



**GUIDE
TO THE
PERFECT
OTAKU
GIRL FRIEND**

5

**ROOMIES
AND
ROMANCE**

Author
**Rin
Murakami**

Illustrator
**Mako
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1

“I think... I’ll be moving out next month.”

“WHAT?! What’s that supposed to mean?”

Kokoro’s unexpected news had thrown me for a loop. One minute I was telling her that I’d found my perfect otaku girlfriend, and the next my roommate was leaving me. I thought she’d be happy about me finally succeeding, not get so upset that she’d go as far as to...

“That call just now was from my dad,” she told me. “He said his company’s gonna let him come back to Japan. My mom’s moving back next month, and he’ll follow the month after...”

Her parents?! If her parents are coming back, then she really has no choice but to move out... but that’s not even our main concern.

“What are we going to tell them? They still think, you know... that we’re dating each other, right?” I asked.

Kokoro’s plan, originally, had been to find a boyfriend by the time they got back and convince her dad that she’d fallen in love with the new guy rather than me. She did have a crush on Yuya, and I also had... a girlfriend? Sort of? Whatever our relationship was, I had Elena. However, to Kokoro’s parents, our breakup could look way too sudden—they were still under that crazy impression that we were not only dating, but that we would marry each other when they returned to Japan.

I’m dead. Her dad is going to kill me, isn’t he?

“Yeah... We can only tell them I’ve changed my mind and convince them it’s for the better, y’know? They’ll probably be mad at me, but you should be safe,” she replied with a sigh.

Convince them? Yeah... she makes it sound easy...

“Anyway, about what you said earlier...”

“Earlier? What?” I asked, confused.

“You said you and Elena became boyfriend and girlfriend. How did that happen?”

Kokoro looked deadly serious as she asked me the question. Her dad’s call had interrupted our conversation right after I’d given her the news. After all our efforts, I’d finally found a date... and my roommate seemed to be anything but happy about it. I was honestly shocked by her reaction.

“Didn’t she say she just wanted to go on the one date...?” Kokoro asked me.

“Well, yeah... But then she asked to become my girlfriend anyway.”

“I... I see. She must have changed her mind then. And you said yes, didn’t you...?”

“Yeah...”

“Why though? I don’t remember you ever mentioning wanting Elena to be your girlfriend.”

“I, uh...”

Kokoro sounded so concerned that I knew I had to answer, but that was another question I hadn’t been expecting.

“After spending time with her, I may have realized that I like her...” I said.

For a second, Kokoro’s eyes seemed to lose all light, but she dropped her gaze so quickly that I couldn’t tell for sure.

“Oh... I see. Huh...” she said, sounding way more stumped than I thought the situation warranted. After that, she stared at the floor for a while.

What’s wrong with her? Why doesn’t she congratulate me? Is she that mad at me for finding a date before she did?

Finally, she looked up at me, slapped my shoulder, and smiled.

“Well, I guess I should congratulate you! I... I was just a bit surprised, you know? This all came out of nowhere. I never thought you’d do it before I could! Well done, really! You got a girlfriend, and what a girlfriend she is too! Elena Minami-Williams! Unbelievable!”

“Th-Thanks...”

I'm glad she seems happy for me, since we were in this battle together, but her initial reaction was really weird.

“She got to like you so much that she changed her mind about dating. And if you... you know... If you also like her, and now you're together, well, that's great, right? I've gotta hurry up too, huh?” she said.

“Y-Yeah...” I replied, but Kokoro continued to act strangely. She silently left the living room and headed upstairs to her room.

Okay, this isn't normal at all. Is she really just shocked that I reached my goal first? She's got a crush too, and he likes her back, so she's also pretty close to getting her perfect boyfriend. So... what's the problem?

Now alone, I checked my phone and noticed that Elena had sent me a message.

“Thank you so much for today. I had more fun than I thought possible! I'm looking forward to writing this new chapter of my life together with you.”

Right... It's just as unbelievable as Nishina said, but Minami really is my girlfriend now.

I began to tap nervously on my phone, trying to come up with a decent reply, but I noticed a new notification from...

Yume?

“You haven't been replying to me lately. Have you been busy? I'd really like to meet up again...≡”

Yume messaged me regularly, but I knew that replying to one of her texts would just lead her to sending me three more, which is why I'd stopped replying altogether. This was the first time I'd heard from her in a few days, and I realized that I needed to tell her I was no longer single. That being said, I had to reply to *my girlfriend* first. I had no idea why, but I figured it was what a real boyfriend would do.

“I had fun too! I was completely flattered by everything you said. I'm looking forward to it as well.”

After typing out my reply, I peppered it with emoji, which I normally never used, and then hit send, leaving me with another, even more difficult reply to write.

In all honesty, I was scared of Yume, but I didn't want to ignore her entirely and hurt her feelings. She liked me—a lot, apparently—but I didn't feel the same way she did. By neither accepting her feelings nor clearly stating that I had no intention to, I'd kept her hanging, maybe unfairly, for all this time.

The fact that she constantly texted me didn't really bother me, and I was flattered that she liked me at all. The thing was, I just wasn't sure how strong her feelings were. Maybe she just wanted me as a friend, maybe as a boyfriend... so I'd always ignored the issue. Now, however, I couldn't do that anymore. I had a girlfriend who was most definitely too good for me, and muddying the waters even further would be a disservice to both her and Yume.

"I'm sorry I didn't reply. Actually..."

My fingers felt heavy as I went to type the rest of the sentence, but I had to do it. I had to tell her.

"Actually, I got a girlfriend. So, we probably shouldn't meet up anymore. And we can't text each other either. I'm sorry."

I'd already been pretty slow at replying to her, but now I had to stop entirely. As harsh as it was, I knew I needed to do it.

I'm sorry, Yume... You've been so nice to me, and you've always been so excited to talk to me... but I can't return your feelings.

Yume had never confessed her love to me or anything, but I knew that whatever she felt for me was too much to take. I felt kind of bad for letting her down.

After a while, I got another notification. I immediately checked it, expecting it to be Elena... but it was Yume.

"That's so cruel..."

The first line of her text was so shocking I almost dropped my phone. Fearing my time had come, I kept reading.

“Does this mean what I think it means? You were having fun with another girl while texting me? I thought of you all day, waiting for your replies... You’re the worst. I was all wrong about you.”

Seeing how upset I’d made her was terrifying. My hands started shaking and my heart began to pound in my chest.

I didn’t think she’d be this mad about it... I guess she really liked me a lot. What’s going to happen now? I doubt she’d come stab me in my sleep like a real-life yandere anime girl, but she sure isn’t going to let it all slide, is she? Is there something I can do to make her forgive me? What did I do that was so bad in the first place?

As these questions spun around my head, I received another message from her.

“I’m going to be working on the 22nd and 23rd between 1 and 7 p.m. Could you come see me? That’s the least you could do. I need to speak to you face-to-face one last time.”

What’s she planning on doing?! Judging from the tone of her messages, even if she doesn’t kill me, she’ll at least scream a bunch of insults at me... Or what if she just starts crying instead? I don’t wanna go... but I feel like I have to.

We’d been talking to each other for some time now, and I wanted to give her the closure that she deserved. I mustered up my courage and replied to her.

“Okay. I’ll visit on the 22nd then. I’ll wait for you near the café around 7.”

2

I left my room at around ten the next morning and ran into Kokoro on the landing.

“Good morning!” she said, back to her usual self.

“Oh, morning,” I replied, trying my best to sound as normal as she did.

“Say, you wouldn’t have any cardboard boxes lying around, would ya?”

“Huh? I think... yeah, I should have some I meant to throw away,” I replied, surprised by the sudden question. I actually had quite a few from all the times I’d bought stuff online.

“Can I take some?”

“Sure, I guess... but why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? To move out.”

“What...?”

The door to Kokoro’s room was ajar, and through it I could see a bunch of boxes piled up on the floor.

Is she putting away her stuff already?

“Didn’t you say your dad will be back in a couple months? You’re packing up already?”

“My mom’s coming back next month, and I want to be out of here by then... even earlier, if I can. I’m thinking of staying in a hotel not far from here. I’ve kinda gotta ask if I can keep my stuff here for a while though...”

“Wh-Why are you in such a hurry? Staying in a hotel would be really expensive. You could at least wait for your mom to come back, right?” I asked, unsure why she was so eager to leave.

“Well... that’d be rude to Minami. If it were me, I wouldn’t want my boyfriend living with another girl,” she replied with a half-hearted smile. “And, you know,

the timing isn't so bad. You've got a girlfriend now, and I found a good boyfriend candidate, so..."

Ah, that makes sense. It's not just about Minami's feelings. Now that Nishina has a crush on that Yuya guy, she probably doesn't want to be caught living with another boy...

"Okay, I get it. I'll help," I said.

I was sad that she was going to leave, even though I knew I shouldn't feel like that. My priority was Elena, and I should have been thinking about how *she* felt about me living with Kokoro.

She took action and started packing out of respect for Minami and me... How could I be sad about it? Maybe I really am the worst, I thought. The least I could do was keep those feelings to myself.

* * *

A few days later, I met up with Ai in Akihabara, where we decided to play a new game at the arcade. For lunch, we went to a nearby McDonald's, and I finally broke the news to him.

"What?! G-Girlfriend?! Who is it? Is it Nishina?"

"Huh?! N-No! It's a girl called Minami, from the first year..."

"Hmm... I think I've heard that name before. What's she like?"

"W-Well, she's half-Japanese, half-English... She's stunningly cute, but she's also an otaku, she loves yuri, and..."

"Whoa, calm down!"

"You were the one who asked me what she's like," I said. Truth to be told, I'd not mentioned one of the most important things about her: the fact that she was a voice actress. After all, she was still keeping it a secret at school.

"Why would such a cute girl want to be *your* girlfriend anyway?"

"L-Look, I'm not sure either..."

"Do you have any pics?"

"Hm, hold on..." I said, taken aback by Ai's rapid-fire questions. I took out my

phone and began to search for a picture of Elena.

I immediately found some of her cosplaying, but those wouldn't do. It wouldn't be gentlemanly to show them without her permission, and I honestly felt weird about showing my girlfriend in such revealing attire to another man (Ai counted as a man). Maybe Elena wouldn't have minded, since she had to show up on a stage dressed like that in front of a bunch of people for work, but...

"You don't have a single picture? And you're sure you didn't just dream this girl up?"

"I didn't! She asked to be my girlfriend... Oh, right, there's her LINE icon!" I said, zooming in as best as I could. The tiny photo was barely large enough to recognize her, but at least she was wearing normal clothes.

"What...? She really *is* cute!" Ai breathed when he saw Elena's profile icon. "Isn't this like one of those bot accounts that lets you pretend you're dating a cute girl?"

"It definitely isn't!"

"But... why would a girl like *that* ask *you* to be her boyfriend? Did she try to sell you some kind of pyramid scheme?"

"She didn't!" I yelled, angry at him for refusing to believe that someone like Elena would ever fall in love with me.

"I'm not sure I'm understanding. Pinch me, this must be some sort of miracle..."

"Look, I don't know either! But she's not tricking me in any way, shape, or form!"

"I thought I was the only one who bothered chatting with you..."

"Huh?"

"How come this is the first time I'm hearing about this girl? You didn't even tell me when you first met her!"

"W-Well..."

Unfortunately, the circumstances under which I'd met Elena were so unique that I couldn't have told him without revealing the truth about her job.

"Look at you, meeting up with girls and only telling me about it when you're dating one! How dare you!" Ai said, puffing up his cheeks. I couldn't tell whether he was mad because I'd kept a secret from him... or if it was just because I had a girlfriend and he didn't. How was I supposed to know?

At around six, Ai left to go buy some cosplaying materials, leaving me by myself. I'd already told him that I had other plans later in the evening; I was supposed to meet up with Yume soon.

I spent some time playing on my phone before leaving the shop and heading to Maid-Tale Café.

What kind of insults will she throw at me? And why does she want to do so in person? Is it just to remind me that she can't ever forgive me?

Being with Ai had kept me distracted, but now I was alone, my nerves had taken over.

I'd better prepare myself to be cursed at...

* * *

I reached the café just before seven. Yume's shift wasn't the last of the night, so she wouldn't have to clean up or anything, but she'd still have to change before leaving, which would probably put her doing so at ten or fifteen minutes after seven o'clock. Still, I was so nervous that I couldn't help but get there early.

My only wish was for nothing crazy to happen. That was all I wanted. I kept staring at my phone, waiting for time to go by, but every minute felt like an eternity.

After about ten minutes, I saw Yume leave the café. I hadn't seen her in person for quite a while now, but she was still as cute as ever. Her white lolita dress was adorable. Sure, I'll admit that she was still my type, but this was no time to be blown away by her cuteness.

“You really came...” she said when she saw me.

“Huh?”

“Let’s go somewhere else. We can’t talk here.” Both her voice and her face were completely devoid of emotion.

“O-Okay...”

She started walking with her back to me, so fast that I struggled to keep up. She eventually stopped in a deserted back alley and turned to look me straight in the eye. A shiver ran down my spine.

Does she really just want to talk? I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t do something as extreme as kill me, but I could be in for at least a slap or two. Or maybe a punch? Maybe she’ll punch me in the gut.

I’d never dated Yume, and I hadn’t betrayed her or lied to her at all. I didn’t deserve to have my gut punched... but it was true that I’d hurt her. If a punch was going to make her feel better about the whole thing, maybe I had to toughen up and take it.

I could read the pain and sadness on her face, and guilt began to build in my chest. Without a word, she stepped toward me.

Here she comes! What’s it gonna be? A slap? A punch? She isn’t armed, is she?!

I instinctively closed my eyes and braced myself... but, instead of the painful blow I’d been expecting, I felt a soft, warm touch encircle my body. When I opened my eyes, I saw that Yume was hugging me.

“Y-Yume...?” was the only word to leave my mouth. I was frozen with shock, my face burning with the heat of the sun and my heart beating like crazy. This was the first time that I’d ever been hugged by a girl.

Yume let go of me and took a step back. I looked down at her small, round face. Much to my surprise... she was smiling.

“Thank you for everything,” she said. “It felt like a dream. It was the first time someone’s been so kind to me. It was so fun to fall in love, and to text each other... Even when you didn’t reply, waiting for that was fun too.”

Fall... in love? Is that how she felt for me?

My expectations had been totally off. I'd thought she was going to hit me, shout at me, cry, and wail... and I now realized how much of an asshole I'd been for thinking that of her.

"Th-Thank you, Yume..."

There was so much more that I wanted to say to her, but I decided to keep it at that. I already felt guilty enough for letting a girl who wasn't my girlfriend hug me.

"I'll *never* forget this..."

"Huh?"

With her last sentence, Yume switched instantly from heartwarming to terrifying. She was still smiling, but her tone was the creepiest thing I'd ever heard. I no longer knew whether to feel moved or scared.



She'll never forget this, as in, one day she'll kill me?!

“Hehe... Goodbye.”

Leaving me both frightened and confused, she turned around and began running away from me.

“Y-Yume...?!” I tried to call out to her, but she was getting farther and farther away. There was nothing more I could do.

Yume... Thank you too.

I could hardly believe that a girl so cute would fall in love with me. She'd previously only told me that going to school was boring and that spending time with me made her happy. All I could do now was hope that she'd find happiness elsewhere.

At least our relationship ended on a good note, I guess...

On the train home, I decided to check my Twitter... and I was shocked by what I saw. There were no tweets from Yume on my timeline.

Could she...?

I checked my follow list, and, sure enough, she wasn't there. I looked up her account, and when I tapped on it, I felt like I'd been punched in the gut for real.

You're blocked.

Just as I'd thought. It was weird for none of her tweets to show up on my timeline given how often she tweeted.

Did she block me today, then? Why? After all those nice things she said to me, I was beginning to think she was actually kind of sweet. Is she mad at me or something? Ugh, I don't get girls at all...

Overcome by sadness, I put away my phone.

* * *

When I got home, I was surprised by another notification. This time it was a LINE message from Mashiro. We'd never really contacted each other on LINE before, except for a couple of messages right after exchanging contacts.

“It’s been a while. There’s something I’d like to talk about. When are you free?”

Does she mean she wants to talk in person? I wonder what it’s about.

“Hey, it really has been. I’m free most of the time.”

As sad as it was, apart from my plans to go out with Elena somewhere in the near future, my schedule was basically empty. After a quick back and forth, Mashiro and I decided that we’d meet at 1 p.m. the next day in Ikebukuro.

“Thanks. Sorry for messaging you out of the blue. It’ll just be a quick chat.”

Now that I had a girlfriend, going out with another girl and enjoying any kind of date-like activity was obviously out of the question. Thankfully, Mashiro only seemed to want to discuss something with me.

I’d last seen her at the café where Yume worked, where Mashiro happened to be helping out that day. She’d sounded kind of jealous back then, but I never had the chance to ask her about it. She had also deleted her private Twitter account, and, as a taken man, I certainly wasn’t going to go out of my way to initiate contact with her. As a result, I had absolutely no idea what she currently thought of me or what she wanted to talk about.

If I’d been a bit braver, I could be dating Mashiro instead right now. Feels weird just thinking about it.

The next day, I went to Ikebukuro. The town still held some special memories for me, as it was where Mashiro and I had gone out together before I’d learned the truth about her.

This time, we had chosen the least original meeting place possible: by the owl statue near the station’s east exit. When I reached the statue, I found Mashiro already waiting there.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“Oh, Ichigaya...”

She was wearing a frilly, sleeveless blouse and a cutesy light-gray skirt that laced up at the waist. She looked as adorable as always... except for the fact

that she was scowling at me.

Wh-What? Did I somehow make her mad?

“I-It’s been so long, huh...?”

“Let’s go somewhere else,” she coldly replied, completely ignoring what I’d just said.

She’s definitely mad. I can tell that much.

“Y-Yeah, okay. Where should we go to talk?” I asked.

“Sunshine.”

I was surprised by the suggestion, since Sunshine Ikebukuro was the complex that housed the planetarium where we’d once gone on a date together.

“A-Actually, scrap that! There’s a park near Sunshine. Let’s go there instead,” she said.

“Uh, okay. Sure...” I followed her without raising any objections.

I guess the park’s quieter. That’ll make it easier to talk...

Walking together without so much as a word was unbearably awkward, so I tried my best to make some small talk.

“So, how’ve you been lately?”

“I’ve been busy with work for pretty much my whole summer vacation. Unlike someone here...”

“What are you trying to say?!”

Does she know something about me?! I’m too scared to ask her directly though...

Eventually, we reached the park.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” I asked Mashiro, who had her back to me.

“First of all, are you sure you can be out here with me? Even though you have a girlfriend?” she replied, turning around to give me the coldest stare in the world.

“What?! H-How do you...?!”

“Did you really think I didn’t know already?” she said, glaring at me so hard that it almost hurt.

“Ah... D-Did Yume tell you?”

Even though she usually worked in a different café, Mashiro would sometimes go to Maid-Tale to help when they were short on staff. The two of them hadn’t seemed on particularly good terms when I first saw them together, but maybe they’d since become close enough to talk about this kind of thing.

“I swear I’m so fed up with you right now.”

I was too shocked to reply.

“First you approach me, then you leave me hanging... and now, to top it off, you go and find yourself a girlfriend.”

“B-But...”

Is that what it came off as to her? That I was leaving her hanging? I thought she’d already forgotten about me, since we hadn’t spoken in so long...

“You never contacted me again,” she continued. “I wanted to forget you... but I couldn’t. You, on the other hand, had no qualms throwing yourself at other women.”

“What?!”

She couldn’t forget me? Where is this coming from?!

“So, now you have to set things straight,” Mashiro said, looking as if she could cry any moment.

After being so scared that she’d entirely stopped caring about me, I was happy—excited, even—to learn that this was how she’d really felt. Those words meant a lot coming from a girl I’d dreamed of dating for so long.

But it was too late now.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You already know this, but there’s someone else in my life now...”

That was my way of setting things straight. The least I could do now was to

muster up my courage and clearly state things as they were.

She looked away from me and slowly started talking. "Hmph, unbelievable. You get a girl's hopes up like that, you stop contacting her, and then you top it all off by saying there's someone else in your life now. A jerk till the very end."

"I-I'm so sor—"

"I loved you."

"Huh?"

Instead of the insults I'd been expecting, I'd been hit with a declaration of love. My brain stopped working for a second.

She... What? Did she just say...?

"Sometimes... I think like... if I'd just stayed as the fake me, then maybe you'd have become my boyfriend." She smiled sadly. "That's all I wanted to tell you. Goodbye."

She started walking away, but I immediately stopped her.

"Wait a second!"



There was one thing *I* had to tell *her*.

“It’s just my opinion, but... the real you is much better than the fake you!”

When Mashiro heard my words, she froze in place. Then she continued talking, still facing away from me.

“You’re so kind... till the very end,” she said, and when she finally did turn around I saw that, even though she was smiling, she was on the verge of tears. “I should’ve been honest from the start. Maybe then I’d have had a chance...”

She let out a deep sigh, then continued. “Ugh, it’s always like this. I swear I’m really going to forget about you after today! So... I hope you and your girlfriend will be happy together. If you aren’t, I won’t be able to keep that promise...”

As she began walking away once more, I shouted a thank you after her, but this time she didn’t stop or reply.

She loved me. Surprise, happiness, guilt, and a bunch of other emotions whirled around my head. Before I knew it, a single tear had made its way down my cheek. *Thank you, Mashiro.*

I stood there, alone in the park, thinking about her—the girl that had probably been my first love.

3

Between Kokoro moving out and me having to meet up with Mashiro and Yume, I'd been going through a lot, but I still found the time to regularly contact Elena. However, on the flipside, I'd been speaking less and less with Kokoro. Making small talk with her made me feel kind of nervous.

I thought dinnertime would be a good time to strike up a conversation.

"You've been working nonstop preparing to move, huh?"

"Oh, yeah," she said with a dejected chuckle without looking up from her plate. "I've got so many games and doujinshi that it feels like I'll never finish."

"Do you need a hand?" I asked. The only reason she was moving out sooner than necessary was because I was in a relationship now, so I believed it was my responsibility to help.

"Nah, it's fine. I've also gotta sort things depending on whether I wanna keep them or not, so it's easier if I go at it alone."

"All right..."

Since Elena had become my girlfriend, Kokoro had started spending more and more time holed up in her room. She used to spend a lot of time downstairs, but now she only came down to the living room to eat. Also, with this particular day as an exception, she'd been eating out more than she ever used to.

I'd asked her how things were going with Yuya, but the only response I'd gotten from her was "good."

I knew she was just busy seeing her friends and packing her stuff, but I couldn't help but feel like she was avoiding me, which made it even harder to speak to her.

I still had a feeling that she wasn't just doing this as a thoughtful gesture toward Elena and me—maybe she didn't want to spend too much time with another guy now that things were going well with Yuya. For all I knew, those

two were dating already... but if that were the case, I wished she would at least tell me.

I even helped her out with getting to know him... But I guess she's the one who put in all the effort. Ultimately, it's her call whether she wants to tell me or not...

* * *

"...aya? Ichigaya?"

"Ahh! M-Minami?!" I exclaimed, surprised, noticing my girlfriend sitting next to me. "S-Sorry, I was spacing out..."

This is our first date as boyfriend and girlfriend! What am I spacing out for?!

"Hehe... Is something on your mind?"

"Nothing in particular..."

"Hmmm? Could you be hiding something from me?" she jokingly asked, leaning so close to my face that my heart skipped a beat.

"H-Haha... N-No. I-It's nothing, really..."

I wasn't trying to keep secrets from her, but I figured telling her that I was thinking about Kokoro while Elena and I were on a date together would have been pretty rude.

"Let's go then!"

"Sure..."

I glanced at her and once again asked myself how such a cute girl could be my girlfriend. She looked jaw-droppingly beautiful in her light-blue sundress.

We were going to the cinema to watch an anime movie about two girls trying to become idols in America. I wanted to watch it because it was from an animation studio that I really liked, so I'd suggested that Elena come see it with me. As a yuri fan, she was bound to be interested in the girl-friendship aspect of it. Turned out, she also really wanted to watch it, so the matter had been quickly settled and I'd reserved our tickets.

"I hope it's good..." I said.

"The reviews have been really positive, so I'm sure it will be!" Elena smiled

happily.

Once at the cinema, we got our tickets printed, bought some popcorn and drinks, and headed over to the viewing room, where we sat side by side. Being so close to Elena's beautiful profile had my heart pounding in a millisecond.

She's so wasted on me. And now I'll be sitting here right next to her in the dark for two whole hours...

The movie started, but, interesting as it was, I was too nervous about Elena's proximity to fully take it in.

"Ah!"

For a brief moment, when I'd reached into the popcorn bucket, Elena's hand brushed against mine. We both pulled back.



“O-Oh my! S-Sorry...” she apologized in a whisper.

“I-It’s okay...”

Agh. Even that was almost enough to make my nose bleed... That’s the first time we’ve ever touched hands! Now that we’re dating, we’re eventually going to... h-hold hands! And maybe even more than that!

...No! Don’t think dirty thoughts! Don’t let the darkness of the cinema influence you. But, even leaving aside the dirty thoughts... if I get so nervous about our hands touching, how am I going to, like, kiss her? I wish I could ask Nishina for advice... Actually, wait. No. That’d be too embarrassing. I definitely don’t want to ask her for advice on that.

I spent almost two hours thinking about stuff like that, and the movie eventually came to its end without me ever properly focusing on it.

However, when the lights turned on, I noticed that Elena was crying.

“Huh?!”

“S-Sorry...”

“N-No, don’t worry...”

What’s a boyfriend supposed to do at a time like this?! Should I just quietly hand her my handkerchief like in those old-timey shojo manga? But she’s already using her own handkerchief. And, come to think of it, I don’t even have one with me.

I hadn’t expected her to be literally moved to tears by the movie. As for me, I had barely been following it, but of course I couldn’t admit that. Previously when dealing with this kind of situation, I’d relied on Kokoro’s advice, but lately we hadn’t been close enough for me to casually ask for her help.

“It was so great!” Elena started excitedly relaying her opinion of the movie we’d just watched. “Of course, I enjoyed seeing the relationship between the two girls, but it was also a wonderful story! The way their friendship was portrayed in a pure and platonic way instead of brashly pandering to yuri fans made it even better!”

She really was a weird girl. She was cute, fashionable, extroverted, popular, and just perfect in every way... but beneath that surface lay an otaku through and through. That actually settled my nerves somewhat, and it was one of the reasons that I liked her so much.

“Thank you for inviting me to watch it! I’ve been able to witness a masterpiece, and it’s all thanks to you!”

“I’m just happy you liked it!”

“What about you? What did you think?”

“M-Me?! O-Oh, yeah, I liked it a lot!”

That was kind of a lie, but I didn’t *dislike* it or anything. I had just been too distracted to follow it.

“I’m glad! Would it be okay if I stopped by the merch stand? I’d like to pick up the movie pamphlet.”

“Of course!”

After stopping by the store, we went to a nearby café to have a light meal. During our relaxed chat, Elena suddenly switched the topic.

“By the way... how has Nishina been lately?” she asked. “Is she... doing well? I haven’t talked to her in a while, so I was wondering...”

She seemed to have a hard time bringing up the topic.

Is it because she doesn’t like me living with another girl? That would make sense. I couldn’t bear it if my girlfriend lived with another guy.

“She’s doing okay, but... she’s actually going to be moving out pretty soon,” I told her, both because I wanted Elena to feel better about it and out of respect for Kokoro’s decision.

“Wh-Why would that be?” Elena asked, surprised.

“Her parents are coming back to Japan.”

“Oh, I see...” she said, dropping her gaze with a thoughtful expression.

Hm? What’s wrong? Why’s she reacting like this?

“Minami?”

“Forgive me... I feel sorry for Nishina, but, to be honest, I’m quite relieved. I was worried that you might fall in love with such a beautiful girl while you were living with her...”

“M-Minami!”

Not only did it warm my heart that she would worry about something like that, but it also made her even cuter.

By the time we left the café, it was already past 6 p.m. I thought it would be better to end our date before it got late, first because I didn’t want to bore her, and second because I didn’t want her to think I had any... impure intentions. She mattered a lot to me, and, even though I didn’t want to admit it, I didn’t have the courage to kiss her, let alone anything more than that. I was interested in those things, of course, but at the same time, I was scared of going too far and driving her away.

“S-So, should we call it a day?” I proposed.

“What?!”

“Is something wrong?” I asked, trying to find out why Elena seemed so shocked by my suggestion.

“Oh, sorry... It’s just that it’s much earlier than I expected,” she replied.

Does this mean that she actually wanted to stay together late?!

“R-Really? Ah, sorry, I just thought you’d be bored spending so much time with me, especially since it’s our first date...”

“Not at all! But I guess going home wishing it had lasted longer would make us both look forward to the next one!” she said, blessing me with her kind smile.

“Y-You’re right! Yeah!”

I was trying to act gentlemanly, but maybe ending the date so early was a mistake...

On the train home, I kept wondering whether I’d done the right thing or whether I should have stayed longer. Whatever the case, going on a date with

such a cute girl had made me happier than I could have ever imagined.

When I arrived back home, I was met by a sight that had become rather rare —Kokoro was on the couch playing with her phone. Lately she'd been spending most of her time in her room, so I wondered why she'd decided to come downstairs.

"I-I'm back..."

"Hi," she greeted me. "You're early."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Weren't you on a date?"

Was she waiting here to ask me about it? I didn't even tell her about it, but she must have guessed by how much effort I was putting into looking good this morning.

"Y-Yeah... I had fun."

"Did you fuck up at all?"

"N-No... At least I hope not," I said, sitting down on the couch a bit removed from where she was sitting. This felt like the first actual conversation we'd had in a while, despite living under the same roof.

"Cool," she said with a smile. "So, anyway... I was thinking I'd leave tomorrow."

This is even faster than I expected...

"I found a hotel where it's really cheap to stay for long periods of time," she added.

"A-Are you sure? Can you really afford that?"

"Don't worry. My mom's coming back next month, so it's just until then."

"I see..."

After hearing Elena's opinion on the subject, I guess I should have been grateful to Kokoro for deciding to leave so soon.

“Thanks for everything,” she told me with a smile.

I felt a lump in my throat. “No, it’s nothing...”

“I’m not just talking about letting me live here, you know? I really mean everything.”

“O-Oh! I don’t know if anything I did really helped you though...” I said, even though I was happy to hear that she appreciated my efforts.

“It sure did. It’s also thanks to your advice that things are going so well between me and Yuya.”

“R-Really? I’m glad then...”

The mention of Yuya convinced me that it really was because she had a crush on another guy that Kokoro didn’t want to live with me anymore.

“I... have to thank you too. If it wasn’t for you, I still wouldn’t even be able to talk to girls, let alone date one,” I said.

Kokoro’s advice had helped me a lot over the past few months. I’d become way more comfortable around girls, I’d learned how to make myself presentable, and I’d even become a bit more confident. I honestly believed that living with her had turned my life around.

I used to dream of having an otaku girlfriend, and living with Kokoro had allowed me to live through a series of incredible experiences, resulting in that dream becoming reality. She’d spurred me to go to meetups and cosplay events, to find a part-time job, and more. Through these experiences, I’d been able to meet lots of girls, befriend some of them, and even go on dates.

If I hadn’t done any of those things, I probably wouldn’t be dating Elena—a girlfriend who, to be honest, was too good for me. An introverted, shy otaku like myself could never have achieved that without help. Now more than ever, I realized how valuable Kokoro’s advice had been to me.

“Come to think of it, you’ve changed a lot from when I first met you, huh? But you were the one who got Minami to like you, not me. I still have no idea how you managed to pull that one off...”

“Nishina...”

Everything had started when I happened to find out by pure coincidence that Elena was a VTuber, but Kokoro didn't know that. I still couldn't tell her, since the whole thing was supposed to be a secret.

"You should be proud of yourself," she said. "You'd be the perfect otaku boyfriend for a lot of girls now."

"N-Nishina..." I said again, surprised that she'd compliment me like that. "Thank you. You know, even if we're not going to be living together anymore, if you need help with something, feel free to ask me, okay? At school or on LINE."

The words flowed out of my mouth without me even thinking about them. Kokoro had thanked me for helping her out with Yuya, but, all this time, she'd also depended on my advice. I wasn't too sure I could still be helpful to her, but if she trusted me enough to rely on me, I could only be happy about that—after all, I trusted her in just the same way.

"Thanks, but I think I'll be fine."

All of a sudden, I realized just how embarrassing my offer had sounded. *That was kind of arrogant of me. She doesn't need my advice anymore, and I forced it down her throat...*

"From now on, I have to do my best on my own. So you do your best too, 'kay?"

Even though she hadn't said it outright, I knew what she meant. "You do your best on *your* own too." Kokoro didn't want to have anything to do with me anymore. Her words, her voice, her face... everything seemed to imply that.

You have Yuya now, so you don't want me hanging around. I get that. I bet you also don't want to make Elena worry, since you're friends with her too. And... you're right. I don't know why I said we should keep in touch. I'm an idiot. That wouldn't be fair to Elena either.

Beneath the guilt of having proposed something out of line, however, I couldn't help but feel hurt by Kokoro's words. Somehow, the distance she wanted to put between us made me sadder than I'd expected.

She's right. I know that. But then, why do I feel like this? When did I become so dependent on her? My romance goals are met. Nishina's are about to be too.

We should go back to being strangers... At least, that's what she wants.

"You're right... Sorry. Please forget about it," I said, feeling so uncomfortable that I couldn't stand one more second in that situation. I stood up from the couch.

"Ichig—"

"Good night," I interrupted, hurriedly leaving the room.

Tomorrow, Nishina will leave. Our friendship is going to end, and we'll be back to being complete strangers... But maybe we were never really friends in the first place. We were just helping each other out because we shared a common goal, and now that we've accomplished that goal, it's natural for us to split up.

There must have been something wrong with me. I'd found my perfect girlfriend, and yet saying goodbye to my roommate felt so devastating...

4

The next morning, at around eight, I was woken up by the ring of the doorbell.

Ugh, let me sleep... Summer vacation is for sleeping.

The doorbell rang once more, so I jumped out of bed and rushed downstairs.

Did Nishina call movers or something?

Still half asleep, I pressed the button on the intercom and asked who was there.

“Yoo-hoo! It’s me, Nishina. Good morning,” a familiar voice said.

Huh? Nishina? Why’s she on the intercom?

I looked at the display and realized that the familiar surname did not, in fact, belong to my roommate, but instead to someone much older.

“Huh?! G-Good morning! P-Please wait a minute!” I said, suddenly wide awake.

Just as I was dashing toward the entrance to open the door, a sleepy-looking Kokoro emerged from her room and met me downstairs.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “It’s still so early...”

“Nishina... didn’t you say your mom wouldn’t be back until next month?”

“Yeah, and...?”

“Well, she’s outside the door *right now*!”

“She’s... WHAT?!”

* * *

In extreme confusion, Kokoro and I darted over to the entrance, opened the door, and greeted Kokoro’s mother for the first time in a few months.

“Kokoro! It’s been so long since I’ve seen you! And you too, Ichigaya!”

“Mom... Why are you here? You said you’d be back next month!”

“But I sent you a text about my change of plans, didn’t I?”

“What? No way! You didn’t!” Kokoro anxiously took out her phone and checked her LINE conversation with her mother. “See? You never told me!”

“But that can’t be! Look,” her mother said, handing over her own phone. “Here’s the message I sent you!”

“That’s not sent! Can’t you see the arrow thingy next to the message? That means it didn’t send right!”

“Oh... It does?”

That explains it. Nishina didn’t know she’d be coming either...

“Ugh. Just wait there for a minute, okay?”

“What? Kokoro?”

Before Mrs. Nishina could get an answer, her daughter returned to the living room, forcibly dragging me with her. Once we were out earshot, Kokoro began to desperately explain her plan.

“If I know my mom, she’s gonna ask to check my room... I can’t have her see my otaku stuff! I’ll go try hiding it as fast as I can, so buy me some time, okay? Keep her in the living room! Can you do that, please? I won’t take long—most of my things are already packed up!”

“S-Sure! I’ll try!”

She really is fast at coming up with a plan!

Being alone with Kokoro’s mother would no doubt be awkward for me, but this was no time to worry about such things. My soon-to-be ex-roommate sprinted to her room, and I went back to the entrance.

“S-Sorry to keep you waiting. Nish— I mean, Kokoro wanted to clean up her room a bit.”

“Aw, not at all. I am sorry for intruding so suddenly,” she replied as I escorted her to the living room.

Seeing her for the first time in so long, I was struck by how much she

resembled Kokoro. I had no idea about her age, but, for having a daughter who was still in high school, Mrs. Nishina still looked rather beautiful.



Kokoro had told me that her parents didn't like otaku stuff—the fact that she was suddenly so anxious to hide it probably meant that it was her mother who was the most biased against it. *She doesn't look like the kind of person to get mad about something like that though...*

"Sorry about the mess. Here," I said, offering her a glass of iced tea from the fridge.

"Oh no, it's not that messy at all. Here, take this. A little souvenir from England."

"Oh, thank you," I said, accepting her gift.

"So, how are things? Are you and Kokoro getting along?" she asked me with a smile.

Of course, the narrative that we'd somehow planted in her brain involved Kokoro and me being deeply in love with each other, so much so that we were already looking forward to our marriage.

"Y-Yes! Very much so!"

"I hope she hasn't started any arguments or anything of the sort. She can be a bit stubborn at times, my Kokoro, and she has a very harsh way of putting things."

"O-Oh, not at all," I said, despite wholeheartedly agreeing with her description. "She's a really good girl, and I owe her a lot."

My rebuttal wasn't a lie either—I really did think that about her.

"Hm, I see. But if there's anything about Kokoro that's troubling you, you can always go ahead and tell me, all right?"

"Troubling me? Oh, no, she would never..."

Answering was hard enough, let alone keeping the conversation going, so I just let it die like that. I was just too nervous. Not only did I have to focus on pleasantries, but I also had to make sure I didn't say anything that would make her realize that Kokoro and I had never been dating to begin with. I figured that the less I said, the better.

What's taking you so long, Nishina?! Hurry up already! You said you'd be fast!

"She sure is taking her sweet time," Mrs. Nishina commented. "You'd think she'd always keep your room somewhat presentable, since she's the guest in it... but that's just me. I wonder why she would have so much to clean up in the first place."

"H-Hahaha... r-right... I-I'll go check on her!" I said, escaping the living room and practically sprinting upstairs to knock on Kokoro's door.

"Are you done?" I called.

"Wh-Where's my mom?!"

"Still in the living room..."

"Come in then!" she said.

I walked into the room and found Kokoro standing on a chair, trying to put a box on a shelf above her. Since she was wearing one of those short dress-like things for pajamas—a nightgown, was it?—I was very close to getting a full-frontal view of her panties. I quickly looked away before she could tell.

"Agh, I can't reach it! Can you help me?"

"U-Uh, s-sure..." I replied, stepping up onto the chair once she'd moved out of the way.

"Perfect timing by the way. There's just one box left. Can I keep it in your room while Mom's here? There's, like, nowhere left to hide it in here, and if she saw what's inside it, that'd be the end of me..."

"Sure, no problem," I said, picking up the box and moving it to my room.

"Thanks!" Kokoro said as she followed me out. "That should be everything..."

"So, is your mom the one who can't stand otaku?"

"Yup! I don't think Dad really cares. She was so mad that one time she found me looking at some of this stuff you wouldn't believe it. I managed to lie my way through it, but now I have to be extra sure that she doesn't find me out."

"O-Oh..."

I actually wanted to ask her more about that, but I didn't want to make Mrs.

Nishina suspicious by keeping her waiting for too long.

“Okay then, let’s go back,” I said.

“Wait a second!” She stopped me. “I wanted to discuss this with you a bit better before my mom showed up, but... don’t you think we should tell her that we broke up? Like, right now.”

“Right now?!”

“The sooner we do it the better, don’cha think?”

She has a point... If we keep the pretense up much longer, telling her parents we’ve broken up is going to be way harder. And she’s in love with someone else... I definitely didn’t feel ready to bring that up, but I knew we’d have to do it sooner or later.

“I’ll tell her, since she’s my mom, so just follow my lead, okay? I’ll say I fell in love with someone else, then you’ll totally get off scot-free.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

We headed back to the living room, prepared for the worst.

“Oh, Kokoro, there you are. Was it *that* messy up there?”

“Haha... Well, a bit, yeah...” Kokoro replied, sitting next to her mom. I took a seat on the chair facing the two of them.

“I heard from Ichigaya here that the two of you have been getting along nicely. I’m so happy to hear that.”

“Huh?!” Kokoro, shocked, shot a look in my direction.

What else was I supposed to tell her?! I thought we were supposed to lie for a while longer!

“You see, my biggest wish is for the two of you to continue loving one another. Even after you’re married, I hope you’ll be a lovey-dovey couple for years and years.” Mrs. Nishina closed her eyes as if in prayer.

Why are you talking about years into our marriage?! Slow down! This isn’t going how we planned at all!

“W-Well, I know you and Dad are like that, but, that’s kind of like... just your

thing. Y-You shouldn't force that on others, you know?" Kokoro replied, choosing her words with the utmost caution.

It is true that her parents look like a lovey-dovey couple though...

"Dad and me? Lovey-dovey? Pffft. Please."

"Huh?"

Kokoro looked just as surprised as I was to hear her mother's tone make a full one-eighty. In an instant, Mrs. Nishina's kind, nurturing manner had transformed into an annoyed, even angry, one.

"What was I thinking, following him all the way to England, leaving you here? Hah! I should have let him go by himself. Well, at least I'm glad it turned out to be an opportunity for you to spend more time with Ichigaya."

"M-Mom? Did something happen between you and Dad?"

"Oh, you should've seen him! All the time I've been in England with him, he's been nothing but work, work, work. He's barely had any days off! I know he needed to increase his connections within the company, but I ended up being alone most of the time, in a new and scary place where I couldn't even understand the people around me! Since I don't know any English, he was the only person I could talk to, but every day after work he was so tired that he couldn't even have a conversation with me! I'd have ended up depressed if I'd spent any more time there. I couldn't talk to you, nor could I see my friends here in Japan, what with the time difference and the cost of international calls. I was so relieved when he told me that the company was preparing to send him back!"

"R-Really? But I've never heard you complain about any of that..."

"I didn't want you to worry, since I knew you were still getting used to your new life together."

I see... Mrs. Nishina's explanation made perfect sense to me, but I also thought, more than a wife, she sounded like a needy girlfriend. Basically, she was sad that her husband wasn't paying enough attention to her. It was clear that she still liked him. Personally, I felt more sympathy for him, having to work so hard in an unfamiliar country.

“So... did you come back before Dad because of all that?” Kokoro asked.

“That’s part of it, but I also just wanted to move back as soon as possible. I’m sorry that I’m tearing the two of you apart by coming here, but don’t worry. As soon as you graduate high school, you’ll be able to live together again!”

“Huh?”

She wants us to live together after we graduate? I, um... I guess that makes sense, since she expects us to get married. But how are we going to tell her that we aren’t dating “anymore” after hearing all this?

“Actually,” she continued, “I’ve already found the perfect place for you both. And I’ve personally taken care of the down payment.”

“WHAT?!” we both shouted in disbelief.

“You can’t be serious!” Kokoro exclaimed.

“Why are you so surprised? Anyway, with this you’ll be able to live together again as soon as possible!”

“Why didn’t you ask me first?!”

“Kokoro? You don’t sound happy about this as I thought you’d be. You wanted to live with your boyfriend so much that you stayed behind without us, right? Well, I thought I’d make sure that you’ll be able to do just that.”

“Y-Yeah, but, I mean... you should have at least talked to us first...”

“Why? Are you going to tell me that you don’t see yourself living with him anymore after we agreed to let you stay just so you could?” Her mother was smiling, but the coldness in her voice was giving me the chills.

“N-No! I... I was just surprised, is all...” her daughter replied, frantically shaking her head.

Nishina wanted to tell her that we’d split up, but can she really go ahead with it after hearing that?! Her mom’s already made the down payment for an apartment! This woman’s already counting how many grandchildren she wants!

“That’s good to hear,” my self-appointed mother-in-law said, showing us yet another terrifying smile.

She usually looks so kind, but she sure knows how to make a guy fear for his life...

“Your father agreed to your absurd request because of how in love you are with Ichigaya, so he wouldn’t be very pleased if things had changed. But anyway, it’s just a down payment. If you look at the apartment and you don’t like it, we can get it back and find a different place. I’ll help as much as I can so we can find a home that both of you like.”

Kokoro and I, feeling utterly defeated, could do nothing but voice the saddest, most broken laugh ever. *Things have gone so, so wrong. So much for convincing Nishina’s parents!*

“Oh, Ichigaya, I have a little favor to ask you. Would it be a problem if I were to sleep here for a couple of nights? I thought I’d asked Kokoro to ask you, but as it turns out, she never received my message, so...”

“E-Excuse me? Why would you need to stay here?” I asked.

“You may have heard from Kokoro, but we began renting out our home just before leaving for England. We thought we wouldn’t be back for three years, and Kokoro was staying with you, so...”

Heard... what? Did I ever hear that from Nishina?

“There’s still a family staying there,” she continued. “And until their contract is over, we’ll be living in an apartment. Unfortunately, the start date on our own contract is two days from now. And you see, after all that time I spent basically alone, I can’t stand the idea of spending another two days in a hotel by myself! There’s also the fact that I won’t be able to live with Kokoro anymore once she graduates from high school, so I want to stay close to her for as long as possible.”

Kokoro’s mom sounded very passionate about all of this, but the second problem could have been easily solved by not letting her daughter marry as soon as she graduated. Of course, I kept that thought to myself.

“I promise I won’t bother either of you, and I’ll cover the cost of my expenses. So, may I...?”

“Um, er, s-sure! Okay!” I replied. There was no way I could say no to the

mother of my (fake) girlfriend after she'd said all those things.

"Really? Thank you so much!"

"O-Oh, don't mention it..."

"Sheesh, Mom, you never think about other people's circumstances."

That's an extra roomie we don't need one bit... We'll have to act like we're dating the whole time she's here!

Having agreed to let Kokoro's mother stay in my house, we spent a little more time in the living room catching up after the few months apart. Or rather, Kokoro and her mom did that. I just sat there without a word.

They really get along well, these two. I'd never have guessed that Mrs. Nishina's the type to prevent her daughter from enjoying her hobbies...

After chatting with us for a while, Kokoro's mother told us that the long trip had left her in need of a bath. I was glad we'd been keeping the bathroom—and more or less the whole house, for that matter—in a presentable state.

"I'm so, *totally* sorry about all this!" Kokoro exclaimed as soon as her mother was out of the room.

"It's okay, we'll survive."

"I just couldn't tell her the truth with her going on about all that. She even put the money down for a freaking apartment. And now she's gonna be staying here..."

Yeah, after all that, I can't blame Nishina for not being able to break it to her.

"Oh well, that's that. We just have to find the perfect moment to tell her during the two days she's staying here."

"Actually," Kokoro began, "I'm afraid we won't be able to do that for a while."

"What?! How so?"

"She's trying pretty hard to keep it together now she's in front of you, but I can tell she's super grumpy because of Dad."

"I-Is she?"

I mean, she did give me chills for a second, but she looked pretty calm in general.

“You really don’t want to see my mom when she snaps,” Kokoro muttered grimly. “At least, we should wait until she makes up with my dad.”

“Really now?”

“She changes like night and day depending on how things are going between them. If we wait for things to get better, it’s a bit more likely she’ll just forgive us.”

She must really love her husband, huh? But, wait... “a bit more likely”? That’s all?!

“For now, the best we can do is just act like we’re dating. Like, I don’t even wanna think how she’d react if she found out the truth. Will you help me out for just a bit longer? I’ll tell Dad to apologize to her, and once I move out, I’ll find the timing to tell her everything. I promise I won’t make it a pain for you.”

“O-Okay then...”

To be honest, I’d rather not be there when she reveals the truth to her mom, so that actually works a lot better for me. But we’re still going to pretend we’re dating...

Mrs. Nishina left the bathroom some time later. Now that she was with us once more, we had to go back to being careful not to reveal our secret.

“Whew! I feel much better now,” she said. “By the way, Kokoro, you’re done cleaning your room now, right? I’d love to see it!”

“Wh-What? Well, um, okay...” Kokoro replied nervously.

Good thing she already hid all the compromising stuff.

The room that Kokoro was staying in used to belong to my little sister, Kisaki, as did pretty much all of the things that were still in it at this point. Kokoro had already packed up almost everything she’d brought with her, hiding away some of the boxes on shelves and others in my room.

“It’s so clean...” Mrs. Nishina commented when she entered. “Perhaps even

too clean. It's like nobody's been using it."

Kokoro twitched in fear. Her mom certainly had a point—the room was so empty it didn't look like Kokoro had actually been living in it. Of course, that was only because she'd recently tidied it all up.

"Th-This is Ichigaya's sister's room, so I'm only borrowing it, basically. I can't fill it with my stuff; that'd be rude," Kokoro said, failing to mention that was exactly what she'd been doing up to a few days prior.

"Hmm, I guess you're right. Wait... Do you sleep in this bed?"

"Y-Yeah? I brought my own pillow and sheets though, since I thought his sister wouldn't like a stranger using hers."

"I see... So you're following our rules and staying away from... untoward conduct," Kokoro's mom said, glancing at me.

Oh. I, uh... yeah. I think I know what she means by that.

"Huh?! What are you talking about?! We're not doing anything like that!"

"Don't get me wrong," her mother replied. "I'm happy that you're doing as we told you, but... the two of you don't really act like a young couple at all."

"What...?" That comment was enough to terrify both of us.

"You don't even call each other by your first names."

"Th-That's just because, you know, we're so used to using last names! Old habits die hard!" Kokoro stuttered.

"And to be honest, from how you interact, I don't feel many loving vibes. Don't tell me that you've already grown bored of one another. Are you even going on dates? Where did you go this summer?"

"D-Dates? We went to, uh... to the pool with a friend!"

Apart from the otaku-related events, which she obviously couldn't talk about, Kokoro and I had only really gone to the pool together. *Did she really have to mention Minami though? Won't that make her mom more susp—*

"With a friend? That doesn't sound like a date at all."

"W-We're totally going on proper dates too! Just the two of us!"

“Such as...?”

“Um, well... You know, we go on dates like, every single day! So many dates we can’t even remember the details! Right, Ichigaya?!”

“Huh? O-Oh, yeah! H-Haha, indeeeed!”

“Really...?”

Now she’s even more suspicious!

“So,” Mrs. Nishina continued, “could it be that you were planning to go on a date today too? If that’s the case, I’m sorry I showed up like this...”

“T-Today? Um, yes, actually” Kokoro dutifully replied. “We were planning a *house date* sort of deal. You know, like, staying at home, chilling...”

“I see. But hey, since I’m here, why don’t we all go somewhere? I want to see the two of you having a date!”

By the way she said that, I couldn’t help but think she was trying to test us.

“What?!” Kokoro cried.

“Don’t worry, I won’t bother you at all! You can go wherever you want, and I’ll pay for it!”

“But...” Kokoro mumbled before turning her gaze to meet my own.

“I-I think we should accept your mom’s kind offer, Nishina,” I said, trying not to elicit any suspicion.

“F-Fine then.”

“I really want to see what kind of date you two usually go on!”

“I-In that case, um...”

5

After thinking about it for a while, Kokoro decided that we'd go to an amusement park. She probably thought it was a reasonable choice for a date.

We all got ready, left the house, and rode on the train to Fantastia Land, which was the closest amusement park—it was only twenty or so minutes away.

On our way there, Kokoro's allegedly grumpy mother sounded excited.

"An amusement park!" she chirped. "That's just what I think of when I think of high schoolers going on a date! And Fantastia Land in particular is such a nostalgic place! We went there a few times, you, Dad, and I, but you were probably too young to remember. You said this is one of your usual date spots—how many times have you been there?"

"Er, I think... at least three times!" Kokoro said with a certain degree of confidence. Of course, this was a lie. We'd never been there together. Not once.

As for me, I'd visited the place with my family back when I was a little kid too, but that was it.

"That many times? To such a small park?" her mother asked, surprised.

"W-Well, you know how it is; there aren't, like, that many other date spots around these parts..." Kokoro promptly replied. Of course, this was also a lie.

Once we reached the park, Kokoro's mother bought our tickets, and we went in through the turnstiles.

"Wow, this is nostalgic!" she commented.

"It really is!" Kokoro replied, raising her mother's eyebrows as well as mine.

What are you saying?!

"O-Oh, I mean, it's nostalgic because we haven't been here since last month! It kind of feels like a long time! R-Right, Ichigaya?!"

“Y-Yeah...” Try to keep it together, please.

“Hmm?”

Hearing her mother’s suspicious reaction, Kokoro tried to distract her by changing the topic.

“D-Did you use to come here with Dad a lot?”

“Oh, yes. We did come here together, back when we were in school.”

“Really? That’s so nice!”

“Yes, he used to be so kind and loving back then, unlike now...”

“L-Let’s just forget about Dad for today! Come on, let’s choose something to ride, ’kay?”

We all sat down together on a bench and, map in hand, started thinking about which of the park attractions to go to.

“Most of these attractions look like they’re made for children... Oh, what about the haunted house?” I suggested.

Among all the tiny roller-coasters and rides themed after kiddie anime characters, the haunted house seemed like the only entertaining option for high schoolers such as Kokoro and myself.

“That sounds wonderful!” Kokoro’s mother exclaimed. “That’s what amusement parks are for! And I bet you want to see your boyfriend being all brave in the face of the spooks, right, Kokoro?”

“H-Haunted house?! Th-That’s probably super lame! Let’s choose something else.”

“Nishina, don’t tell me that you’re genuinely scared of haunted houses.”

“N-No way! I’m totally fine with them!”

Your voice is shaking! If you’re scared, just say so...

“You know, when she was just a little tyke, she would bawl her eyes out at haunted houses! Do they still terrify you that much?”

“I-I said I’m fine!”

“I mean, it’s still probably made for kids,” I said. “But if you’re that scared, we can just go someplace else.”

“Argh! I-I’m not scared or anything! Fine! Let’s go to the haunted house!”

I hadn’t been trying to make fun of her, but Kokoro saw it that way and seemed to feel as if she had to prove something.

Are you really going to be fine?

“What? You’re not coming in with us, Mom?!”

“Of course not. I want the two of you to enjoy yourselves, after all! And oh, Ichigaya... don’t you take advantage of the dark to do anything weird to my Kokoro, all right? Hehe...”

“I-I would never!”

While Mrs. Nishina grinned after us, we gave our tickets to the attendant standing in front of the attraction.

“Okay, if you could please stand side by side,” he instructed. “Now, miss, please raise your left arm. And you, sir, raise your right arm.”

I had no idea why the guy was asking us to pose so strangely, but I dutifully raised my arm.

Click!

“Huh?”

“Wh-What?!”

The man had fastened a pair of handcuffs around our wrists, literally chaining the pair of us to one other.

“You’ll have to hold hands to reach the exit. Have fun!”

“For real now?!”

Kokoro’s mother, who we could hear giggling behind us, seemed just as amused by the turn of events as we were confused by it.

Did this staff guy just go and assume we were a couple?! Do you know how

awkward it is to be literally chained to a girl who isn't even your girlfriend?! Do you?! Don't tell me you do this to everyone who enters the haunted house in pairs! I mean, we're supposed to act like a couple today, but... hold hands?!

I glanced at Kokoro, expecting her to be absolutely furious at the situation, or at the very least incredibly frustrated. After all, she was being forced to do this whole thing with me while she was in love with someone else.

However... she was silently staring a hole in the ground, blushing. Maybe she was restraining herself because her mother was watching.

Mrs. Nishina, however, was already wondering why we were taking so long.

"You have to hold hands if you want to enter, right?" she pressed.

Indeed, the man in front of us seemed to be waiting for exactly that before letting us in. He wasn't saying anything, but I could feel him silently pressuring us into hurrying up.

If we don't do it, we can't get in! And more importantly, we'll make Mrs. Nishina suspicious! I know Nishina's going to hate it, but we have no choice... I thought, and I took Kokoro's hand in my own. I felt a bit guilty when I thought of Elena, since I was now holding hands with another girl before ever having done it with her, but that wasn't important now.

"...Huh?" Kokoro jolted in surprise and began staring a hole through me instead.

I'm sorry, but we have to do this if we want to fool your mother. It's just until we get in, so grin and bear it.

Despite being the one who'd gone ahead with it, I could feel my face getting hotter and my heartbeat getting faster. *I mean, it's my first time holding hands with a girl, so I guess that's to be expected. I hope Nishina won't notice...*

"Very well! You can go in now!"

"See you later, you two!"

Hand in hand, we walked inside, seen off by Mrs. Nishina and the haunted house attendant.

As soon as we were in, I was about to let go of Kokoro's hand and apologize to her, but...

Huh? What? She's... gripping my hand back? I hadn't even noticed.

I wasn't sure why she would go that far just because her mother was watching, but now I couldn't let go of her hand even if I wanted to.

My heart was beating even faster than before.

"I-I'm sorry I took your hand without asking. I thought we had to, you know?" I said.

"Huh? O-Oh, it's okay..."

"Well... Let's go then."

This was all so awkward that I wanted to reach the exit as soon as humanly possible. However, the instant we took our first step, a red light flickered on in front of us, illuminating a creepy doll with hair so long it reached its feet. But that wasn't the scariest part.

"AAAAHHH!" Kokoro, scared witless, screeched so hard that she almost burst my eardrums.

But that wasn't the scariest part either.

Out of fear, she had gripped my hand even harder and was now clutching my arm to her chest, essentially hugging it. I could feel the warmth of her body enveloping it. Now *that* was what sent *my* heart racing.



“S-S-S-Sorry!” she then said, quickly letting go of me.

“It’s fine, don’t worry, haha... Y-You’re scared easily, huh?” I replied, trying my best to smile so that she wouldn’t realize how much she’d stirred me.

It was obvious from the start that she wasn’t fond of spooky stuff, but I didn’t think it’d be this bad...

“I-I was just surprised because it was so sudden!”

“I see... Okay then, let’s continue,” I said, starting to move forward.

“What?! Wait!” She immediately stopped me, grabbing my arm once more.

If she grabs me like that every time, I’m going to die before we reach the exit.

“S-See, you *are* scared... but if we don’t get a move on, we’ll never get out of here.”

“I-I know, but...” she murmured.

Hearing Kokoro as scared as this made her seem... kind of cute. It was too dark to see her face, but I couldn’t help but wonder what her expression looked like. *I wish I could see that... B-But that’s just because she always acts so tough! I just find it a bit surprising that someone like her would have a cute side like this! Cute in a sisterly way, obviously.*

...I don’t think I’ve ever thought of my own little sister as cute though.

My arm felt so hot. My face too. Actually, my whole body felt so hot that anyone would assume I had a fever. I was glad the place was too dark for Kokoro to see my crimson cheeks.

“A-Anyway, we can’t just stand here. Let’s go,” I said again.

“U-Uh... I-Is it okay if I walk with my eyes closed a-and keep hold of your arm?” she asked desperately.

“That’s...”

“I-I’m sorry! I know that Minami wouldn’t like it, but...”

“N-No, I was going to say that it’s okay. You don’t have to apologize.”

“Ichigaya...”

“Y-You can hold my arm or stand behind me if you like. But now, let’s go.”

Just as she’d said, Elena wouldn’t like it. We had to leave this place as quickly as possible, but moving forward was the only way to do that.

“O-Okay.”

“Aaahhh!”

“Gahhh?!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeek!”

All the way through the haunted house, Kokoro held on to my arm for dear life, screaming so hard I started wondering whether bursting my eardrums really was her intention.

As if all of her yelling wasn’t bad enough, the nervousness of having her cling to me was really taking its toll on my poor heart.

“F-Finally, we’re out...” she said once we’d reached the exit, struggling for breath. I could finally see her face, and she looked as terrified as I had imagined, her eyes full of tears.

“How much of a scaredy-cat are you? You were so over-the-top I thought you were faking it,” I said, unable to hold back a grin.

“Why would I fake it?! You’re the weird one for not being scared at all!”

“Welcome back!” the attendant said, relieving us of our handcuffs.

In the end, we held hands all the way through...

“I could hear your screams from out here!” said Mrs. Nishina, who was waiting for us with a smile. “Did your boyfriend protect you from all the terrors?”

“N-Not really! H-He just plowed onward without a care,” Kokoro replied.

“Huh?!”

It’s all fake! What is there to protect you from?! What else was I supposed to do?! Hug you and tell you that it’ll all be all right? I could never do something

like that! We're not dating for real, and you'd hate it if I really did that!

After buying crepes from a stall, we sat down on a bench once more to decide where we'd go next.

"As for roller coasters, there are... let's see... 'Dragon Coaster' and 'Thunder Splash,' I think..." Kokoro said, pointing at the pictures on the park map.

"Looks like it. I remember riding those as a kid. It was terrifying," I replied, shortly before realizing my mistake.

"Huh? Didn't you say you two come here all the time?" Mrs. Nishina asked, eyeing us suspiciously.

Ugh! I slipped up! I phrased it like it's my first time here in a long time!

"O-Of course!" Kokoro replied. "But when we come here on dates, we just, like, eat crepes and go on the smaller rides and that kinda thing, you know? You have to buy tickets for each ride, but entering the park is free, so we haven't been on the roller coasters yet. Right, Ichigaya?"

"Y-Yes!"

"Oh..." Kokoro's mother seemed unconvinced by her explanation.

"Anyway, let's go to the Dragon Coaster! It's the closest one," she said.

"All right!" I replied enthusiastically, since I actually liked roller coasters quite a bit.

"Have fun then! I'll be cheering you on from here!" said Mrs. Nishina.

"Huh?! You aren't coming?!"

"Those kinds of rides are a bit too intense for me... And I'm also a bit tired from riding on the plane for so long, even though I was sleeping for the most part."

"Then why did you say you wanted to come on a date with us?!" Kokoro exclaimed, her voice so high-pitched that it broke at the top.

"I just wanted to see you two being all lovey-dovey, that's all! Hehe!"

"You...!"

Was she testing us for real?!

“So, I’ll be here! See you later!”

“Fine! Whatever!”

“I wonder if she’s onto us,” Kokoro said as we lined up for the ride. Her mother could see us from where she was sitting, but she was too far away to hear us.

“That’s what I thought.”

Kokoro thought for a minute, probably weighing up the pros and cons of dropping the farce. Then, she gave me an apologetic look.

“I’m so sorry I have to put you through this.”

I was surprised by the genuine apology. “N-No, there’s no need to apologize. This whole fake-boyfriend thing started because of me, if you think about it.”

I’d been the one to suggest that Kokoro stay at my house, so much of the responsibility fell on me.

“It’s more about having you come on a date with me even though you have a girlfriend. I mean, Mom’s here, so it doesn’t entirely count, but still. I’m so, so sorry...”

“N-Nishina...” I still felt guilty for doing this when I already had a girlfriend, but I didn’t really blame Kokoro for it. “Like I said, this all came about because of my idea. You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Ichigaya...”

“And, well, you’re here with me despite liking that Yuya guy, right? So we’re in the same boat.”

“I—”

“B-By the way, how are things going with him?” I asked, half-expecting her to dodge the question like before.

“We... We’re going on a date on the first Sunday after summer vacation.”

“O-Oh...”

Things really are going well between them then. I should be happy for her. "Should," yeah... Knowing for a fact that they're getting closer with each other makes me feel so... weird. Maybe I've spent so much time with her that I don't want her taken from me? But we're just rivals working together toward the same goal. That's all. We aren't even friends or anything. She said we'll go back to being strangers once she's moved out. But then, why do I feel like this?

Had I been missing something this whole time?

"What about you and Minami?"

"W-We..."

"Are things going well?"

"We went to watch *Jenny's Sunday* together a few days ago."

"Really?! I was actually thinking of going myself! How was it?!"

"Oh, it was very good—so good it moved Minami to tears."

We continued talking about the movie and other unimportant topics until it was our turn to get on the ride. We sat side by side and lowered the safety harness, and before long we were moving. I remembered it to be thrilling and scary to go on as a kid, but now that I was older, it was very underwhelming. The same didn't seem to apply to Kokoro, who screeched at the top of her lungs from start to end.

If she really were my girlfriend, I guess this is the kind of stuff I'd be doing with her. Going to the amusement park. Seeing her adorably scared by the haunted house. Hearing her scream on the roller coaster... From now on, she'll be doing this kind of thing with Yuya, not me.

I shook my head, realizing that just thinking that was extremely rude to Elena. *There must be something wrong with me today. Actually, not just today... Something's been wrong with me for a while now.*

"It was super fun to ride this again after so long!" Kokoro announced happily once we'd stopped.

"Really? It was a bit disappointing for me, to be honest..."

"I mean, yeah, it's made for kids. I can see where you're coming from."

As we headed to the bench where her mother was waiting, the worst possible thing happened.

“Hey, isn’t that... Kokoro?!” someone called out to her from behind.

We turned around and saw two girls I’d seen before—Kokoro’s friends from school. Beside them were two boys, presumably their boyfriends, who looked slightly older than us.

“Y-Yui? And Manami?! And...”

“Wait, isn’t he the guy you were talking to at school that one time?” one of the two girls, clearly shocked, said while staring at me. “Don’t tell me he’s your boyfriend!”

They’ve jumped to the worst possible conclusion!

“H-He...” Kokoro was stumbling for words. She probably wanted to tell them the truth, but she couldn’t because her mother was within earshot. Her two friends continued taking turns in expressing their shock and horror.

“Oh snap! I *knew* you were hiding something when you told me you didn’t have a boyfriend!”

“But, like... why *him*?! He’s way below your level!”

“Do you have a thing for, er... plain dudes? But, like, all the hottest guys in school are after you!”

Not hurting my feelings wasn’t very high on these girls’ priority list. It’s not like I didn’t already know that Kokoro was out of my league, and we weren’t really dating anyway, but having someone shout it at me, in public no less, hurt.

Maybe I should have at least tried to dress up a little bit. At least that would have made it less embarrassing for her. I’m so sorry I caused this misunderstanding with you friends, Nishina. We all know I’m not the kind of person who’s fit to be your boyfriend. That’d be someone better, like Yuya... Did it really take all this humiliation to remind me of that? Am I just that stupid?

“Hey!” Kokoro yelled. Her voice was terrifyingly cold. “Do you two really think it’s okay to say stuff like that?”

Is she really going to tell them we’re not dating with her mom so close? This

must be even more humiliating for her than it is for me. I guess I can't blame her, but it's still painful.

As I fell into despair, Kokoro spoke up again. "Don't talk about Ichigaya like that. You don't know the first thing about him!"

"...Huh?" *Nishina...*?

She was fiercely staring down her friends, and I had no idea how to react. *This isn't about the misunderstanding... She's standing up for me. But why, Nishina? I'm plain. I'm below your level. Everything they said is true. Why would you argue with your own friends just for my sake?*

"Wh-Whatcha getting all worked up over? We were just poking some fun!"

"You must really like him a lot, huh...? S-Sorry!"

Faced with Kokoro's reaction, her two friends could do nothing but nervously apologize.

"Um... Sorry for making it awkward. We really gotta go now," one of them said, and the two girls and their boyfriends quickly shuffled away.

"N-Nishina..."

"I'm sorry my friends were so rude to you," Kokoro said, staring at the ground with a pained expression on her face.

"N-No, don't worry."

Yes, they had been rude, but it didn't matter what two girls I barely knew thought about me. Right now, I was just happy that Kokoro had stood up for me. *She cared more about defending me than defending her own image. She must think way better of me than she used to.*

Kokoro's words had saved me from despair. It had looked like she was trying to distance herself from me, but what she'd just said convinced me that it wasn't because she hated me.

She doesn't hate me. Somehow, that makes me so happy...

"Welcome back!" Mrs. Nishina greeted us with a smile when we returned. For

some reason, she looked much more appeased and calmer than earlier.

“Kokoro... you really do love Ichigaya a lot.”

“What?!” Both Kokoro and I were shocked.

“Y-You heard that just now?!” Kokoro asked.

“Yes, and it made me feel a lot better about you two. I was worried you didn’t get along all that well, since you don’t really act like a couple, but it seems I’d been worrying about nothing.”

Of course, Nishina doesn’t actually love me. Her mom’s just assuming things based on what she heard. But... why am I so happy to hear that?

After that, we rode on a few more rides, and Mrs. Nishina even joined us on the tamer ones. Once we’d used all of our tickets, we left the park and had dinner at a nearby restaurant before taking the train home.

Even hours later, I still couldn’t stop thinking about what Kokoro had told her friends.

I don’t think I’ll ever forget what happened today.

6

“Thank you for indulging me today,” Kokoro’s mom said when we got back home. “I was happy to see how close you are to each other.”

“Oh... No problem,” I replied.

Running into Kokoro’s friends had been a complete accident, but it had worked in our favor in the end. Her mother’s doubts about our relationship had all been swept away.

“By the way, Mom, you’re fine sleeping on the couch, right?” Kokoro asked.

“C-Couch?!” her mother replied, shocked. “I was looking forward to finally being able to sleep on a proper bed. I’m still so tired from the plane trip.”

“That’s your fault for showing up out of the blue, though.”

My parents used to have futons in their bedroom, but they’d taken those with them to India. That only left Kisaki’s bed—the one that Kokoro was currently using—and mine. Since we didn’t have any extra beds, Kokoro’s mom would have to sleep on the couch in the living room.

“Okay then, Kokoro, I’ll use your bed. This once, I will allow you to sleep together with Ichigaya in his room, since you have an adult in the house supervising you. Aren’t you lucky? Just behave yourselves, all right?”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“WHAT?!” Neither could Kokoro.

“After behaving yourselves all this time, I’m sure you’ll be good, especially since I’m in the house with you. So I’ll allow the two of you to sleep in the same bed just this once. I’ll even forgive a kiss or two, since it’s a special occasion!”

“Wh-What?! You can’t just decide something like that!” Kokoro cried.

I’d been stunned into silence, but I was thinking the exact same thing. Her mom had phrased it like she was doing us a favor, but I suspected she just wanted to steal the bed, even if she had to make her daughter sleep in a guy’s

bed to get what she wanted.

Nishina sleeping in my bed? N-No way that's okay. No way she's going to be okay with it either.

“Looking at the two of you... I’m sure of your feelings for Ichigaya now, and I know that things are going well between you. You’re just... still a bit awkward with each other, you know? You act more like friends than boyfriend and girlfriend. That could be because you so diligently followed what your father and I told you, but this is a rare chance to enjoy your love! Don’t worry, I’ll keep it a secret from your dad!” Mrs. Nishina winked, then gave Kokoro a devious look. “Don’t tell me you don’t want to sleep together?”

“N-No, it’s not that!” Kokoro quickly replied.

“It’s decided then!”

Arguing any further would have made her mother suspicious. Kokoro knew this, and her only choice was to sleep in my room.

“I-I’ll sleep on the rug,” I suggested once her mother went to take a bath. We each had our respective sweethearts, so actually sleeping in the same bed was out of the question. “That way, you can use the bed. Unless you have any problem with sleeping in the same bed I’ve been using...”

“A-Absolutely not!” she replied. “I’ve already caused you so much trouble; I can’t let you sleep on the floor.”

“As I’ve already said, the responsibility for all this is also mine.”

“Forget about it! I’ll sleep on the rug, and you’ll sleep in your bed as usual! Just pretend I’m not there, okay?”

“N-Nishina...”

She sounded like she had already made up her mind, so we ended up doing as she’d said.

A few hours later, I was lying right there, phone in hand, when I heard someone knock on the door.

“C-Come in,” I said, already expecting it to be Kokoro. Even though I’d been trying to distract myself with my phone, I was terribly nervous.

Kokoro, who had finished taking a bath and changed into her pajamas, walked in.

She’s going to sleep here... with me. I’m sorry, Minami... I thought, so tense my whole body was shaking.

“S-Sorry. I guess you had to wait for me before you could go to sleep,” she said.

“N-Not really,” I replied, taking a better look at her clothes. She was wearing a baggy T-shirt and a pair of hotpants. I had been praying that, for once, she would choose to sleep in something less revealing, but, it being summer, my prayers had gone unanswered.

“Here,” I said, handing her a blanket, then a cushion to use as a pillow, knowing full well that it wasn’t going to make sleeping on the floor much better.

She lay down on her side, facing away from me. Since my room was so small, she felt uncomfortably close.

C-Calm down, Kagetora! You already have a girlfriend! What are you getting so worked up about?! ...I-I can’t help it! There’s gonna be a girl sleeping in my room! No high school boy could keep his cool with a girl sleeping in his room! Even if... he doesn’t like her or anything. I wonder if I’ll be able to sleep at all tonight...

“S-So, I’m turning the light off,” I said, trying and failing to hold my nerve.

“Okay...”

I flicked the switch and the room instantly went dark, making me even more nervous. I turned away from Kokoro and tried to forget about the situation, when suddenly, her shaky voice cut through the silence.

“I’m... so sorry. Sorry to you, sorry to Minami...”

While I was busy fighting my impure thoughts, she was troubled by all this...

“Y-You don’t need to apologize.”

“B-But...”

“We’re in the same boat, aren’t we? Y-You also have a boyfriend after all. That Yuya guy...” I still didn’t know whether they were boyfriend and girlfriend yet, but I thought saying it like that would be a good way to make sure. Somehow, this felt like my last chance to ask about her and Yuya.

“W-We aren’t dating yet though.”

“But you said you’re gonna go on a date. Where are you going?”

“That café that’s doing a *Lemon Slayer* collab, and after that, to karaoke...”

K-Karaoke?! They’re going to be shut in a small, soundproof room on their first date?! M-Maybe I shouldn’t think about it. She likes him, and he looks like a nice guy... It’s none of my business anyway.

“O-Oh... Good luck then...”

“Good luck to you too... Try not to get dumped by Minami.”

“H-Haha... right.”

Kokoro and I had been forced to spend pretty much the whole day together because her mom had visited us unexpectedly. Had it not been for her, Kokoro would have already left, and we would have parted ways forever without even a last chance to talk about these things. I was grateful for the opportunity, even though I knew I shouldn’t be.

Suddenly, we heard heavy footsteps approaching the room.

Mrs. Nishina?!

Before we could comprehend the situation, Kokoro’s mother had already knocked on the door.

“Kokoro?! Are you still awake?” she shouted. Something was obviously wrong, but I had no idea what could have happened this late at night.

“M-Mom?!”

“I’m coming in!” she said, then immediately entered without even waiting for a reply.

“Mom, what are y—”

“Kokoro, what is this?!” she said, holding something to her daughter’s face.

I was at a loss for words. Even though the room was still dark, the light coming in from the hallway was enough for me to make out two things: the rage on Mrs. Nishina’s face and the doujinshi in her hand. The two boys featured on the cover were from HypMic, the franchise that Kokoro loved so much. More importantly, they were buck naked, and there was a huge “18+” logo drawn next to them.

“Th-That’s... Wh-Why do you...?!” Kokoro leapt up, scrambling to come up with an excuse.

Didn’t you hide all of your otaku stuff?! Of all the things that you could forget, did it have to be that?!

“I felt something hard under the pillow, so I checked and found this. Judging from your reaction, it’s safe to assume this belongs to you.”

“I, er...”

Why?! I get that you’d want to read that before going to sleep, but put it away properly! Or at least pretend like you don’t know! We could have told her it was my sister’s if you hadn’t reacted like that!

“Kokoro, you... like this kind of book? Is this the kind of thing you enjoy in life?”

Kokoro started shaking with fear.

“Were you hiding this... hobby of yours all along?”

“W-Well, I...”

I had already heard that Kokoro’s mother didn’t take kindly to otaku stuff, and the terrifying look on her face definitely proved that.

“Did you read things like this back at home too?! I would never have thought my own daughter...”

After spending a whole day with her, the impression I’d gotten of Mrs. Nishina was that of a kind and loving mother. She definitely worried about romance far too much, but she didn’t seem very strict or anything. And yet, one single piece of otaku literature had been enough to change her into another person.

Why does she hate otaku stuff so much? She should at least try to understand her daughter's hobby!

Frustration took over me, and I clenched my fists. Kokoro was staring at the floor, saying nothing. Even though I couldn't see her face, I could tell how scared she was.

"I-I'm sorry to barge in," I said, jumping out of my bed. "But being an otaku is nothing to be ashamed of!"

I couldn't just stand there without saying anything while Kokoro was being scolded for a hobby I shared with her. If Mrs. Nishina loved her daughter, she ought to also try to understand the things she loved.

"I-Ichigaya..." Mrs. Nishina was staring at me, surprised.

"O-Otaku culture is an important aspect of Japan's uniqueness! We should be proud of it! Please, don't assume it's bad without learning about it!"

"My word..."

"Y-You may be prejudiced against it, but nowadays, being an otaku is a very normal thing! I'm one too, as are a lot of people in our school! Your daughter had to hide this part of herself just because she didn't want you to hate her for it! Please, try to understand! There's nothing as devastating as when people who are important to you hate the things you love..."



“I-Ichiga—”

“It’s just a hobby! She’s a kind girl who’s always helping people out! I owe her so much! I beg you, don’t be so harsh on her because of the stuff she likes...”

In my excitement, I had started a whole tirade and maybe even said too much. However, I really believed all of it. Kokoro’s words at the amusement park earlier that day had felt like salvation to me, and for as long as I’d known her, she’d boosted my self-confidence time and time again. I could only hope that her mother would listen and that I would be able to help Kokoro as she had helped me. That was all I could do.

Kokoro turned around and stared at me with tears in her eyes. “Ichigaya... Thank you...” she said in a feeble voice.

Her mother began talking again, but she didn’t look angry anymore, just... confused. “Look,” she said. “I don’t mind otaku stuff. Anime, manga, games, and what have you... they’re all fine in my book.”

“Huh?”

“Wh-What?!” Kokoro exclaimed in disbelief.

Did she just say that... she’s okay with otaku stuff? Did I hear that wrong?

“B-But then why are you so mad about my doujinshi?! And you reacted the same way years ago when you found that other one!”

It was a reasonable assumption considering it’s not the first time she’s found out about this...

“The one you told me a friend had given you? So that *was* yours... Anyway, that’s not the point. The point is you’re still in high school! You’re just a student! You can’t go reading these... these lewd books! Much less buy them!”

Mrs. Nishina’s extremely reasonable opinion left both of us speechless.

“If you like anime and manga, sure, go ahead and enjoy them. You can use your allowance or the money you get from part-time jobs to do what you want. But you’re too young for this sexy stuff, miss! You’ll have to wait until you’ve graduated high school. After that, it’s up to you.”

No way...

“S-So... you never hated otaku culture?!”

“Why would I? I never said that!”

Kokoro’s jaw fell through the floor. “I... I’m so stupid!” she said, her voice brightening up so much that it sounded like she might burst into laughter any moment now. “I went through all that trouble to hide it... for nothing!”

If you read something that says “18+” on the cover before turning eighteen, of course your parents wouldn’t approve—especially when there are two naked dudes on there... It was all a misunderstanding. So this means that, from now on, Nishina will be able to enjoy her hobbies at home... the non-lewd ones at least. She’ll be able to be herself in front of her family. Isn’t this great? As a fellow otaku, I know how much that matters.

I was so happy for her that I found myself smiling too, but then Kokoro turned to look at me again, with a concerned look in her eyes. After a quick glance, however, she immediately turned back to her mother.

“M-Mom... Actually, there’s something I should tell you.”

I had no idea where this was going, so I quietly waited for her to continue.

“After all Ichigaya’s done for me... I can’t keep bothering him like this. I’ve been such a pain in his ass all this time... so I’ll tell you the truth.”

“N-Nishina?” I stuttered. *The truth? Is she really going to tell her everything?*

“I’m sorry, Mom. I lied to you. Ichigaya and I... We’re not dating. We never were. He offered me his kindness, and I took all of it.”

I looked at her, surprised and confused as to why she’d decided to reveal the secret now of all times. She turned back to me, forcing herself to smile.

“Sorry I went ahead and told her without asking you first...”

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Nishina asked, looking from one of us to the other. Her face looked calm, but I could almost feel the anger silently building inside her.

“It’s all my fault...” Kokoro said.

“Explain it in a way I can understand.”

Is she really going to tell her the whole story?

Kokoro continued, her voice shaking. “I didn’t want to leave Japan. I love otaku culture too much... It’s something I couldn’t live without. But I thought you hated it, so I couldn’t tell you... Ichigaya has the same hobbies as I do, so he understood how I felt and why I didn’t want to go. That’s why he tried to help me. The only way I knew how to convince you and Dad was to tell you we were dating. I lied without really thinking about it.”

Her mother didn’t reply immediately. My heart beat faster and faster as I anxiously waited for her to do so. Then she finally found the words she was looking for.

“Are you serious...?” Kokoro’s mother said. “Do you understand what you’ve done? You lied to me and your father, you lived with a boy who isn’t even your boyfriend... Didn’t you think of how this might affect Ichigaya and his parents?”

Mrs. Nishina’s voice was shaking too, but I couldn’t tell if it was from surprise or from anger. She was, however, doing her best to at least appear calm as she bombarded her daughter with questions.

“I’m sorry!” Kokoro exclaimed, lowering her head.

“I-I’m sorry as well!” I added. “I shouldn’t have suggested something like that.”

Maybe her mother wouldn’t forgive us, but I also owed her an apology nonetheless.

“Y-You shouldn’t apologize!” Kokoro said to me. “It’s all my fault! You just wanted to help me! And, Mom... I’ll take responsibility, but please, don’t blame him for this.”

Her mother looked at her daughter, then at me, then at her daughter again. “Okay. But now, you and I need to talk by ourselves, Kokoro,” she said.

Kokoro nodded, flinching with fear.

“I knew there was something weird going on. No couple behaves like that.”

She was still suspicious the whole time...

“And to think I was so happy today, when I saw the bond between you two.”

Bond? What’s she talking about?

“We just didn’t want you to find out... I’m sorry.”

“Anyway... Good night, Ichigaya,” Mrs. Nishina said, with a completely expressionless face. Kokoro also looked at me, but she didn’t say anything.

“A-Ah... Yes, good night.”

They left my room together. I could only imagine what was going to happen. Kokoro was going to be questioned and scolded, no doubt about it. Why she had chosen now to reveal this to her mother, I had no idea. *I’m just as responsible for all this as she is, but she took all the blame. I hope she’ll be fine... Her mom looked really mad.*

I felt extremely tired, but the thought of what Kokoro might be going through kept me awake for most of the night.

* * *

The next day, I woke up around seven. Having only slept for three hours or so, I was still drowsy, but I really needed to go to the bathroom, so I dragged myself downstairs.

As I got closer, I heard a noise coming from the living room.

Are they awake already? Seems a bit too early...

It was Kokoro’s mother who opened the door and greeted me. She’d probably heard my footsteps.

“Good morning, Ichigaya.”

“G-Good morning!” I replied, startled by the aura of silent rage that still loomed around her.

“Thank you for taking care of Kokoro all this time.”

“N-Not at all...”

“You’ve been very kind to her, but don’t worry. She’ll be leaving with me today.”

Today?! I was surprised that they would leave so soon, but if Mrs. Nishina knew the whole truth, it didn't really make any sense for them to stay in my home any longer.

"We'll take as many of her things with us as we can, but we'll have to send someone to pick up the rest later on. I'm sorry to trouble you like this."

"D-Don't worry about it."

Right then, Kokoro came down the stairs and joined us. She was already dressed and had her makeup on.

"Again, thank you for everything," Mrs. Nishina said. "Kokoro, you should thank him too before we leave."

"Wait, you're going already?" I asked.

"I can't let Kokoro stay here. We've imposed on you long enough," she coldly replied.

Now that Mrs. Nishina knew I wasn't dating her daughter, I was basically just a stranger. She hadn't said that, but it seemed like it was for that very reason that she didn't want her daughter staying with me anymore.

"Thanks, Ichigaya. Good luck with everything," Kokoro said. She had a smile on her face, but it didn't look particularly genuine.

As for me, I was so shocked to learn that they were leaving so soon that I didn't know how to respond at first. I didn't feel ready to say goodbye yet.

"O-Oh, yeah... Good luck to you too," was all I managed to say.

My two guests bowed and left the house. Seeing them off would have been the polite thing to do, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I just stood there, alone and confused.

And thus ended my time living together with my roommate, Kokoro. She'd finally moved out.

7

I spent the rest of my summer vacation living as a depressed recluse.

Elena seemed so busy with work that I refrained from inviting her anywhere. She was uploading new videos and posting new tweets regularly, and she probably also had her voice acting job to contend with. To avoid bothering her, I also kept the texting to a minimum, only contacting her in the evening and exchanging a few messages before going to bed.

Nevertheless, she was still the person I texted with the most. Ai was replying much more slowly than usual, and even when he did send something, he sounded kind of cold. As for Kokoro, she only briefly contacted me about the moving company her mother had hired to get the remainder of her stuff from my house. I'd told her they could come whenever worked best for them, since I was at home pretty much all the time anyway.

A couple of days after they'd left, movers came and took all of Kokoro's things from Kisaki's room, making my roommate's departure feel even more final. After that, we stopped texting each other.

My time at home was mostly spent playing games and browsing the internet. I loved doing both of those things, but somehow they felt shallow and meaningless.

Was living by myself always this lonely? Days feel so empty when I'm all by myself. At this rate, I'm going to get depressed...

I should have been used to living alone, since I'd been doing just that up until I met Kokoro. But I couldn't for the life of me figure out how to get back to a life like that. Cooking felt pointless, since I would be the only one eating anyway, so I bought premade meals from the convenience store and ate those instead. In theory, I could have eaten cup noodles and other instant foods, but my mom had told me not to rely on that kind of unhealthy stuff, so I kept to her advice, at the very least.

The same couldn't be said for the rest of the instructions she'd given me before leaving Japan. I was only cleaning and doing laundry as much as was strictly necessary. I'd promised her that I'd take care of all the housework by myself, but I was definitely failing in that regard. If she saw me as I was now, I was pretty sure that she would have me follow the rest of the family to India.

I wonder how Nishina's been doing... She'll be going on that date with Yuya pretty soon. Are they together yet?

* * *

It was one of the last nights of summer vacation. I was lying on my bed, playing on my phone as usual. After finishing my dailies, I decided to check Twitter, but when I opened my notifications, I was surprised to see who'd just followed me. It was Yume's private account—the one she'd previously blocked me on. Since you couldn't follow or be followed by an account you'd blocked, that could only mean one thing: she'd unblocked me.

But why? Why now?

Curious, I checked her timeline.

"I went to the Sangrio Café with a friend from work ♪♪~ Never been there with anyone before! It was so much fun!"

That was her latest tweet. The attached picture showed the café's cutesy interior and a dessert in the shape of an adorable animal character. *This must be the first time she's mentioned a friend on her timeline... Did she make friends with a colleague?*

I started scrolling through her past tweets, seeing for the first time all the things she'd written after blocking me. *Maybe what she told me in person wasn't how she really felt. Maybe she wrote loads of bad stuff about me here instead.*

I was scared of what I might find, but my curiosity won over, and I scrolled to the tweets she'd made on the day she'd blocked me.

"I just said the most painful goodbye of my life. It'll take a while until I'm back on my feet..."

She... was talking about me, wasn't she? She probably blocked me so that I couldn't see what she wrote about me...

Ignoring the sudden pain in my chest, I continued reading her tweets one by one. She mostly talked about her hobbies, her favorite characters, games, voice actresses, and the like, but the occasional *"too sad to go to work,"* or *"it's like there's no point living anymore,"* hit me pretty hard. *Was she feeling that sad because of me?*

I was starting to get uncomfortable, but I couldn't stop reading now. Her next tweet came after a day of silence.

"I was feeling down these past few days, but today, a girl from work noticed Yumeko and asked me about her. It was the first time we've talked, but we even exchanged LINE contacts! I owe it all to Yumeko!"

Yumeko? That's the little keychain bunny I helped her find when we first met, isn't it?

"It kinda reminds me of the person who saved her that time I almost lost her..."

She ended her tweet with an emoji of a face smiling and crying at the same time.

That person... That must be me.

In a reply to the first tweet, she continued: *"That person changed my life. I realized the real world could be just as enjoyable as my hobbies. I'd wanted to quit my part-time job, but now I can have fun there too. I have to stay strong!"*

Changing Yume's life had never been my intention, but I was happy to learn that she'd thought so highly of me.

From that tweet onward, the tone of her posts became much brighter. She talked a lot about her friends, uploaded pictures with them, and even chatted with them in the replies.

"I'm going to the Dove Dive! concert with a follower! I can't wait! ♪"

She seemed to be enjoying herself, and not even in a forced "look how happy I am" way. Sad tweets had become rarer and rarer, and she didn't mention me

at all in any of her recent ones.

Seeing how Yume had overcome such dark thoughts and feelings filled me with happiness. As the one who'd hurt her the most, maybe I had no right to feel happy, but I couldn't help it. The same girl who used to complain about how sad her life was now seemed to be having lots of fun. Yume had put in the effort to change her life, and it had paid off. But if I truly had been the one to help her achieve such joy and optimism... that made me even happier.

* * *

Summer vacation was soon over, and I was right back at school again. It was time for PE, so while we were moving from the classroom to the gym, I attempted to strike up a conversation with Ai for the first time in forever.

"Why didn't you reply to my texts?" I asked. "I wanted to invite you over to play some games."

He turned to look at me, puffing out his cheeks. "Oh, I thought it'd be rude to bother you. I figured you were too busy spending time with your girlfriend!"

"Aw, come on, Ai. Do you really need to be all jealous?"

"I'm not jealous!"

Coming back to school after so long was way more fun than summer vacation. I'd forgotten just how enjoyable talking to another human being could be. Everything was back to normal, and life was how it had always been before I'd met Kokoro. The time I'd spent with her now felt distant, like some kind of dream.

That same day, after the opening ceremony and a few more classes, I walked out into the hallway, ready to leave and go home, when I happened to run into Kokoro. She noticed me as well, and she seemed surprised. We hadn't seen each other since she'd moved out a week or so before then. It was hard to believe that we used to see each other every single day.

There were two girls beside her—the same two girls that had seen us at the amusement park.

“Hey, that’s Kokoro’s, uh... friend!” one of them commented when she saw me.

Friend? So she actually told her friends that I’m not her boyfriend.

“Sorry about the other day,” the girl then said.

“Huh? Oh, it’s okay...”

The apology took me by surprise. I wondered whether I’d judged them too harshly. Maybe they weren’t such bad people after all, even if they were still kind of annoying.

“I’ve gotta have a word with him. Leave without me, ’kay?” Kokoro told them.

“You sure? I mean, okay then, see you tomorrow!” The two girls said goodbye to Kokoro, who remained in the hallway with me.

She has to talk to me? About what?

“Sorry. I hope I’m not bothering you,” she said.

“No, don’t worry.”

“Do you have, like, Minami waiting for you?”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that.”

Elena had her own friends at school, so even though we were dating, I’d never suggested we leave school together.

“Oh, I see...”

“Should we go somewhere to talk?”

“No, here’s fine. It won’t take long.”

Whenever Kokoro and I had talked at school in the past, we’d always done so where nobody could hear us. Looking around, I saw a few other students either leaving or standing around chatting. *If she’s fine talking here, then it can’t be anything otaku-related...*

“I just wanted to say thank you. Like, thanks to you, I can now be an otaku around my family. It’s so liberating, y’know? And I’m grateful.”

That’s cool and all, but people are going to hear you! I thought, quickly

checking whether anyone was looking at us.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said. “I don’t mind if people hear me. I kinda decided that I won’t hide it at school anymore either.”

“What?”

“You know how you told my mom that being an otaku is nothing to be ashamed of? It changed her view a bit... and it changed mine as well. You were right. There’s no shame in it. Some of my classmates watch anime and play gacha games, and they don’t even hide it, so why should I? I was scared about letting people know just how much I like this stuff, but I really don’t care anymore. Of course, I’m not gonna rave about BL and raunchy doujinshi in the classroom or anything like that, but if I keep it to, like, totally safe-for-work stuff... talking about it won’t be a problem. And it probably never was to begin with.”

“Nishina...”

I’d never really thought about it before, but she was right. Even the popular guys and girls talked about anime and games. And, though she understood that discussing lewd manga was a different story altogether, she’d finally stopped hiding her hobbies not only at home, but at school too.

“I’m proud of you. So... did you already tell your friends?”

“Yeah. They didn’t make fun of me or anything. They all were like, ‘*So what?*’ I feel kinda dumb for hiding it for so long, especially since it made me feel so bad and all. I actually even found out that some of my friends play the same games I do, and I was able to chat about that kind of thing openly at school for the first time... It was awesome. Seriously.”

“Oh, nice. I’m happy for you,” I said, and I genuinely meant it. Now she could be herself in front of her family *and* friends.

“It’s all thanks to you.”

“Huh?”

“If you hadn’t spoken to my mom like that, I would never have realized all this for myself.”

Nothing I could have said reflected the way her words made me feel. Being told something like that was such a wonderful feeling that I almost felt undeserving of it. All I'd done was tell her mother what I really thought—nothing more. But if my actions had meant more to Kokoro, I could only be happy about it.

"I'm truly glad we met. Thank you for everything," she said with a melancholy smile.

Yet, somehow, Kokoro's words made me feel not only happiness, but also loneliness. In a way, it sounded like she was putting an end to all that had happened between us. *I don't know why, but this feels like a goodbye. Perhaps that's what she really wanted to tell me.*

I was staring at her, speechless, but she ignored me and continued.

"That's that then. Bye, Ichigaya," she said.

This is it... This is our last goodbye.

All the memories I had of our time together began to flash through my mind. I was the one who had changed. I was the one who was glad we'd met. And it was me who was grateful for Kokoro's advice and support. Without it, meeting girls would have been out of the question.

But her help had gone further than that. Kokoro had been the source of my motivation. She had been there to root for me, to think of ways to help me, and, sometimes, to tell me off when I was doing something wrong. Most of all, when I was down or hurt or unconfident, she had always been there to save me.

"N-Nishina!" I called after her as she was walking away. She turned around, and I couldn't help but notice the pain on her face. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be the person I am now either. Thank you!"

She didn't reply, but she smiled. I stood there, watching as she continued walking away. Even after she'd disappeared from my sight, I couldn't bring myself to move.

This is really it... Goodbye.

That evening, I tucked into some reheated food from the grocery store while on the phone to Elena.

“That *Circle Fit Expedition* video you uploaded was hilarious! I had no idea you were so athletic. You got so much further into the game than I expected!”

Circle Fit Expedition was a video game that had recently become popular among VTubers. Instead of a normal controller, you played it with a strange circular hoop which you had to bend and stretch in different ways, resulting in a veritable workout while playing.

Elena, of course, was just as involved in the trend and had uploaded an Emily Saionji video just yesterday. Despite her delicate, slim figure and her elegant demeanor, Emily Saionji had a lot of stamina and a surprising amount of strength—so much so that VTuber fans couldn’t stop talking about it.

“Hehe, I have to stretch and take dance lessons as a voice actress, so I think that helped,” Elena replied.

“Voice actresses need to take dance lessons? Whoa. The dancing in the video where Emily sings was amazing too. You’re telling me that you did it yourself?”

“Of course. It would be meaningless otherwise.”

She can really do anything...

Elena and I mostly communicated by text, but around once a week we would have a phone call like this. Thankfully, she always spared me a lot of awkwardness by texting me first to ask if it was okay, which is exactly what she’d done prior to our current phone call.

The only issue was that we hadn’t seen each other, not even once, since our date to the movies during summer vacation. Considering how busy she seemed, I hadn’t been able to bring myself to invite her out.

At school, Elena and I were in different years, so we basically never ran into each other unless we tried to do so. I also still didn’t know whether she was okay with her many friends knowing that she had a boyfriend, so I thought that it was best not to cause a scene.

I still hadn't talked to her about what had happened with Kokoro—how we had basically been forced to go on a date together, how we had held hands in the haunted house, and how we had (almost) spent a night sleeping in the same room. I knew it would have been better to tell her, but I couldn't find the courage, and I felt more anxious about it every time we spoke.

"You know," Elena said, "it's almost like nothing's changed since before we were dating."

"Wh-What do you mean?!"

Really? It doesn't feel that way to me. We're chatting a lot, we're talking to each other on the phone, we're going on dates...

"I didn't mean that in a negative way! I'm sorry! I just meant that I'm glad to still be able to talk with you about Emily's videos."

"O-Oh."

That's good to hear...

To be honest, I had no idea what a couple was supposed to look like. Since I'd never had a girlfriend before Elena, I didn't know if I was even acting like a proper boyfriend. *Now that she mentions it, I've been sending her my thoughts about her videos since way before we started dating.*

"By the way," she said, "I was wondering when we could go on another date..."

"Ah, r-right," I replied, feeling kind of defeated. I'd waited so long to ask her out on another date that she'd asked me first. "What about next Sunday?" I suggested.

"That would work perfectly!"

Next Sunday... That's the day Nishina will go on her first date with Yuya. Not that that has anything to do with this, but where was it she said they'd be going? Right, the Lemon Slayer collab café, and to karaoke after that...

"Ichigaya? Is something the matter?"

"N-Not at all! I... I was just thinking about where we should go! Do you have anything in mind?"

“Hmm, let’s see... We could go to Dinkyland...”

“R-Really?!”

Dinkyland was an amusement park—no, *the* amusement park. Without any doubt, it was the most famous in all of Japan.

“I... well...” she said, stumbling for words. “I’ve always wanted to go on a date there. Would that be a problem?”

“N-Not at all! Let’s do it! Dinkyland it is!” I replied, taken aback by her cuteness.

We spoke for a little longer, then decided we would meet at the station closest to the park right before it opened.

“See you there then!” I said.

“I’m looking forward to it!”

“Me too!” I hung up the phone.

With our phone call over, I lay down on the couch, thinking about my upcoming date.

An amusement park date... just like with Nishina. Ugh! Why am I thinking of that right after talking to my girlfriend?! I’m the worst. This is a totally different place anyway. You can’t compare that tiny local amusement park to the world-famous Dinkyland. And Nishina’s mom was with us the whole time, so it didn’t count as a date.

I should just forget all about it. I’ll make new memories with Minami. Nishina will do the same with Yuya. We’re on separate paths now... And Nishina’s already walking off down hers.

8

That Sunday, I was out of bed by 6 a.m. That left me with two hours before my date with Elena—just enough time to put all that Kokoro had taught me about looking good into practice and reach the station closest to Dinkyland.

It only took me a few seconds to find Elena once I was at the station. She looked as beautiful as ever. Being able to go on a Dinkyland date with a girl so pretty was like a dream come true. Much to my horror, however, she was surrounded by a group of young men I'd never seen before. They were talking to her, but she was smiling back uncomfortably without a word.

Are they hitting on her?! She stands out even in a place this crowded, wow... Wait! What am I getting all impressed for?!

"M-Minami!" I called out as I got closer, and her face lit up.

"Ichigaya!"

"Aw, shoot. Must be her boyfriend," one of the guys said.

"Tsk. Let's stop wasting our time then," another replied, and they all left.

"I-I'm sorry... It's my fault you had to wait here by yourself," I said, but Elena shook her head.

"Not at all! You're right on time. Let's go now!"

We walked out of the station and quickly reached the park's entrance, where visitors were already lining up to buy their tickets. I hadn't been to Dinkyland since I was in grade school, and I didn't remember it being this crowded. It was on a completely different level from Fantastia Land.

Elena and I joined the line, chatting about anime and VTubers while we waited for our turn (also taking care not to mention any recognizable names, just in case). Our conversation was so much fun that the wait seemed to fly by.

I'd researched the cost of the park tickets before our date. In order to have

enough money to buy one and have a little extra left over, I would have to use a good share of my savings. As Elena's boyfriend, I'd have liked to be able to pay for her ticket too, but at the end of the day, I was still in high school, so such aspirations were beyond my financial reach. Anyway, Elena had a job, and I didn't. I would feel ridiculous offering to pay for her.

I saw how much Nishina's mom paid for our Fantastia Land tickets. Now that I think about it, those were really cheap...

Once we'd gotten our tickets, we went through the baggage check and entered the park. One look at my surroundings was enough to blow me away.

"Wow..."

The park's buildings were of amazing quality, so much so that it felt like I'd suddenly stepped into another world. I didn't remember much about my last trip here as a kid, but I did remember having tons of fun and liking it a lot.

"Look!" Elena squealed. "It's Minky Mouse! Can we line up to get a picture with her?"

"Of course!" I replied, entertained by how adorable she sounded. This was probably the first time I'd seen her get so excited about anything not otaku-related.

Girls really do go crazy for this stuff, huh? That's really cute.

After asking a staff member to take our picture together with Minky Mouse, we headed toward the attractions. Since I wasn't that familiar with the park's rides, I left the choice to Elena. Her choice was the newest attraction, based on a recent animated masterpiece from the Dinky Studios.

"A two-hour wait?!" I cried, shocked, when I saw how long the line was.

"Is that too long?" Elena asked.

"N-No! Not at all! I was just surprised!"

It's crazy that there are so many people willing to stay in line for two hours to ride this... The waiting times for the attractions at Fantastia Land were fifteen minutes tops. The crowds there were nothing compared to this... just like the quality of the attractions.

Realizing that I had to adjust my standard of what a reasonable waiting time was, I lined up with Elena. At least being able to chat with her about otaku stuff turned an otherwise boring wait into a pleasant experience. *She really is the perfect otaku girlfriend for me... There aren't many girls around that I could have this kind of conversation with.*

Even though adrenaline-inducing roller coasters were more my jam, I enjoyed the slow ride, which involved passing faithfully recreated movie scenes acted out by realistic animatronics.

“That was so cute! Did you like it?” Elena asked me with a smile once the ride was over.

“Yes! It was fun,” I said. To be honest, though, it was more fun seeing her enjoying herself so much.

We went on to try out a few more rides, taking short pauses between each to enjoy food from the various stalls. All the attractions had long lines, but Elena and I never ran out of topics to chat about, so I had tons of fun.

“I’m beyond happy to be here with you,” Elena said after we left our fourth ride.

“M-Minami...”

Seeing her smile at me, I was overtaken by happiness... and guilt. She was saying something so sweet to me, and yet I wasn’t completely focusing on her—part of me just couldn’t stop thinking about how Kokoro was going on a date with Yuya at that very moment.

Whenever Elena said things like this, I could tell she really liked me, even if I didn’t fully understand why. And, each time, I would wonder how we’d ended up together. How the voice actress behind Emily Saionji had told me to keep her secret when I’d found out. How I somehow became the only person she could ask for advice regarding her VTubing career.

This story explained how we had met each other, but it was missing the most important piece: how I’d managed to get to the point of being able to strike up a conversation with a girl and befriend her in the first place.

It’s all thanks to Nishina. She taught me how to dress, she taught me how to

look half-decent for girls, and she gave me advice on how to act on my date with Minami. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't have a girlfriend. More importantly, I wouldn't be the person I am today.

"Th-Thank you, Minami."

"I'm sorry. It's like I'm the only one enjoying myself..."

"N-Not at all! I'm having fun too!"

Elena paused, looking at me with the park map in her hands as we stood to the side of the path. "Then... is there an attraction you want to visit?"

"Hmm... What's that one?" I asked, pointing to the attraction closest to us—a mysterious-looking European-style mansion.

"Oh, that? That's the Haunted Manor."

"As in, like a haunted house?"

"Exactly! I love it! Shall we go there?"

Ugh, why does it have to be a haunted house of all things?

"You like that sort of thing?" I asked her. "Like, horror and stuff..."

"I like to think so. I'm not scared that easily, you know?"

"W-Well then... I want to go there." I'd visited that exact same attraction once as a child, but I couldn't remember anything about it.

We lined up and chatted until it was our turn. We only had to stand for an hour, which, compared to that of the more popular rides, was a relatively short waiting time.

Unlike a traditional haunted house, where you walked through a series of spooky corridors, you sat in a cart in the Haunted Manor which slowly took you through the place, giving you more time to enjoy the view. Each cart could seat two people, which, in this case, was Elena and me.

"Eeeek! Hahaha!"

While we cruised through the Western-style building infested by Western-style ghosts, I could hear Elena's cute reactions—a mix of shrieks and laughter that made it clear she was spooked, but certainly not terrified. She had

obviously been telling the truth about not being easily scared.

To be honest, though, this attraction wasn't really trying to be scary in the first place. The effects and animatronics looked awesome, but, despite the horror setting, they were mostly meant to be humorous. That made even more sense considering I'd seen little children lining up at the entrance.

I bet Nishina would still be screaming for her life though. She was shaking like a leaf from that silly little place in Fantastia Land. What'd happen if she ever went there with Yuya? There's something cute about a girl being scared, but she definitely crosses the line into "annoying" territory. I can almost see him covering his ears, wondering what's wrong with her...

"I see you're enjoying this way more than the last ride!" Elena said, staring at my face with her large eyes.

"Huh?"

The inside of the manor was quite dark, but we were sitting close enough to be able to make out each other's faces.

"You're smiling so much..." she explained, and I noticed that I was indeed grinning like an idiot.

"H-Hahaha! It's because this place is so fun!"

I was thinking about Nishina again... I shouldn't be thinking about her today at all! And why was I grinning like that? Anyway, they're probably sitting together in that café right now.

I wonder how she's doing. When I talked with Yuya, it was pretty clear he liked her back. I'd be surprised if they didn't end up becoming boyfriend and girlfriend after today. And after their meal, they'll go to karaoke together... Maybe they're already there, alone together, having fun... That's good for them.

I shouldn't be worrying about her. I shouldn't even be thinking about her. Why do I keep doing it then?! It's like the tenth time today...

As we left the Haunted Manor, Elena suddenly froze.

"Wh-What's wrong?" I asked.

“S-Sorry... I thought I saw a friend of mine, but it was just someone who looks like her...”

Just like when Nishina and I went to Fantastia Land! The coincidences never end! Though those really were Nishina’s friends back then...

“Ichigaya?”

This time, it was Elena wondering what was wrong with me, as I’d also come to a sudden stop.

“O-Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just glad it wasn’t your friend, that’s all.”

“Hm? Why?”

“Because if it really were, they would find out that we’re dating, and you could end up being made fun of for it...”

“Actually, I’m not planning on hiding the fact that you’re my boyfriend. If anything, I’d like to introduce you to my friends, given the opportunity,” she said, against all of my expectations.

I may have just said something rude.

“Oh! Th-Thank you...” I replied, extremely grateful for her consideration.

I wasn’t a boyfriend worth boasting about. Especially not for a girl like Elena. And yet, she thought so highly of me as to want to show me off to her friends. She was just too kind. She was also beautiful, hardworking, and a talented voice actress despite being so young... Elena was out of my league in every conceivable way. The fact that she’d become my girlfriend was nothing short of a miracle.

Why, then? Why can’t I concentrate on my date with her? Why does my mind keep wandering back to what Nishina’s doing?

Back at Fantastia Land, Kokoro had stood up for me, going as far as getting mad at her own friends.

“Don’t talk about Ichigaya like that. You don’t know the first thing about him!”

She’d saved me by saying that, and that wasn’t the only time she’d done so. She’d stood up for me in the same way during my confrontation with Mashiro.

And afterward, when I was hurt and depressed, she had been there to comfort me. Kokoro had been the one keeping me going time after time. She'd given me the strength to come all this way.

But now we don't live together anymore, and I have a girlfriend. A perfect girlfriend who likes me for me... but I can't stop thinking about Nishina.

Only now, when we weren't even living together anymore, did I finally realize how happy the days I'd spent with my roommate were. The more I thought about it, the more memories flooded my mind. *But it's too late. We went our separate ways. We have nothing to do with each other anymore.*

"Ichigaya..." Elena's voice made me snap back to reality. She was looking at me with a concerned expression.

"Mina—"

"You were thinking about someone, weren't you?" she asked me with a sad smile.



About someone? Well...

“Right now... there’s someone in your heart. Someone who’s not me,” she said.

How did she notice that?

“I-I’m sorry!” I bowed apologetically at her. She’d realized what was going on in my head, and I felt like an idiot. I shouldn’t subject her to this. The least I could do now was be honest. I wouldn’t hide the truth from her any longer. “I’m so sorry, I...”

I tried to ignore it, but that turned out to be pointless. I should have noticed earlier... or maybe I did notice, but I didn’t want to admit the truth to myself. I have Minami. Nishina has Yuya. We can’t be together. But I can’t keep lying to myself. Running away from my own feelings will hurt Minami... I’m such a horrible person.

“Yes,” I said. “You’re right... I... I’m in love with Nishina.”

Only after saying it out loud did I realize how true that was. I loved Kokoro. After living with her, spending so much time with her, struggling alongside her... I’d fallen in love with her strength and her kindness.

Minami let out a single gloomy laugh. “Hah... Since we first started dating—actually, even before that—I imagined that might be the case,” she said.

“What?!”

I had always liked Elena. I was sure of that. But some time since our meeting, without me realizing, my love for Kokoro had taken shape. My feelings had always been skewed by one assumption: that Kokoro could never like me in a romantic way. I hadn’t realized I loved her, because I knew that I *shouldn’t* love her. When I’d learned that she could end up dating Yuya, pain had welled up in my chest. I’d been trying not to think about it, but maybe it was too late. Maybe I was already in love with her.

“Ichigaya... I love you. I loved you before we started dating, and I love you now.” Elena’s words pierced through my chest like a dagger. “That’s why I was so worried,” she said, still smiling. “Worried that you loved someone else.”

“But that’s...”

“I know that saying it right now isn’t fair... but I wanted to talk more with you, to meet up with you more often, only... I had a hunch that you probably didn’t feel the same way. That made it difficult to invite you out.”

Is that how she felt all along? She said that it’s like nothing’s changed since before we were dating. Now I know what she meant. She wanted to become closer to me...

“I like you a lot, but I can tell that you’ve never liked me quite as much.”

“I’m sorry, Minami. All this time, I’ve been hurting you...”

“No, please! You shouldn’t apologize. I’ve enjoyed every minute I’ve spent with you, and I only have myself to blame if I’ve lost to Nishina,” Elena said with a joyless laugh.

How can she be so kind to me after I’ve broken up with her like this?!

“That’s not true! You’re such a wonderful, perfect girl! I always thought you were too good for me...”

“I’m truly happy to hear that. Thank you for everything, from the bottom of my heart. Nothing could make me happier than for you to be happy with the girl you love. I wish only the best for you and for Nishina.”

I watched as tears began to trickle down Elena’s soft cheeks. *I just broke up with such a kindhearted girl... I must be the greatest idiot in all of human history.*

“Thank you, Minami! And sorry! Sorry for everything!”

There were so many more things that I wanted to tell her: how happy I was to have met her, how much I enjoyed my time with her too, and how I still wanted to root for her as a voice actress. But I didn’t have the right to say any of that. All I could do was apologize.

“I’ll keep chasing my dreams, and one day, I’ll become a great voice actress! So great that you’ll regret not staying with me! So... keep cheering me on, okay?” Elena had put all of her soul into the smile she was showing me. Her eyes, however, were filled with tears. She turned around so that I could no

longer see her crying and then started running.

“Mi—” I started to call out to her, but I stopped. It wouldn’t have been right. Elena had forced herself to smile up until the end just so I wouldn’t feel guilty.

I don’t deserve her kindness... but she kept giving it to me. Even at a time like this.

I’m sorry for hurting you. I’m sorry for not being able to make you happy. And... thank you for loving someone like me.

9

All around me were couples and groups of friends walking around together, enjoying the park. Elena and I were supposed to look like that too... but I'd made her go back home by herself. I wondered if she was crying right now, and the thought almost made me cry as well.

It was already past six, and, since there was no point in staying there any longer, I headed home. On the train, I thought back on everything that had just happened. *There's only one thing I can do right now—tell Nishina about my feelings.*

Elena had been so kind as to wish me happiness with Kokoro. Unfortunately, I knew that wasn't going to happen. She liked Yuya, and they had probably already become boyfriend and girlfriend by now. Even if they hadn't, it was only a matter of time. All I ought to do was give them my blessing. Nothing more.

What's confessing to Nishina going to do? She'll just reject me, and it'll be a huge nuisance for her. I get that... but I still need to do it. If only to honor Minami's kindness. Even if I can't reach my goal, I have to at least try.

I took out my phone and messaged Kokoro.

"Hey. How did your date go? Actually, there's something I want to talk about in person... Can we meet somewhere? At school or anywhere is fine."

Her date probably isn't even over yet. She has better things to do than read my texts... Or so I thought. The message was immediately marked as read. What's more, her answer followed soon after.

"Yeah. Actually, I wanted to talk too. As long as it's after school, I can find time."

She wants to talk to me too? I felt a strange chill. At a time like this, there really was only one thing that Kokoro could want to talk to me about: her relationship with Yuya. Although she could be direct sometimes, she also had a way of being overly polite, and I could imagine that she felt the need to thank

me for my help after finding the boyfriend she'd dreamed of. She didn't give me any more details over LINE, so, whatever she wanted to tell me, she wanted to do so in person too.

Despite being thrown off by her unexpected answer, I managed to arrange a meeting with her: the next day, right after class. I'd find her in front of her classroom, then we'd take our conversation somewhere more appropriate.

Of course, I'd never in my life confessed my love to someone. I had no idea what an appropriate place looked like, nor did I know what the appropriate words were. I thought of how she would react when I told her that I liked her.

"You? Hah. I already like Yuya."

Maybe I didn't need to say anything complicated. *"I know that you already like him. I just wanted you to know how I feel, even though it isn't going to lead anywhere."*

But was that really all I wanted? Could I be satisfied with just *telling* her?

Of course not.

The truth was that I didn't want her to date Yuya. Of course, I couldn't tell her that... not after helping her out for so long. I wanted to be the one to make Kokoro happy. I wanted to spend more time with her... but not as a roommate—as a boyfriend. *I've lied to myself long enough. I'll tell her how I really feel, and I'll accept her answer, whatever it may be...*

As if to make me aware of my own stupidity, my mind wandered to the three chances I'd so willingly wasted: Yume, Mashiro, and Elena. These three cute girls, none of whom I was worthy of in the slightest, had somehow all ended up liking me. After sixteen years without a shred of luck in dealing with the opposite sex, it was completely inexplicable.

It still feels like a dream... Maybe it was some cosmic mistake. Whatever it was, it surely won't repeat itself. Soon, I'll be back to the old days, when no girl would so much as look at me. Why did I throw all of that luck away just so I could confess to a girl who's going to reject me? I'm going to regret this, I'm pretty sure. If I'd just accepted their feelings, I could have been happy with any of them.

Even knowing full well that I was potentially heading toward the most lonely of all possible futures, I had already made my decision. I wouldn't lie to myself anymore.

* * *

The next day, I waited for Kokoro outside her classroom.

"Ah..."

Once homeroom was over, I saw her walk out, uncharacteristically alone. She saw me and, after taking a quick glance at my face, she averted her gaze.

"So... where should we go? I don't really wanna talk out here in the hallway. Could we go someplace more private?" she asked.

Since I also didn't want anyone to overhear what I had to say, I appreciated the suggestion.

"Okay, what about the roof then?" I replied, guessing there would be nobody there.

She agreed, and we made our way silently up the steps. Students weren't technically allowed on the rooftop, but conveniently, that rule was never enforced and the door was never locked.

I knew what I needed to say, and I'd rehearsed the words over and over again in my mind, but now that Kokoro was right in front of me, saying nothing and running away seemed like the more reasonable option. Confessing my love knowing all the while that she would reject it was beyond terrifying.

This'll just make things even more awkward between us. She was already avoiding me, but she could stop speaking to me altogether after this...

Over the past few months, multiple girls had confessed their feelings to me. Without any doubt, they'd been incredibly brave to do so... but I'd thrown their efforts to the wind every time.

"So," Kokoro said once we were alone, "about that thing I wanted to tell you —"

"Actually, can I go first?"

“Huh?” She looked at me, surprised. “Um, okay...”

My mind was already made up; I had to tell Kokoro how I felt before she told me that she’d become Yuya’s girlfriend. Doing so afterwards would take more courage than I had, and leaving without having made my confession was out of the question.

My hands were shaking. I took a deep breath. If I didn’t speak now, I would regret it for the rest of my life. “I know you’re probably officially dating Yuya by now. And I know that what I’m going to say will sound awkward, or maybe even inappropriate, but I... I like you, Nishina. I love you. Even if you have a boyfriend now, I can’t hide my feelings anymore.”

“Wh... What...?” Kokoro looked at me, shocked, and tried to say something, but before she could do so, I continued talking.

“I was rooting for you and Yuya, but now I’m going to say something selfish. I want you to break up with him. I want to be with you, and I can’t think of being with anyone else... I want to be your boyfriend. I get it now. You were the perfect otaku girlfriend I was looking for all along. And I want to date you—for real this time.”

My speech had gone nothing like how I’d planned. I was stuttering, and I couldn’t even look Kokoro in the face as I spoke. As far as love confessions go, mine had been pathetic, but I’d said all I had to. I’d needed to relay all of my feelings to her.

She was so different from what I’d considered my type of girl to be. Nothing like my dream girl. Sure, she was an otaku, she shared some of my hobbies, and she was cute, but that was pretty much it. Kokoro was a fujoshi. She was way too forward, she didn’t show much respect for other people, and she often said way too much. She had a flashy, gaudy style that totally contrasted the innocent-looking, understated girls I was into.

And yet, despite all this, I had no doubt about it—she was the perfect otaku girlfriend for me. I couldn’t even think of loving someone else as much as I loved her.

Kokoro stared at me, her eyes wide open. My confession must have taken her by surprise. “Wait, what are you saying? What about Minami?!” she asked.

“I broke up with her.”

“What?!”

That piece of news seemed to shock her even further. She dropped her gaze and fell silent.

I'm sure this whole confession is a huge nuisance for her... She doesn't even know how to reply, I thought, wanting more than ever to just run away, but I couldn't let my confession go to waste. I had to wait for her answer.

“Actually... I'm not dating Yuya.”

“I knew—wait. Huh?! ” *Did I jump to conclusions too fast?!*

“When we went on that date a few days ago, he... well, he didn't exactly confess to me, but he told me that he'd like for us to keep seeing each other. And, I mean, I was down for it. He's my type, and he was a really nice guy when I talked to him. And also... you already had Minami.”

The last reason left me confused. *Does that mean that if I hadn't been dating Minami, Nishina wouldn't have been down for dating Yuya?*

“I regretted taking so long to realize my own feelings,” she said. “And I was totally shocked when I heard that you'd become her boyfriend... That's when I realized I liked you.”

She... liked me? I didn't know what to say.

“At first, I told myself I had to give up. Minami's my friend—I didn't want to hurt her. And it's not like I stood a chance against her anyway. So all I could do was wish you both the best and do my own thing. I thought that maybe dating Yuya will help me forget about you... but you kept being super kind to me and stuff. You stood up for me when my mom was all mad, and the things you said made me happy... How could I just forget about you?”

“N-Nishina...”

Am I dreaming? I can't believe what I'm hearing...

“So, you know, even though I was the one who went up to him in the first place, I texted Yuya after our date to tell him I was, like, really sorry, but I just couldn't see him anymore. When he asked me why, I told him that I was in love

with someone else. I decided that, even if you're dating Minami already, I needed to tell you how I feel. I wanted you to know I like you. Even though Minami is basically your dream girl, I wanted you to know that I would try as best I could to be just as perfect for you because I wanted to be by your side... as your girlfriend."



She likes me? That was what she wanted to tell me today? I can tell she's serious. She's not making fun of me or anything like that, but this is unbelievable. This makes me so happy I can't believe it...

I didn't even notice falling, but I realized I was down on my knees. I must have looked so stupid... Could Kokoro really like someone like that?

"Y-You're kidding, right?" I asked. "Are you really okay... dating someone like me? Instead of someone like Yuya?"

"How many times do I need to tell you?!" she replied with tears in her eyes. "I don't know why I like you! I don't know why thinking about you being happy with another girl makes me hurt so much, but... I now know that you were the perfect otaku boyfriend for me all along."

Somehow, I was sure of one thing. No love confession in the world could ever top what Kokoro had just told me.

* * *

Ding dong.

The familiar sound of my doorbell made my heart skip a beat. It was Sunday, precisely noon, as we'd arranged beforehand. I got up from the couch, where I'd been waiting, and rushed to the entrance.

"H-Hey..."

"Hi..." Kokoro replied. She was wearing the sundress she'd bought a few months ago, back when we'd gone shopping together for clothes an otaku date might like.

Is she wearing it because she knows I like it? She didn't have to, but I definitely feel a little warm inside...

"It's been like—what?—not even a month, right? This place feels so nostalgic though..." she said, leaving the entrance and taking a look around the house she'd been living in until a few weeks prior.

"You're keeping it pretty clean, huh?" she asked.

"I am... lately."

“So you let it get filthy?”

After losing my roommate, cleaning the house had felt utterly pointless, so I’d only done the bare minimum in terms of housework. I’d only hurriedly tidied the place up because I was expecting company.

In the living room, Kokoro sat on the couch, and, after serving her some tea, I sat down beside her.

“How come your parents let you come here?”

“Well, both Mom and Dad got really mad at me, but they’re happier now we’re dating for real. They told me off for lying to them, but they also apologized for trying to drag me overseas without really asking first. I told them you just let me stay here, without doing anything, you know, *improper* to me. They’re actually super grateful, and they like you a lot, despite all that. They told me I could come here today as long as I get back before dark and we wouldn’t do anything too, um... ‘intense,’ or something like that...”

Intense?! You can’t just say something like that as soon as we’re alone! Now I’ll be awkward for the rest of the day!

Even before she’d said that, I’d been feeling weird about being alone with Kokoro for the first time since we’d started dating. We’d shared this house for months before now, but this was nothing like our time living together. We were boyfriend and girlfriend now.

“I-I see...” I said. “Oh, by the way, that time when you told your mom the truth for the first time, did she go haywire at you? You never told me what happened after you left my room, so...”

I’d been meaning to ask her about that for a long time but had only just remembered when she mentioned her parents.

“She was seriously angry at first, but... By that point, I already knew I liked you for real, but I also thought you didn’t like me back. I told her, and she ended up hugging me,” Kokoro replied, sounding pretty embarrassed.

“Really?!”

“She’d figured it out on her own already though, so I figured there was no

point lying.”

That all happened right after we went to Fantastia Land. Her mom must have heard Nishina telling her friends off when they were mocking me. That would explain how she figured it out. But that would mean Nishina already knew she liked me when we were on that fake date! I never would have guessed...

“But... Huh?” I muttered, unable to hide my surprise.

“I’m really sorry and all for telling her the truth after saying I’d use our cover-up story,” she continued, “but after she was so understanding about my hobbies, I just couldn’t keep lying to her, y’know? But, like, now I’ve told her you like me back, she doesn’t have to worry. Oh, and, um... I told Dad too. He says he wants to eat out with you sometime, and he kinda still wants to buy us an apartment when we graduate. But this time, he wants to go and check them out, and he wants you to go along, so he needs to know when you’re free.”

“Are you serious?! I can’t let him do that much for me, and I haven’t even told my own parents yet! I don’t think we can make a decision like that so lightly...”

“I know, but just seeing a couple can’t hurt, right? Maybe once we do that he’ll stop showing me floor plans every day.”

Once again, Kokoro’s parents seemed to lack any notion of common sense.

“And, actually,” she continued, looking at the floor and blushing slightly, “it’s not just them. I also wanna go back to living with you... but this time, not just as roommates. A-As a couple...”

Living together as a couple... Kokoro’s proposal reminded me that she really could be cute sometimes. At the same time, the thought of living with her as a couple after graduating high school was enough to make my face burn.

“Y-Yeah... me too.”

This time around, it would be a completely different experience. Just thinking about it made my heart begin to race and the corners of my lips curl upward.

“Oh, right,” I said, remembering to ask her something. “I know I’m showering you with questions, but there’s something else I wanted to ask. This is our first date, right? Are you sure you’re fine with us just staying here at home? You’ve

been living here till recently, so this place must be anything but exciting for you...”

I’d previously asked Kokoro where she wanted to go for our first date, and she’d replied that she wanted to come to my place. *Can we even call this a date?*

“What are you talking about? It’s great! You know, as soon as I left I wanted to come right back again! And I brought a new game for the Snitch! Let’s play it! Pleeese!” Kokoro took the game out of her bag and waved it in front of my face.

“Which game...? Oh, that one?! I was thinking of buying it! Great!” I said, excited.

As she handed me the cartridge, her hand brushed my own. It was only the lightest touch, but my heartbeat began to drum in my ears.

“Ichigaya...” Kokoro said, her eyes looking right into mine. Her tone of voice had changed suddenly.

“What is it?”

“Games are fun and all, but we’re not just roomies anymore.”

“Wh-What do you mean?” I asked.

Kokoro moved closer, her face glowing a few shades redder as it stopped mere centimeters from my own.

“Don’t you get it? This is our first date,” she said.

“I...”

“We still haven’t done any *couple* stuff...”

I might have been dense, but I sure got the hint there. My ears began to burn like they were on fire.

I can’t leave all of the difficult stuff for her to say... So I told her what I wanted to tell her the most.

“Nishina... I’m happy that you’re my girlfriend.”

“I-I’m happy too... Let’s be together always,” she replied, smiling as her soft

cheeks flushed even redder than before.

I took both of her hands in mine, and, as I realized what that meant, Kokoro closed her eyes.

And then, softly, I kissed her lips.



Epilogue

“Ichigaya! Get up already!”

“Hng... Awuh...?!”

I woke up to my covers being yanked away from me. Kokoro, my beautiful girlfriend, was standing next to my bed in her pajamas, glaring down at me.

“It’s past noon already!”

“I haven’t been getting enough sleep lately... The deadline for that assignment is closing in...”

“Did you forget what day it is?! ”

“...O-Of course not!”

Still somewhat dozy, I went downstairs and joined Kokoro in the living room. She’d already prepared my breakfast—or my lunch, I guess.

“We can’t be late! We’re leaving in thirty minutes tops, got it?! ”

“I-I know! Oh, and thanks for breakfast!” I said, shoving the food into my mouth.

Afterwards, I changed my clothes, fixed my hair, and left the house with Kokoro.

We got off the train at Aomi station, where Iroha and Mikoto were waiting for us. It was the first time in months that we’d seen each other.

“Hi!”

“Hello!”

“Heart-chan! Ichigaya! It’s been so long!” Mikoto said when she saw us.

“You two already look like husband and wife, huh?” Iroha added.

“What?! ” Kokoro exclaimed, embarrassed by the sudden remark.

“How long have the pair of you been living together now?”

“It’s not been *that* long! Just about a year...”

Right after graduating from high school, Kokoro and I had moved into an apartment together. My parents were surprisingly okay with it, and hers were downright ecstatic.

“Living together fresh out of high school... Kids these days have no sense of decency...”

“M-Mikoto! What are you implying?!” I cried.

Mikoto and Iroha had changed so little that just chatting with them brought me back to when we used to work together. We’d only been colleagues for a few weeks, but I was glad to still be friends with them after so long.

We all walked together from the station, catching up along the way.

“It’s so weird to be in Odaiba with you guys for something that isn’t otaku-related,” Iroha said.

“Totally!” Kokoro replied. “We always seem to meet up for some cosplay event or other, Summer Comiket, and stuff like that.”

“I still can’t believe Ichi was friends at school with *the* Elaina... Thanks again for the tickets by the way!”

Elaina... That was Elena’s stage name. Today, we were going to attend her first live solo performance. She’d become huge as a voice actress and had just released her debut album as a singer. Her VTuber channel now had more than three million subscribers, and her growing popularity often led to more voice acting opportunities. Her role in an idol-themed anime had allowed her singing skills to become so widely recognized that there was now enough demand for her to host a live performance by herself.

Her good looks had certainly helped, but the greatest reason behind Elena’s success was her talent. I, of all people, knew that the most—I’d been following her career the whole time, even after we’d broken up.

* * *

We had entered the venue and reached our seats, and were now waiting for

the show to start. When the lights went off, the audience began to squeal in anticipation, but that was nothing compared to the shouts that welcomed Elena onto the stage. I could tell from the voices that she had just as many female fans as male ones.

This whole crowd gathered here to listen to her sing. So many people love her.

Her first song was the opening theme to one of the anime she was currently starring in. I was obviously somewhat biased, but her sweet voice ringing along with that rock music was goosebumps material.

Even though we couldn't see her that closely from where we were sitting, she looked incredibly beautiful. It was hard to believe that the girl who was moving such a huge crowd with her performance had once been, even if for a very short time, my girlfriend.

Now that Elena was a celebrity, I knew just how important it was for her that private details about her past remained just that—private. I'd never posted anything about our relationship on social media, nor said anything to anyone other than Kokoro and Ai, who had both promised to keep it a secret.

I'd even stopped sending Elena my thoughts on her latest videos over LINE, since I knew boy-related gossip was lethal for voice actresses of her caliber. Sometimes Kokoro would invite her over to hang out, but I'd cut all personal connections with her.

As a fan of hers, the last thing I wanted was to hinder her career. My only wish was to be able to root for her as she kept on shining like the star she was.

On the train home, Kokoro was still raving about how much she'd liked the performance.

"Elena was so cool! Seeing her like that, I can't believe I'm really friends with someone so awesome!"

"Yeah, me neither..."

"Say, Ichigaya... do you ever regret it?"

"Regret what?" I asked, confused.

“Breaking up with her! Do you ever think, like, *‘Why did I leave such an amazing girl?’*”

Is this what she was talking about?! I can’t even tell if she’s joking. Kokoro was staring at me, as if to gauge my reaction.

“I don’t regret it one bit,” I replied. Of course, I was being honest, but perhaps Kokoro had asked me that because she was feeling insecure. “I’ve told you before, but I’ll tell you again. You’re my perfect otaku girlfriend, Nishina.”

“H-Huh?!” she cried, her face lighting up like a stop light. “Y-You can’t say something like that in public!”

“You asked me!”

“Y-Yeah, but...!”

After silently fidgeting for a while, Kokoro spoke again, still blushing. “I didn’t think you’d reply like that... Thanks.”

I thought back to when I’d been worried that Kokoro would end up dating someone else and wishing that she’d be happy like that. Now, things were different. I was going to make her happy myself. Forever.

Afterword

Rin Murakami here! It's been a while.

How have you all been holding up during these hard times? I hope that you've been well and safe.

As we end this story, I would like to thank you for reading *Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend* up to its fifth and final volume! Because of page count considerations, I'll have to write a rather hefty afterword. Hopefully, that won't be too boring.

This story was born from a suggestion by the editor who worked with me on my debut title, which also involved an otaku boy and a popular girl. The editor suggested that I write a new novel involving that same dynamic, but with a focus on how to find an otaku girlfriend, with a few interesting twists.

I already had a lot of knowledge on the topic, as I'd personally researched how to find an otaku date in the past, and I'm friends with various otaku couples. I was delighted to have the opportunity to write about it. *Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend* draws inspiration from the real-life experiences of both me and my friends.

If you, too, are looking for an otaku date, my suggestion is to take action and go to as many in-person events as possible with a friend, just like Kagetora and Kokoro did. I tried this with a friend myself, and it really did work... for him at least. If you're still a student, you could meet your future partner at a school club or part-time job. It becomes a lot harder once you're an adult, so maybe you should give it a go while you're still young. Trust me, I speak from experience.

If you're an adult, I'm sorry. Lucking out and finding a job with loads of single people around your age seems like the only solution to me.

Anyway, I hope that Kagetora's adventures, the places he visited, and the tools he used will provide some inspiration for those seeking otaku romance.

Since this is the last volume, I'll compile a list of ways that I know have worked for some people. Enjoy!

* * *

Offline Meetups

Meetups like the one Kagetora and Kokoro attended in the first volume are mostly held by communities on social media. Several friends of mine have actually found boyfriends and girlfriends at events like these. I've even heard of couples who formed this way that went on to marry. The best part about it is that, even if you can't find romance right from the start, you can at least make some otaku friends!

Neighborhood Otaku Matchmaking Events

These events have been getting popular lately. I went to one that was held in a neighborhood around Comiket with a friend once. Several shops were taking part. There were a lot of "genuine" otaku, but also some people who didn't really seem like they belonged there. Since we could only have short conversations, it was difficult to get to know anyone, but maybe that applies to all matchmaking events in general. I do, however, know some people who actually found dates there, so maybe it was just my luck...

Online Games

Even if it's not an actual, physical place, I know two married couples who got together through online gaming. It may sound hypocritical to say this after including such events in Kagetora's antics, but you shouldn't start games just to find a date! Not that I think that anyone does that... In the case of my acquaintances, these were people who simply enjoyed the games they played already, then later met in person during offline meetups, became real-life friends and, eventually, got together as couples.

Dating Apps

I've also heard that, nowadays, you can use dating apps to find people with the same hobbies as yours, making it very possible to find an otaku date. I personally know people who've found love, and eventually even marriage, through apps like these. On the other hand, I also know people for whom the

whole experience was a hassle that led to nothing but misfortune. I think it all depends on the luck of whom you match with.

Ticket Giveaways on Social Media

I imagine you're asking yourself what this even means, but, even though it's an obscure way to meet people, I know two different couples who married after getting to know each other this way. Basically, someone who has two tickets for a concert but nobody to go with them asks online to find someone who's interested, they go to the concert together, and they get to know each other... and maybe become friends or something more.

For those who want to date someone with the same taste in music (or idols) as them, this probably sounds like a wonderful opportunity, but keep in mind that relationships born this way usually stem from pure chance. Don't go around offering tickets to people on social media just to score a date, please. You should also know that some concerts forbid giving tickets away!

Parties

As it turns out, parties ripe with romantic opportunities are being held every single day. A friend of mine first met a girl (now his wife) at a Halloween costume party—the two became friends and ended up dating each other. The interesting part is that, at first, they didn't even know they both were otaku. They only found out they shared the same hobbies after becoming closer with one another. So, even if the party that you attend is not specifically tailored to otaku, you might get lucky and find one there.

Social Media Communities

One of the couples I know met in a community on a now defunct social media platform. They started out by chatting there, got to the point of seeing each other in person, started dating, and eventually got married. Of course, since that particular platform is no more, you would have to find another suitable one. That being said, I still think the online environment helps bring people with similar interests together.

Those are the ones that I can think of. Were they useful? Did you find any that sound good to you? If you did, don't be afraid to muster up the courage and

take your chance. If you weren't interested in finding an otaku date to begin with, I'm sorry for having wasted the last dozen paragraphs on that.

* * *

Writing *Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend* has been an incredibly fun experience. It has given me the opportunity to write about otaku romance and to give life to types of characters that I'd never used in my works before. I enjoyed writing each and every volume, and I hope you not only liked reading them, but that the ending left you satisfied.

Of course, this being a romcom, the protagonist had to choose one of the girls (or at least so I believe). Perhaps this meant that Kagetora didn't choose the path you would have wanted him to, in which case I'm sorry. And, by the way, since as an author I can't help but self-insert into the protagonist, I also honestly feel like I owe an apology to the girls that Kagetora (and I) left behind. Don't worry about them too much, though; I bet that, if they haven't done so already, they'll each find happiness on their own, even without Kagetora.

I want to thank my editors and to apologize for making their work so much harder than necessary. Sorry!

Thanks again to Mako Tatekawa, who provided yet another series of wonderfully cute illustrations for this volume. Kokoro looks beautiful wearing her wedding dress in the final illustration... and I really appreciated the warm message.

And once again, thank you, readers, for following the adventures of Kagetora, Kokoro, and the rest of the crew till the end.

In the hope that we'll meet again someday,

Rin Murakami

Otaku Girlfriend

Hello everyone, Mako Tatekawa here! *Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend* was a thrilling ride from start to finish, and I found myself envying Kagetora for being surrounded by so many cute and unique girls. I like all of them so much that being done with the series makes me rather sad. I want to thank everyone who's been enjoying the series, the editors, and of course the author, Rin Murakami!





OTAKU
AND GYARU,
NO LONGER
ROOMMATES.



**GUIDE
TO THE
PERFECT
OTAKU
GIRLFRIEND
ROOMIES
AND
ROMANCE**

CHARACTER



**KOKORO
NISHINA**

A gyaru and secret otaku who lives with Kagetora while in search of her ideal boyfriend. Kokoro and a certain handsome cosplayer seem to like each other a lot.



**ELENA
MINAMI-
WILLIAMS**

Kagetora and Kokoro's younger schoolmate. Elena secretly works as a voice actress and voices VTuber "Emily Saiorji." She recently confessed her love to Kagetora, who became her boyfriend.



YUME

An introverted girl who works at the fairy-tale themed Maid-Tale Café. She likes Kagetora, but her advances can be off-putting.



MIKOTO

An office worker who started a part-time job at the Meow'd Maid Café while hiding her real age. Mikoto wishes she were as young as her otaku friends.

**KAGETORA
ICHIGAYA**

An unapologetic otaku who lives with Kokoro while in search of his ideal girlfriend. Kagetora recently became Elena's boyfriend.



**MASHIRO
GOJO**

An otaku girl working at the Meow'd Maid Café. Lately, Mashiro has been distancing herself from Kagetora.



**TAKESHI
AISAKI**

Kagetora's friend and classmate. Ai is seemingly jealous now that Kagetora has a girlfriend.



IROHA

An otaku gyaru who started working at the Meow'd Maid Café at the same time as Kagetora and Kokoro. Both are still friends with her.



**KOKORO'S
MOM**

Surprise! Mrs. Nishina is back in Japan. Kokoro is scared that her mother could find out she's an otaku.







"YOU SHOULD
BE PROUD OF
YOURSELF.
YOU'D BE THE
PERFECT OTAKU
BOYFRIEND
FOR A LOT OF
GIRLS NOW."

Kokoro
Nishina

Bonus Translator's Afterword & Glossary

Before the final installment of the glossary, I would like to use this space to discuss this series' translation in general. The first issue presented itself before I'd even opened the first volume—the title is a pun. *Otaku Kanojo no Tsukurikata* (オタク彼女の作り方) can mean either one of two things: “How to Get an Otaku Girlfriend” or “How to Become an Otaku Girlfriend.” I believe the English title that was eventually selected carries the same ambiguity as the original, so the reader is free to interpret it as a description of Kagetora's search for a date or of Kokoro's efforts to become more attractive to otaku boys.

Once I did start the book, I had to contend with the two aforementioned characters. With one being an introverted otaku and the other an extroverted gyaru, their dialogue in Japanese was distinguishable at a glance, but they also sounded realistic enough to pass for normal high schoolers. Japanese has a lot of grammatical features that make simultaneously achieving both these goals really easy, but in English, we're afforded no such luxury; each line had to be painstakingly calibrated to fit its character.

The next and biggest challenge was establishing guidelines for translating otaku-related terms and tropes. Changing words such as *moe* or *tsundere* was out of the question since the story is entirely built around Japanese otaku culture. However, leaving everything untranslated would have made the prose completely unintelligible to most readers and janky to the rest. The rule that helped me and the editor find a balance between these two extremes was a simple one: the reader should have all of the context they need to understand the story right in the book. If you were already familiar with this kind of media, you probably already knew what a maid café is, and if you weren't, the tweaked dialogue hopefully gave you enough hints to understand what the characters were talking about.

The glossary at the end of each volume contains information that, while not strictly necessary to understand what's going on, can deepen your understanding of the story. This is all based on the assumption that all readers

would either be knowledgeable about otaku culture or interested in learning more about it—if neither applies to you, props for reading till the end anyway.

Character Cafés

We'd seen a few examples of maid cafés in previous volumes, but this time we got a glimpse of a different yet related trend—character cafés. The most straightforward type is that where the whole establishment is themed around a certain franchise, like the “Sangrio Café” that Yume tweets about. The decor, the dishes, the glassware, the music, the staff uniforms, and just about everything else feature the characters from that franchise. In the case of the Sangrio Café, which is based on the Sanrio Café in Tokyo, you would most likely have Hello Kitty-shaped pancakes, staff wearing My Melody costumes, and so forth.

Something to keep in mind is that these cafés cater almost exclusively to fans, which means that only the most famous series get a whole venue completely revolving around them.

The *Lemon Slayer* collaboration café that Kokoro and Yuya choose for their date, however, is slightly different. This is a normal café that, for a limited period of time, features a few dishes inspired by a currently popular franchise (such as *Demon Slayer*), which often come with a little collectible to entice the fans to order them, like a character keychain, acrylic standee, or something to that effect. Note that this isn't exclusive to cafés; restaurants, fast food joints, bakeries, convenience stores, and the like often feature “collaboration” events like these as well.

Homeroom

Apart from the usual classes, Japanese schools also have homeroom. This time is used for activities that involve the class as a whole, such as assigning seats, discussing non-academic topics with the teacher, planning school trips, and more. When no such activity is available, students are often allowed to spend homeroom as they please, so long as they don't leave the classroom. In Kokoro's case, since she's on her way to graduate high school, it's likely that she

was using this time to prepare for university entrance exams.

Karaoke

Originally, in the novel, Kagetora expressed his surprise at Kokoro's choice of karaoke as a first-date option without elaborating on *why* that would be surprising. The “small, soundproof room” description was added to make his reasoning clearer. Nowadays, if you invite someone in Japan to karaoke, that person will assume you're inviting them to a *karaoke box*.

Karaoke boxes have several small, dimly lit rooms with a large TV, microphones, and a powerful audio system in them. The soundproofing ensures that, for the most part, strangers won't be able to hear you singing, avoiding you needless embarrassment. On the other hand, this extreme privacy may be tantalizing for the ill-intentioned—so much so that many karaoke boxes have posters reminding customers that “any activity involving the removal of one's clothing is forbidden.”

Even if we can completely trust Yuya not to try anything funny, karaoke remains an unusual first date choice, but an appropriate one for Kokoro. In selecting which songs to sing, one can imagine that she rarely strayed from the “anime songs” category, which is a typical otaku way of showing which shows you enjoy without having to talk about them.

Love Confessions

Love confessions have been a central motif throughout the whole story, and some cultural context on them may help you better understand the relationship between Kagetora and Kokoro. Try as we may to avoid any sweeping generalizations, we have to come to terms with the fact that dating, in Japan, is more formalized than in most Western countries. The famous “what are we?” talk would make little sense in Japanese, as ninety-nine percent of relationships are started with a love confession and a request to become one's partner.

In particular, I want to bring attention to a specific translation decision: translating the Japanese word *tsukiau* (付き合) as “dating.” While I believe this brings the point across well enough, it unfortunately causes some confusion—

Kagetora was going on *dates* with Mashiro, but he wasn't *dating* her, as neither of them had ever officially confessed to each other.

Love confessions, of course, come with a series of related tropes, and we get to see one of the most common ones, the school rooftop, near the end of the volume. Speaking of which...

The School Rooftop

In most Japanese schools, because of obvious safety concerns, students can't even access the rooftop. The trope, however, shows up a lot in entertainment, especially when the characters need a private place to interact without teachers or other students getting in the way. You usually expect to find one of three things on the school rooftop: an aloof student eating lunch alone because they have no friends; a delinquent doing things they don't want the teachers to see, like smoking; or two soon-to-be lovebirds, one confessing their love to the other for the first time. Despite Kagetora's obliviousness, the Japanese reader probably knew very well what was going to happen as soon as the two protagonists moved to the rooftop.

This concludes the final glossary for *Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend*. I hope I was able to bring across the nuances of Japanese otaku culture in a way that was understandable yet entertaining. Thank you for reading!



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Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend: Roomies and Romance Volume 5

by Rin Murakami

Translated by Marco Godano Edited by Stephanie Buck

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