

NOVEL

3

Written by  
Takibi  
Amamori

Illustrated by  
Imigimuru



Too  
Many

# Losing Heroines!

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Too  
Many **Losing**  
Heroines!







Houkobaru  
Hibari

Basori  
Tiara

Shikiya  
Yumeko

STUDENT COUNCIL MEMBERS





"I'm just saying, out of context,  
it could look like we're  
on a date."

Nukumizu  
Kazuhiko

Komari  
Chika





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## INTERMISSION

Brother-Sister

## LOSS 4

Let's Talk  
Accountability



## EPILOGUE

A Few  
Floors  
Up

Too Many  
**LOSING**  
Heroines!





# Too Many **Losing Heroines!**

NOVEL  
**3**

WRITTEN BY  
**Takibi  
Amamori**

ILLUSTRATED BY  
**Imigimuru**



*Seven Seas Entertainment*



MAKE HEROINE GA OSUGIRU! Vol. 3

by Takibi AMAMORI

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Illustrations by Imigimuru

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**Nukumizu  
Kazuhiko**

First-year.  
Proud loner.

**Yanami  
Anna**

First-year.  
Happy and hungry.

**Komari  
Chika**

First-year.  
Lit club.  
A bit far gone.

**Yakishio  
Lemon**

First-year.  
Fastest & loudest girl  
on the track team.

**Nukumizu  
Kaju**

Second-year, junior  
high. Little sister  
from heaven.

**Tsukinoki  
Koto**

Third-year.  
Vice president of  
the lit club.

**Shikiya  
Yumeko**

Second-year.  
Student council. Most  
fashionable zombie.

**Tamaki  
Shintarou**

Third-year.  
President of the  
lit club.

**Ayano  
Mitsuki**

First-year.  
Brainiac  
bookworm.

**Asagumo  
Chihaya**

First-year.  
Ayano's  
girlfriend.

**Himemiya  
Karen**

First-year.  
The final boss of  
heroines.

**Basori  
Tiara**

First-year.  
Student council  
vice president.

**Houkobaru  
Hibari**

Second-year.  
Student council  
president.

**Amanatsu  
Konami**

1-C's homeroom teacher.  
Just the cutest. Teaches  
world history.

**Konuki  
Sayo**

School nurse.  
Needlessly  
suggestive.

## Foreword

**O**CTOBER. After school. There I stood in front of the courtyard cafeteria, at the precipice of providence. One by one, the construction workers removed the tape standing between me and my destiny.

In my hand—the school newspaper. *The Honoka Happenings*. Fall edition. Its lead articles had to do with sports matches and the upcoming cultural festival, but those were of little interest to me. No, that was not news. But the little notice off in the margins? *That* was news.

“Cafeteria sink temporarily closed for renovations until October 14th.”

The water lines were aged and needed fixing, apparently. But no more. Today’s date? October 14th.

As the construction workers packed up and left, I stuffed the newspaper into my blazer pocket. “All right. Let’s see what you’ve got, newbie.”

But just before I took my first step, I heard a pitter-pattering behind me. I knew that scuttling. I turned and, sure enough, there she was—Komari Chika. A first-year in the literature club like me, and a fellow tap water savant.

Komari was doubled over with her hands on her knees. “N-Nukumizu,” she panted in between heaving breaths. “There you are.”

“Couldn’t stay away either, huh?”

I couldn’t blame her for rushing over here. I would have too. In large facilities like our school, water normally came from a tank on the roof. But these renovations were going to be a game changer. Supposedly, the water being supplied here came directly from the source. It was connected straight to the water line. No detours.

Komari would never pass up a chance to witness the true potential of Tsuwabuki High tap water.

“There’s room for two,” I said. “Here, you can take the other spout.”



“Sh-shut up...about the water.” She seized me by my blazer—“Come here.”—and started yanking me away from the cafeteria.

“H-hey! Aren’t you here for the new setup?”

“S-snuck a taste during lunch already.”

Oh, come on. Leaks were no fun.

“Now m-move!” she insisted. “To the club room!”

“All right, all right, quit pulling.”

Sighing, I let her whisk me away. If only to spare my clothes the wrinkles.

## Loss 1:

### Shikiya Yumeko to the Rescue

**A**T THE FAR END OF THE WEST ANNEX, WE ARRIVED at the literature club room. As soon as my hand touched the doorknob, I was overcome with dark premonitions. “Hey, uh, Komari? What exactly are we—”

She shoved me. “O-open the friggin’ door already.”

“All right, sheesh. Don’t have to be rude.”

Surrendered to my fate, I turned the knob. It was eerily dark inside. When my eyes adjusted, I could just barely make out the silhouette of someone with long hair sitting in a chair.

“Yanami-san?” I called out. “Is that you?”

“Literature club boy...”

The someone staggered to her feet. I recoiled. It was the student council’s very own gyaru of the dead—Shikiya-san. And she was wearing a nurse’s outfit for some reason.

I flung myself back out of the room and slammed the door shut behind me. What in God’s name did *she* want? And in that getup? I pressed my back against the door, taking long and deep breaths, until a knocking came.

The zombie nurse wanted out. For what exactly? I wasn’t about to find out. The doorknob rattled ominously.

“O-open up! I’m s-still in here!” Whoops. Nearly forgot about her. I took my weight off the door and cracked it open just enough for Komari to slink out. “S-screw you! You left me b-behind!”

“Hey, not on purpose.”

It wasn’t technically abandonment if you didn’t *mean* to. Betrayal is a sin, but forgetfulness is an honest mistake. And mistakes can be forgiven.

While I tried to convince Komari of my ironclad logic, a chill ran down my

spine. Bone-thin arms crept forward and wrapped themselves around our necks. No escape. She had us. Shikiya-san fixed her cold gaze on us, her irises pale white on account of her trademark colored contacts.

“Why did you run?” she breathed wearily.

“Uh, reasons.” She was freaky as hell, that was why. Komari was shaking like a leaf and clung to my necktie. “Komari, can you stop stretching my clothes? And Senpai, your hands are cold. Can you... Hey, are you okay?”

“Tired...” Shikiya-san went limp, and her arms around us began to slip.

“Whoa! Komari, do something! Grab her!”

“N-no way,” Komari protested. “You grab her.”

Me. A guy. Grab a woman. Okay.

Shikiya-san was getting closer to the floor with every second. I stopped thinking and looped my arm around her cold, cold body.

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“Here. You’re good. Sit down. I’ll get some tea or something.”

With Shikiya-san securely in a chair, I started on that tea, but I couldn’t stop thinking about one thing: How unbelievably soft she was.

Were all girls like that? She felt...springy. Like raw fish. What an experience. I didn’t get any of that from Kaju. Meanwhile, it was business as usual with Komari shivering in a corner with her phone.

When my head was clear of nonsense and the teacup full of piping hot tea, I returned to Shikiya-san and placed the cup in front of her. “What brings you here today anyway, Senpai?”

I took a seat across from her. Now that my wits were about me again, I had to wonder—seriously, what was with the nurse outfit? The miniskirt was already a lot, and the exposed cleavage was even more so. I’d made a valiant effort to keep from staring until she reached straight in and pulled out a piece of paper.

“Tsuwabuki Festival...classroom...reservation form...”

Tsuwabuki Fest was one of our high school’s obligatory biannual festivals.

Normally, we'd have both a sports and a cultural festival back-to-back, but due to some scheduling snafus we were only doing the latter this year.

The lit club was supposed to take part, of course, and the plan was to do a kind of exhibit geared around us first-years, but we never settled on a theme. There was barely half a month until the big day, and the most we'd settled on was "make a journal and then do something to show off what we do." Komari had barely gotten the form turned in on time.

"Something wrong with it?" I asked.

"Exhibit details... Layout. Particulars." Shikiya-san shot Komari a stiff glance. Komari nearly jumped out of her seat.

"Tried to show her...how to fill it out," she said all slow. "But she ran." I probably would have too. "We have many applicants. Do it right...or not at all."

"Is that all? We didn't fill in the form right? What was it again? Details and layout. Particulars." I reached for the paper but stopped halfway. That thing had been in her boobs. Was I even allowed to touch it? "Komari, c'mere. You take it."

"Huh? Wh-what?" she stammered. Somehow, she managed to shrink herself down even smaller than she already was.

I waved her over. "Come on. Shikiya-senpai doesn't bite. Promise."

"Y-you're sure about that?"

"Sure I'm sure. She's a real sweetheart. Fosters kittens, I bet."

"You th-think so?" Komari inched closer. My ruse was working. Just a little bit more...

Shikiya-san chose that moment to mutter under her breath, "I'm a dog person."

And just like that, Komari was back in her corner and all the way back to square one. I rolled my head back and got to brainstorming again.

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Shikiya-san marked the form all up in red. We were in for a lecture.

Komari watched closely. Or as closely as she could from over my shoulder. “S-so we fill that in there. Do we need to i-include traffic flow too?”

“Yes,” Shikiya-san said. “Procedure... Very important.”

Komari yanked my shoulder down and held it there. “S-stop moving, Nukumizu. Can’t see.”

“Then quit leaning on me,” I shot back. “Not that you’re heavy, but it’s still annoying.”

For all her complaining, Komari sure was doing a good job at paying attention to Shikiya-senpai’s explanations. It was enough to bring a tear to my eye. It had taken twenty whole actual minutes, some candy, and random internet videos to lure her back out of her corner. How far we’d come.

“Wh-what else?” she asked.

“Description. Too much blank space. Looks bad. Fill it.” Shikiya-san drew a little graveyard in a vacant spot on the form, then stashed the red pencil somewhere in the vacuous space her chest apparently occupied. “That’s everything... Turn it in by next week. Afternoon.” She sipped on some tea that had, by now, gone ice cold, expressionless as ever.

Komari eyed the corrected form like she was trying to stare holes through it.

I sipped some of my own tea, but my eyes were trained on Shikiya-san. “Didn’t realize the student council cared that much about the lit club. Thought you guys...” I stopped myself from saying “hated our guts.”

Shikiya-san tilted her head at me, confused. “Because...Tsukinoki-senpai likes you...I suppose.”

Tsukinoki Koto was a third-year and our vice president. I’d nearly forgotten she technically used to be in the student council. It was always obvious she and Shikiya-san had a history, just not what exactly.

I cast those thoughts aside. Nosing into other people’s private affairs was a bad habit I didn’t ascribe to.

But man was I a curious boy. “So, about that outfit...” Because seriously, why a nurse?

“Costume fitting. For Tsuwabuki Fest. Fit in with...the constituents.” She wobbled to her feet again.

Komari, still not quite past her Shikiyaphobia, remained cowered behind me. She relaxed once our senpai was gone and slumped into a chair. “I-I’ll get on redoing all this at home. You heard her. Gotta make sure everything’s perfect for the—” She froze solid.

I turned to where she was looking and found a pair of pale white eyes peering through a gap in the door. “Oh god. Yeah, Senpai?”

“Forgot... Need supervisor. Or no approval.”

And then she was gone again. No time for a rebuttal.

“Hey, uh, Komari? Do we not have a supervisor? Komari?”

It took a good dozen minutes or so for her to thaw out again.

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After the assault on my psyche, I was killing time staring at clouds on a bench in the courtyard.

This year’s festival would be on the 31st, so most classes were going with the Halloween theme. Apparently even the student council was going to be in costume, if Shikiya-san was any indicator.

I shivered as a stiff breeze rolled through. Winter was on its way. It felt like just yesterday that we were in the middle of summer, and now the days were getting shorter and shorter. One couldn’t help feeling a little melancholic.

My deep brooding was interrupted by a can of coffee in my face. “Hey, Nukumizu. Low sugar, right? And you don’t mind hot, do you?”

“Oh, no. Thanks.”

Tamaki Shintarou, a third-year and our club president, sat down next to me. “Sorry to make you wait out here. Not keeping you from anything, am I?”

“Nah, just finished. Shikiya-senpai was in the club room on student council



business,” I said, juggling the can between my hands. It was a little hot.

“Yikes, okay,” Prez muttered. “Well, I made the right decision not stopping by today.” He cracked open his own coffee. Something about him seemed distant, which was odd because Prez was anything but.

“Do you two have a history?”

“You could say that. Not important. Anyway, thanks for taking care of all this festival stuff. I feel bad not helping out.”

“We’re managing. And by ‘we,’ I mean mostly Komari. She’s really into it.”

Who would’ve thought that Komari of all the people would be excited for Tsuwabuki Fest. And yet, the fact that we still didn’t have a theme seemed to be eating at her lately. I wished she wouldn’t grumble to herself so much about it. It was bad for the vibe.

“Yeah. She is, isn’t she? Which brings us to why I wanted to talk to you today.” He paused to take a sip. “You know October’s when we third-years retire, right?”

“Yeah. I remember.”

This was a prestigious school with the expectation that its students would continue on to higher learning. Frankly, October was a little *late* for third-years to be shifting gears.

“I know the lit club doesn’t exactly demand a whole lot,” Prez went on, “but it’s gotta happen sometime, y’know? Koto and I have exams to study for and all that. To me, the festival seems like the best time to officially call it.”

I’d been prepared for this way back at the start of the new semester, when he himself announced that we’d be focusing on the first-years for the festival. While we still had our entire high school careers ahead of us, their time in these halls was coming to an end.

“We’re going to need a new president,” he said with finality. “So I have a favor to ask.”

There it was. I sat up straight, chest puffing out. I didn’t consider myself much of a leader, but when duty called— “I want Komari-chan to take over for me,”

he said.

“Wait, what?” I went flaccid like a jellyfish.

The president looked at me. “What?”

“Er, nothing. Good plan.”

Who was I kidding? Komari was our most senior member, and the one most attached to the club. The only doubt I had was, well, it was *Komari*. Had he *seen* her?

“So the favor,” he continued. “I want *you* to be vice president and look after her for me. Can you do that?”

“I think so, but you sure it shouldn’t be another girl? Like, say, Yanami-san?”

Prez frowned. “I was afraid she might ghost the club entirely the second she starts dating someone.”

“You know what? Good point.”

Komari and I were free from that worry. I didn’t know how to feel about that.

“We’re worried about how she’s going to get on without us,” he admitted. “Ideally, we want to make her president ASAP so she has a bit of confidence before we graduate.”

That made sense. Put her in the role soon enough that she could start to feel comfortable, then take the training wheels off after our senpai graduate.

“Have you run any of this by her?” I asked.

“I offered her the position last week. She gave me the okay last night, but I just...” He scrunched up his brow.

I smiled at him. “You care a lot about her.”

“Yes! So much!” came a woman’s voice.

The two of us jumped and whipped our heads around. Tsukinoki-senpai appeared from the ether to grab my shoulders and then shake them violently.

“C-can I help you?” I said.

“Don’t help me, help Komari-chan! Agh, I can’t stand the thought of leaving

her here alone! Do you think they'd let me stay an extra year?"

"That's not funny, Koto." Prez looked at her like he meant it. I pitied that man.

Tsukinoki-senpai pretended to not hear him and twirled around the bench, taking the other free spot next to me. "I agree with making her president. It's just...you know how she is. We want to use the festival to help give her a bit of self-assurance."

A self-assured Komari was certainly a tall order and definitely warranted planning our entire festival presence around it. She could hardly speak to anyone who wasn't in the club.

"Nukumizu-kun," Senpai went on, "We're taking the backseat from now on, and we want you to be there for her. For us. And be nice."

"I will endeavor to do so," I acquiesced.

"She prefers pudding for dessert. And she doesn't like coffee, so don't offer her any. She also doesn't really like the green parts of green onions, so you have to make sure those bits are small enough that she can't taste them."

"Noted, in the event I ever feed her green onions." An unlikely future.

Tsukinoki-senpai clasped her hands together and looked to the heavens with teary eyes. "Shintarou, maybe we shouldn't quit the club. We can study *and* do club at the same time, can't we? Especially if we try real hard?"

"We tried that already, remember?" Prez enunciated slowly for her. "How much studying have you done so far?"

That guy was gonna get an ulcer if we didn't change the subject soon. "So basically, step one is to make sure the festival goes well."

"That's right," said Prez. "And the week after, there's the first club president meeting. They're going to want a report on all the activities from last semester too, if you wouldn't mind lending her a hand with all that."

"I'll do what I can."

There were club president meetings once a month, and every club leader was expected to attend. Komari in a room full of second-years. Just the mental image of that was disconcerting, to say the least.



“I appreciate that. You have our contact info if you ever need anything.” Prez got ready to leave.

“Oh, wait a minute,” I said. “Does the lit club not have a supervisor? I was told we couldn’t take part in the festival without one.”

“Oh, right. That. Yeah, that’s complicated.”

It was complicated with Shikiya-san, it was complicated with this—was anything ever simple?

Tsukinoki-senpai exchanged glances with Prez before turning back to me. “The past is the past. Slate’s clean with you first-years, so I say just ask around to some teachers you’re on good terms with.”

Did I have any of those? My own homeroom teacher couldn’t remember my name to save her life.

I decided I didn’t have any of those. But what other choice was there?

“Right,” I said. “I’ll see what we can do.” I tipped back my now lukewarm coffee. This was a problem for future me.

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Later that night, I was sitting at my desk. The teachers weren’t messing around this semester, and it showed in the insane amounts of homework they were assigning. I had just finished up math and was moving to English when my mind wandered back to my talk with Prez.

Komari. The new president. It was a good fit. The lit club meant more to her than anyone else. I knew she’d do good work. I just had to make sure I didn’t fall behind.

My sister Kaju peered up at me from her book. She had to crane her neck back, given that she was currently on my lap. “I’ve been meaning to ask. How are things, Oniisama?”

“‘Things’?” Why was my sister sitting on my lap reading books? An excellent question. One I, and likely Kaju, had no answer to. “Well, the renovations on the cafeteria sink just finished. Got new plumbing.”

“Plumbing.” Kaju made a face.

“Yup. I managed to get a taste too.”

“And how was it?”

“Tap watery.” Kaju seemed unsatisfied with this answer. “Of course, it wasn’t just *any* tap water. Like, obviously it’s not the same as here at home, and the flavor can change depending on recent precipitation. I’ll get a feel for the quirks in time.”

“I see. Riveting. Anyway.” She frowned at me. “That girl who visited last summer—Yanami-san. How are things with her?”

Yanami Anna was a friend who’d joined, or more like landed in, the lit club, after her childhood friend, Hakamada Sousuke, shot her down hard. It wasn’t keeping her down as of late, and she was still good friends with him and the lucky *winning* heroine, Himemiya Karen.

“I mean, I told her to find herself a boyfriend, but no dice yet,” I said. “She shows up at club sometimes. Does her own thing. Nothing new.”

She usually only showed up about once or twice a week. Mostly to complain, do homework, eat snacks, or all of the above.

“You told her to *what*? Oniisama, you fool.” Kaju pinched my ear, entirely displeased. “I worry about you two, Oniisama. I really do. We’re long past the point when Yanami-san should be utterly stricken by your charm.”

Yanami was definitely stricken with something, but it didn’t have anything to do with me.

“For the millionth time, we’re not like that,” I said. “Now how about you get off your brother’s lap.”

“But why?” Kaju asked with genuine sincerity.

“Can’t be easy reading your book there.”

“It’s very easy, actually. Rather calming, in fact. Also, you misspelled ‘immoral’ there.”

So I had. I went ahead and fixed that.

Meanwhile, Kaju handed me my phone. “You know you’ve got a LINE message

from her, right? It looks like an invitation.”

“A what now?”

I didn’t see anything of the sort on my lock screen. When I opened the app, though, sure enough I had a new DM.

⟨Yana-chan: Fire escape. Tomorrow. Lunch.⟩

I sighed and flipped my phone face down on the desk. This would make the third time this semester. Rest assured, it was not the heart-throbbing teen drama sort of rendezvous. She just wanted to complain about something. She *always* wanted to complain about something.

I considered how best to tell her to buzz off in polite terms. “Wait, why’s there already a read receipt here?”

“Because I read it earlier,” Kaju confessed.

Well now, that explained everything. Case closed. “Kaju, why were you looking at my phone?”

“Because you’re always so rude to her. *Someone* has to keep the ball rolling between you two.”

Ball? What ball? Struck with my second premonition of the day, I checked the chat log again.

⟨Nukumizu: I’ll be there. Can’t wait to see you.⟩

My face went straight into my palm. Clearly, I had more pressing concerns than tomorrow’s vent session.

“Kaju,” I said firmly, “do not take other people’s things.”

“But I had to! Or you’d never—”

“But nothing. You wouldn’t want me snooping through your phone, would

you?”

“I wouldn’t mind at all. In fact, be my guest. My password’s your birthday, and I’ve already linked our cloud storage together. What’s mine is all yours, Oniisama.”

Linked? Linked how? What did “linked” mean?! “Kaju. How much have you seen? You didn’t open any folder labeled ‘homework,’ did you?” Sweat began to pour from my brow.

Kaju lovingly dabbed it up with a handkerchief and smiled. “The ball is in good hands.”

\*\*\*

Afternoon of the next day came. I made it to the fire escape first and took a seat on the stairs.

The autumn wind brushed past me as I popped open the lid on my bento box. Normally, I’d have been eating bread, but Kaju insisted. In it, I found three colorful varieties of onigiri, Scotch quail eggs, lotus root, edamame kinpira, and some broccoli and corn with karashi-ae dressing. There was even some homemade gelatin for dessert that she stuffed in frozen to make a makeshift ice pack. By the time lunch rolled around, it would be the perfect consistency. Clever.

Little did I know, as I wavered over where to start, I had a spectator.

“Whoa, that looks pretty. You make that?” Yanami descended the stairs, stopping to sit on the step above me.

“My sister,” I said. “Not much of a chef myself.”

“But your sister clearly is. Man, my mouth’s watering just looking at all that.” I pretended not to notice the implication. She opened up her bento and flaunted a box full of white noodles. “Check it. Somen chanpuru. It turned out pretty good too.”

Yanami stabbed her chopsticks in and hoisted a literal mound of noodles up to her mouth. To her credit, she did hesitate before attempting to bite into it. For a moment.



Might as well rip the Band-Aid off now rather than later. “So, what is it this time?”

“Does there have to be something? Can’t we just chat and have lunch together?” She stuffed more somen into her cheeks.

She wasn’t fooling me. Hakamada had done something. Him or Himemiya. One of the two. They always did something.

Sensing my mistrust, Yanami frowned at me. “Look, I swear I’m not trauma dumping today. There’s just something I have to...make known. On behalf of all humanity.”

Did that make her my representative? Yikes. Didn’t like that.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“So you know how our class is getting ready for Tsuwabuki Fest?”

“Oh yeah. The ‘Flash Halloween’ thing.”

As scary as that sounded, it involved zero flashing. The idea was just to have some people roam around campus doing spontaneous shows or skits, giving candy to kids and stuff. In costume. Speaking of...

“Weren’t they doing measurements for costumes the other day?” I asked.

Only the best-looking in our class would actually do any Flash Halloween-ing. That included Yanami and Yakishio, of course, along with Hakamada Sousuke and Himemiya Karen.

“Right,” Yanami said. “We did that in the nurse’s office.”

“The nurse’s office?”

“Cause it has curtains. So, we had a girl do the measuring for us.”

Underneath Yanami’s chopsticks, the noodles were becoming a mutilated mess. “And Karen-chan’s chest was too big for any of the costumes we had on-hand, so now we need to make adjustments, but whatever. It’s fine. Not important.”

“Wait, what?” That sounded very important.

“Anyway, Sousuke was the first to get measured,” she carried on. “And he was, y’know, chatting with Karen-chan behind the curtain at the same time.”

Costume fitting in front of a girl? Guy was on thin ice.

“But the girl doing the measuring was there with them, right? These kinds of things aren’t a big deal for guys.”

Yanami’s tone darkened. “But then it was Karen-chan’s turn.”

“No.”

She nodded gravely. “She started stripping. Right there. The other girl obviously threw Sousuke out, but you wanna know what he said?” She beat her chopsticks against the bento box. ““Sorry. Forgot where we were.””

There was silence. Deep silence. Heavy silence. Shouting over by the athletics field eventually broke it.

Several painful moments later, I offered her my bento. “Here. Take something. Just take something.”

“Really? Anything?”

“Anything. I recommend the Scotch eggs.”

Yanami didn’t think twice. “I pick this.”

“The onigiri? Really?”

“You literally said ‘anything.’” She gave me the stink eye while she took her first nibble. In fairness, she had a point. Poor phrasing on my part.

“Er, changing the subject. Any ideas on what to do for the lit club?”

“Didn’t they do some, like, research project they presented in the hallway last year? Something about subcultures and shifts over time from Showa to Heisei? I forget. Something hyper specific.” She reached for my eggs next. Didn’t know the offer was indefinite when I made it.

“If I remember correctly, it was about sexual depictions of same-sex couples in fiction. So yeah, a little specific.”

Authored by Tsukinoki-senpai, of course, which said everything. Needless to say, it got taken down within the day.

“So I guess we’re doing something research-y.” Yanami had her eye on another of my onigiri. The second I gave up and offered the box, it was gone.

“Seems to me like Komari wants people to actually show up, though. She wouldn’t be going through the trouble of trying to reserve a classroom if she wasn’t going all in on this.”

“Oh, Komari-chan.” Yanami sighed. “Girls will be girls.”

“What? How is that relevant?”

She clicked her chopsticks together. “The third-years are retiring. If she can’t give her one true love her heart, she can at least give him a good send-off. Get me? Bold. Very bold. I like it.”

“That feels like reading into it.”

“You’re just illiterate, Nukumizu-kun. I, for one, am totally rooting for her.” She bit into her chosen seaweed rice ball. “She’s gonna be the new president, yeah?”

“You heard?” I took the last onigiri before she could steal it.

“Tsukinoki-senpai told me to have her back the other day. So I did some thinking, and I had an idea. Go on, ask me.” Knowing her, I had a hunch, but I gestured for her to continue anyway. “How do you get a crowd? Food. That’s the idea.”

And she looked real proud of it with that grain of rice stuck to her cheek.

“I mean, yeah,” I said, “but what does food have to do with literature? And who’s gonna be running the kitchen?”

“I dunno, man, just make the exhibit food-themed in some way.”

“So keep it within the bounds of what we actually do as a club.”

Yanami licked her fingers and nodded. “My point is, we’re not gonna get people interested if all we’re showing them is what *we* want them to see. We’ve gotta grease their wheels a little. Get them interested with something *they* want to see first.”

Maybe her IQ was positively correlated with blood sugar or something, because she was actually making sense for once.

“I mean, we could get some people if I pull my friends together,” she said.

“But that’s not what Komari-chan would want.”

She was right. What Komari wanted was a real success for the club, not a get-together of Yanami’s social circle.

“Food’s still kind of a broad concept for a theme,” I said.

“Then let’s invite Komari-chan out so we can get some ideas. You’re free after school, aren’t you?”

“Why are you already assuming I’d be free? I can be busy too. Sometimes I... Uh.”

“Yes? Go on.”

“Sometimes I have to go buy light novels. Or, uh...do an event. On one of my phone games.”

Yanami shut her empty bento box. “Just say you’re free, please.”

“I’m free.”

I started on what was left of my lunch. It stopped tasting quite as good.

\*\*\*

Later that day, after a short walk from Toyohashi Station, I scanned around for Yanami and-or Komari. They rode bikes to school, so we split up, agreeing to reconvene up here.

“Not super familiar with this area.”

The Suijou was a collection of old shops right by the station, named so not because they were on any actual water as the word “suijou” would imply, but because they were built on top of a long culvert where water ran through. Colloquialisms. The ground floor was all one shopping arcade, though many were shuttered at the moment. It was kind of funny seeing all the mom-and-pop grocers interspersed between newfangled cafés.

Off in the distance, I spotted a certain someone of identifiably tiny stature staring through one of the shop’s shutters.

“Whatcha doin’, Komari?”

“L-looking at this old poster.”

Must've been one cool poster. I peered inside at the faded thing. "Huh. An anime event at Nonhoi Park from three years ago."

Komari shot me a nasty look. "N-not anime. 2.5D isn't anime."

Could have fooled me. I didn't press my luck, though. Last time, I'd called 2.5D "glorified cosplay," and Tsukinoki-senpai nearly gutted me on the spot.

"Oooh." Komari breathed. "Y-Yakuouji Suketsugu has a different actor." She snapped a photo with her phone.

"Hey, Chikapyon hosted it. Man, wish I coulda seen this."

"S-same."

"The heck are you two doing?" And with that, the moment was gone.

I turned toward the voice. A disgruntled Yanami was standing there with a hand on her hip. "Oh. Hey. Just waxing nostalgic over this three-year-old anime thing."

"You're a teenager."

"Time flies. Only a matter of time before we start mixing up decades, and that's when my old man says things get real."

"I don't even know what we're talking about anymore. Can we go now?" Yanami wasn't having it and shooed us along. "We're not here for...whatever this is. We're here to get ideas, so let's get those brain juices flowing, pretty please?"

I followed behind her, glancing around. "About that. What are we doing here? When you said, 'get ideas,' I thought you meant like, hitting up a library or something. If we're going on location, we could've just wandered around the station."

"Tsk tsk." Yanami flipped her hair, all smug-like. "Don't you know where we are? This is where past and present collide, my dear Nukumizu-kun. Old and new. This is where *art* is born."

"Get to the point."

"Look, the vibes are supposed to inspire us. Take a second to soak it all in, will



you? It'll work its magic. Probably."

Sounded like a load of bull to me, but sure. It was neat checking out somewhere I hadn't been before, I supposed. Maybe all it took to learn or experience something new was just one little peek around an unturned corner.

"There's a bunch of new dessert places around here too. Oh, speaking of!" Yanami trotted over to one of the shops. "I hear these guys serve the *best* fruit parfaits. Shall we?"

"Parfaits don't sound like ideas to me."

"It's about the experience. Komari-chan agrees with me, don't you?"

Komari's cheek twitched as she studied the menu. "I-I...didn't bring any money."

I took a look at the prices. The peach parfait was pretty up there, but I had to admit, it did look good. I made a mental note to bring Kaju on another day.

"Bit fancy for high school students," I said. "You don't even work, Yanami-san. I think this is outside our price range."

Yanami eyed the menu with somber intensity and then muttered, "But what if we didn't think about that?"

An excellent display of intelligence.

"Ideas, Yanami-san. Let's move. Look over there. There's a miso ramen place."

"Ramen? Seriously—wait, miso's good. I'm a tonkotsu gal, myself."

Another note for my growing encyclopedia of useless Yanami knowledge. I trailed after her as she darted off.

Komari followed a step behind me. She looked up at me through her bangs. "N-Nukumizu, why am I here?"

"We still don't have a theme for Tsuwabuki Fest, remember? We're just trying to spark some inspiration."

"S-sure, b-but I..."

"Only got half a month to decide, you know."

“I-I have a report to do. For the club president meet—” She suddenly clamped her lips tight.

“We know you’re gonna be the new president. They filled us in. Should I let Yakishio know too?”

“S-sure.”

“Anyway, let’s focus on the meeting *after* the festival, yeah? One thing at a time.”

Not to mention, we still had a journal to prepare once we had our theme. Prez had passed the editor role on to me, but there wasn’t much to edit without anything to write. The theme had to come first.

Now here was a healthy avenue to apply Yanami’s zero-thought philosophy. A little “c’est la vie” could do us some good.

“Food’s not a bad idea for a theme,” I said. “I say we stop sweating the details and just do what we can today.”

“I-I’m not a third wheel?” Third wheel? How could she be a third wheel on lit club business? Seeing how confused I was, the corner of Komari’s mouth dropped. “B-because you guys are dating. Aren’t you?”

“No. God no. Where did you even get that idea?”

Honestly, that might have been the most offensive thing she’d said to me so far.

“Y-you’re always together.”

This wasn’t the first time she’d said that. Were we really that glued at the hip? I didn’t think so. In class, we hardly said a word to each other. At club, Komari was usually there with us, and come to think of it, she was at the usual fire escape spot more often than even Yanami these days.

“Frankly, I think I spend more time with you than her,” I pointed out.

Komari squawked like a bird and recoiled away from me. Message received, I guess.

“Let me put it this way. Think about otters,” I said. “Otters are cute, right?”

“L-like...sea otters?”

“Sea otters. Very cute. Fun fact: They eat over twenty percent of their entire body weight per day.” For a certain nameless girl, that would equate to several dozen kilograms. “They’re cute. Big eaters. But would you ever fall in love with one? No. And there you have it.”

“I... I do? Maybe.” Good enough for me. She crossed her arms and tilted her head, but she probably got the gist.

Yanami came trotting back. “Come on, guys, hurry it up! I’ve struck gold.” She was totally beaming, and I instantly knew it had to be food related. I followed her, and lo and behold, she took us to a café. “This place does takeout. What do you guys want?” She leaned across the counter. Guess ideas couldn’t tide her over any longer.

“What do they even have?” I asked.

“Western-style dorayaki, looks like. We’re all probably hungry, right? Isn’t this perfect?”

Personally, I was not, but social obligation and all that. I scanned the menu over her shoulder.

“Scuse me!” she shouted. “I’ll have the blueberry cream cheese, please!”

“Think I’ll go with plain for my first time. You, Komari?”

“H-hold on.” Komari counted the change in her wallet, then clamped it back shut. “I-I’m good.”

Oof. Came up short, evidently.

Yanami took her dorayaki from the guy behind the counter, lit up like a firework, and then bit in. “This is so good! You want a bite, Komari-chan?”

She looked away and shook her head. “I-I’m okay.”

Understandable. Speaking from experience, the classic “say ‘ahhh’” move was a toughie for us introverts.

I tore my dorayaki in two and handed one half to Komari.

“Hwuh?” she mumbled.

“Not as even as it could’ve been, but I haven’t bit into it yet.” I took her hand and forced her to take it.

“You’re sure?”

“Won’t make for very good research if we don’t all get to eat.”

“B-but...”

On second thought, maybe she didn’t want my food. Oh god, did this count as harassment? I really hoped not.

Komari finally nodded. “O-okay.” She still wouldn’t look up at me, but she took a bite. “I I-like it.” She grinned and took another.

Meanwhile, Yanami was judging me.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” she grumbled. “Just remembering the way you treated *me* when *I* was broke.”

“Apples and oranges. I can elaborate if you want.”

She answered by kicking my foot. Couldn’t possibly imagine why. If she had a problem, I was all ears.

I bit into my dorayaki. It *was* pretty good.

\*\*\*

After we split up, I took the tram north to one of my favorite places in the whole city: the Seibunkan bookstore. Something about browsing all the titles, reading all the spines, was just so therapeutic.

One in particular caught my eye: *Pulling It Together, One Meal at a Time*. Yanami’s birthday was coming up...

“Excuse me,” someone said to me. “Are you here by yourself?”

I turned to see a small girl with a doll-like face—Asagumo Chihaya, the current girlfriend of Yakishio’s old crush, Ayano Mitsuki. Her forehead asserted itself quite prominently from between perfectly-parted bangs. Ever since the Yakishio fiasco last summer, we’d gotten to talking every now and then.

“Yeah, I’m alone,” I said. “You?”

“I’m here with Mitsuki-san. Getting him to leave, though, is another matter entirely.” Judging by Asagumo-san’s grin, it didn’t look like she actually cared that much. Something told me things were going well for them. She leaned over and examined the shelves in front of me. “Looking for something specific?”

“Not really. The lit club was just thinking about making our theme for the festival about food, so I’m hunting for inspiration.”

“That sounds fun.” She put a finger to her chin and cocked her head all cutesy. “You’re certain to find plenty of food-related literature, so if I were you, I’d narrow it down a little.”

“How so?”

“If you’re interested in delving into trends, you could pick a specific time period from a specific part of the world, and then examine the way representative authors from that era depicted or described food in their works. I think you could draw a lot of connections between history and culture that way.”

“Huh. Trends... Yeah, that might be a bit beyond me.”

Asagumo-san clutched her hands to her chest and stared up at me with her big, round, squirrely eyes. “If that sounds too complicated, I’d be more than happy to pick out a few dozen or so relevant volumes on the subject for you to peruse. That way, you could make a more informed decision on a more specific area of study. Just say the word!”

“I’m, uh, not looking to make a thesis out of it.” I took a step back, bumping into the shelf behind me. Something had set her off. “It’s a cultural festival, y’know? Wanna keep things, y’know, light.”

“The deepest subjects make for the best crash courses. Let’s see what we can find here before going to the library. Give me your wallet.”

“I, well, uh... O-okay?”

I was cornered. She had become a monster, and my only recourse was to surrender my mortal possessions to it.



Just as I was beginning to slip my wallet out of my pocket, a more composed voice came from my periphery. “My personal recommendation would be to pick out well-known authors and works. Recognizability will go a long way for crowds at a festival.” There he was—Ayano Mitsuki in all his bespectacled glory. “Long time no see, Nukumizu.”

“Oh,” said Asagumo-san. “I didn’t realize you’d finished browsing.” She scampered over and wrapped her hand around his arm.

“About time we get going or we’ll be late for cram school,” he replied. “Did I hear right, Nukumizu? You’re gearing up for the festival?”

“Trying to, at least. Having trouble coming up with ideas,” I said.

“Unfortunately, they don’t usually come to us when we need them the most. Try not to fixate on it.” Maybe so. He put a hand on my shoulder while I considered that. “Or you can always come knock on my door. I’m always willing to help.”

“Right.” I gave him a half smile. “Maybe if it comes to that. I appreciate it.”

Asagumo-san shot me a look that saw straight through me. “You don’t believe him, do you? You think it’s just lip service.”

“Ouch.” Ayano shrugged jokingly. “That’s not how I meant it, at least.”

“No, that’s not it,” I said. “It’s just, I don’t want you thinking you owe me or anything after what happened last summer. I’m not really interested in cashing in on that sort of favor.”

I didn’t like treating social interactions like transactions. Obligation eliminated pretty much any free will we might have otherwise had.

“We acknowledge that you’ve done a lot for us, Nukumizu-san, and we appreciate that, but that’s not what this is about.” Asagumo-san stared me down harder. “Consider this: Why did you go so far out of your way for Lemon-san? There was nothing in it for you, but you did it anyway.”

“Because, well, I felt bad for her. And we’re...friends.” I rubbed my neck awkwardly. “Kinda.”

Asagumo-san grinned. “Then you understand where we’re coming from.

Friends just do things for each other. It's not about zeroing out some invisible scale or gaining anything. Except maybe in that helping you and seeing you happy makes *me* happy."

"I-if you say so. I'll reach out if I need the help. Thanks."

"We'll be waiting."

Ayano winked at me from behind her like he had the best girlfriend in the world. Asagumo-san stepped back and nestled into him like she knew he did.

Oh, they were gaining something all right. Gaining my ire.

\*\*\*

The next day after school, Yanami, Komari, and I were in the club room, almost literally putting our heads together.

"I've summarized what Komari and I talked about last night, and I wanna get everyone's thoughts." I handed them both copies of the same sheet of paper.

Yanami looked at it funny. "Last night? Did you two meet up again?"

"We learned how to share docs in computer class, remember? We chatted while we bounced stuff back and forth. Worked pretty well actually."

"Well, I didn't chat about anything. Guess my invite got lost in the mail."

Welp. For the sake of efficiency, we'd excluded her from the discussion. We gambled on her not caring and apparently lost.

I glanced at Komari. She subtly nodded. I subtly nodded back, then faced Yanami again. "That's because we had something else for you to do. You're the only one we can ask for this very, very important job."

"Only me, huh?" She scowled real serious. "Lay it on me."

"We were thinking you could take on a sort of...consultant role. Take a bird's-eye view on everything to give us an unbiased perspective on things. I think you'd be perfect for the job."

"A consultant, eh? Like a person you consult."

"That is what a consultant is, yes. You've got the idea."

Yanami nodded, then ran her hand suavely through her hair. “I definitely see the need, and I agree. I think I’m the girl to fill that role. It might just be my calling, actually.”

That would be awfully convenient for us.

“Back to the main topic,” I said, “I think we’re gonna go with your idea and theme our exhibit around food. We can present stuff like famous authors’ favorite dishes or compare how they’re depicted in different pieces of literature.”

“Nice. So what I’m hearing is there’s gonna be food.” Yanami’s eyes lit up with anticipation.

“The plan is to put out recipes and pictures to help visualize, yeah.”

“Pictures?” The light went out. “Just pictures?”

“We’re not running a restaurant here, Yanami-san.”

“Okay.” She groaned before clearing her throat. “Everybody, listen up. Because you’ve got my idea all kinds of twisted. This is *not* what I meant when I suggested a food theme.”

Dang. My mistake. I was a bit rusty on my Yanamese.

“So what *did* you mean?” I dared to ask.

“What comes to mind when you think of Showa authors? That’s right. Gyunabe. Eel. That’s what the greats were eating. We’re the literature club. If we’re not looking up to and imitating them, then what are we doing with ourselves?”

Sounded to me like she just wanted to open up a gyunabe stall.

“We can’t cook indoors,” I pointed out. “And applications for anyone serving food are already closed.”

“Hey, I’m the ideas girl. You’re the doer. So do. Chop chop. Make it happen.”

We may have made a mistake in our choice of consultant. I didn’t see us renewing this contract.

Komari, somehow having escaped the nonsense thus far, looked up from

something she'd been reading. "W-we could do simple baked snacks."

She slid the something across the table. It was the guidelines for participating in the festival, and according to the section she indicated, we were indeed allowed to cook simple things. The question now was how to incorporate snacks thematically.

"Act first, think later. Let's get cooking!" Yanami was doing a bad job at hiding her ulterior motive.

"Cook what and where?" I interjected. "Also, how do we make it fit with the theme? That's what we need to consider before anythi—"

"Remember the roles, babe. Leave the brain work to your charismatic consultant Yanami-chan." She crossed one leg over the other with entirely unwarranted ostentation, and then made a phone call. "Kana-chan? You have club today?"

Komari and I sat in awkward silence while the two chatted until she finally stuffed her phone away.

"Don't let us keep you if you've got plans," I said. "Feel free to head out."

"If I were crazy, I'd say you're trying to get rid of me, Nukumizu-kun."

"You're crazy. We at the lit club simply respect a healthy work-life balance among our members."

Yanami gave me an unamused look. She wasn't buying it. "Whatever you say. Everyone up. We've got somewhere to be."

"And that is?"

"Somewhere we can cook." She stood up, tall and smug. "Follow me."

Unfortunately, we were stuck with this consultant until her contract ran out. Thing was ironclad.

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Yanami escorted us to the home ec classroom on the first floor of one of the newer buildings on campus.

"My friend in the cooking club says we can use the stuff here so long as we

clean up after ourselves. Here. Snagged us some ingredients to use too.” Yanami thunked bags of flour and sugar onto the counter.

“Is that...*all* you snagged?”

Yanami nodded proudly. “Mm-hmm. So what now, Nukumizu-kun?”

I didn’t have the first clue what she expected *me* to do. I’d never baked in my life.

“Uh, got any spoons?”

“Nah, don’t wanna eat raw flour. Makes your tummy hurt, and it doesn’t even taste that good.”

Clearly, she was speaking from experience, so I didn’t argue.

“Do you have a recipe or something?” I asked.

“Hmm. We could fry the stuff.”

“Do what now?”

Yanami brandished a frying pan. “It’s easy. You just mix a bunch of flour in water and then heat ‘er up. It’s pretty good if you turn your brain off.”

An easy feat, surely, given one would already have to be pretty brainless to even attempt such a creation.

Komari timidly (and mercifully) raised her hand. “W-we could make cookies.”

“Do we have the ingredients for that?” I asked.

“Some b-butter or margarine would be g-good.”

Yanami went over to one of the shelves crammed with ingredients and returned with a bottle. “Would salad oil work?”

Komari gave her a sad look and sighed. “S-sure. Are there a-any mixing bowls or cellophane?”

“Yup. A crap ton too, ‘cause I guess someone bought way too much for class.”

Komari dumped what she needed into a bowl and worked her magic. “F-flour goes last. Then bake.”

It might as well have been alchemy. She turned that stuff into something



potentially edible. Just like that. She paused momentarily to bring out the tea bags she'd brought from the club room and began to tear them open.

Yanami leaned in for a closer look. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Huh? I-I, um..."

Not good. Komari wasn't ready for this level of brazen extroversion yet.

I pulled out a piece of candy to distract Yanami. "Tea cookies? Didn't know you could make those with just any old tea bag."

Komari nodded as she returned to her mixing. When the dough was ready, she wrapped the whole thing up in cellophane. "N-now it has to sit in the fridge f-for about an hour."

"An hour?" Yanami cracked the candy between her teeth.

Komari jumped. "W-we can just t-take it out when the oven's pre-heated!"

"Kay!" Yanami skipped over to the oven.

I started washing the mixing bowl while Komari went to put the dough in the fridge. When she got back, I said, "You know your stuff."

"W-we've got little ones at home, so I...make snacks a lot."

"Why're you eating bread for lunch everyday if you're this good in the kitchen?"

"B-because it's cheap and easy." She flung the whisk she'd been cleaning onto the drying rack. "Obviously."

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Sitting across from cups steaming with freshly brewed tea was a plate of freshly baked cookies. We all gathered around the table, soaked in the view for a moment or two, then each reached out to grab one.

"S-still a little soft," Komari said, taking a nibble out of one. "But done enough."

"Hey, soft cookies are still cookies. Ohhh, they even smell like tea!" Yanami went for a second and inhaled it, then took a sip of her (actual) tea.

They weren't bad at all. The texture was nice, and they tasted great. We could sell these things, no problem. That still left, of course, how to make them make sense within the context of the exhibit. Maybe put little pictures of Dazai Osamu's face on them?

"So we're doing an exhibit, making snacks, *and* putting together a journal," I said. "Think we can manage all that?"

Yanami shook her head and clicked her tongue while she poured herself some more tea. "Oh, we'll manage. That's the easy part. It doesn't all have to be perfect—we'll make as many cookies as we can, and we can just publish some old stuff in the journal. There's gonna be lots of people coming for the festival, and it's not like every single one of them will have read any of it before anyway."

"I guess that's true."

She made a certain amount of sense. We had to be the ones to pace ourselves and set realistic expectations.

Komari opened her mouth to say something but stopped. All of a sudden, she stood and went to get a fourth teacup.

"Expecting someone?" I asked.

"I-I sense Yakishio."

I hadn't pegged her for a chuuni, so obviously that meant she must have had telepathy.

Just then, all the birds outside the window fluttered away. We turned toward it as a girl with sun-kissed, tawny skin rattled it open—Yakishio Lemon, track star and lit club dabbler. In the flesh.

"Heya! I heard you were makin' snacks."

"Lemon-chan!" Yanami cheered. "We just finished."

"Woo! Thanks for the heads-up, Yana-chan." Yakishio mounted the window and swung herself inside.

"Shoes," I snapped. "Don't track all that dirt in here."

Yakishio smirked and swung her sneakers over her shoulder, dangling them by her fingers. “Already took them off. Quit being such a worrywart, Nukkun.”

How and when? That girl got more superhuman by the day, honestly. Not that outdoor shoes belonged in a kitchen regardless.

I unclumped a plastic bag from my pocket. “Put those in here so we aren’t getting dirt everywhere. And wash your hands.”

“What are you, my mom? Want me to start calling you ‘Mommy’?”

Every fiber of my being screamed “no.”

She was probably coming right off of track practice, judging by the tank top she had rolled all the way up to her chest. Her navel looked awfully chilly. Yakishio finished washing her hands then, without even bothering to sit down, reached for a cookie.

“You’re gonna catch a cold in that outfit one of these days,” I said.

“Nuh-uh. I wear it at practice all the time.” She took a bite and her eyes went wide. “Okay, these are *good*. There’s like, leaves and stuff in it.”

“Yeah, well, y’know,” Yanami swaggered for some reason.

“Komari made them,” I made sure to specify. “Those are tea leaves.”

“Wow. You go, Komari-chan.” Yakishio plopped down next to her and patted her on the head.

I got to thinking about last summer, when her love story officially ended. We hadn’t talked about any of that since, but every now and then I’d see her walking to school with Asagumo-san, so I figured we didn’t need to.

Noticing me staring, Yakishio flashed me that toothy grin of hers. “Sorry I’m no help with the festival.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re busy. I get it.”

“Y-you’ve got practice,” Komari added, handing her some tea.

Yakishio couldn’t exactly be in three places at once, what with the track team doing their own Tsuwabuki Fest stuff on top of her taking a lead role in our class’s plans. The life of a people person was an eventful one.

“Hey, did you hear the schedule for our class?” lead number two asked as she counted the remaining cookies. “Gonna be tight.” Yanami shoved the rest of the cookies into her mouth, sparing only three. “Goffa finuhhooferhiver hoo.”

“Yeah. Finding that supervisor’s a toughie for sure.” Yakishio nodded in agreement. Her Yanamese was clearly better than mine. “I could maybe ask ours on the track team. Heck, I bet it’d go easier if you guys join the team.”

“I’d prefer to not be assimilated,” I said. “Any leads on a teacher that’s *not* already supervising a club?”

Yakishio leaned in for another cookie and blinked. “Only ones I know are through club. And Amanatsu-chan, I guess.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

Amanatsu Konami was the homeroom teacher for our class, 1-C and extraordinarily tiny. Like, genuinely. She often got mistaken for a student. It’d almost make her charming if she wasn’t halfway senile and still struggled to remember my name two semesters into the school year.

Yakishio wiped her hands off and stood. “No point stressing about it. Let’s go give it a shot, Nukkun.”

“Who, me? I think you might have better luck with Yanami—” I looked over to find the doofus doubled over and coughing up crumbs. “Never mind, let’s go.”

Komari did what she could and timidly patted her on the back while Yakishio and I left her to her fate.

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No dice in the faculty office. Amanatsu-sensei was apparently prepping in the social studies material room, so we headed there.

On the way, Yakishio nudged me in the shoulder. “Hey, so is it true the third-years are retiring after the festival?”

“Yeah, they wanna take a step back. Same with track?”

Yakishio nodded. She was a little bit paler this time of year. “Got our new team captain too. We’re on good terms, but they’re sort of a stickler. Doubt I’ll get to play hooky as much.” She linked her hands behind her head and sighed.

“Why would you skip? Don’t you like running?”

“I’m a sprinter, so short distance. I got a strict regimen I’ve gotta stick to, but sometimes I’m just not feeling it, y’know? Sometimes I just wanna run.”

That...didn’t make sense. “So you skip running practice...to run?”

“Sometimes.” She gave me a funny grin and bumped me with her shoulder. Ow. “When I get the itch to just *go* and never stop.”

“Why not just dabble in long distance or whatever?”

“Oh, don’t even get me started. It’s a long story that goes back to junior high, and I’m over it.”

She stopped in front of the material room. Now to find out if Amanatsu-sensei was actually inside it. As I reached for the door, there came the distinct clatter of several things falling over followed by a high-pitched squeal. Yeah, we had the right place.

When we opened the door, we found Amanatsu-sensei half-buried in a mountain of textbooks. Yakishio ran over. “Amanatsu-chan, are you okay?”

“Sort of,” she groaned. I went to open the window while Yakishio excavated her, bringing dust up as she did so. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, Yakishio. I think. Not sure how I feel about that getup, young lady.”

Yakishio pouted. “I had practice.”

Amanatsu-sensei dusted off her skirt, glancing between us. “What’s the occasion?” Her expression turned suspicious. The last time it was just the three of us, we were in the PE storage shed last semester.

She scrunched her handkerchief up and hurled it to the floor. “For the love of —take it somewhere else, will ya?! Or the nurse’s office at least! Konuki-chan’s there!”

Wasn’t sure what she had to do with it, but okay. “Hold on, we just wanted to ask you something,” I said.

“Ask me what?” She cocked her head and took another look at Yakishio’s midriff. The color left her face. “Y-y-y’know, I *really* think a nurse sounds like a good idea, you two! Take it to Konuki-chan!”



"I feel there's been a miscommunication." Talk about no chill.

Yakishio glanced at me with a raised eyebrow. "What's she going on about?"

"Uhhh, let's just say some adults have an overactive imagination."

"Um, okay? Let's just cut to the chase." Yakishio cleared her throat.

"Amanatsu-chan, can you *please* be the lit club supervisor?"

"Well that came out of nowhere," Amanatsu-sensei said.

Indeed it had. I took it upon myself to fix that. "Sorry. What she means to say is the literature club doesn't have a supervisor right now, and we were hoping it could be you. We need one to participate in the festival."

She hummed and crossed her arms. "Wish I could help you kids out. I really do. But unfortunately, the ping pong club got to me first." She shut her eyes, deep in thought for a moment, then shot them open. "Tell you what. I'll figure something out!"

"You will?" said Yakishio.

"I've been doing this for five years, and you're the first kids ever to seek out yours truly. So help me God, I will make this happen!"

"You haven't had a single student come to you for help before?" I asked before my filter could kick in. "At all?"

Amanatsu-sensei pressed her lips together. "Your teacher has, er, firm boundaries. As you know, I like to carry myself with stern maturity, and because of that, my students have trouble approaching me on account of how intimidating I can be. Simple as that."

"But you took photos with us just the other day," Yakishio said.

"As a matter of education, and not at all because it looked like fun and I was jealous." Our esteemed teacher pouted and gave us the cold shoulder like the stern and mature adult she was.

"Anyway, uh, thanks," I said. "So you'll see if you can find us a supervisor?"

"Leave it to me, Yakishio, and uh..." Here we went again. I prepared to give her a hint to jog her memory, but she held her hand out to stop me. "Don't tell

me. You're in my class. You're...Nukumizu."

"You got it. You actually remember me?!"

Amanatsu-sensei puffed her chest out. "Process of elimination, my dear student. All I had to do was remember who I *didn't* remember, and—"

"Sensei," I interjected. "Please stop talking."

So much for that.

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The following Saturday, I was at the Michi-no-Eki Toyohashi roadside station with my family.

"First Love Lemon..."

I read out the name of the lemonade I had in my hand. As I stared at the bottle, I couldn't help but think of Yakishio's smile and how grown-up it could look sometimes. The bitterness of a lemon's rind. Things I lacked the elegance to convey with words. I put the lemonade back on the shelf.

They sold local food and stuff here. Figuring I could use some of it as ideas for the festival, I asked my parents to take us.

"Open wide, Oniisama."

In came a spoon. I opened up on instinct and tasted something cold and sweet. That was when I noticed Kaju standing next to me with an ice cream cone.

"Pretty good," I said.

"Mom got gelato. Apparently, they make it with local quail eggs." She popped the spoon in her mouth.

Quails were migratory, weren't they? I eyed some quail sablés on the shelf, wondering how such dumpy, round creatures even knew how to fly.

"What made you want to come all the way out here anyway, Oniisama?"

"The lit club's making snacks for the festival," I said. "I'm thinking we might make a little rest area for people to come and relax too, so I was just in the market for ideas."

“Your own little roadside station! What kind of snacks are you making?”

I opened my mouth up again, granting access to another mouthful of gelato. “Apparently Natsume Souseki famously liked peanuts.”

“Peanuts?”

“Yeah. We’ll probably put them in bags, have a little explanation, and sell ’em for cheap.”

“Just plain peanuts?” Kaju tilted her head, the spoon sticking out of her mouth. “As I recall, Natsume Souseki had a bit of a sweet tooth. He liked to sprinkle them with sugar, and he’d often hide them from his wife to eat in secret. Not that you ever have to do that with me. Ahhh.”

I *ahhh*’d for the spoon. “We don’t have the budget to buy much, though, and we don’t have the means to make anything too complicated.”

“How’s the rest of it going?”

“Uhhh...”

The plan was to do an exhibit on authors and food, on top of the tangentially related snack thing. The food aspect was just to get people to visit, at least as far as we’d discussed at school yesterday. I explained all of this to Kaju.

She turned very serious and stood at attention. “Why, you should have told me sooner, Oniisama.” And why was that? Kaju stared up at me with big, glistening eyes. “My time has finally come. I will be your snack maker, Oniisama!”

“You will?”

“With pleasure! Also, might I recommend tatami for the rest area? I have a source.”

“Huh. That would make it more comfortable, yeah.”

“We can borrow some mats from the judo club!”

My alma mater, Momozono Junior High, didn’t actually have a dojo, so the judo club just laid out tatami mats in the gym for their practice.

“Not a bad idea, but will they be okay with that?”

“I’ll just come on ‘student council business’ and tell them we need them for something or other.” Was that even allowed? She flashed an impish smirk. “There are few lines I would not cross for you, Oniisama.”

Perhaps there should have been.

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Monday came, and so did the end of first period. The deadline for the classroom reservation form was today, so I was scouring the school for Komari. I had it printed out, but I still needed her signature, and I couldn’t find her in class 1-A.

My best guesses were she was either in the girl’s bathroom or at a west annex sink. She wouldn’t be thirsty this early in the day. She’d want to kill time. The west annex next door was far enough away that she could kill just enough to where she wouldn’t have to awkwardly stand around the sink without drinking anything for too long.

But then again, it was chilly this morning.

I instead made my way to the centermost sink on the fourth floor of the new building. Up the stairs and down the hallway, I spotted a tiny girl standing stock-still in front of the sink. Bingo. The new building got good sunlight, especially on the top floor, and Komari was a believer in warm tap water.

She stared idly at the running water. People came and went, but time seemed to freeze for her and her world alone. Despite my better judgment telling me to leave her alone, I approached.

She jumped when she noticed me and quickly shut the faucet off.

“What’re you doing?” I asked.

“Wh-what’re *you* doing?” she shot back.

“Looking for you.”

“L-looking for me?” I caught a glimpse of her timid eyes looking up at me through her bangs. “Why?”

I handed her the form. “The classroom reservation. Need a signature from the one in charge, if you don’t mind. I’ll turn it in during lunch.”

Komari took it and stared. “Am I...the one in charge?”

“It *was* pretty much all your idea. I think it makes sense that you have the final say.”

She stared for a while longer before nodding. I lent her a pencil. She took it, signed her name, and then handed it all back without another word.

Something was off about her. More so than usual, that is.

“You good? Looking a little pale there,” I said.

She grunted. “F-fine.”

“Stressing about the festival?”

Komari hung her head and clenched her fists into tiny balls. We’d finally settled on everything last week, and Komari had taken on the bulk of the work—that being the research—for herself. And it was a lot, I had to admit.

“Hey, breathe,” I said. “We’ve still got our senpai, and we’ll do what we can. No one’s expecting anything more than that.”

“B-but I...!” She shrunk at the volume of her own voice. “I have to do it myself.”

An awkward silence followed. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.

“Sorry. I’ll, uh, see you after school.”

Komari mumbled something unintelligible, so I stopped. Suddenly, a wave of second-years poured from a nearby classroom. I sidled up to a wall to get out of the way while Komari shielded herself behind me.

More kept coming, and it didn’t seem like the crowd was dying down anytime soon. Must have been an assembly or something. I started shuffling down along the wall, but something held me in place. I turned. Komari was gripping the edge of my blazer.

“Everything okay?”

“I-I... I f-finished my draft. For the journal. I-it’s the next part of my...villainess story.”

Was that all? “Gotcha. I guess that’s my job this time around, so send it to me

when you get a chance.”

“R-right.”

That was that. Conversation over. But she still wouldn’t let go. “Second period’s starting soon. I’ve got to get back, Komari.”

“M-me too. We’re g-going the same direction.”

Technically we weren’t going anywhere with her standing there like an anchor. Were all the upperclassmen freaking her out?

Resigned, I held the digital watch around my wrist up so she could see, my eyes glued to the sea of people. “Watch the watch.”

“L-looks kinda lame.”

Whatever. Bad taste. It was solar-powered *and* radio-controlled, thank you very much.

“It’ll take us eighty-five seconds exactly to get to class from here. That leaves us a full minute of leeway before the bell.”

“Um, o-okay? And?”

“I’m saying we’ve got time to wait out the crowd if you want.”

Komari tugged my blazer sullenly. “M-my classroom’s farther than yours.”

“Then we’ll walk faster.”

Stranger after stranger passed us by, and in the midst of them all were two loners, stranded in an ocean of people. Call it coincidence that we both wound up in it together. I wondered if we’d ever witness such a phenomenon again, and if Komari would still be hiding behind me when we did.

I kept watching the crowd, and she kept holding on.

*Literature Club Fall Activity Report: Komari Chika—Single and Ready to Mingle! Chapter 4*

My name is Sylvia Luxéd, *former* lady and even more former high school girl. I

was transported to the world of my favorite otome game from my previous life, and through many trials and tribulations, I was at last on the cusp of happiness. I had finally arrived at the villainess's spin-off redemption arc.

So began my passionate romance...or so it should have.

"Philip!" I crashed through the office's heavy doors, hiking up my skirt as I did. "By god, you'd starve yourself to death if it weren't for me."

"I'll thank you not to shout, Sylvia," sighed the man. Prince Philip pried himself from the slide rule.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. It was about a month ago that I first made Philip's acquaintance. After being broken up with in spectacular fashion at the party, he half whisked, half dragged me away to his country. Such was our first encounter.

I looked askance at the meal set on the edge of his desk. A bland soup of salted meats and potatoes with bread on the side. "Must you really eat like you're one of the help?"

"I've far more important things to do with my time than fuss over each and every meal. Food is food." The prince brought a spoonful to his mouth, a pious grin smeared across it.

The lands had been plagued by drought since the summer, and the fall harvest suffered for it. There were sure to be many victims of famine in the days to come if measures weren't taken.

"And yet you concern yourself with it to no end. Surely you can entrust the disbursement of provisions to someone whose time is *less* valuable. Summon an administrator from the capital."

Philip frowned. "Grand Duke Gordes's fingers are in every pie, Sylvia. If I let his people into my duchy, I might as well be signing it away to him."

"But you've hardly slept."

"I am a duke first and the crown prince second. My duty is foremostly to the people of—" He swallowed his words, noticing the scrutiny in my gaze.



“Codswallop. The grand duke keeps me on my toes. Have to play the gallant lord or he’ll run me through the mud. It’s exhausting work, I tell you.”

“Yes, I’m sure it is. A proper meal may help with that, you know.”

There was only one way to deal with stubborn, dishonest men: don’t. I snapped my fingers and a maid appeared with food.

“And what is this?” the prince inquired.

“Let’s call it a sort of makeshift cabbage roll. Scrap meats and vegetables wrapped in celery leaves from the north, then meticulously simmered in broth.”

“A what roll? Sylvia, you know we’ve nothing to spare. All the crops withered in the drought, and forget having mana in the budget for imports from the north.”

“Oh, I am aware of the habits of nobility. In particular, Grand Duke Gordes’s penchant for importing rare ingredients with freeze magic.” Magic was so ingrained in this society that it effectively functioned as both a resource *and* currency. The mana one used on exotic novelties could be better used for producing foodstuffs locally. “Rest assured, only a fraction was utilized for my purposes. I employed coolers.”

“Coolers?” Philip chewed on that unfamiliar word.

“Double-layered boxes, stuffed with Trousseau drift cotton in between.”

“Drift cotton? The fluff that buries farms in the winter?”

“It makes for an excellent insulator. The lords and ladies of this country have made a ridiculous tradition of wanton magic consumption, as if it’s the panacea to all their woes. With proper forethought, however, imports need not be a luxury.”

“So you say. Very well. I’ll humor your incessant motherliness for now. What was it you called it? A ‘roll’ of some kind?”

“Yes, and you’ll thank me for my ‘incessantness’ soon enough.”

Philip took one bite and the pretension left his expression at once. “You made this?”

“That I did, and you can expect more. Someone has to make sure you don’t keel over one day.”

“And who makes sure you won’t? I notice a few bags under your eyes.”

My hand shot up on its own and felt them. “I-I simply thought I could be of assistance in your work, so I was...busy getting things in order.”

“My work is my own. Your generosity is acknowledged, but I don’t intend to pass my responsibilities onto another.”

“It wouldn’t be that. My role would be purely secondary.” I brandished a bit of illusion magic—my personal specialty, though a field of magic typically looked down upon—and projected a grid of light onto a nearby wall.

“What in the world is this?”

“Say hello to Excel—er, Exzel. Yes, that’s the name of the spell. Simply input numbers into the cells using light magic, and it will run any calculation you wish automatically.”

Never had I been more glad to have paid attention in computer class.

The prince took a sheet of paper at random, glanced at it, and then input the numbers into the grid. Their sum appeared instantaneously. “It’s right.” He cautiously reached out to touch it. “How does it work?”

“In each section of the grid, or ‘cell’ if you will, I have incorporated a sort of magical slide rule mechanism. And let me tell you, getting the SUM function to work was one thing, but VLOOKUP? And don’t even get me started on SUMIF.”

“I don’t believe it,” Philip breathed. “With this, the whole duchy could eat *tomorrow*. All of the country’s finances could be revolutionized. Tell me, how much mana does this use?”

“What, this? It’s just Excel. It’s not very memory...*mana* intensive at all.”

“And this is illusion magic? Incredible. I’ve never seen it utilized in such a...” Philip suddenly staggered.

I leapt and caught him in my arms before he could fall. I brought us both to the nearby sofa. “Philip! Philip, what’s wrong?!”

“Keeling over, it seems. Just tired. May I rest a moment?”

“As much as you’d like. I won’t go anywhere.”

Prince Philip “the Heartless,” they called him. Never had there been a more inappropriate title. In truth, he was terribly concerned for his people. A proper duke.

But he’d sooner die than let it show. To anyone but me, that is.

“I knew I was a good judge of character,” he mumbled.

“Have I finally proved my usefulness to His Highness?”

“It wasn’t practicality that drew me to you, Sylvia.” Philip played with the ends of my hair. “You’re a fascinating woman.”

“Just eye candy, am I?” I blustered. It did little to hide the redness in my cheeks.

Philip looked up at me with warm eyes. How no one could see a heart past them baffled me. “I will make you my princess one day. Father will see reason. I promise you.”

Coming up in Chapter 5: Philip has a bastard?!

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Lunchtime. I was on my way to the student council room, classroom reservation form in hand.

“Something just wasn’t right about her,” I muttered.

I still couldn’t stop thinking about Komari. The way she’d been frozen in front of the sink like that.

She was the next lit club president. There was the festival. And then the club president meeting right after. To say there was a lot riding on her would be an understatement. I could see how that might paralyze her.

I made a note to keep a closer eye on her just as I arrived. The door had a plaque on it reading “Student Council” but was otherwise indistinguishable from the dozens of others I’d passed on the way.

I cleared my throat, then knocked. “Excuse me.”

Inside was a single girl chewing on a cereal bar all by herself. She looked up and covered her mouth with her hand when she noticed me. “Can I help you?”

She had her hair tied back in that “all business” sort of way. She definitely looked all business to me. Without so much as a polite smile, she stood and sped-walked over.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt your lunch,” I said. “I have a form to turn in.” I showed it to her.

She scrutinized it closely but didn’t take it. She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but all deadlines regarding the festival have passed.”

“Wait, but Shikiya-senpai asked us to give this to you guys today. We had to fix some things.”

“Shikiya-senpai? Are you with the literature club?”

We were getting somewhere. Or at least I thought so until she frowned at me.

“Is there a problem?”

“I’ve heard all about you. You’re the lot who coop yourselves up in the west annex and write smut all day.”

I recoiled. “What?! No, we’re an honest club! We don’t write—”

...Okay, one person wrote smut. That hesitation was all it took for the girl’s frown to turn into a glare. “I knew you people weren’t to be trusted.”

“Whatever they’ve told you, it’s not true, um...” My eyes drifted down to the name tag pinned on her chest. I’d totally forgotten we got those when we enrolled, since no one actually wore them.

She was a Basori...something. I couldn’t figure out how to read the rest of the kanji.

Basori-san’s arms flew up to cover herself. “M-my eyes are up here, *sir*! Being alone with a girl is no excuse to act crude!”

“Huh? I wasn’t—I was reading your name tag! H-how do you read that, by the way?”

“Basori... My name is Basori. Student council vice president.”

According to her badge, she was a first-year like me. Impressive that she was vice president already.

“I meant your first name, actually.”

“Oh,” she mumbled. “It’s T...Tiara.”

“Sorry? Didn’t catch that.”

“Tiara! It’s Tiara, okay?! Got a problem with that?! Wanna file a police report?! It’s my name! Sue me!”

Tiara-san stepped up to me like she was ready to throw down.

“I, uh, didn’t mean anything by it,” I said. “Just thought it was weird to see someone wearing the name tag.”







“Oh, so *I’m* weird now?! We’re *supposed* to wear them, you know! It’s in the rules! And for the record, don’t think I don’t know what you’re trying to pull, name-dropping someone like it excuses a late turn-in. Well guess what? That’s not gonna fly with me!”

“So you won’t take it?”

“Yes, I’ll take it!”

This was getting confusing.

“Then, uh, here you—”

“Oh, shoot! When’d it get so late? Hold your horses. The president’s on her way!” Tiara-san trotted over to a mirror and fussed with her ribbons.

“Can you take this?”

“Later! I cannot be in this state in front of the president. Agh, come on! Work with me! Do we really need *four* ribbons on this thing?!”

I had no answer.

I was getting familiar vibes from her, weirdly enough. She reminded me a lot of the lit club girls. Unless all girls were just...like this. I shuddered at the thought.

The door swung open. “Everyone having fun in here?”

“President!” Tiara-san stood at attention. “Welcome back!”

Houkobaru Hibari. Even I wasn’t so ignorant as to not know our own student council president. She was a tall one.

“Welcome to the student council,” she said with a polite grin. Her long hair swayed as she entered. “How can we help you?”

“Just turning in this form for the festival,” I replied.

The president relieved me from the thing at last. “Ah, you must be from the literature club. How’s Koto-senpai?”

“She’s, uh, good. Same as ever.”

“Same as ever. Right.” She smirked as she scanned the form, then she slid it in

with the rest on the table. “Looks good to me. Rest assured we’ll get this processed.”

She was nicer than I thought she’d be. Months of brainwashing had led me to assume everyone in the student council had it out for us.

“Thanks,” I said. “Then I’ll just—”

“Shikiya helped you fix it, didn’t she?” The president spoke in a way that instantly brought the energy down in the room.

“Well, uh, yes, she did point out *how* to fix it, but we’re the ones who rewrote it.”

“That wasn’t an accusation. Knowing when to accept instruction is an invaluable skill.” She stepped up to me, deliberately clicking her heels loudly against the floor, and smiled. I could make out my reflection in her eyes. “The third-years are leaving. Shikiya’s protected you for a long time now, but no more.” She flicked my bangs then turned like she was done with me. “Keep your nose clean.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!” I sputtered, throwing my head down. I practically flew from the room.

Houkobaru Hibari. Our student council president had quite the presence.

Her eyes were as sharp as daggers and twice as deadly. But when she touched my hair just now, I noticed Band-Aids all over her fingers. And pretty cute ones too, with little bears and everything. Also, I could’ve sworn she was wearing her outdoor shoes given how loud they were.

Actually, there was a whole lot I didn’t understand about that interaction. I stopped just in time to hear voices coming from the room.

“President, why are you wearing those shoes?”

“Oh, these? I was outside for... Wait, where are my indoor shoes? Tiara-kun, do you happen to know where they’ve run off to?”

“N-no, but I’ll find them at once!”

I was even more confused. How had she lost her indoor shoes? Would they not be in the cupboards where *everyone* changed shoes?

Whatever. Not my problem, and odds were I'd hardly ever have to deal with the student council ever again.

I hurried along, putting as much distance as fast as possible between myself and that room.

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Classes ended, and the first-years gathered in the club room. Yanami, Yakishio, Komari, and I sat around the table with steady expressions.

I finished handing out the materials and glanced around at them. "So. Our project for Tsuwabuki Fest's been officially finalized. If you'll direct your attention to what I've just handed out." They did. "Our theme will be 'Food for Thought.' We're going to present famous authors and their works from a culinary perspective, as well as sell and distribute related snacks, including explanations as to their relation to the presentation as a whole."

Yanami cocked her head. "We're selling *and* distributing? How's that work?"

"K-kids don't have to pay," Komari answered.

I nodded. "Based on old photos, Tsuwabuki Fest gets a lot of families. Our line of thinking was that we could attract them with a place to relax for a while, and we might even get tatami mats for a resting area."

Yakishio leaned back in her chair. She made no attempt to even pretend she was going to read anything on the paper I'd given her. "Why not hand 'em out to everyone for free? The budget'll cover that, won't it?"

"We'll run out in no time if we do that. Also, the plan for the kids is that everyone in elementary school or lower gets a stamp card. They'll fill it in by seeing all the exhibits, and *then* they get snacks."

We were doing four exhibits in total. We'd have big, meter-long posters up and a station at each for visitors to stamp their cards. That way we could maybe hold a child's interest long enough to see all there was to see.

Yanami stared at her paper, scowling and fiddling with her hair. "But what's stopping kids from just coming in, running the gauntlet, and nabbing something without actually looking at anything? That's what I'd do at least."

She would. I knew she would.

“That’s fine,” I said. “It’s a festival, so the important thing is that people are having fun. To be frank, little kids won’t be able to read any of it anyway. It’s more about the vibe.”

“So why are we even selling the snacks if it’s about the vibe?”

“Doesn’t make for a very good post-mortem if all we did for the festival was hand out food. First and foremost, our goal, at least ostensibly, is to present research and make money off of thematically related snacks. If we don’t sell many snacks, then we can still claim people came to see our exhibits. Another thing, too, is that by making snacks free for kids we get more parents which means more visitors.”

Everyone stared unblinkingly at me.

“Dang, Nukumizu-kun,” said Yanami. “That’s devious.”

“Very devious,” Yakishio agreed.

“D-degenerate.” Why, thank you, Komari.

“Anyway, so this is how the duties are going to be broken down,” I continued, “Komari’s going to handle the exhibits. I’ll be doing snacks and generally managing the venue. I’m in close contact with our senpai, and they’ll take care of getting the journal printed.”

Yakishio’s hand shot up. “What do I do? I can lift stuff if you need stuff lifted!”

“You’ve got both our class and track to worry about, don’t you? If you can help set stuff up the day before, that’ll be plenty. We’ll have to get those posters made eventually.”

“Can do. I’ll make sure I’m free. What about you, Yana-chan?”

“I’ve got class stuff on my end,” Yanami said. “Don’t you have something too, Nukumizu-kun?”

“Oh. Right.” I’d almost forgotten I was on prop duty or something. “You gonna be busy with your class project at all, Komari?”

“Huh? N-no one’s told me anything, s-so it’s probably fine.”

That didn't inspire much confidence. Oh well.

"One last thing. I got some samples for the snack we're selling. Wanted to get you guys' opinions on it." I went to get the bag I'd left on the shelf. "Wait. There was a paper bag here. Have any of you seen a paper bag?"

Yakishio and Komari turned, as one, to look at Yanami. The culprit did not acknowledge them.

"Yanami-san."

"Those, uh... Those were samples?"

I nodded slowly.

She beamed unrepentantly. "Then you're good. I approve."

Well, that was that then. Meeting adjourned, I guess.

I slung my bag over my shoulder, but no one else was moving. "Yakishio, don't you have practice?"

"Uh, well, Amanatsu-chan told me to wait here after school, so that's what I'm doing. Dunno where she is, though."

Yanami nodded and sent her big marbly eyes my way. "She told me too. Didn't she fill you in, Nukumizu-kun?"

It just so happened that she had not. Maybe it didn't concern me. But then again, how could it not when she'd rounded up the other two lit club members she knew?

Voices came from the hall. Right when they came up to the door, they stopped. And then it flew open.

"Gang's all here, I see!" Enter: Amanatsu Konami. And a little more chipper than usual.

"What'd you come all the way out here for?" I asked.

"Hey, you're the one who came crying to me for help."

It hit me. The supervisor thing.

Amanatsu-sensei beckoned to someone out in the hallway before any of us

could process any of this. “Come on in!”

“Don’t mind if I do.” She entered the room like a model on a runway. From an extremely well-filled-out skirt extended two stocking’d legs seemingly for days. The smell of perfume and makeup was immediate and almost intoxicating. “I see quite a few familiar faces here.”

She took an empty seat and met each pair of eyes once, swinging one leg over the other. “I’m Konuki Sayo, and I’ll be your supervisor. Let’s make some memories, shall we?”

Yanami and Yakishio let out a couple of excited *ooh*’s. Komari, meanwhile, was already hiding in her corner.

I should have anticipated this. It made sense that a nurse wouldn’t be someone’s first choice of supervisor, so it totally tracked that she was available. Plus, she and Amanatsu-sensei were friends or something.

“We’re, uh...glad to have you.” I lowered my head. Only slightly out of regret.

Why, god, had I trusted Amanatsu-sensei of all people?

## Intermission: Rendezvous Avenue

**O**N THE EAST END OF TSUWABUKI WAS A LONELY path of tulip trees. There, beneath their great branches, two girls stood at opposite sides of a trunk, their backs to each other.

“Tsuwabuki Fest proceeds apace, Senpai. The literature club has finalized their project, and the classroom reservation form’s been approved. She’s getting along well.”

One of them wore a badge identifying her as a first-year. Her hair hung in waves just past her shoulders, and her figure was the object of many young men’s imaginations. She munched on a Black Thunder chocolate bar as she presented a photo on her phone to the other girl.

The girl glanced sideways at it through her glasses. She was a third-year. Her two pigtails swayed behind her as she passed a small, hand-sized bag over her shoulder. “That’s a relief to hear. This is for you.”

Potato chips. Fried chicken-flavored. A Toyohashi specialty.

The first-year girl accepted at once and immediately started crunching. “Also, I got in touch with a friend of mine who’s in her class to see how she gets on outside of club.” The glasses girl produced another bag. This time, it was barbecue flavor. “Every break, she leaves and comes back right at the bell. She doesn’t talk to anyone, doesn’t pair up with anyone during PE. Or so they tell me.”

“I thought as much. The truth hurts.”

“But I hear that’s changed this semester.”

“Oh?” Another bag. Salted butter.

The first-year polished off the barbecue chips and dug straight in. “She still disappears between periods,” she said, “but now they say she comes back in a better mood than she left.”



The girl with glasses thought on that for a while. What in the world could it mean?

Eventually, she nodded. "Your cooperation is appreciated. I'll have something special for you next time."

"Lucky me. Until then." The first-year nonchalantly and inconspicuously took her leave.

The glasses girl remained. A small, palm-shaped leaf fluttered down to her feet. She reached for it, held it up, and gazed at the sky through translucent, crisscrossing veins.

Only ten days until the festival. Her faith in her would have to hold out until then.

## Loss 2:

### Himemiya Karen, the Fashionably Late

**A**FTER A WEEK OF UNCERTAINTY, KONUKI-SENSEI actually proved to be a pretty attentive supervisor. She was always available if we needed help with something and always willing to look into anything she didn't know offhand. It turned out to be not so bad.

If you ignored her constant attempts to get me alone with one of the girls in her office and her obsession with stamens and pistils.

It was Monday after school. The final week leading up to the festival this weekend.

On my way to the classroom from the nurse's office, I passed a bunch of people wearing pumpkins on their heads, but all I could think about was Konuki-sensei's "fun fact." Did you know pumpkins have separate flowers for male and female reproductive parts? I did. For some reason. Apparently, it was to prevent self-pollination.

I still couldn't figure out how me talking about Kaju had brought that on.

"Coming through, coming through!"

I stepped aside, and a coven of witches carrying enormous brooms barreled past. Tsuwabuki was certainly feeling the Halloween spirit this year. Pretty much everyone was dressing up for the occasion.

Campus was more chaotic than ever, what with the festival just on the horizon. It was like one big Halloween party. After school was normally my own personal witching hour, but enough people were sticking around now to almost fool me into thinking it was still afternoon.

I was keeping occupied myself. I had a meeting about my class's project soon, and then after that I had to head straight to the club room. Busy, busy.

As I passed the stairs, a floral-scented wave hit my nose. I stopped. Whatever it was, it seemed to be coming from above, so I glanced up. A girl carrying way too much at once was descending the stairs on wobbly legs. I happened to catch her at just the right moment.

“Move, move, move!” she shouted.

Ah, I knew this. I’d seen it before in my light novels.

I was promptly flattened.

I awoke on my back, in a daze. Everything was dark. How long had I been out?

I searched my memory, recalled walking through the hall. There were stairs. A girl carrying things down it. She’d stumbled, fell, and suddenly I was pinned to the ground. By something very heavy yet very soft.

The softness yelped and shot up. I could see again, and the first thing I saw was a ribbon. Four, actually. I traced them up to a face I recognized. “Himemiya-san?”

It was Himemiya Karen, girlfriend of Yanami’s childhood friend, Hakamada Sousuke.

I didn’t say anything else. I couldn’t. Not in the state we were in.

Himemiya-san was straddling me, blushing, hands over her chest. The soft, heavy something came to mind.

My eyes fell back down to her ribbons.

Himemiya-san blushed harder and reeled her hand back.

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“Oh my gosh, I am so sorry!”

Himemiya-san clapped her hands together and flung her head down low.

I rubbed my aching cheek and bowed in tandem. “I-it’s okay, really. Very okay.”

I did not know what “very okay” was supposed to mean.

My brain was still processing. An accident in a hallway. A slap to the face. What was this, some kind of rom-com?

“Are you sore anywhere? Any bumps where there shouldn’t be bumps?”

“I’m, uh, bump-free, I think.”

“Thank goodness! You went limp for a while, so I got scared.” Himemiya-san beamed. Literally. Like, I swore I could see lights floating around her. And was that her own personal character theme blaring in the background? She rolled her head back in frustration. “Agh, jeez. Why am I like this?”

She bent down and started hurriedly gathering all the fabric strewn around the floor. Casualties of the encounter, I figured.

“Let me help you,” I said. “I’m half the blame here, anyway.”

I crouched down beside her. They looked like blackout curtains or something. By the time we were done, we had a pretty hefty load. Too much for one person, that was for sure.

“Thanks so much! Here, you take half.” Himemiya-san hoisted a mountain of the stuff on me, still smiling. Still glowing.

“Uh...”

“You said you were half the blame, didn’t you? So you take half. To the classroom, pretty please.” She winked.

The lights were getting blinding now. I had to squint or risk perishing from exposure.

Wait, we were heading to the same place. So we’d be walking together. Yeah, no. I mumbled out a “sure,” then started on my way.

“Hey, now, Nukumizu-kun! What’s the rush?”

“Er, what?”

“Wait up for me, speed racer. Let’s walk and talk. I’ve been wanting to get to know you better.”

For what purpose? She could have only known me through Yanami, so what was there to talk about? Unless Yanami had fed her something ridiculous, which

seemed likely.

I jumped when she sidled up to me. She made puppy dog eyes. “Do you not want me to talk to you?”

“I, uh... No. No, you’re good.”

I was just freaking out a little, truth be told. Here was a real *woman*. A lady with all the ladylike qualities Yanami distinctly lacked. It was like, sure 4K’s pretty impressive, but then you see an OLED 8K and it’s like, wow. Different leagues.

Also, not like I’m making a size metaphor or anything, but one was a hundred-inch screen and the other was not. Just saying.

“I guess this is the first time we’ve actually had, y’know, a moment to ourselves, huh?” she commented.

“I guess it is.”

Himemiya Karen slid in closer, dodging oncoming traffic. “You’re friends with Sousuke and Anna, yeah? They’re, like, always talking about you, so I already sorta feel like we know each other.”

“Hakamada and I just, er, chat sometimes. I dunno if I’d say we’re friends, per se.”

“No? Then you should be *my* friend, and then you’ll get two for one!” She lit up again. “Package deal!”

I was understanding this friend thing less and less by the day. Were girlfriends allowed to just do that?

“M-maybe.”

“Am I being annoying?”

“No, I just—”

“Cool, then it’s settled. Nice to meetcha, friend.”

“Okay...”

My Yanami-handling skills evidently did not transfer to this one. This was like the yin versus yang of extroversion.

Himemiya-san glanced around, then leaned in, and her long, silky hair brushed against me. I caught a whiff of what I could only assume was some kind of perfume. “Say, friendo. Anna. She’s been weird lately, right?”

“Yanami? Has she?”

She was always weird, as far as I was concerned.

Himemiya-san bobbed her head. “Usually, she gets fifteen takoyaki at the station, but lately, she’s only been getting twelve.” Still too many, but I kept that opinion to myself. She frowned anxiously. “And just the other day, when we went to get lunch together, she said *no* to upgrading to a large. A large! And for free too! That’s not normal. That’s just not like her at all.”

She was probably just reaping the rewards of her ridiculous dieting strategy from last summer and scrambling to right past wrongs. Although, she certainly didn’t seem to be counting calories based on the way I’d seen her eat lately.

Himemiya-san hung her head. “It’s none of my business. I know.”

“Well...” She said it, not me. But Yanami’s diet wasn’t what caught my interest about all this. “So you guys hang out a lot?”

“Yeah. We’ve gotten back to doing that more this semester. You should join us.”

“I’m good.”

She widened her eyes at that. “I thought you guys were close. You’re in the same club and all.”

Whether we were “close” was up for debate. Regardless, I didn’t see the point of mingling friend groups as a rule. All the more so if there was potential yuri at stake, and I would not be implicated in coming between that. Personal policy.

“I just think it’d be awkward if I butted in,” I said.

“Oh, you don’t gotta worry about that.” She gave the kind of grin that *almost* made me believe her. “If anything, I’m worried *I’m* the one making things awkward between us. She might even appreciate you being there.”

She’d appreciate a meat roll over me any day of the week.

“See, I think Yanami-san can take care of herself. I would just keep things normal. Don’t make it weird.” I glanced at her. “She’s figuring things out.”

Man, she was pretty. Taller than Yanami, but smaller everywhere it counts. Bigger too. In other places. More than any of that, though, the girl had star energy. Or was bright enough to be one, at least.

She stared back at me.

“Wh-what?” I stuttered.

“She tell you all that herself?”

“Not, er, entirely.”

Himemiya-san giggled. “Anna was right about you. You’re a pretty decent guy.”

Finally, we made it to the classroom. Thank god. That must have been the longest hallway I’d ever walked down.

I started to go in, but a girl was standing just past the doorway, blocking our path. “Oh, 4K—”

Yanami. Yanami was her name. Right.

She turned and raised an eyebrow at me. “Four-what now?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh. Karen-chan.” Yanami grabbed the cloth from me. “Weird seeing you two together.”

“We bumped into each other,” Himemiya-san said, then winked at me. “He was just lending me a hand. Weren’t you?”

Yanami sensed something was afoot and clearly didn’t like it. “Uh-huh. Anyway, Nonomura-san was looking for you, Nukumizu-kun. Don’t you have a meeting or something?”

Nonomura-san? Right. She was on prop duty with me.

I scanned the room and found her standing further in. She hissed at me, “It’s starting!”



“Er, right,” I replied. “Sorry.”

She whipped around in the middle of my apology. She was the tallest girl in class, and yet somehow always the last one to be remembered. We were kindred spirits in that respect.

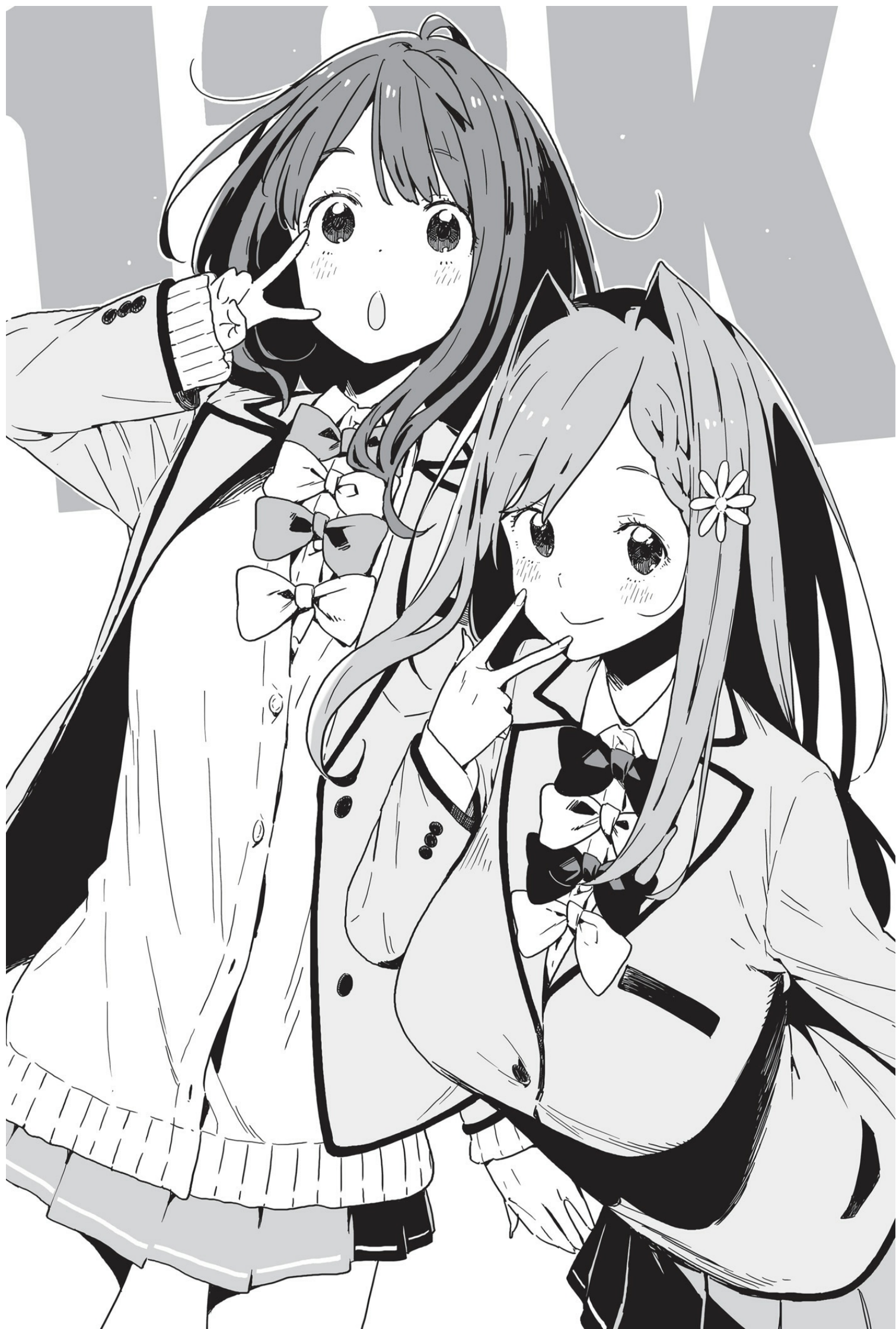
“Thanks for the help, Nukumizu-kun!” Himemiya-san said.

“Later,” said Yanami.

The 12K Duo took their leave, so I slinked away to the corner with Nonomura-san for our meeting. There were four people doing props in total, including me. The remaining two were guys and equally as forgettable. What a team we were.

Nonomura-san held her gaze low and neutral as she began. “So, getting started, there are a few things we still need for Flash Halloween. We need to paste some illustrations onto cardboard, and then they’ll have to be carved out with a box cutter. You’ll find more details on what needs making on the list here, and the materials are there. Have it all done by Friday morning, please.”





And then she stood up, grabbed her things, and that was it. The other two did the same and went right back to their desks. Such efficiency. I was experiencing whiplash, coming straight out of Himemiya World. But this was home. Home sweet home.

I returned to my desk and checked the list. Five bats and spider webs, ten pumpkins and jack-o-lanterns.

“That’s a lotta pumpkins.”

Yanami’s request, no doubt. I tried my hand at one, and hey, I could make a pretty darn cute pumpkin.

I decided to leave the rest to finish at home. Komari would bite my ankles if I kept her waiting any longer.

Stuffing my materials into a big shopping bag, I stood and made for the door. On my way, I checked in on the rest of my fellow proppers. All were quietly and diligently at work.

What a team.

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Komari was alone in the club room, scribbling something in her notebook. As soon as she noticed me, she thumped it shut.

“Y-you’re late. Why?”

“Had to give Konuki-sensei a status report, then I had a meeting for our class project. You sure you don’t have any of those you’re missing?”

Komari narrowed her eyes at me as I sat down across from her. “I-if I am, I don’t know about it. No one’s t-told me anything.”

“Oh. Right. Uh, anyway, snacks. Here, take a look.”

Yanami: nowhere to be found. Door: locked. The coast was clear, so I pulled out a paper bag containing the final versions of the little confections Kaju and I had painstakingly perfected. We had four kinds. One for each exhibit. The first was Natsume Souseki-themed.

“So we’ve got sugar-coated peanuts, Souseki’s favorite,” I explained. “We

used cocoa powder to pretty it up a little more. Give it a try.”

Komari timidly reached into the bag I offered and gave one a taste. “I-it’s good. You made this?”

“Nah, my sister did most of the work. Same for the others.”

“Most? S-so what did you even do?”

“Dishes. Shoulder massages. Oh, and the wrapping. I did the wrapping.”

She didn’t look interested in arguing, so I presented the next snack. This one was Dazai Osamu.

“Cherries. Like the novel, *Cherries*,” I said. “We baked them into a pound cake. That one’s a winner, in my opinion.”

Komari unwrapped it and stared. “Marbled? Wow. P-pretty.”

“We used canned black cherries and a syrup for the coloring. Well, my sister did.”

“I-I think I like her more. You should switch places.”

Turn into a junior high girl? Hm. I could work with that.

I considered the plot of my new brainchild while I handed her the remaining two snacks. “These are based on picture books. This one’s *Swimmy*.”

“Fish cookies,” she murmured.

*Swimmy* was a story about a fish with scales different from everyone else’s, so we emulated that by doing bags of cookies, each with only one chocolate flavor. Accurate *and* economical.

“Th-they smell good. What’s i-in them?” Komari asked.

“Uhhh, not sure. She had a jar of something. I know that.”

“Y-you are actually just worthless, huh?”

Wow, okay. I was stuck doing Kaju’s laundry now for this kind of treatment?

Last but not least, we had *Guri and Gura*, a picture book about two field mice. They make a sponge cake in a frying pan out of some egg they find in the forest, and I remembered always wanting to eat that as a kid.

“Here we’ve got little castella cakes,” I said. “We even found paper cups that look like frying pans. The handle is separate though, so you have to stick those on after the fact.”

“I-it looks just like the book.” Komari ogled the mini cake from every angle. “Your sister’s s-something else.”

“Uh, hey, credit where it’s due. I found the cups, for the record. You’re welcome.”

To my shock, Komari responded not with verbal abuse this time but a crooked smile. “N-nice touch.”

“Huh? I-I mean, yeah, well, y’know. Big bro’s not so worthless after all.”

Okay, this was new. I was not used to compliments from Komari. Still wasn’t sure how I felt about it.

While “uncomfortable” was winning the war of emotions inside me, Komari stuffed the cake into her bag.

“Not eating it?” I asked.

“G-gonna give it to the shrimps.”

Right, she had a little brother and sister.

“Take it all if you want.”

“Wh—b-but two’s all I need,” she stammered.

“I count three, including you.” I forced the bag into her hands. It was safer there than in the room, exposed and vulnerable, for Yanami to consume. I was simply being considerate of her diet, of course. “Anyway, that’s the snacks squared away. We’ll start on getting enough ready for the festival, and I’ll bring ’em all the day before.”

“D-don’t forget the recipes and pictures.”

“Right. I won’t.”

And that was our meeting finished. How simple it was without Yanami around.

“I’m gonna stick around to do some work,” I said. “You?”

“Got b-books to return to the library. Was using them for r-reference.”

I noticed a few thick volumes stacked on the table. For the exhibits, I assumed.

Komari slipped them into a large tote bag and tried to heave it up but stumbled back into her chair.

“You okay?”

“F-fine. It’s just heavy.” She made it up on her next attempt, but her legs looked anything but steady.

“How did you even haul all that over here?”

“One at a time. Th-the school’s copying machine is cheaper to use, so... But I h-have to return them today.”

Here we went again. I picked myself up and took the bag. “I’ll help. Which library?”

“C-Central. It’s...on the way.” She eyed me up and down. “Why are...? A-are you coming?”

“You ride a bike to school. You’re gonna crash and break an arm trying to carry all this.” I started to leave with the bag, but Komari was still in the same place as before, fidgeting. “We don’t have to go together.”

“N-no, that’s not... I-it’s just, you don’t have a bike.”

Oh. I’d nearly forgotten about that. The library was a long walk on foot.

“It appears this is not my burden to bear.” I handed her back the bag.

Komari gave me a look that could kill. “T-too late, jerk.”

There she was. That was the Komari I knew.

Now about that bike...

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Ayano emerged from class D and handed me his bike key.

“It’s yours for as long as you need it. Don’t even worry about rushing back.” He had on his trademark perfect smile. I had to admit, the guy knew how to

make someone swoon.

“Thanks. I’ll be back as soon as I’m done.”

“You can just hold on to it for now if you don’t need to come back to school,” he said.

“How’re you gonna get home then?”

Ayano smirked suggestively. “Chihaya takes the train. We’ve been meaning to ride it together one of these days.” Ah. This again. The guy humblebragged like he breathed air. Still, he was doing me a favor, so I bit my tongue. “Not too long ago we rode double on my bike. Which you’re not supposed to do obviously, but you know how she is, and I just can’t say no to that face. So anyway, we said we’d do the train next time, and—”

All right, favor repaid. I held the key up and interjected, “Sorry, in a hurry. Thanks again. Want me to just drop it off at your house later?”

“Leave it at the bike rack at the cram school by the station, if you would. I’ve got a spare key I can use.”

I thanked him one more time, then dipped.

Komari was waiting for me at the bike racks wearing her white helmet. She seemed to be struggling to keep her eyes open.

“Sorry about that. Got wheels,” I said.

“F-finally. Let’s go.” Komari mounted her bike at once.

And then I was struck with an epiphany.

“Hold up.”

“What?” she snapped.

I was about to leave school. With a girl. Together.

This was big. Huge, even. If this were a light novel, this would be the pivotal moment that defines the tone for the latter half of the story. Such an event could not be undergone lightly.

“I just want to be sure,” I said. “This is my first time, and it’s probably yours, so I don’t want to take things too fast.”



“Th-that is one of the grossest things I think you’ve ever said.” Komari grimaced at me, then started pedaling. “G-give me a head start. You’re making me uncomfortable.”

“Uncalled for, but okay.”

Honestly would have rather she left it at “gross.” The latter half stung.

I pedaled after her.

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Toyohashi City Central Library—the largest library in town. Sure, there were newer ones by the station nowadays, but this one had history. Plus, I had a soft spot for it. I’d been going to this one since I was a kid.

Komari finished returning the books, then immediately slipped into the children’s section.

“More? You just returned some,” I said.

“N-need picture books for the exhibits. Also, f-for the shrimps.” She crouched down in front of a shelf, squinting at the titles on the spines.

She looked tired, and I didn’t think I was just imagining things.

“How’re those coming along?”

“S-still working.” She hunched over standoffishly.

There needed to be enough info on Komari’s drafts to fill up the meter-long posters for four whole exhibits. And all by Saturday, the day of Tsuwabuki Fest. We had the Friday off to focus on preparations, but ideally, we wouldn’t be cutting it that close.

“I’ll take one,” I said.

She leered at me. “Y-you haven’t even finished the journal. Focus on your own draft.”

“Yes, ma’am.” No mercy for lit club members who couldn’t meet their journal deadline. Such was the way of the world. I shut my mouth and peeked at the picture book she’d flipped open. A monster was towering over a naughty kid who’d stayed up too late. “Hey, I remember this. How’s it end again?”

“The kid g-gets kidnapped and turns into a m-monster.”

That was just sadistic.

Komari stuffed a few books under her arm then stood with a satisfied sigh.

“Not all of those look related to the exhibit,” I pointed out.

“Th-they’re for the little ones. They won’t sleep without a bedtime story.” She set off for the front desk again but stopped dead in her tracks.

“Forget something, or...?”

“G-get down!” she hissed, tugging at my shirt.

“Whoa, okay, care to explain first?”

“It’s our senpai!”

“Huh?” I peeked behind the shelf just in time to catch President Tamaki and Tsukinoki-senpai descend the stairs directly in front of the counter. “Okay, but why are we—”

I cut myself off. They were holding hands and smiling, and they looked...not like how they normally looked at school. They looked quieter. Content.

Komari shrank, clutching her books to her chest with tiny arms.

Here was the guy who’d turned her down, walking hand-in-hand with her best friend—her best friend who he’d chosen over her. I could see why she might have conflicting feelings about popping up in the middle of all that.

They’d never treat her like a third wheel. In fact, they’d probably love to bump into Komari, but that would just make it sting worse. And being with me of all people couldn’t have made it any easier.

Even after they left, she remained frozen in place. I waited as long as I could before my thighs started to scream from all the squatting. “They, uh, must’ve been using the study rooms. To study. Y’know, for exams.”

An innocuous comment but enough to snap Komari out of it. “I-I’m gonna go check these books out.”

I watched her scurry to the counter. Place the books there. Struggle to speak with the librarian behind it. Make convoluted hand gestures instead of use her

words. And I didn't find it endearing like usual. Just a little sad.

She came back with eyes downcast and voice hoarse. "I-I'm gonna...go home and work on the research."

"Hey." My lips moved on their own before she could leave. "Got a minute?"

What in the world was I doing?

She made one of her weird grunting noises and turned back around. "Wh-what?"

In for a penny, in for a pound.

"There's a family restaurant not far from here. Wanna stop by?"

Komari scrunched her nose. "I-I don't have any money."

"Then I'll pay."

"Wh-why?"

Why indeed. Most normal people would think twice about letting others pay for them. Most people weren't Yanami.

"They've got this dessert I've been meaning to try," I said. "You know how awkward it is going alone, right?"

"S-since when have you c-cared about that?"

Never. She was making this extraordinarily difficult by actually somewhat knowing me.

"Just humor me, okay? My treat. Order whatever you want."

"I-I, um..." Komari finally nodded meekly. "Okay. I guess."

I let out a silent sigh of relief. I wasn't sure why I cared so much. I didn't care why I cared. The fact was I didn't like the thought of her being alone right now. I didn't need to justify it beyond that.

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I sipped on my hot chocolate in the quiet little dive, far from school and free from the prying eyes of potential classmates. Komari sat across from me, chewing on her lip, hands wrapped around her warm cup of strawberry au lait.

Entirely unintentionally, we'd wound up at the exact table where I first met Yanami.

"Here's that soft serve pudding for you!" The waiter placed the bowl in front of Komari. The staff was as cheery as ever.

"I-I was fine with just the drink," she grumbled.

Oh, my sweet summer child.

"You misunderstand. You see, drinks from the drink bar are cheaper with food. They're basically paying you to eat at that point."

"You s-sound like Yanami."

Oh god, did I? Oh *god*...

Komari stared cross-eyed at the pudding resting on top of her soft serve before finally, slowly, digging her spoon in. "Y-you're trying to be nice."

"I mean, after what we saw at the library..."

"Doesn't bother me. Th-they're dating. They hold hands. S-so what?" She made a sour face at me. "I'm used to s-seeing them together. At school."

"Okay, but school's different." I took a big swig of my slightly-less-hot chocolate. "Everyone's there at school. It's its own thing. Outside, though, is a whole 'nother world. *Their* own world. One we're not usually allowed in, y'know?"

I pressed my lips together. Maybe shouldn't have gone into so much detail there.

I stared down at my drink, waiting for the awkward moment to pass. Komari scooped up her pudding in silence.

"One large fry!" the waiter exclaimed again.

Komari eyed the plate scornfully. "S-some dessert."

"Yanami-san eats hamburgers for dessert. Fries totally count." I offered one, and she begrudgingly accepted.

"D-don't get it twisted," she finally said. "I didn't hide because they were t-together."

She paused for a moment, contemplating what she wanted to do with the smallish fry in her hand, then ultimately dropped it onto her plate. “I hid because...because ‘together’ used to include me.” Her voice dropped to barely a rasp. “I’m just sad th-that it doesn’t anymore.”

Embarrassed, she took a quick, sheepish sip of her au lait and instantly burned her tongue.

It wasn’t that long ago that Prez had rejected her. But that was said and done. History. Komari had made her peace, and they were all still good friends. All’s well that ends well. No baggage to unpack here.

So why did it seem like Komari was still living out of a suitcase?

“I j-joined the club back in April, and they were really nice to me.” She gently placed her cup of water down. “I’d never felt special before. D-didn’t have any friends. But th-they showed me school could be fun.” Her pudding sagged lifelessly in the bowl. Komari smiled sadly. “G-guess I’m back to square one.”

There was a long, long silence.

I downed the last of my drink. “Tsukinoki-senpai’s not gonna just forget about you because she’s busy.”

“I-I know.”

“Prez too. They’re not abandoning you.”

“I-I know that.” Her bangs hung low, hiding her eyes. “I just feel like...m-maybe if I’d never confessed, m-maybe we’d have had a l-little more time together.”

I stayed quiet. I didn’t know what to say.

Just before the awkwardness overwhelmed us, Komari continued, “After Tsuwabuki Fest, i-it’s over. They’re gonna leave. I-I have to learn to be okay on my own.”

I almost told her she’d still have me, but who was I kidding? We weren’t that close. And I sure as hell wasn’t that bold.

So I settled for my best.

“If there’s anything I can do for you, let me know.”

She shook her head. “I can do it. I’ll do the c-club president meeting on my own. A-and the report too.” In a voice barely audible, one meant more for herself than for me, she added, “I have to.”

Strangers passed by our table. Smiling, chatting, laughing. Komari watched them carefully, and when she deemed the coast was clear enough, she stood. “I should g-get going.”

“Right. Me too.”

I paid for us at the register, and we stepped outside into total darkness. Night had snuck up on us.

A cold winter wind blew from the west. I stood between it and Komari while she unlocked her bike.

“Th-thanks for paying,” she said.

“Thanks for the company.”

Empty platitudes. Motions we felt obligated to go through.

I turned away from her and used the dead air between us to check a message from Kaju on my phone. I sighed.

For Yanami, I did nothing. For Yakishio, I did nothing. It seemed like that was all I was ever good for. Nothing. Try as I might to find the right words to say, to be the right person. But a bystander was all I ever managed to be.

Something bumped against my back while I typed out a reply to my sister. “Komari?”

“S-sorry. Just a little tired.” She shoved herself away from me and climbed onto her bike.

“Whoa, hang on.”

“I-I’m fine. My house isn’t far.” Strapping on her helmet, Komari sluggishly pedaled away.

I didn’t trust those words. “I’m fine.” “Just a little tired.”

I was suddenly reminded of how Kaju would lean against my back whenever

she got depressed. I knew the weight well. Komari's head felt just as heavy.

\*\*\*

Two days later—Wednesday. With the festival just on the horizon, the hustle and bustle was coming to a head.

I, for my part, was busily trying to finish my own tasks in a quiet corner of the classroom.

“There's the pumpkins. Bats next.”

I shoved my stack of decorations to the side and scanned the room. A portion of the back had been sequestered off with blackout curtains as a makeshift dressing area. Presently, the class's upper crust, Yanami included, was in the middle of fitting.

At the other end, by the blackboard, were the set designers toiling away, making backdrops out of banners for the impromptu “flash” aspect of Flash Halloween. They decorated long strips of fabric that could be unfurled for skits whenever, wherever. Likely that was to be the fate of the bats I was currently occupied with.

As for the literature club, the preparations were proceeding less frantically but surely. The journal was pretty much done, save for Tsukinoki-senpai's entry.

Komari came to mind. That evening at the library, and then the restaurant. I wondered if she was all alone in that club room right now.

Cheers erupted behind me, interrupting my train of thought. Probably for the best because I wasn't being as mindful with the box cutter as I should've been.

I turned just as Himemiya Karen appeared with a herd of paparazzi in her wake. She was wearing a black and pink dress, complete with a miniskirt. Looked like she was going for some kind of devily vibe.

Wow. The tight fit around her chest was unavoidable, granted, but the rest? Were the hearts on the tights or the heart-tipped tail necessary? I was getting less devil and more succubus vibes, personally, and one had to wonder if that was even school appropriate.

Next came Hakamada Sousuke. He wore a swallowtail vest with a dark black

mantle. Yup. Vampire.

He and Himemiya-san practically owned the entire room together.

“Sorry, Yanami-san, but that’s a power couple,” I muttered.

And then I saw white. “You rang?” Yanami Anna backed off to flaunt her long, white robes to me. She did a quick twirl. “Pretty snazzy, eh?”

“It’s, uh...” It looked Japanese. On her head was one of those triangle headband things. “Are you a corpse?”

“Excuse you! I’m a *ghost*! What corpses have you seen with a body this bangin’, dude?”

Ma’am, ghosts don’t have bodies.

“Okay, but why a ghost?”

“Because, y’know, Japanese ghosts are supposed to be all ethereal and wispy and all. And I figured, hey, winter’s coming up. I can be ethereal.”

Was she “bangin’” or ethereal? Maybe both. I wasn’t gonna argue. The mechanics of moe were ever-changing. Her era would come.

Yanami eyed me like something was wrong.

“What?”

“Something’s off about you, Nukumizu-kun. Maybe it’s ‘cause we’re in class, but this is normally the part where you’d tear my throat out like a moody jaguar.”

“I’m not moody.”

“Yeah, you kinda are.”

“Am I?”

“Kinda, yeah.” She shrugged wearily. “It’s just throwing me off is all.”

That had been my constant state of mind since the day she and I met.

“Anyway,” she said, “you’re on props, yeah? I got somethin’ for you.” She grabbed a few pumpkins from my desk and held them up on her shoulders. “So I wanna up my ghost game, and I was thinking if I had a few soul wisps or



something floating around I could really sell it. Think you could make some?"

"Sure. How big?"

"Like, not *too* big. Like snack-sized."

What was snack-sized to her? Was I gonna have to get a volleyball for scale?

"All right, I'll see what I can do," I said.

"Yanami," some guy interjected, "rehearsal's starting!"

He had on an old Edo-period Shinsengumi uniform. Nishikawa, I vaguely recalled his name was.

"Coming!" Yanami called back. "I'll be back for those props, Nukumizu-kun." She trotted over, waving back at me.

Nishikawa gave me a nasty look before following behind her, and I had a feeling it wasn't the cardboard cutouts he was jealous about. Yanami, believe it or not, was a popular girl. And I wasn't stupid.

Yanami *was* pretty, but lots of people were pretty. Didn't seem to me like a very good reason to stake claim on someone, but whatever.

I went back to my bats. And then another giant cast a shadow over my work.

"Whatcha think, Nukkun? Am I scary?"

Yakishio's turn. I begrudgingly looked up and got a face full of midriff. There was a lot of it, given she was wrapped in nothing but bandages. She held a pose for me.

"You really should cover up when you're out in public, Yakishio."

"I'm a mummy. This is how mummies look. Not bad, right?"

It was bad in a few ways. Only her chest and waist were covered. It might as well have been a swimsuit. Maybe worse, because I was seeing things I, on second thought, probably shouldn't have been able to see.

"Yakishio," I said, "are you wearing anything underneath all that?"

"No? Should I be? I'm covering all the important bits, so what's the big—"

Before she could finish, a bunch of girls formed a human curtain around her.

They ushered her away. “Aaand we’re done here, Lemon.”

“Yikes,” one of them hissed.

“Eyes to yourselves, boys!”

“Huh?” Yakishio blinked. “What’s the rush, guys? Hey!”

They disappeared back behind the curtain.

That was a little too trick *and* treat, even for Halloween.

As I busied myself burning the memory into my brain while I still could, a vampire came and plopped down in front of me, mantle billowing. “You see that just now?” Hakamada Sousuke whispered. “They hid her good. I totally missed it.”

“She did pose for me, so.”

“No kidding. And?”

The guy didn’t mince words. I respected it.

“It was something.”

“Gah, I bet! If only I’d looked sooner!” Hakamada held his head in his hands.

Just then, two great shadows loomed behind him. “Sousuke!” It was the 12K Crew. And each syllable they enunciated oozed anger.





“I think someone needs to be taught a lesson. Don’t you, Anna?”

“That I do, Karen-chan. Grab his arm.”

They flanked him on both sides and started dragging him away.

“Wait!” he pleaded. “I didn’t see! I didn’t see a thing! I swear!”

The ghost and the devil cared not for the vampire’s calls for mercy. I returned to my bats, content with my quiet lot. I did not envy the chaotic life of a protagonist.

I felt a twinge. The source turned out to be Yanami staring a hole through me. “You’re next,” she said.

I looked down at my bat, into its cute, beady eyes, and sighed. For there was no solace in them.

\*\*\*

It was the next day, after school. Thursday. Just two days until the festival.

President Tamaki and I were in the printer room. Tsukinoki-senpai had submitted her draft for the journal, so it was time to finalize.

The copier spat out sheet after sheet. Prez pushed a button. “Once it’s done, you’ll write down the amount you used, then turn it into the faculty office. I’ll elaborate more when we get to that point.” He grabbed a copy and took a seat. “Koto was *supposed* to be reusing one of her older stories. I swear.”

“Don’t worry. This one should be tamer,” I assured him. “I think she realized we can’t release that sort of thing to the general public.”

“I wish she’d realize we can’t release that sort of thing, period.”

The exhaustion on his face, you’d think the draft in his hand weighed a ton. Even paradise was no stranger to trouble.

I took a look at one of the copies of her work myself. The copier whirled in the background.

*Literature Club Fall Activity Report: Tsukinoki Koto—Silence of the Crab*

In a dingy corner of an old port town, there stood a tavern. Hoisted proudly for all to see, thereupon, was a sign. On it was a name: The Moonlight Bower.

Beyond its rickety double doors, one could expect to be met with a spacious floor, vaulted ceilings, and a rough clientele of merry adventurers clinking tankards of ale.

Further still, past the commotion, was a door on the far side of the hall. A private room, presently occupied by a man in flowing Japanese robes. His elbows rested impolitely on the table. Reluctantly, he took a swig of the pisswater in his tankard, chasing it with a bite of fish stew.

The man grimaced, then repeated the ritual.

He went through the motions several more times before the oaken door opened, letting in a swarm of guffaws and cheers from the merriment that lay outside it. A man in military garb entered.

“You do so love to keep me waiting, Mishima-kun. This is my second mug of ale, I’ll have you know.” The robed man raised it high but unsteadily. He was already tipsy. “If you can even call it that.”

“I’m a busy man, Dazai-san. It’s none of my concern that your whims do not align with my schedule.” Mishima stomped over to the opposite seat, his military saber clacking.

“Busy, he says,” Dazai spat. “Busy with schemes and conspiracy, no doubt. I trudged halfway across the world just for your Kawabata-san to try to pull one over on me, you know. While you’ve gone off to play deputy, good Melos, your dear Selinuntius has been betrayed.” Down went the last drops of the man’s booze. He glared at Mishima as if their disappearance were his fault.

Mishima simply grinned, unamused. “I can only hope good news mends your sour mood. I’ve brought what you asked for.” He produced a glass vial and passed it to Dazai.

Dazai opened it. Inside was a white, translucent powder. Indeed, his mood improved at once. He dabbed a touch onto his finger and licked it. “Incredible. It might as well be the genuine article.”

“I went to great pains to obtain it. I hope you’ll remember that the next time you have me concocting MSG simply to satisfy a craving.”

“The elves are a flexible people, to be sure. Accommodating in every aspect. Every aspect, that is, save for cuisine. And the alcohol. Lord, the alcohol. This world has far to go still in the culinary arts.” Dazai held the vial over his plate and sprinkled it like appetizing snow. “I don’t trust a thing that’s meant to cross lips in this nightmare. But MSG? MSG I can trust.” Satisfied, he replaced the cap on the vial and carefully stowed it in his sleeve. “You must be thirsty, my friend. Drink. We have sake.”

Dazai clapped, and from the long, candlelit shadow extending from the table a girl emerged, blacker than night. Mishima instinctively reached for his blade. The shadow, unflinching, retrieved an earthenware jug of alcohol.

“It took an ungodly amount of patience to wait for it to heat up, let me tell you. Now—while it’s hot.” Dazai held out his cup, and the shadow girl served him. She offered the jug to Mishima next, who hesitated to accept. “I thought you weren’t afraid of anything, Mishima-kun.”

“You’ll forgive me for feeling uncertain about being served by a walking ink stain.” He downed his drink at once.

“Don’t be rude. She may not have discernible eyes, or a nose, or, well, I suppose any kind of facial features, but I’d like to imagine she’s quite the charming young lady.”

Dazai rested his cheek in his hand, lapping periodically at his cup. Mishima, too, soon outgrew his initial surprise, a feat made easier after a few more cups no doubt, and began to engage the girl in conversation.

“Tell me,” he said. “Is your form malleable? Could you, say, take on the rippling physique of a masculine Greek sculpture?”

“Please, Mishima-kun, you’re spoiling my fun.” Dazai downed another cup and thrust his hand out for more. The shadow obliged. “Ah, speaking of. I’ve gotten my hands on something I’m sure you’ll want to see. Fetch it for me, would you?”

The shadow nodded, then melted into the floor.

“There’s more?”

“Oh, yes. Today is your lucky day, my friend, because I heard rumors of a similar species to horsehair crab, and I’ve managed to snag one for myself.” Mishima did not look as enthusiastic as Dazai had hoped. “What? Don’t like crab?”

“I do. But their...form unnerves me. I’ve been known to remove the label off of cans if I see any depicted.”

“Perhaps chicken would be more your speed. Very well. I’ll see to it that your tastes are not offended.” The robed man stumbled to his feet and staggered drunkenly behind Mishima.

“Another habit of yours I hate,” the military man said. “Your penchant for practical jokes.”

“Now, Mishima-kun, quiet that tongue and behold: elven magic.” Dazai produced a small cloth and wrapped it around Mishima’s eyes. “The crab is no more.”

“Yes, along with everything else.” He reached up to remove the blindfold, failing to hide his amusement.

Dazai placed his hand over Mishima’s and stopped him. “Caution, friend. That cloth is magical in nature. He who wears it must obey every command spoken by he who tied it.”

“Very funny. I’m well aware of your skill, Dazai. The moment I believe your lie, it becomes true. How fitting for you.”

“Is my cat out of its bag so soon? Oh, Kawabata-san. You never cease to be a thorn in my side.” He released Mishima’s hand. “This time, though, it’s no lie. Quickly now. Remove it, before the magic can take effect.”

Mishima snickered and reached up again to do so. But then he froze. “Wait. You just told me to remove the blindfold, because you were telling the truth. So if I were to do as you say, that would mean I *believe* what you say, would it not?”

The playful mask slipped from Dazai’s face. “Sharp mind for a sharp man.



Don't you want to find out? Don't you want to see just how far my powers can go?"

"I've lost track of where the lie even begins and ends anymore. There must be something in this alcohol." Mishima reached blindly for his cup. Dazai placed it in his hand, and he emptied it.

Dazai rested his hands on the man's shoulders. "What if there is?"

"More lies. Is that all you are?"

"Lies are the lifeblood of any author. We spin narratives through our words. Deceive for the enjoyment of others. Do we not?" He slid his hands down and around the big man's frame. "What do you think? Is this a lie?"

"Games, Dazai-san. All you are is games. It's why I've never liked you."

"So you say. And yet here you are, playing with me."

The shadow girl emerged soundlessly from the floor with a large platter of crab. Dazai signaled to her with his eyes, and she understood. Leaving the dish on the table, she vanished once more into a crack in the floor.

As the robed man unfastened the dazzling, golden buttons of Mishima's uniform, he found his mind wandering. How beautiful, the silence of the crab. Too lifeless to speak. Too delicious to waste on words.

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Prez put the draft down and sighed in relief. "Thank god. It's clean."

"...Is it?" Three years must have warped the poor man's mind.

"Anyway, I hope things are going well on your end," he said. "Just two more days."

"We'll have the last of the snacks done tonight, and then we've got all tomorrow to set things up. Just waiting on the research for the posters now."

I said "just" as if I weren't sweating bullets on the inside. Our exhibits still weren't ready.

"Komari-chan's struggling, huh?"

"I've tried to get her to let me help a million times, but she just keeps telling

me to stop worrying about her.”

And we still had to turn her drafts into the full posters when she was done. If ever there was a time to enlist our senpai for help, this was it.

Once the copier was halfway done, Prez and I started folding the finished copies hamburger-style and stapling the edge for a makeshift binding. We were keeping this journal simple.

I strained my ears while we worked in silence. It was just me and him. No one outside from what I could hear.

“You catch this week’s *NN*, Prez?”

“Seen it three times already.”

*Nature or Nurture*, or *NN*, was a high school rom-com anime about a bunch of girls fighting over the same protagonist. The twist came in with the girls’ personalities—they were your typical cutesy, “must protect” airhead types, but among them were wolves in sheep’s clothing.

In the latest episode, Miku-chan, a fan favorite, went to school without a bra. Nothing major. Just your average fan-servicey comedy.

“I just can’t believe that would ever happen,” I said. “With how big Miku-chan is? I don’t care how late you oversleep. No one *actually* forgets to put a bra on, do they?”

Prez stopped folding. “I’m going to be real with you, Nukumizu. As your senpai.” He paused for dramatic effect. “At her size? No. No, they do not forget.”

I shot off my chair. “So you’re saying she came to school like that on *purpose*?”

He nodded.

We had our first casualty of the season. If Miku-chan was one of the fakes, then everything we knew about her would be a lie. The bath scene in episode two. The confession through the window in episode five. Was all of it some carefully concocted honey trap?

“No,” I said. “No. I believe in her. Even if the whole world turns against her, I

alone will stand with Miku-chan.”

Prez smiled in solemn acknowledgment. “Follow your heart, Nukumizu, and I’ll follow mine. The Alice ship sails with you.”

“Prez!” We locked eyes, our minds as one. In that moment, we became brothers.

And then the door burst open. “There you are!” Tsukinoki-senpai flew into the room.

Prez jumped to his feet. “Koto! We weren’t talking about you, I swear!”

“What? I don’t care what you were talking about!” Senpai seized his shoulders and shook him. “It’s Komari-chan!”

“What about her?” I asked. “What happened?”

She turned to me next, stumbling over her words in her panic. “She fell or something! Passed out right in the classroom! Do you two know anything?!”

She what?

“Slow down, Senpai. You said it happened at school, right? Give me a sec.” I checked my phone, and my hunch was right. I had a message from our supervisor. “Konuki-sensei contacted me. She’s in the nurse’s office.”

“Nurse’s office! Got it!”

Prez snatched her hand and yanked her back. “Koto, you’ve got lessons today. Skip those and getting held back won’t be a joke anymore.”

“So what?! Komari-chan needs me, and I—”

“Koto!” The president spun her around so they were face-to-face and gripped her shoulders. “Relax. What Komari-chan *doesn’t* need is you running around raising hell with your future at stake.”

“But I... If I’d never left her, this wouldn’t have...” She was on the verge of tears now.

Prez gently put his hand on her head. “Trust her. Have faith, Koto.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Prez faced me. “Would you go check on her for us, Nukumizu? We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“M-me?” I stammered. “You really think I’m the one for this job?”

He nodded firmly. “You’re the *only* one, vice president.”

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I entered the nurse’s office. Konuki-sensei’s eyes met mine. She brought her phone down from her ear, then slid it into the pocket of her long, white coat.

She quietly beckoned me inside. “Here he comes, her knight in shining armor.”

“Sensei, is she—”

She pressed a finger to my lips. “Your princess is sleeping, Sir Knight.”

“What happened?” I asked, quieter this time.

Konuki-sensei turned to one of the beds obscured by curtains. “Poor thing’s just overworked and sleep-deprived. She’ll be fine.”

“Oh. All right.”

I collapsed into a nearby chair as every muscle in my body relaxed. I didn’t like what I heard, but at least the prognosis was good. That alone was a relief.

I sent the news over to Prez before I noticed Konuki-sensei looming over me. A bit too far into my personal bubble.

“I take it you have an inkling as to why she’s running herself ragged,” she said.

“The festival. I don’t think she’s been sleeping. All the stress caught up to her, I think.”

“To be young.” The nurse pulled a chair over and sat down. Still too close. “It’s not easy being your age. I know what it’s like to be brought to the edge like that. It’s an exhilarating story if you’d like to hear it.”

“I’m good, thanks.”

She raised an eyebrow, daring me to ask anyway. I wasn’t biting.

Once she was sure I wouldn’t change my mind, she languidly crossed her legs.

“You’re a mild-mannered boy, Nukumizu-kun, but I think there’s something to be said for being passionate about something.”

“Because these are the ‘best years of my life’?” I cringed at the unintentional edge that had crept into my voice.

Konuki-sensei just smiled. “Maybe. Maybe not. But they’ll pass regardless. Better to fill them with worthwhile experiences, I say.” She looked up and past the ceiling at something. I craned my neck to look as well but saw only stains. “Lord knows I’ve left my fair share of memories in these halls.”

“You ‘left’ them?”

“You don’t keep all of them. Sometimes they stay, and that’s fine. Someday you’ll look back on those places, and they’ll find you again.” The gentleness suddenly left her expression. She stood. Komari was peeking her head out of the curtain. “Up already? I’d keep resting if I were you, young lady.”

“I-I have to...pick up my little sister from daycare.” Komari tottered forward. She didn’t make it far. She would have fallen if Konuki-sensei weren’t there to catch her.

“Nukumizu-kun, get me a chair.”

I grabbed the closest one I could find and slid it over. Sensei sat her down in it.

In hindsight, I hated that I had to be told to do it. Useless.

“Can her parents come get her?” I asked.

“They’re at work and I can’t get in contact. I could only leave a message.” She leaned down to Komari’s level. “I’ll call your sister’s daycare. Can you give me the name?”

“M-my little brother’s home alone too.” Komari stood herself up again. “I-I have to go.”

Konuki-sensei helped her steady herself, then patted her on the back. “Okay. I’ll drive you, and I’ll pick your sister up too.”

Perfect. This was the best possible outcome.

“Nukumizu-kun,” she continued, “do you know where she lives?”

“Huh? Uh, technically.”

I didn’t like where this was going.

Konuki-sensei nodded, as if reading my mind and confirming my doubts.

“Come with us, will you?”

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A fifteen-minute car ride took us to a pretty old-looking neighborhood. In a sea of cookie-cutter, one-story houses, we found one with a nameplate that read “Komari” and rang the doorbell.

I waited some time, but no one answered, so I slotted Komari’s key into the lock, slid open the sliding door, and peered inside.

“Hello?” I called out.

Her parents shouldn’t have been home, but I could hear someone in the other room. Her brother, I figured. I timidly stepped inside.

There was a *click* and the light flicked on.

“Who are you?” A small boy stood in the foyer. He couldn’t have been older than seven or eight.

“I’m, uh... Your sister and I—”

“Neechan!” The boy hopped down the front step, still in his socks, and slipped by me.

Konuki-sensei was helping Komari out of the car. The kid skirted around to help her from the other side.

“Well, thank you,” Sensei said to him. “Can you walk, Komari-san?”

She nodded without opening her eyes and walked. Konuki-sensei held one arm while her brother held the other.

And I just kinda stood there.

The kid made the kind of exasperated look that had no business being on a child’s face. “Move, please.”

I sure was right in front of the door. So I did.

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How had it come to this?

I sat with my back ramrod straight on the tatami floor of a small bedroom, separated from the living room by only a single paper sliding door. Komari was fast asleep in a futon right in front of me. Her brother, Susumu-kun, had left with Konuki-sensei to pick up her sister. So it was just us.

Komari was wearing a pair of pink, star-patterned pajamas that Sensei had helped her change into. They looked like they were made for kids. Didn't know what to make of that.

The clock on the wall ticked away incessantly.

I thought back to the words Sensei had whispered in my ear just before leaving.

"You don't let her out of your sight from now on. Understand?"

"Uh, she's asleep. I think she'd probably appreciate being left alone."

"Call it a nurse's intuition. I really think you ought to keep your eyes on her." She ran her finger along my chest.

"Uh..."

"Don't miss a single breath, a single heartbeat. Are we clear, mister?"

My ear still tickled.

I scanned the room in an attempt to point my mind literally anywhere else.

It was thoroughly Japanese. Big enough to fit six tatami mats, which wasn't nearly enough for the two desks and bookcases crammed inside. I surmised the desk with all the dictionaries on it was Komari's and rose to get a closer look at all the books and papers strewn across it.

They were all for the festival. Everything was stuffed with sticky notes

bookmarking various pages. I checked one to find a mosaic of highlighted passages and margins crammed with notes. In the open notebook was some kind of flowchart. She had a solid outline from the look of things, but nothing really concrete enough for a poster.

I looked up. Next to a calendar on the wall, she had a single photo.

It was of us. The lit club, that time we went to the beach. There were Yanami and Yakishio in their bikinis, all smiles. Komari sulked next to them in her hoodie.

It was the sole glimmer of hope in a sea of clutter and stress. The light at the end of the tunnel. She just didn't want us helping her through it.

I heard her turning in her futon behind me. She must have been hot. After a bit of adjusting, she poked her arms out, and I could just barely see the tips of her fingers from inside her sleeves. Soon enough, she was back to sleep.

She was so small. Like Kaju. She clutched the edges of her sleeves in a way that reminded me of a child.

Inside that little head were stories. Characters. Worlds. A villainess making waves with modern concepts and innovative ideas.

Her lips tilted up into a hint of a smile. I peered down at her, wondering what she might be dreaming, when her lips moved. "Nuku...mizu..."

I froze. That was my name. I wasn't crazy, right? My name was Nukumizu, right? She'd just called my name.

Komari rolled over restlessly. "Nuh-uh...dat's cauliflower..."

It sure was.

I'd gotten all worked up for nothing. Komari kept on smirking at whatever she was seeing over in La La Land. All of a sudden, I wished I could join her.

I checked the clock. Sensei had been gone over half an hour now. Her sister's daycare was supposed to be close by, so there was no way it should have taken this long to pick her up.

I felt that twinge from yesterday again and whipped around. "Sensei, what are you doing?"



Konuki-sensei was peeping at me through the surreptitiously opened sliding door. Susumu-kun's face hovered below hers.

"Don't mind us," she said. "Please. Proceed."

"No thanks. Also, there's a kid."

"Ah, of course. My mistake." She quickly put her hands over his eyes, which did not solve the problem she thought she was solving.

I stepped into the living room and shut the door behind me. "I was just keeping my eyes on her. Like you asked."

"You had a good thing going there. Don't you agree, Susumu-kun?"

The kid stared up at me from Konuki-sensei's lap. "Are you her boyfriend?"

"Uh, no," I said.

"Are you her friend?"

"Um, we're in the same club, but..." The kid kept staring. And staring. And staring. I looked away. "Yeah. Yeah, we're friends."

Susumu-kun lit up. "Hina! Hina, did you hear? He's friends with Neechan! Don't be scared."

I followed his gaze to whoever this "Hina" was. There, hiding where the entryway led into the living room, was a little girl that somehow looked like an even more miniature Komari. She stared for a few seconds, bowed real quick, and then pitter-pattered off.

Okay, that was adorable.

"I think she likes you," said Sensei.

"She just ran from me."

Susumu-kun chased after her.

"Oh, also, I got in contact with her mother," Sensei added offhandedly. "She took off work early and is heading this way."

That was something. Better her mom look after her than me, that was for sure.

I was finally letting all the tension drain out when the creature returned. I sat up straight, smiled, and did my best to look as friendly as possible. “Hey there. I’m Nukumizu. I’m a friend of your sister’s.”

Hina-chan stood there for a while before eventually working up the courage to scamper over. She poked the little tuft of hair she had tied up just like Komari. “We’re same.”

“Oh. Yeah, you are. I like it.”

She drooped her head all shy and then scurried off again. Confusing, but god, was she cute.

“See? She likes you.” Konuki-sensei grinned at me before following after her. I guess she liked me.

It was about half past five now. Komari took priority, of course, but there was still a lot of work to get done that hadn’t been touched.

In the midst of my mental rescheduling, the door slid open.

Komari stood on the other side. Her star pajamas hung loosely, and her hair looked like a bird’s nest. She didn’t seem totally awake yet.

“You’re up,” I said.

“Bathroom...” Komari groggily rubbed her eyes. And then they shot open. “Wha—N-N-Nukumizu?!”

“Hey. You passed out at school, so I helped bring you home.”

She leapt behind the door again and slid it shut, leaving only a tiny crack to leer at me through. It soon occurred to her what she was wearing. “P-p-pa—pajam...?! ”

“Oh, those? Konuki-sensei changed you into them.”

“S-sis...”

“She picked up your sister too. With your brother. They’re all playing in another room.”

She finally quieted down. “S-so what are you doing here?” A fantastic question. Wish I had an answer. “I-I’m fine.”

“Mm. Good.”

Wait. Not good. I knew Komari was pushing herself too hard. I’d always known. The signs were there, but instead of acting on them, I’d sat around, hoping she’d be “fine.”

This wasn’t what Prez or Senpai meant when they asked me to look out for her.

I turned to face what sliver of her I could see through the door. “Hey, can you go ahead and send me what you’ve got of your research?”

“Wh-why?” she asked pointedly.





“You passed out, Komari. I’m not about to make you push your luck when you should be resting. I’m just sorry it got to that point.”

“B-but I—”

“Rest. I’ll take it from here. I’ll even get our senpai to help out, so it won’t—”

“N-Nukumizu!” she shouted. Anything I was about to say was swallowed whole by the sheer volume of her voice. Her next words came quieter. “I-I don’t wanna do it halfway. P-please...let me finish.”

I couldn’t believe this girl. It took a lot to keep down a big fat “absolutely not.”

“When can you be done?” I asked instead.

“T-tomorrow morning.”

Didn’t leave a lot of time for sleep, but I doubted she would anyway. I also doubted she’d drop it, no matter what I said.

I hid an incredulous smile. “Okay. Send it over as soon as you’re finished.”

“S-sorry.”

“It’s fine. But I want you to promise me something in return.”

“Wh-what?”

“That draft is *all* you do. Once we get the files, I want you to skip school tomorrow and rest. Don’t even think about the festival.”

“But w-we have so much to get ready tomorrow.”

“And it’ll be ready. Let a guy show off every once in a while.”

I waited for her to call my bluff or to shoot back some scathing remark about my masculinity, but she never did. All I got was a meek, “Okay.”

That threw me and all my bravado off.

I started to type up an update for Prez, but Komari kept eyeing me from the other side of the door. “You should keep resting while you still can,” I told her. “Go on. Back to bed.”

“I-I, um...”

“Sensei’s watching your shrimp. Get some sleep, at least until your mom gets home. Nothing’s gonna happen in the meantime.”

“I-I...!” Komari threw the door open and hurled a pillow at my face. “I still have to pee, jerk!”

I heard her stomp away. By the time I removed the pillow, she was gone.

Today, I learned she slept on buckwheat hull pillows.

\*\*\*

It was night by the time I got back to school, but the breezeway between buildings was still packed with students. I avoided the crowd and cut across the dark courtyard, glancing up at the classrooms all around. Windows shone. Many still had lights on.

Pre-festival energy permeated the air.

Every year, around the beginning of summer, Toyohashi had a local fair at night. I remembered driving my parents up the wall because I’d want to go out early and see everyone setting up booths before sundown.

“Talk about out of character.”

I killed that old excitement before it could take me over. After all, the higher you fly, the farther you fall. Those heights were for protagonists. People who mattered.

I came to the west annex, the door at the far end, and entered. Prez was sitting quietly inside the club room. Stacks of paper journals made hills around the table. He must have finished them for me.

“Welcome back,” he said. “How’s Komari-chan?”

“Better after a nap. Tsukinoki-senpai still in her lessons?”

“Over there.”

He indicated a chair in the corner. Tsukinoki-senpai sat there with her arms wrapped around her knees.

Her mood swings were rare, given she was usually at a constant ten energy-wise, but when they happened, they were severe.

“Y-you okay?” I asked.

“Was she hurt?” She looked at me with eyes like fragile glass orbs.

“No, she’s totally fine. Konuki-sensei was with her the whole time.”

“Okay. Glad she had a nurse. That’s good,” she said. Mostly to herself. She buried her face in her knees. “I just wanted her to be okay. Make sure she knows she can belong somewhere and be happy even after we’re gone, so I forced myself to stay away, but...”

“You wanted her to be strong.”

All this—everything—was hard on everyone. Not just Komari.

“She probably thinks we ditched her. I could have told her. Maybe if we’d just talked—”

“It was my idea,” Prez interrupted. “It’s not your fault, Koto.”

He went and knelt down next to her. Tsukinoki-senpai held her hand out without looking up. He squeezed it.

For some reason, it reminded me of Komari.

“I can’t speak for her,” I said, “but I seriously doubt she’s mad at anyone.” I was far from a people person, much less when it came to girls. For as long a time as we’d spent together, I still couldn’t claim to understand a thing that went on in Komari’s head. But I understood one thing. “She’s strong. Stronger than you think.”

I thought of the books and papers full of sticky notes piled on her desk. The margins crammed with notes. She was trying. I’d seen it for myself.

President Tamaki grinned. “You’re right. I believe in her.” He plopped a hand on Tsukinoki-senpai’s head just as she raised it.

“So about the festival,” I said.

We were less than two days away now. Everything *had* to be ready by the end of tomorrow.

“About that. I need to apologize to you, Nukumizu.” Prez bowed low.

“Huh? A-apologize for what? You don’t have to do any of that.”



“I’m the one who dumped everything on all of you. It’s my fault Komari pushed herself to the point of literal collapse.” It was no one’s fault but Komari’s. She’d made that choice for herself. But before I could find a more tactful way of saying it, Prez looked up. “I’ll finish the research somehow. I can’t keep doing this to Komari-chan.”

“No, Shintarou!” Tsukinoki-senpai cut in, shooting to her feet. “Let me do it. Komari-chan’s my responsibility.”

Komari. Senpai. Prez. Everyone had to do everything all at once all by themselves. Maybe it was genetic.

I stifled a laugh and shook my head. “Let her finish what she started.”

“Is... Is that what she wants?” Senpai asked.

“Heard it from her own lips.”

“She just recovered from working herself half to death,” Prez said. “I really don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“She’s taking all tomorrow off,” I told him. “Give her one more night. Please.”

Silence. I couldn’t blame them. What were they supposed to do? Say, “Yeah, let the girl who just passed out pull an all-nighter”?

“Is it our fault?” Tsukinoki-senpai eventually said. “Is it because we’re retiring? Is it because...” She glanced at President Tamaki. “Because Shintarou’s retiring? Is that why she’s pushing herself this much?”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “But I’m not a mind reader.”

Komari’s love story was over, and nothing could change that. But she could have closure. She could turn the man she loved into the man she *had* loved. For good. Give the three of them one last hurrah. One final memory to close the book on the year they’d spent together.

That dork was no better than me. A side character. An extra. No one important. But god, was she trying. So why not give her a chance?

Call it wishful thinking, but that was my take anyway.

“You taught her well, Senpai,” I said. “Trust her.”

Prez, who'd been quietly listening, finally shrugged in defeat. "All right. We did say we'd leave it up to you guys, after all." Tsukinoki-senpai started to say something, but Prez stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. He slowly shook his head at her. "So what now, Nukumizu?"

"What now?" There were no classes tomorrow. That whole day was blocked out for Tsuwabuki Fest prep, and we'd finally have access to the classroom we'd be using then. "Can you guys meet us in the classroom after homeroom tomorrow? I'll let Yanami-san and Yakishio know too."

"Will do. Until then, I guess we just wrap up what we can individually. You've got something to take care of, don't you?"

"Oh. Right."

Kaju was probably busily baking snacks all on her own right about now. I was in for a pretty bad cold shoulder when I got home.

Note to self: Be extra nice to her after the festival.

\*\*\*

The day before the festival.

My watch read 7 a.m. on the dot. I stifled a yawn as I surveyed the vacant classroom up on the second floor of the west annex. That was where the lit club was setting up. It wasn't always vacant, though. It got used a lot for electives or supplementary classes. I'd been here a few times myself.

The reason for my early arrival was obvious: to haul ass. I had a promise to make good on.

Komari's final draft had come in right at sunrise, and the thing came out to a whopping fifty thousand characters. Checking it over would have to wait until the venue was all set up.

After a few dozen trips lugging desks out into the hallway, the back half of the classroom was finally free.

God, this was gonna take a while.

I bent over again, back straight, about to lift the next desk. It came up way easier than the last ones.

“Didja forget I told you I could lift stuff, Nukkun?” came a bright, summery voice. Yakishio hoisted the desk away from me, all the way up to her chest.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Uh, I’m in the lit club too, aren’t I? Where do you want this? Just the hallway?” She started toward the door like the thing weighed nothing at all.

“But I told everyone to be here after homeroom.”

“Yeah, well, Yana-chan told me you might try to pull something. Said you’d try to do too much on your own.” She deposited the desk and jogged back inside, stacked one desk on top of another. “Komari-chan was already enough. Don’t need you conking out on us too.”

“I won’t,” I argued. “I know my limits. I was just gonna do what I can.”

“What you *can* do is ask for help.” Yakishio flashed a toothy grin and lifted the pair of desks just as effortlessly as the last. “Not that I’m keeping tallies or whatever, but I feel like I owe you, y’know?”

She must have been talking about last summer. I didn’t understand. Lord knows I’d tried to make sense of my role in all of that, but I still couldn’t figure it out. What had I possibly done to make her feel that way?

“You don’t owe me anything, Yakishio. If you’re talking about summer break, then I didn’t do jack.”

She dropped the desks. “Well, you made me happy.” She stared me dead in the eye. She didn’t move. Didn’t blink. “*You* did that.”

I stared back, fighting against the current, trying not to be swept away by her gaze. “I, uh...thanks,” I finally said. “I could use your help. If you don’t mind.”

“Nope, not at all. The sooner that sinks in, the better, Nukkun.” She came over and smacked me on the back. Ow.

One last smile, then she hoisted up the pair of desks again. I tried to copy her and stack one on top of the other but quickly gave up. Desks were heavy.

“By the way, you said Yanami-san mentioned me?” I said.

“Oh yeah!” Yakishio shouted from the hallway. She came back a split second

later. “She told everyone yesterday—”

I turned to see why she’d cut herself off, and there, standing at the door to the classroom, was she. Convenience store onigiri in hand. An invincible smile on her lips.

Yanami.

“Tuna mayo—mankind’s greatest invention. Let it be known that whoever came up with this stuff, they get the Yanami Snack Prize.” A gust of wind came from nowhere. Her hair fluttered, shimmering in the sun. Her onigiri wrapper took flight like flower petals in the breeze.

“Yana-chan!” Yakishio trotted over and gave her a high-five. “Morning.”

“Morning, Lemon-chan. And who peed in your cereal, Nukumizu-kun? Or have I simply astonished you beyond words?”

“Remember to throw that wrapper away,” I said.

“I was gonna get it,” she grumbled, trudging offscreen to do so.

So she’d told something to Yakishio. But what else had she said?

“How in the world did you know I’d be here this early?” I asked her.

“Talked to your little sis,” she said. “I mean, you kept us in the dark all yesterday, and then when I try to help, you tell me you’ve ‘got it.’ I don’t even know what ‘got it’ is supposed to mean. So yeah, I went to your sister instead.” Yanami crunched into the seaweed wrapper around her onigiri.

“Back up, since when have you had Kaju’s contact info?”

“It’s like, come on. Have a heart.” She ignored me and took another bite. “We’re all clubmates. We all care about Komari-chan. Right, Lemon-chan?”

That girl ate too fast.

“Yeah,” Yakishio agreed. “Have a heart, Nukkun.”

“Yeah, okay. You’re right, I’m sorry,” I said. “But how did you get Kaju’s—”

“Don’t we get an apology?” a familiar voice interrupted. Tsukinoki-senpai and Prez stood at the door.

“You guys came too?”

Prez raised a hand in greeting to Yanami. “Yanami-san rounded us up. Can’t let you keep the spotlight all to yourself, after all.”

Tsukinoki-senpai’s glasses gleamed in the light. “This is my specialty, I’ll have you know. I’ve set up my fair share of booths.”

“Please don’t hawk whatever it is you sell,” I pleaded. “This is a cultural festival, not a convention.”

“Hey, I’m eighteen. My works are perfectly above board.”

“Well, they aren’t here. Keep them to yourself, please.”

This was the Senpai I knew. Seeing her like this was a relief.

“What’re you grinning at?” she shot at me.

“Oh, uh...just glad to see you feeling better. That’s all.”

She smiled softly. “Sorry if I worried you. Shintarou and I hashed things out last night, so I’m all right now. And I’m eighteen, so it was all perfectly above board!”

“Koto!” Prez snapped.

“What? Don’t look at me like that.”

“Hallway. Now.” He promptly dragged her off.

I didn’t even want to know.

“Uh... Anyway, thanks for coming, everyone.”

Yakishio winked at me. “Not so fast, Nukkun.”

Was I missing someone? Komari was taking the day off, so I couldn’t have been.

Just then, a teeny-tiny head peeked through the hallway window. “Ah, I’ve found them. Over here, Mitsuki-san!”

Asagumo-san entered with Ayano. I was at a loss for words.

Ayano gave me one of his perfect smiles. “Remember when I said to give a shout if you ever need our help? This is one of those times.” He and his

girlfriend exchanged glances.

Asagumo-san opened up a notebook and presented it to me. "Lemon-san sent us the research. I perused it during my commute, and I've put together a potential layout we might use for the posters."

"You 'perused' fifty thousand characters?" I repeated. Just to be sure.

She nodded, her forehead glistening. "And I was very impressed with what I read. It was clearly written with love and passion. Of particular interest to me was the discussion of Souseki and his understudies. I had never considered their relationship from such a unique perspective, or..."

On and on she went.

That draft was half the length of a full novel. Finishing it on the way to school was a feat in itself without her having somehow summarized it all into a presentation.

I took the notebook to see for myself.

"Prioritizing readability, I've consolidated the information into eight posters in total," she explained. "Similar to the format of a newspaper, I've also incorporated illustrations and short blurbs of the finer points, to frame the meat of the presentation around. So as to make it digestible for children."

"A newspaper?" I parroted.

"It would simply be too dense for the average visitor otherwise. With clever use of titles and pictures, we can effectively summarize the more intriguing points that might draw someone's eye."

I flipped the page. Sure enough, there was a detailed plan exactly as she'd described. It did look very newspaperly.

"Next you're gonna tell me you know exactly what, where, and how to fill in every poster."

"Yes. Because I do. I know the content pretty much front to back."

Sure enough, once again, I found detailed notes complete with page numbers corresponding to Komari's research. Asagumo-san was a human machine.

Yanami took a sip from her carton of coffee milk, smirked, and gave me a thumbs-up. “We good.”

Correction: *Asagumo-san* good.

Ayano pointed to the notebook. “The original draft was actually written with a newspaper layout in mind. I was going to head to the computer room and punch out the final thing.”

I had every confidence he and Asagumo-san could pull it off. It was the lit club specifically I suspected of being incompetent.

That said, we had one big problem. “Will we be able to do all this in time? The posters are only one aspect we’ve got to get ready.”

“I actually had an idea about that.” Prez returned from the hallway. “Can I see the notebook?” He took it. Tsukinoki-senpai stood behind him, making wistful eyes at his back. God, I hoped whatever they’d done had been wholesome. “If we can finalize everything and get it sent off before afternoon, I’ve got a guy who can print it out at the size we need. Ayano-kun and I will get it done by then, and we’ll come back with the finished product.”

Ayano nodded. Those two were oddly in sync.

“Do you guys know each other already?” I asked.

“We technically met last night,” said Prez. “But this is our first time meeting face-to-face.”

Last night?

Yakishio showed me her phone. “Yana-chan made a LINE group. I invited Mitsuki and Chiha-chan.”

I frowned. “But not me.”

“Because you and Komari-chan were the problem,” Yanami explained, enunciating her words. “You two kept trying to do everything by yourselves, so we had to step in. FYI, she’s not in it either.”

That was fair. I didn’t have to like it, but it was fair.

Prez looked around at each of us. “Ayano-kun, Asagumo-san, and I will focus

on the posters. Nukumizu and Koto, you set up the venue. Yanami-san, Yakishio-san, be around to help out Nukumizu when you're not busy with your class. We all have our jobs."

Yanami held her hand out. Yakishio and Asagumo-san overlapped theirs.

Yanami prodded me with her eyes. "Get your butt over here, Nukumizu-kun."

I shyly added my own hand to the pile.

"Let's make it happen, guys," said Prez. "Tsuwabuki Fest!"

"Tsuwabuki Fest!" everyone cheered.

I lagged behind. "Ts-Tsuwabuki Fest."

Immediately, I wanted to crawl into a hole and die. Before I could grab my shovel, though, Yanami bumped her shoulder against me.

"Wh-what?" I stuttered.

"How's that for charismatic consulting, hm?"

Right. I never did cancel that contract.

"We'll get you renewed for next year."

"That's what I like to hear."

She bumped me again, smiled, and then wiped the grain of rice off her cheek.

\*\*\*

With all the unneeded desks vacated, we could really get to work. Yanami and Yakishio took to the blackboard to scribble out details about our presentation.

"What next?" Tsukinoki-senpai adjusted her glasses confidently.

"Right. Pretty much all that's left is to put the posters up and set the snacks and journals out."

"You're not putting out a sign or anything? A menu might be smart if you're selling snacks."

"That's supposed to be what they're doing on the blackboard right now."

"And how are people outside supposed to know what's on the blackboard?"



Senpai pressed. "How about a few decorations? Let's breathe a little life into this place, hm? Where are the journals going anyway?"

"Just on those desks, I was thinking."

She dug around in her bag, pulled out a cloth, and threw it over said desks. "There. Looks a hundred times better already, doesn't it? Also, can't forget this."

Next, she put a small board down that read "Just Printed."

"What is that?"

"Just an eye-catcher. Like an 'open' sign or something." It did a lot for the vibe, I had to admit. "Could use more information though. At least something that conveys what they are and that people are free to take them. Please don't tell me you were planning on just leaving them in some corner and hoping for the best."

She said not to, so I didn't.

Senpai glanced around. "Where are you keeping the materials? Any paper or tape or anything?"

"Uh, no."

She visibly deflated. "Okay. Run me through your entire plan. How exactly is this classroom supposed to look?"

"So, we were going to just put up each section of the exhibit at four different places around the room. Then thematic snacks and a stamp station at each."

"And?"

And...what?

"That's it."

"Wow, okay." She clapped. "Team meeting, everyone! Yes, even you two."

Yanami and Yakishio came over, patting the chalk from their hands.

"It's become clear to me that the situation is dire," Senpai said. "So I'm assuming command of this operation." I found myself suddenly unemployed. "We need flyers, posters, decorations. The place has to look good, get me? So

we're gonna need a few more things." She flipped open a pocket notebook and started jotting down a list. "Colored paper and double-sided tape are musts. If you're selling stuff, you're going to need a coin case and a ledger too. I've got a cash box at home, so that's covered. For change, a single stack should be more than enough. I'll take care of that as well. I also see you have no basket or anything to hold the snacks in. Nukumizu-kun, do you already have the stamps and cards?"

"I was gonna get some when I had a—"

"We'll figure it out. Can someone go shopping for me?"

Yakishio's hand shot up. "I can!"

Tsukinoki-senpai tore the page from her notebook and handed it over. "Go to the discount store nearby. See if they're open, and don't forget the receipt. Can you go with her to help carry things, Yanami-san?"

"Sure," she replied. "But we can't be gone too long. Our class is gonna need us soon."

"Got it. Just be back before afternoon, then leave the rest to me and Nukumizu-kun."

Who was this person and what had she done with Tsukinoki-senpai? I'd only seen her display this much intelligence and authority with BL.

"All right, lots to do, people," she said. "We've got time till the bell. Back to it."

She clapped again, and Yanami and Yakishio scurried back to the blackboard.

I figured I ought to start on those flyers. I scanned the classroom again, until I noticed Senpai holding up her watch at me.

"You're borrowing tatami mats from your old school, yeah? I've got a car. We leave before noon," she said.

"Er, right. Not that I actually know anyone there other than my sister."

I'd spent three whole years at that junior high. Even though it had only been a few months since I last walked through its halls, it already felt like a lifetime ago.

It was the day before the festival, and we were just getting started.

\*\*\*

I paused for a second to check the clock. It was already past two in the afternoon. Prez had sent word that they sent the posters in just before the deadline, and he was on his way to pick them up now.

I had been busy with flyers and such since the morning and had just finished laying out tatami mats, with Ayano's help.

He patted me on the back. "We're gonna head back to class now."

"Good luck, Nukumizu-san," said Asagumo-san, carefully dabbing the sweat off of Ayano.

"Thanks, guys."

I watched them leave. And then it was just me.

Tsukinoki-senpai was returning the car we'd used to grab the tatami. Yanami and Yakishio had been busy rehearsing for Flash Halloween since noon.

I sprawled out onto the tatami floor. I'd done a pretty darn good job, if I said so myself. We'd been so focused on the content of the exhibit that we never really considered the presentation of it all. As it turned out, it was a lot of work to do something right.

I couldn't have done it myself. Tsukinoki-senpai's driving alone had ensured that.

"Hey, lookin' pretty good in here." Speak of the devil. Never thought I'd respect the devil as much as I did right now. "We've got an actual venue on our hands."

"Thanks again," I said. "Can't say I was expecting a truck when you said you had a car."

"Family business. Don't need a special license to drive it or anything either." Tsukinoki-senpai, dressed in a tracksuit, plopped down next to me on the floor.

"Still, I didn't know this school let students drive."

"Oh, it totally doesn't. They'll suspend you on the spot if they catch you."

*Wait, what?*

“Senpai, I was in that car with you.”

“And they’d have suspended us if they caught us.” She pinched her tracksuit. “The heck do you think I put this on for? I’m not stupid enough to drive that thing around in my uniform.”

At least she had *some* sense.

She handed me a bottle of tea. “Can’t believe you and your sister are related. She was a total superstar. Remember those boys who helped us load? I think they said they were her fan club.”

“They didn’t. They were simply students who decided to help us out of the kindness of their hearts,” I assured her. “Junior high is too young for boys, Senpai, and I’ll thank you to remember that.”

She gave me a look. “Oh, you’re one of *those*, huh? You do leave a lot of books about sisters lying around in the club room.”

Well, I sure as hell couldn’t leave them at home.

“Fiction and reality are not the same. You write BL, but you wouldn’t want your boyfriend bringing some guy home, would you?”

“Hey, if he was into that, I’m open-minded. Far as I’m concerned, that’s totally workable.”

Not the answer I expected, but okay.

“Fair enough, I guess,” she said. “Makes sense you’d be a little protective when she’s got that many guys ogling her.”

“It wasn’t like that when I was at school with her. The opposite, really.”

“Really? Huh.”

I thought back to last year, that short period when we’d attended together.

“She kept telling everyone that her brother went to the same school and that he was the bestest, most amazing brother in the whole world,” I recounted. “So, you know, the first-year girls started talking, and all of a sudden there was this rumor going around about this mega hot third-year.”

“Wow, so that’s when you peaked, huh?”

“The rumor changed pretty fast. There was no mega hottie. Just a weird, obsessive little sister.” I cracked open the bottle. “She was a bit of a misfit in her first year. I’m glad to see things are better for her now, though.”

Other than that fan club. Those guys were already on my blacklist.

Tsukinoki-senpai stopped making smug faces at me and looked up thoughtfully. “Have she and I met before? I keep feeling like I’ve seen her somewhere.”

“Pretty sure that was your first time meeting each other.”

Wait, there was the trip last July. Kaju had apparently been spying on us, so it’d make sense if Senpai had crossed paths with her at some point.

Not that I was about to convolute matters.

“Must be going crazy,” I said.

“Hm. I guess I must be.”

Tsukinoki-senpai kept looking up. I took a stoic sip of tea.

\*\*\*

Four in the afternoon. I came to class 1-C and had to do a double take.

Every wall was covered from top to bottom by curtains and decorations. On the blackboard, “HAPPY HALLOWEEN” had been written in humongous, styled letters. The place was fit for a holiday party.

My desk had been hauled off, so I took to just standing around. But it didn’t last long before I got hit by the sudden and intense smell of flowers. BGM started playing in my head.

“Trick or treat!”

Himemiya Karen popped up in her devil outfit. She held one leg up and pointed at me, holding some incomprehensible pose like a total weirdo.

I quietly stepped to the side, figuring I was in the way.

“Come on! Give me something! I’ll even take a pity laugh!”

Ah. Evidently she was talking to me.

“Uh, treat,” I decided. “Don’t have any candy on me, though. Can I bring some later?”

“Y-you don’t make this easy, do you? I *was* gonna follow up with a, ‘No treats? Trick it is!’ shtick, but I don’t even know now.”

I was familiar with it. In less wholesome contexts.

“Oh, I’ve got a Black Thunder bar. You want that?”

“Why thank you kindly, Nukumizu-san.” Her poker face didn’t last long. She cracked up. “Loosen up! You make it look like I’m shaking you down or something. Here. Give this to Anna.”

“Yanami-san?”

Himemiya-san pointed to a corner of the room laid with cardboard. Yanami rested there on her back, dressed in her white robes with that triangle headband, hands folded on her stomach.

RIP.

“She’s *so* tired and hungry. *Starving*, even.”

Starving, even?

I trudged over. “Heard you were hungry.”

Yanami blinked her dreary eyes open and sat up. “Nukumizu-kun?” She reached for the chocolate bar and immediately started munching. “You’re a lifesaver. The store was out of bread, and the cafeteria’s closed today.”

“Did you skip lunch?”

She nodded. “All I’ve had is cup ramen.” Sounded like lunch to me. “Oh yeah, isn’t the classroom so cool? We helped decorate and stuff.”

“Isn’t the whole point of Flash Halloween supposed to be about wandering around outside?”

“We’re still gonna take photos and stuff here. Haven’t you read the agenda?”

I hadn’t read anything but the lists telling me what to do. My lack of response

seemed to communicate that.

“You’re not supposed to pick favorites, you know,” she grumbled. Unfortunately, she had a point. “How’s the lit club coming, anyway? I feel like I’ve it’s been forever since I last checked in.”

“Pretty much done. Just the final touches left once Prez gets here.”

Things were going almost suspiciously well. Tsukinoki-senpai locking in certainly helped.

“I’ll come check it out once I get a chance,” Yanami said. “Ack, chocolate on my costume!” She immediately rubbed at it and made it worse.

She was gonna be at that for a while, so I went to check the agenda on the notice board.

Seven Flash Halloween skits in total, with the actors taking shifts. Apparently Yanami was taking part in three of those. When not performing, actors would go around handing out candy to kids or taking pictures with people.

“You should be in costume too, Oniisama. I think you’d look very handsome as a prince.”

“Stagehands don’t get costumes. Also, I’m gonna be with the lit club all day any—” *Oniisama?* “Kaju?! What? Why? And how?!”

“Tee-hee!”

Ah, yes, of course. Tee-hee.

My little sister beamed up at me, not a care in the world in that grin.

“You can’t just walk into schools you’re not enrolled in,” I admonished her. “Come on. Let’s go.”

She wouldn’t budge. She was far more preoccupied with my necktie. “I swear, you never keep this thing straight. You remembered to eat lunch, didn’t you?”

“Y-yes? Now you really need to—”

“Nukumizu-kun, all your sister’s done is bring us stuff and be an utter sweetheart, and all you’ve done is whine.” Yanami reappeared carrying a box wrapped in cloth.

“Bring you what? That?”

“Uh-huh,” Kaju answered. “I made oinarisan for everyone to enjoy. And plenty of it too.”

Yanami’s pupils dilated. “Hey, guys! Nukumizu-kun’s sister brought snacks for us!”

Suddenly, we were the center of attention. Rather, the inari was. Now was my chance to get Kaju out of here.

But I was wrong. The girls’ attention went not to the inari but Kaju herself. They fussed and called her cute and asked her questions—among them, who “Nukumizu” was.

Kaju was a little flustered at first but soon regained composure. “You must be my brother’s classmates. My name is Kaju, and it’s a pleasure to meet you!”

She did a cute little bow, and everyone squealed.

No slipping away now. There are two things girls just can’t help themselves around: cute things and sweet things. My light novels said so. It was a good thing Kaju worked well under pressure.

Yakishio sauntered up next to me. “Hey, that’s Momozono’s uniform. She goes to the same junior high we went to?”

“We do live together.”

Her mummy costume had undergone some revisions, and I could no longer see all the things I probably wasn’t supposed to. Once again, common sense trumps the ambitions of men.

Noticing us chatting, Kaju extricated herself from the crowd. “Excuse me, are you Yakishio-san? I’ve heard so much about you!”

Yakishio smirked and nudged me with her elbow. “You talk about me at home, eh, Nukkun? You’re gonna make me blush.”

Did I...?

“Anyway, Kaju, it’s time for you to leave,” I said. “This isn’t your school.”

“Oh, I got permission from your teacher. She was very kind. I can tell she



takes her job very seriously,” Kaju replied.

*Could’ve fooled me.* I tried to come up with evidence to support either of those claims. No dice.

“Your sister’s got a good head on her shoulders, Nukumizu.” Oh, there she was. Right behind Kaju. “I guess it isn’t genetic.” Amanatsu-sensei clapped. “All right, folks. Time for late homeroom.”

With Kaju still here? That didn’t seem very orthodox to me.

“School hours still apply tomorrow, and you’re expected to be here on time,” she announced. “Doors will be locked at 8 p.m. *tonight*, so if you’re staying past that, better tell someone soon. That’s pretty much it.” She plopped a hand—although more horizontally than vertically—onto Kaju’s head. “Now, Nukumizu’s sister was kind enough to bring us refreshments. I know what you’re thinking. The early bird gets the worm and all that, but I want you all lined up in a nice, orderly—Yanami! No! Down!”

The Great Inari War broke out instantly. I kept my distance from the mob of people scrambling to snag one for themselves.

Kaju watched next to me. “This is a fun bunch you’ve got, Oniisama.”

Maybe. Wasn’t sure how one measured that sort of thing, so I took her word for it.

“I’ll walk you back to the gate. Big Bro’s got stuff to do,” I said.

“South, please. Mom’s waiting in the car.”

We stepped out into the hallway.

Kaju latched on to my arm almost instantly. She giggled. “It’s like we’re on a little school date together!”

“We’re in public.” I pried my arm away.

That got her pouting. “Can we at least hold hands? I’ll settle for that. Or give me your jacket. One of the two.”

“My jacket? Why? You cold?” I slipped off my blazer and handed it to her.

She swaddled herself in it and giggled again. “Toasty *and* roomy.”

Kaju turned around and started cheerfully walking backward. It wasn't long before she nearly crashed into another student.

I grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her in. "Hey, careful. Walk beside me before you hurt yourself."

She got all meek all of a sudden. "Yes, Oniisama."

Good. Maybe the message had sunk in.

Sometimes she could be such a child. Her attitude could make you forget that about her, although I couldn't blame her for being a little giddy. It was her first time in a high school.





“I’m not mad at you,” I told her.

“I know,” she said. “I made two kinds of oinarisan. One’s vegetable, and the other’s wasabi. You should try some. I made sure there’d be enough!”

“I think I’ll do that.”

I sincerely doubted there’d be enough, but I didn’t say that. See, she’d failed to account for Yanami.

\*\*\*

It was half past seven. Still the day before the festival. And the lit club’s exhibition—Food for Thought—was complete.

Yakishio, the senpai, and I took it all in.

“Perfect!” Tsukinoki-senpai gave us a thumbs-up. “Good work, everyone.”

Yakishio whacked me on the back. Ow. Again. “Don’t act *too* excited, Nukkun!”

What, did she want me to pretend to bounce off the walls? Sounded exhausting.

Prez let out a short, dry chuckle. “Tomorrow’s the big day. Everyone get some rest.”

The others cheered.

He was right. This was only the beginning. It’d probably be smart to get home early today.

“I’m taking Koto home, so I’m gonna bounce,” he said.

“And I’m gonna go get eaten by the big bad wolf,” Tsukinoki-senpai quipped. “Bye!”

“Please be normal in front of the first-years.”

That was the last thing I heard before the newlyweds walked out the door.

Yakishio slung her bag over her shoulder. “I’ll probably head out too.”

“Right. I’ll...” I peeked out into the hallway. No sign of Yanami. Apparently, our class was keeping her extra long. “I’ll stick around to take photos. The student

council asked for some.”

“M’kay. Well, I’m out. See ya!”

“Later.”

Yakishio jogged away.

I looked around the room. Felt awfully big for just one person.

The exhibits. The snacks. The decorations and all the bits and pieces thrown together at the last minute. Looking back, it was a wonder any of this turned out as good as it had.

It wouldn’t have without Asagumo-san’s brains, or Yanami or Yakishio’s charisma. Or Tsukinoki-senpai’s design sense. Even Kaju. She’d baked the snacks and got us the tatami mats. And I...

I’d done stuff.

Yanami came in, back in her uniform, before I could spiral too far down. “Hey, Nukumizu-kun.”

“Hey. They kept you, huh?”

“That stain just would not come out. Oooh, posters looking good.”

She meandered over for a closer look. I quietly moved the desk with the snacks out of her reach.

“That’s the Dazai exhibit,” I said. “It’s based on his short story *Cherries*. Dives into his relationships and his views on family dynamics and stuff. Pretty interesting.”

“*Cherries*? Never read that. Sounds cute, though.”

“Extremely. It’s about a guy who ditches his family, then goes to this bar with this one girl.”

“That doesn’t sound cute.”

“He just sits there getting drunk and talking about how his life’s harder than his kids’. And he eats cherries while he does it. It’s a tough read.”

“Why’d we pick it then?”

I wasn't so sure anymore.

"Because it's popular," I remembered. "And there's lots of personal anecdotes to pull from. They didn't name his deathday after it for nothing."

"They use *that* to remember the guy...?"

We could keep doing this or she could just read the damn poster.

She did, still grumbling. Eventually, though, she went quiet. "Oh my god, I just read that whole thing."

"And that's a problem?"

"Dude, I'm the lit club straight man. The straight man's supposed to make quips and stuff. Not read and nod and go, 'Ah, yes, interesting.'"

"Did you just call yourself the straight man?" It took immense self-control to not fly off the handle there.

"Oh, hey, you got those tatami mats," she pointed out. She promptly threw herself onto them. "I really like how they smell. You borrow them from the tea club or the flower arranging club, or what?"

"Something like that."

Judo was pretty close to those if you didn't think about it too much.

Yanami sat up again and fished around her bag. "I made sure to snag some bread this time. Look. *Two* cream ones. Isn't that insane?" I *uh-huh*'d. She patted the ground next to her. "Come, come. I'll give you one."

"You're giving me food? Wait. *You're giving me* food."

"Yes. Thank you for saying it twice."

She had no right to blame me for doubting my ears.

I took the bread and sat down. This brand, the cream was actually on the outside. It was Yanami's favorite, but my first time trying it. One bite, and I understood.

"Still can't get over all this." Yanami soaked in the classroom one more time, licking some cream off her finger.

“I know. It’s like we’ve actually got something worth showing people now.”

It was still setting in, really. Us. The lit club. The little old lit club did this. Mere days ago I’d been worrying about how we’d even fill the space.

Yanami took the words from my mouth. “Komari-chan’ll love this.”

“Yeah.” I tried not to let it show that she’d read my mind. “She busted her butt for this, that’s for sure.”

Fifty thousand characters. Only time would tell how many of those would hit people’s eyes. Probably far less than she deserved, but her work was visible now. We’d made eight whole posters just to make sure of that.

Yanami finished off the last piece of her bread. “Some love letter.”

She saw a message. A confession. A goodbye. One last room-sized expression of love to that special someone.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” I said, taking another bite.

She glanced at me. “Not how you see it?”

There was certainly a lot of love in this room. But so were so many other things. Things from the bygone days when it was just our senpai and Komari. Bigger things than we knew.

“I see memories in all this. Gratitude. A promise that she’ll look after the club while they’re gone. I see a lot of things. But that’s just me.”

“Hm,” she muttered. She spoke quietly. Gently. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

I hadn’t expected it. My walls came down, and my lips moved on their own. “I feel like I *have* to look at it that way. Hurts too much not to.”

I thought of Komari sitting at that desk, scrawling in her notebook in the dead of night. Spending days creating something in vain. A love letter that would never be read.

And it hurt.

Yanami sat in silence for a while. “I get it. Komari-chan, I mean,” she said softly. “You’re right that it’s more. She cares about Senpai and the whole club.”



“Right. Exactly.”

“But I also think it took something superhuman to confess at the lodge back in the summer. She was ready. She was ready to lose everything, just to say those words.” In that moment, it hadn’t been about winning or losing. It was about laying her heart out, regardless of what happened. “You can figure things out and you can move on. But you never *really* move on from loving someone that much.” Yanami hugged her knees. “You keep loving, but it’s gotta go somewhere. Because you can’t say it. You can’t act on it. So Komari writes. Yakishio runs...”

She didn’t finish.

There was nothing but the buzz of fluorescent lights for a while.

I scanned the room once more, searching for what Yanami saw. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little worried about our senpai retiring at first. She wants to prove that she can handle it. And I get that.” I put my half-eaten bread back in the bag and set it on the floor. “The third-years don’t even have to come to school after New Year’s. There’s only two months left of the status quo, so...”

She wouldn’t have to worry about loving for too much longer.

Yanami waited for me to continue and cocked her head. “So...what?”

“So you wait. Easier to give something up if it leaves on its own.”

I knew from experience. It was the way I’d learned to live my life.

“Right. Been there,” she said. “But girls will be girls. And Komari-chan’s way more girl than me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just who she is. She’ll want to draw a line in the sand. Vent it all out, even if she has to pull a few teeth, all so she can love again later.”

I thought about that—“love again.”

“She have a crush on someone or something?”

“Dunno. But she’s a cute girl.” Yanami leaned over to me. “Better act fast or you’re gonna get left in the dust.”

“What? Who cares if she finds someone first. We’re not racing.”

“You...” She sighed. “Right over his head. Forgot who I’m dealing with.”

Whatever was going on right now, I was definitely getting roasted. That much was clear.

“Speak for yourself,” I shot back. “What about that one guy in the Shinsengumi outfit? Any thoughts?”

“About Nishikawa-kun? Why?”

I’d only had one half-interaction with the guy, and even I could tell.

“You realize he—” My brain caught up with my mouth, and I shut myself up.

“He what?”

“He...seems pretty friendly with you.”

Yanami hummed. “I guess. We’ve been talking more lately. What about it?” She took another bite of bread.

Wait, hadn’t she just finished hers?

“Hey, that’s—”

Yanami gasped. I could hear the light bulbs going off in her head. “Oh. *Oooh!*”

“Wh-what?”

She shot me a snide, sidelong look. “Are you jealous? Are you *jealous* of Nishikawa-kun?”

“H-huh?! No!” I sputtered.

She started gleefully rocking from side to side. “After all that ‘find a boyfriend’ junk, the truth comes out. Shoulda known you were just being shy. Who gets that obsessed over someone else’s relationship status?” Was she seriously still mad about me giving her crap back on the first day of the semester? “Poor Nukumizu-kun’s gonna be heartbroken when I find someone. Who knew you had a cute side.”

“Y-you’re putting words in my mouth. I didn’t care *that* much.”

“Hey, I feel you, dude. Don’t worry. I’ll introduce you if it ever happens. Just

no leaving *me* in the dust, got it?”

I buried my head in my hands. “Please... Please, for once, just listen to me.”

Yanami just sat there humming away, nibbling on my bread.

Aside from her chewing, it was quiet again. Too quiet. Granted, it was always quiet at school after eight o’clock, but this was different.

I slowly looked up. “Keep your voice down.”

“Huh? How come?”

I held a finger up in front of my mouth and drew in close. “Yanami-san—”

“Whoa! Whoa, whoa, whoa, dude!” Yanami scrambled back, voice cracking.

“What part of ‘keep it down’ do you not understand?”

“I know the festival energy puts people in funny moods, but we’re not even there yet! At *least* wait until tomorrow!”

She’d lost the plot.





“Shush. Konuki-sensei’s recording us, so don’t say anything incriminating.”

“Say what?”

Yanami slowly turned toward the hallway window like a broken animatronic. There she was, pointing a camera at us.

Sensei waved. “Don’t mind me. I’m just a fly on the wall. Please. Proceed.”

“There’s nothing to proceed.” I stood, patting off my blazer. “Most people say something when they show up.”

“I thought I’d be intruding. In any case, if you two are finished, I have to lock up.”

“We never started. Let’s go, Yanami-san. Should probably get out of here.”

She was still sitting dumbly on the floor. She looked up at me and made a weird noise.

“She has to lock up,” I repeated. “Come on, can you stand?”

She nodded once, then staggered to her feet.

Sensei walked us to the gate, and the whole way she stayed like that. Weirdly quiet. Distinctly *not* Yanami.

“Something wrong?” I asked her.

“N-nope. I’m good. I think...”

“What were you freaking out about earlier, anyway?”

Her jaw dropped like she wanted to scream. “I-I dunno! Shut up! It’s your fault!” She jabbed her hand straight into my ribs then stormed off.

Ow. Violence wasn’t usually this heroine’s charm point, so clearly, she was mad about something. The question was what.

“So intense,” Sensei breathed. “I bet all that energy makes it so much better.”

I didn’t know what “it” was. I didn’t want to know. Not all knowledge is for knowing.

I ignored her and hurried after Yanami. I understood her even less than “it.”

## Intermission: Think of the Neighbors

**K**OMARI CHIKA ADJUSTED HER RIBBONS IN THE mirror. It was still dark, just before dawn. Nearby, her little brother was still asleep. The cold fall air penetrated her blouse as she carefully slipped her blazer on, so as not to wake him.

Koto-senpai had called last night. As happy as Komari was to hear preparations had gone smoothly at school, she was also frustrated she hadn't been there.

She glanced at her brother one last time before opening the sliding door. It was the day of the festival. And the last day the lit club would have its senpai.

Once outside, Komari locked the front door and let out a sigh. Her escape had gone unnoticed. She didn't want to worry her family, and they certainly would have had they known how early she was leaving.

She stifled a yawn and turned. Parked in front of her house was a familiar minivan. And leaning against the car was an even more familiar bespectacled girl.

"Morning."

Komari croaked. "S-Senpai?! Why are you here?"

"Sounded like you were scheming something over the phone yesterday. Looks like I was right." Tsukinoki Koto pointed her thumb over her shoulder, at the minivan. "I'm not about to let my sweet, sleep-deprived Komari-chan go to school all by herself. Hop in."

"I-I'm not sleep-deprived. I slept all day yesterday. A-and you know he's gonna be mad if he catches you driving."

"Eh, let him! Now let's go, we're burning daylight!"

Koto practically shoved Komari into the passenger seat. She took her own on

the driver side, turned the key, and the engine purred to life. A voice drama of two young men passionately proposing to each other immediately blared from the speakers.

“S-Senpai...”

“Pretty good, huh? I put this baby on for special occasions.”

“T-turn it down, please. My house is r-right there.”

Koto’s expression instantly sobered up. She nodded and did so. “Right. Neighbors.”

“N-neighbors.”



## Loss 3:

### Early Goodbyes

I HURRIED TO THE STUDENT COUNCIL ROOM. I HAD to get these photos in before the festival started.

I opened the door, still catching my breath. “Excuse me.”

“Eep!”

A girl in cat ears and a maid outfit stood inside. She froze so perfectly I almost thought she was a statue. Her twitching cheeks gave her away, though.

This *was* the student council room, right?

On second glance, the cat maid was, in fact, the first-year vice president, Basori Tiara.

“C-can I help you?!” she spat.

“Just, er, turning this in.”

A pair of pale white arms extended from behind Tiara-san and wrapped themselves around her—Shikiya-san in her miniskirt nurse outfit. “Tiara-chan...” she breathed. “You forgot...to say ‘meow.’”

“I am *not* saying ‘meow,’ Senpai, and you won’t work your tendrils into me this time!”

The senpai leaned against Tiara-san lethargically. “You think the president... has bad ideas?”

“Th-that’s not what I said! You’re sure she’s even going to be in costume? I don’t recall her mentioning that.”

“You doubt the president?”

“Never! I’ll do it!”

“You’ll do it...meow.”

“I’ll do it...*meow!*” Tiara-san screamed, her face bright red.

I wasn't exactly sure what to do with myself during this exchange. Wished they'd had it before I showed up.

Tiara-san wrenched her head toward me. The joint was a bit rusty. "S-so how... How can I h-help you...meow." She was red up to her ears. Shaking. She couldn't even look me in the eye.

"Uh, I've got the photos of our venue here. Is this enough?"

"Yes, that's plenty."

"Tiara-chan," Shikiya-san rasped.

"That's plenty, meow!"

I couldn't deal with this right now.

Oh, her costume came with a tail. How was it attached, I wondered...

I pondered that as I left.

"Boy..." Shikiya-san called out with a voice like a mosquito's buzz.

"Yes?"

She rested her chin on Tiara-san's shoulder. Her white eyes stared through me. "I'll be there..."

\*\*\*

I returned from the student council room to the second-floor classroom in the west annex.

Komari was inside, waiting for me by the wall. "T-took you long enough. It's starting soon, Nukumizu."

If she could complain, she was right as rain.

I checked the clock. Ten minutes till showtime. "You were here pretty early, huh?"

"Ts-Tsukinoki-senpai brought me."

"Where is she? And senpai number two, for that matter?"

"Third-years have an a-assembly first."

Right. Something about graduation. What a cheery way to start off the festival. Yanami and Yakishio were on duty in class, so it'd be just us for a while.

"We'll probably be fine," I said. "Everything's pretty much set up."

Komari nodded. She twiddled her fingers around, and I couldn't tell if she was just shy or angry about something. "N-Nukumizu."

"Yeah?"

"I, um... I wanted to th...thank you."

"Huh?" If ears could do a double-listen.

"F-for doing so much with...the s-stuff that I wrote."

Who was this? Komari was never meek. Not around me anyway.

I scratched at my cheek, a little flustered. "Thank Asagumo-san—er, Yakishio's friend. She's the one who came up with the format and everything."

"O-oh. But i-it's printed really well, so... For that, then."

"Actually, it was Prez and a friend of mine who did that. It's pretty good, right?"

Komari tilted her head. "The d-decorations?"

"Tsukinoki-senpai's idea. Yanami-san and Yakishio are the ones who got everyone together too."

"Th-the one time I try to be nice..." She glowered at me through her bangs.

"Hey, I'm all ears. Lay it on me. Let the nicening begin."

"Y-you're about to *lose* your ears."

That wasn't very nice.

We quickly ran out of things to talk about. It was quiet out on this part of campus.

"Yanami-san's got some time later this afternoon. She'll come sub in for one of us later."

Komari nodded. "Ts-Tsukinoki-senpai and the president will be here a-after the assembly."

“Figured as much.”

Out of topics again. But the silence wasn’t so awkward this time.

Shortly after, a speaker on the wall buzzed and hissed. “Good morning, everyone,” someone said on the other end. “This is the student council speaking.”

My guess based on the low timbre was it was the president. Funny how people all turn to face speakers like they’re people whenever announcements play.

“I hope you’ve dotted your i’s and crossed your t’s, because today, our humble school will play host to a plethora of visitors. As such, and in accordance with the philosophy of independence that we espouse, each and every one of you will be his or her own representative of Tsuwabuki. Remember this as you take part in the festivities, and behave with decorum.”

A normal, respectable announcement. That was a relief. At least one person on the student council had their head on straight—when the situation called for it, I supposed. My first impression of her had been mixed, all things considered.

“Was that too pompous?” the speaker went on. “I think I liked the first idea better.”

“You’re good... No one heard.”

“President, the mic is on! Continue! Quickly—*meow!*”

Spoke too soon.

There was a lot of chaos and bumping of the microphone, and then someone cleared their throat. “Let the 98th Tsuwabuki Fest begin!”

A few confused seconds later came the cheers. Komari and I glanced at each other and hesitantly joined in the scattered applause.

So Tsuwabuki Fest began.

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For the first fifteen minutes, no one even passed through the hallway except the occasional student carrying something from one place to another. Komari

picked anxiously at her nails. The place felt awfully empty with just the two of us.

Our eight posters clung to the wall at four different places around the room, snack baskets and a stamp station at each. We had our sample journals set up by the entrance. I wondered how many would even take one.

I also wondered where those Dazai and Mishima headshots had come from.

“The west annex is pretty far from everything,” I said. “It’ll probably be a while before we get anyone.”

“I-I guess.”

“What I’m saying is relax. Remember, we’re giving cookies to elementary school kids and younger, so get your cards—” While I dug around in my pocket, a little boy no older than five popped in. I plastered on that smile I’d spent all last night practicing. “Hey there. Here. Fill that up with stamps and you’ll get some snacks. Can you do that?”

The kid took the card and zipped off. An older woman that looked to be his mother gave us a polite bow and followed behind him.

They couldn’t have been here much more than three minutes before the kid scampered off with his cookies. Komari waved goodbye.

I handed her some stamp cards. “Here. Keep these on you. And some stickers too.”

“S-stickers?”

“They get a sticker on their card when they get their snacks. It’s also to make it easier to keep track.”

Komari eyed them. “Wh-why Pokémon?”

“Yakishio says kids like Pokémon.”

*She* liked Pokémon, and I could think of no one better to speak on their behalf.

I marked a couple of tallies in a notebook. Two visitors so far. More trickled in over time until two became ten.

“Th-that last kid r-read some of the picture book pieces,” Komari mentioned.

“Even made a sale.” I was feeling suave and flipped the hundred-yen coin. It flickered in the light.

*Clink.*

“A-and you lost it.”

“I didn’t lose it. It’s over here...somewhere.” I gave myself a good few minutes before giving up and pulling out my wallet. “You’re pretty good with guests,” I said. “Thought you’d struggle with that.”

“K-kids are fine.” She took the coin from me and dropped it in the cash box.

“Got a sister in her second year at junior high, myself, so same.”

“T-two years isn’t much of an age gap.”

“Hey, she’ll always be a kid to me. That’s how it goes, you know?”

Our luck ran out pretty fast and business slowed. We let our guards down.

And of course, that was when a visitor showed up. A tall girl wearing our school’s uniform stood at the door. “Food and literature. Interesting combination.” Houkobaru Hibari—student council president. Her long hair trailed behind her. “I hope you don’t mind the intrusion. May I?”

“Of course,” I said. “Is this an inspection?”

She puffed a tiny chuckle. “That’s a very formal way of putting it, but you may consider it that if you’d like.”

I noticed she wasn’t in costume. I’d heard she would be. Maybe she’d changed.

“Good. Thoughtful exhibits,” she muttered, arms crossed. “I wish I could stick around to see them all, but duty calls. May I have one of these?” She picked up a bag of cookies.

“Oh, sure. They’re a hundred yen.”

I took her money and couldn’t help but stare.

“Something on my face?” she asked.

“Er, no. I just always had the impression the student council didn’t very much like the lit club. I haven’t seen that myself, though, so I’m just surprised.”

“No one told you?” Her tone took a dramatic shift. The air around her changed. Komari went from simply hiding to plain cowering. “The literature club has been the source of numerous controversies in the past. Too many. One more, and I might just have to, well...” Her eyes sharpened to daggers.

I gulped. “D-disband us?”

The president started to nod but thought about it. “Maybe. But that feels a tad harsh to me. I might consider something along the lines of...*relative* disbandment.”

“What is ‘relative disbandment’?”

“I’m not actually sure. Maybe a strike system. Three relative disbandments and you’re out. We’ll have to hammer out the details.”

I was beginning to realize our student council president was an acquired taste. Just like the rest of ‘em...

Suddenly, a cat maid tumbled in. “President, we have *got* to get meowving if we want to make it in time for the next inspect—*ion*?!” Tiara-san looked ready to self-combust the moment she saw me. “Wh-wh-what are *you* doing here?! Meow!”

“This is the lit club’s venue,” I said.

“Oh. So it is, meow.”

So it was.

She scowled, put on an extremely forced show of scrutinizing our exhibition, and then took the president by her hand. “My apawlogies for the intrusion. President, the astronomeow club is next.”

“I know, I know. Well then, thank you for your time, both of you.”

Their conversation continued out in the hallway. “By the meow, when do you plan on putting your costume on?”

“My costume? What costume? There’s no costume.”

“Mrow?! But Shikiya-senpai told me you were dressing up as a meowgnificant prince!”

Tiara-san had the whole “meow” thing down pretty good.

Come to think of it, where was Shikiya-san anyway? Hopefully not passed out on the floor somewhere.

“Good...presentation...”

In she shambled from a shadowy corner, all done up in her nurse outfit. How did she always pop out of nowhere like that?

Komari fled with a shriek.

“There you are,” I said. “The president just left.”

Shikiya-san sluggishly handed me a hundred-yen coin. “Give me...your cutest.”

Snacks, I presumed. I gave it some thought and handed her one of our pan castellas.

She nodded, satisfied. “Cute... I like.”

“I’m glad you like. The exit is that way.”

She remained where she was, swaying on her feet. I fought hard and valiantly to keep my eyes away from her open cleavage, a task made extraordinarily difficult by just *how* open it was. Eyes were made for wandering, okay?

“I noticed the president wasn’t in costume,” I said. Shikiya-senpai parted her lips ever so slightly but made no other visible reaction. “Did you lie to the vice president?”

“Tiara-chan is...fun to mess with.”

And then she shuffled out the door. Thank goodness.

I scanned the room for Komari. She was off in a corner, fiddling with some kind of puzzle ring. “I thought you’d be used to her by now.”

“I-I am when she doesn’t j-jumpscare me.” She peered up at me with teary eyes. “A-are the scary people gone?”

“The scary people are gone.” Granted, you could never be too certain. Truth



be told, I was a little freaked out too, but she didn't need to know that.

I got to thinking about what the president had said about us. What in the world was this hidden past the lit club apparently had that we didn't know about? What trouble had they gotten into, and how was Tsukinoki-senpai related? I figured it was a safe to assume she had a hand in it, whatever it was.

I put a pin in it for now. I was running out of those.

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An hour flew by, and we started to get more students showing up. Once we hit our fifth full tally, I stepped out to get drinks.

"Hopefully Komari's fine with cold tea."

When I got back, I found old schoolmates Amanatsu-sensei and Konuki-sensei there.

"Nukumizu!" said the short one. "This cherry cake's pretty good, I gotta say."

"That's a hundred yen, Sensei."

"Well, hello to you too. Here. Take it, ya cheapskate," said the teacher who'd just tried to dine-and-dash her own student.

"Komari, I brought drinks," I told her. "You good with tea?"

She trotted over with her arm extended, so I held the bottle out for her. But she went straight past it and grabbed my blazer instead.

"What? Amanatsu-sensei steal your lunch money?" I asked.

"Sh-she talked to me."

"Now that's just tragic."

Genuinely. Amanatsu-sensei was a creature. Komari deserved an apology.

"Konuki-chan, why is everyone so mean to me?" Sensei pouted.

"Now, Konami, a teacher's duty is to lift up her students' love lives," Konuki-sensei proselytized. "Not lift herself up."

A teacher's duty was to teach, actually. Fun fact.

Said teacher waved me over. Komari was safe in the comfort of her tea, so I

went over. “Yes?”

“I like these peanuts. You make these peanuts?”

“My sister did. And they’re a hundred yen.”

“Right. The inari girl. She was here yesterday, wasn’t she?” She parted with another coin, cocking her head in thought. “She have an older brother?”

“Uh, right here?”

“Not you, twerp. Older. Say, someone in his thirties. Has a steady job. Ring any bells?” Can’t say it did. Why was she even asking? “And not to be picky or anything, but I hope he’s good with cats. See, I just got one, and—”

“I’ll, uh, ask around at the next family reunion.”

She’d gotten a cat recently? Oh. Oh no. Prayers for her.

Konuki-sensei clapped her hands together and beamed. “Oh, do tell me if you find anyone! I’d love to sample the goods...meet the man myself!”

“You’re not getting within arm’s reach of my man,” Sensei snarled. “And you’ll be watching the wedding from your living room.”

“Through frosted glass.”

“I’ll allow it.”

They weren’t going to actually look at any of the exhibits, were they? Hopefully they’d leave soon. They were a bad influence on the children.

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By early afternoon, I was in the zone. I smiled for the kids, handed out cards, and rewarded them with snacks like a pro. Anyone thinking about picking up a journal, I was there to make the sell.

“It’s so easy talking to people who aren’t my age,” I observed.

The trick was to have a handful of preset phrases to shoot off and to ignore the junior high and high schoolers. Currently, there were only three Tsuwabuki students present, so I was fully immersed in mind-my-business mode.

Komari stopped fiddling with her cards and tugged my sleeve. “L-look out.”

In came Yanami, dressed in her white robes. This time, though, she'd added a hairband to the look. Two springs jutted from both ends of it, on the tips of which dangled cutouts of wispy souls.

She looked like a friggin' alien.

"How's it goin'?" she said. "Oh, I see we have visitors." She plopped into a chair and pulled some mitarashi dango from the bag she'd been carrying. "Check it out. Yagumo. Never thought I'd find *that* brand at a school festival."

"Yeah, neat. The heck's all that on your head?"

"These are the souls I asked you to make. Am I a ghost or what?"

"You're something, all right."

"I'm telling you, I'm a genius for coming up with this. The kids love me. I haven't had this much attention since my parents were throwing me birthday parties."

I made a mental note to be a little nicer to her from now on.

"That why your clothes are all dirty?" I asked. They looked like they were covered in dirt. Kids tended to have filthy hands and bad senses of personal — "That's chocolate, isn't it?"

"See, I'm still trying to figure that one out. The kids I get always have candy all over their hands or crumbs all over their mouths. And they keep trying to give me their food. But Karen-chan gets flowers and four-leaf clovers and stuff. What's up with that?" I didn't have an answer for her, but I did have some theories.

"That's a good question."

Children could be so cruel.

"Anyway, I'm on break till my next thing," she said. "C'mere and sit down."

I did. I watched her going to town on those dango. Curious.

"What? You want some?"

"Just admiring your appetite," I said.

Yanami gave me a look. "What's that supposed to mean? You wanna go?"

“No, I mean, Himemiya-san told me a while ago you weren’t eating as much. She was worried about you.”

“Oh, nah, I’m just on a diet. Gotta watch what I eat,” she replied, eating her dango without watching.

“A diet.”

Didn’t look like any diet I’d ever seen.

“Lemme fill you in, Nukumizu-kun. Dieting isn’t about eating less. It’s about distributing the calories. You can eat as much as you want and still lose weight just as long as you do it smart.” She brandished a second stick of dango. “So yes, this is a diet.”

“You realize that means eating less with each meal, right? You’re not just eating more and forgetting that part?”

“I know, I know. I don’t go for seconds, and I stopped getting extra eggs with my ramen. It works, okay? Trust the process.” She looked around the classroom, blissfully unaware of the glaze stuck next to her mouth. “It’s pretty chill in here. You guys should go take a break. I’ll man the fort.”

That was music to my ears. I let Komari know and started to leave.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Yanami demanded.

“To the club room to take a break?”

“And just leave Komari-chan all by herself? Why don’t you show her around a little?”

“‘Around’?”

I was probably the last guy Komari wanted to go ‘around’ with, festival or no festival. Plus, I didn’t know if she already had any... Okay, she definitely didn’t have plans, but still.

“Komari-chan!” Yanami called out. “Where are you off to?”

Komari’s eyes darted up off her phone. She made a noise. “Th-the club room. To read.”

“Oh god, it’s spreading.”

Maybe it was finally getting through to her that school festivals were not for we denizens of the dark. We occupied what was probably the least trafficked area in all of campus, and even that was pushing our social batteries to their limits.

Yanami stood, brandishing her dango stick up high. “You two are hereby banned from the club room! Go see the festival for cryin’ out loud!”

“I left a book I was reading in there,” I complained.

“I’m burning it. It’s gone now.”

We had a tyrant on our hands.

Komari waffled between me and Yanami, unable to decide who better to explain what was going on right now. “Wh-what am I supposed to do?”

“Nukumizu-kun here is going to escort you around Tsuwabuki Fest,” Yanami answered. “He *is* a guy, technically. That’s his job.”

“B-but I don’t really care about the festival...”

“You’re a lit club girl, Komari-chan. Every educated woman needs a manservant.” She retrieved her third stick of dango and winked at me. “Don’t disappoint.”

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Off the east gate extended a shaded path of tulip trees. Stalls lined it on either end, and both students and outside visitors alike filled the entire stretch.

Dodging passersby along the way, Komari and I came to the end of the path.

“End of the line,” I said.

“G-guess we should go back then.” Komari stayed glued to my shadow, her eyes never leaving the pamphlet in her hands. The people were getting to her.

I waffled. On the one hand, we could go back and get an earful from Yanami for not staying gone longer. On the other, we could keep drowning in the sea of people.

“Wanna grab something to eat on the way?” I compromised.

“U-udon would be good.”

A decidedly unfestive choice. Very Komari.

We joined the line at the karate club's udon stand. I studied the menu in the meantime. White Belt Udon, Brown Belt Udon, Black Belt Udon... I did not know what any of that was supposed to mean.

"Huh. Neckbreaker Udon. Limited supply. You want some, Komari?"

"I-if it isn't out of stock, it's not worth being limited. Th-that's a trap if I've ever seen one."

Sharp. We settled for the Brown Belt, since it was middle-of-the-road in terms of price.

"Oh yeah, you good on money?" I asked.

She grinned proudly. "G-got extra allowance for the festival."

We took our udon, which turned out to just be kitsune udon, and brought our bowls over to an open bench a ways away.

Rising steam carried the savory scent of bonito stock right up to my nose. The noodles looked pretty good too, and they were apparently handmade. It got me thinking about the rest of the menu. White Belt was probably plain, but Black Belt... What was in the Black Belt Udon? I'd caught one of their staff dunking an actual, literal, whole bottle of pepper into one bowl, which was surely the Neckbreaker.

Komari stopped eating. "H-hey."

"Hm?"

"S-someone asked me earlier i-if they could take pictures." Her lips spread into a smile she couldn't hide completely. "Because they wanted to...take their time to read later."

"Hm. Pretty cool."

"Y-yeah." She tried to take a sip of her broth and immediately burnt her tongue.

I people-watched while I slurped. There were just as many visitors from the general Toyohashi area as there were students. It was a strange feeling, seeing

families and people not in uniform wander places they'd normally have no business being.

It was obvious now that the lit club was only getting a tiny fraction of the proverbial pie, and this was only one part of campus. But Komari was still proud of what we'd done. And some of the people who *did* see her work even appreciated it.

Yanami had called it a love letter last night; Komari's obtuse, roundabout way of putting herself and her feelings out there for the world to see.

"Where do you wanna go next?" There would be time for all that later. Komari's thoughts and motives were her own.

She apathetically blew on some noodles she'd scooped up. "Wh-whenever you wanna go."

Class F, Asagumo-san's, sounded good enough to me. I vaguely recalled them doing something game-themed. Plus, I probably needed to at least say hello after how much help she'd been.

I held a thin fish cake up to the light when a couple in Tsuwabuki uniforms passed us, flirting in that way couples do.

I shook my head. Some people needed to know when to get a room. These festivals weren't supposed to be all fun and games. They were part of the government-assigned curriculum, dang it. Would you let a girl sit on your lap during class? Well, you shouldn't. The same went for the folks who walked around using our fine education system as an excuse to go on *dates*.

"Wh-why are you scowling?"

"Just thinking about the current state of the student body."

But wait a minute. Komari and I were sitting here eating together—couldn't *that* be misconstrued for a date by some unwitting third party?

We couldn't have that. Personally, I considered her to be more like a sister than anything else.

"Hey," I said, "I have an idea."

"Wh-what?"

“You should call me ‘Oniichan.’”

Komari hacked and coughed. And coughed some more. Sounded like she was about to lose a lung.

“Whoa, you okay there?”

“Th-that’s it. You’ve finally lost it.”

“Look, I’m not trying to be weird. There’s a perfectly reasonable explanation for my train of thought.”

“Well, g-go on then. Choose your last words carefully.”

I handed her a tissue. She swiped the entire pack.

“I was thinking,” I began. “Us sitting here together. I’m worried we might be the cause of a misunderstanding.”

“Wh-what kind of ‘misunderstanding’?”

“I’m just saying, out of context, it could look like we’re on a date.” More hacking and coughing. “You’re gonna have to go to the hospital if you keep that up.”

“A-and it’ll be *your* fault.”

Sheesh. Some people just had no self-awareness. At least all the wheezing would throw off anyone who might’ve thought this was anything but platonic.

I downed the last of my broth and immediately choked on all the pepper clumped at the bottom.

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Class F was on the third floor of the new building. We ducked under a fancy curtain to enter, and we were met with another sea of people. There were games like ring toss, goldfish scooping (except with bouncy balls), and other traditional festival staples inside. They even had students in happi coats manning each event.

Komari and I were overwhelmed by the atmosphere when a small girl, also in a happi, scurried over. “Nukumizu-san! You came!” Asagumo-san twirled on the spot. “What do you think of the happi? We made one for everyone in class. I



could probably find one for you too, if you'd like."

I wasn't in this class, so... "I'm okay," I said. "So, um, this is Komari. She's in my club."

I turned to her, but she'd either vanished or become a ghost. Neither, turned out. I found her kneeling by a plastic tub full of floating rubber balls.

"Hey, Komari," I called out to her. "This is Asagumo-san. She helped with the exhibit."

"Whuh? O-oh, um..."

Asagumo-san approached as she pulled herself to her feet. "So you're the one I've heard so much about. I absolutely loved your paper, Komari-san."

"Huh? I-I, um..." Komari sputtered. "Th-thank you...for the help."

Asagumo-san gripped her hand. "It was my pleasure! Really! Your discussion of men's relationships and the inherent sexuality therein absolutely moved me. You blended the topics beautifully. I knew immediately that you must be a fujoshi!"

Komari croaked and made to flee. But Asagumo-san's grip was ironclad.

"I've never been friends with a fujoshi before," she went on. "I'm positively fascinated with the culture. Please, you must teach me about BL sometime!" Her eyes bulged like a knowledge-hungry squirrel. She left Komari no room to breathe.

"I... I-I..." Komari looked about ready to faint.

"Take it easy, Asagumo-san," I cut in. "She doesn't do so good under pressure."

"Ah. Then I apologize. Here, Komari-san, please sit."

Asagumo-san guided us to the shooting gallery. On top of cardboard shelves sat candy and various stuffed animals.

She had Komari sit down in a seat next to it, then twisted a towel around her forehead. "Hey there, gunslinger! Wanna test your aim?!"

Dang, that was smooth. Good business sense.

“Sure, why not? Do I just pick any gun from here?”

There were several rubber band guns made out of chopsticks lined up on the counter. I picked the biggest.

Asagumo-san gave a thumbs-up. “Keen eye ya got there. That, my friend, is my own invention! That puppy could shoot clear through a soda can.”

Then it was probably illegal.

“Why?” I asked. “Why would you make this? Is this a cry for help?”

“It just sort of happened while I was tinkering around, to be honest. Oh, a word of caution: It *will* break whatever prize you aim for. I would shoot slightly askew.”

And now I felt like an accomplice.

I aimed for a pack of cocoa candy cigarettes, adjusting it to be slightly askew. No sooner than I fired did the back wall rumble, and pretty much everything in the vicinity toppled over.

“Big game hunter over here!” Asagumo-san clapped fervently. This thing belonged in a safe, far away from high school students. “You’ve got two more shots.” She handed me my pile of prizes.

I’d had my taste of power and didn’t like it. While I agonized over how to politely back down, Komari prodded my shoulder. “Th-the senpai are back. They swapped with Yanami. I-I’m gonna go.”

I checked my phone and saw I had a message. I was saved.

“Looks like we’ve been summoned,” I told Asagumo-san. “I’ll just take my pick from the pile.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” she replied. “Tell everyone I said hello.”

I dug out my cocoa cigarettes and hurried after Komari, who had wasted no time dipping. “Hey, slow down. I’m coming with.”

I checked my phone but was surprised to see the message wasn’t what I thought it’d be. It was from Yakishio. She was apparently stuck with the track team and wanted to know if we could come see her.

“Got something from Yakishio,” I said. “Wanna swing by real quick?”

“I-I got the same thing. There’s just...so many people.” Komari sighed.

I understood. That said, it didn’t feel right to ditch her. “I’ll go see her for the both of us. You can head back to the exhibit.”

We split up, and I started toward the field. Having friends sure was a lot of work.

“Didn’t used to be this busy,” I muttered to no one.

I wasn’t fooling myself, though. I was starting to like it, and I knew it.

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There were plenty of other clubs aside from the athletic ones out on the field. I kept walking until I found the track team’s booth. A sign there read, “Face the Masked Runner and win fabulous prizes!”

I had a bad feeling about this.

“Nukkun! It just you?”

I turned. Yakishio was in her track uniform, and on her face was a glittery mask like something out of a play. I was, in a word, intimidated.

“*What* are you wearing, Yakishio?”

“I do not know of this ‘Yakishio’ you speak of. I am the Masked Runner! Ahem. Please direct your attention to our selection of challenges.” She handed me a flyer.

There was a hundred-meter race with a track team member, handicapped in favor of the challenger. Winning would get you some kind of prize. And then there was a “Masked Runner” challenge for high school boys. No handicap.

“I’m not really in the mood to lose,” I said.

“Hey, you never know till you try. Your legs are longer...er, about the same length as mine. So there’s that.”

I chose to ignore that. “I’ll pass. I run, and I’ll be on my butt for the next three days.”

“Well, I’m game.” A stranger butted into the conversation. A boy in another school’s uniform.

Yakishio’s eyes widened in surprise. “Taka! I didn’t know you were here.” She turned to face me. “You remember him. That’s Takahashi. He was a sprinter on the track team in Momozono just like me. When he wasn’t playing hooky, anyway.”

Why would I have remembered him?

She bumped this “Taka” on his chest. “Long time no see. Still runnin’?”

“Oh yeah. I’m taking it seriously now too. Bet I could give you a run for your money at the hundred meter these days.”

“I like the way you talk! So you’re game, yeah? Think you can win that prize?”

Taka threw his coat off. “It’s not the prize I’m after. If I win this race, I want you to go to the movies with me.”

“The movies?”

Was this guy for real? Girls all around squealed and *ooh’d*.

Yakishio recovered from her shock and flashed a toothy grin. “Sure, why not?”

She’d done it now. Yakishio was good, but this guy was, well, a guy. A guy who’d apparently practiced extensively in the exact race they were supposed to be running.

It occurred to me then that I may have been bearing witness to the beginnings of a beautiful new romance. All of a sudden, I was on tenterhooks.

Yakishio started stretching. “All right, whaddya say we crank it up to fifteen hundred meters?”

“What?” Taka whimpered. “Not *one* hundred?”

“You said it yourself. You could probably beat my time. And a race is no fun if you already know who’s gonna win.”

“Hang on, I thought—”

“Shoes tied? Muscles all warmed up? Good! Ready, get set...”

And so they ran fifteen hundred meters. Hanging in the balance: one measly date.

The only thing I bore witness to was a murder.

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My thoughts were with dear old Taka on my way back to the west building. "Poor guy's gonna be traumatized."

I could only imagine the way he'd felt, running that final half lap after Yakishio had already crossed the finish line. But then again, you had to be prepared for embarrassment when going for a public confession like that. So really Taka had no one to blame but himself. Festival energy could work miracles, but even miracles needed a little more groundwork than he'd laid.

Cheers came from the courtyard. I peeked outside a nearby window and saw a modest crowd around a group of people. Among them Yanami, clad in white, along with some of my other classmates. Class 1-C's Flash Halloween in action.

I couldn't make out anything they were saying, but the stars seemed to be Yanami the ghost, Nishikawa playing Captain Okita Souji, and some other guy. Now was a good opportunity to take a look at the fruits of my class's labor, so a certain someone wouldn't whine to me about picking favorites again.

I put my elbows on the windowsill and watched.

It seemed to be a tragedy of some kind about two star-crossed lovers. Yanami started to make a tearful exit, but Nishikawa snatched her hand and pulled her close. The story ended as she breathed her final breath.

A ghost. Breathing her final breath.

"Plot holes," I grumbled. I tried not to think about it and hurried back to the classroom.

Just as it came into view, Tsukinoki-senpai found me first and waved. "There you are! Lend us a hand, will you?"

The place had done a total one-eighty and was packed all of a sudden. Prez was busily handing out snacks to impatient children, and Komari was restlessly clutching her stamp cards with both hands.

She relaxed a little upon seeing me and drifted over. “T-took your time, huh? Hurry up and help.”

“Look, it’s not my fault. She was a *ghost*. How does she die at the end? How does that make *any* sense?”

“Sh-shut up, there’s a l-line for the snacks. Go.”

She shoved me toward a growing queue. For a girl like Komari, whose every social interaction was a trial, it must have certainly looked daunting.

I got to work and eventually cleared them out.

Prez came and lifted open the cash box. “Making good money. What is that, about thirty sales?”

“Business is good, for sure. You do some advertising or something?”

“Ayano-kun. He handed out flyers for us. We got tons of hungry kids and tired parents looking for somewhere quiet thanks to him.”

Over by the tatami resting area, children snacked on their mothers’ laps while they enjoyed a bit of respite. Not far away, less docile kids struggled with the stamps, which Komari was quick to help with. All other rug rats flocked to Tsukinoki-senpai for whatever reason. Whatever she’d done, her sermons about the exhibits had reeled them in.

“Picture books aren’t worse because they have pictures, you know,” she preached. “They’re about friendship, and kindness, and adventure, and lots of important stuff. Even I, for all my scientific curiosity, acknowledge that some things are sacred.”

Was she gonna be all right over there? I mentally prepared myself to remove her by force if necessary.

“Had your fill of the festival?” Prez asked.

“I’ve seen enough for all three years, honestly. Don’t you want to be out there with Senpai?”

“I’ll stick around a while longer.” He watched Tsukinoki-senpai give her speech. There was a gentleness in his eyes. He then opened up the cash box, threw a coin in, and opened up a bag of peanuts. “The lit club’s never had much

of a festival presence before, so it's nice that we can go out with a bang like this. Thank you for that, Nukumizu. This was all you guys." He patted me on the shoulder.

I let that sink in. "It was all Komari, really."

Fifty thousand characters. Fifty thousand keystrokes, each representing a little piece of her soul. The feelings she felt. All consolidated into this one chaotic day, this one memory.

A little boy holding a flyer poked his head inside. The day wasn't over yet.

I greeted the boy with a smile and invited him in.

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Our final visitors, a student couple, left the room, and then it was just me, Komari, Prez, and Senpai. It was ten minutes till four, closing time, and the halls of the west annex were growing sparse.

"That's all forty snacks sold. We're cleared out. Do we have any left that we were giving out for free?" Tsukinoki-senpai turned around, claspng shut the coin case.

"Plenty," I said. "We shouldn't be getting any more visitors."

We'd given away over half of our journals too. Not that every single person who took one would actually read it, but it felt good regardless.

We were in the final stretch now. Melancholy mingled with relief. Komari and Senpai spent the last few minutes arguing about the verticality of Souseki and his understudies. How they could get so worked up about such delusions was beyond me.

A whole lot of nothing happened. It was calm. Like an average day in the club room.

A quiet song began to flow from the overhead speakers. It was a classic tune stores would always play around closing time.

I checked the clock. Five till.

"Nothing like 'Hotaru no Hikari' to make it feel like the end of the day," I said.

“H-huh? This is ‘Farewell Waltz,’” Komari argued.

“Uh, no? Didn’t you sing this at graduation? Maybe you called it something different.”

“D-did we?”

Enter Tsukinoki-senpai to settle the debate. “They’re both based on a Scottish folk song. Sort of like how booths selling doujins of the same ship can be in different places at a con based on who’s the bottom.”

I didn’t see how it was in any way like that, personally, but I wasn’t going to take the bait.

We went quiet and let the music play. It had been a long road getting here. And now it was over.

Tsukinoki-senpai cradled Komari’s head in her arms. She leaned into it, resting her head on her shoulder.

“I can’t thank you guys enough.” Prez was the first to speak up. “I’ve never been the most passionate or attentive president. In fact, sometimes it felt like I was more trouble than I was worth.” He bowed low. “But you guys really turned this into something special. Thank you.”

Tsukinoki-senpai clapped. Komari and I followed a few seconds later.

“Aww, Shintarou. Why’d you turn around?” A playful grin spread across Senpai’s face. But it had changed. This wasn’t the same grin she wore when we first met.

“N-no reason. It’s nothing.”

Tsuwabuki Fest Literature Club exhibition, Food for Thought—final numbers: 117 visitors, forty snacks sold, fourteen journals distributed.

It was nothing special. Many of the other clubs could boast far more. In the grand scheme of things, we’d done nothing at all, but we pretended like we’d just changed the world.



At first, it had only been about helping Komari, but I couldn't claim that anymore. It felt personal now. Like I'd done it for me.

The student council president's low voice hummed to life over the speakers. "It is now 4 p.m. The 98th Tsuwabuki Fest has officially come to a close."

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Tsukinoki-senpai and I waited for the car by the south gate. One of Senpai's parents was helping return the tatami mats we'd borrowed, and Prez was supposed to help me load.

Speaking of, where was he?

"Hey, have you seen Prez?" I asked.

"He went to get my bag from inside. Left my phone and wallet."

"Komari's still there. We could have asked her to bring it down."

"And make my poor first-year carry that all by herself?"

But it was okay for her boyfriend to carry all that by himself.

The urge to quip was swallowed down by a sudden wave of regret. This would be one of the last times we got to have one of these stupid exchanges. "So you guys are retiring now, huh? It's gonna be lonely without you."

I watched cars come and go along the road in silence.

"Wow," Senpai said. "Never thought I'd hear those words from you. I know, deep down, you're glad to get rid of us."

"I wouldn't admit that in polite conversation."

"Oooh, someone's got teeth now."

We looked at each other and each cracked a smile. Silence again. Small talk only made the elephant in the room angrier.

I poked it anyway. "Komari's been pretty stressed about being the new president."

"I can imagine."

"There's that meeting next weekend. She'll have to introduce herself and

report on our activities. Nothing she can't write a script for on a few cue cards, but still." It wasn't that simple. "Can't you guys be there for her for just a little while longer?"

"I'd do it in a heartbeat if I could." She smiled sadly. "But that's your job now, Nukumizu-kun. I'm not saying you need to take her hand in holy matrimony or anything, but I can't helicopter around her forever. It's just time to move on."

Our senpai could count the number of things left on their high school to-do lists. It *was* time to move on. And where they were going, we couldn't follow.

"I just don't know how to get through to her," I confessed.

"I think you get through just fine. Komari-chan relies on you. That's why we wanted you to be vice president. To take my place and keep an eye on her for me."

"But I'm... I don't have what you guys have." I was making excuses, but this was perhaps the only person qualified to hear them. "Like, look at what happened in just the last week. She shut herself off, did everything by herself, and wouldn't budge. She doesn't let anyone in when she gets like that. No one but you and, well..."

I looked back at the building behind us. Prez should've been on the second floor right about now. In the empty classroom. All alone with her.

"He's sure taking a while," I said. "Should I go check on him?"

Tsukinoki-senpai rolled her eyes at me, smiling. "Gee, why do you ask?"

I stumbled over my words a few times. "It's just, y'know, them. Up there. Alone."

She didn't say anything. Every word that went unsaid weighed heavy in my mind.

I reached into my pocket and felt a box. The cocoa cigarettes I'd won at the shooting gallery. I took one out, stuck it in my mouth, and offered the carton to Senpai. "Take the edge off?"

She laughed. Took one. "It's all a load of bull. This tough act I put on."

I answered to let her know I was listening but nothing more. She put the

candy cigarette in her mouth like it was real.





“Komari-chan knew I was in love with Shintarou when she confessed to him. She always knew. I just assumed she’d never act on it. Figured things would work out and we’d end on a bittersweet note.” She shrugged. “Not that I didn’t care about her. I love her. But I never gave her enough credit. I sat up there on my throne for a long time, thinking I was the only one with a snowball’s chance in hell at Shintarou.”

“Granted, that did turn out to be the case.”

Senpai eyed me out of the side of her glasses. “Maybe not. Maybe if Komari-chan hadn’t had the courage to lay it all out there that night, he and I’d still be laboring under some stupid misunderstanding. Maybe she’s the only reason it turned out this way.”

“I...”

I couldn’t refute that. Senpai had come to view Komari as a damsel in distress, utterly defenseless and always in need of protection. And that might have been true to an extent, but I knew her precious first-year was stronger than that.

“I feel like all I’ve done is use her. Like everything I have to be happy about came at her expense.”

“And that’s why you’re letting them be alone right now.”

I understood the guilt she must have felt. But people were complicated. They can do one thing and relationships change in ways that affect more than we can ever possibly know. She clearly understood that herself. Feelings can go spoken. They can go unspoken. I’d seen both sides of the coin plenty of times by now.

“Worry too much about what others don’t have, and you’ll lose what you’ve got,” I said.

Senpai shot me one of her bold, brazen grins. “I can always just remind him what he’s missing. I’m eighteen, after all.” She bit her cigarette in two and chuckled to herself a bit. Her expression soon turned anxious, though, and she looked toward the building. “He really is taking his time, huh?”

“You made the bed. Time to sleep in it.”

“Okay, but there’s a certain expectation to these things.”

There was just no working with this girl. Not that I didn't know that already.

"Should I call and ask what's taking so long?"

"No, no, then I'd feel guilty for not trusting him. I've got a better idea." Senpai dropped her elbow on my shoulder. "You go eavesdrop and see what's up."

There really was just no working with this girl...

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The setting sun tinted the hallway dark orange. There was no noise. Evidently, we were the only club still getting cleaned up after the festival. Granted, all we had left were the posters on the walls.

I made it to the classroom, but Komari was alone. Where was Prez? Had I just missed him?

I started to leave, but the sight of Komari just standing there, staring up at one of her exhibits, stopped me in my tracks.







Several moments she stayed like that, until she finally made a call on whatever decision was plaguing her. She stepped forward and reached for the poster. Too high. She reached again, harder, balancing on the tips of her toes. Still just barely out of reach.

I entered and reached for her.

She jumped at my shadow. “N-Nukumizu?!”

“Trying to get this?” She nodded. Careful not to rip the material, I pried the poster from the wall. “Not to toot our own horn, but we did a pretty good job with these, huh? Feels like a waste to toss.”

“I-it’s not your horn to toot.” Same old grumpy Komari. She looked around the sunset-colored classroom. I joined her, counting the empty desks that had returned home. “G-guess that’s it.”

I tried to think of something to say but quickly gave up. Prez could have come up with something. Something tasteful and kind and just a little bit helpful.

“Did the president swing by here?” I asked. “He was supposed to grab Tsukinoki-senpai’s bag.”

“He a-already left.”

I had just missed him.

I finished taking down the posters and smoothed them flat on a desk, then glanced at the clock. “I should get back too. Gotta help load the tatami.”

Komari stared at the posters, saying nothing. Again, I couldn’t leave.

“You guys talk?” I didn’t know why I’d asked. I quickly started kicking myself for it, as if the look I got from Komari and the following awkward silence weren’t punishment enough. “I just figured, y’know, since you, er, won’t get to talk so much from now on. So, uh...”

Komari sighed. “I th-thanked him.”

“Oh. Oh, good. I should do that too. He’s a good guy. I owe him.”

“Owe him what? You’ve b-barely just joined the club.”

So she was gonna pull seniority? *I see how it is.*

I smirked. “I’ll have you know that, *on paper*, I’ve technically been a member longer than you. Remember? I joined when I came to check the club out and just didn’t know it.”

“A-and who’s the one who r-raised that ghost from the grave?”

“I don’t recall asking for a burial.” I remembered. I remembered that stuttering weirdo who’d come to bug me during lunch that July. It somehow felt like just yesterday but also forever ago at the same time. “You’ve been active since April, right? How many prospects did you guys even have?”

“I-I joined on one of the last open house days. It was o-only me visiting at the time.” Komari squinted out the window. The orange on the clouds was getting darker by the minute.

She put her hands together and squeezed. “Th-the lit club changed everything for me. And I... I owe it all to them.” I couldn’t tell if she was muttering to herself or to me. She continued regardless. “P-Prez thanked me too. He said that I-I’m the heart of the lit club.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“M-me too.”

I pictured those three months leading up to my revival. The quiet moments. The comforting calm of a space just for her and her senpai. And then I wondered how Komari must have felt when the rest of us showed up and turned everything upside down. How she felt about it *now*.

I didn’t have to wonder much. Senpai and Prez could never stick around forever, and at some point, we would’ve had to enter the picture.

I thought about Komari, sitting alone in an empty club room.

“Th-they’re done,” she said. “They’re retiring.”

“Yeah. Probably won’t see them around too much anymore.”

She nodded. “And next year th-they’ll have entrance exams. And they’ll stop coming to school, and...and then they’ll graduate.”

In just a few hours it would be November. Soon, we’d have finals. Then the end of the semester. Painfully few things to look forward to.

“N-now that I won’t be seeing the president so much,” Komari went on, “I’ll probably stop thinking about him. Stop c-caring as much.” Her bangs fell over her eyes, and her voice dropped to barely a whisper. “And that...kind of scares me.”

The sun was setting before her eyes. Feelings threatened to become memories. It was a sad and scary thing.

“What’s wrong with that?” I muttered. It was my turn to talk at her.

Komari frowned at me. “What?”

“I mean, I’ve personally never liked the phrase ‘time heals all wounds.’ But it’s sort of a squares versus rectangles thing. I do think all wounds need time.”

“B-big talk from someone who’s never been rejected.”

Seniority again. Was rejection seniority even a thing? Although, to be fair, I *had* been rejected before. Technically. By someone I hadn’t even confessed to.

“I g-get what you’re saying.” Komari sat down on one of the desks. “But w-waiting for time to pass is hard. Just sitting and w-waiting with all this inside me. That’s why I’m proud of today. I got a little bit of it out.”

Wait, “out”? Got what out? No way. “You didn’t confess *again*, did you?”

“Wha—n-no! Of course not.” Time was not a flat circle for Prez. Thank goodness for that. “I-I just asked him if...if it *could* have happened.” Komari twiddled her fingers.

“If what could have happened?”

“I-I asked him if—maybe if Tsukinoki-senpai hadn’t been around—if he might have l-loved me back.”

That sent me mentally reeling. Who in their right mind would ask that kind of thing?

I swallowed my incredulity and took a deep, calming breath. “And what did he say?”

“H-he was...nice about it.” Komari didn’t elaborate. Only smiled in the evening gloom.

She hid everything behind that smile, everything but her strength, like the sun beneath the horizon at twilight. It never mattered what he said. He could have been nice—he could have been gentler than the softest touch—and still his words would have been a thorn to Komari's heart.

I quietly took a spot on the desk next to hers.

"I wonder if things might've been different," she said softly. "I-if I'd never said anything that night."

Her reddish hair matched the afterglow beautifully. I stared for a moment, then nodded. "Probably."

How different, though? Would I have been here with her in such a future? Would any of us?

Komari spoke slowly, picking at each word. "Th-the time we've spent together. Tsukinoki-senpai included. I-it was perfect. It means the world to me. But I...I didn't care that night. At the lodge. S-something else meant more. I think that maybe, s-sometimes, some things are more important than perfect." She hopped off the chair, turned from me, and held her hands behind her back. "P-Prez never wanted me to be perfect. He liked me f-for me."

She turned back around. The sun cast its rays all around her. "I'm glad I loved him."

This smile was brighter than the last. It blinded me for a moment.

"Yeah," was all I could manage.

She echoed me, a little more shyly, before suddenly becoming extremely interested in the wrinkles in her skirt. "I-I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"Better me than someone else. Don't got anyone to blab to." I got off the desk and checked the clock again. "Totally forgot I've got somewhere to be. I better get going."

"I-I'll go too."

Before we made it out the door, I stopped and turned back. I gave our venue one last look. Komari did the same, bowed slightly, and then hurried out into

the hallway. I gave a bow of my own then followed after her.

She sent me a sidelong glance when I caught up. “Th-they’re trusting me with the future of the club. I w-want them to know it’s in good hands.”

“After what you pulled off at the festival, I’m sure they’re plenty aware.”

She shook her head. “Wh-what we pulled off. I have to do this next bit by myself. O-or else I...” She took a big breath. “I h-have to be able to protect the club.”

There was nothing wrong with wanting to show one’s gratitude. To live up to expectations. She seemed motivated, and that was a good thing.

So what was still eating at me?

“I know you do,” I said. “Just don’t forget you have us, okay? We’re here to help.”

“Th-thanks.” Komari smiled up at me. So confident it scared me. “B-but I’ll be okay, Nukumizu.”

I never did find out what it was about her smile that made me so sad.

## Intermission: Brother-Sister

**G**ONDOU ASAMI, A.K.A. GON-CHAN, SECOND-YEAR of class 3 of Momozono Junior High, peered over her friend's shoulder at the camera's LCD display. It was pointed at her friend's brother, a boy by the name of Nukumizu Kazuhiko. She wanted to call it a candid photoshoot, but photoshoots typically weren't held from around shady corners. There was no sugarcoating what they were up to.

Nukumizu Kaju sneered as she double-checked her work.

Gon-chan tore a piece of rainbow cotton candy and fed it to her. "You're a natural, Nuku-chan. You sure you don't wanna go 'n say hi or nothing?"

Kaju, a.k.a. Nuku-chan, gobbled up the candy and smiled a slimy grin. "It wouldn't be very candid if he knew I was snapping photos, now, would it? Look, look! I got him choking on udon! This is an SS-rare right here!"

"M'kay. Well. Happy for you." Gon-chan tore off a bit of yellow.

Her friend had a bit of an obsession. And "obsession" was a good word to describe it. It may have even gone beyond that, but Gon-chan liked "obsession."

"We're good then, yeah? I say we get on and go do something else," she said.

Kaju kept on staring at her camera. This picture was of a girl in white robes shoving a dango skewer at her brother. "Say, Gon-chan. Look at this photo of my Oniisama and Yanami-san. What do you see here?"

"I'mma guess 'Yanami-san' is the drop-dead gorgeous one."

She could have nitpicked the ghost costume, but other than that, she looked like the popular type. Bubbly and fun to be around. That said, Gon-chan spent a long time deciding how much she was willing to risk their friendship for the sake of brutal honesty.

"They're why I came here today," Kaju said. She clicked to the next photo. This time, there was a small girl with a single tuft of hair tied up on one side.

She had that shy, closed-off look that triggered something maternal. “But Komari-san—she’s made a surprisingly good showing. My dearest Oniisama, as kind as he is, *would* be drawn to the pitiful type. But it’s not just her...”

Kaju furrowed her brow. “Basori-san of the student council. She’s a dark horse I never anticipated. The maid outfit. The cat ears. Nothing could be more targeted, and I know that because Oniisama has no less than seventy-two saved photos of cat maids. Both 2D and 3D.” Gon-chan didn’t particularly care to hear that. “To suddenly shoehorn in something so ham-fisted in the midst of what I consider to be a slow-burn romance, well, clearly there are some differences of opinion that need ironing out.”

Gon-chan didn’t particularly care to hear what those opinions were either. Sensing her friend’s sanity teetering on the edge, she picked off some red and held it down to her mouth.

Kaju nommed on the fluffified sugar.

Gondou presented a pamphlet in an attempt to change the subject. “C’mon, Nuku-chan, I wanna get goin’ and see the judo club. They’re doing a cross-dressing contest.”

“I...suppose we can do that. I didn’t realize you were into that sort of thing.”

“I like big guys. Don’t you like big guys? The bigger the better, I say.”

“The bigger the better?” Kaju tentatively considered that, then smiled and nodded. “The world is a vast tapestry, Gon-chan. I support you, no matter your tastes.”

Gon-chan did some backward mental math, calculating the risk to their friendship Kaju had deemed worth the brutal honesty. She decided to smile and nod back.



## Loss 4:

### Let's Talk Accountability

**T**HREE DAYS POST-TSUWABUKI FEST. HINTS OF winter had fully replaced the festival energy.

"Once more, from the top."

Komari and I stood across from each other in the club room after school.

She nodded, her eyes glued to the notes on her phone. "M-m-my name! L-lit-literature p...*president*! Komari!" She wiped the sweat from her brow and beamed. "I-I did it!"

*Debatable*, I very nearly blurted out, but one couldn't discount small victories when it came to this sort of thing.

"You're getting there," I said with not-at-all faked confidence. "I'd say you might even survive the meeting this weekend."

I promptly sat down and opened a book.

"B-but talking in front of p-people's different," Komari grumbled, fidgeting. "I-I'm not so sure I can handle that."

I promptly replaced my bookmark and closed my book.

We were practicing her self-introduction for the club president meeting coming up. As luck would have it, she also conveniently had a report to give at the same time.

"I can still go for you, you know."

"N-no!" she blurted before flinching at the volume of her own voice. "I-I have to do it, o-or else I..." She flopped into a chair.

Komari, to put it mildly, was not a people person, much less a public speaker. And to make matters worse, most other presidents who would be present were upperclassmen. Honestly, I shared her doubts.

“Then at least let me do the report,” I argued.

“Th-that’s not any better.”

We’d done this song and dance more times than I could count by now. I got that if she was gonna do this president thing, she wanted to do it all the way, but still.

“We don’t have a whole lot of time to spare here. No one’ll care if you send me in your place this one time.”

Just as Komari started to scowl in preparation for her next retort, the door flew open. “All right, all right, I’ve heard enough.”

Yanami entered, thunked her bag down on the table, and then thunked herself down in a chair.

“You were listening?” I asked.

“Uh, no. It just seemed like the right thing to say at that moment. What are we talking about?” Fantastic. I caught her up to speed. “Okay, then let’s practice.”

Gee, why hadn’t I thought of that?

“We’ve *been* practicing. But it takes a little more than a day of reading a script out loud to get over chronic stage fright, so I was trying to tell her to just let me —”

“You’re doing it again, Nukumizu-kun.” Yanami shrugged wearily. “Not very supportive of our new president, is he, Komari-chan?”

She emphatically shook her head. “C-cut him some slack, though. N-Nukumizu’s just got problems.”

“That he does.”

I didn’t like whatever this budding alliance was.

Yanami leaned toward Komari. “How about we get a bit more hands-on? We could try Toyohashi Station.”

Now *that* was diving off the deep end.

“A-as long as we’re not standing out or anything.”

I was surrounded by crazies.

Yanami clapped once. "Okay. We've got the day off tomorrow, right? I say we go out. I've got an idea."

"A-an idea?" Komari curled up like a scared hamster.

"Yeah. Sort of. I haven't actually thought about it that much. I'll figure it out." She started humming and fiddling with her phone.

Ideas generally aren't very good without thought behind them, but I began the process of making my peace with it anyway. I already knew they were going to rope me in. The things I did for this club.

"I mean, if Komari's cool with it," I said.

She shot me a look that screamed "I am absolutely not cool with it." Was I supposed to be the voice of reason? With Yanami? Komari knew not what she asked of me.

"Perfect weather too," Yanami chirped. "All right, you two, be up and at 'em tomorrow morning."

"Yep. Will do."

I had surrendered to my fate. Komari still had a ways to go.

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Rolling puffs of clouds dotted a blue sky. Beneath it, Yanami, Komari, and I were using our day off at Nonhoi Park, a local zoo. Yanami's "idea": Komari was gonna talk to some animals. The obvious first step to getting used to people.

We did the rounds and eventually made our way to one of those feeding areas where sheep wandered about. Real sheep. Live ones. Positively tangible, they were.

I held out some grass, and a little dude came up and munched. Astonishing.

"You're, like, king sheep, Nukumizu-kun." Yanami stepped back and snapped a picture.

"It's the food they want. They might have a queen, though." I pointed over to Komari.

Her subjects thronged around her. Wow, that was a lot of sheep.

“She could probably use some help,” Yanami said.

“Probably. But real sheep are big and freaky. Have you seen their eyes?”

“Zoos are disillusioning our youth.” She crept up to one and pressed her hand deep into its wool. “Dang, these guys are poofy.”

“You really think this is gonna make good practice? I’m not seeing a whole lot of that going on.”

She’d seen some elephants and a red panda stand on its hind legs but had yet to hold many conversations with any of them.

Yanami grinned confidently. “Komari-chan’s been on edge for too long. I think the change of pace could do her some good. Get her out of her head a little.”

“If I know her, getting out’s the last thing she wants to do.”

“Well, sometimes you gotta. It’s easy to get stuck in a loop and overthink things when you’re all by yourself. Especially when you’re delicate like us.”

Surely “us” didn’t include Yanami. Not that I was going to ask, no matter how tempting the bait.

The sheep were less resistant to whims and drifted further and further toward Komari.

“Hope she doesn’t drown over there,” said Yanami.

“Hey, she’s the one who wanted to pet the animals. Don’t wanna spoil her fun now, do we?”

Komari had become the source of a sheep singularity. In an attempt to escape their impatient nudging and nibbling, she raised her arms up along with the food—a mistake. Her woolly assailants wouldn’t release her until she gave up what she had.

“She did say that, but I think she meant more like rabbits and guinea pigs,” Yanami pointed out. “See? They’re over that way.”

I checked the map. Yup. There sure was a rabbit-petting area right next door. My mistake.

I looked up just in time to witness Komari succumb to the fuzzy ocean. Her shrieks were still the most feminine part about her.

I hurried to her rescue.

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Komari was not very appreciative. “Y-you left me to die, y-you jerk.”

“Look, it’s not my fault. Have you seen their eyes?”

And for the record, I didn’t leave her to die, because I *did* eventually go to save her.

Her attitude didn’t last long, thankfully. This was kind of her day, and gradually, the animals put her back in good spirits.

Yanami stretched the map out, walking between the two of us. “Man, I love sun bears. Goofy little guys. So where to next?”

We’d already been to the ostriches and the otters and stuff. As far as I was concerned, that left one more stop. “Let’s check out the nocturnal section. I’m a fan of the dormice.”

“R-really,” Komari sneered. “A-aardvarks are cuter.”

There could be no peace between us.

Yanami wagged her finger at me. “Didn’t your mom ever teach you? Ladies first. Where do you wanna go, Komari-chan?”

She made a noise and stammered a few times. “Th-the botanical gardens w-would be nice.”

Yanami cocked her head. “You sure? You can’t eat any of the fruit there.”

Komari and I nodded slowly in perfect unison. Truce.

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Nonhoi Park’s garden area was situated in a northern corner.

We were walking along an outdoor path when Komari noticed something. “Wh-where’d Yanami go?”

“She went to get snacks. She’s on a diet.”

“She’s... What?”

“Her current theory is that she can lose weight by eating more often. Don’t think about it too much.”

“O-oh. Okay.”

Best she left it at that. For both of our sakes.

Some birds zipping by overhead drew my eye. “I usually only ever visit the greenhouse, but this place isn’t so bad either.”

“The o-outdoor gardens are quiet. I like them.”

It was oddly warm for November. Comfortable. Komari set a gentle pace.

“The camellias are in bloom. Are those a winter flower?”

“Those are s-sasanqua.” I must have shown my confusion on my face, because Komari gave me a look. “Th-they’re different. Look at the leaves. A-and the petals.”

I looked. It didn’t help much. Flowers I couldn’t do, but hamsters? I knew my hamsters.

I was idly eyeing a rose off to the side when Komari suddenly stopped. “H-hey. Can we...practice?”

“Here?”

“I-I wanna try something harder. Than in the club room.” She pointed to a bench at the base of a tree.

The place was pretty barren, it being a weekday and all. Maybe it would make a good spot.

I sat down. Komari fished out a thoroughly wrinkled piece of paper. “H-here goes.” She stood in front of me and cleared her throat. “I-I’m the n-new president o-of—of the l-l-literature club. Koma-Komari Chika. P-p-p-pleasure to m-meet you!” And then she let out a big sigh. “H-how was that?”

“Uh, well, a lot better than last time.”

“It was?” Komari took the spot next to me with a smile. “B-break time.”

She was getting better. A lot better. One thing still bugged me, though. “You talk fine with me and Yanami-san. What is it about this that trips you up so much?”

“Th-there’s gonna be tons of people I don’t know. Just the thought of it makes me...ugh, nauseous.” She quickly loosened her grip and flattened the paper upon realizing she was scrunching it. “I-I have to get the report down next.”

She looked down and started mumbling the script to herself.

I tilted my head up and stared at the branches. Clouds peeked through a mosaic of leaves that blotted out the sky. Summer made no guest appearance.

Without the third-years, the lit club went from six to four. It still felt like six to me, though. I wasn’t looking forward to the day when it stopped.

Branches shook their leaf maracas in the wind. Birds chirped, reciting after Komari’s mumblings. Calm. There was peace and quiet all around us, but none of it was to be found in the wrinkles on her harried face. I couldn’t recall a single moment in recent memory when she *wasn’t* frowning like the world was riding on her shoulders.

Well, not the world. Just the lit club. And it was supposed to be my job to make sure that responsibility didn’t crush her. Given the fact that she’d already passed out from exhaustion once before, I wasn’t very good at it.

I remembered her reaching for the poster in the classroom. Why was Komari always alone when I thought about her? Why was she always clutching at something just out of reach?

“I’ll do the report,” I blurted.

Komari jumped and looked up. “I-I told you. No, you won’t.”

“The meeting’s two days from now.” I was panicked. Impatient. I could tell that much. But not because of Komari.

“I-I know that, but I...”

“It’s not gonna happen, okay? Not that I’ve got a way with words or anything, but I can make do. I can help.” Her mouth hung open for a split second. I didn’t let her continue. “I can read a script just fine. You can count on me.”

It hit me far too late that I'd screwed up. Royally.

Komari's eyes wavered. "Why do you...?" She struggled to form words. "Why do you k-keep saying I can't do it?"

"What? No, that's not what I—"

"I-I know it's easy for you, but I'm trying, okay? I'm trying, and I'm practicing, a-and I thought I was getting better." She started to shake.

"I know that. I know. I'm not trying to deny any of that. You're the president now, and you want to do a good job, but I'm saying—"

"I never *wanted* to be president!" Komari shot to her feet. "I-I was finally getting over him. Tamaki-senpai. Prez. B-but now all of a sudden, *I'm* Prez?! I don't... I..." Tears fell from a face hung too low for me to see. With every drop, she seemed to shrink even smaller.

"Komari, we can still talk about it if being president is too much for you."

"W-well, who else is gonna do it?!" she screamed.

I was stunned. I'd never heard her so hysterical, so bitter before.

She stood there for a while, shoulders heaving. Once she'd caught her breath, she turned and walked away. I started to follow.

Without so much as a glance in my direction, she shouted, "S-stay away from me!"

That stopped me dead. That was it. I'd crossed a line, and she wanted nothing to do with me.

I just stood there. Eventually, she vanished from view. And I kept standing there.

"Whew, there you are, Nukumizu-kun. Sorry that took me so long."

A familiar voice snapped me out of it. I blinked, slowly turning toward Yanami like I'd just woken up from a bad dream. "Hey. Um..."

"Where's Komari-chan?" She whipped her head around, her hair narrowly avoiding the churros in her hand.

"I..." I collapsed back onto the bench and slumped over. "I messed up."



Yanami tried to decipher what I meant, then took a seat next to me. “Not used to seeing you like this.” She took a bite of her churro and squinted at the sky.

“I just... I’m sorry. I...”

“Hey, I won’t pry. Is there anything I can do?”

I shook my head.

She said, “M’kay.” Then took another bite.

Time passed. I couldn’t say how much.

I forced my eyes open, carefully, as if all the bad thoughts might come rushing back if I moved too fast. It was still bright out. The wind was still blowing. The sun was still shining.

Surely, Yanami must have left already.

I slowly turned to my side, and there she was. Still sitting quietly. She noticed me and smiled.

I nearly broke down.

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Nothing much happened the next day. Classes flew by, and homeroom came in a blink.

Amanatsu-sensei patted the chalk off her hands. “That about does it for the announcements. Now y’all better appreciate the rest of your day while I’m stuck here doing overtime, got it? Good. Dismissed.”

Chairs screeched and scooted. Conversations started.

I remained firmly planted where I was. Believe it or not, I wasn’t exactly raring to go to the club room. As if wallowing was a better alternative.

A wave of flowers hit me. That unique BGM started to play in my head.

“You look down, Nukumizu-kun.” Himemiya Karen, of all people. Blinding as ever.

“Huh? I...”

“Hey, no spoilers. Allow me. Yours truly will crack this case lickety-split.” She held a finger to her forehead and pretended to rack her brain.

“I’m fine. Really.”

Himemiya-san’s eyes shot open as she swung her finger down in my direction. “Eureka! You’re hungry!”

“Little off the mark.”

“Darn. That usually works with Anna.”

If Yanami was her baseline, she was further off the mark than previously estimated.

“Did you need me for something?” I asked languidly.

She squatted down and rested her elbows on my desk. “I’ve been trying to figure something out. You and Anna. How’d it happen? Where’s the intersect?”

I glanced around for her. Yanami was already gone, it seemed.

Why was she asking me that? Why now? Frankly, she couldn’t have picked a worse time.

I chose my words carefully. “We’re in the same club.”

“Nice try, but I have it on good authority you two were buddies even before that.” Himemiya-san leaned forward, peering up at me. “There’s something about you. Something that just makes you...*get* each other.”

An unnerving thought.

“It’s not that complicated,” I said. “Where’d this come from anyway?”

“Anna’s been off today. Wouldn’t you wanna know why your best friend’s acting funny?” I had a hunch, and it probably had to do with yesterday. Side note: Suddenly, Yanami’s yammerings about her ex-rival being all clingy made a lot more sense. “That was you in her story in the journal, wasn’t it?”

“What?”

What was she talking about this time? What did I have to do with Yanami’s

self-insert convenience store food fic?

“The classmate that shows up in it. She’s writing, like, a diary, right?”

“Just because it’s in first-person doesn’t make it autobiographical.”

“Yeah?”

If first-person equated to personal experience, I would have been quite the playboy. And better at not hurting people. Or alienating myself.

I found myself at a loss for words.

“Hey, Karen-chan! Sorry!” Yanami bounced over. Bubbly Yanami.

Himemiya-san grinned and stood up. “Sheesh, thought I was gonna sprout a few gray hairs waiting on you.”

“Hey, I said I’m—oh. Nukumizu-kun. Not going to club today?”

“I was, um...” I trailed off.

Yanami stared at me blankly. “Actually, you and Sousuke go ahead, Karen-chan.”

Himemiya-san blinked, glancing between the two of us. “We can wait if you’ve got something.”

“This’ll probably take a while. Sorry.”

“Okey dokey. See you tomorrow, then!” She tagged Yanami’s hand and headed out. But not without a subtle look my way.

Why did I get the feeling plans were just made without my consent?

Yanami planted a hand on her hip and acknowledged me again. “Walk with me.”

*Literature Club Fall Activity Report: Yanami Anna—It’s Not Over till I Say It’s Over*

I’m a new me this morning. Because this morning, I’m finally gonna say “good morning.” I have the perfect plan and everything.

I set myself up at the eating area in the Seven-Eleven on the way to school.

Extra early this time. Usually, I miss him because I'm ordering extra snacks at the register or waiting on my hot dogs to warm up.

The solution? Tsukune onigiri.

Why tsukune onigiri? Because tsukune onigiri doesn't need to be warmed up. So he's not getting by me this time.

The thing about the tsukune is the gristle, and the sweet-spicy sauce, and the special kind of mayo they use. It's to die for. It doesn't *need* to be warmed up to be to die for. Oh, and I get a latte too. I love the foam. I've been addicted lately.

I'm listening to the coffee machine growl when I notice someone behind me.

"Oh, A-ko-san. Didn't know you drank things that weren't sweet."

It's my classmate, XX-kun. He's kind of a jerk, to be honest. I notice the iced coffee cup in his hand and feel a little bad for him. He hasn't seen the light of the latte.

I ignore him and focus my attention outside the window. I do a double take, because he's there already, waiting at the stop light with his friends. I let my guard down. I thought I had time because I don't usually leave this early.

I try to pry open the protective cover to swipe my coffee and go, but it's locked tight. So I tap my foot and wait. It finally beeps. I have my latte. Now to stick a lid on and I'm golden.

The stoplight turns green. I have just enough time if I hurry. I fly out of the automatic doors but fly back in just as quickly.

I forgot the sugar.

XX-kun sees me and tosses me something. I catch it. It's sugar. He must have noticed.

I trudge back to the eating area anyway.

"What? I guess wrong?"

I ignore him again and crack open the lid. He doesn't notice everything. He wouldn't get it.

I dump the sugar into my coffee. *Two* packets. Because that's how I like it,

okay?

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A fresh, steaming plate of yaki udon lay before me. Next to me at the counter sat Yanami.

“Why are we here?” I asked.

When she said, “walk with me,” I’d expected a lecture. Maybe an admonishment. I didn’t think we’d literally walk to an udon place.

Yanami put her hands together in thanks for the food. I quickly did the same.

“So,” she finally said, “I have an announcement before we dig in.” She penetrated the pile of noodles with her chopsticks and hoisted a bunch up. “I’ve lost two kilos in two months.”

“Wait, you’re joking.”

Yanami froze with her mouth open wide and glared at me. “I’ll have you know, those three I gained over the summer are as good as gone. Isn’t that crazy? You should be happy for me.”

Still had one kilo to make up for, I noted.

“Sure, I just don’t get how that happens with your appetite. You sure you don’t need to see a doctor?”

“I’m being careful, okay? I don’t get seconds. I don’t get larges. I’m basically an ascetic monk over here,” she said, slurping up a gaggle of noodles.

The fact that her “diet” had worked said more about her old eating habits than it did about the diet itself, honestly.

We ate in silence for a while. When I was about halfway done, Yanami set her chopsticks down. “Have you talked to Komari-chan?”

“N-no.”

I tensed up, preparing myself for a scolding, but none came. Yanami just hummed mildly and took a sip of water.

“You’re not gonna say anything?” I asked.

“Nope. Did you want me to?” She put her glass down. I didn’t reply. “It’s no one’s job to make you feel better, Nukumizu-kun.”

“Right.” I quietly shoveled in some more udon.

“Gotta reap what you sow. You’re used to it by now, I’m sure. You do you.”

I wasn’t sowing on purpose.

“The thing is, I genuinely said some terrible things to her. Even I can tell when I’ve gone too far.”

“Oh, then yeah, that’s on you. You never did understand the intricacies of the female mind.” She picked up her chopsticks again. “I’m sensing there’s a lot of things that are being left unsaid. Have you two, y’know, ever actually *talked*?”

“Yes, we—” I froze as I reached for my glass. *I’d* done a lot of talking. Even more assuming. How much could I say I even really knew about how Komari felt?

“It takes two to tango, Nukumizu-kun. Your feelings aren’t the only ones that matter. Conversation’s about letting the other person have a turn.”

“Conversation...”

My kryptonite. But that wasn’t an excuse. My incompetence had hurt someone, and to deflect that felt wrong.

Just as that familiar, endless web of thoughts threatened to entangle me all over again, Yanami smiled and pulled me out. “But hey, don’t beat yourself up too much. C’est la vie. You do you, remember?”

“Me doing me is what got me into this mess.”

“So you slipped and fell a bit. Big deal. Tell ya what. As an ex-resident of rock bottom, lemme fill you in on the secret to climbing out.”

I questioned the “ex” part of “ex-resident.” Did I want her advice? Then again, beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“Sure,” I said. “Lay it on me.”

“Stop thinking about whether she hates you now or not. Consider how Komari-chan feels—and I mean *really* consider. Talk it out like big kids. And then

you go back to business as usual.”

“And what if I screw it up again?”

Yanami grinned as the last of her udon clung to her cheek. “Let me know where you want me to scatter your ashes.”

Cremated this time. Neat.

I slurped up the last of my noodles, though not quite as impressively as Yanami had.

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I stared mindlessly out the tram window.

Yanami was right. I was always quick to try to “fix” problems, but even quicker to abandon them once it turned out I didn’t have the tools for the job. I was quick to assume I knew what was best. But slow to realize when I didn’t. Always too slow.

The quickly darkening cityscape became distorted. Droplets of water adhered to the glass and contorted the world outside. A drizzle became rain. I hadn’t brought an umbrella.

It was a bit of a trek to get back home from the station. Unless I ran.

“Right. So I can be wet *and* tired.”

I stepped off the tram, resigned to walking. Right on cue, it started to pour. Running returned with a convincing argument.

Just then, an umbrella hung over me. I stopped. It was Kaju, smiling.

I didn’t have it in me to return it, so I looked away. “Didn’t know you were coming.”

“I was worried.”

I took the umbrella. “Wait, you just brought the one?”

“I sort of left in a hurry and forgot to bring another one.” Kaju bopped herself on the head. “Oopsie.”

*Goober*, I thought.

We huddled close together as we walked, doing our best to hide from the rain.

“How’d you know I’d be on this tram?”

She giggled. “Love works in mysterious ways.”

I decided not to justify her sense of humor with a response and watched the puddles instead. A group of junior high school girls came squealing past. Evidently, I wasn’t the only one who’d forgotten their umbrella. Absentmindedly, I watched them scurry.

Kaju grabbed me by the cheeks and turned me toward her. “What happened yesterday, Oniisama?”

“Huh? Wh-what do you mean?”

“You’ve been distracted ever since you got home from your trip. I’m worried about you.”

I’d made a conscious effort to act natural. Apparently not effort enough.

“I just...upset someone.”

Wrong. I’d *hurt* someone. Why couldn’t I get through to myself? Why did I always have to dress things up all pretty? Like it made what I’d done any better.

I kept walking. Didn’t elaborate. Kaju had to jog to keep up with me. I didn’t realize how fast I’d been walking.

She giggled at my abruptly slowed pace. “I knew you loved me, Oniisama.”

I stopped. And they called *me* obsessed. “As a sister.”

“I suppose. But there was a point where I thought you were my dad. Remember when I first started to walk? You followed me everywhere and never let me out of your sight, just in case I fell.”

There was a lot there I couldn’t quite unravel.

“You were a year old when you started walking. You remember that?”

“All of my memories with you are clear as day,” she said without a hint of hyperbole. “And you always came running whenever I cried at daycare.”



“Because that’s what brothers do.”

“That’s certainly what you do.” Kaju strolled ahead of me. I held the umbrella forward and quickened my pace. “Elementary school was chaotic, but you were always there with me instead of playing with your friends.” Because I didn’t *have* any friends. “And you taught me so much in junior high. I still have the map you made me of campus water lines. I even had it laminated.”

I didn’t even remember that. Honestly, I preferred not to remember a lot of what she was dredging up.

Kaju gently touched my hand. “You cared for me, Oniisama. You set me straight when I did wrong, but you never forced anything on me.”

“Because I wanted you to be you.”

She cracked a playful smirk. “Not that I’m opposed to a little bit of you.”

“Please stop.” A small grin snuck up on me.

“You smiled.” Her smirk became a full-faced beam. Many times my own.

Only then did it hit me how out of practice my smile felt. How glum an expression my face had been frozen in. Yanami had seriously been a trooper for putting up with it.

“I like it when you smile,” Kaju said softly. “I don’t ever want you to stop. Because that’s the kind of man I want to point at and say, ‘that’s my big brother.’”

“Nonstop smiling sounds exhausting, not gonna lie.”

“I’m not known for being reasonable. Now what do *you* want, Oniisama?”

I stopped again. Kaju looked up at me, waiting for my answer.

“You said you wanted me to be me,” she continued. “So the girl you hurt. What do you want for her?”

“I...”

I let my mind wander back to the zoo. That moment when she’d turned her back to me, and the wall went up. And how she didn’t look back once.

I still stood by much of what I’d said that day. But I hadn’t gone about it right.

Not at all. I'd taken a shortcut to satisfy my own ego at the cost of Komari's agency. I'd tried to change her.

Selfish. Conceited. Egotistical.

My ego was the problem. But it was also the answer.

I turned away and shyly scratched my nose. "Thanks, Kaju."

"Was I helpful?"

"Yeah. I think I know what I should do now. Or what I *want* to do, rather."

"Good. I hope it goes well."

"We'll see."

The rain had stopped. I folded up the umbrella, revealing the moon hanging overhead through freshly parted clouds.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Kaju muttered. And then she hurried off.

Wait a minute. "How did you know I was talking about a girl?"

Kaju paused, turned, and glared. After a moment's pout, she stuck her tongue out. "Women's intuition."

\*\*\*

The next day, after school, a new assortment of post-festival club presidents were to gather for their first meeting. I stood just outside the room, watching students come and go down the hallway with Yanami. Komari was still missing.

"I take it you haven't talked yet." Yanami gave me a thoroughly unimpressed look.

I pretended not to notice. "These things take time. Like getting to your light novel backlog."

"Stop buying light novels that you aren't going to read."

But if I didn't buy them, then I wouldn't have them!

"I'm gonna talk to her when I see her," I said. "Look. I even brought apology snacks."

"What are you, customer service?"

The internet said the best kind of apology was one with compensation. The internet wouldn't lie.

Yanami peered into the bag. "Oooh, financier cakes. All right. You've convinced me. Lemme just take that off your hands for you."

"Uh, no? Hey! Stop pulling! You're not getting it!"

It felt like I was playing tug-of-war with someone's poorly trained dog. We went back and forth for a while before a pair of gleaming pale white eyes inserted themselves between us. "Quiet...in the hallway."

Yanami and I screeched and leapt back. Shikiya-san didn't flinch.

"S-Senpai!" I stammered. "What're you—" Actually, I knew. She was part of the student council, and technically they were the ones hosting the meeting in the first place. "Hey, did you happen to see Komari anywhere? She's supposed to be present today."

"The small one...?"

"Yeah. Would you mind lending her a bit of support? She's sort of new to this whole thing."

"Support..." She looked Yanami up and down, hard, then nodded. "Relationships are...complicated."

Not in the way she'd surely just assumed. Shikiya-san lightly touched my shoulder then shambled back into the meeting room. My faith in her was hanging by a thread.

"She kinda freaks me out," Yanami muttered. The first words out of her mouth, and they were just plain rude.

The meeting time neared. The relevant parties started filing into the room, among them a tiny shrimp of a girl—Komari.

I ran up to her. "Komari! Hang on."

She froze. "Wh-what?" She clutched a stack of papers to her chest.

"I, um... I wanted to apologize for the other day."

"D-do it after the meeting." She brushed past me and drifted into the room

without a second glance.

“Oooh, she’s pissed,” Yanami chimed in, her mouth full of something.

“What are you eating?” I asked. “Did you steal something from the bag?”

“Relax. Just one.”

“I swear, you—”

Komari’s pained expression flashed through my mind. It was my fault, and some snacks weren’t going to just magic all that under the bridge.

Was that what Yanami was trying to tell me?

“What’s with that face? Need a cry? Hey, I’m here for you, buddy.” She reached for a second, crumbs littering her cheeks.

I felt like an idiot for assuming better of her.

Meanwhile, the door closed on us. The meeting had begun.

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Fifteen minutes into the meeting, and from what I could make out, the student council seemed to have wrapped up their announcements. Now came the club reports. The lit club would come up any minute now.

Some rustling drowned out the voices inside the room. Yanami had her grubby little mitts in the bag with my cakes.

“That’s the last one, Yanami-san. I’m serious.”

“I know, I know. You make it sound like I’m some glutton.”

As the handball club finished speaking, a voice announced, “Now the literature club. Your report, please.” It came from Basori Tiara, student council vice president.

I pried open the door just a crack and peered inside.

“Hey, squat down,” Yanami hissed. She pressed herself against my back.

Ignoring the uncomfortable weight and growing heat, I scanned the room for her. I found Komari when she darted to her feet, nearly knocking over her chair in the process.

Her eyes were glued to the notes written on her palm. “I-I’m I-liter-literature c-club...!” she squeaked. “K-Koma...!”

*Come on!* I found myself clenching my fists.

She started coughing and reached for the water bottle offered to all present. The cap came off and then fell to the floor. It rolled and clattered all the way to the inaccessible center of the square of desks set up in the room.

It was over.

But just then, Shikiya-san came to life for a moment. “Literature club... Komari Chika. Pleasure.”

Komari, paler than even her savior, nodded a few more times than she needed to.

Tiara-san sent a performative glance at the clock on the wall. “Let’s hear your report.”

“Y-ye-yes, ma’am!” Komari snatched up her papers before promptly dropping them. They fluttered everywhere. She froze up again.

“Your report, literature club,” Tiara-san pressed.

“Um, r-right, I-I—”

“If you have nothing to report, then please take a seat.”

Komari scrambled for her scattered materials. “W-wait, um...”

“I’m sorry, but we’re pressed for time. Broadcasting club, will you please—”

I squeezed my eyes shut. That was it. She’d failed.

The air in the room was awkward, but it would fade. Those present would remember and cringe for a day or three after the fact, and then they’d forget. No one would care.

But Komari cared. She would remember. Maybe forever. And it would sting every time.

I opened my eyes again. She was still standing, completely petrified. While the rest of her was locked in time, something inside was crumbling, about to come undone.

Maybe I was overreacting. Maybe I was crazy. But I couldn't stand seeing her like this.

I had convinced myself that Komari couldn't do it. I had forced her to change, because she couldn't do it as she was. But I could. Because I never made mistakes.

Unfortunately, mistakes were my specialty.

The door burst open. I barely even processed that I was the one who'd done it. All eyes gathered on me as I approached Komari, taking a spot at her side. She looked up at me like she was witnessing a murder in progress.

She might as well have been. It was certainly as impulsive. I hadn't given a single thought to what my endgame even was, so I just said the first thing that came to mind.

"Sorry I'm late. I'm Nukumizu Kazuhiko, president of the literature club."

It was like a bomb had gone off. Tiara-san frowned and looked down at her paper. "I don't see your name here. Have you turned in the necessary paperwork?" She held me in a cold, sharp gaze.

The student council president finally spoke her first words all meeting, reining her in. "Now, now. Details later. Please, continue."

"Thank you," I said.

Komari fixed me with a glare twice as cold and twice as sharp as Tiara-san's. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"I'll handle this. Let me see those papers, okay?" I held my hand out for them. She just stood there, shaking. "Komari?"

"I... I can't believe you!" she howled, hurling the papers at my face.

"W-wait—"

"A-after everything I d-did! Everything I...!" Next came the water bottle. She stormed out of the room, leaving deathly silence in her wake.

I picked up the bottle and combed back my soaking bangs. Part of me wished she'd at least put the cap back on before flinging it at me.

“I-is everything okay?” Tiara-san asked. Even she looked a little fazed.

“Fine.” I put on a wide, ingratiating smile and collected the waterlogged papers off the floor again. “Now that report.”

\*\*\*

I sat in an empty room. The meeting had ended a while ago, and I was the last one left.

“Wow. That was a train wreck, dude.” Yanami clunked a chair next to me and sat down.

She wasn’t wrong. I definitely felt like a victim of one.

I collapsed my torso onto the desk. Yanami patted me on the back. “It is what it is,” she said. “Here. You can have the last one.”

“What do you mean ‘last one’?”

Yanami waited for me to take it. When I didn’t, she tore into it herself. “Making yourself the bad guy’s one way to take the heat off Komari-chan. But, well, I can’t really blame her if she hates your guts now.” She held the financier in between her teeth and tore it in half. “Not sure how good a trade-off that is, to be honest. Here. Take half.”

She shoved one end of the financier into my hand. Awesome. Not like I hated eating after people or anything.

She smirked teasingly at me. “Scared you’ll catch my cooties?”

Not hers specifically, no. She wasn’t special.

I stuffed my face with it anyway, too worn out to care. “We need to find her. You see where she went?”

“Uh, I couldn’t tell you. She moved pretty fast.”

“Okay. Then let’s put our heads together and try to—”

“Hold up. What do you mean ‘put our heads together’? Isn’t splitting up the thing to do here?”

“W-well, I don’t actually know what I’d say if I found her first. I was sorta hoping...” Yanami stared at me, daring me to finish that sentence. “Er, never

mind. I'll figure something out."

I got off my butt fast. Anything to get those eyes off me.

\*\*\*

The sun fell faster than I could move. Dusk quickly became night, and the moon hung high. I exited the west annex and stared up at it.

I'd tried the club room, Komari's classroom, the library, various sinks and water fountains—no dice anywhere. Her bike was still in the racks, so she had to be around somewhere. The problem was I only had one idea left.

"The girl's bathroom..."

I couldn't. Some lines couldn't be crossed. But then again, I'd already crossed so many, what were a few more? Didn't desperate times call for desperate measures?

Before I could settle the debate, a tall man rounded a nearby corner. It was Tamaki-senpai—formerly Prez. He raised a hand in greeting and came over.

"Senpai, I—"

He nodded. "Yanami-san filled me in. Koto and Yakishio-san are on the hunt too. Don't worry. We'll find her."

"Oh." I hung my head. "Okay."

He bumped my chest with his fist. "Thanks, by the way. I knew we picked the right guy for the job."

Thanks? Thanks for *that*? I didn't have a clue what he was praising me for. Maybe it was just lip service. Either way, it did feel good to hear. It helped. A little.

"I'm gonna keep looking," I said.

"Same. Got a few more places to check myself."

We split up. I followed along the west annex, all the way to its edge. And there, on the outskirts, I could just barely make out the silhouette of the old annex.

How could I have forgotten?



Maybe I hadn't. Maybe I was just scared of finding her and subconsciously avoiding the inevitable.

I took a deep breath and made for the fire escape.

\*\*\*

Once upon a time, when Yanami was still making me lunch, this had been our meetup spot. Even when she stopped, I didn't stop coming. I'd swing by every now and then when I wanted to be alone, and Komari adopted the habit herself. She'd always complain about finding me there. I'd always tell her she could pick a different landing to chill at. She never would.

I always wondered why.

I took my first step up the stairs, and an automatic light flickered on. It was the only one in this whole dark corner of campus.

I kept climbing. Slowly. One step at a time.

"There you are."

Komari stood on the second-floor landing, so small she would have been invisible if not for the cold fluorescent light illuminating the fire escape.

"Wh-why are you here?"

"To talk, I guess." I tried to move next to her but couldn't. There was a wall. Invisible but nonetheless present. "Komari, I—"

"Why?" she rasped. "Wh-why did you do it?"

"I'm sorry. I know what I did was out of line, but I—"

"*Out of line?!*" Komari puffed up and swiftly, violently closed the distance I'd been too afraid to. "H-how many times did I say I could do it?! That I was f-fine?! That I h—*had* to do it?!" She huffed and shook until she was blue in the face. "Wh-why are you always so...! S-so...!"

Frustrated with the inadequacy of her own voice, she yanked out her phone. Her fingers moved at light speed, her shoulders still heaving.

My phone let out a nice cheery blip that wasn't doing the mood any favors. I checked the notification. She'd sent me a DM on LINE.

I opened the app, a little fearfully.

“I was the only first-year in the club for so long.”

She clutched her phone with trembling hands. Tears welled up in her eyes as she smashed her fingers against the screen. The words they formed filled mine, one message after another.

“It was always just the three of us. There were no second-years. No one. I knew it couldn’t last. Every single day, I’d think about how the clock was ticking. How one day, when they graduated, I’d be alone all over again.”

This wasn’t her running from confrontation. In that moment, her phone wasn’t an escape. It was a conduit for her every thought and feeling.

“I managed to get you, but that was like pulling teeth. And now there are four of us, but everyone would rather be somewhere else! You could all up and leave whenever you want! You all have somewhere to go!”

And they were pure. Unadulterated. Through the written word, Komari shone more brightly than ever.

“But the lit club is all I have! I have to protect it when they’re gone! It has to be me!”

She liked to act snippy. Especially with me. But I’d seen the way she fiddled with her clothes when she got nervous. Nibbled on cheap bread during lunch. Left comments on all my stories.

“I have to do this, or else I’ll never be okay with being alone!”

I’d seen the way she could smile. The way she compartmentalized stress. The way she worked for what she wanted in spite of it. I’d seen who Komari was.

“I’m not good with people. I don’t have any friends. I’m bad at everything. I’m scared of everything. But I have this. It’s the one place I can belong.”

She stopped typing. With her voice raspy and barely audible in the breeze, she said, “S-so stop pretending like you care. Y-you’re just gonna ditch me anyway.”

What an idiot I’d been.

Komari and I weren't birds of a feather at all. I liked being alone. In fact, I thrived in it. But Komari... Komari craved company. She got lonely and sad and missed people when they weren't around. Just like any other ordinary girl.

She gripped her phone tight, shoulders shivering in the cold. Like any other ordinary girl would.

I started to speak, stopped, and started tapping at my phone. These words had to be written.

The message sent. Komari wiped her eyes with her sleeve and read it. She read it several more times before slowly looking up. "Wh-what does this mean?"

What did she mean, "what does this mean"? Did I have to spell it out?

I cleared my throat and faced her straight on. "It means I, uh... I think about you a lot."

Komari made a shrill squeaking noise. Was she a moeblob now?

"Your writing, I mean," I said. "I like it a lot."

"M-my... My writing?" Her mouth hung open dumbly.

"Yeah. You're way better than me, and we wouldn't be much of a club without you, so, y'know. Keep at it. And I'll be on the sidelines helping out how I can. Which, uh, may not be very much. But, um..." I thought hard about my next words. About everything Komari had just shared with me. "You don't have to be alone."

There was a long silence.

Komari hugged her phone. "D-did you mean it?"

"Huh?"

"Wh-what you—"

Suddenly, there was a whole lot of banging and clanging from below. Someone was coming up. I caught a glimpse of something tawny, but it was too late for me.

"You leave my Komari-chan alone!"

Before I knew it, she had me in a headlock. Here was a sensation I had really hoped to never experience again. “Y-Yakishio!” I choked. “Can’t...breathe!”

“I can’t believe you, Nukkun! Bullying Komari-chan! I thought you were better than that!”

I struggled in vain. My lungs screamed for oxygen. My vision dimmed. *So this is how it ends.*

“H-h-he wasn’t bullying me!” Komari stammered.

“He wasn’t?”

She loosened her grip just enough for me to slip out. “J-jeez, I thought you were seriously gonna do me in this time.”

“Well, yeah. I heard you two got in a fight, and then I saw all the messages. Can you blame me?”

I could, actually.

Wait, messages?

Just then, Yanami came lumbering up the stairs. “Lemon-chan,” she wheezed. “Let’s not...be rash.” She stumbled forward and clutched at Yakishio for support.

“My bad,” said my assailant. “I heard them talking and couldn’t help myself. You know how it is.”

“Guys,” I interjected. “What messages did you see? You knew what we were talking about?”

Yakishio tilted her head and showed me her phone. “Uh, yeah. It’s all in the club group chat.”

Komari squawked. She started swiping at her phone so fast I thought she might start blowing steam.

Yakishio threw her arms around her and squeezed. “I had no idea you felt that way, Komari-chan. Well, don’t you worry. We’re your friends, and we’re not going anywhere!”

“C-can’t breathe,” Komari groaned.

Seeing them together—suffocation notwithstanding—felt liberating, oddly enough. It felt like things were right again.

“So you talked, huh?” Yanami came up next to me, fussing with her frazzled hair.

“In a manner of speaking,” I replied. “Didn’t get to see the conclusion, really, but I think all the important stuff got said.”

Komari didn’t owe the lit club anything. That was never the case. The lit club was for Komari. That was what our senpai always wanted. It just took some time and chaos for us to fully understand what that meant, but at this point, chaos was our brand.

“I told you she’d come around. All it took was a little bit of empathy,” Yanami said.

Either my memory was selective or hers was.

“Whatever you say. Thanks, though. For real.”

Yanami raised her eyebrows at me in disbelief. But after a moment, she smiled. “Welcome. This is your charismatic consultant, Yanami-chan, signing off.”

I’d been so caught up in everything that I nearly forgot—it wasn’t just Komari. We weren’t alone. Yakishio and Yanami were a part of the lit club just as much as us. One day, they wouldn’t be. But that was to be expected. One day we’d graduate and go our separate ways, after all.

One could look at life and see an endless cycle of so-longs, goodbyes, and farewells, and you could call relationships fleeting. Insubstantial. But I didn’t like to think like that. I liked to believe there was something to be gained from it all other than sadness.

I would have continued philosophizing were it not for Yanami shoving her phone in my face.

“What?” I asked.

“This chat. You gonna let her vent all that and just not say anything? How’s that fair?”

“I did say something. What more do you want from me?”

It was a short message, but I wasn't good at this sort of thing. What little I'd sent was more than enough to make me want to crawl into a hole.

“Oh, I didn't realize. Lemme see.” Yanami scrolled a bit, then froze solid. “Dude.”

“What now?”

“Don't 'what now' me! Explain yourself! Does this mean what I think it means?!” She shoved her phone at me again.

On it was my singular reply to a long string of messages: “You'll always have me.”

What was wrong with that?

“I'm confused,” I said. “I just meant that I'm not planning on quitting the club anytime soon.”

“Oh.” Yanami held her head in her hands. “Oh god, he's stupid.”

“What? Is that harassment? Oh god, am I about to be #MeToo'd?”

“I swear. That right there's your problem, Nukumizu-kun.” Yanami shrugged and cut in between Komari and Yakishio. “Isn't it, Komari-chan?”

“U-unfortunately, our new president isn't too bright.”

“Better get your act together, Nukkun. Presidents gotta keep up appearances.”

Three-on-one just wasn't fair. Oh, who was I kidding? I couldn't win a one-on-one.

Wait, what did they just call me?

I slowly raised my hand. “Are we, um... Are we seriously rolling with me being the president?”

The girls looked at each other, then cracked up laughing. *This* was bullying.

Komari extricated herself from the oligarchy and stepped toward me. “I-it *was* your idea.”

“So, uh...”

She looked up at me, beaming far too bright for her bangs to hide. “You’re here to stay, Prez.”







## Epilogue: A Few Floors Up

LAUGHTER ECHOED UP FROM BELOW. KOTO FINISHED reading the group chat for the umpteenth time and wiped yet more tears from her eyes.

“I’m so happy. Oh, I’m so glad.”

Together with Tamaki Shintarou, Tsukinoki Koto listened in on their underclassmen down below. She felt her eyes start to well up again.

Tamaki patted Koto on the head. “I know this was hard for you.”

“She’ll be okay now. I think so. Don’t you?”

“I do. And I also think you better keep your voice down before they hear us.”

“I’m trying, okay? I just...” She sniffled. “All I’ve ever wanted is for her to be okay by herself. To get better at dealing with people. But I...” Tamaki offered a tissue. Koto accepted and loudly blew her nose. “I decided all that for her. I was trying to turn her into someone she wasn’t.”

She’d found her people now. Koto’s precious underclassman had found a place to belong all by herself, and that was more than she could possibly ask for.

“She went and grew up on me,” she choked out.

“Komari-chan’s strong,” Tamaki said. “And she’s got Nukumizu too.”

Koto thought about that. “You’re putting a lot of stock in him, huh?”

“He’s more reliable than he looks. Went to him for advice myself once, and you wouldn’t believe how composed he can be. Guy doesn’t act his age sometimes.”

“He’s different. I’ll give you that.”

They had first met back in April, during recruitment season. Koto had managed to get him to sign up for the club, though entirely unwittingly, and

she'd never have expected Komari would be able to drag him back.

"Can't say I thought much of him when he was only in the club on paper. I was grateful when he decided to stick around." Koto leaned against the rail. "But sometimes I wonder. We've put together such a mismatched bunch. How long would it have lasted without a guy like him to balance things out?"

"That supposed to be a compliment?"

"Of the highest caliber. He is an intriguing one indeed." She nestled against him. "I will say, I'd like to see him pull it together just a little more before I'm totally comfortable trusting him with Komari-chan."

"They'll be fine. Trust me. If anyone can make it work, it's them."

"You sound like they're dating already."

"Hey, anything could happen. I'm just saying better him than some weirdo we've never met before, right?"

"What are you, her ex?" Koto pouted and turned away dramatically. "Like she's yours to give away or whatever."

"Maybe she is," Tamaki teased.

Koto glared up at him. "I knew it! You two were getting frisky together, weren't you?!"

"Of course not. And quiet down before—"

Koto tugged his tie and stole his lips before he could finish. He wouldn't get the edge on her this time.

"Koto, we're at school!" he hissed.

"But I quieted down, didn't I?"

Tamaki hid his quickly reddening cheeks. "You're an idiot."

"But I'm your idiot." Koto beamed.

People were stirring down below, and their voices were getting closer. The jig was up.

"See? So much for subtlety."

“Eh, that’s fine. The more the merrier.” She turned toward the stairs to greet them.

Nukumizu must have run his mouth again, because Yanami’s voice suddenly cut above all the rest.

“That right there, Nukumizu-kun!”

## Bonus Story: I'm Beggin' Ya, Teacher!

**N**OT FAR FROM THE STATION, AT AN IZAKAYA RUN by a local nerimono manufacturer, two young women sat at the bar. They clinked their glasses together.

"And that's another Tsuwabuki-fest! Cheers!"

"Cheers."

The first was a minuscule girl, but she drank like she was twice her size. She clunked her glass down. "Another draft, please!"

Amanatsu Konami, Tsuwabuki High School social studies teacher, was twenty-six and proud. A fact she wished she didn't have to constantly show her ID to prove.

"I'd slow down if I were you. Unless you're hoping for some stranger to swoop in and take you back to his place." Konuki Sayo, the school nurse, smiled coyly, running her fingers along the rim of her glass.

Amanatsu, somehow already tipsy, glared at her friend. "Yeah, right. Not everyone's gotta beat guys off with a stick like *someone*."

"They'd have to drag me to theirs if I got as drunk as you get, Konami."

"You sure? I know you're a lightweight, but weren't you always leaving bars with dudes back in college or am I crazy?"

"Oh, I was only ever pretending."

Konami grabbed her second glass and froze. "Huh. I always wondered how come you got drunk at the most convenient times."

"I know better than to drink too much at a mixer." Konuki finished her first glass and ordered another.

"Wait, those were mixers? I only ever went to those things lookin' like something the friggin' cat dragged in."

Konuki froze this time. “I thought you were doing that on purpose. I always assumed you were going for something kinky.”

“Hey, if that’s someone’s fetish, give them my number... Actually, never mind. Don’t.”

“Wise. Not for beginners, those types.”

The waiter carried over a glass of sake inside a wooden box. Konuki took it and sipped down the near-overflowing liquid. Shikaiou Junmai Ginjyo. Her favorite.

Konami admired her serene profile as she drank. She couldn’t blame the men for trying. “Off topic, but how’re those literature club kids? Things going all right on that end?”

“They are, as a matter of fact. It’s an interesting experience, being a supervisor.” She gazed through her cup, past the clear liquid, reminiscing. “Nukumizu-kun in particular is an interesting one. First aid is something I can manage, but matters of the heart? Those, I’ve come to understand, require a different skill set altogether.”

“Nukumizu struggling with something?”

“Less him and more his company. My intuition tells me he means more to those girls than he knows.”

“Hm. Wouldn’t have assumed that myself.” Amanatsu picked at a daikon radish in her miso oden, hiding her surprise.

“He has my professional attention, is what I mean to say.”

Konami warily studied the look in Konuki’s eye. “We don’t gotta have a talk about boundaries, do we?”

“Konami, I am an educator. When I took this job, I swore to myself.” She grinned smugly as she threw her drink back. “No students.”

“Congrats. You’ve accomplished the bare minimum.”

“Am I allowed to argue?”

“No. Drink.” Amanatsu downed her glass and promptly ordered a third.

Just after it came out, so did a small grill. The waiter placed it between them. They let you cook your own chikuwa here.

“Aojiso? How unconventional of you,” Konuki commented, rolling her fishcake along the grill.

“I’m a Toyohashi girl, what can I say? No toppings for you?”

“I’ve been craving simplicity these days.”

The chikuwa began to swell. She squished it down with a pick for a nice sear.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Konami started to grumble, “I like me some chikuwa and a girls’ night out but can’t help wondering when it’ll be my turn.”

Konuki grinned softly. “You’re too rigid. You should live a little more. Take a leap of faith every once in a while.”

“Yeah, like that’s served you well. Don’t think I forgot what happened at your coming-of-age thing. You’re lucky to even be here.”

“Everything comes with a little risk, Konami. Especially when you’re lucky enough to be born a woman.” Konuki picked up a nice brown roll of fish. “But us girls can take a pounding.”

“Glad to see you haven’t learned a thing.”

Konuki simply smiled back.

And on the girls’ night went.

## Afterword

**W**E MEET AGAIN. GREETINGS, FROM TAKIBI AMAMORI.

The heroines lose yet again, which can only mean I've successfully delivered Volume 3 to all of you. No doubt at the relief of my editor, Mr. Iwaasa, who I've continued to give no end of trouble. Ahem, *continue* to give. As we speak... Bless you, Mr. Iwaasa.

On the note of trends, Imigimuru-sensei has once again knocked it out of the park with this volume's illustrations. Frankly, I worry the bar can be raised no further without cuteness overload putting all known physical laws of reality at risk. One of these days, Imigimuru-sensei's talents will be worth more than gold. I'd secure your copies of *Too Many Losing Heroines!*, *This Art Club Has a Problem!*, and their *ART WORKS fruits* artbook while you can. As an investment in future currency.

What kind of currency? I'm not actually sure. Let's get back on topic, shall we?

This time around, it was none other than Komari-chan who was our protagonist, as is evident by the cover. She had a rough time of it, what with her senpai on the verge of graduating. A lot of decisions to make and a lot to come to terms with. At least Yanami came out of it with a full belly. I hope you enjoyed the journey!

Now, I actually have an announcement to make! As it happens, the losing heroines are officially being mangafied! And it's being spearheaded by the great Itachi-sensei, who's been in charge of such esteemed works as *Haganai's* own manga, a series I'm sure many of you may have heard of. It'll be published in Japan on the Manga-One app as well as the Urasunday website, so please check it out!\*

Having utilized my author's privilege and read it for myself ahead of time, I can assure you. It is good. And not just Itachi-sensei's artwork, of course, but seeing everything reconstructed and recomposed into manga form, interactions



adapted and reinterpreted, it's truly something. I can't wait to read more myself.

Even for avid readers of the novels, I would recommend this extra special peek into the World of Losers.

Lastly, I managed to weasel out some extra pages after the afterword again. Flip back a few pages, and you'll find a little snippet of events that take place just after Loss 3. Enjoy!

*\*Also available in English from Seven Seas Entertainment.*

# About the Author

**Takibi Amamori**

At last, Volume 3 is here. Thank you from the bottom of my heart to all of my readers!



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