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ILLUSTRATOR
FUMI

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From

Toxic Classmate to
Girlfriend Goals

The background of the cover is a detailed anime-style illustration of a young woman with long, straight white hair and large, expressive blue eyes. She has a blue headband and a blue bow on the left side of her hair. She is wearing a dark blue school uniform with a white shirt and a red tie. Her hands are raised in front of her, palms facing forward, in a gesture that looks like she is stopping someone or making a point. The background is a soft, out-of-focus pink and white.

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"In other words, you
wanted to take me
out somewhere after
school to thank me, right?"

"Don't you think for a second
that helping me out yesterday
will curry any favors with me!"

"L-Listen... I-I just... Ugghhhh!
If it's fine with you... I'll wait at
the front gate... so... so...!
SO YOU BETTER BE ON TIME!"

★ Koyuki Shirogane

As Koyuki stuck Naoya's finger into her mouth,
she looked at him with puppy eyes and said...

"Are phu alfriph?"

★ Naoya Sasahara



“Huh? Wha-?!”

Koyuki got startled,
lost her balance, and...



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Prologue

A chime filled the halls, signaling the end of classes for the day and the beginning of another battle.

Naoya Sasahara stood up and made his way to the school's communal shoe rack, side-eyeing his classmates all the while. When he reached up to his shelf to retrieve his shoes, he was interrupted by a clear, bracing voice.

"What a coincidence. Fancy meeting you here, Naoya."

A beautiful girl appeared from the cloak of the shadows behind the shelf. She had a unique beauty and stunning figure that didn't quite look Japanese, with silver hair that flowed down to her lower back and glittered like a bundle of fine silk threads.

Her name was Koyuki Shirogane—a girl that Naoya had become somewhat familiar with as of late.

Koyuki's eyes narrowed, and a wicked grin marred her face as she spoke up again. "Going home alone? *Again*? Your two friends seem to be *very* close, so why are you the third wheel here? Talk about depressing."

Naoya sighed in response and placed his hand to his chin as if in thought. *Okay, I see what she's saying.* He faced her and asked, "Uh, yeah, okay. You wanna head home together, then?"

"Wh-Wha?! Why would I walk home with *you*?!" Koyuki exclaimed with a beet-red complexion and a dumbfounded expression. "You make it sound like I've been standing here waiting for you or something!"

"You have though, right? Outside the classroom. This whole time," he pointed out. He'd seen her staring into his classroom just before the bell had rung. On top of that, he'd seen how lonely and frustrated she looked whenever he interacted with his other classmates. What else was he supposed to think upon seeing that?

Koyuki grumbled to herself, knowing she'd been caught out. However, she quickly managed to collect herself with a flick of her hair and spat out, "*Hmph!* It's not like it's my fault you jumped to conclusions. *Buuut* it is pretty pathetic

seeing you going home all by yourself, so I guess I'll take pity on you and follow along. I do volunteer work in my free time anyway."

"Okay... Well, seeing as you're volunteering, wanna volunteer to go get something to eat, too? I'll even treat you to a drink if you want," he responded.

"You really are desperate, aren't you?!" Koyuki protested loudly. Despite this, she lined up next to Naoya, ready to leave.

Thus began the romantic comedy of the boy with a good sense of intuition and the girl with a venomous tongue.

Chapter One

The Poison Tongue and the Mind Reader

Spring—a season of encounters, and the very same season in which the eventual lovebirds met.

It had all started just outside the shopping district. The time was around dusk, and Naoya had just stepped outside of his workplace, broom in hand, intending to tidy up the storefront. Just as he was about to begin, however, he happened to spy a man and a girl having some sort of spat nearby.

While the girl in question wasn't facing him, he could still make out a school uniform—it was the exact one from Naoya's school—and long silver hair that marked her as not fully Japanese. She was also very evidently in some sort of trouble.

Across from her was a man dressed to the nines in a fine suit, although the flashy, dyed hair and dangling ear piercings made for a rather bizarre contrast. He had been persistently calling out to the girl, and she appeared to be at her wit's end. There was also a noticeable tinge of fear in her voice.

Looks like this dude's trying to pick her up and ended up taking things too far... Naoya noted. And just as soon as he'd thought that, he threw himself between the two and the crimson-stained cityscape. He stood boldly across from the gaudily dressed man and called out, "Uh, excuse me? She doesn't look like she's interested, buddy. I recommend you leave it there."

"Wha-? Who're ya supposed to be?" the mystery man gawked.

Naoya heard the girl breathe in sharply, but he chose to ignore her for the moment in favor of pushing his point. He glared at the man and said, "Would you mind not harassing women in front of my workplace, please? If you keep this up, I'm afraid I'm going to have to call the police."

"Haha... Look, buddy, this is all some sort of misunderstandin'. I dunno what kind of image you've got in your head, but I'm no criminal or anything. Okay?" the man tried to assure Naoya with a painfully fake smile. He flicked out a

business card from his pocket and handed it over.

Just from a quick glance, Naoya gleaned something about him being an entertainment talent company producer. And, unlike the garish man, the font and design were easy on the eyes.

Undeterred, the man continued, “I’m actually on the hunt for our next top model right now—someone who’d make the front page of the magazine. This chick looks like she could really go f—”

“Well, that’s clearly bullshit,” Naoya cut him off.

“What?”

Naoya was not here for pleasantries, nor did he buy the man’s easy-going tone. He glared at the man and reiterated, “You’re not some scout searching for a model—that’s total bullshit. You’re just hitting on her.”

“What?! Do you have the slightest shred of proo-”

“Just look at the situation. Really, just think it through for one second. Although people might try to hide their true intentions, their body language almost always gives them away,” Naoya explained. The man was like an open book. The slightly dilated pupils, the hasty breathing, the cracks in his voice, the quivers in the corners of his mouth, the sweat on his brow; every miniscule detail only served to betray him. There was no room for doubt—the man was lying, plain and simple.

“You’re just some university student, right?” Naoya continued. “You’re from Kansai, if I had to guess. You’re struggling at school, and your family cut you off, so you’ve just been wasting your days messing around and acting like a total sleazeball. Am I on the right track here?”

“H-How’d you kn—?!” the man sputtered, his face paleing.

Bullseye. Naoya had been able to tell where he was from thanks to his accent. The rest had been educated guesses based on the slight stench of alcohol wafting from the man's body and the less-than-stellar state of his suit. Sensing weakness in the man’s eyes, Naoya pressed the issue further. He plastered a thin smile on his face and said, “Does your pickup game suck so badly that you need to rely on fake business cards? Come on, man—you can do better than

that. Working on yourself a little has gotta be quicker *and* less expensive.”

“Y-You best watch your mouth, kid!” the man roared as he lunged forward and grabbed Naoya by his collar. A small cry rose from behind them, but the man paid no mind.

Naoya didn’t let his patronizing attitude slip despite the position he found himself in. “Do you wanna get your brains bashed in, kid?! ‘Cause you seem like you do!” the man threatened.

“I don’t really want that, no,” Naoya answered. “Oh, by the way...”

“What?”

“See that used book store? That’s where I work. And you know how things have been pretty sketchy recently? There’s crime everywhere you look. Well, it just so happens we recently got some new security cameras installed out front.”

Naoya gestured toward the sign outside of the shop. It read *Akaneya Used Books*, and next to it was a camera fixed and diligently pointed in their direction.

The man’s face underwent another dramatic change, shifting colors from white to crimson rage to white again as quickly as a chameleon.

Naoya gave him a wide grin and continued, “If you were to ‘bash my brains in’ here, I’d take that footage and run straight to the closest police station. If you still want to, though, go right ahead.”

“*Tch!*” The man tossed Naoya onto the ground and quickly skulked away.

Naoya stood up, patted himself down, and fixed his collar. A sense of relief washed over his body. “*Whew...* Guess it doesn't need to be a real camera to have the same effect, huh?” he remarked. He was thankful he’d had the foresight to insist that his boss install one.

“Um...” he heard a small voice from behind him stammer.

“Yeah, everything’s fine now.”

He heard another gasp and sensed the girl recoil behind him. Naoya began to turn around to see what the problem was, but he was interrupted by a husky voice calling out from inside the store.

“Sasahara, are you there?! Sorry to spring this on you, but could you deliver something for me? I don’t have time to do it myself right now!”

“Got it! Coming! Hey—you stay safe on your way home, okay?” he directed at the girl.

“Um!”

In the end, Naoya headed back inside the store without ever getting a good look at the girl’s face. He simply felt like he’d done a good deed and left it at that.

“Sasahara, huh...?”

The girl in question clutched her hands in front of her chest and recited the name to herself. In hindsight, it was extremely uncharacteristic for her.

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The first time they actually met face-to-face was at lunchtime the next day. Naoya was aimlessly walking down the school halls with his friends until he found his path blocked by a stranger.

“You’re Naoya Sasahara, right? Thanks for yesterday,” the mysterious girl spat out in a frigid voice. Contrary to her unpleasant tone, she was dazzlingly beautiful. Her silver, gossamer hair fell to her lower back, and her blue eyes twinkled like the sun’s rays dancing on the ocean. Her face was perfect, almost uncannily so—as if she were a CGI model rather than a real girl—with skin that was almost translucent in its paleness.

And yet, despite her dainty beauty, the look she gave Naoya could only be described as sharp and vitriolic. An overwhelming aura of intimidation emanated from her as she stood in the hallway, arms crossed over her chest. She reminded Naoya of a Deva statue—the type one could find in Buddhist temples.

“What?” Naoya managed to blurt out in response.

The other students began to take notice of the remarkable girl. Soon, whispers began to fill the air.

Naoya’s friend, Tatsumi Kouno, who had been walking with him, came to a

halt and frantically whisper-shouted into Naoya's ear. "Whoa, hold up, Naoya. Did something happen between you and 'The Queen of Thorns'?"

"Uh, yeah, yesterday. It wasn't really a big deal..." Naoya said flippantly while he made a show of maintaining his composure. He hadn't seen her face yesterday, but he could easily guess who it had been from her hair alone.

Didn't think I'd see her again so soon, though...

As it turned out, her name was Koyuki Shirogane. She was a second-year student at Ootsuki High School, just like Naoya, although she was in a different class. Her grades were just as impressive as her looks. So great was her superiority in every subject, including sports, that it had even managed to reach Naoya's ears.

Unfortunately, the majority of the rumors he had heard about her were far from complimentary.

Koyuki resumed speaking while looking down on Naoya. "Thank you once again. Seeing as I didn't get to say that yesterday, I decided to seek you out. You were wearing our uniform, so I knew you came to this school at least."

"I see. There was really no need for you to come and say thanks, though," Naoya responded.

"There was, actually," she said with a dramatic flick of her hair. She huffed through her nose before she spoke again, "I don't like to be indebted to anyone, so I had to do *something*. It's not like I would approach some nobody like you otherwise."

"Huh?"

Koyuki Shirogane was almost perfect, save for one major flaw: her sharp tongue. Since Naoya had entered this school, he had heard innumerable stories of male students who had fallen for her looks, only to be ruthlessly slaughtered by her verbal onslaughts.

As a result, she had gained the nickname, "The Queen of Thorns." It was for this reason that she was currently drawing a lot of scornful whispers and disapproving looks from the crowd, as well.

“Here we go again...”

“I don’t know what happened, but she really ought to watch her mouth...”

Koyuki, for her part, paid not the slightest bit of attention to the peanut gallery. Instead, she chose to further press her point. “It’s true that I was in a scary situation, but I’m sure I would have figured something out, even if you hadn’t stuck your nose where it didn’t belong. In the future, I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t run around acting like some kind of white knight. Like I said, I don’t like owing people.”

“Mm-hmm, got it,” Naoya nodded and assented immediately. He understood exactly what she was saying. “In other words, you want to take me out after school as a way of saying thanks, right?”

“What?” Koyuki sputtered after a dumbfounded pause.

“What?” Everyone in the hallway echoed, mirroring Koyuki’s perplexed expression.

The most surprising reaction, however, was Koyuki’s—almost immediately, her face flushed tomato red up to the tips of her ears. “Wh-What are you talking about?! How did you m-manage to reach *that* conclusion from what I just said?!” she squeaked.

“What else was I supposed to think?” Naoya responded, incredulous. “You just admitted that yesterday was frightening for you. That part was true... The rest of what you said was just putting on airs.”

Koyuki seemed shocked, but didn’t reply. Naoya added, “And what you said about not owing people was kinda true too, but what you *really* wanted to say was ‘thanks.’”

Koyuki’s voice and expression belied her harsh words. It wasn’t hard for him to uncover her real intentions when he paid even the slightest bit of attention. Naoya continued his assault. “It just so happens that I’m not working today, and I’m not a part of any clubs. I’m totally free. So, Shirogane, where’re we headed?”

“L-Listen! I-I just... Ugggh!” Koyuki protested. Her petite frame shook with frustration. After a while, she managed to stop herself. She stared at the ground

and began whispering something under her breath. “Um... If it’s okay with you, I’ll be waiting, so...”

“Sure, I’ll meet you at the front gate after school.”

“Wait, how did you hear me?! You’re supposed to not be able to do that!”

“My hearing’s always been good. It’s never let me down so far,” he replied.

“Guuh!! You... Y-You-!” she stuttered.

“‘You’ what?”

“You freak! What are you, a mutant?! What’s with the amazing hearing?!” she screamed. And with that suspiciously complimentary remark, Koyuki fled the scene, her face still a bright red.

The peanut gallery in the hallway watched her depart and discussed among themselves.

“What the...? Was that really Shirogane?”

“That didn’t go how I was expecting it to...”

“Guess she really can be cute and charming if she wants to be.”

Tatsumi gave Naoya a hearty slap on the shoulder. “Still an expert mind reader, I see! But...” Tatsumi trailed off as he lowered his voice and inquired with a disappointed tone, “You were just planning on messing with her like you usually do, weren’t you?”

“I mean, yeah. Pretty much,” Naoya replied.

“Godddd! Why does this jerk get to be so popular with the ladies?!” Tatsumi despaired. Naoya met his friend’s outburst with nothing but a small shrug.

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After school, Naoya headed to the front gate and found Koyuki waiting for him. Her stiff posture made her stand out amidst the throng of students even more than usual.

Naoya headed directly over to her. “Sorry, did you wait long?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve said it before, but I don’t like to owe people,” she

answered. Koyuki's face was cool and composed, very different from her flushed and flustered expression from lunch time. Suddenly, she flourished and pointed at Naoya. Her eyes were like those of a lion about to gorge itself on some unfortunate prey, and Naoya was the hapless antelope. "Like you said at lunchtime, it's true that I want to say 'thank you,' but nothing there's nothing more to it than that. Don't get full of yourself, got it?"

"Eh, dunno if I can promise that," Naoya retorted in a noncommittal tone. He deftly warding off her attempt to overwhelm him and smiled wryly. "Any guy'd get a bit of an ego boost if he were about to go on a date with a girl as cute as you."

"C-Cute?! Date?!" Her face turned the color of a cooked lobster. Unlike at lunch, however, she didn't allow herself to be cowed this time. She turned away from Naoya and began speaking. "*Hmph*. Just so you know, flattery isn't going to get you anywhere. This isn't the first time I've heard vomit-worthy lines like that—I get them all the time."

"I'm not really trying to flatter you or anything. I don't really have a strong presence, so I've gotta speak my mind straight up to get my thoughts across."

"Shameless, aren't you? Unfortunately for you, this is nothing new to me. I mean, have you *seen* how cute I am? People are always trying to sweet talk me," she scoffed.

"Is that right?" he said, playing along. Naoya could make out a smile when he looked at her from the side and thus didn't really believe her. She couldn't stop herself from grinning and trembling.

Before Naoya could point any of this out to Koyuki, she began to pick up her pace. "Let's just get going already!" she exclaimed. "Also! You're not allowed to talk to me until we arrive at the shopping district, okay?!"

"I can tell already this is gonna be one tough date," Naoya grumbled.

"This isn't a date! Now shut up and follow me!"

Naoya followed obediently behind Koyuki, who was heading off in a huff.

The surrounding students surveyed the scene with great curiosity. The rumors of the infamous "Queen of Thorns" inviting some gloomy-looking nobody out

on a date had already begun to spread far and wide.

The two eventually arrived at the shopping district in front of the station. Ootsuki High School was located in the heart of town. Because of that, there was a wide selection of cheap chain stores marketed toward students dotted about the area. Koyuki picked one such of these—a donut shop—and headed straight in.

Naoya didn't have any objections to this, so he followed her in and ordered a donut and a coffee. They chose a table with two seats and sat directly across from one another. The nervousness in the air was palpable—Koyuki was fidgeting in her seat and staring blankly at her donut. Since it didn't look like she would be picking it up any time soon, Naoya opted to make the first move.

He raised his hand in a conciliatory gesture and asked, "Is it all right if I eat first?"

Koyuki nodded, staying silent.

With her permission, Naoya reached for his donut. He was very much a growing boy and had a voracious appetite to match. Right in the middle of devouring his delicious snack, a faint voice spoke up.

"Um."

"Hm?" he asked.

"You seem to be... really good... at reading people..." Koyuki mumbled. She monitored Naoya's face closely through upturned eyes. "Do you actually know what I'm going to say before I say it?"

"Yeah. Of course," Naoya responded as he finished up his donut and wiped the sugar from his fingers with a napkin. "But I can also tell that you want to say it yourself. So I'm waiting."

"How do you...? You can't *really* read minds, can you?!"

"Nothing impressive like that. It's like you said earlier—I'm just kinda good at reading people."

"Kinda,' huh? Well, whatever," Koyuki frowned, obviously unsatisfied with the explanation. She paused for a long moment, then sighed before bowing her

head deeply. “As for yesterday... Thank you. I’m serious—you saved me.”

“You’re welcome.” Naoya accepted her words of gratitude.

Koyuki appeared somewhat relieved, as though she’d gotten something important off her chest. Finally, she began to nibble on her donut. “Y-You’re weird... You make me feel like I’m going crazy.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” he replied.

“*Hmph*. I can see that,” Koyuki snorted as her perfect lips curled into a mocking grin. “I hope you realize what an honor it is for a weirdo like you to get to eat with *me*.”

“Oh yeah, I do. Don’t worry. It makes me happy that you’re happy to be here.”

“I’m not happy to be here! No one said anything about that!”

Koyuki’s face once again became dyed a deep shade of red, which was only deepened when she realized that her shouting was attracting the attention of the other customers in the store. To this, she quickly withdrew into herself and turned a reproachful eye onto Naoya, who was quietly sipping his coffee.

“What is up with you?” she grumbled. “I didn’t even say anything like that...”

“I mean, it’s really easy to tell what you’re thinking,” he answered. It was pretty much a walk in the park for him—small details, like her intonation when she spoke, the movements of her eyes, her habit of fixing her hair, all clearly revealed what she was thinking. Even if she tried to hide it, she was like an open book to him.

“Really? I don’t know if I believe you...” Koyuki said hesitantly.

She spent a few seconds examining Naoya intently before an evil smile once again rose to her lips. She retrieved a one hundred yen coin from her purse and held it in her hands, but she hid it from Naoya such that he couldn’t see which one it was in. She then thrust her hands out at Naoya and asked, “Okay, test time. Which hand is the coin in?”

“It’s on your lap, right?”

“Correct,” Koyuki said faintly after a long pause. She opened both her hands;

as expected, there was nothing there. Koyuki plucked the coin from her lap and stared at Naoya like she was looking at an exotic animal.

“You really are good,” she marveled. “Oh yeah, so about that so-called ‘scout’ from yesterday. Are you a detective or something?”

“A teen detective? What is this, an anime? I’m just your average high-school student,” Naoya replied incredulously.

“Your ‘average high-school student’ can’t do the things that you can,” Koyuki pointed out as she gave Naoya a dubious look.

Naoya shrugged his shoulders and replied, “I do hear that a lot, yeah. People ask me if I have special skills and stuff all the time.”

“Well, yeah, of course they would. What kind of training did you go through to be able to do this kind of thing?”

“Nothing in particular, really,” he replied with a shrug and a lopsided smile. He wasn’t really lying or hiding anything. He had never done anything in particular specifically to read people; he had just had a unique set of circumstances that led him to realize he had a knack for it.

“When I was little, my mom was sick. *Really* sick. I mean, constantly bedridden levels of sick,” he explained.

“Huh?” Koyuki gulped, apparently taken by surprise at the direction the conversation had taken.

Naoya ignored her and continued. It must have been around the time he was six years old—his mother had suddenly collapsed one day and was hospitalized as a result. She had been hooked up to ventilators and pipes of all kinds, virtually chained to her bed and unresponsive. Naoya had visited her every day and did everything he could to look after her. He would stare intently at her face to discern what she needed. Eventually, he was able to tell what she wanted just by looking.

“Well, I was still a kid, so I couldn’t really do anything major to help her. But by doing that over and over, I guess I learned how to read people based on visual cues,” he concluded.

“I see... All that for your mother’s sake,” Koyuki murmured as she held a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. Then, in a hesitant and careful voice, she asked, “Um, so... Your mom... What, uh, how is she doing now?”

“She’s gone somewhere far away...”

Koyuki paled and flinched at his words.

Naoya continued, nonplussed, “She’s probably in the Caribbean or somewhere like that right now.”

“Wha?” Koyuki gawked.

“Yeah, she accompanies my dad on his business trips and stuff.”

Although she had once been at death’s door, she had managed to recover through some sort of miracle. Now, Naoya’s mother and father spent their wonderful married life touring the world together. They figured it was fine to leave Naoya to his own devices, considering he was already a high-school student. It wasn’t unusual for Naoya to receive a letter from them at the end of each month, where they would recount their adventures and attach some lovey-dovey couple photos. He had long since given up trying to figure out how he was supposed to feel about those.

Koyuki chewed on her donut absentmindedly before shouting, “You’ve gotta choose your wording better!”

“Ahaha. I get that a lot as well, actually,” he said with a laugh. Naoya did this sort of thing to people all the time.

Koyuki looked on and said, “*Hmph*. I guess that does explain why you’re such a weirdo, though.”

“And why I’m such a good son, right?”

“Still a weirdo regardless,” she rebutted. She sipped her coffee, seemingly annoyed, before putting on a strange smile. “Unfortunately for you, that little skill of yours won’t work on me.”

“Seriously?”

“Of course. I mean, why do I even have to be here with you in the first place? I could list about 100 things that would be more worth my time right now: drink

water, listen to the radio.” She made a show of sighing and shrugging her shoulders. “But, just out of curiosity, what other stuff can you tell I’m thinking?”

“Uh, well, you know...” Naoya trailed off with a nod.

He could tell from how she acted she was the oldest child in her household. She was right-handed, but could probably write with her left hand if she had to. She was the type to work hard in the shadows, and she was very bad at showing any form of weakness. Take their “date,” for example—she was forcing herself to drink black coffee when she was clearly much more of a cream and cocoa person. As Naoya stared her down, listing all her traits in his head, Koyuki began to recoil slightly.

Looks like it’s time to whip out the big guns. Naoya thought to himself, ready to deliver the finishing blow. “I can tell you’ve fallen for me,” he declared.

“*Pfftt!*” Koyuki spat her coffee everywhere. She curled over and began coughing violently.

Naoya was unable to do anything but watch. He knew that if he reached out to her, then he was very likely to receive her ire.

“*Cough, cough!* Th-That’s a good one! *Me?* Like *you?*!” she sputtered out between coughs.

“What? Am I wrong?”

“Uh, duh! Yeah, you’re wrong!” Koyuki shouted in a wavering voice. She was pure crimson from the top of her face to her fingertips. Her exotic blue eyes were wet with tears of embarrassment. Still, in spite of everything, she continued to act defiant. “I wouldn’t fall for you even if you’d managed to save me from a freaking *tiger*, let alone some random loser off the street! Don’t get so full of yourself!”

“Oh. That’s a major relief, to be honest.”

“Wha?” Koyuki’s eyes grew wide.

Naoya sighed and said, “Listen. There’s a reason I came here with you.”

“A reason...?”

“Yep. It’s nothing complicated or anything.” Naoya faced Koyuki, took a deep

breath, then spoke in an exceedingly neutral tone. “I’ll just come out and say it. I’m sorry, but... I can’t go out with you.”

Koyuki’s face dropped at that moment, like her soul had left her body. “Do you have... someone else you like?” she asked.

“No, nothing like that. I’ve never had anyone like that, and I don’t now,” he responded with a wave of his hand.

“So do you just not like strong-willed girls like me?”

“That’s not it either,” Naoya assured her while he shook his head lightly. Even if he did have a girlfriend, he wouldn’t hate Koyuki. He thought she was funny and straight-forward—two traits he rather admired. It was just that he had some... *difficult* circumstances at play.

“You’re not the problem. It’s just that I don’t feel like going out with anyone right now,” he informed her.

“Why not?”

“If there *were* someone I liked, and I was supposed to be with them all the time, well, my mind would constantly be going 100 miles an hour trying to figure them out. It’d really wear me out.”

Because of his strong intuition and people-reading skills, Naoya was always in tune with others. What were they thinking? What did they want? These were questions he never really had to ask—he couldn’t help but know how the other person was feeling. Naturally, the constant access to others’ emotions—be they positive or negative—would wear anyone out, and Naoya was no exception. There had been instances bad enough to cause him to faint at times. He had also made use of his intuition in the past to try to help girls in need. Unfortunately for him, it had always resulted in a major headache for him.

That was why, since he had started middle school, he had declined any girl who seemed even remotely interested in him upfront. Their reactions had all varied—some had blown up at him, some had silently seethed, while others had simply sobbed. In the end, though, they had all quietly distanced themselves and left things at that. Despite that, Naoya could tell that many of them were still hurt.

Letting them down easy at the start saves a lot of pain in the end...

He had never meant to upset any of those girls; he simply knew that it was better for both parties if they didn't get involved with him. They would eventually move on and meet others. That way, Naoya wouldn't end up letting them down.

Naoya's dejected face was reflected in his coffee. He resumed reciting the script he had created and repeated multiple times by now. "So I just wanted to let you know that, even if you do like me, I can't return those feelings. If you do have feelings for me, I'll have to ask you to give up on me now. If you don't, please keep it that way."

Koyuki answered with silence. Perhaps it was more accurate to say she had no answer at all.

Naoya sipped his coffee and noted that it tasted notably more bitter than before. He was reaching for the sugar when she spoke.

"That's... so stupid..."

"Excuse me?" Naoya's head rose at her irate voice. When he saw her face, all he could do was blink and stare in amazement. He had expected her to react in anger, but he didn't glean any of the fury he had been expecting in her eyes.

Uh, I feel like if someone said what I just did to you, you'd start hating them, right? So why don't you hate me?

Koyuki ignored Naoya's confusion and began to rant. "Hmph! I don't like you, okay? Seriously, this whole thing is nothing to me. But what gives you the right to tell me how to feel?"

"W-Well, I didn't really mean to do that. What I meant was, you wouldn't want to date a guy who's always guessing what you're thinking and feeling, right?" Naoya backtracked, trying to inject some good humor into his voice. "And it's not just what you're thinking, either—I can tell how much you weigh, your three sizes, and stuff like that just by looking."

"Uh, and? A tape measure and a weighing scale can do that. Why are you trying to compete with a tape measure? Is that supposed to impress me?"

“Eh, uh, I mean, yeah, but...” Naoya stumbled over his words. He had figured that Koyuki had just fallen for her idea of him, and once he’d shown her what he was really like, she’d quickly lose interest. Things, however, were not going according to plan.

Why didn't that work? Why can I tell she still likes me?

Koyuki snorted haughtily to herself and said, “*Hmph*. So it looks like you want me to give up. If that’s what you want... Okay, Sasahara.”

“Wh-What?”

“You’d better listen closely to what I’m about to say,” she demanded. She took a deep breath, then suddenly thrust her finger toward Naoya and declared, “I *will* make you fall for me!”



“What?” Naoya blinked in surprise.

Her lips curled in a fearless smile. “I get what you’re trying to say, but do you seriously expect me to just roll over and take it? Fat chance!”

She wasn’t giving him any ground. In fact, she appeared to be getting more confident by the second. She continued, relentless. “I don’t care how much you can read me! I’m not scared! And there’s no way I’ll get hurt by you, either. I’m gonna cling to you like a barnacle and *make* you like me! Not that I’ll like you back or anything!”

“Don’t lie! You’re head over heels for me, aren’t you?!” Naoya recklessly stated. It didn’t seem like she wasn’t going to give up on him any time soon. Naoya could tell that she was serious, and it made him uncharacteristically shrink back under her intense pressure. “Hah... Why are you like this? You could have any man you wanted.”

“I’m pretty much throwing myself at you, and you’re telling me to chase after other guys? Talk about bad manners, Sasahara,” Koyuki sighed. “Plus, I did say you’re a weirdo, but I guess this makes me one, too.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’ve heard it, right? What everyone calls me? ‘The Queen of Thorns.’”

“Well, I’ve heard some rumors, yeah.”

“Exactly. I guess I’m so perfect that people find it hard to approach me. Whatever. I’m sure part of it is because those losers are just jealous,” she said with a huff.

“*Sigh...*”

She was 60 percent serious and 30 percent putting on airs—the remainder was self-directed shame. She didn’t need to act so steadfast like this.

Naoya ignored Koyuki’s rambling until she stopped, cleared her throat, and thrust her chest out.

“But yeah, that’s the deal,” she stated. “I need someone who’s just as much of a weirdo as me. You barely, just *barely*, make the cut, so I guess I’ll test you out and see if you can get a passing grade. You’re welcome.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she licked her lips. Her small tongue was a light red color and brought images of a man-eating spider to Naoya's mind. "I *will* make you fall for me. And *you're* gonna end up being the one to confess to *me*. Hehe... Making a composed guy like you fall at my feet is gonna be quite the sight."

"Eh, um..." Naoya stuttered and broke eye contact with her. It wasn't that he was being cowed by her evil empress act. Really. Seriously. It was because he was able to read her true intentions behind the façade she'd put up.

She wanted to be with him. She wanted to know all of his likes and dislikes. She wanted to walk to school with him and then go out together on their days off. She wanted to go on a date to an amusement park and many other places, too.



It was those honest thoughts that caused Naoya to gulp quietly to himself.

She's not joking around! Does she seriously like me this much?!

He could tell her feelings were genuine—they wouldn't be broken easily. Naoya fell silent under the weight of her resolution.

Koyuki continued with an air of victory tinging her voice, "Haha! You'd better prepare yourself for tomorrow. I like to play with my food."

"Y-Your food?" Naoya chewed on the word, then fell into thought. "That sounds like it's going to be something, all right..."

"Hehe, doesn't it? Anyone being pursued by someone as beautiful as me would —"

"I might actually fall for you," he cut her off with a simple statement.

"Yep! That's right. Of cour—wait, what?!" Koyuki's voice rose to a shout at Naoya's words.

The other customers must've been getting used to her by now, as most only spared a light glance toward their table.

Koyuki pointed a trembling finger at Naoya. "What are you saying?! You just told me you weren't going to go out with anyone. Can you stop making such lame jokes?!"

"Sorry, but I'm being serious," he responded with a shrug. It was true that he had not planned on getting close to any girls, as he'd already explained to her. That said, there was something different about her. "I want to see what you're thinking. All of it. All the time. I guess I find it... fun? You're the first person I've ever felt this way about," he explained.

Naoya had only felt regret and bitterness toward the affection shown to him before, but he felt none of that with Koyuki. He wanted to be with her and discover her wide range of expressions, to find out what makes her tick. Such were the thoughts that swirled around his head—he felt like his entire world was turning upside down.

"I know you just called me a weirdo and all, but I hope you're okay with me liking you. I mean, you're cute, and being with you will clearly never be boring. I

think it'd be more weird if I *didn't* like you, to be honest," he continued.

"Wh-Wha?! What's with the Casanova act all of a sudden?!" she sputtered.

"I mean, I did tell you earlier that I can't help saying my true feelings."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you meant this much!" she shouted.

Naoya looked past her outburst and tried to figure out what she truly felt in her heart. As he examined her eyes, he asked, "So, yeah—if you do pursue me, there's a good chance I'll end up falling for you. This is just out of curiosity, but how are you planning on winning me over?"

"Huuuh? Well, uh..." Koyuki fumbled as she averted her eyes and opened and closed her mouth like a goldfish. She spoke in a quiet, embarrassed voice.

"Well, I was thinking I'd wait for you, we'd go to school together, then we'd leave and go to a cafe or something like we're doing now. You know, stuff like... that."

"Oh, good plan. That'll definitely get me to fall for you," he assured her.

"R-Really?!"

"Yep. Definitely as much—if not more—than you already like me."

Her radiant expression soon crumpled into anger, and she spat out with furrowed brows, "Listen up, buddy—I. Do. *Not*. Like. You. When will you get that through your thick skull?!" She suddenly lost her energy and sank back into her seat, sulking. "Quit messing with me. If you continue, I'll get really mad, okay?"

"I'm being serious, though... Oh. *Ohhh*. Okay, now I get it," Naoya said as he lightly punched his open hand in a gesture of realization.

Koyuki liked Naoya, and if Naoya liked her back, then the feeling would be mutual. So why was she getting so angry? It didn't come to him immediately, but he finally understood after he thought it over for a bit.

"I guess—based on my tone—that I sound like I'm not taking this seriously. I've gotta be more serious," he stated.

"*Guh!* No, that's... Well, you're not wrong, but... Okay, no, but... *Ughhh*."

“All right. I’ll just put it simply,” Naoya began. He collected himself, then reached across the table to hold Koyuki’s hand. She let out a small squeak in response, and he could feel her hand rapidly warming up as he grasped it. “I’m looking forward to getting to know you, Shirogane. I’m going to fall for you as hard as you’ve fallen for me, okay?”

“Okay, listen here, you littl—!” Her voice broke as she trembled. “You’re nothing to me! I don’t bike you!”

“Haha. That was pretty cute, messing up what you wanted to say like that.”

“I am so done with you!” she cried.

Naoya’s sweet words drove Koyuki half to tears. And thus the curtain opened on the war between the two lovebirds.

Chapter Two

The Queen of Thorns

The next morning, Naoya had just exited the station's ticket gate when he happened to spot a petite figure.

"Morning, Sasahara."

"Hey."

It was none other than Koyuki. Naoya stood there absentmindedly for a moment, and Koyuki seemed to take this as some sort of small victory.

"Slack-jawed and lame as ever today, huh?" she teased haughtily. Her acid tongue was in prime form today. "Sorry, but you look more lifeless than the geezers strolling around the park. If you can't shape up, don't even think of coming anywhere near me."

Seeing that Koyuki had slight bags under her eyes, Naoya slowly covered his mouth and whispered, "Damn, you're seriously cute..."

Koyuki blushed and shouted, "Would you stop blurting random crap out?! What d'you mean, 'I'm cute'?!"

"I just thought it was really adorable that you got up so early to go to school with me," Naoya explained.

Koyuki's face turned even redder than before, if such a thing were possible, but she fell silent instead of yelling. When he examined her closer, he noticed that she seemed even prettier than usual—she'd paid extra attention to her hair and makeup today. She'd gone through the extra effort just because she was going to school with him this morning.

The fact that Naoya could tell all this by one glance only confirmed his suspicions. "Oh, come on—you really do like me, don't you?" he asked.

"Uh, no! Sometimes I simply happen to wake up earlier than usual, which gives me extra time to get ready. It's got nothing to do with you, okay?!" Koyuki spat out before turning away in a huff. Naoya could tell she only did that to hide

her embarrassment, though.

He found himself thinking back on what had happened the day before.

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After Koyuki had made her declaration, they'd spent some more time in the donut store before leaving together. The town was dyed in the red of twilight, and the streets were packed with mothers out buying groceries and students heading home.

"Wow, it's so bright," Koyuki murmured as she shielded her eyes from the urban glow. At that moment, her hair was tinged crimson by the reflected lights of the city.

She really is quite the beauty, Naoya couldn't help himself from thinking.

The magical moment was quickly ruined, however, when Koyuki suddenly turned on her heel and began walking away with a short, "Okay, bye."

Naoya stuttered a bit before he called out and stopped her. "Hey, Shirogane. Where do you live, by the way?"

"Yotsumori. Why?"

"Oh, I live in the complete opposite direction. I was just thinking about walking you home. It's pretty far and stuff."

"I'm good. It's not like we're dating or anything," she replied.

"It's gonna get dark soon. I mean, worrying about girls is just natural for us guys, you know?" he prodded.

"Ugh, I wish you'd stop saying embarrassing crap like that."

Koyuki hung her head and took several long, deep breaths. She then raised her head, stared daringly into Naoya's eyes, and declared, "You won't be saying stuff like that for long, though! I'm launching my counterattack today. You won't be able to live without me when I'm done with you!"

"Looking forward to it. I've never really liked a girl before, so yeah... I'm excited to see how it turns out," he responded.

"Hah, that's pretty pathetic—wait, I'm your first?!" Koyuki's eyes went wide.

“Yeah. I got this whole ‘people-reading’ skill when I was still a kid, so, you know,” Naoya explained. He had always shut down any advances he’d gotten, and he’d never been the one approaching himself. He basically had zero dating experience. His friends at school often made fun of him for it, and even he himself wasn’t exactly proud of it.

Koyuki’s smile only grew. “Oh, really? Sounds like you’ve always been a pathetic loser, then.”

“Yeah, I guess you could put it that way. Either way, guess we’re both each others’ first.”

“How did you kn—?! I mean, ugh! Just listen to me! I’ve already said I don’t like you!” she cried. Her rage was interrupted by the ringing of a phone. She reached into her bag, pulled it out, and checked it. That seemed to have curbed her temper, because she then said, “As much as I’d love to grind you into the pavement right now, I’ve gotta head on my way. My little sister’s waiting for me.”

“Oh, you have a little sister? I guess if you’re heading home with her, then I don’t have to worry as much.”

“Yep. She’s a really good girl, you know. Recently, at hom—” Koyuki’s hand suddenly froze above the phone screen. Her eyes began to flit between the screen and Naoya. A thin smile crept onto her face, making her look like a child who’d just thought of a particularly cruel prank.

In contrast, Naoya stood there, unsure what to do.

“Okay, listen up, Sasahara,” she began. “I’m going to grace you with my phone number.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. Get your phone out. Now.”

“I get it already. Jeez,” Naoya muttered as he hurriedly searched his bag for his phone.

Soon, the name “Koyuki Shirogane” appeared in Naoya’s contacts. Her icon was a white cat with a sharp glare—in a way, it reminded Naoya a lot of her.

“Not that I’m trying to look a gift horse in the mouth or anything, but why are you giving this to me again?” he asked.

“Well, if I can message you, that means I can attack you at any time, doesn’t it?” Koyuki said, now holding her phone over her head like a weapon. “And your freaky powers can’t work through text, can they? So even if I get embarrass—I mean, uh! You won’t be able to control the conversation! Yeah, that’s what I meant!”

“Ohhh, I get you. Good idea.”

“I’m full of ‘em. I won’t be on the losing end anymore, got it?”

She was right on one account—when someone was lying, Naoya could mainly tell through the movement of their eyes, their verbal tics, and their gestures. Text-based conversation limited this information, thus making it harder to read people. Aside from that, however, she had revealed something huge.

So you admit you get embarrassed around me, huh, Shirogane? Bet you didn’t mean to let that slip. Your grades are always top quality, but maybe you’re not actually the brightest tool in the shed.

“So yeah, see you later, Sasahara. Starting tomorrow, you’re so screwed.”

“Okay, stay safe.”

Koyuki didn’t notice Naoya’s eyes following her as she strutted off toward the station.

That night, they texted each other back and forth for a while and eventually ended up deciding to go to school together the next day.

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It was still early in the morning, so the streets were relatively empty. That meant they were alone for the most part as they walked. Koyuki looked especially beautiful at dawn, basking in the glow of the early spring sun.

She cleared her throat and began, “Okay, you got me back there at the ticket gate, but don’t get too cocky now.” She gave him a devilish smile before brandishing her phone. “So, how did you feel about getting DM’d by the one and only Koyuki Shirogane yesterday? Bet that got your heart racing.”

“Uh...” Naoya replied flippantly, to which Koyuki seemed disappointed.

“What? I thought I messaged you a lot last night.” she asked.

“I mean, uh, yeah, you sure did,” Naoya replied as he produced his phone and navigated to the messaging app they’d used. A concise declaration appeared on the screen: “We’re going to school together tomorrow.” That was followed by a flood of cat and food photos. “How exactly were these pictures supposed to get my heart racing?”

“They didn’t?!” Koyuki was flabbergasted.

What kind of guy does she think I am? Naoya pondered to himself. He was at a loss for words and stood there awkwardly for a while as Koyuki studied the phone screen intently.

“Hmm, but my sister told me that these were the most suitable topics for posting on social media,” she mumbled.

“Yeah, if you’re some disgraced celebrity trying to lay low, maybe,” he replied. He was even more curious as to what kind of girl Koyuki’s sister was now.

Still, that had managed to answer some questions he’d had. The photos of mean-looking cats and food—sent to him apropos of nothing—had thrown him for a loop. It also indicated that Koyuki had actually been trying to have a positive interaction with him. *That was her doing her best to get along with me, I guess.*

Naoya quite liked that clumsy earnestness. Koyuki appeared to miss that she had just made some significant progress in securing Naoya’s heart while she continued to stare at the phone and mutter to herself.

Naoya gave her a lopsided smile and attempted to keep the conversation going. “It didn’t really get my heart going per se, but I did think the cat was pretty cute. Is it yours?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, it is. We’ve only got one pet so far. One spoiled cat baby is enough.”

“Oh, cool. What’s their name?”

“Gizzard.”

“Yo, great name! Really, like... uh, unique!” he floundered.

“Hehe, I know, right? Everyone in our house calls him ‘King Gizzard.’ Lookie here— isn’t he the cutest when he has his after-meal nap? I’ll let you look, but only ‘cause it’s you Sasahara.”

“Ah. Thanks.”

As Koyuki began showing Naoya pictures of her cat, their bodies naturally grew closer and closer. It got to the point that he could smell her sweet scent and became very aware of her chest pressing against him. On top of this, he could sense her happiness—that she was content just to be spending time with him like this. And he found himself feeling likewise.

I’ve heard this is what your first is like—you’re just happy to be near them, Naoya thought. Because of his abilities, he normally didn’t feel like spending that much time with people, except for family and old friends who knew him well. Koyuki was different, though. He wanted to spend more time with her and see all her different moods and expressions.

Naoya quickly lost interest in the cat photos and began staring at Koyuki’s face from the side. *She’s so adorable. Not to mention she’s just a normal girl. Where did this whole “Queen of Thorns” thing come from anyways? Doesn’t fit her at all,* he pondered. He began to wonder about her image at school—about what their fellow students thought about her.

It was standard to spend lunchtime with the person you walked to school with. Koyuki and Naoya were in different classes, so it made sense to him to ensure they got to spend some time together at school. He decided to go ahead and arrange something before they arrived. “Did you bring your own lunch today? D’you wanna eat together, maybe? Just the two of us.”

“Uh, well, yeah, that’s fine...” Koyuki mumbled, seemingly overwhelmed by the sudden invitation. Surprise attacks looked to be super effective on “The Queen of Thorns.”

Once the lunch break had arrived, Naoya made his way to Koyuki’s classroom. He was surprised when he was unable to find her. *I guess she’s in the bathroom?*

“Hey. You,” a familiar voice called out.

Naoya turned to the sound and found Koyuki, but she wasn’t speaking to him. She was addressing a girl who Naoya didn’t recognize. She sported glasses and a prim appearance—a real honor student type. She was struggling to carry two cardboard boxes in her arms, which were filled to the brim with used printouts and such.

The girl looked at Koyuki with wide eyes. “Um, what is it, Shirogane?”

“That looks heavy. Let me take half,” Koyuki commanded.

“But the teacher asked me to do it, and I don’t wan—”

“Just give me the damn box,” Koyuki ordered as she wrenched the box from the other girl, coming across like she was mugging her.

Glasses seemed stunned for a moment before she broke into a smile.

“Thanks, Shirogane. That’s really kind of you,” she said.

Koyuki seemed troubled in response to the girl’s kind words—she stumbled over her words for a moment before she managed to snap, “*Hmph*. I’m only helping you because I was getting tired of watching you struggle, okay? Seriously, you looked like some stupid monkey trying to bang sticks together. Now stop talking, and let’s get this over with. You’ve wasted enough of my time already.”

“Hahaha... Okay. I’m sorry, I guess...” the girl visibly deflated, and her eyes drooped sadly.

Other students in the surrounding area exchanged knowing glances and shrugged. The atmosphere in the hallway was far from light.

Ohhh, now I get it. So this is where the whole ‘Queen of Thorns’ name comes from, Naoya realized. The whole exchange had been obvious to him—Koyuki had been trying to hide her embarrassment, but others had seen things differently. Naturally, they took her words and actions at face value. *It’s obvious she’s gonna get a bad reputation if she acts like that all the time. That’s sad, though. She really is a nice girl at heart.*

Naoya reached a conclusion—he knew what he had to do. He began to walk

toward the two girls with a wide, unassuming smile on his face. “Hey, Shirogane!” he called out to her.

Koyuki turned, spotted Naoya, shrieked, and almost dropped the box she was holding. Glasses cocked her head to the side, unsure what to make of the sudden interloper she didn’t recognize.

“Come on, Shirogane, that’s really not the way to go about it,” Naoya continued.

“Huh?” Koyuki blinked.

“Now, I can tell what you’re feeling, so I wasn’t particularly bothered by what you said, but these guys don’t know that. I realize all that just now was because you were embarrassed, but you’ve gotta be more honest about how you feel, okay?”

“I wasn’t embarrassed!” she exclaimed.

“It just really bums me out that everyone’s ended up misunderstanding you so much...” Naoya lamented, clutching his chest dramatically and hanging his head. He knew his over-the-top, hammy acting would have an immediate effect on Koyuki.

Sure enough, Koyuki grumbled and sputtered to herself at Naoya’s emotional words. She turned toward Glasses and bowed her head. “Um, I’m sorry. I was really mean just now, and I didn’t mean it. I just wanted to help, that’s all,” she apologized.

Female onlookers in the hall began to shriek in disbelief in a high-pitched chorus. “No waaay!” “Ohmigod!” “Whaaa?!”

Even Naoya was surprised—he hadn’t expected her to be that submissive and polite about it. He had simply wanted her to think about her actions a bit more; he hadn’t expected her to go this far. *Ah, maybe she’s only being like this because of me.*

Glasses was understandably flustered by Koyuki’s show of honesty and quickly tried to smooth over the situation. “Oh! No, no, really. It’s fine,” she reassured the other girl. “I wasn’t bothered at all. No worries, ‘kay?”

“Really?” Koyuki asked.

“Yep. I know you always say stuff like that, but help out anyway. I totally get it,” Glasses added with a bright smile. “Still, thanks for being honest. I’m serious. I’m glad to get to know you better.”

“B-But...” Koyuki floundered.

Glasses turned toward Naoya and said, “And thanks to you too! I’m gonna borrow Shirogane for a bit, if that’s cool?”

“Sure, have fun,” Naoya said with a wave. With that, the two girls headed off in the direction of the staff room, Koyuki grumbling all the while. The other students in the hall all gawked at Naoya in awe, as if he was a lion tamer at a circus. He pretended not to notice.

Koyuki returned about 10 minutes later. Naoya had been waiting for her on an open bench in the school’s courtyard. “Good work out there, Shirogane,” he greeted her jovially. “That’s your good deed for the day, haha.”

Koyuki answered with silence.

The courtyard was located between two school buildings and boasted a large, grassy area. There were a large number of students who normally spent their lunch there. The weather was particularly nice today, so there were even more students than usual.

Koyuki took a seat next to Naoya, lunch box in hand. She didn’t start eating immediately, though—instead, she sat there silently.

Naoya could sense her displeasure emanating from her. *Ah, crap. I wonder if I went too far earlier. Yeah, I guess calling her out like that in front of people was a little...* he contemplated.

“Hey,” Koyuki finally spoke in a low volume. She raised her head, and Naoya noticed a serious expression he hadn’t seen from her before. “About earlier... Thanks.”

“Oh,” he replied simply. This was not what Naoya had been expecting. He couldn’t spot any falsehood or grandstanding in her eyes—she really did appreciate his advice and took it to heart.

Koyuki took a breath before continuing, “I’m always like that. I guess you could say I’m really bad at socializing. I always end up saying awful things to people as a result.”

“Well, admitting it is the first step, right? Isn’t that what they say?”

“I know it’s bad, but then I just say things without realizing, and I just can’t stop myself...” she confessed with a tinge of pain in her voice. She was being truly honest. She kept glancing at Naoya in between words, and he could see her troubled expression. “But because of what you said earlier, I was finally able to talk to the girls in my class for the first time. So I just wanna say... thank you.”

“Well, you’re welcome,” Naoya replied with a bright smile. Deep down, however, he was somewhat worried. Koyuki had been in that class for a month already. Had that truly been the first time she’d actually spoken to those girls? He had to conclude he’d been right from the start about her—she really was nothing more than an awkward girl. Her sharp tongue was, most of the time, a product of her embarrassment or a defense mechanism. It wasn’t a particularly uncommon tactic, but in Koyuki’s case, it seemed to be especially bad.

Hmm... Her behavior leads me to think there was some kind of event in her past that triggered her to act this way—oh no, no, nu-uh. Don’t go there, Naoya. Bad Naoya. Naoya quickly stopped himself in his mental tracks. He knew that if he followed that train of thought, he’d only end up prying too much into her personal life, so he banished it from his head. He really couldn’t stop himself from digging into a person’s brain once he started. It was incredibly rude—not to mention unethical—to do that just because he could.

Koyuki’s face darkened as Naoya sat in silence. “I knew it. They call me ‘The Queen of Thorns,’ but I’m really just a bad person,” she said in a trembling voice. She hung her head over her lunch box.

Seeing she was on the verge of tears, Naoya quickly stepped in and reassured her, “You’re not a bad person.”

“What?”

Naoya looked around for a moment before he pointed to a walkway on the other side of the courtyard. The school guidance counselor, Iwatani, stood there. He was known as the toughest and strictest teacher in the school, and he

had a grim exterior to match. He was a real stickler for meaningless school regulations, and no student had ever witnessed him smile.

“Look—that’s Iwantani over there. You see him?” Naoya pointed.

“Yeah. What about him?”

“He’s actually a huge sweetheart. He works really hard as a counselor.”

“You’re messing with me.”

“I’m being serious. Just watch him.”

He had just finished pulling some students aside for minor infractions based on their uniform regulation. When he was done, they all scattered like a newly-hatched nest of spiders. As he watched them leave, Iwatani’s normally hard expression faltered for a moment. His façade crumpled in exhaustion, and he let out a long sigh. The moment of vulnerability was short lived, however, and his usual stern expression was reconstructed in the blink of an eye. He turned around and headed back inside the school.

Naoya turned back around and found Koyuki wide-eyed in surprise. “He actually does look really tired. I had no idea,” she marveled.

“Right? He’s always hiding it from everyone,” Naoya replied.

He was pretty sure only he and a few teachers were aware of this fact. Iwatani was strict with the students, his coworkers, and himself. He was aware this made him hard to be around, so he played into the perception of himself as a strict authority figure so as to better perform his job.

“I can tell that he’s doing that ‘cause I’ve got this skillset,” Naoya explained. “I can also tell that pretty much everyone hides how they *really* feel. They play into people’s expectations to some extent—just like you do.”

Some hid behind the mask of a mean teacher, some hid behind the smiling face of a perfect, popular student, and others held everyone at distance with a veneer of cynicism and irony. Everyone had such masks, multiple facades that they would adapt and wear depending on the situation. Naoya didn’t believe this was a bad thing—it was a necessary skill for getting through life, after all.

“So I don’t think you’re a bad person,” he continued. “The way you act is just

another way of living. That's not a bad thing in the slightest."

"So why did you tell me off earlier then?" she asked.

"Well, I just figured it was a waste."

"What was?" Koyuki's voice was low and sad.

Naoya took her hand in his and clarified, "I thought it was a waste that even though you're such a good, hard-working person, you give yourself the short end of the stick. People always have the wrong impression of you."

"I'm not a good—" Koyuki muttered, struggling to make eye contact.

"Do bad people help out their classmates?" Naoya asked with a smile. "You really want to get along with others, don't you? If you continue to be honest with yourself and others, you're gonna net yourself so many friends that soon you won't know what to do with them all."

"I don't think there's anyone who wants to be my friend, though..."

"What d'you mean? I'm right here."

"You don't count. You're a weirdo," Koyuki spat out with a red face.

Naoya felt that he had spot on in his assessment, though, so he was going to support her and help her achieve just that.

"This isn't something that really changes overnight, but we can work on helping you articulate your feelings more starting now. I'll help you as much as you need," he told her gently.

"Sasahara..." Koyuki trailed off as she started at Naoya. It took her a few moments, but then she nodded in response. "Okay! I'll show them all! I'll be so honest! And I'll never be called 'The Queen of Thorns' ever again!"

"Yeah, that's what I like to hear!" he cheered.

He could tell she was serious about changing herself. When most people are confronted with their flaws, they choose to ignore them and carry on as they were. Koyuki wasn't like that. Soon, the day would arrive when that unbecoming nickname would no longer haunt her.

And as Naoya thought this, a realization came to him: *I really do like her.* He

could feel that deep within his heart. Naoya had always thought love was just something that would conveniently fall into his lap one day. It took him a while to realize that is exactly what had happened.

“Thanks, Sasahara,” Koyuki said.

“For what?”

“If it weren’t for you, I would’ve continued being the same person I am now, and I know I would’ve ended up regretting all of it later on. I want to let you know that I’m grateful for that.”

“Sure, but I haven’t really done anything,” he replied somewhat awkwardly. Despite his attempt at a natural smile, Naoya was still a bit bashful from his sudden realization.



“I just gave you the push you needed,” Naoya told her. “From now on, you’re gonna be the one who makes friends.”

“Friends, huh? I don’t know if I really can do it, though...” she whispered hesitantly.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. You don’t really need to *do* anything in particular, you know. Just be yourself.”

“Be myself? What kind of stuff should I do?” she asked.

“Like, uh...” he fumbled. It wasn’t like Naoya was drowning in friends himself—he wasn’t exactly an expert on the subject. “You could go to school together, eat together, go home together...”

“That sounds like some high level friend-ing... Sasahara? What’s wrong?” Koyuki asked while she tilted her head to the side in puzzlement.

Naoya had realized that he was basically describing what he and Koyuki had started doing today. *Meaning that we’re basically just friends*, he concluded mentally. Naoya had some female friends, so he knew that friendship between a man and woman was entirely possible. To put it another way, he had never had any other kind of relationship with a woman—in the past, whenever a girl had approached him, he’d always shut it down.

He liked spending time with Koyuki; he really did. *I like her, but in what way?* Was it love? Or was she nothing more than a friend? Naoya realized that he couldn’t tell exactly which one it was.

Chapter Three

Love's True Form

It was later that evening, just before twilight.

Naoya reached the shoe rack near the entrance of the school. He leaned against a shelf, sighing to himself, "Thank God it's finally over..."

"Hey, Naoya. Looks like we're both doing just peachy," a voice greeted him. It was Naoya's friend, Tatsumi Kouno.

They'd both bombed a quiz and had to take supplementary lessons as a result. Tatsumi was reaching for his shoes when he paused, as if something occurred to him. He spoke up, "Come to think of it, it's rare seeing you having to take supplementary lessons."

"I'm awful at math, man. You know this," Naoya replied.

"You're never *this* awful, though."

"Not usually, I guess," Naoya admitted. Although he didn't exactly want to toot his own horn or anything, he was quite skilled academically. It wasn't that he was incredibly intelligent; it was just that he was able to predict what teachers were planning to put on tests and stuff like that. He simply needed to do some last-minute studying beforehand, and everything would usually turn out fine.

"You've been staring into space a lot recently, my man. It's like you've got something on your mind. Mind me if I take a stab at what it is?" his friend asked.

"Be my guest."

"It's Shirogane, right?"

"You got me," Naoya shrugged limply.

"I've been dying to ask you about it, dude. Everyone's been talking about the gloomy-looking guy 'The Queen of Thorns' is falling all over," Tatsumi joked. He gave Naoya a playful shove before his face became somewhat serious all of a

sudden. “Still, I don’t really get it. What are you so worried about? What’s the big deal if you two are dating?”

“Well, she’s not really the problem,” Naoya answered hesitantly.

“And you are?”

Naoya heaved a heavy sigh in response. He was happy that Koyuki liked him—really. He was honored, even. The issue laid with him. “I don’t know, like, *how* I like her, if that makes sense,” he explained.

“It doesn’t really, to be honest,” his friend replied simply.

How exactly did he feel about her? How would he describe this affection—was it like family? A friend? Or possibly a lover? What did it really mean to “like” someone, anyway? Naoya knew that Koyuki held romantic feelings for him. So how did *he* feel? The question had occurred to him yesterday, and it only confounded him the more he thought on it.

“So yeah, that’s what’s been on my mind,” Naoya concluded. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“‘Cause I don’t get what the hell you’re saying. Even preschoolers can decide whether they like someone or not, man! You’re nearly a goddamn adult!” his friend cried incredulously.

“What d’you want me to do about it?! I’ve never been in a situation like this before!”

“Well yeah! You’ve always just shut that shit down in the past!”

“Uh, well... Yeah, I guess you’re right about that,” Naoya mumbled sheepishly.

Nothing could shake you to your core quite like the words of someone you’ve known your whole life. It was for a similar reason that he kept those who had approached him romantically in the past at arm’s length. And because he’d done that, he had never sorted out his own feelings toward such situations—in other words, the reason he was struggling was entirely his fault.

Tatsumi smiled broadly and slapped Naoya on the back again. This time, he did it rather roughly. “You’re so good at reading others, yet you don’t understand yourself at all! Haha. Man, I do *not* envy you!”

“Mind your damn business, okay?” Naoya grumbled.

“I’ve got a girlfriend, though. If I can’t give unsolicited love advice, then what can I do?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that.”

Although he often found it hard to believe, Tatsumi had a girlfriend he’d been seeing for over a year. It only made sense that he didn’t really relate to Naoya’s struggles.

“What does someone like Shirogane even see in you?” Tatsumi mused as he put his outdoor shoes on. He stepped toward the doors of the school before stopping. “Well, that aside, she does seem serious about this whole thing.”

“What d’you mean?” Naoya asked.

“Uh, that’s her over there, right?” Tatsumi asked as he pointed at the school’s main gate.

“What?!”

And sure enough, there she was. Most students had either gone home, or they were attending their various clubs. That left the main gate quite deserted, save for a lone girl who stood underneath the gate’s arch, staring quietly at her feet.

“Shirogane?!” Naoya shouted and began running in her direction before he knew what he was doing.

“Ah!” Koyuki gasped. When she saw him, her face lit up for the briefest of moments before her usual cool expression returned. “Fancy meeting you here, Sasahara. What a coincidence.”

She appeared tired, and there were scuff marks from her shoes on the ground where she’d been kicking pebbles around. She must have been waiting for him for quite a while.

“I told you my supplementary classes were gonna run long, didn’t I?” Naoya chided. “You should’ve gone home.”

“What? Did you seriously think I was waiting for you? Hah! Please. I was just studying in the library until now,” she scoffed, posing haughtily as usual.

Naoya didn't point it out this time, though. "Oh, sorry, my mistake. Anyway, I'm sorry I'm so late. I'll study extra hard, too, so I don't have to take any more lessons like this."

"Well, um, if you want to apologize that much... Whatever. I don't care," Koyuki answered in a quiet mumble. Her nose was slightly red, a telltale sign that she was embarrassed. Those little quirks—signs that were dead giveaways to what she really felt—were incredibly charming to him.

I really do like being with her. Normally, I get worn out from being around people, but she's the exact opposite. Is that really love, though? Naoya pondered. There were a few exceptions, of course—there were his parents, his boss, and—

"Oh look, it's Naoya," a bright female voice called out from behind and snapped him out of his mental listing.

Naoya turned around to figure out who had been calling out to him. The girl had burgundy hair that was pulled into a functional ponytail and long, thin legs. Her large eyes were slightly almond shaped. All of these traits combined to give her a rather sporty appearance.

Naoya smiled when he recognized who it was. "Hey, Yui! Club stuff all finished?"

"Nah, there was no club today. So why're you here so late—Whoa, is that Shirogane?!" the girl exclaimed. Her speech had been casual until she noticed Koyuki. "Why are you two together?! What the hell happened?!"

"Didn't I tell you? Some stuff happened, and we've been hanging out a lot recently," Naoya explained.

"A weirdo like you with her, eh? Okay. Stranger things have happened, I guess. Oh yeah, is Shirogane also heading home now?"

"I-I am," Koyuki nodded awkwardly. She seemed familiar with Yui, which made her even more awkward.

It suddenly occurred to Naoya why this may be. "Right, you guys are in the same class, aren't you, Yui?" he asked.

“Yep. We haven’t talked much, though,” Yui replied.

“Indeed...” Koyuki threw a prickly glance at Naoya in spite of her polite smile. “So are you and Sasahara friends?”

“Mm-hm, we’ve known each other for years,” Naoya replied.

“Yeah, since kindergarten, actually. As much as I try and get rid of him, haha,” Yui joked. The way the two of them bounced off each other was a testament to the many years they had been friends. Naoya had known Yui Natsume for over 10 years—so long that their respective families were both friends, and Naoya even ate at Yui’s house every once in a while. She was one of the only people Naoya could easily get along with.

“Oh wow. That’s great...” Koyuki said as her face hardened. Naoya felt as if there was now a wall between him and Koyuki that hadn’t been there before.

“Oh, but you don't gotta worry, Shirogane—she’s just a friend, so it’s not like u—”

“Shut up!” Koyuki shouted and covered his mouth with her hand. Everyone was shocked by her action, including Koyuki herself.

What? Did I read her wrong?! he questioned himself. Although he possessed such a useful ability, in the end, it was up to him to suss out the cause of said emotions. It was clear as day that Koyuki was jealous of Yui, so he had tried to nip it in the bud early on. He hadn’t expected her to react the way she had, and, to make matters worse, he was currently having difficulty reading her.

“Are you freaking clueless or what?! What if Natsume likes you, huh? She’d be so hurt by what you just said!” Koyuki protested.

“But she doesn’t like me, though!” he replied.

“You don’t know that for sure! Come on, Sasahara! You two are childhood friends!”

It seemed Naoya had been totally off the mark—he had expected Koyuki to see Yui as a rival, but it turned out the opposite had been true. *She got angry for Yui’s sake instead... That’s cute as hell.*

“Come here for a sec!” Koyuki exclaimed, yanking Naoya closer in an attempt

at getting some privacy. Yui was only about two meters away, though, so she could easily overhear everything if she wanted to.

“I can leave if you guys wanna talk,” Yui added.

“What are we fighting about, guys?” Tatsumi made his belated entrance.

Yui waved at him lightly and said, “Oh. Hey, Tatsumi. Hope the extra classes weren’t too bad. Was Naoya taking them too?”

“Sup. And yeah, it was a blast,” Tatsumi replied jokingly.

“Haha, sucks to be you.”

“Um, Sasahara, who is this?” Koyuki asked. Her anger had managed to subside somewhat with the new arrival.

After giving it some thought, Naoya found it a bit strange—she must’ve seen the two friends together before. Maybe she just didn’t remember.

“This is Tatsumi Kouno,” Naoya answered. “He’s from my class.”

“Oh, and he’s also my boyfriend slash childhood friend, I guess,” Yui explained.

“Nice to meet you, Shirogane,” Tatsumi greeted her.

“Nice to meet you to—wait! Boyfriend?!”

“Yeah. Look,” he said while linking arms with Yui.

“Get a room, you two. You’re freaking Shirogane out,” Naoya joked. He turned to a rather befuddled Koyuki and explained, “So yeah, us three are all childhood friends. These two are going out, and I’m basically the third wheel.”

“Hm. I see. Mhm,” Koyuki nodded multiple times, seemingly in deep thought as she stared at the couple.

“Are you feeling okay now?”

“I felt fine before. It’s none of my business what you choose to do with other girls. Why would I care? Don’t go around acting like I’m some jealous girlfriend—it’s disgusting,” she spat out. It appeared she was back to her usual self.

Naoya let out a sigh of relief. He was glad to have made it out of that

interaction without any misunderstandings.

“By the way, what are they doing?” Koyuki asked, pointing to Naoya’s friends.

The couple had, at some point, moved away from them and were having a covert conversation near the vending machines. They were obviously all too familiar with Naoya and his excellent hearing, so they chose a faraway spot. Naoya stared off in their direction, wondering what exactly they were talking about. Despite how far away they were, he could still catch snippets of their hushed discussion here and there.

“Those two are... Definitely...”

“But... seems like...”

“Oh, so...”

“Oh yeah... Nice, good idea. Let’s do that.”

“Yeah, let’s get ‘em.”

Koyuki, for her part, remained cool as ever. “She’s doing a hell of a lot better than you, isn’t she, Sasahara?” she remarked. “She’s the same year as me, and she already has a boyfriend. That’s pretty... amazing.”

The couple returned, all smiles. They showed no concern as Naoya glared at the two of them.

“Shirogane, you doing anything after this?” Yui, who appeared to be in good spirits, asked.

“Um, no. Why?”

“Great timing! It just so happens that I have four coupons for that crepe store in front of the station! You guys wanna tag along?”

Koyuki looked quite intimidated by her offer. She replied with great caution, “S-So you’re inviting me to hang out with you?”

“Yeah,” Yui affirmed. “If you can’t right now, that’s totally fine. I’ll just invite you some other time.”

Koyuki grew even more overwhelmed by Yui’s considerate accommodation.

Looks like she really wants to go, Naoya thought to himself. Yui knew that

Naoya always kept other girls at arm's length, so she was probably incredibly interested in this new female friend that Naoya was suddenly getting along with. Girls did tend to like talking about relationships and such, after all.

"Yeah, like, they have all these crazy ingredients," Yui enthusiastically continued. "You can get all kinds of stuff. Come on, Shirogane, it'll be fun!"

"Ummm..." Koyuki hesitated, withdrawing into her veritable shell more and more.

Naoya, yesterday's incident still fresh in his mind, knew he had to act quickly before the dreaded "Queen of Thorns" made her appearance

"Yeah, we can eat crepes and have girl talk!" Yui exclaimed cheerily.

"G-Girl talk?" Koyuki repeated the word quietly to herself as if digesting it. Suddenly, she snatched a coupon from Yui's hand. "I'll take you up on that! Let's have some girl talk!"

"Hell yeah! That's the spirit!"

"I don't really get the fascination with gossiping myself..." Naoya chimed in.

"Women, man..." Tatsumi grumbled.

The two exchanged tired looks while the two girls began hyping themselves up.

When they arrived at the crepe place, they were pleasantly surprised to find only a few other people there. Perhaps it was because it was getting somewhat late in the day, but they had thankfully managed to avoid the after-school rush hour.

Yui surveyed the menu outside the store with great scrutiny. "Last time, I had a strawberry crepe, so maybe this time, I'll go with something that has chocolate in it. What do you feel like having, Tatsumi?" she asked.

"I don't have your sweet tooth, so, uh, do they have any side dishes?"

"They have tuna salad and some other stuff... Oh! Says here that the staff recommend natto and daikon radish! Should I get that?"

"Nah, that sounds too heavy right now. Just gimme some rice."

The couple were deciding on their crepes together, as expected. Naoya and Koyuki stood awkwardly behind them, watching the scene unfold.

“Sorry about this, Shirogane. You’re not bored or anything, are you?” Naoya asked.

“No, not at all. I was free today, so I don’t mind this too much,” Koyuki demurred. In spite of her placatations, her face was a mess of anxiety. “It’s just... I haven’t really done this kind of thing before, so I’m a little nervous.”

“Oh yeah, the whole ‘not having any friends’ thing.”

“That’s a pretty dickish way to put it, but you’re not wrong,” Koyuki mumbled. She looked at Naoya and sighed. “I’ve never been to a crepe store before *or* experienced ‘girl talk’ before, so... I don’t even know if I can do this.”

“It hasn’t even started yet. No need to get so worked up about it now,” he tried to reassure her.

Shirogane is being pretty nice today, he noted. It wasn’t just with him either—she had managed to reign herself in with Yui and Tatsumi, too. *She must be grateful that they invited her here... Or...* Another possibility occurred to Naoya. He gulped before asking, “You aren’t... worried because of everything I said yesterday, right?”

“What are you rambling on about? The crap we talk about goes in one ear and out the other—I forget most of it the next day. What, do you think I obsess over everything we talk about? Gross. But, yeah, you’re right,” Koyuki mumbled the last part, her eyes dropping to the ground. “I’ve always wanted to do stuff like this. I mean, I don’t really like gossiping, but I like sweet food, and...”



“I’m glad I didn’t chicken out. And, um, that’s not because of you, or anything, but... Thank you, I guess,” Koyuki earnestly fumbled over her words. When she was met with silence, her head snapped up. “Wh-What?! Did I say something weird?!”

“No, it’s just...” Naoya covered his mouth and spoke in a strained tone. “You’re really... you know, and I don’t know how to deal with it sometimes. Don’t worry about it.”

“Quit being so vague. That’s only gonna make me worry more,” Koyuki chided him. Her eyebrows were knitted in confusion.

This gesture in particular was too cute for Naoya to handle, and he felt his heart skip a beat. It made him want to pat her on the head and look after her, almost like a caretaker or a parent would. Well, that just added another option to the list of possible ways he liked her. He still didn’t know whether he liked her *like that*, but what he did know was he really enjoyed her company. Was it as a friend, a lover, or as a guardian, though? *Why can’t I figure this out?*

Naoya’s troubles followed him into the store. While everyone around him spoke and joked in high spirits, he alone sat in silence. Koyuki sat next to Naoya, and Yui and Tatsumi sat on the other side of the table. Koyuki and Yui had begun their girl talk, and it appeared to be going swimmingly despite Koyuki’s earlier reservations.

“Sasahara was the reason you two started going out?! No way!” Koyuki squealed.

“Yeah. He doesn’t exactly look like a little cupid, does he?” Yui replied.

“No, not at all. How did it all happen?”

“It’s a long story,” Yui explained with a glance at Naoya. She sighed and continued, “Long story short: it was back when we were about to graduate middle school, I think. We were all walking home together when he suddenly stopped and was like, ‘So when are you two gonna start dating?’”

“So he had as much tact back then as he does now, huh?”

“Yep. I wanted to curl up and die,” Tatsumi grumbled as he took a large bite

of his crepe.

Naoya was brought out of his own head by the three sets of eyes staring at him. “Uh, well, I thought it fit the circumstances at the time fine,” he began to explain.

They’d known each other since kindergarten, and it was obvious that Yui and Tatsumi had liked each other—it was just that neither of them had acted on it. Naoya had also been anxious that they’d end up drifting apart once they graduated. They were all going to the same school, but Tatsumi and Yui were both social butterflies. No doubt they would soon make plenty of friends at their new school, or so Naoya had told himself. If he didn’t act soon, it was possible they would never get the chance to get together. Sure, the couple was awkward about it at first, but look how it’d turned out—everything turned out well in the end, right?

Naoya smiled smugly, “Quite the matchmaker, aren’t I?”

“I dunno about that, but there definitely wasn’t as much drama as I was expecting,” Koyuki said with a look of dissatisfaction and another bite of her crepe. She obviously wasn’t used to eating them, as small crumbs would be left on the tip of her nose every time she took a bite. It was cute, however. Really cute.

“Enough about us, though. I wanna hear about you two, Shirogane,” Yui spoke up.

“Us?” Koyuki asked hesitantly.

“Yep! So—what do you like about our little Naoya?”

Koyuki jumped up and accidentally crushed her crepe slightly, her face redder than the strawberry she was eating. She quickly caught herself and attempted to flash a smile.

“Haha. Nice joke. Naoya’s a loser. There’s nothing likeable about him,” she disparaged in an attempt at an unconcerned voice, gesturing toward Naoya with a tilt of her chin. “I *am* in the middle of trying to make him fall for me—that much is true. Doesn’t mean I like him, though.”

“Oh. Okay, then. Yeah, I figured you didn’t like him,” Yui concluded with a

nod.

“Glad to hear it—wait, what?” Koyuki’s eyes shot open.

Yui continued casually, “I mean, Naoya always runs his mouth and says whatever’s on his mind at the worst times. Plus, he’s not much to look at. I just didn’t see someone like *him* and a total catch like *you* being a good match, Shirogane.”

“Jesus, Yui. The man’s right there,” Tatsumi scolded her.

“Yeah, please don’t be... Please don’t say that about him,” Koyuki spoke in a small voice as she glanced at Naoya. “He’s not really as bad as you make him out to be. He’s helped me out a lot, and I can be myself around him, a-and he’s really kind. So I don’t think it would be a bad match... Maybe.”

If her plan was to come off as adorable as possible, then she had succeeded with flying colors. Tatsumi and Yui hadn’t expected a response like that—hell, not even Naoya had—and they all sat in stupefied silence.

The long and rather awkward silence was broken when Koyuki shouted, “But I don’t like him or anything! Really!”

“Oh. Okay, then. My bad, Shirogane. I get it now,” Yui reassured her.

Koyuki took an awkward bite of her crepe in response. Naoya suddenly felt apologetic toward her—she was being much more honest with her feelings than Naoya was.

“Yeeep. I *toootally* get it now. Right, Tatsumi?” Yui continued in a mischievous tone.

“Sure do,” he replied. The couple shared the ominous exchange with equally ominous smiles on their faces. Naoya was too caught up in his own head to dedicate any significant thought to their behavior, however.

“Your crepe looks great by the way, Naoya,” Yui spoke up.

Naoya peered down at his crepe—he’d ordered a mix with red beans and matcha ice cream. “Yeah, it’s pretty good, I guess,” he surmised. He assumed that she wanted some of his since it was slightly less sweet than what she’d ordered.

Sure enough, his friend asked, “Could I just have a little bite? Pretty please?”

“Uh, no. You don’t do ‘little bites.’ I’ve known you long enough to know that.”

“Come *oon*,” she pleaded.

“No. Take some of Tatsumi’s.”

“I don’t like natto, thouuugh...”

“Speaking of—why the hell did you get natto, Tatsumi?” he turned to his other friend and asked.

“It’s better than you’d think, actually,” Tatsumi answered. He seemed pleased with his strange order—he’d always done things his own way.

Yui decided to press further. “Please, Naoya. It’ll literally just be one small bite.”

“Ugh, fine. Here.”

“Yaaaay!” Yui cheered. She leaned over and bit into Naoya’s crepe. They had been good friends for so long that they no longer cared about frivolous issues like indirect kisses anymore. Naoya looked at his crepe, which had diminished significantly, and sighed.

“Give me some, too!” Koyuki exclaimed loudly beside him.

Naoya looked at her incredulously. It was obvious that, rather than wanting some of his crepe, she simply wanted to get close to him like Yui had. Either way, it was going to end in him losing more of his delicious snack. Although he had no reason to deny her, he was stopped by an unusual feeling. His heart thumped loudly in his chest, he could feel his face turning red, and his mouth grew dry. Soon, he found it was difficult to speak. “S-Sure. Here,” he managed to sputter.

“Okay,” Koyuki replied. She awkwardly leaned in, tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, and took a modest bite from the edge of the crepe. Naoya forgot to breathe through the entire duration of the interaction.

“Thanks. It’s quite tasty,” she surmised. Her lips were glossy from the leftover cream, and Naoya found himself unable to remove his eyes from her. Koyuki noticed his gaze and asked with genuine remorse, “What? Did I take too

much?”

Why didn't I feel anything when it was Yui doing it? This is... kinda amazing. Naoya didn't quite know what his turbulent feelings entailed. In fact, his mind had gone completely blank, and he was unable to think clearly.

Tatsumi noticed Naoya's brain grinding to a halt and took it as an opportunity to strike. “Haha, guess you're one of us now—the blessed few,” he goaded. “Lucky you, getting to flirt with a cute girl and shit. If Yui wasn't here right now, I might've tried to get cozy with her myself.”

“Wow, Tatsumi—if we lived together and had a couch, you'd be sleeping on it tonight. She *is* pretty cute, though. I'm so jealous of your skin, Shirogane...” Yui remarked.

“Yeah. She's got a great body, and she's smart to boot. She's the whole package—you don't see girls like her every day,” Tatsumi added.

“I-I'm not...” Koyuki floundered. It was pretty evident that she was not used to people complimenting her, as she became embarrassed again.

Naoya noticed that another strange feeling had started to well up inside his chest. *Yui's fine and all, but I dunno how I feel about Tatsumi talking to her like that.* Although he knew that they were both just giving her genuine compliments, it didn't prevent a wave of irritation from washing over him. Even worse, he couldn't place his finger on *why* he felt this anger toward his friend.

Naoya shot Tatsumi a glare, and he seemed to notice it. Instead of backing off, however, he chose to double down on the false flirtation. “You're at the top of our year, right, Shirogane? How about we study together sometime?”

“What?” Naoya and Koyuki both blurted out at the same time. Whereas Koyuki's voice held a great deal of confusion, Naoya's was significantly more outraged. Koyuki appeared to be at a loss.

“Yeah,” Tatsumi continued with his friendly prodding. “I just failed our math test *hard*. I was thinking I'm gonna try and study harder. You crushed it, didn't you?”

“I mean, I did okay,” she replied.

“So yeah, how about it? You should be my teacher, Shirogane. I’ll even treat you the next time we get crepes.”

“Um...”

“It can be something else, too. What d’you like, Shirogane? Tell me. I’ll get you anything you want,” he offered, leaning forward slightly. It was as though he was genuinely trying to pick her up, and Koyuki was at a complete loss on how to react. His real girlfriend, for her part, paid no attention—she simply sat next to him and took bites out of her crepe. Tatsumi reached forward, grabbed Koyuki’s hand, and said, “Say, how about tomorrow we—”

“Fuck off,” Naoya snapped, staring daggers at Tatsumi. “You don’t get to go anywhere near her.”

“Well, well, well.” Tatsumi smiled so casually that it was as if his friend hadn’t just freaked out on him.

Koyuki tilted her head to the side, entirely unsure what to make of the situation. “What’s up, Naoya? Did something make you mad?”

“Nah, not really mad or anything,” Naoya mumbled as his actions slowly dawned on him. He fell deep into thought, taking small nibbles off his crepe. “I’ve felt weird for a few minutes now...”

“Weird how?” Tatsumi asked.

“Well, I thought nothing of it when Yui had some of my crepe, but my heart felt really weird when it was Shirogane. And when you were being all creepy with her, it kinda annoyed me. What the heck’s wrong with me?”

Koyuki decided this was prime time to jump in. “Well, maybe it’s...” she suggested with an audible gulp, staring seriously into his eyes. “You might have a cold, Sasahara. That can make your stomach feel weird and give you all sorts of strange symptoms.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll take my temperature when I get home, I guess,” he agreed.

“What the fuck, you two?!” Tatsumi shouted. “I set him up perfectly and everything. What more could I have done?!”

“It’s okay, Tatsumi. We all know Naoya’s an idiot when it comes to himself,”

Yui assured him.

“Stop talking like I’m not here, you two,” Naoya complained, turning a suspicious gaze upon his two friends.

Yui spoke up in an exasperated voice, like she was admonishing a child, “So you don’t care when it’s other girls, but when another guy gets in Shirogane’s business, it bothers you. *Jeez*, I wonder what *that* could mean.”

“Yeah, I have a cold, or... *Oh*,” Naoya stated, finally realizing what they’d been doing. “So that’s what’s happening, huh?”

“Looks like it, Naoya,” Yui affirmed.

“Took you long enough, numbnuts,” Tatsumi added sarcastically.

“Oh wow...” Naoya mumbled. He looked quite surprised.

Koyuki looked to be the only one among them who wasn’t on the same wavelength. She knitted her eyebrows and cocked her head.

Naoya turned to her with a serious expression and declared, “Shirogane. I don’t think a cold’s the issue.”

“Then what’s the matter?” she asked.

“I think I like you.”

“Well, that would explain everything th—WHAT?!” Koyuki had tried to play it cool, but couldn’t quell her sudden outburst.

It didn’t matter how little experience Naoya had in love—now he had an answer for the bizarre sensations. He just *knew*. He continued, “I’ve been worried for a while now about how I feel about you. I knew I liked you, but I wasn’t sure in what way. But now I know—I like you romantically, Shirogane! There’s no other explanation!”

“There’re people here, you moron! Shut up!” she screamed, garnering more attention from the other patrons than Naoya had.

Tatsumi gave Naoya a lopsided smile and noted, “It’s always all or nothing with you, isn’t it?”

“Love makes people crazy, Tatsumi,” Yui followed up without missing a beat.

Naoya had more important things to deal with than to respond to their jabs. He asked, “You said you’d make me fall for you, right, Shirogane?”

“Um, I-I did, but...” she trailed off hesitantly.

“You said you’d make me confess to you, yeah?”

“N-No way!”

“Yes way,” Naoya affirmed with a deep nod. “Shirogane! Do you wanna go out wi—Hey! Shirogane?!”

As Naoya had tried to confess, Koyuki had bolted up and began dashing for the door. “I can’t deal with this right now! Not here!” she cried.

She managed to make it a few meters before she tripped over a chair and collapsed in a heap.

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“I can walk by myself, you know,” Koyuki grumbled.

“This is my fault, so just let me help you out, all right?” Naoya replied. He walked slowly as he carried Koyuki on his back through the dimming evening city.

After Koyuki’s accident, Naoya and Koyuki had headed back to school—they had parted ways with Tatsumi and Yui at the crepe store. Although the couple had both been worried about Koyuki, they had left the responsibility of dealing with the situation in Naoya’s hands for some reason. At the infirmary, the nurse had informed them that Koyuki had lightly sprained her leg and that she would need to stay off it for about a day. She’d initially refused the idea of being carried around when Naoya had volunteered, but she quickly surrendered after trying to walk by herself for a few feet.

Naoya could tell that Koyuki was being careful not to hurt him with her arms wrapped around his neck, and he appreciated her concern. While he carried her on his back, Yui’s parting words churned through his mind endlessly: *“Maybe next time, take things a bit slower, Naoya!”*

“Um, I’m sorry about earlier. I was too forward,” he apologized.

“Way too forward. Now I can’t go to that store for a while,” Koyuki sulked.

After a moment of silence, she fidgeted and asked quietly, “Were you serious about what you said earlier?”

“I was. I like you romantically,” he stated.

“*Ugggh*, stop saying it like that...” she complained. Still, Naoya could feel her racing heartbeat and her erratic breaths directly on his back. “But do you, like, *really* like me?”

“What?” he asked. He hadn’t expected that question.

“I mean, we’ve barely just gotten to know each other. There’s gotta be some misunderstanding, or you’re just joking... right?” Her voice trembled as she spoke. He couldn’t see her properly, but the image of her face scrunched in embarrassment rose to his mind. “I want to believe you... but I can’t.”

“Okay,” he replied after a pause.

Although he had tried to sound cool and collected, he couldn’t deny the sensibility in her words, nor the sense of shock he’d felt when he’d heard them. *It only makes sense that confessing to someone so quickly would only freak them out...*

It was like petting a stray cat before it had gotten used to you. In the end, acting rashly only trampled a budding sense of trust. “I honestly do like you a lot,” he insisted. “I’ll just have to make you believe me.”

“Do whatever you want. I don’t care. You’re a weirdo anyway,” she replied. Naoya pretended to not hear her sniffing to herself.

Guess she was being serious about wanting to believe me, but not being able to. No need to panic, though—I’ll start taking things slow and steady, he assured himself. The first stop was already complete: he now understood how he felt. But the real battle had only just begun.

He continued with a light tone to his voice, “But if I’m ever convinced that I’ve gotten it across, I’m gonna confess right there on the spot. Might wanna start thinking about your answer right now.”

“No pressure, then... What are you gonna do if I reject you?” she asked hesitantly.

“I’ll just confess again.”

“I was worried you’d say that. You’re *that* kind of idiot,” she muttered with a tired sigh. Life quickly returned to her voice, however, and she said, “If you’re gonna insist on confessing, it’s all gonna be on you. Okay?”

“Got it. I’m already working on my finest lines for when it goes down,” he replied.

“Don’t work too hard—if you make them too cringey, I’ll die of embarrassment.”

“I feel like when it comes to stuff like this, you gotta either go big or go home. Oh yeah, by the way—I work at a second-hand book store. I could probably afford a ring or something with about 3 months of my pay. D’you want me to go for that, or nah?”

“Jeez, have you ever heard of walking before you can run?! I don’t need anything like that yet!” she shouted.

“‘Yet’? Okay, you’re the boss,” Naoya backed off, glad that she didn’t notice her Freudian slip.

They eventually arrived at a residential area. As Naoya navigated down the streets, he soon reached a particularly quiet neighborhood. That was when Koyuki told Naoya to stop. When he took a moment to take a good look around, he realized he was standing outside of a formidable Western-style house enclosed by large walls.

“This your house, Shirogane? It’s massive,” he said, amazed.

“What? I think it’s about normal,” she waved him off.

It was basically a palace in Naoya’s eyes. When they headed inside, Naoya was greeted by tall ceilings and walls fully furnished with elaborate and expensive-looking paintings. Naoya placed Koyuki gingerly down near the entryway.

“Thanks for bringing me home. Do you maybe want to come in?” she ventured nervously.

“Not today. Thanks for the offer, though.”

“O-Okay then,” she said.

Naoya realized he was disappointing her—and men everywhere, for that matter—by not accepting the beautiful girl's invitation into her home. “Your parents aren’t home, right? I’ll wait until they’re back. That way, I can come with gifts and stuff and introduce myself properly,” he explained.

“I wanna ask how you knew how my parents aren’t home, or why you think you need to be so formal with them, but I doubt that’ll go anywhere,” she grumbled. She seemed to be learning to read Naoya by now, too—at least to a certain extent. She sighed, then looked at Naoya with a slight blush tinting her face. “Yeah, it is pretty late. I guess I’ll see you... next time?”

“Yep. I’m looking forward to it. Bye. Mind the leg,” he replied, ready to leave.

“W-Wait a sec,” she spoke up.

Naoya turned back and saw Koyuki digging through her school bag. When she found what she had been searching for—a small notebook—she handed it over to Naoya. “You might not need this, but, uh, take it. They’re the notes I made for that last math test. They might help,” she explained.

“Whoa, really?! Are you sure?!” Naoya exclaimed. He accepted the notebook and began flipping through its contents. Important points were underlined neatly with colored pens, and instructions for calculations were methodically written in sequence. It looked more helpful than most textbooks. There were over 10 pages of notes, and Naoya found himself at a loss for words.

Koyuki appeared concerned at his silence. “Sorry if this was rude of me. I just figured you’d want it. I wanted to give it to you at the school gate, but we had to go get crepes, and I ended up forgetting. Plus...” she trailed off as she stared at Naoya. “What?”

“Nah, it’s just...” Naoya mumbled. He found his hand rising to cover his mouth, but it did little to hide his growing smile. “Are you sure I can’t just confess to you right now?”

“What?! You said you were gonna look for a better time, right?!” she yelped.

“But I already really, *really* like you,” he said earnestly and without a hint of embarrassment. A thought had occurred to him—when they had met at school

earlier, she had said she'd been studying in the library. She must have been making the notes then, just for Naoya. "You're already wife material. Come on, le—"

"Shut up! And get out!" Koyuki screeched. She tore the notebook out of Naoya's hands and began beating him over the head with it, unrelenting until she had driven him out of the house. And with that, she tossed the notebook out and slammed the door behind him.

Despite her harsh actions, he quickly received a text message. "If you don't get something, ask me anytime. Later," it stated.

Naoya alternated glances between the notebook and his phone screen. Then, he looked up toward the heavens and declared, "Yep, I'm in love."

It had certainly taken him a while to figure out—so long, in fact, that the affection he had bottled up for her threatened to gush forth at any moment like a broken dam.

He felt a smile rise to his lips that he had some suspicions might never disappear. While he returned home, he mumbled lovesick nothings out loud to himself. "I need to be careful. I need to wait until she's ready... But I wanna confess *nooow*..."

Twilight was being ushered in, and the deep crimson hues of early evening were slowly replaced by shades of indigo. The changes in the sky might have seemed melancholic to someone who was in bad spirits, but Naoya was unflappable. He barely paid attention to his surroundings as he practically skipped his way home.

Suddenly, he sensed a pair of eyes on his back and whirled around. There was no one there, though he felt as though the presence had come from the direction of Koyuki's house. "Must've been my imagination," he mumbled to himself. He turned on his heel and resumed the trek home, albeit slightly faster than he had before.

The truth of what Naoya had sensed would take a few days to come to light, and it would all start with a letter left in his shoe self.

Chapter Four

The (Supervised) First Date

It was the next morning when Naoya noticed the mysterious item in his shoe shelf.

“Hm?” Naoya blurted out, perplexed.

“What?!” Koyuki shouted, equally as perplexed but much louder.

The object of their confusion was a letter that was sealed with a heart and addressed to Naoya. The handwriting on the envelope was quite rigid, but still unmistakably feminine. He opened the envelope and found a single page with only a few lines written on it.

To Naoya Sasahara,

I've liked you for a long time, and I'd like to hear your response. I'll be waiting for you on the roof after school today.

Koyuki was wide eyed as she marveled, “I didn’t realize people still did this kinda thing, much less to someone like *you*. I guess it’s safe to assume they’re as much of a loser as you, whoever they are. Are you planning on going?”

“Yeah, probably. They took the time to deliver a letter, after all,” he replied.

“Oh... Okay, then,” Koyuki pouted and turned away from Naoya. She did a rather bad job of hiding her displeasure. “And here he was spouting all this crap about liking me. *Hmph*, I guess that’s just the kind of guy he is. Well, what do I care? It’s got nothing to do with me. I hope those two freaks have a long, happy life with all their little freak spawn...”

Koyuki’s eyes were pointed firmly at the ground, preventing Naoya from getting a good look at her face. But judging by the quiver in her voice, she was moments away from breaking into tears. He knew he had to intervene soon, so he quickly reassured her, “Whoa, whoa. Slow down. I am going—going to turn her down.”

“*Hmph*, so you do love he—wait, you’re going to reject her? Why?!”

“Isn’t that obvious?” Naoya said with a shrug. The look on Koyuki’s face seemed to say that it *wasn’t* obvious in the slightest. Naoya placed his hands firmly on her shoulders and spoke seriously, “You’re the one I like. *You*. So you don’t have to go worrying about any other girls, okay?”

“But what if she’s cute? And nice? And isn’t a burden like me?” she asked.

“What are you talking about? *You’re* cute and nice. And if there really was anyone like that, I don’t think I could go out with them anyways,” he replied earnestly.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re already so adorable that it basically gives me diabetes. If there really was someone cuter, chances are I’d die of a heart attack.”

“*Hmph*, you talk a big game,” Koyuki sniffed. She flicked her hair back and put on her best impression of a composed expression. She poked Naoya’s nose and added, “Still, I appreciate that. But if I ever see your eyes wander, then we’re done.”

“Of course, of course. I promise that won’t happen,” Naoya said with a nod to display his conviction.

He could tell she believed him in that moment, and a wave of relief washed over him. In a sense, he was almost happy—he was very aware of the tempest of emotions, both positive and negative, that abounded when you cared deeply about someone. Her little display had just shown him that she really did have such feelings toward him. *I never knew jealousy could be so cute. Wow*, he marveled to himself. He was so giddy, in fact, that he had totally forgotten that they were right at the school’s entrance, and that their exchange had drawn in a large audience.

“Jeez, they’re going at it this early in the morning?”

“Just don’t make any eye contact.”

Yui and Tatsumi were among the crowd, watching from a distance. They were both certain that the awkward lovebirds would soon be the talk of the school.

Koyuki, for her part, appeared oblivious to the attention they were receiving,

as well. She plucked the letter from Naoya's hands and examined it thoroughly. "Obviously you're going to turn her down, but you need to go about this the right way. It sounds like she likes you *a lot*, so you've gotta let her down easy."

"Yeah, even I know that much," Naoya grumbled while he retrieved the letter and looked it over again. He was aware it must have taken the writer a great deal of courage to send this to him, but he couldn't shake off the feeling that something wasn't quite right—the prevailing sensation he got from the letter was that of unease. "You know, I don't think this is an actual love letter..."

"What? If that's not a love letter, then what else could it be?" Koyuki asked as she tilted her head to the side in confusion.

Naoya didn't reply—instead, he just gave her an enigmatic smile. Either way, he'd find out the truth of the matter once classes were over.

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Ootsuki High was a fairly easy-going school—there were innumerable clubs and societies, and rooms were exceedingly easy to borrow. After school, the grounds were filled with the jovial sounds of students talking and laughing well into the evening. The school roof, with its sprawling view of the scenic town, was a particularly popular spot. That was why Naoya was quite surprised when he opened the door to the roof and found only one other student there.

"Hey. Are you the one who sent the letter?" he greeted her.

"Ah, y-yes, that's me," the girl stuttered and gave Naoya a slight bow. She was quite petite in stature and appeared to be a first year student. Other than that, Naoya couldn't make out many details—she was wearing a large parka over her uniform, the hood of which was pulled down to conceal her face. He didn't recognize her voice either. He got the feeling that he might have passed her in the halls at some point, but this was definitely their first time meeting properly.

"Th-Thank you for coming. There's, um, something I want to ask you..." the girl stuttered and folded her arms awkwardly across her chest as she spoke. She was the textbook definition of anxiety. Most would feel compelled to cut in, but Naoya patiently waited for her to continue. After a long moment, she managed to summon her courage. "I like you! I've liked you since the first time I saw you. If it's all right with you... would you go out with me?!"

“Thank you, but I can’t go out with you. There’s already someone else I like,” Naoya explained with a kind smile and a shake of his head.

“No way! What kind of person are they?! I’m sure if I really tried, I could be better than them, so—!”

“I’m sorry, but there’s nothing you can do,” Naoya cut her off. The girl’s voice had *sounded* incredibly pained by his response, but something was off. Naoya had rejected several girls in the past, and he knew it was always a painful experience for both parties. This time, however, he hadn’t felt anything remotely like that despite what she was saying. “You don’t really like me, do you?”

“Wha?” she sputtered.

“You don’t like me. If anything, I’d say hating me would be closer to the truth. Right?” he asked.

The girl played with her hands while she stood there in silence. They remained that way for a while, with the jubilant voices of other students in the fields below rising to fill the hush. A cold gust blew through the roof.

Finally, the girl’s hands fell to her sides. “How could you tell?” she asked in a monotone. The lovesick girl who had been standing there just moments before had completely vanished.

Naoya wasn’t all that surprised, though. “Hmm, I guess it was the handwriting that gave it away,” he replied. Most people would be surprised by how much you can tell from someone’s handwriting—such as the type of person who wrote the text, or what sort of mental state they were in. And as for the letter he’d received, all Naoya could glean from the handwriting was open hostility. “And now that I’ve met you, it’s obvious that you don’t actually like me. You were just testing me.”

“Correct,” the girl nodded calmly and put a hand to her chin. “You saw through my deception, and you dealt with a sudden love letter quickly and cleanly. You pass the test.”

“Oh yeah, I wanted to ask you something,” Naoya added.

“What?”

“You wouldn’t happen to be Shirogane—”

Just then, the door to the roof slammed open, and a loud voice cried out, “Sakuya?!” Koyuki rushed toward them, eyes agog as she stared at the girl standing across from Naoya.

Naoya smiled at her. “Ah, I knew you couldn’t resist coming to see who it was. I told her ‘no,’ like I said I would.”

“Wha?! I just came to make sure you weren’t about to upset a first year! More importantly—!” she cut herself off to point at the girl. “Sakuya was the mysterious sender?!”

“Guilty as charged,” the girl stated cleanly as she lifted her hood.

“I knew it. You are Shirogane’s little sister. You’re quite pretty, just like your big sister,” Naoya added.

“I get that a lot,” Sakuya answered in a disinterested tone. She had an expressionless face and a voice to match.



Naoya had heard from Koyuki that she had a little sister and that they even looked and sounded similar. That was why Naoya was nowhere near as surprised as Koyuki seemed to be.

“Nice to meet you, Sasahara. My name is Sakuya Shirogane—Koyuki Shirogane’s younger sister,” she greeted Naoya.

“Nice to meet you, too. Back to our previous topic, though,” Naoya said. He was curious about what she had meant when she said he had passed a test of some kind.

Unfortunately, he was interrupted by Koyuki. “Oh no you don’t!” she shouted as she grabbed Naoya’s arm and yanked him closer to her—this made him keenly aware he was pressing up against her breasts. “You really need to check your taste in men, Sakuya,” she addressed her younger sister. “If you fall for a creepy moron like this guy, it’ll only end badly for you. Seriously—I suggest you reconsider.”

“What kind of guy do you think I am?” Naoya protested.

Since Koyuki had only just arrived, she hadn’t heard what Naoya and Sakuya had been talking about. He could tell that her warning was half out of jealousy and half out of genuine concern for her sister. *Damn, I wanted at least 70 percent jealousy*, Naoya complained to himself.

Sakuya shook her head and assured her sister, “Don’t worry. I don’t hold any amorous feelings toward him. I don’t even know what kind of person he is, really.”

“Wha? Then what was up with that letter?” Koyuki asked.

“It’s simple,” Sakuya stated as she stared intently at Naoya. Even through her glasses, Naoya could sense her eyes were locked directly on him. They were like a calm ocean—still, he also noted a sharp wariness lurking beneath the surface. “I just wanted to see what the guy who captured your heart was like—that’s all. I apologize for going about it in such a surreptitious way.”

“It’s fine. That letter made sure you weren’t being ‘surreptitious’ at all,” Naoya answered.

“Oh, I see the—no, wait a second!” Koyuki cried. She cleared her throat and then continued in a haughty tone, “You seem to be misunderstanding the situation, Sakuya. Sasahara is nothing more than a friend. There’s no way that I’d ever fall for him.”

“What? But you talk to me and Gizzard about him all the time at home,” Sakuya said in a confused tone.

“Wasn’t Gizzard your cat?” Naoya added.

“Yes. Koyuki won’t stop picking our cat up and talking to it. She blathers on about how you complimented her hair, how you look dashing from the side, and things like that. The cat doesn’t seem to enjoy it, I feel,” Sakuya explained.

“What do you mean?! Gizzard loves hearing about it!” Koyuki cried, her face rapidly turning crimson.

Maybe she had let her guard down because her sister was there, but she normally would not have let such information slip. Based on her expression, Naoya could tell that her younger sister had been telling the truth—she really did talk about him to her cat. He was exceedingly interested in the juicy details, but he figured that another line of questioning was more appropriate right now.

“So I get wanting to scope out the guy your sister’s been talking about, but be honest... How am I doing so far?” he asked Sakuya.

“You get a passing mark. For now,” Sakuya replied curtly. “You get points for ignoring the eager first year and maintaining focus on the main heroine. Most romcom protagonists can’t even make it that far. Well done.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, though it does kinda sound like an Amazine review of some light novel...”

“So, Sasahara—what are your thoughts on my sister?” Sakuya asked.

“Uh, she’s cute, and she’s fun to watch, and, uh...” he floundered.

“Yes, she is quite cute, isn’t she? We can agree on that,” Sakuya added.

“R-Really? Haha, looks like you two aren’t as tasteless as I thought. Haha,” Koyuki butted in, thrusting her chest out with false pride.

Sakuya only spared her a sideways glance before she continued, “If you can

tell how cute she is, then you must also be able to tell that she's quite... *simple.*"

"Yeah..." Naoya agreed.

"Hey!" Koyuki exclaimed, baring her teeth like an angry tiger.

Naoya turned to her and smiled apologetically. "Sorry, sorry—that might be a bit far. You're just kinda *pure*, you know? You take everything at face value and worry about others' feelings a lot. Not saying that's a bad thing, though."

"I don't think... Well, I can't say I *never* do anything like that," Koyuki admitted, looking somewhat displeased about her agreement.

Sakuya looked at her sister, sighed, and turned to face Naoya. "Everyone thinks my sister is some sharp-tongued, ice-in-her-veins character. But I knew the day would come where a malicious man would notice that she's actually a sweet, pure girl and take advantage of her."

"You've got a funny way of showing it, but I guess you do really care about her," Naoya concluded. Clearly, Sakuya had been worried about her sister's wellbeing.

Koyuki was still sulking by herself, but neither Sakuya nor Naoya paid her much attention.

"So you just said I passed 'for now,'" Naoya added. "That means you still don't trust me."

Sakuya nodded with conviction and answered, "Exactly." Behind her muted expression, he noted a glint of fire dancing in her eyes. "My sister likes you, but what about you? If you plan to play around with her feelings and then cast her aside at the drop of a hat, I will do everything in my power to remove you from our lives instantly."

"Sakuya! You can't say that!" Koyuki shouted.

Sakuya continued to stare Naoya down. *She really does care about Shirogane*, he recognized. It made sense, really; Naoya hadn't even known Koyuki for a month yet. Sakuya wanted to know if his feelings were the real deal—would he abandon ship when placed under the smallest amount of pressure? Naturally,

he had no intentions of doing so. All that was left was ensuring that her sister knew this, as well.

Naoya faced Sakuya and stated with a serious expression, “I understand where you’re coming from, Sakuya, so I’ve got something important to tell you.”

“What, exactly?”

“I like Shirogane!” he declared loudly.

Koyuki’s voice caught in her throat, producing a sort of bizarre, strangled yelp, and Sakuya’s eyes shot wide open. Naoya wryly noted to himself that these sisters were apparently very expressive with their eyes.

Naoya continued, “I like all of her. I like it when she hides her feelings and when she overthinks things. I like all of her imperfections.”

The more he spoke, the more certain he became—he really *did* like her. He’d known this for a few days already, but now he was certain that this feeling would not change. He looked into Sakuya’s eyes and declared, “So regardless of what you think, and no matter how much you try to stop it, I’m not giving up on Shirogane.”

“Hm. Okay then,” Sakuya’s response was characteristically monotone. Her facial expression hadn’t changed at all, but Naoya was certain something in her eyes had. She thought for a while, then continued, “Fine, I’ll give you one chance.”

“One chance?”

“One chance to show me your resolve is genuine,” she announced, thrusting her index finger at Naoya like a spear raised to declare war. “You’re going to take my sister on a date. If I think you suit each other, I’ll recognize your relationship.”

“A date?!” Koyuki shouted. Again.

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It was Sunday, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Naoya was waiting outside a local shopping mall, absentmindedly enjoying the pleasant weather.

“I’m here,” a voice from right behind him announced, snapping him out of his reverie.

“Agh!” He yelled. He whipped around and found Sakuya standing there. “Oh, it’s just you, Sakuya. You scared the crap out of me. Don’t do that, please.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve gotten into the habit of walking silently,” she informed him.

“You’re not some kind of child soldier or deadly assassin, are you? Never mind that, why are you wearing your uniform on a Sunday?”

“Because I’m acting as a judge today,” Sakuya responded with a hint of pride in her voice. She was wearing a parka over her uniform, just as she had the other day at school, and was thoroughly scrutinizing Naoya from behind her glinting glasses. “Your clothes give you an air of reliability and cleanliness. That, and you arrived early. You get extra points.”

“Your words do me great honor. But anyway, where’s Koyuki at?”

“She’s here, but she’s too scared to come out. She’ll probably wait until the very last moment.”

“Thought so.”

Naoya headed inside and looked around the shopping mall. It was equipped with a theater, a game centre, and a plethora of stores. Not only was it the perfect place for a family outing, but it was also a famous date spot in its own right.

Naoya spotted a familiar figure sitting on a bench in the midst of the large crowd of students and families. Once he was certain it was her, he walked over gingerly—he could easily make out her frantic mumbling from where he stood.

“Ohgodohgodohgod, a date?! What am I supposed to do?! I’m so not ready for thi—”

“Mornin’, Shirogane,” Naoya called out in a friendly voice.

Based on the way Koyuki jumped, it was as if he’d screamed directly into her ear. She quickly regained her composure and stood up, trying her best to look refined and calm.

“Oh, hello, Sasahara. I didn’t know you’d arrived yet,” she greeted him

nonchalantly. “You’re quite early. Wait—don’t tell me you were *this* excited to go on a date with *me*. That’s cute... in a pathetic way. Kind of like a puppy that loses its mind when its owner returns home from a trip.”

“Yeah, I was super excited for this. Woof Woof,” Naoya played along.

“Have some dignity!” Koyuki cried as her face turned its patented tomato red, and she began to withdraw into herself.

Naoya placed a hand on his jaw and examined her. “You really do give off a different vibe when you’re not in your uniform, Shirogane,” he noted.

“R-Really?” Koyuki blinked and then looked herself over uncomfortably.

She was wearing a crisp white blouse and a blue, knee-length skirt. It was a simple outfit, but it was prim and well put together. For accessories, she had a matching ribbon in her hair and wore a tasteful set of earrings that glittered in the sun. The entire ensemble tied together well and really suited a beautiful girl with great posture such as herself. Naoya could tell she had put a great deal of effort into her appearance today.

“You look great. You really do have a great fashion sense,” he complimented her.

“What are you talking about? I’m just wearing regular clothes. Makes me wonder if you’ve ever been out with a girl before,” Koyuki spat with a devilish glint in her eyes. Despite this, she was also fidgeting heavily—she fixed her hair behind her ear and continuously tapped the ground with her foot.

He could tell she was happy, and this in turn made him happy. It was rather endearing that she liked being complimented on her appearance.

“You look so pretty and mature. It’s really cool,” he added.

“F-Flattery will g-get you nowhere...” she mumbled.

“It’s not flattery, really—you look like a model. I’m just happy to be seen with you, and I’m looking forward to spending the day with you,” Naoya assured her with a smile.

Koyuki groaned in embarrassment. She turned away and began to make a hasty retreat, but Naoya was faster and latched onto her hand before she could

leave.

“Hey, where are you going?” he asked.

“Home! I can’t do this!” she cried.

“What? We haven’t even done anything yet.”

“And look at me! I’m already a wreck! I have to go!” Koyuki had tears in her eyes while she tugged on Naoya’s hand. They were supposed to be on a date, but now it looked more like a kidnapping. “Wh-Why do we even need to go on a... a d-date anyway?!”

“So I can judge him,” Sakuya cut in with her usual monotone. “I need to see how you two perform in a real couple’s environment. That means you have to do things together. Like dates.”

“You heard the lady,” Naoya chimed in. “And I think it’ll be good if we can get your family’s approval. Let’s just do this.”

“What about my approval?!” Koyuki cried, becoming more disheveled by the second. In contrast, the other two wore calm expressions. After some struggling, she appeared to have finally worn herself out. “Why do I have to do this?”

“Because you said you would, Koyuki,” her sister informed her.

“We *did* kind of coerce her though, Sakuya...”

“Yeah! You did! How am I supposed to deal with being in front of both of you?!” Koyuki yelled in protest.

Despite her stubborn reluctance, she finally managed to budge after a constant stream of reassurance from both her younger sister and her date. She was a softy, after all.

Sakuya sighed and looked at her sister. “Just be careful. Don’t get suckered into a multi-level marketing scheme or a cult while you’re out today, okay?”

“I’ll look after her, Sakuya. Don’t worry about her,” Naoya assured her.

“I don’t trust you with her yet, but thank you,” Sakuya said and bowed slightly in appreciation.

“Or don’t!” Koyuki snapped, then turned her back on the both of them in a huff. Sometimes it was difficult to tell which one of them was the older sibling. She eventually looked over her shoulder at Naoya and pouted. “Fine—I’ll go on your stupid date. But in return...” she paused to stick her finger out dramatically at Naoya, just barely missing his nose. “If you bore me even *slightly*, I’m dumping your sorry ass and going straight home. At least *try* and make today fun.”

“Okay, you got it,” Naoya said. “So what you really mean to say is, ‘I’ve never been on a date before, so if I leave him in charge, then I won’t have to worry about not being totally clueless. I’m kinda excited to see what he has planned.’ Spot on, right?”



“Not even close! Stop speaking for me!” she protested.

“He was spot-on, though. Even most of our family can’t read her that well,” Sakuya added, applauding with her standard expressionlessness.

“Thanks, Sakuya. All righty then, Shirogane—I *do* actually have a little itinerary lined up, if you’ll accompany me,” Naoya began.

“Ugh, fine...” Koyuki grumbled and reluctantly began walking next to Naoya. She took light, tentative footsteps while Sakuya followed a little ways behind. The supervised date had begun.

First, they headed to the mall's third floor. Koyuki noticed the flashy array of posters on the wall and tilted her head to the side. “The cinema?” she inquired.

“Yep. I figured something like this would be a good compromise for today,” Naoya replied. A movie date was the most basic of basic date ideas. Still, this *was* their first date. “We’ve kinda skipped a lot of steps in our relationship, so I think doing normal stuff like this might be a good idea. So, yeah... let’s go have a normal date.”

“Fine. I guess that doesn’t sound totally awful,” Koyuki surmised. Contrary to what she was saying, though, she looked more than slightly pleased behind her blush.

Sakuya, however, turned a suspicious glare on Naoya and warned, “What are you planning to do in the gloom of that movie theater? If you try anything funny, I won’t hesitate.”

“I was planning to watch the movie,” Naoya answered incredulously, as if it were obvious.

Koyuki looked like she didn’t understand, and tilted her head again. “Anyway, what movie are we going to be watching?”

“I was thinking you could pick which one,” Naoya ventured.

Koyuki carefully examined the posters on the wall and stopped when she got to one that featured a famous actor and actress in a passionate embrace. She pointed and said, “That one. The romance.”

“I’d avoid that one. I’ve heard it looks like a regular romance, but it’s actually

a 18+ slasher,” Naoya added.

“Whaaat?! Isn’t that false advertising? Fine then, what about this one? The one with the foreign couple on the coast.”

“Nah, I’d skip that one, too. It’s actually a shark movie with really crappy CG. It was a global hit with shark fans, though.”

“Does this theatre actually show any *good* movies?” Koyuki grumbled. She was starting to get annoyed. “Fine, how about this one? Oh no, it’s a monster movie...”

“If you don’t like scary movies, then I wouldn’t recommend it. I don’t exactly want you to associate our dates with traumatic experiences.”

“I-I like scary movies. I haven’t been scared of a movie since kindergarten, as a matter of fact,” Koyuki huffed. She tried to act brave, even though it was incredibly evident that she couldn’t even look directly at the poster. Finally, she gave up and turned to Naoya. “So, what *are* we going to watch, then?”

“I’ll go get the tickets. You coming along, Sakuya?”

“Of course. Let’s see what you’ve got,” she replied with her typical stoicness. Still, Naoya could sense a subtle excitement.

The three of them headed over to the counter. Naoya stood in front of the girl working there and declared, “Three youth tickets for *The Adventure of Sir Mittens: Mother is 30,000 Light Years Away* please.”

“Coming right up!” the girl replied cheerily.

“A kid’s anime?!” Koyuki all but shouted.

The girl at the counter paid her no mind as she handed them their tickets alongside three promotional keychains.

Koyuki took hers with a dim expression clouding her features. She stared at it for a while before speaking in a low voice. “Sasahara, this *is* a date... right?”

“Oh, so you’ve finally acknowledged it? Nice. And yeah, it is.”

“Then what’s with the movie choice?! We can’t go watch an anime for kids on our first date!” She protested, holding up the keychain as though making a

point. “Like, what’s with this dumb ass cat?!”

“What? That’s Sir Mittens, the hero of our story,” Naoya informed her.

Sir Mittens was a young male calico cat with characteristically reproachful eyes. If you liked that sort of thing, he looked cool and aloof. And if you didn’t, he probably just came off as absentminded.

Koyuki waved the keychain in Naoya’s face, a symbol of her dissatisfaction. “I can’t believe this—it’s our first date, and you pull *this*? Sakuya, back me up here. Sakuya?”

Koyuki looked over at her sister and found her staring at her own keychain, fixated. She carefully placed it inside her bag before turning to Naoya and presenting him with a clear thumbs up. “An outstanding choice, Sasahara. You’ve earned major points for this,” she stated.

“Good taste, Sakuya,” Naoya said.

“Sakuya?!” Koyuki cried, the sense of betrayal evident in her voice.

Naoya smiled and offered an explanation, “I’ve heard that this movie’s great for all audiences—even for adults. And the characters are all super popular in their own right.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Well, that’s what I’ve heard. And you like cats, don’t you, Shirogane? I thought you might like this one. Was I wrong?”

“Well, I do like cats...” Koyuki admitted with a sigh, the tension leaving her body. She brought the keychain up to her eyes. “You picked this one out for me,” she murmured quietly to herself. There was a brief flicker of happiness in her face before her trademark haughty expression quickly took its place. “Fine. I guess I don’t have any choice but to watch it, seeing as you picked it out.”

“Nice. I’ll go grab us some drinks, then we’ll head in,” Naoya.

“I’m really excited—I’ve heard this movie is a tear-jerker. Make sure you have some tissues ready, Koyuki,” Sakuya stated.

“I’m not gonna cry at a kid’s movie, Sakuya. I don’t cry at movies,” Koyuki replied with a huff. She turned and gallantly set off toward the theater.

Sakuya and Naoya exchanged a knowing look and followed her in.

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90 minutes later, the trio emerged from the theater alongside a crowd of parents and children.

“Sir Mittens! *Uwaaagh!* You finally got to meet your mom!” Koyuki all but screamed through floods of tears.

“Here—a handkerchief,” Naoya offered as he handed it over.

She thanked him while sniffing and wiping her nose. In an alarmingly short amount of time, the handkerchief became saturated with liquid.

“You’re gonna dehydrate yourself crying that much. Here,” he added, handing her the juice he hadn’t finished during the movie. She accepted it and began taking small, weak sips. Naoya cautiously waited for her to calm down before following up on the movie. “Man, those reviews weren’t lying. They might’ve even underrated it a little.”

“The part where Lord Paws pretended to betray Sir Mittens just so he could let him take the ship’s last escape pod was really poignant. It got me right in my heart,” Sakuya quickly added. The faint rush of adrenaline in her voice, in addition to the faint tinge of pink in her cheeks, belied her excitement. She was still riding the movie high. “The director is also working on a TV anime this season—it’s a fantasy, I think. You should watch it. The main heroine is moe as fuck.”

“I’ve heard about it, but I haven’t seen it. Looks pretty cool, though,” Naoya replied.

“You’ll be missing out on one of life’s great experiences if you don’t. I’ll give you the source material, too, so you can write a report on it for me.”

“I do love passionate people, haha...” Naoya replied. She was a fun girl, in a way.

Naoya felt a tug on his sleeve and turned to see Koyuki holding the empty cup. Although he initially suspected she was going to ask him for a refill, her small pout and drooping shoulders made her displeasure evident.

“We’re supposed to be on a date. Talking to other girls is gonna... make you lose points,” she grumbled in a low tone.

Naoya didn’t reply—instead, he and Sakuya exchanged a meaningful look and nodded to each other.

“Why are you two being so quiet? Stop it,” Koyuki protested.

“You know what, Sakuya? 2D girls are great, but I feel the 3D world calling to me,” Naoya suddenly declared with bravado.

“I understand. The real world has a certain ‘je ne sais quoi,’ doesn’t it?”

“Oh, come on! Stop talking to *just* Sakuya!” Koyuki pouted. It seemed she had finally finished bawling over the movie and had returned to her usual self. Koyuki thrust Naoya’s now-empty cup back into his hands and folded her arms indignantly, “Listen, Sasahara—you’re supposed to be giving me a good time here. If you’re just gonna talk... to...”

She never managed to finish her thought, however, as something caught her eye behind Naoya and Sakura. They turned around to follow her gaze and found the mysterious siren song that had captured her attention—a crane game machine in front of the mall’s game center. And, upon closer examination, Naoya could spot a familiar character in the pile of plushies.

“They’ve got Sir Mittens!” Koyuki cried out with a dramatic point. Without waiting for the other two, she quickly trotted off in the direction of the game center.

Naoya had no time to stop her. He just smiled to himself and murmured, “How am I supposed to help you have a good time if you’re all the way over there? You coming too, Sakuya?”

“I will put some distance between us and observe from a distance so as not to upset Koyuki any more,” Sakuya replied coolly. She went to leave, but something made her change her mind. She turned back to Naoya and informed him in her usual flat tone, “Koyuki tries to act mature, but as you can see, she’s quite childish and something of a crybaby. In spite of this, you still find her enjoyable to be around?”

“Yeah, I really do, I think.” Naoya agreed. He folded his arms and began to

contemplate Sakuya's words. It was true that Koyuki was certainly hard to please—not to mention somewhat selfish—but Naoya had never once felt annoyed by her. He realized Sakuya was still staring at him, so he flashed an embarrassed smile and continued, "I mean, whenever she acts like that, she's letting her guard down and being herself. It makes me happy that I get to see that."

"You might actually be strange enough for Koyuki after all," Sakuya surmised. Her face underwent the briefest of changes—so small that anyone who wasn't Naoya would have missed it. For just a split second, a faint smile appeared on her lips. "I'll see you later. Don't disappoint me."

"You got it. I'll go babysit your sister now," Naoya joked.

Naoya scanned the game center for his date before he found Koyuki pinned up against the glass of the crane game machine and breathing heavily. She was staring at the mountain of cat plushies on the other side with an intense hunger.

"Sir Mittens plushies... They're so big..." she marveled.

"You want one?" Naoya asked.

"Ye—" she almost exclaimed, but quickly stopped herself and dropped her gaze to her feet. "I mean, no, these are for kids. I don't like plushies and stuff like that."

"Really?"

"What?" Koyuki appeared surprised by his question. When she looked up, she saw Naoya smiling.

"You said you'd start being honest with yourself, right?" he pressed. "And you did great when we were with Yui and Tatsumi. No need to hold back with me."

Koyuki averted her eyes. She realized Naoya wasn't going to let this go. Her shoulders dropped, and she confessed, "I love plushies. I have lots in my room, and they're all over my bed."

"Thought so."

"It's so childish, though..."

“What? No! It’s cute. I’m not gonna laugh at your hobbies or anything,” Naoya assured her. Despite replying honestly, it only caused Koyuki to clam up on the spot. He was baffled at her response. *Was it something I said? Maybe the “not laughing at her” part?* he pondered and cocked his head to the side. Whatever the reason, it seemed he’d struck a nerve. The best course of action was to move past it and work on getting the mood back on track.

He rolled his sleeves up and turned toward the crane game. “Which one do you want?”

“Um... Uh, th-the smiling one... in the right corner,” she answered quietly.

“Got it. Gimme a sec.”

In this specific situation, there was only one thing for a man on a date to do. He placed the coin in the machine with vigor and a sense of determination. The machine sprung to life with cheery mechanical music and a jerk of its claw. Sadly, his first attempt ended in utter defeat—he had not come remotely close to the plushie.

“You’re not that good at this kind of stuff, are you?” Koyuki asked meekly.

“Yeah, you got me,” Naoya admitted. He was good at social games like Werewolf, but when it came to machine games with simple inputs... “I had a feeling I’d get lucky today, but no dice, I guess,” he said as he bowed his head in defeat. He didn’t try to play off his failure—he was certain Koyuki would be disappointed. When he finally looked up, however, he found her grinning at him. “What?”

“No, it’s just... You were so confident and everything,” she replied with a quivering voice. Her shoulders shook as her smile grew wider—yes, she was laughing. At him. “So even you have weak points, huh? Doesn’t feel bad to have that knowledge in my back pocket.”

Naoya remained silent, prompting Koyuki to ask, “What’s up?”

“I was just thinking that I’m kinda glad I messed up now,” he answered.

“Quit being so weird, Sasahara,” Koyuki snapped. Still, she offered him another smile.

Naoya was pleased that her mood appeared to have brightened. *Seeing her happy makes me happy, too*, he thought to himself. He knew better than to voice his conclusion, though—it would only foul her good mood, so he kept it to himself.

“Stop smiling to yourself, already. It’s creepy. Are you gonna try again?”

“Guess I will, yeah...” Naoya checked his wallet, only to discover that he had no loose change. He looked around for an ATM, but was quickly interrupted by a familiar voice amid the din of arcade goers and electronic sounds. He turned to Koyuki and said, “I’m gonna go to an ATM real quick. Gimme a sec.”

“I’ll get this one, Sasahara. Don’t worry,” she replied.

“Nah, let me. I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

Koyuki looked like she wanted to protest, but Naoya didn’t give her time to do so—he was gone before the words could leave her mouth.

His destination was not an ATM; in fact, he was headed deeper into the game center. It was an area with fewer crowds and an absence of staff. It was there that he found who he was looking for—Sakuya.

She was with a man—a young adult, by the looks of it—who was talking to her. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that he was hitting on her. Letting her go off on her own had been a bad idea. While he had been with Koyuki, she must have been stopped by this guy.

“Sorry to interrupt, but do you have some business with her?” Naoya called out. The moment the words had left his lips, Sakuya ran in his direction and latched onto his sleeve. It was an action not dissimilar to that of her sister, but he noted it wasn’t the time for such comparisons. He scrutinized the man and realized that he recognized him from somewhere. “You again? Didn’t you learn your lesson last time?”

“What? Oh shit! It’s you from before!” the man cried. It was the blonde delinquent with the piercings that had been hassling Koyuki before.

In a way, this guy was the Cupid responsible for Naoya and Koyuki’s relationship. Naoya never thought he’d see him again, and the man seemed equally as surprised—if not more so—by this coincidence.

Sakuya spoke up in a small voice, “Is this someone you know?”

“I guess you could say that. More importantly, you all right, Sakuya?”

“I’m fine, but you left Koyuki on her own. I will be docking points for that.”

“Fair point, but I couldn’t just leave you alone when I noticed you were in trouble,” he protested.

“I’m surprised you were so impatient. But that’s not a bad thing,” she replied. Her face softened somewhat as he looked at her.

The man had been left with little to do while the two exchanged words. After a while, however, he finally decided to chime in. “Hah. Tryna play the hero when you’re just like me, huh?” he smiled mockingly and spat.

“Wha?” Naoya blurted out. The comment had legitimately caught him off guard.

The man pointed at Sakuya and said, “That’s the chick I was tryna pick up earlier, yeah? So after that, you ‘rescued’ her from my claws and snatched her up yourself. You’re welcome, buddy.”

“Wha?” Sakuya and Naoya both blurted out simultaneously.

Naoya pondered the man’s words for a moment before he finally understood. *This moron thinks Sakuya’s actually Koyuki.* To be fair, they did look similar, especially when it came to their distinctive silver hair. And the man hadn’t lied, per se—it was true that Naoya and Koyuki had grown closer because of that incident.

“You helped her out, but you definitely got something out of it, didn’t ‘cha? So you ain’t really in a position to give me some freakin’ holier-than-thou lecture.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” Naoya admitted. A growing sense of guilt started to brew within him. The man was right—Naoya had helped her, but had he really just “snatched her up” for himself? He would be no better than this loser, then.

“It’s 100 percent totally different,” a resolute voice stated from behind the man.

Everyone turned around and spotted Koyuki, a commanding air surrounding her. Her expression was grim, and her arms were crossed sternly. Coupled with her astoundingly good looks, it made for quite the intimidating presence.

“Wait, there’s two of ‘em? So the one I hit on wasn’t—”

“That’s right—it wasn’t her. It was *me*. If you can’t piece that together or even remember the girl you’re hitting on, you’re more of a braindead moron than you look. Honestly, that’s legitimately impressive,” Koyuki mocked.

“What the hell did you just—” the man spat, his face contorted with anger. In spite of his intimidating presence, she didn’t budge an inch.

“He sees me for who I really am,” she continued angrily. “He’s nice—he would *never* try to coerce women like you do. Please don’t lump him in the same category as *you*.”

“Oh, wow. You were scared shitless before, but now you’ve got a mouth on you? That’s just great,” the man grumbled before his hand darted out at Koyuki.

The attack didn’t quite hit its mark, however, as Naoya quickly intercepted. He grabbed the delinquent by his gaudy collar and shoved him up against a nearby wall. “I’m telling you this for your own safety. Do *not* lay a hand on her,” he threatened.

“W-Wow, buddy, you actually wanna throw down?” the man taunted shakily. His surprised expression—a momentary sign of weakness—was quickly covered by a cocky, daring smile.

Naoya knew that if the situation escalated, it would only result in the police being called, and he would end up getting in more trouble than this was worth. He could settle things on his own. He responded with a smile of his own and replied, “Yeah, I’ll throw down. I won’t be using my fists, though.”

“The hell are you talkin’ about?” the man asked with a confused expression.

Little did the man know, it wouldn’t be long before the only thing left on his face were the tears of utter despair.

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A short while after, the man was being led away by the police. Contrary to his

feisty attitude earlier, he offered no resistance. In fact, he was hanging his head in defeat and muttering, “Mom, I’m so sorry... I’ve always been a fuck up...”

The officer holding him seemed confused. “What’s with this guy? Is he drunk? Hey, buddy, tell that to your momma, not me.”

Naoya and the others watched as the man was led away.

An older man in a suit, likely the manager of the arcade, approached the group and bowed deeply. “Thank you for informing us of this man,” he said in a polite tone. “He appears to be very troubled. It’s a good thing that you found him when you did.”

“No problem. He just started acting real weird all of a sudden,” Naoya explained with a friendly smile.

Just behind him, Sakuya and Koyuki were exchanging words in a low whisper. Naoya could barely make out their words through the din of the arcade.

“He utterly decimated him. I feel like I just witnessed a verbal murder.”

“How did he know where he was from? And about his home life and his upbringing?”

Just as he’d said he would, Naoya had “thrown down” without raising his fists. He had accurately pinpointed his opponent’s weak points and needled the man until he broke.

“You’ve been pissing your life away and acting like a dirtbag for a while, haven’t you? Now, what would your parents think of all that?”

“You leave my mom out of this!”

“She’d cry if she saw you now. You know it’s true.”

And just like that, Naoya had worn his opponent down. It had been incredibly easy, to the point that he wondered if he’d gone too hard on him. *Well, at least he won’t be bothering any girls for a while after this, I guess*, he surmised to himself.

Of course, none of these inner thoughts bothered him as he accepted the gratitude from the man in the suit. The man’s face suddenly became cloaked in a dark expression as he explained, “To be honest, this isn’t the first time that

man has caused trouble here. You're absolutely sure nothing happened between you two?"

"Yep. Nothing at all," Naoya assured him.

"That's good, then. Still, I wonder how he ended up like this..." the man pondered. Something flashed in his eyes before he turned to look directly into Naoya's eyes. "This is neither here nor there, but what's your last name?"

"Um, it's Sasahara."

"I knew it," The man nodded before looking up at the ceiling and massaging his temple. "You see, I knew your father. He helped me out with a lot of things."

"Oh. I see," was all Naoya said after a pause.

"So I know what you did to that man. Don't worry, I'll handle the reports. You get going."

"Thank you. Sorry if I caused you any trouble," Naoya apologized.

"It's nothing. Say hello to your dad for me," the man replied. With that, he gave a small wave and left.

Koyuki tilted her head to the side and inquired, "What were you and that guy talking about?"

"Nothing, really. Don't worry about it. But more importantly, Shirogane..."

"Wh-What?" Koyuki sputtered. Her eyes darted from side to side as she tried her hardest to avoid direct eye contact.

Naoya took the opportunity to take her hand in his. "Thank you for helping us out there, but... please don't get carried away like that again. I was so worried I thought my heart would stop," he scolded her gently.

"Uh, um... Okay. I'm sorry," she apologized with a timid nod. The fire quickly returned to her eyes, however. "But he was making fun of you, and... I had to do *something*. I wouldn't care if he was bothering anyone else, but it was *you*."

"That makes me happy to hear. It really does. But it's dangerous."

"I know that, but I was certain you would protect me, so I wasn't scared at all. That's why I did it."

“Well, yeah, but...” Naoya trailed off. It was his turn to be embarrassed by Koyuki’s honesty.

“Hah. You’re always so aloof, Sasahara, so seeing you like this is pretty refreshing. But yeah—back there, you were pretty, um, c-coo—”

“You were really cool,” Sakuya butted in.

“Ah! I wanted to say that!” Koyuki exclaimed.

“Ahahaha...” Naoya laughed while he watched the sisters’ exchange. With each chuckle, he could feel the tension drain out of his body. He was glad they were all okay.

Koyuki sighed and looked down at the ground. “Still, you *did* save a pair of sisters from the same situation. There’s definitely going to be some sibling rivalry now...”

“Koyuki?” Sakuya blurted out, her eyes wide in shock.

Koyuki’s shoulders dropped, and she asked, “You’re not gonna fall for him, are you, Sakuya? That’s a no go, okay? I won’t allow it. He’s mine—my slave. I’ll never give him to you, so don’t even bother trying, okay?”

“Oh. Well, in that case, there’s nothing to worry about. He’s a bit too out there for me,” she informed her sister flatly.

“*You’re* saying that about *me*?!” Naoya couldn’t help but butt in.

Sakuya turned in response and gave Naoya a scrutinizing look. “Not a lover, but... he could work as a brother-in-law.”

“Meaning?” Naoya asked.

“Fine. I approve,” Sakuya conceded with a bow of her head. “Please treat my sister well, Brother-in-law.”

“Damn, and people say I move too fast,” Naoya quipped.

“Sakuya? Did you want a big brother?” Koyuki blurted out.

Naoya couldn’t help but smile. He was an only child, so the thought of having a little sister pleased him to no end.

Sakuya didn’t acknowledge the question. Instead, she saluted and declared,

“The supervised date ends here. Enjoy the rest of your day, you two.”

“Sakuya, wait! Where’re you going?!” Koyuki exclaimed.

“I’m going to buy some manga and then head home. Tell me how today goes. Oh—and if you’re gonna kiss him, then do it after it gets dark.”

“I’m not!” Koyuki shouted as Sakuya retreated into the crowd.

They watched her go before Naoya commented, “She’s a good sister, isn’t she?”

“She is, but she really needs to watch her mouth sometimes...” Koyuki trailed off with some hesitation. Before she could say anything else, though, her stomach interrupted her with a rumble, and she hung her head in embarrassment.

Naoya decided to feign ignorance. “Agh, I’m starving. D’you wanna get lunch?”

“S-Sure. Doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” she replied in her best nonchalant voice, fixing her hair behind her ear and trying to appear cool and calm.

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The two headed to a street packed with restaurants and began discussing what they were going to have.

Once they’d finally picked a spot, they quickly settled down for their meal. Unfortunately, Naoya’s food ended up coming out a lot later than Koyuki’s. When he tried to ask Koyuki for a bite of hers, she seemed oddly embarrassed about the prospect. He reminded her that they’d already shared an indirect kiss earlier when he gave her his juice, which did not abate her embarrassment in the slightest.

There were many similar scenarios as they went about their day, and their first date ended in a huge success.

Chapter Five

The Work Visit

The sky was cloudy and dreary that day.

Naoya stood at the train station's ticket gate and sighed. "Wonder if she's doing okay?" he pondered out loud to himself.

It had been a week since they went on their incredibly eventful, heart-pounding date, and they'd been getting along better than ever... until yesterday, that is.

The train arrived, and passengers soon began to flood through the ticket gate. A distinct head of silver stood out from the rest of the crowd.

Naoya raised his hand and called out to her, "Morning, Shirogane!"

Koyuki reacted somewhat strangely to his greeting. At first, her face tensed up in a grim expression, but her cool smile quickly returned. "Good morning, Sasahara," she replied in a reserved voice.

Naoya blinked in surprise at her uncharacteristic response. He had been expecting her adorably venomous tongue. Perhaps a quip like, "You're here to meet me *again*? Could you be any more desperate? You're already completely whipped, I see." Something wasn't quite right here—he could tell something was bothering her, but she wasn't being honest with herself about it.

"Did you read the thing I gave you yesterday?" Naoya asked in a small voice.

Koyuki made a strange noise, then burst into tears while throwing herself dramatically into Naoya's chest. He was stunned by her actions; at the same time, however, he couldn't help but notice her warmth and sweet scent. He felt a strong urge to wrap his arms around her and only managed to hold himself back by the knowledge that it was neither the time nor place to do so. Dirty looks were being shot their way from students and adults alike:

"A lover's quarrel? School hasn't even started yet. God..."

"Oh, to be young again..."

“Fucking normies.”

Naoya gently—and very reluctantly—placed his hands on Koyuki’s shoulder and pried her away from him, making sure to keep her at arm’s length. “Uh, why don’t we just try calming down a little, okay?”

“Calm down?! How am I supposed to calm down?!” She yelled as she frantically rummaged through her bag. When she found what she was looking for—the thing Naoya had given her the day before—she whipped it out and added, “Why did Fran have to die?! I don’t get it!”

“Ahhh...” Naoya sighed. He had guessed that might be the case.

It had all started yesterday.

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On their way home, Koyuki had mentioned that she wanted to go to a bookstore. Naoya agreed—he had been meaning to stop by one, as well—so they headed to one near the station together.

“That’s what you wanna buy, Sasahara?”

“Yeah? What about it?”

Naoya peered down at the book he was holding, which was currently the subject of Koyuki’s glares. It was the latest volume of a light novel series he kept up with: *To the End of the Other World*. The cover featured a cast of colorful-haired girls clad in skimpy armor and cartoonishly large weapons. It was a fairly standard fantasy series where the protagonist was transported to another world—the type that was a dime a dozen recently.

Koyuki continued her pointed stare at the book and said, “Sakuya likes those types of books. They’ve got... l-lewd pictures and stuff in them, right?”

“Yeah, I can’t deny that.”

“I guess you are a boy after all,” Koyuki murmured with a grave nod to herself, as if accepting some terrible truth.

Naoya could tell she was obviously starting to form the wrong idea, so he quickly attempted to explain himself. “Nah, that’s not it. The lewd stuff isn’t the main appeal at all—the story’s great. It’s even got a manga adaptation and

everything. It's pretty popular right now."

"But I thought—"

"Sometimes, the girls do show a bit of skin in the illustrations, but that's pretty much it," he assured her. Overall, there wasn't really much in terms of fanservice. Naoya had even heard that the title had a pretty sizable female readerbase.

He also knew that words alone wouldn't do much to alleviate the current situation, which was why he decided to skip directly to his last resort. "Well, I always say 'don't knock it until you try it.' I'll lend you the first volume. Here, I've got it in my bag."

"Fine, but if it's all just smut, I'm not reading it."

"It's not, but you can stop whenever you want. Just give it a shot."

Koyuki seemed even more skeptical with the book in her hands; however, Naoya knew that the misunderstanding would soon resolve itself.

That first volume is kind of a tearjerker, though. I hope she'll be okay... he mused to himself, the memory of her ugly crying over a kid's anime in a crowded theater still fresh in his mind.

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And, just as he had feared, the scene unfolding in front of him was much like what had occurred during their date.

Koyuki made several futile attempts to piece her thoughts together through loud sobs. "I-I really liked it, a-and it was really good! Th-there were lewd parts, b-but, but... why did Fran have to die?!"

"Oh yeah, that hit me hard, too..." Naoya replied flatly, his eyes dead as he attempted to calm the weeping Koyuki. He chose not to bring up the fact that Fran ended up returning in a subsequent volume.

Naoya walked side-by-side with Koyuki all the way to school. Although he expected her to calm down by the time they arrived, he was proven very wrong.

"I think I might've been too hard on light novels... I'm sorry," she sputtered through tears.

“Oooh, so you finally admit it,” he replied. He hadn’t expected the book to leave this much of an impression on her.

“I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions about you being a fan of perverted books. That was rude of me...”

“Ah, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it,” Naoya assured her with a smile. He purposefully failed to mention that he had only given her that specific book because it wasn’t one of the more male-oriented books he usually read. He owned some pretty extreme romcoms that he didn’t think he could ever show her—he was a growing boy, after all.

“The story was fantastic. I loved watching Fran grow more comfortable with the protagonist as the book went on... I should’ve known that she wasn’t going to make it...” she gave her impressions in a shaky voice.

“Yeah...” Naoya replied vaguely, trying his hardest to avoid spoiling anything for her. It was interesting that she liked the character that seemed aloof and icy at first, but slowly thawed over the course of the story—perhaps she could sympathize because they weren’t so different from one another.

“So are you gonna read the second volume?” he asked. “I brought it with me just in case you wanted to—”

“Thanks, but I’m already halfway through it,” Koyuki replied as she reached into her bag and produced the book in question. “Sakuya actually has the whole series. I guess that’s to be expected, though.”

“Sakuya really does have good taste, doesn’t she?” Naoya remarked approvingly. It turned out that their date chaperone was something of an otaku.

Koyuki looked down, caressed the cover with a bright smile, and said, “Hehe, I think I’m gonna read some during recess and then try to finish it after school. Do you wanna talk about it then, maybe?”

“Oh yeah, sur—oh wait, sorry. I can’t. I’ve got work today,” Naoya stopped himself. He hadn’t realized it was Friday, the day he worked at his part-time job.

“Oh... That’s too bad. I thought we could have a nice chat,” she muttered, her eyes cast down at the book in her hands.

No man could resist that expression, and Naoya was no exception. He clapped his hands together and proposed, “Okay, let’s do this—why don’t you come hang out at my work? That way, we can talk as much as we want.”

“Oh, no—I don’t wanna get in the way. Won’t that bother the customers?”

“Nah, it won’t be an issue at all. The boss pretty much runs the place as a hobby,” Naoya answered. He worked at a modest bookstore that didn’t exactly bring in many customers and did even less in terms of deliveries. It didn’t turn a profit, really—the boss only really used the job to give some structure to their life.

“Hm, your boss sounds like a strange person,” Koyuki commented suspiciously.

“Yeah, if I had to describe them...” Naoya agreed, trailing off while his boss’s face came into focus in his mind. “I guess I’d have to say they’re like an older sister figure to me.”

Koyuki’s face hardened, but was quickly replaced by a thin smile. “Okay, let’s go. I’m really looking forward to it now.”

“Shirogane, I didn’t mean it like *that*. There’s nothing like that going on between us,” he hastily added. He immediately understood the sort of misunderstanding he had just caused, so he attempted to nip it in the bud as quickly as possible.

“Are they married? Do they have a boyfriend?” she asked.

“No, but—”

“Then I’m coming.”

“You’re the only one I want, Shirogane...”

“That might be how *you* feel, but we don’t know what *they* want, do we?” she huffed angrily before storming off ahead of him.

Agh, she sure likes to jump to conclusions. It’s fine, though. She’ll understand when she meets them, he attempted to placate himself. Knowing that any further explanation would simply fall upon deaf ears, Naoya quickened his pace so he could catch up to Koyuki.



As promised, once school was over, Naoya took Koyuki to his place of work—a small used book store tucked away in a corner of the shopping district. It was a detached house sandwiched between a convenience store and an apartment building that had a sign out front which read, *Akaneya Used Books*.

The store would open faithfully on weekdays from 10:00AM–5:00PM. It boasted a single formidable bookshelf which adorned one of its walls. On it was a wide array of books—from western novels to technical manuals—packed tightly together. There was also a counter, and if one continued behind it, they would be met with a sizable Japanese-style room.

A husky voice that was all too familiar to Naoya's ears came from the room. "Wow, she is way cuter than I was expecting, Sasahara! It's so nice to meet you!"

"Y-You too," Koyuki sputtered. She sat upright, her posture prim and proper, across from a person she didn't recognize. Her face had an unusual expression on it as she stared at the stranger.

Naoya spoke casually. "So yeah, she's going to be hanging out here today, if that's okay?"

"Of course. This job is pretty relaxed. Plus, who wouldn't be happy to have customers that look like her around?" his boss giggled. They were certainly attractive and well put together. With their thin cardigan, tidy, skinny trousers, and dark-indigo hair trailing over their shoulder in a loose ponytail, they were the picture-perfect representation of an "older sister."

They sat across from Naoya and Koyuki and introduced themselves with a smile. "I'm Kirihiko Akaneya. Glad you could come today!"

"Th-Thank you," Koyuki answered awkwardly.

Naoya popped a cookie in his mouth and shrugged his shoulders. "See? There's definitely nothing going on between me and Kirihiko, Shirogane."

"Yep. I like girls, despite how I look," Kirihiko added, completely nonplussed while they sipped on some tea.

Kirihiko had been born male. Although Naoya wasn't entirely clear on what gender they identified as, they had always been a good person to him, and Naoya didn't particularly care about much more than that.

"I'm not gonna go anywhere near him, Koyuki. Don't you worry. I like keeping this place nice and clean, after all," Kirihiko assured Koyuki.

"I-I wasn't worried about anything. Don't make such brash assumptions, please," Koyuki grumbled, averting her eyes. "D-Do you really not like him?"

"Yeah," they answered. "We're distant relatives, and I've known him since he was in elementary school. He's basically my little brother."

Koyuki was visibly relieved by Kirihiko's answer. Their lips grew into an impish grin before they said, "There's nothing to worry about, Koyuki. I won't steal your boyfriend."

"B-Boyfriend?!" Koyuki instantly stiffened up, her tea cup rattling in her hands.

Kirihiko turned toward Naoya and continued, "So don't hold out on me—just how did you manage to meet a total cutie like her?"

"Didn't I tell you already? She was getting harassed by a guy out front, and I helped her out."

"Ooh, what a nice setup!" they crooned. "It's like something out of a romcom. So how long have you two been seeing each other? I'm gonna guess a month based on how naive you both look."

"We're not dating!" Koyuki all but screamed.

Kirihiko's eyes widened, and they asked, "You're not? You're kidding, right?"

"Well, we're not going out yet, to be honest," Naoya replied.

"*'Yet,'* huh? I like it. It's got a real youthful, innocent feel to it!" Kirihiko exclaimed with an approving smile.

Koyuki's face quickly turned crimson, and she began to mumble to herself. Perhaps it was because she was in a stranger's house, but her tongue didn't seem to be quite as sharp today—instead, she chose to simply glare at Naoya from behind her cup. "Sasahara, aren't you supposed to be at the counter? You

know, *working?*” she pointed out.

“Nah, it’s fine. No one comes here anyway,” he replied casually.

“Exactly,” Kirihiko added. “Sometimes, Yui and Tatsumi visit, and we all hang out, drink tea, and play games... but that’s about it.”

Although Yui and Tatsumi weren’t employees at the store like Naoya was, they would come visit and spend the day once a month or so. Like Naoya, the couple had known Kirihiko for a long time, and so the book store was kind of like a clubroom to them.

As Koyuki listened to them, her eyes hardened. She turned to Naoya and asked, “Sasahara, can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“I think it’s important to work for a living, but from what I’ve just heard, it sounds like this is just a place for you and your friends to laze around and do nothing. As far as I’m concerned, you’re basically taking advantage of your poor boss’s kindness.”

“Whoa, I was *not* expecting that!” Naoya shouted. She did make a good point, however, so he scrambled to explain the situation to her. “Well, I guess you could say I’m kind of like a house maid?”

“What?” she replied, dumbfounded.

“Yeah. Kirihiko’s actually a writer, that’s their main job. But because of that, they don’t really have any life skills.”

“Too true. I can’t even cook—I just end up burning everything until it looks like a charred corpse,” Kirihiko casually added. And it wasn’t limited to just cooking either—they couldn’t even wash dishes or do laundry. Contrary to their polished, prim appearance, they were pretty much a slovenly mess. Looks could certainly be deceiving.

“So most of what I end up doing here is housework. Actually running the store comes second to that,” Naoya summarized.

“Oh... I’m sorry for getting the wrong idea again.”

“No worries. It’s really respectable that you would worry about something like

that, to be honest,” Naoya replied with a smile. Admitting you were wrong was no easy feat, so he was pleased that Koyuki had been comfortable enough to express her honest feelings, then admit her error.

“Ah, come on guys—ease off each other a little. You’re making me miss my youth,” Kirihiko sighed morosely.

Koyuki, as if suddenly reminded of their presence, became bashful, “Y-You said you have another job. Are you sure I won’t get in the way of that?”

“I’m all good on that front. My deadline was yesterday,” Kirihiko replied, waving Koyuki’s concerns away with a flap of their hand.

Up until very recently, Kirihiko’s house had looked like a bomb site. Whenever Naoya had visited, he’d found the author glued to their computer, sweaty and unshaven. *They must’ve gotten properly dressed because they heard I was bringing a girl over*, Naoya mused to himself.

Kirihiko didn’t notice Naoya’s stare as they leaned over the table and took Koyuki’s hand. “So I’ve got all the time in the world today! We can gossip, gossip, and gossip some more, Koyuki!”

“I-I guess we can,” Koyuki nodded uncomfortably. She was a shy girl at the best of times, and Naoya could easily tell she’d never been around a person like Kirihiko before. Sensing that she was reaching her limit, he extended a figurative helping hand.

“You know, Kirihiko. I actually brought Shirogane here for a reason,” he informed them.

“Really? So you’re not just here to show off your new girlfriend.”

“I’m not his girlfriend...” Koyuki protested.

“You’re not wrong, but...” Naoya trailed off as he rummaged through his bag in search of something. He finally found what he was looking for—the first volume of *To the End of the World*—and pulled it out. “Shirogane absolutely loved the first volume, and it seems she wants to read the second one now.”

Kirihiko didn’t reply—instead, their face hardened into a serious expression.

The sudden silence appeared to make Koyuki uncomfortable, as she quickly

stuttered, “I-It’s fine, though. I can read it anyti—”

Kirihiko silently rose to their feet, interrupting Koyuki’s attempt to fill the silence in the room. They walked toward the door before suddenly turning back and giving the two not-lovebirds a thumbs up. “I’m gonna go out for a bit! Make sure you get some reading done, Koyuki. You’ll get the housework done, right, Naoya?”

“Will do. Stay safe,” Naoya said as he watched Kirihiko exit the store dramatically.

As soon as they had left, Koyuki began to panic. “Oh no! I didn’t mean to make them leave!”

“It’s fine, they need to get out of the house more anyway,” Naoya assured her as he smiled to himself—his plan to get Kirihiko to leave had worked. “If you leave them alone, they won’t go outside for a whole month. They probably wouldn’t even know what season it is after a while.”

“They’re a hermit, then...”

“Pretty much. I’m here to stop them from getting totally sucked into that lifestyle.”

“You’re kinda like a mom in your own way,” Koyuki pointed out. She pondered her observation for a moment before she realized what she had just been given the opportunity to do. As she grabbed her second volume of *To The End of the World* from her bag, she asked, “So I can start reading now? To be honest, I stopped at a really good part...”

“Sure. I’ll be out front. Just call me if you need me.”

“Got it. Thanks,” Koyuki nodded and opened the book. Contrary to how she normally was, she was being very open with her feelings and desires today.

I love it when she gets all embarrassed and stuff, but damn—her cuteness levels go up a stage when she’s just being herself, he admired. He turned to head toward the kitchen, a dumb smile plastered across his face. He was about to place his hand on the sliding door when he reached a profound realization and froze in place—Kirihiko lived alone and didn’t own any pets. *Me and Shirogane are alone in this house...*



It was just him and her, the girl he liked, under one roof. And with this acknowledgement came the incredibly conscious awareness of Koyuki's presence—the sound of her breathing, the flipping of pages in her book. These subtle noises suddenly became as loud as a pachinko parlor in the silence of the empty house.

Self control, Naoya, self control. She's reading right now. Don't bother her, Naoya mentally chided himself, surprised by his own carnal desires. He closed the sliding door behind him and then slapped himself lightly on the cheek. "All right, it's time to work."

As Naoya had explained to Koyuki earlier, his job was taking care of Kirihiro's chores. Tending to cleaning and laundry was obvious, but his job included cooking, as well. He normally stopped by two-to-three times a week and cooked a number of easy meals that Kirihiro could eat while he was gone.

He put on an apron and got to work. Kirihiro's place was the typical old public house, the only difference being that the kitchen had been renovated and sported a clean and modern integrated style.

To start, he tackled the dishes that Kirihiro had allowed to pile up. Then he took stock of the spices and ingredients in the kitchen. This allowed him to mentally compile a small menu of the meals he would be making.

"Hmm... I can make braised burdock roots with carrots and then komatsuna—mustard spinach—stew. Maybe some sliced daikon radish after that. We're almost out of soy sauce, so I'll get Kirihiro to buy some for me," Naoya noted out loud. With that, he quickly prepped all the vegetables and texted Kirihiro.

Almost immediately, he received a response. "Roger Dodger☆," the text read. Kirihiro's icon was a plump pancake dish, which always gave Naoya the vague feeling that he was speaking to a teenage girl.

Naoya was about to resume his cooking when he received another message. "I was all brave and left my humble abode today, so do me a favor—don't go getting down and dirty in my house, okay?"

"As if we were actually planning that!" Naoya quickly replied. With his message of denial sent, he squatted down in the kitchen, his head in his hands.

He was just a normal highschool boy. Although he had spent a lot of time with Koyuki recently, this was the first time they'd been alone together in an enclosed space—it was only obvious that he'd be overly conscious of it.

“That’s right, this *exact* situation cropped up in a romcom I read recently. What did the protag do?” Naoya thought out loud to himself as he forced his stalled brain into action. He tried his hardest to recall the plot. It found the protagonist alone in a house with the heroine. What had happened then? Ah, that’s right—the heroine had embraced the protagonist and softly declared, “You can do whatever you want to me...”

“It’s way too early for that!” Naoya yelped, shaking his head in an attempt to clear his mind. To make matters worse, the heroine’s voice had been perfectly replaced in Naoya’s mind with Koyuki’s. He wasn’t specifically *against* anything physical happening, but he knew his mind and body couldn’t take it. Naoya shook his head once again so as to cast off his impure thoughts. “Control yourself, Naoya. She’s not even that kind of girl anyway.”

There was no way she was going to come clean with her feelings right now, let alone actually throw herself at him. Although he was admittedly slightly disappointed by that realization, he decided to put all that aside for the time being. It was best to occupy his mind with work—both for his safety and hers.

He was just about to start on the first dish when he was interrupted by a small voice calling out from behind him. “Sasahara?”

“Wagh!” Naoya practically jumped up with a strange, strangled yelp. As he whirled around to face her, he found himself thinking, *There's no way... She's not actually going to that...*

Koyuki stood there, the same as ever. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity while she looked at the vegetables on the counter.

“Sh-Shirogane? Do you need something?” he managed to choke out.

“Not in particular. I’m halfway through the book, so I’m just taking a break,” she answered calmly. She pointed at the vegetables and asked, “Other than that, are you making something? Can you cook?”

“Well, just as much as everyone else can, I guess...”

“Whoa! That’s awesome.”

“It’s really not anything impressive,” Naoya replied with an awkward smile at her praise. She really was only there to take a break. Her pure, innocent excitement—especially when compared to Naoya’s current licentious thoughts—stabbed him in the heart like a knife.

“I think I’ve mentioned this before, but my parents are overseas. I’m living alone right now, so I kind of need to be able to fend for myself, you know,” he explained. Before his mother had left, she’d taught him the basics of cooking. He’d also managed to work out a lot more by himself through trial and error. Although he did buy ready-made meals from time to time, he tended to cook dinner for himself and had the leftovers for lunch.

Koyuki appeared very surprised by this development. “So the stuff you eat for lunch is your own cooking?!”

“Yeah. I’m not really any good, though. Like, I was just gonna make something really simple with these vegetables here...” he faltered.

“That’s still really impressive. Are you doing that thing protagonists do where they’re super modest all the time?”

“You got that one from Sakuya, didn’t you?”

“Obviously.”

“Thought so.” Naoya wondered what the conversations that went on in that household were like.

A short silence occurred, during which Koyuki continued to glance around the room distractedly. Finally, she pointed at the vegetables and asked, “Hey, can I help?”

“Nah. I’m fine, thanks. You’re pretty much a customer here anyway.”

Koyuki snorted lightly and smiled. “Sasahara, since I’m well aware of how much of an airhead you are, I’m just making sure you’re doing your job properly. You should be grateful.”

“You’re just trying to make it seem like you know how to cook because you think that’s what women should be able to do, right?” Naoya asked pointedly.

“Uh, no. I never said that, did I? And why exactly would I care about showing off to you?” Koyuki declared loudly before she withdrew into herself. “When did I say I was bad at cooking, actually? How did you know...?”

“I mean, I could pretty much tell just by looking,” he replied. Her obvious unease around knives told the whole story.

Still, what should I do? I’m happy that she wants to help, but having her so close to me is not good for my heart right now, Naoya pondered to himself.

Koyuki poked her fingers together and sadly whispered, “I’m not good at cooking, so if I’m just gonna be in the way, I’ll leave.”

“No,” Naoya stated. His immediate and short reply made Koyuki’s face light up. How could he deny her when she acted like that? He handed her a handful of carrots and a peeler. “If you could peel these, that'd be great. Think you can handle it?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m not good with knives, but I’ve at least done this before,” Koyuki responded with a resolute nod and lined up next to Naoya. She was a bit clumsy, but she worked diligently.

As Naoya observed her, he found himself thinking, *It’s kinda strange that she’s not more nervous right now. I mean, not that anything’s going to happen, but still...*

Suddenly, he reached another epiphany. “She still hasn’t noticed,” he blurted out loud.

“Did you say something?”

“Nothing at all. Watch your hands, by the way,” he instructed with a bright smile. *Okay. Now I just need to keep it that way.* Everything would be fine as long as he was the only one freaking out. He knew he wouldn’t do anything, but he also didn’t want her jumping to the wrong conclusion.

“By the way, Sasahara, there’s something I wanna ask,” she spoke up.

“Yes, uh, whatever is the problem?”

“Why are you being so weird?” Koyuki noted with a puzzled expression. “Anyway... You’d prefer a girl who can cook, right?”

“Huh?” Naoya blurted. The question had caught him completely off guard. Still, he perceived the correct course of action quickly, and he took it. “Well, I don’t really mind if you’re good or bad at cooking—I still like you either way.”

“I wasn’t talking about me! It was a hypothetical question!” She yelled before quickly deflating again. “Still, guys like girls who make them home made lunches and stuff, don’t they?”

“Well, yeah, that does sound pretty nice,” he admitted. Having a pretty girl bashfully handing over a homemade lunch was every young man’s dream. “But everyone’s got their strengths and weaknesses, so I wouldn’t worry too much about it. You have so many other great points, after all.”

“Back to the cringey lines with a completely straight face, I see. And don’t get the wrong idea—I can’t stand it when people give spineless non-answers like that. But anyway, you *do* want handmade lunches, huh? Interesting,” she spat with her usual vigor until she went silent. After a few seconds, she smiled as though she had settled on something. “Fine. I’m gonna study cooking and make you an awesome lunch one day. It’s just to flaunt my amazing abilities, though, got it?”

“That sounds great. Please do.”

“Fine. If you want it so bad, I’ll have you begging on the ground for it. Might even make you lick my feet while I’m at it.”

“Can I actually do that?” he asked.

“Um, no.” Her fearless smile disappeared.

Naoya’s brain had gone into overdrive. Improper thoughts raced to and fro inside his head, so he decided to take refuge in the repetitive work of slicing vegetables. After a moment, he smiled and offered, “If you wanna learn how to cook, I could teach you. You could come here and help me out whenever I cook for Kirihiko.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad, but won’t I be in the way?”

“Nah. Kirihiko was pleased to have you here, right? Plus, they live alone, so they like it when the house is a bit busy.”

“Oh, okay then. Maybe next time, I’ll bring som—” Koyuki stopped mid sentence, freezing in the middle of peeling vegetables. Naoya gave her a quizzical look. “You just said that they live alone, right?”

“Uhh, yeah...?”

“Meaning that right now...” she trailed off, her face turning a bright shade of red. When it finally reached the color of a boiled octopus, she continued her sentence. “We’re alone in this house together.”

“That would seem to be the case, yes.”

She’d finally realized it. Her shoulders shook for a moment before she bolted over to the farthest wall, putting as much distance between herself and Naoya as possible.

Obviously, Naoya’s feelings were quite hurt by her actions. “I’m, uh, not gonna do anything. You don’t have to run away, okay?” he tried to reassure her.

“B-But...” she stammered in a thin, high-pitched voice. “Sakuya told me that all men turn into wolves when they manage to get you alone!”

“What kinda prejudice is that?!”

“So that was all a lie?” she asked, seemingly relieved at his denial of Sakuya’s words. “So you hold no desire to do anything lewd right now? That’s good to hear.”

“Uh, well, I mean... Well, you see... Yeah, no desire at all. None.”

“You don’t sound very confident!” she shouted.

He didn’t want to lie to her; if he had said there was no carnal desire in his heart, then that would most certainly have been a lie. Unfortunately, he didn’t have the testicular fortitude to be honest with her at this juncture. As it turned out, his averted eyes gave him away regardless.

“I knew it! You wanna do all the things that Sakuya showed me in those books!”

“Please, this is all just a big misunderstanding! And what kind of books is Sakuya showing you anyway?!”

“Quit trying to get me to say lewd things, you pervert!”

“I dunno—it sounds like you’re more of an expert in this field than me!”
Seriously, what kind of conversations were these sisters having in their house?
Naoya paused, knowing he would make no progress like this. He took a deep breath and continued, “Look, let’s just calm down. I don’t plan on doing anything lik—”

A sharp pain suddenly jolted through his finger. He looked down and saw a trickle of blood leaking from a nick on his finger. He must’ve dropped his knife during the commotion. “Ow...”

“Oh my god—are you okay?!” she cried. Although she had been cowering in a corner just a moment ago, she immediately rushed over to him and looked at his finger. “Oh no, oh no, oh no! What should we do?! Is this my fault?!”

“Nah, it’s okay. Don’t worry. It’s nothing serious,” He simply needed to run it under the tap for a while, stick a bandaid on it, and that would be the end of it.

As he was about to do that, Koyuki grasped his finger and stuck it in her mouth. She sucked on it, looking up at him with puppy eyes, and asked, “Are phu alphright?”

Words failed him. Finally, he barely managed to contain himself enough to sputter, “Y-You really are more lewd than me...”

Still, his finger no longer hurt.

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An hour had passed since then.

“I’m baaack!” a voice called out.

“Hi. Welcome back.”

“What’s with the atmosphere in here? Did something happen?” Kirihiiko asked.

Something must have tipped them off—perhaps it was the fact that Naoya and Koyuki were sitting silently at opposite sides of the room, facing away from each other with matching crimson expressions. Kirihiiko’s face was vacant for a moment, then a teasing smile crept across their features. “Naoya, I thought I

told you no illicit relations in the house.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Naoya protested.

“Hm, I see.”

“Why did I do that?” Koyuki grumbled to herself. She was suffering through a severe bout of self disgust.

Kirihiko nodded in understanding. “I see. It must have been one of those wacky situations where one of you accidentally groped the other, right?”

“Please, Kirihiko. Phrasing,” Naoya admonished them.

“Sorry, occupational hazard. Still, I didn’t realize this sort of thing happened in real life,” they marveled, as if they’d just spotted Bigfoot.

Naoya’s head dropped toward the ground, which led him to glance at his finger. *It was so warm...* he recalled. It *had* been warm, and when she’d spoken with his finger in her mouth, he’d felt her soft tongue. When he thought back over the moment, a numbness tingled through his body, and he had to give his head a shake to wipe such recollections from his mind.

Kirihiko looked at the two of them and surmised that there was no more fun to be had at their expense. “Well, as long as it was relatively tame, then no harm, no foul,” they concluded with a wave. “Oh, by the way, Koyuki—did you finish the book?”

“No, I’m still only halfway through,” she answered.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Kirihiko said as their eyebrows dropped sadly. “Next time you’re here, I’d love to hear your thoughts, okay?”

“That sounds great... Hey, wait,” Koyuki paused to think for a moment. “Are you a fan of this series, too?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“It’s great, isn’t it? This is the first light novel I’ve read, but I’m hooked on it. Fran from the first volume was my favourite—she’s so cute, and...” Koyuki fell silent.

After a short while, she shuffled over to the low table in the middle of the

room and looked at the cover of the second volume. It appeared that she had finally noticed. She looked alternatively between the book and Kirihiko before reading the cover out loud. “Author: Kirihiko Akaneya... You *wrote* this?!”

“Yeah. I could never decide on a pen name, so I just went with my real one,” they answered.

“Sasahara, you have to tell me these things beforehand!”

“I just wanted to see the moment of realization, honestly,” Naoya replied with a faint smile. He couldn’t lie—a small part of the reason he’d brought her to Kirihiko’s place was so he could surprise her with this. Her reaction had been so funny he couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

“Anyway, I’m glad you had a good time today, Koyuki. Come back any time—you’re always welcome,” Kirihiko said with a kind smile. Despite their friendly expression, Naoya spotted their eyes glittering with a mysterious dark intention.

“You just wanna use us to write a romcom, don’t you?” he asked them suspiciously.

“Guilty. Who cares, though. It’s not a big deal, right?” they replied simply.

“Well, Shirogane’s cuteness would be appreciated by the whole country, that’s for sure,” Naoya admitted. “Okay then—in exchange, you let me flirt with her as much as I want. Deal?”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” Kirihiko agreed.

“No he does not!” Koyuki cried as she smacked Naoya hard on the shoulder.

We must look like a married couple right now, Naoya thought quietly to himself.

Chapter Six

The Shirogane Residence

“Well?”

A foreign man with finely chiseled features sat on a sofa in front of Naoya. He was dressed to the nines—although not in a showy way—his silver hair was cut short and neat, and his eyes were sharp and discerning. For all intents and purposes, he looked like he’d just wandered off the set of a mafia movie. Koyuki and Sakuya both stood behind this man and exchanged concerned glances. They both appeared as if they were deciding whether or not to say anything.

“Sasahara, I’m waiting. I would like to hear your answer.”

“Well, uh,” Naoya mumbled, smiling awkwardly at the man. Internally, however, he was cursing the way this day was turning out while simultaneously going over its events. How exactly had it come to this?

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It had all started three days ago. Koyuki and Naoya were having lunch in their school’s courtyard, as always. On that day, however, Sakuya had also joined them.

“I appreciate the invite, but are you sure I’m not in the way?” the younger sister asked.

“Not at all. Actually, there was something I wanted to give you,” Naoya replied.

“Oh?” Sakuya asked as she expectantly watched Naoya rummage through his bag.

He found what he was searching for and passed it to Sakuya. “Here. A signed shikishi—a special art board—from Kirihiko Akaneya.”

“What?” Sakuya’s eyebrows knitted together in a movement so small that most wouldn’t have realized it even happened. Naoya also noted that her breathing had become irregular and that her hands were shaking slightly. She

swallowed lightly and murmured, “This is their handwriting. How did you...?”

“I’m actually related to them,” Naoya explained.

Sakuya was left truly speechless—a rare sight, to be sure.

“Hehehe,” Koyuki couldn’t stifle a small giggle upon seeing that.

Naoya smiled as well as he recalled Koyuki’s reaction to finding out this exact same information. “Shirogane told me that you’re a fan, so I asked them if they could sign something for you. They were totally fine with it.”

“I-Is it really okay for me to have this?”

“Well, yeah. They signed it specifically for you—it’s got your name on it and everything.”

“O-Oh yeah, they did...” she practically gasped, then swallowed audibly. “Am I dreaming? They usually never do signings...”

“Yeah, they’re not too good with that kind of stuff. Actually, do you wanna meet them? They live around here.”

“Are you being serious right now?” She gawked, staring directly at Naoya. Just as quickly, though, the light in her eyes dimmed. “N-No... I’ll pass,” she decided, looking as though she had just made the choice to take a relative off life support. “I’m just a simple fan. I don’t want to be a bother to them while they’re working.”

“I don’t think you gotta worry about that. They’ve already told me that they want to meet you, being that you’re Shirogane’s sister and all.”

“Naoya, to be frank, a mortal gazing upon the countenance of a god generally results in the mortal’s death. As a result, I don’t think I’ll go,” she explained flatly.

“Fair point.”

“A real fan supports their idols from afar,” Sakuya gazed up at the sky with forlorn eyes before breathing a heavy sigh and turning back to Naoya. “Thank you. Really—thank you so much. You’ve gained affection points from me.”

“I did?!” Naoya exclaimed. He didn’t realize that the shikishi would be this

important to her.

“I’m now in your debt. Whatever can I do to repay you? I’ll do anything in my power.”

“There’s no need for that, Sakuya. All I did was bring that to you,” Naoya demurred.

Koyuki butted in somewhat frantically, “Y-Yeah, he’s pretty much the delivery guy. Even a kid could do that, s-so there’s no need to *repay* him for anything, okay?”

“Shirogane, for the last time—I’m not trying to pick up your little sister. Please stop worrying so much about it.”

“What?! Would you *please* stop making weird assumptions about me?!” Koyuki yelled, working herself into a rage.

Sakuya quickly jumped in to interrupt her tantrum. “I ship you two too hard to get involved, Koyuki. Plus, NTR is always a minefield.”

“En-tee-are?” Koyuki sounded it out, confused.

“Please don’t teach her strange terms, Sakuya.”

“She’s *my* sister, you know. Oh, I almost forgot—why don’t you come to our house?”

“Wha?” Naoya asked, confused.

“What?!” Koyuki blurted out a split second later.

It was like a bomb had been dropped in the school courtyard. Sakuya took no notice of their reactions and continued in her normal monotone, “I’m actually quite good at making sweets. If you come to visit, I’ll allow you to gorge yourself on them. Afterward, you can flirt with my sister to your heart's content. How about it?”

“That *is* an enticing offer...” Naoya mused. He had been to their house before, albeit he had only stood in the doorway and then promptly left. Ever since then, he had been waiting for a proper invitation and a chance to return. As much as he would love to accept the one he’d just received, there was an issue that had to be tackled first—Koyuki’s feelings.

“Shirogane, how do you feel about all this?” he asked her.

“Well! I, uh...” she faltered.

“Can I come over to your place?” he pushed. The idea of going to his beloved’s house was enough to set Naoya’s heart aflutter, so he could only imagine the sort of havoc it was wreaking upon Koyuki’s fragile heart.

Koyuki was flustered for a moment before she looked up at Naoya and said in a small voice, “You’re not going to do anything... *lewd*, are you?”

“I will not,” he quickly reaffirmed. He had been trying his hardest to regain her trust ever since the incident at Kirihiro’s house. “It’s true I want to express how much I like you directly and openly, but I also want to take this one step at a time.”

Koyuki sighed in relief at Naoya’s quick response. “Really?”

“Really. I promise I won’t do anything to make you uncomfortable,” he assured. It was true that he was a male highschool student, and that he had wants and desires, but he wasn’t the kind of person to trample on another person’s feelings just to get what he wanted. He wanted to treat her right—that much was plainly obvious to him.

Sakuya, for her part, actually seemed to be somewhat disappointed. “I think you could stand to be a bit more aggressive, actually. You’re gonna end up like one of those beta males at this rate.”

“What? You’re the one who told her not to be alone with men.”

“I did tell her that,” Sakuya confirmed with a blank expression. “But what I meant was, ‘Don’t be alone without me there—I want to burn your embarrassed and vulnerable expression into my eyeballs.’”

“That’s what you meant?! Unfortunately, I don’t think I’m gonna be doing anything like that!”

“No, it’s just... I wanna see the perverted sides of my ship too, that’s all,” Sakuya pouted cutely in contrast to her rather adult words. Naoya could tell that Koyuki was confused about what her sister was talking about once again—for this, he was glad.

Koyuki cleared her throat and then declared in a resolute tone, “Fine. You can come.”

“G-Got it. Thanks.” Her nervousness must have rubbed off on Naoya, as he nodded awkwardly. He found himself wondering if he would end up in her room when he went over and what exactly it would be like. She had mentioned that she had lots of plushies, and—in his mind—her room probably smelled great. She definitely favored beds over futons. They’d sit next to each other on the bed before Naoya would lightly place his hand on her shoulder and push her down—*Earth to Naoya! Weren’t you just literally saying you wouldn’t do anything like that?!*

He shook his head to exorcise the lust demons. It seemed as if Koyuki wasn’t the only one who was getting caught up in wild fantasies.

“Is Saturday all right? I’m gonna make lots of sweets, so I’ll need you to help me out, Koyuki,” Sakuya said.

“Fine. I’ll have to let Mom know, too...” Koyuki trailed off as something occurred to her. Her face then turned white as a sheet. “This Saturday, Dad’s probably going to be home...”

“Oh. Oh yeah...” Sakuya murmured, some unspoken understanding having occurred between the sisters.

Naoya was confused. “What’s that about your dad?”

“Well, uh, our dad is, um...” Koyuki meandered while she searched for the words to explain. “He’s not a helicopter parent, but he’s got about as much brain power as a helicopter.”

“He’s protective. Like *really* protective. Like giga-ultra protective,” Sakuya insisted.

“I see...”

The sisters both shared grim expressions, which made Naoya shift around unconsciously.

“Our dad fell in love with our mom at first sight while she was overseas on a trip. He pursued her like crazy and eventually moved to Japan with her.”

“Wait, your dad’s a foreigner?”

“That’s right, although he’s basically Japanese already. He was naturalized, married my mom, and her family basically adopted him.”

“Wow, sounds like something out of a movie,” Naoya commented.

“They’re both still in their honeymoon phase—it makes even us uncomfortable.”

Naoya could tell that, despite the sisters’ grumblings, their father really loved his family. Apparently, he had a wall of photos in his study, and at night, he would get drunk and perform elaborate rituals with the intention of cursing his daughters’ future spouses. He had also been out of the country frequently as of late, and that distance had only made his heart grow fonder.

Sakuya gazed at Naoya’s face as she rubbed her chin, deep in thought. “If we tell him you’re Koyuki’s boyfriend, you’re probably not going to make it out of there with all your limbs...”

“He’s not my boyfriend, Sakuya. But yeah, it would probably be bad,” Koyuki surmised as she regarded Naoya. “What are you gonna do? He’s most likely not gonna be here next week, so we could wait until then.”

“No,” Naoya stated after a pause. Although he was reluctant to be torn from limb to limb, just as any sane person would be, it was the matter of the principle. He was going to have to meet her parents sooner or later, and he didn’t want to run away from that. “I want to meet him properly, I think.”

“I see,” Koyuki replied. She actually looked relieved by Naoya’s response. He could tell that she had been looking forward to having him come over and didn’t want to wait an extra week. This only served to stoke the fire of determination in his heart even more. As if ignorant to Naoya’s inner turmoil, Koyuki hummed happily to herself. “If Daddy actually does break you in half or something, I’ll look after you afterward, okay?”

“Wait, wait—what kind of ‘looking after’ are we talking about? This only makes me want to come more.”

“L-Like patting you on the head and stuff.”

“Roger. I’ll make sure to get pounded hard.”

“No way... My ship is flirting here, right before my eyes... Now this is progress,” Sakuya added, expressionless as always. The shutter on her phone’s camera punctuated the silence between her words.

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The fateful Saturday had finally arrived.

Naoya stepped off the bus, having arrived at the nearest station to the Shirogane residence, and basked in the lovely weather.

It was still quite early in the morning, so most places, save convenience stores and the like, were still closed. Despite that, there was still a good deal of foot traffic—probably because he was so close to a residential area. He could still remember the area, given that he had walked Koyuki home not too long ago. This time, however, he was incredibly nervous. To him, it felt like he had disembarked a plane in a foreign country.

“Man, I hope the gift I got is okay,” Naoya wondered out loud as he shot a concerned glance at the refrigerated bag he was holding.

Inside it was chikuzenni—a dish made with braised chicken and vegetables. Koyuki had recommended he make it for her father, specifying that he should “boil the heck” out of the carrots. Naoya was skeptical about whether or not Mr. Shirogane, a foreigner, would actually enjoy chikuzenni, but he did as he was told. This girl was the object of his affections, after all.

He looked up at the sky and prayed, “I just hope this goes well.” He knew that he was going in at a disadvantage. As he was an undesirable suitor for Mr. Shirogane’s daughter, he would be fighting an uphill battle. The question now was how he would make it up said hill. He ran through multiple simulations in his head until he caught himself and stopped.

A wry, self-deprecating smile rose to his lips. “Who would’ve ever thought I’d be worrying so much about social interaction like this?”

Before he had met Shirogane, he would have been annoyed by the prospect of overthinking a situation like this. He had always preferred to simply throw himself into the midst, regardless of the outcome. He had gone from

purposefully keeping others at arm's length to worrying about how to make a stranger like him. If you had told this to him just a short while ago, he wouldn't have believed you.

"I guess Shirogane isn't the only one who's changed," he noted. Love changes people—it was a cliché, but one that Naoya was now strongly convinced of. He could feel it in his chest. "I guess this isn't so bad."

While he was musing to himself, however, a sudden commotion caught his attention.

"It'll only take a minute! Come on!"

"Come have tea with us, cutie!"

"You lot... Leave me alone! I have a loving wife and two beautiful children at home!" A man cried out among a gaggle of attractive, college-aged girls. He was tall and well dressed, and, although Naoya could only see his back, he could somehow tell he wasn't Japanese. The man was being surrounded at all sides, cornered against a wall. He seemed to be overwhelmed and unable to escape.

Naoya was reminded of the earlier situation at the game center involving Sakuya and Koyuki. That time, the genders had been reversed, but what difference did that make? There was a person in front of him who was in trouble. Naoya took a deep breath, plastered a fake smile on his face, and headed over to the man.

"Sorry I'm late!" he declared with a false jovial tone.

"Hm?" The man turned to him. He had chiseled features and blue eyes—he was a foreigner after all.

Naoya continued, "Sorry, sorry. I missed my train on the way here. Now let's get going."

"Who are—?"

"Sorry about that, ladies, but we'll be going now," Naoya cut the man off and started to lead him away from the group. Unfortunately, an arm shot out and grabbed him. Naoya turned around and saw that the ravenous look in women's eyes hadn't died—if anything, it had only grown stronger.

“Heeeeyyy... You’re pretty cute too. You a highschooler?” one of them asked him.

“Why don’t the two of you come have fun with us?”

“Uh, I’ll pass. I’ve already got someone I like,” Naoya replied.

“Don’t be like that. Look—she’s got a boyfriend, and she’s still out here having fun.”

“Yeah, kid, you’ve gotta live in the moment,” another one chimed in.

These girls were actually quite cute; too bad for them that Naoya only had eyes for Koyuki. He quickly formulated an escape plan; it wasn’t going to be pretty, but he was pretty confident that it would work. He turned to a woman near him with colorful hair and said, “Oh yeah, can I tell you something?”

“What is it?” she replied.

“The girl next to you is probably seeing your boyfriend behind your back. Did you know that?”

“Wha?!” she managed to reply, clearly dubious and taken aback by what he’d just said.

The girl in question, however, looked alarmed and quickly blurted out, “How did you know?! Did you see us together last time we went out?!”

“Um, what the fuck?! D’you wanna explain that maybe?!”

“Tomo doesn’t need you! And you’re out here slutting it up behind his back anyway!”

“Uh, who *exactly* is the slut here?!”

The place quickly devolved into a cacophony of high-pitched screams and insults.

Naoya chose this moment to escape. “Okay, time to leave now,” he instructed the man. He took his hand and began to lead him away.

“Who are you?” the man asked, but Naoya didn’t reply. Once they’d gotten a safe distance away, the man seemed to calm down. He heaved a sigh, collected himself, then bowed to Naoya. “Thank you—you helped me out of a tight spot.

Still, how did you manage to do that? How did you figure out that her boyfriend was cheating?”

“I didn’t really reason it out or anything like that. I’m just good at reading people, I guess,” he answered. It had been a lucky guess, really—he noticed the girl’s friend appeared nervous, as if she was in on a secret the other didn’t know, and had simply taken a shot in the dark. He hadn’t expected it to go that well.

I feel like I’ve met this guy somewhere before, though, Naoya thought. He regarded the man once again. His deeply set features, blue eyes, and proficient Japanese indicated that he was a foreigner who had been here for a long time. He looked to be in his 30s... No, his 40s. Naoya knew they had never met before, but there was still something oddly familiar about him. Thinking nothing of it, Naoya turned to leave. “Okay, I’ll see yo—”

“Wait!” the man cried and quickly took Naoya’s hand before he could leave. “Allow me to thank you in some way. At least let me treat you to some tea.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that. You’d’ve done the same for me,” Naoya demurred.

“My, to think there are youngsters as modest and gallant as you in this day and age,” the man marveled, overcome with emotion. He took his hat off in a show of respect, revealing a swath of shortly cropped silver hair underneath. “Please. I will never be able to rest well again if I don’t thank you properly. Just a short moment of your time will suffice.”

Naoya felt guilty at this display; to refuse him now would be incredibly cruel. He had arrived somewhat early, so he had some time to spare. Still, there was a rather large problem that remained unaddressed.

This guy’s Shirogane’s dad! He has to be! Did he come simply to scout his daughter’s suitor?! Foreigners were no longer a rarity in this day and age. Just because he shared Koyuki’s hair and eye color, it didn’t signify with certainty that he was her father. Even so, his gut was telling him that this was the man himself. *Should I tell him who I am? How should I do it?*

The man grasped Naoya’s hand, interrupting his thoughts, and began to lead him away. “Come!” he directed. “We should hurry. The cafe I frequent is

nearby. I'll treat you there."

"O-Okay," Naoya faltered. They ended up at their destination before he had even had a chance to introduce himself.

The cafe was situated across from the front of the station. The interior was small, but cozy, with calming classical music being played at a low volume. The customers sat around, enjoying their time in their own various ways, such as reading newspapers and eating breakfast.

Naoya and the man chose a booth and sat opposite each other.

"What do you think?" the man asked expectantly.

"I'm not too used to places like this, but I like it. It's nice," Naoya replied.

"You have good taste, my boy," the man remarked with a widening smile—actually, he hadn't stopped smiling since they'd escaped the women.

Okay, let's get things straight. We don't know for sure that it's her dad. But it's gotta be... Naoya attempted to reassure himself. He was 99 percent sure it was him, but it was that lingering 1 percent that scared him. And if it *was* him, he had to be even more careful of what he said.

Incidentally, he'd saved almost every member of this family from unwelcome advances—what were the chances of that? Furthermore, what was the likelihood that Naoya would end up going for tea with Koyuki's father, of all people? Naoya shivered as a chill and cold sweats racked his body.

The man, on the other hand, was positively beaming as he looked over the menu. "The cakes here are all superb. What kind would you like? Order anything you'd like."

"Th-Thank you, but..." Naoya stuttered.

"What is it?"

"Thank you for bringing me here, but are you sure this won't eat into your plans after this?"

"What plans? I don't have anything of the sort," the man stated. For the first time since they had arrived, his smile disappeared. After they had both stated their orders to the waitress—a cake set each—the man set his hands on the

table with a grim expression and explained further, “You see, my daughter’s boyfriend is coming to our home today. I came to the station ahead of time to ascertain what sort of man he is. I don’t know what he looks like, but he should be a young lad—around your age, actually. I was doing some scouting, you see.”

“Oh, wow...”

“There is nothing to be ‘wow’ed about—I would do anything for my precious daughter!” the man cried and took a passionate sip of his coffee. Well, this was most certainly Koyuki’s father.

God, I wish I was one of those bumbling, thick-skulled light novel protags right now, Naoya lamented to himself. If he were, he wouldn’t be bound by knots of fear, and he could actually enjoy his cake. Unfortunately, he was still very much Naoya, and thus he needed to figure out a course of action.

Naoya was good at reading people—not just their general emotions, but also how they felt toward him. Sometimes he liked to assign a number on a scale based on how much favor he held with someone—an affection meter, if you will. Koyuki, even though she herself would never admit it, was at around a full 100. Yui and Tatsumi would be at about 70, and those with no interest in him would be pretty much zero. So where did that place the man? Naoya stared directly into his eyes to ascertain his affection level.

“Um, is there something on my face?” the man asked in a perplexed voice.

“No, no. I was just thinking... You’re a foreigner, aren’t you? That’s so cool.”

“Haha, you’re simply flattering this old man,” the man replied with a wide grin. “But what truly defines a ‘cool’ man is their ability to help those in need. Someone like you, my boy, is the purest definition of ‘cool.’”

“Oh no, please. Anyone would’ve done what I did,” Naoya faltered.

“Modesty is a virtue, my boy, but you should also know when to accept praise,” the man advised him with a warm smile. Naoya smiled awkwardly back.

This man was probably at around 70 on the meter—very high for a first meeting.

Oh god! I’m buttering up her dad, and he doesn’t even know who I am! Naoya

resolved to come clean and tell the man who he really was. He attempted to steel his resolve, but a question suddenly popped in his head—one that took the forefront over confessing the truth. “Um, what were you planning to do to your daughter’s boyfriend if you found him?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” the man’s eyes narrowed harshly. Paired with his handsome face and sharp features, it gave him the look of a seasoned military man. Was he planning on giving him a stern warning to leave his daughter alone? To drive him away before their relationship progressed any further? Naoya couldn’t help but see this man as the very picture of a stubborn, overprotective parent.

However, the man replied by sighing and hiding his face behind his hands. “I likely would have just ran away,” he mumbled feebly.

“Ran away?! Why?!”

“‘Why?!’ Because I have no idea how to greet my daughter’s boyfriend, of course!” the man cried out, on the verge of tears.

Naoya hadn't been expecting the man’s strange reaction, but it also wasn’t entirely unfamiliar. *He really is Shirogane’s father, after all*, he mused. “I’m honestly surprised. I expected you to want to drive him away or something.”

“Well, that was certainly one option! I don’t want just anyone dating my wonderful daughter! But it was also the one thing I simply couldn’t do,” the man quickly deflated as he spoke. “She’s looking forward to him coming so much. She woke up early this morning, you see, and she’s been cleaning the house and baking cookies with her sister all day.”

“Oh...” Naoya replied. He had to stifle a dumb, sappy smile that was dangerously close to plastering his features. As they had left school yesterday, Koyuki had said, *“Don’t expect some big welcome, okay? You can eat your cookies and go.”* Naoya knew she hadn’t been entirely upfront back then, but still—he hadn’t expected anything like this.

Sadly, Naoya’s lifted spirits were soon to be crushed by her father’s next words.

“On top of that, it’s been ages since she’s invited anyone to our house, and I

couldn't possibly deny her that. She had friends in elementary school, but at some point, she seems to have lost them. She used to spend all day inside, alone, reading by herself. Recently, however, something has changed—she's brightened up, she's excited to go to school, and she's always out on the weekends. It has to be because of her boyfriend," the man explained as his gaze fell to the table. His voice was quiet, and it had mixed shades of relief, happiness, and regret. He sipped his coffee before continuing, "My daughter is brilliant. For her to accept this boy must mean that he's truly an amazing person..."

"So you don't have the courage to meet him," Naoya observed.

"Yes," he replied quietly after a brief pause.

"That's very honest of you to admit," Naoya commended. He thought to himself, *If I was to tell him who I am, would he reverse his thinking?* He knew that he would be seeing a lot of this man for the foreseeable future, so he couldn't afford to leave a bad impression. Although he decided to hold his tongue for now, he knew he would still have to tell him sooner or later. His back was soaked with sweat as he sat there with his thoughts swirling around in his head. *It's just a matter of timing...*

The man hung his head low and confessed, "I brought you here to thank you, but in truth, I also wanted someone to talk to. Thank you. I'm sorry for bothering you with this."

"No, no—I'm happy to listen to anything you have to say!" Naoya quickly assured him.

"You are a kind boy," the man said with a soft smile. Naoya could sense the man's affection score soar from 70 to 80. If this were a video game, he knew he would've just gotten a message saying, *"He will remember your words."*

On the outside, Naoya was calm, but his mind was a mess of jumbled thoughts and crossed wires. His hands trembled lightly while he sipped on his coffee.

The man looked at him, then frowned. "Forgive me—are your plans not being interrupted? I did drag you here without much discussion..."

“No, I still have time,” Naoya replied as he checked his watch to confirm. He had about an hour before Koyuki was supposed to come and meet him at the station. Naoya wasn’t really worried about waiting; he was just uncertain whether or not his heart could take much more of this.

Suddenly, it occurred to him that the topic of conversation had shifted, which provided him the perfect opportunity to come clean. Naoya placed all of his hope into the man understanding the meaning of his next statement. “I’m actually visiting the house of a girl I like after this.”

“Oh, really? What a coincidence,” the man replied with a raised eyebrow. He took a neat bite from his cheesecake, completely oblivious to Naoya’s implication. Naoya felt his heart sink. The man asked him in a hushed, embarrassed voice, “So you must be quite nervous too, correct?”

“Oh yeah. I’m very nervous right now. Very, *very* nervous.” This was not a lie in the slightest. “But if I run away now, I’ll never get anywhere. I’ll approach her parents honestly and openly.”

“But her parents, especially her father, might not be so welcoming,” the man warned.

“That’s true, but I’ll just have to deal with that if it happens. I’ll meet and speak with them as many times as it takes for them to accept me.”

“You have guts,” the man admired. He took a pause to down the rest of his coffee, then sighed with downcast eyes. “But what you’re saying does make sense. I need to prepare myself. I will meet my daughter’s boyfriend openly and honestly, as well. You’ve helped me today, so I can’t exactly run from my fears in front of you, can I?”

“Please...” Naoya smiled awkwardly, to which the man replied with a playful wink. He straightened up in his seat. The conversation was entering its final stages now—he had to say something now, or he’d miss his chance. “There’s something I have to tell you, actually...”

“What is it? Would you like a second serving of cake?”

“No, it’s something serious,” Naoya replied. He took a deep breath, readied himself, and blurted out, “I’m actually—”

“There you are!” a voice called out from the entrance.

“Huh?!” Naoya gasped. The shock had made him bite his tongue. In the end, he never managed to confess. His head whipped around, and he spotted a familiar figure—it was, of course, Koyuki.

For the special occasion, she had changed into a black dress that was neatly adorned with flower designs. Several dainty flower ornaments also crowned her head, completing the look. It was, for all intents and purposes, a prim and proper spring look. *Wow, her outfit's totally different from before, but still really cute*, Naoya marveled, awestruck by her beauty.

The man may have been even more dumbfounded than Naoya. “Koyuki! What are you doing here?!”

“Mom told me to come get you. ‘Go bring that scaredy cat back’—her words exactly. I figured you’d be here, and it looks like I was right.”

“I should’ve known. Could you give me a minute though, dear? I’m having an important conversation with this young man,” her father answered.

“Wha?” Koyuki blurted out.

“I’ll spare you the details, but he helped me in my hour of need. He is a good man. Your so-called ‘boyfriend’ could learn a thing or two from him, I’m sure.”

“Daddy, what are you talking about?” Koyuki tilted her head in confusion. “That’s my boyfriend there. That’s Naoya.”

“He’s what?” the man replied, whipping his head back to the boy in question.

“Nice to meet you,” Naoya replied feebly, placing his head on the table in a makeshift bow.

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And just a little while later...

“Now, let’s try this again. Allow me to introduce myself.”

“Yes...” Naoya faltered.

He found himself in the living room of the Shirogane residence, sitting across from Koyuki’s father. He’d only made it to the foyer the first time he’d stepped

foot in the house, but the rest of it was just as—if not more—palatial than he'd expected. The ceilings were high, and the walls were decorated with tasteful artwork and ornaments. The sofa he was sitting on was so comfortable that he could imagine taking a nap on it and waking up perfectly rested. At that moment, however, he had not the time, nor the brain capacity to appreciate such things.



“My name is Howard K. Shirogane. Shirogane is from my wife.”

“I’m Naoya Sasahara,” Naoya greeted with an obedient bow.

Behind Howard, Koyuki and Sakuya exchanged quiet words. They didn’t appear to understand the situation. “So Naoya was having tea with him? Does that mean they’re already getting along well?”

“I don’t know... Daddy said something about Sasahara helping him out.”

For Naoya’s part, he was incredibly nervous—so much so that he couldn’t meet her father’s eyes. To make matters worse, he couldn’t read his emotions... or rather, he didn’t need to. *He’s gotta be so pissed!* he freaked out internally. “I’m sorry, Mr. Shirogane! I should’ve told you from the start, but I didn—”

“How dare you refer to me by name!” Howard interrupted him with a shout. Naoya’s shoulders drooped before Howard continued, “You will refer to me as ‘Father!’”

“Yes, I’m sorry for my rudeness. Please forgi—wait, what?” Naoya paused, dumbfounded. A strange sensation was brewing in his chest. Raising his head, he tested out the words. “Thank you... Father?”

“Yes. That’s better.”

“Is it?!” Naoya cried. This was different from Sakuya treating Naoya like a big brother—worlds apart, even. It seemed as though the 80 affection points that Naoya had built up at the cafe were starting to pay off.

“It’s only natural that you wouldn’t feel comfortable telling me while I was blathering on about who I was. My apologies,” Howard said.

“N-No, I should apologize for talking so openly,” Naoya faltered.

“Nonsense! I think it’s wonderful that you are able to state your opinions so clearly at such a young age! You need not apologize!”

“What the heck is happening?!” Koyuki blurted out.

“Don’t ask me, Koyuki...” Sakuya mumbled.

The sisters looked on at the two, incredulous.

“I thought many times while we were in the cafe, ‘It would be nice if Koyuki’s

boyfriend was like you.’ I now know I can leave Koyuki in your hands without worry. Still, there are some things I would like to ask before we continue,” Howard stated.

“Yes, anything,” Naoya gulped. It was starting to become like an interview.

“Do you mind if I ask you how many people are in your family?”

“Um, there’s me, and my mom and dad. I have two grandparents who live out in the country, but that’s about it.”

“In other words, you are an only child?” Howard observed. He put his hand to his jaw and thought aloud, “Well, that does make it hard for Koyuki to be adopted into your household after marriage then, doesn’t it?”

“Wait, what?!” Naoya cried.

Howard ignored him and carried on, “Then how about this—after you are married, you will live here, or somewhere near here! I won’t accept any less for my daughter!”

“Daddy, what are you talking about?!” Koyuki protested.

“Silence, Koyuki! The men are talking!” Howard shouted. Despite the typical stubborn father line, Naoya could tell the man was steadily warming up to him as things progressed. As happy as he was about that fact, the conversation was moving entirely too fast for his liking.

“Well? Sasahara, I’m waiting. I would like to hear your answer.”

“Well, uh, I still haven’t really decided on my career path after highschool, and I don’t want to make a promise like this lightly, so...”

“What a conscientious young man you are!” Howard commended him, seemingly pleased by the response. And just like that, he was up to 90 affection points.

“Can I ask something, Sasahara?” a light, playful voice rose from the direction of the kitchen, and a small woman emerged. She looked incredibly youthful, but Naoya had been able to tell immediately that she was Koyuki’s mother. He’d met her earlier when he’d handed over the chikuzenni he’d made to her. “Sorry to put you in a tight spot, but I wanted to ask if it’s all right if we try the food

you made now?”

“Go ahead. I don’t know if it’s any good though.”

“Don’t be silly! I tried some earlier, and the chikuzenni is divine!” she replied happily.

“Did you just say chikuzenni?!” Howard shouted and flew at Naoya. Naoya flinched, expecting an impact, but it never came. When he opened his eyes, he found that Howard had taken his hand in his. “That was the first Japanese dish I ever made for my lovely wife, Misora! You can make that too?! I knew you were destined to be my son-in-law!”

The affection meter reached 99 percent, and a virtual fanfare erupted forth in the imaginary game in Naoya’s mind. If this had been a dating sim, Naoya would have unlocked a charming CG, or something along those lines. But this was reality, and all he was treated to was Howard’s beaming face uncomfortably close to his.

“You’re staying for dinner tonight! We’ll discuss all our future plans for you as my son!” Howard declared.

“Hey, he’s my guest, Daddy! Don’t hog him all to yourself!” Koyuki protested.

“Here’re some cookies, Naoya. I made some cakes, too, so feel free to help yourself to those,” Sakuya butted in.

“Can you speak one at a time, please?” Naoya cried.

At some point during this commotion, a cat with a mean glare had curled itself up on Naoya’s knees. It was Gizzard—the cat that utterly dominated Koyuki’s phone album. Naoya tentatively stroked Gizzard while the family erupted into a shouting match with each other over his attention.

After a moment, Koyuki’s mother noticed Naoya. “Oh my! King Gizzard doesn’t normally like new people! You’re doing well today, Naoya!”

“Ahaha... You’re too kind,” he faltered.

And thus, Naoya had succeeded in making the entire Shirogane residence fall for him.

Chapter Seven

Impulse

Naoya and Koyuki's relationship had deepened.

They spoke about all sorts of things and went to all sorts of places together. The more Naoya came to know her, the more he liked her. It was only a matter of time before they reached a particularly important juncture in their relationship.

"So my parents aren't home today..." Koyuki mentioned as they made their way to school.

With those simple words, Naoya stopped dead in his tracks, stone faced—it was like a colossal hammer had just fallen to earth. "Come again?" he blurted out.

Koyuki continued walking for a moment before she realized Naoya wasn't alongside her. She whipped around and quickly added, "Ah! Whoa, hold on a minute! Sakuya and Gizzard are gonna be there, okay?!"

"O-Oh. Oh yeah. They would be, wouldn't they? Wouldn't they..."

"Ew, he said it twice," Koyuki muttered in disgust.

Naoya thought for a moment about how he had misunderstood what she'd said—a rare occasion for him. Very interesting. "I guess Shirogane's airheadedness is rubbing off on me," he thought out loud.

"Airheaded? Excuse you," Koyuki pouted. "You're the one who's always staring off into space. Don't blame it on me. And I'm *not* airheaded."

"Do non-airheads burn their cookies to ash and then serve them to their guests?"

"Hey! The oven's timer was brok—anyway! You said they were delicious!"

"Well, yeah. You made them for me. I'd happily eat anything made by you, even if it's charcoal."

"I wouldn't recommend disclosing that with me, to be honest," Koyuki

grumbled before relenting.

Naoya's visit to the Shirogane residence had gone incredibly well, all things considered.

He'd eaten vaguely cookie-shaped cinders, ingratiated himself with Koyuki's parents, and stayed for dinner. In the end, he was seen off with the promise that he was welcome back any time.

Unfortunately, because Naoya and Koyuki had been in her living room the entire time, there hadn't been any opportunity for any flirtation or any developments like that. Although this had disappointed Naoya, he had to begrudgingly acknowledge that they weren't exactly going out yet. Maybe. Kind of.

The amount of distance they had between them was comfortable, in a sense; he didn't exactly have to do anything major, but he still got to be with Koyuki all the time. It was also precisely because he knew this, however, that he felt like he had to shake things up soon. But what exactly would he do? And how—not to mention when and where—would he do it?

He was well aware he'd gotten carried away at the crepe shop. When he had confessed to her back then, she had—quite literally—run away from him. He knew that if the timing or setting was off, the same thing would only repeat itself. He quietly mulled these ideas over while he resumed walking.

Koyuki carried on as if she hadn't realized he'd stopped. "Anyway, as I was saying—my parents are staying with some relatives tonight, so me and Sakuya are looking after the house. So, um, yeah. My parents suggested that we invite you over to cook dinner for us."

"Whoa, they're already treating me like a son. Awesome," Naoya commented with a serious expression.

Koyuki saw this and appeared to get the wrong idea, replying with palpable disappointment, "Oh, okay then. Yeah, asking you to come over out of the blue isn't fair. It's fine. You don't have to come."

"What? There's literally no problem at all, though," Naoya said incredulously. "I don't have work today, and we're all off tomorrow. I'd love to come over and

flex my househusband skills.”

“Really?” Koyuki’s face lit up. It seemed that she wasn’t exactly comfortable with the idea of her and her sister being alone in the house. Her gait grew lighter, and as she skipped along, she added confidently, “Okay, so we’ll go shopping on the way home. I’ve already made a budget, just so you know.”

“Got it. Since this is such a special occasion, I’m willing to take requests if you have any.”

“Hmm...” Koyuki thought for a moment, then fixed her hair absentmindedly and struck a refined pose. “Well, the last time I took a trip to France, I had a *delightful* foie gras dish that was accompanied by truffles. It was absolutely exquisite.”

“Don’t lie, Shirogane,” he cut in. “You probably want something like curry, hamburger, or spaghetti and meatballs, right?”

“How do you have me figured out *this* much?! We’ve never even had curry together!” she protested, apparently having forgotten that she’d happily announced, “I had curry last night!” just a few days ago. “That’s so embarrassing. Those are all kiddy meals...”

“I mean, who cares?” Naoya said.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he assured her with a pat on the head. “You can like plushies, curry, or anything else as much as you want, because that’s who Koyuki Shirogane is. Not being yourself would be a waste.”

“Maybe...” Koyuki demurred with a downtrodden expression. Suddenly, she seemed to realize what was happening and quickly batted Naoya’s hand away in irritation. “Hey! I don’t need *your* recognition! Who do you think you are?! Still... do you like curry, Sasahara?”

“Of course. It’s easier to make than the elaborate, fancy dishes people love to post on social media or whatever,” Naoya responded. Then, with a gentle smile, he added, “So yeah, let’s go with curry tonight. Will Sakuya be fine with that?”

Koyuki couldn’t help but think that Naoya really did resemble a mom at times.

“She loves curry too. I doubt she’ll object.”

“Nice. Let’s do it.”

“Um...” Koyuki faltered, stopping to grip the edge of Naoya’s sleeve. “I wasn’t really able to help out last time, so I’m gonna do my best today.”

“Th-Thanks. I’ll be counting on you,” Naoya replied awkwardly, his heart beating loudly in his chest.

Koyuki decided to change the subject and began talking about curry. She enjoyed the type you ate with naan, but her favorite was vegetable curry. As she was mentioning that she wasn’t too good with the spicy versions, Naoya looked at her face in profile. He noticed that, in that moment, she was truly at ease and was finally being herself.

I’m glad we get along better now than we did, he noted with appreciation. They talked all the time, he’d already been to her house, and they were able to relax around each other. He could tell that Koyuki trusted him. Naoya cleared his throat, steeled his resolve, and called out, “Shirogane.”

“What’s up?” she asked.

“I really like—”

“Wha?!” Koyuki screamed over him, then patted her chest several times as though to calm herself down. “Oh, I know—you were gonna say you like curry, right? Hahaha...”

Her face was beet red as she laughed nervously. She didn’t know what to do. Still, Naoya could spot traces of happiness amidst her embarrassment. He could tell that she’d been hoping he’d been talking about her. His feelings had gotten through to her, even if only slightly. Naoya recalled telling her he’d confess when he felt the timing was right, when she felt receptive to his advances. Well, the time had finally come.

“Shirogane.”

“Wh-What’s up?” Koyuki asked again, looking up at Naoya anxiously.

He took her hand and gripped it tightly, trying to get his feelings across as earnestly as possible. “I’m going to do my best from now on, too. And when it’s

time, I want you to accept it fully.”

“Wow, this curry sounds like it’s gonna be complex,” Koyuki said, more puzzled than before.

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After school, the two headed to the shopping mall they’d visited on their previous date. It was packed with housewives trying to take advantage of limited-time sales—a veritable battleground of bargains.

Koyuki and Naoya armed themselves with a cart and prepared for battle.

“We should probably buy vegetables first, right?” Koyuki spoke up. She was in charge of pushing the cart, and her excitement for the night's curry put a childish spring in her step.

“Yeah...” Naoya added absentmindedly.

Unlike his love interest, he was somewhere else mentally. *So I’m going to confess to her. But how?* That incident in the crepe store was still fresh in his mind. He knew that if he came on too strong, he’d just end up pushing her away. He needed to come up with something nicer, something gentler. He’d never confessed to anyone in his life, and he could tell Koyuki was a bit of a romantic. Naoya felt his lack of experience like a knife to his ribs. The more he thought about it, the more he spiralled into useless worrying. *Maybe I should wait till the evening when we have a view of the city or something... Or maybe I should give her a present. Would a plushie work? Nah, not the right occasion.*

Before he’d realized it, they had reached the vegetable corner.

Koyuki put a finger to her chin and pondered, “So for curry, we’ll probably need onions, carrots, and... potatoes.” With that, she began to search for the ingredients and placed whatever she came across in the cart.

That made Naoya snap back to reality. “Wait.”

“What is it?” Koyuki stopped, a large bag of potatoes in hand.

“Those potatoes are Irish Cobblers. You’ve gotta use May Queens when you’re making curry,” he informed her.

“May Queen?! We’re gonna put a *cat* in the curry?!”

“That’s *Maine Coon*. May Queens are a type of potato that don’t fall apart as easily. They’re perfect for curry.”

Koyuki obediently placed the rounder potatoes back and picked up the lengthier, oblong May Queens that were next to them. She was clearly impressed by his breadth of potato knowledge. “Whoa, I didn’t realize there was such a big difference between them. Is that something your mom taught you?”

“Maybe... I might’ve looked it up myself, though,” he replied. There was a pause in their conversation as they added garlic and ginger to the cart—used to add depth to the curry as well as to mask the smell of meat in it—before he continued, “I learned most of what I know just from trial and error.”

“I guess experience is the most important thing, after all,” Koyuki noted.

“Exactly. That’s why you shouldn’t worry about the ash cookies from the other day—that was something to learn from,” he reaffirmed.

Koyuki’s shoulders dropped at having been reminded of her failure. “Still, if you mess up, it’s just a waste of ingredients. I’d hate that.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll eat anything you make. Literally anything.”

“O-Okay then...” she faltered, but his statement actually seemed to boost her confidence. “If you end up dying prematurely because of my food, then I’m sorry, but it’s all in the name of improving my cooking abilities.”

“Got it. Let’s see what you’ve got today, then.”

“Hahaha, I’m already a pro when it comes to peeling vegetables,” she boasted.

They bantered back and forth while they added the rest of their ingredients to the cart. They selected meat, roux, and fukujinzuke—pickled vegetables in a sweet soy sauce mixture—for good measure.

“We missing anything?” Naoya asked.

“Hm... Ah!” Koyuki exclaimed, then immediately grew sheepish. “Um, Mom and Dad said I could buy some candy if I wanted...”

“Oh. Sure then. We’ll go get whatever you want.”

“Okay! Let’s go!” Koyuki exclaimed, all smiles as she rushed over to the candy section with Naoya in tow. She quickly found what she was searching for: a box of sweets that Naoya remembered eating a lot as a kid. “These, these! The animal biscuits! I love how they draw the rabbits and the bears on them! They’re so cute! Oh, but I do feel a bit bad when I eat them... But then they’re so delicious that I can’t stop. And—are you okay, Sasahara?”

“N-Nah, it’s nothing. Nothing at all,” he replied as nonchalantly as possible.

“If you want something too, just tell me, okay?”

Somehow, Naoya managed to make it through the shopping trip without dying from cuteness overload.

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They arrived at the Shirogane residence around 6:00PM.

It took them about an hour to make the curry, and before they knew it, dinner was ready. Everyone stood and marveled at the steaming dishes of curry. Even Gizzard, whom Sakuya was holding, let out a meow of approval.

“This looks amazing,” Sakuya murmured.

“Jeez, Sakuya, you could’ve helped us a little bit. Me and Sasahara ended up doing everything ourselves. Those who didn’t pitch in don’t deserve to eat,” Koyuki complained with a pout while she set the table.

“I just didn’t want to intrude on your private time, that’s all.”

“You just wanted to laze around! And you’re always getting away with it just ‘cause you’re the youngest!” Koyuki protested, adding some half-hearted grumbles under her breath.

Sakuya didn’t reply; instead, she waited for Naoya to come out of the kitchen, turned to him, and asked, “Naoya, could you translate what she just said, please?”

““Good job, Sakuya! He taught me to use a knife, and it was just the two of us alone together! I’ll definitely be giving you a cat biscuit later!” Or something like that, I guess,” Naoya explained in a mock falsetto.

“Hey! No translation at the table!” Koyuki protested.

The banter continued until the table was set.

Koyuki looked dubiously at the large slices of carrots floating in the roux and said in a disappointed tone, “I guess we *did* cut them too big, after all.”

“It’s fine. I like them this way,” Naoya quickly added to cover for her. He had peeled the vegetables, but had then handed them over to her to cut up. She’d managed to make it through the prep without cutting herself, which he was grateful for. Even chopping the vegetables without incident was plenty of work for a new cook, and so he’d handled the rest.

His praise seemed to have been effective, because she proudly exclaimed, “Hah! I guess I don’t even have to try to be perfect!”

Naoya stopped them as they were about to sit at the table. “I actually have something for you, Shirogane.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Consider it thanks for helping me out. Here,” Naoya said. He placed some cheese he had cut out on Koyuki’s plate.

“Whoa! It’s a cat-shaped cheese topping!” she cried happily.

“What do I have to do to get one of those?” Sakuya asked.

“Make one yourself,” Naoya replied.

“Yeah, Sakuya—only the helper gets theirs made for them. Hehe.”

“Lame...” Sakuya grumbled.

The scene was a happy one, filled with warmth and friendly bickering. Finally, they all sat down.

“Shall we get started?”

“Let’s do it.”

“Let’s gooo.”

And with that, they all dug in.

Koyuki’s eyes went wide upon taking her first bite. “This... This really *is* curry...” she murmured approvingly.

“What did you think we were making back there?” Naoya asked with a hint of sarcasm.

“No, no. That’s not what I meant. It’s just that I’ve never cooked before, so it’s kind of amazing to actually have something I made on a plate in front of me. I guess I’m not as airheaded as you think, huh?”

“But, Koyuki—if we were alone, we would’ve just bought a ready-made meal from the store,” Sakuya added.

“There’s nothing wrong with that... but cooking something for yourself is pretty nice too, right?” Naoya added to placate the sisters. It had been a long time since he’d had a meal at such a lively table. Sometimes he ate with Kirihiro at work, but most nights, he ate alone. Sharing a meal with someone else had become something of a novelty to him. The taste of curry he had grown so accustomed to suddenly took on a completely new flavor. *The fact that it’s with the girl I like is just the cherry on top.*

“We made a lot, so help yourself to seconds if you want more. If there are leftovers, you can use it to make curry udon, or dry curry, or something,” he mentioned.

“Would we even be able to do that?” Koyuki asked skeptically.

“I’ll write up a recipe for you. I’ll make it simple enough that you and Sakuya can work through it,” he replied.

“Okay then, sounds good. You’ll help me tomorrow, right, Sakuya? ... Sakuya?”

“Hmm...” Sakuya murmured. She was staring ahead with a troubled expression. Did she not like the curry? She was still digging into her dinner despite her absentmindedness, so that likely wasn’t the case. Finally, she turned to Naoya and asked, “You call me ‘Sakuya,’ don’t you?”

“Yeah? What about it?” Naoya asked.

“So you call me by my first name, but you still refer to Koyuki as ‘Shirogane.’ I just thought that was weird is all,” she answered.

“Y-Yeah, I guess I do,” he admitted. If he were to be honest, this wasn’t his

first time considering the same thing. He had started by calling her “Shirogane,” but figured the chance to change it had passed—they had accidentally grown closer before referring to each other by their first names.

He looked in Koyuki’s direction and said, “Is it all right if I call you by your first name, like I do with Sakuya?”

“Um, I don’t really care about that! Do whatever you want!” Koyuki blurted out. She took a quick sip of her water to hide her embarrassment, her hand trembling the entire time.

Naoya examined her. What she had *really* meant to say was, “If you call me by my first name, I might just die of happiness and embarrassment!” It struck him as a good opportunity. He repeated the name in his head—the two syllables he’d been dying to say out loud—a few times over. Then he turned to her and slowly declared, “Koyuki.”

“Pfffttt!” Koyuki coughed, spraying a large mouthful of water all over the table.

Naoya rushed over and patted her on the back. “Sorry! It’s definitely way too early for this. We’ll take it slow. Don’t worry.”

“Nuh!” she choked out.

“Nuh?” he echoed.

“No w—!” Koyuki struggled to speak through her coughs. Naoya tried to decipher her words and quickly braced himself for what was to come. “No way! I can’t handle it when it’s you!”

“Yeah, I figured as such,” he replied simply. He had been too hasty. While it was true that she’d become a lot more honest and comfortable with herself lately, he had rushed things in this respect.

“N-No, I just mean... Uh, that’s not what I wanted to say,” Koyuki faltered.

“It’s fine, really. Hey, we worked hard on this curry, so let’s just dig in,” he said, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

I should wait a bit before I start calling her by her name. Same goes for the confession, too, he reminded himself mentally. Their relationship still had a long

way to go.

Sakuya stared across the table at Naoya's deflated figure, and Gizzard rubbed against his leg and meowed like he was trying to console him. "Thank you for blessing me with this great ship content today," Sakuya stated. "I'd love nothing more than to watch you two all day, but I suppose it's time I head back to my room. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Nah, don't worry about it. You want seconds?" Naoya asked.

"I'll have some. I'll eat it here, so perhaps you two could head to Koyuki's room?"

"We're not going to do anything of the sort, Sakuya!" Koyuki shouted across the table. In between her words, she took quick, awkward bites of her curry. She seemed to be back to her usual self.

Naoya sighed. He went to return to his seat when Koyuki spoke up. "Oh," she muttered, mostly to herself, as she stared blankly at the roof of the living room. "I forgot..."

Naoya was intrigued.

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Dinner ended without incident. Sakuya ended up devouring three helpings, while Koyuki neatly polished off two.

Naoya was busy washing the plates. *I wonder what's up there... She totally remembered something.*

After Koyuki had finished eating, she silently left her seat and headed upstairs, leaving Naoya, Sakuya, and Gizzard in the living room. Sakuya was speaking to Gizzard while Naoya busied himself in the kitchen. Despite the loud rushing of water in the sink, Naoya could still make her voice out clearly.

"What kind of ceremony do you think would suit them, Gizzard?"

"Meow?"

"I like this chapel. It's so new and beautiful. Apparently, their food is amazing, as well."

“Meow... Mrrp.”

“You’d prefer the more traditional Japanese style?”

“Mroooow.”

Naoya popped his head into the room and spotted Sakuya obsessing over something on her tablet screen. *Is she planning my wedding in there?* Naoya pondered to himself while he looked up at the living room ceiling.

The Shirogane family’s bedrooms were probably on the floor above them, as Naoya could hear the scuffle of footsteps and furniture moving above him from time to time. He wondered if she was looking for something. No, it was more likely that she was just cleaning—her footsteps weren’t wandering around, and they sounded slightly hurried.

Is she gonna invite me up to her room? The sudden thought caused Naoya’s hands to falter, and soap flew around the sink. Between her meaningful look at dinner, her rush upstairs afterward, and the frantic cleaning, it was the only natural conclusion.

“No. No way. Get a hold of yourself, Naoya,” he berated himself out loud. She couldn’t even bring herself to call him by his first name. What were the odds that she was going to invite him to her room? Fat chance.

“Sasahara?” a voice called out behind him.

“Agh!” He yelped, nearly dropping the plate in his hand. He turned around and saw Koyuki standing there. She must have snuck up on him while he was absorbed in thought. “Wh-What’s up?”

“Well, um...” Koyuki said hesitantly, pressing the tips of her fingers together and avoiding eye contact. “Um, come this way, okay? Don’t let Sakuya see. She’ll only make fun of us.”

“Huh?”

“This way,” she repeated before heading toward a staircase behind the kitchen.

“Wait, does this go to the second floor? Am I really allowed up there?”

“Never mind that. Just hurry up,” she stressed, lightly nudging his back.

“Okay, I got it,” he relented and timidly headed up the stairs.

As with the ground floor, the ceilings practically spanned to the heavens. A row of doors littered the hallway, and Koyuki headed directly for the farthest one. Her unwavering gaze commanded Naoya to follow.

As he followed meekly behind her, Naoya’s impure thoughts began to rear their ugly head once more. His mind raced, firing on all cylinders at once. *No way, there’s no way... She’s just gonna ask me to carry some heavy stuff or something like that.*

Before he knew it, he was viewing what was most certainly a girl’s room.

The room was colored in soft pastels, and it was adorned in various cat plushies. The furniture—a desk, a set of drawers, a plush bed, a bookcase, and a small chest—were all tasteful and matched the colors of the room. The walls were also decorated with tasteful stickers and the like. And, of course, the room itself smelled amazing.

“Th-This isn’t your room, is it?” Naoya gulped.

“Yeah, it is. What about it?” she answered somewhat defiantly.

At her sudden admittance, Naoya lost his ability to speak. *What the hell is happening?!* He was so blindsided that his normally handy intuition became completely useless—he had no idea what Koyuki was thinking. There was one thing he was certain of, though. “Shirogane, a girl mustn’t invite a guy to her room so casually. You remember what happened when we were alone together at Kirihiro’s place, right?”

“I do, but I had no other choice,” Koyuki answered uneasily as she gazed at the floor, then nodded. “Y-You made dinner for us today, so... I-I wanted to thank you.”

“Th-Thank me?” he stuttered.

“But I’d be too embarrassed if Sakuya saw us, so that’s why I led you here.”

“Embarrassed?” Naoya’s mind, which was still racing with wild thoughts, was quickly honing in on a single conclusion. “Sh-Shirogane, I think we’re moving too fas—”

“Here,” Koyuki said, holding out a small box wrapped in pink paper with both hands. He accepted it silently. “You’re always helping me so much. That’s why I decided to get you something. I bought it when we were out shopping.”

“Oh, so that’s where you snuck off to,” he mumbled, recalling that she had snuck off earlier that day while they were at the mall. *I’m kind of a moron today, aren’t I?* he mentally scolded himself, and his face became downcast.

Koyuki saw his expression and worriedly added, “O-Oh, I’m sorry. I was worried a present would just end up being a bother. I’m sorry...”

“What?! No, no, no! It’s not that at all! I’m super happy, actually!” he quickly cut in.

“I’ve never really given people presents before, so, uh, I hope you like it.”

“I’d be happy with anything you gave me. I’m the kind of guy who eats charcoal without a second thought, remember?”

“I-I guess you’re right.”

“Um, i-is it all right if I open it now?” he asked.

“Sure, go ahead.”

After an awkward exchange, Naoya eagerly removed the lid and looked inside. He looked puzzled at its contents. “A handkerchief?”

The gift in question was light blue and adorned with snowflakes. To be honest, Naoya wondered if it was a bit too cute for him.

“Yeah... I thought something you’d actually use would work well,” Koyuki hesitantly explained. “I got it from a girl’s store, so I was a bit worried about whether or not you’d like it. But I knew this was the one when I saw it. I just went with my gut.”

“Hah...” he exhaled.

“Wh-What? Is something wrong?”

“No, not at all,” he assured her, forcing the words through his dry lips. She’d given him a handkerchief with snowflakes on it. Considering her name, which meant “light snow,” this wasn’t far from a confession—even if it had been an

unconscious one.

Should I do it now? he pondered. The setting was almost perfect, and he'd spent so long worrying and agonizing about it that he really didn't care anymore. Naoya's feelings came gushing forth, practically overflowing out of his body.

He quickly grasped Koyuki's hands and declared, "Shirogane!"

"Eek!" Koyuki shrieked and jumped back slightly. As a result, she ended up losing her balance and pulled Naoya down with her.

When they both came to their senses, they found themselves lying on Koyuki's bed with Naoya on top of her, practically pinning her down. Koyuki's eyes were as wide as saucers, racing every which way except for Naoya's direction. Tears began to well up in her eyes.

Shit, Naoya cursed himself. He could tell that he'd crossed a line, and Koyuki was no longer ready—or in the mood—to receive an impromptu confession. He knew all of this, and yet he couldn't stop the words from leaving his mouth. "Shirogane! I like you!"

For a long moment, time stopped within Koyuki's room. There was complete silence.

Then, as the seconds crept by, Koyuki snapped back to her senses. "Eeeek!" she screamed, kicking Naoya off her and reaching for random objects to throw in his general direction.

Naoya was forced out of the room, and the door slammed shut behind him. The last thing he saw was Koyuki, sitting on her bed while crying with a beet red face.

Naoya collapsed on his back in the hallway and stared blankly up at the ceiling. Silence reigned.

After a moment, Sakuya arrived with Gizzard in her arms. Her face was as emotionless as ever, but her eyes held a glacial edge they didn't normally display. "What did you do, Naoya?"

"It's all my fault. I made a mistake," he confessed gloomily.

“Mrow!” Gizzard growled. He leapt free of Sakuya’s grip and bestowed Naoya with a formidable scratch on his forehead.

No matter what anyone said, Koyuki refused to leave her room for the rest of the night. Naoya ended up having to leave without getting a chance to apologize.

Chapter Eight

Koyuki Shirogane Can't be Honest

Naoya had always lived a relatively carefree life up until now.

He'd always abided by school rules, and his grades were good to match. Owing to his above-average intuition, he'd coasted easily through life by avoiding most conflicts. If any girls had shown him even a hint of affection or interest, he had been sure to let them down gently as soon as possible. So, in that regard, his reputation had always been completely clean, too.

As such, this was the first time in his life he'd ever had to deal with making a mistake of this magnitude.

It was the Monday after his disastrous visit to the Koyuki residence. It was lunch time, and he sat with three other people in the usual courtyard at school.

"Yeah, this is basically all your fault, Naoya."

"You messed up big time."

"I hope you're reflecting on your thoughts and deeds."

"Yes, ma'am," Naoya replied meekly, hanging his head in assent.

He was sitting with Tatsumi, Yui, and Sakuya, and each of them had their own piece to say to him. Koyuki was nowhere to be seen—in fact, he hadn't seen her once since the incident. He hadn't heard anything from her over the weekend, and she had taken the day off school.

He hadn't gotten a single opportunity to apologize and make up with her. *I really screwed up this time. What the hell was I thinking?* he lamented.

Tatsumi took a sidelong glance at Naoya and spoke up. "Even I know that Shirogane would run away if you were too forward with her, bro. Come on."

"And she took the day off too..."

"Yes. Koyuki will only continue to hide like this unless we do something," Sakuya informed them as she chewed on a piece of omelet. She finished her lunch, put it to one side, and bowed to Yui and Tatsumi. "Apologies for the late

introduction. I'm Shirogane Sakuya. Thank you for looking after my sister and future brother-in-law."

"Oooh, you're so polite. And wow, you're already treating Naoya like family," Yui cooed.

"Wonder how long that'll last now, though. Hahaha!" Tatsumi added with an incredible lack of tact.

"Well, I'm glad you all have opinions on this whole thing!" Naoya shouted indignantly. "This morning, Sakuya came up to me from the train station with a wig on—I thought she was Shirogane for a second! D'you know how excited I was, Sakuya?! Have you no heart?!"

"Wow. What a novel way to mess with him, Sakuya."

"Got you," Sakuya added without a hint of emotion. "And by the way, remind me which one of us is the one truly at fault here?"

"Me..." Naoya admitted after a long pause, then gave a melancholic nod. *I knew confessing to her right then was a bad idea, but why did I end up blurting it out anyway? I couldn't help myself, though. Man, I'm such a moron.* He fell even deeper into his misery.

In contrast to Naoya's gloom, a cheery voice spoke up, "I'm actually kinda relieved, you know."

Naoya looked up and saw Yui smiling brightly at him. "Yui, you really enjoy seeing me suffer that much? You're still mad about me forcibly hooking you up with Tatsumi, aren't you?"

"Uh, no?" she replied incredulously. "I was just thinking that you would've never made a mistake like this before. You know, because of your 'power' and stuff."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that this is an opportunity for personal growth, young one," Yui clarified in a condescending tone and pointed at Naoya for emphasis.

"Relationships aren't all sunshine and rainbows—we stumble our way through them, making mistake after mistake, but we keep moving forward. You have to

learn from this instead of being so down on yourself.”

“Preach, girl. You know better than this guy,” Tatsumi added.

Just as she had implied, Yui and Tatsumi hadn’t always gotten along this well. Naoya had been there for the times where they’d had a falling out and disagreed, and because of that, he was well aware that what Yui had said made sense.

That’s right. This is like some sort of test. If I overcome this, I might be able to grow even closer to her! Naoya affirmed to himself. He smiled at his friend and said, “Thanks, Yui. I’m out of my funk now. I’ve never been in a situation like this before, so it threw me off more than I’d expected. I guess this is how normal people worry about stuff—it’s kind of refreshing, honestly.”

“You’re welcome. I’m only letting you get away with calling the rest of us ‘normal people’ because you’re you, got it?” Yui replied with a wry smile.

Tatsumi pounded a fist into his open palm and proclaimed, “This is like when a robot finally gains a soul.”

“Yeah, like in every sci-fi movie ever. And he’ll have to self-destruct at the end to save everyone.”

“Got it. Don’t worry, Naoya—I’ll travel to the ends of the earth to collect your bones and whatever. You go and self-destruct to your heart’s content.”

“I’ll be the subheroine watching the explosion from afar who sheds a meaningful tear.”

“We’ll be having a long talk when this is all over, you guys,” Naoya warned as he glared at his would-be sister-in-law and his childhood friends. He rubbed his head and sighed, “Seriously, though—I need to apologize to her, and I need to do it *soon*. I don’t want her to feel any worse than she already does.”

“What d’you mean?”

“Shirogane’s definitely feeling down about the whole thing, too,” Naoya explained.

Despite her constant attempts to keep up appearances, Koyuki was the type of girl who agonized over every little mistake. *She’s probably doing even worse*

than me right now, Naoya fretted. He could picture it perfectly—she would be curled up in the fetal position in the corner of her room, regretting every action in her life that had gotten her to this point. The fact that he had visited her room recently made the mental image all the more clear.

“Still, Shirogane’s so awkward. I wonder if anything like this has happened to her before.”

“Even I don’t know anything about that,” Sakuya replied with a light shake of her head. Her eyes grew distant while she thought back on the past. “She was normal in elementary school. It was only after that she became the pretentious klutz we know now.”

“Damn, Sakuya, that’s pretty harsh,” Naoya said.

“Call it impartial. Still, Naoya, can’t you think of anything? You’re supposed to be able to read people’s hearts, right? Are you telling me you can’t even figure out if she has some sort of trauma?”

“I consider that an invasion of privacy,” he replied flatly. He had always had the impression that Koyuki kept a part of herself hidden away—a sort of figurative line that he had always taken great care not to cross. “And I wouldn’t want to know in the first place, to be honest. I told myself I wouldn’t worry about it until she feels comfortable enough to confide in me herself.”

“Hm, what a standup gentleman. That’s probably why Koyuki likes you so much,” Sakuya commended, her expression softening for a brief moment. Naoya could tell he’d passed another pop quiz of hers with flying colors. “Still, I want you to do something about this—and soon. The whole family is worried about her.”

“Oh god. D-Did she say anything to your dad?” Naoya asked hesitantly.

“She did. His response was, ‘For now, let’s put our trust in the boy and care for her as best as we can.’”

“Dad...” Naoya whispered.

“He tried to go to work in his pajamas today as a show of solidarity. You have to do something quick before he does something crazy, loses his job, and destroys our whole family.”

“Oh no! Don’t worry, I’ll fix this,” Naoya replied frantically. He could feel his shoulders sagging under the weight of the responsibility.

Tatsumi and Yui looked at Naoya, then at each other. “If he messes up again, though, things’ll be real bad,” Yui noted.

“True. What’s the plan, Naoya?”

“Hmm...” Naoya crossed his arms and thought deeply.

While it was true that he had acted like an idiot an inordinate amount of times recently, he was still confident in his ability. He was certain he would be able to coax Koyuki out of her room if it came down to it. Even so, he would like to avoid that if at all possible—it felt too much like tricking her, and the thought made him uncomfortable.

That left him with only one option. He spoke in a low voice, “We’ll just have to go with a full-frontal assault.”

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Koyuki, completely unaware of the strategy meeting being held on her behalf, was curled up in her dimly-lit room—just as Naoya had predicted. She hadn’t brushed her signature silver hair, and her pajamas were a rumpled mess. She stared blankly at the wall with tear-stained eyes. Gizzard sat next to her. He was clearly worried about her condition, but knew that there wasn’t anything he could do to help her.

“What am I doing...?” she whispered, breaking the silence in her room. She didn’t know how many times she’d asked herself that question.

Her mother had left for her part time job, and Sakuya had already gone to school. Silence reigned over the house, and each minute, down to the very second, felt like it was being stretched to its absolute limit.

Koyuki continued to murmur to herself in the darkness. “It’s all Sasahara’s fault. Saying that he liked me while doing *that*... He’s so mean...”

Her reaction had been only natural, she continued to assure herself.

“I don’t think I’m blameless either, though,” she added, her eyebrows knitting together. She’d kept on coming back to that thought for a while now.

After the “incident,” he’d stood outside her door, apologizing over and over. He’d sent her several messages telling her how worried he was. And—on top of everything else—she knew that pushing her down had, in reality, been an accident.

Even though she knew all this, she continued to sulk like a stubborn child.

“I’m already horrible at dealing with confessions as is...”

It had all started during her elementary school days—back then, she had been a normal child, friendly and full of life. She had many friends, but one in particular was special. She spent every single day with this girl, and no matter where they went, they were always together. They always told each other, “I love you!” in the thoughtless, honest way that children do.

But one day, Koyuki’s sharp tongue had reared its ugly head. Her friend began to label her as “two-faced,” “haughty,” and “someone who looks down on others.” Koyuki hadn’t intended for that to happen, but she had no recourse to their insults. The next time Koyuki had tried to tell her friend “I love you,” her friend had replied “I can’t stand you.”

It was as if the world had been turned upside down. After that, she never spoke to the girl again. The next year, her ex-friend transferred to a different school and disappeared from Koyuki’s life forever.

Ever since then, Koyuki had been incapable of understanding love or affection. Even if she did like someone, she was unable to tell how the other person felt. She couldn’t trust whether or not their affection was real, so she chose to remain alone. Koyuki cut off all those around her, and thus “The Queen of Thorns” was born.

Koyuki heaved a heavy sigh. Naoya’s face appeared in her mind; he was the only thing she could think about. “Maybe things would’ve been better if I could understand people like Sasahara can... No, then I’d just be able to tell that everyone hates me,” she lamented, negative thoughts swirling about in her mind. “Sasahara just deals with all that in stride—he doesn’t let it get to him at all. He’s amazing, unlike me. God, I’m just the worst.”

He had given her an honest confession, and look at how she had reacted. Koyuki was certain at this point that the fault lay with her.

What if he hates me? Koyuki's blood ran cold as the thought dawned on her. She hastily tried to assure herself that there was no way that was possible, but it was impossible to stop the negative spiral once it had begun.

Her nose started to itch, and her vision blurred. Then, just before the tears threatened to trickle down her face, she heard Gizzard stir.

"Meow!" Gizzard cried as he dashed to the window and stared outside. From her window, there was a view of their garden—that was the spot her cat was fixated on. Koyuki strained her ears and heard some rustling noises outside.

That was strange—usually her mother was the one who worked in the garden, but she wasn't home yet...

Oh no! Is it a robber?! Koyuki's face became white as a sheet. She knew her family lived in a nice area, but she also knew that being robbed wasn't an impossibility. She made her way toward the window as silently as possible. When she peered outside and saw what was happening, she threw the window open and screamed, "What are you doing in my garden?!"

"Oops, busted," Naoya said as he looked up. He was in the process of setting things up on a table.

Koyuki arrived in the garden about 10 minutes later. She had thrown a cardigan on over her pajamas; this, coupled with her sullen look, left her looking rather ragged.

Looks like she really has been dealing with this alone. I'm glad this actually managed to make her come outside, though, Naoya thought to himself. He was pleased that things were going relatively to plan, although he had hoped he'd have a little more time to set things up before she caught on. Oh well, this was fine, too. "Sorry, sorry. I didn't think you'd catch me so quick."

"Whatever. What *are* you doing, anyway?" Koyuki looked around restlessly.

The garden was spacious and bursting with various flowers in full bloom—it was obvious from just one look that it was well cared for. Naoya had placed a table he'd borrowed from their storage directly in the center of said garden. There were some paper cups on top of the table and a few paper bags by his feet.

“I’ve got permission from Sakuya by the way, just for the record. This isn’t technically trespassing,” he added.

“I didn’t hear anything about that...” Koyuki complained.

“Fine. Before I explain, though—here.”

“What’s this?”

Naoya had handed her a small device with a button that appeared to be a buzzer of some sort. Seeing Koyuki’s confused expression, he explained, “It’s a buzzer. If you press the button, it’ll make a noise. Sakuya, Yui, and Tatsumi are waiting outside. If they hear it, they’ll come running, so you don’t have to worry about anything like before happening.”

“That’s kind of a scary way to try and make me feel better!” Koyuki shouted.

Sakuya had questioned if the buzzer was a good idea, but Naoya had gone ahead with it anyway. He imagined that three nosy watchmen were peeking into the garden to check what the shouting was about.

Okay, so she’s got it. Now I’ve just gotta make sure she doesn’t use it, Naoya thought. He clenched his fists and bowed deeply to Koyuki. “I’m sorry about pushing you down like that.”

“N-No...” Koyuki replied, slowly shaking her head. Her gaze dropped to the floor and she intertwined her fingers. “I know it was an accident—it wasn’t your fault. My reaction was out of line...”

“Your reaction was totally natural.”

“No, I mean... Even so, I’m in the wrong here,” Koyuki shook her head more forcefully this time. They stood in silence for a long time. Her usual penchant for putting on airs was gone, replaced by a leaden, crushing self-loathing. “It’s always been like this... I’m just a coward who can’t be honest with myself or anyone else. I’ve been like this forever.”

Koyuki’s voice shook as she spoke. Tears began to trickle from her eyes, but she continued without wiping them. She told Naoya about the incident with her friend in elementary school and how, since then, she had been too afraid to accept anyone's affections.

“S-So when you told me you liked me, I was really happy. I wanted to give you a proper answer. I really did. B-But I didn’t know what to say, and I had no idea if it was okay for me to say it. My brain was all messed up...” She paused with another heavy sigh, as if her soul had left her body. “I figured it was a mistake to think someone could like me...”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Naoya stated and grabbed Koyuki’s shoulders. She lifted her tear-stricken face and stared at Naoya in bewilderment. He spoke from his heart. “I’m glad I fell for you—I truly mean that. Please don’t say such depressing things. I want you to feel the same as I do.”

“B-But, s-someone like me...” she sputtered between sobs.

“Oh, come on. Here, stop crying,” he said as he offered her a handkerchief.

“I-Is this the...?”

“Yep, it’s the one you gave me. Didn’t think it’d come in handy this quickly,” he joked.

She took the handkerchief and dried her eyes with it. The dainty embroidered snowflakes met her tears and darkened in hue. Her cheeks and her nose were the red of a perfectly ripe fruit.

Naoya smiled at her and said, “You’re just overthinking things, Shirogane. If you don’t say something like, ‘How dare you do this to a lady such as me? You’re like a badly trained dog—you need to be executed,’ then I think I’m gonna go crazy.”

“I’m sorry... I’m not cute...”

“Have I ever said that? Anyway, I think I prefer your more refined look.”

“And I have a bad personality,” she whispered. Despite her words, some light had returned to her eyes.

“I need to apologize, too. I took things way too far back there and didn’t consider your feelings. We need to take things slowly—we’re both beginners here.” He never wanted these events to happen again.

“B-But if we take it slow, I don’t know when I’ll be able to accept your confession,” she protested.

“That’s fine. We’re both young, after all. You’ve got 70 years to think about it.”

“Stop being so optimistic...”



“Can’t. I like you too much,” Naoya declared confidently. “Okay, now let’s forget about all that. Come on, sit.”

“But that was a pretty important conversation...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Koyuki sat down reluctantly and frowned as Naoya began to fill the cups on the table with juice. “I know I already asked, but what’s the point of all this?” she asked.

“Oh yeah—I wanted to throw a party. You know, for making up.”

“A party? I’m not a kid anymore,” Koyuki grumbled.

Naoya ignored her and started retrieving an assortment of items from the paper bags that lay at his feet. “We’ll start with orange juice,” he declared. “Then I have some of those animal biscuits you like. I made a photo album of cat pictures, and I even got Kirihiro to sign a book for you.”

Koyuki began to wonder what a passerby would think if they happened to spot the table and its eclectic assortment of items. “What kind of party is this even supposed to be?” she asked.

“A party for you and all the stuff you love.”

“Jeez...” Koyuki sighed more out of exasperation than anything. “These are all things I like, though. How did you know? I’ve never told you about them. Did you ask Sakuya?”

“Nah, I just put it all together from stuff you’ve talked about before.”

“I’ll never get over how creepy that ability of yours is...”

“It’s nice to hear you say stuff like this every once in a while,” Naoya added with a smile. He pulled a large object out from another paper bag.

Koyuki’s eyes went wide. “Wait, is that...”

“Yep—it’s that big plushie you wanted on our first date.”

It was a large smiling cat, so big that it could barely fit under one arm. Naoya had sacrificed many one hundred yen coins in his endeavor to win the massive plushie, and he regretted none of it.

“I won’t ever reject your feelings, Shirogane, especially if they're about liking me. I’ll accept everything about you,” he stated earnestly.

Koyuki let out a quiet gasp, then looked quickly between Naoya and the plushie. “So, do you think you could maybe start believing that I really like you now?” he asked.

After a long pause, Koyuki whispered, “Okay.” She accepted the plushie and crushed it in a violent hug.

Naoya was visibly relieved. “Awesome. Now, let’s have fun together today. We can start working together on moving forward tomorrow. I’ll wait for your reply for as long as it takes.”

“O-Okay,” Koyuki nodded, the plushie still caught in an amorous vice grip.

This is good. Still wish I could call her by her name, though, he grumbled to himself. It appeared as though he would have to wait a little while longer until he heard her reply to his confession. Still, Koyuki had, without a doubt, made progress. Naoya took a sip of his juice as he mulled things over.

“Thank you... Naoya,” Koyuki said timidly.

“Pfffttt!” Naoya spat out the orange juice in his mouth, coating the table in a fine orange-colored spray. He promptly fell over onto his back. No matter how good his intuition was, it hadn’t prepared him for that.



Naoya lay prone on the ground and gasped for air. Between ragged breaths, he said, “Th-That really was a low blow...”

“Oh no! Someone! Someone, please help!” Koyuki screamed. Her frantic yells and the sound of the buzzer reverberated throughout the neighborhood.

Epilogue

As Naoya exited the turnstiles, he spotted Koyuki waiting for him. As usual, her good looks, harsh expression, and perfect posture drew many looks from the early crowd. Staff members and regulars at this station had long grown accustomed to the morning routine of the young couple flirting here; likewise, Naoya had long grown accustomed to being stared at.

She greeted him with a sharpness to her voice. “Oh, it’s just you. I thought I recognized someone else. Thank you for meeting me today, Naoya. Your dedication toward being a manservant never goes unappreciated.”

“And a good morning to you too, Koyuki,” he greeted her in a bright tone.

In an instant, Koyuki’s cool demeanor fell to pieces. She grasped her chest and recoiled like a scared cat.

Noaya patted her on the back and said, “You think maybe we should go back to last names for now? Every time I call you by your name, you act like you’re having a heart attack.”

“N-No, it’s fine. I’ll get used to it,” she stammered.

“Fine. I’ll make sure to say it a lot so I can help you adjust to it... Koyuki.”

As they took their usual route to school, Naoya noted that the sun’s golden rays were warmer and more radiant than ever before; the trees that lined the path looked to be incredibly verdant and lush. Summer was now in full effect—of this, he was certain.

“Oh, that reminds me,” he spoke up. “We’re gonna have to start wearing our summer uniforms soon, aren’t we?”

“Ugh, I hate summer. It’s way too humid, and the bugs are so annoying,” Koyuki complained.

“Whaaa? I’m really looking forward to it.”

“You have weird tastes. What? Do you wanna go to the pool, or something?”

“Not in particular. I’m just excited to see your summer clothes. Our school’s girl’s uniform is pretty cute, and—wait, why are you walking away?”

“It should be obvious,” she grumbled under her breath as she sped away from him. She continued to mutter complaints in a low voice, admonishing Naoya for being lewd.

Naoya felt happy and strangely relieved—Koyuki was now back to her usual self. He removed the handkerchief she had given him from his pocket and examined it. “And I might get to use this guy more in the summer, too.”

“You kept it with you?”

“Yeah. I even iron it and everything. Oh yeah—sorry about trashing your garden a little last night.”

After Koyuki had screamed, the watchmen had rushed in to the rescue. In the end, they’d ended up enjoying the sweets and juice together as a group. Although everyone had pitched in to clean up properly afterward, Naoya was sure the whole incident had still been a bother to her family.

Koyuki shook her head. “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. Mom and Dad were just pleased we had a good time. They actually asked when the next party was gonna be.”

“Ahaha. I’m looking forward to it, too,” Naoya replied.

“Y-Yeah...” Koyuki whispered. She fell silent for a while before she continued in a firm voice, “By the way, th-thank you for the plushie.”

“You got it. Look after it, okay?” he said cheerily.

“Of course I will. I even slept with it last night.”

“R-Really?”

“What’s with that face?” Koyuki asked with a confused expression. All Naoya could think about was how he was suddenly jealous of a plush cat. “Oh, yeah—I was also thinking that maybe I should get a friend for it, you know...”

Naoya understood what she was trying to get at, but he didn’t jump in to finish her thought for her; he waited patiently for her to continue.

“S-So do you maybe want to... go on a date?” she finally stammered.

“I’d love to,” he replied instantly.

Koyuki looked up at his smiling face and groaned. “You definitely knew what I was going to say, but you still made me say it! You bully!”

“But you wanted to ask, didn’t you? It’s just practice.”

“You enjoyed it too much for it to be practice!”

“Busted...”

“Ugh! You’re the worst!” Koyuki protested loudly, her face a deep crimson. She slapped Naoya hard on the shoulder, which only caused his smile to grow wider—she was just too cute.

After a short walk—and a good deal more flirting—they stumbled across Yui and Tatsumi.

“Oh look, it’s Naoya and Koyuki. Morning!” Yui greeted the pair brightly.

“It’s still the crack of dawn, and you guys are already at it. You’re worse than me and Yui,” Tatsumi joked.

“Wh-What are you saying, Kouno?! We’re n-not doing anything I-like—” Koyuki protested.

“Yeah, stay jealous,” Naoya quickly jumped in, interrupting Koyuki. “And I know that if we were *really* going at it, you’d be even more jealous.”

“Naoya?!” Koyuki cried and slapped Naoya’s back. Unlike her earlier love tap, this one had hurt.

“This is your fault, guys. You did this to me,” Naoya accused his two friends with a point of his finger. Koyuki huffed off in front of the smiling trio, and Naoya quickly hurried after her to apologize. “I’m sorry, really. I was just messing around, and I went too far with it.”

“You did. We are *not* flirting or anything, got it?” Koyuki spat out, seething.

Unfortunately, Naoya was too busy thinking about how downright adorable she was when she was angry to pay any real attention to her protests. He was so absorbed by this, in fact, that he almost missed her whispering, “The real flirting starts after I convince you to make me your girlfriend, okay?”

Naoya stopped in his tracks, an unusual expression on his face. Koyuki paused

upon noticing this and asked, “What? What’s up?”

“N-Nothing, it’s just...” Naoya stammered, mulling over the quiet words she’d just said to herself. In the face of that, there was only one thing he could say. “I was just thinking about how much I like you.”

“Y-You don’t have anything else to say?!” Koyuki cried. Her face was quickly engulfed in crimson, from the bottom of her chin to the very tips of her ears. She hastily turned away to hide her embarrassment.

Naoya had successfully confessed, but Koyuki’s response was still pending. They had managed to make some progress, no matter how minimal. They had finally begun to call each other by their first names, after all. But even if they weren’t “official” yet, Naoya was no longer worried—his intuition told him that this love story would have a happy end after all.

Afterword

The protagonist and the heroine of a romcom are watching fireworks at a summer festival. The heroine manages to steel her resolve and declares in a quiet voice, “I love you.” But the words are drowned out by the sound of fireworks, and all the protagonist says is, “Did you say something?”

It’s a common scenario in romcoms, and one I’m a huge fan of. But I’ve also thought it would be nice if the protagonist had a strong intuition, and he just blurted out, “I love you too!” or something. This book was born from that thought.

My name is Same, and it’s very nice to meet you. I extend my deepest gratitude to you for purchasing and reading this book. This is a brushed-up version of the work I originally wrote as a web novel. I’ve made a lot of changes to it, so those who’ve already read the web novel can enjoy this book, as well. I’ve covered every scene in sugar for you.

I’ve actually published some books before under the name “Otsukai Shimono.” I’ll be working under the name “Same” from now on, but it would make me happy if you could remember both.

Now, on to thanking people.

Mr. U, thank you for helping out on this book and offering ideas. You told me, “How about this?!” over and over again, and I look forward to the same support on my next work, too.

Thank you to Fuumi, who provided illustrations for this work. The cover is wonderful, of course, but so are the multiple illustrations included in the book. I felt as if I could fall into Koyuki’s eyes just by looking at your drawings, and her embarrassed face is absolutely amazing. I am a lucky person to have my heroine drawn so beautifully.

I also want to thank all those who have supported me since this started as a web novel. I originally uploaded the first chapter by itself—it was meant as a standalone one-shot, but there were so many people saying they wanted more that I ended up writing a lot. This is the result. I’ve come this far all thanks to you lovely people. I’m truly thankful.

I hope that we can meet again someday. This has been Same.

Thank you.

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ISBN: 978-84-123546-9-0

YATARA TO SASSHI NO II ORE WA, DOKUZETSU KU-DERE BISHOUJO NO
CHIISANA DERE MO MINOGASAZU NI GUIGUI IKU Vol. 1

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo
in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo

Translation Work: Callum Conroy Editing Work: Maral Rahmanpour QA Team:
Adam Mousir & Ethan Demedeiros.

Digital Lettering Work: Red Bucket.

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