My Friend's Little Sister Has It IN for Me!
vol. 6
Author: mikawaghost
Illustration: tomari

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My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!

Characters

Ooboshi Akiteru

Second year. The protagonist, and director of the 05th Floor Alliance. His favorite seasons are spring and fall for their mild weather.

Kohinata Iroha

First year. Plays a polite honor student at school, but is annoying to Akiteru. A talented actress and the sociable type. Her energy languishes once summer is over.

Tsukinomori Mashiro

Second year. Akiteru's cousin and fake girlfriend. Currently going all out to win his affections. She is secretly the author, Makigai Namako. She loves fall, when the fish are fattest.

Kohinata Ozuma

Second year. Nicknamed Ozu. Akiteru's only friend, and a programmer of the 05th Floor Alliance. He wants to come up with a way to avoid field day.

Kageishi Sumire

A twenty-five-year-old who loves her alcohol. Akiteru's homeroom teacher, and the illustrator, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. She's happiest in the fall, the season of newly-brewed sake.

Otoi [redacted]

Second year. Her given name is private. Low energy. She's a sound engineer who helps out the 05th Floor Alliance. According to her, fall is obviously the season for music.

Kageishi Midori

Second year. A phenomenal honor student who gets full marks in every subject, every time. Head of the drama club, but her acting skills are dubious. Akiteru suspects she is dirty-minded.

Tomosaka Sasara

First year. A good-looking girl who's second in her year and sees Iroha as her rival. An influencer who boasts a million followers on social media.

Kiraboshi Kanaria

Makigai Namako's editor. A superstar editor whose series always get a second print run. Claims she is seventeen, and chirps at the end of her sentences. Her real name is Hoshino Kana.

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Recap

Relationships are unnecessary. Friends are unnecessary; well, more than one, anyway. And girlfriends are *definitely* unnecessary. The way most people spend their youth is horribly inefficient, and I decided long ago to shed everything unnecessary in order to get ahead in life. My name is Ooboshi Akiteru, and that used to be my heartfelt creed, but then I got a girlfriend. She wasn't a real girlfriend, of course.

Her name was Tsukinomori Mashiro. She was my cousin, my childhood friend, and my fake lover.

Our fake relationship was formed in order to fulfill a promise to my uncle, Tsukinomori-san, CEO of the entertainment powerhouse Honeyplace Works, and to secure a future for the 05th Floor Alliance.

Mashiro had a habit of treating me coldly, and she didn't like to leave her house. That's why I hardly ever had a chance to show off how in love we were, and so Tsukinomori-san began to doubt how well we were keeping up the facade.

He started looking into my relationships with the other girls (like Iroha) around me too, so Mashiro and I came up with a plan to have the most lovey-dovey, typical teenage date we could manage. And while I felt a lot of guilt over going all out for my role as her boyfriend when I knew Mashiro had genuine feelings for me, I still decided to stoop to the level of "piece of shit" to achieve my goals.

Then there was my friend's little sister, Kohinata Iroha. I'd recently discovered the feminine charm hidden in her annoying side. To everyone at school, she was the perfect honor student, but I had a feeling she was closer to her true self when she was being annoying. And if I was the only one she could share it with, then once I eventually graduated and left her, she'd be forced to keep it to herself. That spurred me on to find her a best friend: someone she could be just as annoying with as she was with me.

Now that I look back on everything, I realize I'm a pretty hopeless director who deserves to be punched in the face. All this stuff's in the past, so anything I said now would just be an excuse.

I thought my actions were for the best. I never expected my meddling in Iroha's life to lead to as much trouble as it did. There was never any way for me to predict what was going to happen.

Interlude: Iroha and Otoi-san

“How do I be true to myself without hurting anyone?” I wailed, burying myself in Otoi-san’s motherly chest.

She was in loungewear, but I was in my brightly colored yukata. She’d been at home spending some quiet time by herself, while I’d been living it up at our town’s famous festival on the last day of August. Then I came bursting in here and crying. Talk about selfish. Talk about pathetic.

There were only two people I dared show this side of myself to. The first was Senpai, and the second was Otoi-san, who was holding me into her warmth and stroking my head gently. She was like a sister to me.

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden? Y’don’t usually get like this. I bet it’s got somethin’ to do with Aki, yeah?”

I paused. Then, I nodded once. But a few seconds later, I shook my head twice.

“It’s got something to do with him, yeah, but it’s not his fault. It’s my fault.”

“Aw, don’t blame y’self. Take some time to calm down, and then tell me all about it.” Otoi-san’s voice was as soothing as a lullaby as she stroked my back.

“Okay...”

My rampaging emotions started to calm down. The shattered fragments of crystal started to come together again. My breathing steadied, and the tears flowing down my cheeks began to dry. I tightened my grip on Otoi-san and started to speak, letting out my emotions one by one.

“Mashiro-senpai loves Senpai so much. They went to the festival together today.”

That image of the two of them resurfaced in my mind.

Senpai and Mashiro-senpai sitting together in that huge tree. Mashiro-senpai was all filthy from climbing it, and as a reward, Senpai showed her some giant

fireworks. The way they were snuggled together to watch the colorful display in the sky made them look like a genuine couple no matter how you sliced it.

“Aki’s doin’ it ’cause of that contract, right? They’re not actually datin’.”

“No. Not right now.”

“Y’mean you’re worried they’ll become a real couple at some point?”

“Yeah! Have you seen how cute Mashiro-senpai is?! She’s clumsy, but she tries super hard. Seeing how much effort she puts in makes me feel really pathetic for being jealous of her.”

I wished Mashiro-senpai were horrible. If she had been, then I’d be able to loathe her from the bottom of my heart. I could shout at her not to take Senpai away from me.

It wasn’t fair that she was amazing. The effort she showed today made me look a hundred times worse than her, because I was the one going crazy with jealousy over it. And Mashiro-senpai was facing her feelings for Senpai head-on, and here I was calling that “unfair,” which only sent me into an endless maelstrom of even more self-loathing.

While Otoi-san stroked my head gently, my mind was caught in a loop it couldn’t get out of. Well, at least, it *felt* gentle to me; she probably wasn’t putting too much effort into it.

“I think it’s normal to be jealous,” Otoi-san said.

“But you don’t get jealous, do you?”

“I might.”

“Huh? You do?” I pulled away from her. “I never woulda guessed.”

“Whaddya think I am?” Otoi-san asked, her expression subdued and her tone indifferent. “I’m human too, y’know? ’Course I get jealous sometimes.”

“So when Senpai and I get along, you—”

“Nope.” Otoi-san quelled the spark of anxiety in my chest with an uncharacteristically sharp response. “Love and stuff’s a pain in the ass, so I don’t plan on catching feelings for anyone. I’m kinda impressed you guys handle

it so well, to be honest.”

“I wish I could just be stoic about it like you are.”

But it wasn’t like I could go back in time. Clock hands never moved counterclockwise. I couldn’t go back to the carefree girl I used to be.

“But yeah, it’s impossible to stop yourself gettin’ jealous. And because it’s impossible, y’don’t hafta blame yourself either.”

“You mean I should forgive myself for getting jealous?”

“More like, accept that y’can’t do anythin’ about it.”

“Huh...”

“If you’re true to yourself here, someone’s gonna get hurt, and there’s nothin’ you can do. If everyone wants somethin’ different, that’s gonna lead to a fight. Everyone has experiences like that. Even adults. Like, they’ll argue about creative differences, cheat on each other, get into a fight over territory. Y’know.”

“Territory?”

I didn’t expect her to give something so brutal-sounding as an example. It didn’t have anything to do with love or youth, but it was a strangely persuasive example, coming from Otoi-san. Fighting over a boy versus fighting over land still had the same sort of selfishness at its core.

“I think I’m pretty true to myself when it comes to Aki too. Like, I get him to buy fancy sweets for me, or get mad at him for sayin’ stuff that triggers me even though I don’t tell him why.”

“So you realize that’s kinda unreasonable of you?”

“Sure. I mean, I don’t wanna guess what you two think about it, but speaking objectively, I get that it’s kinda unreasonable.”

“Don’t you worry about hurting anyone?”

“You mean, do I worry about anyone hatin’ me?”

“Huh?” I stared. It felt like she’d plucked out the core of my true feelings without even trying.

“Y’never know what’s gonna hurt someone. Aki hurt you, right, and we know he’d never wanna do that in a million years. You can’t control the reactions of people who aren’t you.”

I realized that she was completely right. I didn’t want to hurt anyone? That was just me prettying up and obscuring my true feelings on the whole thing.

The truth was that I just didn’t want Mashiro-senpai to hate me. I wanted to keep having fun with her like we always had.

“Just kiddin’.”

“What?”

“You’re really kind, Kohinata, so I know you care about Tsukinomori and Aki’s feelings. But that kindness is makin’ you suffer...right?”

I hesitated. “I think so.”

“You don’t wanna hurt anyone, but you also don’t want anyone to hate you. I think you gotta start by doing whatever’s gonna make you feel better most effectively.”

“All right.” I nodded obediently, like a grade schooler who just finished crying.

I didn’t want Mashiro-senpai to hate me. I waited for Otoi-san to continue, hoping she might be able to tell me how to do that, but I didn’t hold out much hope.

“This whole thing about bein’ hated... To be honest, I’ve never worried ’bout anythin’ like that.”

The hope in my heart burst like a balloon.

“I’ve never tried to hide who I am just so I could get along with someone. The only reason we get along is ’cause you guys don’t mind that. If y’hated me for it, well, nothin’ I could do about it.”

“Your mentality’s way too powerful.”

Forget the whole stoic thing; she was practically enlightened. It was like there was just no way I could ever get on her level. I’d always *thought* she was mature, but this just drove home exactly *how* mature she was. It got me

thinking.

It didn't matter if I hurt anyone or if anyone ended up hating me. If being true to myself meant other people wanted to stay away from me, then there was nothing I could do about it. I remembered Senpai saying something similar long ago.

Ozuma had been having a tough time at school, and Senpai decided to be his friend no matter what their classmates made of it. But now wasn't the time to start thinking about junior high school. The point was, in some ways, Senpai and Otoi-san were two peas in a pod.

I wished I could be like them, but I didn't quite have the courage to step forward to that point, because I'd been sensitive ever since I was small. It was too late for me to change now.

Senpai was a warm, kind person who never got mad at anything. That was why I could be myself and annoy him. That was why I felt safe with him.

"But what if he actually hates the way you act around him? Is that what you're thinking?"

"You totally just read my mind with perfect accuracy! That's actually terrifying!"

"Nah, you're just transparent."

"Hmph. That makes so much sense, I can't really argue with you."

"But I do have one question. You're worried about Aki being attracted to Tsukinomori, right?"

"...Sí."

"You're also worried that he might try and keep his distance from you because you annoy him, yeah?"

"Sí."

"Your logic's fulla holes there."

"Sí. Wait, what?"

"All the girls around Aki are annoyin' in some way or another, includin' me."

“No, they aren’t. They’re all cute.”

Mashiro-senpai was a given, but there was also Sumire-chan-sensei, Midori-san, Otoi-san, Canary-san, Tomosaka-san—wait, scratch that last one.

Anyway, the point is, they were all great people. The only really annoying one was (probably) me.

“How ’bout you test that theory?”

“Test it?”

“You’ve got the actin’ talent for it, after all. You can get to the center of someone and understand ’em, right? Then you’ll see that, compared to all of them, you’re not especially whiny or annoying.”

“I should pretend to *be* them?”

“Yeah. You might learn somethin’ too. Or maybe not, I dunno.”

Her advice was way too half-assed. I bet any stranger who heard her say that would think she was spouting nonsense. But Otoi-san knew about my acting ability. She was telling me to solve this problem in a way that only I could.

When acting, I am capable of changing my entire psyche to match whatever role I’m playing. Not only can I perfectly reproduce their voice, I’m able to touch the very core of their being.

What if I could use that to understand my love rivals a little better? I might be able to find the difference. The reason Senpai was trying to push me away when he was happy keeping all of them by his side.

I wiped the damp corners of my eyes with my yukata sleeve and did my best to smile. I wanted to show Otoi-san, the sister who’d saved me, that I was back in action.

“All right, Otoi-san. I’ll give it a try. I’ll become everyone, and see how Senpai reacts!”

“Go for it. And lemme know how Aki reacts. Sounds entertainin’.”

“You got it! Aha ha! Senpai’s gonna wet himself when he realizes I’ve gone into acting overdrive and that I’m not gonna come down from it any time

soon!”

“Good luck. But also, triggered.”

“What?!”

“I’m not gonna tell you what.”

She was going on about trigger words even when I was asking for her advice? What the heck triggered her anyway? It was unreasonable, like an online streaming platform whose rules were strict but annoyingly vague.

I was still grateful, though.

Thanks, Otoi-san.

The new school semester started tomorrow—and I was sure it was gonna be a special one for me.

Chapter 1: The Post-vacation Class Belle Is Sexy!

“How did you all spend your summer vacation?”

The long summer vacation was over, but that didn’t mean it was fall or that the air was cool all of a sudden. The assembly marking the beginning of the second semester was taking place in the hellish heat of the school gymnasium.

There had been calls for more measures against heatstroke recently, and the gymnasium was equipped with a fantastic new AC unit. It was just a real shame that the Japanese education system hadn’t caught on yet that *not* gathering every last student in the same room was a good way to help prevent heatstroke too. As a guy who valued efficiency, it’d be nice if the school would adopt remote assemblies—and sooner rather than later.

“You are all students of this school with its long and upstanding traditions, and so I trust you kept all fun within the appropriate limits.”

Kageishi Midori, the top student in the second year, spoke over the languid, oppressive heat. In the closing ceremony of each semester, a student from each year would get up on stage and deliver a speech. For this opening semester, it was only the representative from the second-years who would do so. Apparently, it was to prepare that representative for leading the entire student body. Plus, it gave the third-years space to focus on their entrance exams.

Honestly, I suspected the more likely reason was that they knew everyone’d still be spaced out from the summer vacation and wouldn’t have the attention span to listen to three speeches in a row. If so, that was a highly efficient way of thinking that I could approve of.

“There may be times where human instinct takes over and you start to forget yourself, however...”

Thinking about it now, the majority of students weren’t even listening to this *one* speech. Some of them were dozing off while others were whispering with their neighbors. There was a general feeling of laziness in the air.

“They say that around thirteen percent of internet traffic is people accessing adult content...”

I let her voice fade into the background as I began to ponder some other worries. For a second I thought I heard some strange words there, but I probably imagined it. There were some kids in the advanced class who were actually listening, and I felt like I noticed them murmuring, but right now I didn’t care enough to pay them any attention—because I was currently focusing elsewhere.

“Don’tcha think Tsukinomori’s been acting weird?”

“I dunno about *weird*. I think she’s gotten more...mature, though. I feel all...funny when I look at her now.”

“Hey, dumbass. She’s Ooboshi’s girlfriend. Don’t get too ahead of yourself, yeah?”

“I *know*, all right? I’m just saying, she’s always been pretty, but now she’s like, fifty percent prettier. D’you think maybe she and Ooboshi ran the bases during break?”

“Will you morons shut up? Kageishi-san’s trying to talk about...uh, something important, probably.”

“But it’s true Tsukinomori-san’s gotten prettier. Her makeup’s gotten better too.”

“Is it just me, or is her chest a little bigger now? Like she’s releasing more pheromones. She’s *definitely* gone all the way with Ooboshi-kun! Think I should ask him later?”

“No way. That’s gross!”

“Lay off the honor student act. What do you really think?”

“I think I’m super curious!”

“Right?!”

All that fuss was about the girl sitting next to me. There were countless curious gazes centered on her: Tsukinomori Mashiro, my cousin and fake

girlfriend.

I glanced at her face. Her fair-colored hair. Her pale, almost sickly skin. The tiny ear poking out from a gap in her hair and its shell-shaped earring. She still looked modest and reserved, but she'd clearly taken a lot of care of her appearance. Her beauty always did lie somewhere between demure and adorable. The shell she'd put all that effort into breaking out of over the summer vacation gave her a much more charming impression than ever before.

Our classmates weren't wrong. It was hard to say exactly what it was or where it came from, but it was like there was a certain alluring scent coming off Mashiro right now, which was making even me nervous as I sat next to her.

Mashiro herself seemed completely unaffected. The attention didn't seem to bother her, as though she hadn't even noticed it; her serious gaze was focused on Midori up on stage.

"Wow, I didn't know that. Midori-san knows so much, doesn't she, Aki?"

"Huh? Oh, sure," I replied half-heartedly.

I didn't have a single clue what Midori was talking about. I searched through the words I'd pick up. There was "internet," something starting with tr...uh, "truck"? Like Truck-kun? Was she planning to publish a novel series online or something? I dunno...

"You seem kinda spaced out. What's wrong?" Mashiro inclined her head.

"Oh, er... Nothing. Right. Nothing at all."

There was even something alluring about her body language when she asked an innocent question, and I wasn't sure how to handle it.

It was only natural that our class thought Mashiro and I had come together over the summer vacation like I was some sleazeball and she was my indecent queen. If that doesn't make much sense to you, don't worry, because I don't know what I just said either.

I couldn't blame them. Because truth was, I was also affected by Mashiro's new attractive luster, even as someone who actually had an idea of where it came from. Just looking at her made me think that maybe we *had* done it, and

that single second's thought was almost enough to have me rewriting my own memories.

"Hm?"

"I'll pay attention to Midori-san's speech now, okay?" I quickly averted my gaze from Mashiro's curious head tilt.

This was not good. In fact, it was *very* not good. I knew everyone was staring at us way too much, and it was making my heart thump stupidly loud and destroying my concentration.

Was this one of those teenage things? Canary, my senpai in all things producer-related, said that letting loose in your teenage years was key to growth, so I'd tried to allow some of that flavor of fun into my life. Now I was worrying that I had let it go too far.

"P*rnhub, XV*deos, Fa*za. I hope you'll avoid accessing these sites, even by accident, and maintain the discipline expected of high schoolers like you as you prepare yourselves and work hard during the coming second semester."

In the end, the warmth coming from Mashiro's arm brushing casually against my shoulder and the sweet toxic scent coming off her broke my brain enough that I didn't take in a word of what Midori said.

***

After the especially arduous ordeal that was the semester's opening ceremony, we returned to our classrooms.

The stares from our classmates continued as we moved from the gymnasium and through the corridors. I glanced sideways at Mashiro. Her expression was cool, and she kept on firing off pheromones while humming and tapping away at her smartphone.

This was probably the best mood she'd ever been in during her entire life. I frowned as I reflected on the injustice of it all. How come she wasn't feeling as awkward as I was?

I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see the handsome Kohinata Ozuma standing behind me. He was OZ, my only friend and the genius

programmer of our indie development group, the 05th Floor Alliance. His constant smile was “princely” according to the girls in our grade, where he was one of the most popular boys. He was also lucky enough to encounter beautiful girls in places like the student council room and on the street, so he was more like the protagonist of a dating sim than a prince. Thing was, he didn’t realize that himself, and had barely made any romantic progress since I’d met him, which was kind of a waste.

Anyway, for once Kohinata Ozuma wasn’t smiling. He lowered his voice, as though something was worrying him.

“Did you do...y’know...with Tsukinomori-san?”

“You too, Ozu? Of course I didn’t.”

“Thought not. Makes sense. But...” Ozu glanced at Mashiro. “She’s obviously excreting more female hormones than normal. You should see the readings she’s getting on the hormone counter I made.”

“Way to unveil your latest patent. Whaddya need something like that for?”

“Nothing, I was kidding.”

“Don’t kid about stuff like that. Knowing you, you probably could and would invent that kinda thing.”

Humans were more likely to believe ideas presented to them with scientific or mathematical language. That was apparently why the sketchier cults were more likely to talk about “electromagnetic waves” or scientific concepts instead of occult topics, and why I was wary of such things.

“Anyway, I’m hoping it’s nothing, but Iroha was acting kinda off this morning.”

“Iroha?”

“She didn’t barge into your apartment like usual, right?”

“Now that you mention it, no, she didn’t. I just thought it was probably ’cause she had a lot on her plate, what with the new semester and practically being her class’s rep.”

“That much is right at least. Her homeroom teacher apparently asked for her help with something.” Ozu sighed and shrugged. “But usually she’ll head over to

your place, whether she's busy or not."

"Yeah, you're right."

Thinking back now, it was the same all through the summer vacation. When Iroha had to go to school to help with the festival, she'd asked me to walk with her. Her reasoning was beyond dumb: she said she got mad at the thought of me lounging around in my air-conditioned room reading manga while she worked hard on a blazing hot day. I figured that much was just her being her usual annoying self.

The point was that she still came to my room even though she was busy that day.

"I was thinking maybe it's because you were taking things further with Tsukinomori-san."

"How does that work? Not that we did 'take things further.' I'm just saying, why would it affect Iroha if we had?"

"I'm more surprised you *don't* realize the connection."

I seriously had no idea what he was talking about.

Because of my uncle's watchful eye, I had had to reject Iroha's prior invitation so that I could go to the summer festival with Mashiro. I ended up bumping into Iroha at the festival, and she'd seemed pretty cheerful. She'd looked like she had been enjoying herself with her school friends too.

I hadn't seen her after that, but even then, it was hard to think that Mashiro was the direct cause of— Wait, unless...

"Hang on. I think I get it."

"Finally penetrated your thick skull, huh?"

"Iroha's keeping her distance out of respect for my fake relationship with Mashiro! She used to pretend-flirt with me all the time because she knew it made me feel awkward, but since she realized that kinda stuff wasn't funny anymore, what with my uncle keeping an eye on everything, she—"

"You get a C."

“Hey, cut me some slack. What am I missing to get an A?”

“You said you realized Iroha’s annoyingness is cute, but you’ve barely made any progress since then. It’s even more frustrating than debugging the most cursed program ever. My experience may come from playing dating sims, but even I know people have this emotion called ‘jealousy.’”

“I’m more frustrating than debugging? Come on now...”

Did that mean Ozu thought Iroha was finding it hard to face me right now because she was jealous?

It was true that I now realized that annoying (in certain cases) and cute weren’t mutually exclusive. I had established the theory that pestering someone you liked wasn’t necessarily inefficient nor inappropriate behavior.

Did that mean Iroha’s feelings towards me were romantic? Hmm.

When I spoke to her at the festival yesterday, she was her usual self. I wasn’t convinced that she was acting off because she was jealous that Mashiro and I had gotten closer.

The reason didn’t matter, though; my reaction was going to be the same.

“I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Thanks. That makes me feel better, as her brother.”

“No prob.”

Hopefully Ozu was just overthinking things, but if there *was* something on Iroha’s mind, jealousy or not, then of course I was going to be worried. I decided to ask her about it the next time I saw her.

Just then, the door slid open with a loud rattle, and the noisy classroom fell into immediate silence.

It was Kageishi Sumire, the class’s dictator, also known as the Venomous Queen. Her heels clicked commandingly as she walked up to the teacher’s desk and took up her position as its gallant master, her violet ponytail fluttering behind her and her icy glare deriding the students in front of her. There wasn’t a whisper to be heard as she swept her gaze over her subjects and then turned her back on us without her expression so much as twitching. We’d kept the

volume down to under a decibel, and she just picked up some chalk and started writing on the blackboard, as if she didn't seem to find our efforts worth any praise.

Special project for the Nevermore Festival: King and Queen contest.

Sumire hit the board with a bang as if to emphasize the large letters, then turned back to us.

"Our school's traditional beauty contest to crown King and Queen Nevermore is once again going to be the main event of our annual culture festival," Sumire announced. "If you think you have the looks to win, then I urge you to volunteer yourself."

Even Sumire's presence couldn't stop the stir that rippled through the classroom then. This was a rare event. Normally, she was all about studying—berating us for having too much fun when we could have been spending that time honing ourselves for our future. Now, however, she was encouraging us to get involved in something that was the height of frivolity and should have been long past its time.

None of those students noticed the look in her eyes, but I recognized that sinister sparkle. Sumire *definitely* had her shipping goggles on!

I knew what Murasaki Shikibu-sensei was really like, which was why this was no surprise to me. A king and queen contest was just the sort of thing she'd try to sell to the students. Especially considering the fate that would befall our attractive winners (assuming I wasn't misremembering things).

"The winners of the king and queen contest will pair up with each other for a folk dance during the festival's after-party. It will be a wonderful sight to behold: the school's hottest—of course, I am referencing the viewpoint of a full-fledged member of society, the type of person to value the pursuit of beauty and its appreciation."

She just about managed to save herself from revealing her true thoughts on the matter. The cracks in her mask were starting to reveal the depravity within, but none of the other students seemed to notice.

"The pursuit of beauty... That's so deep! Now I wanna learn how to

appreciate the beauty of muscles even more!”

“Physical beauty... Is there anything sweeter?”

The boys were hanging onto her every word. It was too late for them; Sumire had them trained like monkeys.

I should say now that I had no interest in this contest, and that I was far from the target audience anyway. My only memories about it from last year were how excited the highly sociable members of the class had gotten.

But this year was completely different from last year. This year, there was a beauty in our class who was immediately a top pick for the winner. And that beauty—Mashiro—was my (as far as everyone knew) girlfriend. The extended vacation had only made her more gorgeous and amplified her feminine allure.

“I bet Tsukinomori-san would win if she entered!”

“Yeah. She’s always been cute, but now she’s kinda sexy too!”

The girls were already raring up to support her. It looked like there was no getting out of this now.

“You should totally enter, Tsukinomori-san!”

“M-Me? U-Um... I’m not sure...” Mashiro answered timidly; the girls’ encouragement had triggered her shyness.

Unlike before though, she was able to give a proper reply, even if she still found it hard to maintain eye contact with the girls. Mashiro was just like me though: unsociable. She’d grown a lot, but she still wasn’t at the stage where she was ready to be the center of attention of every student in the school, which was why she was glancing at me now.

“Are you gonna go for king, Aki?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Did you hear what the prize was? The folk dance. I don’t want to dance with anyone but you.”

“Right.”

Fair enough. We were technically dating, and Mashiro had feelings for me.

She probably wouldn't want to dance with some random king, and worse than that, it might lead to trouble—the last thing we needed.

For once, the other students in the class were looking at me with an open friendliness. Often their uncomfortable gazes were filled with envy because of my relationship with Mashiro. Most of the time, they treated me as part of the wallpaper, like they didn't even know whether I was there or not. Why did it have to be when awkward stuff like this came up that they suddenly started paying attention to me?

"So, Aki?"

"You should already know what I'm gonna say. There's no way I'm entering."

I wasn't interested in the least. I did consider Canary's advice to enjoy my youth a little more, but even then, an event like this was just too wild for me.

"Even if I entered, I'd never win," I said.

"Huh? How do you figure?"

"How do *you* figure? The kinda guys who enter that contest are handsome, sports club aces, or just naturally popular with girls. Someone like Ozu might have a shot, but I'd be kicked out in the first round."

"I disagree."

"You shouldn't underestimate just how much people don't notice me. People only know who I am now because I'm dating you, but before that they paid literally zero attention to me. I know I'm totally uninteresting. I can't bring myself to think I'm anything more than that—even though you...fell for me." My voice became hoarse with embarrassment as I finished off my sentence.

Mashiro's face turned red right up to her ears and she shrank back. She quickly averted her gaze and turned back to the bright-eyed girls.

"Aki says he's not gonna enter. So I won't either. I'm sorry..." she stuttered, timid.

It wasn't surprising that she found it hard to give a firm refusal, given what had happened to her before she came to our school. Rejecting her classmates was something that would bring up the trauma of her past, where she was the

victim of bullying. She was probably worried about offending them, scared that they would suddenly stop fawning over her and start treating her as an outcast.

Now though, Mashiro was stronger. She had the courage to reject people—to be hated, a courage she was displaying now.

“Aw, that’s a shame.”

“I thought you could win for sure! Oh well.”

“But that’s just how much you value your time with Ooboshi-kun, right? Aww, I wish I was in love!”

The more Mashiro made use of her newfound courage, the more she’d realize that the world could be surprisingly kind.

I’d do well to reflect on that too. These people wasted their youth and precious time by indulging in inefficient trends. But I’d learned by looking at these normies and social types with a wider lens that many of them were pretty good people. That was something I’d never have noticed in the days I kept my distance from them.

I’d like to say that quiet returned to the classroom once the fuss over Mashiro had died down, but it was a little too soon for that.

“You’re gonna go for king right, Kohinata-kun?”

“Hey, we should totally enter for him! Then he’ll have to do it!”

“Kohinata-kun’ll win for sure!”

That’s right, we didn’t just have a new-and-upcoming beauty in our class. We also had the handsome Kohinata Ozuma, the reliable mainstay of our class with a proven track record of popularity.

“Hm... I’m not really interested.” Ozuma laughed nervously while the girls practically screamed at him. “What do you think, Aki? Should I go for it?”

“Why are you asking me too?”

“I was thinking I’d enter if you wanted me to.”

“Why though?”

Why was everyone leaving all the decision-making to me?

Mashiro was fair enough: we were lovers as far as the outside world was concerned, but Ozu was just a friend. Although, I had helped him fix up his personality flaws in the past, so in some ways you could say we had a deeper relationship than lovers. Or maybe it'd be more accurate to say I was like his dad, as far as communication was concerned.

Anyway, this could be a huge event in my best friend's youth. I should at least think about it seriously. I would've definitely said it was too inefficient to be worth bothering with before, without even giving it a second thought.

"Why don't you give it a try? I think you'd have a good shot at winning, and it might actually be wicked fun." I gave him a little push.

His eyes widened in surprise for a split second, but then he nodded.

"If you say so, Aki, then I don't doubt it. All right, I'll enter."

The girls let out a chorus of high-pitched cheers. Even the boys picked up on it, with some of them jumping on the bandwagon.

"What?! Kohinata's going for king?!"

"I'm not gonna let my throne get stolen by some lanky pretty boy! I'm gonna teach him that a guy without muscle is a guy without charm!"

"Yeah! You show 'im, bud!"

Apparently, muscle training had become a thing among that group of guys, who were now flexing their biceps and getting rowdy over their desire to participate. One of the reasons the Nevermore Festival's King and Queen contest was so popular was because several people from the same class were allowed to enter.

Everyone was cheering and getting excited, like they'd forgotten this was morning homeroom. Sumire watched the class with a steely gaze, and for once she showed no desire to quieten them down. It wasn't a conscious choice of hers. I knew that, below that mask, she was busy fantasizing about Ozu as the next King Nevermore. Eventually, her eyes widened like she'd just come to her senses, and her expression stiffened without anyone noticing.

"Silence! Is this a zoo or a classroom?! Actually, I already know the answer to

that.” She cleared her throat. A friendly smile appeared on her face, something that would be normal for Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, but was incredibly odd coming from the Venomous Queen, Kageishi Sumire. “I shall allow you to act like the monkeys you are during the Nevermore Festival. You may draw upon your savage roots as much as you like until it’s over.”

The classroom erupted into an ear-splitting cheer, and Sumire found herself at the center of a standing ovation.

I suppressed a sigh and wondered whether I’d ever witnessed such an extreme display of counterproductivity. I didn’t resent them or anything, though. I felt like a grade schooler watching my friend play an enjoyable video game. Unfortunately, as someone for whom looks didn’t play a part in life whatsoever, I couldn’t get as excited about the King and Queen contest as them.

When the chime sounded to signal the end of homeroom, I opened up my phone. I put the volume down to zero before launching a game: *Koyagi: When They Cry*, of course. The debut, representative, (and only) work of the 05th Floor Alliance. In some ways, this game was my youth itself. I thought back to that middle schooler we’d met at the summer festival who’d shared his thoughts on the game.

His name was Tomosaka Chatarou-kun, and he was a self-professed fan of the game, as well as the younger brother to Tomosaka Sasara, a suspicious girl who declared herself Iroha’s rival. I’d never sought out our fans’ opinions on Koyagi, because I didn’t want them to influence me, so until then, I’d focused solely on numbers. His passionate feedback on the game had been like a joyful breath of fresh air for me.

Perhaps it was my newfound acceptance of enjoying my youth that meant I was able to appreciate his opinions. Since then, I’d allowed myself to look up feedback on the game now and then.

“Kokuryuuin Kugetsu...annoying...cute...”

I typed those four words into the social network’s search box. This was a method of searching for stuff about your own works that Sumire taught me. You need to put a proper space between the words instead of stringing the

characters together like in regular Japanese text, and search for positive adjectives only.

You're more likely to get positive results this way, though if you're the type to get easily hurt by unrestrained abusive comments online, I suggest you don't search yourself or your works to start with.

Oh hey. There are quite a lotta people talking about Kokuryuuin Kugetsu online.

We used some voice samples for the character's announcement, and summarized the new story to make it sound as interesting as possible. All our hard work was paid back now in the form of internet comments, which was incredibly satisfying. I knew there'd be some users who didn't write up their thoughts online but were quieter in their enjoyment. Ignoring that part of our playerbase was beyond stupid, and so I made sure to keep an eye on our stats too.

"Stats... Huh?! Wait... No way!"

Uneasiness shot up inside me the moment I saw what was on the store page's admin section.

"What's up, Aki?" Ozu asked from the desk behind; he must've heard my gasp.

"Something bad's happened. Like, seriously bad..."

"Oh?"

"Our humble team of developers would never have seen this coming a year ago!"

"Okay?"

"Just how am I supposed to react to this shocking truth before me?!"

"You can explain now. This is starting to get annoying," Ozu said with a terrifyingly sweet smile.

"R-Right, okay. Well..."

I could understand why Ozu was mad. If Iroha had tried the same stunt with

me, someone who despised wasting time, I'd have been at her pressure points by the second line. Ozu did well to last three.

This time, though, I wanted him to allow me just a little inefficiency. I mean, this was something else. You couldn't ask me *not* to get excited about these sorts of numbers.

"*Koyagi*'s reached over two million downloads!"

"Whoa!" Ozu gasped.

"Really?!" That was Mashiro, who'd apparently overheard us.

Most of the class was getting heated over the upcoming festival. But Ozu, Mashiro, and I were shooting thumbs-up at each other for a totally different reason. One that no one besides us knew.

***

"Two million is a huge leap up from one million. Nice job, Aki."

"It's all thanks to the amazing game you guys made. I felt kinda bad, y'know, not being able to cash out on advertising it properly or launching it with any fanfare. But I'm so glad we kept at it."

"You know what a day like this calls for?"

"Yup! A party!"

05th Floor Alliance (4)

AKI
We're gonna have a party tonight to celebrate over two million downloads and ring in the Kokuryuuin Kugetsu update.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
YAHOOOOOO!!

OZ
Sounds like fun.

OZ
It's not just the downloads. Our DAU is going up too.

Makigai Namako
Nice one.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
what's dau again?

AKI
Daily active users.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
huh

OZ
I'm surprised you're on a mobile game dev team and you didn't know that.

Makigai Namako
Same.

AKI
It's fair enough. Illustrations are more her speciality.

AKI
As long as she draws great pictures, she gets away with whatever.

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Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
you heard the man! i'm a specialist!

AKI
What about you, Makigai-sensei? Think you can make it?

Makigai Namako
Uh...

AKI
You've been busy lately, so it's been a while since you've joined a party.

AKI
It's a big day for us. It'd be nice to be able to talk to you again.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
um.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
um! um! but isn't makigai-sensei crazy busy?!

OZ
Why are you talking for him?

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
oh, y'know, it's just we've known each other for so long...

OZ
?

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
i just thought, i get how you feel aki, but if makigai-sensei's busy and can't make it then there's nothing we can do!

Makigai Namako
It's fine, Shikibu. Thanks for being considerate.

Makigai Namako
I'll join. Remotely of course, like always.

© tomari

AKI
All right!

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
huh? you sure?

Makigai Namako
Yeah.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
ok. if you say it's fine.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
it's all the same to me either way.

Makigai Namako
I've had a bit more time lately, you could say.

Makigai Namako
Not just time either.

AKI
I see?

AKI
Actually, I don't, but it'll be good to speak properly again.

AKI
I'm looking forward to it.

Makigai Namako
Yup.

OZ
So tonight at your place, Aki? Same as usual?

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei
no objections here!

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Chapter 2: My Friend’s Little Sister Is Being Cold to Me!

“Congratulations on two million downloads! Cheers!!!”

It was the evening after the first day of the new semester. In the middle of a peaceful residential area sat an apartment building with pretty affordable rent, and we were there on its fifth floor. Thanks to the flawless soundproofing, this was the perfect place to get a little rowdy without disturbing the neighbors above, below, to the left, and even to the right of us.

The excited toast was led by Kageishi Sumire (technically a teacher) aka Murasaki Shikibu-sensei (technically an illustrator). She was so loud that the toast reverberated through the air.

Ozu laughed. “She sure is stoked. Cheers.”

“Yeah. If I lived anywhere else, the neighbors’d be complaining. Cheers.”

“*Let’s let her off the hook for today. It’s a special day after all. Cheers!*” Makigai Namako’s digitally empowered voice said.

“Cheers...”

“What’s in this highball?! It’s way too good!”

Our teacher had gulped down her entire first drink without paying any attention to the words of Ozu, Makigai Namako-sensei, or me.

She seriously tested my patience sometimes.

“I just realized Tsukinomori-san isn’t here,” Ozu said, looking around the room.

“Right. I invited her, but she turned me down.”

“That’s not like her. Considering Iroha’s here, I’d thought she would wanna spend her every waking second with you.”

“Maybe she’s being considerate. Not that she needed to be.”

I had first asked her over LIME, which was when Mashiro rejected me. Not to be discouraged, I went up to her room about an hour ago when she'd come back from school and buzzed her interphone so I could invite her directly.

Mashiro opened the door.

"I really want you to celebrate with us. I'm being genuine. This is only for Alliance members and long-standing allies like you."

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to be unsociable. I'll prove it by being an overly clingy girlfriend when we're at school. That includes when I help you with directing Iroha-chan."

It was clear that she was determined to sit this one out.

Her refusal wasn't like when she had just transferred. She had tried to turn me down that time so she could hide herself away in her shell. This time she turned me down with a gentle, angelic smile.

It was simply a result of Mashiro's kindness.

It was impossible for her to suddenly become one of the Alliance's founding members, so she couldn't exactly share in the same memories with us. That was probably why she held back; to give us a chance to reminisce together. So I couldn't—no, I *shouldn't*—push it, I decided.

"She refused you, huh? I can't imagine Tsukinomori-san turning you down so gracefully back when she was so shy and withdrawn."

"People can change a lot in a month. You did."

"Ah, I gotcha. You worked your magic on Tsukinomori-san too, right Aki?"

"Don't phrase it like that, or—"

"Wee ooh wee ooh! This is the yaoi police! Whazzat about working magic on men?! No way I'm letting such a beautiful sentiment pass!"

We were suddenly joined by a drunk. The needless phrasing and the way she whistled through her fingers were enough to make her seem a real policewoman.

"Don't just drink your juice and pretend nothing's happened!" the drunk

continued. “Wholesome yaoi is all about the situation! Do it once more, with feeling! Come on!”

“Sh-Shut up, quit pushing, and stay back so I don’t have to smell the alcoholic stink on your breath!” I pushed away the drunken face of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei; Kageishi Sumire-sensei was long gone.

“Aww, c’mon. We got two million downloads! Two million! You know how much work I put in? Gimme my reward!”

“Your reward’s gonna be a bonus...paid out in gift cards so that there’s no conflict with your teacher’s income.”

“I don’t want gift cards! Show me the forbidden fruit!”

“Ugh! You’re starting to piss me off. Go back to horny jail and stay there!”

The fact she looked so happy while she drank only annoyed me more. Though I guess I didn’t really have a right to complain. Half the point of this party was for her to have fun. The other half, I was thinking it was about time to announce. My face twisted into a grin, like a host showing his true colors (but then maybe I was prejudiced).

“You’re right, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. You *have* put in a lot of work.”

“Aw, coming out with the truth all of a sudden? You’re gonna make me blush!”

“*Hey, don’t get carried away. I do a lot for this team too...*”

“I know you do, Makigai-sensei,” I said. “You, Ozu—everyone here has done so much.”

But.

“Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, you have your job as a teacher. You’d be in real trouble if they found out you’re an Alliance member. I’m really grateful that you’ve stuck with us despite the risk.”

“W-Wait, Aki? Don’t just croon into my ear like that...”

“Where’s that smugness gone? When the real praise starts pouring in, you don’t know what to do, do you? That’s pretty cute...”

“W-W— D-Don’t pull those pick-up lines on me. Flirt with, uh, Mashiro-chan, or Iroha-chan instead.”

“I couldn’t do that. You’re the only one for me.”

“You know I only steer the ships! I don’t participate!” Sumire’s voice cracked.

There was an abrupt commotion from the others, who’d been watching me use the deeper tones of my voice to whisper into her ear.

“*Hey. You’re getting a bit too close.*” Makigai Namako-sensei sounded uncomfortable.

Of course he did. To him, it looked like I’d suddenly started flirting with Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.

BE
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I obviously wasn't doing this because I'd suddenly developed a crush on her and wanted to take things to the next level. There was no real feeling to it; I'd just strung together some standard pick-up lines I found online.

It seemed Ozu had already figured out what I was up to, and he turned to the laptop.

"Don't sweat it, Makigai-sensei. I think Aki's just..." He lowered his voice and finished his explanation.

"*Oh, I get it. Nice one, Aki. Keep it up.*" Far from being uncomfortable, Makigai Namako-sensei was now actively encouraging my behavior.

I knew my best friend and Alliancemate would catch on quickly.

"To thank you for your hard work, I prepared a special bottle of *Dom Pérignon* for you. Would you like some?"

"Y-Yes!"

The pick-up lines and the temptation of alcohol were a killer combo. She was immediately putty in my hands, and her cheeks were flushed as she stared at the liquid pouring out of the sparkling bottle before her.

"You even got me such high-class liquor. I didn't know you cared, Aki," she said between sobs.

"That's right. I wouldn't do this for anyone else. Go ahead and drink. Take a nice, big gulp."

"Thanks!" Sumire immediately followed my instructions and gasped once she'd swallowed the liquid down. "Those bubbles are intense, but it's great!"

In a flash, the champagne that had sloshed around in the glass had disappeared into her stomach. The way she drank was true to expectations. She was a heavy drinker, not a heavy thinker.

Too bad that sugary words were often laced with poison.

"You drank it?"

"Hm?"

"You drank the most expensive alcohol I've got?"

“What’s the matter? Um. You were being so nice to me before. How come you look like you wanna kill me now?”

“Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. I’ve got a favor to ask. And since I’ve been so nice to you, I know you won’t say no.”

“Depends what it is, but I’ll definitely totally consider it!”

“Good. Now...” I placed a hand on her shoulder and gave a smile brighter than all the sparkling stars of nighttime Kabukicho. “You can give me the artwork celebrating two million downloads by the end of the day tomorrow then.”

“AAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

It was normal for mobile games to celebrate certain events with special illustrations. Though it didn’t apply to *Koyagi*—a game without a proper advertising policy which the Alliance worked on in our spare time—apparently it rarely happened in the industry that a game’s downloads would come so thick and fast that the developers would miss the milestone.

If we promoted the occasion on the app and social networks just right, it could get people talking, and spread awareness about our game. I was prepared to do anything to get a new illustration out of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei for that very reason!

“You tricked me!”

“Don’t make it sound so serious. Besides, you enjoyed it, didn’t you?”

“That’s exactly what a con man would say!”

“Okay, and? Are you gonna draw me the illustration or not?”

“Ungh... This is so unfair. I don’t have any choice but to say yes, do I?”

“Yes it is, then. Is there a problem?”

“Well, by the end of the day *tomorrow*? It’s already past nine now, and I’m drunk!”

“Right, so you’ve got twenty-seven hours. Plenty of time.”

“I wanna spend those twenty-seven hours doing stuff that *isn’t* drawing!” Murasaki Shikibu shot back in a whine.

“Everyone’s waiting to see what you come up with, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.”

“Gngh.”

“Are you gonna let the fans down?”

“Gnnngh.”

“An illustration for two million downloads. Will you do it?”

“I’ll do it!” Tears gathered in her eyes, her teeth were clenched hard together, and her voice came out like I had my hands around her neck. Sumire downed her second glass of champagne.

“Don’t drink and cry. Honestly...” I scratched the back of my head with a sigh, at which point Ozu came up to me bearing the laptop.

On the screen was the icon of Makigai Namako, the 05th Floor Alliance’s prestigious writer who had been with us since the very beginning.

“She’s chugging that stuff down even while crying.”

“She complains now, but once she starts drawing, she’ll get super into it. That’s just what she’s like. That’s why Aki knew he could ask that of her, even if it seems kinda unreasonable.”

“I get it, yeah. Because you’ve known her for a long time, you know what makes her tick.” I could hear the sigh in Makigai Namako-sensei’s voice, but then his tone got serious again. *“Oh, by the way—I’ve been meaning to ask this for a while, actually—is it just me, or has your sister been acting weird, Ozu?”*

“You noticed, huh?”

You could probably see the ellipses dotted across my face.

I hadn’t mentioned anything about her yet, but there was one more important person attending the Alliance’s party tonight. A girl who made just as much of a ruckus as Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, and who poured our illustrator new drinks whenever she wanted them, just like a perfect little kouhai should. She was Kohinata Ozuma’s little sister, which made her my friend’s little sister.

None of the others knew this, but she was the one who used her voice to breathe life into every character of *Koyagi: When They Cry*, an All-in-One and

One-in-All voice actress.

Kohinata Iroha, my kouhai who had it in for me and me alone.

You may be wondering why, if she was attending the party, she hadn't featured anywhere yet, but she actually did have a spoken line a little bit ago. She said, "Cheers." After that, she said nothing at all, and instead sat hugging her knees in the corner and sipping her tomato juice and hiding behind her golden hair. I swear to you it was her, even if her actions were totally contradicting her usual personality right now.

"What?" Having sensed our glares, Iroha was now glaring at us with suspicion.

I gulped. "I just thought, it's rare for you to be in a bad mood like this, huh?"

"I'm not in a bad mood."

"Actions speak louder than words. You're usually bright and sociable, but I can see the dark aura coming off of you. What's up?"

"Shut up. Leave me alone and let me drink in peace."

I could feel the spurt of blood as her sharp words pierced my heart. Sharp and cold. So cold. Usually she clung to me way past the point of being annoying. Why was she being so mean today? And why was it oddly familiar?

"There's something wrong with Iroha. She's totally acting like Mashiro..."

"That's it!" I was just coming back from having my heart torn to shreds by Iroha when Makigai Namako-sensei's comment hit the nail on the head. Iroha was acting *exactly* like Mashiro. "Mashiro's been so much sweeter lately that I didn't make the connection at first. I'm surprised you figured it out before me, since you don't interact with her that often."

"*Huh?! Oh, well, of course I'd notice. Writers need to be good at observing people.*"

"Ah, makes sense."

That aside, Iroha's weird behavior had me genuinely worried. Especially after Ozu had brought it up at school. If something was upsetting her, I wanted to cheer her up, but I didn't know what it was, which made talking to her when she was already gloomy a risk. *If only I had a little more information*, I thought,

when— “Hey, hey, hey, hey! You’re looking a little down in the dumps, Iroha-chan!”

Oh my God, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, no!

Totally illiterate when it came to reading social situations, Sumire crashed backwards through the walls Iroha had put up around herself, plumped down next to her, and began nuzzling her with a cheek.

“You reek of alcohol. Stay away. Or I’ll snap.”

“Aww! You’re being so cold, Iroha-chan! That sounds like stuff Mashiro-chan would say!”

“Hmph.”

“Hey! Hey, hey, hey! Look at meee!”

But Iroha had stopped reacting altogether.

I understood how annoying Shikibu could be more than anyone, but to totally shut down was so unlike Iroha—yet *completely* like Mashiro.

“Aki!” Sumire wailed. “Iroha-chan’s bullying me! Lemme cry on your shoulder!”

“Yeah, yeah, poor you.”

“Poor me! She said I *reeked* of alcohol! That’s slander! Poor, poor me!”

“Actually, it has to be false to be slander.”

“Stop being so logical! My feelings hurt so bad! Can I get an extension on my deadline?!”

“That reminds me, I learned about a new pressure point the other day. Want me to show you?”

“I was kidding sorry I’ll draw the illustration just please don’t go after my pressure points!” Sumire wept, pressing her forehead into the floor as she bowed before me.

It may have seemed like a weird apology, but it was normal for her, so there wasn’t much for me to comment on. *Iroha* was the one who wasn’t being normal right now, and she was the one I was worried about.

“Hey, Iroha—”

“How many times do I need to tell you to leave me alone before you’ll actually do it? Do you have slugs for brains?”

“Apologies. I’ll stop now.”

No matter how I tried to address her, this was what she’d come back with. Fortunately, everyone at the party was used to Mashiro, so having somebody prickly around wasn’t disturbing the mood at all. Ozu, Sumire, Makigai Namako-sensei, and I all knew that that sort of attitude was just an individual thing, so we didn’t take it personally. No one was getting mad at her mysterious coldness. We were simply worried because it was out of character for her.

“Maybe she’s playing Tsukinomori-san. Y’know, like a character in a play?” Ozu said.

“Huh? But what for?”

“Dunno. Maybe she’s mourning her absence.”

“I...guess it could be. Rest in peace, Mashiro. But I mean, what would be the point? And at a party of all places?”

“That’s where my theory falls apart, huh?”

Not even her own brother was able to work out what was going on.

In the end, Iroha spent the entire party in that unsociable mood, even when everyone was leaving. The anxious question marks were still floating above my head by the time I was alone and in bed.

Please let Iroha be back to her normal self tomorrow...

***

I don’t know how long I actually slept for, but it felt like days. There was just so much information that needed sifting through in my head that my consciousness seemed to sink to the deepest depths of its dreams. Only when I started feeling a strange shaking sensation did it start to return, like bubbles rising to the surface.

Shake, shake.

The sensation began around my stomach, like waves rippling through it. Was this how it felt to be a dad sleeping on his day off when his kid started shaking him and pestering him to play? But I couldn't imagine a future where I was married with kids.

Shake, shake.

I didn't even know any girls who would *want* to marry me.

Shake, shake.

Wait, I guess there was Mashiro—she liked me. If I married her, though, I'd be spending all my mental capacity on trying to avoid upsetting her every day.

Shake, shake.

There were other girls I knew too. Sumire, Midori, Otoi-san... But with their strong "personalities," I couldn't imagine ending up with any of them.

Shake, shake.

Then there was Iroha, but—

Shake, shake.

—marrying her would completely change our current relationship, so— *Grind, grind.*

—Wait, what was this weird pressing sensation on my body?

"Ack!"

My consciousness was switched back on just like that.

I opened my eyes to the sunlight streaming in through the window, but its brightness made me squeeze them shut again.

"You're so lazy, honestly. How long are you planning to sleep for, exactly?"

"Hnrgh?"

I could feel a strange weight on my abdomen. I tried to lift my neck to see its source. My sight was still blurry with sleep, and I struggled to distinguish between shapes. As the seconds passed, my regular vision returned, and I was gradually able to make out a face.

“It takes bears literal seconds to be woken up by their zookeepers. Looks like you’re even lower than one of them.” Those words had all the stringent toxicity of a cruel queen. “If you can’t even wake up by yourself, you’re going to crash and burn when you enter society.”

“You’re overreacting,” I mumbled.

“Talking back, are we? You know I’m in a position to crush your organs under my foot, don’t you?” Unperturbed by my remark, she pushed harder on my stomach with what was apparently her foot.

© tomari

This girl seemed to be sadistic enough to step on a guy while he was asleep. Her voice was identical to that mature tone I never normally heard outside of the classroom.

I'd expected to be met with a disgusted gaze from a purple-haired teacher in a stylish suit and dark tights, a sight that any hardcore masochist would thirst for. But the female in front of me wasn't the woman from two doors down coming in for a sexy night-visit. The first clue was that she wasn't wearing dark tights; she was bare-legged.

"What are you spacing out over? Say something. Oink, pig."

"What are you doing, Iroha?"

It was my friend's little sister from next door, dressed in her uniform and, as usual, without socks. She was the one stepping on me. She looked disgusted, and the fact that it was a high schooler and not a teacher probably wouldn't change the joy felt by any masochist in my situation.

Iroha didn't usually do stuff like this, and more than concerned for my organs, I was confused. Was she trying to annoy me in a fresh new way?

She wasn't saying anything.

"Iroha?"

She was just looking down at me in silence. The coldness in her eyes was just like Kageishi Sumire's when she was in her Venomous Queen mode.

Because I knew Sumire's true nature, that look never scared me. It actually exasperated me because I had full knowledge of the trash that lay within. Now that Iroha was perfectly recreating that gaze, I realized just how terrifying it could actually be. This was the pressure the rest of the class felt on a daily basis.

So I, the pig, stared back at the queen in silence for a few moments.

"Nothing to say?"

"Huh?"

"You answer perfectly well to Sumire-sensei, don't you? You get mad at her, and turn the tables by going after her pressure points. Why not try it out now,

Ooboshi-kun?”

“Sorry, I seriously can’t keep up with— Wait.”

A light bulb suddenly sprang to life in my head.

Yesterday she was Mashiro. Today she was Sumire. What if she was totally becoming every girl who was close to me, speech quirks and all? Given Iroha’s personality, there was only one reason she’d do that.

“I get it! This is all acting practice!”

“What?”

“When you act, you imagine the entire life of that character. The better your imagination, the stronger your acting skills.”

“Huuuh?”

“*Koyagi*’s two million downloads has made you want to develop your acting skills even further.”

“Um. No.”

The enthusiasm from the voice actor under my direction warmed my heart so much that tears welled up in my eyes.

“So it’s true. Geniuses can’t just sit on their talents. Even a genius keeps working hard to develop their talents.”

“Um. Sure.”

“God, you had me worried. You should’ve just told me this was all training to bring you to new heights.”

Iroha stayed silent.

“But yeah, it all makes sense now. Okay. I’ll help you out with your practice.” As a passionate fire burned in my chest, I shot her a thumbs-up. “Let’s get you to the peak of your voice-acting potential together!”

“There’s nothing more pathetic than getting stepped on, yet you’re spouting cool lines with your thumb in the air. Also, you’ve got it totally wrong.”

“You could’ve said that several lines ago.”

She let me get all excited over nothing and pushed me way past the peak of embarrassment. And as she'd just pointed out to me, she was still stepping on me.

"That wasn't right..." Iroha sighed, took her foot away, and jumped off the bed. Something about my reaction seemed to have disappointed her. "It's not gonna work properly if he doesn't respond like he would to Sumire-chan-sensei..."

"What are you muttering about?"

"Hm? Nothing."

"It's definitely something. You've been weird since yesterday."

"Girls have a lot of complicated troubles. Not that a virgin like you'd understand." Iroha sighed.

"Must take some talent to bully me while sounding so depressed."

The bullying was normal, but it was without its usual snappiness. Iroha didn't respond to my quip. Instead, she left the bedroom while still muttering to herself.

What the hell was going on with her? I didn't have a single clue.

There had been times when she acted strange in the past, but this time her actions seemed completely chaotic. She seemed seriously upset about something, but that wouldn't make normal people barge into someone else's room and pretend to be Sumire, all while stepping on them in the process.

If she had come in here and giggled, claiming she was treating me like a pig because she was depressed, I would naturally have punched her in the stomach. It would've at least fit her personality to a T, and then I wouldn't feel so worried.

What on earth had happened to her?

***

"Hey, Ozu! Iroha isn't being annoying enough! You know, that annoying side of her that's also cute?! I need more of it!"

“Wait a second, Aki, *I’m* the one who’s supposed to speak on behalf of the reader...”

Interlude: Kohinata and Tomosaka-san

I left the apartment building and headed for school alone. I felt kinda bad leaving Senpai behind without an explanation, but I really didn't feel like spending too much time with him right now. Sorry, Senpai.

It was still a little early. The roads were quiet. I walked along the quaint pathways—mostly free of people and the sounds of car engines—my head filled with thought.

I don't get it.

I'd followed Otoi-san's advice. Yesterday I had been Mashiro-senpai, and this morning I was Sumire-chan-sensei, but things weren't working out like I'd hoped. I thought that, by becoming the other girls, I could experience how Senpai treated them for myself. But even when I treated him as cold as Mashiro-senpai did, I still didn't understand how he felt about her.

This morning, I waited for him to react to me like he usually did to Sumire-chan-sensei, but that never happened.

I guess it didn't matter how good my acting was. Senpai would only see me for me. It made sense. I still *looked* like me, and I couldn't do anything about that. Since it had come from Otoi-san, who was super mature, I thought it'd be a good idea, but in hindsight, I might've been acting like an idiot this entire time.

Okay, that's it! It's time to stop thinking!

It was Senpai himself who taught me that steady effort was the key to everything. I'd never get anywhere if I gave up just because things weren't going as great as I'd hoped. I could kinda already sense that this was probably gonna end in failure, but I had plenty of time to decide later. *After* I'd tried becoming the girls closest to him.

Besides, this was about more than just knowing how Senpai saw those girls. These were the girls who the guy I liked had influenced positively. It was

important to get a deeper understanding of their personalities; then I could face my own feelings and decide what I wanted to do with them.

“Who should I go for next?”

“That’s a weird thing to mutter to yourself.”

“Ah!”

A sudden voice right by my ear had my vocal cords practically flying out of my mouth. When I was done jumping, I turned and saw the girl who annoyed me to the very depths of my soul.

Her brown hair was brought together in a stylish side ponytail. Her uniform looked messy at first glance, but on closer inspection, you could see that effort had been put in to strike a perfect balance between messy and acceptable.

It was Tomosaka Sasara from my class. “Tomosaka-san” to her face, but just “Tomosaka Sasara” in my mind.

“Tomosaka-san! What a surprise to see you here on the way to school.” I gave her my sweetest honor student smile.

Honestly, I didn’t know how to deal with her.

At school, I tried to be nice to everyone. I tried to avoid any fighting, but I also kept a polite distance from others. I was basically trying to be a true neutral honor student, but she always tried to break down my facade, all without a semblance of guilt.

I never wanted to compete with anyone in the classroom, but she always challenged me without taking no for an answer. I’m also human, and even I get frustrated and annoyed. She used that to draw out my competitive side. It was *so, so, so* annoying, the way she always tried to make me look bad, and how she’d push me inches from going off at her.

My cheeks were actually twitching a little this very moment.

“Your timing was so perfect, I’d almost think you were stalking me,” I said. “That’s sort of creepy.”

“You’re making it sound so bad! I just happened to see you on my way to school, so I decided to come talk to you.”

“You live around here?”

“Other side of the station.”

“Wait, you really *are* a stalker?” I was a little taken aback. I knew she’d taken notice of me, but I didn’t realize it went *this* far.

“I’m *not* a stalker!” Tears welled up in Tomosaka Sasara’s eyes. “This route just has a nice view; that’s all! There’s the way the morning sun shines through here, and how there’s no one else around!”

“A nice view?”

“What’s wrong with that?! I use Pinsta like everyone else, y’know! Look.”

“Oh.”

Pinsta. Or Pinstagram. A social network where you could take photos with your phone, edit them to look all nice, and then upload them to get likes and followers. I’d never touched it myself, but it seemed to be all the rage with girls these days.

The photo on her phone’s screen showed the morning light shining through a backstreet.

If I remembered right, there was a road nearby with lots of night business on it, including a bar Sumire-chan-sensei liked to visit. The pink signage stood out at night and looked anything but respectable. But in Tomosaka Sasara’s photo, it actually looked pretty. I found myself sighing.

There were tons of thumbnails with different photos on her homepage. This wasn’t an account she’d just started yesterday or this morning.

“That’s a lot of photos you’ve got there. And—wait. A million followers?!” I was so shocked at the number I raised my voice.

Tomosaka Sasara’s eyes glistened like a cat’s. “Oh, whoops! You saw that, huh? I’m actually a super famous influencer on Pinstagram and I don’t wanna get doxxed, so I’ve been keeping it a secret, but now you’ve seen it. Oh no!”

Her acting skills could use some real work. I was on the path to becoming an actor myself (even if I was taking the long way round), so I thought about saying something. Because there was no point to it, I decided against it.

“So you’re a popular Pinstagrammer. That’s cool!”

“Oh, stop! ‘Super popular’? Aww, I’m blushing! Heh heh!”

Both the way she wore a carefree smile while she gushed about why she was so great, and the way she shamelessly exaggerated the praise I gave her set me on edge. I found it *so* hard to deal with her on a very instinctual level.

“Hey, Kohinata. You should get a Pinsta account.”

“I need to go this way. I’ll see you later!”

“Wait! Why are you ignoring me?! And whaddya mean ‘this way’?! We go to the same school!”

I clicked my tongue quietly so she wouldn’t hear. She got me. I didn’t want to go all the way to school with her, but being too obvious about shaking her off would be out of character for honor student Iroha. I’d need to play it safe.

“Sorry! I was just kidding.”

“Well, I’m not laughing! Y’know, I think you’re secretly a big meanie, Kohinata.”

“What? That’s not a very nice thing to say.” I smiled at her. I was pretty good at brushing things off like that when people were getting too close to the truth.

If she thought I was that mean, then why couldn’t she just leave me alone? Why was she walking next to me? I seriously couldn’t understand how her brain worked.

“Whatever. Anyway, Pinsta. You should join!”

“Hmm. I don’t really have any photos I’d want to upload.”

“You could just put up some selfies. Just snap some quick when you’re all dressed up and ready to go out on the weekend or something.”

“I don’t really ‘go out.’”

I spent most weekends hanging around Senpai’s place in loungewear. I had clothes for going out, but I didn’t put too much effort into being fashionable. I know teenage girls are supposed to be into that kind of thing, but I wasn’t. I don’t really know what else to tell you.

“Now you’re nitpicking. If you start Pinsta, we can compete with each other! We could see who’d win: you, or me and my million followers.”

“It wouldn’t be a competition. You just want to get one up on me...”

“So?”

“At least deny it.”

I wasn’t sure I’d ever met anyone who was so eager and open about asserting dominance over me. It might be interesting to see who could win if we went head to head on equal footing, but that didn’t make her any less annoying.

“If you don’t want to start because you don’t really get it, I can teach you.”

“No, I’m not really—”

—interested, I was going to say, but the reply stuck in my throat. Tomosaka Sasara’s eyes were sparkling like a dog who wanted me to throw a Frisbee, and I could almost see an invisible tail wagging wildly back and forth like a metronome.

She really wants to talk about Pinsta, huh? Badly.

If I brushed the subject away, she’d get upset. That thought was enough to make me want to show some interest to appease her—which was strange, because I didn’t really like her all that much. If Senpai could read my thoughts right now, I was sure he’d criticize me for my inefficiency.

“A million followers is an incredible number. How did you get that many?”

“*Well*!” There was a real bounce to her voice. She must’ve really wanted to tell me, because the second I asked my question, she came back with a reply faster than a fish getting snapped up by a shark. “I joined in junior high and just uploaded now and again. It was kinda frustrating at first because I got no views at all, but then the more I took, the more I got a sense for what kinda photos were gonna get me the most likes!”

“You kept going out of frustration? Hm, that’s not a bad attitude to have.”

I was genuinely impressed. I’d spent a lot of time close to someone who worried daily about how to get his game more downloads, and I could kind of see how the two situations overlapped.

“Now I’m one of the biggest influencers out there. My fashion, photos, food, all of it just screams charisma! It’s all stuff that I get from just being out on the go.”

All I could do was let out a dry laugh. It was almost refreshing to see someone so capable of talking big about themselves. I was even a little jealous, to be honest. She was totally free to express herself to this extent. The way she shone without anything holding her back made her like a jewel in a locked showcase to me.

“I didn’t know any of this about you. If everyone in our class knew you were this famous, you’d probably get really popular.”

Then she could get all the validation she needed for that massive ego of hers and stop harassing me over random things. A strange expression crossed her face then, one that was hard to describe.

“What?” I asked. “What’s that weird look for?”

“Oh, I was just thinking that you’re totally right. Ha ha. Aha ha ha!”

“Hm?”

“I’d love for everyone to know. I would! But I use a pseudonym, so no one’s ever figured it out. And I bet they wouldn’t believe me.”

“Oh, I see.” I looked at the phone she held out to me. “‘SARA.’ Right.”

Her username was just a distorted version of her real name. The use of romanized letters reminded me of those people who worship all things American and think New York is a paradise.

I then remembered her brother. I think his name was Chatarou-kun. She’d called him “Charo,” with an American intonation and everything. Poor kid, having to put up with his sister’s weird interests.

Namu Amida Butsu. May Buddha look after your soul.

“Huh?”

During my silent prayer, I suddenly noticed something odd about SARA’s page. Her profile picture was a close-up of her face and her hand shooting a peace sign, but there was just...something weird about it. It just looked

different from the Tomosaka Sasara standing in front of me, different enough to remind me of the tagline of a horror movie I watched at Senpai's house once.

I might not have been on social media, but I was still a girl. Even I could figure out why the photo didn't match reality.

"This photo's edited so much, it looks like a completely different person."

"What? How?" She looked genuinely confused. It was almost scary how much self-awareness she was lacking. Maybe she thought that was how she actually looked in real life.

It was probably that app, SMOW. It was the most popular photo-editing app among girls right now, and boasted that it could make even a sumo wrestler look skinny. It was only natural for her to use something like that to make herself look prettier, and I wasn't mean enough to step in and crush her dreams.

Still, with this, it was no surprise no one in our class realized it was her. Her name was different and her face was edited; at best they might think it *looked like* her. Again, I wasn't mean enough to point it out.

"Why don't you tell your friends about your account if you want them to know? You don't need to just sit around and wait for them to notice."

"No way. That'd make it look like I *wanted* them to find it, which is just cringe."

"But you do."

"Well, yeah! But I want them to find it because I'm so super charismatic that I can't hide it, not because I just told them!"

Oh my God, who even cares this much?

"You probably shouldn't have told me then."

"You don't count. I told you 'cause I wanna compete with you, not 'cause I want you to drown me in attention."

"I kind of get it, but also don't. The way social media enthusiasts think is way too complex for me." I paused. "Wait."

I smiled thinly, trying to make it sound like I was complimenting her at least. It was a little mean-spirited even for me, but as I spoke, a single face suddenly popped into my head. A small girl with a cute face, who liked to dress in lolita fashion. The super idol-slash-editor from UZA Bunko, who worked with both Mashiro-senpai and Makigai Namako-sensei: seventeen-year-old Kiraboshi Canary. Thinking about it, she was also a female with a deep connection to Senpai.

We'd only met her this summer, but she was a talented director, the same as Senpai. She had assigned him a task to overcome like he was her student, and I'd bet she took up just as much of his thoughts as the rest of the Alliance—if not more.

What was more, she had an intense personality. That would make it difficult to understand her thought process, so if I was going to be her in front of Senpai, I'd need to get some practice in first.

As luck would have it, here was someone with a strong social media presence right in front of me.

"Tomosaka-san. Will you teach me about Pinsta?"

"Oh! You're interested now?" She laughed. "Good. Good! I'll show you just how much better I am at it than you!"

"Ha ha. Thanks."

As I gave my answer, I was already inwardly preparing myself for becoming Kiraboshi Canary. All I needed was to absorb some social media knowledge from Tomosaka Sasara, and I'd probably be able to pull off a pretty accurate representation. I let myself fall deep, deep into my own consciousness on a journey to search for this new role that I knew was hiding in there somewhere.

Chapter 3: My Friend's Little Sister Chirps at Everyone!

"Well, Mashiro, I guess I should explain why I called you out to this deserted place."

It was lunchtime. Mashiro and I were on the first floor of our classroom's building, in the empty space under the stairs, surrounded by ownerless chairs and desks. The faraway voices of students chatting in the classrooms created an ASMR-like backing track. There was no one about, but their voices made it seem like we weren't entirely secluded. I felt like I was a kid sharing exciting secrets in a hideout or something.

"Yeah. I know." Mashiro nestled up close to me and nodded, a quiet expression on her reddening face.

My heart jolted. "Oh. Sorry to make you do this for me."

"It's okay. If it's what you want to do, then I'll help you out. It would make me very happy."

It was like someone had plucked a scene right out of a teenage romance movie. Here were a young boy and girl, hidden away in a dimly lit space where nobody could see them. There was only one thing to expect from a situation like this.

You've probably already guessed.

"It's about Iroha."

"It's about Iroha-chan, isn't it?"

Some teenagers we were. There was nothing dirty about the thoughts in our heads; we just cut right to the chase in the least sexy way possible. Anyone who was expecting this to fade out to black was probably on their way to beat us up right now. Sorry to break it to you, but Mashiro and I were a *pure* fake couple.

Mashiro aside, I wasn't about to do anything stupid when I didn't even have

feelings for her. There were going to be no naughty accidents here thanks to one man: Tsukinomori Makoto. He was the CEO of Honeyplace Works and the man who held the 05th Floor Alliance's future in his hands. He was also my uncle and Mashiro's father, and he had strictly forbidden us from getting into a real relationship.

Determined to protect his daughter's chastity, he was less her guardian and more a watchful unicorn—to the extent that I might start calling him my Uncle Corn. But anyway, I wasn't about to do anything weird as long as he was keeping his eye on us.

In a way, though, Mashiro and I were co-conspirators. We were both working on the plan to cultivate Iroha's cute brand of annoying, and on getting her a best friend. Someone she could open her heart to. That was our joint goal, and that was why we had something way more important to discuss here than sex.

"There's been a roadblock in our get-Iroha-a-best-friend operation. It's to do with how she's been acting lately."

"Yeah, I know. She's been acting weird, right?"

"You've noticed too? You weren't at the party... Did you catch her before that or something?"

"Wh— Oh, um! I spotted her at school...you know?"

"Really? I barely see her at school. Made me think you barely see anyone in different grades."

"Oh, but it's different for girls. Like, we see each other in the bathroom and stuff."

"Hm? Oh well. I mean, this isn't supposed to be an interrogation."

"Good. Because asking any more questions would've made you scum. Yup."

I didn't get it at all, but I didn't have a reason to disbelieve her. Girls' bathrooms had stalls, and they went in there to do their makeup and stuff too, which just added to the lines. Maybe if the wait was too long for the second-year bathrooms, they'd go to another floor. I'm just guessing, though.

"Anyway, if you've noticed her strange behavior, then at least I don't have to

bother explaining too much. Basically, it's like she's trying to act like other girls, and I have no clue why."

"She's probably not doing it for practice or anything, right?"

"I thought so too, but that was way off the mark."

"Huh. Maybe she's just mad about something, or she just got depressed for some reason."

"That crossed my mind at the party too. But then she showed up in my bedroom this morning and acted like Sumire-sensei in sadist mode, stepping on my stomach while I was sleeping and stuff. That's not exactly what I'd call normal behavior."

"She went to your place this morning?"

"Yeah. I mean, she comes almost every morning, but today she was especially weird."

"Huh. Every morning. Hmm..."

"Mashiro?"

Was it just me, or had her eyes grown super cold all of a sudden?

"You're cheating on me."

"Ow! Don't kick me."

"Shut up. Take that."

She was kicking my shins under the desk. Well, it was more like she was prodding them with the tips of her toes, so it didn't even hurt. But it's natural to say "ow" when you're being kicked, whether it actually hurts or not. Humans are weird like that.

Mashiro turned her face away in a huff. Our relationship may have been fake, but we were still technically lovers—and *she* had actual feelings for me. It was only natural she'd be jealous if I was getting close to Iroha. I'd already dedicated myself to the ways of the piece of shit, so I decided to react like a boyfriend should.

"There is sorta a reason why she lets herself into my place."

“A reason?”

“Due to various unfortunate circumstances and personal concerns. But I think we should look at the bigger picture here.”

“Are you a game director or a politician?”

“I’m sorry, Mashiro-sama, very sorry, but if you could please just not push the subject, I’d appreciate it.” I bowed in earnest, sticking my forehead right into the floor. That I was so good at this was proof I was a piece of shit.

Iroha’s home circumstances, her dreams, and issues with entertainment. They were all secrets I couldn’t leak.

“It’s fine. I’ll make sure you pay me back for it.”

“How much do you want?”

“Not with money. I’ve got enough of that.” Mashiro slid her chair over, closing any distance between us. “With lovey-dovey stuff.”

“R-Right.”

Mashiro rubbed her cheek against my shoulder, like a pet leaving its scent on its master. The fruity scent coming off her hair made my heart pound.

“Okay. Now we’re even.” After a few seconds of taking her fill, Mashiro moved her head away and gave a satisfied nod.

She may have been satisfied, but I was still trying to recover from my frayed nerves.

“Let’s go, then.”

“Huh? Wait. I’m not done talking.”

“It’s about Iroha-chan. We should go.” Mashiro stood up and stepped out of the dimly lit space under the stairs and into the sunlit corridor. “Sitting around and talking won’t do anything. We should go see how she is in the classroom.”

“Oh. That’s what you meant.”

I’d never have expected somebody as withdrawn as Mashiro to come up with such an assertive plan. It made me realize again how much she’d grown. I wasn’t her dad or anything, but I felt a strange paternal warmth in my chest.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

“Right.”

I followed Mashiro out into the sunny hallway to go to Iroha’s first-year classroom. There, Iroha was a popular honor student, surrounded by outgoing normies. I bet anyone isekai’d into some elf homeworld with a totally different culture would step into the unknown feeling the exact same way I did right now.

And then we arrived. Iroha’s classroom was just coming into view.

“Ah! Basic pretentious stalker-senpai!”

We were suddenly stopped by an incredibly rude yell.

I didn’t need to turn around to know who it was. There was only one person I knew who was that rude... Wait, scratch that. Wasn’t everyone around me overly rude? And rude only to me? I turned around before my re-realization of that devastating thought had time to crush me, and found just the girl I was thinking of: Tomosaka Sasara.

“Hey, stalker.”

“Keep it down! If you’re gonna burn me, at least do it when no one can hear. That’s what you’re s’posed to do anyway!”

“That’s a pretty volatile memory you’ve got there.”

If only she’d record that one line and play it back to herself.

“Huh? Volatile? Don’t get it. I wouldn’t use complicated words like that if I were you. Makes you sound like a real nerd.”

“Gngh! That actually hurts...”

It was an effective blow. I shouldn’t have cared what someone like her thought; in fact, I wish I’d made fun of her for being second-best in her year and not knowing the word “volatile,” but she hit me right where it hurt before I could.

Some of us didn’t have much going for us other than our expansive vocabulary, so it’d be nice if she didn’t knock it. It hadn’t just annoyed *me*

either.

“Aki. Can I kill her?”

It got Mashiro too. She’d entered for an amateur writing prize, and the book she was writing was such a big deal that she had Canary on as her editor. Sasara’s words were like a declaration of war to her. No amount of censorship in her words could quell the bloodlust dripping from them.

“What’s your problem? I’m saying it to be nice! You’ll be more popular if you don’t sound like a nerd, and that way everyone’s happy.”

“Talk about jumping to conclusions. You think literally everyone thinks the exact same way you do?”

“Of course they don’t!”

“Yeah. So while you’re ‘saying it to be nice’—”

“What I’m saying is that there are normal people like me, who are the majority, and then there’s a bunch of weirdos on the fringes of society.”

I had a feeling it was already too late for her. I wondered where exactly she’d lost her valuable sense of human objectivity. If she wasn’t so proud, I’d even pity her.

“So, Aki. Who is this girl?” Mashiro asked, looking totally unimpressed. “I’ve never met her before.”

“That’s a good question.”

I didn’t know how to describe her, other than as a fellow stalker I ran into when Iroha gave me permission to tail her. If I had to sum it up...

“She’s an interesting girl.”

“So I only exist for your entertainment, huh?!” Tomosaka Sasara’s reaction came faster than a rim shot.

“See? Interesting.”

“I do see.”

“You can’t just say whatever you want because you’re older than me! And I thought you were Kohinata’s boyfriend, Senpai?! What are you doing with this

girl? You're not some kinda player, are you?!"

"If you're gonna burn me, at least do it when no one can hear."

"Shut up! Wait, is *this* why Kohinata's been acting so weird?"

"Wait. Acting weird how?"

"You'll know as soon as you see her! I swear she was never like this before." Sasara retreated to the classroom entrance and beckoned to us.

"Aki."

"I know."

Mashiro and I looked at each other and exchanged a nod before tiptoeing after Sasara. We crouched down behind the door and carefully poked our heads out so we could look inside the room without being seen.

What we saw was... Well, I'll let it speak for itself.

"You're really going for Queen Nevermore, Kohinata-san?! I thought you weren't interested?"

"I really think you'll win by a landslide, though! It'd be so awesome to have Queen Nevermore be from our class! Maybe I should get your autograph *now*!"

"You're seriously aiming to win? Totally awesome."

There was a gaggle of girls at one end of the classroom. The center of their attention, the eye of the storm, the girl in the middle of those shallow students...was Kohinata Iroha.

"You bet your tail feathers! I'm gonna be entering that contest and swooping my way right to the top, chirp!" Iroha shot a peace sign and spoke like an idol so confidently, I could almost hear the sparkling sound effects.

If she was any older, it'd be enough to make you cringe, but as a pretty and popular teenager, Iroha managed to avoid any awkwardness. The girls around her were actually cheering, with some of them chirping as well.

Was there some weird drug epidemic in the school I wasn't aware of?

"See? Told you she was weird." Sasara turned to me.

“It’s weird all right.” My face was grave.

“I’ve been trying to get her to enter the contest this whole time and she kept saying she wasn’t interested. Then today she’s suddenly all for it. I can’t say I’m happy about it either, it’s like...it’s not satisfying for this to be the way she accepts. She puts up an act all the time anyway, and now it’s like she’s added an extra layer.”

“Huh?” I couldn’t help but react to Sasara’s words.

Iroha “puts up an act”? Did Sasara know that Iroha wasn’t the perfect honor student she pretended to be? I considered asking her about it, but Mashiro spoke before I could.

“That’s Canary-san.”

“Yeah. She’s trying to be Canary-san, no matter how you slice it.”

With that, my train of thought was interrupted. I decided to leave my question to Sasara for later and use my brain’s resources on the problem in front of me: Iroha’s strange behavior.

“There’s definitely something wrong with her,” Mashiro said. “Look! She’s taking photos.”

“Yeah. She’s taking photos with her friends. Like she’s about to upload them to the internet or something.”

Iroha was laughing with the girls around her and taking selfies with them. It was as though she’d fallen from honor student to regular superficial teenager. The boys were staring as though they were witnessing their favorite VTuber suddenly take part in an unusual collab stream, looking confused and restless over Iroha’s personality change.

Weirder than the boys watching from afar was the fact that the girls close to her hadn’t seemed to notice anything. Either they were so dumb they just accepted that the class’s honor student was now chirping and speaking in bird puns, or they were so above it all that it simply didn’t bother them.

As an average guy, there was no way for me to tell.

“Tomosaka, was it? Do you have any idea why Iroha’s acting like this?”

“No clue.” Sasara paused. “Oh, but wait...”

“If you know something, mind sharing? Even just a tiny clue would help.”

“We walked to school together this morning, and we spoke about Pinsta. She actually seemed kinda interested.”

“Pinsta?” I asked. “You mean, Pinstagram?”

“That dumb social media site?” Mashiro said.

“Excuse me?! ‘Dumb’?! It’s actually fun once you get into it, y’know!” Sasara snapped.

I wasn’t going to deny that Mashiro was biased. This was just a smaller version of the fight between normies and outcasts: social media edition.

Who did I want to win?

I didn’t care either way.

Actually, maybe I did care. About social media, that is. Now that *Koyagi* had broken through two million downloads, I was starting to think we should do more to advertise it. We hadn’t done anything with Pinsta yet, so that might not be a bad place to consider.

“You were talking about social media, and then Iroha started acting like Canary-san. Well, she is the most famous influencer in the publication world. And Iroha doesn’t know enough about social media to play her part perfectly.”

“An influencer is just someone who craves validation,” Mashiro said. “An attention seeker who’s never satisfied.”

“Isn’t it kind of harsh to talk about your own editor like that? It’s all that ‘attention-seeking’ that’s gonna help sell your books, y’know.”

“I know. Doesn’t change the fact that it’s attention seeking, though,” Mashiro said, sulking.

To anyone else, it might have looked as though Mashiro wasn’t fond of her editor, but I knew her well enough to see that wasn’t the case at all. She was only harsh about the people she trusted to a certain extent.

As someone meeting her for the first time, Sasara wouldn’t recognize that,

though. She was frowning a little, as though she'd taken Mashiro's criticism at face value.

"What's wrong with wanting attention and validation? That's normal, isn't it?" Sasara said. "It's not normal for Kohinata to act like this, sure, but to be honest...I think I prefer her now to when she's pretending to be all perfect."

"You 'prefer' her like *this*? You sure about that?"

"Why wouldn't I be? It's way more natural than her usual blandness. Way more normal for her to wanna enter the Queen Nevermore contest and do stuff that'll get other people to tell her she's cute. Not that she'll be winning. That honor's gonna go to me!" Sasara puffed her chest out and smiled smugly.

Literally no one asked. The narcissism was so strong that a bird pun-cracking Iroha looked attractive by comparison.

"She wants to be called cute? You know she's been acting like other people lately, though, not just like an idol. Still, I wonder if that's got something to do with it."

"Acting like other people, huh? Guess that means I'm right!"

"Right? About what?"

Sasara put her hand to her chin like a great detective and began to pontificate. "It's trial and error, to try and figure out her cutest side—she's trying out all sorts of characters. I see it now, yes... It's all to wrench the title of Queen Nevermore away from me!"

"It's all to...what?" I stared.

I'd never even considered the possibility. Iroha had stopped being annoying, even in front of me. What if she was trying to develop the other parts of her personality? The parts that didn't involve being a pest?

If that was the case, then hopefully it was like Sasara said and it was solely for the purpose of winning the Queen Nevermore contest. Otherwise, I'd seriously want to know why else she'd be doing it. Iroha was the one who helped me to develop Kokuryuuin Kugetsu as an annoying-slash-cute character, so why would she want to rid herself of the cuteness that lay within her own annoying

nature? Though I guess it wasn't that big of a deal, even if that *were* her intention.

Or maybe this was all something to do with puberty. Maybe she was trying to overcome her annoying nature because of some sort of sexual awakening? Something that made her want to suppress her charms and built up a new persona. If this was all to do with the creation of some kind of secondary sexual characteristic, then it sure was inefficient—is that really fine by you, Iroha?

"What the heck are you muttering about? It sounds creepy."

"Be quiet for a second. This could affect the future of Iroha's growth."

"Huh?" I could feel Sasara giving me a doubtful frown, but now wasn't the time to worry about that. I noticed her lean in to whisper (audibly) into Mashiro's ear. "So does he think he's Kohinata's dad or something?"

"Not her dad. Her producer—something like that, anyway," Mashiro replied.

"Huh. That...still doesn't explain anything about their relationship."

"Aki's just like this."

"And you're okay with that, um..."

"Mashiro. Tsukinomori Mashiro. I'm a second-year."

"Tsukinomori-senpai. Got it. I'm Tomosaka. Tomosaka Sasara," Sasara said. "So, Tsukinomori-senpai, what are you doing with this guy then? You said he's a 'producer' to this other girl in the same school, but she's not even involved in anything entertainment-related."

"I'm his girlfriend. And I understand his dreams."

"His girlfriend?! *This guy*'s girlfriend? That makes no sense!" Mashiro's straight response had Sasara wailing in confusion. "What? *What*?! Kohinata seemed interested in him too, even though he's just some basic pretentious stalker! How does a guy like this get two cute girls hanging around him?! Are my eyes broken and he's actually super handsome or something?"

I was frowning in thought. Sasara was also frowning in thought. Students were glancing at us as they passed to enter and leave the classroom. Apparently we looked a little suspicious. If we hung around much longer, Iroha would

probably notice us. I had a ton of stuff I wanted to say to her, but I didn't have my thoughts together enough for that just yet.

I hadn't figured out what to do. Whether I should respect Iroha's wishes and support her in building up this new persona of hers, or whether I should be selfish and try to convince her to stay as she was. I at least wanted to know what *I* wanted to do before acting.

"What do we do, Aki?"

"Hm. Let's go back to our own class for now. Sorry, Mashiro. I think I wanna spend some time to think about this by myself for a bit."

"Will you be okay?"

"The problem is my own thoughts right now. I don't think there's much I can do even with your help at this point."

"Okay." Mashiro paused. "Right. Take your time."

Mashiro answered me with a patient smile. Thank God my girlfriend understood my dreams so well.

***

After school that day, I found myself in the admin building's hallway. The main classroom block—currently alive with students preparing for the Nevermore Festival—was a short distance away from it.

I stared out of the open window at the sports clubs doing their training. My thoughts wandered to Iroha, and the possibility that she was mimicking various girls to try and discover a new sort of "cute" for herself. It would explain why she was entering the Queen Nevermore contest. That way, she could gain an objective view on what she could reinvent about herself to increase her attractiveness.

Despite how she looked, Iroha was smart. I may have used the extra year's worth of knowledge I had on her to help her study, but that alone wouldn't be enough for most students to become top of their year. The fact that that was all she'd needed to get so far ahead just went to show that she was already clever in the first place.

Okay, so say Iroha reinvented herself into someone who was attractive in a different way, and it was enough for her to gain victory in the Queen Nevermore contest. What then?

If it opened up exciting doors in her future, there was nothing for me to complain about. The problem was, I couldn't be sure things would work out that way. Wouldn't this just mean she would be adding *another* fake persona to her repertoire, on top of her perfect honor student shtick? What would happen to the *real* Iroha then—the annoying one?

I knew full well no matter how much I ruminated on the subject, it would do nothing more than make me feel better, because that was just the sort of nosy bastard I was. I also knew that exercising your free will didn't necessarily lead to a happy ending.

That much was true for both Ozu and Iroha. They both spent junior high school trying to suppress their true feelings. They were trapped under the influence of their family environment, all the while pretending everything they did was exactly what they wanted to do.

That was partly why I didn't want to be so kind as to stick my nose where it wasn't wanted this time. At least, that was what I told myself, but I knew I would anyway.

It wasn't for Iroha's sake. It was purely for the sake of my ego, and that was a fact I was willing to wear on my sleeve as I plunged on ahead. It was always like that whenever I meddled. And it always would be.

"Oh? What might you be doing here, Ooboshi-kun?"

"Huh?"

My spaced-out thoughts were interrupted. I turned around to see a girl with a ponytail and a stack of printed papers in her arms. Her features were stiff and serious, her skirt was regulation length, and her ponytail didn't have a hair out of place. It was Kageishi Midori, younger sister and polar opposite to Kageishi Sumire.

"What about you, Midori-san? The drama club doesn't practice in this building, right?"

“It doesn’t, but at the moment I’m prioritizing the festival over club activities. See?” She showed me the band on her arm.

I studied the characters on it. “Nevermore Executive Committee...Chair?!”

“That’s right. And that room over there is where we meet.” Midori pointed at a room which had students rushing in and out of it almost constantly. Next to the door was a notice identifying it as the room to sign up for the King and Queen Nevermore contest.

“Your committee’s running the contest?”

“As it does every year.”

“Don’t tell me you’re the committee member in charge of it?”

I could see the huge words “application form” sprawled across the papers in her arms.

Midori looked a little awkward as she replied. “You’re talking about these? Well, yes, I am in charge. Is there something strange about that? You think I’m a poor choice, just because I’m not fashionable or anything?”

“Not at all. Actually, I think you do pretty well with fashion, considering you’re not breaking any uniform rules. Like with that ribbon.”

“O-Oh? Well. Good.” Midori put her hand to the ribbon binding her ponytail together and started fiddling with it, her cheeks red.

I wasn’t just saying that to be nice either. Having to stick to all the uniform rules as an honor student must’ve been tough, so it was impressive that she managed to add a spark of cuteness to her outfit despite that. Her genes probably helped; she was good-looking, much like her sister, who I’d even go so far as to call beautiful if she just kept her mouth shut.

Either that, or it had something to do with her acting hobby. She wanted to be ready for the stage at all times, so she put effort into her appearance.

“W-Wait! Don’t praise me any more, or I’ll die from the heat!”

“Huh. Wait. S-Sorry! Did I say all that out loud?!”

“Yes, and I was worried you wouldn’t stop! You really are scum, you know

that? Trying to hit on me when you're already dating Tsukinomori-san! You... You brute!"

I swallowed. "I'm sorry. Really..."

I suddenly found my head under attack by a bundle of papers. I wanted to advocate for freedom of thought, but I knew it was more than thought when I was just standing there blurting out everything that ran through my mind.

Still, good was good and bad was bad. I was just laying down the objective facts, and so frankly I didn't think I'd done anything wrong. But I also knew that saying those things out loud would lead to war.

I was usually careful about what I said to who and adjusted my level of honesty accordingly, but maybe because Midori had caught me when I was busy worrying about Iroha, my communication skills had malfunctioned without me noticing. I pulled myself back to earth, and did everything I could to change the course of the conversation.

"Anyway, I didn't expect you to be the member in charge of the contest—and that's got nothing to do with how fashionable you are or anything. It's because I thought you hated shallow stuff like boys and girls messing around with each other."

"I don't particularly like it, no. Which is precisely the reason I have to keep a close eye on those kinds of shenanigans!"

"I get it. I guess a committee chair like you would see things that way."

Justice, fairness, discipline, and righteousness. This girl was the embodiment of the law, ready to submerge her pristine self into the very slime that she was trying to cleanse. I had to respect her for it, even if I couldn't totally empathize with her.

It seemed someone had heard our pointless conversation, because a student emerged from the committee room.

"Hey, Kageishi. What's all this commotion in the hallway?"

It was someone I knew. Very well, in fact.

Her red hair was messy and looked like it had been "styled" with water before

being hastily pushed back by a headband to keep it at bay. Though she wore her uniform sloppily, she was an irreplaceable ally to the 05th Floor Alliance, and someone I'd known ever since junior high school.

"Otoi-san? What are *you* doing in *there*?"

"Oh, it's you, Aki. 'Sup."

"Hi... No, not 'hi.' Don't tell me you're planning to enter the Queen Nevermore contest?"

"Good one. Naw, I'm helpin' out with the sound production on the day."

"Huh. It's not like you to do anything useful at a school event."

Calm, laziness, relaxation, and immobility. This girl was the embodiment of sloth, ready to submerge her lazy self into the superficial pool of cooperation. I had to respect her for it, even if—no, I didn't, actually.

"I asked for Otoi-san's help," Midori said. "We required audio equipment that would make the event as exciting as possible, as well as music to play during it. Who better to ask than someone with specialist knowledge?"

"You asked her? I didn't realize you two knew each other."

"Earth to Aki. You were the one who recruited me to help out with the drama club, 'member?"

"Oh, so you two got closer then?"

"Otoi-san gave me a lot of advice, even after the Drama Fair. She's so reliable, I just knew she'd be a big help for the culture festival as well!"

"It's a real drag. Thought it might be good for learning more about songwriting, though."

"I see. What's with all that candy you got there, by the way?" I asked.

"The committee's s'posed to check and give permission for all the stuff the students are plannin' on givin' away or sellin' at stalls. We got a lotta samples. Tasty samples."

This girl could sniff out sugar a mile away.

"Otoi-san will assist with anything if she gets paid in candy," Midori said. "It

was so easy, I can't help but worry she'll be duped by a man with less-than-pure intentions one day."

"You sure were quick to figure that much out," I said. "I can see why you're an honor student. It'd probably take most people twice as long."

"Hm? Ooboshi-kun, don't tell me you have already lured her in with sugary treats in order to do unspeakable—"

"Of course I haven't."

Otoi-san and I could never have *that* kind of relationship. It was simply impossible. Even if this were a dating sim, and I were to be the protagonist, she'd never be anything more than a friend, and I would never be able to push her past that line no matter what I did.

"Yeah, he hasn't. Bein' unattractive sure does help."

"*What*? What do you think you're saying? You're incredibly cute, Otoi-san!"

"You gotta learn that anythin' a girl thinks is cute is only half as cute through the eyes of a guy, Kageishi."

"What?!"

It was definitely a theory I'd heard before, but not one that applied to Otoi-san. Though it did sound like she was speaking in general terms, I still couldn't blame Midori for protesting.

"Anyway, Aki, why're you here? You don't usually hang around school this late."

"I know. I've just got something on my mind."

"What, you thinkin' about goin' for King Nevermore?"

"Absolutely not. Funny thing is, Mashiro asked me that too. But there's no way I could ever win."

"Yeah."

"You could've at least hesitated with that response."

I know I was the one who said it, but it still made me feel a little awkward for someone else to agree so readily. Not that it bothered me *that* much. I didn't

think Otoi-san would have said it if she hadn't known I wasn't particularly prideful.

Neither she nor I had the ability to take center stage. Our role was to work behind the scenes to make stars like Iroha shine. We had a mutual understanding about that role ever since junior high, and we understood it wasn't something that came from a place of excess humility either.

The problem was that I'd forgotten there was someone here whose relationship with us was too new to know where we were coming from.

"Why do the both of you lack such self-esteem?" Midori asked. She hesitated before continuing. "From my perspective, both of you have the potential to win. In your case, Ooboshi-kun, you have humility, yet occasionally you show a bit of confidence. Not to mention you give off an aura of kindness and reliability. I think that would put you in good stead."

"Is that really what you think of me, Midori-san?"

"Uh, no, it's not— Nothing so significant as that! And don't think I've forgotten about the savage things you've done to my sister. Don't get the wrong idea, and don't get a big head just because you're a Hollywood director!"

"I never touched your sister."

Also, I wasn't a Hollywood director. I couldn't be bothered to correct her on that right now, though; it'd take way too much explaining.

"Regardless! I just wanted to say that you *could* enter, if you wanted to!" Midori gesticulated wildly, her face red.

I knew she was trying to encourage me in her own way because she thought I lacked confidence. Midori really was kind. While her insistence to stick to every last rule could be annoying, her words and actions made it clear that she had a heart of gold.

I bet that's what made people overlook the fussier parts of her personality and support her as both class president and Executive Committee Chair. It was also why the members of the drama club loved their leader so much.

"Oh, that reminds me. Kohinata's enterin' the Queen Nevermore contest too.

She handed in her application today," Otoi-san said.

"Wait, Otoi-san! You can't disclose information about participants to third parties! We have to respect their privacy!"

"'Sno big deal, right? Aki'd find out anyway when the contest comes around."

"Honestly! If you continue to be so lax about things, it's only a matter of time before your boyfriend convinces you to do a photo shoot, and all your pictures end up online!"

"You know, you used to do a better job at covering up your sex-related expertise," I pointed out.

"*What*?! No, you misunderstand! These are all things I naturally pick up by monitoring the boys' onsite browsing activities!"

Otoi-san turned to me. "Anyway, Kohinata's enterin'."

"Listen to me!" Midori wailed.

"Knowin' Kohinata, she'll probably win. And if you don't get King Nevermore, who knows who'll end up dancin' with her at the closing party. Doesn't that worry you, Aki?"

"I don't really care who she dances wi—"

There was a sharp pain in my chest before I was able to finish my sentence.

That was weird. And highly unpleasant.

If Iroha won the contest, she'd be forced to add an extra mask to her collection. She would be one step further from being able to be her normal, annoying self in public. It was inefficient and a loss to society. That was what had hurt me.

Right?

"But if you don't want that to happen, all you hafta do is win the King Nevermore contest."

"I told you, there's no way I can win. I'd be up against too many handsome guys."

"Oh! In that case, I might have an idea." Midori quickly cut in. Kind as she was,

she probably sensed things were going south and wanted to defuse the situation. Sticking her finger in the air, she had an uncharacteristically mischievous smile on her face. “Why don’t you enter the Queen Nevermore contest instead, then? Just kidding!”

“Kageishi, you some kinda pervert?” Otoi-san asked.

“What makes you think that?!”

“Duh. If you didn’t know ’bout gender bendin’ and stuff like that, you’d never even come up with that idea.”

“I didn’t say anything about him actually *becoming* a girl!”

“See, you just proved y’know what gender bendin’ means.”

“Noooooo! I just happen to know that term because of my broad general knowledge!” Midori insisted, writhing with her burning face in her hands.

I had only picked up on about half of their conversation, though.

“Midori-san... That’s it!”

“Huh?”

The light bulb in my head was so bright I couldn’t focus on anything else after it switched on. Several once-vague ideas were knocked into place like billiards in my head, connecting with each other and linking together until they formed a singular solution.

I grabbed Midori by her delicate shoulders, making her jump. “That’s it. Why didn’t I think of it from the start?”

“What? Wait... Ooboshi-kun?”

“Thank you, Midori-san. I know what I have to do now. And it’s all thanks to you.”

“O-Oh. I suppose you’re welcome...but I have no idea what you mean by ‘what you have to do.’”

Midori’s eyes were darting this way and that, but I stared back into them evenly, ready to declare the resolve that had solidified itself inside me.

“Give me an application form. I’m entering the Queen Nevermore contest!”

“What? *Whaaaaaaaaat*?!” Midori yelled.

The noise alerted the rest of the Executive Committee, who poked their curious heads out of the classroom one after the other. They weren’t even trying to hide the fact they were staring, but even that barely embarrassed me in the face of the lucky idea I’d stumbled on.

“Queen Nevermore? Don’t you mean King?” Midori asked.

“I mean Queen. I want you to let me enter dressed as a girl.”

“*You*...dressed as a girl...”

“Huh. I never thought of that. Y’never fail to impress, Aki.” Midori was still wrapped up in confusion, but Otoi-san was immediately amused. Sure, you couldn’t see it on her face, but I knew she was grinning ear to ear on the inside. “Wait. Kageishi. Is dressin’ up as a girl to enter the contest against the rules?”

“What? Um... I believe it’s not really addressed in the rules at all. Um... Hmm...”

“Then let him enter. I wanna see Aki dressed as a girl.”

“Wait a moment! Allowing something purely for the committee’s amusement is reprehensible!” Midori said.

“But you wanna see it too, right?” Otoi-san asked.

“Don’t say that! People will misunderstand. Of course I don’t...don’t want to...”

“Reprehensible...right. I guess that makes sense. It *is* kinda silly to think a boy could enter the Queen contest...” I murmured.

“Hnngh!”

Reverse psychology. I don’t know who came up with it, but it was probably someone pretty important. It seemed a bit crude to use it for this kind of situation, but it was definitely working. Midori was writhing around and clasping her head like a ninja undergoing brainwashing.

It only took a few seconds before she stopped.

“All right,” she mumbled.

“Oh?”

“Dressing up as a girl to enter the Queen Nevermore contest...is acceptable!”

“*Yes*!”

I had the chair’s permission. There was nobody who could stop me from entering this pageant now.

“Nice one, Kageishi. ’Sgood to be true to your desires.”

“Wrong. This has nothing to do with my desires,” Midori declared, pushing an invisible pair of glasses up her nose.

“Then why didya decide to allow it?”

“Because traditional gender roles are outdated, so it’s just common sense not to include any conditions on gender in the rules for the contest, and it’s not because I want to see Ooboshi-kun in female dress, it’s because I want the contest to be brought up to global standards and—”

“So what you mean to say is, you’re into it,” Otoi-san interrupted.

“I came up with an entire explanation, so please don’t shoot it down in a single sentence.”

“Came up with it, huh? That’s proof you’re into it.”

Midori cleared her throat. Loudly. “Details aside, in light of social ethics, I believe we ought to be actively *encouraging* this type of participation! Yes? You all agree, don’t you?” Midori spun to face the other committee members who were still poking their heads out from the classroom.

They nodded—though it looked to me a little like they were trembling under the weight of Midori’s gaze.

“It’s unanimous! Well, Ooboshi-kun, as you can see, there are no problems with your proposition!”

“Right. Thanks.”

I’d literally just seen her coerce the voters. I didn’t realize the Nevermore Executive Committee was this “democratic.”

“You sure do think up some crazy stuff, Aki,” Otoi-san said.

“You think? This is simply the result of taking everything to its most logical and efficient conclusion.”

“Yup. Crazy. Though I guess it’s also fun.”

Otoi-san seemed a little exasperated. But I wasn’t doing this for laughs or because I felt I had no other choice. I genuinely thought it was the most perfect, divinely inspired plan ever. I was going to show Iroha just how I felt, and grab that new persona she was trying to wear right out of her hands. This plan was the best, most effective way to do that.

No sooner had I taken a form from Midori than I’d filled it in with all my information and officially entered myself into the contest.

We were all set. Now I just needed to make my declaration to Iroha; let her know she had competition. I whipped out my phone and sent her my letter of challenge via a LIME message.

AKI: I need to talk to you. Come to the roof.

Bring it, Iroha. I don’t know what you’re worried about, but I’m about to show you that when I stick my nose in, I stick my *whole* nose in.

***

“You’ve finally malfunctioned, Aki. No matter how logical or efficient it is, don’t you think going for Queen Nevermore is taking things kinda too far?”

“Do you?”

“Yeah, and probably so would any sort of god who might be watching all this play out right now.”

“I should point out that I’m serious when I say this is the most logical conclusion I came up with.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Hey, if you’re gonna doubt me, you should come join me for the rest of this plan. Then I think you’ll have your answer.”

“Guess I have no choice. Go on then; show me how you figured *this* was the best idea you could come up with.”

Chapter 4: I Have a Score to Settle with My Friend's Little Sister!

The fall breeze swept openly along the roof of Kouzai High School. That cool wind hailed the end of summer. It carried along the excited voices of students staying behind and preparing for the festival, and the calls of sports club members doing their usual practice, as though they had no clue about the upcoming event whatsoever.

I stood in the middle of the rooftop with my arms folded, glaring at the door.

Of course, I was waiting for Iroha to show up.

It had been a while since I'd sent that LIME message. The read notification came up but she didn't reply, so I sent her a new message every minute. Checking our history, I noted that my next would be the fifty-ninth.

I knew that what I was doing was creepy and amounted to high levels of crazed-yandere-stalker (and...sent), but this was important—both for my own goals and for Iroha's life. I couldn't just sit back and watch her go through with this. I didn't care if I annoyed her. I was going to keep at it until I saw her walk through that door.

My phone buzzed. It took mere seconds for me to tap the screen and open LIME.

Iroha: Sorry for replying so late! I was de-canaryfying myself!

Her reply made little sense. I could feel my brain itching to extract some meaning from the word "de-canaryfying."

Iroha then sent a message saying she was on her way, so my sixtieth message to her was a simple "OK."

As promised, she showed up at the roof moments later, out of breath.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“You’re finally here. Are you suitably de-canaryfied?”

“Yup! I got rid of her along with a ton of sweat while running here!”

It didn’t look like she was joking. I’d already mentioned she was out of breath, but her bangs were a little sweaty, and her school blouse slightly see-through too. I wondered how she must have looked to the classmates who she had been helping prepare for the festival when she suddenly told them she was going for a run and dashed out of the classroom.

“You already knew, huh, Senpai?”

“Knew what?”

“That today I called on the spirit of Canary-san and was acting as her.”

“Oh, that. Yeah, I saw you around today.”

“Huh. Then you know what I’m trying to do, don’t you?”

“More or less.”

“Seriously? You’re way too sharp, Senpai.” Iroha smiled at me a little awkwardly as she regained her breath.

I could see why she’d feel awkward about it. Iroha hadn’t told me directly why she was taking on the roles of other girls. My conclusion was something I’d cobbled together by listening to what Mashiro and Sasara had had to say. But Iroha’s reaction just now made me think maybe my answer wasn’t all that far off the mark, so it was time to own it.

“I’m not your producer for nothing, you know.”

“Right. That’s my Dreampai!”

Dream pie?

Oh. Dream and senpai. Was I dirty-minded for mishearing her for a second there?

“You’re checking out the competition. That’s what this is about, right?”

Iroha's shoulders twitched. "I guess, yeah."

My friend's little sister's reaction told me I was right. Her mouth was squirming like a caterpillar, a clear sign she was feeling awkward.

It was the guilt. The guilt for daring to throw away all peskiness to replace it with a new persona.

"That was why you acted like Mashiro and Sumire-sensei. By becoming them, you could really understand the core of their being."

"Yeah..."

"You said you were gonna enter the Queen Nevermore contest, right?"

"You know about that too?" Iroha laughed, nervous. "I think I just got too much into Canary-san's character. Everyone was telling me I should enter, and I just kinda hopped on board."

"You're not intending to enter as yourself—the annoying girl you are around me—are you?"

"Huh? Of course not; that'd be crazy. I'm going as my innocent honor student self."

"Remember how we created Kokuryuuin Kugetsu together? We worked side by side to come up with the cutest thing we could for the *Koyagi* fans, and we found it."

"Hm? What's that got to do with anything?"

"Everything. It was the annoying we mixed into her personality that raised her attractiveness up to the next level. Basically, what I'm saying is, you know, well. You're attractive enough as you are, with the whole...annoying thing..."

Ugh. I was starting to speak like a company executive who was trying to cover up an unfortunate truth.

You don't have to say it; I knew how pathetic I was being, but I didn't have a choice. Do you have any idea how stupidly embarrassing it is to tell someone they're cute right to their face? Try it—I bet you couldn't do it.

Wait, who the hell am I talking to?

“I’m just saying, you don’t need to feel like you have to copy other people. You should enter the Queen Nevermore contest as yourself, with your annoyingness cranked up to eleven. That way, you’ll be able to find friends who accept you as you—”

“O-Oh. I knew it, Senpai.”

“Huh?”

For a second, she looked to me like a cat with its fur standing on end. The friendly expression on her face from before was nowhere to be seen, and instead she was glaring at me with an almost feline wariness.

“No way am I doing that. I’m never *ever* gonna annoy anyone other than you, Senpai!”

“Why is this such a big deal to you?” I was incredulous.

“You said you’re not my producer for nothing, but you don’t understand me at all! You don’t understand a single hair on my head. You’re the dumbest, densest director ever!”

“What?!”

Her insult was grade-school level, but in a weird way, it really hurt. It was like she’d set the second hand of my internal clock so it was hours behind the real world. Something like the difference between Japan and Rio de Janeiro.

Wait, what do you mean they’re twelve hours apart so it wouldn’t make a difference? Whatever, I’m trying to come up with a good simile here. You get the picture, right?

“I’m never gonna show anyone in school my annoying side, because I don’t need any friends who accept me for who I am!”

“Why are you so against it? No one’s gonna hate you for it. And if people can accept you for being yourself, wouldn’t that make your life a whole lot easier?”

“They wouldn’t accept me! The problem is *you* don’t realize how nice you are! You’re the only one who’ll ever forgive me no matter what I do, and that’s the way I want it to stay!”

We were talking about the same thing at the start, but somewhere along the

way our conversation split into two directions, each leading to a precipitous cliff that we flung our emotions off, allowing them to hurtle rapidly in different directions.

“I’ve created a version of myself that everyone loves. I don’t need to be myself at school to get through it—otherwise, I wouldn’t be the most popular student in my year.”

“Can you show me the data that proves you’re the most popular? How can you say that? Or is it something you’ve decided for yourself? Or is it just a feeling?”

“I don’t...have any data, but...”

“If it’s all subjective, then you can say whatever you want, right? Maybe you are popular when you’re acting like an honor student. But sometimes what you think and what the numbers say can paint a very different picture.”

Works that got discussed a lot on social networks might not sell. Celebrities who get criticized a lot online might have an even larger number of silent fans. You could never rely on those acting on a general feeling, because there were cases when the harsh reality of the numbers outed them as nothing more than a vocal minority. Unfortunately for us, we didn’t have the numbers to settle this debate yet—so there was only one thing to do.

“Let’s compete for Queen Nevermore.”

Declare war.

“What?”

“You enter as the character you insist on playing, not as yourself, and then I’ll thrash you.”

“*You* wanna enter Queen Nevermore? Hold on, I’m not getting this. Wait. You mean you’re gonna become a girl or something? Aha ha ha! Good one, Sen—”

I looked her right in the eye and opened my mouth before she could finish laughing off the idea. “That’s right.”

“Wait, really?!” Unnerved by the strength of my resolve, Iroha’s eyes widened, and she stared at me blankly.

“Really. I’m gonna show you that there’s no way a Kohinata Iroha without her special brand of annoying can ever beat me. That’s right...”

Any gamer would know what to do when their opponent flinched like this. Take the opportunity to attack. Attack, attack, attack. I stepped up to the frozen Iroha and looked her in the eye before delivering a decisive, final blow.

“I *will* become a girl to show everyone how cute you are when you’re annoying!”

“This conversation isn’t making any sense anymore!”

Was she saying she *still* didn’t understand? My motive was simple, logical, and honest.

Iroha didn’t believe in the charm that lay within her annoying nature. She’d convinced herself that no one was going to accept her for it. So she was now trying to pick up a new mask like it was some secondary sexual characteristic, hiding her true self further away and pulling away from her director’s principles.

In order to break down this character she’d hastily put together, I needed to dress up as a girl and beat her with the truth till she was unconscious, presenting her with the indisputable evidence that was the results of the Queen Nevermore contest.

Iroha pouted and glared at me. “You really want a world where I can be annoying to everyone so badly that you’re willing to switch genders?”

“Yes.”

“And you really think you’re gonna get away with something so dumb? You promised to give everything you had to managing the Alliance. You promised to help me become a full-fledged voice actress. I don’t see what this has got to do with any of that.”

“Everything.”

Iroha was right in that the promise we’d made was to work towards the Alliance’s success and save its members. I also promised to introduce Iroha to the colorful world of entertainment and help her to go out and spread her wings as the best actress she could be. I could see why she thought allowing her

more space to be herself by finding people to accept her wasn't a part of that—but she was wrong.

My mission wasn't just to get every Alliance member a job at Honeyplace Works. It was to guide them to the happiest life they could live; to make that happiness a reality for them. Right now, that wasn't where Iroha would end up after Mashiro, Ozu, and I had all graduated. I couldn't allow for a future where Iroha was bored at school and had to keep hiding under her honor student mask like she'd always done at home, never able to be herself.

"As your director, this is the most efficient option available to me."

"Fine. I don't think we're going to get anywhere by arguing anymore over this."

Iroha might have agreed with me on the surface, but she still didn't accept my decision. That was what I got from her response. She probably had a conviction of her own she wasn't willing to back down on.

"I dunno why you're so obsessed with this idea of yours, Senpai, but I know exactly what *I* have to do." Her voice strengthened by resolve, Iroha thrust her finger under my nose. "I'm not gonna let this play out like you want it to. I'm done being annoying. I'm gonna become a new me!"

And with that, she turned on her heel. Just before going back through the door that led inside, she turned around and stuck her tongue out at me more magnificently than any grade schooler. Then, she disappeared through the door, slamming it behind her.

It was fine. I knew there was a risk Iroha might hate me temporarily for stopping her doing what she wanted. I just needed to keep on forging ahead, sticking strong to my belief that the path I was on was the right one.

I paused.

And then I was overcome with a sudden anxiety that Iroha might just have locked the door from the inside...

***

"*Did* she lock the door?"

“No. But to think she could’ve gotten really mad and locked me up there on the roof by myself... Isn’t that terrifying?”

“Lucky she’s not that yandere yet, then.”

“What do you mean, ‘yet’?! Should I be worried...?”

Interlude: Mashiro Enters the Ring

After school that day, I was in a hallway in the admin building. It was a little quieter than the main building with all the students buzzing about, preparing for the festival. Through the window I watched the sports clubs training, a perfect picture of what a typical youth should be.

I was giving it my all and working hard just like they were, I told myself as my thoughts drifted to Aki.

Where did he go?

As soon as classes were done, he said he wanted to do some thinking by himself and disappeared somewhere. I tried to respect his wishes and go home, but I just kept seeing his brooding face in one corner of my mind, and in the end I wasn't able to leave it alone. I felt like there was more space in my mind now, ever since the summer festival. I'd been able to observe Aki a little calmly since then, which led me to notice something.

It was like something was closing in on him, just a little bit. Or he'd lost sight of his surroundings by a tiny fraction. He reminded me a bit of myself when I got into a panic.

I just hope he doesn't end up doing something weird...

I carried on walking, which was when a poster on a crowded noticeboard outside a classroom caught my eye.

"King and Queen Nevermore..."

They were the twin contests that everyone in our class had been getting so excited over. It was gross, voting on the worth of other students like that. A trashy event designed for dumb normies. That was what the old me would have thought while trying to stay away from it at all costs.

But things were different now, and for a split second I considered that it might be worth entering and trying to win, if only because I wanted Aki to see me as attractive just a little more. I thought about his opinion on the whole

thing—and I realized he probably wouldn't be interested at all.

Iroha-chan was going to be entering, though. That seemed to have given Aki some food for thought, so maybe I should pluck up the courage and enter after all.

I read the rest of the poster, which encouraged the reader to fill out one of the attached forms and bring it to the Nevermore Executive Committee.

"Ah, Tsukinomori-san?"

"Oh, hey, Tsukinomori."

Two girls appeared from the classroom and called out to me. I didn't really know anyone at school apart from the people in my class and the Alliance. I turned around to see that it was Sumire-sensei's sister, Midori-san, and Otoi-san.

"H-Hello. What are you two doing here?"

"We're on the Nevermore Executive Committee," Midori-san said. "This classroom is where we're based."

"We're done for the day, though, so we're headin' home."

"You're on the committee? Wow, Midori-san. If anyone's up to the job, it's you," I said.

"Y-You're overreacting! It's really nothing that amazing."

"It is. It's like you can do anything. You're on the class committee, the student council..."

"Well, you're not exactly wrong..."

"Sounds like sayin' no's too hard for ya."

"Stop that! You're going to make people think they can use a little bit of flattery to get me to do anything!"

"They think that already," Otoi-san said.

From a literary perspective and out of everyone I knew, Midori-san would be my top pick for brat-taming in a doujinshi. Not that I was going to tell her that.

Whether from rage or embarrassment, Midori-san's face was bright red. She turned to me to make an attempt at changing the subject.

"Tsukinomori-san! You were looking at that poster, weren't you? Are you interested in competing for Queen Nevermore?"

"What? Oh, no. Not me."

"Is that right? You've somehow been looking even prettier lately, so I thought you'd be an excellent candidate to get the audience going."

"R-Really?" I said. "I-I heard Iroha-chan's entering, though. I honestly don't know if I'd stand a chance..."

"Aki's enterin' and all."

"What?" I blinked at Otoi-san.

"He was here just now. Filled in an application and everythin'."

"Wait, Otoi-san! I warned you about the applicants' privacy. Have you ever heard of confidentiality?!"

"Aw, quit bein' so strict. Tsukinomori'd hear 'bout it eventually anyway, right?"

"If this were a business, the media would eat us alive for leaking confidential information!"

"Yeah, but it's school, so it's cool."

I didn't hear a word of their exchange.

Aki had entered? Was he going for King Nevermore? He said he wasn't interested when I'd asked him in class, but what if he changed his mind when he heard Iroha-chan entered, because he wanted to dance with her? Wait, but that didn't make any sense! He wouldn't do that and leave me, his girlfriend, out of it. Unless that was why he wanted to think about things "alone" and asked me to go home ahead of him...

"Oh, Aki's not enterin' *King* Nevermore."

"Wait, did I say that out loud?" I said, coming back to my senses.

"You did, but you sounded much more like a high-speed typewriter than a

human being, almost as though you were possessed. Are you all right, Tsukinomori-san?" Midori-san looked a little creeped out.

"Oh, I'm fine! I just fall into a trance sometimes." I let out a nervous laugh. I didn't think most people would be fooled by that, but Midori-san might just be nice enough to let it slide. She seemed like the type to allow anything if you pushed it. "Anyway, what do you mean Aki's not entering King Nevermore?"

"What I said. He's gonna dress up as a girl and enter Queen Nevermore," Otoi-san said.

"Huh?" I froze. Who wouldn't? It didn't make any sense. What was Aki thinking? Had he gone crazy or something? "Wait, is that even allowed?"

"'Snot in the rules at all. But our chair's into it, so she gave him permission."

"I am *not* into it! It's about our school taking the initiative and setting an example for the next generation by clearly challenging society's current gender roles!"

"I see. You're into it."

"Not you too, Tsukinomori-san!" Midori-san wailed, clinging to me.

She was definitely Shikibu's sister.

Anyway, Aki as a girl...

There was no question it wouldn't suit him. I liked his face, but I couldn't say it was downright beautiful, so I wasn't sure how to feel. But I did love him, and I couldn't deny that I was interested in seeing a new side to him.

"I don't get it, though. Why would he enter Queen Nevermore?"

"I dunno. He said somethin' 'bout beatin' Kohinata."

"Beating Iroha-chan?"

Aki had been acting weird ever since we saw Iroha-chan saying she was going to enter while acting like Canary-san at lunch. Could this be some part of his plan to find her a friend she could be annoying around?

"He was sayin' he could never win King Nevermore, but now he thinks he's got a shot at winning Queen. It's actually hilarious."

“If Aki says he can win, I think he can.”

“Yeah, which is why I can’t wait to see what goes down. I swear life’s never borin’ when he’s around.”

So Aki thought he could beat Iroha-chan in the Queen Nevermore contest. What sort of normal person would think they could take on the prettiest and most popular girl in her grade—if not the entire school? The idea should have been laughable. But not for Aki. There would definitely be some grounding behind his claim—I just knew it.

Wait a second. If Aki won Queen Nevermore, what would happen with the dance at the closing party? What if Ozu won King Nevermore, and he and Aki ended up dancing together?

“Mmgh...”

I felt a gloom in my chest.

It was obvious that there was no way Ozu was ever going to be competing with me for Aki’s *romantic* affection, but I couldn’t deny that the two had a special relationship. He already occupied a lot of Aki’s thoughts, and as Aki’s girlfriend, I wasn’t prepared to hand him an even bigger slice of the Aki pie.

Unless...

“Can I ask you something, Midori-san?” I said.

“Hm? Of course.”

“If boys are allowed to enter dressed as girls...are girls allowed to enter dressed as boys?”

Midori-san’s eyes widened, and it was a moment before she found her voice. “Excuse me?”

It may have seemed absurd to her, but to me it was a perfectly logical conclusion: if Aki won the Queen Nevermore contest and I wanted to dance with him, all I had to do was win *King* Nevermore.

“’Course it’s allowed.”

“Otoi-san! We haven’t even discussed this yet!”

“We got no reason to say no, right? This is about gender roles or whatever, right? Then we gotta allow the reverse too.”

“I-Indeed. The precedent has been set, and since my preferences play no part in the decision making, that would be the correct conclusion.” Midori-san made her agreement clear.

It did look like Otoi-san had forced her into it a little, but right now I didn’t care whether Midori-san was a human doormat or not. The important thing was that I had my ticket to enter the King Nevermore contest.

If Aki were entering King Nevermore, there’d be no point in me doing this, but because he was entering *Queen* Nevermore, this was my only choice. And entering wasn’t the end of it; I had to make myself as attractive as possible, and *win*.

“So it’s decided. I’m gonna transform myself into a handsome boy.”

I poured all my determination into the information I scrawled over the form, and handed it over to Midori-san, who was left standing dumbfounded.

Sarge and the Shining Drama Club (5)

Kageishi Midori
It's strange...

Kageishi Midori
The whole day has been strange.

YAMADA
Oh? What's up?

Kageishi Midori
I can't be specific because of confidentiality.

Kageishi Midori
But a certain guy wants to join the Queen Nevermore pageant.

Shadow Drama Club Member A
Sounds crazy. And insane.

Background NPC
Sounds like a guy with guts! Spill the tea sis!

YAMADA
She can't lol. Confidentiality lmao.

Iroha
It's Senpai, right? Ooboshi-senpai.

YAMADA
Oh, hey, Sarge. Been a while.

Shadow Drama Club Member A
Been a while. Nice to see you.

Background NPC
Oh this is rare! You only showed up when you were coaching us.

© tomari

YAMADA

Is it because we're talking about Ooboshi-kun?

Iroha

Heading back to the void now.

YAMADA

I was kidding!

Background NPC

At least give us something juicy first!

Kageishi Midori

Uhh... Once again, I managed to keep nothing confidential...

Iroha

Senpai came to me with a declaration of war. Said he was going to enter the Queen Nevermore pageant.

Iroha

I have no clue what he's thinking. Do any of you know anything?

YAMADA

Nope!

Background NPC

That reminds me. Tsukinomori-san was talking to the committee too.

Kageishi Midori

Enough! We have to protect the applicants' privacy!

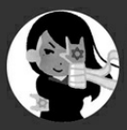
YAMADA

Oh, so Tsukinomori-san's an applicant!

Kageishi Midori

Aaaah! Now I've done it!

© tomari



Shadow Drama Club Member A

Dug your own grave. Lie in it.

Iroha

Mashiro-senpai's entering?

Kageishi Midori

I suppose you would find out sooner or later anyway.

Kageishi Midori

For some reason, she's going for King Nevermore instead of Queen.

YAMADA

lol wut

Background NPC

I gotta hear about this. Tea.

Shadow Drama Club Member A

Interested. Need info.

Kageishi Midori

I'd like to know the reason myself, actually.

Kageishi Midori

Everything's confusing...

YAMADA

They're dating, right? Maybe this is a new form of flirting.

Background NPC

Yeah!

Iroha

I don't think so.

YAMADA

Oh? How come?

Shadow Drama Club Member A

Need deets.

© tomari

Background NPC
pls.
Iroha
Uh, it's just a gut feeling.
YAMADA
Huh. Sounds kinda sus.
Kageishi Midori
Okay, we're done! We should stop right here!
Kageishi Midori
No gossiping behind people's backs. Court is adjourned!
YAMADA
Okay.
Background NPC
K.
Shadow Drama Club Member A
Yes, sir. Whatever you say.
Iroha
Ha ha. Thank you for being so considerate!
Kageishi Midori
Don't worry about it. I shouldn't have brought up an awkward topic.
Kageishi Midori
I'm sorry. I need to become more disciplined.
Iroha
There's something that's been bugging me.
Iroha
Everyone in this chat apart from Midori-san is completely different from their IRL selves...
© tomari

Chapter 5: My Friend and I Are Legitimately OzuAki!

I don't want you to take this the wrong way, so let me be clear: my work with the 05th Floor Alliance is the most important part of my life.

I was entering the Queen Nevermore contest because those kinds of typical teenage experiences helped to develop your artistic skill and were necessary to properly direct your creators. Canary, whom I really admired, taught me that, and I was just following her advice. This event was even more important than that, though; it was indispensable in leading Iroha to her future.

After putting in my entry for the Queen Nevermore contest and going home, it was business as usual: I worked on *Koyagi* and kept an eye on the game's schedule.

I checked the clock. It was midnight; the second hand had only just passed the hour. I wasted no time in clicking my way to my emails to see what was in my inbox.

There was nothing new.

"Shikibu..." I groaned. With an angry sigh, I stood up slowly, like a demon on its way to harvest some souls.

At last night's party, I'd traded her a bottle of Dom Pérignon for an illustration to celebrate two million downloads, due today. There was no illustration in my inbox, so as her producer, there was only one thing left for me to do: knock on her door.

I took a single key out of my desk's top drawer. Since we were neighbors, we'd exchanged these keys so that we could respond quickly in an emergency. While the Kohinata siblings lived with their family, Sumire and I both lived alone. We each had a spare key for each other in case we collapsed at home from sudden illness or faced some other problem where a locked door would prevent us from receiving help.

I'd given Ozu a spare key to my place for the very same reason. *That*

particular emergency key had degenerated into a gadget that let Iroha come in and out of my room whenever she pleased.

As for Mashiro, she was nervous about giving her key to other people, so I hadn't exchanged keys with her. I wasn't going to force her to do anything she didn't want to. It was a rule that applied to the entire fifth floor.

Flipped on its head, that also meant we could do anything, as long as we had the other party's consent. Showing up at someone's door in an emergency (the emergency, in this case, being one undelivered illustration), letting myself in using the key, and searching the entire place top to bottom was perfectly fine. And that was exactly what I was about to do.

I stepped out into the hallway and headed for the apartment two doors down. I pulled the knob, but it clicked, resisting my attempt to open the door. That damned Shikibu had locked it. Not that it made a difference. I simply took out the spare key, shoved it in the keyhole, and unlocked the door. I began to open it...before it stopped halfway with a loud *clink*.

"The chain?" I clicked my tongue. "Very clever."

I began to hammer on the door, calling out to the heinous criminal hiding away inside. "Hey, Shikibu! I know you're in there! Give it up and get over here!"

There is no response. It seems no one is home.

The sentences scrolled through my mind like text in a game, while I carried on knocking.

Suddenly there was a click, and the door opened. Not Shikibu's door, though; the one next to it: the Kohinatas'.

"Keep up the good fight."

"Ozu? Sorry, was I too loud?"

"Not at all. I'm impressed, though. You know this place and its soundproofing so well, you're keeping your voice just quiet enough not to annoy anyone."

"I'm bearing it in mind, but if I got just the right volume, that was a coincidence. If you didn't hear me, why'd you come out here then?"

“I saw your messages to Shikibu-sensei in the LIME group and how she’d left them all on read. Figured you’d be coming to visit her right about now, so I came to see.”

“That’s just like you, Ozu. Perfect deduction.”

“Nah, it was just a coincidence that I was right. So, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. She’s holed up in there, like Amaterasu in the cave, huh?”

“It’s rare for you to make references to Japanese mythology. I thought you were bad at Japanese class?”

“There were a lot of mythology references in this light novel I read recently. It stuck in my head easier because it wasn’t connected to my actual life.”

“I’m glad your study of humanity via nerd culture is still going well. Anyway...” It was time to get the conversation back on track. “You can see what Murasaki Shikibu-sensei is up to. Honestly, there’s not much I can do about it at this point.”

“Gotcha. Y’know, this whole Amaterasu in the cave stuff might actually come in handy.”

“How?”

“Like this: Aki, could you keep your voice down for a little bit?” Ozu chuckled mischievously and held up a finger in front of his face.

His expression was replaced with something innocent the next second, something that reminded me that he really was Iroha’s brother. The hallway was lit even at night, so I could see his face clearly, but if we were outside in the dark I might not be able to tell them apart.

Ozu opened the chained door halfway and turned towards the gap. “What’s wrong, Aki? You look *really* mad. Is it because you haven’t got the illustration? Are you gonna take your anger out on me?”

He laced his voice with a thick seductiveness, as though he were a character in a BL game.

“Wait, Ozu. What are you doing?”

“Shush. Stick with it; it’s part of my plan.”

“Your plan?”

“The plan to get Amaterasu out of Amano-iwato, the cave she hid in. We just gotta say the right lines to get her perverted imagination going, and then she’ll get curious and come see what’s going on.”

“You owe the whole of Japanese mythology an apology. Apologize to the gods right now.”

“Chill. They don’t exist.”

“As logical as ever, I see.”

While he was happy to make use of his knowledge of Japanese mythology, underneath he was still the same mechanical Ozu he always was.

He ignored my comment and turned back to Sumire’s room, using the same tone of voice as before. “S-Stop it, Aki. We’re in the hallway—what if someone sees us? What? You *want* someone to see us? I... I don’t think I could take that...”

“I know this is just some plan, but I’m not sure how to feel about it. Besides, Shikibu’s no idiot. She’s not gonna fall for such an obvious ploy.”

“She already has.”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow! Let goooo!”

So she *was* an idiot. More of an idiot than I thought, I mean.

She must have snuck up to the door, because Ozu had plunged his arm in through the gap and grabbed her. The accuracy and speed of his movements were enough to compete with any machine. And he was able to pinpoint the moment he needed to catch his prey, all while putting on an act. He really was terrifying.

“If this was all it’d take to lure you out, you should’ve just saved us the effort and answered the door in the first place,” I said.

“I just wanted to hold on to a few more precious seconds. That’s just how delicate girls like me are!”

“Shut up and get to work.”

“Waaaah!”

A short while later, we were in Sumire’s workspace. There were framed posters and prints of handsome young boys all across the walls. Her bookshelf was filled with hundreds of doujinshi, her own works, novels, and art-related documents, all divided into their own sections. Her living room didn’t have much nerdy stuff in it, probably because that was where she saw company. The worst thing there was a box of Blu-rays by the TV.

But she showed no restraint when it came to her bedroom-slash-workspace. There was no excuse for this. It was a nerd’s room through and through.

It was obvious from a single look that the bulky PC on her desk was powerful, and her dual monitors and tablet made for a perfect workspace. Sumire sobbed as she sat there, drawing.

Every character that had appeared in *Koyagi* so far had been a hit. The illustration that was coming together line by line before our eyes was full of life, a perfect way to celebrate two million downloads. Because she missed her deadlines so often, it was easy to forget that Murasaki Shikibu-sensei could actually work pretty quickly. When she was desperate, she was way faster than the other artists whose videos I’d watched online, and faster than the average speeds I’d looked up.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei spent the most time on getting around to starting and working up her motivation.

“Watching her work like this makes it seem like some sort of magic,” Ozu murmured.

“Yeah. I could never do this kinda stuff.”

Though from Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s and my perspective, Ozu’s engineering skills were magical.

While our illustrator was working in front of us, Ozu and I were sitting cross-legged on either side of the low table in the middle of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s room. I only came in to watch over her, so there wasn’t anything we could do except talk. Apart from collecting the illustration, I’d already finished my quota of work for the day too.

“Hey, Aki. Y’know about Iroha?”

“You don’t waste any time, huh?”

In the blink of an eye, Ozu was already talking about Iroha again, a subject that seemed to have captivated him lately.

“A reliable source has informed me that you’re planning to enter Queen Nevermore dressed as a girl?”

“You already found out about that? That was quick.”

“Hacking into students’ social network accounts is a breeze.”

“I sure hope you never decide to join the dark side.”

“I won’t, ’cause I know you wouldn’t want me to.” Ozu let out an embarrassed chuckle. “I’ve been worried about how Iroha’s acting, so I was gathering information from the first years and the Nevermore Executive Committee. I don’t usually take things this far.”

“Yeah, I figured. Shikibu, you’ve stopped drawing.”

“Gah! Of course I’ve stopped! It sounds like you guys are talking about something interesting!”

“So listen in if you want, but keep those hands moving.”

“Ugh... Fine.”

I could totally see Murasaki Shikibu-sensei fantasizing about me dressing up as a girl. Talking about it here while she was retroactively meeting a deadline was clearly bad timing. I couldn’t just ignore Ozu’s question either, though, so I reluctantly began to explain.

“I want to find Iroha a friend. Someone she can be herself with; someone she can annoy as much as she annoys me. And I want to find her one before we graduate. But she doesn’t seem interested in being herself; in fact, she’s trying to create yet another persona.”

“A new persona? Are you talking about how she was acting like Tsukinomori-san at the party?”

“Yeah, this is what that was about. She was practicing to pick up this new

persona of hers.”

According to Sasara, the pursuit of cuteness was something girls naturally aimed for. Iroha was at an age where it was normal for her to develop more mature interests, so she might have started thinking along those lines. I shared these thoughts with Ozu.

This was all speculation, but there was one solid contradiction that I couldn’t leave unspoken.

“The cutest version of Iroha is the one that’s all-out annoying. My plan is to show her that this new superficial persona of hers can’t even stand up to me dressed as a girl.”

“And that’s why you’re going for Queen Nevermore.”

“Perfectly logical, right? Not to mention highly rational.”

“For you and your messed up thinking, yeah.”

Ozu didn’t hold any punches. To be fair, even I had a faint sense that I was going off the rails. But if you just ignored how bad it *sounded*, then my plan wasn’t actually all that bad. Surely.

“I guess it’s fine, though. Sure, it’s weird, but as long as it’s entertaining, I don’t have any objections. I was worried you and Iroha had seriously fallen out with each other, but if you’re still at a stage that you can come up with something so dumb, I’m actually reassured.”

“We’re both a hundred percent serious.”

“I know. You two are serious, but from a third-party perspective, this all looks kinda chill.”

“Yeah!” Sumire chimed in. “Whoever wins, no one dies, and it doesn’t sound like anyone’s getting any dreams crushed either. Serious feuds are best when no one loses much, and everyone’s happy at the end! You should totally go for it!”

“Work.”

“Okay.”

I mulled over Ozu's and Sumire's thoughts. They'd been worried about Iroha's strange behavior too. Our relationships and communication with Iroha had an effect on the Alliance members, even when you took out the part where she was our secret voice actor. That was why my entry into the Queen Nevermore contest, frivolous as it might have sounded, was important for the entire Alliance.

"Can I point out something weird? How come you're so confident about winning Queen Nevermore, when you said you had no chance going for King? It almost sounds like you have no clue how to get any girls, but you know how to attract the interests of men."

"Have you forgotten, Ozu? I'm *Koyagi*'s producer."

"Yeah, I know. What's that got to do with it?"

A lot. It was a mobile game so popular it had over one—no, now it was *two*—million downloads. We had some female users, but around eighty percent of them were young men. My point was this:

"Of course I know how to attract the interests of men. I *am* one."

"Y'know, that's actually pretty convincing."

"I'm not just gonna dress up as a girl and call it a day. I already know what I need to do to *win*."

"Will you guys stop using so many buzzwords behind me?! It's getting me super curious! I wanna join in on this conversation so bad!"

"Just shut up and face— Oh, you *were* facing forward. Impressive."

"Whatever you might think, I'm a woman who knows how to follow orders!"

"Then, could you follow your deadlines too, please?"

"You gotta break a few deadlines to break your enemies!"

"No, being behind on those deadlines is gonna make your enemies break *you*."

Even when spouting nonsense, Sumire was glued to her PC and scribbling on her tablet. I was glad she could keep focused even with everything that was

going on around her. Maybe it was just because I was here cracking the whip, though.

But I was getting off track.

“Anyway, so leading the *Koyagi* project’s taught me how to win over the hearts of men. All I need to do next is fix up my appearance, and then I might actually be able to win. Sounds way easier than becoming handsome so I can appeal to women—because I have no clue how to do that.”

“You got a plan for fixing up your appearance?”

“Kinda. I know someone who’s all about creating ‘cute.’”

“Of course you do. You and your mysterious connections, huh?”

“It’s a producer’s job to make as many connections as possible, just in case we need them at some point.”

“Yup!” Ozu looked up at the ceiling. “You know, if you enter Queen Nevermore and win, and I win King Nevermore, we’ll have the dance at the closing party together.”

“Oh yeah. I didn’t think of that.”

A noisy clattering filled the room. It wasn’t me or Ozu, so there was only one possible culprit. Sure enough, when I turned to look, I saw that Murasaki Shikibu-sensei had completely fallen off her chair and was now sitting on the floor.

She pointed at me as though I was the killer in a horror movie about to finish her off, her lips trembling as she spoke. “A-A-Aki! Wh-What did you guys just say?!”

“You need to be more careful with your chair; it was expensive. Do I have to remind you I bought it with the Alliance’s budget?”

“I don’t care about that!”

“You should.”

“If what you guys were talking about is true, then Ozuma-kun will be the prince, and you’ll be the princess, Aki, and—”

“If you wanna get technical about it, sure.”

“Wh-Which means... Which means...!” Sumire curled up and began to tremble like a ninja trying to hold out against an evil spirit that had possessed them. She was like a battery steadily being recharged. And then her magic energy burst forth, and she was throwing a fist up to the ceiling. The unleashed magic exploded brilliantly, and then she was yelling from the very depths of her belly, the depths of her *soul*.

“*Legit* OzuAkiiiiiiiiiiii!”

“What?”

“This has gotta be a gift from the gods themselves! The audience has been waiting for this for so long! It’s literally a godlike ship and yet up till now they’ve been way too stubborn and have done *nothing*! But finally! Romeo and Romeo are taking to the evening dance floor and bringing their bodies together of their *own free will*! Just man and man with no woman in sight! It’s paradise! Aaah! Oh, crap, my nose is bleeding...”

Sumire (need I remind you, a twenty-five-year-old), was rolling around on the floor without a care for her hair or clothes, and deliberately wiping away the “blood” from under her nose. Actually, when I looked, there was a patch of smeared blood where she’d wiped it. I guess her nose really was bleeding. I didn’t realize that was actually a thing. I mean, I had expected her to react like this, but maybe not quite to this extent.

There was that phrase, “to go above and beyond,” and it applied equally to creative types. In this case, I couldn’t say I approved.

“I’m pretty sure you’re gonna end up disappointed. I’m transforming myself into a beautiful girl. It won’t look like yaoi at all.”

“*So*?! Yaoi isn’t about how it *looks*! Yaoi is about the soul! Even if one side looks like a girl, the truth is that both sides of the ship are connected, and that’s beautiful!”

“I see. Sorry, I’m not exactly clued up on this stuff.”

The passion in her speech caught me off guard, and I ended up apologizing. She hadn’t even given me the chance to tell her to get back to work. Fujoshi

sure were terrifying when they started talking about their ships.

“Anyway, it looks like you’re pretty confident you can make the transformation,” Ozu said. “Wait, this person you’re asking to help out. Is it your mom?”

“Oh, no. Not her.”

I remembered then that I’d spoken to Ozu about my parents before. I didn’t really talk about my family to anyone, not even Iroha, but there had been a point in junior high school where I ended up having to tell Ozu. My mom was seriously amazing at makeup, with women’s fashion being her specialty. Her skills were so impressive that she could claim to be Arsène Lupin’s assistant, and nobody would doubt her.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t in Japan right now.

“Nah, I was thinking of someone else.”

“Who?”

“You met her too, over the summer vacation.”

That life-form of unknown age. A walking vat of charisma whose character was so strong, she imprinted herself on your brain the second she appeared. She was a famous witch of the publishing world, claiming to be forever seventeen.

“Kiraboshi Canary. Makigai Namako-sensei and Mashiro’s editor.”

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“Yes... Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s done a nice job on this. Just a few final touches and it’ll be incredible. It might even be better than her illustration of Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, and that was already fantastic.”

I appraised the freshly sent image file like it was a fine wine. I knew doing the whole wine-critic thing was outrageously cringe, but I was by myself in my own room, so I hope you can let it slide.

It was already 7 a.m. We’d ended up monitoring—I mean, encouraging—Sumire’s work until four in the morning. Once she was done, I came home and slept for three hours, then woke up and re-checked the file she’d sent.

The commemorative two million downloads image was a fun, lighthearted piece, and it almost didn't match the horror game it featured. Characters who had died in-game were flashing peace signs to celebrate the Alliance's success, which made me feel oddly guilty.

Sorry you had to die, guys. Any complaints can be mailed to Makigai Namako-sensei. He's the one who makes this stuff happen.

It was around a year since the game was first released. Our short history as a development team felt much longer than that, and these successive generations of characters all grouped together in one drawing felt like a representation of our accumulated hard work.

I knew it was dumb to get so worked up over a number that represented nothing more than a checkpoint on our way to Honeyplace Works, but being reminded of how all our hard work had come together to form this game just warmed my heart.

We were going to be okay. We were going to keep moving forward.

We'll keep on going, taking it one step at a time. Right, Iroha?

I checked my Tweeter timeline. The "Superstar Editor Kiraboshi Canary" account had just put up a tweet five seconds ago: "Just taking it easy at home today doing some typesetting, chirp!"

I tapped her number into my phone.

There was a simple business card on the table in front of me. It bore the contact details for someone with a completely ordinary name: "Hoshino Kana." It was one of the most average business cards you'd ever see, representing employees of the publishing label, UZA Bunko.

This card wasn't for Kiraboshi Canary's idol persona. It was for her as a regular adult, given to me in case I ever needed her help, and as a sign of her trust. Truth was, I really needed some nepotism in my life.

"*Aki-kun? Didn't take you long to snap, chirp. You coming to work for me now?*" Hoshino Kana—okay, I'm just going to call her Canary so that I don't have to keep differentiating between personas in my head—picked up the phone. It sounded like she was working from home today.

“Sorry to disturb you. That’s not why I’m calling.”

“*Aw, well, my hopes and dreams just took a nosedive. But don’t worry! If my cute little kouhai’s got his feathers in a bunch, I’m on call twenty-four hours a day, chirp!*”

“Thanks. That’s reassuring to hear.”

“*It’s all good, chirp! Now what can I do for you?*”

“Well...” Her voice was sweet and childlike, but with an adult open-mindedness. I was grateful for her kindness, and intended to make the most of it. So I held no punches and told her exactly what I wanted. “Can you turn me into a girl?”

“*That’s a heck of a thing to ask right off the bat!*”

Canary was so shocked, she even forgot to chirp. I thought characters like her only dropped the act when they were in super serious situations.

“*What’s wrong, Aki?! I didn’t think you were like* that*!*”

“I’m not looking for surgery or anything. I just need to be a girl for the day of the culture festival.”

“*You wanna be a chick for one day only?! We don’t have that kind of technology, chirp! You’ve been watching too many dirty videos.*”

“You can’t do it?”

“*Of course not, chirp! I may be more majestic than any phoenix, but even I can’t cast magic!”*

“Magic? Is it really that difficult just to make me look like a girl?”

“‘*Look like’? Ah... Oh, oh. Right.*”

It sounded like we were finally on the same wavelength.

“The truth is...”

I felt bad for wasting an adult’s precious time because I was unclear, so I launched into a proper explanation to make sure there were no further misunderstandings. I needed to keep Iroha’s identity a secret, but I managed to pull it off and tell Canary that I wanted to take part in the Queen Nevermore

contest.

When I was done, Canary sighed. "*I thought I told you it was fine to enjoy your youth with Iroha-chan, but you're still looking at things from the perspective of a producer. I guess the definition of youth is different from person to person. This is yours, huh?*"

"Yeah. I guess it is."

"*Your life really is just one can of worms after another, huh? But I guess that's what makes you so interesting!*" I could imagine the cheeky smile on her face just from her tone of voice.

Her teasing made me feel a little awkward, so I brushed it off with a quick cough before continuing. "Your skills embody the very essence of beauty, Canary-san. You can turn me into a beautiful girl, right?"

"*Hmm. Well...I do know a few people in my flock. But I wonder...*"

"You want to add some conditions for me meeting them?"

"*Oh, no, you don't have to worry about that. I just know so many people, I'm wondering who the best choice would be.*" She wagged a finger at me by clicking her tongue over the phone. Okay, that sounds weird, but you know what I mean, right?

I don't want to get into linguistics here, so anyway, her confidence in this matter was highly reassuring. After a little more silence, I heard her fingers typing away at a keyboard.

"*Oh, that's right, Aki-kun. You said you went to the same school as Maki—Mashiro-chan, right? Kouzai High School?*"

"Yeah, that's right."

"*Gotchu. Turns out I've got the perfect feathered friend there already.*"

"What, at my school?"

"*She's a member of my online paid community. My students there really know their stuff about beauty, chirp.*"

"Students? Is this a different community from your fan club?"

“*We study the publishing trade there, and I run it under my real name. My nom de plume is only for my idol stuff, chirp.*”

“I had no idea. I really need to learn more about you. And you say there’s a student at my school involved? I didn’t know the people at my school cared about the internet so much.”

“*There are about ten thousand members, so it’s not all that surprising, chirp.*”

“Ten thousand?! Without even using your idol name... You just keep on impressing me.”

“*It’s not that big a deal. It’s mainly for rearing the next generation and scouting for new talent. The idol business is what I’m really about, chirp! And don’t I look adorable doing it!*” Canary-san played it down, but ten thousand members was impressive no matter which way you sliced it. “*I’ll introduce you two then. Are you free after school today, chirp?*”

“I am! I didn’t expect you to be able to organize something so quickly.”

“*The early bird gets the worm, especially when it comes to getting your ducks in a row and talking turkey!*”

“Wow. You really know what you’re doing.”

She rattled off idioms with such confidence and rhythm that I had no choice but to get swept away. At the same time, she was so persuasive that I barely minded.

“*I’ll send you the time and place over LIME and book us a table at* the *cutest café ever, chirp*!”

Between Tsukinomori-san and Canary-san, first-rate businessmen sure were quick at arranging stuff. I didn’t think Canary-san would put so much thought and effort into something that must’ve sounded dumb to her, but I was glad she had. It just went to show that she really was looking out for me. I needed to make sure I wouldn’t fall short of her expectations.

I was even more determined now.

I will *become the most beautiful girl in the school! Beautiful enough to claim victory over Kohinata Iroha!*

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“I feel like your motivation is taking you to some really strange places.”

“Maybe, but what can I do about it? When you work your brain as fast as I am right now, sometimes it’s bound to launch you off track.”

“You mean the end comes...beyond chaos?”

“Wait, I’ve seen those words in a game somewhere.”

“I’ve been playing through the older Grand Fantasy games since the 7 remake came out.”

“You’re easily influenced, huh?”

Chapter 6: My Friend’s Little Sister’s Rival Is My Teacher!

“What are you wearing?”

That was the first thing out of my mouth when I showed up at the designated café to find a blonde loli in sunglasses.

This was a fancy place close to the station; I wouldn’t usually come somewhere like this. The terrace was like a slice of an otherworldly, pretentious paradise, and Canary-san sat there, eating pancakes with elegance.

“I’m an idol. I need my camouflage if I’m gonna meet with a guy, chirp. I don’t need some stalker from a rag paper exposing me, chirp!”

“Oh, right. Must be tough to be famous.”

She was totally different from me, who blended into the furniture whether I liked it or not. That had changed a little lately since I started fake-dating Mashiro, but fame within a single classroom was incomparable to fame throughout the whole of Japan. And even my “classroom fame” was the sort of thing everyone experienced.

“Our friend should be swooping in shortly. Go ahead and order yourself something to drink, chirp.”

“Sure. Let’s see...” I picked up a menu. “Jeez, that’s expensive!”

A thousand yen for a coffee! And if you wanted something a little more special, it’d cost you an extra five hundred.

I know what you’re thinking. I have sales from *Koyagi*, I live in a nice apartment, and I can afford to take Mashiro to a fancy French restaurant, so I’m rich. But the money from *Koyagi* went back into the Alliance budget, which covered the other stuff as expenses. Personally, I didn’t have that much money on me at all. This place was expensive when you considered that it was on top of one of my three meals of the day—and the fancy Canary here acted like it

was nothing. I'd hate to be the guy who ended up dating her.

"Don't panic about the prices, chirp. I'll cover everything."

"Huh? But you're doing me a favor already."

"Careful, you're making me look bad. Don't forget about the pecking order here. Let me take care of you, chirp."

"All right. Thank you."

It was easy to forget when she looked so young, but Canary was as much of an adult as Tsukinomori-san. It was important to know when to let yourself be treated.

"By the way, your users seem to love your new chick, Kokuryuuin Kugetsu-chan. I've seen them twittering about her online. How are your downloads doing?"

"They're doing well, thanks to your help. I blinked, and we were over two million, so I suddenly had to put in an order for an illustration. Oh, I'll have a regular iced coffee, please." I quickly placed my order with the waitress who'd come up to the table the second I'd sat down.

When I looked back at Canary, she was leaning her face on her hands and grinning at me. There was a mischief in her expression that kind of reminded me of Iroha.

"Your downloads are soaring, huh? All thanks to *my* Kokuryuuin Kugetsu-chan. Ooh, it hurts to be this talented."

Smug was too weak a word.

"Iroha and I were the ones who polished her up."

Canary tittered. "When you come up with the original idea, you get to be as proud as a peacock no matter who developed the idea afterwards. Even a great anime with a not-so-great source material'll get praised, and the same holds true in reverse. It's one of society's crueler rules, chirp."

"I guess that makes sense. But wait, you've already got fame and fortune, and yet you're getting smug over reviews for *Koyagi*?"

“Of course! I love every project I’m involved in equally, and I’m proud of every last one of them! And if you love something, you can’t forget the pride, chirp!”

The slackers crowed “their” achievements from the rooftops, and the go-getters never admitted to a job well done. It was kind of refreshing to see someone so smug in this country, where a more quiet pride in your work was valued, but it made sense if she was doing it out of love. I never even thought of things that way, so honestly, I’d learned something.

“But yeah, she wouldn’t have developed into the character she was without the basic concept. I’m really grateful. I don’t think the Alliance could have come up with her without you.”

“Heh heeeh. But really, I gained a lot from our little summer vacation too, chirp. I think Makigai Namako-sensei came out of his shell a little too, thanks to his work with the Alliance.”

“Really?!” I asked, my voice cracking.

“Really! He’s way less uptight than he used to be. He used to be like a poisoned talon, ready to wear his readers down mentally, but since working on *Koyagi* he’s getting more and more...balanced, I’d say.”

“You mean his writing’s gotten gentler?”

“Let’s put it like this. He used to be as toxic as an Australian box jelly, but now he’s more like a giant jellyfish.”

“I don’t know much about jellyfish... You’re saying he’s still a little toxic, right?”

That kind of harshness in his writing was something he was known for, so it wouldn’t do him much good if it disappeared completely.

“Oh, speaking of Makigai-sensei... Here! Take this, chirp!” Canary pulled a book from her bag. The cover was somehow emotional, powerful, and gloomy all at once.

“What? Whoa! The latest volume of *Snow White’s Revenge Classroom*! Is this what he was writing during the summer in Kageishi Village?”

“That’s the one! I was sure he wouldn’t make it this time, but I managed to

pull it off with some begging at the printers' office, chirp."

"Sounds like he didn't make it in time then."

"Well, it'll release on time, so he only just about died, chirp."

"But he still died."

"Anyway! That's Makigai Namako-sensei's latest book. It doesn't go on sale till next week, but I wanted to get you the sample print before anyone else!"

"Canary-san!"

I was so emotional I could cry. The rest of the Alliance was so used to having Makigai Namako-sensei around that they might've forgotten, but I'd always been a huge fan of his. I loved his work so much that I asked him to do the scenarios for *Koyagi*. It was just a coincidence (but a very lucky one) that he accepted. By all means, I shouldn't have been able to get us such a talented author. I was a devout follower of his, and this preprint version of his book would now become my bible.

"It's signed too, chirp."

"Seriously?! I'm gonna treasure this more than anything else in my life ever!"

I was acting like an overexcited kid. I mean, a signed copy of my favorite author's book! And Makigai Namako was famous for being an anonymous author who never had anything to do with the media. Signed copies of his work just didn't exist. It was plausible that there were others in a similar situation to me who'd gotten copies, but you never saw them on auction sites, so this was pretty rare.

"Makigai-sensei's signature... I wonder what it's like!" Trembling with excitement, I opened the book, searching for a blank space on the first page behind the cover, and...there it was!

As brilliant as the brightest of stars, it was...

"*To my beloved Aki, from your beloved idol☆ Kiraboshi Kanaria.*"

"Why is it *your* signature?"

I wanted my hopes and dreams back.

I mean, I guess Kiraboshi Kanaria was also worthy of my respect. But it just wasn't who I was expecting, you know? I'm sure you understand the kind of despair I was feeling right now.

Canary burst out in laughter. "Makigai-sensei said he'd rather give you his signature in person, if you ever met up one day. I wasn't about to rob you of your first, very precious experience! Heh heh! I'm such a sweet little goose!"

"Ah. Right, that actually makes sense."

I'd never actually met Makigai Namako-sensei in person. But I agreed. I wanted my first signature from him to be in person. And if he felt the same way, then as someone who'd worked together with him on *Koyagi*, I couldn't be happier.

"Oh! It looks like our special friend is here. I'll let my idol persona nest while I go back into editor mode. Try not to be surprised, and don't say anything, okay?"

"Huh? Oh, sure."

By editor mode, she probably meant Hoshino Kana—the same normal girl she had been when she gave me her business card. I remembered that the person meeting us was a member of her online community, which she ran as Hoshino Kana.

"Sorry I'm late, Hoshino-san! I was helping prepare for the festival and lost track of time!"

"Don't worry about it. We haven't been waiting long."

Who was this girl? Now that Canary was Hoshino Kana again, she seemed way too plain. If I could see her speech on a page, it'd look completely nondescript. I then turned my attention to my fellow student who'd arrived, chest heaving.

She sounded like a girl, and she was wearing the girls' uniform. She had brown hair with a peculiar twist at—

"Huh?"

"Wha..."

Time froze, taking her and me with it.

We both recognized each other.

“A-Argh! You’re that perverted nerdy stalker!”

“*You’re* the pervert! *And* the stalker!”

It was Tomosaka Sasara. The cringey—um, highly interesting—girl who’d decided she was Iroha’s rival. She pointed a rude finger in my face.

“Why are you with Hoshino-san?! Wait, don’t tell me *you’re* the guy who wants to enter Queen Nevermore and get makeup lessons from me?!”

“That’s him! Ooboshi Akiteru-kun!”

“WHAAAAAAT?!”

A hundred shrill decibels reverberated through the once quiet café.

I sent a silent apology to the staff for being the reason she was here.

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“Mmm. This boba is so squishy! I love the bubble tea at this place, and the decor is so pretty. This has gotta be one of the best cafés ever!” The cheerful girl sipped at her bubble milk tea. You could take a photo of her right now and paste it into a weekly magazine, and I don’t think anybody would object.

We were still in the fancy café from before. After a surprising and unexpected encounter, along with mutual shouts of “What are *you* doing here?” things had somehow calmed down to a point that we could hold a normal conversation.

“I thought you were just a typical normie. I’m kinda shocked that you know Canar—Hoshino-san.”

“The heck? You still trying to pick a fight?” Sasara narrowed her eyes at me, keeping her straw held in her mouth.

“You don’t need to get so defensive. I was just wondering how an ordinary teenage girl knows an editor from a publishing company. It’s not something you see every day.”

“‘An ordinary teenage girl’? What? You think I’m just an ordinary girl?” Sasara sighed. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, right, sorry. You’re not an ordinary teenage girl. You’re a slightly

unhinged teenage girl.”

“Okay, now you’re just being outright rude.”

“All right, you two. Let’s stop the fighting now. Time is money.”

“Oh! Of course, Hoshino-san!”

The moment Canary stepped in, Sasara melted like a cat getting its chin scratched. It was terrifying, like she had multiple personalities or something.

“Tomosaka-san is a member of my online community. She often comes to my lectures. We talked, and I found out she has a Pinsta account.”

“Oh, yeah. You said something about that at school, Tomosaka.”

“Right.” Canary nodded. “I was very surprised to hear that she’s an influencer with a million followers. I immediately asked her to do some work for my publishing company.”

“Your publishing company? I thought Tomosaka hated nerdy stuff like that. Like light novels, and—”

“Ah! Aki-kun, that’s not what I’m talking about.” Canary waved her hand at me: a wordless signal.

I shut up. Clearly I’d steered the conversation into dangerous territory.

Just then, my phone buzzed. It was a LIME message from Canary. We’d only just exchanged IDs today to arrange this meeting.

“*Sasara-chan hasn’t got a clue that I work with light novels, chirp!*”

Seriously?

If Sasara respected her so much, wouldn’t she have looked Hoshino up online to find out what field of work she was in? Though I *had* heard that young people these days didn’t know how to coogle anything; instead, they only consumed the information fed to them by social media.

Yeah, I know I’m a “young person” too, but that’s not the point I’m trying to make. What I mean is, Sasara might have been a textbook example of one of those people.

“I’m always working with *popular* novels, and so I wanted to branch out and

try something new. I decided to ask a few influencers to write me some essays.”

“Your drive to always try new things is so wonderful, Hoshino-san! You’re so serious about the stuff you wanna do too. I have mad respect for the way you stay so true to yourself while tackling new challenges!”

Listen, Sasara, that woman was anything but “true to herself.” She had even called “light novels” “*popular* novels” instead, to the extent that she *emphasized* the word. I couldn’t really blame Sasara for her perception, though, and I had a lot of respect for Kiraboshi Kanaria as an example to follow myself, so I did agree with a lot of what Sasara said.

Wait a sec. I almost missed something majorly important there, didn’t I?

“A million followers?”

“That’s right. Tomosaka-san is hot and popular right now on Pinsta.”

Hot and popular meant the same thing in this case, didn’t they?

But I was so shocked by the revelation that the thought dissipated from my mind immediately.

“A million Pinsta followers... Wow...”

Unlike TikTak, where new users’ uploads were automatically recommended by the algorithm, Pinsta required steady work to gradually build up response and popularity, so it was unlikely that you would suddenly find yourself at the top of the social media food chain. That was the impression I had, at least.

Maybe I just wasn’t familiar enough with what girls consumed online, but while *Koyagi* had moderate success on Tweeter, it had never found similar success on Pinsta.

“Well, y’know, it’s not hard when you’re overflowing with charisma!” Sasara wore a triumphant smile and sent several glances my way. She was clearly dying for attention, which was pretty annoying.

Though she did have my respect for getting a million followers on Pinsta—it was honestly an impressive number. While she had mentioned using Pinsta at school, I never imagined we were talking about these sorts of numbers. I always thought normies switched off their brains for the sake of wasting as much

precious time as possible, but I guess even they were capable of possessing talent as long as they put in the work.

“So? What does a zero-follower loser like you want with a million-follower star like me?”

Okay, forget anything I said about being impressed. She was *annoying*. And if she was going to keep emphasizing the numbers like that, this conversation was going to take forever. I decided I needed to be the one to push things forward.

“I want you to turn me into a girl. I want to dress up as the most beautiful girl the world has ever seen.”

“You wanna dress as a girl. Okay. Welp, I guess you picked the right girl for the job!”

“You don’t seem that shocked.”

“Hm? Why should I be shocked?”

“Uh, I mean. Everyone else freaked out. I was sure you were gonna call me a pervert or something.”

Iroha, Mashiro, Midori, Sumire, and Ozu had all failed to hide their surprise. Even Otoi-san, with her lackluster reaction, had noted that I was doing something weird.

“Well, you *are* a perv for stalking Kohinata and grinning at pictures of 2D girls, but dressing up as a girl is normal stuff, isn’t it? I’ve got friends who do things like that, and I think people are free to wear what they like, regardless of gender, y’know?”

“If you’re that open when it comes to diversity, maybe you could stand to be a little nicer to nerds too.”

“Shut it. You can’t just tell me to start liking something I know nothing about.”

“So that’s why there’s still conflict in the world.”

“Huh? The heck are you talking about?”

There were plenty of examples in human history of conflicts started by ignorance, which led to fear. Things you didn’t understand were scary, and

people generally hated scary stuff.

Anyone who led a normal, honest life would arrive at the same system of values. Sasara was tolerant when it came to things she was familiar with. Everything else got excluded. It wasn't about whether she liked or disliked something; it was about whether she understood it or not. You could say she was the opposite of Mashiro and I: we didn't understand normies and therefore preferred to keep our distance.

"But yeah, that's why I don't care if you wanna turn yourself into a cute girl. I don't really wanna do makeup on someone I can't stand, though. And if you're entering Queen Nevermore, that makes you my rival. Why should I have to do anything that gives my competitor an advantage?"

"Don't be like that, Tomosaka-san," Canary said. "He could be a powerful rival; imagine if he entered and you still beat him! You'd be an even more spectacular winner than before!"

"You're so right, Hoshino-san! That's exactly what I was thinking!"

Her opinions were like a revolving door.

It was like she was totally brainwashed by the Cult of Canary. She'd probably get involved in a porn video if Canary told her to—obvious age-related issues with that aside.

"Okay, then. I'll do your makeup on that day!"

"Thanks a lot!"

"*Only* because Hoshino-san asked me to help out, okay? Make sure you remember that I'm under no obligation to do this at all!"

"I know you say you hate nerd culture, but you're really playing into it right now."

If that wasn't an example of tsundere, please tell me what is.

"I dunno what you're talking about, but I definitely know you're making fun of me. Are you really grateful, or are you just trying to insult me?!"

"I'm grateful; I'm just not sure how I feel about you getting all tsundere on me."

“If you’re grateful, then you’re not really showing it!”

“You don’t have to show something to feel something.”

“Huh?! What the heck are you talking about?! Like, if you’re in love with someone, you can’t help but show it by letting them do whatever they want, right?!”

“Okay, now that’s just dangerous.”

“Whatever. I’m done listening to your annoying lecture!”

If she kept up that line of thinking, I could see her getting sucked dry financially by some guy in a band or a host or someone. Was this how impulsive people like her thought? I had no clue.

“I said I’d do your makeup, so get off my case already!”

“Okay...”

I guess if she did get duped in the future, it was her life. Nothing to do with me. It didn’t matter how weird a cult someone was wrapped up in, if they were happy, maybe there was kindness in letting them be.

“Let’s go, then.”

“Huh?”

“Not ‘huh.’ We’re gonna do your makeup, right?”

“I thought you were just gonna do it on the day?”

“What? This is way more complex than that. I gotta teach you a whole ton of stuff first, to get the best results we can on the day itself.” Sasara angrily sucked up the rest of her bubble tea, then she grabbed the bag she’d put behind her on the chair and stood up. “Would you like to come too, Hoshino-san? I’d be happy to have you.”

“Oh, sorry. I need to get back to the office.”

“Thought so. But I’m super happy you took the time to meet us when you’re so busy! I’ll make it up to you by turning this guy into the most beautiful girl *ever*!”

“Thank you. I’ll send you back your essay with the edits on it later.”

“Thanks!”

Apparently we were going somewhere. Canary tapped on my shoulder and whispered into my ear. “I’ll leave the rest to you two fledglings. Good luck turning into an adorable chick, chirp!” She gave me a covert wink.

Canary rose to her feet and handed a black credit card to the waitress she summoned. It was a symbol of extreme wealth, which she waved around completely casually.

“Let’s go then,” Sasara said, impatient.

“Wait. Go where, exactly?”

I didn’t like the fact that she was moving things along without an explanation. You couldn’t let a scenario continue without the users understanding everything, or there’d be a flood of complaints.

“*Like I said.* If we want your makeup to be perfect on the day, we need to lay some groundwork. I gotta teach you, and for that, we need tools.”

“Tools? Uh, you know how they have software to practice karaoke? Is there anything like that to practice using makeup?”

“Nope. Wish there were, then you wouldn’t have to line up for the bathroom. Anyway, stop asking dumb questions. It should be obvious where we’re going.”

“I can’t think of anywhere,” I said, tilting my head and frowning.

“Ugh!” Sasara scowled in annoyance, and started tapping the side of her head. “We’re going to my place!”

“Oh, right.”

Wait.

“*What?!*”

***

Has a girl ever invited you to her house within a month of meeting her?

It had never happened to me—until now. This was a first for me.

It was an ordinary house in a friendly neighborhood. The front door practically

invited you in, and a fresh, unfamiliar scent hit me the moment I was over the threshold.

You know what I'm talking about, right? When you first go to a friend's house, or your girlfriend's house—wait, I don't know about that second one. But yeah, when you go to a new house for the first time, there's always a unique, indescribable scent.

There wasn't anyone else at home. Apparently, Sasara's brother Chatarou had gone to see one of his geeky friends. I guess it's true what they say, that geeky kids have more friends nowadays. I hurried down the corridor as Sasara led me to a bathroom.

Because I was at a girl's house, I almost expected it to be super chic. It wasn't; it was just an ordinary bathroom belonging to an ordinary family. There was a stack of laundry, with underwear that—that I never saw. I didn't see anything. It was gone from my memory, and now I'm done with this description.

Anyway, this was a regular house. Maybe it was a little on the messier side too. I felt like my apartment was tidier, because I constantly expected visitors.

"Stop staring, you perv!"

"I'm not staring at anything!"

"It's not like I wanna be teaching you about the basics of skin care right now! It's only because Hoshino-san asked me to. The second you've learned, you can go home. Okay?"

"Okay..."

"Good. Now, we need this, this...and I guess this too. Did I have any of that?" Sasara mumbled to herself, pulling product after product out from the cabinet behind the mirror.

I stared at the neatly packaged items she put out on top of the washer like they were a collection of exotic animals.

"These are...cosmetics?"

"Way to generalize there. You don't just call a bunch of pens 'stationery,' do you?"

I mean, she was right.

“So these are all different products?”

“Duh. This is cleanser, and that one’s lotion. Serum, body milk, cream, sunblock, liquid, gel, oil—”

“Wait, wait, wait! We’re not gonna use all of these, are we?”

“Of course not.”

“Right. Good, good. I didn’t think so.”

“You don’t use all of these at once. It’s more like you gotta pick the right product out of these for the situation.”

“Sorry, but there’s not much difference between having to pick from all of them and having to use all of them...”

Was she serious? There were more products here than cards in a TCG hand. Was she really saying you had to pick the best card from this hand every single time? Were cosmetics really that intense?

“The makeup remover you use depends on your skin condition. You can use cream, lotion, or gel, and there are some for morning use and some for evening use. It’s important to know what to use in what situation. Get it?”

“I get that I don’t get it.”

Sasara sighed, impatient. It was honestly embarrassing to have her reacting like I was an idiot, although this time I had to agree that my lack of knowledge on the subject was frustrating.

That’s it. I’m gonna get this down pat no matter what, and then have her eat my dust in the Queen Nevermore contest!

“Gimme your face.”

“We’re doing it here? I didn’t think girls would be okay just doing it over the sink. Like, I thought you’d have a dressing table somewhere or something.”

“Huh?! Are you stupid?!”

Ever heard the theory that anime’s most beloved lines actually hurt when they’re used on you in real life? I think this was proof of that. I wish normies

would stop trying to desecrate everything that was holy to us.

“It’s not like *you* have a dressing table in your house, do you?! You’re just some unsociable nerd with no style!”

“Now you’re stereotyping. Apologize to every unsociable person in the country right now.”

“What, so you *do* have one?”

“No.”

“Then why are you getting all uppity?!”

Well, it wasn’t like I was important enough to represent every last nerd in the country. It was just best to avoid sweeping statements in general. There might be some unsociable nerd out there with their own dressing table at home. Sure, the chances were minuscule, but still.

“Gosh, you’re so argumentative! Just shut up and gimme your face. Come on.”

“Right...”

I didn’t fight back as she grabbed my face. Partly because I wanted things to move along...but also because the sudden sensation of her soft hand on my cheek sent a jolt through my chest.

“The first thing to do when you get home is clean your face, so we’re gonna start with this cream cleanser. If you’re not wearing makeup already, there’s no need to use something as strong as oil.”

“Can’t you just use water to wash your face?”

“You can, but it’s gonna do nothing to get the sebum off your face, and it’s not gonna repair your UV-and pollen-damaged skin either.”

“Sebum... Pollen... Right...”

“The hay fever season’s coming up too. You can’t see it with your eyes, but it’s poison for your skin.”

“Seriously? I never knew pollen was so evil— Hyah!”

A sudden sensation caused me to squeal like a loli.

“Don’t make weird noises like that.”

“S-Sorry.”

“Listen up. Before you use any water, you’ll want to get your cleansing product and...” Sasara’s hand ran across my face, leaving cream in its wake. It was cold at first, but as her hand warmed it up, it started to feel pretty good. “Then we’re gonna take this gel...”

“Owowo.”

I made another weird sound—but it didn’t feel bad at all. Sasara smirked, as though she could tell I was enjoying it.

“Well? I bet it feels pretty nice getting this stuff spread all over your face.”

“Y-Yeah. I could get used to it...”

“I can tell you hardly clean your face, ’cause there’s a ton of crap on it. It’s kinda funny actually. But then your skin’s still pretty smooth and soft. You gotta be using some good soap and shampoo. Does your mom buy your products for you?”

“Huh? Uh, I dunno. I buy it myself, but I guess it might be good quality?”

She was way too perceptive, dammit. I mean, my mom *didn’t* buy my soap, but her guess wasn’t far off. The amenities in my house were always ready for any member of the Alliance to use them if need be. If, after a late party, Sumire or Iroha (and lately, Mashiro too) didn’t have the energy to get home and needed to stay over, they’d have to take a bath at mine. That was why I didn’t buy overly masculine soap or shampoo.

Tomosaka Sasara seemed like a total idiot, which only made her sharpness in this case all the more terrifying.

At some point, the warmth on my face had lulled me into closing my eyes. Seeing that I was on the verge of falling asleep, Sasara burst into laughter.

“You look like you’re really enjoying this! You’re so gross!”

“Don’t *you* call me gross.”

“Hey, I was complimenting you! I like making people feel good.”

“You do this kinda thing to people a lot?”

“Sometimes I meet up with my followers and teach them about makeup. I get pretty good reviews for it.”

“Yeah. I can see why.”

© tomari

I was honestly impressed.

The first time we met we'd argued the whole time, and I disagreed with the negative view she had towards *Koyagi* and nerd culture, but she had real talent—and I loved people with talent. I liked it even more when they were making good use of those talents and getting rewarded for it. It made me feel like society was functioning as it should be.

Sasara shared her love of beauty with her followers because she wanted to make them happy. That love was both genuine and valuable; I could tell by the way her hands moved across my cheeks. She was careful even with me—someone she didn't like—and purely committed to the dialogue between her and the skin in front of her. A professional of the highest quality, no doubt about it.

Sasara went on to rub various liquids into my face, explaining each cleansing product one at a time.

"Listen up. This is what we call a night routine. What you do to take care of your skin when you get home. There's a morning routine too, and..." Sasara continued, sharing her skin care expertise with me as she played with my face. "...that's all about cleaning off the sweat and other dirt that builds up when you sleep. Also, I know I've gone through how to repair the damage from UV light and pollen already, but in the morning you're about to go out, so that's when you need to do the opposite and prepare some protection against those kinds of things."

The memory portion of my brain was working hard, but there was also another part that was running at the same time.

"It's true that skin lotion is the key, but I know some guys who just stop there. You want to use a milky lotion to lock in the moisture and—"

An idea sprang to mind. A devilish plot to borrow Tomosaka Sasara's skills for *Koyagi*. Now that we'd reached two million downloads, our next milestone was three million. I'd already failed at targeting the Pinstagram market and appealing to female users. Maybe making use of Sasara's influence could change that.

Man, this whole thing felt good.

Uh-oh. Her hands felt so good on my face that I was finding it hard to concentrate. I decided to leave the details of the plan for when this skin care lecture was over. My mind made up, I let Sasara take over.

A little over an hour had passed since Sasara had started teaching me about daily skin care. It was getting late, and Sasara led me to her entrance porch to see me off. I bowed my head, then raised my schoolbag. “Thanks for today, and for all the stuff you gave me.”

“It’s no big deal. My fans send me a lotta products like that, so I’ve got more than I need.”

“They send you that much, huh? That’s really impressive.”

My team and I had been developing our mobile game for a long time now, but it was rare for anyone to send us anything physical. It was usually things like fan art that I found by searching social media, or messages of support sent to our official accounts.

I wasn’t complaining, of course; I was more than grateful for those things. If our fans were like Sasara’s followers and sent us physical stuff, we might end up like her and not be able to make use of them all, so it wasn’t that I was jealous of her. I was just genuinely impressed.

Sasara’s lips curled and her shoulders started shaking like she was holding in laughter.

“Hm? What’s up?”

The next thing I knew, she’d jabbed her finger into my shoulder blade.

“I was just thinking that you’re a pretty nice guy!”

“O-Oh? Where did that come from?”

She was the one who’d invited me round and taken the time to educate me, after all.

“Because you’re honest. I mean you straight up praised me. Lucky you! I’m gonna recognize that as one of your good points.”

“That counts as a ‘good point’? I just say what I think. I have done so ever since we met.”

“That’s it! That’s great! You’re, like, *too* amazing at giving compliments! It’s, like, your compliments aren’t superficial. Or, because you’re always ticking me off, it makes your compliments seem even more genuine.”

“I guess that’s because I don’t lie.”

If I faked my own feelings and lied about them, I was bound to be found out at some point. Then I’d have to explain myself and work to repair the relationship, something that would cost time. Considering the future that such inefficient behavior would invite, it was obviously better just not to lie and give my honest opinion in the first place.

There were of course cases where it was necessary to absorb those inefficiencies because I needed to keep a secret. Iroha’s involvement in the Alliance, Sumire’s true identity, Ozu’s past... In these cases, there were just costs that needed to be paid.

Thinking about what other people thought was a waste of time. Apparently that attitude was enough to pull on Sasara’s heartstrings, since she was a validation-seeking monster.

Could this be my chance?

A chance to bring up the idea I had, and invite her to help us out.

“Hey, Tomosaka. While I’m here, do you mind if I ask another favor?”

“Ooh, go on! Ask away!” She giggled.

She must’ve liked people relying on her. I was getting even more worried about some guy with impure intentions taking advantage of her now.

“Hypothetically speaking—and I *mean* hypothetically—if someone said to you they wanted your help to advertise their mobile game to female Pinsta users, what would you say?”

“A mobile game? You mean like Tsun Tsun?”

There we had it. The first smartphone app any typical high school girl would think of. It was a game where you had to stack mascot characters from a certain

amusement park that was popular with girls. Just mention “mobile game” to a teenage girl and that was the first thing out of their mouth. The game itself was super fun, though, so of course it was popular.

“Not that one. I meant like that game your brother likes: *Koyagi: When They Cry*.”

“Oh, the stuff made for gross nerds?”

I didn’t respond.

“Obviously I wouldn’t promote stuff like that.”

“Right...”

I shouldn’t have expected anything else. Maybe she did like me a little more than before, but our personalities were still oil and water. Sasara still had her same prejudices against nerdy types, so hoping for her help with *Koyagi* wasn’t exactly realistic.

I hadn’t even thought about what sort of components or projects we could work on for the game to appeal to people like Sasara’s followers. If she advertised the game in its current state on her Pinsta, it probably wouldn’t even attract any new fans.

“Sorry, that was a weird question. Just forget about it.”

“No worries. My family’ll be coming home soon, so you should get going. Make sure you don’t slack on your skin care before the day of the festival!”

“Got it. Thanks.”

With that, I left the Tomosaka house behind.

I’d taken my first step towards becoming a beautiful girl. I’d also come up with a basic plan to advertise *Koyagi* more widely. It was so satisfying to see so many things proceeding so smoothly and efficiently, and I was in a good mood as I made my way home.

There was something else on my mind too.

Tomosaka Sasara really was a sociable type. She hated me so much, but when she found one good aspect of my personality, suddenly she was all ready to be

friends. That friendly nature of hers made her a perfect candidate for Iroha's best friend.

I had no idea how I was supposed to get them to like each other, considering how prickly their current relationship was, but if Iroha was ever comfortable with being herself around Sasara...

I hadn't just killed two birds with one stone by visiting Sasara's. I'd catapulted a boulder into *three* of them.

"I wonder if Iroha's at my place right now."

After our fight on the school roof, I wouldn't be surprised if I didn't see her at all until the festival. If I did, though, it probably wouldn't hurt to talk about Sasara a little. The idea made me impatient, and I started to jog so I could get home quicker.

"Hey, Aki. 'Sup."

"You're doing Otoi-san now? Why are you so good at acting?"

So yeah, Iroha was waiting for me in my room. She was lying on the bed so limply it was like there wasn't a bone left in her body, listening to music through her headphones and reading some manga. She was foregoing her usual annoying habit of letting the music boom loudly through the headphones, instead focusing on what she was listening to; something that was very Otoi-san.

"After my declaration today, I didn't think you'd be here," I said.

"Am I in your way or somethin'?"

"No, actually, I'm glad you're here."

She was still acting like someone else, but for some reason just seeing Iroha here made me feel oddly relieved. I felt like telling her that would annoy her, though, so I held my tongue.

"You're not usually worried about getting in my way. But that's fine—you can stick around if you want."

"Hm. Well, this is the only place I can read manga or listen to music."

“They say it takes three days to regain one day of lost work. It’s good that you’re carrying on as normal.”

Even if normal did mean she was coming into my room when I wasn’t even here...

I was just glad that our fight hadn’t completely ruined our relationship, and my shoulders felt oddly light. I loosened my tie. I put my bag down on my chair and opened it up, pulling out the products that Sasara gave me and lining them up on my work desk. I heard a small curious hum from the bed.

“What’s that, Aki?”

“I’m glad you asked. I’ve had some lessons on skin care to prepare for my transformation into a beautiful girl. Did you know you need to use different products in the morning and evening?”

“Huh. Sounds like y’actually learned somethin’. Not that I care.”

You don’t care?

The nerdy side of me wanted to show off my brand-new knowledge, so I couldn’t help but be disappointed when she showed little interest. Though I knew Otoi-san would definitely show the same lack of interest, so to be honest Iroha was doing a pretty good job.

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“You’re flirting with yet another girl, Aki?”

“I know what you—you and everyone else—wanna say. But I’ve got no choice if I wanna win that contest... I swear...”

Chapter 7: My Friend's Little Sister Is My Maid!

I managed to enlist Sasara's help with around a week to go until the Nevermore Festival. I spent that week in a meticulous pursuit of beauty, making use of everything I'd ever learned about fashion. Every morning and evening, I followed the skin care routines I'd been taught to the letter. I followed Sasara on Pinsta and did all the exercises she uploaded to her story. I ordered some hair removal cream online and got rid of all my leg hair (it hurt like hell). I even started drinking smoothies with my meals.

Bit by bit, I could sense every inch of me transforming into a teenage girl, from the top of my head down to my toes, and I felt an indescribable sense of accomplishment. I was being taken over by it. Overflowing. I kept training so that the teenage girl growing and growing inside me could be set free on the day of the festival. I even put in contingency measures to guarantee my victory.

Not that I didn't trust my own understanding of men and their interests, but I needed everything to be as perfect as possible to raise my chances. So I sent Otoi-san, who was on the Executive Committee, a bribe (read: candy) to set something up for me. And in case you're wondering, that wasn't cheating. I just made a request of her, and it wasn't something that gave me an advantage over the others, so it was all above board. I won't say what it was here; it'll be obvious enough once the day rolls around.

And it wasn't long until it did.

The day of the contest came, where Iroha and I would stubbornly oppose each other on the most ridiculous battlefield imaginable—but I wasn't prepared to lose. It was bittersweet.

Uplifting music streamed through the school-wide speakers, boosting the festival cheer in the air. The faint, lingering scent of summer hung in the blue skies, brightened up by multicolored balloons, with students walking and laughing beneath them. Here and there you could spot students wearing the uniforms from other schools too. There were even adults, some of them with

children, and the variety of visitors spoke volumes about the influence of the Nevermore Festival over this entire region.

I guess this is how popular our school's festival really is.

I already knew that, but this was the first time I was feeling the enthusiasm in the air in person. Last year, I'd made use of my lack of presence and skipped out on my class's stall. Instead, I had sat behind a quiet school building with my laptop on my knees and typed away—technically, we weren't even allowed to bring laptops.

Back then, my motto was "Reject youth, embrace *Koyagi*," but now... Well, *Koyagi* was still my top priority, but I was less...open-minded back then. All I would focus on was the work right in front of me, and that meant I missed out on everything that was going on around me right now.

The excitement in the air. The only way to understand this sort of thing was to experience it directly, and this was more than enough for me to know what Canary had meant when she said that these experiences of youth were helpful in developing your artistic skills.

"Aki. Aki."

"Hm?"

I stopped in my tracks when I heard Ozu calling me. We'd been going around the classrooms together to see what was on offer. Except he wasn't next to me anymore; he was a few steps behind me, pointing into the classroom next to us.

"This is Otoi-san's class, right? You just walked right past it."

"Oh, sorry. I was thinking about stuff."

"That hurts. You can't just ignore me when we're out on a date like this."

"If you're looking for a date, you should've gone with that girl who hit on you just now."

"Did you know that it's impossible to understand your conversation partner if your IQs differ by more than twenty points?"

"Don't treat her like an idiot. There have been studies that say your IQ falls below a chimpanzee's when you're in love. That's why she's dumb—it's the

love. Probably.”

“I see. That’s pretty deep.”

If there was anyone who knew the problems differing IQs could cause, it was me. It gave me a ton of trouble whenever I tried to get Ozu to fit in with society.

“Hasn’t the pretty student council president been into you recently?” I asked. “Your IQs probably aren’t all that different.”

“I dunno if I’d say she’s into me. She’s just been asking for my help with computer stuff. I don’t know her well enough to go on a date, and even then the student council’s probably just as busy as the Executive Committee today.”

“Oh, yeah. Fair.”

Anyway, we’d gone inside Otoi-san’s classroom. The entrance comprised bricks with hexagrams on them. They must have been doing fortune telling in there. Its atmosphere was exotic, emotional, and spiritual.

Walking through the entrance was like stepping into another world. The skillful use of partitions and blackout curtains created a perfect darkness. For lighting, there were lanterns—well, not real lanterns, since fire was probably against safety regulations, but lantern-shaped lamps. It was too dark to see the faces of the other guests, and the students who came to guide us were wearing deep hoods. You couldn’t even tell if they were male or female until they got right up close.

“Welcome, wandering souls. Our diviners will guide you to a happy fate. What troubles are weighing on you today?” The girl who greeted us played her part perfectly.

It felt incredibly real. Her acting was great, and then there was the low-key background music playing in the room which added to the whole thing. I was willing to bet that part was thanks to Otoi-san.

“We’re here to see Otoi-san.”

“Oh my. You must be leading an incredibly strenuous life.”

Where did that pity come from?

I blinked at her doubtfully, which was when I heard Ozu reading something

aloud behind me.

“‘For those who seek no good advice nor deep sympathy, we have a diviner who will simply listen to your troubles and nod from time to time by the name of Otoi.’”

“Ah. That does seem like a good option for people who’ve lived a tough life.”

I could more or less guess why Otoi-san had picked to run that option too: because it was *easy*. I could picture her spacing out while her visitor’s words flowed in one ear and out the other as she nodded vacantly—perhaps with an occasional “uh-huh.” Then annoyingly, she would give a proper response right at the critical moment, and turn the entire ordeal into a very satisfying chat.

She was an amazingly lazy person. And amazingly efficient.

“Please, right this way.”

We followed the girl to the spaces separated by partitions. We could see glimpses through the curtains of other people getting their fortunes told, and it looked like the real deal.

“Here we are. O Otoi, I have brought you some wandering souls.”

“Cool.”

The girl opened the curtain with a dramatic flourish, where we were greeted with Otoi-san slouching back in her chair and lazily raising a hand.

“O Otoi, I beseech you to work at keeping up the atmosphere.”

“C’mon, it’s no big deal. Oh, hey, it’s Aki. And Ozu.”

The girl paused. “I shall leave the rest to you.”

“Sure thing. Thanks.”

Our guide left. I couldn’t help but smile awkwardly at just how much Otoi-san was in her own world. Ozu and I sat down in front of her.

“We’re here to hang,” I said.

“Oh. Y’didn’t hafta, but it’s whatever.”

“Here, this is for you.”

“Aw, you’re too kind. But I already knew that.”

“We were looking around, and I found a stall I thought you’d like. There’s a stall selling candy and stuff from one of the students’ families that works in a confectionery shop. Apparently they got special permission to sell their products here.”

“Yeah, I know. I got to sample the goods, and I was the one who gave permission for them to be sold here.”

“I didn’t know you were doing that kinda work,” Ozu said, his eyes wide.

Oh, right. I forgot Ozu didn’t know that Otoi-san was on the Executive Committee. The girls in our class had entered him into the King Nevermore contest, so he probably hadn’t even been near the committee’s classroom. I decided to give him some context.

“Otoi-san’s on the Nevermore Executive Committee. Part of their work is to give permission for what the stalls want to sell.”

“A small part. I’m mostly workin’ on the sound and stuff.”

“Huh, I didn’t realize you were behind the music for the entire festival. That makes sense,” Ozu said. “That’s why the music’s so seamless when you walk down the hallways. It plays so smoothly, and the volume’s been adjusted perfectly for each stall and attraction. Like how the music is quieter in the hallway around this classroom so it doesn’t break the immersion.”

“You think about that kinda stuff when you walk around? You should probably focus on havin’ fun.”

“That *is* how I have fun.”

“Yeah... It is fun.”

Geniuses were a different breed, I swear. But I kept the thought to myself. It was almost perverse how Ozu could pick up on and analyze the slight changes in sound to a technical level while walking around. Meanwhile, Otoi-san’s talents and tastes were outstanding—the way she managed the sound production for the festival to the same standard as a first-rate theme park.

“That suits you, by the way,” I said.

“What, this?” Otoi-san lifted up the black veil that was hanging down from her hood.

She was wearing a loose outfit and a necklace with large (obviously fake) gems the size of meatballs embedded in it. She looked like she belonged in a fantasy world: a suspicious fortune-teller who dwelled in gloomy alleyways and gave the heroes advice on where to go next. It matched perfectly with Otoi-san’s lack of worldly sense.

“I’m surprised how well made it is too. I didn’t go to see anything last year, so I never knew how much quality you could find in a school festival.”

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, I think there’s always been a lotta work put into the festival, but this year’s ’specially good.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. And it’s your fault, Aki.”

“Huh?”

How could it be my fault? I was busy losing my mind over the Queen Nevermore contest this year, and last year I hadn’t done anything. I didn’t see how I could’ve contributed anything to the festival as a whole.

Otoi-san drew a circle in the air with her finger. “It was, y’know... You helped out the drama club, right?”

“I did, yeah, but what’s that got to do with anything?”

“’Cause the drama club’s performance’s quality went way up, some of the students who went to see them got super motivated in their own creative spheres.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Obviously, Kageishi and the club’ve been workin’ hard since they won the fair, but Kohinata and you inspired a ton of others too.”

“Me and Iroha? Sure, we filled in on stage, but...”

It was still fresh in my mind how, on the day of the drama fair’s preliminary round, I stood in to play the lead role for Midori, who had gotten caught up in a

ton of trouble on her way to the fair and couldn't make it.

Standing up on stage in front of everyone didn't suit me. Looking back on it made me cringe. Even though I had given an average performance, inferior wasn't a strong enough word to describe how I compared to Iroha, who had shone like the brightest star. That was how I saw it, anyway.

"It's 'cause Kohinata was so brilliant that she inspired loadsa people. And you're the one who brought that light outta her. Like, you're the only one who can make her shine so bright. I never get jealous, but whenever I think of yer performance, I feel something kinda *like* jealousy."

"I'm the 'only' one? I think you could probably put her with any half-decent actor and get the same result. What about Midori-san? She's come a long way."

"Kohinata's turnin' into a ton of different girls right now, ain't she?"

"Huh? I think I missed a step in the conversation. But yeah, you're right. She pulls it off so well, it's uncanny."

"And who did she turn into back then?"

"Um, the part she was playing?"

Otoi-san was talking about the play and who Iroha "turned into" on stage, right?

"Y'think so? I dunno much 'bout this kinda stuff, but I've heard there's more to drama than just actin' out a role. You heard that one?"

"I think I saw some famous actor say that on TV. Oh, uh, sorry for interrupting."

It was Ozu who had answered Otoi-san's question.

"No, it's fine. I'm kinda interested—could you tell me more?"

Ozu nodded. "The actor was famous for his supporting roles. It was something like...you don't just act out a role, you let that role permeate you and draw out a different side of yourself you weren't aware of."

"Yeah, that. Uh, so Ozu—" Otoi-san began.

"It's okay. He already knows about Iroha," I said quickly, sensing what her

glance meant.

“’Kay, I won’t hold back then. Iroha’s a super good actor, and she can pull off any role, but the problem comes when ya tryna see what’s underneath. I dunno, it’s like she doesn’t wanna be herself or whatever.”

“Yeah.”

Iroha had several different masks depending on who she was trying to protect. And now she had added a new mask to the equation, to completely hide away her true comfor—annoying self that she only used to show to me. When she acted, she totally transformed into her role. You could pull back the layers, but Iroha herself would be nowhere to be found—unless we were talking about Kokuryuuin Kugetsu.

That was why I wanted to take away her mask completely, and encourage her to show her true colors a bit more. I wanted to make progress in my direction of her, so I was doing the dumb thing and competing against her in the Queen Nevermore contest.

It seemed like Otoi-san was saying that Iroha *had* been herself when we acted at the Drama Fair together, which didn’t make sense.

“How was that character anything like Iroha?”

“Trust you not to notice, Aki. Not like I’m gonna tell you.”

“Huh?”

“Me neither.”

“You know the answer too, Ozu? Come on, guys! What are you trying to tell me?”

“I could tell you, but I kinda feel like there’s no point unless you figure it out for yourself. I think you’ve been getting a little closer to the answer recently too.”

I fell silent, but I thought I knew what they were getting at.

The heroine in that play—Iroha—poured her emotions out to the protagonist. What if she hadn’t been talking to this fictional protagonist, but to me?

Jeez, talk about narcissism. If Iroha knew what I'd just been thinking, she'd tease me for being a pathetic virgin. Of course, I couldn't deny the slim possibility that Iroha liked me, but... Ugh. My thoughts were getting so tangled up that my phrasing was starting to sound weird.

Ozu laughed. "Look, his brain's overheating like it's a PC. I can practically hear the fans whirring at hyper speed."

"Whatevs. Anyway, Aki, why don'tcha reel the whole producer thing in a little and just spend time with Kohinata like a regular guy?"

"But I made her a promise. A promise as her producer."

"Okay, fine. This is too much of a pain. Lemme just do your fortune. C'mon, gimme your hand."

"Wh— Hey!"

Otoi-san, who apparently had suddenly remembered she was supposed to be a diviner, grabbed my hand.

Her hands were on the cooler side, smooth and firm like a doll's. A voice in my head told me that her hands were the opposite of Sasara's. Another voice— more cynical, and more like a teenage boy's— pointed out that I'd been getting touched by girls a lot recently.

"'Kay, here goes."

I was expecting a palm reading, but then I felt a weight settling in my hand. A crystal ball, for some reason.

"Ummmmm... I can see it..."

"If you're using a crystal ball, why're you making *me* hold it?!"

"It's too much of a pain to hold it myself. Just bring it up to my eye level."

"There's laziness, and then there's this."

"I see it... I see it..."

"Ha. This seems about as legit as ozone therapy." I let out a dry laugh.

Otoi-san ignored me, narrowing her sleepy eyes slightly as they reflected the light of the ball, and she hummed profoundly.

“The ball says...if you wanna find your happiness...go to the first-year classrooms... Class...uh...I forget which one...but...Iroha’s class. She’s on duty now, just before she has to get ready for the Queen Nevermore contest.”

“I feel like this fortune is meant to benefit you more than me.”

“Feel free to keep complainin’, but I hope you’ve got somewhere and someone else to help you with your recordings.”

“I’m sorry! Please forgive me! I’ll do anything!” I was on the floor and bowing in seconds. Otoi-san really couldn’t let a joke like that slide? She was way too powerful.

Watching our exchange, Ozu could no longer hold in his laughter. “Even you’ll bow down to Otoi-san, huh?”

“I know. It’s painful.”

“I agree with her, though. You should go see Iroha. I think her class was doing a maid café. I’m sure she’d love to see you.”

“Sure. But you’re coming with—”

“Nah, she’ll die of embarrassment if I show up. You still wanna try and talk your way out of this?”

“No...”

I knew Iroha was fond of me. I just wasn’t as confident as these two that her feelings for me were romantic. I could find out, but it wasn’t a risk I could take right now. And assuming she *did* like me in that way, I doubted Iroha would want me to.

We shared the same dream. I believed that much. Or maybe I just wanted to.

Regardless of the truth, it was a senpai’s duty to go see what his kouhai had prepared for the culture festival, if that was what she was hoping for.

“I’ll go then,” Ozu said.

“See ya.”

“Have fun. I’ll see you for our dance tonight.”

“Hey, since when were you so confident? I mean, I know you’ll probably win,

but still.”

“Who knows?” Ozu shrugged.

His response did nothing to dispel the sliver of doubt in my mind, but I didn’t really have the time to worry about it. I needed to get ready for the contest soon.

“You look like you’re hatching some kinda plan,” I said. “But either way, at least I know *I’m* going to win. You’d best prepare yourself for that dance!”

With that, I jogged from the room and left Ozu and Otoi-san behind. I pulled my phone out to check the time. There was plenty of time to get ready. I was a participant, so I knew my timings perfectly.

To be honest, I wasn’t really sure how I was supposed to act when I went to Iroha’s maid café. I wasn’t sure *how* she liked me, and I didn’t really understand my own feelings either. I didn’t even know what I was supposed to talk to her about at this café.

But she was my cute little kouhai. I wouldn’t disappoint her, you know?

***

I already knew where the classroom I wanted was. I wasn’t Iroha’s official stalker for nothing. My path was properly guided by signs and posters, exactly how I would have laid them out myself. I made it right there without getting lost.

How would Iroha act when she saw me? Since her classmates were there, maybe she’d be a perfectly professional and polite English maid. Or maybe she’d secretly go the annoying route, while making sure no one noticed. Or, she might follow the recent pattern of acting like someone we knew.

Would she be a cold maid like Mashiro? An older, sadistic maid like Sumire (in teacher mode)? A low-energy maid like Otoi-san? Or an idol-maid-hybrid like Canary? There were a lot of unique and idiosyncratic personalities among our acquaintances, so whoever she picked, it was going to be worth seeing. It might even be good enough to base a new *Koyagi* character on.

I passed the sign promising an authentic English tearoom and headed on into

the classroom. Half of the classroom was dedicated to customer seating, while the other half was the kitchen (read: probably just a coffee machine and microwave), hidden behind a dark curtain.

Iroha, the girl I was after, was by the entrance, and I wasn't sure she'd noticed me until she opened her mouth.

"Welcome. Master."

"Great. Midori-san when she's acting."

All optimism was lost when she gave me a monotone greeting. It vaguely occurred to me that Iroha was cherry-picking in the cruelest way too. After going through some hellish training, Midori's acting ability should have been decent now—or at least, she didn't read her lines in monotone anymore. Though maybe I was being a little harsh, since Iroha was just recreating the most memorable parts of Midori's character.

"Oh, Ooboshi-kun. What do you want?" Iroha asked, in the same grouchy way Midori would, holding a silver tray under one arm. The inflection had returned to her voice too. Apparently, when she was acting like a maid, she was copying Midori's acting, but when she wasn't in maid mode, she was copying Midori as she normally was. Talk about complicated.

"I was just wondering what a genuine English tearoom looked like."

"Oh. I'll show you to your seat then. Just make sure you follow the rules while you drink your coffee. All right? Don't even *think* any dirty thoughts about these maids!"

"I would never. By the way, you're pulling off Midori perfectly."

Her words could have been spoken by Midori herself. Iroha and Midori's personalities were completely different on the outside, but they both loved drama, so maybe they were similar in some ways, deep down.

Iroha had a strong interest in entertainment and acting, but she had learned not to show it openly. Midori was... What *was* she? You know...an honor student, yet a closet pervert intimately knowledgeable about all things lewd. Or maybe she was just a bit of an airhead.

Midori—I mean, Iroha—led me to a seat by the window. The male customers around us looked jealous that I got to be served by Iroha. My friend's little sister was always the center of attention in her class anyway, so it was no surprise that her maid form was incredibly popular too.

In line with the café's theme, she was of course wearing a traditional English maid outfit, which was drawing gazes from customers around the room. The skirt was long enough to cover her ankles. A white apron covered her stomach and shoulders. She wore a black dress that peeked out from below the apron and around her bust. Her ample chest pushed up the buttons of that dress from behind, so while she looked prim and proper to start with, there was a bolt of eroticism that— Ah! I gotta stop. Anyway, I understood why the male patrons were looking at her. That's all.

"Here you are."

"Th-Thanks."

I sat down in the chair she pulled out for me.

Iroha stood gracefully beside me, like a real maid waiting on her master. "I-I'm attending this table, so if you have an order or request, please let me know. I-I'll do anything, as long as it's nothing sexual!"

"You didn't have to specify that last part."

If sexual stuff *were* allowed, this class would be in a lot of trouble.

"So you each have assigned tables?" I asked.

"Yes. The rule is that the maid who sees you to your table will then attend to you. You can request a certain maid if you want, but you have to ask for that. It's a little like how call girls operate."

"Even your examples sound like Midori-san's." I was suddenly struck with a thought. "I'm surprised you were free, though. You're pretty popular; I would've thought you'd already been nabbed by some other table."

The next second, Iroha's cheeks were aflame, and she was leaning forward aggressively. "Wh— I-It's not what you think! I definitely *wasn't* making sure I was free just in case you came to see me, Sen—Ooboshi-kun!"

“Okay, I believe you. It’s not like you would’ve gained anything by waiting for me either.”

I’ll say it again, but she was a perfect copy of Midori. The face was the one I saw in my apartment every day, belonging to my friend’s little sister—by whom I mean Iroha, of course—but her expression was totally Midori’s. So much so that for a second I mistook her *for* Midori. Her words just now were exactly like — Wait a minute.

Something felt off. Had she almost said “Senpai” just now? Was that because she was trying to replicate Midori’s tsundere-ness, or was it a slip of the tongue from Iroha herself that she quickly amended? I guess it didn’t really matter either way, but I also felt like the answer was a window into a deep section of Iroha’s heart itself.

A fancy leather-bound menu suddenly landed on the table in front of me with a thump, interrupting my thoughts.

“Feel free to order. I recommend the Mexican drip coffee and the omurice—b-but the omurice doesn’t come with the whole lovey-dovey *moe-moe-kyun* maid thing, okay?!”

“I wouldn’t want it to. But yeah, I’ll go for those two.”

The earlier conundrum had me sifting for clues, but now I decided I should just drop it and enjoy Iroha’s service. As a good senpai, it was my duty to watch over my kouhai as she worked hard.

Iroha gave a courteous bow before disappearing behind the black curtain. I watched her go with a vague sense that something was missing.

Iroha. Maid. The combination somehow felt lacking. She was acting as a normal honor student. I had a sense that this wasn’t what I’d wanted to see from her. I realize Midori wasn’t exactly “normal,” but that wasn’t my point.

I wanted to see Iroha *like she usually was* as a maid.

It wasn’t long before she returned with a tray bearing a microwave-made omurice (on a fancy plate, making it look tastier than you’d think) and a coffee.

By the way, it did cross my mind to point out that they should have been

serving tea instead of coffee if this was an “authentic” English tearoom. However, I’d heard that there were a surprisingly large number of English people who preferred coffee to tea, and to be so nitpicky over a school festival was the opposite of intelligent, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Here you are.” Iroha placed a cup in front of me.

I gazed at the steaming black liquid before looking up at her. “Could I order something quick?”

“You’re already thinking of your next order? Fine, but you *do* know that ordering too much and leaving leftovers is rude, don’t you?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I’m not looking to order food or coffee.”

“What?” Iroha stared at me, leaving her hand with the plate of omurice hovering in the air.

“You can be subtle about it so the other customers don’t notice if you want—but would you mind serving me like Iroha, not Midori?”

Iroha flinched.

“I get that I’m being selfish. And I realize I should have more important things to worry about with the Queen Nevermore contest right around the corner. The contest you’re betting your true self on. It’s just that, this whole café is the result of my kouhai’s hard work. As your senpai, I want to experience it with both of us as our normal selves.”

I told her exactly how I felt.

Her cheeks red, Iroha tried to frown, just like Midori would. But then she let out a tiny sigh.

“You love me too much, Senpai.”

“I dunno about that, but I do care about you. Though it pains me to admit it.”

“Huh. Well, if you insist, I guess I can grant your request for a little bit.” Iroha pouted, before casting her gaze across the room to check if any of her classmates were watching. The moment she confirmed none of them were, her face twisted into an annoying grin. “You sure are a greedy master, huh? Jeez, what a pain!”

That was it!

The annoying smile that rubbed me the wrong way and rattled my bones! That charming smile belonged to the *real* Iroha, and she hadn't smiled like that in so long. Nostalgic tingles ran up my spine.

Iroha brought her face close to mine, split open the soft omurice with a spoon, and brought the melty, steaming mixture to my mouth.

It was just freezer food, so why did it look so tasty? Well, freezer food nowadays tasted way better than the old products and their lingering stigma. It could actually be pretty delicious, apparently.

"Now, say 'aah,' Master. *But*, letting me feed you like a small animal means accepting your defeat. It means you're a pathetic little boy, and I'm your babysitter!"

"I want a redo."

"What?"

"You're forcing the annoying too much. Be more natural, like you always are!"

"You don't think that's asking too much?!"

I did, actually. The situation was unnatural enough as it was, so asking her to act natural was a bit of a stretch.

"Couldn't you wait till we get home for that kinda thing?"

"I guess, yeah. Till then, just be as annoying as you can."

"Okay." Iroha sighed. "Gosh, you're so selfish, Senpai. Here. Have this."

Iroha forced the spoon into the tiny gap between my closed lips.

"Pwah! Hey, that's hot!" I gasped, feeling the ketchup cling to my lips.

"See, now you got clown lips just 'cause you wouldn't open up. I bet you like to hang out in sewers and catch little boys in yellow coats!"

"Stop making references to classic horror movies. You just want me to open my mouth, right?" I closed my eyes and opened my mouth a little impatiently.

I'd done it out of embarrassment, but cutting off my vision was a bad idea.

Instant regret. Even if they weren't paying attention, there were other guests and students here. Without my sight, all I had was my hearing, and the conversations and chattering of the other people in the room sounded even clearer, making my anxiety that Iroha might be seen acting like this rocket.

I couldn't see Iroha's face either. Was she giggling at me right now? I could see it... It was pretty cute. I was thinking about her annoying face in the darkness, when suddenly—

"Mmgh!"

I found my mouth stuffed with omurice. I chewed desperately, having no other option with the way it was mercilessly forced through my lips. I didn't even have time to notice how much more pleasant the tastes and textures of freezer food had become lately, as I immediately grabbed the glass of water on the table, and swallowed the deliciousness down in one go.

"Wh-What was that all about?!" I gasped.

"Did you think I was gonna be gentle or something? You thought you could get away with being conveniently lovey-dovey with me when you're ignoring how I feel and competing against me for Queen Nevermore? Too bad! Even I have my limits, dumbass!"

"Ugh. You're a hundred percent right."

"Yeah, so feel bad about it! Hmph. You're always just doing whatever you want with people, and then you show up with some line that's gonna make my heart melt? That's not fair!"

"What was that?"

The second half of what she said was so quiet I didn't catch it.

"Nice original response there, Senpai! I'm thrilled!"

"What's with the sarcasm? I just didn't hear what you said. All you had to do was repeat yourself!"

"I'm not repeating myself! Not in a billion years!"

"Now I *know* whatever you just said is important! I'm a producer who's absorbed countless games and manga over the years. Don't underestimate me!

I know hundreds of examples where this kinda thing creates devastating misunderstandings if you leave them alone.”

“I’m *not* telling! I hope those misunderstandings *do* devastate you.”

“You’re so... Look, I’m used to being criticized and compared to blank-slate romantic comedy protagonists, but heroines have a responsibility to talk so that people can hear them, and repeat themselves if they can’t!”

“Ooh, so it’s the *girl’s* fault, is it?! Way to show me just how majorly uncool you are! You clearly don’t understand girls one tiny bit...”

“You’re doing it again! I couldn’t hear that last part.”

“Why don’t you come back when you’ve cranked your hearing ability up three thousand percent?!”

It was a constant back and forth. Anything I said, she’d have a comeback ready. I didn’t want to fight with her like this. Not here.

I guess there was no way two countries at war could ever go through a temporary truce. More so when one side was Iroha. A part of me was relieved that I could speak to her like this—to Iroha, and not some other girl she was pretending to be.

We were being too loud; I realized then that people were starting to look our way. Personally, I was happy for Iroha’s annoying nature to be exposed to the masses, but she had other ideas.

“You have ketchup on your mouth, master,” she said sweetly.

I knew she was going to rein it all in when other people were watching.

“I’ll wipe it off for you.”

“Th-Thanks.” I could do nothing but let her wipe my mouth with a napkin.

“I’m so jealous...”

“Imagine getting your mouth wiped clean by a sweet, innocent maid. Talk about follow-through after the meal. She’s got the mentality of a martial artist and the manners of an English lady! The best of both cultures!”

“Iroha-chan as a Victorian maid... She’s the second coming of art nouveau!

This is what modernism is all about!”

Envious comments came one after the other, and I could hear the voices of other male guests more clearly than before. They *loved* Iroha in her honor student form. Not one of them understood. She might only have been able to transform three more times before she was stuck forever!

Iroha seemed to hear them too. She changed her position so that no one could see the provocative look on her face.

“Hear that, Senpai? People love me when I act all innocent.”

“They’ll love you a hundred times more if you act annoying.”

“Fine, but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna lose to someone like you!”

“We’ll see about that when I rip that innocent mask off your face in two hours’ time. I hope you’re ready.”

“It’s not gonna take that long.”

“What?”

“I’m taking it off now. There’s a ton of them I still want to try. So...” Iroha took a deep breath and let it go again. Her eyes changed size, as though she’d activated some sort of switch, and, like she was possessed, Iroha opened her mouth. “If. There. Is. Anything. Else. I. Can. Do. For. You. Please. Let. Me. Know. Master.”

“That again?”

She was back to where she started. Wonderful.

Midori’s monotonous voice seemed to sap the energy from my bones. As I sipped my coffee, I found myself worrying, just slightly, whether I could even keep up my resolve to face Iroha in the Queen Nevermore contest.

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The fourth floor of the arts and science block. The barricade of desks in front of No-Man’s Land was...not there. The desks had been neatly stacked away to one side of the corridor, where the floor lay polished and open. It was just an empty space. Yet despite the ongoing festival, something in the air seemed to

set it apart from the floors below, like there was an otherworldly hush.

After having my energy sapped by Iroha and her monotones, I needed to head for the dressing room to prepare for the Queen Nevermore contest. That dressing room was—surprisingly—the drama club's room.

The other contestants for Queen Nevermore were all girls, so obviously I couldn't share a dressing room with them. In her position as committee chair, Midori had personally arranged a private room for me.

"Oh, hey, you're already here," I said.

There was already someone in the room when I got there. Two someones, in fact.

"Ah! You're a little early. I'm glad to see you've got great timekeeping skills!" Midori gave me a satisfied nod.

It looked like she had been engaged in a fun conversation before I got there. Her conversation partner wore a suit that hugged her curvaceous body; she was the coolest, most beautiful teacher in our school: Kageishi Sumire.

"Nice to see you, Ooboshi-kun."

"What is my teacher doing here?!"

"What is that, the title of a new manga?"

"Manga?" Midori said. "Sumire, I thought you weren't interested in forms of entertainment like manga, which have a wide-ranging appeal and—"

"It's just that I noticed the manga my students were reading had titles like that and I realized that it must be a new trend but it isn't as though I downloaded an entire ebook collection of a series with slightly sexual overtones and a great story to enjoy in a casual manner," Sumire said in a single breath.

"Oh, I see! That makes sense. I know you would never read manga, Sumire!"

"That's right. Teaching is my sole passion in life."

"I know! It's completely acceptable for faculty to enjoy the festival today, and yet you dealt with the permission to get this room and you even agreed to supervise. Are you sure you're not working too hard, Sumire? Be sure to take

breaks once in a while!”

Sumire giggled. “You’re too kind, Midori. But perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to take a long vacation once things have settled down a bit.”

Said the woman who’d spent so much of her summer vacation playing through the Grand Fantasy 7 remake. And I was sure this “supervision” she’d agreed to came from somewhere less than pure.

I placed a hand on her shoulder. She took the signal and we moved away from Midori. I ignored Midori shooting me a peeved look, instead whispering into her sister’s ear.

“You haven’t told Midori-san about Murasaki Shikibu-sensei yet? Your granddad knows, and your sister attends the same school you teach at. Don’t you think it’d be a good idea to spit it out already?”

“O-Obviously I can’t do that! D’you know how much Midori-chan respects me?! Plus, she gets these ideas in her head... What if she can’t face reality? I don’t even wanna think about what might happen!”

“All I’m saying is that this is a ticking time bomb.”

I wish I could say more than that, but I had my own fair share of similar stuff coming back to bite me, and I didn’t want to be a hypocrite. At least I could give some objective advice as an outsider.

“And what’s all this stuff about teaching being your sole passion? You’re just here to see me cross-dress.”

“Yup!”

“Don’t agree, moron.”

“Ow! Just because Midori-chan can’t see us from this angle doesn’t mean I deserve to be ribbed!”

“Those weren’t your ribs. It was your solar plexus.”

“Who even cares? Wait! Stop that, it’s really effective! I don’t want Midori-chan to see me squirming in pain!” Sumire was trembling and biting her lip as though on the verge of collapse, but she was still managing to keep her ironclad teacher’s face on.

Midori was there behind us to intervene. “Hey, don’t you think you’re a little too close? And— And what’s ‘ribbed’? D-D-Don’t tell me you’re doing something dirty?!”

“You need to get your ears and brain checked if that’s the first thing you think of. She meant ‘getting hit in the ribs,’” I said, stepping away from Sumire like nothing had happened. “Stop getting worked up over every little thing. I was just giving your sister some stimulation to her pressure points to alleviate her exhaustion.”

“Oh. I see. I apologize. It was just a pressure point...”

“Yeah. As if I’d ever do anything dirty like that,” I said. “It was all nice and normal.”

“Yes, stimulating pressure points is completely...” Midori paused. “Wait! Wait, wait, wait. Don’t talk like that’s normal to try and manipulate me. Because I will not be fooled! Attacking someone else’s pressure points in the middle of school is voyeurism!”

“Actually, I don’t think it is. At least throw a ‘practically’ in there.”

“Ah, of course,” Midori said. “It’s foolish to equate two things just because they have one point in common. Wait! Wait. Why are we arguing about that? That’s not the problem here!”

“Maybe not, but if you would just think of it in reverse... If that *was* the problem, then you have to ask, why has humanity failed to bring about world peace for so long?”

“That’s a difficult one. To start with, we need to define what world peace means and— Aaargh! I *told* you that’s *not* what we’re talking about! Stop changing the subject like that. I’m going to lose my mind!” Midori grabbed her head and squirmed like she was trying to resist some kind of brainwashing magic.

She was so smart that she could keep up with a conversation that jumped from one topic to another—and she was suffering for it. Poor girl.

I felt bad for her, but if she was going to carry on making insinuations about my relationship with Sumire, I was ready to keep it up until she forgot what had

started this in the first place. Hopefully she was prepared for that.

“What are you guys doing?”

I turned around only to see Tomosaka Sasara grimacing at us, her eyes narrowing as she spotted Midori writhing in the middle of the classroom.

I gave her a reassuring thumbs-up. “Messing with Midori-san.”

“Ew...”

Damn, she looked seriously disgusted. I wanted to come up with a more sophisticated expression, but it wasn’t something that teenagers who only cared about romance and being popular were likely to understand with their sub-chimpanzee levels of comprehension, so “messing with” it was.

“Kageishi Midori-senpai, right? I heard she was top of the second year and chair of the Nevermore Committee, so I thought she’d be really impressive...but I guess she’s just a weirdo.”

“Ack!”

It was a direct hit through her skull.

What could I say? Sasara was completely right.

“Also, how come the entrance to this floor is so gross? I mean, I’ve heard the rumors, but I just can’t believe the school hasn’t done anything about it! What are they thinking?”

“We get it, the school lacks common sense.” The words I’d been thinking this whole time came out of my mouth before I could stop them.

I had the exact same thought as her so many times myself, only I’d held it in every time. That was holy ground she was trampling with those dirty feet of hers—I had to say *something*.

Pointing out absurdities was *my* job. Sasara was the kind to create those absurdities, and I’d be grateful if she could just stick to that, please.

“Oh, and I see you’re fooling around with girls apart from Kohinata Iroha and that pale girl?”

“‘Fooling around’? No, Midori-san is different.”

“Hmm...” Sasara grumbled.

“Wh-Wh-What?! What are you staring at me for?!” Midori cried.

“You’re in love with this guy, right?”

“S-S-Stop spouting nonsense! Wh-Where’s your evidence?!”

“All that stuttering.”

“Eep!”

“Well, I guess I could be wrong, but you seem like a cute enough girl, Kageishi-senpai. I swear, though, how come this guy’s so popular with the girls? He’s just so average.”

“You can stop being rude now. It’s obvious that your false assumptions are making Midori-san uncomfortable, so just drop it.”

“False assumptions? What? Try looking in the mirror—and then look at Kageishi-senpai, because she’s in love no matter how you slice it. Literally no one wants to see you enter Queen Nevermore, but she makes an exception and lets you anyway, then she even reserves you a special room to do your makeup, and *then* accompanies you there. There’s no way she’d do that if she weren’t in love with you! Also, how dense have you gotta be not to realize that when—”

“That’s enough, Sasara-san.” I’d never seen Sumire glare at anyone with such authority before.

It seemed to have a real effect on Sasara, as she started to defend herself. “Um, uh... Don’t get me wrong! I’m not trying to insult him, I’m just trying to open his eyes to the truth—”

“I’m not interested in what you’re trying to do. I just don’t need you adding more rivals to the mix, for the sake of Mashi—ahem—my friend.”

“Huh? What do you mean by ‘rivals’? Are you saying this guy is even more popular than—”

“There’s nothing more pathetic than being distracted from your original goal by a fleeting curiosity. What have you come to this classroom for?”

“Ah! That’s right. I don’t have time to waste chatting about dumb stuff! I

gotta do my own prep too, so I gotta get started on your makeup right away!”

With that, Sumire had Sasara back on the straight and narrow. She wasn’t like Midori, who was so quick-witted that she just went along with any change in conversation and refused to admit that change had even happened. No, Sasara was simple. I wasn’t saying that was a bad thing. It was the opposite; there was a kind of honesty to it.

Sasara may have been second in her year, but compared to Midori—the queen of all honor students who got perfect scores in every subject—she was as average as the rest of us. Maybe it was only natural that she voiced the exact same thoughts as me.

Maybe because I felt guilty that Midori’s relationship with me was under scrutiny when she had no interest in me at all, or maybe it was nothing deeper than that getting teased was annoying, but either way I was grateful to Sumire for putting an end to it. *Thanks, Shikibu.*

The drama club room was well-equipped, with chairs and motivational mirrors. There was also a side table with wheels. None of it was exactly first class, but it was more than enough for a high school beauty pageant.

The girl doing up my face in that room was undoubtedly a makeup master. It was probably way easier when your field meant you could pick around eighty percent of your tools.

“You really have been keeping up the skin care routine every single day, huh? Impressive.”

“You can tell?”

“Yeah, just by touching you. You’d be surprised how many *girls* give up on the skin care routines I recommend to them after, like, three days. When I said ‘impressive,’ I meant it.”

“Eh, sticking to things is about all I’m good at.”

“That’s hilarious. You’d make a good monk.”

Her metaphor sounded great on the surface, but a little thought showed it wasn’t that great. Meanwhile, she’d started smearing various cosmetics over

my face. Her hands moved skillfully even while we chatted. Her metaphors may not have been great, but her makeup skills were, of course, phenomenal.

After that, I was stripped of my clothes, changed into my Queen Nevermore outfit, and then the finishing touches were put on my face. Somewhere along the way I noticed myself gradually undergoing a transformation in the mirror.

I didn't know when, but at some point, I must have closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

"Hey, I'm done. Open your eyes and check the mirror. Just don't fall in love with yourself, 'kay?"

"R-Right... Wh—!"

Sasara's voice roused me from my sleep. I opened my eyes as instructed, and there I saw her:

A drop-dead gorgeous girl.

"Is this...really the new me?"

There was a graceful fairy in the mirror. A goddess of beauty who belonged beside a lake. An ethereal maiden who lived deep in the forest. Makigai Namako-sensei would probably compare her to a clione dancing elegantly through the deep sea.

My regular dark hair had been replaced with a completely natural-looking long, black wig. My dress combined cool threads of black, purple, and blue, like something a witch would wear.

But my clothes and hair didn't really matter. There was never anything stopping me from buying the best quality items I could.

It was my face. My *face*. Holy crap, my face. And my body.

My jawline was smoothed out, my eyebrows filled in, my nose brought inwards, and even the shape of my eyes had been altered with tape. And yet, from the finished product, nobody would know that any of my features had been done up in this way. The only way I can express what I'm trying to say is: I was a freaking beautiful girl.

"This is... Oh my God." Sasara almost sounded like she'd made a grave

mistake.

“O-O-Ooboshi-kun! You’re a g-g-girl!” Meanwhile, Midori sounded like a washing machine vibrating on its highest setting.

I couldn’t blame them for having such powerful reactions. My beauty was in more than just my face. I looked so slender, I couldn’t help but wonder where my broad shoulders and muscles had gone. My chest held a tasteful level of volume. The work of stuffing, of course. Yet nothing was exposed. I looked like the purest girl who ever lived. My dress covered my legs, chest, and arms, allowing any onlooking guy to draw whatever fantastical conclusions he wanted to.

That...wasn’t what I was going for, though—I just needed something to hide my masculine frame, and this was the dress I ended up choosing. I needed something that would trick every guy out there and have them feeding out of the palm of my hand. I couldn’t let anyone know that I was actually a guy, except for the few people who were in on it.

Rest assured, I had checked beforehand that the swimsuit round had been well and truly axed from this year’s program. I never thought that Midori’s love of morals would be to my advantage. She had insisted that anything “dirty” was forbidden.

I was sure that some of the male students would be disappointed, but the committee had voted on it. Apparently only Otoi-san had abstained, not caring either way. Anyone opposing the move openly would have looked like a pervert, so the vote was pretty much unanimous. The whole thing was just a topic for gossip really, and there wasn’t much worth in digging too deeply into it.

“Ooboshi-kun! Could I take a photo please? Just one! I promise I won’t upload it to the internet!” Midori already had her phone out, and her breathing was ragged.

“I don’t mind. Though you’re making it sound like you’re *definitely* going to be spreading it around for profit.”

Those bloodshot eyes of hers were honestly terrifying. Perhaps this was my first experience of the awkwardness of being lusted after by a girl.

“You look so wonderful dressed as a girl! You’re totally gorgeous!”

“You’re exaggerating. Though I gotta admit, I do think I look objectively beautiful...”

There were several rapid clicks as Midori took her “one” photo of me.

Meanwhile, Sasara had gone pale, and she was muttering under her breath. “Crap, I shouldn’t have tried so hard... I think he might even be cuter than me...”

“Thanks, Tomosaka. I’m ready to win against Iroha now—and you, of course.”

“Grk!”

We were going up against each other in the contest, and yet she’d used the full extent of her talent to turn me into a beautiful girl—so I thanked her. She could have just done a half-assed job and made me look just good enough for me not to complain. But she didn’t, and that was because of her overwhelming pride in all things beauty.

She was a queen, a goddess of all things fashion, photography, and makeup, descended down upon social media as an example to follow for all girls. That wasn’t the sort of person who was dishonest in their work.

Tomosaka Sasara was a regular girl, and I might even go so far as to call her a normie, considering her anti-geek views. But she was also an exemplary creative soul.

“Don’t get too full of yourself! Just ’cause I gave you a sprinkling of innocent mystery doesn’t mean you have a *chance* against me! I haven’t even finished getting ready yet. There’s no way I’m ever, ever, *ever* gonna lose against you!” After thrusting her finger in my face, Sasara claimed the final word and zoomed out of the room.

The attitude suited her, I thought. And she had the same rough charms and elegance you might find in a rural girl surviving on a diet of quartz, for example.

Okay, so that was a bit of a joke, but I really did think she could make a good friend for Iroha. They were very much alike. Maybe I should see if I could get them to see eye to eye at some point.

Wait. Sumire's been awfully quiet ever since my makeup was finished...

There was no denying that my transformation was stunning. It wouldn't have surprised me if she had transformed into a savage beast of a geek (read: Murasaki Shikibu-sensei), but I guess she was just trying to hold herself back because Midori was here?

I turned to Sumire to check.

She was in full-on Venomous Queen mode, with her brows knit tightly together, and a stern expression on her face.

"Sumire-sensei?"

There was no response.

"Hello?"

Still no response. Not a twitch in her expression; not even from her fingertips.

I had a horrible feeling I knew what this was.

"She passed out...while standing?!"

***

"I always thought Midori-san was fighting the curse of her natural urges to live out her life as an honor student, but I guess she was just a dirty old man all along."

"Hold it right there, Ozu. I'm gonna feel sorry for her if you keep talking like that."

Chapter 8: My Fake Girlfriend Is Handsome!

The fall breeze blew gently through the courtyard, rustling the long black hair of the beautiful girl walking sweetly and silently along. It was like a painting left behind by an artist, and its subject...was me.

A commotion was stirring up around me.

“Who’s that pretty girl over there? I don’t remember seeing her around school before.”

“She’s gotta be all dressed up for the Queen Nevermore contest, right? I’m pretty sure they weren’t accepting outsiders as contestants.”

“So she’s gotta be from our school. But damn, I didn’t know our school had such a cutie.”

All it took was me walking in plain sight to get the rumors flowing. Just as I’d planned. I smirked internally.

Sasara had made me look cute, but there was more to it than that. My gait, my mannerisms, my expression. All of it was a part of my calculated creation to entice the hearts of men!

That wasn’t to say I was the only one capable of something like this. Anybody who’d spent such a long time poring over the desires of their fan base would be able to pull it off.

But the simple truth was that I’d captured these boys’ hearts. I’d managed to catch the attention of every pair of eyes around. It was a good thing that I’d decided to pass through the courtyard on my way to the Queen Nevermore contest. Call it a dress rehearsal. My judges were both the many, many people looking on from the school hallways which overlooked this area, *and* those taking a break from the clamor of the festival in the courtyard.

I had to suppress a chuckle. I couldn’t wait for the contest itself.

I was walking along, minding my own business, when I suddenly heard some

shrill voices among the chattering boys.

There were a number of girls there, their screeches high-pitched enough to burst my eardrums.

That was weird. I could understand why Midori and Sumire had reacted as extremely as they had; they both knew who I was underneath. To any regular girl, I must have looked like the same type of beauty you'd see walking on the street. It shouldn't cause such a commotion.

I looked up, puzzled. A white rose bloomed in front of me. I mean figuratively, of course.

"H-Hey, Aki. You look great."

A handsome young man was in front of me, raising a hand in a casual greeting. He was dressed like a fairytale prince. Only he wasn't a man, he was a beautiful girl dressed as a man.

I hadn't *seen* a person like this before, but I'd heard that voice often enough to know it like the back of my hand.

Tsukinomori Mashiro. My cousin, neighboring classmate, and fake lover.

Why was she standing in front of me now under the guise of a handsome guy?

Also, she'd done well to recognize me. Maybe she'd known me for so long that she recognized me by something akin to a scent?

"Since you're entering the Queen Nevermore contest by dressing as a girl, I wanted to enter King Nevermore dressed as a boy. If we both win, we can have the closing party dance together," Mashiro explained, bashful.

It made sense. I had to admire her ability to take action.

"I didn't tell you because I wanted to surprise you. What do you think?"

There was silence.

"H-Huh? You *are* Aki...aren't you? Why aren't you saying anything?" Mashiro looked up anxiously from under her long eyelashes.

I crossed my fingers in front of my mouth and shook my head to let her know

we couldn’t talk right now. My appearance was the perfect disguise, but in the end it was still only a mask.

If I was touched, if I took off my clothes, or if I spoke, I was done for. As a beautiful girl, I was imperfect; my layers were paper thin, and the removal of any one of them would be devastating. There was no telling who might overhear us right now. I couldn’t risk speaking with my masculine voice.

If I couldn’t speak, wouldn’t that put me at a disadvantage in the Queen Nevermore contest, I hear you ask?

Have no fear.

Mysterious, silent beauties were popular with around eighty percent of the male population, according to the statistics. In actuality, my inability to speak was a limitation that I would use to give myself a major advantage!

I’m not taking constructive criticism. This is the truth I’ve decided to cling to.

Either way, I still wanted to avoid being outed as a boy before I took to the stage. Luckily, Mashiro seemed to understand my concerns; she nodded.

“Don’t say anything, then. Could you tell me what you think with body language?”

I nodded.

“Canary-san helped me dress up.” Mashiro hesitated. “What do you think?”

Mashiro stood in a way that would let me see all of her, the same way you might stand in front of a mirror. She was wearing a jacket and waistcoat reminiscent of late eighteenth-century French nobility. On her lower half she wore long culottes, giving her a sophisticated air. There was something sexy about her even as a boy—it probably had something to do with the weird pheromones she’d been giving off recently. She was like a mind-melting prince who’d put all his skill points into sex appeal. It was kind of weird, to say the least.

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“We even bound my chest properly to make my figure less feminine.”

I couldn’t remember her chest being so prominent that it would require binding. That was the first thought that came to mind, but of course I didn’t voice it out loud. I knew it was a rude thing to think, but I should be fine as long as Mashiro respected my freedom of thought.

“You were just thinking something rude, weren’t you, Aki?”

Except Mashiro didn’t respect my freedom of thought.

I shook my head vigorously like a frightened puppy pleading for forgiveness.

An earlier version of Mashiro would promise forgiveness on the condition I set myself alight and offer up my life, along with a myriad of other insults, but the Mashiro who’d overcome the hardships of the summer vacation was a little different.

“Seriously? You’re such a naughty little kitten, Aki.”

“Wh—”

I almost spat out the word without thinking.

Look, I couldn’t help it, okay? It wasn’t my fault. Mashiro was dressed up right now like a boy with a pretty face, and she’d suddenly closed the gap between us so she was right in front of my nose, like a brand-new, all-powerful enemy showing up in their first scene of a shonen manga. The fact that my squeak had been too quiet for anyone but Mashiro to hear was something, at least.

I was forced backwards till I had my back against one of the pillars holding up the walkway, at which point Mashiro put one hand beside my head and smirked at me.

She chuckled. “You’re cute as a girl, Aki. Even your reactions are girly.”

Stop it! I don’t know how to feel when you’re saying all this stuff with such a handsome face!

“That defiant look in your eyes is really nice too, like you’re a power bottom. It’s like I’m seeing a brand new side to you, and it’s making my heart pound. I guess it’s because I love you.”

I couldn't respond. She was being so direct and honest with her feelings. My own heart was thumping uncontrollably. Mashiro's thought process was...

"You know, I kinda like it."

"Huh?"

Taking advantage of our proximity, I whispered into Mashiro's ear.

It was because I was jealous. Deeply jealous of her ability to think this way.

"Love is blind and narrows the mind. It puts a complete stop to your thought process. And yet you're able to accept the person you love *as* the person you love, no matter how they're presenting themselves. I can't think of anything kinder than that. This might be rude to say, but that's not something I'm capable of myself. I'm super impressed."

I wanted to create an environment for Iroha where she could be herself, but up until now, I hadn't noticed the question that I was essentially asking myself through that desire:

If Iroha lost her annoying nature, would I stop liking her? Oh, and when I say "liking," I mean as a friend or senpai.

If there are any of you out there who also think Iroha's annoyingness is cute, I want you to speak up. Could you accept Iroha just as she is? Could you accept all of her, even if she changed who she was?

Say my own answer to that question was no. I would be just like her mother, Amachi Otoha. And maybe I was; right now I was expecting Iroha to be a certain way. She'd now threatened to change, and I was trying to put a stop to it.

That was why Mashiro's words resonated with me, in a weird way. Mashiro's gentle and unconditional acceptance of me, even when I was pretending to be a girl and based entirely on love, only seemed to highlight my selfish ego.

Even so, I'd challenged Iroha to this duel, and I wasn't about to back down!

I decided I would sit down and have a proper conversation with her once the Queen Nevermore contest was over. On first thought, I wasn't sure what I would do if Iroha decided to abandon her pesky ways and continue on with a new persona, but I knew I had to be prepared to face it head-on if nothing else.

“Thanks, Mashiro. By the way, you’re really handsome.”

Mashiro giggled. “I know. I *am* handsome. Handsome enough to beat OZ—Kohinata-kun—and take the closing dance with you.”

“Right. I’ll see you then.”

“Yeah! I can’t wait.”

Mashiro shot me a final, sweet smile before stepping away from me. The way she turned her back, the hand she raised to say goodbye, the scent she left in the air; everything about her was as smooth and cool as the most handsome of boys, right up until she disappeared from view. I sort of understood how those screaming girls must feel about her.

When the realization hit that by dressing like a girl I was starting to *think* like a girl, I quickly clenched my jaw to pull myself together. I needed to complete my mission as soon as I could—so I started walking in the direction of the Queen Nevermore contest again.

“Hey! You’re Kohinata-san’s senpai!” A voice from behind made me jump.

I turned around to see a friendly girl waving from one of the windows in the school hallway. She was one of the girls Iroha had spent the summer festival with on the last day of the summer vacation. The one who spoke in some really strange slang (which I was pretty sure was of her own creation). I didn’t know her name, so let’s just call her Pudding-chan for convenience, since her use of lexicon had a similar structural integrity to the dessert.

Hold on. How did she know it was me?

Maybe she had the same thing going on as Sasara; these open-minded sociable types like her had several friends who didn’t pay much attention to gender norms, so they were good at recognizing people whatever they looked like. Or maybe it was a complete coincidence.

My first thought was to ignore her, but if she called out to me several times, it would only attract unwanted attention. My best bet was probably playing innocent. There weren’t a whole lot of students who would equate “Kohinata-san’s senpai” with “Ooboshi Akiteru.” See? It was a good thing that everyone treated me like part of the furniture...and I’m definitely not crying about it right

now!

I approached the window, and kept my voice low as I spoke back to her. “I’m in a hurry to get to the Queen Nevermore contest right now. If it’s not urgent, do you mind—”

“It’s urgent! Urgent, sergeant!”

Those things only look *like they rhyme...*

“Right... So what’s up?”

Her weird word choice aside, I could tell she was in a panic from the air she gave off.

Pudding-chan’s eyes opened wide. “It’s a major danger-banger-disaster-burnt-toastal-service level of bad!”

“Could you stick to Japanese? Also, I should’ve said this ages ago, but there’s no way that’s real slang.”

“We’re dealing with something super bad here!”

“Okay, now I understand. Wait, what’s bad?!”

“Kohinata-san’s vanished-banished into size-zero air and a baff of smoke!”

“How many times do I have to ask you to speak— Iroha’s disa— Ah!” I nearly let out a shout, but quickly shut my mouth before my deep masculine voice could out me to anyone nearby. I tried to make sense of the situation, but I just couldn’t work it out. “You sure she’s not just gone to the dressing room to get ready for the contest?”

“No, nope, and nopers! Our bud-bud reminded her to get a shovel on, but she was all like ‘no!’ and ran away! It was like spy-fall supreme!”

Her friend had reminded Iroha to hurry up, but Iroha had refused to go get changed and ran away with all the stealth of a professional spy. I guess. I must have been getting used to listening to her weird slang, because I actually understood it this time—just about.

It wasn’t that Iroha had run away from her friends to prepare for the contest, but that she’d run away from the contest itself. It was weird; when we poked

our heads into Iroha's classroom before, she'd seemed full of enthusiasm. Could something have made her change her mind in the short time between then and now? Or was there some kind of trouble afoot?

"We're gonna look for Kohinata-san ourselves. If you find her, please make sure she's okay!"

"Right. And please let me know if you guys find her."

"Okey-de-cokey!"

She'd used that one before, at least, and it was nice that she was trying to be confident. Pudding-chan left then.

I wanted so badly to pull my hair out, but then I remembered my wig and makeup, and my hands stopped in their tracks. But at least I could grumble.

"Iroha! What the hell are you playing at?"

I raced away, cursing the frilly dress and freshly worn shoes which hindered my movements.

***

The Queen Nevermore contest was due to start at three that afternoon.

I stuck my head into classroom after classroom. Whenever I did, the hands on the room's clock had crept a little closer to the deadline. I checked my phone and the flood of messages I'd sent Iroha that would put any stalker to shame. Not a single one of them had been read. I tried calling her too, but of course she didn't pick up.

"Where the hell did she go?" I couldn't help grumbling aloud, no longer caring about the risk of anyone hearing this pretty girl speak with masculine tones.

All of this had been to satisfy my own ego and to win the Queen Nevermore contest against Iroha specifically. There was no point in my transformation if Iroha wasn't even going to be there.

I'd been doing a lot of running lately, I realized. Chasing after people who'd disappeared for one reason or another.

Like that time I chased Mashiro after school when she kept refusing my party

invitation, or that time I went looking for Mashiro after she hid away in the mall's movie theater, or that time at the summer festival when Mashiro and I got separated...

Now that I thought about it, I was always running after Mashiro. This was the first time Iroha had disappeared on me. It was rare for me to have to search for Iroha.

Was that because she was stronger than Mashiro? Or was it because she tried to hide her weaknesses?

If her disappearance was a result of her weaknesses coming to the surface, then I was the only one who could support her. The only one who understood her to her very core, the only one who could encourage her. She had a handful of superficial friends, but no one best friend who knew what she was really like. She only had me, her senpai in the year above.

I was running around the school as fast as I could, like the protagonist of a major anime movie. My self-appointed sense of heroism was a little embarrassing, and I was starting to get sick of it. My ego had really been on the rise lately, huh? As if Ooboshi Akiteru could ever be the protagonist of anything. People barely noticed my existence—yet here I was trying to "save" Iroha like the male lead in some romantic comedy.

This was no story. This was real life.

Say this *was* the final scene of a movie. I'd reunite with Iroha, there'd be some drama, and then we'd live happily ever after. But reality was rarely that interesting.

The conclusion was something much simpler, and it came in the form of my phone vibrating.

Iroha: LOL. How many messages you gonna send me? You really are in love with me, lmao!

My stream of messages displayed a *read* mark all at once, along with Iroha's laughter-filled, teasing reply, and a sticker of Tomaty-kun spluttering with

laughter that I found especially irritating.

“What the hell!”

Annoyed at how much she’d made me worry, I sent her a ton of stickers to express my rage. Slamming my phone back into my pocket, I let out a huff.

Yeah, it was unlikely that there was ever going to be any real trouble. This was real life. It wasn’t a story, where everything was meticulously organized. There was chaos, and stuff that just wasn’t fair. I was no protagonist; not everything could be solved by my hand, and I didn’t have control over everything either.

Iroha was living her own life. Her own story.

Maybe it was Pudding-chan or someone else, but it seemed somebody had positively influenced Iroha and helped her to find an optimistic answer for this situation.

“Iroha has more people in her life than just me.”

The thought made me a little sad, but at the same time...

I’m so glad she’s okay.

And that was the truth.

AKI: Glad you’re okay. I hope you’re not planning to run off with your tail between your legs anymore, because I’m going to crush you in the Queen Nevermore contest.

Iroha: You’re going down, Senpai! This isn’t gonna end up the way you want it at all!

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“So yeah, everything just kinda solved itself. Not an exciting story at all, right, Ozu?”

“Don’t worry, Aki. The gods see everything; not just what goes on from your perspective.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you’ll learn all about what happened to Iroha later on.”

Interlude: Iroha and Sasara

I was in a far corner of the empty library, squished between two bookshelves. It felt like I was a hermit hiding away in the forest. The scent of damp, old paper seemed to settle my thundering heart, and I felt the tension start to drain from my stiff shoulders. I could just about make out the sounds of the festival drifting in from far away, as though they were coming from another world I wasn't a part of.

During the Nevermore Festival, only staff and students were allowed in the library. It was closed off to prevent books from getting stolen or lost, something that became more likely when a large number of outsiders had access to it. On the flip side, that made it the perfect hiding spot.

When I realized the Queen Nevermore contest was getting close, something inside me had frozen up and said I couldn't do it. With nowhere else to go, I ended up escaping here.

I felt an unexpected affinity to this library. Anything to do with entertainment was banned in my house, so I didn't have any books of my own. Sometimes, if there was a book I wanted to read, I'd come here and pass the time with it in peace, sitting right at one end of the room where no one would see me. Though someone must've at some point, because my existence in the library became a kind of urban legend, which was pretty funny. I always made sure I was in honor student mode when I read, of course.

This place was like my third home, and I felt a sense of peace here. There was no committee member standing guard here today, and the librarian was also out. It was just me, by myself, making the whole place completely quiet.

Until I heard the door slide open.

"Found you! Finally. Seriously, that took forever!"

It was one of my classmates, Tomosaka Sasara. She was wearing a gorgeous, fiery orange dress with a flourish of frills. It looked like the kind of thing she'd

wear if she was determined to get her next photo trending on Pinsta. I bet it would too.

It wasn't like I was an expert or anything, of course! I just kinda pieced it together from the stuff she told me was popular on Pinsta.

"What are you doing *here*, Kohinata Iroha? You haven't even gotten changed! The Queen Nevermore contest starts in literally two seconds!"

If I had to sum Tomosaka Sasara up in one sentence, it would be this: she was so freaking annoying. It should have been obvious that I didn't want to take part.

She grabbed a nearby chair and pulled it way too close to me, before sitting down right in front of me. Her chest was pressed up against the back, and she was straddling it like a spring horse, her legs wide open in a stance that was anything but refined. It was even worse when you considered how fancy her dress was.

"This better be good. Why'd you run off like that? I was super excited to face you in the contest, so now it feels like you've betrayed me."

As if she had the right to complain. *She* was excited, and *she* felt betrayed. How was any of that my responsibility?

I was about to open my mouth to reply, when Sasara frowned and inclined her head.

"No, wait. I'm the one who got overexcited and then felt betrayed, so that's on me. So...huh. I guess I don't have the right to blame you for anything."

Where did this self-reflection come from all of a sudden? I thought she'd come here to pick a fight and lord over me. I mean, it was nice that she'd picked up on her own mistake and was working to fix herself, but couldn't she have done that on the way here and then just left me alone?

"Look, I get that you're terrified of losing to me—it's not like you've got a chance, after all—but that doesn't mean I'm gonna let you just run away! At least put up a proper fight!"

"I...can't..."

It was all I could do to squeeze out those trembling words. That was all my voice was capable of at the moment.

I mean... I mean, I... I couldn't...

"I can't take part in an event that puts me on stage with all those animals staring at me! It's disgraceful!"

There was a pause.

"Huh?"

Sasara's eyes were as tiny as pinheads.

I know! I'm acting like a total weirdo. I am *a total weirdo!*

But I couldn't stop it. These feelings of disgrace that bubbled up inside me. I didn't like them, and I knew I was being a hypocrite, so I had to try and keep them to myself. But the cry of my soul couldn't be silenced. Because right now, I was acting. I was possessed by my role.

Who was I acting as? It should have been obvious. I only had one person in my repertoire who worked so hard to be pure in all things. I'd slipped into the role a while ago now, pausing only once, so any observers should have known who it was.

It was Midori-san.

My true, rational self was still sleeping deep within me—the one listing off so much pretentious nonsense right now. She knew this situation wasn't exactly ideal. Now that I was Midori-san, I was struggling to get out, and the Queen Nevermore contest was about to start.

Imagine someone telling Midori-san to enter the contest. How do you think she'd react?

Right. She'd get totally red-faced and then make a run for it, guaranteed.

As long as my mind was taken over by Midori-san, I just couldn't take part in the contest. I was in a pinch.

"What are you talking about, Kohinata? You were totally up for it before."

"I just can't. In front of all those people...violating me with their eyes!"

“Vio— The hell are you talking about?! Hey, Kohinata Iroha! Come back to us!”

“Waaah!”

Sasara had grabbed me by the shoulders and was now shaking me back and forth. Maybe it was the rattling of my brain in my skull that unstuck the Midori-san that was attached to its outer surface—but something suddenly struck, and I raised my head.

Tomosaka Sasara’s face was closer than I’d expected. She was staring at me point-blank with her big, round eyes with their perfect makeup. She jolted back and looked away, as though she also found it embarrassing.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I’m back to normal now. Thanks.”

“The hell? You make it sound like you were possessed by a demon or something.”

“That’s pretty close to the truth, actually.” I laughed.

If I told her someone else had taken over my brain because I was acting as them, I bet she’d laugh at me. So I smoothed things over with an inoffensive, honor student smile.

“Huh. I was thinking you had a fight with that senpai of yours or something.”

“My senpai? You mean Ooboshi-senpai?”

“Yeah. I dunno what’s going on, but he said he was gonna enter Queen Nevermore so he could go head-to-head with you.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s right. I don’t know what he’s thinking either! Aha ha!”

“Hey, when are you gonna get tired of that?”

Sasara’s mood had visibly soured. She was always like this, always getting grumpy when I was trying to be as inoffensive as I could. It was honestly hard to deal with her. My other classmates were way easier to understand. As long as I maintained a basic level of friendliness, they did the same for me.

Why couldn’t Sasara be like them? I’d be way happier if we could just be on good terms, but not be close enough to fight. That would be so much easier,

and neither of us would get hurt that way.

“Tired of what?”

There was a little assertiveness to my tone as I responded. It was partly her provocation, but there was something else too. Maybe I’d been getting kind of stressed lately having to juggle my relationships with Senpai and Mashiro-senpai, and I just hadn’t noticed.

“There’s no one else here, right? So lemme tell you something that I’ve been holding back for *ages*.” Sasara looked around to make doubly sure the usual suspects—the library committee, the librarian—and anyone else weren’t around. “That paper-thin smile of yours. It’s a big, fat, stinkin’ lie, isn’t it?!”

“Wh— H-How cruel! Why would you say something like that?”

“Stop it. I *saw* you. I saw you picking on that guy!”

“What?!” I froze up instantly.

Where could she have seen us?

I tried to think things through calmly. There were times I bullied Senpai in school when no one was watching, and I rarely bothered to wear my usual mask when we were outside school. It wouldn’t be too crazy an idea to think that Sasara had seen us somewhere.

“I’m never satisfied with *anything* unless I’m number one! That goes for studying, sports, popularity, and my number of social media followers. I’ve been that way ever since junior high, so when I didn’t get first in the entrance exam—when I didn’t get to give a speech at the school entrance ceremony as head of the class—that was when I started holding a grudge against you.”

“Why do you care so much about being first?”

“What? Isn’t it obvious?” Sasara snorted.

I swallowed. If she really cared that much, she must have had a tumultuous childhood or something. Like her parents would treat her like crap unless she got first in everything. You see that kind of tragic backstory in fiction all the time.

Tomosaka Sasara jabbed her thumb into her chest and grinned at me smugly.

“It’s ’cause first is always best, no matter what you’re dealing with.”

“Huh?”

“What, you didn’t hear me? First is—”

“I heard you, I heard you. I just didn’t expect that to be your only reason. I thought there’d be some huge reason behind it, or maybe something major in your past you were about to tell me about.”

“The heck?”

She was looking at me like *I* was the crazy one here. Was she seriously saying she aimed to be number one in everything just for the sake of it?

“You know why high school baseball players aim for the top spot at Koshien, right? It’s because getting first is best. That’s why I aim for the top too. Is there something wrong with that?”

“Uh... If you put it like that, I’m thinking maybe not...”

“You’ve been reading too many manga, probably because of that gross senpai of yours. This isn’t some story or anything. I do it ’cause I wanna, ’cause I like it, and ’cause first is best! That’s all the reason I need, right?”

“You’ve got a twisted view of manga and stories. You know there are some characters who aim for the top just because?”

It was only then that I realized that kind of thinking *was* a thing. Some characters just wanted to be the Pirate King, meet their fathers, or become lovers with someone—without any deeper reasoning behind it.

Sometimes those characters were confronted with the “why” and tried to look deeper, but often they would find that their goals were driven by nothing but pure emotion. If I wanted to be an actress, I needed to learn about these sorts of characters whose motives couldn’t be easily compartmentalized.

“Anyway, that’s why I started taking notice of you right from the day of the entrance ceremony. When it was over, I went after you to go talk to you, which was when I found you behind the gym.”

“Oh. Yeah...”

I knew what she'd witnessed. I could remember that day really well.

No one in my class knew this, but my grades weren't that great throughout junior high school. Once Senpai got into this school, I knew I wouldn't be able to follow him unless I poured everything into studying and passing the entrance exam. He taught me what I needed to know for the year ahead, and I made use of his prior experience and efficient tendencies to put together a study program and excel in a short space of time. It worked a bit too well, and I ended up getting the top marks in the exam.

I got kind of overexcited and ended up bragging to Senpai behind the gym about getting into this school with better grades than him.

But that wasn't the real reason I was happy. I was so overjoyed at being able to spend more time with Senpai than ever before that I couldn't hold it back, and wanted to go annoy him as soon as possible.

That was the point in my school career that my guard had been at its lowest. It was before wearing the honor student mask had become my norm, and it was that moment Tomosaka Sasara had witnessed.

"The guy you spoke to had such a plain face, I barely remember him if I'm honest."

She just insulted you like it was nothing! Hope you don't feel too down about it, Senpai!

"But I remember *you,* and the way you were bouncing around him and being a pest. I don't wanna admit this, but you were radiant. Like, genuinely stunning. Not that I wanna admit it!"

"Tomosaka-san..."

"And then, we ended up in the same class, but you acted totally different, like you were some shallow honor student, and hell if I wasn't mad! It ate me up inside, 'cause it wasn't like I could tell anyone about it either!"

"I didn't know you were so considerate."

"Of course I am! What kinda person do you think I am, anyway?"

"Um. A weirdo who's so desperate to make people think she's got a boyfriend

that she gets her brother to pretend to be one.”

“Forget about that alreadyyy!” Sasara pounded her fists against me, her eyes moist with tears.

You know, maybe she’s actually super funny. Definitely still cringe, though.

Before I knew it, I was laughing.

“Hey! Now you’re laughing at me?!”

“O-Oh, sorry! I didn’t mean to!” I’d just let out the same sort of laugh I did with Senpai. I quickly wiped the smile from my face.

Sasara’s eyes flew open. “I knew you could make that face! You should make it more often!”

“Huh?”

“I know what you’re really like, so that smile you always put on in the classroom? It gives me the creeps. Plus, it’s a total waste. You’re cute, you know? So you really should smile like you actually want to. Like you just did.”

“Oh...”

I remembered what Senpai said to me. Something about wanting to find me a friend I could be my annoying self with and open my heart to. There was still a part of me that was annoyed by his selfish directorial desire of wanting me to be myself more openly and show everyone who I was, but...

I decided to try it a little.

“I give *you* the creeps, huh? You’re the one who’s been obsessed with me since the entrance ceremony. You in love with me or something?”

“Hey, I’m not creepy! And...wait. You’re finally not pretending to be all good anymore!”

“You already saw what I’m like and you never told anyone, so I might as well be myself. I’m still gonna be a perfect honor student in class, so I’d be grateful if you could keep this quiet. Unless you want me to tell everyone your boyfriend’s actually your brother!”

“You don’t have to threaten me! I wasn’t gonna tell anyone anyway. And

don’t *you* go spilling any of my secrets either!”

“Aha ha! Look at you flailing around! It’s so cute!”

“The hell? You’re a hundred times more annoying than I thought!”

Annoying. I was always terrified of being called that by anyone who wasn’t as genuinely open-minded as Senpai.

I wasn’t scared now—maybe because I also had one of her embarrassing secrets. Or maybe it was because I didn’t care if someone like Tomosaka Sasara hated me. Whichever it was, I didn’t seem to mind Sasara telling me I was annoying. My heart felt just a little lighter, like a small weight had been lifted from it.

I suppressed a sigh. Senpai really was an amazing guy. I bet he knew I’d feel this much better just by having one other person I could be myself with.

I wasn’t completely free, though. I still had the dark cloud of Senpai and Mashiro-senpai hovering above my head.

“Oh, hey, look at the time. Sorry, Tomosaka-san. Can’t waste any more time chatting with you.”

“Chatting with me isn’t a waste!” Sasara looked at the clock. “Whoa, you weren’t kidding about the time. You’re making me late, dumbass!”

“Let’s hurry! C’mon, pick up the pace!”

“Don’t forget whose fault this is. Hey, wait up! I can’t run in this long dress! Waah!”

We tried to rush out of the library together, when Tomosaka Sasara nearly tripped. It looked like she was doing some weird dance. I pointed and laughed at her.

“You run like a total weirdo!”

That was all it took for pure joy to well up from deep in my chest. After that, my footsteps felt a little lighter.

“Hey, Kohinata.”

Tomosaka Sasara and I were jogging to the dressing room for the Queen Nevermore contest. She spoke to me between gasps.

“That guy you were fooling around with on the day of the entrance ceremony—it was that same senpai you were with at the festival. Ooboshi Akiteru-senpai, right?”

I paused before answering, but decided to just be honest. “Yeah. So?”

I wasn’t acting around her anymore, so I didn’t see the point in being secretive about Senpai either.

“I’ve actually been helping him a bit with entering Queen Nevermore.”

“Seriously? I’d never have thought it.”

“Right?! Get a loada this. There’s this...person, who I, like, *really* respect, and it turns out they know Senpai too! By total coincidence, they asked me to help him with his makeup for the contest. Small world, huh?”

“This person knows Senpai? Wait, do you happen to have a sugar daddy who’s the CEO of a huge games company?”

“No?! What the heck gave you that idea?!”

Darn, I was wrong. I almost thought it sounded like this “person” was Tsukinomori Makoto-san. I didn’t know him myself, but I’d heard about him from Senpai.

“They’re an editor for this publishing company. They’re incredible! All their series get reprints.”

“Oh, Canary-san!”

“Cana...? Okay, look, I guess I can tell you. Her name is Hoshino Kana-san. Who’s this ‘canary’ person?”

“Hoshino Kana? Huh?”

I thought her name was Kiraboshi Kanaria. I guess maybe that was her stage name and Hoshino Kana was her birth name? I also thought Tomosaka Sasara hated nerdy stuff. If she respected Canary-san, maybe Tomosaka didn’t know the details of her work?

Crushing someone's dreams was only cool if you were a light novel protagonist. *I* was the sweet, tactful Iroha-chan, and so I was going to keep my mouth one hundred percent closed!

"Okay, cool! So, you did Senpai's makeup, right? What about it?" I pulled the conversation back to the starting point, my voice cracking as I spoke.

"Oh, right! Basically, when I helped him with his makeup, I realized he's actually a really great guy!"

"What?!"

"He looks totally plain, and he's a creepy, geeky stalker. At first, I didn't have a clue what you liked about him."

"You're a stalker too, y'know."

"But then, when I was doing his face today, it clicked. He's been keeping up the skin care routine I taught him every single day."

"Huh. And that was enough to make you see him in a new light?"

"It's a bigger deal than it sounds. I sometimes give lessons on skin care routine via Pinsta and in-person lectures, but the number of people who actually stick to what I tell them is seriously tiny. People are like, 'Hey, this doesn't work,' or they say I'm a hack, but then when I ask them what they actually did, they haven't been doing what I told them at all. It's seriously depressing. Makes me think the stuff I'm doing is totally pointless."

"Oh, I get it. Senpai followed what you said perfectly."

"Exactly! I *swear* no one's ever taken me more seriously than him! I don't wanna admit it, because he's so up himself it grosses me out, but I can't fault him when it comes to sticking to the plan. Now I get why you're attracted to him."

"I'm not 'attracted' to him, though."

"Are you kidding? It's super obvious. Like, I'm sorry, but you gotta understand I know you *really* well."

"Having a stalker sure is terrifying." I pouted, not liking the way she was able to see right through me.

I'd been harboring my feelings for Senpai for a long, long time, keeping them locked away close to my heart. It was only recently that I told Otoi-san how I felt about him, but I hadn't gotten around to telling Sumire-chan or Mashiro-senpai yet. I was pretty sure Ozuma had figured it out. My brother was way too sharp.

"Wait, are you still mad about what happened at the summer festival? 'Cause I'm sorry about that. I didn't really understand Ooboshi-senpai back then. He made me mad, yeah, but that was because I decided he was an unsociable creep. That was my bad."

"You feel bad about that now?"

"I sure do."

"Okay. Then there's something I wanna tell you."

Now that I thought about it, Tomosaka Sasara was a convenient ally to have: she had nothing to do with the Alliance at all. There were too many secrets I was supposed to keep that prevented me from talking about Senpai to my classmates, but she was different. I didn't care if she hated me, and that was to my advantage. I could say anything I wanted to her and not feel the slightest bit guilty about it.

"You're totally right. I *do* like Senpai. Romantically."

"See? I knew it! That kinda stuff doesn't get past me!"

Jeez, she's so annoying. But that's fine!

"But I've got a friend who's got a crush on him too. It's been messing me up a lot lately, and I don't really know what to do anymore."

"Is that why you've been acting so weird lately?"

"You're really paying that much attention to me, huh? Talk about creepy."

"I'm not creepy!"

"I'm only saying it outta love," I told her, before dropping my tone again. These feelings had been jumbled up inside me for a while, and now I was getting them off my chest. "I told my friend that my feelings for Senpai aren't romantic. Now she's being completely open with her feelings for him, because

she doesn't have to worry about me. Meanwhile there's me, sneaking around like a total coward. I don't deserve to tell him my feelings anymore."

"Huh? Just tell him."

"What?"

Her reaction was way too casual. I know I was going on about how I could say whatever I wanted, but I meant "within reason"—and her response wasn't exactly reasonable. Didn't she realize I was seriously struggling here?

"Quit glaring at me! I didn't say anything bad!"

"Yeah, you did! I can't just ignore my friend here. This isn't as simple as you're making it sound!"

Tomosaka Sasara sighed, impatient. "Listen, Kohinata. Your mindset right now's just gonna make you miserable, so you need to quit it."

"Like you know that for sure."

"But it makes sense, right? You're giving up your own happiness so that someone else can get theirs. If you don't have that happiness, you're miserable."

"I'm gonna regret being happy if it means making my friend miserable, though."

"Yeah, which is why you're suffering now. Because there's no perfect answer to this."

I could only grunt in response. She was way too perceptive. Was this some skill limited to normal, happy people? Or was it the kind of skill that made her a decent stalker? It felt like she'd pinpointed something deep within my heart and shot an arrow right through it.

"The whole point of life is to find happiness. What are you doing with your life if you're just gonna let that happiness pass you by?"

"Mmngh."

"And it's not like you can stay friends with someone who won't be happy for you when *you're* happy, right?"

“Hnngh...”

“You’re kinda screwed the second your interests clash. Only an idiot would hang around to make themselves miserable.”

“Gah!”

Could she let up with her logic for just a second? It was like she could see right through me and all the tiny details of my emotion, which she then used to force her own opinion onto me. It was annoying, irritating, and infuriating. And...

“If you’re honest about your feelings, and you lose your friend, then it is what it is. And honestly, it’s probably kinder to let your friend go in that case anyway.”

And that was exactly why her words resonated with me so much.

“You fall in love with the same person and one of you pushes, it’s gonna make the other one unhappy. You keep forcing your friendship to continue, and you’re *both* gonna end up more miserable the longer you drag it out. For the sake of your friend, honestly, I think the kindest thing to do is to be prepared to end your friendship.”

“That’s pretty deep. Y’know, my opinion of you’s gone up a bit.”

Tomosaka Sasara let out a laugh. “Right? That’s ’cause I’m number one!”

“It actually sounds like you were directly quoting someone super smart. You steal that from Cana—Hoshino-san or someone?”

“I did, yeah, but so what?! You can’t just cut me down after giving me a compliment!” Tomosaka Sasara wailed.

Seeing her animated like this might never get old. It was rare to see someone manage to get mad and start crying like a coward at the same time. I guess she was one of a kind.

Anyway, if those words came from the mind of a capable adult, then they were probably true. I felt like the path I needed to take was suddenly a little clearer.

“Hey, Tomosaka-san.” I paused. “Wait, actually, can I just call you Sasara? It’d be easier.”

“Y-Yeah, you sure can! Iroha!”

“Well, that took you, like, two seconds to adapt to. Anyway, Sasara. Thanks. Your words—ripped off from a famous editor—have filled me with courage!”

“You can stop emphasizing that they’re not my own words now! Like, you coulda just said ‘thanks’!”

“Hey, I don’t mind if you stole them. Own it. I’m still grateful, because they really helped me out.”

“Whoa! Wait, Iroha, does that mean...”

“Yup. I’ve made up my mind.” I nodded, filled with determination, and it was just then that the Queen Nevermore dressing room came into view. What perfect timing.

It was among a collection of classrooms that were only open to students and staff at the moment, so they could take refuge from the hustle and bustle of the festival. We stopped in front of the classroom where the sign identified it as the dressing room.

“I’m gonna fight Mashiro-senpai. That’s something Senpai taught me too.”

He told me that if I cared too much about my mom’s feelings, I’d lose my freedom. So he said he’d make me a space where I could spread my wings. I only had one life, so I needed to make full use of my talents and choose my own path. And he said he’d never accept it if I chose illogical inefficiency over happiness; if I held myself back and made myself miserable because I looked out for someone else too much.

It was with those words that Senpai took my hand and led me into the light. Of course, he was talking about my acting skills back then. It had nothing to do with romance, and I bet Senpai never expected something as bothersome as love to encroach on his life.

I wasn’t going to run away anymore. No matter what.

“Hm. Nice. I kinda love that expression on your face right now.”

“Hey, I’m not in the market for a pervy stalker girlfriend.”

“That wasn’t a confession! And even if it were, you turned me down *way* too quickly!”

“Aha ha! Thanks, that’s a great photo. This’ll be my first upload to Pinsta!”

“When the heck did you take that?! You know you gotta have permission to upload photos of other people!”

I snickered as I looked at the photo I’d just taken of Sasara—of my friend. She looked so mad she didn’t know what to do with herself.

“After all that love advice I gave you and you’re still trying to get under my skin?!”

“It’s punishment! You shouldn’t have started shouting like that!”

“Tch. Whatever. Just go get changed. And just ’cause we’re friends now doesn’t mean I’m gonna let you win Queen Nevermore!”

“That’s just what I wanted to hear!” I replied brightly before opening the classroom door and stepping inside. I spun around. “I know I said a lotta crap, but I really appreciate your advice. Just knowing you’re on my side is super reassuring!”

It might’ve been a little cowardly of me to get more people on my side. But at this point, I was willing to do anything; I was at war. If I just sat back and watched, I’d be stolen from, killed, and totally destroyed. I had to fight if I wanted to survive.

If I wanted to be able to smile at the end, I had to run down this path and chase after my happiness.

Chapter 9: My Friend Is a Little Sister!

A special temporary stage had been set up in the schoolyard. The school had hired workers, who had instructed the students on how to put together the steel frame and lumber. Combined with the avant-garde work by the art club and the skillful sound production of the Executive Committee (read: Otoi-san), its quality rivaled that of any stage set up for a genuine outdoors concert.

The building enthusiasm from the crowd was penetrating the thick curtains at the back of the stage and reached me, who stood in wait behind them. I scrunched up my sweaty palms into fists and gulped.

Was I nervous about the contest? A little.

But more than the contest, I was worried about how Iroha hadn't shown up yet. After she'd sent me that determined LIME message too. Where was she?

"Thank you for your patience! Welcome to our wholesome and totally innocent Queen Nevermore contest! We'll be ready to start in just a few moments!" Midori's voice boomed from up on stage, amplified by the microphone.

At first I found it odd that Midori—goody two-shoes that she was—would want to oversee the Queen Nevermore contest—until I realized it was actually a stroke of genius. She hated wildly inappropriate stuff, so this way she could take control of the contest and make sure nothing went completely off the rails. That was also why the swimsuit round, as well as any other rounds that might reveal too much skin, had been rejected. Midori's desire for a polite and wholesome contest worked in my favor, seeing as I couldn't take off any clothes.

Once all the contestants had shown up, I was ready to give my all to the contest. So where the hell was Iroha? My chest was being squeezed and my heart was hammering. What if she'd gotten caught up in some kind of trouble?

Wait, when I said "my chest was being squeezed," I didn't mean like *that*—I just meant I was anxious.

“Hm... *Hmm*... I guess it’s the stuffing that makes them weirdly hard, huh? But they still feel pretty good!”

“Most people say ‘hi’ instead of harassing others from behind. What if you got the wrong person?”

“Lucky I know *just* what you look like from behind, Senpai!”

Scratch that. My chest was *actually* being *literally* squeezed. Iroha had somehow snuck up behind me and was now groping my chest with both hands. She leaned her head over my shoulder and giggled into my ear, tickling my earlobe.

“You seriously did transform into a beautiful girl, Senpai! That’s hilarious!”

“Yeah. I’m in it to win it.”

“You look good, Senpai, but you’ll never win against a cute honor student loved by *everyone*. As if I’ll let you walk away with the prize!”

“Glad to hear you’re fired up. But you’re about to see how stubborn I can be. And hey, how come you were late?”

“I was busy getting changed.” Iroha laughed. “If you wanna start shaking in your boots at how lovely and innocent I look, be my guest!”

Iroha’s weight disappeared from my back.

When I turned around, I really did start shaking. Iroha stood there, dressed in a completely unblemished dress for the contest. It was a V-neck mermaid dress with exposed shoulders, which emphasized her large chest and tight waistline. The grin on her face was filled with childlike innocence, but her entire image gave off a sexy maturity. Talk about unfair.

To me, she looked just like a first-rate stage actress ready to accept a prestigious prize.

“That actually suits you,” I said.

“I know, right? This kinda stuff *does* suit me, because I’m so pure and innocent!”

“But don’t think that means you’ve got an easy victory ahead. Your purity and

innocence are gonna be forced to yield in the face of my mysterious beauty!”

“I’m sure this is gonna be a close one at least. You may be all girl inside and out right now, and I know you’ll be putting up a fight, but I’ve got a reason why I can’t afford to lose this!”

We looked each other in the eye. Invisible sparks went flying as our minds locked swords.

“If I win—” Iroha’s tone was suddenly serious. “—will you properly listen to something I want to tell you? Without laughing at me.”

That was her request—a prize to be promised to her before the contest began.

“Sure. I’ll listen to whatever you have to tell me. And if I win, I’ve got an order for you to follow. Nothing indecent or immoral—so don’t worry about that.”

“That sounds just like the opening of a doujinshi. But sure, I can agree to that easily, ’cause I won’t lose.”

“Then it’s settled.”

“Yup. And no take-backsies!”

“What kind of man do you take me for? Or girl, I guess...”

“Now, it’s time to bring on our contestants! Princesses, take the stage!” Midori’s loud announcement was followed by a cutesy idol song that was bound to knock a good chunk of IQ points off anyone listening.

The cheers of the crowd reached max volume, heating the cool fall air up with a burning enthusiasm in an instant.

Both Iroha and I flashed each other confident smiles before stepping out towards the stage of female warfare. The other contestants may as well not have existed for us. This was a one-on-one fight.

“You guys sure forgot about me quick, huh?! I’m in this contest too, y’know!”

Sorry, Tomosaka. By my own admission, I completely forgot you were here.

***

“The Queen Nevermore contest is now underway! Which of our female students will end up as our school’s brightest shining star? You, our audience, have their fates in your hands! That’s right! You! My name is Kageishi Midori, chair of both the Nevermore Executive Committee *and* the Queen Nevermore Contest Committee. I’m joined by—”

“Y’sure are stoked for this, Midori.”

“—by Otoi-san!”

“If y’want your favorite to win, get me the fanciest cake y’can, and—”

“Don’t just announce you’re taking bribes right on stage! O-Or off stage, for that matter!”

The audience erupted into laughter. It wasn’t that Midori or Otoi-san were natural-born entertainers; their conversations were just naturally funny, and it looked like the overwhelmingly male audience thought so too. It was no surprise to me; if those two were competing, I’d bet they’d both do pretty well.

“This is a merciless knockout competition. There are five rounds—only half our girls will survive the first. And so on until the fourth round, when we’ll have two girls left! The final round will be a virtuous one-on-one competition between our two finalists!”

“That’s gonna take forever, and we gotta make it for the closing party. Instead of makin’ all of ’em perform each round, can’t we just knock out whoever?”

“Do you *want* everyone to think we’re corrupt?!”

“’Kay, time for the first round.”

“Ugh! I just cannot keep up with you. But yes, it’s time for the first round! As a warm-up, all the girls will briefly introduce themselves!”

“’Sall ’bout first impressions.”

“Each girl has thirty seconds! Express yourselves in whichever way you see fit!”

There was a whistle announcing the start of the round, and the girls started to

introduce themselves one by one. There were between ten and twenty other girls competing, and apart from Iroha and Sasara, I didn't know any of them. It was more than I'd expected.

As one of the last to go, I was able to study the other girls' introductions in great detail. None of them were great. None of them were bad. They were too forward, trying too hard to be sexy, and it fell flat every time. My masculine heart was crying out that they didn't know what men really wanted.

Nothing changed until Tomosaka Sasara's turn.

"Heeeya! You guys all doing good? Y'know, I'm way too cute, *and* I'm famous! I don't even have to give a self-intro, because you already know who I am! Right?" Sasara pointed the microphone out to the crowd.

"I don't!"

"Who the hell is Tomosaka?!"

"Deflate your ego and give us an introduction!"

Complaints came flying from the audience one after another.

"*What*?! I'm Tomosaka Sasara from the first-years! I heard that dude over there call my name! So you *do* know me. *Everyone* knows me!"

The crowd exploded into laughter. I looked to see who exactly was getting excited over this...and it was mainly the normies. It was easy to pick them out from the rest. It was the way they wore their hair and uniforms. They were the class of people able to turn light banter into full-on comedy. Depending on the status of the person they were laughing at, that "banter" could easily turn into "bullying." It was a dangerous line to toe.

In Sasara's case, she had a secure, popular seat among the members of the crowd, and was happy to make use of self-deprecation. It wasn't making anyone uncomfortable, and the use of humor was sure to leave a lasting impression.

It was no coincidence. This type of excitement was exactly what Sasara was going for. That much was made obvious when she returned after thirty seconds with a large, smug smile on her face. Honestly, I was impressed.

She must really have been confident in her own attractiveness and her dress sense. Yet she didn't let that give the sour impression that she was completely unattainable. The self-deprecation had shown there was some humanity in there. Even more impressive was that it probably wasn't an act; I'd be willing to bet this was how she acted normally among her peers.

Humans are more likable when they present themselves as they are. It does leave them open to rejection and intense hatred, but it also increases their chances of being loved. Giving a half-hearted performance in the hope of avoiding all hate wasn't going to win you any hardcore fans either.

Tomosaka Sasara understood that principle perfectly, and I was sure it wasn't something she'd used logic to figure out. It was instead a natural instinct borne of her experience posting to her many social media followers on a daily basis.

I understood perfectly—she had the potential to snatch victory in this contest. She called herself Iroha's rival, and I was assured now that she was a suitable candidate for the title.

Even then, Tomosaka, you should know that you haven't done enough.

It wasn't enough to beat true strength. To beat an absolute champion.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Kohinata Iroha, a first-year."

When her turn came around, Iroha stepped forward and smiled a sweet, unassuming smile at the crowd.

That was all it took for the crowd to start roaring.

I heard a wide-eyed Sasara make an incomprehensible noise next to me, as though that reaction was more extreme than she'd expected.

"It may be harsh, but this is reality," I whispered.

Sasara glared at me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The winner of Queen Nevermore is decided by vote. Today's performance is important, but really, the results are going to depend on each candidate's popularity outside of the contest."

Iroha was the top student in her year. Not only did that place her name conspicuously at the top of the ranking tables, but it meant she spoke in front

of the whole school at the opening and closing ceremonies. That meant her face and name were more widely known than other students'.

Then there was the fact she was so adorable. The number of male students who had confessed to her out of the first years was never-ending, and there were even those in the years above. The school's male population had her unconsciously down as the most desirable girl in the school.

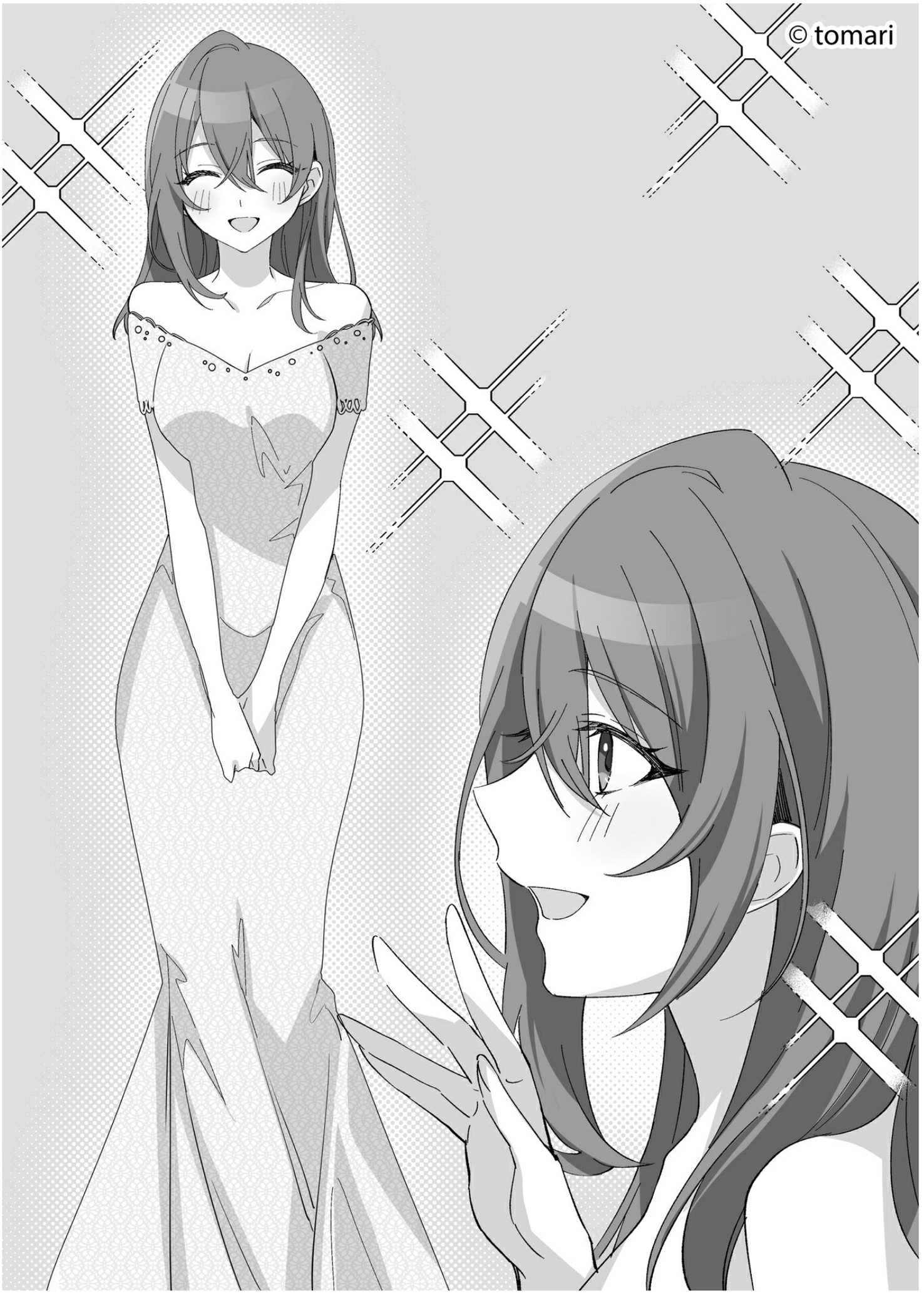
Kohinata Iroha didn't need to resort to any cheap tricks. She was essentially royalty—entitled to the crown already.

"A little extra cuteness or a joke or two isn't going to be enough to topple her."

"Ngh... I knew she was gonna be tough to beat, but I'm still mad!"

"Yeah, she *is* tough."

"What's with you saying all this stuff anyway? Didn't you wanna beat her?"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“Of course I do. So just watch.”

While her performance was inoffensive at best, Iroha was definitely taking this contest seriously. After giving a few simple words that were bound to set themselves in the hearts of her fans, she bowed when her time was up, and returned to us. The cheers from the crowd hadn’t quietened down once. As soon as her back was turned to them, she shot Sasara and me one hell of a smug grin.

“*Iroha!*” Sasara growled, biting her lip.

I simply looked back at Iroha, letting her smugness wash smoothly off my back. This wasn’t going to be a problem. I’d already factored her popularity into my plans.

“Next up, entry number fourteen! She asked that her real name be kept anonymous, and has entered the competition as ‘Aki-chan’! Come on stage!”

Once Midori had introduced me, I stepped forward. My appearance sent a strange stir rippling through the crowd.

“Who’s that?”

“She’s gotta go to our school, right?”

“I’ve never seen her before...but she sure is pretty.”

“If she’s anonymous, maybe she’s, like, a hidden beauty?”

“Does anyone have her on social media? I gotta know who she is!”

The mysterious beauty who appeared from nowhere. I’d piqued the boys’ curiosity and the rumors were now spreading like wildfire. Everything was going exactly as I’d planned. They were expecting all the contestants to be girls from this school, so when an unfamiliar face appeared, it was only natural that their interest would gravitate towards her.

A beautiful girl that no one had noticed before. Is she one of the ordinary girls who usually doesn’t stand out much, but is secretly beautiful? Why have none of the handsome or sporty guys picked her up yet? Does that mean *I* might have a chance with her?

The guys who were thinking along those lines would be aware that those hopes were in vain, that there was, in reality, only a tiny chance of them getting together with the girl on stage. They knew that the Queen Nevermore contest was a place to rate girls based on their attractiveness, and it had nothing to do with romance. And yet they still couldn't help but hope, because that was just how men were.

I had them now. But this still wasn't the only trick up my sleeve.

"You now have thirty seconds to introduce yourself. Off you go, Aki-chan!" I could hear the excitement in Midori's tone—she knew who I really was, after all.

I nodded silently, and the countdown started.

One, two...ten...twenty...

I smiled, waved, and took on some simple poses without saying a word, totally squandering my performance time. It was so nonsensical that it thrust the crowd into even more confusion. The guys who were just waiting for me to speak and give them some hint as to who I was were now even more starved of information, and those who weren't that interested to start with now had their interest piqued by the novelty of a silent performance.

This wasn't a simple weapon either. I was filling that space between positive and negative. My smile was neither too plain, nor too bright. There was an otherworldly aura about me, and the expression on my face seemed strangely unreal.

You sometimes get those beautiful, almost spirit-like girls in games and manga who hold a major key to the main character's quest, right? They hold an extraordinary darkness within them, and yet the fact that they want to help the character out shows a glimmer of weakness. *That* was what it meant to be the ultimate, mysterious, expressionless, wordless girl!

And right now, I was channeling her perfectly, using my dress-clad body as a vessel. Unlike VTubers, I didn't have access to a voice changer up here on stage. A single peep out of me would show that I was male and shatter the illusion—and I was using that to my advantage. I'd also calculated the best angles for showing off my face, and for emphasizing my chest—all of that.

This was my lot that I'd received for leading the 05th Floor Alliance and standing at the helm of *Koyagi*'s management for all this time. The power to recreate cuteness itself, after spending day after day looking at numbers and user comments.

There was no way I was going to lose to some regular girl.

My wordless thirty seconds came to an end, and this heroine had managed to plant herself in the curious hearts of every guy in the crowd.

"Wow. You were great out there, Senpai!"

"Is that even allowed? Ugh! I hate to admit it, but you really have got the guys out there eating outta your hand!"

I turned my back on the clamoring audience and returned to my original position, where I grinned at Iroha and Sasara, and mouthed at them.

You two are going down.

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After the first round, the Queen Nevermore contest progressed smoothly with the second, third, and fourth rounds. The sky was gradually turning crimson, and the stage was now illuminated with lights, creating a totally different atmosphere for the final round—and red was the perfect color for it. The final boss battle was to take place under the watch of the setting sun. I didn't know whether it was fate or coincidence, but I had full faith in the geeky romance of having a stand-off like this at sunset.

"We've finally made it to round five, the climax that will determine our queen! Our final two survivors are the top contenders to take the crown: the stunningly beautiful Kohinata Iroha-san, and the mysterious beauty, Aki-san! Which of the two will earn the favor of the Goddess of Victory?"

The final round was me versus Iroha, just as planned. Sasara was kicked out during the fourth round, but that's got nothing to do with Iroha and me, so I'm not going to go into specifics. Sorry, Tomosaka.

"They've shown a variety of skills by clearing the previous rounds, and now we know just what these two beautiful girls are capable of. The final round is

going to push their charm and glamor to its limits!”

The crowd roared, its excitement at a fever pitch. Midori must have gotten used to being the presenter, because she’d really started getting into it. I thought she’d struggle with an event which catered to normies like this, but I guess she was just so smart that she could pick anything up quickly.

“It’s time for the deciding round, Iroha.”

“Everything else went by in a flash. You really pulled out all the stops to pick up your votes, huh? Now I’m even more sure you’re not gonna be an easy opponent to beat, Senpai.”

“Same goes for you. You did well to beat the competition using nothing more than your cute and innocent base stats.”

“I’ve got more experience than you. I’ve proven how pure I am, and it’s made people believe in me. I know you’re good, Senpai, but now that we’re head to head, I wonder if you’ll actually be able to beat me?”

“I gotta admit, it might be tough.”

“You’re wimping out on me now? You were super confident before this contest began. What happened to that?”

“You’re a strong opponent, and a hundred times cuter than me. I know it’ll be tough to beat you one-on-one. But—” I looked Iroha straight in the eye, refusing to let my piercing gaze waver. Like a conman with a conniving plan, or the protagonist of a psychological manga, a devious smile rose to my lips. “—win or lose, I know I can tear that mask off your face.”

“This is the final round, like it or not! And our final performance...is all about being *annoying*!”

“Whaaat?!”

I’d never heard Iroha yell like that. If this were a manga, her eyes would be popping out of her head right now.

“Cute, annoying girls are all the rage nowadays, and there are plenty of boys who love their girls to be a bit of a tease! The Nevermore Festival is at the cutting edge of the times, and it is our intention that the Queen Nevermore

contest keeps up with the trends and works to reflect what's popular in the here and now!"

"Sure, but actually I got bribed with candy to include this— Mmgh! Mmgh?!"

"What have I told you about confidentiality, Otoi-san?!"

I felt like I could watch the comedy duo go on like this forever, but there were more important things at hand right now.

"Why is this round so specific? And *why* is it so convenient?!"

"Good question."

"Wh— You planned this, didn't you, Senpai?!"

I gave a devilish grin in response. It was pure luck that Otoi-san was involved in setting up the Queen Nevermore contest. Of course I was confident that my transformation was enough not to lose out to Iroha in honor student mode. I'd just thought of a way to reach my goal even faster, and so I had to use it.

It would be like a dress rehearsal for Iroha to reveal her true, annoying self to the world. It was just like acting. No matter how many promiscuous women she played, an actress herself was never considered to be less than virtuous, and no matter how many drug addicts an actor played, he— Okay, so there were exceptions to the rule, but let's ignore that for now.

What I was trying to say was that, as long as this was an act she was putting on for the contest, no one was going to know that Iroha was *actually* annoying. The audience would be able to see an annoying Iroha *without* her having to destroy her long-standing image of perfection. Then she'd see that the reaction wasn't as bad as she'd feared, and the prospect of removing that mask of hers wouldn't be so daunting anymore.

The stage was set.

"You're going to show everyone just how annoying you are, Iroha!"

"Nnngh..." Iroha was biting her lip. The way she was groaning in frustration was pretty cute.

The audience crackled with anticipation for the upcoming final round.

“They gotta be annoying, huh?”

“Annoying and cute? What’s that all about?”

“Oh yeah. That’s a thing now, you know!”

“What? That doesn’t suit Kohinata-san at all!”

“I guess, but I reckon the mysterious Aki-chan is gonna struggle with this too.”

“Eh. I’m not really into the whole ‘annoying’ thing.”

I could hear the whispers from the crowd clearly. Whoever that last guy was, I was ready to take this outside and beat him till he acknowledged that annoying *could* be cute.

The audience’s reactions were varied, but the majority of them just seemed excited to see Iroha and me doing something different. I could feel that excitement like burning pinpricks on my skin which pulled my nerves taut. Iroha was still biting her lip, her arms trembling as she kept her eyes fixed firmly on the floor.

I leaned forward, waiting to see what sort of annoying she was going to bring to the table.

“I...”

“Hm? Did you say something, Kohinata-san?”

Iroha had dragged her feet towards Midori and whispered something to her. When Iroha spoke again, her voice was clear enough for everyone to hear.

“I forfeit.”

“What?”

“Huh?”

“Wait...”

Midori-san, Otoi-san, and I were all equally stunned.

“What?! But it’s the final round! Nobody has *ever* retired in the final round

before! Wh-Why? Do you feel harassed, sexually speaking? I-I didn't intend for this contest to be anything but respectful towards women!"

"No, that's not it. I don't want to take part in this final round for religious reasons. I'm handing victory over to Sen—Aki-chan. Bye!"

"Kohinata-san?"

Iroha ignored Midori's call and instead leapt off the stage with grace, hoisted up her mermaid dress, and swam—I mean, ran—away as fast as she could.

It only took a few seconds for the crowd to explode. For a contestant to up and disappear in the final round was unprecedented. All the excitement the boys had for the final round now had nowhere to go, and instead resulted in a commotion.

"D-Due to Kohinata-san's forfeit, the coveted title of Queen Nevermore goes to Aki-chan! Congratulations, Aki-chan! You've won."

"Congrats," Otoi-san said.

Midori rushed over to me, poorly hiding her desperation, and lifted my arm high into the air. Otoi-san began to clap half-heartedly, and the audience followed her lead, though the applause was slow and confused.

I felt no triumph in my victory. It just sort of happened. I didn't know what to do with my face, leaving my features in an odd, vague expression.

It never even crossed my mind that Iroha would bail like this at the very last second. I took it for granted that since she'd entered, she'd naturally see things through to the end. Maybe this was my punishment for fixing the final round.

Punishment or not, I never realized just how averse Iroha was to being herself in front of everyone.

You're cute when you're annoying, Iroha. It is *attractive. I mean that.*

I felt so useless. All of that for nothing.

I wasn't the only one feeling the disappointment either.

"What do we do? The crowd looks so dissatisfied!"

"Hm. Well, we're the committee. Guess it's our place to take responsibility."

“Otoi-san? What exactly do you mean by that?”

“I mean take off your clothes, Kageishi.”

Suddenly the air was filled with roars rivaling those you’d hear at a World Cup game when someone scored. Midori’s face turned scarlet under the cascade of countless eager eyes.

“Noooooo! Animals!”

The microphone amplified her scream and sent it reverberating around the entire school.

This wasn’t one of those obscene erotic manga where schoolgirls got assaulted, so needless to say, Midori was fine. Since the contest was done sooner than planned, Otoi-san used the rest of the time to bully Midori. The audience loved being entertained by two cute girls, and Midori’s reactions went down especially well. They performed well enough to make up for the disappointment of the final round getting canceled.

Midori and Otoi-san should totally join up and go into comedy together. They’d be wildly popular.

***

That was how I won the Queen Nevermore contest. I was due to dance with the winner of King Nevermore at the closing party, so I couldn’t change out of this dress just yet. I was still the mysterious dark-haired beauty as I snuck through the courtyard.

My legs felt heavy. I still wasn’t completely over the shock of Iroha running away from the final round. She’d even gone so far as to cite religious reasons for her withdrawal. If she was really that dead set against it, I didn’t see how I could force her to be herself in public anymore. More than that, I realized now it was something I *shouldn’t* do.

I didn’t think she would be *that* against it. Having more people she could be herself with should make her life a lot easier. That was the idea which had set me off mentally rifling through several plans to make it happen, but in truth, I was doing nothing more than meddling. I was satisfying myself, not her. Her

rejection was clear as crystal, and my only option now was to drop it. Pushing it despite that rejection would just be harassment. I'd just be forcing what I wanted onto her, and there was nothing kind about that.

Being a producer sure is tough...

The way I saw it, a producer was expected to discover the charms in someone that even they themselves weren't fully aware of, and then work to share those charms with the world. But sometimes a producer might fail to be self-aware, and their efforts would backfire. They could try and stubbornly push the point, but there was no sense in doing that if it was going to cause a breakdown of trust.

I'll say it again, but it really was a tough spot to be in. Human relationships, human psychology... It's all way too complicated.

I kept on walking, wrapped up in my thoughts, and before I knew it, I'd ended up near the stage for the King Nevermore contest. It was diagonally opposite to the Queen Nevermore stage, and as far away as possible. The stage itself was set up very similarly.

It looked like the contest was already over. There were only a few members of the audience left: sparse groups of red-faced girls discussing their thoughts.

I wonder how Ozu and Mashiro did?

I walked around the stage to check out the back, where I reckoned the contestants would be. It crossed my mind that they'd all probably left by now, but it was then that I locked eyes with Mashiro, who was sitting on a folding chair in a daze.

"Aki... Are you guys done too?"

"Yeah. Things didn't exactly go smoothly, but I won."

"Wow. You really did it. I knew you could."

Her compliment warmed me, if only a little, but I could tell there was something off about her. Her smile was clumsy and unstable, and it lacked spark.

"Did you lose?"

“I made it to the last round. Most of the other guys were blockheads or creepy playboy types. I took out the trash.”

“Oh, cool. Well done.”

I did feel like I should remind Mashiro that these blockheads and playboys types were technically people too, so she should probably keep the insults to a minimum.

“But I lost the very last round. The one-on-one.”

“Awww. So the winner was—”

“OZ—Kohinata-kun.”

“Ozu, huh? Makes sense; his looks are in a league of their own. I know it sucks, but I’m not sure there was much you could do to beat him.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“I don’t think I lost—not properly. The screams we got from the crowd were on the same level, but...” Mashiro’s voice started to wobble as the memories came back to her. Her tiny hands were curled up in firm fists, and when she next spoke, she sounded completely outraged at the unfairness of the world. “The last round was solving a math puzzle in the shortest time! How could I win against Kohinata-kun then?! It’s not fair!”

“A math puzzle?”

What was up with that? That sounded like a round chosen specifically so that Ozu would win. Had someone fixed the competition?

If so, maybe it was one of the Queen Nevermore contenders who fixed it to get a dance with Ozu? But that didn’t make sense. Iroha didn’t have any incestuous leanings, and I was pretty sure Sasara wasn’t interested in him either. Which left another possibility.

“Great work out there, Mashiro-chan! Man, you were so close!”

“Shikibu. This was your doing, wasn’t it?”

Kageishi Sumire appeared backstage from the other side of the curtain. One

look at that blissful smile on her face had the FBI inside my brain clocking her immediately as the culprit.

“What? Huh? What are you accusing me of right now?”

“You fixed the King Nevermore contest so that Ozu and I would dance together at the closing party, right?”

“Hold up, I don’t know what you’re talking about! I admit I have power over these things as a teacher, but I swear I left the entire contest up to the Nevermore Executive Committee.”

“What are you doing here at the King Nevermore stage then? Don’t you have work to do?”

“Obviously I wanted in on this paradise of handsome guys! I was out watching from the crowd.”

“A likely story. Look, why not just admit what you did?”

“I haven’t done anything, I swear!” Sumire paused. “But wait, does that mean you *did* win Queen Nevermore?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Oh my God! OzuAki is actually happening? *Yes*!”

“Stop acting like— Hm?”

I wasn’t picking up on anything dishonest in the way she was celebrating. If she was innocent, did that mean the final round was just a coincidence? That conclusion didn’t sit right with me. There was something off about this whole thing. I just couldn’t put my finger on what.

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The clock kept on ticking by without waiting for me to put the pieces together. The crimson sky burnt itself out and was replaced by indigo, which brought with it silent shadows. An ancient gift from the gods, the message was clear: stop ruining your health and go to bed now.

Since humans were ungrateful, they had ignored the kind message and developed the means to allow them to stay up late into the night. A prime

example of this grand rebellion was the burning-red campfire set up in the middle of the school courtyard.

The closing party had already started. A jovial folk song—something about Oklahoma and mixers—was playing, intermingled with the voices of elated students in the air.

So much wasted time, so late into the night. School events sure were inefficient. But if these pleasant transient events were what happiness was, then the most efficient way to be happy was to enjoy it to the fullest extent possible.

I was here anyway, might as well have as much fun as I could. I'd put a lot of work into preparing for the festival, even if I'd failed to help Iroha make any progress. Her flight at the final round still left me feeling a little gloomy, but getting to folk dance with my friend while dressed as a girl seemed like an interesting distraction and something I could only really do at this stage of my life.

What a shame that it would lead to nothing but feverish all-nighters for Sumire.

"If you would all turn your attention to the bonfire! It's time for the traditional royal folk dance, performed by King and Queen Nevermore!" Midori announced.

I stepped forward gracefully. The spot closest to the bonfire was reserved for King and Queen Nevermore, so the other students kept their distance. The chosen two would dance their sacred dance while the students watched on from afar. There was a rumor that those who danced here would often get together, and I could see that being the case between a girl and boy. It was a romantic atmosphere to dance in; magical, even.

Too bad this year it was a dance between two guys not that way inclined. There would be no magic or tradition this year. Sorry.

I heard the noise of footsteps on sand, and turned around to see the silhouette of a prince with golden hair walking my way through the twilight. The faint illumination from the fire wasn't enough to make out the shape of his face or the details of his features, but I knew him well; we went way back.

“Congratulations on winning, Ozu. I mean, I knew you’d win for sure if Mashiro weren’t taking part. She was a bit of a dark horse.”

“Thanks, Aki. You know it’s only thanks to you that I’m so popular.”

“You’re the one who had the ability and put the effort in. Anyway, I know this isn’t exactly an exciting conclusion to everything, but let’s enjoy this dance as best we can. Oh, but I should warn you—I know I’m super cute right now, so try not to fall for me, okay?”

“Ha ha. Funny how you’ve got no confidence as a guy, but the second you turn into a girl you’re brimming with it.”

“It’s the objective truth, though.”

“It is, huh? Well, Aki, you may have no confidence as a guy, but there’s one more ‘objective truth’ I need you to know.”

“Huh?”

The prince stepped up to me in a single stride and took my hand a little forcefully. He embraced me, putting his face close to mine, and then I heard Ozu’s voice right by my ear.

“You *are* attractive, Senpai. There’s plenty of room for improvement for sure, but at the very least, *I* love you.”

“‘Sen’... Ozu?! What’s gotten into you?”

Wait. No way. There was absolutely no way.

Ignoring my confusion, the prince giggled in my ear. “Since when did you think I was Kohinata Ozuma?”

“What?”

At first, it was Ozu’s huskyish voice, but then it gradually changed, like it was being tuned. By the end, it had transformed into an irritating laugh.

“You really thought I was Ozuma, huh? Bzzzt! It’s me, Iroha-chan!”

“Huh?!”

To be honest, I had already had an inkling the moment she hugged me. It was the chest that gave it away! She could dress up as a prince all she wanted, but

they were too big to hide away. The moment they pressed against my fake female body, I knew it was a girl in front of me.

“I can’t believe you didn’t even see through my crappy disguise! I didn’t even try to copy Ozuma’s hair, and I just borrowed some random prince costume from the drama club that sorta looked like his. I’m lucky you’re so dense, Senpai!”

“Ugh... I can see all that stuff now that you mention it...”

My eyes had adjusted to the light, and when I looked at her properly, I could see that she didn’t resemble Ozu in the slightest. She just looked like Kohinata Iroha dressed up as a prince. Also, now that I looked closer, I recognized the outfit as the one I wore at the Drama Fair.

The campfire’s light was so dim, my brain had just accepted that silhouette as Ozu’s. If I’d seen her in broad daylight, I wouldn’t have made the same mistake.

No one else had noticed—they were too far away.

“Why are you here at the dance then?”

“I’ve been acting like loads of other girls for a while, and it’s taught me something.” Iroha grinned mischievously. “I wanna get deep into your head and try acting as *you*.”

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“You’re a weirdo.”

“Yeah, but I’m also your lovely, cute kouhai who you shower with affection!”

“And annoying.”

“So then I realized something else. You’re Senpai. You’d probably do everything you could to get your desired result at the Queen Nevermore contest.”

I paused. “I can’t deny that.”

It was the very reason I fixed the final round, after all.

“*Sooo*, I did a bit of meddling of my own! Is Otoi-senpai a super duper star or what?!”

“Wh... You’re the one who fixed the King Nevermore contest to give Ozu an advantage?”

“Yup! So I could switch with him and dance with you at the closing party!”

“Seriously?”

I then remembered the weird thing Ozu had said to me before the contest.

“Have fun. I’ll see you for our dance tonight.”

Ozu wasn’t overly confident, so I found it strange that he spoke like he was guaranteed to win. I couldn’t believe that he’d actually been colluding with Iroha this whole time. And why did Iroha feel the need to go this far anyway? She’d brilliantly sidestepped my trap to show off her annoying side, but now she was determined to enjoy this dance with me. My puny brain couldn’t come up with any explanation for her behavior.

The music in the air changed then to signal the beginning of the dance.

“Come on, don’t just stand there! We’re dancing! Fear not, my princess. Just follow my lead.”

“Right, uh... Sorry, I’m just really confused right now.”

I let Iroha lead me into the dance. I was just like Cinderella, sneaking into the ball with no clue how to conduct myself. I didn’t know how to step, how to

breathe; I was just reflexively following the lead of my partner.

“Aha ha ha! You’re totally spacing out! Are you feeling dumb ’cause I outsmarted you? You know it’s no big deal, because it means you get to dance with a cute girl like me! You’re looking pretty cute yourself too! Just look at that long, dark wig.” Iroha went on and on, like her mouth was being powered by a tireless motor. “I told you this wasn’t gonna end up the way you wanted! D’you understand that now?”

“Yeah... I hate to say it, but you got me this time.”

Iroha giggled. “Victory sure is sweet! Especially when I get to see that adorable look on your face, when you know you’ve lost!”

“You know, I really think it’d be great if you showed some other people how annoying you can be too.”

“No way!” Iroha pouted, but then laughed again. “I’m glad you like who I really am, but this isn’t the kind of cheap cuteness I can show just *anybody*.”

I suddenly realized something.

Whenever Iroha hugged me, it was always from behind. Right now, she was facing me, dancing with me, and there was barely any distance between us at all. No hesitation, no shyness; just closeness.

Her cheeks were the same color as the flames; perhaps her skin was reflecting the light. My cheeks were probably red like that too. The envious voices of the other students, and the screams of those mistaking this for an OzuAki dance, and even the music itself seemed to melt away from my world with Iroha.

“I only wanna be this way with you, Senpai.”

Iroha’s voice was reserved, but her words penetrating my ears were profound. My heart started to pound.

“I came up with this plan a while ago, but I was fretting over whether I was actually gonna go through with it till the very last minute.”

“I’m guessing you had a few final rounds lined up that you could switch

between on the actual day, then?”

“Yeah. I know that stealing this dance away from Mashiro-senpai is really scummy of me, so I wasn’t sure about it.”

If a real scumbag were listening to her right now, they’d probably laugh. It was more like a prank than something actually evil. Iroha was kind, though; that was why something on this level seriously worried her.

“Sasara opened my eyes. She made me realize it was okay to be a little selfish. To be scummy.”

For Iroha to say that may not have sounded like much, but it was a huge step forward. Not that last part; it was the fact that she called Sasara by name, and without an honorific. Though it wasn’t obvious at first glance, I had thought that the two of them might get along well. It made me a little sad to think that they’d done just that, but without any of my involvement at all.

Wait, sad? What was wrong with me? My desired result had come about without any effort on my part. Wasn’t that as efficient as things could get?

“Mashiro-senpai’s feelings for you have nothing to do with it. I wanna dance with you, Senpai. It’s not fair that Mashiro-senpai gets to do whatever she wants and I don’t. I’m done with suppressing my feelings all the time!”

“You know, you’re making it sound like—”

“I’m not saying anything!”

“Huh?”

“You’re curious, aren’t you? You wanna know how I really feel about you. Whether I’m in love with you or just wanna be friends. Or maybe I’m just a possessive kouhai. The possibilities are endless, so I’m gonna leave the answer up to your imagination!”

“What the hell? You can’t do that...”

“I lost the Queen Nevermore contest, right? You were gonna seriously listen to what I had to say, but only if I won. If I told you now, you’d just brush it off as a joke or something. So I’m putting it on hold for now. Sorry, not sorry!”

Was she seriously insisting on being annoying over *this*?

Putting the pieces together in an objective and logical manner, the only conclusion I could come to was that she *did* have romantic feelings for me. But the truth was still mired in darkness, because she wasn't going to tell me straight yet. I couldn't get romantically involved with anyone either, so confessing to me would only lead to trouble.

Her feelings were close to crystal clear. She probably liked me. As a result, my perception of her was now fraught with anxiety.

Strangely enough, she was employing the same male-attention-grabbing techniques that I had used during the Queen Nevermore contest. I had every guy up in arms wondering who I was, especially when they knew I had to be a student at the school. Whether she was doing it on purpose or not, my friend's little sister had now done the exact same thing to me. How scummy.

She was using my anxiety to try and charm me. On her face was an adorably impish grin. And Kohinata Iroha—my friend's little sister—was making sure I was the only one who could see it.

"I'm gonna get even more annoying from here on out. Hope you're ready, Senpai."

And then she laughed her annoying laugh so that only I could hear it.

Epilogue: Iroha vs Mashiro

The end of the closing party dance also marked the end of the Nevermore Festival. I was invited out to karaoke by my classmates to celebrate, but I completely ignored them and headed on home by myself in the dark, not even asking Senpai to walk home with me. I had a proper reason for wanting to do this, and it was a reason no one else could understand.

There was one thing left for me to clear up.

She was probably around here somewhere. I kept my eyes peeled as I made my way back towards the apartment building in the dark.

I was right—she was there, in a small park along the way. It was a tiny park, with only a tiny selection of play equipment, a sandpit, and a hedge. She was sitting on a bench with one of the nearby wildflowers in her hands, picking off the petals one by one and muttering.

“I’m so tired... I’ve never been this tired. I’ve been kinda happy lately, like I’ve had some kinda stat bonus or something...but things sure are more peaceful out here at night by myself...”

Just like me, Mashiro-senpai had opted to grab some quiet time alone instead of going out with her classmates. With all of the excitement of the festival out of the way, it seemed like exhaustion had set in for her. It looked like her MP had totally drained to zero. She’d been so energetic lately, but now that she’d calmed down, I actually felt relieved.

This was more like the Mashiro I knew.

Mashiro-senpai was the girl I was after. And there was only one thing I wanted with her. Something important enough for me to blow off my classmates.

I snuck up behind the bench before flinging my arms around her from behind. “Mashiro-senpai!”

“Waaah! Oh, Iroha-chan?” Mashiro-senpai jumped and turned around. It was

so cute.

“Yup! You got it! What are you doing out here?”

“Huh? Um... I was just recharging from talking to people.”

“Boy, that sounds sad. You know Senpai told me you’ve been super popular in class lately.”

“Yeah... They wanted me to enter Queen Nevermore, but then when I decided to enter King Nevermore and dress up as a prince, all the girls thought it was really cool. It *was* fun. Fun but exhausting—I don’t know if that’s the right word, but I’ve never been popular before. I guess I’m not used to it?”

“Lucky you, huh? You know some people try really hard to be popular and never make it.”

“Yeah...but that’s how I really feel, and I can’t change that.”

“I totally get it, yeah.”

It was always like that. Other people wanted what I had, and I wanted what I didn’t have. We were always wanting, so no matter how much time passed, we’d never be any closer to being happy. Senpai was doing everything he could to hurry us down the long path leading to that happiness, and that was why I—we, the Alliance, pinned our hopes and dreams on his words and actions.

Even then, there were some things Senpai couldn’t do. One of those things was achieving every single one of us happiness with maximum efficiency. It was either Mashiro-senpai or me. One of us was going to have to cry. The switch to make that happen was right in front of me, and I was about to push it.

“There’s something I need to apologize to you for, Mashiro-senpai.”

“Being annoying?”

“Nope! It’s way more serious than that. It’s *this* serious.” I hopped over the bench and plopped myself down right next to Mashiro-senpai.

She stared at me wide-eyed. Her eyes shone like pearls even in the low light of the park, and for a split second I felt my heart stutter. I was a girl; if she could make *my* heart pound, then it was no wonder she had such a powerful effect on a virgin like Senpai—and again I was reminded of how powerful my love rival

was.

But I couldn't let my feelings waver. I'd made my decision. I was going to war with Mashiro-senpai. I hadn't prepared any kind of escape route. I'd already done something scummy to cement myself as a villainess.

I'm sorry, Mashiro-senpai.

"I'm in love with Senpai. I know I told you I wasn't interested in him romantically, but I lied. I'm your rival, through and through."

I wondered what was going through her mind as she listened to my confession. I wondered how she'd react.

Liar, liar, liar. I hate, hate, hate *you.*

I could see her spitting venom at me like that. Slapping my face back and forth.

"I wanted to dance with Senpai at the closing party, so I came up with a dirty plan to do just that. I asked Otoi-san to fix the final round so that Ozuma would win. You dressed up as a guy and entered the competition using your own charms, fair and square. I cheated and went behind your back so I could dance with Senpai. That's how much I love him."

I didn't try to defend myself. What I'd done was dirty and cowardly. You can't change the past. That fact was the one thing pushing my stupid self forward, because there was nothing I could do to go back.

What would Mashiro-senpai do now?

I was horrible. I was the worst. She should hate me. And I hoped that was what she'd tell me. I hoped she'd be as insulting as she always was. Actually, insults were probably how Mashiro-senpai expressed love. Her insults were mostly aimed at Senpai, after all. I was now her enemy. So what sort of words would she throw *my* way?

It was almost scary to think about, but a part of me *wanted* her to be ruthless, to stab the knife in and twist it. I was used to conflicting emotions, but these were more powerful than ever, swirling around in my chest.

Finally, Mashiro-senpai responded.

“Yeah. I know.”

Her response was quiet but clear. She gave it while looking me right in the eye, and then she nodded once. It was as though she had known this day was coming sooner or later. In her eyes was the majestic light of a maiden ready for battle, a light which conflicted with her innocent, delicate face.

“I didn’t think you’d go as far as fixing the King Nevermore contest, but now it all makes sense why the final round was so weird. It was your plan...”

“You already noticed my feelings for Senpai?”

“Of course. I’ve had my eye on Aki forever. I know more than anyone who else is watching him.”

“You’re not gonna get mad that I never said anything? Or that I stole the dance with him?”

“No. I’m being just as unfair as you.”

“Hm? How?”

“I’m not gonna tell you. I *can’t* tell you. But I just... It’s fine, right?” A smile suddenly appeared on Mashiro-senpai’s face. Like she was a con artist—no, a clumsy girl pretending to be a con artist. That sneer was flimsy. “We both fought dirty, so now we’re even.”

“Aha ha! Yeah, you’re right! You really are so sweet, Mashiro-senpai!”

If Mashiro-senpai was willing to be a villainess, that made it a little easier to forgive myself for being one too.

“You’re cute, Iroha-chan, and I like you a lot. Enough to think that you might end up winning Aki’s heart in the end. But I’m...I’m not prepared to lose.”

“Right back at you. No matter how hard you try, and no matter how long you’ve liked Senpai, I don’t wanna lose either. I love him too. I want to be with him, to spend my life with him, so—”

“We’re gonna fight for him. Right?”

“Thank you. For accepting my declaration of war and for being so nice about it. But just know that I’m giving this fight everything I’ve got! *And* I’m gonna win!”

My friendship with Mashiro-senpai ended that day. From now on we were two girls, both in love with the same friend. There was no going back now, whether we liked it or not. One of us would come out of this smiling, while the other would cry. Or maybe Senpai wouldn’t look at either of us, and we’d both end up sinking to the ocean floor together. It really sucked that the last option was also the most peaceful.

In any case, we now had our swords locked and were at war with each other.

That day would come eventually. The day when Senpai had achieved his goals for the Alliance and was free to pursue a romantic relationship.

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I was going to be the one by Senpai’s side when that day came around.

I’d make sure of that by winning out over the girl in front of me.

That determination burned in my soul, and I knew it burned quietly in Mashiro-senpai’s too—though neither of us said a word. The white fall moon was the only witness to the opening of our silent battle.

At that very moment, both our phones vibrated at the exact same time. Someone had sent us a message.

Epilogue 2: Meeting with the CEO

“Sorry to have to bring this up right on the back of a fun-filled festival, Akiteru-kun, but I’m hoping you’ll lend me your ear and take this seriously.”

“O-Of course. Um, is there some kind of problem?”

We were at a twenty-four-hour family restaurant not far from where I lived. My uncle and Mashiro’s father, the attractive middle-aged Tsukinomori-san, was sitting in front of me with his hands clasped together like the big shot from some secret military agency working on behalf of its country that was currently under attack by a gigantic monster. His eyes were serious and sharp.

The Nevermore Festival was over, and it was late; the date was just on the verge of changing over.

Ozu had been invited by the class to hang out after the festival, and he invited me to go too (I was in the same class, so I didn’t understand why they couldn’t just invite me directly and it had to come through a middleman like that. Yeah, I know; it’s because I have no presence, dammit!), but I refused outright. I didn’t have *that* much time to waste.

It was then that Tsukinomori-san called me out. The timing was so good, I wondered whether he hadn’t planned it.

“I’ll get right to it,” Tsukinomori-san said.

I swallowed. He only got serious like this when he was about to broach a difficult subject. This was the man with the Alliance’s and *Koyagi*’s future in his hands. A greasy sweat broke out over my skin.

What if we’d lost our spot at his company? Or what if he’d messed up somehow, and had been forced to resign? Like a tabloid had exposed an affair or something and he’d been forced to take responsibility. Impossible, right? Those were all possibilities. Honestly, the most likely one was that he’d had some sort of trouble with a woman.

Tsukinomori-san’s face was solemn as he opened his mouth.

“My wife’s packed up all her stuff and left.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“No, not thank God!”

Whoops. I’d been so relieved it had nothing to do with *Koyagi* that I’d let my thoughts slip out unfiltered.

Think about it. With Tsukinomori-san’s track record, it was a wonder his wife hadn’t left him way sooner than this. You could say this was the way things ought to be, and normality was finally catching up.

“You’ve cheated on her so much, I’m not surprised she’s run out of patience.”

“*I’m* surprised. I swore to myself that I would never do anything to hurt my beloved wife.”

“You’re going to have to explain what that means exactly, because I don’t see it.”

“Listen! My policy’s always been, no matter which women and how many times I meet up with them, I would never let my wife find out about it! Affairs don’t exist as long as they stay hidden, and that way no one gets hurt! You know I’ve never really fought with my wife over other women at all?”

“‘Never really’ isn’t the same as ‘never.’”

“You’re never gonna get any girls by being so nitpicky.”

“I’m going home. Thanks for taking care of the check.”

“Hold on! Look, I’m always talking to you as a CEO, but right now I’m trying to talk to you as your uncle! You could at least listen to me once in a while!”

I sighed. “Okay then. If she didn’t leave you because of your infidelity, why *did* she leave you?”

“I don’t know, and it’s driving me nuts... Wait a minute!” Tsukinomori-san’s eyes flew open, and his face turned pale. He clutched at his head. “Maybe she’s been going after younger men. In a few days from now, I’m gonna get a video message of her being held by some baby playboy! Aaargh! How could this happen?! She’s not getting away with this!”

“This seems like a perfect example of the pot calling the kettle black.”

As I recalled, he also had a good thing going with a waitress from this very diner. I could remember the snapshot of the two of them, blissful and slightly tipsy, taken in that restaurant with the night view. Looking around, I couldn’t see that waitress here now. Whether she wasn’t on shift or had quit already, I was just glad she wasn’t overhearing this mess of a conversation.

“Mizuki! Where have you gone!” Tsukinomori-san bawled, slamming his head down on the table in front of him.

He was usually so cool and composed, it was quite the hard-hitting truth that he was able to break down and sob uncontrollably in public like this.

It was a whole two hours later by the time I was on my way home again, released from hearing about the CEO’s private troubles. It felt like possibly the biggest waste of two hours of my entire life, but my uneasiness settled after I convinced myself it had been an important investment for the future of the 05th Floor Alliance.

Tsukinomori-san’s wife—Mashiro’s mother. I was a little worried about Mashiro in all of this. Depending on how things played out, she could end up badly hurt, so I decided to keep an eye on the situation.

“If you hear anything about Mizuki, let me know right away!”

Tsukinomori-san had asked for my help too.

“I’m not a marriage counselor here...” I sighed.

You saw a lot about marriage troubles on social media, whether it was a wife complaining about her husband or a husband complaining about his wife. Then there were those having random flings, those with side pieces, idols who have boyfriends and earn themselves stalkers because of it...

None of these problems were real problems as far as I was concerned. It was all just a colossal waste of time. That was why I’d decided to avoid romance as best I could, because it seemed to me to be totally inefficient. And yet, as much as I tried to avoid it, there was someone who had brought it all *to* me: Mashiro.

Iroha too, but...I still wasn't sure where she stood. It was a very firm "possibly" with her. Why had she felt the need to come up with a master plan just to have a dance with me at the closing party? What were her motives in her mysterious declaration to me as we danced? Those unanswered questions led me to think that she *possibly* liked me.

I didn't know where my own feelings stood either. Did I like someone, or didn't I? And if I did possess such feelings, was it really okay to let this stuff keep on distracting me? Youth was the spice of creativity, but everything had to have its limit. It was fine to indulge in this stuff, as long as it didn't get in the way of my goal to share the Alliance's talent with the world.

The beach, the summer festival, the culture festival. All of these events had led me to feeling little sparks of fondness for both Iroha and Mashiro. I had no idea if those sparks were romantic, or whether any teenage boy in the same situations would feel that way.

But what if they *were* romantic? Would I *want* to be in a relationship with either Iroha or Mashiro?

I tried, but I just couldn't picture it. But I had to face my own feelings on the matter, properly now. I had a perfect example of what *not* to do in the form of my uncle. I didn't want to walk the same dirty path he did, so I needed to be sincere in all of this. Otherwise, maybe the girls in my life would leave me too.

The streets were deathly quiet as I made my way home, yet it felt to me like the new day was coming in like a lion, with all the thoughts storming around my head. It only added to the weight of my weary body, heavy from the festival and the Queen Nevermore contest.

I opened the door to my apartment, fully ready for a bath and then to hop into bed.

Unfortunately, the sound of the doorbell put a stop to those plans.

"Huh?"

Who the hell was calling at two in the morning? Who did they think was prepared to entertain visitors at this hour? Not to mention they were at my door the very second I got home. The timing was too perfect.

I paused. Could this be one of those supernatural things? My insides suddenly felt cold. I crept towards the intercom, and peered cautiously at the screen.

I saw...Iroha and Mashiro?

What were they doing here? At this time of night? Standing side by side like the best of friends? They both looked a little awkward. Both of them were fidgeting and had their gazes glued to the floor.

“What’s the matter, guys? Do you know what time it is? Is it an emergency?”

“It’s kinda...a peaceful emergency, I guess.”

“We want to talk to you... We know it’s sudden... Can you come outside?”

Hearing their voices only cemented the feeling of awkwardness, like there was some terrorist pointing a gun at them outside the view of the camera.

“Um, okay. I’m coming.”

Confusion hastened my steps as I hurried to my front door and opened it. I was faced with Iroha and Mashiro, just as the intercom promised.

And yet, there was something the monitor hadn’t shown. And it was a very big something all right.

“Hi, Ooboshi-kun, sweetie! Thank you so much for looking out for my little Iroha!”

“Bonsoir! Thank you for taking care of Mashiro.”

Two women stood beside Iroha and Mashiro, both of their features colored using the exact same color palettes as the girls. It was as though somebody had flung Iroha and Mashiro twenty years into the future, and yet both women looked oddly young.

One of them had her lips curved into a gentle smile, yet her narrow eyes betrayed an overpowering intelligence. The other seemed to embody a pristine-white purity, and yet her eyes were cold, making it difficult to read her emotion. They were both beautiful.

Oh, Uncle Tsukinomori, what have you done?

I’d found his wife mere minutes after we’d finished speaking.

I was stunned, but not so stunned that I couldn’t turn my gaze to Iroha and Mashiro to seek some sort of explanation. This entire situation must have come as a surprise to them too. They both looked troubled and needed a few seconds to pick their words.

Their answers came almost simultaneously, and were as follows:

“Mom said she wanted to say hi to you, Senpai.”

“My mom wanted to talk to you, Aki.”

Afterword but It's Actually an Apology

Thank you so much for being a fan of *My Friend's Little Sister Has It in For Me!,* or *ImoUza*. I'm the author, mikawaghost. Volume 5 advertised a release date earlier than this, but various factors turned me into a first-time offender (read: I missed my deadlines) and led to the release getting postponed. I'm really sorry to everyone who was looking forward to this volume.

I miss deadlines, meaning I have lost the right to make fun of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. I decided to let her enjoy a drink to make up for all the times I've been critical of her. Did you enjoy having AKI as your nontraditional host, Murasaki-sensei?

By the way, my own intentions had nothing to do with Akiteru being Akiteru and charging off to get the illustrations from her. He ended up treating her like he always does, of course.

Changing topic, this volume is all about the culture festival. We had our mainstays like Akiteru, Iroha, and Mashiro, but we also saw the appearances of Otoi-san, Midori, and several other side characters. I hope that made it a fun and exciting volume for fans of the series.

The culture festival is the time of year in a high schooler's life when adrenaline is maxed, and your IQ drops way down. Nothing screams "youth" more than this annual event! That's my opinion at least. Whether you're a current high school student, a former high school student, or your only experience of high school is through fiction, I wonder if my depiction of the culture festival matches up with your experience in any way?

Yeah, as if I did such a great job...

What the heck was that culture festival? The author is delusional! That was way too unrealistic. The author thinks they're so smart, huh? I'm so jealous! Those are my half-honest, half-fake feelings towards myself, the author of

ImoUza volume 6. Huh? My vision is blurring, and my mouth tastes salty...but I'm definitely not crying.

I've realized this isn't coming off like an apology at all, but I did try to make this volume extra funny, so hopefully, that'll be enough for you to forgive me.

The work of everyone involved with *ImoUza* is truly godlike. That includes Tomari-sensei and her godlike illustrations, my editor and their godlike annoying antics, and the godlike annoying advertisements from the sales and PR teams. I'm going to give it my all to write a godlike series and not lose out to them!

I hope you, my godlike readers, will also continue to support me.

That's all from me,

mikawaghost

My Friend's Little Sister Has It IN for Me!

vol. 6

Author: mikawaghost

Illustration: tomari

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"YOU SURE ARE A GREEDY MASTER, HUH? JEEZ, WHAT A PAIN!"
First year, Kohinata Iroha
Maid Café
AS PLOTS SWIRLED THROUGH OUR MINDS...
KOUZAI HIGH SCHOOL'S CULTURE FESTIVAL FINALLY BEGAN!
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"YOU, OUR AUDIENCE, HAVE THEIR FATES IN YOUR HANDS!"
"THE QUEEN NEVERMORE CONTEST IS NOW UNDERWAY!"
Second Year, Kageishi Midori
Chair of the Nevermore Executive Committee, and head of the Queen Nevermore Committee
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"OKAY, FINE. THIS IS TOO MUCH OF A PAIN. LEMME JUST DO YOUR FORTUNE."
Second Year, Otoi [redacted]
Fortune-Telling House

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"HM. NICE. I KINDA LOVE THAT EXPRESSION ON YOUR FACE RIGHT NOW."
"HEY, I'M NOT IN THE MARKET FOR A PERVY STALKER GIRLFRIEND."
"THAT WASN'T A CONFESSION! AND EVEN IF IT WERE, YOU TURNED ME DOWN WAY TOO QUICKLY!"
First Year, Tomosaka Sasara
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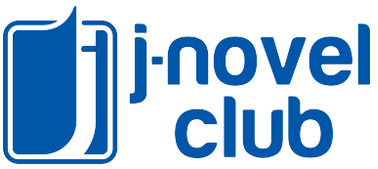

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My Friend’s Little Sister Has It In for Me! Volume 6

Originally published as TOMODACHI NO IMOUTO GA ORE NIDAKE UZAI Vol. 6

by mikawaghost

Translated by Alexandra Owen-Burns Edited by Hendra Boerma

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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