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YURI TAMA

From

Third Wheel to Trifecta

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YURI TAMA

From

Third Wheel



Trifecta

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Prologue: My Friends

What is true love?

I pondered the question on my phone's screen as I flopped down onto my couch. I was looking at the official website for a TV drama that had started airing this past April. May had arrived, Golden Week had come and gone, and I still hadn't seen so much as a single episode of the show.

It was supposed to be a bittersweet high school romance sort of deal, I guess. Honestly, the only reason why I'd looked it up in the first place was thanks to an article I'd found that gushed about how it was "the best show on TV," supposedly. It was also apparently "beyond real and romantic to a tee," and watching it was like "taking a step back into my own youth."

Anyway, between that review and the tagline plastered at the top of the show's website—"What is true love?"—I found my mind wandering to another question.

What does "real" mean, anyway...?

I, Yotsuba Hazama, was a very real sixteen-year-old girl who had just started the second year of her equally real high school experience. That said, there was one big point of inconsistency between my real and the so-called real in that show.

"Forget true love—I haven't even had a brush with *fake* love," I idly mumbled to myself. I wasn't exaggerating either. So far, my time in high school had been as ordinary and mundane as could be.

But then again, let's look at this from another perspective: If that TV show's world of romance counted as "real," then wouldn't that make *my* life anything but ordinary? I'd been in high school for a year and change, and I hadn't experienced so much as the slightest spark of romance. I didn't have any guy friends, much less a boyfriend! Heck, I wasn't even on an exchanging-casual-greetings-in-the-morning basis with any boys!

The protagonist of that supposedly beyond-real romance drama was a second-year, just like me, but according to a plot outline I'd read, she apparently had *three* hotties fighting for her affection. One of them was even supposed to be an ex she'd dated during her first year! Let me tell you: *Cannot* relate! At *all*!

"Not that there are any guys out there who'd want to date a girl like me, anyway," I muttered, punctuating my self-deprecation with a heavy sigh. That particular reality went back to long before high school. It didn't matter if I thought back all the way to middle or elementary school either. I'd never had so much as the slightest taste of that bittersweet youthful *whatever* with a boy. Seriously, not even once.

It's not like I'm ugly or anything, right? I had two little sisters, and both of them were as cute as could be. I might have been a little biased since they were family and all, sure, but that wasn't *just* conjecture on my part; I also knew for a fact that they'd been hit on and asked out plenty of times. I had the same DNA as them, so in theory I shouldn't have been playing with an appearance-based handicap, right? I'd have liked to believe that, anyway.

That still left the big question unanswered, though: What *was* holding me back? If it wasn't my looks, was it my personality?

Wait...is it my personality? I don't think I'm, like, a bad person or anything, but it's not like I haven't caused my fair share of trouble here and there...

The more I thought about it, the more I began to feel a looming dread that my personality really did have some massive defect that was putting me out of the running. It was bothering me so much, in fact, that I found myself opening up a group chat I had with a couple of friends, typing, "Hey, am I just totally unlovable or something?" and hitting send—

Wait, gah! Wh-What am I doing?! It's bothering me, sure, but that's not the sort of thing you can just ask your friends apropos of nothing! And aagh, the way I said it makes it sound, like, super melodramatic, or like I'm fishing for compliments or something!

"I-It's fine, no biggie, just have to delete the post and everything'll be just—oh *god* I already sent it! You can't unsend posts in this app! Crap, okay, uhh...right!

I'll just play it off like I was kidding around! That'll—*gaaah?!'*"

Barely seconds after I'd sent the message, a little mark showed up next to it indicating that one, no, two people had read it. And an instant later...

What's wrong?

Did something happen?

...they were worried about me. I didn't even have time to *try* to claim it was a joke. That meant that if I stuck it out and went with the just-a-joke plan anyway, it'd probably only make them even *more* worried! *No choice... I'll just have to commit!*

Me: Nah, I was just wondering why I'm so unpopular

What?! No! Committing too much! Dial it back, me!

Unpopular? You?

You know that's not true, right?

Gah, I knew it! They've got no idea what I'm talking about, and now they're walking on eggshells around me! Not only was it true, it was so transparently true that my friends' choice to phrase their responses as questions felt downright charitable of them. *They're wasted on me, I swear.*

The two of them were also entirely unlike me in one major way. Now, to be totally clear, I'd more or less come to terms with my own unpopularity. I was unpopular, and that was just how it was going to stay! The two girls I was texting with, though? They were a *totally* different matter. Sure, they'd ended up acting like we were a group of unpopular kids consoling each other thanks to the ill-advised subject I'd brought up, but really, they lived in a completely different world.

Do you know what "yuri" is?

Literally speaking, it's just the Japanese word for lilies, but around the time I got into high school, I learned that the word has a very different secondary meaning as well. In short: when two girls fall in love, that's yuri. I guess they call it that because it's a form of love as beautiful and precious as a flower in bloom.

Why am I bringing this up? Because as far as the world around them was concerned, those two friends of mine were in precisely that sort of relationship. Just about everyone believed that they were the perfect yuri couple.

Their families had been on good terms since the two of them were born, and they'd grown up together as a result. Not only had that given them a deep-seated connection, it had led to them being the fastest of friends imaginable for their whole lives. They were also both absolutely, breathtakingly gorgeous, and astonishingly talented to boot.

One of them was the spitting image of a classic princess: so light on her feet she practically floated, and so adorable that just looking at her prompted a powerful urge to protect her. She was also a certifiable prodigy who consistently held the highest grades in our year. Her name was Yuna Momose.

The other was on the opposite end of the spectrum: a classic prince, through and through. She was cool and dashing, from her looks to how she carried herself, and she had the figure of a model. To top it all off, she could play just about any sport at an incredibly high level. Her name was Rinka Aiba.

Either one of my friends would've probably stood out in a crowd on her own, but I almost never got the chance to test that theory. The two of them were together pretty much all the time—and they were incredibly affectionate with each other. Their yuri level was off the charts, basically, and so pure and exalted was their relationship that the rest of the students at our school had quickly taken to referring to them collectively as the Sacrosanct, of all things. The space between them was holy ground: a sanctified realm that none would ever dare to enter.

And yet in spite of all that, those nobles within our school's hierarchy—no, those *royals*—no, those veritable *goddesses* who dwelled far up in the heavens above...

I can name all sorts of good things about you, Yotsuba!

Same. I could rattle them off all day.

...were somehow getting worked up over *me*, the certified commoner! How did that make *any* sense?! This was the sort of scenario that could only possibly happen in my wildest of dreams, and yet when I looked back down at my phone, I found a spirited conversation about my good points continuing to unfold. And the more it sank in that they really were talking about *me*, the more painfully embarrassing it became to read...

“Huh? Wait a second... ‘The way you fail all your classes’?! ‘The way you always catch the ball with your face in dodgeball’?! What the heck?!”

Me: You think those are my GOOD points?!

Yes! They make you very charming.

I can see why they might not feel that way from your perspective, though.

I could practically *hear* the two of them chuckling at my objection. Their replies were as perfectly in sync as always, and my phone just kept dinging away with message after message. Around the time they started spamming me with comedic chat stickers, I reached an inescapable conclusion.

“They’re totally making fun of me!”

So, yeah. I couldn’t really explain how or why, but the two of them were my friends—though we’d only been that way since we’d gotten into high school a little over a year ago. Yes, the two best of gal pals, the ultimate childhood friends, the yuri couple that the entire school watched over with a reverent sense of warmth and pride, the Sacrosanct themselves, were *somehow* friends with me.

It was a situation so mind-boggling it could never make it into a TV drama, but no matter how many times I pinched my cheeks, I showed no sign of waking up

from this long and elaborate dream. That proved that it *was*, in fact, reality, and confirming that was a relief every time I checked. Still, though, I couldn't silence that little self-loathing voice in the back of my mind that constantly asked: *What if being friends with me is just a phase for them?*

I mean, the two of them were incredible! They were incredible, and I was, well...lower than average, at best. I was sure that as far as everyone else was concerned, I was just an obnoxious third wheel sandwiched in the middle of their favorite yuri couple.

Someday, the Sacrosanct will stop being friends with me.

Talk about pessimistic, right? Not to mention downright pathetic... I shook my head to drive that train of thought from my mind and bring myself back to reality. They were my friends, and I had to start focusing on the *real* problem at hand: how to get them to stop mercilessly teasing me in our group chat.

And yet, looking back on it...my premonition in that moment hadn't actually been off the mark. In the end, I really did stop being friends with Momose and Aiba. And I don't mean somewhere in the far-flung future either. We stopped being friends before the rainy season ended; before the blazing heat of summer descended upon our town.

It just happened in a way I never, *ever* could've possibly imagined.

Chapter 1: The Sacrosanct Duo of Ideal Yuri

After school, a horde of students descended upon the gymnasium. You'd've thought a famous band was putting on a surprise concert in there, or that a flea market selling ridiculously high-quality goods at ridiculously low prices had somehow booked it as their venue, but the truth wasn't even close to that straightforward. The *actual* event that had drawn such a crowd was the girls' basketball team's practice match. It wasn't even a practice match with another school—they'd just split the team up into two groups to play against themselves.

I'm not exactly in the know when it comes to basketball, but as far as I could tell, our school's team wasn't anything special. I can barely tell one sport's ball from the other, to be fair, so I couldn't exactly judge how amazing of an event that sort of practice match was, but I still felt *pretty* safe in concluding that they usually don't fill a fairly sizable two-story gym's bleachers to capacity. Yeah, that couldn't possibly be normal.

Normal or not, though, I sure am witnessing it right here and now...

I was up on a second-floor landing, leaning onto the handrail and looking down at the gym below. My eyes were fixed on a particular player, and even not knowing the first thing about basketball, I couldn't help but be impressed as she dashed her way through the gym.

Her black ponytail swayed elegantly with each step as she sprinted, faster, more agile, and more beautiful than anyone else on the court. She played like she was dancing, and I think *everyone's* eyes were glued to her, really. After all, the majority of the audience had shown up just to see her, Rinka Aiba, in action.

Aiba was tall for a girl, with strikingly handsome facial features, and she emanated a constant aura of refreshing composure that became all the more evident when she was playing some sort of sport. She also had the sort of womanly figure that I couldn't help but admire, and the gym clothes she was wearing made all those curves stand out in a way that I could only describe as

super erotic...

Wait, what am I thinking?! She's your friend, Yotsuba! Not cool!

As I glanced around the room, it seemed pretty likely that I was the only one present whose mind was stuck in the gutter, at least in that particular sort of way. She might have been *breathtakingly* beautiful, and she might've had a figure that just screamed grace and femininity, but her status as the school's prince overwrote those traits entirely in the eyes of her fans. Her fans, and one more observer...

"Eeek! Shoot, Rinka! Shoot!"

...that being the school's resident princess, Yuna Momose, who was standing beside me and cheering her lungs out for Aiba.

The first time I heard those two get called "the Sacrosanct," all I could think was, *Wow, now that's an over-the-top nickname*. I ended up looking it up in the dictionary, and found that it meant something to the tune of "something sacred or holy that must not be interfered with or transgressed upon." That didn't really strike me as prime nickname material, and I kept thinking it was weird for a pretty long while, but the more I watched the two of them together, the more I realized how oddly on-point it was.

"Whoo, nice shot! Hey...Yotsuba, what're you spacing out for?"

An unexpected poke to the cheek brought me back to reality. *"Bwuh?" Guess I was a little too lost in thought for a minute, there.*

"Come on," said Momose, *"you're supposed to be cheering for Rinka! Wasn't she amazing just now? She snatched up the ball mid-pass, dribbled it right past the other team, and scored with a layup shot, just like that!"*

"Wha—aw, no! I totally missed it!" I was there as Aiba's friend, sure, but I was also just as invested in catching every moment of her epic heroics on the court as her most obsessive fans. It had been a pretty long while since the last time she'd gotten called in to play in one of these games, after all! I'd been looking forward to it for so long!

"I'm going to tattle on you to Rinka if you space out again, for your

information!”

“R-Right, sorry,” I awkwardly apologized.

“Of course,” she added, “knowing Rinka, she might’ve caught you already.”

“Huh?!” *She can’t really be watching me while she plays basketball, can she?*

A second later, I shook my head. This was Aiba we were talking about! It was *completely* plausible that she’d noticed me zoning out even while she was focused on the match!

Aiba was so good at sports that calling her “athletic” felt like a hilarious understatement. No, she was the *ultimate* athlete. Her ability to play any sport to the point of perfection made the fact that she’d never joined an athletic club feel like a waste. Track and field, swimming, dancing, tennis, dodgeball—literally nothing was out of her comfort zone, and it went without saying that basketball was no exception. The members of our basketball club were dedicated and diligent, but she was still better than all of them. And, like, *transparently* better than them. Enough so that even a complete layman like me could tell.

“It’s funny, though. She’s made it perfectly clear that she won’t play in any official matches and that the most help she’ll give them is subbing in for practice games, and yet she *still* gets more requests than she could ever possibly accept,” said Momose with a sigh as she leaned onto the handrail. She didn’t sound upset, per se. More exasperated, really.

“I guess playing against someone as good as her makes for great practice, or something?” I theorized.

“Hmm,” said Momose, “I wonder about that. I mean, these people practice...well, maybe not *every* day, but they practice all the time, right? Don’t you think getting crushed by some girl who isn’t in a club at all, much less theirs, and who doesn’t even do any proper training would *kill* their motivation more than anything else?”

Frankly, I couldn’t have agreed with Momose more. Then again, my mindset was probably about as far from that of one of those athletic-oriented types as it could get. I didn’t understand how those people thought at all. That said, I had a feeling that the biggest reason why they asked Aiba to play for them had

nothing to do with practice, or motivation, or any of that stuff. It was a pretty awkward explanation to bring up with Momose, though, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Aiba!” shouted one of her teammates, drawing my attention back to the court. Just in time too—I looked back right as the ball got passed to her, and I gasped in shock. She caught the pass no problem, of course, but something was wrong. There were *three* players keeping a mark on her at once!

On second thought, though, I realized it was actually pretty reasonable. When Aiba got the ball, it was more or less guaranteed that she’d immediately turn around and score with it, so the excessive caution made sense...or at least it did to an amateur like me, anyway. The other team’s blockade hadn’t seemed to faze Aiba at all, in any case. She’d shaken them off and left them in the dust without breaking a sweat, and she’d done it *just* in time to snatch her teammate’s pass from the air! Her timing couldn’t have been more perfect!

“Wow...” I mumbled to myself. No matter how many times I saw her borderline superhuman feats of athleticism, they always rendered me speechless. I didn’t really know *how* skillful you’d have to be to pull off the stunts she managed, but at the very least I knew for a fact that it was out of the question for me. *Nope, absolutely not, not on your life!*

Meanwhile, Momose was right beside me, shouting “Rinkaaa!” at the top of her lungs and literally hopping with excitement. Momose had a beautifully high-pitched voice that carried like nothing else, and I had a feeling that it got through to Aiba better than any of the other cheers and squeals that resounded throughout the gym.

As a matter of fact, every time Momose shouted or otherwise reacted to Aiba’s playing, a decent number of gazes turned in her direction as well. That definitely wasn’t a sign that she was standing out in a bad way, though. The crowd of spectators filling the gym had gathered to see Aiba’s outrageous skill in action, of course, and they were probably there to cheer on the basketball club as well, to some extent. Some of them, though, were *definitely* also there because they wanted to see Momose cheer Aiba on.

Aiba out on the court, carrying her team to victory. Momose off to the side,

cheering her heart out for Aiba. That interplay between the two of them was what had turned them into the Sacrosanct. Each of them was a jaw-droppingly beautiful girl who overflowed with talent, of course, but it was when they came together—when their long-standing, intimate friendship was put on full display—that they formed the truly ideal yuri pairing.

When you put those two together, their charms weren't compounded—they were *multiplied*! I'm talking an absolute explosion of yuri appeal, intense enough to turn an audience member like Momose into one of the show's leading stars! Like, if the match had been broadcast on TV, the main camera would've been glued to Aiba except for every once in a while when it'd wipe to Momose shouting from the stands! Which, when I really thought about it, kinda made Momose a monster in her own right. The whole situation reminded me all over again just how incredible my friends really were.

Suddenly, I heard a *fwish*! While I'd been off in my own little world again, Aiba had landed a shot! She'd stopped a fair distance from the basket and sunk a three-pointer without batting an eyelash. Every little motion of the shot was polished to perfection, and the crowd went absolutely *wild* over it. You'd have thought she'd just scored the winning basket with how loudly everyone was cheering her on!

Then again, the crowd went wild for each and every shot she made. It felt more like a festival than a practice match, and everyone was drawn into the ecstatic atmosphere. Including me, of course! "Oh wow, oh wow! She's so cool!" I shouted with glee, demonstrating that my vocabulary had barely evolved since elementary school, and clapped wildly.

"Isn't she, though?!" agreed Momose, puffing out her chest with pride. Which was *adorable*.

"You're incredible too, though, Momose!"

"Huh? Me?"

"Yeah! You're amazing!"

"O-Oh? Hee hee hee," Momose giggled, fidgeting bashfully with her hair.

Gaaaugh?! I clutched at my chest reflexively. Momose was heart-attack-

inducingly cute when she got all embarrassed like that! Thankfully, I seemed to have escaped sudden cardiac arrest...*barely*.

And, yes, maybe it *was* a little weird that my heart had literally skipped a beat on account of a friend—and a *girl*, at that—but it's not like I have control over every little one of my body's reactions! Cut me some slack! It would probably have been super awkward for Momose if she found out about it, though, so I jerked my line of sight away from her in a panic.

Ah, I thought, stunned in a physical *and* mental sense as my gaze fell instead back onto Aiba. By pure coincidence, she was looking up at *me* as well at that precise moment, and our eyes met. It felt, like...I dunno, like it was *destiny* at work, or something! Or like she was reading my mind, which only seemed more plausible as Aiba flashed me a ten-out-of-ten—no, a *twenty*-out-of-ten—full-on ultimate prince smile.

“Ghwaugh!” Sniped through the heart by Cupid himself! C-Calm down! You remember she’s your friend, right? And also a girl?!

“People want to see the Sacrosanct swooning over each other, not *me* drooling over them!” I whispered to myself. “Get a hold of yourself... Don’t get the wrong idea...” I had to face facts: Momose and Aiba were wasted on me as *friends*, much less anything more than that! I couldn’t let myself expect anything of the sort! I just *couldn’t*!

“Yotsuba?”

“Wha-huh?!” I shrieked in such a hysterically panicked falsetto, it even surprised *me*. The squeal wasn’t *my* fault that time, though! *Momose* was the one who had decided to reach over and rest her hand on top of mine!

“You were spacing out again, weren’t you?” asked Momose in an accusatory tone.

“N-No, I...wasn’t...”

“I heard that pause! You expect me to believe you when you can’t even deny it with a straight face?”

“You saw right through me?!”

“Heh heh heh!” Momose chuckled with an adorable little smirk.

My heart let out a scream of agony as it was punctured yet again. *Come on, don't grin... Keep a straight face...*

“What's *that* look supposed to mean?”

“N-Noshing ad awl,” I droned through clenched teeth. Some sacrifices had been made, but I'd managed to stop myself from grinning like a moron, at least! Sure, she might've ended up thinking I was a weirdo, but that beat the heck out of her thinking I was the sort of person who'd start lusting after my friends out of nowhere! And so I made it through another perilous moment without committing social suicide. The End.

“Ah, come on, Yotsuba! Help me cheer her on!” said Momose, still squeezing my hand as tightly as ever.

“R-Right!” I agreed. I was saved—she hadn't thought I was *that* weird after all! If she'd gotten freaked out and told me to take a hike or something, I would've never been able to look back on this day without writhing in shame!

So anyway, I jumped at the chance to latch onto Momose's benevolent offer and focus once more on cheering on the star of the hour. Or that was the theory, at least, but part of me had to wonder: Would Aiba *really* be able to pick out my voice over the thunderous roar of all the other wildly cheering fans packed into the gym? *Everyone* was putting their everything into cheering with all their might. How could I expect *my* cheers to get through to her under circumstances like those?

“Hurry up, Yotsuba! Rinka's waiting for you to cheer for her!” shouted Momose, almost as if she'd seen through me and picked out my self-doubt in an instant. It felt like *she* was cheering *me* on, which seemed like a waste of her efforts...but oddly enough, it still managed to give me the courage I needed.

That's right—I'm Aiba's friend! She's playing her heart out, and that's all the reason I need to cheer for her with everything I've got!

I finally worked up my nerve and nodded to Momose, who smiled back at me and mouthed, “On three!” Then, a count of three later...

“*You can do it!*”

...the two of us shouted in unison, as loud as we possibly could! I didn't have Momose's voice, and I knew it. I knew better than anyone that my shout was doomed to be swallowed up by the cacophony of cheers that echoed throughout the gym...or at least, I *thought* it would be, until I felt a twinge of pain in my throat and heard myself yell in a voice louder and clearer than I'd thought I was capable of producing!

Then, almost as if in answer to my cheer, Aiba looked up at me from the court and beamed. I saw her lips twitch—I was probably wrong, but I could've sworn she was mouthing, "Thanks."



A moment later, her eyes were back on the court! She slipped right through the ring of players surrounding her with agile ease, shaking off her pursuers and speeding toward the basket! The other team shifted their formation in an instant. They weren't about to let Aiba make it to their basket that easily, and practically formed a human wall to block her path.

But as Aiba caught the pass one of her teammates threw to her, the look on her face told me that *she* wasn't about to let them stop her. She sprung into action, dashing forward! The thing about basketball, though, is that you're not allowed to just run along with the ball in your hands. You have to dribble it—bouncing it along the ground as you run—and from the perspective of an amateur like me, it looked really hard to pull off.

Aiba, however, manipulated the ball with incredible ease, like it was as much a part of her body as her hands and feet. It almost seemed like the ball had a will of its own, slipping through the crowd of defenders before it and bouncing obediently back into Aiba's hands on the other side. She pulled feint after feint, dodging, sidestepping, and sometimes even spinning around entirely as she forged ahead.

It looked like she was dancing with the ball—like Aiba was a dazzling prince, escorting a rather round and incredibly small partner across the ballroom floor...okay, no, that simile was probably a step too far. The point is that she was just *that* graceful, just *that* gorgeous, and just *that* unhindered as she made her advance. She wouldn't let anyone get close to her, much less bring her to a stop.

Finally, she made it to the three-point line and sprang into the air. Aiba was going for another three-point shot, with pretty much the exact same setup as last time, and yet something about her form was completely unlike the last shot she'd taken. This shot had an *elegance* to it, I guess? Something about it made her look even cooler than ever, and it was enough to take the breath away from all of us up in the stands.

Before I knew it, the chaotic tumult of the gymnasium had vanished, replaced with a pure and reverent silence. At the peak of her jump, Aiba let the ball fly. It danced a perfect arc through the air, plunging directly through the hoop with a

quiet little *whiff*!

The gym *erupted* in a deafening roar of celebration. At that same instant, a whistle marked the end of the match. It was a complete shutout—Aiba’s team had scored twice as many points as the opposing team. Nobody was rooting for the underdog, though, no matter how overwhelming Aiba’s victory had been. The sheer skill she’d displayed was enough to charm any observer into a passionate frenzy.

The most amazing part was that all of that didn’t just apply to us up in the stands. The other members of the basketball club—even the ones who’d been playing against her—were just as elated by her performance. I’m sure part of it was that they appreciated the chance to test their skills against an incredibly talented player, considering that the summer tournaments were just around the corner, but that probably wasn’t the *only* reason.

I would’ve bet that the basketball club had chosen to call Aiba and Momose in for the match specifically because they knew that the two of them would draw a massive crowd. After all, in the best-case scenario, some of the people who came to see the Sacrosanct might end up coming out of the experience as fans of the basketball club too! Some of them might even turn up for the club’s upcoming matches!

In other words, Aiba had had a lot of expectations riding on her when she went into the match, and she met them all with ease. She was without a doubt the coolest friend I’d ever made, and when I watched her do her thing, I couldn’t help but feel dazzled.



The moment I stepped out of the gym, it suddenly felt like a weight had been taken off my shoulders. A sigh slipped past my lips. The intensity of the atmosphere in there really had been stifling—so much so that it felt cool and refreshing outside, even though the muggy heat of summer was well on its way to setting in.

Momose let out a sigh as well. “I think I must be sweating as much as Rinka was.”

“You really went wild when she won, huh?” I noted.

“Of *course* I did! After all, to the victor go the spoils!” Momose declared, flashing me a broad, toothy grin.

It was so, I dunno, belligerent? Hot-blooded, maybe? Point is, it was such a seemingly out-of-character thing for her to say, I couldn’t help but grin right back at her.

“Hey, Yotsuba?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s too hot to be loitering around outside, so why don’t the two of us head on our way?”

“Huh?!” It was such an abrupt suggestion, I froze up for a second. At first I thought she was just messing with me. Supposing she wasn’t, though, and I really did run off with Momose, leaving Aiba all by her lonesome...

I glanced around the vicinity. Plenty of other students were waiting around outside the gym, fiddling with their phones, chatting with their friends, and generally killing time while they waited for what was without exaggeration the second-biggest event of the day, in their eyes: seeing Momose congratulate Aiba on her victory as she left the gym.

Aiba was showering off inside and the two of us were indeed waiting for her, in theory. Her reunion with Momose was sure to be straight out of a storybook. The gallant prince, returning victorious from the battlefield to the lovely princess’s side! What words of gratitude would Momose convey to her knight in shining armor? Everyone, and I do mean *everyone*, was beside themselves with impatience to find out!

But what if I took Momose up on her offer, and we just...left? The day’s second-biggest event would go up in smoke in an instant! Accepting her proposal was, therefore, totally out of the question...but at the same time, I wasn’t anywhere near brave enough to turn her down offhand. Just as I came to realize what a pickle I was really in, though...

“Yotsuba!”

“Huh?”

...a voice rang out behind us, calling my name. I turned around, and there she was: the only person in the whole school who called me by my first name, other than Momose. Well, really, she wasn't so much standing as running. Straight at me.

"Whaaah?!" I squealed as Aiba wrapped her arms around me and very nearly hugged the life out of me. Her grip was shockingly powerful thanks to her firm, muscular arms, which couldn't have contrasted more with the almost otherworldly softness of the chest she pulled me right into. I was immediately overwhelmed by the sweet aroma of what I assumed was some sort of deodorant spray. "A-Aiba?!"

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" said Aiba. She'd already changed back into her uniform, and I could tell she'd done so in an awful hurry. She looked pretty sloppy, honestly, but it sort of suited her, or at least didn't detract from her overall image.

"I-I wasn't waiting—that, I mean, er," I stammered.

"*Rinkaaa?*" growled Momose, cutting into our little exchange. She did *not* sound happy either. And, well, of course she wouldn't—Aiba was supposed to give this treatment to *her*, not me!

Wait—oh, crap! Suddenly, it felt like a bustling crowd's worth of stares were all focused upon me...probably. I mean, I'd never really *been* the center of attention before, so it wasn't exactly a sensation I could identify with any real certainty. Maybe I was totally imagining the whole thing! Still, though, I was pretty darn certain that the fans who'd been eagerly awaiting the Sacrosanct's touching reunion would've probably really appreciated it if I'd butted out and minded my own business. Who knew how many enemies I'd just accidentally made for myself?!

"I was waiting too, you know?" pouted Momose.

"Oh, right, of course!" said Aiba. "Can't forget to give you a hug too, huh, Yuna?"

"You don't have to bother—gwah!"

Aiba released me, stepped over to Momose, and lifted her up in a bear hug.

Ph-Phew! We're back on script! Everything's the way it should be again...I hope, anyway.

Unfortunately, though, the unpleasant, nagging sensation that I was being stared at and the cold sweat dripping down my back lingered for quite some time.



“Jeez, Rinka, just look at my hair! It’s a mess thanks to you!”

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, my bad.”

The three of us were walking home from school, Momose and Aiba chatting happily in front as I lagged a couple paces behind them.

“I can tolerate the hugging,” said Momose, “but patting me on the head’s a completely different matter! It’s condescending, for one thing, and uncouth to boot.”

“Is it, now? I’ve always thought it’s just normal,” replied Aiba.

“*Really*, Rinka? Your dearest childhood friend spends her precious free time after school cheering you on, and *this* is how you repay her? You need to learn some respect!”

Momose was in an irritable huff, and Aiba casually brushed off her every objection. The two of them held nothing back from each other, but there wasn’t any real hostility behind their snappy back-and-forth either. It sort of looked like the two of them were enjoying their little verbal sparring match.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” Aiba finally conceded. “How about I treat you to some ice cream to make up for it?”

“Ice cream?!”

Momose’s eyes lit up as Aiba pointed toward a food truck that just happened to be set up on the other side of the park we were passing through. A sign in front of the truck had a big drawing of an ice-cream cone filled with soft serve on it. Considering the heat and humidity, I was all for it—ice cream really *did* sound like it’d hit the spot.

“I-I’ll have you know I’m not the sort of girl you can bribe with an ice-cream

cone!” Momose snapped, recovering quickly from her moment of temptation.

“Oh? Well, *I’m* certainly in the mood for some. I’ll be right back.”

“Hey! W-Wait, I’m getting one too!”

The two of them dashed off toward the food truck together, and I let out a quiet sigh as I watched them go. *It’s still so hard not to get nervous around them*, I thought to myself. We’d been friends for a whole year, but I still hadn’t quite shaken the awkward diffidence I displayed toward them every once in a while.

Both of them were incredibly cute, yes, but that wasn’t all they had going on. They had, I don’t know...a certain *glamour* to them. If the world was a stage, then Momose and Aiba stood perpetually in the spotlight. The word “sacrosanct” suited them perfectly, and if I’d met them in any other way, I’m pretty positive I’d have ended up as just another one of their fans, idolizing them from a distance without a care in the world.

But that wasn’t how it had turned out. What had *actually* happened was a downright miracle. I’m sure that sounds like an exaggeration, and maybe it is one, but if I’d taken even the slightest step differently, made even the slightest mistake, I know for a fact that I never would’ve been able to make friends with them.

It all started back when the cherry blossoms were in full bloom, bright and early on the day of our entrance ceremony—my very first day of high school.



I felt a little restless as I walked to school that morning. Frankly, I hadn’t quite believed that I’d *actually* be going to Eichou High until the day of the entrance ceremony was upon me. Eichou was, after all, a prep school famous nationwide for the astonishing percentage of its students who went on to attend highly rated colleges, and its entrance exams were exactly as competitive as you’d imagine.

I, meanwhile, wasn’t a brainiac by any stretch of the imagination. I’d never even considered *attempting* to test into an academically rigorous school like that! How had I ended up taking the test anyway? Well, basically, when I filled

out the application that indicated which schools I'd be trying to get into, you could say I got a few wires crossed, and, well...to make a long story short, I signed up for Eichou High's entrance exam by accident.

By the time I realized the mistake I'd made, it was already too late. Withdrawing my application would've been effectively no different than failing the exam, so in a fit of desperation I figured that I might as well go for broke and take the test...and *somehow*, I actually passed.

Boy, was *that* ever a shock! The biggest shock of my life, before or since! My family was just as astonished as I was, of course. My mom thought that I must have contracted some strange disease and took me to the doctor, and for some reason my dad swore off alcohol. The older of my two little sisters got a little *mad* at me for reasons I couldn't even begin to fathom, and the younger was convinced that I'd fallen for some sort of scam.

Yeah...honestly, their reactions kinda hurt, but they really drove the point in: the idea of me going to a school like Eichou—heck, the idea of me being even remotely *associated* with a school like Eichou—was just that unfathomable. And yet somehow, even after the acceptance letter and admissions paperwork arrived in the mail, even after my homeroom teacher called up Eichou's admissions office, learned that I really *had* passed, threw out their back, and got hauled off to the hospital in an ambulance, I still didn't wake up from what I could only assume was a really, *really* long and elaborate dream. Which was only natural, considering it turned out to not be a dream at all.

Did I have my apprehensions? You'd better believe it! A moron like me going to a school like *that* seemed like a recipe for disaster! In the end, though, my excitement overwhelmed my concern. I mean, come on, I was finally gonna be a high schooler! Just the thought of it was enough to make me feel just a little more adultlike than I ever had before. Plus, *both* of the two styles of uniform that Eichou allowed its students to wear were super cute! And who knew what sort of people I'd meet there? Maybe I'd even run into the partner of my dreams!

In short: my mindset was as positive as it could've possibly been as I walked along the road to school. Positive enough to make me do something I'd normally have never even considered.

“Umm, excuse me! You dropped your handkerchief!”

A scrap of fabric had fallen from the pocket of someone walking in front of me, and I scooped it up and called out to them without a second thought. I know what you’re thinking, and yeah, maybe picking up somebody’s hanky *isn’t* exactly the most surefire indicator of a positive mindset. For the record, though, I normally would’ve at least stopped to take a look and see what sort of person had dropped it before calling out to them. In this particular case, if I had, there was no way I would’ve had the guts to say so much as a word.

“Huh...?”

“Hm?”

There were *two* people walking in front of me, not just one, and as they turned to look at me, *I* took my first proper look at *them* and straight up forgot to breathe for a moment.

Standing before me were two *incredibly* beautiful girls. They were, unquestionably, the most attractive people I’d ever laid eyes upon...and there were *two* of them! At the same time! *Holy crap, prep schools are crazy!* I marveled internally. They seriously felt like they belonged to a completely different reality than I did.

One of them had the sort of radiant aura you normally only saw from a trained actress, bathed in the spotlights as she sang and danced resplendently across the stage. Her long, brightly colored hair just *had* to feel silky smooth to the touch, and she was surprisingly petite for a first-year high schooler in a way that gave me the almost irresistible urge to protect her. Protect her from what? I dunno—people like me, probably.

The other was a slender, strikingly handsome girl who looked like she could’ve been the starring model at a fashion expo. If it weren’t for her double take-inducingly ample chest and the skirt that revealed her long, slender legs, I might’ve mistaken her for a boy at a glance. *She* gave me the irresistible desire to be protected *by* her...though again, the question of “from what?” loomed in the background. A bear, or something? I guess?

Anyway, the point is that the two of them were so cute, so pretty, so *everything* all at once that if there were, like, the equivalent of an MMA league

for womanly charms, they'd be vying with each other for the title of world champion...and they were *right in front of me*. And I, in the face of all *that*, went completely off the deep end. The two of them were just so hopelessly out of my league, my state of mind shot straight past nervousness and awkwardness and landed right in the realm of unhinged, irrational bravery. In short: in that moment, I was invincible! *I'll be fine no matter what sort of outrageous hottie shows up out of nowhere right in front of me! Heck, I could stare down a starving lion and I'd still be perfectly calm and—*

"Umm...is something wrong?" one of them asked.

"Ah, uh, I, er, umm..." *Nope. Never mind. Scratch all that.* I started stammering like a lunatic and my face lit up like a furnace.

But I didn't run away! That's something, right?! Considering how I *usually* acted in that sort of situation, it would've been totally unsurprising if I'd made a break for it, handkerchief and all! Then I probably would've spent days—maybe *months*—agonizing over how to give it back! Compared to *that*, I was doing just fine! "It's okay! I can do this... I can *do* this..."

"You, umm... You know you're talking out loud, right?" The ridiculously handsome girl peered at me with concern in her eyes.

"Ah, I, umm!" *To heck with it! If I'm gonna run away, I at least need to do it after I give the handkerchief back!* I took a moment to psych myself up, then thrust the handkerchief out at her! "You dropped this! It's yours, right?!" I shouted. I also made *direct* eye contact with her, causing my heart to very nearly stop dead. *It's okay! It's still beating! We're still alive here!*

"Huh...?" The handsome girl blinked with surprise.

For a second her reaction confused me, but a moment later I realized that it made total sense. After all, the handkerchief I'd picked up was bright pink, with lacy frills decorating its edges. It was super girly across the board, and if I were judging based solely on the girls' appearances, it would've made much more sense to assume it belonged to the cute, pop idol-esque girl beside her. I hadn't actually seen the moment it had fallen out of its owner's pocket, to be clear, and I didn't *really* know for sure who it belonged to. Somehow, though... "It's yours, isn't it?" I asked the handsome girl, holding it out to her. "Sorry if I'm

wrong! I just sorta got the feeling that it belongs to you, for some reason.”

Did I have proof? Absolutely not. If I had to rationalize my guess, I’d say it was because when she noticed the handkerchief in my hand, she looked sort of sad for just a fraction of a second. Maybe she’d had too many people make the assumption that I’d almost made just a moment before. Maybe people always thought that something that cute would suit her girlier counterpart more than it did her.

There’s no rule that says that cool, handsome girls can’t carry around cute little handkerchiefs, though! And if there *were* a rule that said everything you wear has to suit you, then people like me who aren’t cute *or* cool would be stuck living our lives in the buff! *So y’know what? Let this be her handkerchief! I’ll stand tall and proud and shout it out loud! I don’t even care how embarrassing it’ll be if it turns out I’m wrong!*

The handsome girl just stood there for a moment, seemingly petrified. The idol-like girl next to her was just staring at me as well, and before long I started getting really, *really* nervous. I gulped. *Gaaah, hurry up and take it already! I’d really like to run away now, so the sooner the better!*

Finally, after an instant that felt like an eternity, the handsome girl said, “Thank you,” and took the handkerchief. She still seemed a little surprised, but apparently it *was* hers.

Oh, good. Looks like I wasn’t wrong after all. Okay, time to make a break for—

“This is mine, all right. Heh—I appreciate it. Seriously, thank you.”

Oh... Oh, wow, her voice is perfect... If love at first sound is a thing, then I think I probably experienced it the moment I heard her speak. Her voice wasn’t too high or too low—it sat in the perfect middle ground, its tone reverberating within my heart. I don’t exactly know how to put it in words, honestly, but her voice was incredible enough that for a moment, I genuinely thought that if my eardrums were to rupture at that very instant and her voice ended up being the last sound I ever heard, I’d basically be okay with that.

And not only was her voice certifiably swoon-worthy, not only had she turned out to be the handkerchief’s owner after all—on top of all that, she’d been something like ten times happier to receive it from me than I ever could’ve

imagined! I was swooning so hard, in fact, that I completely forgot about the bit where this was my only chance to make a break for it.

“Wait a minute...aren’t you the pencil girl?!” Suddenly, the idol-like girl piped up out of the blue and grabbed my hand. And *her* voice was perfect too! It was the sort of voice you’d expect to hear coming from an anime character: high-pitched in just the right way and charming as all get-out. It was the sort of voice you’d hear once and never forget for the rest of your life.

“Bwahuh?!” *Holy crap, her voice is as pretty as she is!* Her voice had a totally different thing going on than her handsome counterpart’s, but I would’ve really struggled to pick one over the other. I’d been sort of exaggerating with the whole eardrum-rupturing scenario before, but if I could’ve had both of them whisper into my ears at the same time? *Then* I would’ve been totally, literally okay with having that be the last sound I ever etched into my memory.

“What do you mean, the pencil girl?” asked the handsome one.

“I told you about her, remember? The weird—I mean, mysterious girl in the entrance exam who spent the entire time rolling a pencil around on her desk!” the idol-like girl said, speaking in an incredibly fast and excited tone. She turned back to me, her eyes sparkling with glee. “If you’re here, that must mean that you passed, right? That’s *incredible!*”

In contrast with her excitement, *I* was totally overwhelmed. I also had to laugh, albeit internally and in a distinctly self-deprecating way. She really *was* talking about me after all. My smarts weren’t even close to the level that a prep school like Eichou was looking for, and the questions on the exam had all looked like so much incomprehensible gobbledygook to me. With my back up against the wall, I’d chosen to rely on the one tool I had available to me: my pencil.

Happily enough, the exam’s answer sheet was one of those automatically graded scan sheets and the questions were all four-option multiple choice. That meant I could mark the sides of my pencil with the numbers one through four and surreptitiously roll it across my desk when the proctors weren’t looking to pick my answers to all the problems! That got me through to the end of the test with my answer sheet filled out, at the absolute least. Imagine my surprise when I learned that I’d also actually *passed*.

“Oh wow, oh wow!” exclaimed the idol-like girl. “Did you buy that pencil at a shrine or something? Maybe there’s a god dwelling inside it! Ooh, and maybe you could use it for other stuff, like, like...like picking lottery numbers!”

“L-Lottery numbers...?”

“I don’t really know how they work, but you see commercials for them on TV all the time, right? I think they call it the Number Six Lottery, or something, and pencils have six sides, so I’m sure you could work something out!” she exclaimed, squeezing my hand tighter and beaming as she continued her excited ramble. “And I’m sure you could do lots of other stuff with it too! You could predict just about anything, as long as there’s only six choices or less!”

“Wh-What? No, this is just a totally ordinary pencil, I swear! It came in a twelve-pack!”

“Oh, did it? Then I suppose *you* must be the lucky one! That’s just as amazing!”

“No, I mean, well...th-thanks, I guess,” I replied, shrinking awkwardly away so far it broke her grip. Luck didn’t really strike me as something worth praising me for, honestly, but I couldn’t help but get a little giddy about being complimented so openly anyway.

The thing is, though, her voice *really* carried. And even if it hadn’t, the two of them were still beautiful enough to turn just about anyone’s head. That, of course, meant that we were quickly gathering the attention of all the other new students who were on their way to the entrance ceremony. The handsome girl seemed to notice their stares and tapped the idol-like girl on the shoulder.

“Hey, Yuna.”

“Oh, whoops! I guess we’re standing out, aren’t we? Let’s walk while we talk. Sound good, Rinka?”

Yuna and Rinka. I guess that’s what they’re called? Man...even their names sound beautiful somehow! Then there’s me: Yotsuba, as in “four-leaf clover.” If their names make them sound beautiful, then mine makes me sound like my luck is all I have going for...me...

Suddenly, I felt something touch each of my hands. “Wait...huh?” I looked

down at one, then the other, only to find that for some reason the two of them were walking on either side of me and *holding my hands*, of all things!

“Whaaat?!” I shrieked.

“My name is Yuna Momose. Nice to meet you! And the girl over there’s...”

“Rinka Aiba. How about you? What’s your name?”

“Er, I’m, ah...I’m Yotsuba Hazama,” I replied.

“Yotsuba? Got it!” Momose chirped.

“That’s a nice name. I like it,” Aiba said.

They praised me again... Actually, wait, they’re calling me by my first name already?! Holy crap, pretty girls really are built different! “U-Umm, Momose, Aiba...” I said, still flustered beyond all belief.

“Oh, you can call us by our first names! We don’t mind! Right, Rinka?” said Momose.

“Right,” agreed Aiba with a nod.

“N-No, umm...sorry, but I think that’s, well, a little too high a bar for me to clear right off the bat, I guess,” I mumbled. I was completely caught up in their pace, but that was the one line I just couldn’t bring myself to cross. A girl like me—a person who had nothing but luck going for her—could never possibly end up on a first-name basis with incredible people like them!

If, just hypothetically, I go on to become friends with them, I’m positive that I won’t be anything more in their eyes than a fun little toy they happened to stumble across. I mean, look at them! They’re cute, cool, cheerful, and kind, all at once... I’m sure they’ll make a ton of friends before I know it—friends who are way better than the likes of me.

I resigned myself to the fact that this would be our one shining moment of contact and they were sure to forget about me soon afterward. It was kind of a depressing thought. Just a few minutes beforehand I’d been plotting to run away from them, but there I was, bitterly disappointed by the inevitable fact that we’d part just as quickly as we’d come together.



...Well, that was the theory, anyway! In complete defiance of my expectations, though—not to mention common sense—the two of them had remained my fastest of friends ever since.

And I don't mean that they had the broadness of mind and openness of heart to treat absolutely all their friends the same no matter how many of them they made! I mean, okay, they might've *also* had those things for all I knew, but I had no way to verify that because of one simple fact: the two of them, for whatever reason, just didn't really make friends with people, period. In fact, over the course of the year they'd spent in high school, I was the *only* person they'd genuinely befriended.

I didn't get the feeling that was intentional on their part, to be clear. No, it was the people around them who made it that way, and especially the people who'd known them back in middle school. To them, after all, Momose and Aiba were the Sacrosanct. They were a holy and immaculate presence, never to be transgressed upon or defiled under any circumstances.

And that was precisely how things stayed. Nobody *ever* tried to come between them. Not only did nobody ask either of them out—not even the most obnoxiously flirty boys—nobody even tried to get too close to them on a platonic level. People from the sports clubs would ask Aiba to help them out sometimes, of course, but since Momose always came along to cheer her on, even that didn't break the two of them apart.

It was like there was an unspoken rule that nobody was allowed to get closer to them than the rest of the pack. Like they were a work of art in a museum, carefully roped off to ensure that no one could ever touch them—only stand at a distance and stare. Nobody dared cross that line under any circumstances. Nobody except one person, that is...me.

And so there I was, a month into my second year of high school, *somehow* still monopolizing the Sacrosanct's friendship. Against my better judgment. I just *knew* their fans weren't happy with me—I mean, to them, it probably looked like I'd broken the unspoken pact! Honestly, it was kind of astonishing that nobody had tried to take me out of the picture yet. I was expecting, like, *some* sort of attack, I guess.

Please, everyone, believe me when I say that I never had any intention to defile those two's relationship! I just didn't know back when I first got into this school! Not only did I not know about all this Sacrosanct stuff, I didn't even know that yuri meant girls falling in love with each other! I didn't know it was supposed to be something sacred or precious or whatever! I had no idea that third-wheeling a yuri couple was one of the cardinal sins!

"I just! Didn't! Knoooooow!" I shouted, my fruitless yell echoing away into the heavens above, never to fall upon anyone's ears.

"What didn't you know?"

So much for not falling on any ears!!!!!!! Apparently, while I'd been flashing back at length to my first meeting with Aiba and Momose, the two of them had bought their ice cream and walked all the way back to me! *Y-Yeah, figures! Buying ice cream isn't exactly a herculean task! Of course it'd go by pretty quickly!*

"Here you go, Yotsuba," said Aiba.

"Huh?"

"Your ice cream!" she said, holding a cone full of white and brown swirled soft serve out to me. "You really cheered your heart out for me today, so consider this a thank-you."

"Th-Thanks," I replied, a little apprehensive. "Are you sure, though? I mean, I barely managed to raise my voice at all back there."

"That's not true at all. Trust me, I heard you loud and clear. I was really happy to have you cheering me on too," said Aiba with a grin. Hearing that from her made *me* that really particular sort of warm-and-fuzzy happy in turn.

"I got chocolate, by the way!" piped up Momose.

"Mine's vanilla," added Aiba.

I guess that'd make mine a mix of theirs. Sort of feels like getting the best of both worlds without any downsides...or maybe I'm overthinking this. Nah, definitely overthinking it.

"Come on, Yotsuba, eat up! It's nice and cold!" said Aiba.

“R-Right,” I stammered, taking a lick of the ice cream. *Oh, wow, this is great! The sweetness of the vanilla and the bitterness of the chocolate complement each other perfectly!*

“Heh heh!” Aiba chuckled as she watched me eat.

“Huh? Wh-What?!”

“Oh, nothing much. You were just making it look so tasty, and I thought it was kind of funny.”

“Was I...?”

“You really were,” Momose chimed in. “You made it look so delicious, I was almost embarrassed to watch! Maybe I should’ve gotten the mix too?” she added, giving my ice cream an envious glance.

The look on her face was so adorable, I found myself reflexively holding the cone out to her like I would with my little sisters. “Do you want a bite?” I offered.

“Huh? Can I?” said Momose, hesitating for just a moment before her face lit up. “I do!” She leaned in and took a bite out of my ice cream. “Mmm —*delicious!*” she exclaimed, which struck me as kind of funny. Half of it was the same flavor that she’d gotten, so it seemed a little silly for her to be *that* pleased.

“Ah, hey! That’s not fair, Yuna!” shouted Aiba. Apparently, it was *her* turn to be jealous next.

It wasn’t totally unexpected. Generally speaking, whenever I gave Momose something, Aiba would get a little jealous about it. It went both ways too, with Momose giving Aiba the exact same treatment. I sort of figured it was just one of those childhood-friend things. When you’re that close to each other, it’s like you’re one and the same, or like you’re of the same mind and body...wait, I guess those basically mean the same thing, don’t they? Anyway, the point is that I’d anticipated that Aiba would react that way and was already holding the cone out to her next. “You too, Aiba! Feel free to take a bite!”

“Ah... You don’t mind?”

“Of course not! I mean, you bought this for me in the first place, didn’t you? It’s kind of silly for me to act like you need my permission!”

“No, it’s not *silly* at all. But, okay, I’ll have a bite too—if you’re sure, I mean,” Aiba said, leaning in timidly to take a lick of my ice cream. She kept her gaze glued to my face the whole time, which made me feel more than a little awkwardly nervous. After she was finished, she offered, “Would you like a bite of mine too?”

“Ah, sure,” I replied. “Thanks.”

“Ooh, ooh, then you should have a bite of mine too!”

“Thanks, Momose!”

I fed ice cream to them and was fed ice cream in turn. Just sitting there with Momose and Aiba to either side of me, enjoying our afternoon, felt so, I dunno...*youthful*, I guess? I hadn’t worked up the nerve to call them by their first names even though it’d been a full year since I’d met them, yes, and I didn’t consider myself even *close* to their equal, but still, in that instant it really did feel like we were, well, friends. No matter what everyone around us thought about our relationship, it wouldn’t change the fact that to me, Momose and Aiba were my precious, beloved friends. I could say that with confidence...probably.

“Oh, I know—we should take a picture together!” said Momose.

“Good idea!” agreed Aiba. “We can use my phone.”

“Come on, Yotsuba, scoot in closer!”

I found myself wedged between the two of them as Aiba held her phone out at arm’s length. *Wow*, I thought as I saw them displayed on its screen, *they really are both ridiculously pretty, huh?*

They were leaning in so close to me that their cheeks were practically pressed up against mine, and I don’t know *how* I kept my composure, but somehow or other I could see that I was smiling as brightly as could be. It was proof that, even if I was internally freaking out a *little*, deep down what I really felt in that moment was pure happiness.



“I’m hooome!” I called out in such an upbeat voice, even I thought, “Man, I must’ve really had a good day!” I couldn’t hide it, though—my day really had been just that much fun!

The three of us had split up pretty soon after we finished our ice cream, but Aiba sent that picture she took to our group chat, and just looking at it was enough to make me grin all over again. Ever since we’d met and gotten to know each other, we’d been building up more and more pictures of the three of us together. It sort of felt like we were collecting memories in physical form, which was just, well, really nice!

The moment I stepped inside, though, an ice-cold voice did its best to wipe the grin off my face. “You’re late, Yotsuba!” said a strikingly pretty girl, standing in the entryway with her arms crossed imposingly.

I mean, okay, it might have been a *little* weird for me to call her pretty...but, like, compared to *me*, it was just an objective fact! She really was super cute! Anyway, she was Sakura, one of my two younger sisters, and she’d been going through a bit of a rebellious phase lately. Her attitude toward me was ever so slightly unfriendly more often than not.

On second thought, though, does this really count as a rebellious phase? Wouldn’t one of those normally mean she rebels against our mom or dad, not me? Plus, she still gets along with her little sister Aoi just fine! She really is only snappy with me in particular... Maybe she just doesn’t like me anymore, or something...?

“Hey, Yotsuba! Are you listening?!”

“Huh? Wh-What?!”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Hurry up and make dinner.”

“S-Sure. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to *apologize* or anything,” Sakura huffed. Which was weird, considering she was obviously upset about something.

I guess she’s just at that age, huh? She was in her third year of middle school.

In other words, Sakura was hard at work preparing for her high school entrance exams. She was up late studying just about every night, and speaking as her older sister, I really wanted to do something to cheer her on.

Fortunately, one of my very, very few actual talents just happened to be cooking! It only counted as a talent by my remarkably low standards, to be fair, but still! Our parents both worked full time and I was responsible for pretty much all of the household chores, so making sure that all of our meals were as tasty as possible seemed like the best possible way for me to support Sakura in her studies.

“Seriously, though, hurry up,” Sakura continued. “If you wait much longer, Aoi’s gonna start cooking for us instead.”

“Wait—she’s what?!” *O-Oh jeez, this is bad!* I yeeted my bag away at random and sprinted off at top speed! “I-I’m hooome!” I shouted as I barreled into the kitchen.

“Ah, Yotsuba! Welcome back!”

Within stood a literal angel—ahem! Within stood the youngest of the three Hazama sisters and our collective pride and joy, Aoi. Sakura was *also* our collective pride and joy, for the record, as were the parents who worked their butts off to support their three daughters! So much pride! So much joy! And also an eldest daughter who was a little more questionable on the pride and joy fronts. Okay, digression over!

“A-Aoi! Just out of curiosity, why’re you wearing my apron...?” I asked apprehensively.

“You were late, so I thought I’d make dinner for us! I had a feeling that you’d be tired out tonight, after all.”

“N-Nah, no waaay! I’m just *fulla* energy, for real!”

“Really? You don’t *sound* super up for cooking.”

“I’m *so* up for it, you have *no* idea!”

Aoi was, very simply, the goodest of girls. *She* definitely wasn’t going through her rebellious phase yet, and wasn’t being sarcastic or anything—she was just

genuinely concerned about me. I would've really preferred it if she hadn't tried to help, though, at least in this case. Aoi, you see, possessed the borderline supernatural power to turn absolutely any ingredient into literal, lethal poison, simply by attempting to cook with it. She was, in short, a cheftastrophe.

I was perfectly aware that I was way too soft on and affectionate with my sisters on the whole, and yet even *I* couldn't withstand Aoi's cooking without a bottle of stomach medicine on the side! Sakura was exerting some pretty major pressure on me to stop Aoi as well, so I had to do *something* to turn the situation around!

"You know, Aoi, your big sister would just *love* to cook for you tonight," I opened hopefully.

"But *I'd* love to cook for my big sister too!"

"Hnnngh!" *She's perfect! Seriously, how is it even possible for someone to be this good of a girl?! Y-You know...maybe I should just let her cook for us? It's been so long, after all! And who knows, maybe a little time away from the stove's all she needed to recover from her cheftastrophic nature...?* I found myself teetering upon the brink of temptation...but then I glanced behind me.

"Really...?" sighed Sakura from the kitchen's entrance, as calm and cool as ever. Which, for the record, is another side of her that I just can't get enough of! "Look, Aoi, just let her cook tonight. Okay?"

"Aww... But I—"

"You like Yotsuba's cooking, right?"

"Yeah! I love her food!" said Aoi with a big ole smile that nearly knocked me to the floor. *Oh, god, my heart... Keep it together, me! She said she loves my cooking, not me! B-But, I mean, that doesn't mean she doesn't love me too! That's still on the table! Still too early to judge!*

"Y-Yeah, listen to Sakura, Aoi!" I said. "You can just leave it to—"

"C'mon, let's play some games while we wait," said Sakura, cutting off my one last desperate Hail Mary before I could even let it fly. "I bet you're up for that one racing game you love, right?"

“Ooh, yeah! Let’s play!” replied Aoi, instantly giving in to temptation and skipping out of the kitchen.

“Kay, all yours,” said Sakura, following along right after her.

“Right! I have it under control!” *No way am I letting the fact that I was kinda useless back there get me down! I might be, y’know, maybe just a little on the pessimistic side of things when I’m out and about, but when I’m at home I’m the ever-reliable older sister to the bitter end!*

Or, well, I would’ve liked to say I was pulling that off, anyway. At the absolute least, Aoi had said that she loved my cooking, and that meant that I had no reason to hold myself back! It was time to go all out!

“Hey, Yotsuba?”

“Oh, Sakura?” I’d thought she’d already left, but when I looked back, she was poking her head halfway through the door.

“Umm... So...”

“What is it?”

“I, umm...too,” she finally spat out in a barely audible whisper, eyes glued to the floor and ears red with embarrassment. Then she beat a hasty retreat.

I, on the other hand, stood stock-still, gaping in shock. Her last sentence had been so quiet that I probably would’ve missed it nine times out of ten, but somehow, I’d just barely managed to pick it up.

I love your cooking too.

That was definitely what she’d said. I was positive.

“Heh... Heh heh heh!” I laughed as the gears in my brain clicked into place and I finally registered the meaning of her words. “Heh heh... Ha ha ha ha...”

This surge of motivation... Nothing can stop me now! Nothing!

“AHHAA HA HA HA HA HA!!!” I bellowed uproariously!

I heard a couple shouts from the living room—something to the tune of “Shut up in there!” and “Oh no, she’s going crazy!” I think—but to my ears, they sounded like nothing less than the heraldic trumpets of a host of angels!

“All *right*! Your big sis is going *all out* tonight!” I was charged to the max with enough magical power to shock the socks off the toughest of magical girls! I laid hands on the pile of ingredients before me...

“Yotsuba...you overdid it.”

“Is it somebody’s birthday today...?”

And yet when I presented my little sisters—the little sisters who *supposedly* loved my cooking—with their rice omelets topped with thick, luscious beef stew, they just cringed at me in horror.



“Bwaaah...”

I made the *weirdest* groaning noise as I collapsed into bed. Dinner was over and I’d taken my bath for the evening, letting me finally liberate myself from the ever-oppressive need to stand upright, and oh *boy* did it feel incredible. *I was born for this moment, I swear.*

Between everything that had happened with Momose and Aiba and the fact that I’d gone ever so slightly overboard on dinner, I was completely tapped out. I could hear my parents arriving home for the evening, but I didn’t even have the energy left to get up and say hi to them.

“Man...this was such a good day,” I mumbled to myself, dozing off as I stared at my phone. I’d already set the picture that Aiba took earlier in the day as my background. From then on, whenever I turned on my phone, I’d remember everything that happened today. That was sure to pick my mood up no matter *what* I was going through.

“I hope I get to have another day like this, eventually. And someday...”
Someday I’ll get to call Momose Yuna, and Aiba Rinka... That’d be so nice...but isn’t that just too unrealistic of a wish for me?

“Oh, I know—maybe I should practice saying their names in advance!” I rolled onto my back and held up my phone above me to help get in the spirit of the drill. There they were, right in front of me...I was all ready to go...and then, all of a sudden, I sat up!

“Sakura, Aoi! What’re you two peeking into my room for?!” *I know you’re lurking right outside my door! My big-sister ESP means you’ll never get the jump on me—I’m always watching! Okay, wow, that sounded so much weirder than I thought it would!*

“You’re the one who was rolling around on her bed and mumbling all sorts of weird, creepy stuff to herself,” said Sakura.

“Wait, I was?! I said that stuff out loud?!”

“Yotsuba, did you get a boyfriend?! Or did somebody ask you out?!” Aoi shouted.

“No and no!” *Why do you sound so distraught, and why am I the one who has to explain herself here?! I guess the fact that I was about to practice saying my friends’ first names is unbelievably cringey, but still!* “But no, seriously, was I actually being too loud?” I asked. “I wasn’t distracting you from studying or anything, right?” When all was said and done, I was way more worried about being a nuisance than I was about whether or not they really thought I was gross. Sakura and Aoi shared the room next to mine. It felt sorta unfair that I was the only one who got a room all to myself—by which I mean, it made me feel kinda sad and lonely—but that wasn’t a valid excuse for me to go distracting my sisters while they were trying to focus!

“Not really. You weren’t *loud* or anything,” said Sakura.

Huh? Really? But then why were you peeking into my room and calling me out for being a creeper...? Wait—no way?! “Did you wanna ask me a question about your schoolwork?! That’s gotta be it, yeah! Go on, shoot! I’ll answer anything! Your big sister’s a real live high schooler, you know!”

“If I needed to ask a question about my schoolwork, I’d ask Aoi, not you.”

“But she’s *younger* than you!”

“I think that if I had a question stumping me, I’d probably ask Sakura too,” added Aoi.

“Yeah, good call,” I mumbled. Tragically—or maybe I should say fortunately—Sakura and Aoi were on a totally different level from me when it came to smarts. Sakura in particular had made it her goal to get into Eichou High, just

like me, and was studying her butt off already with rapid gains in her grades to show for it. She was worlds ahead of a certain someone who'd gotten in by rolling a pencil around on her desk!

"Let's not bother her, Aoi," said Sakura. "I'm sure she's really busy fantasizing or whatever."

"I-I wasn't fantasizing!"

"Wait, do you *really* have a boyfriend, then?" asked Aoi. "I thought I heard you say something about calling someone by their first name..."

"Ah, no, that was...I was, umm...fantasizing. Yup."

"Ah, I knew it! I mean, there's no way you'd really get a boyfriend!"

"Gwaaaugh?!" Aoi sounded just so happy to hear that news, and her ebullient response dealt critical damage to my psyche. It was funny—I could give *myself* crap for being unpopular all day long and not lose a single point of HP, but the second one of my beloved little sisters brought it up, it became my one greatest weakness. It was like she'd disavowed my very existence... *The pain...*

"Don't worry about it," said Sakura. "Even if you never, ever date anybody, you'll still have us as your sisters, at least."

"Th-That's great, really...but, umm, Sakura? You're not *trying* to rub salt in the wound, are you? 'Cause you're *kinda* making it sound like you're convinced I'll never get a date for as long as I live... I'm just imagining that, right?"

"Okay, night, Yotsuba!"

"Good niight!" Aoi chimed in.

In a moment of pure coldheartedness, my little sisters cut the conversation off and left the room without another word.

In the end, I was left grievously wounded and down for the count. *They do sort of have a point, right? It's weird that a high schooler in the prime of her life like me hasn't had any heart-throbbing romantic moments, right?*

Like, I get that I'm probably waaay outside of the strike zone for pretty much all the guys at school. That just makes sense. But...just hypothetically...what

about, y'know, girls? Like the Sacrosanct, and all that...?

I shook my head. "No way, no way! That only works because it's *those two!*"
Yeah, there's no doubt about it. I'm just not cut out for romance. I'll live my life as an eternal spinster, imposing on my family to the bitter end.

It had been a long, long day, full of all sorts of fun and excitement, but in the end it wrapped up in the most *me* way possible: with a sudden bout of faint but nagging anxiety about the future. *Ugh...*

Chapter 2: The Day the Sacrosanct Split Up?!

“All right, class, I’ll be passing your midterms back now.”

The day after I watched Aiba become the MVP of her practice game, ate ice cream with her and Momose, and had my very existence disavowed by my little sisters (okay, yes, maybe I *am* being a little melodramatic), my homeroom teacher casually uttered a phrase that made me immediately clutch at my head in despair. Our midterms had taken place at the end of May, and it was finally time for us to learn how we’d scored on them.

“Your answer sheets have your overall placement within your year written on them,” our teacher continued. “Please take note of how you’re doing compared to your peers and use that knowledge to assess how much you’ll need to step up your studies moving forward. I think I already mentioned this yesterday, but we’ll be using the next several lessons to go over the problems on your tests, so make sure to bring both the answer sheets I’m giving back to you now *and* the question sheets. I’ll be calling you up to collect your papers in alphabetical order.”

With that, our teacher started handing back our tests. She’d given pretty much exactly the same speech every time we got tests back since last year, and it felt like the whole process was just rote to her.

Anyway, you might expect a prep school full of honor students to take the whole “getting our grades back and learning our ranking” process pretty seriously, but no, the general atmosphere of our class was just as boisterous as it had been in the public middle school I’d attended. A few students were betting on who had ranked higher on the tests, and others were eagerly comparing their answer sheets with each other. I, meanwhile, was lying prone on my desk with my crumpled-up answer sheet clutched in one hand, doing my best to shut out the outside world entirely.

“Umm... Are you all right?” asked Momose.

“I’ve gotten pretty used to seeing you in that pose,” chuckled Aiba.

Normally I'd appreciate their concern, but today, it cut like a knife.



“That’s a good point—you get so depressed about your grades every time you get them back, Yotsuba! Haven’t you gotten used to it by now?”

“Hold up, Yuna, don’t encourage her! She’d be in deep trouble if she got used to this.”

“You think? My rank in class always stays just about the same every test, just like hers, and *I’m* totally used to it.”

“Are you *trying* to make me feel even worse?!” I snapped, sitting bolt upright. *It’s hard to appreciate this sort of concern when these two are the ones giving it to me! Especially Momose the natural-born genius!*

“Oh, she’s back with us,” commented Momose in the sort of blasé tone that let you know she was very aware that none of this was *her* problem. “Let’s have a look!” she exclaimed, snatching the answer sheet out of my hand, uncrumpling it without so much as a single thought spared for my dignity, then sighing. “Yes, this really *is* the same as always, isn’t it...? That’s so, well...so *you*, Yotsuba.”

“Ugggh,” I groaned pathetically.

“I took first place in the ranks, by the way!” Momose continued with a proud chuckle. “Feel like praising me?”

“That’s so *you*, Momose...” I sighed.

There were 128 students in the second year at our school, and Yuna Momose unquestionably had the best grades out of all of us. *Somehow*, she’d managed to get the top score on every single test we’d taken! She was a true prodigy—a veritable genius!

The *worst* grades out of all 128 of us, on the other hand, belonged just as firmly to a certain girl named Yotsuba Hazama. *Somehow*, I’d managed to stay the worst of the worst on every single test we’d taken. I guess you could call me a genius as well, in a certain sense of the word. According to our teachers, I was breaking new ground in the realm of bad scores. Eichou High had never seen a student manage to fail *every* subject so consistently since its founding. I was, in short, rapidly carving out my own corner of my school’s history books!

My only salvation—or the closest thing I had to it—was the fact that Eichou was such an elite school that its administrators had never anticipated a student like me somehow slipping in, and there weren't actually any provisions written into the school's policies for holding back or expelling students on account of bad grades. Thanks to that handy little oversight, I'd managed to move up to the second year even as my marks remained as appalling as ever.

To be clear, it wasn't like I faced *no* consequences for my grades. I had to suffer through an endless gauntlet of makeup lessons, for one thing, and my relationship with Miss Miki Abiko, my homeroom teacher for two years running and the woman responsible for administering said makeup lessons...wasn't as bad as you might have expected, actually? The opposite, if anything—all those extra one-on-one lessons had led to us getting along surprisingly well.

The dull, disinterested tone of the speech she'd given before handing our tests back was a pretty representative example of what sort of person Miss Abiko was. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that she could be downright robotic sometimes. Her suits were always perfectly pressed, her posture was always on point, her hair was always tied up just right, she wore glasses, and she was quite pretty to boot. All those traits came together to give her a sort of unapproachable aura, and at first, I'd assumed her to be a cold, unfeeling person. I was actually sorta scared of her. Eventually, though, I figured out that she was just a little too tense and too serious for her own good. At heart, she was actually a really nice person! She was always direct and earnest with me and never condescended, in spite of my status as a borderline washout. She even smiled every once in a while, though only when we were alone together in my makeup lessons! We got along so well that I'd even taken to calling her by her first name when we were alone, of all things, the thought of which was enough to make me grin and chuckle to myself.

"Hey, Yotsuba! Are you even listening?" Momose gave the back of my head a gentle slap, bringing me back to reality. Whoops! "You *do* understand how important this is, right?" she continued. "The summer of your second year in high school is *huge*!"

"Bwuh? Summer?" I repeated. It was early June, and we still had almost two months left before summer break, so I had no idea what she was talking about.

“At this rate you’re *definitely* going to fail your finals, right? That means you’ll end up having makeup lessons over the summer, right?” pressed Momose.

“Y-Yeah,” I admitted. “I mean, that’s exactly what happened last year.” Our school didn’t actually impose that sort of remedial course on you if you failed your midterms. There just wasn’t any time for makeup work while normal classes were still going on, after all. Over summer vacation, however, there was *plenty* of time to catch the slackers up. Long story short: if I really worked my butt off studying for my finals, there was technically still a chance that I could be spared from spending my summer in a classroom.

“Next summer you’ll be preparing for your college entrance exams! That means you’ll spend all your time going to cram school and taking practice tests—study, study, study, all the time! This year’s your *last chance* to spend the summer goofing off! You don’t have *time* to waste on some stupid makeup lessons!” shouted Momose, punctuating her speech by slamming her hand down on my desk.

O-Oh, jeez. I definitely can’t tell her that I was just thinking about how having more makeup lessons will let me get even friendlier with my teacher!

“Oh, I know! Why don’t the three of us go on a trip over the summer?” suggested Aiba, who seemed to share Momose’s opinion. Incidentally, Aiba wasn’t *just* an omnitalented athlete—she also got pretty darn good grades, and always ranked somewhere between tenth and twentieth in our year. Needless to say, *she* had never failed any subjects.

“Yes!” shouted Momose. “Exactly! We have to get the most out of this summer, and that means that *you* have to do everything you can to prepare for finals while you still have time! Listen up, Yotsuba: we’re getting together to study tomorrow, and you don’t get to refuse!”

“Huuuh?!” I shouted in shock and confusion...and for some reason, found Aiba shouting right along with me.

“But I was planning on hanging out with her tomorrow,” Aiba grumbled.

“Wait, so this is the first you’re hearing of this study session too?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Aiba confirmed with a nod. “You know that workout game you said

you wanted to try the other day? I got my hands on a copy, so I was going to invite you over to play it.”

“Seriously?! The one that’s so popular, you have to enter a lottery to even get the *chance* to buy a copy?!”

“Heh heh heh—that’s right, and guess who won that lottery just the other day?” Aiba boasted with her head held high.

Oh, wow! I was so impressed that Aiba was practically shining with an aura of brilliance in my eyes!

“Hold up a second, Rinka!” snapped Momose. “Don’t you go tempting Yotsuba! Don’t you think she should be prioritizing what’s really important right now?”

“C-C’mon, Momose, it couldn’t hurt to play just a *little*, right...?” I said with a hopeful little giggle.

“Yotsuba, I’m saying this for *your* sake, you know?” Momose replied with a stern glare, then sighed. “Oh, *fine*... Tomorrow’s Saturday, so it’s not like we have school anyway. You’ll study with me in the afternoon, then go over to play games with Rinka after we’re finished. I think everyone can agree on that schedule.”

“Hmph... Why do *you* get to go first?” said Aiba with a frown.

“Because that’s the only way this will work at all! You said you’d be playing a *workout* game, right? Yotsuba’s not even close to athletic and has *no* stamina! If she plays that game first, then she’ll do more sleeping than studying when she finally makes it to my place.”

“Ugh!” I grunted. Momose had wielded her blade of reason with expert precision and plunged it right into my self-esteem.

She was, of course, totally right. Even Aiba nodded and said, “Okay, that’s fair enough...”

Huh? Wait a second...it almost sounds like the three of us aren’t going to be doing all this stuff together?

“All right! That sounds like a plan, then!” said Momose, wrapping up the

conversation before I had the chance to voice my doubts.



Saturday arrived before I knew it, and I found myself standing in front of my mirror, giving myself one last look-over and trying to hype myself up for the day ahead.

“Hmm... All right, that should do it!” I told myself. Was it weird for me to have to hype myself up for something as simple as hanging out with my friends on the weekend? Maybe, but, I mean, the friends in question were Momose and Aiba! Hype was an *absolute* requirement, for sure! It would be for anyone, and it was *especially* so for a faceless bystander like me!

I would’ve preferred to stop by an actual salon before heading over to Momose’s place, honestly, but I just didn’t have the time, so I’d ended up settling for giving my hair a thorough combing. Hopefully that would be good enough—plus a morning shower and shampoo, of course!

My outfit was a little easier, at least. Momose had told me to come in my uniform, so I didn’t have to put myself through the nerve-racking stress of agonizing over my personal clothing and trying to pick out something that wouldn’t make me look like an unfashionable slob. Her logic was that I’d be wearing my uniform when I took the test, so it’d be best to study in my uniform as well for the sake of acclimation! I didn’t know if there was actually any scientific basis to that theory, but if Momose believed it, I figured it probably *had* to be true. For one thing, she was the top student in our grade, and for another, she was pretty! If a pretty girl says it, you can generally assume that it’s probably true!

“*Sakuraaa!* Yotsuba’s getting ready for a daaate!”

“Aoi?!” I squealed in surprise. I had no clue how long ago she’d cracked the bathroom door and started spying on me, but the jig was up and I could already hear the dull, rapid thud of Sakura’s footsteps.

“A *date*?! What?!” shouted Sakura as she burst onto the scene! She must’ve been asleep until just moments before—she had a crazy case of bed head, and her pajamas were in such a state of disarray they were barely covering her up at all. I had *no* clue what had her in such a fluster. “Is it true, Yotsuba?! Are you

really going on a date?!” she asked—demanded, really—without missing a beat.

Why am I being interrogated? “N-Nuh-uh, nope, ain’t goin’ on no dates here!” I insisted.

“I smell a rat—and it’s a rat who thinks she can distract me by putting on a phony accent!”

“I was just thinking about how phony it sounded too, but that’s not what I was going for, I swear!”

Maybe it was only natural that Sakura would find my seemingly pre-date-like preparations suspicious. After all, I’d never been on anything even *close* to a date up to that point! Not once in my whole life! Sakura and Aoi, on the other hand, were both *way* cuter than me, and despite also being younger than me, they’d both apparently been asked out a bunch of times. In their eyes, I probably looked like some sort of weird, dateless cryptid! Me getting a date was about as likely as a panda plummeting down from the sky, plunging into the ocean, and surfing all the way to shore. In other words: Completely impossible. Completely, tragically impossible.

“I’m just going over to a friend’s house, that’s all,” I explained.

“A *friend*?!” exclaimed both of them in unison.

“You don’t have to be *that* surprised, jeez! It’s not like I’ve never gone out to see a friend before, right?!”

“But when you put *that* much effort into getting ready, it really does make you look like you’re prettying up for a date,” noted Aoi. “It’s weird that you’re wearing your uniform on a weekend too... Are you sure you’re going to meet a friend? Not a *very special* friend?”

“L-Let’s just ignore the whole uniform thing for now,” I said, “but as for the rest, you like to get prettied up when *you* go out to meet your friends too, don’t you, Aoi?”

Aoi’s mouth snapped shut and she gulped. Her inner thoughts *instantly* showed on her face, which really drove in the fact that we were related. Aoi and I were exactly the same in a lot of respects, really. Take the time the two of us had gone out to see a movie together, for instance: she’d ended up spending a

whole two hours picking out her outfit, and *another* hour on top of that in front of the mirror! “B-But,” stammered Aoi, “But I was just...”

“*Yotsuba*,” snapped Sakura, “stop bullying Aoi!”

“Huh?! But I wasn’t! Wait, was I?! I’m sorry, Aoi! I wasn’t trying to accuse you of anything!”

“Then what *were* you saying?” asked Sakura.

“Just that we’re all the same! Like, the Hazama sisters have ‘spending ages getting ready for outings’ written into our DNA! You’re the same way, aren’t you, Sakura?! You took the time to change into going-out clothes and pretty yourself up the other day when we were just going to a *convenience store* together!”

“Gah!” Sakura reeled and her face flushed red.

“Heck, even your *indoor* clothes feel really fancy these days. It’s like you’re *always* trying to look your best... It’s pretty rare seeing you the way you look now, actually,” I noted, once again taking note of the less-than-put-together pajama look she had going. Sakura *usually* got changed in her room, so I almost never got to see her looking this unkempt. She hadn’t been like that when she was little, though. The opposite, even—she used to get up in the morning, totter over into my room, crawl into my bed, hug me, and fall right back asleep. If her guard was raised high up now, then she hadn’t even *had* a guard back then.

“Ugh... Graaah!” Sakura howled, blushing as bright as could be and even tearing up a little. It seemed that I’d inadvertently *really* embarrassed her.

Wait a second... If she’s taking all of this this seriously, then does that mean...? N-No way! “Don’t tell me *you’re* the one who has a boyfriend, Sakura?!”

“Huuuh?!” said Sakura, doing a double take.

“Wait, you do?!” exclaimed Aoi, rounding on her other sister. I’d managed to escape the center of attention and leave Sakura there in my place!

“O-Of course I don’t! What kind of stupid question is—” Sakura started to

snap, but Aoi was already too busy jumping to her own conclusions!

“Oh, wow, I had *no* idea,” she said. “You really got yourself a boyfriend! Oh, wait—doesn’t that mean you’ll have a hard time calling him at night, since we share a room?! Ooh, I know, I know—we should give you your own room, and I can share a room with Yotsuba instead! It’s not like *she* has a boyfriend, after all!”

Aoi prattled on and on. *Why does she sound so weirdly happy about this? Or wait—is she just teasing Sakura?* It was only natural she’d be a little closer with Sakura than she was with me, since those two were only a year apart in age. It made sense that Aoi would be a bit more willing to go for that sort of good-natured joking around with her than with me, but it still made me feel just a little bit lonely.

Come to think of it...maybe if I really did get the chance to share a room with Aoi, the two of us could end up that close as well? Sakura’s studying for her tests, anyway, so it’d probably be really convenient for her to have her own space where she can—

“Quit joking around, Aoi!” Sakura snapped in such a serious tone that Aoi shrank back reflexively. *Eek!* “We promised we wouldn’t try to steal a march on each other, didn’t we?”

“H-Hee hee hee...” Aoi awkwardly tittered.

Steal a march on each other? Over what? It sure looks like Aoi knows what she’s talking about, at least... Ah, I get it! “‘Stealing a march,’ huh? Sakura...”

“Huh? Ah!” exclaimed Sakura, flapping her hands in the air in a panic. “No, umm, i-it’s not what you think, I swear!”

I just strode right up to her...and hugged her as hard as I could.

“?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?”

“I get it, Sakura. You’ve really grown up, haven’t you? I’m so proud of you!”

“Wha, wh-wh-wh... What are you *talking* about?!”

“Oh, you don’t have to be embarrassed about it! You just don’t want to steal a march on Aoi by being the only one to get a room of your own, right?”

“Huh...? *Huh?*”

“It feels like just yesterday that you and Aoi were getting in fights over the cookies I baked for you, but look at you now! You’ve grown into such a good kid! I’m so, so proud to be your big sister, Sakura! Maybe a little sad too, though, in that empty-nester sort of way.” I squeezed Sakura a bit tighter, giving her a gentle pat on the head. She’d really stiffened up at first, but she was gradually starting to relax and timidly return the hug when...

“Saaakuuuraaa?”

“*Eek!*”

...Aoi called out to her, her voice laced with an astonishing amount of pressure, and Sakura stiffened right back up again.

“That’s right! We agreed not to steal a march on each other...*didn’t we?*” said Aoi, smiling the brightest and cheeriest smile I’d ever seen her fake.

Sakura twitched, then jumped free of my arms. “N-No, I wasn’t...it’s not what you think, okay?! That was just—”

“*What’s* not what I think?” asked Aoi. “Come on, explain, Sakura!”

“H-Hey, what’s going on, Aoi?” I asked. I was *totally* lost.

“Hmm? Oh, nothing you have to worry about, Yotsuba! Just a little something between the two of us. Let’s talk it over, okay, Sakura?”

“What, like, *now*? But Yotsuba’s gonna—hey! Stop tugging me!”

Aoi grabbed Sakura by the collar and dragged her away, smiling in that disconcertingly intimidating way all the while. I tended to forget that Aoi had that side to her personality. She was always so nice and calm and happy, and loved being doted on, and had the most beautiful personality (And looks! Beauty across the board!), but all of that just made her all the scarier when she got mad. What I still didn’t get was, what part of the exchange she’d had with Sakura had set her off like that...?

“Gah, wait, crap! I’m out of time!”

I was still curious about what my sisters’ deal was, but I had a rendezvous to keep with Momose, and no time to waste! I checked myself in the mirror one

last time, just for good measure, then started rushing through the rest of my preparations as fast as I could.



Momose was the sort of girl that *most* girls want to become when they grow up. She was as happy and radiant as could be—no, she was downright angelic! Always kind, always gentle, always smelling faintly of flowers, and with a voice sweet enough to give you cavities. I don't think *anyone* could handle her smile without going at least a little weak in the knees. Believe me, I know that very well...

"Ah, Yotsuba! You made it!"

After all, on that day, I had a total monopoly on that smile of hers!

"G-Good morning, Momose!"

"C'mon, don't just stand out there—come in!" said Momose, smiling so brightly you'd have thought she was meeting her lover for a date as she pulled me by the arm into her house.

Thinking back on it, although that wasn't my first time going over to Momose's house, it *was* the first time I'd been over without Aiba there with me. Honestly, in the past, it had always felt like I was just tagging along with Aiba while she visited Momose, so I was more than a little surprised to see Momose grinning as cheerfully as ever when I was the only one around to appreciate it. The thought that her smile was just for me this time made my heart skip a beat.

As if that weren't enough, she looked even cuter than usual that day, despite wearing her school uniform in solidarity with me! She'd put on a bit of makeup, from the look of things, and the results were so incredibly effective they'd reduced my internal monologue's vocabulary to "cute," "holy crap," and "I wanna take her home with me."

Momose led me along into her house. For a moment I felt almost like a prince, getting dragged about here and there by a willful princess, but then, oh *crap*, I accidentally glanced into a nearby mirror and ruined the whole shebang. It was hard to stay in the spirit of things when instead of a prince, Rando Schoolgirl A was reflected back at me. I shook my head and tried to start a

conversation, saying the first thing that sprang to mind. “Not sure why, but you look really cute today, Momose!”

“Oh, really? Hee hee hee—well, you’re *always* cute, Yotsuba!” she replied with a grin.

Yeah, a princess like her really does have a special sort of presence. I knew that the part about me always being cute was just flattery, of course, but it still put a grin on my face.

“All right! It’s time to hit the books and make sure you don’t fail a single subject!”

Aaand just like that, I was back in the real world again.

The first subject Momose chose for me to focus on was modern Japanese. She’d decided to have me solve some reading-comprehension problems, specifically.

“We’ll have to study a wide range of problems for the rest of our subjects, but the fundamentals of reading-comprehension problems are always the same! If you know how to solve one, you know how to solve all of them! You just need to learn the trick, that’s all. You’ll be having fun in no time, I’m sure of it!” said Momose, smiling like an angel as she plopped a hellishly thick pile of practice worksheets onto the table in front of me.

I was happy she’d gone out of her way to prepare them for me, sure... But oh god, the *pressure*! Momose sat across from me with a stopwatch as I worked, timing me as I slogged through the problems. The one issue: I couldn’t focus at *all*! I mean, she was *right* there on the other side of the table the *entire* time! All I had to do to behold her lovely countenance was tilt my head up ever so slightly, and every time I slipped up and gave in to the temptation, our eyes would meet without fail! I didn’t know if it was just a coincidence, or if she could somehow *sense* when I was looking at her, but regardless, each and every time she’d give me another of those incredible grins.

Seriously, how the heck was I supposed to study in an environment like *that*?! I was more interested in giving my full attention to *her* than to the worksheets! Of course, I knew for a fact that if I let myself focus on her like that, I’d be dead

within the hour. My heart simply couldn't take it, and even if I managed to survive the cardiac arrest, the guilt I felt for staring at her would be along to finish me off before I knew it. In any case, there's pretty much no way I could've given my work a hundred percent of my attention while I was busy agonizing over all *that* stuff, and my distraction took its toll.

"Hmm," said Momose as she graded my first round of practice questions with a frown. "This is *way* worse than I thought it'd—ah! Sorry, I didn't mean it like that!"

"N-Nah, it's fine," I replied weakly. Her consideration was painful. In fact, if it were possible to die of a consideration overdose, it felt like I was already most of the way there.

"W-Well, nobody's good at this sort of thing when they're just starting out!" said Momose. "Right, that's the ticket. This just means you have plenty of room to grow! Right, for sure. Probably. In theory, anyway..."

Is it just me, or is she losing confidence in me before my very eyes?!

"A-Anyway, before I go over your answers with you, let's take a minute to talk about those fundamentals and tricks I mentioned!" Momose rallied, trying to salvage the situation. Unfortunately, her little show of courage just made me feel worse.

Kill me... Please, somebody, just end it...

My thoughts on everything I'd been taught after her lecture concluded: *Momose is, like, literally an actual angel.*

Wait, no! That's not what I meant to say! I mean, it's also true, but what I was *actually* going for was: *Momose is, like, straight up 10/10 best person.*

...Which was both barely any different than the first thing I said, and also proved that my powers of expression were dribbling down the stupidity drain at an alarming rate. Still, though, it was *also* totally true, beyond a shadow of a doubt. She taught me all sorts of tricks and techniques, like how it's best to start out by just skimming the passage, and how pieces of vocabulary that turn up over and over are probably important, so I should focus on them.

If I'd gotten that sort of advice from any other high schooler, I probably wouldn't have made much of it at all, but the thing is, I'd *never* heard Momose talk about study techniques like that before. She'd been the best student in our year for as long as I'd known her, of course, but previously, whenever I asked her how to solve certain problems, she'd say something along the lines of "you just sorta *do* it" and that would be that.

It wasn't that she didn't *understand* the problem, by any means—quite the opposite. It was that to Momose, things like efficient study techniques, optimal methods of solving problems, and approaching tests in the right frame of mind all came as naturally as breathing. She didn't understand *not* understanding the problems we were given, which meant that she couldn't put herself in the mindset of a person who didn't have a clue. She was, in short, a genius.

I forget when exactly, but once, Momose had all but broken down in tears while we were trying to study together. "I'm sorry, Yotsuba," she'd said, "I'm a terrible teacher! I'm so, so sorry!" Aiba had been with us at the time, and the two of us had done our best to console Momose, but to be honest, I didn't think it was anything *she* had to cry over in the first place. It wasn't *her* fault—she was just too nice for her own good. *I* was the one who didn't get it, and if anything, she should've blamed *me*, but of course she'd never even think to do such a thing. She'd tried so hard to put herself on my level, she'd expected so much of herself, and in the end she'd hurt herself in the process...

And yet here she was now, briskly and easily teaching me how to solve problem after problem without overwhelming me *or* breaking a sweat! I was seriously moved. "Oh, wow," I said, "that was so easy to understand! You're amazing, Momose!"

"O-Oh? Hee hee hee, that's good to hear," she replied, a little bashfully.

"I have a feeling I'm gonna ace my next test, at this rate!"

"Okay, now you're getting ahead of yourself! Sheesh, Yotsuba, you're way too impulsive for your own good," Momose grumbled as she fiddled awkwardly with her hair. "Okay, let's review your answers from the practice problems now! We'll start with...ah, okay, let's look at this 'how did the author feel when they wrote this passage' problem."

“Okay!”

“You wrote, ‘The author wasn’t sure what direction they wanted to take the story in, but I think they made a good decision in the end.’” Momose paused, then sighed. “If you’re going to write an obviously wrong answer, couldn’t you have just gone with ‘the author was hungry’ and saved yourself the trouble?”

“You’re mad that I got it wrong in the wrong way?! And wait, you mean that *wasn’t* the right answer...?”

“Of course not. You remember what I told you a moment ago? Reading-comprehension problems are basically puzzles. I think the fact that you were trying to put yourself in the author’s shoes is wonderful, and that sort of attitude is *exactly* what I like so much about—e-er, I mean, it was a good attitude to go into the problem with! But the thing is, the answer that the *test’s* author was looking for will always be hidden somewhere within the text itself. Here’s where it was for this passage,” she said, circling a line.

Oh, I get it... Looking at the line in a new light, I actually *could* see how it sort of applied to the question.

“Of course,” Momose continued, “if your teacher’s an amateur novelist, they might give you a few pity points for trying to see things from the author’s perspective, at least.”

“Oh, that makes sense... I’ll ask our teacher if they’re a writer, in that case!”

“Oh, *no*, you won’t!” Momose snapped, thwacking me on the head with a rolled-up notebook. “Put yourselves in your *teacher’s* shoes this time! You, the biggest problem student in their class, finally walk up to them to ask a question...and that question turns out to be, ‘Do you write novels in your spare time?’ Can you *imagine* how much of a letdown that would be?”



“I, uh, I guess...? Wait, I’m a problem student?”

“Did you really think there was any chance you *weren’t*? You’re the only student in our whole school who fails so consistently. Your grades are genuinely stunning.”

“Uggaugh,” I gurgled.

“It’ll be fine, though!” Momose declared as she gave her chest a confident thump. “I’m here for you, after all!”

“Momose!” I was incredibly reassured, even though I also knew that, really, she probably had *no* desire to be the personal tutor for the worst student in her whole grade. I had a feeling that dealing with my nonsense was probably even harder than keeping the number-one spot she’d been monopolizing. Still, though, her smile sent a clear message: it told me that she’d never abandon me, no matter what I put her through. “Thank you, Momose,” I blubbered. “Thank you so much...”

“Huh?! Why are you *crying*?!”

“I’m s-sorry, I’m just...I’m just s-so happy!” Momose had overcome her aversion to teaching, and she’d done it all for my sake. Not even my ever-present veil of low self-esteem could blind me to *that* truth! *Though, actually...maybe there’s some other reason why she’s doing this...? Wait. Am I being, like, super self-absorbed right now? Oh god, now I’m starting to get all nervous about it!*

“Dummy,” sighed Momose, her persistent smile taking on an edge of exasperation as she patted me on the head. “I’m doing this for *you*, you know?” she said, her voice boundlessly warm and kind.

It was strange. She’d always given me a *young* sort of impression—almost like one of my younger sisters, in a sense—but now I was seeing the truth of her personality...or maybe I should say a different side of her personality?

I had always played the role of the big sister, doing my best to be a pillar of reliability. However, I was also dumb, unathletic, and unable to live up to anyone’s expectations because nobody had any expectations for me in the first place—least of all myself. So having somebody treat me like that...having

somebody take on that reassuring role for me...well, let's just say it was *really* effective. It was something I'd never experienced before.

"I'm sorry, Momose," I mumbled.

"Oh, stop it, silly," she replied. "If you have to say something like that, at least make it a 'thank you' instead."

"Right... Thank you."

She just kept gently stroking my head...

...and in the heat of the moment, I couldn't stop the words "I love you, Momose" from slipping past my lips.

They were true, no doubt about it. If anything, the word "love" didn't seem sufficient. She was the best friend I could possibly ask for, and words just didn't do my feelings for her justice. I just couldn't describe how lucky I felt to have an incredible person like her as my friend!

As I was overcome with emotion, though, Momose's hand gradually came to a stop on my head. I felt her start to faintly tremble and looked up, and then...

"Sorry. I can't hold this back any longer."

The moment I looked up, I found Momose's face close to mine, *incredibly* close, and an instant later, something soft touched my lips.

Huh?

I couldn't process what was happening. I could see Momose's long, beautiful eyelashes right in front of me. I could feel each puff of breath from her nose on my skin. And most of all, I could feel that softness on my lips—a softness that, at this distance, even a moron like me realized could only possibly be one thing: *her* lips.

Momose was kissing me.

"Mmh..." She made a little noise that I *felt* more than I heard. It traveled through her mouth into mine, then up into my brain, which it promptly addled. The softness of her lips upon mine, the ticklish brush of her hair on my cheeks, the scent that wafted over me from her, the heat of her hand—I was drowning in a flood of sensation, and all of it traced back to a single girl named Yuna

Momose.

She didn't pull back after that first moment, and she didn't stop kissing me. She actually leaned in even further, if anything. I, on the other hand, had succeeded in analyzing the situation, but still wasn't anywhere even *close* to processing it, and ended up simply falling over backward with her on top of me.

"Yotsuba," said Momose as she looked down on me. She was on all fours, her gaze wavering in a way that the corner of my mind still capable of thought found strangely attractive. More than anything else, though, anxiety was written all over her face.

"I'm sorry," Momose said. "That came out of nowhere... I must have caught you so off guard... You can't have *wanted* that, right...?" She sounded choked up, and tears were beginning to pool in the corners of her eyes. I knew that look—it was a look that said she'd immediately regretted what she'd just done.

But, well...I *was* surprised, that's for sure, but the funny thing is that *not* wanting it had never even crossed my mind. In fact, I hadn't felt the slightest shred of distaste. A *girl* had kissed me, and she'd done it totally out of the blue, but I wasn't upset about it in the least.

"But I... I just," Momose continued, forcing her words out one by one, "I just can't keep it bottled up anymore! I... I..."

Her tears dripped down onto my cheeks. She was too beautiful for words, beautiful enough to take my breath away. The girl above me wasn't my friend Momose. She wasn't the girl who made up half of the Sacrosanct either.

She was somebody totally new—a Yuna Momose that I'd never known until this very moment.

"I love you, Yotsuba. And not as a friend... I love you as a girl."

I knew without question that when she said "love," it meant something very different from what I'd said moments before. Her words were so direct, so earnest, that they left no room for doubt or escape, piercing into my heart without mercy.

"Yotsuba...I want to go out with you," Momose continued. "Part of me always wondered if maybe it wasn't normal for girls to do these things with each other,

and I kept my feelings bottled up for so long...but I love you too much to manage that anymore! I love you so much, I can't stand it!"

Her every word landed with the impact of a freight train. The first time I'd been asked out in my whole life, and the one doing the asking was the cutest, most perfect girl on the planet. It was a truth too outrageous to be believed, and all I could do in the face of it was wordlessly return her gaze...but I couldn't keep that up for long. Momose said that she wanted to go out with me. With *me*! And that meant I had to respond. I had to tell her how I felt about her... But how *did* I feel about her?

"No, Yotsuba! Don't do it! Get a hold of yourself!"

Whahuh?! Is that you, my inner angel?!

"You know the score deep down, don't you?! Society—no, the world will never accept this! They ship Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba, not Yuna Momose and you!"

Aiba...that's right! Momose already has Aiba, doesn't she?

"A pair of beautiful young maidens. A lovely princess and her gallant prince. They're the most perfect, ultimate, superlatively sublime pair of childhood friends to ever form a yuri couple! They are the Sacrosanct, and you mustn't blemish their relationship!"

That's right... The Sacrosanct must never be corrupted...

"You have to understand, Yotsuba. You are an irregular factor in Yuna Momose's life. The more perfect and flawless a person is, the more tempted they'll be to play with fire, and you are the fire! If you really are her friend, then isn't it your job to tell her that she's making a mistake?"

That's true, isn't it...? My inner angel's right! If I want to keep Momose's best interests in mind, then I can't let her involve herself any more intimately with somebody like—

"Hold it right there!!!"

Whaaa?!

"No, it can't be! Are you...Yotsuba's inner devil?!"

“You’re damn right I am!”

An inner devil?! I have one of those?!

“But that’s not all—I’m also the only one here who has justice on my side!”

“A devil like you dares to speak of justice?!”

“You bet I do! See, you, Angel? You’re Yotsuba’s sense of reason, basically. I guess you could also say you’re her sense of self-control.”

“Th-That’s right! That’s exactly what I am, so I’m obviously the one who’s—”

“Oh, no, you’re not! Yotsuba doesn’t need reason or self-control right now. No, she needs something dirtier, something raw! Yotsuba needs desire!”

Desire?! Wait, what happened to justice?!

“This isn’t about what you should do, Yotsuba. This is about what you want to do! What sort of relationship do you want with Yuna Momose? Are you planning on making some weak-ass excuse and letting her feelings go to waste? Or are you going to open up and be honest about how you really feel?”

How I really feel... M-Miss Devil, I...

“Gaaah! Why’re you calling your inner devil ‘Miss,’ Yotsuba?! L-Look, none of this changes the fact that it’s out of the question! The Sacrosanct—”

“And who are you to decide what is and isn’t out of the question when it comes to yuri, Angel?”

“Wha...?”

“You think all this ‘Sacrosanct’ crap makes Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba happy? You think it’s fun having everyone put you up on a high horse and never come anywhere close to you? Well, I think everyone treats them like a couple of lepers! Can you seriously tell me that you believe from the bottom of your heart that that’s right?!”

“Th-That’s not what I...”

That’s not exactly wrong, per se, but isn’t it kind of taking this logic to an extreme...?

“I happen to love yuri, but yuri doesn’t have to be something perfect and

pretty you keep locked away in a glass case! Yuri can be dirty, and messy, and complicated, and that's just friggin' fine! A flower isn't precious because it's beautiful—it's precious because it fought with all its heart and soul to bloom, and in the end, that's what really matters!"

Miss...Devil...

"Let's see this through, Yotsuba! You too, Angel! This is no time to sit around and indulge in reason, or common sense, or any of that bullshit! There's a whole new sort of yuri opening up before us...and that means there's only one answer you can possibly give her!"

Kra-kow! It felt like a bolt of lightning crashed down upon my head. I could feel my common sense—the one excuse that was holding me back—shatter into a million pieces. *That's right. Momose told me how she feels about me. She put her feelings out there, and now it's my turn to tell her my true feelings as well!*

I took a deep breath...and then I said it. "Me too."

Yuna blinked. "Huh?"

"I feel the same way, Momose... No—I love you too, Yuna!" I declared, my mouth moving faster than my brain could process.

"R-Really...?" said Yuna, her eyes wide open with stunned disbelief. And, well, maybe I was acting on impulse, but that didn't mean I wasn't being completely and totally honest. I'd just never known...or I guess I'd never noticed?

As it turned out, though, I was in love with Yuna. Not as a friend...I loved her in a deeper, more special way than that.

As that feeling grew more certain, more real within me, I reached out and wiped a tear from Yuna's cheek. "Yeah," I said, "really. I love you, for real, in the same way you love me."

Yuna gasped. "I-I can't...I can't believe it... Th-This is incredible, I... I love you... I love you, Yotsuba! I love you!" she sobbed, wiping fruitlessly at her tears.

And then we kissed again. And again. And again. Not as friends, this time, but as an honest-to-goodness couple, each kiss as hot, as sweet, and as passionate

as the feelings we held for each other.



“Okay, then... I’ll see you Monday!” said Yuna, fidgeting nervously as her cheeks lit up like a sunset. She’d followed me all the way to her front door to say goodbye.

It felt like I’d been under the influence of a magical spell that had only just worn off. Yuna looked just as cute, dainty, and princess-like as ever, and yet the dreamy look on her face also gave her a somehow sexy, somehow mature allure that I’d never been able to perceive before. If one of her fans saw her like that, they’d probably be sent crashing to the ground with a geyser-like nosebleed. I was barely able to keep myself from doing just that, in fact.

“See you then...Y-Yuna!” I awkwardly replied as I pulled my shoes on. After all that, calling her by her first name still made me feel a little nervous. *Come to think of it, wasn’t I supposed to be here to study? We sure didn’t do much of that in the end, huh?*

“Ah, Yotsuba!”

“Hmm?” I looked up from my shoes just in time for her to plant a quick peck on my lips, then pull back an instant later, smiling bashfully.

“Love you!” she said with a grin.

My face set itself aflame. It was like the heat from her lips had diffused all throughout the rest of me. Struck dumb in more ways than one, the best reply I could manage before I went on my way was a frantic nod.

As I stepped outside, the humid air felt like it was engulfing me. The rainy season had ended a short while ago, but the ambient moisture still lingered on. It felt like we’d spent a long, leisurely time in her house together, but somehow the day wasn’t over yet. To the contrary, I had another big event still left on my personal docket! After all, I was about to go hang out with Aiba!

I have to be honest—my state of mind was sort of all over the place. Don’t get me wrong, I was happy about getting to spend some time with her! Whatever went on between me and Yuna would never change the fact that Aiba was one of my dearest friends.

But that was *me*. What would *Aiba* have to say about all this? What if she really did have feelings for Yuna? What if, from her perspective, I was some random girl who'd appeared out of nowhere when she got into high school, only to steal her precious Yuna away from her...?

What if Aiba hates me for this?

I felt a hefty bead of sweat slowly drip its way down my back, and knew it had nothing to do with the brilliant glare of the sun that shone down upon me. I had two choices: I could tell Aiba that Yuna and I were dating, or I could act like nothing had happened and keep my mouth shut. I wanted to be with Yuna, yes, but I also wanted to stay friends with Aiba! I knew that was selfish of me, and I really did sort of hate myself for it.

Aiba's and Yuna's houses were right next to each other, so it only took a few seconds at most to walk from one to the other. No matter how slowly I plodded my way over, step by dragged-out step, it still couldn't possibly take any significant amount of time for me to reach my destination. Unfortunately, though, it *did* take more than enough time for the rush of self-esteem I'd gained when Yuna told me she loved me to fade away entirely. In the end, I pushed the call button on the intercom by Aiba's door without ever reaching a real decision.

Come on, I can't be like this! I have to tell her! Keeping quiet about it means I'd have to stay quiet about it and keep lying to her forever! Deep down, I knew that no amount of worrying was going to change the truth. I was scared about what would happen...but I was finally just moments away from resolving myself. I wanted to be honest with my friends, above all—

"Hey, Yotsuba! Come on in!"

"Ack!"

Aiba burst out from her front door without warning, a brilliant, spirited grin upon her face, and I nearly choked. She must've seen me through the little camera on the intercom!

"H-Hey, Aiba!" I managed to spit out as all that courage to tell her the truth I'd just mustered came crashing down around me.



“Hah, hah... Hngh! Mngghh!” *This is so! Much! Fun!!!!!!* I kinda hated the fact that my mindset was *that* easy to influence, but all it took was a little gamified exercise to make me feel much better about my little conundrum. “This is so great!” I exclaimed from atop the yoga mat Aiba had set me up on.

The game I was playing was designed to let just about anyone get a fun, straightforward workout at home. Apparently gamers these days have a tendency to be couch potatoes, so the game filled a major niche and had sold like hotcakes. It was out of stock pretty much everywhere you could look, and I’d been unable to get my hands on a copy even though I *really* wanted to try it.

Not being able to get a copy had made me go into spite mode and convince myself that it couldn’t really be *that* fun, but boy, was I ever wrong! It *felt* like I was just playing a game, and yet I was getting all sorts of muscle and cardio training while I was at it! Or at least, it made me feel like I was! I hadn’t exactly been getting enough exercise lately—or, really, I’d *never* gotten enough exercise or been even a little athletic—but even I found myself perfectly able to enjoy it. *This must be the power of technology!*

Aiba, who was watching me play, chuckled. “Well, I’m glad to hear it! Nice to see you having so much fun,” she said. We’d been taking turns to play, so she’d gotten just as much of a workout as I had and had worked up quite a sweat, but she didn’t look *tired* in the slightest.

Incidentally, Aiba had gone out of her way to wear her school uniform, just like Momose. Watching her do her thing, though, part of me had to question whether or not it was really the same uniform as mine at all. Eichou High had two uniforms, one designed with a standard dress-shirt collar and the other with a collar that looked more like a sailor uniform’s, and students were allowed to choose whichever they preferred when they enrolled in the school. The clerk at the store I got mine from had told me that both versions were light, comfortable, and made out of nice materials, so I’d chosen the sailor-uniform-esque one mostly on impulse. Aiba, however, had chosen the more dress-shirt-like one, and seeing the way it snapped crisply in the air as she moved around with the utmost of ease made part of me want to grumble that clearly, the two of us weren’t on an even playing field.

Yeah, I know, I know. It's absolutely true that we weren't on an even playing field, but our uniforms had absolutely nothing to do with it. Aiba really was just so light on her feet, just so elegant, that her movements couldn't possibly have looked more different than mine, even though we were playing the same game. She'd made it look downright artistic.

Aiba really is beautiful, isn't she? I thought, then chided myself internally for pointing out the obvious. She was tall, her figure was incredible, and her long ponytail gave her a certain athletic dignity that suited her perfectly. And yet in spite of the fact that she was so unapproachably gorgeous and cool, she could also be surprisingly absentminded and easy to catch off guard, which just added to her charm. The fact that I could play video games all alone with a girl as incredible as her was some seriously mind-blowing stuff.

"I thought it couldn't be *that* tough since it's just a game, but it's surprisingly tiring, isn't it?" commented Aiba.

"For real?" I replied. "You don't look tired at all to me, though."

"Ha ha ha! That just means I'm doing a good job of hiding it. You're here, so I have to look my best, right?"

"Huh?! Why're you bothering to look your best in front of *me*?!" I exclaimed. "Am I supposed to reward you, or something? I could, like...give you a round of applause, I guess?" I paused the game and started clapping because, hey, why not?

"Come on, cut it out!" said Aiba, scratching her head awkwardly. "Anyway, I might not look tired to you, but that goes both ways! You seem way less tired than I was expecting as well."

"Huh? Really?"

"Compared to how you usually look during gym class, yeah. You always look like you're just about ready to drop dead on the spot whenever we have to do a long-distance run or whatever."

"W-Well, I mean, I guess," I stammered, unable to deny it. My athletic ability was neck and neck with my academic ability in an all-out race for last place. On the one hand, having bad grades in gym didn't feel like as big of a deal as failing

literally all of my academic courses, but on the other hand, my lack of athleticism had led to me getting traumatized *way* more often than my lack of brainpower. The fact that I still felt relatively happy and healthy after the workout the game had given me was borderline miraculous. “I don’t get it... Maybe the game part of it’s distracting me so much I just haven’t noticed how tired I am?”

“In that case,” said Aiba, “couldn’t you survive a long-distance run just fine as long as you played a game while you did it?”

“I think I’d trip and break my neck first, actually!”

“Ha ha ha! True enough!” I couldn’t tell if she was kidding or not, but watching her crack up like that, I also couldn’t really bring myself to care. “I’m pretty good at most sports, but I think even I’d have a hard time playing a game while I ran around.”

“I dunno—I can picture you pulling it off without a hitch!” I insisted.

“Not even I’m *that* good,” said Aiba with a shrug.

Thinking back on it, Aiba was the sort of person who’d always lean into the turns whenever she was playing racing games and shout “ow!” when she got hit in fighting games. She just concentrated a little too hard, or got a little too immersed in them, I guess. She’d spill the snacks she was eating and knock over her drink all the time too. Aiba could give me a run for my money in terms of clumsiness, really, though only when she was playing video games.

“You’re thinking something ridiculous right now, aren’t you, Yotsuba?” said Aiba, giving me an accusatory glance.

“Wh-Whaaat? No waaay.”

“Then what’s with the monotone?” She saw through me in a second, and I felt myself blush. A moment later, though, Aiba cracked a smile again. “You’re so easy to read, Yotsuba!”

“A-Am I...?”

“Yeah, you are. I barely even have to look at you to know what you’re thinking,” said Aiba. She spoke slowly, deliberately, and it felt like her words

were soaking into me. She looked me right in the eye, and I found myself unable to avert my gaze. For a moment, the only sound in the room was the ticking of the clock on her wall.

Wow... She really is beautiful. I didn't have the expertise to comment on her beauty in any sort of artistic terms, but still, I knew very well that she was a truly lovely, truly adorable girl. At the same time, she was a tried-and-true prince who bathed in the cheers of her fans after crushing the competition at basketball. And also at the same time, she was a girl who got so wrapped up in her games she'd spill her drink and freak out like a cute little klutz. She was all of those things at once, and they all came together to form the girl I knew as Rinka Aiba.

Aiba sat there silently, staring me right in the eye. *What could she be thinking right now?* I wondered. She'd said that she could tell what I was thinking by the look on my face, but what about me? If I kept staring at her for long enough, would I be able to see through her in the same way?

The answer was no. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. I couldn't even tell what *I* was feeling, deep down. *I bet that Aiba could, though. I bet she could put a name to this strange, formless emotion that I just can't identify.* The thought made me equal parts happy and ticklishly embarrassed. I wanted her to understand me, but at the same time, I wanted those feelings to stay nice and private. Meanwhile, the whole train of thought I was on had set my heart aflutter in the strangest way.

"Yotsuba," Aiba murmured so softly, it was practically a whisper. Before I knew it, she'd gotten so close that she could reach out and lay her slender, elegant hand upon mine. Close enough that the oddly appealing aroma of sweat and *girl* that wafted off of her tickled my nostrils. Her face drew closer and closer, and all I could do was sit there, paralyzed, until finally...

"Mnh..."

Aiba pressed her lips to mine.



I'd never seen her face from that close up before. Her eyes were closed, but I was too captivated by her beauty to even think to shut mine. She almost never wore makeup, and yet her eyelashes were so perfectly long and gorgeous you'd think they were fake. Even her eyelids were flawless! She was so beautiful, the thought of being jealous of her looks never even crossed my mind...but when she pulled away from me and opened her eyes once more, their usual brilliance was marred by a trace of unmistakable anxiety.

"How is it that you're so beautiful?" Aiba whispered.

"Huh...? What, *me*? I'm not!"

"No, you are. You're beautiful, body and soul. Nobody else has ever made me feel so captivated, so obsessed... Nobody else has ever made me lose control like this..." Aiba hung her head, forcing out the words one by one, her voice growing weaker by the moment. "I'm sorry, Yotsuba. I didn't mean to do this to you. I didn't want to bother you like this... I didn't want to make you hate me...but, I just..."

Aiba pulled her hand away from mine. As I felt the heat of her palm gradually fade away from my skin, as I looked at her face before me, I found myself—

"No, Yotsuba! You can't," my inner angel whispered into my ear. "Yuna is already your girlfriend! You can't choose Aiba—it's too late for that! You understand, don't you?"

Yeah...I do. But what am I supposed to do? She doesn't even need to say it—I already understand how she feels about me! Maybe I'm just being conceited, or maybe hearing Yuna say she loved me went to my head, but I don't think so. I think she really has feelings for me!

"But even if that is true, it doesn't change the fact that you can't return those feelings! That would be cheating, plain and simple! If you choose that path, then the inevitable result is that Aiba, Yuna, and you will all end up getting hurt! You'll lose your love and your friendship!"

That's... That's true, but...

"Put a sock in it, Angel. She already knows all that crap," said my inner devil as

she manifested once again. *“Look, I’ll admit it: what she’s thinking about doing right now might be the worst decision she could possibly make. It’ll mean that she’ll have to lie to Yuna and Rinka, and she’ll have to keep it up forever. And even if she can pull that off, it’s hard to even imagine the guilt it’ll put her through.”*

“And you’re saying that in spite of all that, you think that it’s the right thing to do?!”

“I’m saying this isn’t about right and wrong! There’s a girl right before her eyes who’s suffering from a terrible case of lovesickness, and all it would take to cure her of that illness is reaching out a hand to her! I think it’s pretty goddamn obvious what she should do!” my inner devil snapped. It caught me off guard, but on the other hand, her passion was infectious! *“How many of society’s precious little rules has she already broken, anyway? She stepped right up to the so-called Sacrosanct that everyone’s supposed to stay away from! She put her dirty hands all over Yuna, one of its halves! She rolled a damn pencil around and made it into an elite prep school!”*

“I-I don’t think that last one is all that bad, is—”

“You bet your ass it is! Thanks to a certain someone taking the test for kicks, somebody else who took it seriously couldn’t make it into the school!”

O-Oh, jeez, she’s right...

“Who even knows how many people she’s screwed over to get here, and who even knows how many more she’ll screw over before she’s done? For all we know, Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba will end up on that list. But that’s exactly why she can’t afford to turn down a chance to make someone happy, and that chance is looking her in the face right goddamn now!”

“Devil...”

“Yuna and Rinka worked up the courage to take a step forward! Don’t think about the Sacrosanct. Don’t think about friendship, or common sense, or any of that crap—it’s not important right now! The only thing that matters here is you, Yotsuba! What do you want to do? What do you want to become? Make your choice, and me and that angel over there will support it with everything we’ve got!”

And so the devil let out a fiendish laugh, the angel let out an exasperated chuckle, and the both of them disappeared together. I'd been confronted with a reality that was way, *way* past my capacity to process, and they'd played out a whole little farce to help me sort through my feelings...but in the end, they'd never actually told me what choice I should make.

I had no clue what was right and what was wrong. Okay, no, if I let common sense factor into the equation, I had a *pretty* clear idea, but that aside! The point is, I still didn't have my answer. I was desperate to say *something*, though, and I looked up into Aiba's eyes...and gasped. Aiba, the coolest, kindest, most reliable girl I'd ever known, was crying. She was weeping bitter tears of regret, like her very world had ended.

This...isn't about right and wrong. My devil may have had to say it for me, but there was no mistaking that those were my true feelings. I didn't know what the answer that would make everyone happy was. I didn't even know if there *was* such an answer to begin with. I'm an idiot, and I knew it—no amount of thinking would lead me to a perfect resolution. But what I wanted to do? *That* I knew all too clearly.

"Aiba!" I shouted, grabbing her by the hand before she could pull it away from me.

Aiba gasped. "Yotsuba...?"

"Y-You're..." I stammered, then took a deep breath. "You're not bothering me, and I'd never, ever hate you, no matter what!"

"Ah..."

"I... I..." My mind was a chaotic mess. I had *so much* I wanted to say, and the words were burning away at me, but I just couldn't choke them out, and every time I tried, tears dripped from my eyes instead.

"Thank you, Yotsuba," said Aiba, leaning forward to gently hug me. Her embrace was warm, but somehow painful, and I didn't know whether or not it was all right for me to hug her back, but then she spoke again. "I love you."

This time, *I* was the one to gasp. She'd finally said it, loud and clear, and her

words swept all those muddled feelings and impulses right out of my mind in a flash.

“I’m sorry for taking advantage of your kindness,” Aiba continued, “but I just couldn’t help myself. Having you so close to me, having you look into my eyes... It was too much. I never imagined that I’d be made a slave to love, of all things, but I can’t deny it.”

Aiba held me closer, squeezed me tighter, as if she believed that the moment she let me go, she’d never be able to touch me again. It wasn’t like how she’d hugged me the day before, after her practice match. This hug was a little painful, a little stifling. For all the skill she’d shown on the basketball court, manipulating the ball with expert precision, now she seemed downright awkward in her desperation to get her feelings across to me.

“I love you,” said Aiba again. “I love you from the bottom of my heart.”

And I, in the face of her profoundly up-front, passionate confession of love...

“B-Bwuhhh...”

...went completely brain-dead. There was simply no way I could resist my impulses any longer. *I can’t! I just can’t! How could I, when I...when I...*

“I...I...love you too.”

“Huh...?”

“I love you too, Rinka!” I declared, returning her embrace.

“Yotsuba, I... I’m so, so happy!”

Rinka beamed at me, as brightly and happily as I’d ever seen her smile, then kissed me once more. It wasn’t like the first time. This was a longer kiss, a slower kiss, a kiss that took its time to let her really, truly appreciate that I was there in her arms...and a kiss long enough to almost suffocate me. I couldn’t really tell how much time passed, but I still felt a pang of regret as our lips finally parted.

“Yotsuba,” said Rinka, grinning as she looked into my eyes, “I can’t tell you how glad I am that you’re the one who picked up my handkerchief that day.”

“Ah...” Instantly, I knew what she was talking about. That day. The day of our

entrance ceremony. The day we'd become friends thanks to a moment of pure happenstance. We'd met by chance, been drawn together by what felt like an intangible force, spent so much time with each other, and now, finally... "I'm glad that I managed to give you your handkerchief too!"

And I'm glad that I met Yuna and Rinka. As I returned Rinka's smile, I felt that gratitude more keenly than I ever had before.



I went home, had dinner with my family, took a bath, and crawled into bed, and throughout that whole process, the blissful feeling of euphoria coursing through me never faded for so much as an instant. It felt like I was stuck in the happiest dream imaginable. Well, I say *stuck*, but to tell the truth, I was too afraid that I might actually wake up to even *try* pinching my cheek.

"Oh, wow... I'm actually in a relationship now," I quietly said to myself. I thought that I'd never find a romantic partner and would live my life loveless and alone. I'd never imagined that I'd find one, much less a *girlfriend* rather than a boyfriend, and even *less* that I'd have *two* and that they'd be Yuna and Rinka!

I found myself touching my own lips without even thinking about it. I could still feel the sensation of their kisses, and as soon as I thought back on those moments, my face flushed all over again. *I never realized that kissing felt totally different depending on who you're doing it with*, I reflected. Yuna's kisses were pecks—short and quick, like she was telling me "I love you" over and over and over again. Rinka's, however, were long and heavy, like she was telling me "I love you" just once, but packing every ounce of emotion she possibly could into the words. Both of their techniques were just so, well, *them*, and so adorable, and so passionate...and there I was, getting all ecstatic all over again.

"Hee hee hee!" I giggled uncontrollably. It was no use. I just couldn't stop myself from grinning like an idiot. My little sisters had called me out on it earlier, but not even that could stop me. I was just so happy! Surely it was all right for me to bask in it for a little while? It was no exaggeration to say that this day had been the best day of my life up to that point—maybe even its peak!

"I wish I could see them soon," I mumbled, picturing their faces and smirking

all over again. Before long I fell into a deep and profoundly contented sleep, visualizing the heart-throbbing, pulse-pounding happy life that would await me upon the morrow.

Chapter 3: A Heart-Throbbing, Pulse-Pounding Happy Life Begins

“Like *hell* it will!!!”

The next morning, I woke up screaming.

“*What have I doooooooooooooone?!*”

A good night’s sleep had cleared my mind, and in my newfound lucidity, it finally sank in what an absolutely, tremendously, horrifically colossal mistake I had made. *Oh god, I’m two-timing them! That’s literally cheating, in every sense of the word! My inner angel told me this was an awful idea, but I just wouldn’t listen! I mean, they are both cute and special and amazing, and they did both ask me out, and there is absolutely no way I could choose between them...but that’s no reason to two-time them, you absolute cretin!*

If you put out a survey asking people what they thought about two-timing as a practice, I can guarantee you that the vast majority of responses would say that it’s a crappy thing to do. That’s how *I’d* respond, for crying out loud! If Sakura or Aoi found a boyfriend and it turned out he was cheating on them with some other girl, I’d punch his lights out without a second thought! And if the sleazebag were cheating on one of them with the *other* of them, the odds were distressingly high that my mugshot would end up decorating the front page of the next day’s newspaper.

“And *that’s* what I’m doing?! Two-timing?! *Seriously?!* ” The truth sank in all over again. I was absolutely aghast with myself, and I hadn’t even *started* factoring in the bit where I was cheating on half of the Sacrosanct with the *other* half of the Sacrosanct! If the truth was ever made public, I was pretty certain that an awful lot of people would end up plotting something front-page-mugshot-worthy before the day was up!

“Gaaah, why am I thinking about *newspapers*?! This is *not* the time!” The most immediate and pressing problem was the simple fact that I was deceiving

Yuna and Rinka. Thanks to *my* selfishness, the two of them might...get...hurt...

“Gaaaaaahhhhhhhh!!!”

I had *no* clue what I could ever possibly say to them, and my emotions were such an utter and complete mess that all I could do was scream and punch my pillow.

What, you think I could’ve stopped myself?! How?! I know I don’t have any right to complain like this, but I’m gonna do it anyway! I’ve lived my entire life so far knowing that nobody, myself included, would ever have any half-decent expectations for me! How’s somebody like that supposed to resist when an unspeakably beautiful, high-class girl—let alone two of them—comes right up and says that she loves you, point blank?! You think it’s possible to not get hyped up about that?! I’d love to meet a person who could pull that miracle off! Yes, I’m still complaining, and no, I still don’t have any right to! Live with it!!!

Of course, if I were to actually say any of that to someone in the hopes of getting their sympathy, the odds of me actually receiving any were literally nonexistent.

“Yotsuba?”

“Gah!”

A sudden voice derailed my train of thought, and I froze up with shock. It was Aoi, who was peeking into my room through the cracked door... *Wait, how long has she been there?! And more importantly, h-how much did she hear?! I’m pretty sure I was really running my mouth for a minute there!*

“Mom says to get your butt out of bed and eat breakfast already,” said Aoi.

“Uh, bwuh, okay?!” I spat out, mostly on autopilot. I hadn’t actually been able to parse her words at all before replying.

As a side note, while I usually handled most of the household chores, my mom would do them for me on days she didn’t have to go in to work. I always thought it’d be best if I kept up my routine on those days so that she could use them to actually rest, honestly, but she wouldn’t have it. That was why I’d been able to sleep in so late today, and why I’d been able to spend all of yesterday out and about... *Oh god, yesterday! Aaaaaaugh! Mom, dad, I’m so sorry! I*

forced you to do all of my chores so that I could go out and two-time my best friends! I am a terrible daughter!

“Yotsuba...” sighed Aoi as I gave in to the guilt and rolled myself up in my sheets in shame. Her voice was bone-chillingly cold, and she sounded *deeply* fed up.

Eek! Is this it?! Have I finally earned her contempt?! “I’m sorry,” I sobbed. “I’m so sorry, Aoi... I’m sorry I was even born...”

“Huh?! What?! Where is this coming from?! Did I do something wrong?! I’m *glad* you were born!” said Aoi, jumping in to console me.

Man, Aoi’s such a good girl... She’s the best... Wait, hold your friggin’ horses, Yotsuba, you little punk! Have you already forgotten that giving in to your insatiable thirst for approval’s what got you into this whole stupid, selfish two-timing mess in the first place?!

I’d come dangerously close to getting swept away by my worst instincts again, but I managed to control myself at the last second. At the same time, though, a thought sprang to my mind: She really *was* trying to console me, wasn’t she...?

Imagine, if you will, that she’d heard my strangled screams a moment before and figured out that I was a dirty rotten two-timer. Wouldn’t it have been normal for her to say something along the lines of, “Why *were* you born, you disgusting, two-timing th*t? Your entire family’s ashamed of you! ≡” Not that Aoi would *ever* be vulgar enough to actually say a word like th*t, of course, but the point is, the fact that she didn’t seem even a little bit hostile felt sort of telling. Maybe she hadn’t heard me after all?

“Aoi!!!”

“Wh-What is it, Yotsuba?” Aoi replied. She seemed maybe just a little bit frightened now.

“Did you hear me sleeptalking just now? B-Because that’s what I was doing! Sleeptalking! *Just* sleeptalking!”

“Sleeptalking...?” repeated Aoi, cocking her head.

That adorable little gesture of hers made me pump an internal fist. *All right!*

She really didn't hear me! My family isn't going to find out that I—

“Oh, I guess you did say something about two, er...two-timing, I think?” Aoi tapped a finger on her cheek as she puzzled over the question, then shot me a quizzical look the moment she remembered the word.

Gaaaugh?! D-Did I just accidentally kick a hornet's nest? Would she have totally ignored all of this if I hadn't said anything?!

“What did you mean, ‘two-timing’?” asked Aoi.

“O-Oh, *nothing*, of course! You're so silly, Aoi! You know sleepwalk never means anything real!”

“But since you asked if I'd heard you sleepwalking, doesn't that mean that it means *something*, at least? You wouldn't have asked otherwise!”

Ugh! Aoi the master detective had me backed into a corner, and her stare was growing more dead and glassy-eyed by the second...or at least that's how it looked to me.

“Yotsuba?”

“Ah, I, umm... Y-Y'know! It was just this whole big, funny dream about me two-timing two super hot dudes, that's all, ha ha ha ha! J-Just a dream, of course!” I spouted out randomly.

My attempt to tell a convincing lie had somehow wrapped around and landed just barely askew of the truth. Aoi's gaze, unfortunately, didn't grow any less chilly after she heard my story. *I'm sorry, Aoi. I'm sorry you have to live with an older sister who has really embarrassing, delusional dreams.* The worst part was that it wasn't really a delusion at all—you just had to swap out “super hot dudes” with “super ultra mega hot girls.”

“You...must be really tired, huh?” said Aoi, adding a sigh that sounded half sympathetic and half fed up. “You definitely shouldn't get any ideas about *actually* two-timing anyone, though!”

That, I assumed, was her best attempt at coming up with a coherent response to her sister's barely sensible and deeply tragic delusional ramblings. *But, umm, Aoi? You sure did pick the most painful response you could've possibly given me.*



“Uggh, my stomach,” I grumbled, rubbing my aching midsection.

A full day and change had passed, it was Monday morning, and I was on my way to school. I’d never found a decent answer to my conundrum, and I had *no* clue what I was going to say to Yuna and Rinka when I saw them next, but alas, Monday arrived with callous disregard for my problems. Part of me had seriously considered cutting class, but feigning illness would mean not being able to make breakfast or lunch for my parents and sisters, so that was off the table. I’d never really thought about it before, but it seemed that truancy was out of the question for me. Unlike two-timing. Apparently.

“They haven’t texted me or anything, so I *guess* I can just act normal for now...?” I muttered hopefully.

We always met up at the same place on the way to school, as a matter of routine. My home was in a pretty inconvenient location relative to Eichou High. It took around forty minutes for me to walk to school, but riding the train or taking a bus would’ve required me to use a weirdly roundabout route, so in the end, walking was still the most... *Huh? I should just ride a bike? Well, maybe I can’t ride one, smarty-pants! Got a problem with that? Is it a crime for a high schooler to not know how to ride a bike or something?! They don’t teach that stuff in school, for your information! And besides, what sort of lunatic would go out of their way to learn how to ride a two-wheeled death trap like those things?! We CRAAPs (that’s Completely, Repeatedly Anti-Athletic People) have our pride, dangit!*

So anyway, I always had to get up early to cook for everyone regardless, and after thirty minutes of walking I ended up on the same route as Yuna and Rinka, so I could spend the last ten minutes of my commute walking with them. That made the fact that I had to walk to get to Eichou High feel like a perk, if anything...but today, it felt like my shoes were weighed down with lead. In the worst-case scenario, my two-timing misdeeds had already been exposed and Yuna and Rinka would call me out the second they saw me. *Not that I have any right to gripe about that, seeing as this was all my fault to begin with...*

“Morning, Yotsuba!”

“Yeah, good morning.”

“Hyeeek?!” I let out a squeal of shock as two hands clapped down on my shoulders! I spun around and, of course, found Yuna and Rinka standing behind me. I’d been brooding so hard, I’d managed to reach our usual meeting place without even realizing it! To be totally honest, I wasn’t emotionally prepared to see them at all yet...but on the other hand, they certainly didn’t *look* like they were about to confront me for being a dirty cheater. That, at least, made me breathe an internal sigh of relief.

“What’s wrong, Yotsuba?” asked Yuna. “That was one heck of a noise you just made!”

“N-Nothing! I’m fine! Morning, Yuna, Rinka!” I shouted, doing my best to distract them from the incredibly weird squeal I’d just let out, not to mention the obvious aura of gloom I’d been projecting.

They both smiled at me in return...then cocked their heads in unison.

““Rinka’?”

““Yuna’?”

“Huh...? Gah!” *Oh, craaap! I let my guard down and called them by their first names! And since I started using their first names after they asked me out, I practically just declared to their faces that I’m cheating on them with each other!* “U-Umm,” I floundered, “I-I mean, I just thought that you two have been calling me by my first name for ages, so it’s about time I tried calling you by yours too, y’know?! Just an impulse!”

“Oh?” said Yuna. “That sounds good to me. Doesn’t it, Rinka?”

“I don’t have a problem with it, if you don’t, Yuna,” Rinka replied.

Nooo! I silently wailed. The glances they were giving each other made it so obvious that they’d intended their statements in a super smug “*actually, she just wants to call me by my first name, but you can come along for the ride, I guess*” sort of way, and it was excruciating to witness. *Stoop!!!*

All agony aside, that little exchange had given me the last piece of proof I

needed to say with confidence that the two of them *hadn't* told each other about dating me after all. I didn't know whether Yuna had caught on to Rinka's feelings for me, or vice versa, but at the absolute least I'd been spared the worst-case scenario where I got found out immediately. This also meant, of course, that I'd have to keep hiding my two-timing for the foreseeable future. After all, I'd just blatantly lied to cover it up! It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, sure, but it had still locked me onto that course, like it or not.

"Whoops—we should get going now or we'll end up late to class," said Rinka. "By the way, is it just me, or were you a little late today, Yotsuba?"

"Huh? Oh, uhh, I just overslept a little, that's all," I lied once again with an awkward chuckle. *Uggh, the guilt, it burns...*

"We'd better get a move on, then!" said Yuna. "And while we're at it," she added in a whisper...then looped her arm around mine!

"Wha—" I *almost* shouted out loud. I knew we'd be in big trouble if Rinka saw us like that, but a moment before freaking out, I realized that saying something to Yuna was more likely to tip Rinka off than anything else! Unfortunately, my best option seemed to be using myself as a human shield and praying that Rinka didn't look too closely at us until I got the chance to subtly dislodge myself. I could feel my willpower to actually go through with that slipping away by the second, though. Yuna's arm was just so warm and soft, and she was just so darn cute, and she smelled so nice, and—*EEK!*

While totally focused on Yuna, I'd completely neglected to pay attention to my *left* side, and the next thing I knew, a set of elegant, silky-smooth fingers had entwined themselves with my hand, slipping between *my* fingers! *Isn't this, like, the way people who're dating hold hands?!* Needless to say, the hand in question was Rinka's. I stole a glance at her face, and she gave me a heart-stoppingly charming wink in exchange. I gotta be real, here: if I hadn't been practically dying of nerves, I probably would've been so gobsmacked by that wink I'd have collapsed on the spot! *I can't afford to fall here, though! Gaaah, you can do it, Yotsuba Hazama! You've got this!*

"Hey, Yotsuba?" Yuna whispered into my ear.

"Yotsuba," Rinka whispered into my other ear at the exact same moment.

Both of them spoke so quietly, their voices were almost swept away by the summer breeze. There was no way anyone other than me could've heard them.

"Let's keep *us* our little secret, okay?"

"We'll keep our relationship between the two of us, okay?"

A surprisingly mature but truly adorable voice tickled my right ear while an ever so slightly bashful and reserved voice soothed my left. Their words were passionate, sweet, and packed full to the brim with the most dangerous sort of sentiment. They mercilessly assaulted my brain, which was in real danger of melting down at any second.

"Uhh, ah, heh heh... B-Boy, sure is hot out today, huh...? Heh heh heh," I blathered nonsensically. I didn't have the brainpower to say anything coherent—I was already using every ounce of my will to keep myself from grinning like an idiot. I was seriously just *that* far gone. I was so happy, my heart was pounding its way out of my chest. I wanted to just open up and *scream*, "I love you!" at the top of my lungs! But the moment that thought crossed my mind, the moment I considered what might happen if I were found out, a chill ran down my spine. And so I put everything I had into keeping my smile normal and restrained, acting as if nothing was going on whatsoever.

I had just reached a newfound appreciation for the fact that Yuna's and Rinka's feelings for me were real. We'd spent so long as friends that I could tell beyond a shadow of a doubt that the way they were behaving was by no means an act. They'd gone from seeing me as their friend to seeing me as their girlfriend, and that meant that if they found out what I was doing behind their backs, they'd be hurt for sure. It wouldn't be a temporary sort of pain either—it could end up being the sort of emotional wound that sticks with you, making you too scared to let yourself fall in love again from that point forward.

It struck me that back when they'd asked me out—and for that matter, ever since that point—I had only been thinking about myself. I'd been framing the potential consequences of my actions as Yuna and Rinka getting upset with me,

or them learning to hate me. Me, me, *me*. *But that's not what really matters, is it? The real danger here is that the two of them might suffer, and if they do, it'll be all my fault.*

I may have agreed to go out with them on pure impulse, but my feelings for them *were* genuine. I really *did* love Yuna and Rinka. I'd made all sorts of mistakes already and was behaving like a total scumbag, but I'd managed to commit to this path and had no choice but to see it through. The fact that I was an idiot, while true, was no excuse. I just had to hang in there until the day I could no longer keep hiding it—or, even better, the day that some miraculous turn of events meant that I didn't *have* to keep hiding it anymore!

But until that day comes...I'll just have to keep my two-timing a secret at all costs!

Saying that I was doing it for them would've been nothing more or less than self-deception, and I knew it. Still, though, as I listened to the two of them giggle happily on either side of me, happier than I ever could've imagined simply because they were walking with me, I felt my resolve redouble.



A few days had passed since that life-changing day of destiny, and I couldn't help but be astonished at the dramatic changes to my lifestyle...that had *not* occurred.

My greatest fear was that Yuna and Rinka would wise up to my two-timing. My *second* greatest fear was that the Sacrosanct's fans would wise up to the fact that I'd played a part in tearing their favorite pairing apart at its foundations. The consequences of the former went without saying, but the latter could result in my total ostracization at school, *and* would without question lead to Yuna and Rinka figuring out about my cheating as well! It basically went without saying that I couldn't let *anyone* catch on to what I was doing.

So far, though, there hadn't been any shocking or dramatic developments that would indicate I'd been busted. It seemed that my social life would indeed live to see another day. It had taken a lot of effort on my part to keep the charade up...but really, the biggest factor working in my favor was probably the

fact that Yuna and Rinka were both doing their best to keep their relationships with me private. It made sense—society as a whole wasn't exactly accepting when it came to girls dating each other, and I figured they were probably also worried about people giving me a hard time if the news were to get out.

Of course, the way *they* framed it was more along the lines of “It would be a huge deal if the world at large realized how adorable you are!” and “In the worst case, some oil baron might set his sights on you... I can hardly even bear to think about it.” And, I mean, I *had* to assume that they were joking, but they sounded so serious about it I had a really hard time bringing myself to contradict them. To be fair, they weren't wrong—it *would* be a really big deal (in the worst sense of the phrase) if I managed to catch the eye of the world at large, and if word got out about me dating them, I could honestly imagine some rich person setting their sights on me (as in, the sights of a sniper rifle). So yup—there were literally nothing but upsides to hiding our relationships, and I was *incredibly* grateful for their consideration!

“Ready to go, Yotsuba?” asked Yuna after school got out for the day.

“Ah, yeah! Almost ready!” I replied reflexively. I wasn't, in truth, but I managed to cram all my textbooks into my bag in just a couple seconds anyway.

“Okay, let's go!” said Yuna once I was done.

“Wait, what about Rinka?” I asked. She was nowhere to be seen.

“Rinka's on day duty,” explained Yuna. “She has to write today's entry in the class journal and a bunch of other stuff, so I thought we could wait for her outside.”

“Ah, okay!” I hastily shouldered my bag as Yuna grabbed my hand to lead me out of the room.

The group dynamic between the three of us hadn't changed *dramatically* since I started dating Yuna and Rinka, but it *had* definitely changed. The first sign was pretty obvious: I'd started calling the two of them by their first names. Since the goal was to hide our relationship, it *probably* would've been a better idea for me to not do that thing, and I *had* suggested to both of them in private that we walk it back, but they'd overruled that suggestion without a second

thought. “Having you use my last name after we’ve finally started dating would feel so *sad*,” according to Yuna, and Rinka claimed, “Hearing you call me by my first name makes it feel like we have such a *connection* somehow.” I was completely incapable of arguing against points like those, so that option was off the table.

Calling them by their first names was a pretty big deal for me as well, of course, though in a very different sort of way. I was still far from comfortable with doing it casually, and every time I had to, I ended up fixating on whether I’d sounded natural or if my voice had cracked or whatever. My voice actually *did* crack out of sheer nerves every once in a while, so it’s not like my paranoia wasn’t justified!

By the way, the faction of dedicated Yotsuba-haters who’d always been a little prickly about me being friends with the two of them *did* seem to have picked up on that subtle shift in our dynamic. Every once in a while I caught one of them shooting me a glare that just screamed, “Curse that Yotsuba Hazama! How dare she call the Sacrosanct by their first names?! She deserves death for her insolence!” So, yeah, that was pretty freaky.

The second sign of our shifting dynamic was more a problem for me than anyone else, honestly: the three of us spent less time together than we used to, overall. In the past, whenever one of us had chores to do, the other two would usually help, or at the very least hang out with her and chat or whatever until she was finished. Recently, though, it had become more normal for the chore-haver to end up on her own while the other two of us went off to do our own thing while we waited for her. That was precisely the situation I found myself in today. We weren’t about to go home on our own and leave Rinka behind, of course, and it wasn’t like she and Yuna seemed *suspicious* of each other or anything, but something about the way things were playing out still struck me as a little awkward...

“It sure is summer, all right... Even the summer uniforms are too hot...” grumbled Yuna as she slumped over onto the table. We were sitting out in the school’s courtyard, and she sounded like she was beyond drained by the weather.

“Here, Yuna! I got you a drink!” I said, offering her a can I’d bought from a

nearby vending machine.

“Oh, yay! Thanks, Yotsuba! Love ya!” exclaimed Yuna, throwing her arms around me!

“A-Ahh?!” *Was she that moved by me buying her a drink?!* All this clinging felt like it would just make her more uncomfortably hot than ever, but since I was getting a hug out of the deal, I decided not to nitpick. Actually, as her embrace lingered, I was so struck by how devoid of sweat she was and how nice she smelled that I had to question whether we were really the same sort of life-form after all... *Wait, crap, we’re at school right now!!!* “Uhh, Y-Yuna?! Somebody might see us!”

“It’s fine,” replied Yuna, arms still clamped firmly around me. “I’m pretty good at telling when somebody’s watching me. And besides, even if somebody *did* notice, all they’d see is two gal pals giving each other a little affection.”

“Y-You think...?”

“Pluuus...we’re *finally* alone together! How could I resist?! Really, Yotsuba, how are you so darn *huggable*? You’re *just* squishy enough, and your boobs are nice and big too!”

“My boobs...?”

“*Way* bigger than they look, actually! I always thought Rinka was big, but you can’t be far behind her...shame about the bra being in the way, but that just means I have something to look forward to in the future!”

“S-Something to look forward to?! ” I stammered. Yuna was starting to huff and puff as she got a bit handsy with my chest, and when I say “handsy,” I *do* mean it in *that* way. I was having trouble keeping myself from letting out a very different sort of sigh than the ones I directed at myself on a daily basis. “H-Hey,” I managed to choke out, “is it just me, or are you...kinda used to this...?”

“Heh heh heh! Let’s just say that Rinka has me to thank for how her chest turned out!” said Yuna with a grin.

R-Rinka’s chest?! Rinka’s downright glamorous figure did indeed include an ample bosom—enough so that she grumbled pretty frequently about how much it got in the way while she was playing sports. According to her, she was

fond of sports bras, and preferred them to be a little on the tight side to keep everything as firmly in place as possible. Anyway, my internal monologue had taken a hard turn into the gutter. The whole “Rinka having Yuna to thank for her chest” bit *heavily* implied that Yuna had been regularly groping her for who even knew how long, and even just *beginning* to imagine that was enough to bring me to the brink of a catastrophic nosebleed.

“Jealous?” piped up Yuna.

“Huh?”

“Are you jealous about me fondling Rinka’s boobs?”

Oh. Right, yeah! That makes sense! It had taken me a hot minute, but I finally put together the point she was trying to get at. It was sort of similar to a hearing-your-SO-talk-about-their-ex situation, as best as I could tell. *Actually, though, I don’t really feel jealous at all...? I mean, Rinka’s not Yuna’s ex-girlfriend so much as she’s my current girlfriend, so the scenario she’s setting up actually just works out to one of my girlfriends getting flirty with my other girlfriend. That makes me feel more guilty than jealous, in a really weird sort of —*

“Oh, don’t worry, Yotsuba!”

“Bwuh?”

“From now on, I’m yours and yours alone, so you don’t have to worry about a thing. I love you, Yotsuba my darling,” Yuna whispered into my ear, leaning in closer (while still getting a solid handful of my chest while she was at it). She was coming on so strong that a part of me had to step back and note that, yes, this really *was* all still happening on school grounds. The ambient heat plus the warmth of her touch had me dripping with sweat in no time.



A few days later, that same situation ended up playing out in the opposite direction. Yuna got held up by the school committee she was on, leaving Rinka and I waiting in our classroom for her to finish. Everyone else had already gone home for the day, so we had the whole place to ourselves.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t go help her?” I asked, a little pensively.

“Oh, Yuna will be just fine on her own,” Rinka said with a grin. She was sitting on the other side of my desk, facing me. “I have a feeling that if we were around to chat with her, we would just get in her way.”

She wasn’t wrong, of course, but that’s exactly what we’d done up until recently anyway, so I still sort of had to question it...for about as long as it took me to realize that we were all on our own together and get all flustered. I’d been the same way with Yuna, and really, that was the worst part about the whole situation. I’d gotten into this position by being a huge jerk and I knew it, but when all was said and done, I enjoyed having their undivided attention and didn’t *really* make any effort to convince them not to give it to me. I’d been totally passive so far, letting them pull me along and dote on me, and I couldn’t help but wonder if somebody like *me* had any right to be treated that way.

“Heh heh!” chuckled Rinka.

“Huh? Wh-What?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing, really... I was just thinking about how lucky I am. I *do* feel a little bad for sitting around and enjoying this while Yuna’s working her heart out, though,” Rinka added. Her voice was calm and soothing, and she stared straight into my eyes as she spoke. Something about her gaze made it almost seem like she was captivated by my face. It wasn’t the way she usually looked at me, that much was clear—it was very much the sort of look you’d give to your lover. I was starting to realize that Rinka was capable of speaking volumes through her gaze alone, and said gaze was starting to make me feel really bashful...

“I-Is my face *that* funny...?” I asked.

“Not funny, no,” said Rinka. “I’d sooner call it beautiful.”

Holy crap, how can she say stuff like that so brazenly?!

“Oh,” Rinka continued, “but now that you mention it, the little show you put on during gym class today *was* pretty funny.”

“Th-That wasn’t, I mean, umm... H-Ha ha ha,” I stammered, failing to come up with an excuse and falling back on that old standby: awkward laughter. Gym class and Yotsuba Hazama were a surefire comedic combo. Our collaborative antics were a guaranteed gut-buster, but they were also so sure to happen

every time gym class and I got together that even *I'd* started getting used to them.

“Ah,” Rinka said with a start, “sorry! I wasn’t trying to make fun of you, I promise!”

“Nah, it’s fine,” I replied. “I mean, I couldn’t even count how many times you lapped me during the long-distance run today.” Rinka had practically been flying around the track, and I saw her breeze past me over and over, ponytail bouncing away behind her. She made it look like the easiest thing in the world as she ran along ahead of me, so fast that it made *my* running pace look like a leisurely walk, and I couldn’t help but feel a little pathetic in comparison.

Rinka really *was* fast. Her average time for a one-kilometer run was around three and a half minutes. That made her the fastest runner in the class, needless to say. Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, *I* took more than seven minutes to run the same distance, putting me squarely at the bottom of the rankings. I was always the last one left on the hundred-meter track, and still tottering my way along while everyone else watched felt like some sort of particularly creative and cruel punishment. Of course, nobody ever *actually* bothered watching me—they were always too busy chatting with their friends or whatever.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” said Rinka, “but I actually love watching you run, Yotsuba.”

“Seriously...? What’s there to love?” I asked, incredulous.

“There’s plenty! You always try your hardest, after all. Even if you don’t get the best results, you’re beautiful when you put your everything into running like that.”

It was weird. Normally, hearing something like that from the top athlete in my grade really *would* be impossible to interpret as anything other than sarcasm, but hearing it from Rinka in specific made me ecstatic instead.

“I’ll never get tired of seeing all the incredible faces you make while you run, and the way you always keep at it, never giving up no matter *how* bad your time’s going to be, is just so *you*,” Rinka continued. “Having you out on the track always makes me push myself extra hard to finish my laps early, just so that I’ll

have more time to watch you when I'm done."

"You run like crazy for *that*? Seriously...?"

"As far as I'm concerned, it's the best motive I could ever ask for. Plus, I know you'll always praise me if I do well enough! It would be harder to convince myself *not* to run as fast as I can, with rewards like those on the table." Rinka grinned, but in a slightly different way than she'd been smiling up to that point.

I found myself putting on a little smirk, as well. Recently—or rather, more and more so ever since we'd first met—I'd learned to recognize exactly what her expressions meant she wanted from me. "You really are incredible, Rinka," I said, reaching out to stroke her head.

Rinka made a happy little humming noise as I ran my fingers through her silky-smooth hair. She clearly put a lot of effort into maintaining her hair, and touching it felt almost as good for me as she made it look like it did for her...*almost*. Judging by the look on her face, she still had me beat in the end.

"Good girl, good girl!"

"Couldn't you find a different way to say that? You're making it sound like I'm a little kid," Rinka pouted. She made no attempt to dislodge my hand, though.

You wouldn't think that childish pouting would suit her at all, but ever since she'd started behaving that way in front of me, I'd started to think that *this* might be closer to her true temperament than the way she usually came across. She almost looked like a cat, all sprawled out on my desk, staring up at me with a dreamy look in her eyes as she reached out and—

"*Eek?!*"

—poked me in the boob, for some reason?!

"Whaugh...?! What the heck?!"

"Sorry! Couldn't help myself," said Rinka, though her apology felt a little empty considering she hadn't stopped poking me in the meantime. And, I mean, it was better than a certain *someone* who went all out with the groping...but this was making me feel ticklish in a whole different sort of way!

"Hey—Rin—stop it!"

“I wish I had *yours* attached to my chest instead of mine,” muttered Rinka. “Then every night I could crawl into bed and feel my fill of you...”

“Wait, what does *that* mean?!” *I know what’s going on here—this is one of those times where Rinka’s spacing out so hard that not even she knows what she’s saying anymore!* I quickly tore my hand away from her head.

Rinka let out a truly tragic little grunt of disappointment, but I hardened my heart and ignored her. This was for her sake!

This was pretty much business as usual for Rinka. It wasn’t uncommon at all for her to get a little bit spacey, or let her guard down in a weirdly immature sort of way, and every time it happened she would always end up deeply regretting the indiscretion as soon as she snapped out of it again. Once she got into her full-on regret mode, nothing that Yuna or I could say would bring her back to normal until it naturally ran its course, so if I wanted to head her depression off at the pass, I had to do it as quickly as possible.

“By the way,” I said, then paused, trying to think of *anything* that could let me change the subject. “N-Nice weather today, huh?!”

“Huh? Y-Yeah, I guess...?” replied Rinka.

I know, I know! The sheer lack of good conversation topics to fall back on had me in despair. Thanks to my extremely forced topic-swap, though, I’d somehow managed to bring the conversation back to a degree of normality. Still, the fact that it had ended up feeling like *she* was being considerate of *my* conversational slipup didn’t sit super well with me.

“Oh, that’s right! Yotsuba...” said Rinka. It seemed she’d suddenly remembered something, and she reached out to take my hand in hers.

The unexpected physical contact set my heart aflutter, and as I replied, “What is it?” my voice came out so quietly that even *I* could barely hear it.

“Would you like to go out on a date with me this Saturday?”

“Bwuuuh...?”

“Saturday will make it one week since we became a couple! I was hoping we could celebrate the anniversary by getting together... What do you think?” she

asked, clasping my hand in both of hers.

I could tell how enthusiastic she was about the idea—though, actually, there was a note of anxiety to the gesture as well. She was watching me *very* carefully, taking close stock of my reaction. That ever so slight dose of her true feelings hidden away within her tiniest of gestures set my heart pounding all over again.

“Or do you...not want to go out with me?” Rinka followed up as that anxiety began to win out, looking up at me with an *incredibly* potent set of puppy-dog eyes.

“O-Of course I do! I totally want to! Seriously, I’d love to!” I shouted reflexively.

“Really?! Hah hah, that’s great! Oh, wow, I’m so glad I worked up the courage to ask... Thank you, Yotsuba! You’re the best!” shouted Rinka as she threw her arms around me.

“H-Heh, heh heh heh,” I chuckled stiffly as my face was buried in Rinka’s chest. I was *almost* completely prepared to lose myself in her ample bosom, but before I did, the tiny part of me still capable of rational thought realized something.

Isn’t the one-week anniversary of me going out with Rinka also the one-week anniversary of me going out with Yuna?

Chapter 4: Yotsuba Vs. Double Booking!

I had fully resolved myself to keep my two-timing secret, and that meant I couldn't afford to just sit around on my heels doing nothing. I thought as hard as I possibly could, plumbing the cobweb-ridden corners of my brain for *some* sort of general plan of action, and eventually settled on a productive use of my time: reading as many rom-com manga as I could get my hands on! Needless to say, if my family—and particularly my sisters—found out that I was reading a weirdly large amount of that sort of fiction, I wouldn't be able to escape an interrogation. Thankfully, though, a recent technological innovation known as the “e-book” meant that I could read all the manga on my smartphone with my family none the wiser!

I read my way through all the highly rated manga with the “two-timing” tag that I could find, along with a few harem rom-coms while I was at it. And yes, maybe turning to manga for serious reference regarding my real-life problems *was* a little silly of me, but the situation I'd gotten myself wrapped up in was *already* manga-level absurd, so in a weird sort of way they felt like the perfect resource. Did I have any evidence to back that idea up? Nope, but I was rolling with it anyway!

Thanks to all that research, I ended up learning about a number of tried-and-true plot developments I'd have to watch out for. One of those developments was known as a double booking: a scenario in which the protagonist inadvertently promises to go out on a date with *both* of their love interests at the same time! Shenanigans inevitably ensue as the protagonist attempts to go out on two dates at once without letting their love interests catch on to their deception. They have to, like, wait until their date's reading a manga or trying on clothes, then claim to go to the restroom but *actually* sprint off to join their *other date* instead! They'd accidentally lead their dates right past each other, bump into acquaintances, and generally run around into pratfall after pratfall.

Chapters like that usually prompted comments like “I was on the edge of my

seat waiting for the moment they'd get found out!" and "Lmao this was so over the top," but speaking as someone who was actually engaged in real-life two-timing, I really couldn't see the humor in them. After all, there was a very real possibility that *I'd* end up in an over-the-top situation that would get *me* found out!

Yuna and Rinka had no idea that I had more than one girlfriend. Rinka had already asked me out on a one-week anniversary date...but that was *also* my one-week anniversary with Yuna! And to be totally clear, *I* am a girl too, and I was just as invested in celebrating that sort of occasion as I assumed they were. What I'm getting at here is that there was a very real chance that Yuna would *also* invite me out on a date that Saturday, and when I considered whether or not I'd be able to firmly turn her down... *Yeah, no. Not happening in a million years.*

I mean, I *already* felt incredibly guilty about the two-timing to begin with! Coming up with a decent excuse for turning her down while I was in *that* mindset was just not going to happen. I mean, think about it: If I had that sort of consistent rationality and willpower, I never would've ended up in this situation in the first place! I would've figured out *some* better way of dealing with it all...probably. Not that I'd know, I guess. All that really mattered was, judging by everything I'd gone through since my two-timing adventure had begun, I couldn't say with any confidence that I'd be able to firmly turn down a direct invitation. Yeah, pathetic, I know.

It still got worse, though. If I *did* end up in a double-booking situation, there was absolutely no way I'd ever be able to play it off like a manga protagonist and pull through both dates at the same time. I was positive I'd get found out within five minutes, max. And of course, the second my attempted double date was found out, my two-timing would also be plain as day! I *had* to avoid a double booking no matter what it took, and I cobbled together a plan that I hoped would let me do just that...

And so, the fateful Saturday arrived. I found myself at the square in front of the station about an hour before I was actually supposed to meet Rinka there, breathing deeply in an effort to convince my pounding heart to maybe chill out

a little. Everything was fine, though—I still had time to collect myself. That was, in fact, precisely why I’d gotten there an hour early.

I pulled out my phone and used its front-facing camera to check my bangs, making sure they hadn’t gotten all weird since I left the house. Checking my clothes seemed a little pointless since I didn’t exactly have the time to go back and change, but I decided to give them a look-over anyway just to make sure I didn’t have any trash stuck to me or whatever...

My outfit that day, by the way, consisted of an off-the-shoulder blouse and a long skirt. I’d bought them because Aoi had *insisted* that they’d look perfect on me, and frankly, I trusted her fashion sense way more than I did my own. The way my shoulders were slightly exposed *was* a little embarrassing, though.

“Fifty minutes left... It’s fine, I’m still fine,” I muttered to myself. My nerves felt like they were going to drive me crazy, but with almost an hour left to sort through them, I knew I’d be okay. I decided to take a look around in the hopes it would calm me down, and glanced up from my phone...

“Ah.”

...and for a second, I thought I’d dropped dead on the spot. I mean, I hadn’t, obviously, but I got such a shock it really felt like I might’ve! After all, the girl upon whom my eyes fell looked so radiant she was literally, no joke, no exaggeration, glowing. She was wearing a peplum top that gave her a remarkably adultlike air along with a pair of stylish, pleated pants that made her look just plain *cool*. Her ponytail swooshed through the air with every step, and the light of the sun made her black hair look like it glimmered with all the colors of the rainbow. It was like she was being lit up by a natural spotlight, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her—heck, I couldn’t even *blink* as she slowly crossed the plaza, collecting the gazes of everyone present, and finally stopped right in front of me.

Then she paused, fidgeting bashfully for just a moment before she spoke. “Hey, Yotsuba.”

“W-We weren’t supposed to meet up for another fifty minutes, you know?” I stammered.

“I, umm, thought that if I got here early, I’d have some time to calm myself

down,” admitted the girl—that is, Rinka, scratching her cheek awkwardly.

My eyes widened. That gesture could only mean one thing. “Rinka, you were *nervous?!?*”

“Well, yeah,” Rinka admitted. “So I decided to leave early...but I never imagined that *you’d* get here before me.”

“I-I’m sorry!”

“No, you don’t have to apologize! I mean, I’m sorry too!”

Somehow, the two of us ended up just standing there and apologizing to each other. This, I could say with reasonable confidence, was *probably* a pretty weird way to start a date, but that sort of haphazard, flying-by-the-seat-of-our-pants style of dating sorta felt like it suited the two of us. I mean, we *had* become a couple after Rinka asked me out on impulse, after all.

“Aha ha ha!”

“Heh heh heh!”

We both took a look at each other’s faces, then cracked up in unison. Suddenly, I could barely even remember what I’d been so nervous about in the first place.

“You’re really cute today, Yotsuba,” said Rinka.

“And *you’re* really pretty today,” I countered. And with that round of compliments complete, our first date was a go.



Rinka and I knew that our relationship had to be kept a secret, and that’s why we’d chosen a destination five stations down the local train line for our date. It wasn’t the *worst* date spot, by any means—there were a reasonable number of things to do and places to hang out—but there were also plenty of more developed, more *city*-like places just as close by. The theory was that nobody would bother coming out all the way to a relatively unremarkable location like this to hang out on the weekend...but there was still an ever-looming chance that we’d run into a fellow student who would recognize us. Or, more accurately, who would recognize Rinka.

As such, we'd resolved to make our date look less like a date and more like a couple of friends hanging out. Keeping that sort of distance between us would probably feel a little uncomfortable, yes, but putting up with that was a lot lower of a bar to clear than going *way* far afield for our first-ever date. Plus, I was nervous enough about people catching on to us being a couple that honestly, starting out with a just-friends pretense was sort of a relief. Well, maybe not a *relief*, but it helped me stay a lot calmer than I otherwise would've, anyway. Speaking of reasons why I couldn't keep calm, this would actually be the first time that Rinka and I had gone out together like this, period! It didn't even matter whether we were going out as friends or lovers—I would've been out of my mind with nerves regardless!

"All right, shall we?" suggested Rinka.

"O-Okay!" I replied. It was such a casual comment on her part, but the thought that it was meant for me and me alone made my heart race. Of course, we *were* trying to look like plain old friends, so there was no way she'd try to hold my hand or anything, and—*gah!* "Hyeeek?!"

"N-Nobody will make anything of *this*, right?" Rinka bashfully whispered. She'd brushed her pinky finger against mine as we walked, so gently I could've almost believed that it had been an accident. I was kind of flabbergasted at how big of a gesture it felt to me in spite of that...and judging by her faintly flushed cheeks, Rinka felt similarly.

"Y-Yeah," I stammered, "you're right. Nobody will think anything of this... For sure... F-Friends totally do, umm, stuff like, er, this, I guess?"

"C-Could you try and act a little less embarrassed about it?" Rinka whispered, hiding her mouth with her other hand. "You're making me feel like I'm doing something really crazy right now..."

A moment later, though, she timidly brushed her finger up against mine again. My heart was pounding like a drum, but I brushed mine against hers in return, and stroked it...and eventually, our fingers wound up wrapped together. Finger-on-finger contact was hardly the most scandalous thing ever, but walking around town like that sure made it feel that way somehow, and we ended up walking all the way to our destination without exchanging so much as a single

word as a result.

Our first stop was a popular café that I'd recently read about on an online news site. Our general plan for the day's date was to start out by grabbing lunch, then go shopping afterward. I was hopeful that shopping around and chatting would make for a fun, uncomplicated day out. Neither Rinka nor I had ever actually gone out on a date like this, to be clear, and we'd thought long and hard before finally settling on what I had to admit was a pretty banal schedule. Banal as it was, though, it had turned out that the whole "walking and chatting" thing was a lot harder than I'd anticipated. I just couldn't stop myself from obsessing over her, and the conversation just wasn't coming...

Eventually, though, we strolled into the café. The decor was rather cutesy, but in a tastefully understated sort of way, and most of the tables were occupied by either groups of girls or boy/girl couples. As an employee led us to our seat, I found myself wondering if any of the girls who were sitting together were girl/girl couples, just like us.

"Hmm," muttered Rinka, "this is certainly all new to me."

"Oh," I said, a thought suddenly striking me. "Don't tell me you don't like going to places like this, or something...?"

"No, that's not what I meant at all! I'm actually really glad you brought me here. When I go out to eat with Yuna, we always end up at places that serve heavy meat dishes and stuff like that," Rinka explained bashfully. She was glancing around all over the place, gawking at her surroundings like a countryside tourist visiting the big city for the first time.

Ah, yeah, that makes sense, I thought. Yuna had always been really carnal...or, wait, do I mean 'carnivorous'? Point is, she'd always really loved meat! The café had been my suggestion, by the way. I'd never actually been there before myself, but somehow... "I just sorta had a feeling that you'd like this place, Rinka."

"And that's why you picked it out?" she asked, her eyes widening. "That's so nice of you! Thank you, Yotsuba!"

"I-It wasn't that big of a deal, really," I stammered. "Anyway, no point wasting

time! We've gotta pick something to order!"

I opened up the lunch menu and laid it out so that both of us could see it, then pretended to peruse it as I surreptitiously glanced over at Rinka instead. I really *had* chosen this café because it was popular and because it seemed like the sort of place she would like, but I also had one other reason: I'd chosen it because I wanted to see Rinka inside of it. I was...curious, I guess? No, that wasn't quite right, but the point is, I'd sort of suspected that a seemingly mature but inwardly adorable girl like her would fit perfectly in a café that featured both a slightly mature and yet also adorable girly vibe. Judging by Rinka's reaction, my assumption had been right on the mark.

"Oh, they have all sorts of lunch dishes... They all look so good, I can't decide," Rinka muttered to herself as she closely examined the menu, her eyes sparkling with excitement. I, meanwhile, felt like just gazing at that look on her face would be enough to sustain me for days on end.

We took our time enjoying our lunches—plates of food with such spectacular aesthetics they felt like they were *made* to be photographed for social media, accompanied by tea brewed from a blend of leaves unique to the store that I could've kept drinking all day long if I'd had the chance—then made our way to the only big department store within walking distance from the station. Apparently, Rinka had something she wanted to shop for there.

"My bra's been feeling sort of tight lately, so, well..." she explained.

"Uh." *What, like, seriously? Her chest still has more growing to do...?*

"I go shopping with Yuna sometimes," she continued, "but she always gets upset with me when I bring it up."

"Yeah, considering Yuna's, well," I began, then hesitated. "I mean, I can kinda see where she's coming from, I guess." Compared with Rinka, Yuna's figure was definitely on the more modest side of the spectrum. She'd never really struck me as being particularly bitter about that fact, but I guess the knowledge that Rinka was still growing might've pushed her ever so slightly across that line.

"I'm out with *you* today, though, so I thought we could take the chance to buy matching underwear sets, or something... What do you think?"

Matching...underwear...?! How could two simple words have such a wonderful ring when put together?! “Th-That sounds great! Let’s!!!” I enthusiastically agreed the second I managed to process what it was she was asking me. Wearing matching underwear with Rinka? That would almost make it feel like...

“Oh, good! When I think about it, though, wearing matching underwear with you might sort of make it feel like you’re always right there by my side. It’s kind of exciting, isn’t it?”

I mean, yeah, that’s exactly what I was just thinking, but it’s really embarrassing to hear you say it out loud, so stop? Please? Okay, thanks.

Skipping ahead to the important part, it turned out that Rinka was a full two sizes bigger than me. I had to wonder—were the two of us *really* the same age? Or was I maybe smaller than I’d always given myself credit for? Having the sheer difference between us rubbed in my face like that made me really realize that, well...basically, I’d never been impressive enough in *any* aspect to turn any heads, and this one was no exception. My chest wasn’t exceptionally big or small—it sat in that perfectly unremarkable average zone.

So that train of thought got me a little depressed, but when I saw Rinka happily hugging the bag with her newly purchased undie set inside, the design of which matched the ones I’d bought, I just couldn’t bring myself to care about any of that stuff anymore. Then when I reconsidered the fact that the bra and panties I’d just bought matched the ones she was clutching...well, let’s just say it set my heart racing in its own right. *I-Is she really going to wear those...?* I didn’t know why, but the thought of *her* wearing them made me a thousand times more embarrassed than the thought of wearing them myself did! Like, almost unbearably so!

All in all, the matching underwear thing had me in a very hyper mood, and although we didn’t have any other objectives in particular left for the day, we coasted off the momentum of our purchase and ended up wandering around and checking out all sorts of shops. We looked at cute, trendy clothing, accessories, knickknacks, and shelf upon shelf of brand new, glimmering cosmetics. I think that might’ve been my first time wandering around in a place like that so aimlessly, and to my Rinka-addled eyes, the whole building looked

like a massive treasure chest, with the stores inside being priceless jewels. We stopped at every one of them, shouting, giggling, and frolicking our way through the building. We very literally lost track of time.

“Man, I’m so hungry,” I moaned.

“Ha ha, and no wonder! It’s pitch black out!” said Rinka.

She was right—by the time we’d finished chatting and laughing our way through the building and made our way back outside, the sun had set entirely. It was just about the perfect time to stop for dinner, but unfortunately, being high school girls meant that our finances were pretty much perpetually in dire straits. The underwear we’d bought hadn’t exactly been cheap, and we’d been forced to spend the latter half of our trip just window shopping. Eating out for dinner was out of the question.

“I never imagined I’d find so many things I want in a single day,” said Rinka with a satisfied smile as she gave the notebook in her hands a squeeze. She was a very analog sort of girl—a rarity for our generation—and had made a point of jotting down a quick note whenever she came across something she wanted so that she could come back and buy it later. I couldn’t help but notice that she’d made notes about not only the sort of cool, dashing outfits that anyone would agree would look incredible on her, but also about plenty of cute, girly items as well. Her tastes were less than consistent, but that lack of consistency felt so natural for her, I just found it funny.

“I guess you’ll have to save up if you want to buy all of them!” I replied.

“You’re right about that—though if I keep spending time with you like this, I’ll have found twice as many new things I want by the time I’ve actually saved up enough!” Rinka noted in a sort of sarcastic tone that made me crack up a little.

To be fair, I couldn’t really deny it. After all, I was in the same boat! Something about being with her made it incredibly easy to discover things I would’ve never realized I liked if I’d seen them on my own, and I was confident that wouldn’t change anytime soon. I didn’t have a notebook like Rinka’s, so I couldn’t say for sure how much stuff I’d noticed, but I *had* made mental notes of so many things that caught my eye over the course of the day I couldn’t even begin to count them. I found myself hoping that someday, I’d get the chance to

go shopping here with her again...

“Hey, Yotsuba?” said Rinka, a little hesitantly. “I was thinking that if you want, we could, umm...go out together again sometime? Not for a special occasion, or an anniversary, or anything—just a totally normal date...?”

“Ah... Yeah, of course we can!” I replied immediately. For a moment I suspected that she’d been reading my mind, but then I realized there was a much simpler explanation: she just actually felt the same way as I did. I felt my mood skyrocket the second the revelation hit me, and found myself beaming before I knew it.

Rinka smiled back at me...then grabbed me by the arm. “Over here, Yotsuba,” she said, pulling me into a nearby alleyway where nobody would see us, and then—

Smooch!

“Wha...*huh*?!”

“Well, we *are* on a date,” said Rinka, who had just kissed me full on the lips. She’d *really* gone in on it this time too—enough so that it’d been a little hard to breathe. “I love you, Yotsuba.”

“I,” I began, then paused to take a deep breath. “I love you too.”

“Hey,” said Rinka, leaning forward again. The look in her eyes was full of a deep, longing passion. “Can we...do it one more time...?”

“Okay...” I replied, and just like that, we kissed once more. As she pressed her lips to mine, it finally sank in that this really had been a date after all—not an outing between friends, but a real, proper *date*-date between lovers.



And so my first-ever date came to a close. The last few moments of the experience had been *really* intense, and I could still almost *hear* my heart pounding, even after Rinka went on her way and I was left alone. I did my best to stow those feelings away within the depths of my heart, though—they’d

have to wait for later.

In the end, I hadn't wound up double-booked on our one-week anniversary after all. Classic two-timing pratfall: successfully dodged! Luck had nothing to do with it either. I may have a pea-brain, but I'd worked it as hard as I possibly could to come up with a solution...though in the end, the fact that my brain was pea-sized might've been the only reason why I'd managed to put the plan I came up with into motion without overthinking it too much.

Regardless, what's important is that it went off without a hitch, and thanks to that plan, I'd been able to enjoy my date with Rinka *without* the fear of a double booking looming over me! Rinka had enjoyed it too, and in the end, she'd even given me a kiss for my trouble. It was almost enough to make me think that this whole two-timing business hadn't been a mistake after all...but no, nope, no way, that'd be taking this line of logic *way* too far!

The thing is, though...I wasn't actually finished yet. To partially quote, er, somebody—not exactly sure who—double bookings aren't avoided in a day! That's right: my plan was a *two*-day affair, and I'd be at it again tomorrow as well! Today's date was only the first step! I couldn't afford to spend the rest of the weekend spacing out as I stared at the treasure trove of *incredible* Rinka pictures I'd taken over the course of our outing, much as I'd have liked to.

I sped my way through the poorly lit residential streets in my neighborhood, arrived at my house, scarfed down the dinner my mom had made for me, took a quick bath, and climbed into bed nice and early. I'd barely been able to sleep a wink the night before—I'd been *way* too nervous—but I knew that I wouldn't be able to make it through tomorrow without getting a solid night's rest, for more reasons than one!

"Tomorrow, huh...?" I mumbled to myself as I settled into my bedsheets. Looking at things from an outside perspective, I had to admit that the plan I'd come up with was a remarkably audacious one. I'd made a promise to myself, though: if I was going to keep deceiving Yuna and Rinka, then I couldn't allow myself to prioritize one of them over the other in any capacity! I had to make them *both* happy at once, and that meant that I'd have to enjoy tomorrow just as thoroughly as I'd enjoyed today!

“All right, sleep time! Sleeping: now! Gotta sleep! Tiiime to sleep!” I said, hyping myself up for slumber. Between my leftover excitement from today’s date and my lingering anxiety about tomorrow’s plans, I wasn’t even the slightest bit sleepy, but that was precisely why I’d forced myself to go to bed at nine in the evening—way earlier than I normally would’ve done so. And, predictably...

“Two in the morning?! You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

I woke up in the middle of the night, failed to fall back asleep, and ended up greeting the rising sun on Sunday morning in a state of sleep-deprived delirium.



Some time later, I found myself once again standing in the plaza out front of the station, just like I had the day before. I was a little dressed down compared to how I’d arrived yesterday, though—this time I was just wearing a hoodie and a pair of long pants. It wasn’t exactly as stylish as the outfit I’d worn the day before, but on the other hand, I was a lot more comfortable in this sort of clothing, and it felt like it suited me a little better too.

Why was I dressed down this time? Was it because today’s plans were less important than yesterday’s date had been? Hah—not even close! No, today’s objective was easily as vital and special as my date with Rinka had been. *After all*, I thought, glancing around to catch sight of...nobody in particular, actually, which made it really hard to close out my internal monologue.

“Yeah, no way she’d show up with *that* perfect timing,” I said to myself. “I mean, come on, there’s still a whole hour left before we’re supposed to meet —”

“Guuueeeess who!”

“Hyeeek?!” I shrieked like a banshee as *somebody* wrapped her arms around me from behind. That drew me no small amount of attention from all the passersby in the vicinity, but I had bigger things to think about! “Y-Y-Y-Yuna?!”

“Wow, first guess!” said the girl who was hugging me, who also happened to be the girl I’d been waiting for: Yuna herself. That meant that I’d guessed right,

of course, but she seemed totally disinterested in letting me go—in fact, she squeezed me closer than ever!

Gah, I can't handle this! Not in public, anyway! "A-Aren't you really early?!" I all but shouted.

"Oh, like you have any right to talk, Yotsuba!" countered Yuna.

"Y-You have a point, but, I mean..." A whole hour early?! Rinka only showed up fifty minutes before her meeting time with me!

"To tell the truth," said Yuna, "I actually got here about thirty minutes ago!"

"You what?! Y-You didn't have any weird guys try to hit on you or anything, right?!"

"Why? Are you worried about me getting targeted by pickup artists?"

"Of course I am! I mean, you're so cute!"

"Huh...? U-Uhh, hee hee... Thanks..." giggled Yuna bashfully. She finally relaxed her grip, which gave me the chance I needed to slip out from her arms and spin around. Before me stood Yuna, her cheeks faintly...flushed... *Wait, never mind, that's an angel! There's definitely a literal angel standing in front of me right now! Yup, for sure!*

Yuna was wearing a T-shirt that was so oversized for her, it ended up looking more like a dress. I'd heard people talk about turning "wearing your boyfriend's clothing" into a fashion statement, and had to imagine that her current look was something like how that would turn out. She'd also gone all out on her makeup, taking advantage of the weekend to doll herself up in a way that our school's regulations usually kept her from doing. Her choice of fashion, her makeup, and her small build all came together to give her such a light, bouncy air that part of me just wanted to pick her right up and take her home with me.

"S-So, first of all, can I take a picture?" I asked.

"Huh? Why?" countered Yuna. I couldn't exactly say "because I can't take you home and this is the next best thing," but I also couldn't come up with a decent excuse in the moment, sooo...

Snap!

“Ah, hey!” yelled Yuna as I took a picture of her anyway. She really *was* adorable, even in photo form! “*Yotsuba!* C’mon, jeez!” Yuna huffed, puffing up her cheeks as she wrapped one arm around me, pinning my arms to my sides, and pulled out her phone with her other hand. “If we’re going to take a picture, we might as well take it together!”

Yuna swapped to her phone’s front-facing camera and started snapping picture after picture before I could protest. I guess that was her way of getting back at me for the photo I’d snapped? She looked absolutely, incredibly adorable in the pictures, of course—seriously, like a downright angel—while I looked a *little* dressed up, at absolute most. We looked like an idol and a fan who’d asked to take a picture with her.

Yuna, however, seemed to feel differently. “Hee hee! Just *adorable*,” she mumbled to herself as she admired her photo. I knew, of course, that the “adorable” thing she was talking about was probably none other than me, and that thought put a blush on my face before I knew it. “I’ll set this as my wallpaper!” Yuna added.

“Wh-What? No, you can’t!” I shouted.

“Huh? Why not?”

“Because, umm... W-We’re keeping this a secret and all, right?”

“Oh, it’ll be fine! It’s totally normal to use a pic of you with your friends as your wallpaper,” Yuna reassured me.

I wanted to keep arguing the point...but I just couldn’t bring myself to! I mean, what right did I have to stop her when *I* was using a picture of *both* my girlfriends as my phone’s background? Sure, I’d set it before I started going out with them, but still!

“All right, let’s go!” said Yuna, tugging me onward.

“O-Okay,” I replied as I let her drag me out of the plaza.

So, yeah—as you’ve probably already figured out, I’d made plans in advance to go out on a date with Yuna the day after my date with Rinka was scheduled. That was the essence of my master plan to ensure I wouldn’t end up in a double-booking situation!



Let's turn back the clock to about four days beforehand. I'd made my date plans with Rinka, and was busy racking my mind for a good way to ensure I wouldn't end up promising the same thing on the same day to Yuna. Eventually, a remarkably simple plan occurred to me: if I wanted to keep her from asking me out on one day, I just had to ask *her* out on a *different* day before she could get the chance!

My date with Rinka was on Saturday, so I figured that asking Yuna out on Sunday would do the job perfectly. If we already had plans to go out on Sunday, then there was just no way she'd decide to drop a Saturday invitation on me out of the blue. Some of the rom-coms I'd read complicated their protagonist's plans with sudden schedule shifts that resulted in their dates piling up with each other, but I figured that those stories were driven by pure comedy logic. It only turned out that way in them because it *had* to in order to sell the story! If something like that happened to me, and Yuna or Rinka told me we'd have to pick a different day, all I'd have to do is put my foot down and say that the rest of my schedule that weekend was already full!

Of course...if that had *actually* happened, I knew perfectly well that I'd have probably ended up agonizing over the situation all over again. After all, if Yuna or Rinka really did beg me to change my plans, I would almost certainly cave and agree without a second thought. I was getting ahead of myself, though—first things first, I had to text Yuna to ask her out...so I did!

Waaait a second, I thought a second after hitting the send button. *What if Yuna's already fully booked on Sunday, and asks if I can do Saturday instead? Wouldn't that put me in deep trouble?!* In retrospect, the whole plan hinged upon getting an initial okay from Yuna about the Sunday date. That way, even if her plans did change and she ended up asking to make it Saturday instead, she'd feel a degree of responsibility for our plans changing and I'd be able to say that I was already booked Saturday guilt-free. In other words, if she never agreed to Sunday in the first place, I *wouldn't* have that advantage and would be super easily pressured into double-booking myself!

Wh-What should I do?! Should I tell her that I'm already busy on Saturday in advance?! B-But wouldn't that come across as super unnatural?! I was

descending into a blind panic, and all I'd done so far was send a single message! I had a *terrible* habit of only thinking these things through *after* I'd already committed to them. It was just like how I always screwed up on my tests—on the rare occasion I *did* feel confident about my work, I'd inevitably accidentally shift my answers a space down on the answer sheet, or something along those lines.

Yuna: Okay!

“Bwuh?!” She already replied! It hasn't even been a minute since I sent that message!

Yuna: Thanks for inviting me out, Yotsuba! I'm so happy!

*“Oh my god, how is she *this* much of an angel?!”* Yes, I was perfectly aware that getting *that* happy about her saying yes to a date meant that I was dangerously easy, but that didn't change the fact that Yuna was so angelic, I half expected to find her name cross-referenced with the word in my dictionary.

Yuna: Actually, there's somewhere I've been wanting to go with you!

And she's all ready to propose a plan for the date too? Just how high is her girl level, seriously?! I was overwhelmed, but I managed to type out a simple reply, though not before she sent another follow-up message telling me to make sure to wear something comfortable I could move around in. With that, my plans were laid, and all I had to do was make my preparations for both of my weekend dates.



Y'know, looking back on all that, it sort of feels like all I *actually* did was ask Yuna out on a date and leave the rest for fate to sort out. My so-called plan was more of a house of cards...but it all worked out in the end, so whatever! I didn't end up facing any last-second schedule alterations, and needless to say I didn't

end up with a double-booking disaster on my hands, so I was prepared to call the plan a win overall. It was a win enabled by me sprinting across an unstable scheduling tightrope and only making it to the other side by virtue of pure momentum, sure, but a win was a win! I mean, it's not like I could've ever possibly come up with a perfect plan to begin with. I knew my own limitations better than anyone! I'd made it this far in life thanks to pure luck alone, and that wasn't about to change anytime soon!

"What's wrong, Yotsuba?"

"Huh?"

"You've been sorta spacing out for a while now."

"Er, ah, I mean... I was just a little surprised by how crowded it is here, I guess."

"Well, it *is* Sunday! Hee hee—good thing we thought to hold hands, right?"

"Huh?" I glanced down, and holy crap, she was right! We'd somehow ended up walking hand in hand before I knew it! She had a real firm grip on me too! "Whaaaugh?!"

"Oh, you don't have to make such a big deal out of it! This is totally normal for plain old friends, you know?" said Yuna. "And besides, considering how you've been off in your own little world so far, I'm afraid you'd get lost if I let you walk around on your own!"

"I-I mean, I guess you have a point, but I dunno," I awkwardly stammered. *I guess holding hands to keep from getting separated is a normal thing for friends to do? But, like...hmm, I mean...gaaah, I don't even know anymore!* "B-By the way, where were you waiting, Yuna? You said you've been here for a half hour, but I thought I got here first!"

It was weird that I hadn't noticed her. After all, if an angel like Yuna were hanging around, there's no way she wouldn't draw a ton of stares, and I definitely would've picked up on it if a crowd had gathered around her. Plus, she would've been waiting for me all alone! That would've practically guaranteed that she'd get—

"Let me guess, Yotsuba," said Yuna with a sly grin. "You really *are* worried

that some creep hit on me while I was waiting for you, aren't you?"

"Mngh!" *Seriously, how does she read my mind like that?* I was so taken aback, I couldn't even manage to reply. Like, she was absolutely right, and I really *had* been worried, but we were supposed to be acting like friends, and that was *such* a girlfriend sort of thing to be concerned about!

"It's fine, though," Yuna continued. "I was waiting in the café by the station!"

"Huh?"

"Yup! I was sitting by the window, keeping a watch on the plaza while I waited for you to show up. It's nice and quiet in there, so I knew nobody would try to go all pickup artist on me, and more importantly...hee hee, waiting in there meant I got to see the look on your face when I surprised you!" Yuna admitted with a devilishly mischievous little smirk. "But I wasn't expecting you to worry about me! That was a happy miscalculation...though actually, of *course* you'd worry about me! I know that's just how you are! I'm more happy than surprised to hear it, honestly."

"Ah, I, umm, well," I floundered helplessly. "I kinda, er, don't know what to say to that..."

"Hey, Yotsuba? Can I squeeze you?!" asked Yuna with a sudden and intense vigor.

"That'd take us past the just-friends point, so no!"

"Hmph! Stingy," Yuna grumbled with a pouty frown.

The way she went about demanding attention was sorta childish, but it suited her appearance so well that I found myself going into dreamy fantasy mode as I gazed at her face...

"Ah, we're here!" Yuna declared as she pulled me along again, which was nice of her considering I was in no state to follow by my own initiative.

Okay, get a grip, Yotsuba! Yes, we're dating, but we're supposed to make today look like a friend-date! I was so busy mentally admonishing myself that I only realized where exactly Yuna had led me after we'd already stepped into the building. "Wait, isn't this...?"

“Heh heh! *This* is a place I’ve wanted to take you for ages!”

Yuna had brought me to a “sports park,” as people called them. They’re, like, indoor entertainment facilities that’re made to let you try out a bunch of different sports in an easy and convenient way, basically. From what I understood, they usually had areas for indoor soccer, free-throw hoops, batting centers, ping-pong tables—all sorts of stuff, really. They weren’t so much a place you’d go for serious competition as much as a place you’d go to have fun, live it up, and maybe work up a bit of a sweat in the process. This being Sunday, the place was packed, and a lot of people seemed to have brought their whole families along with them.

“Is this your first time here, Yotsuba?” asked Yuna.

“Y-Yeah,” I replied. “What about you? Do you come here often?”

“Oh, every once in a while, I guess? With Rinka, I mean.”

“Ahh...” Suddenly, it all made sense. A CRAAP like me had no business hanging out in a place like this, but someone like Rinka would probably fit right in. I could easily picture her dominating the competition in every sport the place had on offer. “But, wait...if you always come here with Rinka, then won’t playing with *me* instead feel sorta lacking?”

“Are you kidding? You have it backward!” laughed Yuna. “When I have Rinka on my team, I always end up playing support for her the whole time! And there’s no way I could ever possibly win when I end up playing against her! With you, though? Heh heh heh—I think I stand a pretty good chance this time around!”

“I’d call your chances a bit better than pretty good... Wait a second! Are you trying to hustle me or something?!”

“Hee hee hee! I wonder?” tittered Yuna. She had a *very* suspicious glint to her eyes.

I knew it! She really is setting me up so she can wipe the floor with me! Yuna was by no means unathletic. I’d say she ranked somewhere around the middle of our grade in that respect. I, needless to say, ranked dead last. “Ugh... You’re such a meanie, Yuna,” I moaned.

“Huh?! W-Wait, don’t tell me you’re actually upset?!” exclaimed Yuna. “N-No, it’s not what you think! I didn’t bring you here just to tease you, honest! I just thought it’d be really fun to play games and run around with you and stuff, that’s all! I-I’m sorry, okay? We can go somewhere else, if you want...?”

I guess my moping must’ve made Yuna panic. *She* seemed more likely to burst into tears than I was...or rather, than I was making it look like I was. Speaking of which, I was nearing the limit of my endurance. “Pff... Hee hee hee!”

“Huh...?” muttered Yuna, cocking her head.

“Hee hee... Aha ha ha ha ha!”

“Wait a second—*Yotsuba*! Were you *teasing* me?!”

“I was just getting you back for earlier!” I managed to reply in between bursts of laughter. Her reaction had been so much funnier than I’d expected, I just couldn’t hold it in.

Yuna just stood there in shock for a moment, her whole face flushed red, then dove into my arms. “Yotsuba, you *dummy*! I really thought I’d messed up big time for a moment, you know?! I thought you’d hate me!”

“Oh, come on, as if *that* would ever happen!” I replied. “I’m sorry for messing with you, though.”

“Mmh...” Yuna grunted. “Well, I *did* mess with you a little first... I’m sorry too.”

Yuna sniffled, and I gave her a consoling pat on the head. She wrapped her arms around me in response, pulling me close to her...and right around then, I remembered that we were still standing in the sports park’s entryway. It had been pretty loud and busy in there from the get-go and we hadn’t been *shouting* or anything, but the hugging? *That* was drawing us some attention for sure. *Th-This is fine, right? Friends hug sometimes, right?!* I thought, desperately hoping that there was an element of truth to the convenient excuse I was trying to make myself believe in.



I’d *heard* an awful lot about places like these before, but truth be told, this

was the first time I'd ever actually been to one myself. It turned out to be the sort of establishment that bills by the hour. You just had to pay for a set period of time, over the course of which you'd have the run of the place.

If I had to compare it to something, I guess it was set up a little like karaoke booths? Not that *that* gave me much more info to work off, but I'd been to karaoke before, at the very least, with my family *and* with my girlfriends! I had *one* vaguely similar experience to help keep me grounded as I ventured into the unknown! Searching for those was a trick that I'd learned over the course of a lifetime spent almost perpetually outside of my comfort zone. *That's right—this is basically just karaoke, only with a little more in the way of available activities! Totally the same thing, except instead of playing music, the machines shoot balls and Frisbees and stuff at you! Sure, the sheer number of variations is a little overwhelming, but it's still totally fine!*

"Hey, look at that, Yotsuba! Let's try it first!" said Yuna, pulling me along by the sleeve and pointing at the basketball free-throw corner.

Oh, that's not a bad idea! We'd seen Rinka play a basketball match just a little while ago, so it seemed somehow appropriate. It struck me as the perfect warm-up, even! "Okay, sounds good! Let's do this! Let's gooo!" I shouted, surrendering myself to the hype and stepping forth onto my new battleground! "We might as well make it into a contest while we're at it, right? We'll see who can make the most baskets in ten...no, that might be a bit too much—five shots!"

"Huh?" Yuna's eyes widened with shock, which was fair enough. We *had* been riffing on my CRAAP nature just a minute beforehand, and she was probably trying to avoid bringing up the whole competition thing. But that's exactly why I brought it up instead! Was I confident I could win? No! Not even a little, actually. But I *was* confident that by proposing a contest, I'd be able to prove to Yuna that my reaction really had just been an act, and that she hadn't actually hurt my feelings at all.

"If I win, you can... Hmm... Ah, I know! If I win, you'll treat me to lunch!" I added.

"Huh?! We're betting on this?!" exclaimed Yuna.

“We might as well, right?” I laughed, though inwardly, I was already planning for my frankly probable loss. Then again, the worst that could happen if I *did* lose was me having to treat Yuna to lunch, so it’s not like I had much to plan for! That felt like a suitable level of punishment for making her sad a moment ago, so it all worked out in my mind. My wallet might not’ve been happy about the solution, but I *had* made sure to bring along the same amount of funding as I had the day before, so I was prepared for the worst.

“Umm, okay then,” said Yuna. “In that case, if I win...you have to kiss me.”

I *tried* to respond, but the noise I made was closer to a strangled gasp than an actual word.

“You can be sneaky about it!” Yuna continued. “It wouldn’t be a problem then, right?”

“I-I mean... I-I guess as long as we’re sneaky, yeah... But wait, why?!”

“Well, I’ve always been the one kissing *you* so far, right? I’d really like it if you took the initiative at least once...okay?”

Oh god, not the puppy-dog eyes! Nobody could possibly resist Yuna’s puppy-dog eyes! This isn’t fair, and yes, I’m going to gripe about it, even if that doesn’t help me at all! And so the stakes for our free-throw contest were set. On one side of the scales lay lunch, and on the other, a kiss. And I...

“Aaaaugh!”

“Woohoo, I did it!”

...ended up knocked flat on my backside while Yuna literally jumped with joy. The score: zero to two, in her favor. *It’s okay! This is fine! I knew this would happen, right?*

“All right,” said Yuna, turning to face me. “Time to claim my reward...”

“W-Wait, Yuna?! Sneakily, remember?! We’re supposed to be sneaky!” The free-throw corner was fenced off by a net, but there were still people on the other side who could absolutely see us. Nobody was rude enough to loiter around and stare at strangers while they played, of course, but I was positive that *somebody* would notice if we started making out in the middle of the court.

“Hmph,” grunted Yuna. “Well...fine. We can save the best part for last, then. Next, though...ah, look over there! Let’s try that one!” she exclaimed, pulling me off by the arm once again. It looked like winning had put her in a pretty great mood. Some people might’ve considered that attitude a little self-centered of her, but personally, I didn’t mind at all. After all, the fact that she was willing to let her desires take the wheel and pull me around with wild abandon felt like proof of just how comfortable she felt being herself around me.



I’d like to set the record straight on one point: I may be hilariously unathletic, but it’s not like I *hate* sports. I love playing tag or badminton with my family when we go out for picnics, and I used to play with my friends in the park all the time back when I was in elementary school. Though of course, if you view those games as competitions, I always lost, excepting the occasional instances where a particularly skilled player on my team carried me to victory.

I know that a lot of people enjoy that sort of activity more when they win, or get frustrated when they lose, but I just never had enough experience with victory to develop that sort of association. I guess that’s probably sorta sad, huh? Or at least, it might be from somebody else’s perspective. I’m glad that I’ve never seen it that way—if I did, I think I would’ve had a pretty tough time growing up.

Yuna and I explored the full run of the facility, trying out all the attractions they had on offer. We visited the batting cages, played a pitching game, roller-skated, and even played a racing game in a section that was sort of like an arcade. I lost basically every game, but I still had a blast, and before I knew it, it was almost five, when the block of time we’d booked was scheduled to end.

“Thank you, Yotsuba!” Yuna suddenly piped up.

“For what?” I replied.

“You know, for asking me out today. I’ve actually wanted to go out with you like this for ages...but I kept worrying I’d be bothering you or something, and never worked up the courage to ask.”

“Of course it wouldn’t bother me! Not at all!” I exclaimed. She couldn’t have been further from the truth. I’m actually pretty confident that if she *had* asked me out, I would’ve said yes before she even had the chance to explain what she wanted to do with me! Which would’ve been a potential disaster on the double-booking front, but details. “Heck, I was worried this whole time about whether *you* were even having fun... I mean, like, I’m *awful* at all these games.”

I hadn’t so much as nicked the ball in the batting cages. I hadn’t come even close to hitting the targets in the pitching game either. And that’s not even starting on the roller-skating—it was my first time, sure, but even taking that into consideration, I’d *still* fallen over so many times that Yuna started getting worried about me. I guess I did okay on the arcade games, at least?

Playing with you’s no fun, Yotsuba! You suck at everything!

Suddenly, a memory from back in elementary school sprang into my mind. It was lunchtime, and one of my friends had been playing with a ball. I asked her to let me play too, and she said, well, *that*. Thinking back on it, I actually give myself credit for not breaking down in tears on the spot. Whether or not I cried, though, I think that might’ve been the moment that I started to give up on...all sorts of stuff, really. She *was* basically right, to be fair. When we all played dodgeball, I pretty much just served as a target.

If I’m going to spend time with someone, then I want them to enjoy it. I don’t mind if that means that I lose. If they want to laugh at me for being a klutz, then that’s fine with me. If that makes them happy—if it makes them smile—what more could I ask for?

Playing with you’s no fun, Yotsuba! You suck at everything!

But still, I couldn’t stop myself from imagining—what if Yuna felt the same way as that girl had? Yuna was an incredibly nice girl. Even if she *had* found her time with me miserable, I knew that she’d just give me as big of a smile as ever and tell me she’d had fun.

I’m such a coward, I thought to myself. *I want her to tell me that she had fun. That’s the whole reason why I even mentioned sucking at games in the first place...* We’d been having so much fun, and yet there I was, thinking about all that depressing stuff from my past. I’d been fishing, and it was *super* obvious

that I should've just kept my big mouth shut! *Gaaah, why am I like this?!*

"I'm sorry, Yuna!" I exclaimed. "Just forget about—mmph?!"

Before I could finish my sentence, Yuna reached up, laid her hands on my cheeks, and pressed them together, glaring at me in a way that said she was *not* going to let me get another word in edgewise. "If you're trying to tease me again, I'm *really* gonna get mad at you this time, Yotsuba!"

"I-I wasn't—"

"And if you tell me you were being serious, I'm gonna get even madder!"

"Whaaat?!" *She has me between a rock and a hard place!*

"You've been with me this whole time! You shouldn't have to *ask* whether or not I had fun!" Yuna shouted.

"Ah..."

"No more asking for my impression about each and every little thing! The way you always look out for other people is part of what makes you *you*, Yotsuba...but it makes you feel so distant sometimes."

"I-I'm sorry—"

"No saying sorry either! Listen up, Yotsuba: when I'm with you, the only thoughts in my head are 'This is so much fun!' and 'I'm so happy' and 'I love Yotsuba, she's the best, I wanna marry her'—" Yuna paused as her thought process caught up with her mouth. "W-Wait, no, forget that last one! I mean, umm, it's not that I *don't* think that every once in a while, but, I mean, well," she babbled as her face flushed red.

T-To be fair, I think my face is as red as hers right now! Her little verbal slip had landed with all the force of a high-impact warhead! I was *super* happy, but also *super* concerned about whether anyone nearby had heard her. *She sort of trailed off there, right? Nobody would've picked up on that, right...? But what if they did?*

"Mnhh... Yotsuba, you dummy!" huffed Yuna. She looked like she didn't even know *how* she felt anymore, and bapped my chest ineffectually with her fists.

"L-Look, I'm just trying to say...well..."

“Come with me for a second, Yuna!”

“Whahuh?!”

Yuna was starting to panic, and I couldn’t just stand there and watch it happen, so I pulled her away with barely a moment’s notice. We had to leave the facility soon or we’d be charged an extension fee, but that was the last thing on my mind at the moment! I dragged her along until I found an area with a bunch of booths set up, where I finally figured we’d be able to have at least a little privacy.

“Y-Yotsuba...?” Yuna stammered.

“I, umm, sorry—wait, right! No apologizing! I just, well... I just wanted to say that I...” *Gaah, I can’t figure out how to put it into words!* I knew that I’d regret it if I didn’t get my feelings across to her, though, so I spun her around, pressed her up against the wall, and did the only thing that came to mind. “E-Excuse me!”

“Wha—mnhh...”

I kissed her. As our lips touched, it struck me that she’d been applying and reapplying her lip balm over and over that day. *No wonder she tastes so sweet.*



“Ahh?!” Yuna grunted with surprise as, in the heat of the moment, without even thinking about it, I licked her lips.

“Mnhh?!” I grunted as well, my eyes widening as my own impulsive action caught me just as far off guard as it had caught her. I’d seriously just stuck my tongue out and licked her, just like that! “Sorr—wait, no...I mean...okay, no, I’ve really gotta say sorry this time!” I babbled. *I know I’m banned from saying sorry and all, but this one feels really apology-worthy!* “It was just, you know, the bet... I didn’t want to let the day end without making good on my promise, and I just...” I just couldn’t hold myself back after what she’d let slip out a moment beforehand. Not that I could bring myself to admit that out loud, of course. Way too embarrassing!

Yuna pressed the back of her hand to her lips as she looked at me, her gaze full of shock and maybe just a hint of desire. She looked away...then looked back at me, then looked away again a second later. “Oh, come *on*,” Yuna finally huffed. “You are *such* a dummy! You can’t just catch me off guard like that!”

“I-I’m sorry...”

Yuna sighed. “Even I need some time to prepare myself for that sort of thing, you know...? My heart’s pounding so hard, it hurts.”

“A-Are you okay?” I asked, suddenly worried.

“No, I’m *not*... I’m not okay at all, so...marry me.”

“Uh?”

“Take responsibility and marry me!” murmured Yuna as she wrapped her arms around me and buried her face in my chest.

“Whaaat?!” *Of all the ways to propose! She sounded like a vengeful spirit moaning about her last grievances!*

“Why are you surprised?! You licked my *lips*! I haven’t even done that to *you* before! There’s no choice left but for us to get married and be done with it!”

“I-I think there are a *lot* of choices left before we reach that point, actually!”

“You don’t *want* to marry me, Yotsuba...?”

Ugh! Th-This is one of those situations where I can't give her an even remotely negative reply, isn't it?! But, I mean, marriage?! We're still in high school, and, like, it's not that I don't want to or anything, but there's all sorts of stuff we'd have to think about first, and, I mean, uhh...

"O-Okay, then—when it's legal," I finally spat out, using the current state of marriage law in Japan as a shield and thus technically, *barely* resisting the urge to give in to her all-too-sweet temptation. *Someday, when gay marriage and polygamy are finally legal... Though I think I might end up waiting forever on that second point.*



"Sooo...tiiired..." I droned as I staggered through my front door and flopped right down onto the floor in the entryway. I'd gone out with Yuna and Rinka as friends plenty of times since I started high school, but it seemed that two consecutive date-days in a row had been too much for a natural loner like me to handle. The sleep deprivation wasn't helping either, not to mention how much running around I'd had to do during that second date. *I think I'm gonna be sore tomorrow.*

"Oh, Yotsuba's dead," noted Sakura, who happened to be passing by at the time.

"M alive..." I groaned.

"Really?" she asked, squatting down and poking my cheek.

"Dunno..."

"Want me to get you some water?"

"You'd do that for me...?"

"It's *water*. Why would you *question* that? Wait just a minute," Sakura sighed, then sorta half-dashed away, returning a moment later with a glass of water.

My little sister's turned out so kind... I'm so proud of her...

"Here you go," said Sakura as she offered me the glass.

I chugged it down so fast, I had to gasp for air afterward. "Thank you, Sakura!"

“S-Seriously, it was just water! It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Sure, but that glass of water saved my life, so I think it... Huh? Come to think of it, where’re mom and dad?”

“They’re out shopping, and took Aoi with them,” Sakura explained.

“Shopping...?” I repeated, then glanced at my phone. “Oh, I guess they *did* tell me about that.” My mom had sent me a text saying that if I wanted her to buy anything specific, I should let her know. I’d forgotten about one of the Hazama household’s family traditions: every Sunday, our dad would drive us out to the grocery store to stock up for the week’s meals. Normally I’d have gone along with them, but since I was out and about today, it seemed they’d left without me. “What *are* we running low on...?” I wondered out loud.

“Do you need, like, help getting up?” asked Sakura.

“Ugh... It’s fine, I’m not an invalid! Alley-oop!”

I let out a mighty cry and, with great difficulty, heaved myself to my feet! Then I made my way into the kitchen. Sakura hit me with a parting jab about how saying “alley-oop” like that made me sound like an old man, but I’m of the opinion that exerting-yourself noises like that are timeless across the board!

“Let’s see,” I said as I checked our stocks, “we need eggs, milk, and bacon, looks like. Oh, we still have some of yesterday’s curry? Wonder how many meals I can stretch that into if I get creative with it? What else...”

“Isn’t dealing with all of this stuff day after day hard?” asked Sakura, who’d wandered into the kitchen after me.

“If anyone has it hard, it’s mom and dad!” I replied. “They’re the ones who have to work late every day.”

“I guess, but still,” Sakura began, then fell into silence. She seemed a little tongue-tied, but I knew what she was trying to say already, and I knew I had to nip that train of thought in the bud.

“You don’t have to worry about any of this stuff, Sakura! You’ve got your exams to focus on, right?”

“But...”

“Your grades have been going up lately, haven’t they?” I asked.

“Ah, yeah,” Sakura confirmed with a nod.

“Well, I wanna help you keep that momentum going! I mean, you’re actually *smart*, unlike me!”

“I’m still not good enough to make it into Eichou High like you did, though,” Sakura countered, shooting me a bitter glare.

“Ugh,” I grunted with a stiff smile. This was far from the first time that someone had jabbed me about my miraculous entrance exam results, but it hit different coming from Sakura, a girl who was actually working her hardest to get into the same school. I didn’t think I’d ever get used to *that*.

“Also,” Sakura continued, “I’ve been thinking of moving out on my own after I graduate high school.”

“Huh?! B-But why?” I exclaimed.

“No big reason,” said Sakura, deflecting the question. This was the first I’d heard of this plan, though then again, Sakura’s high school graduation *was* still several years down the line. “So anyway, I was thinking I’d like to learn how to cook from you, unless I’d be getting in the way or something.”

“Oh, right... Yeah, I guess it *is* pretty important to know how to cook for yourself if you live alone,” I replied, mostly on autopilot. My mind wasn’t really processing her words well at all, honestly. *Sakura’s not just thinking about her entrance exams—she’s thinking all the way out to college...? Meanwhile I can barely even plan for tomorrow! The best I’m capable of is figuring out what I’m going to cook!* I was really impressed with her, but something about the revelation made me feel weirdly lonely as well. “You’ve really grown up before I knew it, huh, Sakura?”

“Excuse me?” replied Sakura with a glare.

No, I wasn’t making fun of you! I promise!

“I’m at least as grown-up as you are, Miss No-Thoughts-Head-Empty.”

She knows! “I-I’m not *that* bad, right?” I stammered.

“When was the last time you planned a day ahead for anything other than

your meals?”

She really knows! She's totally got my number!!!

“Anyway, that’s how it is,” Sakura said, capping off her point.

“B-But why start now?” I asked. “Why not wait until you’re actually in high school, at least?”

“By the time I’m in high school, you’ll be studying—ah, uhh, I mean...Aoi’ll be studying for *her* entrance exams, right?” countered Sakura.

Wait, no, you were right the first time! I'll be studying too! Not that there's even a single college in the country that'll take me, probably!

“Aoi’ll be working her hardest, and if I had you spending all your time teaching me how to cook, I’d... I dunno, I’d feel sort of bad, I guess,” Sakura continued.

“Oh, right... You and Aoi really do get along great, huh?” I said.

“I mean, we’re *sisters*. If anything, you’re the one who...” Sakura began, then trailed off again.

“Huh? I’m the one who what?”

“Never mind. Look, the point is, I’ve made up my mind about this!”

Uggh—I guess that's that. On the one hand, speaking as her older sister, I couldn’t have been happier to get to cook with her. On the other hand, though, I didn’t want to get in the way of her studies, even indirectly... *I'm so conflicted!*

“Oh, by the way—Yotsuba?” Sakura piped up once more.

“Yeah?”

“What were you doing these past two days?”

“Huh...?” I blinked. “Nothing much. I was just hanging out with some friends.”

“Hmm...” Sakura looked a little skeptical. “You weren’t out on any dates, then?”

“Any *what?!* ” I felt my heart jump halfway up my throat. Her question had come so far out of left field, I was *completely* unprepared to come up with a

decent response. “N-N-No way, of course not!” I finally choked out.

“Oh, really...? The way you smell sorta tells me otherwise, though.”

“The way I *smell*?!”

“You’ve told us you were going out to hang out with friends plenty of times this past year, and you always came back smelling a little like them...but that smell’s *way* stronger this time,” said Sakura as she leaned way in to sniff my collar.

*What is she, a bloodhound?! I would’ve instantly assumed she was just messing with me if it weren’t for the fact that I really *had* been out on dates. Plus, the look in her eyes was way too serious to write off as a joke! She looked like a detective in a crime drama, trapping the criminal in their own web of lies and deception! D-Do I really smell more like them than usual, though? That’d have to be because, like, you know, right...? Like, I’ve been getting way closer to the two of them than I did when we were just friends... We’ve been hugging and k-kissing and stuff!*

A lengthy moment of silence passed before Sakura spoke up once more. “Just kidding.”

“Huh?”

“It was a joke. Of course I couldn’t tell something like that from your smell! I’m not a dog,” said Sakura in a completely deadpan tone before turning around and walking out of the kitchen.

“Wha...whaaat?! You were just teasing me?!” I shouted after her.

“Yeah, I was,” Sakura called over her shoulder.

O-Oh, okay, then! Just one of those friendly sisterly jokes, I guess... I felt like a fastball traveling at 160 km/h had just skimmed *right* past my cheek.

“I’ve been spending all my time studying, and that gets pretty stifling, you know?” Sakura continued. “I just thought it’d be a fun change of pace to mess with you a little.”

“To mess with me...? Not, like, mess around with me, or hang out with me...?”

“Anyway, thanks in advance for the cooking lessons,” said Sakura, ignoring

me.

“R-Right! So, uhh, when do you want to start on those?”

Sakura paused for a moment, mumbled, “One of these days,” then finally vanished into the living room.

Man, I’m supposed to teach her how to cook...? I was a little apprehensive about that. My mom had taught me everything I knew about cooking, but I wasn’t at all confident I’d be able to convey that knowledge as well as she had. I mean, this was *me* we’re talking about! I was the *last* person qualified to teach anyone about anything.

“Then again, this might be my perfect chance to really show my big-sister stuff... And if Sakura’s that interested in learning how to cook, it’s not like I have any good reason *not* to support her, right?” *Aside from the fact that her talking about living on her own makes me sad, of course.* “Oh! If she’s gonna be learning how to cook, maybe I should get her her own knife and apron and stuff?” Our mom had bought that kind of stuff for me when she’d taught me how to handle myself in a kitchen, so it seemed like a good idea for me to carry on the tradition.

I’ll have to ask mom about that later. And actually, if Sakura’s learning how to cook, then Aoi might decide to learn as well... But then again, Aoi’s a whole different can of worms—she’s got enough, er, talent that it might not make a difference whether I try to teach her or not. Hmm... Yeah, I’ll just go ahead and ask mom about that as well.



I ate dinner, took a bath, then tumbled into bed, already mourning the conclusion of another precious weekend. I lazily fiddled with my phone, texting Yuna and Rinka, reading the replies that arrived soon afterward, and idly carrying on both conversations until suddenly, my mind drifted back to Sakura. Something she’d said was weighing on me, and no, it *wasn’t* the part about me smelling. I was thinking about the part where I learned that she’d already started planning for her life post-high school.

When was the last time you planned a day ahead for anything other than your meals? It had been more of an accusation than a question, and however much I

brooded over it, I still couldn't deny it. Sad as it was, I'd made my way through life entirely flying by the seat of my pants. I mean, okay, maybe I had a *few* things that I could be proud of—I *had* been awfully pleased with my plan to dodge a potential double booking when I came up with it a few days beforehand...but the fact that said plan was only necessary because I was a two-timer sorta disqualified me from being proud about *anything* related to it, on second thought. And besides, that was me planning for, like, two or three *days* ahead. What about months down the road? Or years? My own future was completely in the dark.

Can I really keep going like this...? I cared about Yuna, and I cared about Rinka. I loved them, and those feelings were growing more and more intense with each passing day. At the same time, though, my apprehensions were growing at the same rate. Would I really be able to keep my cheating secret? *Should* I even keep it secret in the first place? Suddenly, those worries grew and grew and grew in an instant. I gasped as a strange dread spilled out from deep within my heart, threatening to overwhelm me. All I could do was clamp my eyes shut in a desperate attempt to escape it, but it was no use.

And so that night, even though I was exhausted and sleep-deprived, the horrible, drumlike pounding of my heart made sure I couldn't sleep a wink.

Chapter 5: Yotsuba Vs. a Fan Club Higher-Up?!

A few days had passed since I'd pulled off my preemptive anti-double-booking dual-date stratagem, over the course of which that hazy sense of unease had thrown a pall over my everyday life. I remained constantly terrified by the prospect of getting found out whenever I chatted with my girlfriends, and the guilt I felt over tricking them grew more and more impossible to ignore as time wore on, but I'd still somehow managed to keep acting like everything was perfectly normal.

Yuna and Rinka, meanwhile, were still the ever-inseparable Sacrosanct. They were getting along as well as they ever had, and as far as the rest of the world was concerned, I was just some insignificant little moron who'd wandered in to clog up the scenery around them. If their social circle was one of those fancy lunch boxes, then I was the decorative sprig of parsley, or the little plastic grass thingy that they always put in for whatever reason. I thought that nothing had changed whatsoever...until a pointed “*tsk*” snapped me out of my complacency and made me freeze up in terror.

It suddenly struck me that the certain sense of hostility I'd always felt directed toward me had grown stronger. Like, *way* stronger than it had been before I started dating the two of them! It wasn't so bad when I was actually with them—just the inescapable feeling that somebody was glaring at me behind my back every once in a while—but when I was on my own, I got tongue-clicks that were *obviously* intended to be just loud enough for me to hear and smack talk that was clearly intended to be just quiet enough for me to *not* catch the details.

I'd thought I was just imagining it at first, but as time went by, my certainty grew. It was no figment of my imagination. Before, I'd usually been able to pin down who was giving me the stink eye with a decent enough degree of certainty, but now there were so many people who seemed to have it in for me, I couldn't even tell *who* was plotting my demise anymore! I guess I could've just turned around to see who was tut-tutting me or gossiping about me, but I was too scared to bring myself to try it. It sort of felt like if I made eye contact with

them, I'd get a fist to the face for my trouble.

Where's all this hostility coming from all of a sudden? Has it somehow gotten out that I'm dating the two of them? I mean, I couldn't imagine that *anyone* would be happy to learn that the biggest underachiever in their grade was going out with the Sacrosanct. On the other hand, if that info *had* leaked, it was hard to imagine that people would've been anywhere near that roundabout with their harassment. The rumors would've been *way* more out of hand—so out of hand they'd go past “rumor” and land somewhere closer to “uproar”—and I would've had people coming right at me without making any effort to keep it subtle.

So what gives, then? It didn't *quite* feel like the grasping hands of public opinion were clasp around my neck to throttle me just yet, but it *did* feel like their clammy fingers were tapping upon my nape. I was scared. I didn't know *what* I was scared of, and I didn't know where any of this was coming from, but that didn't help...and I haven't even gotten to the worst part yet.

“Heeey, Yotsuba! It's lunch time!”

“Let's all eat together, okay?”

What if the two of them get dragged into it? That thought made keeping up the everything's-normal act harder than ever. It was getting to a point where even *faking* a smile took all my effort.

“Huh...?” Yuna cocked her head. “What's wrong?”

“You look sort of sick, you know?” added Rinka.

“N-Nah, I'm fine!” I quickly lied, throwing that false smile back up again before they could get too worried about me. Even *I* could tell that I wasn't really pulling it off, though. I didn't have to see my own expression to tell how strained it was. Still, I couldn't have them pressing that line of questioning even further, so it was time to lie my way out of jeopardy again. “I-I just have the weirdest feeling one of our teachers is going to call on me to answer a question this afternoon, that's all!”

“Oh, *again?*” sighed Yuna.

“You've been getting that feeling just about every day recently, haven't you?”

Rinka noted.

“O-Oh, have I...?”

I had. I don’t know if it was the guilt talking or if it was just because I was dumb as a post, but I’d been reusing that excuse for days on end. A part of me had to wonder if I couldn’t come up with *something* at least a little bit more believable, but when push came to shove and panic set in, I always ended up sticking to that old standby.

“When was the last time you were *actually* called on, though? You’re just being paranoid,” said Yuna.

“No, she really did get called on yesterday, actually. In math class, remember?” piped up Rinka.

“Oh, right! She did! Hmm... I guess it’s a little too soon to *completely* rule out Yotsuba being a latent psychic, then.”

The two of them broke into fits of giggles, but I could tell they were trying to make me feel better, not make fun of me. I could also tell that they hadn’t noticed what I was worried about yet, which seemed like a pretty clear sign that the ambient hostility was *just* directed at me, not the three of us together. *But if it got out that we were dating...if it got out that they were getting two-timed by the likes of me...isn’t it totally possible that even some of their fans could lose faith in them and lash out in anger? What could I even do if it came to that...?*

“Ahhh!” shouted Yuna.

“Hyeeek?!” I squealed in shock.

“What’s wrong?” asked Rinka, who hadn’t lost her cool for a second. “What are you yelling about?”

“My lunch! I forgot it!” wailed Yuna as she rummaged through her bag, her face as white as a sheet. I glanced inside, and sure enough, there was no lunch box to be seen. “Uggh, that’s right...I overslept a little today, and when I think back on it, I can’t remember ever picking up my lunch at all...”

“And yet your makeup looks as on-point as ever,” jabbed Rinka.

“Well, of course it does! I *am* a girl, you know?” boasted Yuna, puffing up her

chest with pride, only for it to deflate seconds later as the fact that her lunch was as missing as ever sank in. Our school did technically have a school store that sold food, but it was notorious for being so popular around lunchtime that it sold out all of its stock on a daily basis. By this time, they probably wouldn't have so much as a single bread crust left. *But that means her only choice if she wants food would be...*

"Looks like you're eating in the cafeteria today, Yuna," said Rinka.

"*Ugggh*, not the cafeteria from hell," Yuna moaned listlessly.

Our school's cafeteria was on the smaller side, but in spite of that fact, a surprising number of students decided to eat there on a daily basis. In the worst case, you could expect to wait for ten minutes or longer just to buy a meal ticket! And that wasn't even taking into account the fact that if someone who stood out as much as Yuna did made an appearance there, well... Let's just say that I could totally understand where the "from hell" descriptor was coming from.

"Oh, I know!" Yuna piped back up a moment later. "Hey, Yotsuba, let's go eat in the cafeteria together!"

"Huh?" I grunted with surprise.

"You know *she* actually brought her lunch today, right?" said Rinka.

"There's no rule that says you can't bring a homemade lunch into the cafeteria, is there?" countered Yuna.

"Well, sure, but it's hard enough to find a seat in there *without* people bringing lunch boxes in and taking up space. I don't think anyone would be very happy about that," Rinka pointed out.

"Well, I guess *you* get to stay here and eat on your own, then!" Yuna huffed. "Let's go, Yotsuba!"

"*Huh?!*" Things were happening too fast, I couldn't keep up, and I just froze up entirely as a result. *Is it just me, or are Yuna and Rinka being weirdly terse with each other right—*

"*You're* the one who forgot her lunch, Yuna. Why are you pulling Yotsuba into

your problem?”

“So, what, you’re saying I should go suffer through the cafeteria on my own?!”

“I mean, it’s the natural conclusion, isn’t it?”

“What the heck, Rinka?! Why’re you being so mean to me?!” shouted Yuna, slamming her hands onto the desk and leaping upright.

“I’m not being *mean*!” Rinka shouted back as she jumped up as well.

The two of them glared at each other, and sparks practically flew between them. It felt like they could explode at any second, and I gasped—actually, the *entire class* gasped in unison. Of course they did! In the year and change since we’d all started going to this school, Yuna and Rinka had *never* fought like this before!

“Yotsuba’s going to the cafeteria with me!”

“No, she’s staying right here and eating lunch with *me*!”

The two of them shouted back and forth at each other, and I, stuck precisely in the middle of the exchange, could feel my heartbeat rapidly accelerating. *Oh, crap. Ooohh, crap! I think I know why everyone’s been so hostile—actually, make that why everyone’s been so straight up angry with me lately!* I was always close to them, always sandwiched between them, and as a result, I hadn’t been able to perceive the changes in our three-way relationship. There *had* been changes, though, no matter how hard we’d tried to hide the fact that we weren’t *just* a squad of three perfectly ordinary friends anymore. In Yuna’s eyes, I was her girlfriend, and in Rinka’s eyes, I was *her* girlfriend. Meanwhile, neither of them saw the other as having any business in that equation. A clash was inevitable, and their previously rock-solid relationship breaking down was just as certain. In retrospect, this couldn’t have been the first sign. They’d probably been building up, slowly but surely, ever since the day I started going out with them...

“H-Hey, Yuna! Why don’t you just eat my lunch instead?” I suggested, barely managing to spit the words out as I did my darndest to keep myself from obviously trembling and choke back the urge to break down in tears.

“Huh?!” gasped Yuna.

“Huh...?” murmured Rinka.

Gah, even the way their reactions contrast with each other’s is making my stomach hurt!

“Can I?!” Yuna exclaimed.

“I wouldn’t get in the habit of spoiling her like this if I were you,” warned Rinka, who sounded a lot less excited about the idea.

“*Excuse you! She’s not *spoiling* me!*” snapped Yuna.

“Oh, she isn’t? I’m guessing you haven’t considered that if you eat her lunch, Yotsuba won’t have anything to eat for lunch herself?”

“Ugh! I-I mean, I wasn’t going to eat *all* of her food! I was gonna split it with her!”

“With an appetite like yours? If you try to get by on half a lunch box, you’ll be griping about how hungry you are before we know it.”

“I will *not*!”

“Yes, you will!”

Yuna and Rinka were both leaning so far across the desk as they glared at each other, their foreheads were practically touching. I, meanwhile, was vibrating with incoherent terror, though a small part of me *did* still have the presence of mind to note that Rinka had a point. Despite her small frame and slim figure, Yuna was a surprisingly heavy eater. She’d polished off three whole hamburgers on her own during our date the other day, and yet somehow, no matter how much she ate, she never seemed to gain so much as a pound. Just a metabolism thing, I guess, and boy was I ever jealous of it. I suppose you could call it an inborn talent of hers? Though she *did* complain all the time about the fact that none of the nutrients she took in ever seemed to make their way to her chest.

In direct contrast, you had me. I was actually a really light eater, and the lunch box I took to school was on the smaller side of things. My whole lunch probably wouldn’t have been enough to satisfy her, and eating just half of it might’ve put

her into that awkward state where you end up feeling even hungrier than you'd have been if you hadn't eaten anything at all. Unfortunately, that realization just made the situation even harder to resolve than it already had been!

I couldn't bring myself to send Yuna off to the cafeteria on her own, that was for sure. But if I went along with her, I'd be leaving Rinka on her own instead! All three of us going to the cafeteria together *seemed* like the best option on paper, but you have to consider that Eichou High's cafeteria was a battlefield. Occupying two extra seats when we had our own lunches and didn't *have* to be there just wasn't on the table. So, what *could* I do? With so few options left, the choice was actually surprisingly easy.

"Hey, guys!" I shouted. "Actually...I-I'm on a diet!"

"Huh? A diet?" repeated Yuna, her eyes wide.

"Why? I don't think you've gained weight, have you?" asked Rinka, who looked just as surprised.

My sudden topic shift had cleared away the simmering tension, and that was a relief, but I couldn't let myself stop yet. One mistake could steer the situation back in the wrong direction, so I had to keep it together! "I mean, summer vacation's coming right up, isn't it? I thought I should put at least a little effort into my figure, you know?" I explained.

"Oh... Summer."

"Right, yeah..."

The two of them nodded in newfound understanding as they gave me—or rather, my chest, hips, and rear end—a long...like, *really* long, appraising sort of look and started faintly blushing. *What are you two, a couple of guys?!* I was their girlfriend, and it wasn't like I couldn't more or less guess what they were thinking about, but I had to wonder how the heck that would've looked to an outside observer if anyone else was watching.

"I-I mean, I *am* a girl and all, so, y'know! Ha ha ha... So, yeah, I was gonna skip lunch anyway! You picked a great day to forget yours, Yuna! My mom would've been worried if I came home with a full lunch box, so this is just *perfect!*" I prattled, fleshing out my excuse on the fly as a waterfall of cold sweat ran down

my back. For something I'd come up with at the drop of a hat, I've gotta say, it was pretty bulletproof! *You go, me! Is this what people mean when they talk about everything going into slow motion in a moment of crisis?!*

"I thought you made your own lunches, though," said Yuna.

"And your parents work late, so you have to wash out your own lunch box too," added Rinka.

Augh?! C-Come to think of it, I've been pretty open about my home life with these two, haven't I?! Did I pile so much extraneous info up on my excuse, it's starting to teeter under its own weight...? N-No, I can't backpedal now! I have to see it through! You've got no choice, Yotsuba—you just have to do it! You can't give up hope after coming this far! "Anyway, that's just how it is! And I'm off to the restroom! Y'know, gotta, uh, detox, or whatever people call it... Wow, I probably shouldn't be talking about this right before you guys eat, huh?! Ha ha ha ha ha..."

So that didn't go super great, and I had a feeling I might've just added more incriminating material to my towering pile of excuses, but I stood up to leave before they could question me any further! Incidentally, that bit about "detoxing" or whatever was a bit of vocab I'd picked up while I was only half paying attention to the TV the night before. Honestly, I barely even had the faintest glimmer of an understanding of what it actually meant. I'd just been driven so far into a corner that I had to deploy any weapon in my knowledge arsenal, no matter how recently and poorly forged it was! Thankfully, though, that last effort was enough to get me out of the classroom and away from its stifling atmosphere. I could finally pause to take a breath...or *not*!

"Ugh!" I felt my legs begin to tremble reflexively as I suddenly remembered that I was effectively Public Enemy Number One for *all* of the Sacrosanct's fans. And that was my *default* state—when you factored in the extremely public argument they'd just had and the potential for people to assume the Sacrosanct were on the verge of splitting up as a result, the stares I attracted and the animosity packed into them felt even more intense than ever. *O-Oh, jeez, I think they're gonna murder me!* I know that probably sounds like hyperbole, but I really did believe it for a moment there.

And then, just as my premonitions of doom were nearing their peak, a girl's voice rang out as if to affirm them. "Hey, Hazama, do you have a minute?"

I turned to find a girl from my class approaching me. Specifically, it was one of the Sacrosanct's fans, and one who had always struck me as especially zealous even among their baseline fanatical numbers. I was *pretty* sure her family name was Inomata. There were two other students standing just a little ways behind her, and all three of them were glaring right at me.

"Do you have a minute?" *sounded* like a perfectly polite request on a surface level, sure, but one look at their faces was all it took for me to know that what she really meant was something closer to "I gotta bone to pick with you, asshole! Get over here!" Yuna and Rinka weren't around to save me, and I didn't want to drag them into the issue regardless. Unfortunately, though, I also wasn't nearly brave enough to put up a front of indifference and ignore the three of them. I was actually so scared that it took all I had to keep myself from breaking down in terrified tears on the spot.

"Hey, are you listening?"

"Ouch!" I grunted as Inomata seemed to get tired of waiting for a response and grabbed my arm.

I guess that reflexive gasp of pain was as good a response as any in her eyes, and she smiled. "Come on, we don't have much time. Let's just hurry up and—" she began as she made to pull me off to who knows where, but then all of a sudden her words and stride cut off in unison.

Oh no—did Yuna and Rinka come outside?! My mind immediately leapt to the worst-case scenario and I looked up, only to find... "Wait, who?"

Some girl I'd never seen before was standing in the hallway, blocking our path. Actually, calling her "some girl" definitely didn't do her justice. She was *outrageously* cute, for one thing! I could tell at a glance that she wasn't Japanese. She had long, wavy, golden hair, eyes as blue as a cloudless sky, and skin that was as fair as it was flawless. She was as beautiful as a doll that had been crafted by a master artisan, suitable to be put in a display case and awarded a perfect score at a competition, and surprisingly young-looking to boot. As she looked up at me, an innocent smile came across her face.

“Indeed! ♪”

Indeed...?

Before I knew it, the girl had strolled right up to me, pulled out a lacy little handkerchief, and pressed it up against my mouth.

N-No way... Is she doing that thing you see on TV all the time?! The super cliché one where she soaks a cloth with chloro-whatever and uses it to knock somebody out in no time flat?! I've always wanted to see what it's like to... Hmm? That's weird. Why aren't I getting sleepy? Strangely enough, I wasn't passing out, like, at all. The handkerchief smelled sorta nice, but that was pretty much all I could say for the experience.

“Indeed?” The girl cocked her head, looking a little bewildered.

The other girls who had been halfway through abducting me when she'd suddenly burst onto the scene were clearly just as confused as she was, and had frozen in place.

“You're not getting sleepy?” she asked in surprisingly fluent Japanese, considering how conspicuously foreign she looked. Then her eyes started getting a little teary and, *wait, oh god, is she crying?!*

I wasn't the only one who'd been thrown for a loop by *that* shocking development. My would-be abductors looked just as put off. “Wh-What the heck?!” said one of them.

“Who even *is* this kid? Is she touring the school? She's wearing one of our uniforms, though,” noted another.

“H-Hey, Hazama, do you think you should pretend to fall asleep, or something?” suggested the third in a whisper. Yesterday's foe had become today's friend... Well, okay, it was probably still a little early to say that we were on the same side, but we were certainly stuck in the same awkward situation together, and that took precedence over everything else at the moment! I decided to take her suggestion and play along.

“H-Huh? Weird, I'm getting sooo sleepy! Oh, whooooaa, look at me swoon, oh nooo...”

My act was received with four completely blank stares. *Gaaah, don't look at me like that!* Convincing or not, I was committed to the bit and fell to my knees before crumpling to the floor, right alongside my hopes of ever becoming an actress.

"She's asleep, indeed!" declared my diminutive visitor from somewhere above me. At least *she* was enjoying the experience—I felt like I was gonna cry again.

What am I supposed to do now? Is that gonna be enough to satisfy her? She's not just gonna leave me here, is she? That...might not actually be so bad, on second thought. I was about to get raked over the coals by the Sacrosanct fans before she showed up, and if this takes the wind out of their sails, then so much the be—

"Hmm... Indeed, but just to be safe, I should finish her off!"

Just to be safe... Wait, "finish me off"? Before I could process her words, I felt a heavy impact on the back of my neck accompanied by a jolt of agony. The last thing I heard before I passed the heck out was a gasp from Inomata and her crew, accompanied by an undignified "Bweugh!" from my own mouth.



"So hoooot..."

I'm not actually sure if I mumbled to myself after I woke up or if I woke myself up by mumbling, but regardless, that sure was the only thought in my mind as I came to. I vaguely remembered the weather report that morning saying that it was probably going to be hotter than thirty degrees Celsius that day, which struck me as pretty darn cheeky of the stupid weather, considering it was still only June.

As for why I was feeling the oncoming summer in such an up-close-and-personal sort of way, it seemed I'd been carried up to the rooftop while I was out. I'd also been carefully propped up onto a chair, then subsequently and equally carefully *tied* to said chair hand and foot. I couldn't move a muscle. *I guess Li'l Miss Indeed must have carried me up here?* I dismissed the thought as soon as it occurred to me—considering how tiny and dainty she looked, somebody else must have done the heavy lifting.

But anyway: holy *crap*, was I scared! This whole development was so shocking and outlandish that I'd ended up spouting random nonsense internally, but no amount of rambling could change the simple fact that I had, apparently, been kidnapped. The one upside to the situation was that I knew that things were going to start looking up at any moment, judging by the fact that they *really* couldn't get any worse than they already were!

The fact that my hands were literally tied, by the way, meant that I couldn't wipe away my sweat. My uniform was soaked, and I was a sticky mess overall. "Ugggh, this suuucks... I wanna take a shower," I moaned.

"You want me to shower you?"

"Hyeek?!"

Suddenly, Indeed Girl stepped out from my blind spot! She was carrying an elegant parasol that really suited the overall rich-girl vibe she gave off, and had some sort of sports drink in her other hand. "I can shower you, indeed," she said.

"Uh... Wait, with *that*?!"

"Indeed! It's hot, so I thought it would be better to make you drink it. I can shower you with it instead, though."

Wait, she said she was gonna let me drink it, right? The way she plopped an "indeed" into, like, every other sentence was starting to give me a headache, but at the same time, it seemed she might not've been that awful of a person after all. I mean, aside from the part where she'd knocked me out cold. "I-I think I'd rather not be showered with *that*, thanks," I replied.

"I'd rather not shower you with it either, indeed! You'd start gathering flies."

"Y-Yeah, I guess I probably would..."

"But that's also how they lure rhinoceros beetles! Indeed, they slather honey on trees to draw them in!" said the girl, her eyes now sparkling with excitement as she uncapped the bottle and started slowly drawing closer.

"W-Wait, that's not how this works! I'm not a tree, and sports drinks aren't made of honey!"

“Now that you mention it...indeed,” she said, stopping in her tracks. “Do you want to drink this?”

“Er... I mean, yeah. I do, I do!”

“Indeed, then!” said the girl with a nod. Then she held the bottle up...to *her* lips, and started gulping it down.

Uh. What? She offers it to me, then drinks it herself? Is she playing “haughty noblewoman” or something? Is this an “oh, but steak tastes so much better when I eat it in front of the starving plebeians!” sort of situation?! I was just about to start shouting in protest, but then I noticed that something was off.

“Fwbwbmph,” the girl mumbled, her voice completely garbled by the liquid that was inflating her cheeks like a hamster’s. She slowly stepped toward me again.

W-Wait, no, she wouldn’t?! “H-Hey, what’re you doing?!” I shouted.

“Fwwmmnbhgghmngbneemnd!”

“I think I caught an ‘indeed’ at the end there, somehow? But that’s literally the only part that I—wait what what *what?! “*I shrieked as she stepped right on up into my personal bubble and sat on my lap, *facing* me. Then she leaned in... “H-Hey, wait! No way! Oh, *nooo* way, right?!”

“Fwmbnmnd!”

“Indeed *not*! Stop! Stoop!!!”

The heat already felt like it was about to melt my brain, but the direction the situation was progressing in seemed likely to melt it down even faster. Apparently, this cute little foreign-ish indeed-creature had realized that I couldn’t move and concluded that she’d have to feed the sports drink to me mouth-to-mouth!

“Wait! No! Seriously, no! Be more selective about these things! This might be normal wherever you’re from, but this is Japan! When in Rome, do as the Romans do!!!” I shouted, struggling as wildly as I could manage.

“Fwmnghmbnmmh!” grunted the girl as she grabbed onto my head.

Whaaa?! How is she this freaking strong?! Oh, jeez, I can’t resist her! S-Sorry,

Yuna, Rinka... I'm about to have my lips stolen by some extremely weird little girl I just met for the first time less than an hour ago!

But then, the very instant I succumbed to despair, the rooftop door slammed open.

“What are you *doing*, Emma?!”

Pfff!

“Gah?!”

“Sister dearest!”

That was probably sort of hard to follow, so let me explain what just happened. In short: somebody arrived without warning on the rooftop, the little girl was taken off guard, and she reflexively spit out her mouthful of sports drink...directly in my face. Then she hopped off my lap and ran off toward the new arrival as if she'd completely forgotten I was even there. My chair was facing away from the door, so I couldn't actually tell who had shown up, but that wouldn't have been the first thing on my mind anyway. *Welp. Looks like I got a sports-drink shower in the end after all.* It felt like I'd dodged one bullet, only to wind up in the path of a completely different bullet instead.

“Look, look! I did it!” squealed the little girl.

“Yes, I read your message,” said the new arrival. “Honestly, I can't believe you...”

Meanwhile, I was brooding. I'd managed to avoid having my lips stolen, yes, but it sort of felt like I'd had my *dignity* stolen in the process. I tried to force myself to find something, *anything* positive to say about the situation, and eventually settled upon the fact that my little shower actually *had* made the heat ever so slightly more bearable. I mean, sports drinks are *mostly* water, at least! They're also sticky, though, and between that and the sweat, I was more uncomfortable than ever on the whole.

“Hazama.”

Come to think of it, it's still lunchtime, right? What's happening back in the classroom? If I don't make it back soon, Yuna and Rinka are gonna get worried

about me... No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than I heard a bell ring in the building below me. Apparently, fifth period had just started.

“Yotsuba Hazama!”

“Huh?” I finally noticed that somebody was calling my name, and looked up to find a girl with long, black hair standing before me. The little foreign-ish girl from before was standing right beside her—well, really, she was practically hugging her waist. “Wait, you’re...th-the vice president?!”

That’s right—I knew the new arrival. I mean, that sort of went without saying. She was undoubtedly one of my school’s local celebrities, almost on the same level as Yuna and Rinka. Her hair was perfectly straight, without so much as a kink or curl to be seen, and so long it reached down past her waist. People always talk about, like, the classical Japanese ideal of beauty, and she definitely fell into—

“I’d appreciate it if you’d stop staring at me like that,” the new girl snapped.

“Gah! Right!” I jerked my line of sight away from her. I’d never felt super comfortable around her, on the simple grounds that I knew for a fact she despised me. “Was all of this your doing, Miss Vice President—I mean, Koganezaki...?” I timidly asked, my gaze still glued firmly to my feet.

Why had I reflexively called her “Miss Vice President”? Not because she was the VP of the student council, that’s for sure. She also didn’t have a seat on any of the school’s other official committees. No, Koganezaki served as the vice president of the Sacrosanct’s fan club. That is, she was the second in command of the organization that held Yuna and Rinka’s relationship in the highest of esteem and saw *me* as an irritating nuisance who’d inserted myself in between them!

Back when I’d learned about her position in the fan club, the first thought that crossed my mind was “Why?” After all, Koganezaki herself was exceptional enough to stand on even ground with Yuna and Rinka. If *she’d* been the one to third-wheel them instead of me, I’m pretty confident that nobody would’ve so much as considered objecting. It would’ve been viewed as the natural evolution of the Sacrosanct’s relationship from a line into a triangle! I hadn’t heard much about her athletic talents, but I *did* know that she consistently ranked just

below Yuna on her tests, and that she was incredibly beautiful. Her one flaw, if you could call it that, was that she gave off a sort of cold and indifferent impression and never seemed to act like she was close with anyone. I'd heard that some people even called her "the Empress," though I'd never quite figured out if they were kidding or serious about that one. All of that, of course, just made it all the more confusing why she'd join a fan club like that, of all things. It just seemed so...lowbrow for her, I guess? And that's not even starting on the question of how and why she'd wound up its vice president. *Hmm...*

In any case, Koganezaki didn't answer my question. She didn't say anything at all, actually. She just stood there, looming right in front of me. To my understanding, strictly managing who was allowed to come into contact with the Sacrosanct was her primary duty as the fan club's vice president. We'd never ended up in the same class before, but that was the impression I'd gotten from the times I'd passed her in the hallways or ended up in a combined-class lesson with her. And *that* was the sort of girl who was currently staring down at me, moments after the Sacrosanct had thrown down in an undignified shouting match centered around *me*!

It would be totally unsurprising if she'd ordered my kidnapping, wouldn't it?! She was, essentially, my natural enemy. The cat to my mouse. The tortoise to my hare. The mongoose to my pit viper. The night to my day...wait, does that one even make sense?

"Hazama."

"Eep..." I looked back up to find Koganezaki's merciless glare boring right into me. A bead of sweat dripped down my brow, and this time, it had nothing to do with the heat.

"It seems I'm at least partially responsible for all the trouble you've been put through today," she said.

"Eeep... Wait, huh?" *Did she just say something about putting me through trouble? Was that, like, an apology? From the fan club's VP? To me?*

For a moment, I thought that the heat had fried my brain so badly I was hallucinating, but then she pulled out a handkerchief and gently wiped away the sweat on my forehead. *That* seemed pretty unambiguous.

“Emma?” said Koganezaki.

“Indeed, sister dearest?” replied the little girl.

“Why, exactly, did you decide to do this?”

“Because of you! You told me, ‘It looks like I’ll have to speak with Hazama sometime soon,’ indeed!”

Oh, wow! Her impression is spot-on!

“I did say that, yes,” admitted Koganezaki, “but I didn’t say anything about kidnapping her.”

“I didn’t kidnap her! Indeed, I simply set up a time and place for the two of you to meet!”

“Is that how it went?” asked Koganezaki, glancing over at me.

I paused for a moment, thought back on the sequence of events that brought me there, then frantically shook my head.

“No, this was definitely a kidnapping.” Koganezaki let out a long, deep sigh and massaged her temples.

Is it just me, or is she actually surprisingly approachable...?

“Sister dearest...did I fail you...?” asked the girl.

“Ugh!” grunted Koganezaki.

“Did I make trouble for you agai—”

“N-No, not at all,” Koganezaki quickly insisted. “Y-Yes, in fact, if you hadn’t done this for me, I most likely would have done it myself. You haven’t done anything wrong, Emma...s-so don’t cry, okay?”

“Sister deareeest!”

So, uh...what exactly am I watching? The second that the little foreign-ish girl—Emma, I guess—started to tear up, Koganezaki’s Empress persona crumbled to pieces and left a perfectly normal girl standing in the rubble. And a considerate, kind girl who couldn’t stand to watch people cry, at that! I was staring again, in dumbfounded astonishment this time, and Koganezaki awkwardly glanced away from me, though she didn’t stop patting Emma—who

was still clinging to her—on the back as she did so.

“This girl’s name is Emma Shizumi,” Koganezaki explained, “and in spite of her size, she’s a first-year student at our school.”

“A...first-year?” I repeated, cocking my head. “I’ve never seen a girl like her around the school, though, and she’d be kinda hard to miss.”

“That would be because she only transferred in recently.”

Oh, okay! No wonder she doesn’t look familiar, then. That didn’t explain why Koganezaki was so familiar with her, though, or why Shizumi seemed so attached to Koganezaki.



“I suppose I never introduced myself, come to think of it,” said Koganezaki, “but I assume there was no need for me to bother in the first place, was there, Hazama?”

“Oh, yeah, no need!” I replied. “You’re famous, after all!”

For a moment, she just stared at me in total silence. “My name is Mai Koganezaki.”

“H-Huh? But wait, you just said you didn’t have to introduce yourself, right?”

“I am *not* famous,” Koganezaki curtly insisted as she broke eye contact.

Is it just me, or is she acting kinda sulky? “W-Well, my name’s Yotsuba Hazama.”

“I know. You’re famous, after all,” jabbed Koganezaki with a self-satisfied chuckle. She was probably trying to get back at me, but unfortunately for her, I ended up thinking it was kinda cute instead. Meanwhile, the intimidating image I’d built up over the past year of Mai Koganezaki, fan club vice president and school empress, continued to crumble to pieces.

“So, umm, there’s still one more of you, right?” I said. “As long as I’m meeting everyone, I was thinking it’d make sense for them to come out and say hi too...?”

“What do you mean, one more of us?” asked Koganezaki.

“The person who carried me up here!” I replied.

Koganezaki scowled and patted Shizumi on the back. Shizumi jumped with surprise, then turned around to face me. “Indeed, I’m the one who carried you here.”

“Huh? But, I mean...”

“I put you to sleep and carried you here on my own, indeed!”

“Wait a moment,” interjected Koganezaki. “‘Put her to sleep’? I swear, Emma, how many times—”

“Ah!” Shizumi yelped. “No, it’s not what you think, beloved sister of mine! I put her to sleep with my handkerchief! I didn’t use my arts!”

‘Arts’?

“Emma’s parents have trained her in self-defense since she was a child,” Koganezaki explained. “If she put her mind to it, she could...well, *deal with* most adults, I imagine.”

“Wait, so you meant, like, *martial* arts?!” I exclaimed.

“Her parents are doting to a fault. It seems they were worried that she might be hit on or harassed someday, and trained her accordingly.”

“B-But indeed, I really didn’t use them! I put her to sleep with a handkerchief, like you see on TV!” Shizumi frantically insisted, but of course that wasn’t even remotely true. The handkerchief definitely hadn’t been drugged, for one thing, and more importantly, I hadn’t forgotten how she’d said she should “finish her off” right before a sudden impact turned my feigned sleep into genuine unconsciousness.

Yeah, okay, I think I see how that went down now. If I came out and revealed that piece of info, though, there was absolutely no doubt that Koganezaki would get mad at Shizumi. Even *I* was exasperated with my own excessive good-naturedness for worrying about getting Shizumi chewed out after everything that had happened, but that’s just how it goes sometimes. “Th-That’s right,” I said. “She pressed a handkerchief to my face and I just fell right asleep!”

“A handkerchief...?” Koganezaki frowned. “Where on earth did you get your hands on chloroform, Emma?”

“Chloro...indeed?”

“Ah!” I shouted. “Umm, so! I guess that handkerchief wasn’t soaked in anything after all, huh?! That’s so weird! I just got super sleepy the moment she pressed it up against my face anyway! Maybe it’s ‘cause I’ve seen it happen all the time on TV too?! It’s, like, the whatchamacallit effect! Like, where you think a thing’s gonna happen, and your body reacts to it even though it doesn’t actually...umm... Right! The flamingo effect!”

“The placebo effect.”

“That too!” *Oh, whoops—she sighed at me again.*

It was starting to look like Koganezaki had concluded she now had *two* morons on her hands in need of babysitting. “Well, if you don’t feel like pressing the issue, then I won’t either,” she said. “I’m sorry for doubting you, Emma.”

“It’s okay!” squeaked Shizumi. “Even suspicion feels like a reward indeed when it’s coming from you, sister dearest!”

This girl really is just...a lot, huh?

“In any case, now that we’re all acquainted with each other, I’d like to move this conversation along. We’re already missing fifth period,” said Koganezaki with a dejected frown. Considering she was an honor student, I wasn’t surprised to see she was upset about missing a class. She probably never would’ve played hooky if Shizumi’s message hadn’t sent her sprinting up to the rooftop. “There’s no point beating around the bush—as Emma said a moment ago, I have something to speak with you about, Yotsuba Hazama. I assume you know what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah, I think I get the picture, more or less... Oh, but before we get into that, would you mind untying me?” I asked hopefully. She *was* probably my enemy, and she couldn’t have possibly been a big fan of mine one way or another, so I was really in no position to ask her to set me free. Weirdly enough, though, the past several minutes of talking with her had given me the impression that she would probably give me a hand anyway.



I still vividly remember the first time I met Koganezaki. I’d only just started attending Eichou High a short while beforehand, which made it just about exactly a year ago. That day had been my turn to clean the classroom, and I was carrying a trash can down a flight of stairs to the disposal site when it happened.

“Hazama,” Koganezaki called out as I hauled the bin down the staircase. She was standing by the landing, leaning against a wall and gazing outside through a window. Something about her presence felt really picturesque to me—maybe it was because of how her hair fluttered in the gentle breeze like a curtain?

Of course, the fact that she’d called out to me despite the fact that she wasn’t even *looking* at me colored my first impression of her as well. I ended up

viewing her as “pretty, but weird.”

“Do you have a moment?” asked Koganezaki.

“Ah, sorry! I’m taking some garbage out now,” I replied reflexively. Her eyes widened with shock at my refusal, and *her* disturbance disturbed *me* in turn. Point is, I freaked out. “Ah, but, umm, I mean, it’s just that the other people on day duty can’t leave until I come back with the trash can, is all.”

“Right... Yes, that *is* quite important, then,” said Koganezaki, her voice ever so slightly wavering. At the time, I assumed that meant she was angry, but looking back on it with what I know about her now, I think there’s a chance I might’ve misread that just a little.

In any case, I ended up speeding off down the staircase, elated that a hottie like her had actually *talked* to me! I’d already made friends with Yuna and Rinka by then, but that hadn’t really done as much as you might expect to get me used to being around pretty people, and interacting with her put me in a weirdly good mood. If only that was where the story ended.

Oh, she’s still here, I thought later on as I passed by on my way back to my classroom. She was still standing in the exact same spot, looking out the window in the same way as before. *I wonder what she’s doing, anyway...? Just killing time? Nah, she’s gotta be waiting for someone. I mean, just look at how pretty she is!* And so, as my weirdly distorted view of pretty people threatened to send me into another outburst, I decided to sorta just sneak around her and pass by without saying anything. *She* was the one who had called out to *me*, so it would’ve felt weird for *me* to say something to *her*, and I assumed that my earlier refusal meant she’d totally lost interest in me. Plus, it would’ve been rude of me to linger around and stare.

I brought the trash can back to my classroom, and all of us on day duty quickly finished up the rest of our cleaning. I wasn’t *as* hopelessly friendless back then as I would end up a year later, so everyone actually said goodbye to me as we all split up for the afternoon. I was also a little less resigned when it came to my studies, so I decided to stick around for a little while and go through my notes on the day’s lessons.

“Huh? That’s weird—I wrote these notes myself, but I can’t understand what

they mean at all!” I said to myself...and okay, in *that* sense I was the same back then as I am now. Since I’d been on cleaning duty, Yuna and Rinka had gone home without me that day, so I was totally on my own when it came to figuring that out.

I wrapped up my totally fruitless self-study session around the time twilight was setting in, stepped out of my classroom, then froze in shock. “*Huh?*” I gasped as my bag slid off my shoulder and fell to the ground.

The pretty girl from before was *still* standing in the exact same spot! She was still right there, tapping her foot against the ground in apparent irritation. The moment she noticed that I’d stepped out of my classroom, though, her eyes widened...then narrowed again as she shot me a pointed glare.

“Ah, so, umm,” I stammered. *Surely she wasn’t waiting for me, right?* Unfortunately, the sheer intensity of her expression had me so scared that I couldn’t even walk toward her, much less ask her about it.

She grew tired of waiting pretty quickly, though, and started walking up to me instead. *Oh god, she’s gonna punch me out*, I thought, wincing reflexively and clamping my eyes shut.

In the end, though, the attack I feared never came. Her footsteps didn’t stop in front of me either. “It’s getting dark. Be careful on your way home,” Koganezaki said as she passed by me.

“Huh?!”

Her voice had been so lovely and fluid, it almost sounded like she was reciting a stanza of poetry...and yet at the same time, it instilled in me a fear so deep and primal, I felt like her words had taken hold of my heart and given it a powerful squeeze.

And that’s how Mai Koganezaki and I first met. I would later learn that she’d apparently gone to the same middle school as the Sacrosanct, but hadn’t interacted with either of them very much at all. It was only after I’d obtained that particular piece of info, plus the fact that she was a core member of the Sacrosanct’s fan club and a woman who wielded so much influence she was known as the Empress, that I realized what her final words of warning to me

that day had *actually* meant. In short: “Watch your back, or you’re dead meat.”
Eeek! What is that girl’s deal, seriously?

And *that’s* how I ended up being completely terrified of and incapable of dealing with Koganezaki for a *very* long time—enough so that I actually prayed that we wouldn’t end up in the same class on the first day of my second year in high school.



I wonder what the me back then would’ve thought if she’d had the chance to see me right now? I thought to myself as Koganezaki not only untied me from the chair, but also took the time to carefully massage the red marks that the ropes had left on me.

“Umm, Koganezaki...?” I began.

“What? Does this hurt?” she replied.

“Ah, no, that’s not it... I was just wondering if you remember the first time we met...?”

A lengthy silence fell. “No,” Koganezaki finally replied as she awkwardly averted her gaze.

In sharp contrast to her reaction, Shizumi, who was standing right nearby, looked so excited her eyes were practically sparkling. “Your first meeting with my beloved sister? I want to hear all about it, indeed!”

“It’s not a particularly interesting story anyway,” said Koganezaki.

Huh? Wait a second, didn’t she just say that she doesn’t remember—

“*Everything’s* interesting if it’s about you, sister dearest! I’ll put all your stories together and publish them someday!”

“Do *not* do that. I’m serious, Emma. Please.”

“That’s the one request I just can’t abide by, even coming from you!” insisted Shizumi. “Indeed, your wonderfulness has to be recorded for posterity! And I, Emma Shizumi, am fated to take on the task!!!”

“Sh-She’s so cool,” I muttered under my breath.

“Please don’t take her seriously, Hazama. Emma gets carried away like this all the time,” sighed Koganezaki. “Also, do *not* tell her how we met, under *any* circumstances,” she added with a glare that had me nodding frantically before I knew it.

Was there really anything about our first meeting that could make her this embarrassed to tell the story, though...?

“If you tell her, I *will* kill you.”

Okay, yeah, there must’ve been! The murderous aura emanating from Koganezaki made that *very* clear, so I decided to nod once more and leave it at that.

“I think it’s about time we get to the point,” said Koganezaki after pausing briefly to clear her throat and pass me what was left of the sports drink Shizumi had brought. “I’m sure you’ve noticed the recent developments between Momose and Aiba?”

“Y-Yes, of course! They’re my friends, after all,” I replied, unable to bring myself to admit that I’d actually only noticed said developments earlier that same day.

“Over the past several days, numerous reports that their relationship has grown dangerously volatile have reached our fan club,” Koganezaki continued. “Many of them also identified *you* as the cause. You’re quite popular, aren’t you?”

“I don’t think *popular* is really the right word for it...” I began to protest.

“Indeed! She was surrounded by girls just a moment ago!” shouted Shizumi, busting into the conversation. Apparently, she’d taken the word “popular” completely at face value.

“Oh? You *do* have it rough,” said Koganezaki. In contrast to Shizumi’s excited earnestness, I could tell that *she* didn’t actually mean it at all. “But it’s not like that’s a recent development. Plenty of students have been unhappy about your association with the Sacrosanct from the very beginning. You’re familiar with how idol fans who misjudge the distance they should keep from the artists they

support earn the ire of their fellow fans, yes?”

“Well...I guess,” I replied. I didn’t actually know much about idol culture at all, but I still basically understood what she was getting at. After all, I’d been dealing with the disapproving glares of Yuna and Rinka’s fans on a regular basis for quite a long time. *Then again, it’s never escalated to full-on, outright bullying up until today. I guess my natural small-fry energy made them think I was too insignificant to bother with, or something...?*

“I’ve done what I can to hold them back up until now.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve established rules in the fan club to ensure that its members don’t resort to any extreme measures, and I’ve spread...well, I suppose you could call them rumors about you in an effort to chip away at their hostility.”

W-Wait, does that mean that it’s all thanks to her that I’ve been able to live a slightly terrified but otherwise peaceful daily life? I wasn’t a small fry after all?! Actually, it almost sounds like I’ve been a big enough deal to keep Koganezaki really busy!

“Of course,” she continued, “the fact that you’re indisputably insignificant and harmless *has* helped as well.”

“Way to pick me up just to let me down, jeez!”

“Hmm?” Koganezaki cocked her head. “I don’t remember saying anything that would pick you up.”

Right, true enough! My getting worked up about my small-fry status *was* pretty much all on me.

“Well,” Koganezaki muttered, “if I had to choose something to praise you for, it would be the fact that you’ve managed to develop a friendship with those two without losing sight of your own social standing.”

“You’re making fun of me, right?”

“Frankly, I’m praising you so openly that even I’m shocked to hear it coming from myself.”

Sure didn’t sound like a compliment to me, but, well, I’ll take it, I guess. I’d

been complimented infrequently enough over the course of my life that I'd learned to make the most of it when it *did* happen.

"If I ever uncovered evidence that you were plotting to use the two of them, I intended to remove you from the picture immediately, no matter what means I had to resort to," said Koganezaki. You don't get to hear lines *that* colorful very often outside of the movies, but she looked so perfectly serious about it that I found myself nervously gulping in response. "As it turned out, though, you really were nothing more than a perfectly ordinary friend to them. And so, I decided that even if the rest of their fans viewed you unfavorably, I would do my best to watch over you. After all, I was partially responsible for a line being drawn between them and the rest of the school, and I feel guilty about their resulting isolation..."

Koganezaki hung her head as her expression twisted into a bitter frown. I couldn't say exactly what she was thinking, but I *could* tell that she'd been trying her hardest to protect Yuna, Rinka, and their fans alike...and from the sound of things, me as well. When she'd told me to be careful about walking home in the dark back when we first met, it wasn't a declaration of her criminal intent. She didn't mean "I will murder you if I get the chance"—she was actually just worried about me. *Though, I mean...she did go about it in the most awkward possible way. Like, there's being considerate, and then there's waiting around until sunset to deliver a single message!*

"What's that face supposed to mean?" asked Koganezaki. "It's obnoxious."

"Wait, I was making an annoying face just now?!"

"Yes. The sort of face that tells me you're under the misapprehension that you understand everything there is to know about me as a person," she said with a frown. "Don't misunderstand me. Let the record show that I am *not* on your side."

"Wait, you're not?!" I shouted.

Koganezaki paused. "Is it really that surprising?"

"Well, I mean, you're super nice, and a little awkward, but in a way that makes you seem really cute... I've been thinking about how nice it'd be to make friends with you this whole time." *Wait, what the heck am I saying?! I mean, it's*

totally true that I was thinking that, but, but... I mean, I already have Yuna and Rinka, and—wait, no, just being friends with another girl wouldn't be cheating, right? Of course, it's kinda ridiculous that a two-timer like me's worried about cheating in the first place. And, um...is it just me, or is it weird that Koganezaki hasn't reacted at all yet?

Honestly, I was expecting her to scold me or tell me to stop acting so full of myself, or something. But no, she'd done nothing of the sort—in fact, she'd frozen solid, her mouth hanging half open. She looked half shocked, half suspicious.

“U-Umm...?” I began.

“*You* have an *excellent* eye indeed!”

“*Gah?! Shizumi?! She'd been so quiet for the past few minutes, I'd forgotten she was even there!*

“My dearest sister is kind indeed! And cute indeed too!” Shizumi declared, eyes shining with more excitement than ever. The sheer intensity of it all was almost too much for me to handle, but on the other hand, the way it was just so obvious how much she loved Koganezaki made me feel a little warm and fuzzy inside.

Maybe this counts as a sort of yuri too? In my eyes, Shizumi's feelings for Koganezaki were unmistakably more than *just* friendship. Then again, considering that Koganezaki had been responding with an air of mildly dismissive sisterly maturity, I also had a feeling that Shizumi's feelings might've been a bit one-sided.

“You understand what makes her so wonderful!” Shizumi continued. “You're my comrade indeed! My friend!”

“Th-Thanks,” I replied, “but I don't think I can hold a candle to you as far as Koganezaki's concerned.”

“Naturally, indeed! After all, I was built from my sister dearest's love!”

“Her love?”

“Her love! She was truly kind to me indeed when I first came to Japan. I only

learned to speak Japanese thanks to—mmph!”

“She does *not* need to know this,” said Koganezaki as she covered Shizumi’s mouth with her hand, cutting her off and bringing the conversation to a premature halt. Her cheeks were turning ever so slightly pink. “Honestly... This would be so much quicker if you’d stop driving us off-topic out of nowhere.”

“Umm, Koganezaki?” I said.

“What...?”

“You taught Shizumi Japanese?”

“She lived in Sweden all the way up until she started middle school,” Koganezaki explained. “She’s half-Japanese, you see. She needed someone to teach her the language when she moved here, so I—”

“Right, but what I meant was, well... About the way she says ‘indeed’ all the time...”

If alarm were audible, Koganezaki’s expression would’ve been ear-piercing.

“I was thinking that if you’re the one who taught her Japanese, then maybe she picked up that verbal tic thanks to your influence too...?”

“...”

“Ha ha ha, no way, right? I’m sure I’m just overthinking this! I mean, *you* don’t throw ‘indeed’ into every other sentence like some spoiled rich girl—”

“Hazama.”

“Yeah...? *Eek!*”

Koganezaki was smiling. A truly flawless, perfectly friendly smile. But it was a smile *utterly* devoid of mirth. Somehow, there was no *smile* to her smile! It was a smile that sent an immediate, ominous chill shooting down my spine!

“I’m only telling you this because I’d prefer not to have my business pried into. The middle school that Emma and I went to was a girls’ school that catered to the upper crust. Manners and etiquette were *very* strictly enforced. There was *nothing* strange about it.”

“O-Okay, then...?”

“Quite. Even if I did hypothetically speak ‘like some spoiled rich girl,’ as you put it, it was not because I was weird. It was the environment we were placed in. If anything, that style of speech was the standard there. You speak Japanese because you were born and raised in Japan, yes? It’s exactly the same principle. If you’d been raised in a part of the country where a nonstandard dialect was prevalent, you would probably speak said dialect as well. That just goes without saying, doesn’t it?”

“U-Umm, Koganezaki?”

“Yes, I know—you should simply go to my old school and see for yourself, Hazama. Then I’m quite certain you’ll understand what it is I’m trying to tell you. Indeed, this is a perfect solution—I just know you’ll find it a perfectly agreeable environment! No need to worry, you’ll find yourself fitting in before you know it. Everyone there is *ever* so kind, and—”

“Wait, time out! *Stop!*” I shouted. Koganezaki was obviously not in a normal state of mind, and I desperately tried to stop her before she *really* went off the deep end. Apparently, I’d inadvertently touched a nerve with her.

For a very long, very awkward moment, we just stood there. Finally, Koganezaki broke the silence. “Please forget everything you just heard.”

“C-Can do! Forgetting it right away! Actually, I’ve already forgotten!” I figured that the moment she’d had the chance to pause and think back on what she’d been saying, Koganezaki had realized that, midway through her ramble, she’d accidentally started talking in that same rich-girl sort of style herself.

Koganezaki hung her head. Not out of anger or embarrassment—as best as I could tell, she was doing it because it was the only way she could keep herself from breaking down in tears. Curiosity really *could* kill the cat, it seemed, even if it was someone else’s curiosity and even if the cat was more of a terrifyingly powerful tigress. I, meanwhile, was definitely more of the harmless little kitten variety, so I could only hope that when curiosity got around to me, it would at least make it quick and painless. *Or that it never gets around to me at all...*



The conversational land mine I’d blundered my way into turned out to be a powerful one indeed, and by the time I managed to pull Koganezaki back out of

the depressive pit she'd wound up in, the closing chime for fifth period and the opening chime for sixth had both rung. I'd also felt my phone vibrate a few times, and I could pretty easily guess that Yuna and Rinka were worried and were trying to contact me, but unfortunately I couldn't spare so much as a moment to pull it out and check. *I'll have to apologize to them later...*

"So, uh...would you like a drink?" I offered, holding out the bottle that Shizumi had given me. Koganezaki hesitated for a moment, then silently nodded. We were sitting with our backs up against the fence that surrounded the rooftop, and the atmosphere was so oppressively awkward it felt like it was going to literally crush me. I couldn't just *leave* her like that, though, and on the bright side, it had started to get a little cloudy and that stupid-hot jerk of a sun was finally hidden away, making it ever so slightly cooler out.

Yeah, that's right! Look for the upsides! Stay positive, Yotsuba, positive! If I start getting as upset as she is, then this rooftop will turn into a living hell for both of us before we know it! Do not think about how staring up at a cloudy sky's actually sorta depressing!

Now, generally speaking, I was definitely not the first person who I'd think to call upon to inject a dose of positivity into this or any situation. Shizumi was *clearly* the better candidate on hand, but unfortunately, she was, well...

"Zzz... Zzz..."

...a little indisposed. By which I mean she was sitting on the opposite side of Koganezaki from me, leaning on her shoulder, fast asleep and snoring. *Guess she went and tired herself out?* I was sort of jealous about how blatantly she marched to the beat of her own drum.

"I'm sorry for putting you through all this trouble," murmured Koganezaki.

"It's, I mean... I guess I *was* pretty surprised by it all," I admitted.

"I can't believe I embarrassed myself like this..."

"What? There's nothing embarrassing about anything you did!" I insisted. "And heck, look at me! I do embarrassing stuff literally all the time in comparison!"

"Yes, and the fact that I embarrassed myself in front of an embarrassment like

you just makes it all the more embarrassing.”

“Ugh!” I grunted. “I guess you’re going back to your old self quicker than I thought.”

At that point, Koganezaki finally looked up at me. She was smiling...technically. The corners of her mouth were twitching, her fists were clenched, and her arms were shivering, so yeah, smile or not, it was pretty transparent that she was putting up a front. “That’s right,” said Koganezaki. “I may have remembered some unpleasant experiences, but when all’s said and done, the past is in the past, isn’t it?”

“Right...” She was trying her hardest to pretend that everything was fine and normal, so I decided to suck it up and not pry any further. If she was fine with not talking about it, then I decided to be fine with not asking. I’d really learned the importance of letting sleeping dogs lie today. “Umm, Koganezaki?”

A long pause ensued. “What?”

“Wait, why the hesitation?! You don’t have to be on guard with me! I just thought I should talk about Yuna and Rinka with you...”

“Oh, right. Them.”

“Weren’t they supposed to be the whole point of all this?!” I shouted.

“Yes, of course,” replied Koganezaki. “Right...umm, yes, right. Just a second. I have to remember what I wanted to say about them.”

Okay, she really obviously hasn’t pulled herself together at all! “Umm, I think it was about how Yuna and Rinka’s relationship felt like it was starting to get kinda volatile? And you said something about how the fan club folks were angry, and I think you were gonna say something about wanting to make them go back to the way they used to be...? Probably?”

That last part was just a guess, but it seemed like the best direction I could steer us in that would give the two of us a common objective, based on how the conversation had gone up to that point. I was thinking remarkably clearly, by the way, which was no surprise—after all, it’s a fundamental principle of reality that if somebody’s completely given up on everything in your vicinity, it makes *you* feel calm and collected to an equal degree! Maybe. Okay, so I don’t know if

that's actually a thing or not, but one way or another, I *did* feel weirdly clearheaded and in control for once.

"Right... Yes, that's it," said Koganezaki. She sounded almost as surprised about me talking sense as I was. "If their relationship goes back to the way it used to be soon, we should be able to pass all of this off as the two of them having just been in a bad mood today. We can say it was their time of the month, or something."

"Both of them? At the same time?"

"I have a feeling their fans would eat that up, actually. Most likely. Anyway, the actual reason doesn't matter much," Koganezaki said with a shrug. "As long as we can show them the Sacrosanct being affectionate with each other like they used to, everything else is just window dressing." Then she shot me a piercing gaze that made it *very* clear who she believed this plan would hinge upon. "You're the only one who can make that happen, Hazama."

"W-Wow, you've got some really high expectations for me, huh?" I stammered.

"Of course I do. After all, you're the only friend those two have ever made."

The only friend they've made. Calling me their *friend* wasn't entirely accurate anymore, sure, but still, hearing Koganezaki acknowledge that fact made me really happy.

"I told you that I was planning on removing you from the picture if you were plotting to use the two of them, didn't I?" asked Koganezaki.

"Y-Yeah," I nervously replied.

"Well, I've thrown those plans out. It's clear to me now that your presence is irreplaceable for them. And so..." She looked me in the eye, and my breath caught in my throat. There was a warmth to her expression, but something else as well—something almost sad, almost envious, that made me feel a strange tightness in my chest. "Please. Let me count on you for this."

Why would she make that face? Why would she worry about Yuna and Rinka with such profound sincerity? I had no idea, but what I *did* know was that the girl whom I'd thought of as my enemy for so very long had turned into my ally in

the blink of an eye. And not just that—she was an ally who struck me as incredibly reliable.

“All right!” I declared. “Just leave it all to me!”

“I’m...surprised,” said Koganezaki. “You seem very confident about this.”

“Well, yeah! I mean, they’re my—um, I mean, they’re both really important to me!” I replied. I’d *almost* said, “They’re my friends,” but the truth was that they were a *little* more than that to me, but I couldn’t reveal that to Koganezaki. Plus, the fact that they were important to me wasn’t a lie at all! I wanted them to get along with each other, and I wanted them to smile and be happy forever and ever, so if there was anything I could do to make that happen, I wanted to give it my best shot.

“Heh heh...” Koganezaki chuckled. “Aha ha ha ha ha!”

“Wh-Why’re you *laughing* about that?!”

“Because it’s just so completely out of character for you,” she gasped between laughing fits. Which was pretty out of character for *her*, in my book! *I really don’t get this girl at all!*

But then again, seeing her crack up was way better than seeing her look as sad as she had a moment ago, so I just clammed up and let her laugh at me. I *did* pull my knees up against my chest and hide my face behind them while I waited for her to finish, though.



“Ahhh...” I sighed in a frankly undignified manner as I slowly submerged myself in the bathtub. It was the evening of that same day—the day I’d forged a bond with...okay, the day I’d at least *started* to reach an understanding with Koganezaki, and a nice, hot bath was exactly what I needed after all that excitement. They say that a hot bath can wash your exhaustion right away, but I’ve always felt that a bath that’s *too* hot and *too* nice runs the risk of washing *all* of you away entirely. I mean, people say that taking a hot bath when it’s too cold out can be bad for your heart or whatever, right? These things are pretty dangerous! Not that any of that was relevant, considering it was nearly summer and all.

“Today really was exhausting, anyway,” I murmured to myself as I lay back in the tub and really let myself relax. Baths were always a powerful temptation, but I was feeling it way harder than usual on that day. Actually, I’d been feeling it harder the past *several* days, when I really stopped to consider it.

I found myself thinking back on everything that had happened to me recently. I’d agreed to go out with Yuna and Rinka, taken both of them on dates, gotten threatened by their fan club at school, and gotten warned and advised by Koganezaki... *And wow, looking back on all of it from a broader perspective, it really feels like I’m the worst person in this whole story by a landslide! I mean, think about it—I’m the one who’s two-timing, and I know that if all that gets out, the fans will get even angrier, and even Koganezaki might decide that I’m the enemy...*

“Wait a second,” I muttered as a thought struck me. “Isn’t it *my* fault that Yuna and Rinka are fighting too...?”

There *had*, after all, been a major change in their lives recently that could’ve prompted their fight. That being, of course, the same change that *my* life had been through: the start of my relationships with them. From their perspective, it was a one-on-one sort of situation—a pure and honest relationship with absolutely no two-timing involved whatsoever. On the one hand, that meant that they weren’t dealing with any of the guilt and stuff that I was, but on the other hand, that meant that, from each of their perspectives, I was still just a plain old friend to the other.

There are all sorts of stories floating around online about friendships breaking down thanks to romantic relationships getting in the way, right? It just so happened that I’d brought my conveniently waterproof smartphone into the bathroom with me, so I pulled up its browser and typed “romance” and “friendship” into the search bar, only for “breakdown” to pop up as a suggested third term. The verdict was clear: romance and friendship were like oil and water.

So theoretically—like, really, just purely hypothetically!—if their little argument today was a sign that there’s a major issue causing friction in their relationship with each other, and if you really can connect the dots between “friendship,” “romance,” and “breakdown” that easily...then wouldn’t it logically

follow that I was the cause of the problem this whole time?!

“O-Oh, *no!*” This was a shock of unprecedented proportions! An absolute cacophony—I mean, calamity! “Leave it all to me,” I’d said to Koganezaki with all the confidence and bluster I could possibly manage, but it turned out that I was the reason the issue was a thing in the first place! I was like a pyromaniac moonlighting as a firefighter! “So wait, does this mean that this whole thing was a charade on *my* part?!” Had I set up a disaster solely so that I could resolve it on my own?!

The biggest problem of all, of course, was that I, the apparent mastermind behind all this trouble, still had *no* idea how to solve it. I’d set the fire without bothering to check if I was carrying an extinguisher—penned a script without ever remembering that I was a terrible actress...or, like, something to that effect.

“Oh god, what should I do? What should I *do*?!” I muttered. If I were smart, this is probably the part where a little light bulb would’ve lit up over my head as I was struck by a flash of inspiration for how to solve everything in an instant. Unfortunately, though, however much I wished that an answer would fall into my lap, it didn’t change the fact that I had a burlap sack of rocks for a brain.

Come on, is it too much to ask for a single miracle? I wondered...and then it hit me! “That’s it!” I tapped a few buttons on my phone, and held it up to my ear. It rang once, twice, and then...

“Hello?”

“You picked up!!!” I shouted.

“...And now I’m hanging up.”

“Whaaat?! No, time out! Stop! Freeze!!!”

“What on earth is this all about?” sighed the girl I’d called: Koganezaki herself. We’d swapped contact info shortly before we’d split up earlier in the day.

“You told me to call you if anything happens, right?” I said.

“Yes,” replied Koganezaki.

“Well, something happened!”

Silence. *Wait, no—I think I might’ve heard her sigh!*

“This is...awfully abrupt, isn’t it?” said Koganezaki.

“Heh heh heh... Don’t you know? Trouble *always* shows up abruptly!”

“I don’t think you should sound that proud about calling yourself ‘trouble.’”

Okay, but it’s still true! On the other hand, I couldn’t deny that this phone call probably had felt pretty out of the blue for her. For all I knew, she wasn’t ready to get a call from me at all! “Sorry, is now a good time?” I asked.

“And *now* you’re acting considerate...?” Koganezaki sighed once more. “I wouldn’t have picked up in the first place if it wasn’t.”

“Wait a minute...” I said, a thought striking me. “Are you in the bath right now?”

“Are you an idiot?”

Oof! That one was such a head-on insult, I almost shed a tear.

“I *definitely* wouldn’t have answered a call from you if I were in the bath,” continued Koganezaki. “I’d break my phone, for one thing.”

“Huh? Your phone’s not waterproof?” I asked, then remembered what her phone had looked like. “Oh riiight, you have a flip phone! Makes sense.”

“It...*is* a flip phone, yes, but that doesn’t necessarily guarantee it’s not waterproof,” said Koganezaki. “I believe they make waterproof flip phones.”

“Do they? Really?”

“I’m sure they do. Most likely.”

Well, she sure doesn’t sound confident... Then again, it had sounded less like an answer-answer and more like a “stop asking me this stupid crap” nonanswer. But yeah, Koganezaki had one of those flip phones, which were practically an endangered species in this day and age. Apparently she’d received it when she was a little kid, and had been using the same one ever since. I couldn’t tell if she took unusually good care of her things or if she was just unusually uninterested in phones. *She* claimed that it did everything she needed it to and was good enough for her, but considering that flip phones couldn’t use chat apps and

there was no way you could properly watch videos on them, I could say with great confidence that I certainly would've found one of those lacking.

"Well, gotcha," I said. "Guess that means I'm the only one talking from the tub tonight..."

"Wait. Did you call me on the phone while you were taking a bath?" asked Koganezaki.

"Yeah," I replied.

Another sigh. "Are you an idiot?" she asked, for the second time that night. This time it had sounded a little less accusatory and a little more concerned, which somehow hurt my feelings even more.

"I just wanted to talk with you as soon as I possibly could! Got a problem with that?!"

"Why are you *shouting* at me now?"

"Heck, I should be asking *you* why you *aren't* in the bath! Don't you know not bathing's unhygienic?!"

"I already took one! Don't treat me like I don't bathe just because we don't take our baths at the exact same time!"

Right, yeah, that's fair. If I'm gonna pick a stupid fight for no reason, I should at least look for a better excuse from now on. Lesson learned.

"So, out with it—what was so important you felt the need to call me from the bath to talk about it? You just couldn't wait until you'd finished, I assume?"

"I sure couldn't! This had to happen A-sap! Or maybe even A+-sap!"

"ASAP is an acronym. It means 'as soon as possible.' The first 'A' isn't a grade."

"Oh, huh!"

"You're aware this material is going to be on our next tests, right?"

"For real?!"

"No."

“...” *She got me! Hook, line, and sinker!*

“So,” said Koganezaki, “can we get to the point now?”

“Oh, right! We almost got *way* off-topic there!” I replied.

“We certainly did, though I’m not sure I would use the word ‘almost.’”

“Right, so, what I wanted to talk to you about! In short...” I paused to take a breath. “I have no idea how I should get those two to make up!”

Once again, I received a moment of silence in response. Unlike last time, though, *this* moment of silence was punctuated with a question mark. This was a “what is this moron even *talking* about?” moment of silence.

“Is *that* the business that was so urgent it just couldn’t wait?” Koganezaki finally asked.

“It’s really important!” I insisted.

“Yes, it is. I certainly can’t deny that, but...from the *bath*...?” Koganezaki sighed for the who-even-knows-how-many-th time that evening. Her voice had trailed off so much over the course of that sentence, I could barely even hear her by the end of it.

“Koganezaki?”

“To start with, get out of the bath. I can wait.”

“Huh? But—”

“It’s the strangest thing. I can practically see a future in which you keep talking to me for so long, you overheat and pass out in the tub. So get out and call me back afterward.”

Then she hung up.

Come on, Koganezaki, don’t you think you’re underestimating me juuust a little? You know that I’m the one who called you, right? Nobody knows what’s good for me better than I...okay, no, I can’t really get away with that claim, can I? I am the girl who started two-timing her best friends on impulse, after all. I can take care of myself at least, though! I haven’t caught a cold in years, and I pulled off my anti-double-booking scheme to perfection the other weekend!

Besides, I've never even come close to spending so long in the tub I overheated and passed out! Heck, part of me thinks that's just an urban legend! Actually, come to think of it, it's weird that I'm so healthy when I have so little stamina. Is this, like, one of my talents? I've got a talent for being healthy!

Just then, I heard a voice from the changing room. “Yotsuba?” called out Sakura, sounding a little peeved. “How long are you planning on spending in there? I’m waiting, you know!”

Ah, my bad! I had bigger problems to worry about than whether or not I’d overheat. We were a five-person family with a single bathtub to split between all of us, so taking a long, leisurely soak was definitely something of a faux pas. *Okay, I’ll give you points for this one after all, Koganezaki!*

I told Sakura I’d be out in just a second, then stood up and—wait. *Huh? I did tell her I’d be right out, right...?* I’d certainly *tried* to—moved my lips and everything—but I guess I didn’t actually make any noise? *And huh, weird. Why’s everything getting all fuzzy...? And why’s the light bulb so bright? I can barely breathe, I can’t hear Sakura super well, and my legs feel so heavy...*

Wham!

“Wha—Y-Yotsuba?! Dad—wait, no, not him—mooom!!!”

Before I knew it, I was lying flat on the floor. *Everything* hurt. I saw Sakura run out of the bathroom in a panic to call for our mom, but the ringing in my ears was getting so loud I could barely even hear her. I was barely conscious, even, and the most I could do was stay slumped over on the ground in a daze.

And that’s how I, Yotsuba Hazama, at the age of sixteen, overheated myself in the bathtub so badly I boiled my brain. First time for everything, I guess.



So things got kinda crazy after that. To start, it goes without saying that I was both sopping wet and buck naked at the time I passed out in the bathroom. Mom, Sakura, and Aoi all had to work together to dry me off, haul me out into the living room, put an ice pack on my forehead, and fan me until I cooled down a little. Honestly, they did a pretty thorough job of nursing me! My dad, by the way, was forced to retire to his room for the night a little earlier than usual. I

felt sorta bad about that, but it was a necessary step to preserve the dignity of a certain adolescent maiden. *I'll have to make those cheese-stuffed hamburger steaks he loves sometime soon as an apology.*

I'm probably making it sound like none of this was a super huge deal, but the truth is, I really couldn't move at all throughout the majority of the process and spent most of it in a kinda dreamy half-awake haze. Mom kept going on about how "a high schooler should really know better" and "this is what happens when you fiddle with your phone in the bath" and stuff, and the most I could say in response were assorted groans of the "uhh" and "ahh" variety. I *do* feel the need to defend myself a little, though! I mean, this was the very first time I'd ever overheated in the tub like that, even if everyone else seemed to cope with it so efficiently it was almost like they dealt with that sort of thing all the time. From my perspective, it was no exaggeration to say that this was an important milestone in my life!

"Are you okay, Yotsuba?" asked Aoi as she fanned me.

Ahh, Aoi, you're the nicest little sister ever! My other little sister, by the way, was in the bath, but don't take that to mean that she was heartless or uncaring or anything! She'd been seriously freaking out when she'd run off to call our mom, and she was the one who'd herded dad into his room and dried me off. Sakura was going through a prickly phase, sure, but she was still as kind as could be at heart. I just felt a little guilty for leaving the bathroom in a crime scene-esque state right before she was scheduled to use it. *I'll have to make her favorite food soon too. And mom's and Aoi's, for that matter. Favorite foods all around, plus apologies for the fact that I'm a sleazebag of a daughter who tries to solve all her problems with food!*

"How is she, Aoi?"

"Eep!" yelped Aoi. "Sakura! That was so fast! You usually take your time in the bath."

"I-I wasn't *worried* about Yotsuba, for the record!" snapped Sakura. "It just hit me that this was the first time this has ever happened to her, right? Then I started worrying that the bathwater might be infected with some weird virus or something, and decided to get out," she explained, pursing her lips irritably. She

didn't *just* take long baths most of the time, by the way. She also usually took the time to blow-dry her hair before she left the changing room, but this time it still looked pretty damp. She must've just toweled off and left it at that.

"I'm sorry, Sakura, Aoi," I moaned. "I went and made you worry about me..."

Sakura gasped. "You were listening?! Wait, I mean, you're talking already?! Are you okay?!"

"Yeah, thanks to you guys, I'm all better... Thanks, mom—" I began to shout to my mother, who was over in the next room, but then my voice caught in my throat and it came out as more of a croak. "Ha ha ha, okay, I guess shouting's still out of the question." First things first, I heaved myself upright for just long enough to slump over into a sitting position on the couch. Standing seemed to be out of the question for the moment as well.

Before I knew it, my sisters had sat down on each side of me, sandwiching me in between them. *What is this, a little-sister hostess bar?*

"Are you okay, Yotsuba?" asked Aoi.

"Yup!" I replied. "I sucked the energy right out of you, so now I'm all better!"

"Eeek! Yotsuba's sucking my energy!" Aoi squealed as she leaned into me.

Just look at how naturally and casually she touches her client! Waiter, fetch me a bottle of the finest booze you have in this joint!

"Aoi, please, she's still recovering," said Sakura.

"Ah! I'm sorry..."



“Oh, come on, it wasn’t *that* bad,” I replied. “I mean, I’m not *sick*.”

“You were basically a puddle until a second ago!” countered Sakura. “Even if you weren’t *actually* sick, you were close enough.” She still sounded a little snippy, but her tone had changed subtly in a way that told me she was in a slightly better mood now.

“Thanks for worrying about me, Sakura. You even skipped drying your hair to come see me...”

“Wha—?! N-No, I didn’t!” snapped Sakura. “I just happened to be in the mood to leave my hair damp today, that’s all!”

“Oooh? What sort of mood makes you want to leave your hair wet, Sakura?” teased Aoi.

“Shut up, Aoi!” snapped Sakura, immediately taking the bait. I could feel the sparks between their gazes flying past me, but weirdly enough, it didn’t make me feel anxious at all.

“Isn’t leaving your hair wet like that bad for it, though?” I noted. “That’d be such a shame—your hair’s so long and pretty!”

“Hyeek?! Hey, Yotsuba!” shrieked Sakura as I reached out to stroke her hair.

“Ah, sorry!” I apologized reflexively. It really *had* felt nice, though. I was so used to having my hair in a bob cut that growing it out after all this time would just feel, well...*weird*, somehow, but seeing Sakura’s, Rinka’s, and Koganezaki’s super-long hair had a way of making me imagine what it’d be like if I let mine get a bit longer as well.

“Aww, I’m jealous,” said Aoi. “Hey, Yotsuba, me too!”

“Okay! Good girl, good girl!” I said as I gave Aoi’s hair a healthy stroking.

“Eeek!” Aoi happily squealed.

Sakura sighed. “Is she your pet or what?”

I sorta got what she meant. Aoi had a bob cut just like me, so it somehow ended up feeling more like I was petting her than stroking her hair.

“Oh, Sakura’s just jealous,” said Aoi.

“Excuse me?! I am *not* jealous, thank you very much! What would I even be jealous *of*?!”

“Oh, I’m so glad I got the same haircut as Yotsuba!”

“Why you little...” growled Sakura. Aoi had her thoroughly baited.

You’d think this was the sort of scene that would set my nerves on edge, but I knew that they weren’t *really* fighting. If anything, they could only playfully clash like this *because* they got along so well.

Huh? Wait...maybe that’s also true for—

“Well...maybe *I’ll* cut my hair short too,” mumbled Sakura.

“What?! N-N-No, you can’t!” I shouted. The bombshell she’d just dropped had *completely* blown my train of thought off its tracks! *Sakura, cutting her hair short? No, no, absolutely not!* “No cutting off your hair! I won’t allow it, you hear me?!”

“Wh-What the heck?!” Sakura shouted back.

“Your hair’s so pretty right now! It’d be such a waste...heck, it’d be a tragedy! The whole world would mourn the loss! Your pigtails make you look like an anime character in a way that’s so *cute* on you, and when you let your hair down at home it’s, like, such a contrast! Like, ‘*whoa*, she looks so much more adultlike than I thought!’ It’s the best! Listen to your sister, Sakura: The! Best!”

“Is your brain still scrambled from the bath after all?” asked Sakura as she cringed away from me.

I didn’t let her repulsion bother me, though. As long as my passion had gotten through to her, I knew that she wouldn’t cut her hair after all, most likely. Earning the distaste of my little sister *was* pretty painful, sure, but I knew that someday, Sakura would look back on this moment and understand how right I really was! *I’m so glad you’re my big sister, Yotsuba! It’s all thanks to you that my life has turned out so well! You’re the best big sister ever! I love you!* And then we’d hug! Happily ever after!

“Heh heh heh... Yeah, right...” I muttered to myself.

“Yotsuba, that’s kinda gross.”

“Yotsuba, that’s kinda gross.”

“*Both* of you?! In perfect harmony?!”

And so, having taken way more damage from that last jab than I could’ve possibly anticipated—plus the fact that I’d already boiled myself into exhaustion—I fell into a deep, depressed sleep.

Then, when I woke up again, I immediately set to work on a plan to repair...no, to *confirm* the state of Yuna and Rinka’s relationship.

Chapter 6: Where Better to Make Up than an Amusement Park?

I checked my bangs using my phone's front camera to make sure they weren't mussed up, put the phone away, pulled it out to check them again, then heaved a sigh. My mind was a roiling mishmash of anxiety and excitement, and I knew for a fact that I would never get used to this sort of thing as long as I lived.

Why do I keep checking on my bangs like this, anyway? There are, like, a million other things about my appearance I could fixate on instead! I mean, I guess it was too late to do anything about my clothes and makeup and stuff, so I didn't really have any choice other than to give up on those. The real problem was that fiddling with my bangs was so easy, I just couldn't stop myself. I'd get all antsy sometimes and mess with them without even thinking about it too, or the wind would pick up in just the right way to make them look all weird. *Man, sometimes it feels like I might as well just shave it all...nooope, nope, nope, nope! Bad idea, bad idea, bad idea!*

"Uh...Yotsuba?"

"Is something wrong? Why are you clutching your head like that?"

Apparently, Yuna and Rinka had shown up while I wasn't paying attention. They sounded a little concerned as they called out to me, and yeah, fair enough. I'd be concerned too if I went out to meet someone and found them clutching at their head and moaning incoherently. Honestly, I probably should've been thankful that they hadn't assumed I was sick or something.

"It's nothing! I just—" I began, but then I looked up and was struck speechless. Not in a bad way, of course! No, I was struck dumb by the fact that the two girls standing in front of me were a portrait of perfection itself.

On one hand, you had a truly adorable girl wearing a breezy white blouse and a high-waisted brown skirt. I'd seen outfits like it on social media before—there'd been this whole thing a little while back about how an ensemble like

that was the best way to ensnare an inexperienced boy's heart. It might've been a little out of fashion these days, but seeing *her* wear it made it look cutting-edge all over again. Not only was it cute, the way the skirt squeezed in around her waist had the side effect of emphasizing her chest, which gave it a sexy sort of allure as well.

This is cheating! Forget the innocent boys—that outfit's a danger to my heart too! It's pounding so hard, it feels like it could stop at any second!

Then on the other hand, you had a girl in a blue denim jacket, a striped T-shirt, and a simple but stylish pair of black pants. In fact, her outfit was stylish across the board, and made her look as cool as could possibly be. It was like a model had stepped right out from the front cover of a fashion magazine—she was just *that* dazzling!

Sometimes a simple outfit is the best option available. Sometimes outfits are predictable because there's genuinely nothing better. There were no tricks or fancy embellishments to this outfit. No, it simply hit me with the raw, innate power of its wearer, and *that* hit with the force of a truck. I mean, she was *stupidly* cool, and yet had a cute side as well that the outfit brought out at the same time!

After all, it wasn't like she was particularly fond of that boyish sort of fashion. I mean, I don't think she *hated* it either, but the point is that I knew she was wearing it specifically because she thought it was the sort of outfit she looked best in. In other words, she wanted to make herself look as nice as she possibly could for me—yet on the flip side, the gaze she was shooting me carried with it a touch of anxiety alongside the expectation that I would like the way she was dressed. It was just so *cute* of her, and the sight of her set my heart racing as well.

Yuna and Rinka, in short, had both gone all out. They'd dressed to impress without sparing the slightest expense, doing their best to draw out every ounce of appeal they had to offer. And me? I looked...I mean, pretty basic, honestly. Basic enough that I'm too embarrassed to go over it all in detail. Just run an image search on "basic fashion" and you'll get the general idea. It was suddenly very clear to me that my bangs really were the least of my worries—there was *so much* else I should've reexamined!

Oh, jeez, I wish I could redo everything starting from this morning! Actually, if I'm gonna go that far, I might as well go even further back...but wait, where do I stop? Can I go back to my birth and be the daughter of a famous actor and actress instead? That line of thought, of course, was less a line and more a bottomless pit. The protagonist of the scenario I was building up didn't even resemble Yotsuba Hazama on a basic level anymore, so I decided to abandon the hypothetical while I still could.

"You both look so pretty and cute and cool and amazing!!!" I blurted. They'd come at me with a merciless level of charm, so I had no choice but to respond with an equally merciless level of unreserved praise. My outfit might have been basic, and I might have been pretty worried about that, but that didn't diminish how glorious *they* looked at all!

"Th-Thanks," said Yuna with a composed smile that had just a *hint* of satisfied smirk to it.

"That's a little embarrassing to hear," added Rinka, who, true to her words, was scratching her cheek bashfully.

The fact that *my* words could make them that happy, could make their faces flush that clearly, was astonishing. Granted, if either of them were to look off to the side, they would've noticed that the other was reacting in the same way, so in a certain sense it was a pretty terrifying scene as well, but it seemed the two of their gazes were locked onto me alone. And that's not even *starting* on the distinct hint of passion in their eyes as they stared at me.

"O-Okay, it's still a little early, but shall we get going?!" I shouted as I checked the time on my phone. It was, predictably, an hour before we'd actually been scheduled to meet up. I'd arrived a full *two* hours early this time, just to be on the extra *extra* safe side, and was extremely glad in retrospect that I'd gone to the trouble. Of course, since my phone had kept me company for that whole hour, I had to hook it up to the mobile battery I'd brought with me a lot earlier than I'd initially planned to.

On that particular Saturday morning, precisely two weeks after I'd started dating Yuna and Rinka, I'd been standing once again in front of the same train station as last week for one simple purpose: to meet up with both of them for a

three-person date. *Does this count as a double booking?* I wondered, then shook my head. The whole concept for our outing today was to have the three of us hang out together for the first time in ages, so it wasn't even totally clear that it counted as a *date* at all.

Of course, I hadn't been counting on those two showing up in full-on, hardcore date fashion! And, I mean, *I'd* shown up super early and had spent my waiting time fiddling with my bangs, so I was acting the same way as ever too...or rather, the same way as ever as of two weeks ago, and *completely* unlike my usual self from any point prior to that.

In any case, I was in friend mode with them today, *not* girlfriend mode. My goal was to verify what sort of state their relationship was in, and if it really was deteriorating, to help them make up! Somehow! I wasn't naive enough to just come out and *tell* them that was my goal, of course, but I was committed. I'd make it happen, for their sake!

I'd do it because...because I was their friend.



"...so I thought I'd just ask the two of them to go hang out somewhere," I told Koganezaki over the phone.

"Oh, all right," she replied, letting out what sounded suspiciously like a sigh of relief. Most likely she'd been prepared for me to come at her with some ridiculously convoluted, hijink-laden nightmare plan, and hadn't been prepared to handle the relatively reasonable and ordinary suggestion I'd thought up instead. I'd completely defied her expectations.

"So anyway, about the actual *plan* part—"

"You don't have to tell me the details. That's all up to you," said Koganezaki, cutting me off. "I'm sure that you know those two better than I do at this point, anyway," she added in a slightly subdued tone. "And most of all, I know *you* well enough to know that the *less* you think this through in advance, the more likely it is to go well."

"Wow, rude?! I think stuff through all the time, actually! Try going on one of Yotsuba Hazama's special-produced dates yourself and see if you can say *that*

again! Just one time, and you'll be hooked for life!"

"Oh, a TV show I wanted to watch is about to start. Well, then..."

"Way to totally ignore me! Jeez!"

"I look forward to hearing that your plan was a success," Koganezaki said, then hung up. I couldn't help but notice her conspicuous use of the word *that* rather than *if*. It was very *her*, in a sense...though it also occurred to me that it might've been a sign that she trusted me implicitly to pull it off.

I found my mind drifting back to that conversation as I led Yuna and Rinka onto the train. The two of them had gone so all out they were practically sparkling, and the amount of attention they were drawing to our little group was intense. I'm pretty sure I even heard somebody say something along the lines of "Are they shooting a movie here or something?"

I had to wonder—how did I look to all those people who were watching us? If they thought Yuna and Rinka were actresses, then maybe they thought I was their manager? Or maybe the two of them were shining so brightly that I was blotted out entirely by their magnificent glow.

"It feels like it's been *ages* since the three of us went out together!" exclaimed Yuna.

"Yeah, you're right," said Rinka. "At least a month or so, I think?"

Neither of them seemed bothered in the slightest by all the attention they were getting. They just chatted away like they didn't even notice the stares. Their conversation didn't seem to have any sort of antagonistic edge, incidentally, but I *did* pick up on a certain strange stiffness that I'd never noticed between them before.

"Hey, Yotsuba!" said Yuna. "Where are you taking us today?"

"Huh? Er, ah, umm," I stammered.

"It's pretty rare for you to be that insistent about asking us to go somewhere," noted Rinka. "I was so curious where you'd be taking us, I barely got any sleep at all last night."

“G-Gee, sure hope I can live up to those expectations,” I replied, taking great care to speak slowly and not trip over my own words. It felt like I’d start shaking if I let my guard down. I’d had such a sense of drive and purpose when I’d set out this morning, but I just couldn’t stop myself from going all weak in the knees in the face of their absurdly powerful auras of beauty. I’d spent ages this morning staring into the mirror and telling myself, “You can do this! You’ve *got* this!” but somehow I’d *already* expended all of that positive energy. *Man, if only I could’ve brought along a mobile battery to charge myself up with...*

“All right, let’s get going!” said Yuna.

“We’ll be counting on you to escort us,” added Rinka.

Barely an instant before I went into complete panic mode, the two of them stepped up to either side of me and each took one of my hands. Which, for the record, was the opposite of helpful on the panic front! *Not to mention that Rinka feels like she’d be way better at escorting a lady than I would... Gaaah, whatever! It’s time for desperate measures!*

“Leave it to me! I’m gonna make today so much fun for you two, it’ll make your birthdays look shabby in comparison!” I declared.

In retrospect, the desperate-measures thing was a bit silly—after all, I was pretty much *always* desperate. Fortunately for me, whenever I got desperate, it allowed me to tap into a well of inner power so deep that even *I* couldn’t believe it! Sometimes. Occasionally. Okay, maybe not, but it sorta *felt* like it. I’m gonna be honest—I had *no* clue if my attempt to hype us all up had been successful at all, but in any case, all I could do was let impulse take the wheel and set forth.



Several stations’ worth of bumpy train ride and a line change later, we reached our destination: an amusement park that you might say was a little famous in the area, or alternately, you might say was literally *only* known to area locals. The place was called Elphie’s Family Park, which was such a weird name that it was sorta no wonder the place wasn’t exactly popular (though, speaking as a local, I’d never really considered how strange the name was until this precise moment).

As far as I was concerned, the place had always been the very first candidate for all of our family outings, and I was very familiar with it as a result. Yuna and Rinka, on the other hand, were both gawking at their surroundings with such obvious curiosity that I had to wonder if they'd been here at all before. They lived in a different school district than I did, sure, but it still wasn't *that* far away from their houses. I felt like the place *had* to count as a local attraction for them as well, and in the end I decided to just ask. "Is this your first time here?"

"It is," said Yuna.

"We've been to a place that's a little like this, though," noted Rinka.

"Oh, you mean, like, the one by the ocean?" I asked.

The two of them nodded. There *was* another theme park by the coast in the general area, about an hour away by train. That one was a *big* theme park, though, with a ridiculously famous mascot character. All sorts of people came from every corner of the country to visit it—the place was famous on a national level. And yet, even though it wasn't far away at all, I'd never actually been there myself. It was supposed to be crowded all the time, and it was expensive, and you had to wait for ages to get on a single ride.

"I guess that sort of big, fancy place *would* fit you guys better than here, though," I sighed. My local haunt of an amusement park was so lacking in comparison that rumors floated around pretty regularly that it was going to get shut down. It was famous for the fact that it *somehow* still hadn't folded...or at least it was in my mind, anyway. Plenty of people had never bothered coming here even when they were in elementary or middle school, and the folks who were *really* winning at life probably hadn't even *heard* of the place. It didn't even have any standout attractions or unique signature products associated with it. It was almost enough to make you wonder why I'd brought Yuna and Rinka there in the first place...but you sure weren't gonna catch *me* asking that out loud!

"Is that this place's mascot?" Yuna asked as she pointed at the archway that stood above the park's main entrance. A cartoony elephant character was drawn at the top of the arch.

"Yup! That's Elphie, all right," I replied.

“Is it just me, or does he look kind of like an old man?” asked Rinka.

“Yeah, I guess they modeled him after the park’s founder,” I explained.

Rinka really did have a point. Elphie looked less like an adorable mascot animal and more like some crotchety old dude. His face was covered with wrinkles and something about his expression made him look kinda depressed. When I was little I’d thought that he looked like a kindly old elephant-man, but now that I was older and wiser, he just looked incredibly exhausted. As far as child-oriented designs went, it might’ve leaned just a *little* heavily on projecting a sense of decrepit sorrow...but then again, little-kid me had totally failed to pick up on it, so maybe it wasn’t an issue after all.

Y’know, now that I’m here, I’m starting to think that this isn’t the sort of place a bunch of high school girls would usually go to together. I might’ve fit in just fine there, sure, but Yuna and Rinka were the sort of ultra-dazzling high school girls who could take the whole world by storm. We hadn’t even gone inside yet and I was already regretting the decision to bring them to a kitschy little local theme park like this place.

No, don’t think like that! It’s still too early to regret this! I mean, it’s not even noon yet! There must be a billion ways I could turn this situation around before —

“Do you come here often, Yotsuba?” asked Rinka.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I do. With my family. We haven’t come here super recently, though.”

“I see...” she said with a nod. “So you probably have a lot of memories here, then.”

Th-That’s kind of an overblown way of putting it...but I guess it’s not totally wrong. I’d only chosen this destination today in the first place because in my mind, this was the place you went when you needed to make up with someone. Not that *I’d* ever been the one who needed to make up with someone—no, Sakura and Aoi were the ones who ended up fighting with each other.

Back when they were little, Sakura and Aoi used to get into fights over who would get to play with me all the time. Which was a *super* cute reason to

quarrel with your sibling, in my book! But anyway, the usual tactic to pacify them was to find something that all three of us could do together, and a nearby, never-crowded theme park like Elphie's was the perfect choice to keep things nice and easy on our parents. Though that was all in the past, of course. I couldn't possibly imagine the two of them fighting over their big sister's attention now that they'd grown up.

"Yotsuba?"

Gah! I'd inadvertently let myself sink into my old, nostalgic memories until Yuna's voice snapped me out of it. I glanced up to find her and Rinka giving me a sort of worried look. My goal for today's to make them have as much fun as possible and remember how great it is to hang out together, so what am I getting all gloomy on them for?! Calm down, it's fine. It's not like they've had a complete falling-out or anything! They're together right now, and they don't seem like they're upset with each other at all! I just need to give them the chance they need and they'll go back to normal for sure!

"I'm fine! It's nothing! I was just thinking about what part of the park I wanted to show you first, since you're a couple of first-timers," I explained with a smile. Then I pulled three scraps of paper out from my bag. "Ta-daaa! Guess what *these* are!"

"Wait, are those tickets to the park?" said Yuna.

"Don't tell me you bought our tickets too...?" asked Rinka.

Their eyes were both wide with surprise...but they were wrong! *Heh heh heh! Sorry, girls, but there's no such thing as a free lunch in this world!*

"Nope! They're coupons!" I declared.

"Coupons?" parroted Yuna, cocking her head.

"That's right! Believe it or not, these suckers get you half off on your admission fee!"



“O-Oh, okay, then... For a second, I was convinced that you were going to insist on paying for us,” Rinka said, then let out a sigh of relief. I think she’d gotten a pretty good idea of how I was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy back when we bought matching underwear together.

Now, I *had* pulled some money out of my personal rainy-day stash, just in case I needed extra funding to make the date a success. If I’d wanted to, I totally could’ve covered the cost of all three of our tickets. If I did that, though...

“If I insisted on treating you guys, you’d probably feel bad and end up *forcing* yourselves to look like you were having fun, even if you weren’t, right?” I told them. Granted, paying for the two of them would’ve let me look all reliable and capable of covering for my friends, but I didn’t want to potentially make the rest of the day awkward for the sake of that one tiny upside. I *did* want to make it at least a little less expensive for them, though, which was where readying the half-off coupons came into play! Not that I’d had to do much to ready them—my family were such regulars at this place that they sent the things to us in the mail for free every once in a while.

“That’s so *you*, Yotsuba,” chuckled Yuna.

“Agreed,” said Rinka with a nod.

“Umm... Was that a compliment?” I asked. It *sorta* sounded like they were praising my restraint, based on how the conversation had flowed up to that point...but that didn’t explain why they were snickering at me. “Wait... Don’t tell me you guys think I’m cheap now?!”

“No way, of course not! Right, Rinka?”

“Right, Yuna. It’s just that bringing along coupons is so, well... *You* know what I mean, don’t you?”

“Right, right?!”

They grinned at each other, then cracked up in unison. *I knew it—they really do think I’m stingy now! I thought that bringing coupons was a great idea, but it’s come around to bite me in the rear!*

“But hey,” said Yuna, “We don’t have all day to stand around talking! Let’s

head in!”

“O-Okay,” I groaned. I’d kinda sorta felt like I might cry for a minute there, but at least she and Rinka seemed to be getting along great, considering the exchange they’d just had. That thought gave me the strength I needed to grit my teeth and bear it.



The last time I’d gone to Elphie’s Family Park was several years ago, but it hadn’t really changed much at all since then. I certainly wouldn’t say that the place was thriving, but it also felt like I’d be exaggerating if I claimed it was on the decline. The rides were all well-maintained and the park boasted a flawless record as far as accidents were concerned. They were even still adding new rides and attractions at a rate of one every few years or so.

The thing is, the park didn’t really have anything *special*. There were no rides among the old *or* new attractions that you couldn’t find somewhere else. This might be a weird way of putting it, but if I had to pin down its most prominent feature, it would be its lack of anything special to distinguish itself. It had a roller coaster, a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round, a spinning-teacups ride—basically a full stock of all the generic rides you’d immediately picture when you heard the words “theme park”—and I knew the place like the back of my hand. I thought that here, at least, I’d be able to keep up with the Sacrosanct themselves...and boy, was *that* ever stupid of me or what!

“Bleeech...”

“Let’s ride again! One more time!”

“I’m up for that. It’s not every day we get to ride something like this, after all!”

Apparently, pretty girls are *also* born with unusually well-developed inner ears. We’d just ridden the park’s headline attraction—the Elphie Coaster—so many times in a row I couldn’t even count them. It had to be at *least* in the double digits. *How was I supposed to know that the two of them would be such thrill-seekers?!*

“I-I think I’m gonna take a break, thanks,” I groaned.

“Oh, no—are you feeling sick?” asked Yuna.

“We probably shouldn’t have dragged you on that ride over and over again...” said Rinka.

H-Huh? Is it just me, or are they starting to look sort of gloomy?! Oh no!

“J-Juuust kidding!” I shouted, forcing a sudden smile to cover up my nausea. *Today’s all about making sure they have fun! It would be absolutely inexcusable for me to go and rain all over their parade!!!* “I just thought you two might’ve been forcing yourselves to keep going without a break, so I put on a little act, that’s all! You can’t *possibly* think that I, Yotsuba Hazama, professional Elphie-master, would *ever* go down for the count after a few measly rides on the Elphie Coaster?!”

That, of course, was a load of lies. The truth was that I’d felt a hot mass of bile welling up in my throat several times already, and there was no telling when I’d finally fail to force it back down again. Heck, even after I’d gotten off the ride, I was still—*urp!*

You’d think that a ride called the Elphie Coaster, a ride named after a depressed little elephant mascot, would be a cute little kiddie affair, but nope, it was actually a pretty darn decent, almost full-fledged roller coaster. It was just authentic enough to satisfy the needs of thrill-ride fans, to a certain extent, but it was also an average enough experience that nobody would ever bother visiting the park specifically to experience it.

Now, it’s not like I particularly *hate* thrill rides or anything. I’d actually ridden the Elphie Coaster plenty of times before today, even. What I *hadn’t* done was ride it over and over and over again that many times in a row! I’d only gotten a ten-minute wait between rides at best, and at worst there wasn’t a line at all and we got to just stay in our seats and go for another loop right away! Even a totally average thrill ride could build up some really nasty damage on a girl if you let it whip you around at that sort of pace, and by the end of it I could practically *hear* my inner ear screaming at me to stop. *Oh god, it still feels like I’m spinning around, and we’re not even on the ride...*

“That final drop, though! The way the wind just *buffets* you as you go down it, it’s the best!” Yuna gleefully shouted.

“The best? No, the *best* part is the big loop!” Rinka insisted. “The feeling in your stomach as it whips you around is incredible!”

“No way—the drop’s the best!”

“The loop!”

And suddenly, they were staring each other down from an incredibly close range, rapidly escalating into a full-on shouting match. Both of them looked like they were ready for an argument, and neither of them seemed inclined to concede the point even a little.

“What about you, Yotsuba?” asked Yuna.

“Huh?”

“What part do you like better? The drop or the loop?” clarified Rinka.

Wait, they’re dragging me into this now?! O-Oh god, what should I say?! After riding it that many times, I can barely even tell the difference between the drops and the loops anymore...

“The drop, right?”

“No, the loop, obviously!”

They were both incredibly worked up, and their eyes sparkled with anticipation as they awaited my answer. *S-Seriously, what’s my move here? I have no clue what the right answer is!* If I chose one over the other, then one of them would inevitably end up feeling sad, so that was right off the table. But if I said I liked both of them, there’s no way that Yuna and Rinka would be satisfied! The opposite, probably—they’d get even *more* heated! I’d end up in real danger of the conversation going into an endless roller-coaster loop until I finally worked up the nerve to make a clear decision! I would *definitely* die, or at the very least barf my guts out, and by *that* point the question of which I enjoyed more would be completely out the window.

“Come on, Yotsuba!”

“Yotsuba!”

U-Uggh... No choice! Time to play my trump card! “H-Hey, it’s almost lunchtime, huh?! Wanna go get something to eat?!” I desperately shouted. As

usual, I'd fallen back on the one plan that I was actually capable of: running the heck away.



"Oh, wow, this is delicious!"

"You're right, it really is!"

Deep relief washed over me as Yuna and Rinka flashed their ever-perfect smiles at me. I'd completely lost track of time thanks to the nonstop roller-coaster hell I'd been thrown into right after we arrived, and before I knew it, it was two in the afternoon. We were a little late for lunch, but after spending *that* long in a state of intense dizziness, I'd completely lost my appetite regardless. It was the perfect excuse to get me out of the roller-coaster opinion conundrum, though, and I had one other reason why I couldn't afford to put off lunch for much longer as well.

"I'm just so *touched*, Yotsuba! I can't believe you made a lunch box for us!" said Yuna.

"Was this inspired by that conversation we had the other day?" asked Rinka.

"Yeah, it was," I confirmed with a nod. "You guys talk about how good my lunches look all the time, but I didn't get to give you any the other day, Rinka, and I don't think what I gave *you* was enough for you, Yuna."

"Mnh—stop acting like I'm some sort of glutton!" huffed Yuna, pouting even as she stuffed her cheeks with a rice ball. She'd already eaten twice as much as Rinka and I had, and her objection was so unpersuasive that Rinka and I couldn't help but crack up.

"I thought about bringing you to the food court at first," I continued, "but then I remembered that there was a place at the park for picnics! I guess they were really trying to lean into the *family* park thing? Anyway, my family used to always bring a boxed lunch and eat here whenever we visited."

Of course, in today's case, making that lunch had involved waking up at five in the morning to cook. The whole family had helped out with that, back in the day, but today I was all on my lonesome and had to do all of the preparations myself. I was a little worried that the lunch might spoil before we got to it, since

it was pretty hot out, but thankfully Yuna and Rinka seemed to be enjoying it without reservation.

“Oh, Yuna, you’ve got some rice on your cheek!” I said.

“Huh?” Yuna grunted as I reached out, plucked the grain of rice from her face, and popped it into my mouth. This whole scene was taking me right back to my childhood. Sakura and Aoi used to turn our lunches into a little contest and compete to see who could eat the most, and they ended up with rice stuck to their faces all the time as a result.

“Eeep...”

H-Huh? That’s weird—why’s Yuna blushing like that? She looks like she’s frozen up with surprise too...

“Hmph...”

“Gyaaah?!” I shrieked as I felt something jab me in the side.

I reflexively whipped my head around to find Rinka giving me a very pointed look—specifically, a “stop flirting around with some other girl in front of your girlfriend” sort of look. The meaning packed into her expression was so shockingly obvious, I could practically *hear* her saying it.

“Ah, you’ve got some on you too, Rinka!”

“Wha—?” Rinka exclaimed as I abruptly spun around and reached out for her mouth as well. Then she let out a very brief squeal of shock and blushed as I scooped an imaginary grain of rice off her cheek and licked it right off my finger.

In retrospect, cleaning rice off Yuna’s face and eating it was a *super* girlfriend-like thing for me to do. I hadn’t considered the implications at all when I did it with Yuna, but in Rinka’s case, it was a deliberate attempt to restore the balance I’d accidentally destabilized. Plus, she *had* to know I was just acting, which made it so much more embarrassing that the word barely even did it justice!

And so, as a natural result, all three of us spent the next several minutes fidgeting around in awkward, incredibly uncomfortable silence.



Looking back on it, everything was actually going pretty well up until lunchtime. I'd been a little overwhelmed on account of a tiny little miscalculation, sure—who knew that Yuna and Rinka would like thrill rides *that* much?—but both of them were all smiles the whole time, and I saw no signs of any real sort of conflict between them. I mean, there *was* the roller-coaster debate, but that came across to me as more of an example of their charming chemistry with each other than anything else. The image of them screaming and squealing with glee on that ride could've made for perfect commercial material, if anyone had been filming.

After lunch, though, the mood had shifted dramatically.

"S-So, what should we ride next?" I asked.

"U-Up to you..." replied Yuna.

"Agreed," said Rinka, in just as quiet of a tone.

"O-Okay, then...I pick that! Let's go ride the spinning teacups!" I said.

Yuna was walking to one side of me, Rinka to the other, and both of them were spending more time looking at the ground than the park around us. They didn't seem *depressed*, though. Every once in a while I'd catch them glancing over at me, or one of their hands would just barely brush up against mine, and then for just a moment they'd be all smiles again. It was like they were trying to turn this into a secret stealth-date, and were enjoying the challenge of expressing their affection without giving it away to each other. At that point, I didn't think they were paying any attention to the attractions at all—their attention was totally focused on me instead, and I was painfully aware of it.

In complete honesty, part of me found the whole situation super romantic. I wanted to let myself wallow in their secretive affection...but I couldn't give in to the urge! It'd all be over if either of them noticed what the other was up to! I could forget about Operation Help Them Make Up then, that was for sure. Heck, not only would my two-timing be exposed and my relationship with them destroyed, their relationship with each other could end up abruptly and permanently fractured!

I can't believe that having my girlfriends express their affection for me could somehow end up being this excruciating, I thought to myself. When I went on

dates with each of them individually, the experience was almost intoxicatingly joyful. Yuna and Rinka were both so cute, so cool, so incomparably amazing and fun to be around that I wished our time together would never end. I was feeling all of that happiness again now that I was with both of them, to be clear—it was just drowned out by pain. When Yuna did one of those tiny little gestures that showed me how much she cared, I found myself thinking about Rinka. When Rinka did so herself, I found myself worrying about Yuna instead! The stronger my feelings for each of them grew and the more aware of their feelings for me I became, the guiltier I felt for deceiving them and the more overwhelming the self-loathing that ate away at me from the inside became.

We're supposed to be here as friends today... Just three friends hanging out! Not a date at all, I kept telling myself, but it wasn't even a little bit convincing anymore. After all, the more I spent time with the two of them and the more fun I had with them, the more inescapable the realization became to me: Their relationship with each other hadn't changed at all. No, what *had* changed was—

“Here goes!”

“Whaaaugh?!” I yelped as I got yanked around at an astonishing speed. The wind was slamming into my cheek like a brick wall! My vision was getting all twisty and wobbly!

“Yuna!” shouted Rinka. “You’re spinning us too fast!”

“Oh, already?” pouted Yuna. “I’m not even going at full speed, and it’s already too much for you?”

“Oh, it’s on... This is nothing! Go ahead and take your best shot!”

Yuna and Rinka were both holding onto the handle at the center of our teacup, spinning it with all their might and sending the cup itself whipping around at an incredible speed.

“Aaaaughhaugh?!” I wailed.

Yuna, on the other hand, was whooping and laughing as she spun us faster and faster. “This is actually really fun!” she shouted.

“You always have loved spinning around in office chairs, haven’t you?!” shouted Rinka.

“Hey, are you trying to call me a little kid or something?!” Yuna shouted back.

They’d only had eyes for me before we got on the ride, but now their attention was squarely focused on each other. Specifically, they were glaring at each other in the most childish way I could imagine—it was like they were trying to compete with each other or something.

“No way, I was just *worried* about whether you could handle this much spinning!” countered Rinka. “You used to get so dizzy you’d fall over and cry when we were kids, remember?!”

“*Me?! You were just as bad as I was!* I definitely remember you bawling your eyes out!”

“Only because *you* spun us way faster than you should’ve!”

Meanwhile, neither of them had let up on turning the handle for even a second. They were off in their own little world—a world that I was totally incapable of butting into. That world was located in the same teacup I was sitting in, sure, but it still somehow felt impossibly far away from me. They were being so belligerent with each other, but thrilled at the same time. The sight of them like this was just about as far away as it could possibly be from the perfect, adorable, cool, harmonious aura that made everyone who witnessed them extol them as the Sacrosanct.

I didn’t necessarily think that was a bad thing, though. As a matter of fact, I thought that it was really nice in its own way. *They* were obviously having fun, and I was having so much fun as well just watching them that I ended up grinning right along with them. *Of course, if the folks from their fan club saw them like this, they’d probably pass out on the spot.*

I was convinced by now that *this* was their true nature. It just seemed to suit them so much better, from my perspective, but of course the moment they let this side of themselves show even a little at school, it caused a huge commotion. Yuna and Rinka were smart. *Way* smarter than the likes of me. They really hadn’t changed at all—this was always what they were like, deep down. Putting up the Sacrosanct front that their fans demanded of them had probably taken a lot of collaborative work between the two of them.

That, however, would mean that I was right after all. *Something* had changed,

and if it wasn't them...

"...ba?"

"...tsuba!"

"Huh?" Suddenly, I found myself somewhere completely different from where I'd been just an instant before. The pitch blackness had been replaced by a world bathed in the glow of sunset... *Wait a second. "Pitch blackness"? When did that happen? What's going on here...?*

"Oh, thank goodness! Looks like you're back with us again," sighed Yuna.

"Are you okay, Yotsuba?" asked Rinka.

They were leaning over me, peering into my face. Somehow, I'd ended up sitting down on a bench. *Okay, let's rewind for a second. I remember riding the spinning teacups, yeah, but that was just a little while after lunchtime... Did I pass out or something?*

"You get really spacey sometimes, Yotsuba, you know that? Something on your mind?" asked Yuna. She looked a little pouty.

"Well, we *did* get a little too worked up today," said Rinka with a slightly apologetic chuckle. "I think we might have run her ragged."

It was becoming clear that once again, I'd gotten stuck in my own little dreamworld. In a way, it was almost impressive that a moron like me was capable of getting that lost in thought. Just another of my many, many bad habits.

"I'm sorry!" I frantically apologized. We'd finally had a day out together, and I'd been the one to invite *them* on top of it, and there I was, ruining it all by not even being mentally present!

Rinka glanced over at Yuna. "You just had to go and blame her, didn't you?"

"I-I wasn't *blaming* her for anything!" Yuna quickly snapped. "And Yotsuba, you don't have anything to apologize for either!"

"She's right! I'm sorry that Yuna's like this, Yotsuba."

"Hey! Why're you shoving all the responsibility for this off on me?!"

Those two really are just plain nice. I was obviously the one at fault for zoning out, but they were doing their absolute best to try and make it look like they didn't care at all. *If only I could make people feel at ease the way they do...*

"And *anyway*," said Yuna, "it was *your* fault that Yotsuba passed out in the first place, Rinka!"

"Wh-What's that supposed to mean?!"

"*You're* the one who insisted she get on that Viking boat ride with you! All that spinning around must have scrambled her brains like an egg!"

W-Wait—say what now?! I mean, I knew the part about my brain getting scrambled was a joke. That wasn't what had surprised me at all! No, the part that surprised me was the fact that I'd apparently actually gotten on the Viking ride! It was this thrill ride shaped like a Viking-style longboat that rocked forward and backward on an axis, going a little higher and higher each time until finally it did a couple full loops, turning you all the way upside down.

"W-Well, I mean...it's *fun*," Rinka bashfully explained, biting her lip and fidgeting in an adorably childish sort of way. "And it's not like *you* didn't have fun on it too, Yuna."

"Maybe at first, sure," Yuna sighed. She sounded fed up, and considering that, as best as I could tell, that ride had lasted us all the way from the afternoon to the early evening, I could understand why.

"And anyway, Yuna, you're making it sound like this was all *my* fault, but *you're* the one who dragged her onto the Tower of Doom over and over!"

The Tower of Doom?! That was another thrill ride. It was built around a big, tall tower, as you'd expect. A bunch of chairs were set up around the tower's circumference, and those chairs got pulled up all the way to the top of the tower, then dropped all the way to the bottom in an instant. It was like that game parents play with their kids sometimes where they toss them up into the air, only it was machine-powered and on a way bigger scale. The Tower of Doom was actually the newest attraction in the park, and I'd never ridden it myself—or rather, I'd never ridden it until some point in the gaping void that my memories of the afternoon had apparently turned into.

“You just kept going up and down, up and down... No wonder Yotsuba’s brain ended up getting turned into a milkshake! I was half expecting to see it start dribbling out of her ears!”

W-Wait—say what now, part two!!! I mean, I knew the part about my brain getting milkshake-ified was a jo—

“N-No way?! Taking her on the tower did her in?! It was my fault?!” wailed Yuna.

“No, not *just* yours,” sighed Rinka. “Me taking her on the Viking ride was probably just as big of a problem.”

“The two rides synergized with each other, and aggravated her condition past the point of no return...”

“Wait, condition?! *What* condition?!” I wailed.

“Well, naturally,” the two of them began in perfect unison...then paused, hesitated for just a moment longer, and cracked up in perfect unison as well.

They were messing with me! I mean, I’d had my suspicions that might’ve been the case, but their act was *way* too realistic! It would’ve been one thing if *one* of them had decided to joke around with me, but the fact that both of them had managed to make themselves look *so* seriously concerned about it the whole time had actually almost sold me. Both of them had the sort of acting chops that could easily give most professional actresses a run for their money, and their looks could put said actresses to shame...not that *that* had anything to do with the current situation. “I can’t believe you two,” I groaned.

“Ha ha ha, I know, I know! Sorry,” said Yuna. “You were just so cute, I couldn’t help it.”

“It’s true,” said Rinka with a sagely nod. “You really are to blame for this one.”

“I-I am *not* cute,” I muttered. It sounded sarcastic coming from beauties like them, even though I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that wasn’t how they meant it. Speaking of which, they were both giving me that girlfriend sort of look again, and it was starting to put me on edge once more.

But more importantly, now I was more certain of my theory than ever. Yuna

and Rinka weren't the untouchable objects of admiration that their fans thought they were. They could only be the Sacrosanct because they had the brains and the acting ability to back it up.

"Hey, Yuna? Rinka?"

"Hm?"

"What is it?"

"So, umm... Seeing as you guys dragged me all over the park today, can I make just one request as well?"

Yuna and Rinka's eyes widened with shock. They gave each other a look...then turned back to me, smiled, and said, "Of course!" without a second thought.

Chapter 7: A Girlfriend for Two

“You just can’t take a hint, can you, Hazama?”

I remember the words slamming into me like a truck. The impact had been so intense that I just stood there, stunned, staring blankly in lieu of a response.

I’m pretty sure it happened during my second year in middle school, specifically during our school’s sports day. I ended up running in the hundred-meter race, came in dead last—as always—and was heading back to the area where the rest of my class was sitting when she said it to me.

She was more or less the leader of all the girls in my class. Everybody had absolute faith in her, especially all the people in her club, the, umm...well, I can’t actually remember what club she was in, but it was something sporty and she’d apparently been doing really well in it. Sports day was her time to shine, and she’d been practicing like her life depended on it...so it was no surprise that she absolutely hated me and my total lack of athleticism.

“If you *knew* you were going to drag the rest of us down, then you should’ve just taken the day off,” she told me.

I wasn’t the only one who was taken aback—the rest of the kids around us looked shocked too. She was always so cheerful and positive that it felt really out of character for her to say something *that* harsh.

But she wasn’t just kidding around, and she wasn’t wrong either. After all, if I’d skipped school that day, she never would’ve had to get angry like that in the first place.

I’d never had a subject that I could say with confidence I really excelled at. Not in terms of athletics, or academics, or, well, *anything*, really. When I got bad grades on my tests, though, my teachers and parents would be disappointed in me, and that was the end of it. The only effect it had on my peers was that it brought down the class average, and since my middle school used that average grade to determine what was and wasn’t a passing mark, the

people who just barely managed to clear that threshold were actually *grateful* for my failure.

Sports day was different, though. The fact that I was useless was an actual problem for the people around me. *I* didn't get it, to be sure, but for her and her friends, sports day was a really major event. They were in it to win it, and they'd put in the effort to make that ambition a reality. And all that hard work, all that time they'd invested, was wasted because *I* couldn't cut it. And so the next year, when our sports day rolled around again...I called in sick.

Nobody wanted me to try harder. They wanted me to take a hint and do nothing at all.

I know now that I can't let myself get my hopes up. I just have to laugh it all off and keep rolling that pencil across my desk, accepting whatever result it might give me and praying that I don't cause trouble for anyone else in the process.



...Or at least, I'm supposed to know that, anyway.

It turns out I really *am* a moron who really *can't* take a hint. I get all worked up about stuff, throw caution to the wind, let my desires get the better of me...and cause trouble for people all over again. And this time, I wasn't causing problems for some random classmate whose club I couldn't even remember anymore. This time, I was dealing with two girls who I really, well and truly loved.

"Oh, wow, we're so high up!" gasped Yuna.

"I wonder if we can see our houses from up here?" said Rinka.

The two of them were gazing out the window at the scenery below. The one request that I'd made of them was that we try out a certain ride next: the Ferris wheel. It idly occurred to me that the *other*, much stupider amusement park by the coast didn't actually have one of those at all. A Ferris wheel offered

something that other rides just couldn't give you—I mean, you couldn't exactly take your time and appreciate the view from the top of a Tower of Doom. Actually, when I stopped to think about it, there weren't all that many other easy opportunities to look out over the city from somewhere really high up at all.

“The highest point of this ride is forty meters up,” I explained.

“Huh,” Yuna and Rinka grunted vaguely in unison, their foreheads pressed to the glass. The way they were so entranced by the scenery reminded me so much of my little sisters, I found myself smiling in an instant.

“I always ride this when I come here with my family,” I continued. “If we'd waited just a little longer, the nighttime skyline would've been really pretty, but personally, I like the way everything seems to almost *glow* when you ride right at sunset just a little better.”

“Huuuh,” said Yuna, looking over at me.

“It feels sort of rare for you to say that you like something that clearly—or at least for you to bring it up on your own,” said Rinka.

“I-Is it?” I asked. That struck me as odd. I may have been utterly worthless myself, but I still had plenty of things that I *liked*! I cooked every single day, so I had to like that a little, at least. Oh, and I liked cute things and pretty things as much as the next person! I definitely didn't like studying, and I wasn't super fond of sports either, thanks to my anti-athletic nature... I wasn't in a club, so that was right out, and as far as TV or manga was concerned, I was only interested enough to check out the really popular stuff every once in a while.

Huh? Now that I think about it, maybe I don't actually have that many things that I like after all...? N-No, that can't be right... Oh yeah, of course! My family! I like all of them for sure...but wait, liking your family's not anything special at all! There's also, uhh—

“Yotsuba?”

“Why are you staring at us like that?”

“Ah, umm... Well...” I stammered.

The view from the Ferris wheel was beautiful, for sure, but the two of them were beautiful enough to put it to shame. I liked *them*, no question about it. No, I *loved* them. And so...

“S-So, hey. I...I have something that I need to tell you two.”

I loved them, so I couldn't let myself drag them down any longer. I couldn't let myself keep living out this dream any longer... *And so...!*

“I've been lying to both of you.”

“Huh?”

“What are you talking about?”

As I heard their startled responses, as I looked at their dumbfounded faces, I felt a painful pressure in my chest. Even though I'd *known* that this was how they would react.



I'd spent the entire time between working up the resolve to tell them and getting on the Ferris wheel preoccupied by the question of *how* I'd go about spilling the beans. I'd really done my best to work out a solid plan, in my own sort of way. Like, part of why I'd brought them on the Ferris wheel in specific was to make sure I wouldn't have anywhere to go if the impulse to turn tail and run overwhelmed me. I couldn't exactly make a break for it when I was forty meters in the air, after all! I knew that no matter what happened, I *had* to move forward...but for some reason, I found myself tongue-tied. It felt like all the things I wanted to say were slamming on the brakes the instant before I could put them into words, and were causing quite the pileup in my throat as a result.

"Hey, Yotsuba?" said Yuna. "Whatever you're trying to say, you know you don't have to force yourself to spit it out if it's that hard, right?"

"Sh-She's right," added Rinka. "Why not just look at the city with us? It's such a nice view, see?"

They both seemed a little uneasy themselves, but they still did their best to try and make me feel comfortable. They were as kind as ever...and that only made me feel all the more obligated to be as honest with them as I possibly could. And so...

"I've been going behind your backs and dating both of you!!!"

I just let my impulses do their thing and shouted it out, as loudly as I could. I was half expecting my voice to resound like crazy, since we were in a tiny Ferris wheel cabin, but no, my voice faded away so quickly I almost had to wonder if I'd said anything at all...though the two pieces of proof that I *had* gone through with it were sitting right in front of me, staring at me with shock on their faces. I couldn't stop, though. With my biggest, most horrible secret out in the open, the brakes were broken and slamming them was no longer an option.

"I've basically never had anyone appreciate me before, other than my family. But then some sort of miracle got me into high school, and *another* miracle helped me make friends with you two. That was already enough to make me happy, but then the two of you said you loved me on top of it, and I...I got greedy, and..."

Having a set of broken brakes, unfortunately, didn't make me any more

articulate than I'd been before. If anything, my sudden spike in self-loathing was turning my brain to mush and had me spouting out every last random thought that popped into my head. *I'm sorry for toying with your feelings. I'm sorry I'm so selfish. I'm just so, so sorry.* I kept saying the same thing over and over again, each time in different words, apologizing for what little I was worth. It was a continuous, one-sided apology that I just kept dragging out because the longer I spent on it, the longer I'd be able to stay bowed down before them, unable to see the expressions on their faces.

I had no idea whether ending it all with an apology like this would actually lead to any sort of good outcome. The best possible conclusion, as far as I could tell, would be for the two of them to go back to the way they used to be with each other. That would certainly satisfy Koganezaki and the rest of the fan club, and that was the original purpose of this whole outing I'd arranged today. The thing is, though, that there was no room for me in that picture. I would become a blemish in their histories: the girl who'd played with their hearts during the early summer of their second year in high school. There would be no going back to the way I used to be with them.

But, I mean...what's the big deal about *that*, right? I'd just be going back to the way I used to be! I'd be returning to the old me who absolutely nobody expected anything from, least of all myself. Everything up until now had been like a dream. Just one big, blissful, yearlong fantasy. That was something to be grateful for, and whatever I did, I couldn't let myself feel regret over its passing. It would be ridiculous to regret it—after all, I was the villain who'd brought about its end! It was only natural that I'd be punished for hurting them! And yet...

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I moaned. I'd finally exhausted what little vocabulary I'd had available to me in the first place, and my head felt so hot it was like my mind was literally boiling. It was so painful I could barely stand it, but I still stayed bowed down, desperately resisting the inevitable even though I knew it wouldn't help in the end. I was scared they'd blame me. Scared they'd hate me. Scared that at that very moment, they were staring at me with open contempt in their eyes. That thought alone was enough to make all the resolve that had

allowed me to confess my deception vanish away in the blink of an eye. I was trembling, and tears were pooling in my eyes. I finally understood just how badly I'd made fools of them, but still, I couldn't stop myself from loving the both of them more than I could stand.

The seconds ticked by. Silence dominated the Ferris wheel cabin. My heart was beating with such painful intensity that I could hardly even breathe. I waited for them to speak, feeling for all the world like a criminal waiting for her judgment to be handed down from on high.

"Yotsuba."

I gasped. Yuna's voice sounded so incredibly kind, like a mother speaking to her own child, and I have to admit that I was relieved to hear her speak in that tone. That just made me even worse of a person, I know—there wasn't the slimmest chance that she'd forgive me, so what was I getting my hopes up for?

"Is that why you brought us here today? To tell us this?" she asked. She sounded kind, and ever so gentle, almost as if she were using her kindness to force down some *other* emotion and keep it from coming through in her voice.

For an instant, I felt myself go even stiffer than I already was. I almost answered her on reflex, but instead I took a moment to let her words sink in...then shook my head. "I wasn't going to tell you. I thought that if I could keep it hidden, then today would go well...*everything* would go well," I said, admitting the ugly truth of the matter as I cursed myself for being such a pathetic weakling. I had nothing left, and nowhere left to go, and putting myself out there in a show of absolute sincerity was all I could do.

"So then why *did* you tell us?" asked Rinka. She sounded just as terribly kind as Yuna had, and I balled my hands up into fists, digging my nails into my palms to keep myself from crying.

"Because I realized that being around you was causing the two of you problems," I explained.

"Problems?"

"You two are always so perfect, and everyone loves you...but then that

started to change because I came into the picture and started messing things up.”

“Everyone loves us, do they...?” said Rinka.

“Are you talking about all that ‘Sacrosanct’ stuff, or whatever they call it?” asked Yuna.

“I... I mean...” I wasn’t all that surprised to hear the word “Sacrosanct” come out of Yuna’s mouth. There was nothing strange about that—if the two of them paid even a little attention, they’d know what everyone else at school was calling them. What *did* surprise me, though, was the slight but unmistakable hint of irritation in her words as she said the name. I found myself shrinking back into my seat.

“I guess we’ve been letting them get away with too much lately... Oh, those little *bitches*,” growled Yuna.

“Uh?”

“Okay, settle down, Yuna,” said Rinka, quickly moving to soothe her. Or at least, to put on a show of it, anyway. Something about the way Rinka was acting felt just as cold and upset as Yuna.

“Did they say something to you?” asked Yuna.

“Huh?”

“I knew that you’d been watching out for those people this whole time,” said Rinka, “but it never seemed like they were bothering you *that* much up until now.”

“Well, I mean...” I know I’d just spilled my guts about cheating on them and all, but somehow, telling them that their fans had been worried about the fact that their relationship was changing in a bad way and that said fans thought I was the culprit was still really hard to spit out.

“Is it something you can’t say?” asked Rinka.

“Umm, well...”

“That would be ridiculous. Right, Yotsuba?” said Yuna. “I mean, you were two-timing us, weren’t you?”

“Agh!” Hearing Yuna say the words “two-timing” straight up like that felt like getting punched directly in the heart.

“And if you feel even a *little* bit guilty about that, then I’m sure you wouldn’t want to hide *anything* else from us, right?” Yuna continued.

“Ugh... O-Okay, I’ll talk,” I moaned. Yuna was so indisputably in the right that I couldn’t even begin to object, and started explaining with no further prompting. And I told them everything—how the way they acted in the classroom had started to change, how their fans had been more and more openly hostile, how Koganezaki had given me a warning and advice—all of it. I talked about how I’d set today’s outing up to gain new perspective on their relationship and look for clues on how to set it back to normal without harming either of them in the process, and most of all, I talked about how I was pretty sure that *I* was the source of all this discord. “I didn’t want you to get hurt because of *me*, so I decided that I had to tell you how I was cheating on you... I thought that you’d start hating me, and go back to the way you used to be...” I concluded. Even if it *was* true that I’d had their best interests at heart, saying that out loud still felt like an excuse and made me hate myself a little more. It felt like I was asking them for forgiveness.

And yet, at the end of it all, when I was finally finished telling them everything, Yuna and Rinka...sighed deeply in unison?

“So *that’s* what this was all about,” groaned Yuna. “I didn’t notice at all...”

“I *told* you, didn’t I? I *said* that it was only a matter of time before one of us slipped up,” said Rinka.

“You’re making it sound like *you* didn’t slip up as badly as I did! But I guess that just goes to show how serious both of us were about this.”

“True enough. Actually, when you put it that way, I don’t feel so bad about any of it.”

“Right? If anything, it’s kinda nice! Kinda awkward too, though.”

And then they cracked up. They laughed as happily and cheerfully as ever, almost like I *hadn’t* dropped the two-timing bombshell to end all bombshells on them seconds beforehand. I wasn’t even following their conversation on a basic

level, of course, and just sat there in bewildered astonishment.

“Ah, we’re at the bottom!” noted Yuna.

“Oh? It feels like we just got on... But I don’t think we’re done yet, and I don’t think Yotsuba is either,” said Rinka.

“Huh?” I grunted.

“You know what I’m thinking, Rinka?”

“I just might, Yuna.”

They smiled at each other like little kids who’d just come up with the perfect prank, then turned to face me.

“Let’s ride one more time around!”



Weird. Something’s...no, scratch that, everything’s weird.

I was *pretty* sure I’d spilled all the beans I had to spill. I’d told them about my two-timing, about their fans having it out for me, and...about how I’d caused them so, so many problems. So why in the *heck*—

“Ahh, *finally*! I’ve been waiting so long to get my daily dose of Yotsuba!”

“I’ve actually been holding myself back all day, you know? You wouldn’t believe how cute you are today, Yotsuba.”

“Wow, way to sound like a total perv, Rinka!”

“You’re in no position to talk, Yuna.”

—were they talking with each other like everything was perfectly normal...seated with *me* in between them?! And to make matters even more confusing, they’d each linked arms with me—like people do when they’re *dating*—and were squeezing me for all they were worth!

“Wh...*Why*?!”

“Why what?” asked Yuna, cocking her head.

“Wh—I mean, why—you know I—?!”

“I’m not sure what you’re so confused about,” said Rinka. “You yourself said

you were dating both of us, didn't you?"

"She sure did!" piped up Yuna. "So we figured we might as well go into girlfriend mode for our second time around the Ferris wheel. Right, Rinka?"

Neither of them sounded like they cared about anything that had happened at all! *Huh? Wait, did I have this all wrong somehow? I cheated on them and toyed with their feelings, so they'd get super mad at me and dump me on the spot. Isn't that how this was supposed to go?*

"What's going on...? Why aren't you mad?" I asked.

"Well, of *course* we're not mad!" laughed Yuna.

"I mean, she has a point. It *is* pretty justifiable to get upset after you get told you've been two-timed," said Rinka with a chuckle.

Noooope! My mind is definitely not keeping up with reality right now!

"Mnhh..." grumbled Yuna. "Honestly, telling you this is gonna take an awful lot of, like, guts, I guess you could say? Or something along those lines...anyway, all yours, Rinka!"

"Wha—it's not like this is going to be any easier for *me*! Oh, fine... So, umm, to make a long story short...I already knew."

"You knew...what?" I asked.

"I knew that you were dating Yuna too."

I blinked.

"And needless to say, I knew that you were dating Rinka as well!" Yuna said.

"U-Umm... So, wait, that means...?"

"Well, basically," said Rinka, scratching her head. "I guess you could call this girlfriend-sanctioned two-timing?"

"HUUUUUUUUUUUUUH?!" Screaming was all I had left. Just an absolute all-out *shout*, paying zero attention to the fact that we were all trapped together in a tiny Ferris wheel cabin. *They knew I was two-timing them?! Wait, so, that means, like... What the actual heck does that even mean?! "Wait, but, I, huh?! I don't understand this at all!"*

“See?” said Yuna. “I *said* we should’ve just told her all of this right from the beginning, didn’t I?”

“Sure you did, but I know for a fact that you were *really* thinking, ‘Wow, Yotsuba’s so cute when she panics!’ deep down, weren’t you?” countered Rinka.

“I... Okay, I can’t deny that.”

You can’t...? And wait, why are they so affectionate right now?! Like, I know that I’m in no position to talk when it comes to gushing over girlfriends, but am I the only one who’s kinda shocked about how far into the deep end these two are going all of a sudden?!

“Where do we even start...?” said Rinka. “Well, first things first, like Yuna said, we knew that you were dating both of us from the very beginning. Though I guess if you go even further back, we both fell for you completely independently. We didn’t even realize what had happened, at first.”

“Th-That so...?”

“It *is*!” cut in Yuna. “You wouldn’t believe it! I was all excited to tell Rinka that I had a crush on someone, and then she told me that *she* did too! And when we finally told each other who it was, we *both* said, ‘Yotsuba’! *That* conversation turned out to be a bit of a bloodbath, though I guess that’s no surprise.”

A bit of a what?!

“I had a feeling, honestly,” said Rinka. “I know everything there is to know about Yuna’s social circle, so the second she said she liked someone, I pretty much knew it could only be you.”

“I-I really don’t think I have *that* much going for me, though,” I murmured.

“Ooh?” said Yuna. “Is that a challenge? Are you asking us to tell you everything we love about you? How many more go-arounds are you planning on keeping us on this Ferris wheel for?”

“N-No, that’s not what I meant at all! T-Two times is plenty! My brain’s a soupy mess right now!!!”

“We’ll take it nice and slow, then,” Rinka whispered into my ear, piercing me

right through the heart in a single breath. Actually, when I put it that way, my expectations and the reality before me were so hopelessly askew from each other, I sort of had to wonder if I really *had* died and gone to heaven or something.

“Well, the point is that we have *plenty* of stuff we like about you, so no worries there, okay?” said Yuna. “Anyway, after we were done with that first throw-down, we ended up deciding that we’d compete to see who could make you fall for her! It seemed like the natural conclusion!”

“You made it into a *competition*?! *Why*?! That’s *so embarrassing*!”

“Aww, and here I was hoping to turn it into a recurring event,” Yuna pouted.

“With seasons in the spring and summer,” added Rinka with a nod.

“You wanted to make it *seasonal*?!” *Please stop trying to turn this into some sort of TV special! You’re gonna make me paranoid about who might be filming me every time a new season comes around!* “And wait,” I said, “I was sorta prepared for you guys to never speak to me again after this, honestly...?”

“No way! Never happening! Your two-timing’s official, so that’s off the table!” snapped Yuna.

“If anything, *I* feel bad for putting you through so much stress,” added Rinka. “I’m sorry, Yotsuba.”

“Ah, but, umm...” I was stuck somewhere between being relieved and being totally unable to accept that any of this was really happening, but in any case, I felt all the tension completely drain away from me. And not just the tension from my trials and tribulations today—I mean *all* of those dark, looming emotions that had been building up within me over the two weeks since I started dating them, fading away into nothingness.

“You get it now, right?” said Yuna, looking me in the eye. “I’m saying that I love you *so much* that I don’t even *mind* you dating someone else along with me.”

“And that’s true of me as well, of course,” said Rinka. “I really do adore you, Yotsuba.”

And then, as if hearing them both say they loved me point-blank in succession wasn't bad enough, they kissed my cheeks in unison to finish me off. My brain was boiling over in a very different way than it had been before, and I just sat there, petrified.

Hey, mom? Dad? When people said that the full power of the Sacrosanct working in unison is enough to make a girl's head explode...they were right.

- Yotsuba Hazama's last words

"Ah, look, we're almost at the top! Hey, why don't we forget about all the complicated stuff for the second half of the ride, go into girlfriend mode, and just enjoy it?" said Yuna.

"I'll second that," agreed Rinka. "It'd be a shame to waste such a pretty view!"

After everything that had happened, all I could do was nod in agreement. Was this all a dream? Was it reality? I didn't know for sure, but as the glow of sunset faded away and the lights began to flicker on in the city below, I could faintly feel the pounding of their pulses, the warmth of their skin, and the ever so slightly amorous heat of their breath.



That final ride felt like it lasted an eternity and felt like it was over in a second. When I'd gotten on, I'd done so under the assumption that, by the time the ride was over, the spell would be broken and I wouldn't get to be with Yuna and Rinka anymore. Yet there I was, off the ride with the both of them still right by my side...though with our relationship having taken a slightly different form than before.

Anyway, the Ferris wheel was the last attraction we'd wanted to ride, so once we were finished with it, we wandered over to the plaza by the park's entrance and took a seat on a bench. I guess this might go without saying by now, but I ended up in the middle, perfectly and firmly sandwiched between the two of them.

"This is kinda relaxing, isn't it?" said Yuna.

"We *did* go on an awful lot of rides. It's been a long day," said Rinka.

“I mean, the sitting-down part is nice too, yeah...but I was actually talking about cuddling with Yotsuba like this,” said Yuna, leaning so far onto me I was bearing pretty much all of her weight. “Come to think of it, we always sorta end up in these positions, don’t we?”

“What positions?” asked Rinka.

“I mean me on the right and you on the left. And Yotsuba in the middle, of course!”

I guess my central position’s a matter of course these days, huh? She did have a point, though. I’d grown accustomed to the idea that I could always look over to the right to see Yuna and to the left to see Rinka.

“When you put it that way, I guess you’re right,” said Rinka.

“Heh heh, but you know what? Me being on the right means that I have a leg up on you, Rinka!”

“Huh?” *Wait, does it?! I had no idea...*

Rinka paused. “How do you figure that?”

“Well, think about it!” said Yuna. “The right side’s the one that people always talk about, isn’t it? Like how you can be somebody’s right-hand man! Plus, Yotsuba’s right-handed!”

“Well, I happen to walk on her left side on purpose,” countered Rinka. “She’s right-handed, so that means she needs someone on her offhand side to protect her.”

Oh my god, she’s so cool... I gotta ask, though: Protect me from what, exactly?

“Plus, your wedding ring goes on your left hand, doesn’t it?” Rinka added with a smirk.

“Bwuh?!” I grunted.

“W-Wed—?!” Yuna shrieked, then glared daggers at Rinka. Bolts of invisible electricity seemed to crackle between them, right past me, and as I sat there, my mind drifted back to that one moment in our classroom.

So the tension between them really was all my fault after all!!! I didn’t know if

I should feel happy or honored or what, but one way or another, it seemed I'd carved out a niche for myself between the two of them. *And, like, I know that they said they were fine with it, but two-timing? Really...? And wait, I still don't understand why they'd date someone like me in the—*

"Yotsuba!"

Wha— I began to think, but before I could even start to reply, I felt Yuna's palm on my cheek, followed immediately by her lips on my own. "Mnhh?!"

"*Yuna?! Wh-What are you doing!*" shouted Rinka, who immediately threw her arms around me. It was like she was trying to steal me back from Yuna or something, and my face ended up buried in her chest in the process. That sudden softness plus the dawning realization that Yuna had, in fact, just kissed me full on the lips pretty much put me down for the count. I was *gone*.

"Well, what was I supposed to do?" Yuna pouted. "I had to show Yotsuba how much I love her *somehow!*"

"Right, but you could've *said* something," countered Rinka.

"That, and I just didn't want to let her go."

"Let me go...?" I parroted nonsensically.

Yuna smiled at me and patted me on my head. I hadn't had *my* head patted much over the course of my life, and it sorta felt, like, *really* new, but also kinda awkward, but even more nice, and—

"You were worried about us, right, Yotsuba?" asked Yuna, cutting off my train of thought. "And all because we forgot to keep acting like the us everyone *wants* to see and got in a fight. You see how this all happened now too, right, Rinka?"

"Yes," said Rinka after a short pause. "And that's why she decided to tell us about her two-timing, lose our trust, and distance herself from us. All so that everyone else wouldn't start turning against *us*," she concluded. She almost sounded like she was about to cry at the end of her explanation.

And she really had explained it all. The two of them had seen through my incredibly shallow plan with ease. *But it's still true that the people who want*

them to be the Sacrosanct can't stand me being around them! It's obvious! So if I stay this close to them, it's only a matter of time before—

"You have it all wrong, Yotsuba. This is *our* fault," said Rinka.

"Right!" said Yuna. "*We're* the ones who keep forgetting ourselves and giving in to our desires when we're with you!"

"What? No way! You two haven't done *anything* wrong!" I shouted.

"No, we really have," said Yuna. "For one thing, *we're* the ones who started the whole Sacrosanct thing in the first place."

They started the Sacrosanct...? What? I mean, it is a pure and holy form of yuri that only exists when the two of them are together, that kinda makes sense... I shook my head, though. Somehow, I didn't get the feeling that was what Yuna was trying to tell me at all.

"We used to be just your everyday childhood friends," explained Yuna. "We each had our own other friends and everything. The thing is, though, we both sorta stood out in a lot of ways."

"Makes sense," I replied. "*You are* both super cute and all."

"Yotsuba..." sighed Rinka.

"Seriously, cut that out," groaned Yuna. "Not now! You're gonna make me grin so hard I won't be able to tell the story!"

I thought that I was just stating the obvious, personally, but I'd made them blush so hard that I was starting to blush with them out of sympathy. Oh, huh. I guess this is what people mean when they talk about feeling the irresistible urge to gush about their girlfriend at the slightest opportunity.

Yuna cleared her throat. "So! The thing about standing out is that it's not always a good thing. We had no end of boys trying to hit on us—not to mention leering at us—and plenty of girls got jealous as a result."

"And eventually, Yuna and I got sick of all that," said Rinka, taking over the story. "That's why we decided to form the Sacrosanct as a countermeasure."

As a countermeasure...?

“We’d always gotten along well,” Rinka continued, “but from that point onward, we started playing it up. We acted like we got along *way* better than we ever would’ve otherwise. You know how it’s really hard to shove your way into a group of friends who’re already super close with each other, right? That’s the effect we were aiming for.”

“I think that must’ve been just a little before we started middle school?” said Yuna. “Anyway, we started acting like we were all over each other, any time, any place. We were building up our own little world, basically. Then eventually people started assuming that we were, like...doing a yuri thing, or whatever? They started assuming that we were actually straight up in love with each other, and all the leering shifted into more of a watching-over-us sort of deal. Seriously, though, I never thought that I would *actually* fall totally head-over-heels in love with a girl in the end!”

“‘T-Totally head-over-heels in love’...?” I repeated, stunned. Yuna had *just* chastised me for being too careless with my praise, but she had a way of being pretty casually bold herself as well. I still hadn’t built up enough of a tolerance to praise to bring myself to protest like she had, though, so instead I just sorta shrank down into the bench as she kept talking.

“Y’know, back when we first started putting on the act, Rinka tried to act all boyish and stuff? She’s totally gone native with the role now!”

“Not that you have room to talk,” said Rinka. “*You’ve* gotten completely accustomed to the super bubbly girly-girl act you put on back then.”

“Huuuh? This is, like, too *complicated* and stuff, I don’t *get* it!” Yuna singsonged.

Rinka sighed. “As I’m sure you can see, playing the role of a princess was more or less beyond Yuna from the very beginning,” she said with a shrug.

I actually thought that Yuna’s act was super cute, though. She had both of her hands pressed into her cheeks, was giving us a *really* good puppy-dog-eyes sort of look, and had cranked her voice up into a cutesy falsetto. It was like how someone would try to play themselves off as an adorable girly-girl if their understanding of the concept dated back to somewhere around the prehistoric era. It was, in short, ridiculous, but in a super flirty way that I was pretty into.

The way Rinka had shrugged, by the way, had this incredible sort of listless charm that *really* hit me where it hurt, and...*wow, I am incredibly easy, aren't I?*

"The fan club, though? *That* I really didn't see coming," said Yuna.

"Not to mention them being so offended by the idea of Yotsuba getting along with us," sighed Rinka. "I just don't understand that. She's so cute and perfect—what's not to like about her?"

"Right?"

"I'm *really* not, c'mon," I said, very deliberately glancing away from them in an effort to hide the fact that I was grinning uncontrollably.

"I *wanna* say that if they think they can just threaten our Yotsuba like that, then this means war!" said Yuna. "Buuut I'd be too scared of accidentally making all of this even harder for you in the process..."

"Really, the whole problem is that when you're involved, the two of us forget to keep the act up and end up defaulting to our real selves," said Rinka. "As long as we can get a hold of ourselves, we should be able to bring things back under control...probably."

"Okay, but *can* we?" asked Yuna.

"Hmm..."

The two of them cocked their heads and sank into thought in unison. I, meanwhile, was still confused about why they would get so worked up about this in the first place. I mean, over someone like *me*?

"Of *course* we'd get worked up over you!" shouted Yuna.

"You need to learn to appreciate just how important you really are to us, Yotsuba!" added Rinka.

"I-I'm sorry," I stammered. *They got mad at me?! But I hadn't even said anything yet!*

"Listen up, Yotsuba!" said Yuna. "We've decided to accept the fact that you're two-timing us. You could even say that we're *encouraging* you to do it! But that doesn't mean I've given up on being your number one!"

“Yuna’s been my friend since forever, and she’s important to me. I want her to be happy...but I won’t give *you* up no matter what, Yotsuba,” said Rinka.

And just like that, the sparks were flying again. Only for the briefest of instants, though, after which they quickly turned their gazes back to me.

“Don’t worry about all that stuff at school. I’ll be careful not to get too heated about you in public anymore. You too, right, Rinka? No trying to slip ahead of each other?”

“Of course. Though if we’re going to talk about slipping ahead, I think that *you* asking Yotsuba out before me was just about as bad as that could possibly get.”

“Th-That just sorta happened... And besides, I hadn’t said a word to you about that when *you* asked her out too! That’s basically the same thing! If I hadn’t asked her out then, *you* would’ve been the one getting ahead of *me*!”

And just like that, we’re back in critical condition?! They kept telling me that they could keep themselves restrained at school, but considering how belligerent they were acting now, I was having just a little bit of trouble believing that.

“But you know,” said Rinka, “when *I* asked Yotsuba out, she had already said yes to you. She’s not anywhere near proactive enough to go out of her way to two-time someone by her own initiative, but she said yes to me anyway. Isn’t that, you know...proof that she loves me just *that* much, or something like that?”

“Th-That doesn’t mean anything! It’s just a matter of the order things happened in! If I’d asked her out second, she would’ve said yes to *me* too!” Yuna turned to look at me. “Right?!”

“Uh, r-right!” I replied without a second thought.

“*See!*” said Yuna with a cute little smirk. Rinka gritted her teeth. “And you know something else? As long as we’re on the subject of who did what first, *I* took Yotsuba’s first kiss!”

“Huh?” I grunted.

“Ugh! Th-That’s just a question of the order things happened in, it doesn’t

mean anything,” groaned Rinka.

“I still got her first, though, and nothing’s ever changing that! Yotsuba and I had our first kisses together! Tee hee hee!” boasted Yuna, head held high and smirk even broader than before.

“Ugaaaugh!” moaned Rinka, who was *not* taking this well at all.

There was just one little problem, though. “Uh, Yuna?”

“Yesss, Yotsuba? What is it? You want to kiss? Okay! Pucker uuup!”

“N-No, that’s not what I...” *I mean, it’s not that I don’t want to, but...no! Not the time for that!* “I’m only saying this because this whole two-timing thing taught me how painful keeping lies and secrets can be, but, well...that, um, wasn’t exactly my first kiss...”

A long pause ensued.

“*Huh?*”

“You mean you kissed someone else, even before Yuna?!”

“I mean, I guess you could say...well...”

Rinka was plainly taken aback, and Yuna had gone deathly pale. Her eyes were open wide and growing ever so slightly damp with tears. *O-Okay, it kind of feels like this is turning into way bigger of a deal than I expected it to?! Not lying was all well and good, but I had a feeling that I’d just accidentally hurt her feelings even more by telling the truth! B-But, the thing is, my actual first kiss...was with my little sister! A family member! We were both really little, and we were basically just playing around! Maybe that doesn’t even count, legally speaking...?*

“Uh, Yuna—” I began.

“N-No! Don’t tell me! I don’t want to hear it!” she shouted before I had the chance to resolve the...misunderstanding, if you could even call it that? Anyway, the point is, she pressed her hands up to my mouth and stopped me from saying another word, whether I wanted to or not.

“Y-Yuna...” said Rinka.

“I don’t even care! I was still ahead of you, and that’s good enough for me! And besides, *I’m* her girlfriend now!”

“So am I, of course.”

“Right! *We’re* her girlfriends now! That’s all that really matters! Who cares about the past, anyway?! That was forever ago!” insisted Yuna.

The knowledge must’ve really been a pretty heavy blow after all, though, because she still looked like she was going to break down in tears. In the end, Rinka and I spent the entire trip home slowly but surely consoling her.

And so my master plan to get the Sacrosanct back together at the amusement park went so far off the rails, I couldn’t even say for sure whether it was a success or a failure by the time it was over. *What on earth am I going to say to Koganezaki? I’m not gonna be able to give her any of the details, am I...?*

Today, however, had unmistakably been a step forward for me on a personal level. If I was completely honest, I still had my doubts about whether this two-timing relationship would work out for the best, even now that it had been formally acknowledged. Beneath those doubts, though, I was just happy that we’d be able to keep things between us the same, even if I wasn’t sure how long it would last.

I really do love Rinka and Yuna so much, I could never possibly pick a favorite, I thought to myself. I knew that if they did fail to keep up their Sacrosanct act again, and if Koganezaki were to ask me to try and fix things up between them once more, there wasn’t a chance that I’d try to do it by ostracizing myself from them again.

Please—all I want, above all else, is a future where the three of us can be together. For that sake—for *their* sake—I felt like I could work my hardest at just about anything. *I guess it’s not such a bad thing for me to try hard in this case, huh?*

I was still as hopeless as ever. I still couldn’t study or play sports even half-decently. What *was* different now, though, was the fact that I’d fallen in love with two special, wonderful girls...and that I didn’t *care* about whether or not I could take a hint anymore. I’m not sure if that counts as personal growth or not,

but, well...at the very least, I feel like I've grown to like myself at least a little bit more than I used to.

Epilogue: I Third-Wheeled My Way into Two-Timing Everyone's Favorite Yuri Couple, and Here's How That Turned Out

Monday arrived and, having mustered up the ironclad willpower required to ignore Koganezaki's nonstop barrage of "What happened?" texts, I was on my way to school. She *had* agreed to leave it all to me, in my defense, and honestly, I couldn't really say for sure if the plan had gone well, or failed, or what!

I'd successfully explained the big problem to the two of them, that was for sure. The problem, however, was that the central cause of their spats—i.e., me—remained exactly as present a factor as ever in their lives. In short: the situation had not, in fact, changed in any way whatsoever! I had a hard time imagining that Koganezaki would accept a fuzzy and ambiguous answer, and one of those was about the best I could provide. As such, my only option was to ignore her entirely.

Okay, yes, I know! I was digging my own grave, no matter how you look at it! But after I'd *started* the "just ignore her" plan, it ended up getting harder and harder to give it up and reply to her texts without having a good pretext for doing so. I mean, I'd spent *all* of Sunday ignoring her! How was I supposed to start replying *now* out of the blue?! I barely ever had *any* texts sitting in my phone's "unread" folder, and now they were piling up like nobody's business! *Lesson learned: flip-phone users are not to be underestimated!* And all of that is why, as I tiptoed toward our classroom, I found myself both worrying about whether or not the Sacrosanct would be back in form this week *and* desperately praying that I wouldn't run into Koganezaki on the way.

Okay, there's no way I'll encounter her at this point, I thought as I finally made it to the classroom door. I didn't think she'd want people assuming she was going out of her way to meet up with me or anything. She was, after all, the vice president of the Sacrosanct's fan club, and I was the insolent interloper who'd plowed her way into their favorite couple's relationship. Our positions in society

were fundamentally incompatible, and us interacting was basically unthinkable. *Well, as long as you don't throw a wrench called Shizumi into the works, anyway.*

Let's see, I thought as I waited and observed the situation. Looks like Yuna and Rinka...aren't doing anything in particular, I guess? I hadn't ended up walking to school with them that day, and they hadn't shown up together either. They'd each walked into the classroom on their own, and were both sitting around and fiddling with their smartphones like the modern teens they were. The people surrounding them at a distance, though—that is, their fans—seemed pretty on edge. I assumed they were worried about whether Yuna and Rinka's relationship was still in dicey territory.

Koganezaki: What did you do?

Gah! Another Koganezaki text?! And she's escalated from "What happened?" to "What did you do?" now! I had a terrible feeling that one of the fans had tipped her off. *Ugh—the way social media can proliferate information to anyone in an instant really has changed everything...* Suddenly it felt significantly less likely that I'd be able to evade a Koganezaki encounter after all.

I was a twitching, terrified, nearly-in-tears mess, but little did I know that the whole situation was about to undergo a sudden and drastic shift. It happened that same day, during our fourth-period math class.



"All right, can anyone solve this problem?" our teacher asked, scribbling an equation out onto the blackboard.

Hmm, hmm. Nope! No clue whatsoever! In fact, all that I understood about the equation was that I didn't understand it at all. Of course, none of this really had anything to do with me in the first place. Our teacher knew that calling on me would be an exercise in futility, I was sure...or at least, that was the tragic assumption I'd convinced myself was the case.

"Meee!" an energetic voice rang out, snapping me out of my lamentation and making me all but jump out of my chair.

“Momose?” said our teacher, who sounded as shocked as I was. And no wonder, really—although Yuna was incredibly smart and got superlative grades, she barely ever *volunteered* to answer a question in class. Though she’d crush any and every question that the teacher called upon her to answer, of course! That was her style: a purely defensive approach to classroom conduct!

Seeing her not only raise her hand on her own, but do so with overt enthusiasm, was such an irregular event that it had the whole classroom in a bit of a stir. Yuna, however, paid the commotion absolutely no mind and strode right up to the blackboard...then stopped and folded her arms. “Hmm... Rinka!” she shouted, for reasons I couldn’t even begin to fathom.

“Oh, *you*. Fine, fine,” said Rinka as she stood up from her seat.

Huh? What is even happening right now?! The classroom was in a state of complete shock. Not only was all of this coming from *way* out of left field, the Sacrosanct stood right at the center of it all! It probably goes without saying, but nobody who’d ended up in the same class as the two of them *hadn’t* had their brains melted by their incredible charms, so them acting up like this was some seriously attention-grabbing stuff!

“Lift me up, Rinka,” said Yuna.

*L-Lift her—?! A wave of shock crashed through the room. Then a second later, we all doubted our ears. Had she *really* just said that? No way, right? This wasn’t some cheesy classroom comic like people post on social media! But as we freaked out—before any of us could really process what we were witnessing —*

“Heave ho!” Rinka wrapped her arms around Yuna from behind and lifted her up, just like that.

“?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?”

A silent scream made up of a multitude of wordless voices echoed throughout the classroom. They’d gotten so touchy with each other so fast! The prince had lifted the princess right up before our very eyes, and the two of them weren’t even charging us for the privilege of watching it happen! And we were *still in class*, where stuff like this wasn’t supposed to happen at *all*!

“Heave ho’? You’re making it sound like I’m heavy,” pouted Yuna.

“Ha ha ha!” chuckled Rinka. “Don’t worry, Yuna. You’re as light as a feather. I could carry you around like this all day long.”



“Well, maybe I’ll take you up on that! This *is* nice and comfy,” said Yuna.

Eeeek?! And now, on top of everything else, they’re straight up flirting in front of the whole class! It’s like they don’t even care that we’re watching! This spectacle is so downright divine, it’s making me want to clasp my hands together in reverence...wait, holy crap, our teacher’s actually literally doing that thing! Guess I can add one more name to the list of people whose brains have been done in by the Sacrosanct.

So anyway, while all of us students and our teacher were indulging in the mind-melting glory of the Sacrosanct, the two of them kept flirting away as Rinka held Yuna up to the blackboard and Yuna made solving the problem look like the easiest thing in the world. Frankly, though, I couldn’t have cared less about the problem itself anymore. I was too busy witnessing a miracle, and there was only one thought on my mind—on *all* of our minds:

Yes!!!!!!!!!!

This was what the Sacrosanct were meant to be. Long live the Sacrosanct. The sheer emotional impact of the spectacle was nearly enough to move me to tears, and I realized all over again just how spectacularly powerful those two could be when they worked together.



“Yeah, that was all just an act,” droned Yuna. It was lunchtime, we were on the school’s rooftop, and she was sitting in a lethargic, cross-legged slouch. Seeing her like that really made me wonder where all that preciousness from fourth period had gone and run off to. She was like a craftsman who’d wrapped up her work for the day and swapped right on over into slob mode.

“Ugh... Was all that *really* a good idea?” Rinka asked anxiously. She was leaning up against the fence, her head tilted back with concern.

Immediately after that class had ended, I’d gotten a text that told me the two of them wanted some alone time with me. By the time I’d made it up to the roof, both of them had reverted from their Sacrosanct forms to their usual selves.

“So, umm, what do you mean ‘an act’...?” I asked.

“We were putting on a little skit—showing everyone that we were still the Sacrosanct they’re all obsessed with,” said Yuna. “Think we might’ve overdone it a bit, though.”

“You told us about how all of them thought it was your fault we weren’t getting along, right?” added Rinka. “So we thought that if we made a big show out of us being really close, it would clear up all that suspicion.”

“A show? All of it? For real?” I said, gaping with disbelief.

“Well, duh,” said Yuna. “Rinka and I scripted it all out yesterday. Like, we knew we were gonna do it during math class and everything! We’re pretty sure that teacher’s into our whole thing.”

“Y-You can tell?” I asked.

“We’ve been doing this for years, after all,” said Rinka. “It’s not too hard to judge how people react to us, as long as we’re not too busy being distracted by you at the time. Though yeah, like Yuna said, I think that might be the first time we’ve gone quite *that* over-the-top with it.”

I was starting to understand why the two of them looked so hopelessly drained. Apparently, they just weren’t used to going into full-blown affection mode with each other. *An act, huh...? Man...*

“This was such a classic Yuna plan, though. You came up with a pretext for everything!” said Rinka.

“It was totally perfect, right?” Yuna said with a nod. “I’m kinda short, and if I tried to write the answer to a question that’s way up on the blackboard, I’d get chalk on my uniform, so I had to have you pick me up so it wouldn’t be an issue. It was a perfectly logical excuse.”

“Oh! *Now* I get it!” I shouted. “So *that’s* what that was all about!”

“Huh?” Yuna cocked her head.

“I seriously didn’t pick up on that at all,” I explained. “Yeah, okay, *that* explains why you called Rinka over to lift you up. It all makes sense now!”

“W-Wait a second,” said Yuna, pressing her hand to her forehead as if she was trying to hold back a headache. “Yotsuba? Are you trying to tell me that up until

a second ago, you thought that I'd called Rinka up with me completely out of nowhere, on impulse?"

"Well, uh...yeah."

"And when I had her pick me up, you didn't at all consider that there might've been a *reason* for it?"

"I sorta figured it was love."

"*Love?!?*"

"Yeah, like, 'Yuna just gets the impulse to rely on Rinka for something, and Rinka lives up to that desire without missing a beat!' I thought you were showing us that something like that was a valid form of love—actually, make that love's *final* form!"

"What do you *mean* 'final form'?!?" wailed Yuna.

"It was all a *total* sham, honestly!" shouted Rinka at the exact same moment.

Their protests were perfectly in sync with each other, and they were so obviously frantic it almost looked like they were tearing up a little. I was taken aback.

Somehow, though, I found that reassuring. Their earnestness was so powerfully clear that even I, a girl who had somehow failed to see through their act just shortly beforehand, could say with absolute confidence that they were being completely sincere with me. The feelings they had for me weren't an act at all—they were as real and genuine as could be. And so...

"Wha—?!?"

"Mnhh?!?"

Before they could shout another word, I pressed my hands to their mouths, looked up at them, smiled the most wholehearted smile I had in me, and said exactly what I was thinking as loudly, clearly, and directly as I could manage.

"You know what, you two? I love you."

The words came straight from my heart, and this time, there wasn't a hint of deception in them.

“Uh...”

“Ah...”

And then Yuna and Rinka both froze up and turned shocking shades of red. On top of everything else, this was my way of getting a little payback. They’d made *me* spend almost a full day in a state of near cardiac arrest just recently, after all!

“Hee hee hee...” I giggled. “I just wanted to say it out loud. It felt like I *had* to tell you both how much I love you.”

“Th-That’s not fair...” stammered Yuna.

“Now *that*, I can agree with,” sighed Rinka. “You really don’t play fair, Yotsuba.”

Both of them were pouting and half-glaring at me, but I knew them well enough to tell in an instant that they were just putting up a front. After all, in that moment, the two girls before me weren’t the Sacrosanct at all. They were just my pair of beloved girlfriends.

“B-By the way,” I began, grasping for a new topic. After *that* incredibly embarrassing exchange, we’d moved on to eating our lunches, but we’d ended up doing so in almost total and completely unbearable silence. I could only take so much awkward fidgeting before I felt the need to say *something*.

Yuna and Rinka looked up at me, then bashfully averted their eyes a split second later. *Was hearing that I loved them apropos of nothing really that impactful?* I wondered. Getting a reaction like that from them, of course, was making *me* feel pretty uncomfortable too. *R-Right, a topic! I need a topic!*

I opened my mouth, but failed to come up with anything to say and just sat there, still and slack-jawed. I knew that if I didn’t say *something*, though, we’d probably spend the entire rest of our lunch break in this awful silence. *I just need something to say. Something to say. Something to...say...*

“So, why *did* you two fall for me, anyway?”

“Pffffff!”

“Mmnnggh?!”

“Whaugh?!”

That was, respectively, Yuna spitting out a mouthful of tea, Rinka choking on her food, and me shouting with shock at the sheer audacity of the question that I myself had just asked. For just a moment, chaos reigned supreme over the rooftop.

“Was this *really* the moment for that question?!” Yuna shouted.

“Just how tough *is* your heart, Yotsuba?!” asked Rinka after a couple seconds of hacking and coughing.

“You absolutely have a point, but for the record, I’m just as surprised I asked that as you are!” I shouted back.

Frankly, looking back on it, I think the only person who could ever possibly explain what had possessed me to ask that question was me in the very specific several-second span it took for it to come out of my mouth. That being said, I *had* always wondered—why would the ever-perfect, ever-radiant pair to end all pairs, a duo so exceptional they were out of *everyone’s* league no matter how handsome or beautiful their suitor might be, fall for a below-average girl like me? I really *was* super curious, and so...

“B-But, I mean, if you wouldn’t mind telling me...” I stammered.

“Y-You’re actually following through on this?!” gasped Rinka.

“W-Well, I mean, it *would* feel sort of weird leaving it unsaid after everything that’s happened,” noted Yuna.

The two of them exchanged glances, their smiles looking just a little bit strained. I felt weirdly compelled to sit up with my back straight and my knees tucked beneath me, gulping as I nervously stood by for their report.

“So, I’ve actually talked about this with Rinka before,” Yuna began.

“Y-You have?” I asked.

“Yeah. Back when we both ended up telling each other we had a thing for you.”

“Oh, okay. Then it’s not really *that* embarrassing to tell me too, is—”

“Yes, it is!” Yuna and Rinka shouted simultaneously.

“R-Right, sorry.”

“But, well, I guess that’s just how you are,” Yuna sighed, her angry scowl quickly shifting into an exasperated smile.

Rinka nodded vigorously in agreement.

Wait, what? What’s how I am?

“Yotsuba, you *really* can’t take a hint sometimes. You know that?”

“Huh?!” *I can’t take a hint.* She wasn’t wrong, of course—it really was an area that I suffered from a distinct lack of ability in—but boy, did that ever bring all that middle-school trauma rushing back into my mind. *Yup, here it comes...*

“But you know what else?” said Rinka. “The way you can’t take a hint has really helped the two of us out.”

“Uh?”

“We told you how we’d been stuck acting for ages, right?” said Yuna. “How Rinka and I just kept pretending we were more than friends and built up this special little world that only the two of us fit into? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I *do* totally love Rinka—just, like, in the *friend-love* sorta way.”

“And I love Yuna too,” said Rinka. “As a childhood friend, of course.”

Yuna and Rinka beamed at each other. Their smiles were truly gorgeous, and spoke of just how many years they’d been together and how many experiences they’d shared. Even after they’d gone out of their way to preface their explanation with an emphasis that they were *just* friends, the sheer beauty of their relationship was enough to render me spellbound and speechless. *And they called me unfair? Come on!*

“But then you just marched right on into that little world of ours without even taking your shoes off first, Yotsuba!” said Yuna.

“Huh?! Wait, I thought you two were the ones who pulled *me* in!” I protested.

“You’re the one who picked up my handkerchief, aren’t you?” noted Rinka.

“Well, I mean...yes, but still.” I might’ve been the one to start things off, sure, but that really was *just* the start. *They* were the ones who’d grabbed onto my arms right afterward.

Although, actually...if someone who could take a hint had been in that situation, they probably would’ve turned around and run away right after handing it over to her. They’d tried to seal themselves off in their own little world, but that didn’t mean they could avoid making contact with other people entirely. Yet somehow, in spite of the contrast between their closeness to each other and their lack of engagement with anyone else, they didn’t have a reputation for being *unpleasant* to other people. The secret was that they never overtly distanced themselves from others—instead, others distanced themselves from Yuna and Rinka, lest they accidentally pollute the prince and princess’s perfect little world.

“Honestly, I thought you were gonna pull away from us right away too,” said Yuna. “I didn’t really mind the thought either. I wanted to keep avoiding all that obnoxious crap in high school just as much as I had in middle school, and I thought that sticking with Rinka and nobody else would be easier anyway...at first.”

“But you *didn’t* avoid us,” said Rinka. “You said hello to us every morning, you ate lunch with us, and you even played along with all of our stupid small talk.”

“B-But that’s just *normal*, right...?” I protested. I thought of them as my friends, after all—it wasn’t anything *special* like Rinka was making it out to be. *I mean, I guess I did get super nervous about everything she listed, but that’s a me problem.*

“It might be normal for most people, but not for us,” said Yuna. “We’d spent so long distancing ourselves from people that actually getting *close* to someone felt, like, super new and fresh? But then it started feeling more and more natural, and before I knew it...I realized I couldn’t live without you anymore.”

“Y-You couldn’t *live*—?!”

“You’re the strangest person, Yotsuba,” said Rinka. “You came into our lives out of nowhere, smiled with us when we were happy, comforted us when we were sad... But just when I started thinking you really had it together, it turned

out that you're a total scatterbrain, a crybaby, and a hopeless case in studying *and* sports."

"Ugh! That list of flaws is kind of a deal-breaker, don't you think?!"

"No, not at all. Your flaws just make you more adorable."

"Right? It's like how people always end up doting on the dumb kids 'cause they're so much cuter than the smart ones!" added Yuna.

"That is *not* a compliment!" I shouted.

"I guess you could say that we just couldn't leave you alone," Rinka continued. "It felt like if I took my eyes off you for even a second, you'd end up wandering off and getting into some sort of ridiculous trouble, so I couldn't help but pay attention to you...and before I knew it, not a day passed by where I didn't think about you."

"Before we knew it, we'd fallen head over heels for you," said Yuna. She and Rinka glanced at each other and grinned again.

Well, this is kinda hard to deal with. I had no clue what sort of face would be appropriate to make, and unfortunately for me, my face made the decision on its own without waiting for my mind's input. I ended up grinning as well.

"You're just a natural-born lady-killer, y'know that?" Yuna said as she playfully poked my cheek.

"Of course, that might make the two of us a couple of suckers, considering we let her seduce us that easily," added Rinka, who leaned over onto my shoulder.

Once again, just like the other day on the Ferris wheel, I found myself sandwiched between them. The thing is, though, we were at school this time, which made it feel like we were doing something really...I dunno, *naughty* somehow. It definitely set my heart racing, that's for sure.

When I really thought about it, I realized that ever since I'd had my two-timing officially approved by the two of them, a massive weight had been lifted from my shoulders—like I'd been released from the incredible guilt I'd felt toward them. At the same time, though, the fact that none of us were keeping any secrets from each other anymore had sort of resulted in the two of them

totally losing all interest in taking things slow. *Am I really going to be able to handle this? At this rate, I don't know if my heart or my body's going to give out first, but one of them's gonna go for sure!*

A year and change had passed since I'd made friends with Yuna and Rinka. Not only had I totally failed to acclimate to their charms over the course of that year, I was actually *still* discovering and getting blown away by new facets of their personalities that just made them all the more incredible. I was completely and utterly stuck on them. Seriously, they were *way* more unfair than I ever possibly could've been. I'd spent my whole life living quietly and unassumingly, without a desire to speak of, and then *they* had to go and give me all this *affection*, and I started wanting them to love me more, and for *me* to love *them* more, and all those desires just spiraled away into infinity.

"So you'd better get ready, Yotsuba!" said Yuna.

"Huh?" I grunted.

"We'd do anything to make you fall deeper in love with us, after all," said Rinka.

"A-Anything?"

"That's right. *Anything.*"

The smiles on their faces told me that they were enjoying every second of this. I, on the other hand, was already getting dangerously close to hitting my maximum heartthrob threshold!

"And right now, that means getting ready for summer vacation!" declared Yuna. "We're gonna hash out the perfect schedule and make sure we don't waste even a *second* of free time!"

"I'd love to go to the ocean, or a pool. Camping might be nice as well," said Rinka. "Oh, we could also find a fireworks show or a Bon festival to check out. I'd love to see you dressed up in a yukata, Yotsuba."

Yuna nodded. "Yeah, since we didn't get to do any of that stuff together last year. Oh, I know! If we're going to the beach or the pool or whatever, we should all go buy swimsuits together!"

“Now *that’s* an idea!” said Rinka.

The two of them were getting pretty worked up, and I found myself unable to say a word. It wasn’t that I felt like I’d been shut out of the conversation or that I was getting bored, though—I was just sinking into thought again. *The beach, a pool, a festival... We didn’t get to do any of that last year because our schedules mostly didn’t match up, and when they did, I couldn’t work up the nerve to go through with meeting them.* This summer, though, we’d be together, and while last year that thought had put me into a state of terror, this time around just imagining it was enough to make me feel beside myself with excitement.

“Plus,” Yuna continued, “when we’re not at school, we won’t have to worry about people we know watching us, right? That means we’ll get to flirt with Yotsuba as much as we want!”

“And if we make it a sleepover, we’ll be able to stay with her all day and night long,” added Rinka.

“F-Flirting in public...? Wait, a *sleepover*?! Isn’t it a little early for that?!” I nervously yelped. *I dunno if I’m emotionally ready to jump that far in a single leap!*

“Oh? A little early for *what*?” Yuna asked, immediately latching onto my panicked exclamation.

Rinka cocked her head quizzically. “Yeah, what’s the problem? Yuna and I have sleepovers all the time, and it’s not like we haven’t done plenty of flirting already.”

They were both making it *look* like they hadn’t considered the implications of their suggestion...but the ever so subtle twitching of the corners of their mouths didn’t escape my notice. *They’re totally just messing with me!*

“You don’t have any idea what she means, right, Yuna?”

“Nope. Not a clue, Rinka!”

It seemed they were set on dragging exactly what I was thinking—or really, what I’d inadvertently fantasized—out of me the hard way. *Are they trying to get back at me for my little sneak attack earlier...? N-Nah, no way, right? That’s totally impossible! They would’ve had to plan that out in advance, and they*

didn't have the time to—wait, gah?!

“Heh heh!” Yuna and Rinka chuckled.

As I looked over at each of them in turn and found them both wearing the *exact* same smirk, it finally hit me: I was dealing with the Sacrosanct! They'd been working together for *way* longer than I'd known the two of them, they understood each other perfectly, and they were as in sync as it was possible for two people to be! They were the most powerful pairing in history, and I could hardly believe I'd thought for a second that they'd have to *plan ahead* to successfully mess with me. They could do *that* without exchanging a single word! I was *absolutely* no match for them!

“A-Ah, umm...I, uhh...might've imagined something a little dirty,” I admitted.

“Oh, *Yotsuba*! You mean you want to do *dirty* stuff with us?” gasped Yuna.

“You're more than welcome to any time, as far as we're concerned,” noted Rinka.

Both of them leaned *way* into me, pressing themselves against me with absolutely no concern for the hot weather. The sun beamed down on us, and the smell of our sweat—plus the scent that Yuna and Rinka always seemed to carry—was enough to make my head spin.

“Don't worry—I'll study up and make sure I'm nice and ready to take the lead when the time comes,” said Yuna, her eyes sparkling with the glee of a carnivore staring down its hapless prey.

“I think I'd rather Yotsuba take the lead, myself. For that matter, I'd rather she *really* mess me up,” mused Rinka with an adorable grin that made her look like a defenseless little herbivore.

They were both giving off pretty much the opposite of the images that the world at large expected from them...but from *my* perspective, this was as *them* as they could be.

“Wait a second... So that *is* what you actually meant?!”

“Hee hee hee! Look forward to it!” giggled Yuna.

“Let's make this the best summer ever!” said Rinka.

As they smiled those peerless smiles that only they could ever manage, a few thoughts struck me.

First: I would absolutely never, ever, *ever* be able to get the better of them.

Second: the upcoming summer was probably going to be even crazier than I'd given it credit for.

And third: I really did love Yuna and Rinka so much, I could hardly contain myself.

My heart pounded like a drum, my face felt like it'd catch fire, and yet I was overcome with the urge to wallow in the feelings that had put me in that state. I knew now that it was *far* too late for me to ever step back from the new three-way relationship that we'd somehow ended up in, and with that thought in mind, I reached out and clasped their hands in mine.

Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta—Fin

Afterword

Hello! This is the author, toshizou, speaking. I'd like to start by saying thank you for purchasing this book, *Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta* (or just *Yuri Tama* for short).

As you might expect given the title, this is a yuri story—in other words, a rom-com about girls who fall in love with each other. I actually only discovered the yuri genre a few years ago, and my experience with it happens to line up just about perfectly with my history as an author. Personally speaking, my understanding of yuri on the whole is still developing, but in spite of my inexperience, I had the great fortune of having the short story I submitted to *Shosetsuka ni Naro* get picked up for publication as a full novel. Over the course of writing said novel, I found myself rediscovering the sense of enjoyment that I'd experienced way back when I'd first started writing. I'll be extremely pleased if my readers have as much fun reading through the story as I did writing it!

Moving along, it's not hard to figure out that two-timing is a central theme of this novel. That's not exactly the most upbeat of themes, to say the least, but when it became clear that I would be able to publish it as a full story, I decided that I might as well give said story the most excessively bright and sappy ending I possibly could. That aspect of the story's central concept was what inspired the bulk of Yotsuba Hazama's personality and decisions.

Yotsuba has a way of sinking into her worries, chucking those worries to the curb to think about something fun instead, then going right back to worrying again moments later. She's incredibly free-spirited, but she has a certain weakness to her as well, and she wound up being just the right sort of protagonist to represent everything that the story was about, bringing it to exactly the sort of conclusion I was hoping it would have. If at all possible, I'd love to see where her life takes her next...if you know what I mean! And by "you," I mean "the higher-ups at Overlap, the story's publisher"!

Setting aside that particular desire for now, though, I'd like to take a moment

to thank everyone who was involved in the publication of this book. To my illustrator, Kuro Shina: you brought all of the characters in this story to life, and speaking as the author, I couldn't help but grin with every new illustration that was sent to me.

Next, to my editor: you were an incredible help for this story, from your deep and profound understanding of yuri to your assistance with the overall plot, the first draft, and everything that went into preparing the illustrations.

To all the good people of the Overlap editorial department as well: thank you for giving this story the chance to become a published novel. Personally, I think you should keep churning out as many yuri-related stories as you possibly can. Feel free to let me write another, while you're at it!


I would also like to thank Teren Mikami, who took the time to write an endorsement for this novel in spite of their incredibly busy schedule. Having my book recommended by the number-one writer in the yuri light novel world gave me an incredible boost to my confidence.

Finally, and above all else, I would like to express my gratitude to all the readers who purchased this book. Thank you so much for giving a total newcomer to the yuri light novel world like me a chance. I sincerely hope that you all enjoy it!

Before I wrap this up, a bit of self-promotion: another of my stories, *Yuujin ni 500 Yen Kashitara Shakkin no Kata ni Imouto wo Yokoshitekita no da Keredo, Ore ha Ittai Dousureba Iin Darou*, has also recently been published by the good people at Famitsu Bunko. The title, which roughly translates to "I loaned my friend 500 yen and he gave me his little sister as collateral; what am I supposed to do about this?" pretty much summarizes the story in a nutshell, and while that one's a hetero rom-com rather than yuri, I believe it's a fun story in its own right! If you're interested, please give it a try! There's a manga adaptation you can check out too. I have to admit—from an objective point of view, you really have to wonder about the personal ethics of an author who writes stories about officially approved two-timers and people who offer up their little sisters as collateral on a 500-yen debt, don't you?

Anyway, this afterword has ended up being a little on the long side, so I think

it's about time for me to wrap it up. Once again, thank you very much for giving *Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta* a try! I hope we'll meet again someday!



*I've made a
promise to
myself. I swear
I'll make them
both happy
at once!*

YOTSUBA HAZAMA

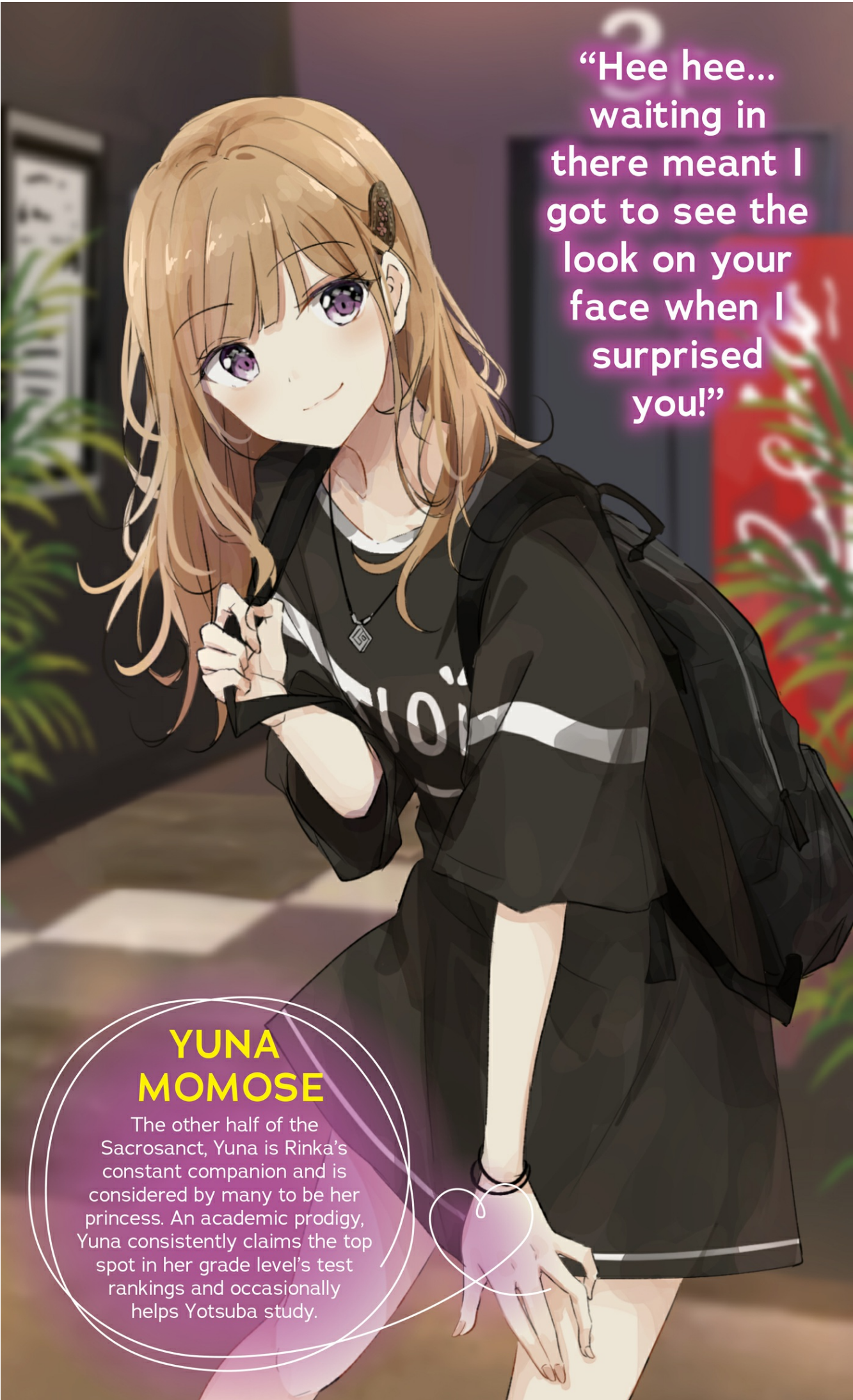
A high school girl who might not be the brightest bulb in the box, but will do anything to make her friends happy. A strange series of circumstances leads to her befriending the Sacrosanct... and dating both of them before she knows it!

An anime-style illustration of a young woman with long, dark blue hair tied in a high ponytail with a small orange bow. She has large, expressive green eyes and a gentle smile. She is wearing a light brown, short-sleeved top with a ruffled hem and light grey pants. She is holding a black bag in her left hand. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with other people.

RINKA AIBA

Yuna's childhood friend, and one half of the pair that everyone in Eichou High knows as the Sacrosanct. Widely considered the school prince, Rinka is an omni-talented athlete who looks constantly cool and collected...though she's also secretly fond of cute things.

“You’re really cute today, Yotsuba.”

An anime-style illustration of a young woman with long, wavy blonde hair and purple eyes. She is wearing a black t-shirt with a white horizontal stripe and a black backpack. She is leaning forward slightly, holding a small black object in her right hand. The background is a blurred indoor setting with green plants and a red wall.

“Hee hee...
waiting in
there meant I
got to see the
look on your
face when I
surprised
you!”

YUNA MOMOSE

The other half of the Sacrosanct, Yuna is Rinka's constant companion and is considered by many to be her princess. An academic prodigy, Yuna consistently claims the top spot in her grade level's test rankings and occasionally helps Yotsuba study.

“Let’s
keep *us*
our little
secret,
okay?”

A surprisingly
mature but truly
adorable voice
tickled my right
ear while *an ever*
so slightly bashful
and reserved voice
soothed my left.
Their words were
passionate, sweet,
and packed full to
the brim with the
most dangerous
sort of sentiment.
They mercilessly
assaulted my brain,
which was in real
danger of melting
down at any second.

“We’ll
keep our
relationship
between the
two of us,
okay?”





"What have I **Do**oooooone?!"

I'm
two-
timing
them!

That's *literally*
cheating, in
every sense of
the word!

Bonus Short Stories

An After-School Photo Shoot

The Sacrosanct: a term that carries a certain dignity and solemnity by virtue of its sound alone, and the title applied to the most overwhelmingly beautiful pair of girls at our school, Eichou High. Their beauty was only the beginning, though—they had talent to match, and were childhood friends, and *best* friends on top of it. They were always together, their relationship always perfectly harmonious...and watching them, you couldn't stop yourself from imagining that whatever they had moved beyond the realm of friendship and into a realm of pure and precious lilies in full bloom: a realm of yuri. It went without saying that boys were not allowed to intrude upon their domain, but not even *girls* were permitted entrance either. The Sacrosanct were simply too revered to be meddled with, and so everyone kept their distance, watching over them from afar.

Aaand this is the part where I have to introduce myself, I guess. Hi! My name is Yotsuba Hazama, and I'm a perfectly ordinary high school girl with no particularly noteworthy good qualities, but a boatload of bad ones! And somehow...

"God, I'm bored..."

"Same..."

...I've made friends with the pair of outlandishly pretty girls sitting before me: Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba, the Sacrosanct themselves!

Yes, friends. Seriously. The Sacrosanct were so pure and exalted that nobody dared approach them, and I'd just stepped right on up to them like a moron...which, *somehow*, had resulted in them accepting me into their social circle. We'll have to gloss over all the details of the situation for now, though—what's important is that I was stuck between a rock and a hard place, with the

rock being my friendship with them and the hard place being the incessant glares of the Sacrosanct's numerous fans. If my school life didn't give me an ulcer in the near future, I suspected that nothing could.

"Hey, Yotsuba, we're *super* bored right now," Momose poutily droned.

"Wait, am I supposed to do something about that?!" I replied.

"Well, we're waiting for *you*, aren't we?" Momose countered as she started poking me. She had the small build and downright angelic features of a trueborn princess, which made it all the harder to resist when she gave me those willful little puppy-dog eyes of hers.

"Stop distracting her, Yuna," sighed Aiba.

"I'm not distracting her! I'm lodging a formal and legitimate complaint!" retorted Momose.

"Right, yes, of course you are. You can just ignore her, Yotsuba," said Aiba with one of the most amiable smiles I'd ever seen.

"R-Right," I replied, flinching back with reflexive diffidence like the petty little peasant I was. Aiba had a calm, remarkably mature sort of air, and combined with her handsome features, the word "prince" couldn't possibly have fit her any better. Yes, she was a girl, but still.

"Okay," said Momose, "but it was *Yotsuba's* fault that she forgot her homework in the first place, right?"

"Ugh!" I grunted.

"Well...I suppose I can't deny that," said Aiba.

Yup, that's right. The only reason why the two of them were hanging out in our almost entirely abandoned classroom was because they were waiting for me. We hadn't promised to meet up or made plans or anything. We were just going to walk home together, that's all. I was really happy that they'd go that far out of their way for me, but that happiness was mostly overwhelmed by how simultaneously guilty I felt about it. Their after-school time was precious, and there I was, stealing it away from them!

"Umm, Momose? Aiba?" I said. "I think this is going to take a while longer, so

you can go ahead and go—”

“Nope,” said Momose. This wasn’t even close to the first time I’d made that suggestion, and she shut me down before I could even finish.

“Think about it this way, Yotsuba,” said Aiba. “If we went home *now*, that would mean that all the time we spent waiting up until this point was wasted, right?”

“W-Would it?”

“It would!” shouted Momose. “So we have to *do* something! Something that’ll make us be all ‘I’m so glad I stayed behind! I’m so glad I decided to wait for her!’ It would be *ridiculous* for us to just sit around here, bored out of our skulls! Our time in high school’s going to be over before we know it—we can’t go wasting it!”

Wait, when did the conversation expand from “this afternoon” to “our high school lives on the whole”?!

“So we have to do *something*,” said Aiba with a nod. “Just sitting around and fiddling with our phones while we wait would be a waste.”

And so, before I knew it, their brilliant teamwork had driven me into a corner. Okay, maybe that makes it sound a little more dramatic than it really was, but apparently I would have to offer up a topic for them to talk about, or come up with some sort of event to run, or something along those lines. *I am technically still busy with my homework, you know...?*

“O-Okay, then,” I said, then paused. “You could...umm...take pictures?!”

“Huh?”

“Pictures?”

Momose and Aiba cocked their heads in unison. Which was fair enough—it *was* a super abrupt suggestion, and not even I knew what I was talking about, really. I’d just always sort of wanted a picture of the two of them, I guess. I mean, come on—they were the Sacrosanct, for crying out loud! If I hadn’t just happened to end up becoming friends with them, I’m *positive* I would’ve ended up being one of their fans! I got to see how above-and-beyond incredible they

were up close and personal from a friend's perspective, yes, but could you really blame me for wanting to preserve those scenes as photos and gaze at them to my heart's content?!

"I mean, you just said that high school ends before you know it, right, Momose? So like, when I think about how we only have one chance at this moment and it'll be gone forever once it's over, I started thinking, 'Hey, why not just take a picture?'" I said. I only ever seemed to be able to come up with that sort of excuse on the fly when I was really desperate, but I was oddly reliable about doing so when the chips were down and my adrenaline was pumping.

"I *guess* that makes sense...?" said Momose.

All right! I think they're sorta buying it! "Okay, then let's do it! Stand up, you two!"

"Huh?! Us?!" Momose shouted.

"What about *you*, Yotsuba?" asked Aiba.

"I'll be the photographer, of course!" I declared.

Momose and Aiba were bewildered, but I managed to get them to stand up and pulled out my phone. *What's that? My homework? Whatever, it can wait!* There was, of course, absolutely no merit to having *me* in this sort of picture, so Momose and Aiba would be the subjects of the day's photo shoot. It was just common sense—shame they didn't put *that* sort of stuff on our tests at school!

"Okay, get closer to each other! A liiiittle closer!" I said, coaching the two of them like a tour guide taking a commemorative photo of the group they were leading around. I had them stand side-by-side, then squeeze in a lot closer to each other than was strictly necessary.

Oh, wow, they already look amazing! There's just something so picturesque about those two! It was the perfect setup: after school, in a classroom, dressed in matching uniforms, standing so close to each other that they were *obviously* more than just plain old friends! I could feel myself grinning like a moron as I snapped picture after picture of them. *I am so setting this as my phone's wallpaper! Or wait, maybe I should get it printed and hang it up in my room...?* "This is the *best*," I sighed as I thought of all the practical uses I could put the

photos to.

“H-Hey, Yotsuba? Can we back off from each other a little now?” asked Aiba.

“Huh? Oh, right! Sure!” I said. “Here, let me post the pictures in our group chat—”

I figured that we’d had our fun and our little photo shoot was over, and was just about to go back to my homework when Momose grabbed me by the arm. “Why’re you sitting down already?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“We’re taking pictures, right? You got one with me and Rinka, so next up is me and you, right?”

“I’m not sure who decided that *you* get to go first,” said Aiba, “but I’ll be taking one with you as well afterward, Yotsuba.”

“W-Wait, you mean you’re going to take them with *me*?!” *Who on earth would want a picture like that?!*

While I was busy being confused as heck, Momose threw her arms around me and—*wait, she what?!*

“Here, take my phone, Rinka! Go ahead, any time!”

“I know, I know,” said Aiba, who accepted Momose’s phone and started snapping pictures. Then they switched places and Momose took pictures of me and Aiba. And somehow, even though it felt like they were a couple of idols taking pictures with some rando background bystander, *my* photo sessions took *way* longer than I’d spent taking pictures of the two of them...and before I knew it, the final bell for the day rang, indicating that it was time for all of us students to leave the school.

“Wait...my homework!!!”

Needless to say, I hadn’t finished up the work that I’d actually stayed behind to do in the first place. I ended up getting a lengthy scolding from my teacher...and Momose and Aiba ended up getting lectured right along with me.

Daily Life with the Hazama Sisters: Home Cooking That Makes

Your Heart Pound (But Not in the Good Way)

“How did it come to this...?” I groaned.

“Don’t ask *me*,” Sakura moaned back at me.

We were sitting at the table in our living room together, and both of us were grimacing. I could just barely hear somebody humming happily one room over, her voice wafting over to us along with what I can only describe as an ominous aura of doom. I felt myself shudder involuntarily.

“Our school was on a half-day schedule today,” Sakura listlessly explained.

“Oh, I get it,” I replied. “So that’s why she got home early... *Wait!* That means *you* got out early too, Sakura! Why didn’t you stop her?!”

“Huh?! You’re saying this is *my* fault?! *I* was out shopping for reference books because *I* take *my* studies seriously! Not that I’d expect a moron like *you* to understand!”

“Wha—?! I can’t believe you just called your own big sister a moron!”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?!”

The fact that we got into that little argument goes to show just how on edge we were. Or really, how terrified we were, I guess. Under normal circumstances, I’d be showering her with praise, patting her head, and telling her how good of a student she was for going textbook shopping. She’d probably still snap at me for it, though, so I guess that’s consistent.

“Dinner’s seerved!”

“Eek?!” Sakura and I shrieked in unison.

Our worst fear had finally entered the room, that being my ever-adorable littler little sister, Aoi. Well, *she* wasn’t our worst fear, really—it was the platter of toxic waste...*ahem*, of food that she was carrying.

“S-So, Aoi,” I said, “wh-what did you decide to cook for us tonight...?”

“Tee hee hee,” Aoi giggled. “I decided to try my hand at making a meat and potato stew! I heard on TV that being able to make this dish is a must for any newlywed bride!” she explained, her smile shining as brightly and brilliantly as

the sun itself.

She was just so *adorable*, and I was so proud of her, and I *wanted* to root for her and her ambitions...but I just couldn't help but think something was strange. After all, I could've *sworn* the dish in her hands was supposed to be curry. It was that distinctive shade of curry-brown, for one thing, and it looked *really* thick, and I could pick out a lot more ingredients than just meat and potatoes in there, and something about it just looked...*wrong*.

"Ugh! Blech," Sakura grunted, her face white as a sheet as she looked at Aoi's dish.

"Hey, Yotsuba?" said Aoi.

"Huh?"

"I'll feed you tonight, okay?"

"*Huh?* Ah, uh, I mean, it's fine, you don't have to! I can eat at my own pace," I frantically explained.

"Aww... But I made this just for you! I wanna feed it to you myself! Can't I? Pretty please?"

Augh?! Her gaze—it's so pure and genuine! How's a doting sister like me supposed to say no to that?! And hold on a second, Aoi—weren't you just saying something about making this to prepare for when you get marr—

"Okay, Yotsuba, say ahh!"

"A-Ahh," I said, opening my mouth wide. I noticed Sakura shoot me a glance that I took as an unspoken "good luck." I was bearing both of their expectations now, and I could only brace myself as the spoon entered my mouth, and—

I don't really remember much about what happened after that point. The next thing I knew, Sakura and I were both slumped over on the table, completely immobile. We'd survived, though, and as we listened to Aoi humming away as she washed the dishes in the kitchen, we both thanked our lucky stars for that fact.

Recollections of a Fangirl: The Sacrosanct and Their Meddling Hanger-On

When I first enrolled in Eichou High, I experienced a meeting that truly felt like the stuff of destiny. It was a meeting too wonderful for words—a meeting that turned my entire worldview upside down.

“C’moon, Rinka! Just one bite! Pleeese?”

“Fine, fine! Honestly, Yuna... You really don’t know how to take no for an answer, do you?”

There they were: a prince wearing an exasperated smile and lifting a meatball with a pair of chopsticks to offer it to the awaiting princess.

“Okay, open wide.”

“Ahh!”

And then, at the princess’s urging, the prince popped the meatball into her mouth with a remarkably practiced hand.

“Mmh! Delicious!”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

The princess’s smile was as wide as could be, and the prince nodded and smiled in turn before going back to eating, still using the same chopsticks as before.

This sort of exchange wasn’t rare by any means. We got to witness scenes just like it as a matter of course, almost every single day, right here in our classroom...and I said a quick prayer of thanks for the fact that I’d been granted such an incredible privilege. They were our school’s very own pride and joy, the most wonderful, lovely, and precious yuri couple in existence: the Sacrosanct. And I, as their classmate, was allowed to witness them in the flesh. All the effort that I’d put into passing this school’s entrance exam was so, so worth it...but there was just one problem.

“Ah, Yotsuba! Welcome back!”

“Hey, Yotsuba.”

“H-Hey! I’m back, yup!”

Her. What is her problem? She was the girl who had trampled right on into the Sacrosanct’s territory that the *rest* of us had kept safe and watched over for so very long—a girl without even the slightest *hint* of tact or delicacy: Yotsuba Hazama.

She got the lowest scores in our grade on literally all of our tests. She was *beyond* hopeless when it came to athletics. She had no redeeming qualities whatsoever—and yet somehow, she’d become *friends* with the Sacrosanct...supposedly. It was just unthinkable! If I had been in her position, I knew for a fact that I would have known my place and bowed out of their social circle in an instant! She was *ruining* the happy little space they’d made for themselves! The scene that was playing out before me was the perfect example—she’d gone out to use the restroom, and what happened the moment she got back?

“Hey, Yotsuba, the meatballs in Rinka’s lunch box are *amazing* today!”

“I’m not sure why *Yuna*’s bragging about them, but I’d be happy to share if you want to try one, Yotsuba.”

And the absolute worst part—the part that annoyed me above all else—was the fact that...and I *hoped* I was just imagining it...it almost seemed like the Sacrosanct were *more* enthusiastic when they were talking with that meddling little hanger-on than they were when they talked with each other.

No, no, no! That’s not possible! That utterly forgettable plain Jane of a girl could never be more important to them than they are to each other! I’d be less surprised to see pigs fly than I would to see that!

I couldn’t deny, though, that some of the members of the Sacrosanct fan club I belonged to viewed Yotsuba Hazama as dangerous. They thought that her presence could very well spell the end of the Sacrosanct’s whole relationship...though our vice president, at least, seemed to think differently.

I shook my head—I hadn’t even realized that I’d started thinking about that Hazama girl, and before I knew it, I was totally fixated on her. I didn’t have time

for this! I wanted to spend my days not thinking about anything at all, and instead basking in the Sacrosanct's precious radiance!

I could tell that I needed a mental reset, so I stood up and headed for the restroom. *No question about it—whether you're a man or a woman, third-wheeling a yuri couple should be a capital offense*, I thought as I strolled down the hallway. But just then, I heard a voice call out behind me.

"U-Umm, hey!"

"Huh?" I spun around. It wasn't every day that I had someone who sounded *that* timid trying to get my attention, and I immediately went on guard...and found none other than Yotsuba Hazama herself standing behind me!

"Wh-What do you want?" I asked, going even *more* on guard than I had been to begin with. *She didn't notice that I was watching her, did she? She looks like she couldn't hurt a fly even if she wanted to, but what if she's secretly a highly trained fighter? Is she going to kidnap me, haul me off into the wilderness, and beat the crap out of me?!*

"Y-You, umm...you dropped this!"

"Huh?"

Hazama handed me a small, remarkably dingy cell-phone strap. It was so unfashionable you'd probably think it was a literal piece of trash if you found it lying around, but she was right—it *was* mine. The string had been getting pretty frayed recently, and it seemed it'd finally snapped and fallen off my phone.

"How did you...?" I began, too shocked to finish my thought.

"Ah, umm... I saw it fall off your phone, so... Ah! No, I mean, I wasn't *watching* you or anything! I just happened to notice it out of the corner of my eye, that's all!" Hazama blathered.

"That's not what I meant!" I snapped. This was, in fact, the very first time I'd had an actual conversation with her. The odds were high that she didn't even know my name. It annoyed the hell out of me to admit it, but in her eyes, I was probably nothing more than a background extra.

“So I saw it and thought, ‘Oh, I bet that’s really important to Kida! I should go grab it!’”

“Huh...?”

“I mean, like, I could tell since it’s all worn out! That means you’ve been using it for a long time, right...? So I thought you might get really upset if you thought you’d lost it, so, umm... I know you don’t really like me, but...”

She’d whispered that last part so quietly I could barely even hear it. Maybe she thought I *wouldn’t* be able to, but I *was* standing right in front of her, and I picked it up clearly enough that there was no doubt in my mind about what she’d said. She smiled at me, but in an uncomfortable, almost sad sort of way. I didn’t know what to say to her, and I just stood there, gaping and clueless.

“Ah, umm... I should go now! See you later!” Hazama said, then awkwardly retreated back into the classroom.

All I could do was stand there and watch her go, and all I could think was, *So she really did know my name.*

Nothing really changed after I had that encounter with Hazama. Not for me, not for the Sacrosanct, and not for life in general. I still spent day after day glaring at Hazama as she third-wheeled the Sacrosanct like the meddler she was. If there was just one thing that *had* changed...

“See you later,” she said. When is later supposed to be?

...it was the fact that every once in a while, I found my gaze following *her* in particular rather than the Sacrosanct themselves.

Gaaah, I really can’t stand that girl!

Re: Fast Food

Momose, Aiba, and I stopped by a fast-food place on the way home from school today. The place we went to tended to be pretty crowded right after school got out, but we somehow managed to secure a table and sit down. Momose and Aiba were sitting next to each other, of course, while I had the

other side of the table to myself.

“You have an incredible way of making the things you eat look delicious, Yotsuba,” observed Aiba as I dug into my food.

“Huh? Really?” I asked.

“Yeah!” piped up Momose. “You’re like a little squirrel!”

I couldn’t help but be embarrassed by the way they were watching me, but I also couldn’t help but eat that way. I’d ordered a sort of croquette burger that the store only served during certain times of the year, and it was a personal favorite of mine. The croquette came stuffed with cheese and noodles and stuff, and it was super oozy in the best possible way!

“You two sure ordered a lot today, huh?” I asked, blatantly changing the subject in an effort to get their attention off me for a moment. They really *had* ordered a ton, though—both of them had gotten a combo, and also ordered an extra hamburger each on top of that. It was a downright feast over on their side of the table.

“Well, we did have gym class today,” said Aiba. “I worked up an appetite.”

“Oh, right. You really stole the show, huh?” I replied. We’d played volleyball in gym that day and Aiba was pretty incredible. She would receive a serve, then sprint up to the net and score with a spike just moments later! It was *crazy* cool!

“Same here,” chimed in Momose.

“I didn’t see *you* doing very much running around at all, though,” Aiba noted.

“What? That’s not true! Right, Yotsuba?” asked Momose, looking over at me.

I hesitated. Momose had, in fact, spent the entire period in a corner of the gymnasium with me, where we chatted while doing our best to not draw anyone’s attention.

“For the record, Yuna, I *did* notice you,” Aiba noted with an air of exasperation before I could answer.

“Huuuh? *No* clue what you’re talking about!” Momose said, feigning ignorance as she nibbled on a french fry. She was completely unflappable!

“Let’s change the subject! Hey, Yotsuba—you know that ‘fast food’ is an English term, right? Well, do you know what the actual words mean?”

And now Momose’s changing the subject even more blatantly than I did! Aiba must have been used to that sort of behavior and made no attempt to conceal her sigh. They understood each other so well, and it made me feel all warm and fuzzy...

“Yotsuba?” Momose prodded.

“Huh? Ah, fast food? Y-Yeah, of course I know what it means! It’s English for ‘food that gets served quickly,’ right?”

“Oh, wow,” said Aiba, her eyes wide.

“It’s a little early to get impressed with her, Rinka,” noted Momose. “Just checking, Yotsuba—what does ‘fast’ mean?”

“Number one!” I promptly answered. I mean, come on, even *I* knew *that* level of vocab! “Fast food” was obviously English for “food that comes out first”—in short, food that gets served quickly!

“Ahh...”

Huh? Why’s Aiba looking at me like that?

“Yotsuba,” said Momose. “It’s fast food. *Fast*. Not *first*. They’re different words. ‘Fast’ means ‘quick.’”

“Huh? Wait, they are?”

“It has nothing to do with the *order* that food gets served in—it’s all about *speed*!” Momose explained eagerly. Maybe a little *too* eagerly, actually. I had a funny feeling that she’d set me up—she *knew* I’d have the wrong idea from the very start! And she was totally right, so I couldn’t argue with it at all!!! “Looks like you learned something new today, Yotsuba!” added Momose with a grin.

“Good point!” I replied. If “translate the words ‘fast food’ into Japanese” showed up on our next English test, I would *nail* that question! “Maybe I’ll actually pass a test for once?!?!”

“Y-Yeah, uh, well...” mumbled Momose.

“I think you might not want to get your hopes up,” Aiba added awkwardly.

Oh. Yeah. Fair enough.

The next day—speak of the devil—we had a pop quiz sprung on us in English class! Unfortunately, I did *not* have a speak-of-the-devil moment when it came to the term “fast food.” It didn’t show up on the quiz at all, and I failed it just as spectacularly as ever. *Fiddlesticks!*

The Final Day of Yuna Momose’s Unrequited Love

“Haaah...” I sighed, only for it to hit me a moment later how unlike me sighing like that was.

I’ve always taken a certain degree of pride in my positivity. I’m the sort of willful, self-indulgent person who for the most part does what she wants when she wants to, and I appreciate that about myself. I know this is going to make me sound totally smug, but I’m also pretty smart, and though I always get outdone by my childhood friend Rinka when it comes to stuff like sports and athletics, that doesn’t really say much about *me*. And besides, it’s not like I think of her as a rival or anything. No, seriously, I don’t.

Ever since I got into high school, though, things changed. My circle of friends had consisted of just me and Rinka for the longest time, but now another girl had been added to the mix—and a really entertaining one, at that. She just had this certain *something* that made me feel, well, *comfortable* around her, and before I knew it, I found myself submerged up to the neck in whatever that certain something was. At first I’d thought that the three of us spending time together was going to be a one-off thing, and by the time I realized I was wrong, having her around was already something I’d started taking for granted—something I couldn’t live without anymore.

I was stuck, firmly, with no hope of ever escaping her.

“Haaah!” I sighed again, a little more emphatically this time, then sank deeper into the bathtub as if reflexively fleeing from the sound. I submerged myself

entirely, holding my breath for as long as I possibly could until I was forced to burst through to the surface again, gasping for air. Even down there, where it was hot and suffocating, where I *shouldn't* have been able to think about anything other than my next breath of air, I still couldn't pry my mind off of her.

"Stupid Yotsuba," I grumbled, even though it went without saying that she was nowhere near my bathroom and could never possibly have heard my complaint.

I knew that if I spent any more time stewing in the bathtub, I was liable to overheat, so with no small amount of reluctance, I pulled myself out of the water and changed into my pajamas. Her presence was still there that whole time, though, lingering somewhere deep within me.

I couldn't deny it: I, Yuna Momose, was in love. I hadn't gone on a single date over the sixteen years of my life. I hadn't even had so much as a crush on anyone! You'd better believe that I never imagined I'd fall for a girl I'd only just made friends with recently, especially considering that I was cute, smart, and about as close to perfect as a person could get, while she was just so, well...not *normal*, exactly, but *simple*, I guess? She was kind, a little spacey, and just so *lovable* in a way that rendered me unable to leave her alone.

I sighed again, and whispered, "I love you..." under my breath. Yes, I know. I had it *bad*. She'd turned me into a lovestruck dolt, and ever since I'd realized how I felt about her, not a day had passed by that I didn't think about her—about Yotsuba Hazama.

In an ideal world, I'd have loved to ask her out...but the thought of her rejecting me kept me from taking that vital step forward. I mean, if I were up against some random boys or whatever, I would've jumped right in and courted her with absolute confidence that I'd come out on top! I was pretty much the talk of the school, after all. When Rinka and I were together, we stood unrivaled! I mean, they called us the Sacrosanct for a reason! We even had a *fan club*, apparently, which I did my best to ignore since they hadn't done anything to bother us so far.

In Yotsuba's case in particular, though, I had the most intimidating rival I

could possibly ask for. That rival's identity: Rinka Aiba, the other half of the so-called Sacrosanct. I have to say, incidentally—we'd been friends forever, spent our entire lives with each other, and then *fallen for the same person* on top of it all? Like, come *on*! And for a *girl* at that! A girl named Yotsuba who was as perfectly normal...as... *Okay, no, of course we fell for her! She's Yotsuba, dangit!!!*

If any of the random riffraff in our school had decided to make a pass at her, I would've taken them on no problem. Rinka, though? *She* was different. Even I could tell that she was pretty much as cute and charming as a girl could be. Her athleticism was as cool as all get out, and her maidenly side contrasted with that cool image in just the right way to make *both* of them hit even harder. She was basically a god, and a perfect beauty who didn't even *have* a bad side on top of it! Her figure was great, her boobs were huge...and that just made me look shorter and flatter by comparison. I wasn't confident that I'd be able to win against her in a contest of love. I mean, even *I* admired her in all sorts of ways!

"Ugh... No, stop being so negative!" I told myself, diving into bed and burying my face in a pillow. I was getting pessimistic, and I knew I had to lift myself out of that mindset ASAP! *I swear I never got like this before I fell for Yotsuba!* "Y'know what? Whatever! She promised to study with me tomorrow, after all!"

Yotsuba was, to put it gently, so absurdly bad at schoolwork it was honestly hilarious. Like, she was *really* bad! But since *I* was as good at it as she was terrible, I could support her and end up becoming a vitally important presence in her life! And then maybe, someday, she'd start to catch feelings for *me* too... *Heh heh heh! C'mon, what am I thinking?*

"Okay, I've got this! Every day's a new battle, and I'm gonna seduce the *crap* out of her tomorrow!" I said, psyching myself up as I crawled into bed. I wasn't about to stay up late that night—couldn't risk ending up sleep-deprived and nodding off in front of her, after all!

And so sleep gradually overtook me, bringing with it happy dreams of a future where Yotsuba and I shared a much, much closer relationship than the one we had now.

Rinka Aiba's As-of-Yet Unrequited Love

She was the very first thing I noticed when I stepped into the classroom that morning.

“Mnhhh...” she groaned. She was staring at her smartphone, totally absorbed in whatever was on its screen.

“Morning, Yotsuba,” I said, gently tapping her on the shoulder in an effort to not surprise her. Getting her attention like that was just a little nerve-racking, I have to admit.

Her name was Yotsuba Hazama, and she was a friend who I’d made here at Eichou High School. She was also, unbeknownst to her, the subject of my affection. Frankly, I hadn’t even considered the possibility that I might be attracted to girls until just recently. And with that fact in mind, what about her? How would *Yotsuba* react if she learned that I had feelings for her...? The thought was a little scary—just a little, though. After all, I had total faith that she would never come to hate me over something like that.

“Ah, Aiba! Good morning!” Yotsuba said as she realized I’d arrived. She looked up from her phone and flashed the happiest grin at me.

Ugh! That smile of hers was dangerous—just a glimpse of it set my heart aflutter. I’d been forced to admit recently that I was *not* hard to get, to say the least. And maybe that was a little pathetic of me, on the one hand, but on the *other* hand, what sort of person could look at a pure and perfectly innocent smile like hers and *not* be at least a little moved?! And she was *always* like that! Always defenseless, always adorable...so much so that it made me worry about her, actually. It seemed totally plausible that someone would try to trick her and kidnap her away from us one of these days. *Unless I take her for myself first, that is!*

“Aiba? Hey, what’s wrong?” asked Yotsuba.

“Ah! Nothing, really,” I said, snapping back to reality and driving away the significantly *less* than pure and innocent thoughts I’d sunk into. Hopefully she hadn’t noticed. “I just noticed you were really staring at your phone, so I was wondering what you were looking at,” I said, managing to conceal my inner turmoil and get the conversation rolling again.

“Oh! Well, look at this!” said Yotsuba, who apparently hadn’t picked up on

what I was really thinking after all. She showed me her phone's screen, which had a digital flyer for a supermarket sale displayed on it. "The supermarket near my place is having a sale tomorrow, so I was thinking about what I wanted to buy! It'd be a waste if I didn't plan, bought too much, and it ended up spoiling, right?"

Apparently, Yotsuba was the sort of girl who got preoccupied over the sort of problems that mostly plagued homemakers. She'd told me about how her parents both worked and how she'd taken on all the household chores in their place, so it did make sense. *That sounds so nice*, I thought. *I'd love to try her cooking...* Suddenly, I found myself jealous of her family. I imagined what it would be like to get to eat her cooking every day, and the thought alone was enough to make me giddy.

"Ah, right!" Yotsuba exclaimed. "Hey, Aiba—what's your favorite food?"

"Huh?" I grunted.

"I just can't decide what I'm going to cook, so I thought it might be fun to try and make your favorite! Hee hee hee..."

Sh-She's so cute, god!

"Ah!" Yotsuba gasped a second later. "I-I didn't mean that in a weird way, or anything! But, I mean...I *might* end up getting the chance to cook for you someday, right? You never know! So, like, might as well start practicing now, right...?"

Huh...? Was that...a really roundabout proposal? If it had been, my answer would've been an immediate and unambiguous yes. I could be the breadwinner, and I'd get to come home every day to a dinner that she'd make for me—what could possibly be better than that? *Oh, come on, what am I even thinking? Of course that's not what she meant! In her mind, I'm still just a friend. Plus, she just said that she didn't mean it in a weird way!*

"Hey, Aiba...? Uh, I mean, sorry!" said Yotsuba. "What am I even saying, right...?"

"Ah, no, you don't have to apologize! I'm glad you're thinking about that sort of stuff! I was actually so happy about you asking me what my favorite food

was, I was speechless, that's all!" I quickly explained. I could tell she was getting depressed, and I knew I had to make up an excuse right away. I wasn't even remotely inclined to turn her down—in fact, I would've eaten just about anything if she'd made it for me.

"Okay, then," said Yotsuba, "which do you prefer: meat or fish?"

"Fish, I guess?" I replied noncommittally.

"And let's see—you prefer Japanese cooking over Western stuff, right?"

"Yeah, that's right," I said. I was the opposite of my childhood friend Yuna in that sense. She loved meat and loved Western cooking—especially if it was heavily seasoned. I don't *think* this has anything to do with her influence, but I'd ended up preferring my food on the lightly seasoned side. I'd never really thought about it in these terms before, but most of my favorite dishes were Japanese as well.

"Okay, so what *don't* you like?" Yotsuba asked next.

"Hmm... Nothing really comes to mind offhand," I said.

"Hmm, hmm! Something with fish, then... Guess I'll just go to the store and plan as I go!" said Yotsuba, nodding to herself as she jotted notes down in a little handbook she carried with her. "Thanks, Aiba! You really helped me work through that dilemma!" she said, smiling at me. The look on her face was akin to an angel's. All I'd done was tell her that I like fish and Japanese cooking, and she got *that* happy about it? *God, I love her.*

"I'm just glad to be of service," I replied. If I'd let my impulses get the better of me, I might've hugged her then and there, and it was *really* hard to resist the urge, but I managed to hold back and even play it cool with my response while I was at it. *This is for the best. Have to keep it in for now...*

"Mooorning!" a cheerful voice rang out with perfect timing. "Huh? What're you two talking about?"

It was Yuna Momose. My childhood friend...and my rival.

"Oh, nothing really," I said. "Right, Yotsuba?"

"Huh? Ah, right."

“Hmm...?” Yuna hummed skeptically. I knew for a fact that she’d be jealous if she heard about the conversation we’d just had, and I wasn’t inclined to spill the beans myself. Yotsuba had offered to make *my* favorite food, so this time it felt like it was my right to keep it as my little secret.

We chatted for a while until homeroom started, then headed for our seats. As I sat down, though, I got a text from Yotsuba—and not in our group chat.

Yotsuba: I’ll send you a picture when I finish cooking!

I felt myself crack a smile as I screenshotted her text to save for posterity.

How to Beat Sleep Deprivation

“I’ve been having the *worst* time getting up in the morning lately,” groaned Momose. That offhand comment was where it all began.

“Well, that was abrupt. Where did that come from, Yuna?” asked Aiba.

“I mean, I *guess* it was abrupt, sure...but you’re in the same boat, aren’t you, Rinka? You’ve been yawning an awful lot lately.”

“Have I? I guess you might have a point...”

We were just making idle small talk, really. Or rather, I was listening to the two of them make idle small talk while I sat off to the side and made little oohs and aahs in reaction. I did see where the two of them were coming from on this particular point—both Momose and Aiba had seemed pretty spacey recently, and them being tired would explain everything. I’d even caught them nodding off during class after lunchtime.

“How about you, Yotsuba? You...haven’t seemed sleepy at all, actually,” observed Momose.

“True,” said Aiba. “I’m not sure if *anything* could make Yotsuba do things in a way that wasn’t business as usual.”

“Huh? Umm,” I replied, a little confused. I had the distinct feeling that I was

getting made fun of somehow, though I couldn't quite figure out why. They had a point, though—I basically always slept like a log. The changing of the seasons tended to throw me off my rhythm a little, but that wasn't an issue at the moment, so I'd been sleeping just fine.

"And y'know what? I know why I've been sleeping so poorly too."

"Oh, really? Wow, you always know your stuff, Momose!" I said.

"Try making it sound like you *mean* it next time you say that sort of thing," said Yuna as she leaned forward and gave my forehead a flick.

"Ouch!" I yelped.

"Anyway," Momose continued, "the reason why it's been so hard for me to wake up early is obvious: it's because I've been going to sleep late!"

Huh...? So, wait, this is entirely self-inflicted? "What about you, Aiba?" I asked.

"Well... I suppose I've been staying up a little later than usual recently as well," Aiba admitted with a strained smile.

"Oh, well, that's easy, then!" I exclaimed. "You just have to start going to bed early—ouch?!"

"It is *not* that easy," said Momose, who'd just given me a second forehead flick. And one that I didn't deserve at all, for the record!

"Yeah," said Aiba. "It's so easy to get caught up in your thoughts..."

"You too, Rinka...?"

"You too," meaning you have the same problem, huh?"

The two of them gave each other a glance, then heaved a deep sigh in unison. As best as I could tell, they'd both been worried about the same thing, and whatever it was had been disrupting their sleep schedule. Then, suddenly, a bolt of inspiration struck me!

"Ooh, I know!" I shouted. "All you have to do is solve whatever problem you're worried about, and then you won't have to stay up late any—waugh?!" I yelped as I ate *another* flick to the forehead, though this time it was technically two of them, since *Rinka* let me have it as well! And they'd done it in perfect

unison again! The Sacrosanct never ceased to impress! They really were Eichou High's best couple!!!

"If it were that easy, we wouldn't be having this much trouble in the first place!" snapped Momose.

"I couldn't have said it better myself," agreed Aiba with a nod.

"Oh, come on," I whined. "I could even try to help, if you'd just tell me what you're worried about!!!"

"No, you couldn't," said both of them! In unison!

"How are you *this* in sync?!" I wailed. One thing was for sure, though: if the Sacrosanct said it in perfect harmony, there was *absolutely* no way it wasn't true! Me helping was *out* of the question! I'd known it all along, really—I was so unimportant, I didn't even qualify as a sidekick in their story. Somebody like *me* hoping to solve the problems of a couple of certified main characters like them was downright laughable!

"You're the one person we could never, *ever* tell about this, Yotsuba," said Momose.

"Very true. Though—oh, right, I did have one idea, Yuna," said Aiba, who then leaned over to whisper into Momose's ear.

Whoa! Where's this bit of fanservice coming from?! Can I, like, take a picture?!

"Rinka... That's an *incredible* idea!" exclaimed Momose a moment later.

"Heh heh... I know, right?" said Aiba with a smirk.

"Huh? Wait, what?" I asked.

"Rinka had an idea for how we can deal with our staying-up-late *and* not-waking-up-easily problems!"

"In short...we just have to have *you* call us to wake us up in the mornings, Yotsuba."

"Uh... What? *Me?*"

"Yup, you!" said Momose. "Think about it—you always get up early in the

morning to make breakfast for your family, right?”

“Well, I mean, yeah...”

“So you can just call us up on the phone while you’re at it! I’m sure that’ll be much nicer than waking up on our own!”

O-Okay, I guess that makes sense, I thought, but a moment later I realized that no, it really didn’t. After all, if a wake-up call was all it took to solve the problem, they could just set alarm clocks, right? Or get a family member to come wake them up? *And no, that’s not even the most obvious issue!* “How will getting a wake-up call from me help solve whatever problem’s making you stay up late?” I asked.

“It, well...it just will! Right, Rinka?”

“Right. For...reasons. Good ones.”

“I think you mean *vague* ones!” I snapped.

“Well, think about it,” said Momose. “If we know you’ll be calling us in the morning, then it would feel downright silly to stay up late brooding!”

“How does a phone call from me have that much power over you?!”

“I’m very confident that hearing your voice would wake me up in a flash,” added Aiba.

“And now my *voice* is crazy powerful too?!”

To make a long story short, it was eventually decided that I really *would* try giving them wake-up calls to see if it solved the problem. And, much to my confusion, it apparently did! Momose and Aiba regained their former well-rested radiance in no time flat. I couldn’t even begin to explain why...but it meant that I got the chance to talk with both of them on the phone every morning without it being weird, so all in all, it worked out well for everyone and I decided not to think too hard about it.

I Want a Part-Time Job!

“I’m *dead* broke!”

That, in short, was my biggest worry at the present moment. The summer of my second year in high school was right around the corner, but the current state of my wallet had me shivering so hard you’d think a cold snap was rolling in.

It wasn’t hard to figure out *why* I was broke. I’d been spending an awful lot of money while doing stuff with my two friends—er, I mean, g-girlfriends—or, as the rest of the school knew them, the Sacrosanct. We’d go out together, go shopping, that sort of stuff. My parents gave me an allowance, yes, and I’d more or less managed to get by on that so far, but my spending had been so extravagant lately that not only had I eaten through that funding, I’d also reached the bottom of my already modest long-term savings.

“What should I do...? At this rate, buying a new swimsuit and having sleepovers and stuff are gonna be totally out of the question!” I muttered to myself.

I knew that my parents might give me a little extra allowance if I just, y’know, *talked* to them about it, but the older of my two little sisters had been going to cram school lately to study for her high school entrance exams. Those schools weren’t exactly cheap, and I didn’t want to put even more of a financial burden on my parents on top of that, especially considering that my *younger* little sister would be studying for *her* exams *next* year. No, I’d have to handle this on my own somehow, and that left me with just one option!

“Please help me find a good part-time job!”

“...Excuse me?”

My choice to literally bow down and beg the girl I figured would most likely be able to help me—that being Mai Koganezaki—was met with a significantly less than enthusiastic reply.

“I have no clue what you’re talking about, Hazama,” said Koganezaki.

“Well, see, the thing is, I’m just a *little* short on cash right now...”

“I’m not asking *why* you want a job. I’m asking why you would come to *me* for help with finding one.”

“Well, I mean, I just sorta had a feeling you’d be in the know about this sort of stuff.”

“*Why?*”

“Because, uhh, you sorta have this, like, mature vibe, I guess!”

“Well, that’s...a remarkably arbitrary reason.” Koganezaki took a deep breath, then let it out again in the form of a heavy sigh. For the record, the incredible aura of ennui she gave off just reinforced that mature vibe I was talking about a second ago. Like, seriously, it was hard to believe we were really the same age.

“Well, I apologize for not living up to your expectations, but I’ve never worked a part-time job in my life.”

“What?! Seriously?!”

“Why are you so surprised? I think that’s perfectly normal for high schoolers. Most of us have classwork, clubs, or *both* occupying a tremendous chunk of our free time. I’d imagine a majority of us just don’t have the time to work.”

“Oh, huh...”

She’d actually made some pretty good points. When she put it that way, it was true that I didn’t really hear people talking about working all that often. On the other hand, I’d never heard anyone mention Koganezaki being in a club—a school-sanctioned club, anyway—and she didn’t seem the sort of person who would devote all of her free time to hitting the books either. That’s why I’d thought the idea of her working after school felt so incredibly natural.

Then it hit me. “Ah, wait, that’s right! I totally forgot that you were a rich girl!”

“I’m...a *what?*”

“You told me how you went to a rich-girl school in middle school, remember? Yeah, I get it now—no need to work if your family’s already super wealthmmphgh!”

“My family has *nothing* to do with the current conversation,” said Koganezaki, her hand pressed to my face as she pinched my cheeks together and glared daggers at me.

O-Okay, so talking about her family’s taboo! Is it just me, or does she have an

unhealthy number of topics that set her off like this?

“What?” Koganezaki asked pointedly.

“Oh, nothing,” I said in a somewhat muffled monotone.

Koganezaki was, as far as I could tell, very nice to the people around her. She was nice to Shizumi, to the Sacrosanct, to their fans, and even—very rarely—to me. She came across as pretty cold and stuff, sure, but you always knew she would be totally upfront with you. The one thing was that, well...I was pretty sure she didn’t like herself very much. I could just sort of tell, somehow. I wasn’t really in any position to judge her, to be fair—I didn’t like *myself* either, sometimes, on account of how much of a klutzy, impulsive doormat I could be. Of course, being a klutz was definitely not on *her* list of worries.

“All that said, a part-time job? Hmm...” she said, dropping into thought.

“Uhh, yeah. Why, do you have an idea?”

“Do you have anything you’re particularly skilled at, Hazama?” Koganezaki asked.

“Stuff I’m...skilled at...?”

“Do you...have anything you’re relatively *average* at?”

Agh, now she’s trying to make me feel better! “I’m, uhh, really good at housework and stuff! My parents both work, so I do all that stuff for them!” I said.

“Housework? Hmm...housework...”

It sort of felt like she’d had an idea, which was good, seeing as the conversation was making me feel like I was already going through a job interview. Koganezaki sat there for a moment, lost in thought and nodding to herself every once in a while, then finally looked up at me.

“I might just be able to refer you to a job, if I feel like it,” she said.

“Huh?! For real?!”

“If I feel like it.”

“Something that pays well would be great, thanks! Oh, and it’d be really nice

to work somewhere indoors, with air conditioning!” I said, gazing upon her with a look of the highest and least reserved of expectations.

“You’re really pushing your luck, you know that?!” snapped Koganezaki with a scowl, though she *didn’t* take back her offer.

Yeah, she might sound mean sometimes, but she’s definitely a nice person at heart. Of course, when I stopped to consider the exchange we’d just had, it occurred to me that I hadn’t actually gotten any closer to solving my immediate bankruptcy problem than I’d been at the start of the conversation. *Meh, I’m sure it’ll work itself out somehow!* I thought, incorrectly.

Shelter from an Evening Shower

“It’s really not letting up, huh?” said Yuna.

“It really isn’t,” agreed Rinka. “Oh, Yotsuba, do you want to borrow my handkerchief?”

“Ah, sure, thanks!”

The three of us had been on our way home after school when suddenly, a freak rainstorm had forced us to take shelter in a covered bus stop. The rain pounded away incessantly at the roof above us, and we were clearly going to be stuck there until it decided to stop...whenever that ended up being.

As I patted myself dry with Rinka’s handkerchief, Yuna leaned over onto my right side. “Just when I was thinking we could stop by somewhere on our way home,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s not our lucky day,” I agreed.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” said Yuna with a shake of her head. “I mean, look at it this way—thanks to the rain, we get to sit around and take it easy for once!”

Yuna really is a diehard optimist, huh? I thought.

Just then, I felt Rinka lean onto my left side. “Yeah, you have a point,” she said. “Yotsuba’s so nice and warm too...”

“H-Hey, Rinka? This feels a little, er, *intimate*, I guess...?” She was leaning way in, nuzzling her cheek up against my arm.

“Okay, but what Yuna’s doing is way worse.”

I looked over to my other side and instantly gaped with horror. Yuna was, for whatever reason, leaning *way* in and sniffing at my armpit!

“What the heck, Yuna?!” I yelped.

“It’s cool, Yotsuba. You actually smell *nice*.”

“That’s really not the problem!”

“Oh, does she?” said Rinka. “Well, now I’m curious. Let’s see...”

“Not you too, Rinka! I can’t handle *both* of you getting carried away at once!” I protested.

But I never had any hope of actually resisting them, and ended up getting my armpits, arms, boobs, etcetera mercilessly sniffed. *Ugggh, and we had to run to the bus stop when the rain started, so I’m all sweaty too! What did I do to deserve this?!*

Sniff sniff!

Sniiiff!

“Eek! C-Cut it out!” I wailed. I was nearing the limit of my capacity to tolerate shame, but thankfully, the two of them finally backed off again. *Man, I just wiped myself off with Rinka’s handkerchief and now I’m dripping with cold sweat again!*

“Aww, come on! What’s wrong with a little sniffing?” said Yuna.

“Agreed,” said Rinka. “What’s the harm?”

“It’s *major*, that’s what! Major harm to me as a maiden! Not sure what *specifically*’s getting harmed, but *something* is, that’s for dang sure!” I shouted, excruciatingly aware that I was starting to tear up a little. Given the way the two of them were smirking, though, I was pretty sure I hadn’t gotten through to them at all. *Oh, you little Sacrosanct punks!*

“You probably shouldn’t shout that sort of thing quite that loudly, Yotsuba,”

said Rinka.

“Very true,” agreed Yuna with a nod. “If somebody overheard that, they’d definitely think you were one heck of a weirdo! Not that anyone’s likely to hear us in this downpour, of course.”

“Way to act like it’s not your problem!” I wailed.

“Of course it’s our problem,” said Rinka. “We’re dating, aren’t we?”

“That’s right!” chirped Yuna. “Don’t worry, though! Even if everyone starts assuming you’re some sort of pervert, we’ll never abandon you!”

Both of them embraced me, one on each side...then planted a kiss on each of my cheeks.

“Hyeek?!”

“Boy, we’d sure be in trouble if somebody saw that, huh?” giggled Yuna.

“Y-Yeah, we would, and it really wouldn’t be funny!”

“No need to worry—the rain’s coming down way too hard for anyone to see us,” said Rinka.

“I *know*, but, I mean, still...we’re *outside*...”

Something had really set the two of them off, and they were both in mercilessly touchy-feely mode. They were keeping it all perfectly PG, technically, but from my perspective, getting touched by them at all was still a major event. The fact that my two-timing was all aboveboard now really didn’t do much to change that.

“I really do love you, Yotsuba,” whispered Yuna.

“I adore you, Yotsuba,” whispered Rinka from my other side.

Mercy, please! “I-I love you guys too...but not *here*!”

Between the incredibly direct declarations of love and their hot breath on my neck, my brain was on the verge of completely melting down, but I *barely* managed to pull myself back from the brink and put my foot down. I’m not *always* a *complete* doormat! No means *no*! And personally speaking, I thought that sort of stuff was better saved for somewhere nice and calm where the

three of us could be alone...though of course, from the perspective of society at large, the fact that I just said “the *three* of us” would probably land us in trouble on its own.

“Hmph... Well, just plain old hugging’s okay, right?” asked Yuna.

“A-As long as we stick to *just* hugging, I guess?”

“Well, I’ll be getting in on that!” said Rinka.

Each of them immediately latched onto one of my arms. They were acting like a couple of attention-seeking children, and their embrace was warm and soft...and though I’d definitely succeeded in getting them to tone down the PDA, I wasn’t feeling any less weird at all. If anything, the fact that they were just hugging me now made me feel like I had to do something to them in return... *Wait, no! Stupid! Stupid! I can’t let myself go off the deep end next! You’re doing this to protect them, Yotsuba, not just yourself, so put up with it! Endure!!!*

Okay, yeah, so that was probably a kinda self-important way of thinking about the situation. In the end, though, it was definitely true that I was the one who was getting the most out of this little bus-stop encounter. I had two breathtakingly beautiful girlfriends who told me they loved me, and I loved both of them back just as much, from the bottom of my heart.

“I almost wish it’d never stop raining,” I mumbled under my breath.

“Same...”

“Yeah...”

Two voices mumbled to either side of me, so quiet and peaceful it sounded like they were drifting off to sleep. After that, we fell into silence, slowly and thoroughly enjoying a moment that I knew was likely to be over all too soon.



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Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta Volume 1

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