weird fetishes...

* * *

Unfortunately, come Sunday, I was on the same shift as a certain masochist.

It was pretty obvious while we were working that Kusumi was under the weather, and I even heard him sigh a couple of times. It was probably because Kokoro's messages had become so cold, but I felt too guilty seeing him like that to not do something about it.

"Y-You look pretty beat up, Kusumi. Anything troubling you?" I asked him

"Haha, it's nothing really... Heart-chan has just stopped replying to my messages..."

"Oh... Is that so?" I replied. I obviously couldn't tell him that I already knew about this from "Heart-chan" herself.

"She asked me what my favorite adult game was, you see? And I honestly replied with the name of a hardcore maso one. I wonder if I shouldn't have..."

"Of course not!"

He may look handsome, but on the inside he's just a virgin loser. Why am I feeling a bond with him?

"You can't just tell a girl that you're super masochistic. Unless you already know her well or she's a huge sadist to begin with, that'll just creep her out," I told him.

"I guess you're right... but I thought she was a sadist..."

"H-Huh?"

"I hadn't spoken much with her yet, but she looked like the tough, aggressive gyaru type. Just my type! Can't you imagine her insulting men and bossing them around?"

I... can. Let's say that your prediction wasn't totally wrong.

More than anything, I was impressed by how he'd managed to find that out about her despite the agreeable, soft-spoken way in which she presented herself at the café. Unfortunately for him, she wasn't *exactly* a sadist.

"From the second I laid eyes on her, I thought that maybe she would be the one to give me some of that sweet pain!"

“B-But why Heart-chan? Couldn’t you go for another tough-looking girl? Like Iroha. She’s definitely a sadist,” I said.

“Could be, yeah. But I have a younger sister, so I’m not really into younger girls. And I like gyaru...”

“I see.”

In short, Kokoro looked like the perfect fit for him.

“In any case, you should probably keep that kind of fetish to yourself, at least until you’re dating,” I told him.

“I wish I’d known that earlier. From now on, I’ll wait to tell girls until I’m one hundred percent sure that they’re into sadism.”

“Th-That could be a good idea...”

You’re going to tell them either way, huh...?

“Thanks for the advice,” he said. “You’re a cool guy. Hey, wanna add each other on LINE?”

“Oh, sure,” I replied.

For some reason, Kusumi was warming up to me.

After our conversation ended, I noticed Mashiro’s heavenly singing voice echoing through the café. Once again, the customers had been showering her with stage requests, and I couldn’t have asked for anything more perfect than the voice of an angel in my ear as I worked.

“That was ‘Lemon,’ for Mr. Hiramoto! Thank you for the request, master! Next up is one of our new maids, the cuter than cute Heart-chan!” I heard Mashiro announce. Surprised, I turned my head toward the stage.

“I-I’m Heart-chan, and th-this is ‘Hitorigoto.’ Thank you to Mr. Takeda for requesting it. This is my first time doing a stage request...”

Kokoro, visibly shaky, stood on the stage and started singing the opening to a popular anime. Someone had paid to listen to her sing, so I was happy for her.

Despite the nerves, she was actually a good performer and had a surprisingly cute singing voice. She was almost as good as Mashiro, but with an important

difference: she stood almost completely frozen to the spot for the entire song, without even a hint of dancing. Not a wiggle. Not a wave.

“She’s so cute...” Kusumi said, entranced by Kokoro’s performance.

“I’m happy you’re getting some eye candy while you work, but am I going to get my order by the end of the day?” Sasaki, the dude who always sat at the counter, commented sarcastically. Kusumi hurriedly went back to cooking.

“Th-Thank you very much,” Kokoro said as she left the stage, and it was then that something caught my eye. A customer, probably the man who had requested the song, had walked up to her, putting a hand on her back.

“You did great!” he said.

In any other setting, this could easily have been taken as a friendly gesture. However, in our café, touching the maids was prohibited.

I looked around, but none of the full-time employees were present, including the manager. As they had to care for more than one café, it was a relatively frequent occurrence. The only other male staff member at the café, besides myself, was Kusumi, and he was too busy cooking to notice. I had to do something.

Unsure whether I was even allowed to speak up about this sort of thing, I left the kitchen and walked toward Kokoro.

“E-Excuse me, sir,” I said, addressing the customer, “it’s against the café’s rules to touch the maids...”

“I-Ichigaya...?!” Kokoro looked at me, shocked. Mashiro was also looking at me, equally surprised.

“Oh, yeah, yeah. *Sorry*,” the customer said, rolling his eyes. As unpleasant as he sounded, at least he didn’t get mad at me and actually took his hand away from Kokoro.

I thanked him and hurried back into the kitchen.

After work, I left the café and walked to Akihabara station, ready to ride home with Kokoro as always.

“Oh, there you are,” she said when she saw me. “Don’t you get thirsty after work? It’s super hot in that kitchen. Here, have this.”

She handed me a bottle of iced tea that she had probably bought from a vending machine.

“I... Thank you?” I said, taking it.

“Hey, erm... thanks for today,” she said as we walked toward the platform.

Wait, did she buy me this to thank me for speaking up to that customer?

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s just, you know, since the manager wasn’t there...” I said, slightly embarrassed.

I glanced at her, and noticed that she was blushing.

“I almost couldn’t believe it. I would never have expected you to do something like that,” she said.

“Huh? Well, I guess so.”

“But I’m really, totally grateful,” she said.

Seeing her thank me like that, with such a shy look on her face, was making me blush too.

“Oh, by the way... I talked with Kusumi today,” I said. “He looked beat down, but he’ll probably be fine.”

“R-Really?! I mean, I think he’s a nice guy, so I hope that one day he finds a good... well, a *bad* girl to make him happy,” she said.

While I agreed with her, I also knew that it wasn’t exactly common to find a girl “bad” enough to meet Kusumi’s very particular standards...

* * *

The following weekend, I was on the shift starting from 2 p.m. Being a Saturday, there were lots of customers even though it was still early in the day.

Kusumi was working with me until three, which made things much easier, but when his shift ended, I would be running that busy kitchen all by myself.

Despite being new and still relatively unknown, the café seemed to have no

lack of customers. I guessed that must be a good thing though, at least in terms of business.

“Welcome back, meowster!”

Another group of customers walked through the door, greeted by one of the maids. I casually looked over and... my jaw dropped to the floor.

One of them, who at first glance looked like a girl, was actually a cute boy. One that I knew very well, in fact: Takeshi Aisaki.

I never told him where I work! How did he find out?! And he couldn't choose a worse time! Nishina's on shift too! He's going to find out that she's an otaku!

“Would you like to be seated at a table or by the counter?”

“Hm... I think we'll get a tab—” the man who was with Ai was in the middle of his reply when I rushed to interrupt him, under the guise of saying hello to my friend.

“Ai!”

“Huh?! Kagetora?!”

If he's so surprised, surely that means he just came here by coincidence? Well, he does come to Akihabara a lot, so it's not that much of a stretch...

“So this is the maid café you work at? What a coincidence! And *whoa*, someone actually hired you! How unbelievable!”

“That's kinda rude... A-Anyway, Ai, why don't you sit at the counter? It's empty, so you can chat with me as much as you want,” I said.

“What? Why would I want to see your mug after coming here to chat with maids? And as a paying customer, no less! That's the worst offer I've ever heard!”

“You—” I started rebutting him, offended.

“But, oh well, I guess you're going to be lonely over there all by yourself, without me to keep you company. Might as well sit by the counter. Do you mind, Honda?” Ai asked.

“No, doesn't really matter to me,” his friend replied. I took a good look at this

Honda, an overweight man probably somewhere around his late thirties.

Why is Ai coming to a maid café with this guy? H-He's not getting paid to go on dates with that man... is he? No, no. That can't be. He may be cute, but he's still a boy. No man would pay to go on a date with a boy. I need to think straight...

"By the way, Ai, I've never met your friend..."

"Oh, this is Honda. He's a cameraman. We met at a cosplay event today, and we decided to check out the new café."

"Oh, I see. Please follow me," I said, leading the two to the counter and giving them coasters and menus.

"Ai's Rina Kagura cosplay today was stunningly cute! Wanna see?" the man said, excitedly taking out his camera.

Cute?! Th-This man is totally going after Ai, isn't he?!

He turned on the camera's display and showed me a picture of Ai cosplaying as the VTuber.

"You should have seen all the people surrounding him! He was one of the most popular cosplayers at the event!"

"That's a lot of skin he's showing..." I said.

"I know, I know. He's so sexy you wouldn't believe he's a boy, right? I'm sure all the other cameramen still think he's a girl!"

Did this old pervert just call Ai sexy?! Is he trying to get in bed with him or something?!

"What's the matter, Kagetora? You look pale," Ai remarked.

"Oh, nothing..."

As disgusted as I was by the man, right now he was a customer. I had to be polite.

Why am I even mad, like this is some sort of love triangle? We're just three ordinary men! A triangle of men! No love involved—at least not on my end! Calm down, Kagetora!

One of the maids approached the counter.

“Sorry for the wait. May I take your orders?” she asked them.

Oh no! I despaired. It was Kokoro. My effort to have Ai sit at the counter was in vain...

“Oh? Have we met before?” Ai asked, scanning Kokoro’s face with interest.

“Hm? You do seem familiar...” Kokoro replied, frowning back at him.

“Ah! I know!” Ai exclaimed, finally realizing who she was. “You’re Nishina, from school! But... why do *you* work at a maid café?!”

Even though she wasn’t in the same class as us, Nishina was popular enough for anyone at our school, including Ai, to recognize her face.

“F-From school?!” she parroted, spinning around to look at me.

“Yeah...” I said, since it was too late to lie about it. “He’s a friend of mine, Takeshi Aisaki. He’s that crossplayer I talked to you about.”

“The one from that selfie you showed me? Oh my God, he’s even cuter in person!”

“Aren’t you just the *tiniest* bit worried that someone from school knows you work here?” I asked her with a forced smile, appalled by the lack of nervousness she was showing.

“Well, he’s your friend, right?” she asked rhetorically before turning back to Ai. “Aisaki, was it? Could you keep the fact that I work here a secret? I wouldn’t want other people at school to find out, if you get me?”

“Oh, sure. No problemo. I really wouldn’t have expected *you* to work at a maid café though!” Ai replied, crossing his legs and leaning against the counter.

“What...? Huh...?” I muttered, confused by how casual the two of them were about the whole affair.

That’s it?! That’s her reaction! Now I feel like an idiot for trying to keep her secret!

Kokoro took their orders, and, after I’d regained my composure, I got started on their drinks.

“What brings you to Akihabara today?” she asked them—a pretty standard line for a maid to use to start up a conversation with customers. I was impressed at how much more natural her small talk sounded compared to when she’d started.

“We were attending a cosplay event in Odaiba, and thought we’d stop by here on our way back,” the middle-aged pervert replied.

“Oh, a cosplay event?!” she asked, genuinely interested.

“Yeah, take a look here—I took some sweet pictures,” the overweight creep said, showing her some shots from his camera.

“Wow, your Rina Kagura cosplay is sooo cute!” she squealed to Ai. “Actually, one of the cosplays I like doing is a VTuber too! You know, Yumeno☆Saki!”

“You cosplay?! Wait, *you’re* an otaku?!” he asked her.

“Yeah, of course! Why would I work in a maid café otherwise?” she said, being surprisingly honest with Ai despite having met him for the first time literally minutes ago.

“Huh, I think you’d look great doing more grown-up characters too. More *beautiful* and less *cutesy*, if you know what I mean,” Ai said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t fit that kind of stuff. And look at you! You’re more beautiful than most girls I know! What other characters do you cosplay?”

These two are really chatting about cosplay. Life sure is unpredictable...

When the cameraman left his seat to use the restroom, Ai addressed both me and Kokoro at the same time.

“It’s not a coincidence that you two both work here, is it?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

“Well... I’ve been keeping it a secret, but...” I said, finally telling him about how the two of us had met at that otaku matchmaking party and had decided to help each other find dates. Of course, I didn’t mention the fact that she lived in my house. That was a little too much information, even for Ai.

“I’m sorry I never told you... but she told me not to tell anyone she was an otaku, you know,” I apologized to Ai.

“Whoa, that sounds like the plot to some anime! Amazing!” he replied.

“Ah! That guy is coming back! We can’t let customers know about this, get it?” I asked him nervously.

Ai, understandably, still looked like he needed to process everything he’d just learned.

We continued chatting casually as I worked and they finished their meals.

“See you two at school then!”

“Y-Yes... See ya...”

“Please come back soon, meowster!”

Finally satisfied, Ai and his “friend” left the café.

I met Kokoro at the station, like always.

“Your friend is so cute! He really looks like a girl! And he’s super approachable too!” Kokoro told me excitedly.

Wait... Does she... like him? I haven’t heard her talking about a guy like this in a while now...

“But didn’t you say that you don’t like cute-looking boys?” I asked her.

“Huh? Yeah, no *duh*, I don’t like them *as boys*, but I think we’d be great cosplaying friends! He’s so cute that talking to him doesn’t feel like talking to a boy, you know? So I don’t get nervous at all.”

Someway, somehow, she had a point.

“I wonder if *he* knows any handsome cosplayers...” she said.

“Are you really trying to use a friend of mine just to get a boyfriend? Anyway, as far as I know, he only knows cameramen like the one at the café today, and girl cosplayers,” I explained, forming my opinions based on what I knew from following Ai on Twitter.

“Too bad... You know, you’re lucky you found Mashiro. You don’t have to constantly look around to find dates, like I do...”

So she's really decided not to give Kusumi any more chances. And since he's the only young, attractive guy at the café, I guess she doesn't have all that many options left...

The next day, I crashed onto my desk to get some sleep before first period.

Between school, my job at the café, what little housework I did, and my late-night gacha gaming, I'd been completely exhausted. I was sleeping at school way more than usual.

"Kagetora!" Ai woke me up.

"Hm?" I thought he was going to call me out about our meeting yesterday, but that wasn't it.

"Nishina is asking for you."

"Huh? Okay..." I said, still groggy and slightly confused.

I looked at the door at the back of the classroom and saw Kokoro standing out in the hallway. Many of the boys in my class were stealing glances at her. It was the first time she'd come to talk to me with so many people around, so I wondered what had happened.

"She said she wants you to bring your bag," Ai parroted.

Weird as it was, I did as I was told. I grabbed my school bag and I walked out into the hallway, where I met Kokoro. I could definitely feel people staring at me. Seeing me of all people speaking with *the* Kokoro Nishina would definitely raise some eyebrows.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"Come with me!"

"What? Where to? Homeroom is going to start soon..."

"It doesn't matter as long as there's nobody around! Like, the toilet!"

"What?! You want me to go into the girls' toilet?!" I asked, astonished.

"Yeeeah, I guess that won't work... Let's go this way then," she said, pointing toward the stairs at the end of the hallway. I followed her as she ran up them to the stairs' landing, where we were safe from prying eyes.

What's wrong? Why are we doing this?

"You got them mixed up!" she said, taking a lunch box out of her bag and shoving it in front of my face.

That morning, Kokoro had prepared both of our lunches with the leftovers from the previous day's dinner. Since the two boxes looked identical, I'd just taken one off the table without thinking too much about it.

"But they have the same stuff inside, don't they?" I asked.

"They're totally different! Mine has less rice in it!"

Way to make a huge deal out of nothing...

"Sure, sure... Here ya go, have the one with less rice," I said, taking the lunch box out of my bag.

"Quickly! I don't want to be seen with you!" she urged me.

That was when we heard the voices of two girls coming toward us.

"Jeez, girl. That guy's like, totally the creeps, you get me? Figure I should block him?"

"The dude from the party? But you said he was a catch!"

"I know, buuut I went on a date with him, right? And he was like, *ugh*. So annoying. Like yeah, you're handsome, I get it, but maybe chill out a little?"

"Oh no!" Kokoro jolted with fear. She exchanged the lunch boxes in our hands faster than any magician could have.

Noticing her, one of the girls called out, "Kokoro? That you, honey?"

The two girls were probably Kokoro's friends. One of them had dyed brown hair and a ton of makeup on her face; the other had black hair and a more reasonable amount of makeup. They both looked like stereotypical popular girls—a population I had very little contact with.

Since they both still had their school bags on their shoulders, they'd probably only just gotten here. Between how little they worried about being late and the conversation I'd just overheard, I could work out that they weren't exactly model students.

“Morning. Whatcha doing here?” the one with the brown hair asked Kokoro, looking me up and down curiously. As our eyes met, my nerves took over my body. I wasn’t used to interacting with people like *these*.

“I, uh, er...” Kokoro was lost for words.

“And who’s that?” the girl asked casually, continuing to stare right at me.

“Haha! Kokoro, with this loser? Better call the weird-police!” the one with the black hair added, staring at me.

Kokoro, meanwhile, was glancing over at me, sweating bullets.

“This is, w-well—” she began.

“Your boyfriend? Yeah, as if!” one of the girls said.

“Not in a million years, right?” the other one followed.

They’re basically saying that I’m too unattractive to be her boyfriend?

Kokoro had taught me a lot about clothing and styling my hair, but I only put her advice into practice when going on dates and such. At school I just wore my uniform, and my hair looked exactly like it did when I got out of bed. All in all, I couldn’t really disagree with the girls’ opinion, but being told that so casually made me both angry and mortified.

“No way!” Kokoro said, sounding almost disgusted at the idea.

Thanks, yeah. Not like I have feelings or anything...

“What’s with those lunch boxes then?” the brown-haired girl asked.

If she realizes that we’re living together, that’s going to be a huge problem!

“Did you, like, make matching bento and bring him one?” she then said.

“Huh?” Kokoro replied, caught off guard by how absurd her friend’s guess was.

I guess you wouldn’t jump to the conclusion that we’re living together just because we have the same lunch boxes...

“Whaaat? That’s not very Kokoro. You like that guy or something?” the one with the black hair asked.

“No! Not at all! This is just a coincide—” Kokoro started to explain again, but she was interrupted by the bell.

“Let’s go!” Kokoro told her friends, and they hurried toward their classroom. After watching them leave, I walked silently back to my own.

I was relieved that those slutty-looking girls hadn’t figured out that Kokoro was living in my house, but I was still offended by what they’d said about me.

If there was any chance of gaining the respect of that kind of girl, a guy would have to take care of how he looked even when going to school and make way more friends than I had... but the former sounded like too much work and the latter sounded impossible.

Anyway, I don’t care about what people think of me at school. I’ll find my cute otaku girlfriend somewhere else and be completely happy, I thought to console myself.

Later that day, during lunch break, Ai and I were chatting in the cafeteria.

“You know, I still can’t believe what I saw yesterday. *You* working with Nishina in a maid café?! Now that’s a laugh!” he said.

“Shhh! Don’t talk about that here! She doesn’t want people to find out that she’s an otaku, or even worse, that she works as a maid!” I whispered urgently.

“Oh, that’s right. Still, who knew you’d be able to become friends with a girl like *that*? She’s way more popular than you could ever be.”

“We aren’t really friends or anything... Anyway, do you always go to cosplay events with cameramen like that dude from yesterday?” I asked him.

“Why? Is that weird?”

“I think he likes you... a bit too much.”

“Oh, that? I don’t mind. He can be creepy at times, but he’s a good guy and a great photographer. There are people a hundred times worse than him at that kind of event,” he replied.

Cosplay events are scarier than I thought...

“Oh, damn!” Ai said, looking at the time on his phone. “I have a student council meeting soon! I gotta go, see ya Kagetora!”

He ran out of the cafeteria and I was left all by my lonely self eating yesterday’s leftovers.

A few tables away from where I was sitting, I noticed a familiar face. It was Elena, eating with her friends. As I looked over at her, our eyes met. She’d probably already noticed that I was here.

I really wanted to ask her about that Emily Saionji video and how she was dealing with the backlash after she collaborated with that jerk of a YouTuber. I was worried that the fans’ reactions might have hit her too hard. However, of course I couldn’t just up and make my way into a hoard of pretty girls.

Just as I was busy wallowing in my own powerlessness, I saw the girls from Elena’s table getting ready to leave.

If she leaves the cafeteria, I’ll really have no chance to ask her... I thought, but then I heard her address her friends.

“I want to pick up some snacks first. I’ll catch up to you later, okay?” she said.

If she stayed behind by herself, this would be the perfect chance to talk to her. Our eyes met again, and she began walking toward my table.

“Hello, Ichigaya,” she greeted me with a smile.

“M-Minami!” I said, surprised but happy that she would actually come and talk to me. “It’s been a while! I-I’m still watching all the newest... you know what!”

I knew that Elena’s VTuber identity was a secret to be protected at all costs, so I tried not to mention her videos in a way that anybody else could understand.

Now that I think about it, there’s no way I can ask her about her last video here at school, can I?

“Th-Thank you...” she said.

“Actually, there’s something that I wanted to ask you... but maybe this isn’t the right place, is it?” I asked.

She looked around, seeing that there were still quite a few people hanging around in the cafeteria.

“Say... are you busy today after school?” she asked.

“Huh?! N-No, I’m free!” I replied, bewildered by what I assumed that question meant.

“A-Actually,” she said, “I wanted to ask you about something too... Something that has to do with *that*. Could you spare some time for me then, if that’s all right?”

“O-Of course! I don’t know if I can be of any help, but I’d love to!” I replied immediately.

She wants to ask me something about her videos? She considers me a reliable person that she can ask?! Yeah! Awesome! I’m so glad I’m not on shift today!

“Thank you so much! And as for the place... I think it would be better to use the room where we talked last time. If we lock the door and keep our voices down, nobody will hear us,” she suggested.

“Sure! That sounds good.”

I knew that she was taking these precautions because she needed to keep the VTubing a secret, but the idea of being locked up inside a small room with her still freaked me out.

“So, four o’clock, same room as last time. Okay?” she asked.

“Okay!”

“Thanks again!” she smiled brightly, before we both returned to our classrooms.

Minami wants to ask me about her videos... That’s unexpected. It must have something to do with that latest tragedy of a video, no doubt. That’ll be perfect, since I wanted to ask her about it too. Hmm, but maybe I do have an idea why she’s relying on me... I’m probably the only one at school who knows about her secret.

That day, after class, I told Ai that I couldn’t stay and chat with him as I usually

did. I reached the science lab's storage room, the place where Elena and I were to meet, just before four.

"Ichigaya...?" I heard a voice whisper from inside the storage room. I opened the door and saw Elena, already waiting there.

"Please come in," she said.

After I was safely inside, she stuck her head out into the hallway, checked that nobody was there, and then locked the door with the two of us inside. I could only imagine how weird it would seem if somebody saw the two of us going inside a tiny room together. Elena was also well-known at school for her mixed heritage and nondescript entertainment job, which made it even worse.

Keeping my cool in this situation wasn't easy.

Elena took out her phone and chose some music. "If I put this on full volume, nobody will be able to hear us," she said. Surely music blaring out of the storage room would just attract unwanted attention, but I guessed that it was still better than our conversation being overheard.

"Thanks for coming," she said.

"It's nothing!"

"I just wanted to ask about something. It's been on my mind for a while..."

"Go ahead!"

"You already know I'm a VTuber," she told me with a serious expression on her face. "And I've always had fun making videos. I just did whatever I enjoyed doing and the viewers seemed to like that as well..."

I agreed—as a viewer, the videos where Emily Saionji was just having fun doing what she loved were always the most entertaining ones.

"But now," she continued, "the management is forcing me to play popular games that I'm not really interested in. They're also making me collaborate with other YouTubers, and that sort of thing... I don't mind other VTubers, but I had to do this video with a real-life YouTuber, and—"

"I know who you're talking about. I wanted you to ask you about that too," I said.

“You watched it?” she asked, looking both shy and flattered. “So, you know, my company wants me to focus on what’s ‘trendy’ so that I get more subscribers. I agree that growing my following is important, but the videos that they’re having me make are just so disheartening... I’m sorry I can’t be more specific, but I signed a contract...”

“I agree with you one hundred percent!” I said. “To be honest, I already thought there was something weird going on with your recent videos... So it’s the company’s fault, not yours!”

“Something weird?”

“Hmm, the older videos were just more... *fun*. The ones where Emily played games full of cute girls, chattered away about the pairings, and you know... had fun too.”

She seemed surprised by my words.

“I liked the collabs you did with other girl VTubers, but the one with that guy was just... shocking. Why would they force you to do that? Emily’s fans could never enjoy something like that, and I say that as a fan myself.”

“Ichigaya...”

“S-Sorry! I might have been too blunt.”

“Not at all! I’m just so happy that you care so much about Emily Saionji!” she said.

“A-Anyway... I think that the best thing about Emily is how enthusiastic she is about what she does. Fans like me just want to see you enjoying yourself. So you’re absolutely right! Your company is messing everything up.”

What kind of idiot is in charge of deciding what videos Emily has to make? Doesn’t he know anything about her?

“Th-Thank you...” she said, staring at the floor.

Did I creep her out by being too enthusiastic?

“I’m so glad you agreed to speak with me!” she said. She looked up at me, smiling with a hint of embarrassment.

“Huh?! N-No, I’m sorry I couldn’t give you any useful advice...”

“That’s not the case! I was worried that maybe the company was doing the right thing and I just couldn’t understand them... but after hearing what you said, I’m more sure about how I feel. You’ve given me the courage I needed to talk to management about changing their minds. Thank you very much!”

“Oh, but I just gave you my opinion as a fan...”

Of course, I was more than happy that my words had been useful to her.

“Now that I think about it, there’s this one video of yours that I absolutely loved!” I told her.

“Hm? Which one would that be?”

“The viewer Q&A! When you talked about your favorite anime, games, and all that, it was so entertaining to hear about all the games you love—and that every single one has yuri couples in it! I could really tell how serious you were!”

“Oh! I had so much fun making that one!”

“And it was hilarious when someone asked you about your ideal man and you just replied, ‘Either a tomboyish girl or a cool, beautiful girl,’ like it was the most obvious thing in the world! Your ideal man is a woman! Hahaha! I’m sure all the other VTubers were taking note! You’re so good at playing the part of a yuri lover!”

Elena suddenly averted her gaze, shifting about as if uncomfortable.

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked.

“I-I’m not... I’m not playing a part.”

“Huh?”

“I think... I might like girls... for real,” she quietly said, still avoiding my eyes.

“What?!”

Did she just come out to me?! How am I supposed to react?!

“Actually, there was something else that I wanted to talk about apart from my videos... and it’s this. I never told anyone in real life how much I like yuri, but, when I told you, you were really supportive. After that, I decided that I wanted

to tell you,” she said. I was dumbfounded.

“I-I’m sorry I said something so weird all of a sudden,” she apologized.

“Not at all! I’m happy to listen to whatever you want to talk about!” I said, and she started explaining further.

“I think I realized around middle school, or even grade school. I’ve always fantasized about characters that I liked falling in love with each other. But I noticed my fantasies were always about pairs of female characters. The first time was probably when I watched *Magical Fighting Girls Milky 5*, with Marika and Kaoru...”

“Oh, *Milky 5*?” I said. “That show’s turned loads of people into otaku! I know it was supposed to be a kids’ show, but I think a lot of adult otaku watched it too. And if I remember right, Marika and Kaoru being in love with each other was canon, which is why there’s so much yuri doujinshi about them. Kaoru was popular with girls, wasn’t she? Being the cool type and all...”

“Y-You know?! You understand? Yes! I became an otaku because of it too! And I also realized how much I loved yuri. I was still little, but I was madly in love with Kaoru.”

I, too, watched that anime back in the day, as a grade schooler. In particular, more than the protagonist, I liked the tsundere girl with the long black hair. She was my first two-dimensional crush.

“After that, I started watching more and more anime with female couples. I’ve never been interested in boys, neither in anime nor in real life, and I’ve never really wanted a boyfriend...”

“So, are you... a lesbian?” I asked.

“I... don’t know. All the fictional characters I like are women, but when it comes to real life, I’ve never fallen in love with anyone, man or woman. Maybe I can’t feel attracted to men, maybe I can. I’m not sure. But I can’t talk about this with my friends, and certainly not with my parents, so I’ve kept it to myself all this time. It must have been a nuisance to listen to something like this, when we don’t even know each other so well. I’m very sorry...” she said, her eyes full of remorse.

“No, no! It’s not a nuisance at all!” I immediately replied. “Maybe, you know, it’s just a question of time. Actually, I’ve never had a girlfriend either and a lot of my friends have never even had a crush. Most of them have never dated anybody, actually.”

I thought of the only two people I could call friends: Ai and Kokoro. Neither of them had ever had a girlfriend or boyfriend, so that was two for two.

“R-Really? All of my friends already have boyfriends, so I thought I was weird for never falling in love with anyone...”

“That’s because all of your friends are super popular! We’re still in high school, so there’s no need to hurry.”

“I see...”

“If, one day, you fall in love with someone, then you can start worrying about confessing to them... whether they’re a boy or a girl,” I said.

I was doing my best to shut off the part of my brain that wanted to fantasize about Elena romancing another girl so that I could provide a half-decent answer. Not that I was in any position to give advice about romance to other people...

“Thank you,” she said, smiling ever so slightly. “Not only did you listen to my problems, but you also cheered me up. You’re right. I shouldn’t worry about not having fallen in love yet. I feel so much better now!”



“I’m glad to hear that!”

“I didn’t know that just talking with someone could make me feel so much lighter. I know I keep saying this, but thank you again. And actually, just knowing that there’s someone in my school who enjoys my work and understands the things I like gives me so much courage,” she said.

“M-Minami, I—”

“If it’s not a problem... could I come to speak to you whenever I need advice?”

“O-Of course! Anytime! I don’t know whether listening to what I have to say will do you any good though.”

“Really?! Thank you! You’re the only one I can be so open with, despite having so many things to worry about. I’m really grateful,” she said.

I’m listening to Emily Saionji saying that she can only rely on me... I’m so happy I could die.

After that, she and I walked to the station together.

After I got home, I received a LINE message from Elena, thanking me.

Having a cute girl counting on me made me happy enough, but the fact that she was the very same VTuber I loved was even better. It was a dream come true for an otaku like me.

It must have been hard for her to keep all those worries bottled up inside without anyone to speak to. I was glad that she managed to open up to me, and I was ready to help her as much as I could, as many times as I needed to.

Of course, if she was a lesbian, then I’d have no chance at dating her. Granted, that wouldn’t change much even if she was heterosexual, but thinking that it’d be one hundred percent impossible made me a little sad. But sure, I’ll admit it. Thinking about it in this way was very egotistical of me.

5

I only had to work at the café for two more days before my contract would be up. I'd gotten used to the work, and now I was even decent at speaking with customers.

"All right! Let's get going! I'm so ready for work! You're ready, right?"

"Would you tone that down?" Kokoro scolded me. "You're giving me a headache. You're just pumped up because you're on the same shift as Gojo, right?"

She knows what's up.

"You bet I am!"

Kokoro and I were walking from school to the station together, where we'd catch the train to get to work in Akihabara. As usual, we planned to split up at Akihabara station and arrive at the café individually.

As she'd correctly guessed, I was excited because Mashiro was going to be there. Her heavenly presence was the reason the job had become so much fun for me.

"You're so lucky to work with a girl you like..." Kokoro said.

"Why do you sound so sad all of a sudden?" I asked her.

"I started this job thinking I could meet guys, but my contract is going to be over soon and I didn't meet anyone..."

"Well, you met, erm, Kusumi," I corrected her.

"He... Yeah, I guess..." she said, the light leaving her eyes.

After all, she hadn't met anyone she was really interested in.

"I mean, it's not like I didn't have fun. I could wear a super cute outfit and sing on stage... and all of the staff are really nice people. It's just that, boys-wise, it was a failure. Where am I going to find a boyfriend?! Things are looking good

for you and Gojo, so make sure you help me too!”

“I’m not so sure things are looking *that* good though,” I said. Our relationship hadn’t really progressed. I was still waiting until my last day at the job, the following week, to ask her on another date and for her LINE.

“Once we’re done working, we’ll get our weekends back. I’ll start looking for new places to meet guys, and you should do the same to find girls, okay?”

“Huh? If things do go well with Mashiro, I’m not going to look for girls anymore...” I said. That would be hurtful to Mashiro.

“I know what you mean, but like, do you really have to say it like that?! Jeez! It sounds like as soon as you reach your goal you aren’t going to help me anymore...”

“What?! That’s not what I said at all!”

“Hmph! Fine! I don’t care! I can find an otaku guy on my own, even without your stupid help!” she said, storming ahead to get away from me.

Why is she mad now?! Is it because she’s worried about not finding a boyfriend after what happened with Kusumi? She’s been so on edge lately. But does she really have to get mad at me because of that? I don’t even know if Mashiro will agree to go out with me! This girl, I swear...

Later, in the kitchen, Iroha leaned over an omelet that I’d just prepared.

“Yikes, Ichi. You know that this is supposed to look cute, right?” she said straight to my face.

Like in most maid cafés, our omelets had cute drawings and phrases written on them with ketchup—in our case, it was a cat’s face with the café’s name written under it. The customers could request that they be drawn by a specific maid, or else the kitchen staff would take care of it.

“What?! I just drew what I’m supposed to!” I exclaimed, unable to see anything wrong with my ketchup cat.

“Wow, it’s so bad...” she said, chuckling at me and my artwork, before putting the plate on a tray and taking it to the table that had ordered it.

Although I was still offended by Iroha's casual insults, I'd gotten somewhat used to them by now. That was just her standard format of communication—or at least, so I hoped.

I took a look at the dining hall while I continued working through the orders. Mashiro looked even cuter and more cheerful than usual, and the customers loved her. Kokoro's smile, by comparison, looked a bit stiff, but all in all she seemed to be doing a good job.

Without exception, all the girls working here were cute otaku. But even with so many options to choose from, I still thought that Mashiro was the best—my ideal girlfriend. Even if she liked male voice actors, I honestly didn't care. Luckily, for reasons I didn't fully understand myself, she seemed to like me back. At least, she acted very friendly toward me.

My plan was ready: on my last day on the job I'd ask her for her LINE contact and if she'd like to go on a date with me. Then, during the date, I'd ask her to be my girlfriend. If I could pull something like that off, anyway.

If she said no, I'd probably die from the disappointment, but since we wouldn't be working together anymore, at least I wouldn't have to endure any awkwardness later on.

This is my chance. I'll ask her to be my otaku girlfriend!

"I'm going on break!" I said before leaving the kitchen.

I was sitting looking at my phone, enjoying a refreshing glass of water, when I heard a voice coming from the changing room.

"Can you believe it? The same customer again! '*Mashiro, please, give me your LINE!*' What a creep!"

That voice was unmistakably Iroha's. I thought her shift was over, but she was still in the changing room, talking with someone. Even I was surprised that a customer would ask Mashiro for her private contact information. Mashiro must have it hard. Some customers just couldn't follow the rules.

"We've both told him that that's against the rules, like, a thousand times," Iroha continued. "We'd better ask the owner or the manager to do something

about it.”

“You’re right. We should ask the owner to ban that customer from entering the café.”

“Whoa, ban him?! You never go easy, huh, Mashiro?”

What? Iroha is speaking with... Mashiro? But that sounds nothing like her...

“It was the same back at the old café. It’s better to just take care of these damn creeps as soon as possible. The worst thing is that they’re always cheapskates! They just have one drink, don’t request pictures or songs or anything, and leave! What do I care if they don’t come anymore?”

Is that really Mashiro? Her voice sounds way lower than usual, and the things she’s saying aren’t like her either... Is this the same Mashiro I know? The cute, innocent girl who’s always smiling and treating everyone kindly?

I felt my perfect mental image of Mashiro slowly crumbling. I hadn’t planned to eavesdrop on her, but since the break room and the changing room were so close to each other, I couldn’t really help it.

“Yeah, I gotta agree with you there,” Iroha said. “They just come here hoping to date the maids or something. Oh, by the way, did you manage to get the tickets for the *Next Stage* live event? I’ve had no luck at all.”

“I’ve told you not to speak about that here!”

“But you’re the only one on break right now, and the customers can’t hear you from here.”

“I know, but you can’t be too careful...”

The only one on break? Did they forget about me? And Next Stage... I heard about that from Nishina. It’s that anime about boy idols, isn’t it? She wants to go to a live event? I didn’t know she liked anime for girls too...

“Anyway, yeah, I did get the ticket. I had to buy ten rays to get it,” Mashiro said.

Rays? Like, Blu-ray discs? This must be that kind of thing where you enter a lottery by buying the Blu-ray for an anime... But that would mean that she bought the same anime ten times...

“Haha! Spoken like a true Soma Sato fan!”

“I had to use up all my pay for that. I’m thinking that maybe I should take on more shifts to get some more spending money.”

Oh, that’s right! That voice actor she was talking about with her friend during our date... That was Soma Sato! So she’s a true fan of this guy?

The curtain separating the break room from the kitchen opened, and Mikoto walked in.

“Ichigaya! Why are you here?!” she asked me. “You’re supposed to be in the kitchen!”

“Huh? But it’s my break time...”

“Your break is an hour from now!” she said, and I looked at the shift table on the wall.

“Ugh! You’re right! I’m sorry!”

I realized that I’d taken my break one hour early by mistake. At that moment, the changing room’s door opened, and I saw Mashiro inside, dreadfully pale. Our eyes met for a second, but I looked away.

The Mashiro I’d heard speaking moments before was like a completely different girl.

Was that... the real Mashiro? Was the Mashiro I knew just a fake?

I was so shocked that I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I just walked back to the kitchen and got back to work. I didn’t exchange many words with Mashiro for the rest of the day.

My shift was over, and I went to change my clothes. Kokoro’s shift was supposed to end at the same time, but since she was so mad at me, she was probably going to go home by herself.

I left the changing room and walked up the stairs that led out of the store where, to my surprise, I found Mashiro.

Her shift was supposed to be over a while back...

"I-Is something wrong?" I asked her.

"It's... well... er..." she said awkwardly, without making eye contact.

The kitchen staff and the maids aren't supposed to talk to each other outside of the café... If the owner found out we'd be in trouble.

"You heard my conversation with Iroha, didn't you?" she asked me with a gloomy voice.

"Y-Yes... I didn't mean to, but I took my break too early by mistake and just happened to be there."

"Were you shocked by what I said?" she asked, glancing at me and looking mortified.

"Well..."

I was definitely shocked, at least a little bit. I did already suspect that Mashiro was heavily into male voice actors, but I didn't have any problem with that per se. The problem was that she'd faked everything, including her speech, her voice, and her personality, in front of me.

Why would she even do that?

I wasn't sure how to respond.

"You *were* shocked..." she said. She must have taken my silence as a yes. Her expression looked like a bitter, painful smile. I really couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"I guess it's too late now, huh..." she murmured to herself. "I'm sorry for lying to you all this time. I've lied about my hobbies and about my personality as a whole. I love male voice actors, I love anime for girls, and I have a terrible personality. That's the real me. So... are you disappointed?" she asked with a small laugh.

I had no clue about what was going through her head. Was she genuinely sorry about lying to me? Was she making fun of me for being deceived? And why would she lie in the first place? For fun? I had a lot of questions, but I didn't have the energy to ask all of them.

"Can I just ask you one thing?" I said, mustering what little voice I had left.

“Hm?”

“Why did you text with me, invite me on dates, and so on?” I asked.

She looked surprised by my question, and didn’t immediately reply.

“Were you just making fun of me? Laughing at my reactions?” I continued.

“It’s not like that... You know, it’s better to grease as many wheels as you can. If you got to like me, that’d be one more person liking me,” she said, looking down, with a smile that didn’t look the least bit happy.

Hearing that, I felt a pain in my chest.

I’d been a bit suspicious to begin with. Mashiro was kind to everyone, and everyone liked her. Whenever she tweeted, either on her personal account or her maid one, dozens of guys would rush to comment. There were tons of people who wanted to date her... and I’d been scared that I was just another one of them.

Kokoro was right. To Mashiro, I was only one more fan. When she texted me, when she invited me on dates, and when she baked me that cupcake, I thought that maybe I was special to her—that maybe she really liked me. But I’d just heard the truth, straight out of her mouth.

“It’s better to grease as many wheels as you can”? I’m just another wheel that she greased so that she could use me.

“I... I see. Thank you for telling me the truth,” I said, and I turned around to leave.

“I-Ichigaya!” I heard her call my name, but I didn’t have the strength to talk to her anymore.

Then, another familiar voice from behind took me by surprise.

“Are you *serious*?!”

“Huh?” I exclaimed, surprised, as I turned back to see Kokoro, who’d just come out of the café next to Mashiro.

Did she hear our conversation just now?

“Grease the wheels?” You’ve gotta be kidding me!” she said, staring fiercely

at Mashiro. “You played with him just so you could use him! You made him think that you liked him so he’d fall in love with you! That’s disgusting!”

I’d never seen Kokoro look so heated before. *Why is she so angry? Wasn’t she mad at me a few hours ago? But now she’s... on my side?*

“Th-This doesn’t concern you!” Mashiro replied. “It’s got nothing to do with you—”

“The hell if it does! Do you understand what you’ve done?! You played with his feelings! Is it fun treating people like that?!”

Kokoro continued yelling at Mashiro, whose whole body had gotten tense.

“Th-That’s not what I...” she started whispering.

At that moment, the owner came back from the other café, and saw what was going on.

“Hey! What are you doing there?! What if the customers see you?! Split up and take this somewhere else!” he scolded us.

In silence, we all went our separate ways.

In the ten minutes that it took me to walk from the café to the station, several thoughts kept my mind spinning. In particular, one sentence echoed through my head:

“You know, it’s better to grease as many wheels as you can.”

The sound of those words in Mashiro’s voice amplified the pain in my chest a thousand times over.

She had lied to me, used me, and hid her true, harsh personality. It was a shock, but it wasn’t even the biggest problem. My dream girl didn’t actually care about me. *That* was the biggest problem.

I’m such an idiot. Why didn’t I realize? A girl as cute as her could never like me. Nishina had even tried to warn me, but I didn’t listen. I was just fooling myself. All that Mashiro did, all that she said... they were all lies meant to use me. I was just one of hundreds of nerdy idiots she wanted to turn into a fan.

I was embarrassed at my own stupidity to the point of despair.

Still... I hadn't hit rock bottom. Deep inside, I felt that this overwhelming sadness was temporary. And I had one person to thank for the last shred of optimism that I was able to hang on to...

"Hey," Kokoro said.

She was waiting for me at Akihabara station with a sad smile on her face.

"Hi..." I said, walking closer to her. "Nishina... I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

We reached the platform and stood there, waiting for the train.

"You'd warned me to stay away from Mashiro... and you were right. She's the kind of girl you thought she was. I fooled myself into thinking that she liked me, but she just wanted to use me. I should have listened to you."

"You don't need to apologize," she said. "Since we started working together, I was fooled too. It's obvious that she's putting on an act, but she didn't seem like a bad girl or anything. And hey, I totally get it. When you like someone, you want to trust them."

I was moved by her kindness—despite me ignoring her warning, she was still trying to comfort me.

"And also... I'm sorry too," she said. "Today, when we were going to work, I kinda let myself have a go at you, and I shouldn't have. I was scared I'd end up not finding a boyfriend while you dated Gojo, so, like, I guess I was a bit jealous..."

"Don't worry about that. More importantly..." I said, still unsure that my words were enough. "Thanks for earlier."

I stared at her, dead serious, trying to express how grateful I felt. When she stood up for me, I was so happy that I could have cried. It was the first time that someone's words had given me that much strength. She'd been mad, genuinely angry at Mashiro... and it was all to stick up for me.

"I-It's not worth thanking me for..." she said.

But she was wrong. If it hadn't been for her, I would have been hit much

harder, so hard that I never would have gotten up again.

“You know, what do you say we eat out every once in a while?” Kokoro asked after we’d reached our station.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” I replied, and off we went to look for a place to eat together.

* * *

“Now that we’re almost done with our jobs, we should look for somewhere else to find dates!” Kokoro said right after we’d ordered our meals. “I didn’t have any luck at the café, and *you* need to take your mind off Mashiro!”

“Finding dates, huh...” I said.

I wasn’t really in the mood for romance. Thanks to Kokoro, I didn’t feel like I was out of the dating game forever, but for the time being I wanted to rest and forget about girls.

“I think I’ll take some time off from that.”

“What?! If you say things like that, you’re going to graduate high school without ever finding a girlfriend! Right after a breakup is the best time to find a date, don’t you know? One of my friends broke up with her boyfriend and found a new one immediately after! And *she* said that love is what mends a broken heart!”

“R-Really?”

The whole process of going out and meeting girls, at present, sounded like a huge hassle. I wondered if I could become interested in anyone else at this point, and, even if I could, things weren’t that likely to go better than with Mashiro.

“Well, we can look into that once we get ho—Hm?” Kokoro was interrupted by the sound of a notification on her phone.

“Oh, I got a message from Iroha,” she said.

“You two message each other?”

“Sure. We have similar interests, and she’s cool and all.”

Working in the kitchen, I could only meet the maids during my breaks. But Kokoro, being a maid herself, spent a lot of time next to Iroha. That would explain how they'd become friends so fast.

"Oh! For real?!" she gasped as she read the message.

"What happened?" I asked.

"She said that there's a meeting for all part-time workers from the café's chain! It's supposed to be to 'develop team spirit' or something like that... Anyway, she asked me if I wanted to go! It's this Saturday, so we're both free!"

"Oh, I see..."

"Can't you be a bit more enthusiastic?! This is the perfect chance to meet new people! The chain also owns that store in Ikebukuro with all the handsome male staff! Maybe there'll be some of those guys there!" she said excitedly. As usual, the thought of handsome men was enough to make her eyes sparkle.

"And think of all the other maid cafés too!" she said. "There'll be loooads of cute otaku maids for you to meet!"

C-Cute otaku maids?! That does sound enticing...

"But isn't Mashiro going to be there too?" I asked. Having to see her at work was bad enough, but if I ran into her at a place like that it'd be so awkward that I'd want to go home immediately.

"I'll try asking Iroha," Kokoro said, and she sent her a message.

"She said that Gojo can't come, because she's working on Saturday!" she said shortly after that.

"I-I see..."

"C'mon, Ichigayaaa! This is the perfect chance!" she said, all pumped up as usual.

She's going to go even if I don't, right? If she's friends with Iroha, they'll probably go together. But if I stay home by myself, playing video games or watching VTuber videos... I'll probably get really down thinking about Mashiro. That doesn't sound like a good time.

“O-Okay! I’ll come too,” I said.

“Perfect! I’ll tell Iroha,” she said, typing on her phone, already thrilled.

In a sense, her enthusiasm was contagious. My expectations, however, weren’t that high. I wasn’t looking forward to finding a girlfriend at this event—all I wanted was to take my mind off Mashiro.

6

Saturday morning, while I was playing on my phone in my room, I heard a faint knocking on the door.

“Aren’t you ready yet?” Kokoro called nervously from outside it.

“There’s still more than half an hour left before we have to leave...” I said, opening the door.

Kokoro was already ready, with her hair, makeup, and outfit perfectly prepared.

“You’re still in your pajamas?!” she asked, incredulous.

“Thirty whole minutes are going to be more than enough to change.”

“Have you forgotten all those times we went to other events, or when you went on dates with Gojo?! Getting ready properly takes almost a full hour! Do you think there aren’t going to be any girls there today or something?!”

She was right, but I just didn’t have the motivation after everything that had happened.

“I thought it’d be better to keep expectations low, you know... I just want to do something fun. If I do meet any girls, that’d be great too but...”

“Ugh... Listen! Even if you say that, do you know what will happen if you meet a girl and you look like *that*? She won’t even look at you! What if you find a girl you like even more than Gojo?! You have to put in some effort!”

“I-I guess you’re right, but—”

“No buts! Come with me!” she said, dragging me downstairs by the arm.

“Take a bath! And then get ready!”

“But I already took a bath last night.”

“Didn’t I tell you?! On special occasions, you have to take a bath in the morning too!”

Still unconvinced, I did as she said. As I shampooed my hair, I strangely started feeling slightly better.

She's right. It'd be a waste to go to an event like this and not be prepared, I thought. This helped me find the motivation to do all those things I hadn't had the energy for lately: trimming my eyebrows, plucking my nose hair, cutting my fingernails, and so on. I noticed with disappointment that my hair was getting a bit too long, since I hadn't cut it in a while.

I changed into the only fashionable clothes I owned (which, at least, made it easy to choose my outfit) and carefully blow-dried my hair so that it looked *somewhat* decent.

"Are we running late?!"

"Don't worry!" Kokoro said. "It's better to be a teensy bit late and look one hundred percent perfect! This isn't work, and we haven't promised to meet anyone at a specific time, so it's fine!"

"O-Okay!" I replied, and started setting my hair with wax.

When I was finally ready, I found Kokoro sitting on the couch, doing something on her phone.

"Whew... Sorry to keep you waiting," I said.

My roomie had definitely put in one hundred percent—her makeup was natural-looking, her hairdo was fashionable, and her clothes, which I'd never seen before that day, were the cute kind of outfit that otaku boys liked, which surprised me.

She looked me up and down before giving me her approval.

"Very good. Let's go!"

In order to avoid running into customers, the event was being held in Shinjuku, instead of Akihabara.

Underage employees could attend too, but of course they couldn't drink alcohol. Since the seats weren't assigned ahead of time, we didn't know who would be sitting at the tables next to ours.

“You know the people we’re gonna meet today?” Kokoro said while we rode the train to Shinjuku. “We’re probably never gonna see them again. So, if you find some girl you like, you *have* to go talk to her! And if she seems nice, ask her for her LINE! That’s what I’m gonna do, so make sure you do the same!”

“O-Okay...”

She sounded even more serious than she usually was about this kind of thing, probably because this was her first chance in a while to find a boyfriend.

I should follow her example... Maybe—just maybe—I’ll run into someone I like even better than Mashiro.

“Please tell me your name, age, and the name of the café you work at,” the lady at the reception said. After we’d given her our names, we were free to sit wherever we wanted.

“Let’s see... Oh, there’s Iroha!” Kokoro said, finding her friend.

“Oh, Heart-chan! And Ichi too!” Iroha greeted us.

“Are you two joining us?” Mikoto, who was sitting next to her, asked.

Kokoro and I sat at the same table, facing them.

A waiter approached us and asked what we wanted to drink.

Kokoro, Iroha, and I all asked for soft drinks.

“I’ll take a beer. Why don’t you all drink too? We aren’t working today, come on!” Mikoto said.

“We’re all underage...” I told her.

“Ah! Th-That’s true, right...” she said, looking completely shocked by the reminder.

“Aren’t you two kinda... *different* today?” Iroha asked, eyeing me and Kokoro.

“Huh?”

“*Your* hair and makeup look even better than usual,” she said, pointing at Kokoro, “and *you* set your hair, like, for the first time ever,” she continued, pointing at me.

I took care to look nice on days when I knew that Mashiro would be on the same shift as me, but, since I usually went to the café right after school, my hair tended to get all messed up. On days when Mashiro wasn't working with me, I usually didn't even bother.

"Aren't you both waaay too enthusiastic about being here?" Iroha asked.

Kokoro and I held our breaths.

"Ahaha... What are you talking about? Th-There's nothing different about us," Kokoro lied as best as she could.

"Yeah, it must be your imagination," I said.

"Hmm I get it... You're trying to score today, huh?"

"N-Not at all!" Kokoro nervously rebutted.

"I thought Ichi was into Mashiro though."

She knew that much...?

"N-No. There's no way that's true," I said, trying to remain calm.

"Hmm? Really?"

"Well, our drinks are here, so... bottoms up, huh?" Kokoro swiftly changed the subject.

"Haaah," Mikoto breathed after downing her drink. "The first beer after work really brings me back to life!"

"You *destroyed* that beer. Were you working before coming here?" I asked her.

"Yeah. I have to go to the office on Saturdays too, once every two weeks."

"You have another job?!" Kokoro gawked.

"Oh, didn't I ever tell you?"

We went on chatting over our drinks, and continued as we ate. I realized that this was the first time that the four of us had had a chance to talk and relax together like this. Even though I'd agreed to come to the event to meet girls, I was having a good time just chatting. My last day on the job would be next

week and I was glad I could have a proper conversation with my colleagues before then.

“Another beer, please!”

“You’re really, like, going to drink another one?!” Kokoro asked with wide eyes.

“Aren’t you drinking too much?” I added.

“Oh, leave me be! I’ve worked for six days straight! I *need* this!”

Kokoro sighed. “Having a full-time job is tough, huh...”

“Now that I think of it, our contracts with the café will be up soon,” Mikoto said.

All four of us had all attended the same interview and had the same kind of contract, so we would finish more or less at the same time as one another.

“Shame... It was a pretty cool job,” Iroha said, pouting with disappointment.

So she can act adorable when she wants to....

“It was nice being able to chat with you two and poke fun at Ichi...” she went on.

“Don’t single me out like that!”

Am I your monkey or something?!

“Hahaha, I’m kidding! It’s just funny because you react like that. I don’t really like talking with boys, but I enjoy talking with you,” she said with a small smile.

Hearing Iroha say something so uncharacteristically cute, without a hint of sarcasm in her voice, caught me off guard.

“O-Oh... You’re just poking fun at me again, aren’t you?!” I said.

“No, I’m serious,” she said.

I-Iroha?! You can’t turn sweet at the last second! That’s illegal! I-I guess you do have a cute side after all...

She didn’t like talking with boys, but I was an exception. Hearing that made me happy. Before starting this job, Kokoro had told me that I should try to be

natural and chat with all my colleagues... That was probably why Iroha thought of me this way.

“It was certainly fun while it lasted for me too,” Mikoto said. “I could forget all the stress of my day job when I was at the café. And I’m grateful to you all for being so nice to a woma— to a girl like me.”

The work was hard and seeing Mashiro again would have been awkward, so I was relieved it would be over. On the other hand, I was a little disappointed that I wouldn’t see Kusumi or these two again. Iroha and Mikoto may have been the first girls I’d been able to have a normal conversation with apart from Kokoro.

“I know!” Kokoro said. “Let’s all get each other’s LINE and Twitter details! That way we can keep in touch, and maybe we can meet up again in the future!”

“Right, that’s cool!”

“Yes, that sounds lovely.”

Everyone agreed to her proposal, and we added each other to our contacts. I liked the idea too, since it’d be a lot of fun to meet again once the job was over.

Despite how entertaining our conversation had become, nature called, and I got up to go to the restroom. When I came back, I found someone else in my seat. It was a guy I’d never seen before. Another guy was standing next to the table, and the two were talking to Kokoro, Iroha, and Mikoto.

Judging from how attractive and flashy they looked, they were probably staff from that male-employees-only café that Kokoro had mentioned.

You can’t even leave for one second to go to the toilet! Where am I going to sit now?! And those girls... They look like they’re having fun chatting away over there. They must have forgotten all about me! Ugh! Girls!

I was slightly mad, but Kokoro *had* said that she wanted to meet that café’s employees, and they’d approached our table themselves. It wasn’t really that surprising, since she was an extremely beautiful girl; Iroha and Mikoto weren’t half bad either.

Aren't you lucky? You got what you came here for. But... what am I going to do now? Should I look for someone else I know? But the only other employee I'm familiar with is Kusumi, and I can't see him anywhere...

"Huh...?!"

My thoughts stopped dead as I noticed something very strange on the ground in front of me. A girl wearing a frilly white dress—*this is what they call "lolita fashion," right?*—was crawling around on her hands and knees.



“A-Are you okay?” I asked her, worried that she might be feeling sick.

“Oh, s-sorry... I’m in the way, aren’t I?” she said, staring up at me without getting up.

Her dress looked like a doll’s, and so did her face. She was stunningly cute, with her curled hair divided into twintails and draped over each of her shoulders. Her skin was clear and pale, except for her pink cheeks, and her two big eyes glistened with tears.

Which café does she work at? She’s stunning!

“N-Not at all. Is something the matter?”

“I dropped my phone charm...” she said with a voice so feeble that I feared she might burst out crying at any moment.

“Oh! What does it look like?” I asked.

“It’s a teeny stuffed bunny... It’s pink, and it’s so cute...”

If she was trying so hard to find it, it must have been really important to her—a day shall never come when Kagetora Ichigaya ignores a damsel in distress.

“I’ll help you look for it,” I said, heroically.

“What...?”

“Pink bunny... Pink bunny...”

I crouched down and started looking around the floor for a while, until I eventually found the lost phone charm in front of the women’s restroom.

“Oh, this must be it!” I said, standing up and handing it to her as quickly as possible—also because I didn’t want people to see me crouching down in such a weird place.

“I...! Th-Thank you... s-so much!” she said, unable to contain her joy as she took her stuffed bunny.

“This is my best frie— I mean, my cutest phone charm... So, thank you, really!” she said, looking to be, once again, on the verge of the tears.

“I’m glad we found it then,” I said.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The conversation stopped dead.

I remembered that Kokoro had told me to make sure to talk to girls I liked and to ask for their LINE, or else I might never see them again. I definitely liked this girl. She looked cute and sweet... I wanted to talk to her, but I didn't know what to say. I didn't want her to think of me as some kind of jerk who goes around picking up girls or something.

In any case, it wasn't like I could go back to my table, since my seat had been taken.

I'm going to talk to her! I don't care if things go wrong!

“S-Say, which café do you work at?” I asked her.

“Maid-Tale Café...” she nervously replied, avoiding my eyes.

“O-Oh, that sounds interesting! I'm assuming the outfits are fairy-tale themed?”

“Yes... we have *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and more like those... And we can choose which one to wear from them,” she replied.

“That must be fun! I-I work at Meow'd Maid Café, where they do, like, cat ears...” I said.

I was so intent on keeping the conversation going that I'd told her where I worked even though she hadn't asked. *What if she thinks I'm a narcissist who can never shut up about himself? She looks like the type to get nervous easily, so I should be more careful...*

“I'll come visit,” she said.

“Ah... Excuse me?”

Did she just say she's going to visit the café where I work?

“I want to thank you for today...”

“What?! No, I didn't do anything! You don't need to, really!” I replied.

“But I’m really grateful... and—”

“I-I’m flattered, but actually I’m going to be leaving next week,” I explained. Even if she did visit, she wouldn’t find me there. It’d be much better if we had a way to contact each other; or rather, I wanted a way to contact her. But how could I steer the conversation to a point where it’d be natural to ask her?

“I see...” she said. “I-In that case... w-would it be fine for you to g-give me a way to contact you?”

“Ah, what?! O-Of course! I’d love to!” I said, shocked by the turn of events.

Why would she ask to contact me? Even if it’s just to say thanks, wow... She’s really polite. I can’t believe that a girl that cute would ask for my contact. I mean, after what happened with Mashiro, I’m a bit skeptical, but...

“Would LINE do?” I asked her.

“Y-Yes! And a-also, if it’s not a problem with you... could I have your Twitter handle?”

“Yes! You could!” I said, immediately telling her both.

When I added her on LINE, I saw that her name was set to “Yume”—*dream*—the perfect name for such a dreamy girl.

“Ichigaya... Such a beautiful name...”

“R-Really?! Thanks...”

“I was actually supposed to come with a friend today, but she had to cancel at the last minute, and I felt so alone, since I don’t know anyone... So I’m very happy you came and talked to me,” she said, looking up at me shyly.

I was worried I’d annoyed her, but now she was telling me she was happy about me chatting with her. That was a pleasant surprise.

“Ah, I have to leave now... Thank you so much, I hope I’ll see you again!” she said.

“Oh, me too! See ya around!”

She excused herself with a bow before walking toward the exit.

I managed to get a cute girl’s LINE! And she was actually the one who asked

me first! I didn't feel like coming here, but I'm so glad I did. Thanks, Nishina.

I looked over at my table, and the two men seemed to have left. Relieved, I went back.

"Ichigaya! Where were you? You took your time!" Kokoro asked me as she saw me return.

"That's not my fault! There was someone in my seat," I said. Since I'd scored a girl's LINE because of it, I wasn't even annoyed.

"You were waiting because of *that*?! Ugh! If you'd come back earlier, maybe these two creeps would have left us in peace!"

"Huh? Weren't they from that café with all-male all-handsome staff you talked to me about?"

Didn't she actually, you know... want to talk with those guys?

"Yes!"

"So weren't you happy they came to talk to you?" I asked her.

"I was at first, but they were totally insufferable! They had this annoying, like, womanizer aura, you know? They kept asking questions without any delicacy, and then when I told them, like, 'My friend's coming back from the restroom and he's gonna sit there,' they didn't even listen and one of them parked his ass! And they were sooo stubborn, asking for a way to message us, and... Look! They're going for another group of girls already!"

I looked at the table that Kokoro was pointing to, and the two handsome dudes from earlier were indeed attempting to chat up more girls.

"I went full snark on them, but they just wouldn't take the hint," Iroha said. "Mikoto had to step in and just straight out tell them, 'We don't want to talk with you so please leave.'"

"They were terrible, yes," Mikoto agreed. "No matter how desperate I may be, I'd rather die alone than date someone like that."

"D-Die alone?! Is there no gray area?!" I exclaimed at Mikoto's exaggerated comment.

I was honestly surprised by all three of their reactions. I thought that they would be enthusiastic about being able to talk to two handsome dudes, but, as it turned out, girls didn't like annoying men, no matter how good they looked. I was actually relieved to find out that they weren't having all the fun while I was away.

Shortly after, the event was over.

Kokoro and I split up with Iroha and Mikoto at the station, and we rode our train home together.

"Another event without getting a decent guy's LINE..." she said with a sigh. "It figures, since most of the people there were girls. We both didn't have any luck, huh?"

I pressed my lips together.

"Wh-What's with that grin on your face? You're creeping me out!"

"Tsk-tsk, what made you think I didn't have any luck?" I asked her.

"What?! Do you mean that... Huh?! You got a girl's LINE?! When?!"

"You remember when I went to the toilet? On the way back, I met this girl who was having some trouble looking for something..."

I explained what had happened to Kokoro.

"For real?! Aww, c'mon! That's not fair!" she said, disappointed.

She was the one who really wanted to go to this event, and I ended up getting the most out of it...

"But, hey... aren't you glad you came, after all?" she asked me with a smile. She looked genuinely happy for me.

"Yeah. Thanks for inviting me to come with you."

Kokoro had helped me get back on my feet after the Mashiro incident. She'd scolded her, comforted me, and even convinced me to go to the event with her when I couldn't find the motivation myself. Thanks to Kokoro, I was able to meet another girl. And also thanks to Kokoro, I'd found the courage to talk to

her. I owed my roommate a lot.

“Our job ends next week. So we’ve still got to look for more places like this,” she said.

“Yeah!”

I wanted to help her, just as she had helped me. And that meant looking for new opportunities to meet new people.

When we got home, I unlocked my phone to find two new LINE notifications from two not-so-surprising senders: the first was from Yume, the girl I’d met earlier, and the other was from Elena.

I started by reading Yume’s.

“Thank you very much for today!★ I owe you a lot. I was very happy to be able to meet you ♪”

After the message, she had also sent me a cute sticker. I couldn’t tell whether she was being polite or if she actually liked me.

Since she was the one who asked to exchange contacts, she probably likes me... Or it could just be like Mashiro all over again... I thought, deciding that I’d reply to her later.

I looked at the other message, the one from Elena. Receiving a text from her was a rare occurrence in itself.

“Sorry for the sudden message. I wanted to thank you for the advice you gave me the other day. I reached out to my company to let them know what I think, and they organized a meeting so that we could discuss things further. I don’t know for certain how things are going to go, but I feel that, thanks to your advice, I was able to take a very important first step forward. Thank you.”

She actually talked to her company about the kind of video she really wants to make! I’m so relieved that Emily Saionji’s videos have a chance of going back to normal...

I then replied to both texts, one after the other. To Yume, I simply wrote that I enjoyed our chat as well. To Elena, I wrote a slightly longer message about how

I was happy for her, and to feel free to come talk to me if she ever had anything on her mind.

As for Mashiro, things had gone somewhat sour—or, rather, they were never really sweet to begin with. But, surprisingly enough, here I was texting two other girls. Neither of them was my girlfriend, of course, but I'd have been a fool to complain.

7

My conversation with Yume ended there, but Elena and I kept messaging each other. She told me about how things were going with her videos—as much as she could considering her contract, anyway. She then told me that her meeting with the company was planned for that week, and that she would do her best to tell them everything on her mind so that she had no regrets later.

I hoped things would turn out well for her.

Although I was disappointed that Yume and I didn't keep talking, I decided to try to text her again soon.

Of course, we'd also followed each other on Twitter, too, but I actually hadn't even looked at it since I'd found out Mashiro had misled me like that—I didn't want to be reminded of her. She was always tweeting, so I'd have only ended up seeing her posts on my timeline, but I also didn't feel like blocking her.

Quitting Twitter altogether because of a girl would be overkill though...

I wanted to see what kinds of things interested Yume, and replying to one of her tweets was much less stressful than messaging her privately on LINE. So, while rolling around on my bed, I decided to load the Twitter app on my phone.

Before I went to check out Yume's profile, I scrolled a way through my timeline out of curiosity. Sure, I know—I was looking for Mashiro's tweets, knowing full well that I would only regret it. She was probably still fishing for attention from her army of followers.

"Huh?"

Yet I couldn't find any new tweets from her.

Did she block me? I thought, suddenly scared, and I checked my follow lists. Her name was still there, and she was still following me. That meant that she hadn't blocked me, but for some reason she'd stopped tweeting. I had to be sure, so I checked her profile.

She hadn't tweeted at all since our falling out in front of the café. Before then, she would usually tweet several times a day, even just to write "good morning" for the dozens of replies from (probably male) followers. But now... nothing.

A few (probably male) people had even tagged her in tweets, asking why she wasn't tweeting recently, if she was sick, and things like that.

What happened to her? Is she really sick or something?

I was so curious that all my thoughts were consumed by Mashiro. I even forgot about messaging Yume...

It was now my final day at the café.

"This job's over next week, huh," Kusumi said while I was doing some dishes.

"Oh, actually... this is my last day," I said.

"What?! Really?! It's our last time working together?!" he exclaimed before returning to his dismal state. "You know... I actually started working here so I could try to get a date with one of the maids..."

"D-Did you now?"

That's not something you want to say out loud while on your shift, I thought, conveniently forgetting my own motivation. At least there weren't any customers sitting at the counter.

"In the end, I didn't get to date any of them, and things didn't work out at all with the one I actually liked. But, you know, I'm happy that I was able to make a great new friend!" he said.

How he could say something like that directly to my face, I don't know. It was kind of embarrassing; to the point where I was at a loss how to respond at first. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but feel happy about it. I was grateful to have had someone like Kusumi working with me.

"We should meet up sometime, after all this!" he told me.

"Oh... I guess you're right!"

When his shift ended, we said our farewells and I was left alone in the

kitchen. Mashiro was on the same shift tonight, and I couldn't help but be hyper-aware of her presence. While I was wiping a glass clean, I saw her talking with a customer. Much to my surprise, she didn't look sick in any way.

But why's she staying so quiet on Twitter if she isn't sick?

"I'll have an omurice and an iced coffee."

"Yes, master..."

She was taking her orders as usual. Of course, as she was working, she had to keep that bright smile on at all times, which made it look like she was okay, but unless I was just being too imaginative, she did seem to be lacking some of her usual pep.

"You've gotten used to the kitchen, huh? It's been, what, a month since you started?" Sasaki, who'd taken his usual seat at the counter, asked me.

"Yeah, more or less... But this is my last day, actually," I replied.

"What?! You're quitting? But you've only just started."

"I know, but it was a month contract..."

"Awww! Seeing you slowly getting the hang of the job was one of the things I always looked forward to..."

"R-Really? Haha... Thank you."

During my break, I sat down to get some rest. I was definitely the only one in the break room this time, so I could let my mind wander without worrying about overhearing any more terrible things.

I still haven't told Mashiro that it's my last day...

Despite the way she'd made me feel, I was sad that we'd never see each other again. It was also unfortunate that we had to part on such bad terms.

Oh well. I'll just concentrate on finding love elsewhere. I'm sure that'll make me forget about her eventually, I thought, feeling kind of emotional.

"So, say, you got a boyfriend, didn't ya?" I heard an unfamiliar voice say from the dining hall. Since the break room was only separated from the kitchen by a

curtain, you could hear most of the conversations going on in the café.

“No, really, I haven’t.”

That voice... Mashiro is in the kitchen.

“You aren’t tweeting anything except for your shifts, and you don’t reply to me at all anymore!”

“I think I have mentioned this before, but it’s a café rule that we can only reply once per customer on each thread...” Mashiro said, clearly annoyed by the way the customer was speaking to her.

“Sure, I get that, but I actually checked out your main account, and you aren’t tweeting anything there either. So you have a boyfriend. There was a guy you were sending off replies to a while back. Is he the lucky one?”

“Y-You know my main account?!”

Mashiro had both a personal Twitter account and one that she used as a maid to post her shifts at the café, but lately she hadn’t been using either of them very much.

“Yeah, it wasn’t that hard to find. I’m following you there too.”

This guy stalked her online and found her main account... Is this okay? He sounds pretty creepy...

“What was his handle? *Shadow* something, right? I saw you comment on his tweets a couple of times. Is he your boyfriend?”

And he’s talking about me now?! It’s true that Mashiro used her main account to reply to my tweets sometimes but...

“Th-That’s not the case...”

“Hmm, really now? And anyway, the café rules don’t apply to your main account, do they? So if I comment on your tweets there you can reply to me as much as possible!”

Ugh. This guy is starting to sound dangerous...

Since Kusumi had already left, I was the only male staff member on shift.

What does it even matter? It’s my last day here anyway. I mustered all my

courage and walked back into the kitchen.

Mashiro looked at me, surprised.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said to the customer at the counter, “could you please refrain from asking personal questions to the staff?”

“H-Huh? I’m not doing that!” the customer nervously replied. He was a youngish, scrawny man.

“You purposely went looking for a maid’s private Twitter account and asked her to reply to you more than the café’s rules allow. You’re clearly bothering her,” I said.

“What?! What’s bothersome about that?!”

Mashiro stared at me silently. She must have been confused.

“In any case... I’ll have to report this to the store manager,” I said.

“Ah...?! J-Jeez! I’ve had enough! Bring me the check already!” the customer replied, frustrated, as he quickly took his wallet out of his bag. Mashiro immediately gave him his check.

After making sure that the customer had paid and left the café, I went back to the break room.

The curtain moved, and Mashiro’s head poked through it.

“Thank you...” she said without looking at me.

“Y-You’re welcome...”

I thought that maybe I’d been a bit too heavy-handed with that customer. Of course, I didn’t want him to treat Mashiro even worse because of me. For the time being, the best thing to do would be to tell the manager about it, so that he could ban him from the café.

After remaining silent for a while, Mashiro closed the curtain and went back to work.

After my break, I worked for my last two hours at the café. Then I changed and took out my phone to kill some time. My bad luck meant that today, of all

days, Mashiro's shift ended at the same time as mine. In order to avoid any awkwardness, I decided to wait a few minutes so that she would leave before me and we wouldn't run into each other.

When I heard the sound of the door of the girls' changing room opening and closing, I knew that she was done changing. I came out of the boys' changing room and found the manager in the break room.

"Oh, hello..." I said. "This is my last day, so... It's been a pleasure."

"For me too. Good work. Make sure to pass by next month to collect your salary," he replied robotically.

"Of course. And, er... There was a problematic customer today, and I think it would be better to ban him from the café altogether. He found private information about one of the maids, like her private Twitter account, and he even asked her to break the café's rules regarding online replies to customers. For the customer's name you should ask Mashi... Gojo."

"Huh? Really? I'll ask her then. Thanks."

Now I've done what I had to.

Thinking melancholically about how I was never going to come to this café again, I opened the door and walked up the stairs. I was surprised to find Mashiro standing outside the entrance.

"I-It's been a pleasure..."

"M-Mashiro? What's...?"

"This was your last day at the café, right? I just wanted to talk one last time."

"B-But it's forbidden for maids to be seen with male staff outside the shop..."

She wants to talk with me? Why now?

"You aren't a member of staff anymore," she said.

She looked and sounded nothing like she had so far. Her pitch was lower, her speech was slower, and her face was calm and unsmiling. This was probably the real Mashiro.

"I-I guess so. I don't mind either way..." I replied.

Since I didn't work for the café anymore, I didn't have to worry about the rules. She was the only one who would be taking a risk, so, if it was her choice, I had no reason to argue.

"I'm really grateful for what you did for me earlier in the kitchen," she said.

"Don't worry about it... Oh, and I told the manager that they should ban that customer, so when you have the time, you should go and tell him what his name was."

"Really? Thank you!" she said, and then the conversation stopped. We awkwardly looked at each other in silence.

What did she even want to talk about? I can't stand this silence, I thought, and decided to break it myself.

"You aren't using Twitter at all lately. You used to tweet every day."

"Oh... I've quit Twitter," she replied.

"Huh?!"

"After you quit, your account stays up for a month."

"But why would you quit?!"

"Because it's pointless... What's even the point in having so many people like you...?" she said, emotionless.

"What?"

"I was stupid," she said, as if each word coming from her mouth was causing her pain. "Even if everyone's giving you compliments and falling in love with you... So what? What's the point if the one you really care about doesn't like you? Or worse, if you end up making him hate you?"

She took her gaze off of me and smiled bitterly. Her eyes seemed to be glistening.

W-Wait... "The one you really care about?" Would that be... me? No, no way. It has to be another lie.

"Aren't you just saying that so that I'll start liking you again? So that you can use me?" I asked. I didn't choose my words with any care because I feared that

if I showed even a hint of delicacy, Mashiro could take it as a chance to fool me again.

“Wh-What are you talking about?!” she said. Her voice grew louder. “Who would go through so much trouble just to use someone?! Who would do all that for someone that they didn’t care about?!”



Her eyes, now full of tears, were piercing straight into mine. No matter how much I distrusted her, I couldn't bring myself to believe that she was faking this.

"But you were the one who talked about greasing wheels and stuff..." I said.

I honestly didn't know what was what anymore. *Was she lying then or is she lying now?*

"You heard me talk in the changing room, and you found out the truth about me," she said, reminding me of what had happened a few days earlier.

I had found out that the girl I'd believed to be an angel could speak as harshly as Iroha, and that she was a die-hard otaku when it came to male voice actors. However, our conversation after that had shocked me so much that I'd almost forgotten about what I heard her say inside.

"When I saw your reaction to finding out about my real hobbies, I thought you were done with me. I was so frustrated I said all those things..."

What...?

"My hobbies, my personality... I know that they drive boys away. So I knew that the second you learned about them you'd want nothing to do with me anymore..."

"What?! So the thing about just wanting to gain another person who liked you... Was that a lie?"

"Would I go through all this trouble if that was the only reason?! Maybe I'd pretend to be friendly just to be polite if I ran into you, sure, but would I keep messaging you? Would I bake you a cupcake? Of course not!" she cried, blushing so hard that even her ears were red.

Wait a second. So she, uhm, actually liked me, at least a little bit? Is this what she's trying to say here?

"I-If that was true, then... what other reason could you possibly have?" I asked.

"When we first met... I thought you kinda were my type. And it looked like you liked me as well, so of course that made me happy. So I figured it'd be cool to try and go on a date..." she explained, getting even redder.

Kinda her type? She really thought that about me?!

“And when we went on a date, you were kinder and more considerate than I’d expected from someone who’s obviously never had a girlfriend. I thought that maybe *I* could become your girlfriend, but...”

Did she just use the g-word?! And she even thought of becoming my girlfriend without asking whether I wanted to or not. Is she serious?!

“...even though you’re older than me I was the one who had to ask for your contact and invite you on those dates! And then you went home early! I was furious! And you never tried to make a single move! Not one! But the worst part was after all the effort I put into hiding it, you found out that I’m a voice actor otaku... I wanted to disappear...” she said, basically crying, hardly stopping to breathe until she was done.

“A-Are you serious?”

So she actually liked me from the start? This is unbelievable, but she said it herself, didn’t she? But why?! I’m as popular with girls as a cockroach, and the last time someone called me handsome I was in kindergarten.

I thought back to when Mashiro and I first met. On that day, I’d done my best to look as good as possible, achieving—if I may say so myself—quite a decent result. This, of course, was all Kokoro’s doing. She’d taught me how to style my hair, how to choose my clothes, and how to tidy myself up properly. The unbelievable result was a girl as cute as Mashiro thinking that I was “kinda her type.”

Of course, I was still having trouble believing what she was saying. I was half ecstatic, half shocked.

“I don’t care if you like male voice actors! Who am I to judge people for their hobbies? I spend most of my time playing gacha games and watching anime!” I told her, letting the words flow out without thinking about it. “Why did you hide it?”

She could have just saved herself the hassle and been honest from the start...

“Back when I was in middle school, I used to talk about it all the time... but the boys would bully me for it,” she said.

Mashiro, the mayor of Attractive Town, being bullied by boys?!

“And you’re shocked too, aren’t you...?” she asked sadly.

“More than anything, I was shocked by the fact that you hid your real personality from me. I just wished you’d been honest to begin with, and told me about what you really like. Male voice actors aren’t that weird of a hobby,” I replied.

“R-Really—?”

I didn’t get a chance to reply. I’d noticed the owner walking along the road in our direction.

“Ah! Over there!” I said. I didn’t have any reason to fear him, but Mashiro could be penalized for breaking the café’s rules.

It’s better if he doesn’t see us talking to each other right in front of the shop...

“I’m going to get a move on so you don’t get in trouble!” I said, and she stood there, dumbfounded, staring after me.

I caught the train alone, but made sure to send Mashiro a message.

“Thank you for being honest with me. If you want to, I’d like to talk things over sometime.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt, or how I was supposed to feel. I wasn’t infatuated with Mashiro like at the start, nor was I completely hurt like a few days ago.

She’d revealed her true colors, but that also meant that she wasn’t my ideal girlfriend. That being said, seeing her cry while telling me that she liked me had warmed my heart somewhat. I wanted to learn more about Mashiro—the true Mashiro. I wanted to become friends with this girl that I barely knew.

She, however, didn’t read my message for some time.

“I’m back.”

“Oh, hey,” Kokoro greeted me from the kitchen.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Ginger pork and miso soup.”

“Oh! Sounds yummy!”

“Hmm? Is it just me or are you in high spirits today?” she asked.

“N-Not really...”

“You’re grinning to yourself. Creeepy...” she said, but her harsh words didn’t bother me at all.

Just as I decided that I’d tell Kokoro about what had happened with Mashiro over dinner, my phone started to ring.

Speak of the devil? I thought, hurriedly checking my phone.

It wasn’t who I’d expected. It was Elena, calling me through LINE. Nervous and confused, since we’d never called each other before, I ran to my room.

“H-Hello?” I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking. I could count the number of phone calls I’d had with girls on one hand.

Why’d she call me out of the blue? Is she okay...?

“Hello. I’m sorry for calling you all of a sudden... Do you have time to talk?” Elena’s voice reached me through the phone.

“Oh, yeah! I do!”

“Wonderful. Well, today I had that meeting with my company, the one about my future videos. Since you were the one to give me advice and motivate me, I wanted to tell you about it like this rather than in a text. I-Is that a problem?”

“Not at all! I didn’t know you had that meeting already! I absolutely want to know how it went!”

“Th-Thank you! I managed to tell them about all the issues I have with the recent policy. And they said that in the future, I won’t have to do videos that I’m uncomfortable with, especially the kinds that fans dislike so much. I’ll have to keep putting in the effort to find new subscribers, but I’ll also be able to do what I’ve always done and loved: talking about my hobbies, playing the games I like, and so on.”

“Really?! That’s awesome! The meeting went great then!”

“I think they listened to my opinion because I found the courage to tell them

directly... and I found that courage thanks to you.”

“Huh?”

“You listened to my troubles and offered me such kind words, which gave me the confidence to talk to them. Thank you so much.”

“I-I haven’t really done anything, but I’m glad things turned out well!”

“I’m glad too!”

As someone who was rooting for both Elena and Emily Saionji, this was fantastic news. The fact that she was relying on me so much, and that she was even calling me to tell me about how it went, just made it even better.

“I-Ichigaya...”

“Yeah?”

“I have never had a boyfriend before, and I’ve never had any close male friends, so... Thank you for being so kind to me. I called you without thinking too much about it, but... you mentioned that you were looking for a girlfriend, did you not? Did you find one? If you did, then I shouldn’t have called you... I’m sorry...”

“Oh, don’t worry, I still haven’t found one—”

“R-Really...?!” she said, sounding mysteriously happy.

She must be happy because I’m still single! That means... No, no, I’m being way too optimistic. She was just glad that it wasn’t a problem to call me, that must be it.

“I-In that case, when I am in need of advice, I’d like to continue coming to you. If that doesn’t bother you, of course...”

“It doesn’t bother me at all! I’d be happy to help!”

“Really? That’s a huge re—”

Knock knock.

“Ichigaya! I’ve been calling you from downstairs! Can’t you hear?”

Oh, damn! Did Minami hear her?!

“I’m coming in!” Kokoro said, opening the door without waiting for a response. “Oh, there you are! Why didn’t you answer me?”

“Wait, no, you—” I couldn’t even manage a complete sentence.

“I said dinner’s ready! It’s gonna get cold! Oh, wait... You were on the phone?”

“Th-That voice...” Elena said, shocked. “Is that... Nishina? Do you two... live together?”

“Huh? The voice on the phone... Is that Minami?” Kokoro asked, just as shocked.

I was at my wit’s end. The phone call was still going, but I got a message notification and looked at the screen to read it.

“I’m coming back to Japan by myself next month.”

“What?”

The text was from Kisaki, who I hadn’t heard from in a while. Kisaki, as in, my younger sister. I was completely paralyzed with confusion.

She’s coming back? By herself? How come?! I didn’t know that would happen! Nishina’s living in her room...!

“What’s going on here, Ichigaya?!”

“H-Hello? Ichigaya...? Are you still there?”

Kokoro was in my room. Elena had overheard her through the phone. Kisaki had just told me she would be coming back to Japan. I just stood there, dumbfounded, with absolutely no idea how I was going to get out of this one.

Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm Rin Murakami. It's been a while.

Thank you so much for reading the second volume of *Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend*! I started writing this series last year and it's thanks to you, the readers, that I've been able to continue up to this point. I hope you liked the main theme of this volume: meeting new people in the workplace.

Since I became a full-time writer, my sleep schedule has become so bad that I now sleep during the day and work at night. I sometimes try to fix that by waking up earlier, but then I end up writing until late and I go back to square one. It's a vicious cycle...

Since sleeping correctly isn't an option, I try to take care of myself by exercising—jogging and cycling—but it's painful to admit that the years have taken their toll on my body.

When writing this volume, as I wanted the characters to look for romance by starting a job, I had to find a good option for otaku to meet each other. I have a couple of friends who have worked in themed cafés, so I asked them a ton of questions to get ideas. Kagetora and Kokoro ended up working in a maid café. I also chose that, and was (hopefully) able to write about it in an interesting way, because I personally love going to all kinds of themed cafés.

There are so many weird cafés in Japan. There are ones where you can play board games with the maids, ones which have stage performances, ones that make fine cuisine, ones where you can roleplay with the maids, and so on. There's even one, which I haven't visited myself, where the maids dress and act like little girls. I'm told that, despite how that sounds, it's a normal, wholesome place. The café in the story, however, with the waitresses dressed as maids with cat ears, is a relatively standard one.

In order to get more material for the book, I even visited what is probably the single most popular maid café in Japan, and I was shocked to see just how pretty all of the maids were. As it turned out, though, they weren't all otaku. I

still believe that one of the best things about maid cafés is that you can revel in your otakuness without needing to hide your power level.

Other ideas I considered for the protagonists' jobs were working in an anime store, selling doujinshi, and debugging games. I know people who have done these things, but they all sound exhausting...

Another possible job, which I've actually experienced myself, would have been working in an internet café. The coolest benefit was being able to read manga when there was nothing else to do. I've also tried attending events to help manga circles sell their doujinshi, although I'm not sure that counts as a proper job. That was a lot of fun too, and it made for a good experience.

As for the romance part, back when I was in school, I used to hear a lot about how the people around me had found their boyfriend or girlfriend at their part-time job, be it at a fast food joint, at a pizzeria, as a cram school instructor, at a family restaurant, or so on. Incidentally, most of those who found love at work did so at Mister Donut, for some reason.

Most of my part-time jobs were things like cleaning, posting pamphlets, or working in factories and warehouses, which meant that I never had any luck meeting anyone there.

When it comes to otaku romance specifically, I think that most otaku become couples at events and offline meetups, or even by using dating apps, like the ones in the first volume. Everyone who attends that kind of event is an otaku to begin with, and with the apps you can filter out people to find those that have the same interests as you. Just like in the book, dating apps really do have lots of otaku communities centered around particular anime or games.

Nowadays, with all the different kinds of dating apps on the market, there are some that allow you to filter people based on their ideas or their personality, match with people who walk past you on the street, choose partners only based on appearance, look for people who live near you, *etc.* Some of them even let you register with your social network profiles, giving you the option to never match with your friends on those sites.

I actually tried using one myself for a while, but I lost interest quickly. Several of my friends have found partners through dating apps, though, so I think that

they're a good tool. Also, recently, there have been a lot more matchmaking parties aimed at otaku, so that should give people who are in the same position as Kagetora and Kokoro more options.

I love using real stories as inspiration for the things that happen to my characters, so I hope that if you are looking for a boyfriend or girlfriend, reading this series could be of some use to you.

Since the second volume is mostly set in a maid café, Mako Tatekawa is drawing Kokoro in a maid outfit for the cover! I've only seen the rough sketch, but it's so cute that it almost gave me a heart attack...

There are also several new characters appearing for the first time: Iroha, Mikoto, Kusumi, and Yume. Did you like them? I looked at the character design illustrations from Mako Tatekawa, and they look exactly like I'd pictured them, if not even better. Iroha and Yume are adorable, Mikoto is cool and beautiful, and Kusumi is handsome! Thank you so much, Mako Tatekawa!

I also want to thank my editor, who even helped me with promoting the book online. I'm very grateful for that.

In the third volume, I hope to write about Kagetora's first cosplay, how he looks for romance by doing so, and how he grows closer to the various girls.

I hope to see you there!

Rin Murakami

WE STARTED
A PART-TIME JOB
WITH ONE GOAL IN
MIND: FINDING THE
PERFECT OTAKU
DATE.



GUIDE
TO THE
PERFECT
OTAKU
GIRLFRIEND
ROOMIES
AND
ROMANCE

2



“YAY!
WORKING
WITH
ICHIGAYA
WOULD
BE THE
BESTEST
THING
EVER!”

KOKORO NISHINA

A gyaru and secret otaku who lives with Kagetora while in search of her ideal boyfriend. Kokoro recently became a maid in order to meet more boys.

Kagetora's friend and classmate. Ai leans into his natural cuteness by cosplaying female characters.



Kagetora and Kokoro's younger schoolmate, Elena secretly works as a voice actress and voices VTuber "Emily Salonji."



A bubbly girl working at the Meow'd Maid Café. Mashiro loves anime and games filled with cute girls, and Kagetora is head over heels for her, but...



A mischievous gyaru who started working at the Meow'd Maid Café at the same time as Kagetora. Iroha never loses an opportunity to tease him.

An office worker who started working at the Meow'd Maid Café because she wanted to wear a cute, frilly dress.

Yume

An introverted girl who works at the fairy-tale themed Maid-Tale Café. Yume meets Kagetora at a work-related event.

"I WAS
VERY HAPPY
TO BE ABLE
TO MEET
YOU."

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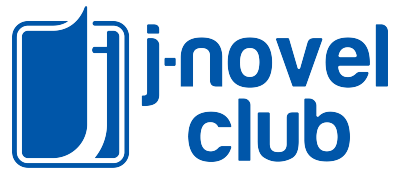
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Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend: Roomies and Romance Volume 2

by Rin Murakami

Translated by Marco Godano Edited by Stephanie Buck

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