Author
Rin Murakami

Illustrator
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GUIDE TO THE PERFECT OTAKU GIRLFRIEND

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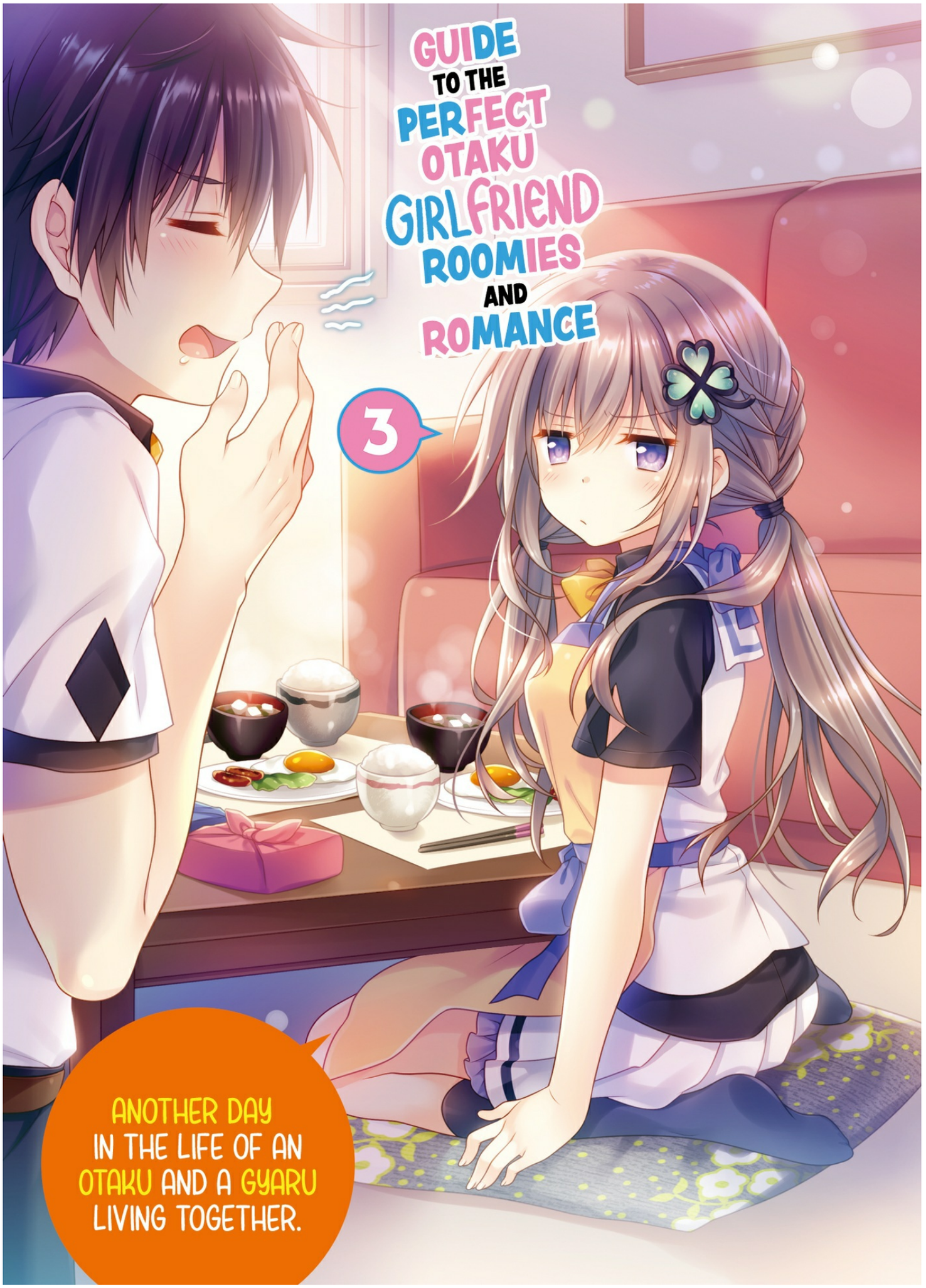
GUIDE
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ANOTHER DAY
IN THE LIFE OF AN
OTAKU AND A GYARU
LIVING TOGETHER.

CHARACTER

ROOMIES

KAGETORA ICHIGAYA

An unapologetic otaku who lives with Kokoro while in search of his ideal girlfriend. Lately Kagetora has been learning about cosplayers.

KOKORO NISHINA

A gyaru and secret otaku who lives with Kagetora while in search of her ideal boyfriend. Kokoro recently made up her mind to cosplay at a big event.

ELENA MINAMI-WILLIAMS

Kagetora and Kokoro's younger schoolmate. Elena secretly works as a voice actress and voices VTuber "Emily Saionji."

MASHIRO GOJO

An otaku girl working at the Meow'd Maid Café. Mashiro told Kagetora how she really feels, but...

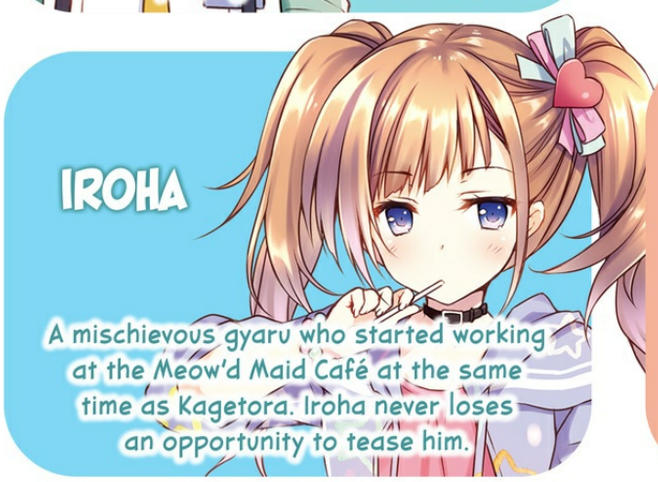
TAKESHI AISAKI

Kagetora's friend and classmate. Ai leans into his natural cuteness by cosplaying female characters.

YUME

An introverted girl who works at the fairy-tale themed Maid-Tale Café. Yume met Kagetora at a work-related event.

IROHA



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.

MIKOTO

An office worker, seemingly single, who started working at the Meow'd Maid Café because she wanted to wear a cute, frilly dress.

two_heart
two_heart
At the pool with Minami and Ichigaya! Had lots of fun! ♡
#NightPool #BikiniTime
#Summer #FirstTime

"YOU'RE ALWAYS THERE FOR ME WHEN I NEED HELP..."
Elen
Minami
Williams

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1

“Th-That voice... Is that... Nishina? Do you two... live together?”

I was too shocked to reply to Elena’s question.

That day, after getting home from work, I’d received a phone call from Elena, who wanted to tell me how her VTuber work was coming along. Lately, she’d been worrying about her management steering her in a direction she was uncomfortable with, but she’d managed to improve things by bringing it up with her company. I was happy for her, and even more so because she’d taken the time to tell me. But no happiness lasts forever.

“Ichigaya! I’ve been calling you from downstairs! Can’t you hear?”

Kokoro barged right into my room, loudly summoning me for dinner—so loudly, in fact, that Elena heard her. *Minami... She knows we’re living together...*

I was already speechless, but when it rains, it pours. Right on cue, I received a text message from none other than my little sister.

“Kisaki: I’m coming back to Japan by myself next month.”

I stood there, completely dumbfounded.

“Huh? That voice on the phone... Is that Minami?!”

The color drained instantly from Kokoro’s face as she was hit with that same realization.

My roommate had even more reason to worry than I did: if a reasonable adult found out that we were living together—excluding her parents, of course, who were *somehow* totally supportive of this—she’d be in serious trouble. She’d told them that she was in love with me so that she wouldn’t have to leave Japan and her beloved otaku culture behind, which was completely reasonable when you think about it. But she’d also lied to them about my own parents being okay with it. So, if anyone told them the truth, her mom and dad would most likely

be mad at her and force her to follow them overseas.

Possibly motivated by this fear, Kokoro's brows knitted together as she thought silently for a moment.

"Jeez, Ichigaya! Y-You'd better hurry up and find a girlfriend to cook for you if you're gonna be so ungrateful! I'm not your slave just because we live next to each other!" She spoke nervously, taking care to be *just* loud enough for Elena to hear.

Huh? I thought for a second, but I quickly understood what she was up to. She was pretending that we didn't live together, and that she just came to my home to cook me dinner. *There's no way Minami will fall for this!*

"Oh...? Nishina comes over to cook you dinner?" Elena asked, surprised.

"Yes! She does do that sometimes!" I said, quickly agreeing with Kokoro's story. As contrived as the lie sounded, going with it was the only way we were going to get out of this.

"So... Nishina is in your house? Right now?" Elena asked again.

That does sound like the two of us are dating... But that's still better than her finding out that we live together! It's not like I have any other option.

"Y-Yeah... You see, I live by myself, so she helps me out. It's not like we're dating though!" I said, hoping that she'd swallow it.

"I-I see... You must be very close friends," she replied. She sounded like she believed me, but I wasn't so sure. After all, it was weird for a girl to cook for a guy that wasn't her boyfriend.

"H-Hello? Minami?" Kokoro, unable to contain herself, took the phone from my hands and started addressing Elena directly. "We really aren't dating! I just cook for him, because... As a thank you, that is!"

A thank you? For what? I thought.

"A thank you? To Ichigaya?"

"Yes! You see, he's got a lot of games, you know, and I'm like, hiding that I'm an otaku, right? So he lets me play games at his house!" Kokoro explained.

Isn't that going to make her even more suspicious? I guess it's partially true though, since we played that *game together. Though I'd rather forget about that...*

"Oh, games..." I heard Elena say through the phone, as if finally understanding.

"Yep! He has yuri games! You like yuri, don't you? He even has, like, *Yuri Kiss*, and it's super cute. You should check it o—"

"*Really*?! Ichigaya has *Yuri Kiss*?!" Elena asked, practically screeching into the phone. Kokoro shivered a little bit.

Yuri Kiss was my first yuri game—I'd been able to buy it without any problem since it didn't have any R-rated scenes. It was so popular with yuri fans that I knew Elena would like it, and her reaction seemed even more positive than I could have expected.

Kokoro, on the other hand, had probably just mentioned a random game title that she'd seen on my shelf. She gave me my phone back, probably thinking that I'd be better suited to continue this conversion.

"Uh, I, er... Yeah! I do have it!"

"I've always wanted to play it, but my computer's in the living room, and my family would find out..." Elena said.

"I-I see..."

I'm not sure I can see where this is going...

"E-Excuse me for being so forward," Elena said with a shaky voice, "but, if it isn't a problem... could I come to your house to play it sometime? I'll pay back the favor of course!"

"Huh?!"

Minami? Come to my home?! Does she want to play this game so much that she's willing to go to the house of a boy who lives by himself?!

Whatever the case, the fact that Kokoro and I lived together was a secret to be protected at all costs. I couldn't have Elena visit and run into her. Even if Kokoro went out while Elena was here, she was bound to find out the truth.

My roommate, who had probably heard Elena's request on the phone, also knew this was a bad idea. I could tell by her frantic head-shaking.

"W-Well..." I said, unable to find the words to deny a cute younger girl who'd asked to come to play in my home.

"I-I'm sorry!" she said while I still hadn't managed to reply. "I know I'm not as close a friend to you as Nishina is. I shouldn't have asked for something like that!"

"Not at all! You can come when you have the time!" I said.

I, er... What did I just say?!

Kokoro's eyebrows almost jumped off her forehead.

"R-Really?! Thank you so much! That makes me so happy!" Elena said enthusiastically. She sounded so overjoyed that there was no way I could take my offer back now.

"Y-Yeah..."

"I'll look at my schedule and let you know when I'm free, so please do tell me which day would be convenient for you! And thank you again!" she said.

I only managed a couple of half-hearted *uh-huhs*, and then our conversation ended.

"Wha... What the hell did you just do?! Why'd you tell her she could come?!" Kokoro yelled the very second I'd hung up the phone.

"What was I supposed to do?! I couldn't tell her no! And this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't started yapping about my yuri games!"

"Are you trying to say that this is my fault?! I was just trying to find a better excuse! It's too weird that I'd come to your house to cook if we're not dating!"

"Hah... A-Anyway, we need to find a way to hide this," I said, realizing that it was too late to discuss whose fault it was.

"And how do you suggest we do that, genius?!"

"You need to leave the house before she comes over, and we'll also need to hide your stuff from the living room, the bathroom, and anywhere else she'd

see. Your room's easy enough since I can just tell her that it's my sister's."

"*All* of my stuff? Do you have any idea how much of it there is?"

Kokoro, who wasn't exactly the tidiest person in the world, had spread her possessions all throughout the house.

"Let's think of it as a good opportunity to clean up."

"*Ugh*... Fine! But you're helping too, got it?!"

"Yeah..."

Why's she bossing me around like that? Anyway, as long as her stuff isn't all over the place, I only need to keep Minami out of her room.

I was scared about our secret being found out, but I was more scared of the simple fact that Elena was going to come to my house. While it was understandable that she really wanted to play *Yuri Kiss*, going by herself to a boy's home seemed a bit... much. Of course I was nervous—a beautiful girl, the soul of Emily Saionji, was going to be alone with me in my house.

Speaking of being nervous, there was another huge problem that I hadn't even mentioned yet. I pulled out my phone and stared down at my sister's message.

"Nishina... Next month we might need to do some *heavier* cleanup..."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I got this text and, erm... My sister is coming back to Japan."

"Are you *kidding* me?!"

"For now, I'll try to ask her for more details..."

Although Elena was going to visit first, Kisaki was probably the one that I had to be more concerned about. If she was just going to be here on vacation for a few days, then we could come up with a solution to temporarily hide Kokoro. However, if she was coming back for good, we'd have to find another place for Kokoro to live. As the one that had proposed to her parents that she could live with me, I couldn't stand having to call that off after just a few months. Of course, back when I'd let my stupid mouth run wild in front of the Nishina

family, I hadn't imagined that Kisaki would actually come back.

What am I going to say to Nishina's dad?!

"I-Is she coming back, like, temporarily? Or..." Kokoro asked me, obviously worrying about the same thing.

"I'm going to ask her," I said. I was trying to keep my cool, but my hands were shaking as I typed my message. Kisaki was a few years younger than I was—in her third year of middle school—and, truth be told, we weren't on particularly good terms.

"What do you mean 'coming back'? Are you gonna move here? And next month when?"

She immediately replied.

"I'm coming for summer vacation. Still haven't decided when exactly or if I'll stay after vacation is over."

"Sh-She said she still hasn't decided yet."

"For real?! What if she stays? What am I going to do?!" Kokoro exclaimed, her face pale.

"I'll tell her to make up her mind and tell me as soon as possible."

"Please decide and then let me know. I have to fix my schedule," I wrote to Kisaki.

"What do I care about your schedule? It's also my house, you know," she replied.

"Ack..."

I felt the blood rise to my head in anger.

And to think she used to be so innocent. Then she started middle school, and she started avoiding me like the plague... It must be what popularity does to a girl. Now she can't even stand to be around her unpopular otaku brother, though she's never really looked up to me as a brother anyway. Why couldn't I have one of those cute little sisters like they have in anime?

"I can only keep asking her until she answers me. For the time being, we need

to find a solution in case she decides that she wants to stay. And even if she doesn't, we have to put all your stuff somewhere so that her room goes back to how you found it when you moved in," I said to Kokoro.

She stared at me in shock. No wonder—Kokoro had brought tons of figures, costumes, doujinshi, clothes, magazines... Moving all of them out seemed like an impossible feat.

"You're going to help, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I said. I couldn't bring myself to tell her no.

"But I still don't know what I'll do if your sister moves here. Maybe I should find another part-time job and start saving up money to live by myself... Is that even possible? Can I save so much money in so little time?" She sighed in frustration.

Since convincing Kisaki to let Kokoro stay with us was out of the question, the most realistic option was for Kokoro to pack up and follow her parents overseas, but she would have died rather than do that.

All I could do was to try and steer Kisaki toward going back to live in India with our parents, but I also knew that she wasn't the type to listen to other people's opinions, much less mine.

Since Kisaki hadn't told me what she planned to do, it made more sense to first focus on the Elena problem. She was much more receptive to making plans with me and we decided that she'd come here on Sunday. On Saturday, Kokoro and I would work together to remove all of her stuff from the living room, bathroom, and entryway.

Today had been one hell of a rollercoaster. I'd found out about Mashiro's true feelings for me, Elena had almost realized that Kokoro and I lived together, and to top it all off Kisaki was coming back to Japan. It was way too much to think about at once, so I decided to focus on the most urgent issue: Elena.

Before going to bed, I checked Twitter to see if Mashiro had replied to my message. She hadn't.

2

The next day, during lunch break, I was scrolling through my phone to see if I could find some kind of rental storage space. If Kisaki decided that she was just going to come for summer vacation and then leave, we'd have to temporarily hide Kokoro's stuff, but there was no way all of that was going to fit inside my room. Unfortunately, rental storage was quite expensive.

Will she be able to afford it? I might have to help her out with the money...

"Rental storage spaces? Do you have so much otaku junk in that room of yours that you don't know where to put it anymore?"

"Wha—?!" I yelped with surprise.

The voice belonged to none other than my classmate, Ai, who had just come back from the restroom.

"N-No, that's not i—"

"Come on, chill. I know how hard it is. My closet is so full of costumes that I need to regularly sell off the older ones," he said.

"You have *that* many costumes?" I asked him.

It was then that I noticed a familiar face walking past us. It was Kokoro, accompanied by some of her friends. Our eyes met. She then said something to the girls and walked toward us.

"Ichigaya! Oh... and Aisaki! I saw your post on Twitter! Your new *IMS* cosplay was totally adorable!" she said.

I remembered her talking about how she wanted to become cosplay-friends with Ai. After addressing him, Kokoro looked around nervously, making sure that nobody had heard her talk about something so clearly otaku-related.

"Oh, you saw that? Thanks!" Ai replied.

Am I missing something here?

“Are you two connected on Twitter?” I asked them.

“I looked through your follow list and found Aisaki from there,” Kokoro explained.

“I see...”

When did she even do that?

“The other cosplayers with you were super cute too!” Kokoro said, turning her attention back to Ai.

“Not as cute as me though, right? Do you cosplay *IMS* too?” he asked her.

“I have some costumes, but I’ve never, like, worn them at an event...”

Look at these two, chatting about cosplaying in broad daylight. I guess Nishina doesn’t have anyone else to talk to about this though. I’m glad she met Ai.

“I have a lot of other pictures that didn’t end up on Twitter! I took some good ones with a couple other cosplayers...” Ai, full of enthusiasm, handed his phone to Kokoro.

“Wow! Is this *Adore Lane*? It’s so *awww*! And this is *FG0*! All the costumes are so convincing! It’s incredible! And who’s this handsome Marene?! Is it a crossplaying girl?”

“Nope! He’s actually a guy friend of mine. Stunning, isn’t he?”

“A-A guy?!” Kokoro asked, shocked. “A guy this handsome is actually cosplaying? O-Oh...”

I could hear the excitement mounting in her voice as their conversation continued.

“But handsome cosplayers are usually kinda slutty, aren’t they? I mean, I don’t know about this guy, but... I’ve just heard that they usually are... from a friend, y’know...” Kokoro said, as if she was trying to convince herself.

She was obviously talking about Bambi, the narcissistic cosplayer who had so insistently tried to persuade her to go home with him. Judging from her enthusiasm though, she still hadn’t quite abandoned all hope when it came to male cosplayers.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that too, but I’ve never met anyone like that myself. He’s the opposite,” Ai said, pointing at the man that had caught Kokoro’s attention. “The dude’s dating the girl cosplaying Marsha, and you should see how much they love each other. So sweet.”

“R-Really?!” Kokoro asked, even more excited.

A cosplaying couple? That... exists?

“Whoa. A handsome cosplaying guy dating a beautiful cosplaying girl...”

“I know, right? They look like they have a lot of fun cosplaying together and taking pictures and stuff like that.”

“No way! That must be awesome!”

Kokoro’s eyes were sparkling, and I couldn’t blame her. Being an attractive otaku *and* dating another attractive otaku seemed like too much luck for one person.

“I’m slightly jealous... So there *are* male cosplayers who are actually good people too!” Kokoro said. Her dreams of dating a cosplayer were now completely reignited.

What about the Bambi incident? Did she forget about that in the last thirty seconds?

“I-I wonder how couples like these get together... Do they meet at cosplaying events, then become friends before they start dating?”

“That’s how it worked for these two. They met at an event, started cosplaying together, and then— *Poof!*—they were a couple.”

“Did they, like, exchange contacts at that event?” Kokoro asked. The conversation had somehow turned into an interrogation.

“Well, not contacts, exactly... more like business cards. Cosplayers usually take them to events.”

“What?! Business cards for cosplayers?”

“Oh, yeah. They have the cosplayer’s alias, their social network handles, and usually a cosplay pic on them. Look here, this is mine,” Ai said, pulling out a card

and handing it to Kokoro.

“Th-Thanks... Wow! It’s adorable!” Kokoro said, looking at the same card that Ai had, in the past, also handed to me.

“If someone takes a pic of me, or if I take a pic of them, we usually exchange cards and follow each other on Twitter!”

“Ohhh!”

“So you want to meet male cosplayers?” Ai asked casually.

Kokoro immediately began to deny it, not wanting Ai to think she was in it just to find a date. “It’s not like I just want to look for a b-boyfriend or anything like that! I-I just thought it’d be cool to cosplay with someone who has such a good-looking costume! Right, their costume looks awesome!”

“Hmm... Maybe you should go to a big event like Summer Comiket. There are loads of good male cosplayers there—”

The bell rang, marking an end to our conversation.

“I see! Thank you so much, Aisaki! I learned a lot!” Kokoro said, scurrying off to return to class.

Once we were back at our desks, Ai turned around to look at me.

“Nishina is looking for an otaku boyfriend, huh?” he said. There wasn’t much use trying to hide it now.

“Yeah... She says that she’ll only date an otaku.”

“Well, you’re as big of an otaku as they come. Aren’t you on her list?”

“Hah, as if! She’ll only date *handsome* otaku guys. And you know she’s not my type!” I replied.

“Hmm... If being handsome is a condition then that does disqualify you, I guess.”

“Hey! Watch your mouth!” I said to a grinning Ai as the teacher walked in.

Nishina is probably going to start checking out loads of male cosplayers again, isn’t she? She was hanging onto Ai’s every word. I just hope that she’ll be able to

look after herself this time. Don't go and get yourself tricked by another Bambi...

When I got home from school, Kokoro wasn't in the living room. She'd come home before me, so she must have been in her room. My theory was quickly proven true when she came bounding down the stairs, stopping in the middle to greet me.

"Ah, Ichigaya! Welcome back!"

"Hel—"

"Come to my room!"

"What? Wh-Why?"

"Just hurry up and come!"

What's wrong? Did she see a bug or something?

There was so much urgency to her tone that I could do nothing but follow her. I knew this was my own house and all, but going into her room still made me nervous.

The second I walked through the door I was met by a pleasant smell that I couldn't exactly pinpoint—maybe it was perfume, or some kind of shampoo.

"Look!" she said, jabbing a finger at her laptop.

There on the screen was an image of a business card similar to Ai's, with Kokoro's cosplaying alias and a picture of her.

"Is this... a cosplayer business card? That was fast..."

She'd only learned about their existence at lunch break, yet she'd somehow designed it before I'd even walked through the door.

"What do you say? Do you think this picture will do?" she asked me. The picture in question was one of her favorite photographs taken of her Yumeno☆Saki cosplay.

"Sure, I guess..."

"Perfect! Then I'll be using your printer later. Would twenty be enough? And then I have to find an event to attend! That's the most important part!" she said, taking a seat and starting to tap away at her keyboard. When it came to meeting potential boyfriends, Kokoro had a tendency to act before thinking.

"You sure that you wanna meet more cosplayers? After Bambi?"

"You heard what Aisaki said! It's just a few rotten apples!"

"And you're planning to bite into more apples to see if they're rotten?"

"I know the risks! Now that I've seen what the worst of the lot looks like, I'll be able to filter them out!"

"Will you now?"

"Aisaki said that the larger events have loooads of male cosplayers," she said, uninterested in my concerns. "So what event do *you* wanna go to?"

"*Me*? Why does it matter what event *I* want to go to?"

"Because you're coming too, duh!"

"Huh?!"

"I can't go by myself! And hey, if you cosplayed too, maybe you'd meet a cute cosplayer girl or something!"

"That wouldn't happen even if I were the last male cosplayer on the planet," I told her, painfully aware of the major problem I would face as a cosplayer—me.

“With some makeup, a wig, and a good costume, I’m sure there’s a character you could pull off!”

“Yeah, like ‘*Villager B*’ or ‘*Store Clerk Who Sells Potions to the Protagonist*,’ right? I don’t have the confidence, the skills, or the money to cosplay anyway.”

“Hmm... What about coming as a cameraman then? You could take my pictures! If I’m going to cosplay, I’d like to have pictures of it,” Kokoro suggested.

At least that isn’t as unrealistic as cosplaying myself...

“And if you ask a girl for pictures, maybe she’ll give you her card and you can follow each other on Twitter!”

“A-Aren’t you a bit too optimistic?” I asked skeptically.

“You have to try though, you know, since it ended up like that with Gojo. You want a girlfriend, don’t you?” she asked.

Hearing Mashiro’s name took me by surprise. The cute, kind, sweet girl who was into the same stuff as me... or so I’d thought. She’d just been fooling me. The real Mashiro was the total opposite of how she was on the surface. She was just a foul-mouthed fujoshi obsessed with male voice actors.

Mashiro had told me that she’d only been kind to me because, to her, I was just one more person that could like her. After chatting with her again though, it turned out that she did actually like me to some extent. Even if she wasn’t the ideal girlfriend I’d initially thought she was, I was still happy that she was interested in me, and I wanted to learn more about the real her. I’d even messaged her saying that I wanted to see her again sometime... but she still hadn’t replied. Despite saying that she liked me, she was ignoring me. I was doing my best not to think about her.

“Ichigaya...” Kokoro looked at me with pity in her eyes. I still hadn’t told her about Mashiro’s later confession. All she knew was that I’d basically been dumped by her.

“Actually, something happened...” I explained the whole story. How Mashiro actually liked me; how I was happy about that; how I’d messaged her; how I still hadn’t gotten a reply.

“I-I didn’t know that,” Kokoro said, shocked. “So she isn’t as terrible as we thought? It was just her pride then, I guess? Her tastes really were the standard otaku girl stuff though...”

“That’s it, more or less.”

“I still think that what she said to you that time is kind of unforgivable. And anyway, you’ve still not gotten an answer, right?”

“None.”

“So... what do you think about the whole thing?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You’re interested in the real Gojo, and you told her you wanna see her again, but she isn’t replying. Are you gonna give up and forget all about her, or do you wanna try and get with her?”

“I couldn’t forget all about her even if I wanted to.”

“Why don’t you try sending her another message then?”

“Even though she’s ignoring me?”

“If you’re not gonna give up, that’s the only thing you can do! And if you don’t have the courage to do that, you’d better forget about her and look for another girl at a cosplay event.”

I didn’t have the courage to send a second message to a girl after my first one was ignored. On the other hand though, I couldn’t just give up on her.

“Whatever you decide to do, I think you’d better come to the cosplay event with me!”

“Why, though?”

“If getting back with Gojo isn’t that likely, then you have nothing to lose by looking for other opportunities, right? And it’ll probably make you feel better too,” Kokoro said with a smile.

She wants someone to go there with her... but she’s also trying to cheer me up, isn’t she? Turning her down would be too ungrateful. She does have a point. Going and having fun will make me feel better. And, unlikely as it is, if I do make

friends with a cute cosplayer, I'd feel even better than that.

"Okay. I'll be there as your cameraman. You're fine with that, right?" I asked, just in case she was going to change her mind and insist that I cosplay too.

"Yep! Come on then, let's get looking for events!"

"Wait! We still have to clean up the house!"

"I-I know!"

My problems hadn't gone away, but I felt that, somehow, sharing them with Kokoro made them feel much lighter.

3

When Saturday came, Kokoro and I took all of her stuff that was spread around the house and shoved it into her room. We removed her shoes from the entryway and hid all the girly bath products, hair tools, and cosmetics from the bathroom.

“This should do it,” I said, collapsing onto the couch once I was satisfied with the state of the house. If I just made sure that Elena didn’t walk into Kokoro’s room, we’d be fine.

“Are you really planning to let Minami in the house while it looks like *this*?” Kokoro asked, appalled.

“Huh? Did I forget some of your stuff somewhere?”

“That’s not the problem! You still have to tidy up! And clean the bathroom!”

“It doesn’t look that dirty to me...”

“You realize you’ve invited a girl over, right?! Don’t you want to make a good impression? You’d better take this seriously!”

I’d never had a girl over before—except for Kokoro, of course. If she hadn’t brought it up, I would have thought my efforts were more than sufficient.

“Hmm, I guess you’re right. All right! I’ll make this place spotless!”

With Kokoro’s help, I proceeded to dust, vacuum, and sweep the whole house.

“Perfect!” I said proudly, checking out our handiwork. The place looked the cleanest it had in a long time.

“We’re getting there, at least,” she said, still not entirely satisfied. “Ah, right!”

She dashed out of the room, returning seconds later with a pink spray bottle in her hand.

“This is the air freshener I use in my room. Spray it around yours before

Minami gets here tomorrow," she said, handing it to me.

"Oh, so you were using this stuff. Thanks," I said, finally understanding why her room smelled so nice. *Girls have some really advanced technology, huh?*

"If you're going to actually get a girlfriend, you should at least be able to take care of this much by yourself," she said. As usual, she couldn't help but phrase everything in the most condescending way possible, but I was still grateful for her advice.

"A-Anyway, the house is perfect now, isn't it?"

In its current state, my humble abode was fit to welcome Elena and any other hypothetical future girlfriend.

"Well... Do you have snacks and drinks ready?"

"Do I...?" I replied, running to the fridge to check its contents. The only thing I could offer to a guest was the cold barley tea that Kokoro had made, and there wasn't much of that left either.

Snacks and drinks... I didn't think that far ahead.

"I'll make some more tea. Then I should buy some snacks..."

"Yeah, you should! You can bet she's going to bring something to eat as a gift tomorrow! Do you wanna look like an inconsiderate guy who can't even offer her a snack in return?!"

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

"And you're going to walk her here from the station tomorrow, right? That's the perfect opportunity! Ask her what she likes while you're walking together and buy it before getting home!"

"Actually, we still haven't talked about whether I'd walk her here or not..."

"What?! It's like ten minutes from the station! You definitely need to do it!"

"You're right... I'll message her."

Kokoro sighed loudly. "If you ever do manage to get a girlfriend, you'd better be more prepared than this, or that relationship isn't going to last long."

"Ugh..."

What am I supposed to do?! It's my first time doing this! I've had Ai and other male friends over, but guys don't treat it like it's a huge event every time! Hmm... maybe my parents did though. When my friends' parents came over with them, mine would prepare drinks and snacks for them... I think. I'd better make a mental note of everything Nishina said, so I'm prepared when I do manage to get a girlfriend...

I sent a message to Elena and we agreed on a time to meet at the station.

"About tomorrow," I said to Kokoro, "I'm sorry I have to ask this, but you can stay out of the house for the whole time she's here, right?"

"Yeah... I guess I'll go to a manga café or something. There's a ton of manga I wanna catch up on."

"Thanks. I'll message you once she leaves, okay?"

"Okay."

The next day.

"Come on, Nishina, it's almost one! If you don't leave soon, you'll run into Minami outside the house!"

"Sheesh, I get it, I get it," Kokoro said, quickly preparing, then leaving the house.

I sprayed the scent that she'd given me in my room, which immediately started smelling so good that I could barely recognize it.

I'm ready... I thought to myself, suddenly feeling nervous.

I jumped onto my bicycle and reached the station just in time.

"Ah, Minami!" I said as I saw her standing next to the ticket gates. She was wearing a white blouse open on the shoulders—what I'd once heard Kokoro call a "cold shoulder" blouse—and a blue knee-length skirt that showed off her beautiful pale legs. Today she was wearing her silky golden hair in a ponytail, revealing her dainty ears that were studded with two small earrings. Her look was completed by a thin necklace that glittered in the sunlight. She'd absolutely nailed the delicate balance between "cutesy" and "sexy"—so much so that I

was left utterly speechless.

“Ichigaya! I’m sorry I invited myself over like this,” she said, looking painfully guilty. “I really appreciate you coming all the way here to meet me!”

“Oh, it was nothing. Don’t worry about it! Let’s go, shall we? It only takes about ten minutes.”

We started walking, chatting as I pushed my bicycle along the pavement.

Along the way, I asked Elena what kinds of snacks she liked and bought them from a convenience store as we passed. I had to insist, since she kept telling me that I didn’t need to, but we eventually left the store with a bag of chips and a box of chocolates.

We arrived at my house soon after, though Elena seemed even less prepared than I was.

“You live by yourself in such a huge house?”

“It used to be me and my family, but then they moved overseas because of my dad’s work, so I have it all to myself now.”

“R-Really?!” she asked, suddenly fired up.

“Y-Yes...?”

“Ah, sorry. I just got excited about how ‘anime protagonist backstory’ your situation sounded.”

“Haha, I get that a lot. Well... come in, I guess,” I said, unlocking the door and inviting Elena to enter. As she stepped inside, my nervousness tripled.

Minami is in my house! She’s inside of it! Really inside!

I instinctively looked down. Kokoro’s shoes had all been safely hidden away. Even if we’d forgotten a pair, I could have easily passed them off as my mom’s or sister’s.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot. I brought you this...” Elena said, handing me the paper shopping bag she’d been carrying.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s just a small token of my gratitude,” she explained.

I opened the bag and saw a box of cookies.

“Aw, you didn’t need to! Thanks! Hm...?”

As I took a closer look, I noticed that there was something else inside the bag: a file folder and a keychain, both with images of Yumeno☆Saki on them.

“Are these the convenience store collab items?!”

“Yes, that’s right. After our call, I realized how impolite I’d been to invite myself over like that... I know that this isn’t enough, but I wanted to thank you for being so kind.”

“You’re too nice! It’s not such a big deal, really!”

I (or rather, Kokoro) had expected her to bring a small gift, but I was surprised that she’d go to the trouble of buying something like this for me. *I’m so glad I stopped to get those snacks... Being completely empty-handed would have been terrible of me.*

“Wait...” I said, digging further inside the bag. “There’s more? This is... Emily Saionji!”

Alongside the cookies and the Yumeno☆Saki merchandise, Elena had also gifted me an Emily Saionji acrylic standee.

“I had a few of them at home. I thought that maybe you’d like it.”

“Oh wow, I do! Thank you so much!”

“I also wanted to give you something as a thank you for always listening to me and offering me your advice...”

“I barely did anything at all!” I replied, completely blown away that a girl younger than me would give me all of this stuff.

When I showed her into the living room, the gravity of such a simple action suddenly dawned on me. I was showing Elena, a *girl*, into my own living room... and she wasn’t just any girl. She was my favorite VTuber.

Emily Saionji and I are alone in my house!

“Y-You take a seat on the couch if you want,” I said, so tense that my voice cracked.

“Whoa, your house is so tidy! And it smells so nice!” she commented, looking surprised.

Thanks for saving me, Nishina.

“Did I... impose on you?” Elena asked. “Did you have to clean everything up because of me?”

Is she trying to say that my house is too *tidy for me to live in it?!*

“N-Not at all!” I said, offering her some of the tea from the fridge. I then opened up the chips and chocolates and put them on a plate on the coffee table.

“Thank you! To think that you’d receive me so politely even though I’m just here to play a game...”

“Oh, it’s just a few snacks!”

Thanks again, Nishina.

“W-Would you mind showing me where to wash my hands?” Elena asked. As expected of a girl so well-behaved, she wanted to wash her hands before touching any food.

“Not at all!” I said, leading her to the closest bathroom. We’d cleaned in here too, so I felt pretty safe bringing her there, but I instinctively looked around one last time just to make extra sure.

That’s when I saw it. Something that shouldn’t have been there.

Inside the laundry basket was a single garment: a pastel pink bra.

Of all the things you could have forgotten, did it have to be your underwear?!

I rushed inside and closed the door behind me before Elena could reach it.

“I-Is something the matter?” she called out, perplexed, from the other side.

“S-Sorry! Just a second!” I said, quickly scooping up the bra. Since Kokoro was the one in charge of laundry, I’d never even seen—let alone *touched*—her underwear before.

It’s still warm... Did she forget about it after her bath?

I looked around, but there was nowhere to hide it. I couldn't leave Elena waiting much longer, so I did the only thing that made sense to me at the time: I slipped the bra under my shirt.

If she finds out about this, Nishina will kill me, but it's her fault for leaving it here!

"S-Sorry I kept you waiting!"

"Oh, uh, not at all..."

"It was a bit, erm, messy, you see? But I tidied up! It's all fine now!" I said as naturally as I could, pressing the hem of my shirt against my body so the bra wouldn't fall out.

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but there's really no reason to worry about that with me," Elena replied.

I'd tucked the front of my shirt into my trousers. It might have looked ridiculous, but the alternative was having a random bra fall out of me. I had to find a way to dispose of it in my room.

Damn you, Nishina! A bra! That's the last thing I'd want Minami to find here! She'd think I have a girlfriend. Or would she? Maybe she'd think that I just like to wear girls' underwear... Wait, that's even worse!

Once Elena had washed her hands, we both returned to the living room and sat down next to each other on the couch. I'd brought down my laptop and put *Yuri Kiss* on the table in advance. Being so close to Elena, it took all of my concentration to keep my hands from shaking.

"Oh, this is it! It's *Yuri Kiss*!" she said, eyes sparkling. I handed her the box so she could take a closer look at it.

"Thank you so, so much! I thought I'd never be able to play this. I could cry!" Her excitement continued to rise, so much so she was almost bursting from her seat. She must have been even more into yuri than I thought.

"Haha, I'm just glad to help. Okay then," I said, opening the CD drive... but there already was another disk inside.

"Whaaa—?!" I yelled, shocked, after glimpsing what it was. I quickly closed the drive back up to hide the disk inside the computer. I couldn't have Elena seeing *that*. It was a game that Kokoro had basically forced me to play so that I could learn more about otaku girls and their interests. So yeah, it was a BL game, adult scenes and all.

I'd only tried it out once, but had disliked it so much that I'd forgotten all about it.

How could I forget to take out the disk?! Sh-She didn't see it, right...? I wondered.

My wonder was brief. Little did I realize I had just made things much worse.

The game's loading screen popped up in front of us. Five handsome men stood one next to the other under the game's title logo, flashing with fancy, vibrant letters:

Me & My Lovely Ass♥ociates.

"Gahhhh!" I shouted as I slammed the laptop shut.

Of course the disk would autoplay it if you put it back into the laptop, I

thought to myself, surprisingly calm. *I'm done. Completely done. My life is over. Maybe I could have talked myself out of it after that disk came out, but now it's too late.*

I slowly turned to look at Elena. She looked completely unfazed.

"Is something the matter?" she asked me.

"Y-You saw it, didn't you? On the screen..."

"Oh, that game just now? Sure. It was a BL game, right?"

No! She saw it!

"I've heard that boys that like BL are called fudanshi," she said casually. "It's growing very popular as a genre lately, isn't it? I really look up to you for enjoying all kinds of otaku subcultures."

There was no mistaking the honest respect in her tone.

That... That's a reaction I wasn't expecting. If she doesn't see any problem with this, she's either very kind, or very forgiving about people's hobbies. Or maybe she just lacks common sense.

"Hahaha... I-I just borrowed this from a friend, you see, out of curiosity! Actually I wasn't even curious! Not at all! This friend kind of forced me to play it! I'm not actually into BL, y-you know?"

"Oh, I see."

"Good! Now, where were we...?"

She's not disgusted or anything, but I still don't want her thinking that I'm a fudanshi...

I took Kokoro's game out of my laptop and replaced it with *Yuri Kiss*. Instead of five handsome guys on the screen, there were now six beautiful girls.

"Awaaah!" Elena squealed enthusiastically.

"Here, go ahead," I said, sliding the laptop in front of her.

"Thank you so much! I-I can play by myself, so don't worry about me! You can go and do what you like in the meantime!"

“Hm? Sure, but... I haven’t played it in a while, so I thought I’d tag along. If that’s okay with you, of course,” I said.

“Of course it is!” she said as she happily clicked on the “New Game” button.

Elena didn’t seem to be the kind of girl to nose around someone else’s computer without permission, but, just in case, I had created two new folders before she arrived: “Job Documents” and “Games.” All of the files that had previously been in plain sight on my desktop were now in one of these folders. More specifically, “Job Documents” contained porn and other questionable material, while “Games” contained the shortcuts and save files of all my R18 games.

However, despite my precautions, my laptop was still full of all kinds of files and bookmarks that I didn’t want Elena to see. I was too scared to leave her by herself while she was using it, though having me over her shoulder was probably a nuisance for her. But I had to be there in case anything happened.

“Awww, the intro is so sweet! This is like a dream come true. I thought I’d have to move out before I could play this! I’m so, so grateful, Ichigaya!”

“Don’t mention it...”

As she played, she commented on how cute this girl was, how much she loved that girl, how much she wanted to marry that other one, and so on.

As for me, even though I’d obviously already played it in the past, I liked the game enough to enjoy watching another playthrough. More entertaining than that though, was watching Elena and her reactions to everything.

Totally absorbed, Elena played through *Yuri Kiss* without seeing anything that she shouldn’t have.

“Ah! I didn’t realize I’d been here for so long! I’m so sorry!” Elena said around four hours into the game.

“It’s not a problem. But... wasn’t it a pain to have me watching over your shoulder the whole time?”

“Not at all! I’m just happy I could share the experience with a fellow yuri-

lover!”

“That’s a relief. Anyway, each route in this game takes around eight hours to complete, so you’re still far from seeing the ending,” I said, thinking that visiting a boy’s home—*my* home—till late would be an issue for her.

“I see...” she said, looking disappointed. After all, few things in life are sadder than playing a dating sim, getting to like it, then having to quit without seeing how the story ends.

“If you want to, you can come here again,” I suggested, before immediately regretting it.

“I-I can?!”

Why did I say that?! We somehow managed to pull it off this time, but hiding Nishina again would be a ton of work! But how could I let her go like that? She looked so sad!

“Thank you! I can’t tell you how happy I am!” she said, smiling and staring up at me with those big, shining eyes.

Hiding Nishina again wouldn’t be so bad. It’d definitely be worth it...

“N-No, it’s nothing, really...”

“I owe you so much already for listening to my troubles with work, and you’re still so kind to me.”

“Oh, it’s not like I’m doing anything but listening. And how’s work going, anyway?” I asked her, glad the flow of the conversation had allowed me to bring up her VTubing.

“Great! Things have been going really smoothly since my last meeting.”

“That’s cool! Oh, your last collab video with Bunny was the funniest thing ever! The horror one!”

Bunny Bellhop was a cute VTuber with distinctive bunny ears who often collaborated with Emily Saionji. The two of them had become good friends, and many of their fans—including me—relished in imagining a certain romantic tension between the girls.

In particular, their latest video together involved the easily scared Bunny playing a horror game together with Emily, clinging onto her for comfort. The cuteness had almost given me a heart attack.

“Really? I had a lot of fun making that video, so I’m happy you liked it! I’ve become friends with Bunny in real life too, and we’ve been playing together a lot recently!”

“What?!” I replied in shock. The yuri-loving side of my brain was starting to overheat. I’d skeptically assumed that their friendship was little more than an act that they put on for the sake of entertainment, but now I’d learned that it was more than that. “The fans shipping you two together would melt if they knew that...”

“Would they? Just recently I went to her home and stayed the night there. I wonder if I should mention that in one of our videos... Would the fans like it?”

“You stayed over at her place?! You absolutely have to mention that! That’s huge news!” I said, unbridling the filthy otaku inside of me.

Elena, slightly befuddled, stared at me.

Oh no, I bet she’s so disgusted right now—

“Hehehe... You know, I’m always coming up with yuri fantasies about other girls, but being on the receiving end of those fantasies is fun too. I’ll ask Bunny for permission to talk about that in our next video together then!” she said happily.

Phew... She took it well...

“Oh, didn’t you announce that you’re going to be in a live event together?” I asked.

“Ah, yes! We’ll be singing a few songs together. I’m really looking forward to it!”

Live VTuber events were the biggest new thing: augmented reality technology was used to make it look like the virtual girls were really singing and dancing on stage. I only wished I could afford to attend one.

“That sounds great. I couldn’t afford a ticket, but I’ll be watching the stream

and rooting for you from the comments!”

“Th-Thank you!”

“Now that I think about it, you’ve also collabed with Sakurajosui Rinne quite a few times... Are you friends with her too?” I asked Elena, but her face turned gloomy the second she heard the VTuber’s name.

Did I say something bad? Do they actually hate each other or something?

“Hmm, we don’t really know each other so well yet, but... I take it you haven’t heard the news about her?”

“What news?”

“She’s been involved in a bit of a scandal...”

I wasn’t up to speed with Rinne, as I only knew of her through Emily’s videos.

“What kind of scandal?”

“They found out the identity of the girl voicing her. She doesn’t belong to any entertainment company and has done voice acting work for several adult games and *scenario audio* works...”

“Scenario audio?”

“You’ve never heard of them? They’re recordings of voice actresses playing out various lewd scenarios. There are also non-lewd ones, but...”

“Ohhh, that’s what you mean! I guess the fans must have been shocked since she has that cute and innocent persona going on.”

Rinne had long black hair and clothing that, for a VTuber, showed very little skin. Her backstory was that she came from a wealthy family, and she always behaved in a dignified, refined manner. She was the typical well-to-do young lady archetype.

If I were a fan, I’d also be surprised to learn that she was voicing erotic material... but this hardly seemed scandal-worthy to me. Personally, if anything, I’d be excited about it.

Elegant young lady saying lewd stuff? Sign me right up.

“There were some audio samples of her adult-only work online, and people

found out that the voice is exactly the same."

"To be honest, I don't see what the issue is."

"Well, the real problem was when people found her personal Twitter account. She talks about her private life there, and the fans weren't pleased by the way she came across."

"Why not? What kind of person is she in real life?"

"Let's just say that she's as far from Rinne's character as a person could be."

I was so curious that I immediately pulled out my phone to check it out. Her Twitter account had been made private, but there still were screenshots of the tweets going around.

Why did this recording have to be scheduled right when I have the most painful period of my life ughhhh...

Since I'm going to be famous, maybe I'd better tell my ex to delete all the pics and videos he took of me.

I can't stand horny guys who bother me at matchmaking parties. I hope they all burn in hell!

"Wh-Whoa..."

This is a bit too much. I'm glad I wasn't a fan of hers to begin with. So much for having your virtual persona be an elegant, innocent young lady.

Apart from the awful tweets, there were also screenshots of selfies that she had uploaded. Her hair was dyed a hideous blonde, her clothes were skimpy, and she could afford to lose some pounds. As the cherry on top of this distasteful cake, she looked as if she were *at least* thirty.

The more I looked, the more I understood what the scandal was about. She was always complaining about her voice acting gigs and about VTubing, and she was constantly replying to attractive male voice actors' tweets to arrange to meet them in real life.

"Since all of this came to light," Elena explained, "she's made her personal account private and stopped tweeting from her VTuber account as well. A lot of people started hating her, including some of her old fans. They kept writing

mean things to her, like ‘you killed Sakurajosui’...”

“Coming back wouldn’t be easy at this point, huh?”

“Not at all. She’s probably going to retire.”

As sad as it was, she was partly responsible for her own downfall. After becoming a famous VTuber, she should have stopped tweeting those kinds of things and deleted what she’d already written. She knew there was a possibility she could be found out...

Elena was looking at the floor with a concerned expression. Seeing a colleague go through so much trouble must have been hard for her.

“Maybe next time it’ll be me...” she murmured.

“You mean, somebody finding out who’s behind Emily Saionji?”

“Yes... The company I work for has pictures of all their voice actresses, including me, on their website, and they also told me to post on Twitter regularly, which I do. I can’t help but feel scared that some day the fans will find out who’s voicing Emily Saionji and be terribly disappointed, as they were with Sakurajosui. Disappointing the fans is the last thing I’d want to do...”

“M-Minami. Even if they did find out it’s you, I doubt anyone would be disappointed,” I said.

Elena was pretty much the perfect fit for Emily. She actually liked yuri and she was similar not only in character, but also how she looked. Her normal speaking voice wasn’t that different from the one she used for Emily.

Which is why being with her makes me feel as excited as if I were standing next to Emily...

The main advantage that Elena had over her unfortunate colleague, however, was how beautiful she was. That alone meant that her situation would be completely different... not that I could ever tell her that.

“I’m happy you’d say that, but I can’t ignore that possibility. It’s terrifying. I hear a lot about people who stopped being fans of this or that character after finding out who voiced them because the actress was too different from their expectations...”

“People really go that far?”

“They do. But of course, I still want to give my best not only as a VTuber, but also as a voice actress. Right now I can only take on very minor roles, but one day I want to voice a big anime character; one who actually has a name. But the more I focus on voice acting, the more I risk being found out as Emily’s voice...”

“I’d love to hear your voice in an anime! I don’t think you should give up on your voice acting dream because of that, even though it’s a totally different career from VTubing. Maybe one day the fans will find out, but hey, you can cross that bridge when you get to it. There are loads of VTubers whose identities were discovered without any scandal, right?”

“I... I guess you’re right! After all, I started VTubing because I like voicing characters so much. If I gave up voice acting, then it would have been pointless,” she said before looking at me again. “Your words helped me out of a bad place again... Thank you, Ichigaya.”

“Huh? I don’t think I’ve said anything worth a thank you.”

“But you have! I feel so much better after talking with you. Actually... if it’s not a bother... could I ask for your opinion on one more thing?”

“Of course! Lay it down!”

The very fact that you’d confide in me at all is a pleasure and an honor!

“Thanks! So, my VTuber job has become so much easier, but there’s something that has me worried.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

“Well...”

Elena trailed off at the sound of raindrops hitting the window.

“It’s raining?” she asked, surprised.

“It started pouring all of a sudden. Do you have an umbrella with you?”

“I do have a small folding one, but the forecast said it’d be sunny all day...”

“That’s the rainy season for you. Ah! The laundry!” I remembered, running to the balcony to grab the clothes before they got wet.

I opened the balcony door, and... immediately shut it again.

“I-Is something wrong?” Elena asked. “Erm...”

Oh no! Did she see?!

“Were those... women’s clothes?”

Noooo! We spent so much time cleaning the house but left the clothes on the balcony! Nishina’s in charge of laundry so it never even crossed my mind!

“W-Well, er, that’s, you see...” I stammered, unable to produce a complete sentence.

“You have to bring them in, or they’ll get soaked!” she said, sweeping quickly past me, opening the door, and starting to take the clothes down by herself. Summer storms hit fast and hard—the laundry would soon be drenched.

“B-But...” I began, before giving up and following Elena onto the balcony to help her. All the while, my mind raced in search of an explanation, but I couldn’t come up with one.

“I think we got everything!”

“Y-Yeah. Thanks...”

“It’s nothing, really. But...” Elena was looking at me with a worried expression. She was probably considering whether it was okay to ask me about the clothes.

“Th-These are... a hobby! Yes, I collect these for fun!”

“A... hobby?”

The excuse I ultimately went with, if I may say so myself, was utterly ridiculous.

“I-It’s not like I crossdress, it’s just that, er, I like owning the same clothes as my favorite voice actresses, you see? That kind of thing!” I said, trying to make things slightly better, but ultimately making myself sound even more stupid than I’d imagined.

“O-Oh? I see...” she said, obviously suspicious.

“You know, it’s a collec—”

“Hm? You dropped something...”

I looked down, back up, then down again. But it was still there: a pink bra staring up at me from the floor. It had fallen out of my shirt at the worst possible time.

Aaaaah! I forgot to hide it in my room!

“Is that—?” Elena began to ask, but I quickly interrupted her.

“Ohhh, this?! This is just, um, my sister’s!”

With every excuse, I was digging a deeper and deeper hole for myself.

“Didn’t you say that you live by yourself?”

Rest in peace, Kagetora. Time to bury yourself completely. After all the trouble I’ve gone through to clean up the house and buy snacks, she probably thinks I’m some kind of crossdressing fetishist... And now she’ll hate me!

“I’ve been meaning to ask you this for a while, but you and Nishina live together, don’t you?”

“Wh-What?! Why?!” I asked, surprised.

“When we were taking in your laundry, I noticed a girl’s blouse. One from our school’s uniform... and some of the clothes we took in are the kind of thing that Nishina would wear.”

She realized our secret just by looking at our laundry?!

“Minami... I’m sorry I lied to you!” I said, bowing my head down. “It’s just as you said. We live together. I’m so sorry.”

“Y-You don’t need to apologize,” she replied as she looked at me, befuddled. “So the two of you really *are* dating...”

“Huh?! No, we’re not! The reason we’re living together is a reeeally long story. I’ll ask Nishina to come here so we can explain it to you.”

I decided that having Kokoro explain her side of the story was the safest choice, since I didn’t know how much my roommate actually wanted to reveal about her own situation. So, I messaged her.

“Minami found out we’re living together. Can you come back home? I should

explain stuff to her...”

“What? How did she find out?!!!”

“We took in the laundry when it started raining and she saw your clothes. Anyway, can you get home by yourself? It’s pouring.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think of the laundry...”

“Yeah, don’t worry. Just come home.”

After around ten awkward minutes waiting with Elena, Kokoro finally arrived home.

“Hi...”

“Welcome back...”

“Hello,” Elena greeted her. “Did you walk all the way here through this rain? You’re soaked through...”

“Here,” I said, handing Kokoro a towel.

“Oh, thanks,” she said, using it to wring out her hair. “So, how much did you explain?”

“I’ve only told her that we live together and that we aren’t dating... I wasn’t sure how much it’d be okay to say about your personal stuff.”

“Okay then. Listen, Minami, I’m gonna explain from the start...”

“O-Of course!”

“Ichigaya and I ran into each other at this matchmaking party, where we, like, found out that we were both looking for otaku dates...”

Kokoro went on to recount the story of how we’d become roommates, including how we were helping each other, how my parents lived overseas, and how her parents believed that she and I were actually dating.

“I know it’s super hard to believe, but that’s what happened. I’m totally sorry we lied to you. We’ve gotta hide this from everyone, because if someone at school found out, you know, people would talk, Ichigaya’s parents would find out, and I’d have to move away from Japan. He’s been helping me keep it a secret.”

“Ah, I see now. Thanks for letting me in on it. As unbelievable as it sounds, it explains a lot. In short, you and Ichigaya are *not* dating, right?”

“Of course not! Not in a thousand years! I’m looking for a guy that’s waaay different than him, and he’s looking for someone who’s nothing like me!”

“You can say that again!” I agreed, vigorously nodding my head.

Hearing how offended we were, Elena started giggling.

Does she believe us? I know I’d have a hard time believing this myself. I thought she’d be mad at us for lying, but she already forgave us for that. She’s just so kind. Then again, why is she grinning like that? Did we say something funny?

“Minami?”

“Oh, sorry! It’s just that earlier, when I saw that uniform, I thought the two of you were boyfriend and girlfriend. I was already so surprised, but then I saw that cute, frilly apron...”

“Oh, that’s the one I use when I cook,” Kokoro said.

“When I saw that, I couldn’t help but think of you and Ichigaya as a lovey-dovey couple, with you cooking for him wearing nothing but the apron...”

“*What?!*” Kokoro cried in horror, as her face flushed a new shade of red.

“I started imagining how the two of you, who are normally so distant, are actually deeply in love with each other. And then my brain went rather wild...”

“I-It’s just an apron! I wear clothes under it, jeez!”

“I’m really sorry, there was just a scene like that in a yuri manga I read recently.”

She came up with all of that just by looking at an apron? If Minami’s not a hardcore otaku, then I don’t know who is. At least I’m glad she’s having fun instead of being mad at us.

“Anyway,” I said, “we’re really sorry. I wish we didn’t have to lie to you like that. If there’s anything I can do to make up for it, tell me! It can be anything!”

“Not at all! I was the one who asked you to let me come over so impolitely.”

“Actually, me too!” Kokoro said. “If there’s anything I can do to apologize, let me know!”

“There’s no need to apologize, really. But there is something I would like to ask you,” Elena said, turning to Kokoro. “You cosplay, right?”

“Hm? Yes, kinda,” Kokoro replied.

“Have you ever heard of Wonder Festival? It’s an event about anime, figures, and things like that. The company that I voice act for has asked me to go on stage and cosplay a character from a new anime that’s going to be released soon. They gave me the costume, but I have to buy the accessories myself. The wig, the socks, the shoes, the makeup, and so on. I’ve never cosplayed before, so having someone knowledgeable giving me advice would be really helpful.”

I knew about WonFes—it was a huge event held at the Makuhari Messe convention center, near Tokyo. I’d never been there myself, but it would’ve been nice to go one day.

This must have been the thing that Elena wanted to talk with me about.

“That’s it? No problem!” Kokoro said. “I’ve never cosplayed at an event myself, but I know a thing or two about putting together costumes, putting on wigs, and stuff! I’m actually planning for my first convention too, so the timing’s perfect! Let’s do our best together!”

“Thank you so much! Though I should also mention...” Elena paused, embarrassed. “The costume I’ll have to wear is rather... revealing. I’m really nervous about wearing it, so if you could tell me how to feel comfortable in clothes like those, then...”

“What? But you have such a nice figure! You’d look super hot in anything! What costume is it?” Kokoro asked. I, too, was *very* interested in what kind of revealing costume Elena had been asked to wear.

“This one...” she said, pulling out her phone to show us a picture. For something that was supposedly a full “outfit,” the costume that she showed us barely covered anything at all: the top was little more than a shiny bra with frilly sleeves accompanied by some frilly cuffs at the wrists. The bottom was a skirt so tiny that it served no purpose at all, and was seemingly held up at the waist by a couple of ribbons. I’d seen swimsuits less revealing than that.

I looked at the picture, cleavage and navel and all, and imagined Elena wearing that exact outfit. Swallowing my excitement took a decent amount of effort.

“It’s a cosplay of the anime’s heroine.”

“Wow! It’s super cute! But yeah, it’s very skimpy. It’s kinda like a bikini with a skirt, isn’t it?”

“Yes... They said they’ll make the skirt a tiny bit longer so at least my underwear won’t show, but it’s still embarrassing, especially because I have to wear it in front of so many people. Nonetheless, I want to do my best, since it’s part of my job.”

“Hmm... What about going to a convention as a cosplayer to get used to wearing similar stuff?” Kokoro suggested.

“The company rules actually state that I can’t cosplay in public if it’s not for them. They don’t want pictures to get around.”

“Then we’ve gotta think of another way to get you used to it...”

I can see how cosplaying on your own time as a voice actress could be a problem... but is there really no other way?

“Oh,” I remembered. “I was just reading a news article about a voice actress who went to a nighttime pool party.”

Aaand that sounded like I wanted to invite Minami to the pool... I thought, but Kokoro seemed to like my idea.

“Some friends of mine have been going to events like that—the ones in hotel pools, you know? They say they always get great pictures out of them. Ichigaya’s got a point. What’s the big deal about a skimpy cosplay if you’re used to wearing a swimsuit around strangers?”

“That would be even more revealing, yes... I’ve always been interested in events like that, but so far I’ve never found the courage to go out in a swimsuit,” Elena said.

“Me neither. This could be a good opportunity for both of us to, like, wear a swimsuit at the pool, and then cosplay feeling a bit more used to it.”

“Would you go there with me?” Elena asked Kokoro.

“Sure! I said I’d do anything to apologize, and I wanna get used to wearing those kinds of outfits as much as you do!”

“Really?! That takes so much of the pressure off! Now I’m looking forward to it!”

Even though I’d brought up the topic myself, I was still surprised that they would actually decide to go through with it.

These two are going to be at a pool, wearing swimsuits? That’s going to gather some attention. Not that I’ll be there to see, but—

“Would you like to come too, Ichigaya?”

“H-Huh?!” I replied, taken aback by Elena’s suggestion.

“What?! Him too?” Kokoro exclaimed, as surprised as I was. “Hmm... No, wait. That could actually be a good idea. I’ve heard that there are a lot of men going around the pools at night trying to pick up girls, so having him with us would be safer.”

“Are you two serious?” I asked them—not because I didn’t want to go, but because it felt weird that *they* would want me to.

“What’s up? You don’t wanna come?”

“No, no. That’s not what I mean. Okay, fine. I’ll tag along.”

“Cool! Now we just have to go and buy swimsuits! There are a few cute ones I’ve been eyeing for the looongest time, but I never went ahead and bought them because, you know, I didn’t feel comfortable wearing one. But I’ve got to sooner or later, right?”

“Right! After school, we could go shopping for swimsuits together!” Elena proposed, earning a nod of agreement from Kokoro.

With our plan sorted, Elena went to take a look out of the window. “It’s still raining, but not as hard anymore. I should probably head home. I’ve abused your hospitality enough already,” she said.

“Not at all! And you’re free to come over whenever you want!” I said.

Kokoro and I walked Elena to the station, where we parted ways for the day. It wouldn’t be long, however, before we saw each other again—we’d promised to go to the pool together, after all.

“You had me scared for a while when you told me she’d found out! I’m sooo glad she was cool about the whole thing,” Kokoro said as we headed back home.

“Yeah,” I agreed, still thinking about something that seemed more important to me—I was going to go to the pool with Elena and Kokoro. *What kind of dream is this?*

“By the way, that festival she was talking about... It’s a pretty big event, isn’t it? Maybe that’s where I could go and cosplay! I could root for Minami when she’s on stage, and we’ll probably get to meet a ton of other cosplayers!”

“Hmm... That’s actually a good idea!” I said, eager to see Elena and her skimp—Elena and her passionate performance.

“Then I’d better hurry up and decide who I’m going to cosplay! There’s no time to lose!”

“You already have some costumes lying around, don’t you? Are you going to use one of those?”

“Buying a new costume would be fun, but I haven’t worn the ones I have now at any actual event, except for that meetup we went to. That would be a bit of a waste. And even if I bought a new costume now, who knows if it’d get delivered in time! The festival is in late July, so we only have a month or so left... But which character should I go with? Apart from having fun, I also wanna meet male cosplayers, so it’s gotta be a character popular with guys. What do you think?”

“From the costumes you own, I’d say either Yumeno☆Saki, Unithorn from *Adore Lane*, or someone from *IMS*.”

“Okay! I’ll do one of those then. I have to choose as soon as possible, since I still don’t have the wig and colored contacts for some of them. And you’d better prepare too, so that any cute cosplayers you meet will actually like you!”

“Prepare? Like... how?”

I’m going to attend as a cameraman, not as a cosplayer. What do I even have to prepare?

“You’ve obviously gotta clean up again, and you know, as a cameraman, maybe you should get, like, a camera?”

“Uh, yes... I don’t have one, now that I think about it.”

“Me neither. The one on my phone can only do so much, so I was thinking of buying one to get better cosplay pics, but they’re sooo expensive! Lately I haven’t been able to save up any money either.”

What kind of impression would I give off as a camera-less cameraman, armed only with my lousy phone?

“Maybe I should go and buy a cheap one,” I said. “Just so I look the part.”

“Oh, and also, in case you run into a cosplayer who doesn’t have a business card, you should make ones of your own—as a cameraman, you know? You could add your Twitter handle or something on there, so that if someone likes you they can follow you or message you.”

“I don’t know about that...”

I’m not enough of a cameraman to have a business card, am I?

“Anyway, let’s do our best! We’ll go to that festival, cheer on Minami, and meet loads of hot cosplayers!”

“Mm-hmm...”

Kokoro was as excited as it gets, but I had something else on my mind. Let’s say that I actually met a cute cosplayer at the event and ended up becoming friends with her. Wouldn’t that mean completely giving up on Mashiro? Would I be fine with that?

She still hadn’t replied to my last message. A sensible person would have probably realized that it was time to move on by now. But as long as there was a possibility—no matter how small—that she’d eventually message me back, I didn’t want to have any regrets.

As soon as I got back to my room, I opened up Twitter to check the message history between me and Mashiro.

“Huh?”

There was no history. There was nothing.

`This account doesn’t exist.`

She’d actually deleted it. I’d only been able to message her before because it takes a certain amount of time for an account to disappear after the owner decides to delete it. But, as Mashiro had said, after that time passes, it’s gone forever.

Mashiro’s Twitter—my only means of communication with her—was gone. If I wanted to hear from her again, I had no option but to go as a customer to the maid café where she worked.

However, despite telling me that she’d considered dating me, Mashiro had intentionally cut the only bridge that connected us without even sending a reply. I wanted to talk things over again with her, but she obviously wasn’t of the same opinion. How could I go and meet her at the café knowing that?

While I was lying on the bed trying to process the sadness of the situation, my misery was interrupted by Kokoro, who was calling me from downstairs. She

was in charge of cooking today.

“Dinner’s ready!”

I picked myself up and trudged down the stairs, meeting Kokoro in the living room.

“I’m already looking forward to my next cosplay! It’ll be at a proper event this time!” she said as she happily laid our meal on the table. “What’s with the long face?”

“Hm? Oh, it’s nothing...”

I took a seat next to her on the couch and we started eating.

“No, really, what’s wrong?” she asked after a while.

“Well... Actually, just before dinner, I tried messaging Mashiro again.”

“Oh? And...?”

“And I couldn’t, because she’s deleted her Twitter account.”

“What?! But why would she do that now?”

“Not *now*; it must have been around a month ago. That’s how long it takes for an account to be deleted from Twitter. As for why, she said something about how it’s pointless to have tons of people like you if the one person you actually want to like you doesn’t, or something like that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No idea. All I know is that I never got a reply, and now her account has disappeared. That means she doesn’t want to talk to me, doesn’t it?”

“I can’t speak for her, but would she really delete her whole account just because of you?”

Would she? I wish I knew, I thought to myself, grateful that Kokoro seemed to care so much.

“You two didn’t exchange LINE accounts?”

“Nope.”

“The café Twitter accounts have DMs disabled too. That means that if you

want to talk to her, you'll have to go to Meow'd Maid..."

"I definitely don't have the courage to do that."

"Yeah..."

Maybe it was time for me to forget about Mashiro. She didn't seem to want to talk to me anymore, and in any case, I had no way of contacting her.

I remembered her saying that she thought she liked me, but, since she hadn't replied to my message, that must have meant she'd changed her mind. That realization hit me pretty hard.

"Say, when we went to that company event, didn't you pick up some girl? How'd that turn out?" Kokoro asked.

"We just said hello to each other on LINE right after the event, but that was it."

To be honest, Yume had slipped my mind, though our exchanges had been so brief that I couldn't really help it.

"What was she like, anyway?"

"She was very, *very* cute. She was wearing this... What would you call it? A gothic lolita outfit? She worked for the Maid-Tale Café, if I remember right."

"Oh... Then, if I checked out that café's account, maybe there'd be a picture of her on it."

"Actually, we followed each other's private accounts, so there are probably pictures of her on there," I said.

"For real?!" Kokoro asked, surprised.

I pulled out my phone and found Yume's account. Her profile icon was a selfie, and there were other pictures of her in her tweets.

"Wow, she looks so sweet! And that sure is lolita fashion, all right. How did you manage to get her LINE?"

"I just helped her find something she'd dropped, and she said she wanted to thank me, so she just kind of naturally gave me her contact."

"*She* gave it to *you*?! Then she must be totally into you!"

“We haven’t really messaged each other since then though...”

“Why don’t you try to message her then? You could invite her out or something.”

“I thought about it, but I don’t have the courage to do that either. We only met in person once.”

“Sheesh, you can’t just go and waste opportunities like that!”

“But what else am I supposed to do?”

“Just reply to one of her tweets or something! And when you’re more familiar with each other, then hit her up on LINE!”

“Ohhh... I see,” I said, convinced by Kokoro’s suggestion. It sounded much easier than messaging her out of the blue.

I decided to look at her timeline and reply to one of the tweets that I could actually hold a conversation about.

“You’d better try your luck with this girl, on Twitter or wherever else. Maybe that’ll help you get over Gojo. And, who knows? When we go to WonFes, you could meet your future girlfriend there. A girl cute enough to make you forget all about Gojo! New love is the best medicine for a broken heart!”

New love, huh...

Before learning the truth about Mashiro, I really had liked her. Afterwards... I still kind of liked her. But I couldn’t keep thinking about her forever. I had to find my ideal girlfriend within the next two years, before graduating high school. And to do that, I had to keep moving forward. Kokoro was constantly doing her best, and I had to do the same.

“Yeah, you’re right!”

Speaking with Kokoro had a strange way of helping me sort out my feelings.

I need to wallow less and act more. I’ll try to become friends with Yume and maybe meet some cosplayers at this event. There’s no point looking back. I have to do what I can right now.

4

The next Monday, at school, I explained our plan to Ai.

“...which is why I’ll be going to WonFes with Nishina, who wants to meet other cosplayers.”

“Damn, that girl’s always trying something new, huh?”

She’s just that desperate. Not that I can blame her. I should be trying just as hard, since I have a deadline.

“Wait, don’t tell me you’re cosplaying too!”

“No way! I’m going to go with her as a cameraman of sorts. She said she wants pictures of her cosplaying, so—”

“You never come with *me* as *my* cameraman!” Ai said, puffing his cheeks with an audible *Hmph!*

Is he... jealous? That’s kind of cut—wait, never mind...

“Don’t you have that old dude as your cameraman anyway?” I asked him.

“Yeah, that’s true. You probably can’t even take pictures right anyway.”

“Hey!”

“Have you ever taken a proper photograph in your life? Do you even own a camera?”

“I—”

“And it’s not like Nishina’s the only one. It’s really obvious that you only want to go there as a cameraman so you can meet some cute cosplayer girl.”

He saw right through me!

“But if you go there asking girls for pictures with nothing but your phone, they’re gonna think you’re just another creep in the crowd.”

“R-Really? Nishina even told me to print business cards with my Twitter

handle on them to exchange with cosplayers.”

“Huh? You’re not going there as a cosplayer though. What kind of business card would you need?”

“A cameraman business card...?”

“Huh? Are you trying to make me laugh? You might as well hand them cards saying, ‘*I’m only here to meet girls!*’” Ai joked, failing to hold back his grin.

“I’d better buy a camera before the event then. Even if it’s a cheap one.”

“You wanna borrow my DSLR?”

“C-Can I?!” I asked, surprised by the sudden offer.

“Sure. I’m not going to that event anyway, so I don’t need it.”

“Ai! Thank you so much!”

“But don’t think that having a good camera automatically means you can take good pictures.”

“Hmm, yeah. You’re right.”

“I guess I *could* teach you the basics...”

“Really? You’re serious?! Why are you helping me out so much all of a sudden?”

Being laughed at and called desperate had made me regret mentioning the event to Ai, but now I was more than glad that I had. After all, he could be kind sometimes. Rarely, but sometimes.

“Heh, it’s just so you can come with me as my cameraman if Honda isn’t available sometime.”

“Of course! I’ll come with you! Oh... actually, there’s another thing I want to ask you.”

“I cooperate with you the teeniest bit, and now you’re taking advantage of my kindness?”

“As a cosplayer, what kind of cameraman leaves you with a good impression?”

“Good impression, like, *I really want to hire this cameraman*?”

“No, no. Good impression, like, *I really want to date this cameraman.*”

“Why are you asking *me* that?! I only dress as a girl! I have no idea what girls think!”

“Hmm... you have a point. Try to channel your inner girl then,” I suggested. After all, Ai was, for most intents and purposes, basically a girl.

“Agh, then let’s see... I guess the most important things are having good manners and taking decent pictures. And by manners, I mean the obvious stuff, like asking before taking pictures and thanking the cosplayer afterwards, but also things like not getting too close, not touching the cosplayer, not trying to get panty shots, not taking up too much time, not going for sexy angles, et cetera, et cetera. Oh, there’s another very important one: sending the pictures after the event.”

“I see... Sending them to the cosplayer?”

“Exactly. Cosplayers want their pictures from that day, so that they can upload them on socials and the like. Ideally they want pictures that have been taken by talented cameramen with good cameras, but that goes without saying.”

“So that doesn’t apply to me...”

“It kind of does though. When a cameraman sends you your pictures, you tend to remember the guy. I just forget about the ones who don’t, anyway.”

“Okay,” I nodded along with his valuable cosplayer opinion, taking mental notes of everything.

“Then if you want to *look* like a good cameraman... As far as being actually attractive, I’d say that looking fresh and well groomed is the most important thing. Then, of course, being kind, well-behaved... the usual stuff. I’d say that being an excellent cameraman doesn’t even matter that much, as long as you at least have a proper camera. Also, you’ll want to give non-creepy compliments.”

“Meaning?”

“Obviously, things like ‘you look sexy’ are out of the question, but hearing

‘you’re cute’ from someone you’ve never met before is weird too. Things like ‘what a great costume,’ or ‘you look just like that character,’ or ‘that wig is so detailed’ are much better.”

This made enough sense that I should have been able to figure it out by myself, but it was useful information nonetheless.

“I see! You really *do* know what girls think after all! But still, being well groomed and kind and stuff... That doesn’t only go for cameramen, does it? Those are just ways to be attractive in general.”

“Of course they are.”

The teacher walked into the classroom, which marked the end to our conversation.

Just by having a short chat with Ai, not only had I found a camera, but I’d also learned how to behave like an attractive cameraman.

You have no idea how grateful I am.

The same day, after classes were over, Kokoro and I met Elena outside the main gate.

“Oh, hey, Minami!”

“Nishina, Ichigaya! Sorry to have kept you both waiting!”

It was time for us to go buy swimsuits together, since the only ones we owned were the plain, generic ones we used for PE. We needed something that actually looked good at the pool. I didn’t have a clue where to look for one, but Kokoro and Elena had researched our options beforehand.

“So, are we going to a sports supplies shop or something?” I asked.

“Sports?! Do you wanna buy another school swimsuit or something?” Kokoro grinned, barely holding back her laughter. “We’re going to 209 in Shibuya, where they actually have, you know, decent ones?”

“Shibuya? 209?” I parroted back, suddenly nervous. I’d never been to Shibuya before.

“I looked online for some two-pieces that don’t show too much, and I think something like this would be super cute,” she said, showing a picture on her phone to Elena.

“Ah, you’re right! That does look rather sweet!”

Weren’t they nervous about going to the pool? They look pretty excited about it to me. I’m the one feeling nervous right now. I’ll have to show off this skinny-yet-somehow-squishy body of mine at the pool, among loads of fit, handsome guys, and it’s way too late to start working out now.

The two girls continued showing each other pictures and chattering loudly all the way to Shibuya.

Despite it being a weekday, the station was absolutely packed. The Scramble Crossing was also terribly crowded, like it always is on TV. Think of it like Comiket that, instead of otaku, is attended by trendy, attractive people. A nightmare, basically.

We somehow fought our way through the ocean of pedestrians and made it to the 209 fashion mall, which the two girls said they’d already visited several times before. Sometimes I couldn’t help but wonder whether they were real otaku.

We found the swimsuit shop on the seventh floor.

All of the customers here are young girls... Am I even allowed inside?

“Look! Look! Awaaah, there are so many!”

“Oh, wow! Do you think a hat would be suitable for this kind of event? And sandals?!”

Unlike me, Kokoro and Elena were as enthusiastic as ever.

“If we find something cute, let’s try it on! Okay?”

“Sure!”

Looking at girls’ swimwear was the last thing I wanted to do with my time, so I swiftly left for the men’s section, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. Being in this place was painful. If other girls saw me, they’d look at me

in disgust, asking themselves why such a creepy, unattractive boy would come to this store.

I should have gotten one off Amazon, I thought to myself, before automatically pulling a pair of trunks from the rail and checking the price. *Ten thousand yen?! That's one more zero than I was expecting! Th-There must be cheaper ones, right? They can't all be this expensive... right?!*

I started to frantically pick up all the swimsuits around me, checking how much they cost.

"You look lovely, Nishina!" I could hear Elena's excited squeaks from across the store. "Oh, Ichigaya, I was wondering where you'd gone! Come, take a look!"

"Huh...?"

I went over to Elena, who was standing outside one of the fitting rooms. Inside was Kokoro, already sporting a bikini. It had a white, ruffly top and a red floral pattern on the bottom. It wasn't shaped like the run-of-the-mill bikinis that I often saw in anime: the ruffles on the top were stacked in two layers, going all the way to the sides and ending in a thin string that was tied around the back. The bottoms were more like a tiny skirt.

Is this the kind of thing that's popular at pools?

It may have been less revealing than a normal bikini, but only slightly so. Her cleavage, shoulders, hips, arms, navel, and thighs were all perfectly in view, and keeping my eyes off all the off-limits zones was not an easy task.

You can't tell when she's wearing her normal clothes, but Nishina's really fit. She's got a decent chest, a narrow waist, and slim legs to boot. Her skin is so smooth... Ah! She's going to kill me if I keep staring at her!

"I'm torn between this and this other one," Kokoro said, picking up a different swimsuit. This one had a pink check pattern, and the bottom didn't have a skirt-looking thing on it.

"That looks wonderful too! I'd love to see you wearing it!" Elena said.

"Really? Wait a sec then," the impromptu model said, closing the fitting room curtain.

"Are you not trying anything on?" Elena asked me.

"Nah! Men's swimsuits are just like any old shorts. Wh-What about you?"

"I will! I'm just waiting for Nishina to choose."

I'll get to see Nishina and *Minami in swimsuits? Maybe coming here was worth it after all...*

The curtain slid open.

"H-How does it look?" Kokoro asked, embarrassed.

This bikini looked even sexier. The top didn't cover her cleavage at all, with only a thin piece of string connecting the cups over her breasts. The bottom too, was held together by strings on the hips.

This makes it even harder not to look at her skin...

"Ohhh! That's so cute too! I can't tell which one looks better on you! What do you think, Ichigaya?"

"M-Me?! Er..." I fumbled for words.

As a man, the second swimsuit was the one I'd rather be looking at, but that

was *way* too creepy to tell her.

“S-Spit it out, Ichigaya! As a guy, which one do you like better? When I find a boyfriend, I wanna wear it and go to the pool with him...”

She’s right! What am I being all considerate for? This is what we’re supposed to help each other with!

“I-I think I’m speaking for all male otaku when I say that the one you’re wearing now looks better. The other one is trendy, but, you know... a bit *too* trendy. Otaku like cute but simple designs, like on this one. And this one also looks a bit more childish, which is always a plus for us...”

I conveniently forgot to mention how *this one also shows more skin*.

“Oh... I guess I’ll buy this one then. I liked it better to begin with! I’m not so comfortable with how uncovered I feel though,” she said, closing the curtain once again. To value my opinion so highly, Kokoro must have had some serious trust in me.

“I’ll try something on now then!” Elena said.

“O-Oh, cool...”

I wonder what kind of swimsuit she’s going to choose...

While I waited for Kokoro and Elena to change, I went back over to the men’s section. I’d checked all of the price tags, and even the cheapest one cost around five thousand yen—not crazy expensive, but definitely not cheap either.

To be honest, I didn’t really care that much about what I wore. This would likely be the only time I ever wore it, so I wanted to spend as little money as possible. On the other hand though, I didn’t want to be wearing something so uncool as to stand out at the pool.

After changing back into her everyday clothes, Kokoro came out of the fitting room.

“You choose one yet?”

“They’re all too expensive for what I’m ready to spend on a swimsuit...” I told her honestly.

“But you came all the way here!”

“I expected them to be cheaper.”

“What are you going to do then?”

“I’ll just get a cheap one off the internet, I guess.”

“Ugh, fine, but... try not to choose one that looks *too* bad. That’d make it embarrassing for us to be seen with you,” she said, making no attempt to hide the contempt in her eyes.

As much as it pained me to admit it, I agreed with her. Wearing a bad-looking swimsuit next to two fashionable, pretty girls would have been embarrassing for me too.

“If you’re going to buy it online, check out the trendy ones here, so you can look for ones that look kind of similar,” Kokoro said.

“Oh! That’s a good idea!”

Previously, I’d only looked at the price tags, but now I focused on how the trunks actually looked. Most were ridiculously gaudy, but there were also some simple striped ones with not-so-flashy colors. I obviously liked those ones better.

Kokoro went to the cashier to pay for her pink bikini, when all of a sudden...

“Looking for anything in particular, sir?”

“Wha—?”

A store clerk addressed me out of the blue, catching me by surprise. The guy was probably prepared to talk me into buying something I didn’t want, but I decided that the best course of action was to reply honestly anyway.

“I, well... I need something to wear at the pool at night.”

“In that case, you’re probably going to spend a lot of time around the pool rather than in it, so I suggest you go with a nice pair of surfers’ swimming trunks. That’s also what I personally wear!”

“Surfers’...?”

Are they different from normal swimming trunks?

“Yes! They’re made from a special fabric that dries much more quickly than normal trunks, and they can also be worn as shorts with a T-shirt. They’re very popular this year,” he explained.

If I could wear them as normal shorts, that’d definitely get me more mileage out of them. That pool event is probably the first and last time I’m actually going to use them to swim...

“There are even some that have an underwear layer built in, so you don’t need to wear anything else underneath,” the clerk said.

Wait, you’re supposed to wear underwear underneath your trunks...?

“These, for example! They’re our best-selling design,” he continued, holding up a pair of trunks with some kind of Hawaiian print on them. They were certainly eye-catching—in a bad way.

“Of course, you can also wear another layer underneath them just fine!”

“Another layer... of what?”

“Well, we have some specially made underwear for swimming, but normal briefs, or better yet boxers, work just fine. What do you say?”

Boxers?! Under a swimsuit?! I’m learning so much today...

“If possible I’d like something a bit more... low profile. But not too uncool, you know?” I said, despite knowing that continuing this conversation would lead to me being pressured into buying something.

“What about... this?” the clerk asked, showing me another pair. “This design is also trendy lately. Not too long, not too short. Just above the knee.”

These trunks had three wide stripes over a solid background, but were slightly longer—*“not too long, not too short”*—than the previous ones.

“Oh, not bad...”

Thinking that I could actually wear these in public, I checked the price tag—they were over ten thousand yen. *Waaay too expensive.*

“This one doesn’t have the built-in inner layer, so you would need something to wear under it. I recommend this!” the clerk continued, waving some boxers

with an abstract oriental pattern in my face. I looked at the tag, and was just as shocked as last time: five thousand, five hundred yen.

More than five thousand yen for a pair of boxers?!

“Haha...”

Unable to find the words to refuse the clerk’s recommendations, I remained completely still, laughing to myself like an idiot.

“Oh, Ichigaya, there you are! Find anything good?” Kokoro, who had finished paying, came over to me.

“K-Kind of...”

“Oh! This looks nice!” she said, pointing at the trunks the clerk was holding.

“It’s this year’s best seller!” he swiftly replied.

“I see, I see. Well, we’ll look around a bit more before deciding.”

“Take your time. Let me know if I can be of any more help,” the clerk said, and then he hopped away with a polite smile on his face.

“Why did you...?” I asked Kokoro.

“Because you looked like a guy who was being persuaded to buy something way too expensive for him. Why didn’t you tell the clerk you were fine by yourself?”

“H-He just kept talking, and I didn’t know how to tell him I wasn’t interested.”

“C’mon, it’s his job! He’s used to being told off! Just say that you need more time to think and he’ll go bother someone else!”

“I see...”

In my heart, I thanked Kokoro for saving me. After all, the swimsuits that looked half-decent were all out of my budget.

“Did you at least decide what kind of trunks you’re going to look for?” she asked me.

“More or less, yeah. Talking with that guy actually taught me a lot.”

Thanks to that talkative clerk, I’d gone from knowing nothing about swimming

trunks to knowing very little about swimming trunks, which was a significant improvement. I just needed to find the right one online.

“Good for you. What’s up with Minami anyway? She’s taking her sweet time. Is she okay?” Kokoro wondered, before heading toward the fitting room where Elena was still changing. “Minami! Is everything all right?”

“Y-Yes... I’m sorry I took so long. I’m done changing...” Elena’s voice came from inside the fitting room.

“Really? Great! Can I open the curtain?”

“Ah! I... er, I-I guess... I’m done changing, b-but...”

“Hm? I’m opening it!”

“Uh... O-Okay...”

Kokoro swiped open the curtain, revealing Elena in a sexy black swimsuit. The top did very little to conceal her large breasts, and the bottoms started even lower on her hips than a normal bikini would.

Elena’s proportions were worthy of a swimsuit model, if not better. Even in school uniform, she had a great figure (and a great chest), but it was almost too much to take in all at once.

Are those E cups? I’m pretty sure they’re D cups at the very least...

“Oh, whoa! That’s some body you’ve got, Minami!” Kokoro commented.

I agreed with her, but this was *way* too sexy. Showing up at the pool like this would have definitely stirred up a mess.

“I thought that, since I’ll have to wear that skimpy costume,” Elena explained, “I needed to choose a swimsuit on the sexier side, so that it’d actually help me get used to being so exposed. So I chose this and tried putting it on, but then I saw myself in the mirror and was a little bit shocked. I can’t bring myself to go to the pool in this...” she said, squirming in embarrassment as she tried to hide herself behind her arms.

Seeing Elena blushing so shyly made her look even sexier. Realizing that she probably didn’t want me to stare at her, I averted my gaze from the sight that had fully repaid me for the trouble of going to Shibuya.

“Maybe you should save that for another occasion, yeah? Let’s try another one!” Kokoro replied optimistically.

“Yes, let’s...”

Next up in the Elena collection was a light blue halterneck bikini with large ruffles, similar to the one Kokoro had tried on earlier. It wasn’t as daring as the previous one, but it still put her cleavage on display.

I’m starting to think it’s not the choice of swimsuit as much as her huge boobs making her look sexy...

It looked really good on her, and, while sexy, it still had a cute, innocent vibe to it.

“You look great! This is totally the one you should go for!”

“Th-Thank you, Nishina...”

“Ichigaya! Don’t be rude! Tell her how good it looks!”

“B-But I... I, um, am not... er...”

Stop asking me for my opinion! All I can give you are horny remarks about how cute and sexy every single swimsuit looks on the two of you!

“I-I think that this one... looks better than the previous one, maybe...”

The previous one had looked *wonderful*, but going to the pool wearing something like that would have had its share of dangers.

“Okay! I’ll buy this one then,” Elena said before changing back into her clothes and proceeding to the checkout.

“I’m so glad I was able to find something cute! It was kind of pricey though,” Kokoro said as we walked back to Shibuya station.

“There were so many nice ones that I had trouble choosing. Ichigaya, I don’t think I saw you try any swimsuits on. Did you end up buying one?” Elena asked me.

“Ah, yeah... that. That shop was too expensive, so I decided to just buy one online.”

“Oh, I see. That’s understandable.”

I just hoped that they didn’t think I only tagged along to see them trying on swimwear. At least, that wasn’t my original intention.

“So, as for the pool... We’ll go on the Sunday a week before the cosplay event. That works, right?” Kokoro asked.

“Yes! That would be perfect!”

“Oh, and before that, sometime this week, let’s go to Ikebukuro after school to get your wig and color contacts!”

“Can I really ask you to help me out that much?”

“Don’t worry! I actually need to buy some for myself too!”

“What character are you going as?”

“I’m thinking Unithorn from *Adore Lane*!”

“Awww, that’s such a cute choice! I’m sure you’ll look lovely cosplaying her!”

Once we reached the station, we parted ways with Elena and caught our train back home.

When we got in, I made myself comfortable on the couch and began scrolling through online clothing stores. There were a surprising number of cheap swimsuits, many more than at the store we’d visited in Shibuya.

I tried to recall the information that the overbearing clerk had given me: surfers’ trunks could be worn as normal pants, some trunks didn’t require underwear, and this year’s trend was wearing not-too-long, not-too-short trunks. Taking all that into consideration, I looked for something that looked cool without being flashy.

“What store are you checking out?” Kokoro asked, pulling up a chair in front of me.

“Rakuten. There’s so many options I have no idea what to look for.”

“Oh, I buy loads of stuff there. Sort the results by number of reviews, and find something that has a lot of ratings and a good average. And actually read the

reviews!”

“I see!”

Following Kokoro’s expert advice, I sorted the list of results and found a few pairs of trunks that looked somewhat like the designs I’d seen at the store earlier today. I bookmarked the ones that seemed to fit the store clerk’s advice and that I actually thought looked okay.

By reading through the reviews of several pairs, I realized that most people suggested wearing something underneath them, even for the ones that didn’t strictly require it. I decided that I’d wear my own boxers at the pool just in case.

“I found a few good options. Could you take a look?”

“Sure,” Kokoro said, taking the phone I handed her.

“Hmm... I’d personally go with this one!”

When she gave the phone back to me, the screen showed a pair of surfers’ trunks with horizontal stripes. It looked similar to one of the designs I’d seen in the store, but it cost less than a third of the price. Since that’d have been my top pick too, I was relieved to have the fashion-savvy Kokoro agree with me.

“Perfect! I’ll get those then!”

I quickly ordered the trunks, mentally checking the chore off my to-do list.

The next day, before class.

“Here. My camera. And you’re very welcome.”

Ai handed me a large pouch containing his DSLR.

“Ohhh! Thanks!”

“Take it out, so I can teach you how to use it.”

“Right!”

Slightly nervous at handling something so expensive, I took the camera out of the pouch.

“You see it doesn’t have a lens, right? The lens is in a smaller pocket inside the

case, and you need to mount it.”

“Okay...”

I carefully followed Ai’s instructions on how to mount the lens on the camera.

“Since you’re a beginner, I guess you can just leave it on auto.”

“Auto?”

“That just means the camera automatically chooses the best settings. There’s no way *you* can manage to learn about exposure, tone, and all that before the event, so this will have to do. You just need to worry about focusing the camera.”

“Really? It’s easier than I thought! Auto it is!” I took a couple of shots of the stuff on my desk as practice. “Wow! It even blurs the background automatically!”

“Well yeah, of course. That’s ’cause it’s a DSLR.”

I had to admit that taking pictures with a fancy camera was a lot of fun. I finally understood why some people were so passionate about photography.

“You’re just starting out, so don’t bother worrying about any complicated details. There’s only one important thing: making the cosplayer look good in pictures!”

“Yeah, that makes sense...”

“Right? But you wouldn’t *believe* how many cameramen can’t even do that. You have to look through the lens and find the perfect angle. And if you find a good angle, take several pictures! If you take a bunch, at least one is bound to be good! Got it?”

“Y-Yeah...” I said, finding Ai through the lens and shooting pictures of him from different angles. I took picture after picture of him, just as he’d said. *Snap! Snap!*

“This kind of depends on the individual, but most cosplayers like to have their pictures taken from above, since that makes them look cuter.”

“From above, uh-huh...”

I continued taking more pictures of him, this time from above. *Snap! Snap!*

"C-Can't you find another subject?!" he scolded as I took yet another shot, looking an uncomfortable mix of perplexed and embarrassed.

I did want to meet cute cosplayers and exchange business cards, but first I had to take good pictures so that they'd at least like me as a cameraman. I still wasn't sure if that would find me a date, but I had to try.

Later that week, Kokoro and Elena went to a cosplay shop to buy shoes and other accessories. Kokoro had asked me whether she could cut the wig at home, and since she told me she'd clean up after she was done, I'd said yes.

While she was busy trimming the purple hair, I got to work printing my business cards. They only had my name and Twitter handle on them.

I wish I had the confidence to put my photograph on them like Nishina did...

* * *

Three days later.

When I arrived back from school, I noticed an extra pair of slip-ons in the entrance next to Kokoro's. It only took me a moment to realize that Elena was here, and only one more moment to start feeling nervous about it.

Right... I guess they did say they'd be trimming and trying on their wigs today.

I opened the door to the living room and braved a step inside.

"I'm ho—"

I froze in place. Kokoro and Elena were there, as I was expecting, but, while the former was wearing her usual clothes, the latter was trying on an... interesting outfit.

"Eeeeek! I-Ichigaya?!" Elena shrieked, blushing.

She was standing in front of our full-length mirror wearing a costume that looked like a white bikini and a dangerously short skirt with white knee-high socks.

Why is she dressed like that*?! I... I think I remember seeing that costume*

somewhere before. But where? Oh, that's it! It's the one she's supposed to wear at WonFes! I know it looked skimpy from the character illustration she showed us, but this is barely an outfit at all!

The top barely covered half of her huge breasts, and the skirt served no purpose at all. Elena had told us they would make it longer for her, and maybe they had, but if she wore such an outfit on stage, she risked showing her undies to everyone in the crowd.

The fact that she's got such an attractive body makes it look even sexier...

"I-I'm so sorry I'm dressed like this inside your house. The company recently sent me the costume and I, e-erm..."

"We just wanted to see how revealing it is, so she tried it on, y'know?" Kokoro explained.

"O-Oh, I see..."

"And it sure is revealing, huh? We've really gotta do something about it!"

Kokoro was right. This was no way for a young voice actress to show up in public—especially one trying to start a career.

"Y-Yes. Since we already trimmed the wig, can I put it on to see how it looks?" Elena asked.

"Sure! Go ahead!"

The wig she was talking about was long and pink, just like the hair of the character she'd shown us before. It was resting on a wig stand on the floor, on top of some old newspapers. Next to it was a plastic bag full of pink trimmings.

Elena bent down, picking up the wig stand with the wig with it. The only problem was that I was standing behind her, and was suddenly presented with a perfectly unobstructed view of her panties.

Oh! I... I, er, wasn't expecting that. White... the color of purity and innocence. Beautiful...

"Eeeeeeek!" Elena squealed again, pulling down her skirt to hide her butt as she spun around to look at me. Her cheeks were now even redder. "I-Ichigaya! D-Did you...?"

"H-Huh?! N-No!"

"Ichigaya," Kokoro said, her face as cold as stone. "Don't tell me that you were looking at her panties!"

"No! Really! I-I-I...! Minami!"

"You pervert!" Kokoro yelled.

But it's not my fault!

"No, it was all my fault! I should have been more careful!" Elena inexplicably apologized.

"What did I tell you?! This is why we need to do something about it! You have to wear shorts under it or something!"

"But they'd peek out beneath a skirt this short..."

"What about your swimsuit then? You can wear that, then wear skin-colored pantyhose over it and put on the socks on top of those. How does that sound?"

"That sounds perfect! I'll do that!"

I was relieved that she would take the necessary precautions. Elena's panties were a priceless sight, not to be shared with crowds of nameless otaku.

"What are you even wearing under that top?" Kokoro asked.

"Hm? Nothing in particular..."

"What?! No strapless bra? Not even pasties?!"

"I wasn't sure what would work, so I haven't bought anything yet..."

Her boobs' only barrier from the outer world is that thin piece of fabric, I thought, unsuccessfully trying to hide my excitement. *They're way too big for that top anyway. One abrupt accident and out they come!*

“When you go on stage, you need to wear one or the other, okay? You can even get them online! Like this one!” Kokoro held up her phone to Elena, showing her a strapless bra.

“I didn’t even know things like these existed. I’ll have to buy one!”

Kokoro sighed. “Okay. Now I’ll tell you how to put on the wig.”

“Thank you!”

“You see that net, right? You put that over your head and pull it down around your neck. Then you pull the front part up over your face until it’s only covering your hair. Got it?”

“Yes! I’ll go give it a try,” Elena said, glancing at me briefly as she made for the bathroom.

“We have a mirror in here. Why does she need to use the one in the bathroom?” I curiously asked Kokoro.

“When you’re putting on a wig net, you look super weird. Like, your face gets all squished up. She probably didn’t want you to see.”

“Oh, really?”

“Can’t you guess from how I just explained it?”

To be honest, I couldn’t. But that would explain the look Elena had given me on her way out of the room. That made me happy though, since it meant that Elena worried about not looking bad in front of me. *She should be more worried about how sexy that outfit makes her look...*

“I’m going to give her a hand,” Kokoro said, leaving me alone waiting.

When the two of them came back, Elena was wearing the pink wig. It looked really cute on her.

“Now you just need to do your makeup! We’ll cover your eyebrows with concealer, then pencil on some pink ones, like the character has. Also, you really wanna go all out on the eyes when you’re cosplaying. Eyeliner, eyeshadow, and fake lashes too. That’ll get you closer to the character.”

“Mm-hmm!”

“Ichigaya, we can’t focus with a guy around. Go to your room or something.”

“A’ight...”

“I’m sorry,” Elena said.

“You don’t need to apologize!” I replied, smiling on the outside, but inwardly cursing Kokoro, who could have done this in her own room instead of here.

Back in my room, I thought about how incredible Elena’s cosplay was. I couldn’t help it: even if I tried not to think about it, her sensual, scantily clad figure had been burnt forever into my brain.

“You can come down, Ichigaya!” Kokoro called after what felt like forever. I obediently went back down to the living room.

“O-Ohh!”

Elena’s cosplay was now absolutely perfect. Her makeup, as was usual for cosplayers, was thick, but it fit well with the overall gaudiness of the costume and pink hair.

“Isn’t she the cutest? It’s like she jumped straight out of an anime!” Kokoro commented, and I had to agree. Elena was cute, beautiful, *and* sexy. She looked perfect in every detail. I was so taken aback that I couldn’t even find the words to compliment her.

“Yeah...”

“It’s all thanks to your help. I’m so grateful,” Elena said, blushing as she thanked Kokoro.

“It was super easy, since you look so good to begin with! You’re built like an anime character, y’know?”

“I’m going to take a picture of the makeup you put on me so I can try to do the same on the day of the event,” Elena said.

“Okay! Lend me your phone. I’ll take it for you!” Kokoro replied.

“Thank you so much!”

“Oh, that reminds me. I actually borrowed Ai’s DSLR camera today,” I said.

“For real?! That’s perfect! You can take pictures of her and then send her the files! It’s going to be difficult to get decent pictures during the event, since she’ll be so far away on the stage.”

“Huh?”

Me? Take pictures of Minami’s cosplay?!

“A DSLR? Why would you...?” Elena asked.

“Oh, yeah. Ichigaya and I are going to the festival. I’m gonna be cosplaying, and Ichigaya will go as a cameraman. Do we need to register or buy tickets in advance to see you on stage there?”

“No, it’s free and open to anyone.”

“That’s great! We’ll be cheering on you!”

“Really?! You’re going to come to see me?! Knowing that both of you will be there makes me feel so much better. Thank you!”

It was nice to see her so enthusiastic about us going to see her performance. I just hadn’t expected to also become Elena’s cameraman.

“So,” she continued, “what was that about a DSLR?”

“He borrowed one from a friend so he can take good pictures of cosplayers at the festival. But since you’re all dressed up already, I figured we might as well snap a couple of pics of you right now.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful! Actually, taking pictures will be against the rules during the performance, and I thought it was a shame that I wouldn’t have anything to remember the cosplay by.”

“Perfect then! Let’s do it!”

“Wait, wait,” I said. “Slow down. I have the camera, but I’m still terrible at using it.”

I could hardly believe that I’d be allowed to take pictures of Elena in such an incredibly sexy costume, but that didn’t mean that I’d be any good at it.

“Stop messing around and bring the camera here!”

“U-Uh, sure...”

Following Kokoro's orders, I brought the camera back from my room and put the lens on it like Ai had taught me.

"I'll give it a try then. If that's okay?" I asked Elena, pointing the shutter at her. My nervous hands were shaking the whole camera.

"Y-Yes! But, erm... How should I pose?"

"What about you start by looking over your shoulder? Your costume looks cute from behind too," Kokoro suggested.

"That's a great idea! One second, then," Elena said, facing away from the camera and looking back over her shoulder.

I pressed the shutter button as deliberately as if I were pulling the trigger on a gun. I just hoped that all of my shaking didn't end up blurring the picture.

"Why don't you try sitting down next?" Kokoro continued, suggesting another pose to Elena. As for me, I was way too nervous to come up with any useful advice.

"Like this?"

Elena knelt on the floor, bending her knees outwards so that she could sit between the lower half of her legs, aaand I got another glimpse of her underwear.

Whew! Calm down, Kagetora! But, hm? They looked different from before...

"Minami," Kokoro scolded. "Your swimsuit is showing!"

Swimsuit? Oh, she put her bikini on so that her panties don't show...

"S-Sorry!" Elena rushed to pull her skirt down to keep her substitute panties safe from prying eyes.

"Ichigaya! Why were you staring?! They weren't her panties, get it?! It's just a swimsuit! Stop being a creep!"

"I-I didn't even see anything," I promptly lied.

I took more photos of Elena, then she told me her email address so that I could send her the files later. Kokoro asked her to stay for dinner, but she told us she didn't want to intrude for so long. So, right after she'd changed, Kokoro

and I saw her off.

“My costume is pretty much ready, and you’ve got your camera. We’re good to go! Maybe you should get a bit more practice taking pictures though. Your hands were shaking so much! Cosplayers are gonna laugh at you if that’s how you are when we’re there.”

“Ugh...”

I considered explaining that I’d just been nervous seeing Elena dressed like that, but I decided to keep my mouth shut. I didn’t want to be laughed at or called a creep again. That being said, she was right that practicing a bit more wouldn’t hurt.

“But even if I practiced taking pictures of things or landscapes, having to shoot a person is completely different,” I lamented.

“I guess that’s true, yeah. Do you want me to model for you? I need to practice my cosplay poses anyway. I still look way too stiff.”

“R-Really? You’d do that for me?”

“Sure, no problem! Let me go change!” Kokoro said, then ran up to her room.

I’d taken pictures of Kokoro in the past, but I never imagined that I would be doing it again, never mind with a proper camera. There was even more pressure to get a decent photograph than when I was using my smartphone, and as if that wasn’t enough, I had to improve myself in time for the festival.

After thirty long minutes, Kokoro finally walked back into the living room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“You sure took your time, Nishin—”

It was not Kokoro standing before me, but Unithorn from *Adore Lane*. The cosplay was as cute as it could possibly get, with her long, violet hair, white sleeveless dress, and horse plushie. She could have walked right out of the game.

“I thought it’d be better practice if I put on the wig and the makeup like I’ll have on at the festival. Of course, I’m going to have *proper* makeup on then though.”

This isn't "proper" makeup? It looks perfect to me.

I feared that Kokoro's cosplay would make me just as nervous as Elena's had and make it impossible for me to focus on taking photographs. The upper half of her chest was completely exposed, and my eyes naturally strayed there.

"I started playing it because you told me that it's popular with otaku guys, but I actually liked it so much that I'm playing it all the time now! I've been wanting to cosplay Unithorn for aaages!"

"Oh, so you actually like it? That's going to score you points with the fans."

"Hehe. I know, right? Okay then! Let's try a few poses!"

Kokoro moved in front of the empty wall that we'd used as a background before, but stood there as straight as a scarecrow.

"Hm... I'm not really sure how to start."

"Can't you just try something? Anything will do!"

"I wouldn't need to practice if it was that easy!"

"For what it's worth, when I think of Unithorn, I think of her from the official art. You know, where she's hugging the plushie against her chest."

"Oh, you're right! Like this?"

"Good," I said, watching Kokoro squish the horse plushie. "I'm going to start then. Yeah?"

As I pointed the camera at Kokoro, I tried to remember what Ai had taught me: *"The most important thing is making the cosplayer look good."* I tried out various different angles, and took a bunch of pictures from the best ones.

"Show me already!"

"All right, here you go." I took the camera from around my neck and handed it to Kokoro.

"Hmm... I look weird."

"What? How so?"

"I just don't like how I look from up front. I'll face this way, so shoot my left

side next, okay? And you're a bit too far away. Come closer next time."

"S-Sure!"

I took back the camera and Kokoro posed again. This time, with much less blank space around the subject, the pictures looked a lot better. We then went through several cycles of taking pictures, looking at them to see which angle and pose would work best, then went back to taking more pictures.

"Come on, give me some input here! Tell me where to face or how to move. Only you can see what it looks like!"

"G-Got it. Then... turn a little bit that way."

With Kokoro following my instructions, we started getting even better pictures. She eventually got used to posing in ways that looked good on camera, and I was getting better at finding flattering angles.

"Let's try to take some while I'm sitting," she said, sitting down just like Elena had done earlier. I remembered Ai telling me that a lot of cosplayers liked having their pictures taken from above, and I took the chance to do exactly that.

Ohhh! Hmm... Did Unithorn's dress look this sexy in the game? If I shoot from this angle, it's going to be a one-way ticket to cleavage city...

"What's wrong? What are you waiting for?"

"I-It's just that, um... This angle is... not good..."

I knew she was going to look at the pictures later, and I also knew that she'd be mad at me if I took one with her half-exposed boobs front and center.

"Huh? But I can't take selfies from above like that! Please! I'm sure it'll look good!"

"O-Okay..."

With Kokoro asking like that, who was I to refuse? I started taking pictures of her from above, still fully expecting her to be mad at me later. My hands, which had been nice and steady this whole time, started shaking again. Her boobs stared up at me, taunting me like soft, white marshmallows... I tried to keep my cool and snapped a picture.

“You got it? Show me!”

With no other choice, I handed her the camera. She took one look at the picture and froze, her face gradually becoming redder.

“Wh-What is...?! H-How do you...?!”

I had no idea what she was saying, but I understood the point she was trying to make.

“That’s why I told you that that angle was bad!”

“*This* is what you meant?!” She continued to stare down at the picture, shivering.

Oh no. OH NO. She’s going to snap...

“I deleted it! At least now I know that I have to be careful about pics from this angle when I’m at the festival,” she said, still blushing.

Maybe this was for the better. She probably didn’t want strangers taking pictures of her rack, and the one I’d taken was already taken care of.

That was enough practice for one day. We were starting to get hungry anyway, so we packed up the cosplay stuff and decided it was time for dinner.

That rehearsal is going to help both of us, I think. I’ll have to keep in mind what I’ve learned when I’m at the event. I’m going to give it my best!

5

Sunday seemed to come around faster than usual, and it was finally time for Kokoro, Elena, and me to go to the pool.

The girls had eventually settled on a pool inside an amusement park, since most hotel pools didn't allow minors for night events, and they were too expensive anyway. I was glad, since going to a pool like this didn't take quite as much courage as going to a hotel. The one they chose also seemed to be comfortably large, which was a nice bonus.

The pool opened at 6 p.m., and we arrived there early to buy our tickets, but by the time we got to the ticket line it was already chock full of people.

"I'm sooo excited!" Kokoro said.

"Me too!" Elena agreed.

They were both obviously already enjoying themselves, but I could feel my nervousness returning. It wasn't as bad as a hotel, granted, but being surrounded by all these extroverted, attractive people, I felt like a fish out of water. Lining up with us were families, couples, groups of girls, and handsome boys.

When we received our tickets, my anxiety took over entirely. If anything, I was glad I'd bought a decent swimsuit. Being in ugly school swimming trunks would have been another reason to want to run away.

"I'll text you when we're done changing!" Kokoro told me.

"See you later, Ichigaya!" Elena smiled as she waved to me.

"S-Sure."

Going into the men's changing room meant that I was now truly alone, but I was somewhat relieved to see a lot of other guys who were also there by themselves.

Well, I guess they're here with their girlfriends...

I changed into my swimsuit, left my stuff in a locker, and made for the pool. As hard as it was to believe, it was really happening. I, Kagetora Ichigaya, the introverted kissless virgin, was now at the pool at night, like the popular guys.

The sun was setting, blanketing the poolside in a beautiful orange hue. Young bikini-clad girls were dancing to the upbeat music. Again, there were families, couples, and groups of handsome guys—*are they here to pick up girls?*—but the guests in the highest number were, by far, groups of young girls.

Needless to say, all of the people I mentioned, unlike me, looked like the type of people who belonged at a nightly pool event. I'd thought the news of a voice actress going to an event like this would lure at least a few otaku out of their dens, but there was no one around who looked or smelled anything like an otaku.

It's not like I wasn't expecting it, but I'm all alone here!

Since the girls were still changing, I had to stand by myself, showing off my bony body. It couldn't get much worse. Though I knew nobody would waste their night staring at me, I could still imagine people making fun of me.

Please finish changing already!

After around five minutes of looking at my phone, trying not to focus on the people around me, I heard Kokoro's voice.

"Whoa! This place is neat! I'm totally feeling it!"

She and Elena had both changed into their new swimsuits, but were wearing long pieces of fabric tied at the chest over them.

That's a, uh... a "sarong," isn't it? When did they even buy those? I guess they still aren't comfortable showing their bodies in public...

Despite the fabric covering their figures, the two girls had already gathered a lot of attention. Men around the pool were staring at them, but so were other women.

Seeing them like this makes it feel even weirder that they'd go to the pool with me...

On one side was Kokoro: thin, slender, and as cute as an idol. Today she had

her hair up in a bun. On the other was Elena: an exotic beauty with blonde hair, blue eyes, and curves in all the right places. She'd tied her hair up in a ponytail. There were other cute girls around, but none of them stood out half as much as these two.

I could hear the comments of the men standing next to me.

"Wow, aren't they both amazing?"

"The one on the right is totally my type! Short and sweet!"

"Is the one on the left a foreigner or something? She must be a model. She's gorgeous!"

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" Elena apologized as the two approached me, triggering yet more comments from the crowd.

"They're here with a boy? Shame!"

"He looks so... meh!"

I guess someone like me showing up with two girls as good-looking as these two would weird anybody out. Nothing surprising. At least I didn't come here with an ugly old pair of trunks, so that's one less thing people can make fun of.

"It's just the one guy with the two of them? What did he do to get a harem like that?!"

Would you people shut up already?!

"Look!" Kokoro said. "You can rent light-up floats over there!"

"Oh, like the ones those people are using?" Elena asked.

"You're right! Aaaah, they're so cute!"

There were actually two pools. In one of them, everyone was swimming with floats that had some kind of LED inside them.

"Those must make for the most awesome pictures ever!"

"We should get one too! Shall we?"

They started walking toward the place that rented out the floats, and I quickly followed them, not wanting to be left by myself.

They paid two thousand yen to borrow a large float. It wasn't expensive per se, but it certainly wasn't cheap either. That being said, it turned out that you couldn't access one of the two pools without having one, so they didn't really have a choice.

"Let's take pictures then! We can both fit on it, Minami. Hop on! Ichigaya, you take the pictures! Take a lot of them, so I can choose the best ones for Instagram!" Kokoro said, handing me her phone, which was inside a water-resistant bag. When I took it, a fancy camera app called "SNOW" was already open.

"Fine..." I said, pointing the camera at the girls. "But aren't you going to take those things off?"

Both of them still had their sarongs on. Since the whole point of coming here was getting used to wearing skimpy costumes in public, keeping their bodies covered while having their pictures taken defeated the purpose.

"Ah! I-I guess you're right," Kokoro said, looking down at herself nervously. She put a hand on the knot keeping the fabric up, but she didn't quite have the courage to undo it.

"Yes, I guess we should. A-After all, we bought cute two-pieces just so we could come here..." Elena said, sounding just as hesitant as Kokoro.

They ended up taking off their sarongs at the same time. Kokoro was wearing her pink check bikini, and Elena was wearing her light blue one. Now that they were wearing nothing but their swimsuits, even more people turned to stare at them.

"Wow! Those girls are so cute!"

"Check out the curves on the blonde one!"

The men, in particular, were making no effort to lower their voices, much to the discomfort of Kokoro and Elena. The latter was so embarrassed that she held her bag in front of her chest, as if to hide herself.

"H-Hey," Kokoro said nervously. "I brought a picnic blanket. We should lay that somewhere so we can put our stuff on it!"

She found a good spot, took the blanket out of her bag, and laid it on the floor, putting her sarong and bag on top of it.

“I’ll put my stuff next to yours,” Elena said, placing her own belongings on the blanket.

The two then grabbed the float and headed for the closest pool, while I remained on land to take their pictures. I made it a point to take the best pictures I could, as practice for the upcoming cosplay event. I was a bit too far away to get the perfect shot, so I had to walk closer to the water. The place was already dark, but the seashell-shaped float provided enough light to see them.

“Okay. Say cheese...”

“Cheese!”

I took a lot of pictures from as many distances and angles as I could think of, adjusting the exposure several times in the hopes that there’d be at least one that pleased the subjects. The phone saved shot after shot. There I was, shooting pictures of cute girls’ bodies with their permission. Maybe coming to the pool wasn’t so bad after all. Unfortunately though, this wasn’t my phone, so all I could do was save the beautiful view onto my retinas.

“Are you finished or what, Ichigaya?” Kokoro asked, laughing.

“You told me to take a lot,” I replied.

“Thank you so much!” Elena told me with a smile, making me feel kind of bad.

Why am I even feeling bad? I wasn’t thinking any lewd thoughts or anything.

“Show us!” Kokoro said as she and Elena got out of the pool.

“What?! This is *definitely* too many! And there are like a dozen shots that look exactly the same!” she commented as she scrolled through her phone.

“B-But, when I was taking pictures of your cosplay, you told me that it’s better to take a bunch to be sure.”

“We aren’t cosplaying now though, are we? But still, there are some pretty good ones here! Thank you!” she said, before facing Elena. “I’ll send you them later, yeah?”

“Thanks! I’ll ask permission from my company to post them on my Instagram too.”

Oh, that’s nice to hear. I feel useful.

“Let’s take one together next. All three of us,” Kokoro said.

“Sur... Huh?!”

I was instinctively going to reply “sure,” thinking she was going to ask me to take more pictures of them. That came out of nowhere. *The three of us? What? Why?*

“Look, I even brought a selfie stick! The float only fits two people though, so let’s take it over there, by that other pool.”

“I-I’ll pass! My physique is hardly worth taking pictures of!”

“Grow some balls already!” Kokoro scoffed.

“It’ll be such a good way to remember our evening together!” Elena urged, staring me right in the eyes. I couldn’t say no.

Why ruin a perfectly good picture of two cute girls by shoving an eyesore like me in there? Are you two really fine with this?

I was extremely confused, but I followed them.

“Eek! It’s so cold!” Kokoro screeched as she dipped her toes in the water.

“It’s refreshing! This is the first time I’ve been to a pool this year, other than at school, of course!”

Forget “this year,” this is my first time in a pool since forever. The last time was with my family back when I was in grade school or something.

“Okay, I’m going to take the picture!” Kokoro said, standing next to me.

“Huh?”

She’s so close to me... wearing that bikini...

Despite my best attempts to stay cool, my heart was beating twice as fast as normal.

“Okay!”

Elena was just a step away from me on the other side. I looked at her for a second, but our eyes met, and we both quickly looked away.

“We don’t fit in the frame yet. Let’s get closer!” Kokoro said.

“O-Okay...” Elena obeyed.

“Huh?!”

Both of them leaned in toward me, getting so close that our bodies were almost touching. My poor heart could hardly bear it.

“Say cheese!” Kokoro said before pressing the button on her selfie stick. She then checked the photo and began to laugh. “Hahaha, Ichigaya! You were making the silliest face ev—”

A loud bang made all three of us jump. When we looked up, we saw fireworks exploding in the night sky.

“What? They even have fireworks?! That’s awesome! Look! So pretty!”

“They are! It’s a breathtaking view...”

I watched as the two of them enjoyed the fireworks, and it suddenly dawned on me just how lucky I was. I’d only been invited as an afterthought, sure, but I was at the pool with two beautiful girls, and we were all in a picture together. To top it all off, now we were watching fireworks.

Watching summer fireworks with girls? I thought only cool guys got to do that. I was so scared coming here at first, but now... I’m having fun.

“Thank you both for coming with me today,” Elena told us with a smile. “At first, the idea of showing myself in a swimsuit other than those that we wear for school made me uncomfortable, but I had so much fun that I didn’t even have time to feel embarrassed. It was all thanks to you two. You’ve helped me find the courage to cosplay in front of a crowd.”

“M-Minami...” I murmured, surprised. I didn’t think I deserved gratitude—if anything, I wanted to thank her for all the fun I’d had.

“Don’t mention it! I had tons of fun too!” Kokoro happily replied.

“M-Me too!” I quickly agreed. “So, you know, there’s no need to thank us or anything.”

“Ichigaya... Nishina...”

“Let’s do it again sometime! You, me, and Ichigaya!”

“With pleasure!”

And thus, my night at the pool with two beautiful girls came to an end.

6

Following Kokoro's advice, I'd been watching Yume's Twitter account every day, waiting for an opportunity to send her a reply. Of course, I still hadn't found the courage to actually do so, and only liked her tweets every so often.

Reading through them had taught me quite a bit about the things she liked: a cute bunny character, *IMS*, a group of voice actresses, otome games, and other similar otaku stuff.

Every once in a while she also uploaded selfies, and she looked incredibly cute in all of them. I wanted to like every single one, but since that would come off as creepy, I limited myself to one like every few pictures. The fact that she looked so adorable *and* that she liked *IMS* was enough to make her a perfect girlfriend candidate.

Unfortunately, the timing and topics of her tweets were never quite right for me to reply to any, at least until that day.

I saw a tweet that simply said *"I'm off to my part-time job..."* dated one minute ago. I usually only caught her tweets long after she'd posted them, but this time my timing was perfect.

"Do your best!" I replied. It wasn't much of a reply, but even so, it had taken me quite a lot of writing, rewriting, and worrying until I was satisfied enough to send it.

Seconds later, she replied back.

"Thank you! If you'd like, come see me at work! ♪"

That made me incredibly happy, of course, but I had to wonder whether that was a standard reply she always used when talking about work. But then again, this wasn't a work account. I also already knew from working in a maid café myself that maids didn't receive any incentive just from asking people to come to their café.

Unless that customer asked for pictures with the maid, of course, but that's

another story...

In other words, I had enough reason to believe that she didn't have anything to gain work-wise from inviting me to come. That gave me enough confidence to reply to her once again.

"Of course! I'd love to come sometime!"

Even if she *had* invited me just because that's something that maids are supposed to do, or if she'd just done so to be polite, I still thought that telling her I'd love to go was the best thing to do. What I said was true—I wanted to see her again, even if just as a customer, and I also wanted to see her working as a maid.

Seconds later, she liked my reply.

Ugh, I know this kind of like! This is when you like someone's tweet so you can end the conversation without replying further... I thought, already sad, when another notification surprised me. It was a LINE message from Yume.

"Thanks for replying to my tweet. I'd be really happy if you came to the café when you have the time as I still haven't had the opportunity to thank you properly. Of course, anything you order would be on me! ≡"

She really wanted me to go see her at work... and she wanted to pay for me?! The reply she'd sent me on Twitter wasn't sales talk at all. I was suddenly glad that I'd found the courage to reply, even though I'd only been able to come up with something short.

"I'll definitely visit sometime soon, but you don't need to pay for me!"

After all, I hadn't done that much for her. It wouldn't feel right.

"I insist. I owe you, since you saved Yumeko's life! ★"

Yumeko seemed to be the lost keychain bunny that I'd helped her find. How could a girl even be so girly? Her messages were sprinkled with emoji, and she'd even named her keychain.

We kept talking and decided on a weekday when she'd be working so I could go to her café after school.

Kokoro's advice to reply to Yume's tweet had borne fruit faster than I had

expected. *Thanks again, Nishina.*

Going by what I could gauge from our short conversations, Yume was a very sweet girl, and most importantly, she seemed to be my type, but my priority right now was to get to know her better and grow closer as friends.

"*For real?!*"

Kokoro seemed surprised when I told her over dinner about the reply I'd received. Surprisingly so, even.

"That's great! Am I an awesome advisor or what? But, like... how did you go from *that* to a promise to meet? Are you two gonna hang out somewhere?" she asked.

"Well, she tweeted that she was off to work, so I wished her luck, and then she told me to come visit her at work sometime."

"You can't be serious. That sounds like the sleaziest sales talk ev—"

"Hey! She isn't sleazy at all! She even said it'd be on her! She just wants to thank me for that time."

"What time?"

"Remember when I first met her, how I told you I helped her find something she'd lost? Turns out she's really grateful."

"Hmm... A girl that cute being so eager to show you how grateful she is? That's a bit fishy, if you ask me. Kinda like she wants to recruit you into some weird cult or pyramid scheme or something. Or maybe she just wants you to get hooked on her café..."

"Why are you so rude?! Yume isn't the—"

Yume isn't the type to do something like that—that's what I'd wanted to say. But on second thought, Kokoro had a point. *What if she's right? I don't know that much about Yume yet...*

"Just be careful, okay? If she says anything shady, you'd better up and leave."

"Y-Yeah. I guess so..."

All in all, despite the terribly rude way she put things, I could tell that she was worried about me. A hint of appreciation for Kokoro and a pinch of wariness of Yume had made their way into my head, but for the most part, it was still full of anticipation.

Against my expectations, Yume and I continued chatting on LINE with some frequency after that.

“After we spoke for the first time here, I really didn’t know what to say. I kept writing and deleting, writing and deleting, over and over without sending anything. I was sooo happy when you replied to me on Twitter! ★”

Wait, slow down. Why does she like me so much already? Maybe it really is like Nishina said...

Despite my worry, I replied to her message.

“I wasn’t sure how to start a conversation either, so I was really happy when you invited me to visit you!”

“I noticed on your Twitter that you also play IMS*! Who’s your girl?”*

“Fumiko! What about you, Yume? I can call you Yume, right?”

“Oh, you’re playing Fumifumi! I’m playing Yumama and Arimu ♪♫~”

We started by talking about *IMS*, then moved on to talking about work, school, our other otaku hobbies... Before I knew it, we were exchanging a dozen messages a day. She eventually started sharing some of her more personal thoughts and feelings with me. I was happy that she’d started to trust me enough to do so.

“Actually, I don’t like school very much. Summer vacation can’t come soon enough...”

“Oh, yeah, me neither! But it isn’t so far away. Let’s both hang in there just a bit longer!”

“It’s nice to speak with someone who also dislikes school. I basically have no friends there...”

Why would such a sweet, cute girl have no friends? Maybe she was just too

shy.

“Same here, lol. That’s a bit surprising though, since you’re such a nice girl. But I think having one friend is enough!”

I hoped I wasn’t overstepping any boundaries. After all, we’d still only met once so far. Maybe I was being too forward. Thankfully, her reply seemed positive.

“I’m so happy that you’d say that ♪~ I wish we went to the same school ★★”

Even keeping in mind the possibility that she was saying that just to be polite, I couldn’t help but feel flattered. Since she’d been so open with me, I decided to be frank as well.

“The same school as you? That’d be so fun. Even though we go to different schools, I hope we can still be good friends!”

For my standards, that was a pretty daring line.

“Yes! I hope the same too! So... I’m sorry I’m asking this out of nowhere, but do you have a girlfriend?”

Excuse me?! Does this question mean what I think it means?! Or is it just a random topic to keep the conversation going?

“As if! I don’t have a gf. What about you?”

“I’m happy to hear that ≡ I don’t have a boyfriend either, of course.”

An I’m-happy-to-hear-that heart emoji... It’d be weird not *to get my hopes up, right?*

With time, our conversations became more and more casual.

“I’m going to work now! ♪♫~”

“Okay! Have fun!”

“I’ll be having fun thinking of the day when I’ll be able to see you again. I’m looking forward to it so much! ★★”

“Oh?! I’m looking forward to it too!”

Even though we'd only met in person once, I felt that our messages had brought us pretty close together. I'd never texted with a girl on such a regular basis about such personal things... Scratch that, I'd never texted with *anyone* in that way.

I wondered whether this was what it felt like to have a girlfriend. If so, it felt pretty good. Good enough to be scary. But scared or not, I would have had to be blind not to see the affection she put into her messages.

Does she like me that much? Does she just need that one last little push to become my girlfriend? But then again, why would she? We've only met once...

I remembered what Kokoro had told me.

"That's a bit fishy, if you ask me. Kinda like she wants to recruit you into some weird cult or pyramid scheme or something."

Since she'd spoken them, her words had taken up residence in a tiny corner of my head and had never left.

Yume was a truly sweet girl. I couldn't believe she'd be doing something like that, and I didn't want to doubt her, but you never knew for sure. I decided that when I visited Yume at her café, I'd better bring some caution along with my excitement.

A few days later.

It was finally time for me to visit Yume. I'd started my morning in front of the mirror, armed with wax and a hair dryer, styling my hair for the first time in a while.

"Good morning..." Kokoro yawned as she walked in on my hair-styling efforts. "Hm? You're up earlier than usual. What are you doing?"

"Morning. I'm gonna go meet with Yume today... That girl I told you about."

"Oh, I see. Be careful, okay? If things get weird, get out of there rather than being dragged along," she warned with a serious look in her eyes.

"Y-Yeah... I will."

Does the fact that Yume is so nice to me warrant this much suspicion? Is she

that much out of my league?

As much as I was grateful to Kokoro for worrying about me, the implications made me a bit sad. Despite all the warnings, I was still pretty hyped. Maybe, just maybe, I'd finally found my perfect otaku girlfriend.

Worry and excitement fought themselves inside me as I continued to prepare myself.

Once classes were over, I quickly fixed my hair in the school restroom, then fired up the maps app on my phone to find Maid-Tale Café. It was in Akihabara, just like Meow'd Maid, but this place was a little further—a good ten-minute walk from the station.

The closer I got to the café, the more nervous I became.

Maybe Nishina was right and it's all an elaborate sales tactic. I don't even know if I'll be able to keep up a decent conversation after all this time, not to mention that it's my first time going to a maid café by myself...

I eventually found the sign for the café.

Here it is... Yume's going to be in here, right? How should I even greet her?

With my head still full of questions, I opened the door and walked inside.

"Welcome to the world of fairy ta—!"

"Huh?!"

I couldn't believe my eyes. I was so shocked that my voice became shaky and high-pitched, matching that of the maid in front of me.

"M-Mashiro...?"

There she was, the girl who had made me struggle with my feelings for so long, greeting customers dressed up as Little Red Riding Hood.

"I-Ichigaya?"

"What are you doing here?!"

"I-I should be asking that!" she squeaked, looking just as confused as I was. "I-I'm just here to help because they're short on people..."

I hadn't thought about it, but since Meow'd Maid and Maid-Tale were owned by the same company, it made sense that they could shuffle their maids around like that when the need arose.

I was surprised, of course, but I was also a little happy. After her Twitter account had disappeared, I'd feared that I'd never see Mashiro again unless I went to Meow'd Maid as a customer. Finding her here was a lucky coincidence.

Seeing her after all this time, I thought she still looked as angelic as ever. The cosplay was a perfect fit for a girl like her, with her fair skin and child-like face.

"W-Well, anyway, I'll show you to a seat," she said, still sounding a little shaken. She led me over to a table and pointed me to a free seat in perfect maid fashion."Would this do?"

"Y-Yeah..."

I sat down, and Mashiro started talking...

"You know, Ichigaya, I-I—"

...only to be interrupted by another girl calling my name.

"Oh, Ichigaya!"

It was Yume, who'd just appeared from the back room.

"Y-Yume!"

She came all the way to my table and greeted me with a deep bow.

"Thank you for coming all the way here!" she said, looking nervous but excited to see me.

"Not at all!" I replied, still shocked that such a cute girl could be nervous, excited, or any combination thereof because of me. Her outfit looked straight out of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and she was just as cute and doll-like as I remembered.

"I'm so happy! I've really been looking forward to seeing you again after all this time," she said, her eyes swelling up with emotion. She definitely didn't look or sound like someone trying to talk me into a pyramid scheme.

"Yu—" I began, but suddenly remembered that Mashiro was there too.

Snap! She saw how friendly Yume and I are with each other! I'm happy to see Mashiro again, but did it have to be now *of all times?!*

It's not like I was cheating on anyone, and there's no way either of these girls liked me *in that way*, but meeting both of the girls I liked at the same time was really unfortunate. I slowly turned to look at Mashiro.

"You and Yume-chan... know each other?" she asked with a bewildered expression, her voice reduced to a whisper.

"W-Well, we..."

"Hm? Yes, we know each other," Yume replied. "We met at an event held by the head company, and then I asked him to come visit here."

"Event? Oh, that one with employees from all the cafés, right... I didn't go. And you two met there, huh...?"

Little by little, I could see the light disappearing from Mashiro's eyes.

"But, Mashiro, yo—" I tried explaining, but she quickly interrupted me.

"Looks like you've been keeping yourself busy," she said with a cold smile. The smile only made her look scary.

"So you two also already knew each other?" Yume asked, anxiously looking at me. "Were you two... I mean, how do you know each other?"

Is it me or did Yume's smile right now also have a certain... chilling quality to it? I have to explain things to her too!

"We were, um, colleagues when I worked at Meow'd Maid," I replied, suddenly coming to the realization of how disgusting I was for thinking that I should try to appease both girls. I knew I didn't have any more chances with Mashiro. Dating Yume, on the other hand, was still within the realm of possibility. Having the two meet me at the same time was the worst possible thing.

"Oh, really? So you're just ex-colleagues?"

"I, er, we—"

"Exactly. Just ex-colleagues," Mashiro replied before I could. She still had that

—also chilling—smile on her face.

“Ohhh, that’s such a relief! I was a little scared for a moment. I almost thought that Ichigaya was friends with another girl even though we text each other so much every day...” Yume replied, grabbing my arm with both hands.

I am... confused.

“O-Oh, you text each other every day?” Mashiro commented, her smile twitching ever more creepily. “Where do you find the time, Ichigaya, considering all those days you spent a little while ago sending *me* DMs?!”

What’s this *about?!*

“D... Ms? You were sending each other DMs?”

“Y-Yes, we were, but that was way before you and I even met each other!”

“Well, well, well,” Mashiro addressed me. “Seems like your aims are set on Yume-chan now. And to think that you even took me on a *date*.”

“Wha—”

“Date...? You took Mashiro-chan on a... date?”

“Oh, sorry, I misspoke. I meant *dates.* Two of them. What about you, Yume-chan? Has he taken you on a date yet?” Mashiro mockingly asked her fellow maid.

Why are you doing this?! You stopped replying to my DMs because you don’t care about me anymore! Why do you sound jealous all of a sudden?!

“No,” Yume replied. “B-But that all happened before we started texting, didn’t it? So now you couldn’t care less about Mashiro-chan. Isn’t that right, Ichigaya?”

Yume was staring at me, piercing me with her emotionless eyes as she waited for an answer.

“I, well... um, er, uh...”

I am very, very confused right now, I thought as I felt cold sweat trickle down my forehead. *What’s Mashiro’s deal? As I understood it, she used to like me a little bit, but then stopped liking me. But now she sounds like she still likes me. And Yume is being just as confusing! We’ve only met once and she’s acting all*

jealous! Am I going to see two girls fight over me? That'd be amazing, but also terrible.

"Is that... not the case?" Yume urged me to answer. Seeing her like that, on the verge of tears, made answering even more difficult.

"I'll be going back to work!" Mashiro announced, her chilling smile still in place as she turned on her heels and stormed away.

"W-Wait, Mashiro!" I called after her, and her feet stopped. "Why... didn't you reply to my DMs?"

I knew how stupid asking that was. Right now I wasn't thinking about appeasing this or that girl. I just knew that, if I ever had the chance, I needed to ask that question.

Still facing away from us, Mashiro stood silent for a while before mumbling something.

"...anted to, bu...when I tri...ccount was...eleted."

"Huh?" I hadn't been able to make out even half of what she'd said.

"Have fun then, Yume-chan, Ichigaya," she then said, spinning around to flash us that terrifying smile one last time before heading over to another table.

What was she even saying?

"Ichigaya..."

I looked back at Yume. Her face was the scariest thing I'd ever seen. It was completely expressionless, her eyes glassy.

"Do you... like Mashiro-chan?"

"What?"

"What do you think of me? What am I to you?" she asked.

Her eyes still looked dead, and I was genuinely scared. I had no idea what had gotten into her. As for her question, I honestly didn't know myself. I wasn't sure I liked Mashiro, but I couldn't say that I didn't like her at all either, and I didn't want to lie about it.

What am I supposed to tell her?

“I thought we were basically dating, but it seems that I was the only one to think that,” she said.

“Huh?!”

Her face finally started showing emotion, but unfortunately that emotion was utter misery. She looked like she could start crying any second.

“Basically dating”? She liked me that much? Even though we only met once?

“You were so kind to me when we first met, and you texted me and replied to me even though nobody ever wants to talk with me. And the things you said were so nice, and I was so happy, and... and I was looking forward to today so much...” she continued talking, staring right through me while on the verge of tears.

“Wh-What...?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I’d even doubted that Yume liked me at all and thought she was just trying to lure me into joining a cult or whatever, but I’d had it all backwards.

“T-Talking to you was a lot of fun for me too. I was looking forward to today just as much, I swear!”

“Please leave. Seeing you makes me hurt...” she said, in a tone that left no space for rebuttals. Then, she turned away.

“Y-Yume... Okay. I’m sorry...”

I took my things and left the café, still confused. Mashiro watched from afar.

So many things had happened in so little time that I could barely process it all.

How did it come to this? It’s my fault, I’m sure, but I never even became anyone’s boyfriend...

All I knew was that, in one fell swoop, I’d killed off my chances with both Mashiro and Yume.

I was still dumbfounded when I got back to the house. Kokoro wasn’t there. If she had been, I could have told her about what had happened. Although I didn’t

know what her opinion would have been, I knew that hearing it would have made me feel better.

I went to my room to lie down.

What did I do wrong? Do I deserve this, or was it just bad timing? Is there any way I can make things right with the two of them?

I felt that, at least as far as Yume was concerned, the situation was beyond fixing. I thought that she was a nice, sweet girl, but seeing her overreact like that... I was happy that she liked me, of course, but I was also scared. I'd never been so terrified by a girl's expression.

As for Mashiro, even if I wanted to explain the situation to her, I had no way of contacting her. Why had she acted like that in the first place? For someone who wasn't supposed to like me at all anymore, she sounded kind of... jealous. Maybe she did still like me. Just a little tiny bit. But then again, why hadn't she replied to my DMs? I wasn't even able to hear her answer...

Suddenly, a notification on my phone snapped me out of my thoughts. It was a LINE message, so I immediately checked it.

"Huh?!"

It was a message from Yume. I mentally prepared myself for a good beating and began to read:

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have chased you out of the café after you came all the way there to meet me. I was just shocked to know that you were friends with another girl, but I overreacted. I really am sorry. It hit me so hard because I was looking forward to seeing you so much. Please let me make it up to you in some way. Also, and I know I'm in no position to say something like this, but if you're not dating Mashiro-chan, I hope we can keep things going between us the way they were... But only if you want that too, of course."

Out of all the things that had surprised me lately, this message surprised me the most.

What the... What's going on in that girl's head?

Back at the café, Yume looked like she was so mad at me that she didn't want

to see my face ever again. How could she change her mind so drastically in so little time?

My phone buzzed again.

"Also, if you and Mashiro-chan aren't dating and if you don't like her, I wanted to ask you to stop talking to her altogether."

Huh?

I was growing more and more confused by the minute. I didn't understand Yume. Between her outburst at the café and the messages right now, I could only conclude that she wasn't normal. Even though her messages were kind and apologetic, what if the next time we actually met she'd get angry at me again?

Although I knew that possibility was real, I couldn't help but feel happy that she liked me so much after having met me so few times. Having a girl that cute get so attached to me was undeniably pleasant, and jealousy is just another way to prove that someone likes you. Right?

I wanted to reply to Yume, but I didn't know what to say. If I were to accept her apology and agree to never speak to Mashiro again, I had a good chance of things working out well with her. But... was that what I really wanted? Was I ready to give up Mashiro?

Mashiro's show of jealousy at the café *had* to mean that she still liked me, despite what I'd thought. Maybe, if I could get in touch with her and talk it over, I could make things work out with her instead. The problem, of course, was that I couldn't get in touch with her.

I didn't want Yume to get the wrong idea while I still hadn't made up my mind. It was clear from her words that she was serious about me, and I didn't want to commit unless I was serious about her too. After all, even though she hadn't exactly confessed her love to me, what she'd said came just short of that.

While I was still lying in bed, thinking about whether to reply to those messages, and how I would even do that, I heard Kokoro coming through the front door. I rushed to meet her in the living room, anxious to get some support.

“Hi, I’m back.”

“Hi...”

“Is something up?” she asked, probably noticing that something was off about me.

“Well, I went to the café where Yume works today...”

“Oh, right, you said you’d do that. How’d things go?”

I sat heavily on the couch and recounted my café plight. Kokoro looked at me in shock, as if she could hardly believe what I was telling her.

“Whoa...”

“It was the worst timing ever! I’ve got the worst luck.”

“No way! You’ve got girls all over you!”

“Huh?”

“If I’m being honest with you, that girl—Yume, right? I thought she was definitely up to something shady, but she basically asked you out!”

“D-Did she?!”

Are girls... actually attracted to me? I couldn’t even tell. I’d never experienced anything like that before, and I’d assumed that I never would.

“I just don’t quite understand why anyone would grow to like you so much after only meeting you once...” she said. She seemed genuinely puzzled, and had I not felt the same, I would have probably been deeply offended.

“So what are you going to do? If you just went along with it, you could probably start dating Yume pretty easily.”

“Hmm... I have to be honest, I’m still a bit scared. She’s cute though, and I can’t hide how happy it makes me to know that she likes me that much.”

“And what about Gojo?”

“Judging from how she acted today, it looks like I’ve still got a chance with her. If I do, I don’t want to lose it...”

“How indecisive can you be?!” Kokoro exclaimed, but I didn’t know how to

respond. “Doesn’t that mean that you don’t have romantic feelings for *either* girl?”

“I had feelings for Mashiro before everything went down, but now I’m not so sure. I like her in *some* way. The same goes for Yume, but—”

“I can’t believe you’d find yourself in such a lucky spot after so little time...” she said, letting out a loud sigh.

“Huh? But I don’t even know whether either of them likes me or not!”

“*Ugh*. Anyway, if you’re not going to date a girl, don’t give her any false hope. Since you still don’t know what your feelings are, can’t you just be friends with Yume? Then you really ought to think about which girl you like and want to date.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Kokoro’s advice was on point, as usual. I decided to take all she said at face value for the time being.

Later, lying on my bed, I made up my mind about one thing: I couldn’t leave Yume hanging without replying to her.

“I’m glad to hear from you. I thought you were done with me, so I’m happy you reached out. Since we still know so little about each other, I was thinking that maybe it’d be best to keep things as they are and stay as friends.”

I was slightly worried that suggesting we continue on as friends when she hadn’t even asked to be my girlfriend was being too full of myself, but I thought that I should make things clear. That way, like Kokoro had told me, Yume wouldn’t get her hopes up for nothing.

My message was marked as read as soon as I sent it, and Yume’s reply came back shortly after. Except for when she was at school or at work, she always replied pretty much instantly.

“That will work. When will we be able to see each other next? Hopefully next time it will be just the two of us...?”

“Just the two of us”? She probably means“without Mashiro”...

There was something unsettling about the tone of her message, and I couldn't find it in me to immediately propose another time and date to meet her. Instead, I ended up somewhat dodging the issue.

"When I know when I'm free, I'll let you know!"

Again, her response was immediate.

"Okay. I'll be waiting."

Usually, we would keep messaging each other, chatting about anything and everything throughout the day, but I feared that doing so right now would send the wrong signals. Heeding Kokoro's advice, I decided that our LINE conversation would end with that for the day, or else I knew we'd keep chatting until it was time to sleep. Eventually though, I wanted to have a proper conversation with Yume in person, since our first meeting was so short and the second was... that.

As for Mashiro, my only option was to continue checking her shifts at the café and finding her there, but after seeing how she had reacted today, I doubted that she'd be up for talking it out with me.

The cosplay event was only a few short days away, and looking for other potential dates had sunk to the bottom of my list of priorities. After all my preparation though, I figured I should still try my best.

7

August was coming to an end, and summer vacation had already started. The time had come—it was the day of Wonder Festival at the Makuhari Messe.

At six thirty, much earlier than I'd usually get up, my alarm blared into my ears. Since I'd been informed that looking clean was the most important thing, I hopped in the shower and started styling my hair. Kokoro had also chosen my clothes for me—at least, as best as she could from my limited wardrobe.

"I haven't forgotten anything, have I? I've got my costume, my wig..." Kokoro nervously checked the contents of her travel bag. She'd gotten up much earlier than I did to get her makeup and outfit ready.

"You've got your camera, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

Kokoro's enthusiasm about this whole festival thing was overwhelming. You could tell how much she hoped to befriend a handsome cosplayer there. As for me, I was so concerned with the Yume/Mashiro problem that I was struggling to get excited at the prospect of meeting other girls, but after asking Ai for advice and having practiced my photography skills with Kokoro, I felt a responsibility to go.

Our plans for the day were as follows. In the morning, Kokoro would change into her cosplay, then I would follow her, taking pictures. We would check out the anime and game figures—the main focus of WonFes—on display, while hoping to run into attractive cosplayers so that we could take pictures and exchange business cards. At one o'clock, the anime presentation hosted by Elena would start. Kokoro and I would head toward the stage thirty minutes in advance so that we could find a good spot to cheer on our cosplaying friend.

We left the house at seven and got on the train to the festival venue.

"Today's the day! I'll keep my eyes peeled for all those gorgeous guys, awaaah!"

“You wear that boy-hungriness on your sleeve, don’t you? It’s almost refreshing.”

“Don’t talk like you’re not nervous! You’d better find some cute cosplayers too!”

“W-Well, you have a point, but after what happened recently, I don’t know whether I should even be looking for girls in the first place.”

“But neither of those two have even asked you to be their boyfriend, and you’re not sure whether you like either of them that way. Am I right?” Kokoro asked.

Taken aback, I let her continue.

“Say you meet a girl that you *really* like today. What would the problem be? We don’t have that much time left, remember? We can’t waste any chances to find someone.”

I was surprised, but hearing her say those things made them sound rather plausible... true, even. After talking with Kokoro, I already felt much better.

“I-I think you’re right...” I said.

There’s no reason to waste this chance. I’ll give it my all today. It’s for the best, isn’t it?

We soon reached Kaihin Makuhari, the station closest to the Makuhari Messe. I’d been to the Tokyo Big Sight, a similar venue, for other events, but this was my first time here. Despite the early hour, the station was already crowded with other Wonder Festival attendees.

“Whoa, look at all these people! Is this what Summer Comiket looks like?” Kokoro asked me.

“This is your first time at an event this big, right?”

“Yeah! And I’m super excited!”

We waded through the crowd and finally entered the event hall. Kokoro's excitement had started to rub off on me too. I was looking forward to seeing Elena's show, the cosplayers, and the figures. I told myself that, if I did find a cosplayer that I fancied, I would ask them for a picture. Of course, I'd also keep Ai and Kokoro's advice in mind.

"I'll text you when I'm done changing. You can, like, walk around and stuff if you want to, just as long as you meet me back here," Kokoro said.

"Okay then. See you in a bit," I replied as she headed to the changing rooms.

Now left to my own devices, I thought I'd use the time to check out the figures on display. I walked over to a couple of the areas that I was interested in and looked through the booths of various companies. There were a lot that caught my eye—either because they were figures of characters that I loved or because they were sexy as hell—but I didn't have enough money to actually buy any.

While moving between the many halls of Makuhari Messe, I walked into the cosplayer area. The cutest cosplayer of the bunch already had lines of people waiting to point their cameras at her. One by one, the photographers would snap a few pictures, thank the cosplayer, then move on.

There's barely any interaction going on! I don't think I'll be able to befriend any of the popular ones...

Business cards were also being exchanged, but what were the chances of a cosplayer actually remembering you once the event was over? *Slim,* I thought, *unless you can make one heck of an impression on them.*

The cosplayers that people lined up for, however, didn't give out their own cards. Instead, they had their cosplayer name and Twitter handle printed on a large sheet of paper or written on a piece of cardboard next to them. The idea was probably that, by taking a picture of the sign along with the cosplayer, there would be no need to hand out your information to photographers one by one, which would require a large amount of time and an even larger stack of cards.

Might as well take some pictures while I wait for Nishina, I thought, quickly

scanning my surroundings. Not far from me there was a girl cosplaying Fumiko, one of my favorite *IMS* characters. The cosplayer was cute, slim, and accurate in her rendition of the character. I was immediately thrilled by the sight.

A character I love, done by a cute girl! Let's go with her.

Of course, I was only the latest in a long line of people who had also thought, *"Let's go with her."*

Even if I couldn't actually get to know the girl, I wanted to try out what Ai and Kokoro had taught me. I also wanted to give her my card and follow her on Twitter. Finding her there so I could send the pictures I'd taken was enough.

As the line moved and I got closer to the front, I started getting nervous. Of course, I was looking forward to my turn, but my hands were literally shaking. Since there were even more people waiting behind me now, I started preparing the camera in advance so that I could start taking pictures right away.

Given how popular this girl was, taking just one or two pictures would be the most considerate thing to do, but all the other photographers before me were clearly taking more than that. Since Ai had told me that it'd be rude to take too many, I decided I'd take around half a dozen.

When my turn finally came, I approached the cosplayer, who had a smile that seemed permanently plastered on her face. To her, this was probably already routine.

"Hi there!" she said.

"H-Hi. Say cheese, I guess..." I replied, pointing the camera lens at her.

I changed up the angle and zoom just as Kokoro had taught me. The cosplayer was obviously used to this kind of thing, as she changed poses every time I closed the shutter. *So this is how an experienced cosplayer does things...*

Moments later, I'd already taken five pictures.

I thanked her for posing and lowered my camera, and she thanked me back. But of course, walking away just like that would have made the whole thing pointless.

"I-If you don't mind, please have my card..." I said, cautiously handing it to

her.

“Oh, thank you!” she said, politely accepting it.

“I-I can send you the pictures I took if you want!”

“Oh, really? That’d be great! Thanks! You can find me here,” she said, grabbing a sketchbook that she had beside her and opening it to reveal her name and Twitter handle. The whole motion had the seamlessness of something that had been repeated many, many times.

I thanked her and took a picture of the info.

Is this all I can do? She’ll have forgotten me in five minutes if this is the scope of our interaction.

I remembered something that Ai had told me: one of the things a cosplayer appreciated most was to receive non-creepy compliments.

“Y-Your Fumiko cosplay is really great, by the way! Fumiko’s my main, so it’s great to see her done so well! Thank you so much!” I said, trying to speak as fast as possible so as not to make the other people in line wait too long.

She smiled. Was this also routine? I didn’t know, but she looked genuinely happy. I was glad I’d found the courage to compliment her.

I’ve got to remember to follow her on Twitter once I’m back home. I don’t know whether I’ve made a good impression, but it’s worth trying...

After taking my leave, I noticed I’d received a LINE message from Kokoro, so I headed back to the place where we’d planned to meet. She arrived a few minutes later.

“Did I keep you waiting?” she asked.

“N-No...”

This wasn’t the first time I’d seen her Unithorn cosplay, but even with all these other cosplayers to compare her to, it held up surprisingly well. Actually, if I had to be honest, it was probably the best cosplay I’d seen that day.

If she went to that cosplaying zone, she’d have people lining up within minutes, but then she’d be so busy that she wouldn’t be able to meet the

handsome cosplayers she's looking for.

"Did you go to see the other cosplayers then?"

"Yeah... The cute ones all had tons of photographers lining up for them. I managed to take pictures of a Fumiko from *IMS*, actually, but..."

"That sounds great! I've gotta check it out!" she said, leaving no room for objections.

"If you go there," I began to warn her, "you'll get people lining up for you too. You know, Unithorn being so popular and all. Then you might not be able to leave the area for the rest of the morning."

Actually, it was her cuteness rather than her choice of character that I thought would gather attention, but I didn't really want to admit that.

"For real?! It'd be great to have good photographers taking pictures of me and all. That way, I could upload them myself... But I wanna be able to enjoy the festival," she replied.

"Now that I think about it, are you okay with your pictures being online? Some photographers could upload them themselves, you know?"

In the past, Kokoro had told me that she only uploaded heavily retouched pictures so that none of her offline acquaintances could recognize her and find out that she was an otaku. But it wasn't rare to see online threads where people posted all the pictures of cosplayers that they'd managed to take during events like these, even without permission.

"I thought about that, and I figured that... heh, it doesn't matter that much. My real-life friends won't be looking at cosplay pictures online anyway, and even if they did, I could just tell them it's someone that just happens to look like me. Between the wig, the colored contacts, and the makeup, they'd *probably* believe me."

"Oh, I see..."

Pretty soon, we were back in the area where the cosplayers were having their pictures taken.

“Look, look! There are cosplayers everywhere! There’s Yumeno☆Saki! And that’s an *IMS* group! They’re so cute! Ohhh, over there! These girls are crossplaying as *A4* characters! They look so good!”

Kokoro was squealing left, right, and center as she noticed cosplayer after cosplayer.

“Do you want to go around as I take pictures of them, or should we take yours first?” I asked her.

“Um... Let’s take some of me, but just a few. Then we’ll walk around and look at the other cosplayers. Oh, tell me if you see a cosplayer you like though!” she said.

I pulled out the camera, mounted the lens, and put the strap around my neck.

“Okay then. Whenever you’re ready,” I told her.

Kokoro began by striking one of her well-rehearsed Unithorn poses. Even through the camera, she looked astonishingly cute. Aware of my lack of artistic talent, I snapped as many pictures as possible from different angles, hoping that I would stumble upon one that made her and her cosplay shine. If I took a bunch of pictures, at least one of them would have to be good enough for Twitter.

After I’d taken roughly ten pictures, Kokoro looked in my direction with a very surprised expression on her face. Intrigued, I stopped and looked back at her. As it turns out, she was actually looking *behind* me, so I turned around... and saw a line of photographers waiting to take pictures after me. They couldn’t have known that I was her private cameraman, so to speak, so they must have assumed that I was just some random guy who had asked her for photos. I did the only thing that made sense to me: step aside and let the next guy have his turn.

“Hey, nice cosplay,” the photographer said, smiling at Kokoro.

“Wha...?! A-Ah! Th-Thank you!” she replied, quickly going back to her pose. This time, however, she looked way more stiff and contrived.

The man took seven or eight pictures and thanked Kokoro, who grabbed one of the business cards out of her bag and handed it to him. One down, plenty to

go. Some of the photographers only took a couple of pictures, while others took more than a dozen, which obviously required a considerable amount of time.

Just as I feared...

The line was growing longer and longer. Even if it stopped growing, there were probably enough people there already to take up our entire morning. However, since Kokoro herself had said that she'd like a good photographer—myself obviously not included—to take pictures of her, I thought it better not to intervene. That being said, I didn't have the courage to start up conversations with the cosplayers passing by, and lining up in front of someone else didn't seem like a good idea, so I just stood there, waiting.

I noticed that in the few seconds between one of the photographers leaving and the next taking his place, Kokoro was staring at me as if desperately trying to tell me something. Intrigued, I walked up to her.

"I just saw the most handsome cosplayer doing Toppo from *HypMic*! And he's probably a guy too!" she whispered, clearly excited.

HypMic, short for *Hypnotic Mic*, was one of the games that Kokoro was obsessed with. It starred several voice actors in the roles of various handsome rappers.

"Yeah? Where?"

"He just walked past us!"

"Wha—"

"Excuse me..." one of the photographers interrupted, as if to ask whether it was his turn yet.

Kokoro and I had limited time, and the event venue was huge. If we didn't hurry, we probably wouldn't be able to find the cosplayer she liked again.

"What should I do...?" Kokoro muttered to herself.

She probably doesn't have it in her to make a choice right now... I'll have to make it for her!

"E-Excuse me! She wants to go to the restroom! Can we stop with the photos for a while?" I shouted at the line of waiting photographers.

“Huh?!”

Kokoro was looking at me, half bewildered, half embarrassed. The people in line didn’t look any less surprised. Unfortunately, that was the best idea I could come up with on such short notice...

“Let’s go, Nishina! To the restroom!” I told her.

“What...?! O-Okay. Sorry, everyone!”

She bowed apologetically to the photographers, picked up her stuff, and followed me.

“What’s going on with you, Ichigaya?! What’s this all about?!” Kokoro asked as we ran.

“It was the only way to get rid of those people! Now, where did that cosplayer go?”

“Which cosplayer?”

“The handsome one! You know, in the *HypMic* cosplay!”

“O-Oh, so you were trying to... Anyway, he went that way!”

We started running in the direction she’d pointed, ignoring the strange looks directed at us.

“Now I see...” she continued. “I wouldn’t have had it in me to disappoint those people myself, so thanks, I guess. But did you *really* have to tell all those people I needed the restroom?!”

I couldn’t tell if Kokoro was trying to thank me or if she was mad at me again.

“What else was I supposed to say?! That was the only way to get you out of there without seeming really rude. More importantly, do you see your guy or not?”

“Hm? I, er—Oh! There he is!”

She came to an abrupt halt, quickly followed by me. I looked in the direction she was pointing and found the cosplayer from before standing next to a wall, with a line of girls beside him. I wasn’t all that familiar with *HypMic* characters,

but male cosplayers were somewhat rare, and handsome ones all the more, so I could tell at a glance that it was the right guy.

He had bright red hair and wore a black suit with a striped shirt.

“Whoa! He was right by us just seconds ago and he already has a huge line!”

Even men had hoards of photographers—female ones, in this case—waiting to take pictures of them if they were handsome enough. The world that cosplayers live in is an incredible one.

“For the time being, why don’t you line up too? You can get his picture and try to get his card,” I suggested.

“R-Right!” she said, nervously joining the end of line.

This is why she’s here in the first place. I’m glad we’re working toward her goal at least.

I felt my phone vibrate in the back pocket of my jeans, so I pulled it out to see who was calling me.

“What the...?”

It was Elena, who was supposed to be on stage in about an hour. Why was she calling me at a time like this?

“Hello? Minami?”

“Hi, Ichigaya. I’m sorry for calling you at a time like this...”

The reception was bad in the event hall, but I could just about hear her.

“It’s no big deal. Is something wrong?”

“Can you speak right now?”

“Well... sure,” I said, glancing over at Kokoro. It was finally her turn, and she was the last in line. After taking a few pictures and giving the cosplayer her card, she was now chatting with him.

Good for you, Nishina. Seems like you’re going to be able to chat with him for a while. Perfect timing.

“I’ve just finished preparing,” Elena said, “so I was browsing the internet on

my phone, and...”

Her voice was shaking. Could this be some kind of emergency?

“...people found out that I’m Emily Saionji...”

“What?!”

Her words came as a shock. “Really? But how?!”

“Recently, I got my first role as a supporting character in an anime. A clip from the TV show was uploaded online, and someone looked up my information on the company website. Then they compared my voice to my YouTube videos... It all happened between last night and this morning. The timing couldn’t have been worse!”

“This morning? So they’ve only just found out?!” I asked, trying to keep my voice down as much as possible.

“Yeah. I went to check my Twitter account—my voice acting account. My followers have skyrocketed, so I searched around for the reason and found a thread on 3chan, where someone posted about it. People are tweeting loads and the news is spreading! I haven’t been able to read the whole 3chan thread, but I read some posts from people who are attending WonFes today that plan to come see me on stage.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“Completely. The only picture of me that I know about online is the one on the company’s website, and it’s a really old one. So people really want to see Emily’s real face for the first time. No one’s allowed to take photos during the show, but there are already posts saying that they’ll take pictures and upload them to the thread!”

Elena sounded like she was about to start crying. Eventually, someone had been bound to discover her identity. As long as she was both a voice actress and a VTuber, that was unavoidable. But this truly was bad timing. She was already nervous about having to appear on stage in such a skimpy outfit, but now she also had to deal with the weight of expectations from Emily’s fans *and* people who were going to try to take photographs without permission. Knowing that this was her first time performing on stage, I felt bad for her.

“There’s not much time left before the show, but I’m getting really dizzy and my hands are shaking, so I panicked and called you. I’m sorry...”

“No, it’s okay. I totally understand. There’s no reason to apologize! If I could help you in any way, I really would!”

I wish I could do something more, but right now, helping her calm down is my top priority.

“Thank you... Having to go out in this costume in front of Emily’s fans is making me so scared, but I’m even more scared of not living up to their expectations...”

“Minami...”

Even at a time like this, Elena was thinking of her fans first and foremost. She really cared and had the mindset of a professional.

“Don’t worry! No fan of Emily’s would ever be disappointed with you!”

I tried my best to find words that would cheer her up. Of course, I was just being honest...

“I-I’m sorry, but the reception is so bad that I didn’t quite catch you...” she said. I was still finding it difficult to hear on my end too.

This isn’t going to help... Even if we could hear each other better, cheering her up on the phone can only do so much.

“Minami, do you have a minute? Away from work, I mean.”

“W-Well, yes. If it’s just ten minutes or so...”

“Where are you?”

“In the dressing room near the stage...”

I checked the map of the venue and found the right dressing room, which was luckily not too far from where I was. It was also close to a restroom.

“In that case, can you head over to the restroom? The closest one to where you are.”

“If I ask my manager, I think he’d let me go...”

“Can you go there alone? I’ll meet you there for a minute, if that’s okay with you.”

“Really?! You’ll come see me?”

“Yes! I’ll be there in five minutes!”

“Th-Thank you so much!”

At first, I’d thought I’d just be a nuisance if I asked to see her in person, but since I was the one that she’d called in her panic, maybe she felt like I was reliable enough. *Well, maybe that’s just because I’m the only one who knows her secret, but still...*

“Okay! See you soon!” I said, hanging up the phone and walking quickly up to Kokoro. She was still talking to that cosplayer.

Maybe things are going well with him. I’ll have to ask her later.

“Ichigaya! Where were you?!” she asked as she saw me approach, despite still being in the middle of a conversation. The grin on her face was enough for me to figure out that it was going well.

“I’m sorry! It’s kind of an emergency. I’ll be back in around fifteen... twenty minutes, tops! I’ll text you when I’m heading back!”

“Huh?! What’s this about?” she asked, but I left her to her confusion and quickly made my way toward the correct hall.

I felt bad about not explaining the situation to Kokoro, but she seemed to be having fun chatting with the guy, so I figured that she wouldn’t mind too much. I couldn’t tell her about what happened to Elena anyway, since it was still supposed to be a secret.

There were so many people around by this point that running wouldn’t have been safe, but I walked as fast as I could to reach her. Elena was already there.

Now that I think about it, I really should have chosen a better place to meet... Oh well, at least it’s easy to find.

“Ichigaya!”

She was so cute and sexy in that costume that I had to look away, lest my

heart explode. *Ugh, it's no time for something like this!*

"M-Minami! Are you all right?"

She looked incredibly pale, and I couldn't really blame her under the circumstances.

I looked around to see if anyone had noticed us, but fortunately that wasn't the case. Even though her identity had been leaked online, she still wasn't that famous.

"I know I have to do this," she said. "It's my job. I can't let fear get in my way, but if I think of the fans... They could say that I don't look anything like Emily, or that Emily would never wear a costume like this. They could get mad at me and tell me to give them their Emily back! I'm so scared..."

"Minami..."

We didn't have much time. I had to cheer her up before the show started, and I needed to find the right words to do so. That's why I was there.

"No one's going to think that! I would know! I've been a fan of Emily's for a long time now. All Emily's fans know how seriously she takes her work. This is the first time you've cosplayed, but you've gone through so much trouble to prepare. You look so good I can barely believe this is your first time! Fans are only going to appreciate Emily even more for that!"

"I-Ichigaya..."

"And I'm a hardcore Emily fan. I've watched all her videos, and I even watch the live streams when I can, and I read all her tweets! I've been doing it since long before I met you."

"Huh? O-Oh..."

Elena looked at me, dumbfounded.

"And when I met you and found out that you were the girl behind Emily Saionji, I was far from disappointed! When people imagine Emily's voice actress, they think of a girl just like you."

She continued listening without saying a word.

“As a fan, finding out that Emily is voiced by a girl as cute as you was great!”

“C-Cute...?!”

Up until now, I’d never found the courage to tell her something so embarrassing, but that’s what I’d always thought. It was nothing but the truth—she looked like her character, and she was just as cute. I couldn’t imagine many fans complaining.

Upon hearing it, Elena’s pale face turned red.

“N-Not only cute, but you also have the kind of style I thought you would, and you also have a great f-figure! Just as great as Emily’s! And with a costume like the one you’re wearing today, fans will notice that!”

“What?!” she exclaimed, blushing even harder.

Wh-What did I just tell her?! I must have sounded so sleazy!

“I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean that in a weird way. What I meant is that you look and sound very much like Emily. Your personality, of course, is just like hers. So I think the fans are going to be glad to know that you’re the one behind her! I’m telling you this as a fan, so it’s probably... no, *definitely* right!”

Elena continued to stare at me, her face still glowing. I wanted her to know what a true fan really thought, but I was afraid that I might have come off as creepy. “You’re cute,” was one thing, but “You have a great figure,” was probably too much.

Just as I was thinking that I shouldn’t have opened my mouth, Elena let out a rather unexpected sound.

“Hehehe...”

Is she... giggling?

“You know,” she said, “I was so scared about the fans’ reactions after they found out. So much so that I was in no state to go on stage. But... it’s so weird. Now I don’t feel scared anymore.”

“Minami?”

“I don’t know what everyone will think. At least, I can’t know until the show is

over. But right now, one of Emily's fans... You told me those things. And that's enough to give me the strength to go up there. So thank you."

"O-Oh, I haven't done anythi—"

"I should get going," she said, looking at her watch. Then she looked back at me, her calm smile breaking into a beaming grin.

"See you later, Ichigaya."

"S-See you later! Good luck!"

I stood there, watching her walk back to the dressing room.

Once she was gone, I took out my phone and saw that Kokoro had left me several messages.

"Where are you?! It's almost time for Minami's show!!!"

And later:

"I'm heading to the stage! I'll save you a seat, so call me when you're finished!!!"

I hurriedly did as I was told.

"I'm sorry, Nishina! I'll be there in a second!"

"The show's about to start! Where are you?!"

"Really close by!"

"I'm in the third row from the front, on the seat farthest to the right!"

"Got it! I'm coming!"

I ran right there and took my seat next to Kokoro, who promptly asked me where I'd been.

"I'm sorry! It was just... you know..."

"Wait, did you come from that direction? The restrooms are that way. So *you* were the one who needed to go to the toilet!"

"Well, haha, I guess so..."

Since I couldn't tell her about Elena, I lied my way out of it. Thankfully, I didn't have to explain any further because it was time for the show to start.

"Hi, everyone!"

Elena stepped confidently onto the stage. I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

"Thank you all for coming! Today we'll be introducing *I Became the Strongest Paladin in Another World*, a new anime that will begin airing in July. I'm Elena Minami-Williams, a debuting voice actress and your host. I hope you all enjoy the show!"

And to think that a few minutes ago she looked like she was going to cry...

Elena didn't look the tiniest bit nervous. She was so bold and energetic that you'd believe she was a professional host who'd been doing this kind of thing forever.

"Wow! She's great!" Kokoro whispered.

The comment made me snap out of my Elena-induced trance, and I looked at the people sitting close to us.

There are people here who have come to see Emily's voice actress... and there are even some who are going to try to take pictures...

A big sign on the stage read "NO PHOTOS," and I wondered if anyone was really going to go against that. At the very least, I couldn't see anyone with cameras or phones in their hands.

Elena was soon joined on stage by the anime's director and some of the show's voice actors. She was doing her job perfectly, introducing each guest one by one. As for the audience, most of them seemed to be clapping, shrieking with excitement, and just generally enjoying the show. Nobody was causing any trouble as far as I could see.

"She's sooo good at this, and she looks super pretty! She's awesome!" Kokoro whispered in excitement.

"I know. She really is," I said, watching Elena with admiration.

"And this concludes our show! Thank you for coming, and please look forward

to *I Became the Strongest Paladin in Another World*!”

After thirty minutes, the show was over. Elena hadn’t slipped up once. Much to my relief, none of the people sitting in the crowd had done anything suspicious or even mentioned Emily’s name.

“She was so cool up there though... I mean, she’s a real pro at this point. I can’t believe I’m friends with someone so cool! Hm? Ichigaya?”

I was too busy looking at my phone to fully hear Kokoro. Elena had mentioned before that people had already started spreading the news about her identity, so I thought it was a good time to search “Emily Saionji” on Twitter.

If you so much as mention Emily Saionji’s voice actress, I’m just gonna assume you’re a hater.

That was the first tweet that came up. Talking about VTuber identities was often considered taboo, and this was a fan that played by the rules. I continued reading other related tweets.

Is it true that they found out who’s behind Emily Saionji?

Someone show me what the real Emily Saionji’s voice actress looks like!

While scrolling past all the generic tweets, I stumbled upon some more salient ones:

I saw the girl voicing Emily Saionji and she’s like... actually Emily Saionji. It’s like it’s really her.

EMILY WAS REAL ALL ALONG.

These were clearly people who had seen her on stage, and they sounded enthusiastic. I kept scrolling, but there wasn’t a single person complaining about Elena, nor was there a single picture.

It all went well in the end...

I felt a huge relief, and being such a big fan myself, I was genuinely happy about how things had played out.

“What are you grinning for? Come on, let’s go,” Kokoro said.

“Oh, sure.”

“Maybe I should text Minami...” I said, as we left our seats. I wanted to congratulate her for doing so well, but maybe this wouldn’t be the best time for her to take a call.

“Oh, totally! I should do that too!”

Kokoro and I stopped just outside of the stage area and texted Elena. I decided to tell her what I’d found on Twitter, since she still probably hadn’t had the time to look it up for herself, and I didn’t want her to worry any longer.

“You did great! You were such an amazing host that I’m speechless. I tried looking you up on Twitter, and everyone loved you! They said you were just like a real-life Emily Saionji!”

I knew Emily’s fans would love her. I’d be curious to see what a disappointed fan would have to say, if one existed.

“Okay, sent!” Kokoro said. “I forgot to tell you, but it looks like Iroha and Mikoto are here too!”

“What? Really?!”

“Yeah! They posted on Twitter. They also cosplay and stuff, you know?”

“I didn’t...”

Maybe it was normal for girls that worked at maid cafés to like cosplaying. *I kind of want to see their cosplays too...*

“I’ll try messaging them,” she said.

“Sounds good. Oh, now that I think about it, how did things go with that cosplayer guy you were after?” I asked her. I’d been so busy thinking of Elena that I’d forgotten to ask until now. At the mention of him, Kokoro’s face instantly lit up.

She really wears her heart on her sleeve...

“He was such a cool guy!”

“I see... Were you able to chat much?”

“Yup! Quite a bit! He said he liked my costume! We even followed each other on Twitter!” she said, unable to hide her excitement.

“Even though you’ve just met the guy? I’m getting *déjà vu* here...”

“I mean, I get why you’d think he’s just another Bambi, but I have this feeling that it’s different this time, you know? Out of all the girls I saw taking pictures of him, I’m the only one he stopped to chat and exchange contacts with. I guess that’s also because I was the last one in line though. And he didn’t sound as desperate to get to know me as Bambi was. It was like we both had our boundaries, if you get me?”

“Uh-huh,” I replied, unconvinced. I already knew that Kokoro lost any and all sense of judgment when it came to handsome men, but I promised myself to ask her more about him later on.

“Oh, Iroha replied! She said they’re coming h—”

“Heart-chan! Ichi! Been a while!”

“Nishina and Ichigaya! It’s lovely to see you both.”

Before Kokoro could finish, Iroha and Mikoto arrived wearing *IMS* cosplays. Iroha was Karen Nanjo, and Mikoto was Kaede Takagi, both in their recently released new stage outfits. Their costumes looked great, but what made them stand out was how perfectly the two girls seemed to fit their characters.

“Karen and Kaede! You’re too cute! Both of you!” Kokoro shrieked.

“Yours is from *Adore Lane*, right?” Iroha asked.

“I didn’t know you two cosplayed,” I said.

“I’ve been a cosplayer for a while, but I didn’t want to go alone so I invited Mikoto to come with me.”

“That’s right. This is actually my first time. Iroha taught me everything.”

“What about you, Ichi? Why aren’t you cosplaying?” Iroha asked, sounding slightly disappointed.

“What? Why would *I* be?!”

“You know, I reacted like that too when Iroha first suggested that I go with

her. She managed to convince me though. Maybe if you'd had a little more courage you'd have cosplayed as well..."

"Courage won't make me look good!" I replied.

"Hm? You're lugging that around with you?" Iroha asked, pointing at Kokoro's travel bag.

"Yeah, why?"

"There's a place where you can keep your stuff for free, didn't you know?"

"Really?! I've been hauling this thing around all day!"

"I'll show you, come on."

"Thanks a lot!"

"Oh, I need to visit the restroom, so I'll follow you both since it's in the same direction," Mikoto added.

I felt my phone vibrate—it was a message from Elena.

"Thank you so much. I actually have a bit of free time now. Would you like to meet up? I wanted to thank you in person..."

"You gonna wait here, Ichigaya?" Kokoro asked me.

"Oh, y-yeah! I'll be here!"

"Okay, see you later then. I'll text you if we can't find you."

"Okay, sure," I said, and the three girls headed off.

When they were out of sight, I sent a quick response to Elena.

"Of course! I'd love to! I'm still near the show area!"

"I'll come to you then! I'll be there in a few minutes."

I was surprised that I'd get to see Elena again so soon after the show, but I was glad. She turned up a few minutes later, as promised, having changed into normal clothes with a hat and face mask. "Ah, Minami!"

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Isn't Nishina here...?" Elena asked.

"Someone we know is showing her where to store her bag. She just left."

“I see...”

“Anyway, Minami, you did a really great job! You were perfect! I can’t believe it was your first time on stage. No one would have guessed how nervous you were right before the show!” I said.

“Actually, that was all thanks to you.”

“What? Me?”

“After talking with you, all my anxiety was gone, and I was able to go on stage and give it my all,” she said, taking off the mask and revealing her stunning smile. “You made me realize that even if some of the fans would be disappointed, at least someone would be ready to accept me. And that was all I needed. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.”

I didn’t know my words had made such an impression on her...

“You’re always helping me out so much. And you’re so kind that I end up relying on you all the time. Today I panicked and called you without even considering that you might have been busy. But you still helped me out again, and said all of the words that I needed to hear. And it’s not just today. You’re always there for me when I need help...”

For some reason, even though she was smiling, she sounded as if she was going to cry.

“I-I haven’t done that much, you know,” I said, though she was making me incredibly happy.

“All this time, I’ve always looked up to strong, cool girls. I thought that if I ever fell in love with someone, it could only be with that kind of girl. Until now, that is.”

“Huh?”

What is she trying to say?

She stared at me with tears in her eyes, pausing for a moment before speaking again.

“I’ve finally realized something. Ichigaya... you’re the person that I want to be with.”

Oh.

Wait...

What?! Did I hear that right?!

The shock stopped my brain from working.

That sure sounded like a... confession. A romantic one. Like... Minami confessing her love to... me?!

She began again, stammering this time and blushing from ear to ear. “A-Ah, I-I, um, am so... What was I saying?! P-Please forget about it! I can’t believe I said something like that. I-I’m so sorry! I’ll be leaving!” she said, bowing to me, spinning around, and scampering away.

Did she... She did just say that I’m the person she wants to be with, right? I can’t have misheard that. She really thinks of me like that? What’s going on?!

Shocked and frozen in place, all I could do was watch as Elena gradually disappeared into the crowd.

Afterword

Hi, it's Murakami here!

It's been four months since the last volume. Thanks for reading volume three of *Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend*!

As I write this afterword, it's July here in Japan—smack in the middle of the rainy season. It's been raining for so long that I'm starting to feel cold. I wish the weather would calm down a bit.

When I started out, I worked a day job, but now I'm a full-time writer and can concentrate on writing novels, games, and so on. Of course, this has led me to a disastrous sleep schedule... Maybe I should start working part-time in the morning so that I get used to sleeping at night and being awake during the day like a normal person...

The main topics of this volume were cosplaying and the nighttime pool event. I've actually never been to a pool at night, so I had to ask my friends and look online for information. I do have some experience cosplaying, although the less we talk about those embarrassing years of mine, the better. I also have some friends who cosplay, and I've heard from them that cosplayers sometimes end up dating each other. These same friends also let me in on some saucy rumors, such as a sleazy group of handsome male cosplayers who, allegedly, meet up to exchange information about girls. As you might imagine, Bambi was partly inspired by that particular story.

I've written a lot more about VTubers than I did in the previous volumes. At first, I'd used my VTuber-loving friends as sources of information, but when I started watching the videos myself, I found them cute and funny. Inevitably, I ended up becoming a fan myself. I particularly like Kizuna AI and Siro.

Starting with this volume, there are two editors helping me instead of just one. I want to thank both of them for their priceless advice.

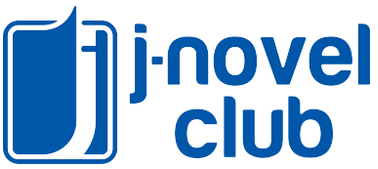
I'd also like to thank Mako Tatekawa, who provided the wonderful

illustrations for the book. When I saw the cover and color illustrations, I was so impressed by how cute Kokoro and Elena looked that I couldn’t stop staring at them.

In volume four, I plan on writing about some summer vacation antics. Please look forward to whatever Ichigaya and the crew will be up to next.

Thank you again to all the readers,

Rin Murakami



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Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend: Roomies and Romance Volume 3

by Rin Murakami

Translated by Marco Godano Edited by Stephanie Buck

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