

vol 4

雨森たきび ILLUST. いみぎむる

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AMAMORI TAKIBI
presents
Illustration by
IMIGMURU

Too Many
GAGAGA

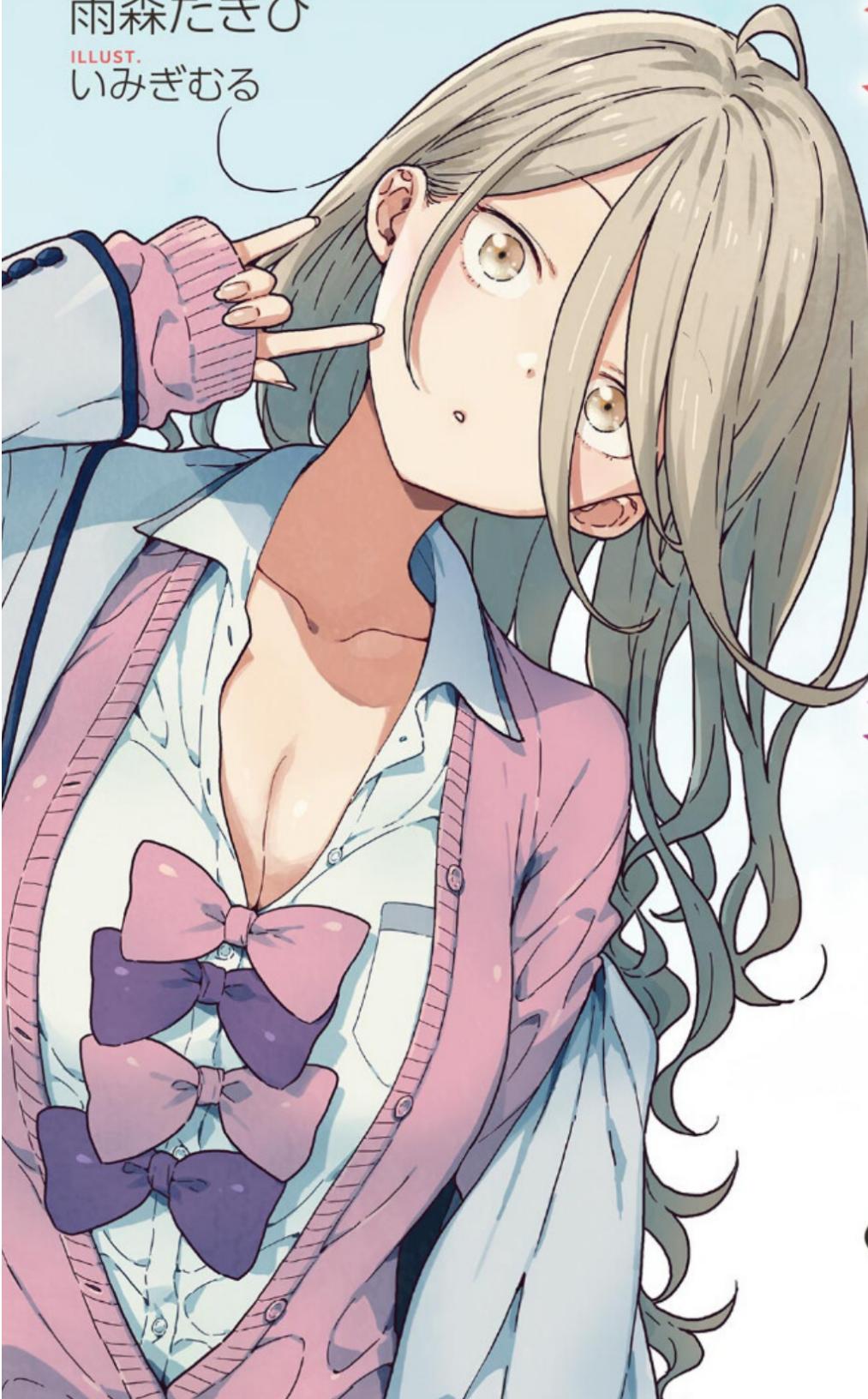
Illustrations

負けヒロインが多すぎてる!

vol 4

雨森たきび

ILLUST.
いみぎむる







"WHAT PREZ? HE'S A GUY!"





Too Many
LOSING
Heroines!

Character



...Let's eavesdrop on Yumeko's secret. Shall we?

It's December. Christmas is approaching ever closer.

The student council confiscated Tsukinoki-senpai's real-life BL fanfiction!

Teiara-san angrily demanded the novel be submitted to the teacher's conference. The Literature Club will be in big trouble if this goes on.

At this time, Shikiya-san suggested we cooperate with her...?

"Try to...conquer...Teiara-chan?" "What!?"

Ignoring the method, I feel like, as the new president, I'm the only one who can save the situation.

Yanami warned me not to get a headstart on her. As for Shikiya-san, I think she's definitely up to something-

This is the 4th edition of the ever-getting more popular losing heroine rom-com!

Prologue

The sky is clear without any clouds. The glass-like blue announces the official arrival of winter.

Tsuwabuki Fest is over. Once I snapped out of it, it was already mid-December.

I'm waiting for the traffic lights on the crosswalk near the school's east gate. This place is full of Tsuwabuki students going to school.

An awkward yet wonderful sensation fills my heart when I realize I'm part of them.

The days without the third-year students are enshrouded in a haze for us. The final exam followed soon. Then, I finally got used to only having first-year students in the Literature Club after the exam results were released.

Emotions such as melancholy seem powerless before the great wheel of our daily lives.

The light turned green. I took a step forward half a beat slower than the rest.

I quickly chased the stream of students as I observed the liriodendron tree with falling leaves over the school's walls.

The short autumn tangled with the memories of Tsuwabuki Fest will be gone forever once all of the yellow liriodendron leaves have fallen.

I watched the tree as I walked and nearly bumped into a student before me.

It looks like there's a crowd before the school gate.

Passing around the student in front of me, I saw a familiar person before the school entrance.

It's the vice president of Tsuwabuki High School's student council- Teiara Basori.

She greeted the Tsuwabuki students going to school. Her face is devoid of a smile.

Some students are standing around her as well. My class's committee member seems to be there too.

...What on Earth are they doing?

Upon further observation, everyone opens their school bags when passing by. They seem to be showing what's inside to the students at the gate.

Right, I think the teacher said they would check our belongings during homeroom.

Alright, I have nothing indecent, anyway. I opened my school bag and showed what was inside before making my way to the school gate.

"Excuse me. Please wait for a moment."

A familiar voice stopped me.

Teiara-san gave me a displeased look as she stared at my bag.

“Me? Is there any problem?”

“I don’t know if there’s any problem if I don’t check yours.”

She’s right.

But other students just passed by without a hitch. Why am I the only one getting stopped?

Teiara-san mumbled, “Excuse me.” She suddenly reached her hand into my bag.

“Eh, wait. What are you doing?”

“I told you I’m checking your belongings. The Literature Club will bring obscene books to the school if I don’t pay attention-”

After that, Teiara-san took out a novel from my bag. She briefly reviewed the colored illustrations on the first few pages without changing her expression.

“Alright, you’re the second one today. Please come to the student council room after school.”

“You misunderstood. This is just a normal light novel. Wait, don’t take off the book cover here. Hey?”

“This is- a normal novel?”

Teiara-san gazed at the light novel’s cover earnestly.

The title is <If The Two of Us Added Together Are 20 Years Old, We Can Get Married Immediately, Right?>.

On the cover, two girls open their arms toward us with nothing but ribbons on their bodies.

“Covers like this are very common in these so-called light novels (bias). It’s nothing out of the ordinary. Also, please put the book cover back, will you?”

“Two 10-year-old children can’t get married, right? What does this title mean?”

“I told you. The story takes place in a world where this has been legalized- do I have to explain the synopsis in front of the school gate? Like, are you serious?”

The passerby Tsuwabuki students looked toward us. They want to know what's happening.

Teiara-san seemed to have understood something. She nodded exaggeratedly.

“In other words, this is science fiction, right? However, since the cover has half-naked girls, it’s hard for me to determine whether this should be confiscated. Can you go more in-depth about the content?”

“...Please confiscate it.”

“Ha?”

“I’m begging you. Please confiscate it. I’m about to be late. See you!”

This is my limit. I ran away from that place. Teiara-san raised the book toward me.

“Hey, you, hold on! You’re just leaving your book here!?”

...Is this person a hitman trying to kill me socially?

I planned to ignore her. However, I suddenly remembered what she had said and stopped.

-I'm the second one. That's what she said.

Am I simply the second one having his belongings checked?
Or...

I turned around in curiosity. This time, Komari is arrested by Teiara-san.

I thought about it for a second- before quickly walking toward my shoe shelf.

Chapter 1: Despite My Looks, I'm Also an OO

Club room, after school. The kettle on the kerosene stove is steaming.

I loosened my tie and opened my book.

It's been a hectic day since morning.

The shame play resulted in confiscating my recently purchased light novel.

I was trying to forget this disgusting memory and focus on the book.

“Hey, Nukumizu-kun. I’m bored.”

The girl sitting before the table spoke to me lazily.

Anna Yanami. She’s also a first-year Literature Club member. She’s the losing heroine rejected by her childhood friend this summer.

Aside from that, she’s an ordinary girl, ...I guess? I won’t dig deep into that. The only thing I’m sure of is that the mood isn’t awkward and vague at all, even when it’s only the two of us in this room.

Yanami leaned onto the table. She's eating something and making these weird "mokyu mokyu" noises.

"...Hey, something purple is coming out of your mouth."

"They are gummies. The book says eating something chewy makes you thinner."

Yanami handed me an empty bag of gummies.

Rock Paper Scissors Gummies. It's a kind of snack made in Toyohashi. There are rock, paper, and scissor-shaped tips above the slender gummies.

"This has been trending for a long time, right? Nukumizu-kun, are you the type who doesn't eat dagashi?"

I do, but you're eating this from the shaped side. What's the difference between this and eating regular long gummy candies, then?

Yanami slurped the gummies as if she was eating noodles.

"I feel really bored. Eating is all I can do. I bought a dozen, but they probably won't last 3 days."

"Why don't you just do your homework if you're bored? We have a lot today as well."

Yanami shot me displeased glances.

"Nukumizu-kun, don't you think you're pretty cold? Hey, the female friend you're slightly interested in is bored right now, you know?"

Yanami slammed the table with her palm. Her lips curled down in dissatisfaction.

“...Yanami-san, can you stop adding weird settings to me?”

I couldn't focus at all. So, I decided to close the novel that had avoided being confiscated, *<Since My Childhood Friend Is Living on the Attic, I Bought Fumigant Insecticides>*, abbreviated as *<Osabaru>*.

<Osabaru> is a battle of wits between the MC and the heroine trying live off him. It's the *<Home Alone>* of the light novel world. Also, the heroine finally registered the resident certificate to the MC's house in the latest volume.

Yanami keeps slamming the table to protest about my half-heartedness.

“Nukumizu-kun, you're the president of the Literature Club, right? I think the president is responsible for making the club members happy, you know?”

No.

“Yanami-san, you still haven't finished the draft for the club magazine, right? Why don't you work on that if you have time?”

“I'll write that later. I already have an idea. I have an idea, alright?”

“That's what people who can't write anything say, right?”

Instead of retorting, Yanami carried a melancholy expression. She seems to be pondering something.

Then, she sometimes glances at me.

“...Did something happen, Yanami-san?”

I'm sincerely not interested, but I still ask her. I'm the president, after all.

"Well, didn't someone suggest we can go to the class party after school on the closing ceremony day?"

Class party? I have no business in that, but-

"The closing ceremony is on the 25th, right?"

I spoke calmly. However, my reply was a voice so low that it seemed to be crawling on the ground.

"...It's Christmas."

Black flames raged in Yanami's pupils. She suddenly stood up.

"Also, Sosuke and Karen-chan are responsible for organizing the party."

"Eh, but those two-"

I went silent in the middle. Yanami glared at me.

"Couples usually flirt and be all lovey-dovey on Christmas Eve. That's why I don't need to worry about the 25th. Karen-chan's parents are working in England, so she lives alone."

I see. We indeed don't need to worry about that.

"I'm still hesitating whether I should participate despite the invitation. What about you, Nukumizu-kun?"

"What can I do? I wasn't invited."

"...Hmm, well, let's put Nukumizu-kun aside first."

I was put aside.

“Even though it’s okay for me to reject it, won’t that seem like I’m conscious of something? Look at me. What should I do when there are couples everywhere? Sosuke and Karen-chan will be living together on Christmas Eve. What should I do if I bump into those two the following day? Should I pretend I don’t know anything? It will be strange if I say no. But if Nukumizu-kun joins too, instead of saying that you work as a safety charm, it feels more like you’re just accompanying me.”

That’s a long excuse.

“It’s my birthday that day. I won’t be going since my little sister will be celebrating for me.”

“Eh? Nukumizu-kun’s birthday is on Christmas?”

“Hmm, yeah.”

“I see. This year’s Christmas is suspended...”

No, that’s not what’s happening here.

Yanami’s eyes brightened up. She clapped her hands.

“Very well. Now’s not the time to celebrate a dead person. Let’s hold a birthday party for Nukumizu-kun, hmm!?”

Eh, she’s celebrating my birthday?

I’m pretty startled since this is my first time encountering such a situation. Yanami smiled.

“Let’s organize a girls’ meeting to celebrate Nukumizu-kun’s birthday! If it’s Remon-chan and Komari-chan, I bet they will come since they don’t have boyfriends, right?”

A girls' meeting. That celebration seems to have excluded me even though I'm still alive.

"Yakishio will probably go to the Christmas party, too, right?"

"Ah, no, no, no, Nukumizu-kun. I won't let my friend visit such a dangerous place."

Yanami took out another pack of gummies from her shirt pocket. She unwrapped the package.

"They aren't pointing a gun at your head and forcing you to join. Why don't you outright say no if you don't like it? You don't need to force yourself."

"Perhaps, but it's very lonely not to have anything to do on Christmas. If I pretend I'm busy-"

Yanami threw the scissor-shaped gummy into her mouth. Her eyes are devoid of emotions.

"It feels empty, to be honest."

Mokyu, mokyu, mokyu, mokyu. The chewing sound echoed in the club room.

"...Yanami-san, I think you should still go to the Christmas party. I bet there are other single people as well. Also, why don't you just invite Yakishio and protect her yourself?"

Even though I don't know what she's protecting.

"Oh, pairing up- ah, no, I should say I'm accompanying her. Let me ask if Remon-chan will go."

Yanami started clicking her phone.

I sighed in relief due to the silence's return. "Ding, ding." A phone's ringtone played.

-From a bag in the corner of the room.

"That's Yakishio's bag, right? Where did she go after leaving it here?"

"Remon-chan should be in her tutorial class, right? She failed the final exam."

Come to think of it, Yakishio kept practicing rolling the pencil before the exam.

Eh, if that's the case...

"Yanami-san, are you sure it's fine not to go?"

"Go? Go where?"

Yanami tilted her head.

"The tutorial class for failed students. It has already begun, right?"

"Ha!? I didn't fail!"

I see. I had a feeling that she wouldn't pass.

"Despite my look, my grades are actually quite decent, okay!? I'll prove it to you right now!"

Yanami took out a thin and long slip from her school bag and shoved it before me.

This must be her final exam grade sheet. Well, ...she ranks 135 out of 228 people?

Even though it's not that bad, is a grade like this really worthy of showing off with such confidence...? I really don't understand...

I had trouble coming up with a proper reaction. Then, the club room's door opened.

The person sneaking in from the half-opened door is the Literature Club vice president, Chika Komari.

Her petite body contains an equally little courage. However, she's just a cheeky little lady in my eyes.

Komari closed the door with the back of her hand. She looked around the club room worriedly.

"What's wrong, Komari-chan? How about I kick Nukumizu-kun out if you're afraid of him?"

"I-I'll bear with him~"

Komari turned around and checked the door in the middle. She trembled in fear.

"T-Tell her I'm not here!"

"Eh, hey, Komari."

Komari hid below the table. The door was opened again.

The bottom of her white coat is swaying in the wind. The person entering the club room is the Literature Club's advisor, Sayo Konuki.

Despite being a school nurse, her body is full of erotic elements. What a waste. She rarely visits the club room and often remains in the nurse's office.

“Thanks for the work, sensei. What’s wrong?”

“Ara, thanks for the work, you two. Did Komari-san come here before me? I think she’s heading toward this place.”

Sensei looked around the club room.

Yanami and I exchanged glances before shaking our heads.

“We haven’t seen her today. What happened?”

Sensei sat on the chair. She crossed her legs with pantyhose exaggeratedly.

“That girl immediately ran away once I chased after her. I wonder why?”

“I think it’s because you’re going after her. Why did you do that?”

“It’s because she’s adorable when she freaks out. I was driven by desire subconsciously. Yet another new door opens after living for 27 years.”

I understand your feelings, but shutting off that door is better.

Yanami tilted her head in confusion.

“Chase? Are you looking for Komari-chan?”

“Didn’t the children in the student council check your belongings this morning?”

Sensei took out a book from her white coat’s pocket.

“Vice president Basori-san gave me this book. It was confiscated, but she wished to return this to Komari-san

after knowing there weren't any issues with the content."

Come to think of it, Teiara-san caught Komari as well.

The title is <A Book That Makes a Person Who Won't Go A Step Beyond Being Your Friend Cares About You Hopelessly>.

Is this...a love manual? That girl is reading some unexpected stuff.

I subconsciously tried to take it. Then, Komari stopped hiding and jumped out. She nearly flipped the table.

"T-Thank you very much!"

Komari robbed the book and curled up in the corner of the room.

"Komari-san, you are here?"

Sensei is surprised. Komari shivered and nodded.

Sensei turned to me confusedly.

"...Prez-san, did I say anything weird? Is she alright?"

"Well, it's just as usual, but I'm not sure whether she's alright."

Konuki-sensei thought for a moment. However, she clearly decided not to investigate any further in the end.

She stood up formally and waved her hands calmly.

"Well, sensei should go back. You guys should also come to the nurse's office occasionally."

“Oh, sure. Next time.”

After sensei left, Komari trembled as she came out from the corner of the room.

“W-Well, t-that teacher won’t come back again, right?”

“Konuki-sensei is busy. She probably won’t come back.”

Komari looked at the door worriedly. She’s holding the love manual from before on her chest.

As a person writing rom-coms, I’m a bit curious about the content.

“Komari, that book is a reference for your novels, right? Can I take a look as well?”

“Wha!? N-No! I-I wrote something inside-”

This seems to be Komari’s first time to freak out that much. Her limbs flailed around as she hid the book inside her jacket.

“Oh, you’re paying quite the attention to the book. I won’t copy your idea. Please relax.”

I was genuinely amazed. Komari’s face is as red as a tomato. She’s shivering.

“..Komari?”

“I-I’m going home! A-Also, Nukumizu- go die!”

Komari spat out all of that and charged out of the club room.

Ehh, ...why am I getting scolded?

I'm shocked. "My my." Yanami shrugged.

"That's why I don't like this part of you, Nukumizu-kun. You still don't understand a girl's heart."

"Eh, then, does Yanami-san know how Komari feels?"

"Hmm- nope."

Then why are you dissing me?

I tolerated this woman's unreasonable tantrums as I remembered what had happened this morning.

...Teiara-san's target was undoubtedly me when she checked our belongings in the morning.

I thought it was a personal matter. However, I didn't expect Komari to be under her watchful eyes. Her book was confiscated despite having no issues. Me, Komari, the next would be-

I looked at Yanami, who hesitated to open the next pack of gummies.

"Yanami-san, did your pass the belongings check?"

"I go to school by bicycle. I just charged through the barricade empty-headed since I thought it would be a pain."

That's rad.

"Actually, my book also got confiscated. Even though the others only receive symbolic checking, only Komari and I-"

Wait, come to think of it, Teiara-san said I was the second one, right?

Was there another Literature Club member that suffered from the confiscation treatment before Komari and me?

At this point, I noticed that the club room's door opened without noise.

I thought Komari had returned. However, unexpectedly, it's a girl with glasses and a scarf on her head. She sneaked into the room.

It's the ex-vice president of the Literature Club, the third-year Koto Tsukinoki.

We haven't seen each other for a while since she retired from the Literature Club after Tsuwabuki Fest.

I sensed trouble before the nostalgia even kicked in. I'm afraid that I'm not just imagining things.

"It's been a long time. Can I ask what's with your outfit?"

Tsukinoki-senpai closed the door quietly. She fell to the chair.

"...It's been a while. Are you two doing okay?"

Yanami smiled and answered.

"Yes, Nukumizu-kun is just the same. Is senpai doing alright with your exam revisions?"

"Not very good. Listen, there's something even more troublesome than that."

There's something even worse than the entrance examination for this person...?

How much trouble will this bring us? Yanami and I secretly exchanged looks.

“Uh, well, that seems like a mess. Senpai, how about a cup of tea?”

“Let me prepare that. Nukumizu-kun, you’re drinking, too, right?”

Tsukinoki-senpai stopped us when we were about to stand up.

“Wait, don’t leave me alone. Please just pretend you two are tricked by me and hear me out.”

Regrettably, I’m afraid that we can’t run away. Without any other options left, Yanami and I sat back down.

“Sure, I’ll let you trick us. Go on.”

Tsukinoki-senpai spoke up solemnly.

“Long story short. My own BL novel got confiscated this morning.”

She really tricked us.

“The exam is right around the corner. Why did you write something like that?”

Tsukinoki-senpai put her hand on her forehead. She’s doing that on purpose.

“It’s the exact opposite. I did that because of the stress from revisions. I can confidently say without exaggeration that I’m a poor sacrifice for this competitive society. Ugh.”

“Then please pick yourself up and aim to be a better person. How about you write an apology letter and ask for forgiveness?”

Despite my nonchalant answer, I can feel a subtle sense of unusualness in senpai’s behavior.

Why did she sneak into the club room when it was just her BL novel getting confiscated...?

“This is a common occurrence for BL novels, right? Is there something bad about this?”

My question is reasonable. However, senpai hesitated to answer. She continued reluctantly.

“That’s because- the novel that got confiscated was a real-life doujin. It’s guaranteed to be a problem, right?”

“...Real-life doujin?”

Yanami repeated out of her inability to understand the term.

It looks like proper explanations are required for the normal Yanami.

“Well, it’s a story with characters based on real-life figures. This is a common term in the BL world.”

This may indeed become a problem.

“Wait, did you make someone in our school one of your characters?”

Tsukinoki-senpai nodded.

“You two know about the student council president, Hokobaru, right? It’s that girl’s genderswap BL novel.”

“That’s absolutely senpai’s fault. Please reflect on it.”

-Tsuwabuki High School’s student council president, Hibari Hokobaru.

She’s a perfect and all-rounded beauty, even though she’s probably a little weird inside.

At this point, Yanami gently raised her hand.

“Uh, what does...genderswap mean?”

Indeed, some explanations are required for this as well. This time, Tsukinoki-senpai spoke up.

“Hokobaru is a guy in my novel. There are no special reasons, but that’s the case anyway.”

She said that without hesitation.

Anyway, there’s no helping it if this is the case. In contrast to my 100% understanding, Yanami’s face looked like she ate a caterpillar, thinking it was a gummy candy.

“Uh, what’s the purpose...? Ah, no, save the explanations.”

It seemed that Yanami had accepted it, so I continued.

“Prez was your kouhai when you were still in the student council, right? Why don’t you just give her a sincere apology and ask her to return it to you?”

Tck, tck, tck. Tsukinoki-senpai shook her finger toward me.

“Doujins like this must be kept a secret from the person in question. Only allowing like-minded people to enjoy it is the rule of the universe. She doesn’t seem to know the existence of the doujinshi yet. That’s why I want to solve

this secretly. I was supposed to keep Nukumizu-kun in the dark too, but I had to make a prompt decision at the right moment.”

“Well, I guess. You can’t let her see things like this-”

...Hmm? What did this person just say?”

“Wait. did you just say I’m involved as well? Don’t tell me I’m in your novel too.”

“It’s okay. Nukumizu-kun is a beginner. I went easy on you and let you be the top. The cold, aggressive type suits you unexpectedly well. Onee-san is relieved.”

Have you considered how I feel then?

“Where is the doujinshi now? Don’t tell me it’s already in a teacher’s hand-”

“Basori-san from the student council is still keeping that thing. Although I apologized to her, that girl hated me. That’s why she rejected my request coldly. She even threatened to submit it to the teachers’ meeting during the closing ceremony.”

So, she means the teachers will be reading a BL fanfic about the student council president and me during the teachers’ meeting, right?

Tsukinoki-senpai clapped her hands together.

“Please! Please take the book back from that girl for the Literature Club!”

Uhh, ...why should I do that?

“But isn’t senpai retired already? You brought it onto yourself. This has nothing to do with the Literature Club, right?”

Indeed, if I’m the president now, I sometimes have to make cold-hearted decisions to protect the club. Or I should say I don’t want to get dragged into this at all.

I hesitated to end our conversation. Then, I realized senpai’s glances floated around quite awkwardly.

“...Is there something else?”

“The copyright page of the BL novel has the Literature Club on it. Moreover, the issuer is Prez Nukumizu-kun.”

...Ha? What did this person just do!?

“If people are getting called to the teachers’ meeting, Nukumizu-kun and I will definitely be one of them since you’re the president. So- you will help me, right?”

I dropped my jaws. Yanami handed me a small pack of gummies.

I threw the rock-shaped gummy into my mouth and chewed it brutally.

*

After Tsukinoki-senpai left, Yanami and I strolled shoulder to shoulder in the external corridor along the atrium.

Yanami followed me when I headed to the vending machines to get drinks.

“Well, Tsukinoki-senpai hasn’t changed in a sense. That’s quite relieving.”

Yanami is still chewing gummy candies.

“I do want her to change more or less, though...”

I just got hit by a truck out of nowhere this time. I’m not responsible for this. At all.

“Compared to us, shouldn’t this be better off in Tamaki-senpai’s hands? First-year students like us shouldn’t get involved in this, right?”

Shintaro Tamaki. He’s the ex-president of the Literature Club and Tsukinoki-senpai’s boyfriend. A boyfriend is supposed to wipe his girlfriend’s ass clean, right?

“Didn’t Tsukinoki-senpai mention this before? She doesn’t want Tamaki-senpai to know about this.”

Yanami reached into her pockets and showed a depressed look. She seems to have eaten all of the gummies already.

“...Well, this is awkward timing in every sense, after all.”

Tsukinoki-senpai is heading in a different direction than Tamaki-senpai, who’s trying to enroll in a national university.

Despite her looks, she must be nervous about her imminent graduation. Please don’t write things like that if this is the case.

“Nukumizu-kun, this is a request from a senpai who has shown great generosity to you, alright? It’s normal to help her out, right?”

Yanami waved the free lunch tickets she got from senpai. It’s making swishing noises.

“Also, we can’t cut off any responsibilities if the book is in the name of the Literature Club, right? The senpais didn’t file a request for quitting. So, symbolically, they are still part of us.”

Even though this girl was bribed by lunch tickets, her reasoning was sound. I nodded silently.

It’s not mandatory to quit clubs. It’s possible to continue until graduation. However, this is still a transfer of positions in a sense.

“Tsukinoki-senpai was in the student council in her second year, right? The current president was still her kouhai at the time. I think she has been covering senpai’s scandals since that point.”

“We can’t tell Prez this time, so asking for her help is out of the question. Should we ask vice president Basori-san instead?”

“Today’s belongings checking is clearly aiming for the Literature Club. Tsukinoki-senpai isn’t the only one who has received their attention. The whole Literature Club is under their watch.”

The Literature Club made the real-life BL doujinshi. If this is revealed to everyone-

“The Bird Watching Club has suspended a few days ago. Perhaps the Literature Club will end up the same as them.”

“Birds? It sounds like a peaceful club activity. How did that happen?”

“According to the president meeting’s report, they took secret shots of Tsuwabuki girls instead of birds. Even though

there weren't any obscene parts, they sold photos of popular girls."

I'm keeping this a secret from her, but 8 people have bought Yanami's photos. Half of Yakishio's and a quarter of Himemiya-san's sales. Be confident in yourself.

"It will be troublesome if our club is suspended. There won't be a place to eat snacks and do homework after school."

"These have nothing to do with the Literature Club, right?"

I stopped before the vending machines. I tidied my thoughts as I browsed the beverages.

We're talking about Teiara-san here. She probably won't accept my excuse even if I say Tsukinoki-senpai did that alone. First of all, senpai is still a Literature Club member. We can't deny any responsibilities.

Is the Literature Club really heading toward its doom here...?

"Hey, that's Shikiya-senpai from the student council, right?"

Yanami's voice interrupted my thoughts.

I looked in her direction. A familiar person is sitting on the bench inside the freezing atrium.

-It's the secretary of the student council, the second-year Yumeko Shikiya. She's a zombie gal senpai.

"What is she doing there in this cold weather? Nukumizu-kun, should we say hi to her?"

"Please wait. It's dangerous to approach her carelessly."

I took out a notebook from the inner pocket of my uniform jacket.

“What’s this?”

“These are notes of my observation of Shikiya-senpai in her natural habitat. I’ve seen this situation before.”

“...Uh, there we go. It’s long been since I’ve seen Nukumizu-kun’s disgusting side.”

“Ah, no, no, no, this isn’t disgusting, okay? It’s just like an observation diary for wild birds.”

The not-disgusting me opened the notebook.

“Shikiya-senpai’s movement turns slow when the temperature is lower than 12 degrees Celsius. This behavior is becoming more apparent this month.”

“...Heh.”

Yanami remained emotionless. I ignored her and flipped to another page.

“On windless days like this, her habit is to raise her body temperature by showering in sunlight. She’s an exothermic animal. This is especially common in reptiles.”

Yanami made another “...heh” again. She looked to the sky.

“But it’s evening right now. The area around the bench has turned shady and cold.”

“Her body temperature drops when left in the shady area due to lack of caution. This will render her immobile. In other words, Shikiya-senpai is suffering from hypothermia right now, and her consciousness is slowly fading away.”

I put my notebook back and put a coin into the vending machine.

Well, should we just get some cold juice here and return to the warm club room?

“Eh, are you sure we can just leave her alone? Isn’t she about to die?”

“...I feel the same.”

I pressed the button for hot milk tea, took the plastic bottle, and ran toward Shikiya-senpai.

*

We’re at the cafe closest to the station. Yanami and I are sitting before Shikiya-san across the table.

Coffee, cakes, and a mysterious board game are put before us.

This seems to be a so-called board game cafe. Shikiya-san brought us here to show appreciation when we saved her in the atrium.

“No worries. ...My family...is quite rich...”

“We are sorry for making you pay for us.”

“Alright! Let’s eat!”

Yanami immediately shoved the cake into her mouth after saying that.

This store’s original baked cheesecake seems to be handmade. I took a bite. The balanced sweetness and sourness radiated in my mouth.

Yanami already stabbed her fork into the last bite. Her face is shining.

“Senpai, this cake is delicious!”

“No worries. ...You can order another one...if you like it...”

Are you sure? This girl will really go full throttle.

I poured sugar into my coffee as I observed the store. Guests are having fun with board games. They seem to be university students. This place is lively despite not being the weekend.

Shikiya-san started handing out the pieces in the board game skillfully.

“What is this game?”

“Fjords. ...Area control board game...”

Shikiya-san continued distributing the tiny pieces quietly after mumbling. Even though I don't really understand, I shouldn't bother her.

For some reason, Yanami glared at my cake and mumbled quietly.

“Hey, Nukumizu-kun. How about we discuss that with her?”

“That?”

“About Tsukinoki-senpai getting her doujinshi confiscated. Shikiya-senpai's in the student council, right? Perhaps she can pull some strings for us, you know?”

Maybe she's right. However, in a sense, Shikiya-san's in the enemy camp.

We whispered to each other. Shikiya-san tilted her head.

“Tsukinoki...senpai...?”

Shikiya-san stopped distributing the pieces after hearing us.

“Did...something happen?”

Shikiya-san’s white pupils turned toward me. Scary.

How much should I tell this person? Indeed, she cares a lot about the Literature Club but is her relationship with Tsukinoki-senpai cordial or tenuous? It feels awkward...

I winked at Yanami. She nodded gently.

“Well, actually-”

I made up my mind and started explaining.

Shikiya-san sighed gently after hearing that.

“Teiara-chan...hates...Tsukinoki-senpai.”

She spoke up determinedly without attempting to conceal the truth. Then, her hands moved again.

“Those two weren’t working in the student council at the same time, right? What’s with her hatred then?”

After handing out the pieces, Shikiya-san took out a tiny hexagonal terrain plate.

“The three of us...place...in order...”

“Eh? Ah, sure.”

Shikiya-san seems determined to push the game's progress forward.

We gradually understood the rules as the game went on.

At first, a camp is created using terrain plates and pieces. Then, the players will place the Viking pieces in order and occupy the land. It's similar to Go.

"Uh, there isn't anywhere left to place pieces."

"It's over then. ...Whoever has the most land...wins..."

Shikiya-san achieved an overwhelming victory in the first round. I ranked third after Yanami, which is in last place, to be honest.

...I hate this sense of defeat. I just couldn't focus because I was thinking about the discussion. This shouldn't be the case if I'm serious.

During this time, Yanami poked me with her elbow.

"Hey, Nukumizu-kun. Are you sure this is fine?"

"Hold on, Yanami-san. I've already grasped the technique. Next time, I'll definitely..."

"Get your head off the game. Focus on the discussion, Nukumizu-kun."

Right. I faced Shikiya-san again.

"Sorry, can we continue our previous topic? We need a way to get the doujinshi-"

"Put it...here..."

“Eh? Ah, sure. It’s my time.”

The second round quickly started.

Of course, we aren’t just playing. Instead, it’s just a tactic for a successful discussion. Yanami was nagging initially, but she slowly became invested in the game.

“Nukumizu-kun, I can’t put mine there if you block it, you know!?”

“No shit. That’s the point of the game.”

I blocked and attacked the constantly complaining Yanami. Shikiya-san seemed to have realized something and mumbled to herself.

“I...understand, ...but...”

Shikiya-san placed a black Viking piece with her slim fingers.

“Teiara-chan...is getting too emotional...about Tsukinoki-senpai.”

The Q&A part of our troubleshooting discussion suddenly began.

“Also, it’s not just about Tsukinoki-senpai. The student council president’s reputation is on the line here as well. I want to solve this peacefully if it’s possible.”

Shikiya-san nodded.

“You’re right. ...The young man Sakurai...will have holes in his stomach...”

-The young man Sakurai? Even though I don't know who he is, that person's about to have holes in his stomach.

I feel a subtle sense of intimacy toward this unfamiliar Sakurai-kun. Yanami reached her hand toward my piece on the board.

"Hey, Nukumizu-kun, can you move your piece?"

"No, we're talking about something serious now."

My stomach is about to have holes as well. I took a sip of coffee and restarted the conversation.

"So, we hope Shikiya-senpai can intervene. You are very close to Basori-san, right?"

Very close. Shikiya-san blinked after hearing that.

"Yeah, ...I'm quite close...to Teiara-chan..."

Shikiya-san's holding the cup with both of her hands. Her white pupils looked into the distance dazedly.

An unknown amount of time has passed. Shikiya-san's lips moved slightly.

"Take down...Teiara-chan, ...how about that?"

"Ha? Take down what?"

I'm confused. Shikiya-san continued.

"Make that girl...yours."

"Ha!?"

Yanami choked next to me. Hey, this girl just ate my cake without permission, by the way.

I ignored Yanami and shook my head forcefully.

“No, no, no, no, that’s impossible, right!? I only know her name, and you’re telling me we should go out...?”

Yanami smacked my back while I was saying that.

“Hey, Nukumizu-kun, senpai didn’t say you two would be dating, right...?”

Yanami covered her mouth with a handkerchief as she coughed. Her teary eyes glared at me.

“The so-called ‘take down’ means...that, right? Don’t act foolishly and be steady. This won’t be solved so easily, anyway-”

We were blabbing nonsense. For some reason, Shikiya-san made a heart with her fingers.

“It’s fine. ...Teiara-chan...is very easy...”

Is that person very easy? Is that how she feels?

“But it’s impossible for me to take down Basori-san.”

“You’re overthinking, Nukumizu-kun. You just need to stay on good terms with Basori-san and ask her to return the doujinshi to us. Right, senpai?”

“Also, isn’t Yanami-san better suited for this task in every sense?”

“That person is a bit terrifying, so no.”

I'm afraid of her too. Also, Shikiya-san is very scary as well.

"Senpai, I don't think I can get along with Basori-san."

"It's easy....as long as you're a bit nicer to...Teiara-chan..."

Teiara Basori, is she a tutorial character in a dating sim or what?

"Ah, no, but-

"Grasp her weak points, ...sell her a favor, ...use her guilt... to block off her escape."

Shikiya-san mumbled as she gently put a black piece on the board.

"Let's...cooperate, shall we?"

I'm slightly worried. Is this person really close to Teiara-san?

Should I reject her? Shikiya-san gazed at me. She seems to have seen through my dazed feelings.

"You want to...take back...the novel, ...right...?"

"Well, yes."

I stuttered. Yanami looked at me dumbfoundedly.

"It's not easy to get senpai to help us. You should just prepare yourself, hmm?"

"In the end, I'm not good at dealing with girls. I don't really talk when we're face-to-face."

"Nukumizu-kun, you should sometimes be aware that I'm also a girl, right?"

Yanami handed me an empty cake plate. She clapped her hands to show her appreciation. This girl really just stole my cake.

“This seems strange to you only because of your impure thoughts, Nukumizu-kun. Look, aren’t you very close to Imouto-chan? Why don’t you just treat Basori-san like your little sister? This seems better, right?”

Treating Teiara-san as my little sister...?

Not that I can’t. A nagging tsundere little sister is a classic in light novels. Perhaps I can reluctantly accept it this way. Is it better for her to call me “onii-chan” or “baka aniki”...?

I turned to Shikiya-san after completing a year’s worth of simulation in my head.

“Please let me confirm something again. Based on my observation, Basori-san is hostile to the Literature Club. The Literature Club was undoubtedly under their attention when they checked our belongings. This is without question.”

Shikiya-san listened to me both emotionlessly and motionlessly.

“As the president of the Literature Club, I’m solely responsible for this issue. You can say that I’m in the opposite camp as Basori-san. Is senpai okay with that?”

Shikiya-san nodded gently and wobbly.

“Sure, ...perhaps Teiara-chan...went...overboard.”

“Got it. Please help me out then. Of course, I’ll try my best to solve this peacefully.”

After all, in my fantasy story, Teiara-san (little sister) even gave me a handmade scarf on my birthday. I don't want to be too rude to her.

I made up my mind and nodded determinedly.

"Yeah, ...I'll...help...as much as I can..."

Suddenly, a notification sound played on my phone. I glanced at the screen. The text is from Yanami.

<Yana-Chan: Your goal isn't dating her. Getting a headstart is banned, okay?>

Why did she text me despite sitting right next to me...?

Yanami calmly placed her piece at the final square- and guaranteed my last place.

*

I'm exhausted.

After going home, I didn't even have the strength to go to the second floor. I just collapsed onto the sofa in the living room.

My plan was to spend the winter holiday peacefully. I didn't expect to be dragged into this mess.

How on Earth did I get here? I thought about that. Then, I noticed a handwritten banner on the wall.

<Kazuhiko Nukumizu's Birthday Is in 8 Days.>

The number can be taken off. It's a countdown design.

...Haha, this must be Kaju's masterpiece, right? She's improving every year.

I'm deeply throbbed with my little sister's growth. During this time, the door to the living room opened.

"Onii-sama, I'm back!"

Kaju walked into the living room with her hands full of ingredients.

"You're back. It's a bit late."

I stood up and took the ingredients.

"Thank you. Hehe, we're like newlyweds."

I ignored Kaju's joke and put the ingredients into the fridge.

"This is a lot. Are these for making desserts?"

"Indeed, onii-sama's birthday eve, the eve of birthday eve, the eve of the eve of birthday eve- yes, I think I'm baking a cake every day starting now."

"Please just save the cake for my birthday. Yanami-san isn't here. I can't finish them if you bake one every day."

"Well, why don't we invite her on the weekend? Should Kaju say hi to her?"

It will be a pain to meet Yanami on the weekend. If only I could put it at the entrance and let her take it away at midnight...

"It's time for Yanami-san to enter her weight-losing phase based on my observations. Let's leave it at that. Dad and Mom will be late. I'll make dinner tonight."

“Are you sure? Well, then Kaju wants onii-sama’s waterless curry.”

“Alright, got it. There’s still minced meat in the fridge, right?”

Then, Kaju’s smile suddenly disappeared.

“What’s wrong, Kaju?”

“Onii-sama, where did you go today?”

“Ah, something happened, and I went to a cafe-”

Sniff, sniff, sniff. Kaju buried her face in my chest and started sniffing.



“Coffee and cheesecake. Also- a woman’s scent.”

“Uh, woman?”

Kaju picked up her smile again. She raised her head and looked at me.

“Indeed, there’s makeup powder on the collar of your jacket. Yanami-san doesn’t use foundation at school, right? Did you see another girl?”

Even though I don’t know about Yanami’s makeup, this should be Shikiya-senpai’s, right? I bet some of it stuck on me when I held her in the atrium.

“Eh, well, I was just discussing something with an acquaintance.”

“That’s why there is makeup? Onii-sama, how exactly did you discuss with her?”

Kaju’s smile was highly unsettling as she questioned. What’s with this pressure?

“I just held her because her physique wasn’t good. Yanami-san was there when we went to the cafe too.”

“Ara, Yanami-san was there too! Sorry, Kaju seems to have heard something unexpected.”

I think she got something unexpected out of me.

“Well, let’s wash away the makeup on the jacket right now. Alright, please take it off.”

Kaju suddenly got into an overjoyed mood. She forcefully took off my jacket and stared at it.

“Is it that dirty?”

“...No, don’t worry about it. Kaju shall remove it properly.”

Kaju hugged my uniform jacket. Her face is brimming with a smile.

*

The next day, I watched the student council room from the corner of the corridor after school.

According to the intelligence from Shikiya-san, the student council room is about to be empty.

...Of course, this isn’t just a coincidence. Instead, Shikiya-san arranged this for us beforehand. This is based on our tacit agreement that we shall not contact each other.

Yanami poked her head out slightly beneath my arms.

“Hey, how long do we have to wait?”

“Please be quiet, Yanami-san. Those two are about to head out-”

Ka-chak. The door to the student council room opened. Vice president Teiara Basori came out.

Then, Shikiya-san is the next one to appear. She glanced at us before following her.

...Alright, the student council room is empty now. Yanami and I exchanged looks.

We slipped into the student council room while ensuring no one saw us.

I looked around the room after closing the door with the back of my hand.

The president's desk should be at the back of the room behind the long tables. It's an old and glamorous wooden table and a big chair. The shelf and lockers are next to the walls.

Yanami dashed to the middle of the room thrillingly.

"It's literally like we're doing bad things. It feels exciting."

"Oh, no, we are actually doing bad things."

-Here's our plan.

Shikiya-san brings away Teiara-san at the right time, and then we sneak into the student council room. Then, we should investigate Teiara-san's locker.

The best scenario is that the doujinshi is there. Even if we can't find it, we may know Teiara-san's hobbies and secrets. This will be a staging ground for further attacks.

"The second uppermost one from the right. ...So, this one?"

I mumbled to myself to cover my guilt as I reached my hand toward the locker.

"Nukumizu-kun, we don't really need to go out of our way to bring that girl outside. Why don't we just come when Shikiya-senpai's here alone?"

"Rumor has it that Basori-san locks her locker before going home. According to Shikiya-senpai, she's probably hiding something in there."

Despite my emotions, I must finish the investigation before those two return.

There seems to be a treasurer in the student council besides the president. He appears to be patrolling around the sports clubs now. This is a rare opportunity. I can't afford to miss it.

It's definitely not because I want to peek into a girl's locker. Absolutely not. Please believe me.

I opened the locker quietly. Books and documents are kept tidily inside.

Magazines, a girl's makeup bag, etc. None of the stuff associated with "entertainment" are found.

Yanami peeked into the locker next to me.

"Oh, this locker is radiating self-discipline. Perhaps Basori-san is unexpectedly similar to me."

"In what ways?"

"Now you don't get it, Nukumizu-kun. I'll eat up all the snacks if I place them in my locker. That's why I never stock up."

Is there nothing else for this girl to put into her locker aside from snacks?

"Fine, got it. Help me take a look. It's not good for me to touch a girl's belongings."

"It's okay. This seems more like a teacher's locker than a girl's. Nukumizu-kun, what's in that paper bag over there?"

There's a bookstore paper bag between rows of books and documents. This seems familiar. Is there something

important inside?

I hesitated, but I eventually took a look inside. It's filled with exam papers.

"Are these...all of the exams and grades since April...?"

This is an invasion of privacy. I put the bag back where it was.

We checked again. What was left seemed to be paperwork for the student council only.

At least we know Teiara-san is a serious person. We have no other clues.

I sighed in relief and closed the locker.

"Nukumizu-kun, something fell off."

Yanami bent down and picked up a small piece of paper.

What is it now? This slip seems familiar-

During this time, the door to the student council room suddenly opened. A student came in before we could even prepare.

Yanami shoved the paper into my pocket and quickly turned around.

"...Eh, what are you two doing here?"

The person swept his bangs around as he showed a calm smile.

Looking at the tie and his uniform, he seems to be a boy, ... right?

No wonder I was confused at first. This boy has a pleasant and neutral appearance along with a petite body.

Also, his movements radiate with gentleness. If anything, he seems more like a girl than Yanami.

“Uh, well...”

I stuttered. Yanami pushed me away and stepped up.

“Shikiya-senpai told us to come here. So, we’re waiting for her.”

Yanami answered with a refreshing smile.

“I see. Hey, Hiba-nee. Do you know where Yumeko-san is?”

“I don’t know. Shikiya has always been a free spirit. You two should sit down and wait for her, hmm?”

After this boy, another tall girl walks into the room.

It’s the student council president, Hibari Hokobaru. In contrast to her strong-willed appearance, she’s a rather peculiar second-year student.

We’ll raise suspicions if we just go back like this. That’s why we listened to her and sat down.

The boy took out teacups from the shelf as he smiled at us.

“I’ll go make some tea for you two. Please wait.”

“Sorry, there’s no need for pleasantries. Well-”

...Who is this person again? I didn’t see him at the president’s meeting.

He seems to have noticed my glances. A shy smile appeared on his face.

“I’m the treasurer, Hiroto Sakurai. I didn’t attend the meeting because I’m not good with crowds. Nice to meet you.”

“Ah, hello. ...I’m Nukumizu from the Literature Club.”

This person seems to be the “young man Sakurai” Shikiya-san has mentioned.

His body seems to be filled with exhaustion. Somehow, this makes him appear a little lewd.

...Of course, I don’t mean it weirdly. I’m just telling the truth.

Prez reached her hand out next to Sakurai-kun while he was preparing the tea.

“Alright, let me make the tea sometimes too. Just sit tight, Hiroto.”

“Hiba-nee, you flipped the can of tea leaves upside down-”

Ah, Prez just spilled what was inside the can everywhere.

After that, Sakurai-kun kept suffering from stomach aches caused by various incidents.

“I’ll clean them up later. Let’s make the tea first.”

“Hiroto, I didn’t do anything, and then the teapot handle broke.”

“...This is bad. Indeed, please leave it to me here. Slow down, Hiba-nee.”

“The teacup broke as well, even though I didn’t do anything.”

We bid farewell to them and left the student council room when the third teacup broke.

*

We returned to the club room. I put my elbows on the table and crossed my fingers before my face.

“That was dangerous. We would have no excuse if we were caught opening Basori-san’s locker.”

Yanami nodded. She crossed her legs on the chair.

“Indeed, even though we managed to pull through sneaking into the student council room thanks to me, this normally would be a big problem, right?”

...Alright, that’s all from the last episode. Yanami and I looked at the corner of the club room.

Komari’s sitting on the chair before us. She’s looking between Yanami and my face worriedly.

“W-What? W-Why did you two sound like you were explaining something to me...?”

“We’re dragging you in, of course.”

“Come here, Komari-chan.”

“Ehh, ...I-I don’t want to.”

Komari’s fear rendered her immobile. Yanami and I decided to move our chairs near her.

“So, we didn’t get much out of this investigation.”

“Indeed, it’s time for us to consider the next step.”

I nodded deeply at Yanami’s words.

“Absolutely. Well, what does Komari think?”

“T-Think about what!? W-What are you two going to do, a-anyway!?”

We thought we could force her to join, but I guess not.

I changed to a serious tone and explained again.

“People were checking our belongings yesterday at the school gate, right? It’s not just us. Even Tsukinoki-senpai’s book was confiscated as well. ...It’s that real-life BL doujinshi.”

“Wha!?”

Komari’s overreacting.

I glared at her. Komari hastily hid her face behind a book.

“Come to think of it, why did she bring such a thing to school?”

“W-Who knows...?”

“Senpai mentioned that doujin is for like-minded people to enjoy only. In other words-”

I paused. Komari peeked her head out from her book tremblingly. We looked at each other.

“There are like-minded people lurking in this school. Isn’t that right?”

Komari shook her head like her life depended on it.

“W-We aren’t like-minded at all! Nukumizu being on the top is a-absolutely wrong!”

I don’t want to know your preference.

“That’s right. Senpai brought it for Komari, right? Then this can’t be helped.”

Yanami crossed her arms and nodded.

“Indeed, this is an accomplice among accomplices. There’s no running away from responsibilities. Komari-chan, you have to redeem yourself.”

“Ugh, ...s-so, what should I do...?”

“In summary, Komari is already involved in this now. That’s all.”

Clack. ...A noise came from the club room’s door.

On the other side of the door, a pair of white pupils is glowing faintly in the darkness.

Komari hugged her legs on the chair and shivered like a hamster.

Well, it’s time for today’s strategy conference-

*

It’s already dark outside when the strategy conference is over.

I took the train at the nearest station as I remembered my conversation with Shikiya-san.

-Shikiya-san says that Teiara-san doesn't have any particular hobbies or interests.

She has never been seen doing anything outside of student council work and studying. Her relationship with her friends is unknown. It's pretty unsettling. However, if anything, Shikiya-san is even more unsettling.

"Well, it's not like I have a reason to worry about her, anyway..."

I walked around in the carriage, wondering where to sit.

"Eh, Nukkun's taking the train this late. Did you stay for that long in the Literature Club?"

I can never get bored of this voice. It's as refreshing as sunlight in the summer.

The girl sitting in the middle of the chain of seats and waving at me is Remon Yakishio.

Also a first-year student, she's a Literature Club and Track and Field Club member.

A pleased expression appeared on her tanned face. She patted the seat next to her.

I thought for a moment and sat down a seat away from her.

"Yeah, we talked about a lot of things. The same goes for you, Yakishio. Did you get off your tutorial class this late?"

Yakishio bitterly smiled as she moved to the seat next to mine.

“Hiya, that was rough. It was very serious. The teachers even threatened I would be held back a year.”

Perhaps that wasn’t a threat.

“It’s good if you can pass the tutorial classes. So, which subject did you fail?”

Yakishio showed a puzzled look.

“Eh? Are there fails for each subject?”

Did she fail everything? Sensei, the threats are far from enough.

The train passed the river and stopped at the next station. Our conversation stopped for some reason as we watched the flow of commuters.

Clack. The train wobbled and moved again.

“By the way, why does Yakishio usually take the train in and out of school? You could’ve just run such a short distance easily, right?”

I didn’t really expect her to answer. Yet, Yakishio looks pretty interested.

“Hear me out! I used to go to school on my bicycle, but Mom banned it after I took a detour once. She made me sit on a train instead. Ugh.”

“Can’t you take detours with trains as well?”

“It was when I just got into this school. One time, I rode to visit Lake Hamana after class. Mom was furious when I got home late. She said it would be safer to take trains since

they have a fixed schedule. Don't you think she's pretty strict?"

Lake Hamana is the famous brackish lagoon in Shizuoka Prefecture next door. A one-way trip from Tsuwabuki High School is 20 kilometers.

Did this girl go there to have a taste of the famous unagi pie?

"Listen to your mother, alright? That's better."

"Heh, Nukkun says the same thing as my Track and Field Club senpai did."

I'm so glad there's a proper senpai in the Track and Field Club.

"By the way, is everything okay with the training in the Track and Field Club? You can't go when you have tutorial classes, right?"

"Yeah, I'm banned from participating in club activities for a while since I failed."

Yakishio seemed to have sighed on purpose.

"Even though I can train myself, my body goes sluggish if I just keep running."

Your body turns sluggish when running...?

I hesitated to complain about this. Then, Yakishio showed a mature smile I had seen some time ago.

"Well, but I do need some time to think about stuff. Perhaps this is right."

“Did something happen to your club?”

“The Track and Field Club, ...no, it should be my own problem.”

The announcement for arriving at the next station has already played before I can even ask her.

The train slowed down and slid into the platform.

Yakishio wore her school bag on her shoulder and stood up before the train stopped completely.

“Well, I’ll be leaving. Don’t be too bothered as well, Nukkun.”

“Eh? Thanks. I’ll pay attention to it.”

The door opened. Yakishio waved her hand and jumped out.

Do I look like I’m bothered by something? Well, I guess the BL doujinshi with me starring in it is a source of trouble...

I bitterly smiled as I walked away from the platform.

I tried to take out my phone from my pocket. Then, my fingertip touched a small piece of paper.

...Right.

I remembered Yanami shoving something into my pocket when Prez returned to the student council room.

I took it out subconsciously. It’s a grade sheet from the final exam.

The name printed on it is- Class 1B, Teiara Basori.

*

The next day, at lunchtime. I'm standing with a plate in Tsuwabuki High School's canteen.

“...No empty seats.”

Even though I successfully bought a Set A Lunch like the ones before, the canteen's seats are full of students happily chatting with their friends.

Should I just eat while standing up...?

I looked around as I made up my mind. Then, I discovered a gloomy corner at the periphery of the canteen.

Upon a glance, Shikiya-san is sitting on a 4-person circular table alone.

I passed through the crowd of students and sat on the seat before her.

“Sorry to make you wait.”

“I...just got here...”

Yesterday night, I texted Shikiya-san and said I would like a chat with her. She said we should go to the canteen.

This is my first time coming to the canteen during lunch.

Ultimately, going to the canteen alone during lunch is a bad choice. This place is like an online game. You can't play without teammates.

“You aren't...eating?”

“Ah, sure. Let's eat.”

I pierced through the lunch croquette with my chopsticks. Then, laughter suddenly erupted from the next table. I couldn't help but look away.

I'm having lunch with a female senpai in a packed canteen. Even though I'm slowly getting used to girls thanks to Yanami (?), I still have a hard time swallowing food.

Shikiya-san's face remained emotionless. She's breaking the grilled mackerel with her chopsticks.

"You have...something to say, right...?"

"Uh, ah, yes."

I took a sip of tea.

"I picked this up in the student council room yesterday."

I put the final exam grade sheet Yanami had shoved me on the table.

It says- she ranks 202 out of 228 people.

Shikiya-san just glanced at it. She's not surprised. Instead, she just continued breaking the mackerel apart.

"Teiara-chan...has bad grades..."

"Senpai, you know that as well."

"That girl...isn't good...at keeping secrets."

I nodded and pushed the paper on the table to her.

"Can you please return it to Basori-san for me? Just say she accidentally dropped it."

“Grades...are that girl’s...secret...”

Shikiya-san skillfully picked up the mackerel’s bones and lifted them.

“So, ...I have to pretend I don’t know...”

“Well, then, I guess I can’t have senpai return it.”

“Yes, ...how about you...use this opportunity and get along with her?”

I was about to take back the grade sheet. Shikiya-san’s words stopped me.

A thorn has been stuck in my heart since yesterday.

Then, Shikiya-san’s words right now finally enabled me to grasp it.

“-Senpai, you have predicted this since the beginning, right?”

“Why...do you think that?”

Shikiya-san tilted her head.

“It was the same when we sneaked into the student council room. We searched the locker like what senpai said. Then, the grade sheet dropped. Isn’t this too much of a coincidence? Aren’t you aiming to let us pick this up in the first place?”

Silence ensued for a while.

“I hope Teiara-chan...can get along with...Tsukinoki-senpai.”

After separating the grilled mackerel perfectly, Shikiya-san quietly put down her chopsticks.

“That’s all, ...okay?”

I assume she’s hiding something.

Perhaps she’s not lying. However, what I want to know isn’t the situation between Teiara-san and Tsukinoki-senpai. Instead...

“What happened between Tsukinoki-senpai and you last year?”

“.....”

Shikiya-san’s pupils shivered slightly beneath her white contact lenses.

I attempted to continue. Then, suddenly, two energetic voices blew away the heavy atmosphere.

“Hey, isn’t this Yumeko? Didn’t you say you have something to do? Hey, we can sit down too, right?”

“Hello. Sorry to interrupt you two!”

“Huh!?”

These girls have a brilliant gold tint on their fingernails. Their uniforms are very messy.

Before I even answered, the two girls dressing like gals sat left and right to me.

From the school badge, they seem to be second-year students. So, they are Shikiya-san’s friends, right?

“It’s fine. ...Let’s eat together.”

Shikiya-san seems slightly relieved. She picked up her chopsticks.

“Hey, first-year-kun.”

Gal Senpai A spoke to me. She seems intrigued.

“...Eh, well, are you talking about me?”

“There isn’t anyone else!”

The clumsy answer made Gal Senpai B chuckle joyfully.

“What’s your relationship with Yumeko? Are you her boyfriend?”

“Ha!?”

I quickly shook my head.

“No, no! Well, should I say she’s just my senpai’s acquaintance? Or...”

Looking at my reaction, the two girls laughed at the same time.

“Eh, our lunch invitation got rejected by an acquaintance’s acquaintance. I’m shocked.”

“That’s not right. Even though he said that, perhaps they were flirting before we were here. Yumeko betrayed us too.”

“No...! Say something, senpai.”

I searched for her help. Shikiya-san held her chopsticks and tilted confusedly.

“You’re...going out with me, ...you know?”

“Ah, wait, wait, wait, we aren’t dating, right!?”

No way. There’s no way a gloomy character like me can break out three gal senpais’ encirclement.

I completely abandoned thinking. Gal Senpai A then put a sausage on my plate.

“Sorry for scaring you. Here’s an apology.”

“Replacement boyfriend-kun, lunch will be over if you don’t speed up, you know?”

“Yes...”

Right, Shikiya-san has been breaking her mackerel apart since then. How’s this person’s lunch going?

I secretly took a glance. Everything on her plate has already disappeared. When did she eat all of that?

Shikiya-can holds the cup of tea in her hands. We look at each other.

“What’s wrong...?”

“N-Nothing!”

I chugged the cold miso soup at once to avoid her pair of white pupils.

*

I approached the student council room that day after school.

I confirmed the grade sheet was in my pocket with my fingertip as I simulated in my mind.

-First, I'll pretend I picked up something in front of the student council room.

Lines like "Eh, why is there something like this on the ground?" is necessary.

"...Seamless."

Even I think this is a foolproof and perfect plan. This shall be a superb act when I increase its credibility by mumbling to myself beforehand.

Well, the only thing left is whether my throat will listen to me when I haven't spoken anything since lunch-

-I had to change my plan immediately once I turned the corner to the student council room.

Teiara Basori, the owner of the grade sheet, is walking around the corridor with a stern face.

Teiara-san stumbled before me. She finally noticed my presence and raised her head suddenly.

"Sorry. ...Tck, you're that president of the Literature Club."

I'm so sorry for being in the Literature Club.

Even so, I'm not here to start a fight.

"Are you searching for something?"

"Yes, but don't mind it."

Teiara-san seems uninterested. She wanted to get past me. However, her face immediately went pale upon seeing the paper I took out.

“Ah!? Where did you find it?”

“Well, I just picked it up there. Of course, this is a total coincidence.”

Alright, things are still progressing naturally at this point. I can still remain calm should there be accidents.

Teiara-san reached her hand out and took the grade sheet- I thought that was the case. Yet, unexpectedly, she grabbed my arms and pulled me over.

“Come over here for a second!”

“Eh? What!?”

She brought me to a dark corner beneath the stairs.

I have my back against the wall here. Teiara-san raised her head and glared at me.

“...Did you see the content?”

“Well, I just took a look-”

“You saw it!”

Teiara-san’s face suddenly got closer. There’s a faint scent of deodorant.

“I did see it, but you don’t need to mind me that much.”

“I care about it a lot! A student council committee member is supposed to be a role model for everyone, yet I barely

passed the exam. How can I let anyone know about this!?"

"Uh, yeah. I know, so please calm down. Here. Take a deep breath-"

"Eh? Ah, sure."

Teiara-san put her hand on her flat chest and took a deep breath.

"...I've calmed down now. All of the student council members have good grades except for me. That's why I've been working hard to try and be like them more. However, I don't want others to know this process."

Eh, those people are that good at studying? But wait.

"Our school posts the top 50's exam results on the notice board. Everyone will know your grades aren't good if you aren't on the list."

Teiara-san's expression froze after hearing that.

"...Teiara-san, are you okay?"

"Please don't call me by my first name! In other words, ... everyone actually knows I have bad grades!?"

"Uh, well, I guess."

"Also, does everyone just pretend they don't understand those elite student topics since they don't want to hurt my feelings...?"

I have no idea.

I handed the grade sheet to the depressed Teiara-san.

“No one really cares about other people’s grades that much. Well, I’ll be leaving.”

I tried to end the conversation and run away. Then, Teiara-san went around me as if she wanted to block my escape.

“...Please wait. Does anyone else know about this?”

Teiara-san glared at me. I would be dead if her eyes could murder someone.

Uh, I’ll get a bad ending if I answer incorrectly here, right...?

“No, uh, no one.”

I replied earnestly and tremblingly. Teiara-san stared at me in silence.

“Well, ...Basori-san?”

“-Tell me your condition.”

“Eh?”

What is she talking about? I’m confused. Teiara-san spoke up coldly.

“You brought me to such a dark place when you knew I was alone. Aren’t you going to make me do something in exchange for keeping my secret?”

Girl, you’re the one who pulled me here.

I wanted to diss her. Then, the unseen doujinshi’s cover suddenly flashed across my mind.

Perhaps this would be an excellent opportunity to take the book back.

I cleared my throat.

“Well, it’s not really an exchange, but-”

I was about to say something. Next, Teiara-san’s worried look as she bit her lips came into view.

...Asking for the book back here isn’t a fair exchange. Instead, it’s a one-sided threat.

To be honest, she’s the one who started the fight with the Literature Club. However, I don’t want to threaten her simply because of that.

“But what?”

“Ah, no, it’s a bit...”

Teiara-san hastily wrapped her hands around herself when I stuttered.

“D-Don’t tell me you’re trying to do some indecent things in exchange for the secret!?”

I won’t.

“I didn’t give you the grade sheet back just so I can get something. If anything, I think I have some ideas for you if you’re troubled by academics.”

Perhaps I said that out of the guilt of making things up.

Teiara-san gave me a suspicious look at my sudden suggestion.

“You mean I can inquire you about studying?”

“Not me, but my friend is the top kid in the previous exam.”

“You don’t seem like you have a friend who got no.1 on the exam.”

Alright, now I don’t feel bad at all.

“I do, and that’s a fact. I can ask that person for Teiara-san if you want.”

Teiara-san pondered it for a while. She nodded slightly after that.

“Well, can you introduce that person to me? Also-”

Teiara-san took out her flip phone and spoke up displeasedly.

“Please don’t call me by my first name.”

*

The next day, after school.

I’m at the flagship Seibunkan Bookstore before the station-no, the fast food chain next to it.

I looked around the seats on the second floor with a plate of fried chicken and cola. A Tsuwabuki couple is sitting with each other on the chairs next to the window.

They are Mitsuki Ayano and Chihaya Asagumo.

Even though a lot has happened between them and Yakishio, they are now intimate lovers.

Ayano noticed me and raised his head. I replied with the same gesture and sat before them.

“Sorry to bring you two here. Is everything fine with cram school?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s rare for Nukumizu to need our help, anyway.”

The 6th place in the final exam, Ayano smiled cheerfully.

“But did something sudden happen? You said one of your acquaintances would like some advice.”

Asagumo-san’s sitting next to him. Her squirrel-like eyes rolled around.

She’s holding an apple pie with both hands and munching on it. With such a look, it’s hard to imagine that she’s the 1st place in the final exam. Both of them are perfect elite students.

I took a sip of cola and spoke up solemnly.

“Yes, a person I know is having trouble with her studies. She’ll be here soon. I mentioned you two, and she wanted a meeting-”

I temporarily stopped.

I have a feeling. I shouldn’t lie or hide the truth from these two.

“Nukumizu? Why did you stop?”

Ayano handed a piece of fries over with a confused look. Asagumo-san ate it in one bite.

Why are these two flirting off now?

“Well, it’s a long story. Can you hear me out?”

They nodded. After that, I explained what had happened ever since I got my belongings checked. Despite not mentioning Teiara-san's ranking, I think this is enough to qualify as not hiding the truth.

Asagumo-san's forehead sparkled after hearing the story.

"I understood. Nukumizu-san tried to seek out Basori-san's weak points to take back the doujinshi. ...I see. It's my time to shine!"

Yes, but also no.

"Well, I won't deny that my goal is to take back the doujinshi. However, can you two simply talk about studying with Basori-san on my behalf today?"

"Are you sure? It'll be bad if you can't take it back, right?"

I shook my head toward Ayano.

"I'm not trying to grasp her weak points. Instead, I hope she can trust us. Things will go a lot smoother if she can even just understand the Literature Club a little bit. Well, even though that's the best scenario."

That BL doujinshi sort of counts as Tsukinoki-senpai's creative writing.

Even though something that's supposed to be enjoyed by individual circles getting shown in public is a problem, it should have passed the belongings checking if Teiara-san isn't so fixated on the Literature Club.

...Come to think of it, why does she hate the Literature Club and Tsukinoki-senpai so much?

I became lost in thought. For some reason, Ayano handed me a piece of fries.

I ate it on reflex. Ayano gave me a refreshing smile.

“Sure. Of course, I’ll help you.”

“Indeed, I’m the same as Mitsuki-san. No objection.”

Asagumo-san said that. She raised her head and glanced at Ayano trustingly.

“On the surface, I’ll be discussing with you two. She’s supposed to be a partner who’s going to take references. That person doesn’t seem too keen on others knowing her grades.”

I checked my watch. It’s the promised time.

Teiara-san seems to have grasped the moment. She came up from the stairs with a plate in her hands.

She headed straight toward our table and bowed deeply.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Basori from Class B. It’s my pleasure to be with you all today.”

Eh, has this person been so formal? She’s very clumsy every time I see her.

“The pleasure’s on us. Nice to meet you. I’m Ayano from Class D. This girl is-”

“I’m Asagumo from Class F. Please take a seat, Basori-san.”

Teiara-san sat next to me.

After some chit-chatting, I brought up the topic under Teiara-san's urge with her eyes.

"This is sudden, but how do you two study?"

"There's not a particular way. I don't know if it's any use for reference either."

Asagumo-san cleared her throat cutely.

Actually, I'm also very curious about how Asagumo-san studies. Despite not sharing the same brain, perhaps there are techniques worthy of learning.

"Hmm, first of all, recite all of the textbooks and supplementary books."

Fighting the final boss at the start, yeah?

"For all subjects? Every single page?"

I couldn't help but question back. Asagumo-san smiled and nodded.

"Indeed, remember all of that in your head. The rest is the same as everyone. Don't miss the teacher's every single word during class and revise after school."

It looks like I'm not part of "everyone".

Teiara-san is also excluded from "everyone" as well. She dropped her jaw dazedly.

"Well, is this of any use to Basori-san?"

"....."

Teiara-san just stared at me quietly. Brutally as well.

“W-Well, how does Ayano study then?”

This is terrifying. Let's change the topic.

“I didn't do anything special either since I have cram school. School lessons are more like extra revision sessions for me. Like today's English class, for example.”

Ayano took out his notebook.

“I made a notebook for revisions to not waste too much time copying what was on the blackboard. I've written the teacher's explanation on it.”

“Without copying the blackboard?”

“I just jotted down the key points. I can ask my friends if I still need help.”

I see. He has friends who allow him to ask about this easily.
Hmm, I see.

I sipped the cola with a heart full of emotions. Teiara-san raised her head after jotting notes down passionately.

“This is very useful. Well, what does Ayano-san learn in cram school, then?”

“Well, in cram school-”

Asagumo-san blocked Ayano's mouth with her tiny hands as he was about to speak.

“Mitsuki-san mainly focuses on English and Japanese. He has implemented a series of learning systems based on foundations and balanced applications. If necessary, I can tell you Mitsuki-san's schedule from last month.”

Why is Asagumo-san doing the explanation?

Ayano bitterly smiled as she held her hand.

“Why is Chihaya answering?”

“It’s because I understand Mitsuki-san the most.”

“More than myself?”

“Of course. Mitsuki-san, you always forget about your website passwords after setting them. I’m the one who keeps telling you that.”

“Yeah, but why does Chihaya know my passwords?”

Asagumo-san smiled silently. Ayano followed soon.

...Did Asagumo-san do something terrible again? Also, it's time for you two to stop holding hands.

The couple is flirting. Teiara-san glared at me brutally again.

You’re scary. Please stop. I understand how you feel.

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After bidding farewell to Ayano and Asagumo-san, I stood before the archway entrance of Tokiwa-Dori. It's right next to Seibunkan Bookstore.

Let’s get some coffee beans at the store in front. Kaju asked me to do that, after all.

Our conversation with Ayano and Asagumo-san lasted less than 20 minutes. Actually, I’m interested in how elite students study. However, I feel like half of the time, I’m just watching them flirting.

Teiara-san's next to me. She stared at her notebook and mumbled.

"Those two spend a similar amount of time studying as I do. Perhaps I should go to cram school as well..."

"Hmm, maybe you're right. There's a cram school near Tsuwabuki."

I prepared to leave after giving a half-hearted answer. Teiara-san stepped forward at the same time.

...? Is this person trying to follow me?

I tried to think of a way to ditch her. Guu, ...someone's stomach rumbled.

It wasn't mine, of course. Next to me, Teiara-san blushed and lowered her head.

"Uh, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. ...It's because I haven't eaten anything since morning. Sorry."

"Why didn't you eat anything before if you're hungry?"

"Please review Chapter 3 of our school rules. Paragraph 3 of Article 4 states students should not visit cafes or entertainment facilities after school. It's clearly listed on there."

Ha, I see.

My reaction was flat. Teiara-san sighed dumbfoundedly.

"I've heard that we're meeting at a fast food chain today. That's why I didn't eat lunch and controlled my water intake."

Taking detours was banned initially, too—”

Teiara-san took out her student handbook. She opened it and showed me.

“As for Appendix 3, added in Reiwa 1, it allows proper water intake. I was about to die from thirst at the time. In other words, it counts as an emergency consumption. That’s why getting drinks there doesn’t count as taking detours.”

“Eh...”

I have no idea what this girl is talking about. There’s a rule like that? Also, someone’s following it as well?

“Basori-san, do you have friends? Are you alright?”

“I do, of course! What are you suddenly worried about!?”

“It’s because you won’t take detours with your friends, right? Won’t you look strange that way?”

“Strange in what sense!? I’ll go home, change, and meet up with them!”

That’s what makes you strange.

Teiara-san put her hands on her waist and glared at me.

“So, Nukumizu-san, are you still following me? I’m going back.”

Eh? Since when I’m following you?”

“There’s a cafe called Waltz ahead. I’m getting some coffee beans there.”

“.....”

Teiara-san lowered her head again. She remained silent.

Indeed, misunderstandings like this are awkward.

“Well, if you don’t mind, how about you come with me, Basori-san? I think you can eat something inside.”

Even though it only happens once, she’s my imaginary little sister, after all. I had already formulated my words carefully, yet she still shook her head.

“I-It’s fine! Thank you very much for today!”

Teiara-san lowered her head and tried to run away- Bam, she ended up hitting her head on the archway’s pillar.

“Basori-san!? Are you okay?”

Teiara-san bent down while covering her head.

She remained in such a pose for a while. She then slowly stood up while moaning gently.

“I-I’m sorry. It’s because I was a little nervous. ...I’m okay now.”

But seeing you go back like this makes me worry a lot. Well, it’s not like she wants me to walk her home, anyway.

“Basori-san, can I take some time of yours?”

I brought Teiara-san to a crepe store I frequently visit.

“How about you eat something if your stomach’s empty?”

“But this is the school rule, so-”

“You haven’t eaten anything since morning, right? The rules say that emergency water intake is allowed. The same goes for nutrients, right?”

“...Makes sense.”

She accepted it. This girl is quite easy.

I ordered a fresh strawberry crepe. Teiara-san hesitated for a while and ordered a custard chocolate banana crepe.

I took a bite. The sweetness of the cream radiates throughout the tip of my tongue. It’s an elegant duet with the refreshing sourness of the strawberry.

Indeed, this store’s crepes are the best. The bread’s crunchiness is fantastic as well.

“Hmm? Basori-san, aren’t you going to eat?”

Teiara-san held the crepe in both of her hands. She looked at me for some reason.

“...You’re so used to it.”

“What?”

“Is that how you ask girls to hang out with you?”

“I can’t even talk to girls properly, not to mention hang out with them.”

“I find your speech subtly unacceptable.”

Teiara-san took a bite of her crepe. Her face immediately softened.

“How is it? This place’s crepe is good, right?”

“This is just supplementing nutrients to me- but it’s good. This is my first time eating crepes.”

Teiara-san took another bite as she said that.

“I see. I thought girls always liked eating crepes.”

“What do you think girls are?”

It’s because that’s how they are in light novels and anime. Please don’t ruin my fantasy.

The crepe store is already getting a long line over the road. Unexpectedly, there are many adults and guys as well.

Kaju always brings me here too. However, this is my first time eating with someone other than my family. I feel a little nervous...

I secretly glanced at her. Teiara-san and I looked at each other.

“Thank you very much for today. I’ve heard something precious from them.”

“No problem. I don’t know if it’s of use to you either.”

“Yeah, perhaps it won’t work. Our difference is too great.”

Basori-san stared at her half-finished crepe and continued calmly.

“...I was still an elite student in middle school. I thought I would be competing with similar people after getting into Tsuwabuki.”

She continued self-mockingly.

“I was wrong. Passing the same entrance exam doesn’t mean standing on the same starting line. There are already differences between our capabilities at the start. Giving efforts like I used to will just make me fall behind more and more.”

Teiara-san looked into the distance. Her body suddenly shivered.

“Sorry, I said something weird. I normally won’t say stuff like that.”

“Oh, it’s fine. I understand how you feel too.”

Tsuwabuki High School is one of the best schools in the Mikawa region.

Elites in middle school will be separated into castes when clumped together.

It’s easy to understand that exam results aren’t everything. However, when facing the future upon graduation, finding another metric to measure yourself is hard.

I pondered about it to the point where I forgot about my crepe. During this time, I noticed Teiara-san’s eyes were fixed on me.

“...What’s wrong?”

“Come to think of it, how did you do in the exam a few days ago?”

“Eh, why do you ask?”

“It’s not fair for you to know my rank only. Relax. You’re not going to be worse than me, right?”

Teiara-san laughed jokingly. I'd never seen her smile before.

"I think- I'm in 47th place."

"...Ah, that's nice."

Teiara-san's smile quickly disappeared.

"Uh, it's worse than the first term. Compared to Ayano-"

"There aren't many Tsuwabuki students who can come close to them, right?"

Teiara-san finished the last bite of her crepe and wiped her mouth with a handkerchief.

"Well, I'll be leaving. Thanks for today."

"Eh, sure. Me too."

Teiara-san turned around and left after throwing the crepe packaging into the trash bin.

Although I don't feel like we're getting any closer, in summary, I don't feel guilty anymore.

We still need a new plan for getting back the doujinshi. Let's finish the crepe and-

Then, Teiara-san quickly came back.

"Did you forget anything?"

"Hey, you aren't lying about your rank, right?"

"Yeah, it's on the noticeboard."

“I’m not suspecting you. I just think you’re on the perfect level for me.”

I’m not sure, but she’s dissing me, right?

Teiara-san’s expression seems to be between a smile and a threatening look.

“In other words, I’ll consult again, but it’s with you this time.”

“Me? Why?”

“My embarrassing secret isn’t that cheap, you know?”

Teiara-san departed for real after saying that.

I sighed deeply as she disappeared.

Honestly, this is a pain. However, I can’t just break off our relationship...

I quickly thought about future development as I looked around dazedly.

Next to the crepe store is the west entrance of Seibunkan Bookstore. A petite Tsuwabuki student stands behind that glass door like a security guard. Ah, that’s Komari.

Komari’s in her bloated jacket. She’s giving me cold gazes behind the glass.

...What is she doing?

“What’s wrong? Did you freeze after hitting the glass?”

Komari stepped out with a cautious expression after I opened the door.

“I-I’m here to buy stuff. N-Nukumizu, stop messing around and go write your draft.”

“I have an idea already. I’ll write that later.”

“N-Nukumizu, p-please stop saying things that Yanami has been saying lately...”

Alright, I copied the exact same thing Yanami said a few days ago.

“Komari hasn’t finished your draft either, right? We’re planning to upload it before the end of the year. Can we make it?”

“I-I’m done with it. I-I’ll send it to you later.”

...Come to think of it, this girl writes very fast.

“I see. Well, I should go back and work on my draft too.”

The tide is turning against me. I plan to leave. Komari grabbed my shirt.

“Y-You were t-together with the vice president from the student council, right? A-Are you two going out?”

“That’s not true. All of this is because of that doujinshi. Help me out too, Komari.”

“Y-You two w-were eating crepes, e-even though you two aren’t dating.”

We did. Crepes carry too much of my fantasy.

“Eating crepes is normal, right? You can have one too, Komari.”

“...C-Can I?”

“Hmm? What’s stopping you?”

Why does she need my permission to eat crepes?

I was dumbfounded. Then, Komari suddenly approached me-and bit my crepe.



“I-It’s a little crunchy.”

Komari’s eyes bulged. Her cheeks are full of crepes. She’s chewing it joyfully.

“...Ah, did I sound like I was letting you eat mine?”

I blurted that out subconsciously.

“!?”

Komari’s face flared up. She quickly distanced herself.

“Ugh!? Ah, ...I-I messed up...!”

Crap, Komari’s emotions are going haywire.

Not wanting to push her further to the edge, I smiled and slowly handed out my crepe.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind it. Look, crepes are tasty, right? The strawberry is sweet.”

“S-Strawberry? ...The red one...?”

“Well, yeah. Strawberries are red. How is it? Do you want another bite?”

Komari shook her head furiously.

“W-Well, I-I-I’m going home!”

Komari prepared to leave. A palm-sized paper bag dropped from her pocket.

“Komari, you dropped something.”

I picked it up. There's a red ribbon sticker on the green packaging.

"T-That! M-Mine!"

Komari freaked out. She took it from my hands.

"Stay calm. I'm not going to steal it."

"U-Uh, ..N-Nukumizu, I've heard your birthday is on Christmas. I-Is that true?"

That's a sudden question.

"Ahh, yeah. What's wrong with that?"

"Uh, well, this..."

She still went silent in the end. Komari put her paper bag before her chest and froze.

What's up with her...?

"Are you okay? There's more crepe if you're hungry."

Komari suddenly glared at me.

"D-Don't get so carried a-away!"

She ran away after saying that.

Ehh, ...why am I getting scolded again?

I looked at my crepe dumbfoundedly. There's a tiny bite mark at the edge.

I hesitated for a while- In the end, I closed my eyes and shoved the entire thing into my mouth.

*

Literature Club Report - Winter Edition

<Everyone Has to Know the Engagement Is Voided!> Chapter 6

By Chika Komari

The duchy is greeted by winter.

The year's first snow is already reaching our ankles.

The heavy cold air is silently advancing toward the mansion's corridor. With a stack of documents on my chest, I also begin to pick up the pace.

I'm the former daughter of a baron, Sylvia Luczel.

Recently, I've turned from being a free rider to the financial officer of the duchy.

I pushed open the heavy door to the office and asked the man sitting behind the table.

“Philip, can I borrow some time of yours?”

“What's wrong, Sylvia? I already got the required information yesterday.”

Philip, the handsome young man sitting behind the table, raised his head and smiled faintly.

People who don't understand him may think his smile is freezing due to his frigid and collected appearance.

I can barely hold myself back. After that, I put a thick stack of documents on his table.

“Reports say our collected tax is less than expected due to cuts in land rent. I have implemented corresponding policies in that regard. First of all, road infrastructure is fundamental-”

Philip raised one of his hands confusedly. He interrupted.

“We have already discussed this last time, right? Both sides have reached an agreement with the contract.”

“Even so, I still don’t agree to hand off the monopoly on minerals and salt to merchants. Please reconsider it.”

“I know you’re very worried, but this contract lasts only 3 years. Also, I have already thought of the worst-case scenario.”

I took the document. It’s the draft of the contract.

“As you know, this place has always been isolated. Didn’t you agree to use her powers to open up new trade routes?”

“That’s right, but...”

Indeed, the conditions offered by the contract are not bad. The shopowners benefit from new trade routes, and we have an emergency food stockpile and temporary income.

Restrictions on the effects on the peasants’ life are also in place, so we don’t need to worry about that.

It’s- too convenient.

I’m worried. Philip showed a smile.

“Relax. Even though Elisa is a businesswoman, she’s not a deceiver. I’m an old friend of hers.”

...That's precisely what I'm worried about.

I mumbled in my heart.

The contract is offered by a businesswoman from Nazart, a trading metropolis in the south, Elisa Volta. She's also a baron's daughter.

The youngest daughter of the baron. She was Philip's classmate.

I have seen her once only. She's a beauty with bright red hair. Her talking to Philip as if they are best buddies has left a deep impression on me.

“Anyway, can you take a look at the report from the Suvia region? The toll of the port has decreased a lot. There are also rumors of Leviathans appearing on the voyage routes-”

In contrast to her, all Philip and I have been talking about is work recently.

Even though I'm glad I can be of use to him, I'm just his friend and employee in public.

I've heard that Elisa is quite rich. The wealth of Count Volta is comparable to the duke, First Prince Philip. If it's Elisa, I guess she'll be a good fiancee for Philip-

...No, I should stop thinking about it now.

Using the opportunity of the end of our work conversation, I spoke up.

“Philip, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“What’s wrong? Tell me.”

“I want to have a party this weekend. So, can I use the reception room?”

Philip frowned in confusion.

“The room is fine, but we can’t arrange a banquet and musicians this late, right? We also don’t have invitation letters as well.”

Despite having the best duchy in the kingdom, Philip isn’t a man of luxury, especially this year. We just barely made it through the food shortage caused by unusual weather patterns.

I smiled to ease his worries.

“Even though it’s a party, my plan is just to have tea, snacks, and chat with our friends. No need for all that effort.”

“That’s not all. December is ending soon. I don’t like having extra work in such a swamped period.”

Servants get holidays in Philip’s house before and after the end of the year. I know that. This is a reminder of his care for his servants.

“Please don’t worry about it. I’ll give overtime pay to everyone. It’s more like so many people want to participate that it’s bleeding my wallet dry.”

“...Overtime pay? You say some unbelievable things sometimes.”

Perhaps he knows I’m winning the debate. Philip smiled.

"Alright, alright, you win. It's fine if it's for our friends. Have fun, okay?"

"Hmph, hmpf, you're joining too, of course."

"I'm not suited to tea parties, right?"

"In my country- no, based on past literature, the 25th of this month is an important date for spending time with your family or important ones. I hope Philip can participate as well."

"But..."

I smiled charmingly- at least, I planned to do that. However, an invisible sense of worry blurred my smile.

Did he notice it? A gentle smile appeared on Philip's face. It was the same one when we met for the first time.

"Sure. Let's arrange a time."

Right now, I'm in a garden entirely covered by snow. I'm throwing them away with a shovel.

"Phew, ...I guess that's enough."

I wiped the sweat on my forehead and put the shovel on the ground. The snow on the path has finally been cleared.

The best way to disperse the depression lingering in my heart is by moving my body.

...It's been a few months since I was kicked out of my old house and started taking residence here.

I've kept this "more than friends, less than lovers" relationship with Philip.

One day, he'll meet my promise and be my fiancee. It's just a verbal promise, though.

"...Getting my engagement voided for the second time would be terrible."

My exhaustion has caught up. I stretched my back relaxedly. Then, I noticed someone approaching me from behind.

"Sylvia, did you do all of this alone?"

"Elisa-san!"

The sweet voice reminds me of velvet. Her bright and tidy red hair is carefully adorned with golden ornaments. Also, there's her overwhelming beauty.

A gentle smile appeared on the count's daughter's face.

"You never let yourself relax, right? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, Elisa seems very energetic too. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see Philip. He's going to give me more opportunities to earn money."

Elisa winked sharply. She wrapped her arms around my waist and walked toward the mansion.

"Please bring me to Philip. How's that guy doing?"

"Come to think of it, something weird happened a few days ago. There are rumors about Philip having an illegal child in Granburg."

I couldn't help but chuckle after thinking about Philip freaking out as he tried to explain.

"...Then, what happened after that?"

"It's just a rumor. It's because Philip was still studying in the magic school when that child was born. There's no way he would've been in Granburg."

I laughed and turned around. For some reason, Elisa's smile disappeared.

"Hey, Elisa-san?"

"...Yeah, Philip wasn't there indeed."

She mumbled as if it was to convince herself. Elisa wrapped her arms around herself and stood still.

"...No, never mind. Right, I've brought the small Bergson tree you want. Is it okay if I send it to your room?"

"Ara, it's here! I want to use it at the tea party tomorrow."

Bergson. It's a circular coniferous tree I saw on the index. It looks the same as cedar trees.

I asked her whether she could get it one last time. She didn't seem to forget.

"Are you using this tree at the tea party?"

"Yeah, I'm decorating the tree, and we'll have desserts. Some gifts for people who have taken care of us."

"Oh, that's literally like Christmas."

Elisa mumbled calmly before moving again.

I casually answered. Then, I stopped when I was about to pick up the pace.

Eh? Did Elisa...just say Christmas?

“What’s wrong, Sylvia?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

...I must be imagining things, right? I quickly followed Elisa.

Whether it’s Christmas or the illegitimate child, all of those-must be my misunderstanding.

Alright, the Christmas party is right around the corner. I should get to the preparations-

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The next day, after school. Yanami and I walked toward the club room.

Shikiya-san asked us to be there for a strategy conference.

After Yanami got a rough idea of what happened yesterday, she displeasedly threw a red cube into her mouth.

“I look away for one second, and you give me this, Nukumizu-kun. Don’t tell me you’re interested in Basori-san?”

“No, I’m not. Also, in the end, isn’t this because you pushed all of this on me?”

“But crepes are different. They are going into another stomach. I want that too.”

Leave me alone.

Also, why did Komari share information about what food I bought with Yanami?

Despite the ever-increasing number of questions, I cannot help but notice what Yanami is eating.

“Anyway, Yanami-san, what are you eating? Eraser?”

“Even I won’t eat erasers, alright? It doesn’t taste good.”

Yanami seems well-versed in the taste of erasers.

“It’s a jelly. I’m completely addicted to it after trying one in Grandma’s house. It matches very well with hot tea.”

Yanami took out a bag. It’s saying “mixed jelly”.

Adding sugar to jelly cubes is a dessert originating from the Mikawa region. It’s indeed a little addicting.

“But Yanami-san, didn’t you say you would lose weight at the end and the start of the year?”

“I did. That’s why I’m eating this.”

...She said something weird again.

Seeing my look, Yanami shook her finger chickly.

“Nukumizu-kun, we’ve learned about this in Biology classes, right? Our organs secret something whenever our blood sugar level rises. It’s supposed to make you feel good, right?”

Even though we did, was the content this suspicious and vague?

Yanami swept her hair upward joyfully.

“That’s why I have noticed something. Eating snacks while walking effectively burns out the absorbed sugar while increasing my primary metabolism- In other words, I’ll get thinner easily.”

“Are you sure? Did you even listen to the teacher?”

“Of course. Believe in the textbook, Nukumizu-kun.”

That can’t be helped, then. Let the weight scale next week be the judge.

We arrived at the club room and opened the door. Then, I saw Shikiya-san and- Komari froze on her lap.

What’s happening here?

Komari’s face is pale. Her lips are trembling.

“Thanks for waiting. Senpai, you’re here early.”

“Yes, ...I’m playing with Komari-chan...”

“I see. Komari, I’m glad that you’re having fun with senpai.”

“-G-Go die.”

I’m so glad she’s energetic. I sat on the opposite chair and immediately started our discussion.

“Actually, I met with Basori-san yesterday.”

Shikiya-san nodded.

“I’ve heard from Teiara-chan, ...an after-school date...”

“Ah, so you’ve heard about it. However, it’s not a date.”

It feels embarrassing when someone's talking about me behind my back.

"Hey, Nukumizu-kun. How did you get so close to Basori-san?"

Yanami kept two jellies in her mouth. She poked me with her elbow.

Hmm, ...how much should I reveal? I carefully formulated my words as I answered.

"It's because that person is wondering whether she should go to cram school. So, I introduced her to Ayano and Asagumo-san."

"Hmph, hmpf, and then you two went to get crepes."

Yanami gave me a dissatisfied look. This girl. Can you don't mind it that much?

"Compared to me, the most important thing right now is getting back the doujinshi, right? From my perspective, instead of blindly opposing her, she should understand that we have learned our lesson-"

"Young man, ...are you getting closer to Teiara-chan...?"

Shikiya-san ignored what I said and questioned.

"Perhaps she doesn't hate me anymore, yet we aren't on excellent terms."

"Give it another push, okay? ...Teiara-chan...will be easy from this point onward..."

Indeed, I can't deny Teiara-san seems relatively easy.

“Well, let me confirm something first.”

I cleared my throat to divert our conversation back to the topic.

“Basori-san is hostile toward Tsukinoki-senpai. I do know that. Even though it’s hard to accept it, I understand why the Literature Club is under attention.”

Shikiya-san stared at me as if she had forgotten to blink.

I withstood her glance and continued.

“Honestly, I wanted to get the book back no matter the cost in the beginning. However, I felt different after speaking to her.”

“Is that...because of...guilt...?”

“Maybe. That person is someone who can be fooled with a poorly-made lie. Hmm, for example, you have seen chihuahuas, right?”

“Eh? Nukumizu-kun, what are you going on about suddenly?”

Yanami interrupted. My my, this girl must find this concept quite hard to comprehend.

“I’m talking about Basori-san. Please imagine tricking the chihuahua Basori-san by taking away her favorite toy. Don’t you feel guilty?”

“Uwah, that’s bad. Nukumizu-kun, your sin can only be atoned with 10,000 deaths.”

“Y-Yeah, i-it’s best for you to g-go die.”

How much do you girls want me to die?

I cheered myself up and turned to Shikiya-san.

“In the end, this is Tsukinoki-senpai’s fault, right? So, taking the book back from Basori-san by fooling her doesn’t seem right.”

“If you...think this works...”

Shikiya-san suddenly hugged Komari from behind. Komari let out a quiet moan.

“Of course, I don’t mean to blame Tsukinoki-senpai. I know she wrote it as part of her creative writing. As for whether it’s right or wrong, I believe that should be decided by the characters involved.”

I pieced together my scattered thoughts as I looked at Shikiya-san’s white pupils.

“Prez doesn’t know about this yet, right? What would she think if she knew?”

“If it’s her, ...she’ll probably just laugh it off, I guess...”

Shikiya-san played with Komari’s hair as she spoke.

Indeed, Prez and Tsukinoki-senpai definitely have a good relationship. She should be well aware of her constantly-over-the-line BL hobby. In a sense, there isn’t an actual victim in this incident.

“So, you...will be the bridge...for improving their relationship.”

“Even so, I feel like I’m lying to that person.”

There's still one more thing. In my eyes, Teiara-san is Prez's fan.

Will such a girl really want to submit a book about Prez to the teacher's meeting, not to mention something as complicated as a genderswap BL doujin?

This time, Shikiya-san started stroking Komari's ears.

I looked at Komari shivering as I summarized my thoughts. Then, someone knocked on the door.

Hmm, who will knock on the door?

"Please come in. The door isn't locked."

The door slowly opened as if the person had waited for my answer.

"Excuse me. Did Yumeko-san come here?"

The person entering the club room is- the treasurer of the student council, Hiroto Sakurai.

He showed a relieved look upon seeing Shikiya-san.

"Young man Sakurai, ...what's wrong...?"

"You didn't check your phone, right? The Broadcast Club said they wanted to talk to you."

"Broadcast Club...?"

Shikiya-san's head tilted in surprise while Sakurai-kun sighed.

"Hiba-nee and Yumeko-san are in charge of the graduation ceremony arrangement, right? Hiba-nee already went to the

gymnasium. Can you meet up with her?"

"But I..."

Shikiya-san seems unwilling. She remained on the spot. I gave her a reassuring smile.

"Please don't worry about us. Go. The student council is more important."

"Yes, ...sorry..."

Shikiya-san was about to stand up. She whispered next to Komari's ears.

"Let's go...together...?"

"Fueh!? I-I'm not going!"

"Sure, ...well, ...I'll be leaving..."

After putting down Komari, Shikiya-san wobbled as she left the room.

..Eh, is Sakurai-kun not going with her? Why is he still standing here?

"Hey, you sure you don't want to leave with her?"

"I want to talk to everyone in the Literature Club. Can you spare me some time?"

An unexpected suggestion. Yanami stood up and pulled a chair.

"No problem. Have a seat."

Well, what does a person from the student council want from us, then?

I observed the situation. Then, Yanami took out a bag of chips. It's seaweed salt flavored.

"Does Sakurai-kun want snacks?"

"Thank you, but I don't really eat them."

"Oh, I see."

Yanami nodded as she opened the chips like it was a party. How come she just opened it on her own?

"...Yanami-san, are you sure about your weight loss program?"

"Look. There are 4 people in the room, right? In other words, the calorie will be distributed into 4 servings. In a sense, this is losing weight as well."

Is her theory correct? How come I think it's false?

"Well, what do you want to talk about with us?"

Upon my question, a shy smile appeared on Sakurai-kun's face.

"Yumeko-san has been visiting here a lot, right? Hiba-nee, I mean, Prez is very worried about her."

Yanami chewed the chips as sparkles of curiosity flashed in her eyes.

"Sakurai-kun, you call Prez 'Hiba-nee', right? What's the relationship between you two?"

“Prez and I are cousins. I’ve always been calling her that way.”

Sakurai-kun smiled. His eyes squinted slightly.

“Did Yumeko-san cause any trouble?”

“Hmm, well, ...I won’t say she’s causing us trouble. It’s because we asked her for help first. Saying she’s a troublemaker is a little cold-”

My words clearly aren’t coherent. Sakurai-kun sighed deeply.

“...That’s what we are worried about. That person is a loose cannon.”

“Does Shikiya-senpai have that many previous convictions?”

Sakurai-kun shook his head.

“Please don’t misunderstand. She’s very capable at student council work. The same goes for Hiba-nee and Basori-chan. The follow-up work aside from those is the worst- Ugh, but everyone didn’t mean it.”

Sakurai-kun smiled helplessly. Things seem tough...

“Well, I hope you can ease your worries about Shikiya-san. Compared to that, how’s Basori-san doing?”

“...Did something happen to Basori-chan too?”

“Ah, no, that’s not it-”

Yanami licked her finger full of seaweed powder as she interrupted.

“It’s because of that. They were checking our belongings a few days ago, right? The old senpai in the Literature Club is pretty upset with her self-made doujinshi getting confiscated by Basori-san.”

Also, Yanami ate up all of the chips. Didn’t she say she would share them with the 4 of us?

After Yanami said that, Sakurai-kun’s head tilted in confusion.

“The confiscated items have already been printed into a list and submitted to the teachers, but the doujinshi isn’t among them.”

Is it not on the list? So, in other words-

“Did Prez or Shikiya-san stop her?”

“First-year students in the council have been handling the belonging checkings for the past couple of years. The senpais aren’t involved.”

That’s why we didn’t see Prez and Shikiya-san there.

Sakurai-kun continued with a calm demeanor.

“The checking is a practice meant cooperating with outsiders without relying on the senpais. They even have to give orders to senior students upon finding problems.”

Sakurai-kun sighed for a long while as if it was to empty his lungs.

“Then, Basori-chan seems a little too enthusiastic. Things are tough in every sense.”

“Ha...”

According to what he said, Teiara-san seems to be dealing with the doujinshi alone.

Is she trying to prevent Prez from covering this up, or is she not planning to let everyone know from the start?

“I can convince her if she’s causing you trouble.”

I scratched my head as I stood up.

“No, I should talk to Basori-san instead. She’s in the student council room, right?”

“Yes, she was asked to tidy up the materials. So, I think she’s alone in the room now.”

Teiara-san is alone in the student council room.

Despite my lack of motivation, I guess we need to have a nice chat.

...I really don’t feel like it.

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Tsuwabuki High School Student Council Room. I took a deep breath as I fixed my tie.

...First, I need to apologize for sneaking around to gather intelligence. Then, I need to ask her to return the doujinshi to us.

Indeed, I should have used a frontal assault in the beginning. Based on how I felt talking to her yesterday, she doesn’t seem that unreasonable of a person- I guess.

I knocked on the student council room door.

I opened the door after a while. Teiara-san raised her head and glanced at me. She seemed to be reading something.

“Ara, thanks for yesterday. Can I do anything for you today?”

“I want to talk about something. Can you spare me some time?”

“Sure, no problem.”

Teiara-san is the only one in the student council room now. This is my only chance to speak to her.

Teiara-san ignored me and continued working. I took a step toward her.

“Actually, I have an apology and a request...”

“It’s about the book confiscated from Tsukinoki-senpai a few days ago, right?”

“Eh?”

Teiara-san continued reading as she spoke calmly.

“Shikiya-san has shown great care toward the Literature Club during this period. I do know that. Bumping into me in the corridor a few days ago was meant to be an opportunity to talk to me alone, right?”

“Uh, no, hmm...”

She’s not correct, but she’s close. Seeing her in the corridor was a coincidence. However, picking up her grade sheet wasn’t.

I stuttered. Teiara-san pressed her forehead and sighed.

“It’s my failure for you to have picked up my dropped grade sheet. You have grasped my weak point because of that.”

“Eh?”

Does this person still believe I picked up her grade sheet by accident...?

Teiara-san raised her head. She looked at me dumbfoundedly.

“What are you surprised about? Grades are more important to me than you have thought. Please don’t spread the word.”

“Ah, yeah, of course. So, about the doujinshi...”

Teiara-san stopped jotting notes in her notebook.

“...That obscene book using Prez as the model.”

Clang. She stood up and nearly kicked over the chair.

“She made something like that and dared to bring it to the school. Even though she’s my senpai, she deserves proper complaints and punishments. Isn’t that right?”

Correct. I have the same opinion as you, alright...

I cheered myself up and nodded forcefully.

“I think Basori-san is correct, but that person has learned her lesson. Moreover, what does Prez herself think? Will she be mad even if she knows?”

Teiara-san’s expression relaxed as if someone had sprayed a bucket of cold water on her.

“Prez is very kind. ...Yeah, she will definitely forgive her.”

Good, the mood is perfect.

“Exactly. Prez and Tsukinoki-senpai are on good terms, right? Let’s just solve this peacefully and ask her to write a reflection letter or-”

...I was too hasty.

Teiara-san’s face changed immediately the moment I said “good terms”.

“Koto Tsukinoki was the student council vice president last year.”

Tsukinoki-senpai used to be the vice president?

That’s strange. Right now, Teiara-san is also standing before me over the table as the vice president.

“That person had a feud with Shikiya-senpai during the second term of the second year. She left the student council.”

“Feud. Did something happen?”

“I don’t know, nor do I want to know the details. However, that person gave up her duties in the student council and ran away. That alone makes her deserve to be looked down upon.”

“But Prez doesn’t seem angry. Instead, Shikiya-senpai seems quite worried-”

Teiara-san didn’t speak. She suddenly got her face real close.

I fell silent due to the overwhelming pressure. Teiara-san was about to say something, yet her shoulders suddenly dropped powerlessly.

“...You’re exactly right. The senpais are always on Koto Tsukinoki’s side. No matter how often that person has caused problems, the two always help her out. Instead, I’m the stubborn girl whenever I try to scold her sternly.”

Teiara-san turned around and slowly walked out.

“Shikiya-senpai invited me to the student council. She went out of her way to recommend me to the vice president position, even though she was supposed to be the one to do it.”

I see. I thought this girl joined the student council due to her admiration of Prez.

“Since Sakurai-kun is in charge of taking care of Prez, I spend a lot of time with Shikiya-senpai. Senpai spoils me a lot. Everything went well in the beginning.”

...This person starts talking about something.

I immediately sensed the upcoming trouble. I looked at my watch on purpose.

“Well, it’s already this late. It’s time for me-”

I was about to run away. Teiara-san turned around and approached me suddenly.

“Did you know what Shikiya-senpai had done to me when I was unconscious!?”

“Eh, no. What did she do?”

“I couldn’t believe she said this suited me better, so she tied two ponytails behind my head! I also got a pair of optical glasses, you know!?”

Ponytails with glasses...? Is that outfit-

“Isn’t that like Tsukinoki-senpai-”

“Indeed, it is, alright!? What’s the point of dressing me up like that person!?”

I can’t do anything about it, even if you ask me. I mean it.

“Also, Shikiya-senpai is constantly touching me. Can you believe it? That person can untie my bra over my clothes, alright!?”

“Uh, even if you tell me the details of the play, I can’t...”

“Who’s talking about plays with you!?”

I think we’re precisely talking about that.

Teiara-san blushed and trembled. She cleared her throat to cover her embarrassment.

“A-Anyway, I hope Shikiya-senpai and Prez can acknowledge that problematic child’s issues!”

I think Prez is already well aware of her issues, right...?

“I understand how you feel, really. In other words, you want to showcase Tsukinoki-senpai’s novel and make everyone realizes her mistake, right?”

“Well, ...that’s right.”

I see. I've understood everything up to this point. However, there's still something else.

"But that novel's protagonist is based on Prez, right? Are you sure you want to publish it?"

"Of course, I plan to black out the obscene parts."

What's the point if you do that?

Teiara-san walked to the wall. She tiptoed and took out a thin book above the shelf.

"Is this the-"

Teiara-san frowned and nodded. That BL doujinshi is at a place like that?

Teiara-san pinched the book with the tip of her fingers as if it was something dirty.

"In the end, as a woman myself, I can't understand a book about the sexual exploitation of women. A high school student should behave like one-"

...Hmm? This person just said something weird.

The unusualness in my heart slowly materialized.

"Teiara-san, can I ask something?"

"Please don't call me by my first name! Also, what are you asking? I'm not returning the book."

"That's not it. That novel doesn't have any women."

"...What are you talking about? Didn't she star in the novel? The student council president Hibari Hokobaru-"

“Ah, hmm, that’s a real-life doujin.”

“Real-life?”

Ah, where should I start explaining?

“Let me check again. If you know Prez is in it, this means that you have read the book, right?”

Teiara-san shivered.

“I just read a little to check the content! T-The lewd illustrations, well, I have just taken a look- sheesh, what are you making me say!?”

“Ah, no, that’s why I said there are only men in this novel. Probably.”

“No women...? Isn’t Prez in it?”

“Well, that’s genderswap. ...Anyway, the Prez in this novel is a guy.”

“Genderswap...? Sorry, what’s the point of that?”

Hmm, good question. I don’t know, either.

“In other words, this is a so-called BL novel. Prez turns into a guy and has sex with another man. It’s mainly about love between males-”

“Ha...”

Teiara-san’s sight froze mid-air for a while. Then, she seems to have realized something suddenly.

“Ha!? Prez!? He’s a guy!?”

Flap. She quickly opened the book.

“H-Hold on. Then, this illustration, eh?”

Teiara-san mumbled as she stared at the novel.

“Hey, Basori-san?”

“Then, here’s also, …uwah, like that.”

Teiara-san flipped through the pages hastily.

“Uwah, …uwah-”

“Hey, excuse me, alright?”

“Eh, I can’t believe a place like this-”

…C-Can I go back?

Teiara-san sighed as she closed the book.

“This...is indeed something bad.”

I see, but you look very satisfied.

“Basori-san, now you understand, right? You can’t publish a book like that. How about we solve this peacefully to defend Prez’s reputation?”

Did she understand? Teiara-san’s cheeks grew a faint red. She looked at me listlessly.

“President of the Literature Club. What’s your name?”

Uh, …this girl managed to talk to me this long without knowing my name.

“I’m Nukumizu.”

“Nuku-mizu!?”

Flap. Teiara-san opened the book again.

“T-Then, the Nukumizu who have conquered the Magic Academy in this book is...?”

Holy shit. Is that my character? It’s also an isekai novel.

“Ah, no, I’m one of the characters. You can also say I’m the victim.”

“Eh, then this scene has you...? Eh, uwah, ...that’s too much...”

Teiara-san looked between me and the book. She mumbled “uwah” from time to time.

Can you imagine a girl using 100% of her brain power to read a BL fanfic of you in front of you? Even though this is a good experience, my heart can’t take it anymore.

I started approaching Teiara-san again. She’s still fully invested in the novel.

“Well, now that you understand, can you return the book to me?”

“...Ha!?”

Did she only notice I’m in front of her now? Teiara-san hugged the book before her chest and jumped.

“W-W-Wait, what are you doing!? What are you trying to do to me!?”

“Eh? No, no, no, no, that’s not it! Don’t be so loud. People will misunderstand.”

My high school life would be over if people saw this, right?

I reached my hand out nervously. Teiara-san backed to the wall.

“Hey, I’m not going to-”

“P-Please wait! I’m a girl!”

What are you trying to declare?

“I told you I won’t do anything. I’m different than the Nukumizu in that book, right?”

Teiara-san is glaring at me cautiously. She must have finally understood, right? Her body ran out of strength. She bent down on the spot.

“...Y-Yeah, I was freaking out, but you were at fault too.”

Eh, no way. Am I at fault too?

Teiara-san slowly stood up. She looked at the book cover carefully.

“Indeed, this novel is complicated. It’s not just something obscene...”

“Right? So, let’s just-”

Teiara-san shook her head. She gazed into my eyes.

“I changed my mind. Nukumizu-san, let’s make a trade.”

Trade. Is she trying to make me do something in return for giving me the book?

I'm scared the plot will go down the same as the BL novel. Teiara-san spoke up formally.

"Be on my side. I'll give you back the book then."

...Eh? This means-

"You have enemies too?"

"In a sense, everyone is an enemy to me. I'm just doing my job as the committee member of the student council, and you think of me as a bad person, right?"

Well, I can't deny that.

Teiara-san glanced at Prez's table.

"Prez is kind and forgives everything. As for Shikiya-senpai, she just ignores everything I say. She always touches my neck whenever she has the chance-"

"Uh, please discuss the content of the play with her beforehand."

"I told you it's not a play!"

Her emotions are going up and down like an escalator. She must be exhausted, right? Teiara-san put her hand on her forehead and sat down.

...Alright, this is getting even worse.

I spoke up to the exhausted Teiara-san.

“I’m okay with being on your side, but can you decide the actual conditions and expiration date? It’s not fair for me to listen to you forever just because of the book.”

“I see. You’re right.”

Teiara-san thought for a while and clapped her hands.

“Shikiya-senpai and Koto Tsukinoki. Please put an end to their mess before the graduation ceremony, alright?”

“Eh? Why should I do that?”

“I already have had enough of those two’s past. Tsuwabuki High School Student Council only has Prez Hokobaru and her three underlings. Let the ghosts from the past move on.”

“What if I...can’t do it?”

Teiara-san hugged the BL fanfic to her chest dearly.

“Then, I’ll read everything in this novel- and submit it to the teacher’s meeting at the graduation ceremony.”

There are 8 days until the graduation ceremony.

As a person who only goes with the flow, I finally realized the murky waves were swallowing me.

Intermission: Sincerely Hoping That You Can Show Your Skills

Municipal Momozono Middle School. A boy and a girl are facing each other behind the school.

“Sorry, I can’t go out with you.”

The petite girl with black hair lowered her head slightly.

A moment of silence ensued. The male student asked quietly.

“...Kaju-kun, is your brother that important?”

“Yes, Kaju won’t go out with anyone until onii-sama finds happiness.”

Her big eyes are filled with determination. The boy realized it and nodded.

“I understand your feelings. Sorry for suddenly bringing you here.”

“I’m pleased about Prez’s feelings. I shall put what happened today in the bottom of my heart. May Prez guide me as usual.”

The boy can only give a bitter smile at Kaju’s gentleness.

“...No one can tell who’s the senpai here if you say that. Can I confess again, should I outperform your brother one day?”

Unwilling to admit defeat. Isn’t this pretty tragic?

Kaju’s eyes glistened at the boy’s words, full of regret.

“...No, that’s impossible.”

“Ah? No, this is-”

Kaju approached the startled boy.

“From the past to the future, no one is better than onii-sama! It’s because onii-sama’s attractiveness is absolutely legitimate. Instead, it’s the light of his soul-”

A female student suddenly appeared and grabbed Kaju’s arm as she tried to continue.

“Alright, Nuku-chan, stop! Come over here!”

“Eh, Gon-chan? Eh, why are you pulling me?”

Asami Gonto, also known as Gon-chan, used every ounce of strength she had to bring Kaju away.

Gon-chan sighed in relief after bringing her to an empty place.

“Nuku-chan, you always can’t stop once you start talking.”

“But...”

“No but.”

Gon-chan knocked Kaju’s head.

“He’s the 8th guy this year, right? You don’t really reject them properly.”

“That would be bad. Kaju has onii-sama, you know?”

Kaju stroked her head as she showed a stubborn look.

“You can have a boyfriend and a brother, right? No need to stay single.”

“Not just anyone will do. Does Kaju look that easy?”

Kaju puffed up her flat chest. Gon-chan shrugged. “Ara.”

“Alright, what kind of person does Nuku-chan want to go out with?”

Kaju put her finger on her chin. She tilted her head adorably.

“Hmm, ...even though this person isn’t as great as onii-sama, the least he can do is be as sincere.”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes.”

“He needs to be as gentle as Kaju and treasures Kaju. If an honest person is in trouble, he won’t leave them alone. He needs to look as reassuring as onii-sama. Kaju will help him if he oversleeps and is late for school. He will silently sneak into his blanket alone at midnight and sleep like a baby. He’s afraid of loneliness. He loves to eat white potato cake. He would be born on December 25 with blood type A. If he’s someone 2 years older than me- Kaju can give my body to him at any time.”

“Hmm...”

Kaju didn’t notice Gon-chan’s half-hearted reply. She looked toward the sky with sparkling eyes.

“I wonder where I can find such a person? I think he’s unexpectedly close to me. What do you think, Gon-chan?”

“A person like this. Who else can he be other than Nuku-chan’s ‘onii-sama’?”

“What should I do? ...If only we could meet each other...”

Gon-chan stared at the sky with Kaju half-heartedly.

The breezes from Mikawa Bay blow from the west. There isn’t any cloud in the sky.

The main show in the winter is right around the corner-

Chapter 2: Just a Little Kindness

The Friday classes are over. It's homeroom time.

I put my elbow on the table as I remembered my conversation with Teiara-san yesterday.

“-Be on my side.”

Her tone was relatively light. However, I was crushed by its meaning after the passage of time.

I was going to ask Teiara-san after Shikiya-san's encouragement. However, Teiara-san wants me to be on her side and fix Shikiya-san and Tsukinoki-senpai's relationship.

“...No, there's no way, right?”

I accidentally blurted that out in the classroom.

Amanatsu-sensei was reading the list of precautions for the winter holiday. She glared at me.

“Hey. Nukumizu. Why don't you say it out loud if you have a problem? Is it that difficult not to have an impure relationship with the opposite sex? Are you trying to say

that you're not going to be single this Christmas? Is that what you mean?"

"Eh? No, that's not what I meant."

I mumbled. Amanatsu-sensei smacked her tongue and threw away the list of winter holiday precautions. This class teacher has a bad temper.

"Whatever, you guys can just read it yourselves. Let me tell you something- actually, I went to a friend's wedding a few days ago."

This is the start of a weird story. The mood in the classroom immediately tensed up.

Amanatsu-sensei spoke up with a bright smile plastered on her face.

"What a great ceremony. The reason the bride decided to get married is the best thing I've heard. She said it was lonely to return to an empty, gloomy room every night. Isn't that funny? Ahaha."

Amanatsu-sensei laughed. A dark silence fell upon the classroom.





Sensei suddenly lowered her head and smacked the podium.

“...Imagine how sensei felt that night when I returned to my empty, gloomy room in my formal dress with presents in my hands. That will be how you brats look like in 10 years.”

What on Earth is with this curse?

Sensei raised her head after some time. She returned to her usual human-eating expression.

“Alright, get ready to go home after everyone feels better! Sensei will hand out all of your grade sheets afterward. Sleep with one eye open this weekend!”

Ehh, ...are we supposed to greet the weekend with such tension? Come to think of it, sensei, are you getting close to the cat you just started keeping?

Amanatsu-sensei went out of the classroom. Everyone left their seat.

Now's not the time to worry about that. The most important thing now is to continue our strategy conference from yesterday. I have to bring Shikiya-san over. Yanami seems to have left the classroom already.

I have to go to the club room as well. ...Honestly, I'm suffocating. The pressure can't be more tremendous. I have to ask what happened between Tsukinoki-senpai and her while keeping Teiara-san's secret-

Can I really pull a double-agent move here?

Spies are fantastic, man. Can I get an anime adaptation as well...?

A tinge of flower scent flew into my nose as I attempted to escape reality.

The light novel BGM played in my head. This way of entrance is undoubtedly-

“Nukumizu-kun, do you have time?”

-Karen Himemiya. The classical main heroine took down Sosuke Hakamada in 2 months, which Yanami had been unable to do for 12 years.

Bolts of light sparkle around Himemiya-san’s long hair. I squinted my eyes at her charming smile.

“Ah, sure, what’s up?”

“Can I ask whether you’re free on Christmas?”

“Eh?”

She’s definitely going to ask me to work her shift if I say I’m free here. I know this because I always surf the web.

“Working part-time is banned in our school. Helping you is a little-”

“Eh? Sheesh, Nukumizu-kun is joking again.”

Himemiya-san covered her mouth and chuckled. It was like that was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

“The closing ceremony is on Christmas, right? Our classmates want to have a Christmas party. How about Nukumizu-kun come and join us?”

I think Yanami has talked about this.

“Well, I appreciate it, but I’m busy that day.”

“Busy...?”

This isn’t a lie. Kaju’s doing her best to celebrate my birthday.

There’s a countdown timer made with LED lights on the walls of my house. It’s actually the remaining days until my birthday. I bet the neighbors think our family really likes Christmas.

“Nukumizu, you’re not free on Christmas?”

The person sitting next to Himemiya-san is Sosuke Hakamada. A regrettable expression appeared on the handsome guy’s face.

“Uh, ...sorry, I have something to do that day.”

“It’s okay even if you leave in the middle. Just show up for a while.”

“Eh, but-”

“W-Wait, Sosuke!”

Himemiya-san hastily stopped Sosuke’s invitation.

“What’s wrong, Karen?”

“Look, Anna-chan also says she doesn’t know if she can make it, right? Perhaps...”

“Ah, crap. My bad.”

“Sosuke is dense as usual.”

Himemiya-san said that as she smiled and kissed Hakamada’s cheeks.

I feel like an annoying misunderstanding came out of nowhere. Also, can you two stop flirting in front of me?

“Well, my Christmas plan has nothing to do with Yanami-san-”

I explained with my honor on the line. Then, the BGM that has been playing in my mind suddenly changes.

It turned into an eerie melody.

The sparkling Himemiya dimension is quickly swallowed by darkness.

No one else would do this. A gloomy shadow loomed behind Himemiya-san.

“You’re still here...”

“Kya!”

Himemiya-san yelled and hugged Hakamada.

The shadow is cast by Shikiya-san. She wobbled as she stood before me.

“I have...something urgent to do...today.”

Shikiya-san tilted her head deeply.

“Sorry...for...breaking our promises constantly.”

“Eh? Well-”

Promise? Does that mean we won't be having a strategy meeting today?

"It's okay. No worries. Well, see you next week."

I was about to stand up. Shikiya-san leaned her face toward mine over the table.

Her face nearly touched my forehead. I frantically sat back down.

"Ah, well-"

"As an exchange, ...are you free this Sunday afternoon...?"

Basically, I'm always free.

I nodded silently. Shikiya-san stood up- she suddenly squatted down and slammed her face onto the table.

"Went upstairs, ...tired..."

"You came upstairs to the second floor, right? Here. I'll pull you. Stand up slowly. Alright, hold on tight and get yourself up."

...I'm already used to taking care of this girl. My forehead is already full of sweat as she finally stands up. Shikiya-san wiped my forehead with her handkerchief as I searched in my pocket.

"Ah, thanks."

"Well, Sunday, ...I'll wait for you at that old place..."

Shikiya-san wobbled as she left the classroom...

Hmm? Where's the old place? I don't really understand. Ah, I have to tell Yanami and Komari what happened and that today's conference is canceled too. What a pain.

Fine, let's go to the club room first. I put my bag on my shoulder. Himemiya-san and Hakamada bulged their eyes and glared at me as they cuddled.

"Uh, what's wrong?"

"Nukumizu, she's the second-year student in the student council, right? You two are quite close."

"That's not true. She's always like that."

Hakamada looked dazed.

"She's always so clingy?"

"Even I'm embarrassed too."

The two wrapped their arms around each other and chuckled.

I managed to hold the following sentence in my throat.

-Like you two are the ones to talk.

*

It's the corridor of the west school building. I checked my phone's notification screen. Shikiya-san replied to me on Line.

Hmm, a strategy conference at the board game cafe at 3 PM Sunday?

Even though she said we don't need to worry about money, it's a little much for her to keep paying for us when she did that last time already. Let's bring the girl some desserts. I have to pay attention and not let Yanami devour them.

<Got it.> I texted her. Then, a new message immediately came through the screen.

It's not Shikiya-san's reply. Teiara-san texted me instead.

<I want to discuss something with you. Sunday at 3 PM. I'll be waiting for you at the karaoke before Toyohashi Station.>

Why is it karaoke? She politely sent me the location. However, the meeting time is really close to Shikiya-san's. It's going to be a pain. I wanted to reject her, but I stopped my fingers from typing an answer.

...Wait, she will definitely ask for another time even if I reject her here. How about I show up first and then run away with another meeting as an excuse?

I don't think she'll reject it if I say it's a promise with the student council.

I opened the club room door with a smile. Yanami and Komari are inside.

"Thanks for the work."

They are having an intense debate about whether Pretz or Pocky is better. I told them my weekend plans, and then all they gave me was a cold stare.

"After eating crepes with Basori-san, it's the karaoke this time? Nukumizu-kun, aren't you mixing up your responsibilities and hobbies a little?"

Yanami pointed her Pretz at me.

I'm the lonely hero fighting my way to take back the doujinshi. Isn't her unreasonable treatment of me a little absurd?

"It's more convenient to meet each other alone in the karaoke, right? There may be acquaintances asking me questions if we decide to meet in a cafe."

"W-Why are you s-seeing her alone?"

Komari took a bite of Pocky and glared at me.

I can't say what I've promised Teiara-san. I stuttered.

"Well, ...it's a little inconvenient. Moreover, I can't just let a girl enter my room."

"Didn't I go to Nukumizu-kun's room?"

Yanami's chewing both the Pocky and Pretz. Komari's eyes bulged.

"Eh!? Y-Yanami, you went to h-his house?"

"Yep, Nukumizu-kun was too pushy. This isn't good, you know? I'm a girl too."

For some reason, Yanami spoke chicly. She just blatantly tampered with the fact.

"Yanami-san just showed up because you wanted to during the summer holiday, right? Asagumo-san was there too when you were in my room, also."

"Ah, now that I remember. You didn't hand out desserts to two cute girls. Komari-chan, can you believe that?"

“U-Uh, a-are desserts that important...?”

Komari's right. Yanami nodded and opened the next packet of Pretz.

“Guys need to be reliable. Make sure you remember that, Komari-chan.”

“Stop saying nonsense to Komari. Anyway, I'll be seeing her alone.”

“But Shikiya-senpai called you out also, right?”

Yanami seemed upset. She measured the length of the Pretz with her finger.

“Hey, do you think I can finish this in one bite without breaking it?”

“Ah, let's meet at the board game cafe we went to a few days ago at 3 PM. Also, please chew the Pretz properly.”

“T-Then, will Nukumizu really be there?”

Worry is written all over Komari's face.

“I promised to meet Basori-san at 2 PM at Toyohashi Station. I can make it if we end within 30 minutes. We have to talk to Shikiya-san immediately afterward.”

“Ah, I have to hang out with my friends, so I can't be there.”

Yanami spoke up calmly.

“Eh, is that so? Well, Komari can go alone.”

“B-But Nukumizu won't be late, right...?”

Hmm, I'm almost certain I'll be late if I have to talk to her and then take the train. If that's the case, Komari and Shikiya-san will be alone...

"I definitely won't be late. Look, have I ever lied to you before?"

"F-Fair enough."

See? I'm lying to you right now.

"How about I ask Remon-chan instead?"

Yanami stuttered as she chewed and spoke up. Did this girl just finish the Pretz in one bite without breaking it...?

"Y-Yakishio?"

"She's banned from participating in club activities right now. She'll definitely come if she's free."

Even though the purpose of banning club activities is studying, nothing will change since she won't be doing that, anyway.

"Then, can I message her? Is that alright for you as well, Komari?"

"Y-Yeah, I got it."

"It's decided then. Basori-san and I will visit the karaoke, and then I'll meet with Komari. Yakishio and Komari can gather around in the board game cafe at 3 PM. How about that?"

I think I've been busy recently.

Come to think of it, we were planning to finish our club magazine this year. Can we really do it?

“We don’t have time to play around...”

Komari and Yanami looked at me. They muttered.

“I-I wasn’t planning to play around in the first place.”

“Eh?”

“We are taking back Tsukinoki-senpai’s doujinshi, right? Don’t forget our goal.”

...I didn’t. Believe me. Seriously.

*

It’s now Sunday after lunch. I’m in my room, crossing my arms toward the clothes on my bed.

This is my first karaoke debut.

Moreover, the person I’m meeting is Teiara-san. She’s my classmate.

I don’t think it’s true, but some rumors say this is-

“My popular phase...?”

Someone called me the moment I mumbled.

“...Onii-sama, here’s your tea.”

When did you come into my room? Kaju smiled and raised the plate with the cup of tea.

“Ah, Kaju? Thanks. Just put it there.”

Kaju put the tea on the table and tilted her head in disbelief.

“What’s with all of the clothes on the bed?”

“I’m heading out. What outfit should I wear? How about this, coach?”

I grabbed something. This is a special treasure with an illustration of a woodlouse.

“Is it a pill bug?”

“This is a woodlouse because it can’t curl up. You can tell them apart by how their body parts overlap differently.”

“I see. I didn’t know about that. Onii-sama, fashion etiquette prohibits wearing sweatshirts in December. How about a collared shirt?”

Eh, there’s a rule like that? I guess it can’t be helped if it’s about etiquette. I unfolded the shirt I had just bought.

“What about this one? The whole shirt is printed with English newspapers-”

“Just go with this simple shirt, alright? Patterns are a taboo near Christmas.”

There’s even a rule like that...? Fashion is complicated, man.

“I think I’ll wear these pants.”

“Ara, are these denim jeans?”

“Isn’t this pair of jeans trendy? The patterns resemble paint stains. There are chains on the waist part as well...”

“Indeed, it’s great. However, wearing jeans gets you targeted by demons at the Ghost Festival. So, let’s just go with the chino pants here.”

The Ghost Festival. It’s a tradition in Toyohashi where ghosts parade around the streets and spray salt on the residents.

“The Ghost Festival is in February, right?”

“It’s a year-end special. It would be bad if people sprayed salt on you when heading out, right?”

Indeed, I don’t want to worry about that when I go outside.

Kaju moved all of my spare clothes away. She put the shirt on my chest.

“Well, how about going with a brown cardigan on this shirt? I’ll bring it later.”

“Why does Kaju have that?”

Kaju gave a natural smile toward my question.

“It’s natural for a little sister to dress up her brother. Look, isn’t that the case in the light novel I lent you the other day?”

It’s from light novels. That can’t be helped, then.

“..By the way, onii-sama, you’re meeting a girl afterward, right?”

“Eh, how did you know that?”

Kaju approached me with sparkling eyes upon hearing that.

“Yes, I knew it! This is a date, right? Is it Yanami-san? Or Komari-san- no, it’s someone else?”

“Wait, wait, this isn’t a date. I’m just going to talk to her a little bit.”

“But, but! You two will be alone, right? If it’s possible, Kaju would like to attend and interview her-”

“That’s not it. I have to meet someone else after this too.”

I slipped that out. Kaju’s bright smile disappeared.

“...Double-header.”

“Eh?”

We aren’t talking about baseball, right? Kaju slowly shook her head.

“I understand the world won’t leave onii-sama alone, but I know what will happen after back-to-back dates. My suggestion is that you should at least move one to another date.”

What kind of suggestion is that?

“We have a lot to discuss regarding club activities. Look, onii-chan’s going to change. Leave the room, Kaju.”

“But Kaju doesn’t mind, you know?”

“Onii-chan minds. Alright, go outside.”

“Nya!”

I picked up Kaju and put her outside before changing my clothes. Then, her words just then flashed across my head.

-Dates refers typically to a man and a woman going out together.

No, but Yanami called me out, and we met during the summer holiday. It didn't feel like a date at all. Indeed, the presence or absence of romantic feelings is essential.

However, if thinking about this the other way around, if Basori-san has even the slightest romantic feeling-

That person gives off the same feeling as Yanami.

I shook off my evil thoughts and buttoned my shirt. Then, I noticed a pair of jeans clinging to the side of the bed.

I think this is cool, though...

*

The flagship Seibunkan Bookstore before the station. Right now, I'm in a karaoke room nearby.

The time displayed on my watch is 13:05.

Indeed, I arrived an hour early so no one would be aware of my karaoke debut.

"...That was close."

The first trap was beverages. The staff member kindly explained the drink bar to me when I was about to ask for a cola at the reception.

It was my first time knowing I could choose the type of karaoke. I would've died instantly if that wasn't the rehearsal.

I looked up after glancing at the menu. There's a receiver on the wall.

Is that how people order? Should I practice using it?

I subconsciously picked up the receiver. Voice came out the next second.

"Hello, this is the front desk!"

Wait, it's already a call the moment you pick up the receiver? I thought there was a call button.

"Hello!? Are you ordering?"

"Uh, please give me something popular. Ah, yeah, that one."

I put down the phone. Sweat is dripping off my forehead.

My mental strength is reaching its limit. I ran away from the room and headed to the drink bar.

There's already someone before the juice machine. I can only wait behind dazedly.

The girl in front seems to have a glass in each of her hands.

She poured the juice into one of her glasses and chugged the other one. Then, she drank the juice she had just poured and filled the other glass. A perpetual motion machine has been completed.

Hmm? She's drinking a lot. Her semi-long hair makes me feel like I've seen her somewhere...

The girl turned around while drinking cola.

“Ah, there you are, Nukumizu-kun. So, how was it? Did you make any progress?”

“...Yanami-san, why are you here?”

Shit, I let my guard down because her hairstyle looks different than usual.

“Imouto-chan said Nukumizu-kun went out looking handsomely. It’s too early. I bet you’re preparing your karaoke date, right? Did I get a bingo?”

She’s right overall. Honestly, I hate to admit it.

“It’s not a date, but this is my first time coming to karaoke. I want to rehearse the plan first.”

“I know. I know. I also went for a preliminary inspection when I went on a date with Sosuke. Anyway, where’s your room?”

“Eh, is Yanami-san coming too? You’re with your friends, right?”

“There’s still time. ...Do you not want me to come?”

Everything sucks.

Yanami forcibly followed me to the room. She sat down on the sofa and looked around.

“Sosuke and I came to this store as well. It was exactly this room at that time.”

Yanami’s expression turned dark.

“I see, ...at that time, ...I see.”

Please stop coming here and flipping on your weird switch. I hurriedly changed the topic.

“Look, there’s a lot in this menu, right? Yanami-san, do you have any recommendations?”

“We ate french fries together. ‘Anna is eating too much, right?’ Sosuke always joked.”

I wondered whether I should diss her. Then, someone knocked on the door. A staff member came in.

“Thanks for the wait. Here’s your onion ring tower.”

Something amazing has been put on the table.

The light returned to Yanami’s eyes after seeing the stacked onion rings.

“...Eh? Nukumizu-kun, did you know I was coming? Or were you looking forward to my arrival?”

“Heh? No, not really.”

“I see. Nukumizu-kun is lonely, right? No need to be embarrassed. I’m sorry. I should have been with you from the beginning.”

Yanami’s mood recovered completely. She put an onion ring into her mouth. I didn’t say you could eat it.

“No, I have been alone since the start.”

“Then why did you order that? It will get cold before Basori-san comes, right?”

Yanami’s cheeks are stuffed. She tilted her head.

I picked up the phone, got connected to the front desk, asked for something random, and here's what I've got- yeah, I'm too embarrassed to say it.

"Actually, I was wondering whether Yanami-san would come."

I immediately changed my mind and answered. Yanami gave me a thumbs-up with the cola in her hand.

"I like your answer. Alright, onee-san will teach you a lot of things."

Yanami grabbed the remote and started clicking the screen with a touch pen.

"The basic controls can be done with a remote. Let's get used to this first, hmm?"

"Uh, so I can choose a song or something, right?"

"Yeah, you can search for the lyrics with this. You can also change the key as you sing."

Isn't this remote too powerful?

"Well, what about this menu then?"

"Hmm, that's-"

This is the start of Yanami's karaoke seminar. Unexpectedly, her explanations are easier to comprehend than I'd thought. This girl is probably well-suited to do a presentation about hobbies for older adults. I think she'll get a lot of sweets from them.

"Alright, that's all you need to not embarrass yourself."

Yanami stood up after sharing her thoughts and experiences about karaoke.

“We still have time, right? Let’s sing a few songs, hmm?”

I checked my watch. It’s 1:40 PM. There are only 20 minutes left.

“But Basori-san may come early. She’s a serious girl.”

“Hmm? What does that mean?”

Yanami held the phone with both of her hands. She seems shocked.

“Uh, ...I mean, I’ll pay for Yanami-san. So, it’s time for you to go back, right?

“...Ho.”

What’s wrong with her? Yanami let out an owl-like noise.

I see. Is it because I didn’t thank her properly? Manners are necessary, even if we’re talking about Yanami here. I lowered my head.

“Thanks for the help today. I appreciated it. Make sure you don’t forget your belongings.”

Alright, I thanked you already.

I even reminded her not to leave her belongings behind. Even I think I did pretty well.

“.....”

“Hey, Yanami-san?”

Yanami mumbled “ho” again. She glared at me sharply as if she was an owl before leaving the room.

...What was that? Perhaps she’s mad because there’s no dessert.

I can figure out why Yanami’s mad later. Teiara-san comes first right now.

I texted her the room number after cleaning it a little.

I’m not used to using mail. I only use it for registering magazines and sites.

Finally, I found the send button. I pressed it carefully.

*

Someone knocked on the door at 2 PM exactly.

Teiara-san entered the room. She sat on the sofa Yanami was on a few moments ago.

“Sorry for the wait, Nukumizu-san.”

“No, I just arrived as well.”

I glanced at Teiara-san.

She’s wearing a deep blue dress with a white collar. Instead of a date, it’s more like she’s going to a relative’s wedding.

“What’s wrong? You’re staring at me.”

“It’s nothing. Why did we come to the karaoke out of all places?”

“We can avoid other people while not letting you get any messed-up ideas. The staff members will be here too. This is a good palace for a private discussion.”

Teiara-san puffed up her chest, whose size matched her age. This girl is as impolite as usual.

“...I see. Do you want any drinks?”

“No, thanks. I’ve brought a bottle of water.”

Eh, again? What now? I was in disbelief. Teiara-san glared at me.

“Setting the venue in the karaoke is meant to reduce contact with others as much as possible. I’m not here to play today.”

Teiara-san put out a colorful brochure on the table.

“Is this- a brochure for cram school?”

“Hey, Nukumizu-san. You were in the same cram school as those two a few days ago, right? I hope I can get references from you if possible.”

Eh, aren’t we supposed to be talking about Shikiya-san and Tsukinoki-senpai today? Yes, she did ask me about studying, but this is quite confusing...

“I’m not in cram school right now. If you want more details, I can ask those two for you.”

“No, those two are good people. Getting close to them in front of you is a little, ...w-well, I won’t say much since this is an outside-of-school matter!”

...This can’t be helped. I opened the cram school brochure.

“Compared to the web, I like face-to-face lessons in a classroom more. That’s why I like this cram school. There are plenty of study rooms and materials too.”

“I see. I’m terrible with one-on-one cram lessons. Do you have experience, Nukumizu-san?”

“I’ve never thought about one-on-one teaching. I don’t really want to talk to strangers.”

“You know the teacher from cram school, right...?”

I see. Is that what she thinks?

Still, Teiara-san doesn’t seem as scary today. She’s furious in school.

After a while of chatting, I realize she sometimes also shows a smile.

...She’s just normally cute in this way, right? I hope she can keep it up.

I stared at her dazedly. Teiara-san and I exchanged looks.

“What’s wrong, Nukumizu-san?”

“N-No, it’s nothing. Come to think of it, there’s still time left.”

I reached my hand toward the remote. Well, it’s finally time for my karaoke debut.

I recalled Yanami’s teachings in my mind. Indeed-

1. Beginners shouldn’t try singing romance songs.

2. Avoid anime songs at all costs, even the famous ones.
3. Meme songs are all about singing at the right time and place.
4. A person will cry during tense moments due to the emotional gap.
5. That's why I told you anime songs wouldn't work.

Did anime songs murder Yanami's parents?

But what else can I sing other than those...?

I hesitated with the remote in my hand. At this moment, Teiara-san took out a Japanese reference book from her bag.

"Basori-san, what are you doing?"

"I want to study first. You too, Nukumizu-san. Why aren't you taking out your stationery?"

"Eh, you're really here to study?"

Teiara-san's expression turned serious.

"Didn't you say I could consult you? What do you think we're here for?"

Ehh, ...don't you think we're supposed to sing in karaoke?

I went silent due to embarrassment. Teiara-san handed me an English vocabulary book.

"Do you want to use this?"

“Ah, sure.”

I dropped my eyes on the vocab book as I was told.

....Why am I studying in a karaoke room with another girl I'm not even friends with?

After memorizing the third vocab, I covered my face with the book and observed Teiara-san.

Just like at school, her hair is pulled up neatly. She doesn't wear any accessories, nor does she give off a restless aura.

Teiara-san is just staring at the vocab usage table and mumbling. This doesn't feel like a date at all.

After a while, Teiara-san stretched her back.

“I’m a little tired. Do you want any music?”

“Well, ...I want to talk about something else.”

I won’t hesitate if this isn’t a date. Teiara-san closed the book after seeing my look.

“Are you talking about Shikiya-senpai?”

I nodded with a serious expression.

“Yeah, Basori-san have also told me to put an end to their mess, right?”

“I did. That’s the condition for giving you the book back.”

“Both of us don’t know what happened between them. I’ll be honest and say this. Do you think it’s okay for us to intervene?”

Teiara-san poured tea into her water bottle silently. She slowly inhaled the rising steam.

Silence ensued. I attempted to break the ice by speaking up. She interrupted me.

“...Those two don’t seem to hate each other in my eyes.”

Teiara-san slowly sipped the tea after saying that.

I thought carefully about how I should interpret her words.

“Does that mean Basori-san thinks those two can reach a mutual understanding if they communicate properly?

“How should I put it? I think it’s precisely because they used to know each other that they may break off their relationship completely should they meet.”

Teiara-san stared into my eyes.

“People avoiding contact fear that their vague relationship may break if they face each other. This is quite common, right?”

I looked down to avoid Teiara-san’s eyes.

I know what she means. However-

“I still have another question. Basori-san, why do you care about those two’s relationship this much?”

“I told you before, right? I don’t want to get dragged into those two’s past.”

“But, if that’s your reason, why don’t you just ignore them? Tsukinoki-senpai will be graduating very soon. She even has an exam ahead of her. You can just leave her alone.”

“Perhaps so...”

“If you can’t ignore them, it’s more like the reason has to do with Basori-san, right?”

“That’s-”

Teiara-san lowered her eyes and stared at her cup.

“That’s because Shikiya-senpai...looked very lonely when Koto Tsukinoki rejected her.”

Teiara-san drank the tea after answering calmly.

Then, she shot me provocative glares.

“Isn’t that enough of a reason?”

That’s enough. I shook my head silently.

“Sorry, I was asking too much. But I hope you don’t think too badly about Tsukinoki-senpai.”

“Even if you say so, I have no reason to have a good impression of her.”

“Sure, she can be a little- no, quite cheeky sometimes. She learns her lessons- or not. I mean, there are many good points about her, even if they don’t add up to much.”

“...I admire your generosity.”

Teiara-san sighed in amazement.

“I hate sloppy and careless people, and I also hate people who caused a senpai I treasure to show a face like that. Also, I hate- people who ruin my values more than anything else.”

There's nothing we can do about the difference in values. While there's no excuse for coming up with BL fanfics, I don't want her to stop writing. I wish to keep this a secret if possible.

"I'll try to do something about those two. Don't forget our promise about the doujinshi."

"The same goes for me. I'm begging you."

Teiara-san returned her attention to the reference book silently.

...Well, I should leave when the time is right.

I was looking up the train time on my phone. Then, Teiara-san spoke up while reading her reference book.

"But I'm indeed worried about cram school."

She flipped over a page after saying that.

"I have a little brother. He doesn't want to go to cram school no matter how many times I've tried to convince him."

"Why?"

"He has joined the Football Club recently, and they require training fees. Our family isn't particularly wealthy either."

She said that as she highlighted parts in the reference book.

"Even so, I think he'll go if I ask my parents to convince her. However, that's why I want to find a way that has the least burden on them, if possible."

That's the end of Teiara-san's story.

She continued studying silently. I spoke up.

“My parents once said I should tell them if I have something I want to do. They will help out whenever they can.”

“So?”

Teiara-san stopped. She slowly raised her head.

“So, I think Basori-san’s parents think the same.”

“Nukumizu-san’s family is quite blessed.”

“Huh? We aren’t, but both of my parents work-”

“This has nothing to do with money. Of course, my family isn’t poor either.”

Teiara-san seemed like she wanted to say something else. Her expression looked like she couldn’t bear it anymore.

“Sheesh, what a pain. I’ll be honest here.”

Teiara-san crossed her fingers and stretched her back.

“Actually, I came here today intending to mess with Nukumizu-san.”

“Eh? Why are you doing that?”

“It’s because you’re here to take back the doujinshi under Shikiya-senpai’s guidance, right? I feel like I more or less have the right to a little revenge.”

I have no words besides a wry smile. Teiara-san glared at me.

“But please don’t misunderstand! It’s not like I’m just trying to talk to you aimlessly! The school rules clearly specify that a relationship with the opposite sex must be healthy and transparent. No more interactions than necessary-”

Teiara-san ranted quickly.

“...Nukumizu-san, was any of that wrong?”

“No, I just think this is more like the usual Teiara-san.”

“Huh!? Doesn’t that mean you think I’m always angry!? Also, don’t call me by my first name!”

Teiara-san took out a question book from her bag furiously.

“I won’t hold back anymore. Nukumizu-san, are you good at maths?”

“Well, not really.”

“You’re on my side, right? Teach me.”

Eh, what should I do? I’ll be late if I don’t get my ass out of here soon.

I hesitated to answer. Teiara-san had already opened the question book without waiting for my reply.

“I’ve already understood cosine and sine completely. However, for some reason, I can’t solve this question.”

Isn’t that because you don’t have a complete understanding? I glanced at Teiara-san’s question from the other side of the table.

“Uh, it’s dark. I can’t see it very well.”

“Well, then, please sit over here.”

Teiara-san patted the sofa next to her.

“Eh? Next to you? This isn’t good, right?”

“I’m just asking you to teach me. Don’t get any weird ideas.”

I hate to admit it, but I feel like I’m the only one getting nervous. I acted calmly and sat next to Teiara-san. There’s a faint fragrance of subtle makeup.

...Teiara-san, are you wearing makeup? Ah, I discovered a beauty mark on her neck.

“This is the question. Do you know how to solve it?”

Teiara-san passed me the question book. I shook off the lewd thoughts and stared at it.

She seems to be halfway through the question. Let’s see...

“I’m not making any progress. Could it be that something’s wrong with the question?”

“Uh, this one. I think you switched the law of cosine and sine.”

“.....”

Teiara-san wrote something with the pencil for a while. She then closed the question book in a snap.

“I was the one who was wrong, not the question book.”

Yeah, well, that happens sometimes.

I guess this is the so-called secondhand embarrassment. Feeling unbearable, I attempted to stand up. Teiara-san lowered her head and grabbed my arm.

“Eh, is there anything else you don’t understand?”

“No, not really. I just want to say something.”

“Okay...?”

Teiara-san plopped down her head. She fiddled with her fingertips.

“Well, aside from me coming here to study and consulting with my senpai, there’s one more thing I can’t let anyone else hear.”

...Hmm? What is it?

Wait, she has something she doesn’t want others to know, and she even called me out during the weekend-

Eh, hold on. In other words, ...is it really here, my popular phase?

Teiara-san’s petite and downcast face trembled slightly. Her slender neck glows a light sakura color.

Gulp. My throat made a noise.

“Hey, Nukumizu-san!”

“Y-Yes!”

“-----?”

Hmm? What did she say? Based on the flow, did she ask me whether I have a girlfriend?

“Well, no, I don’t have someone like that.”

“...Really?”

Teiara-san raised her head.

“So, ...you mean there’s a continuation to that book?”

“Eh? That book?”

I’m confused. Teiara-san snapped.

“I-I mean the continuation of the confiscated doujinshi! Is there one? Is it still not out yet!?”

“Uh, that person is an exam student. She can’t write that fast.”

“I see. It can’t be helped. Preparing for the exam is more important.”

Teiara-san’s shoulders immediately dropped. So, she is-

“...Are you curious about the continuation?”

“Wha!? D-Don’t just make things up! I’m just wondering what happens next since it ended in a cliffhanger. That’s all!”

So, you are curious.

Of course, one can decide whether they want to sink in the BL swamp. However, isn’t having your fetish awakened by a BL novel of a respected senpai too deep of an addiction? There’s no way she can be satisfied.

“Hey, what I just said is a secret! Don’t tell Koto Tsukinoki, especially!”

“Is it okay to tell Prez then?”

I said calmly. Teiara-san’s face went pale.

“Why would it be!? Are you insane!?”

I won’t deny it, but Teiara-san isn’t better, either.

Also, it’s my fault for teasing her.

“Teiara-san, your face...is a little too close.”

“Eh?”

That’s right. Teiara-san was just one step away from pushing me over. I ran away.

Teiara-san immediately jumped away. This time, even her ears are red. She lowered her head.

“Ah, it’s because you keep saying weird things! Also, please don’t call me by my first name!”

“Uh, my bad...”

This is- pretty awkward. Being alone with a girl in a private room. I can’t deal with this atmosphere. It’s entirely different than when I was Yanami just then.

I subconsciously looked at the clock and the wall. It’s almost 3 PM. Time to meet with Shikiya-san.

“Sorry, Shikiya-senpai will have to wait for me if I don’t leave now.”

I said that in relief. Teiara-san raised her head.

“...You have to meet Shikiya-senpai?”

“Yes, well, other members have already gone ahead. I have to join them.”

It's okay to be late since Komari and Yakishio will be there. However, my heart can't take it anymore if I stay here any longer.

I tried to stand up. Teiara-san's whispers followed.

“-Can't you stay here a little longer?”

What? I nearly wanted to ask her, but I swallowed it back down.

I don't really know what she means, but I know I'm allowed to stay here.

...Can't you stay here a little longer?

Teiara-san looked away and pushed the question book toward me.

“Please don't misunderstand. I just want to ask you another question.”

“Oh, I see. Which one?”

“Well, I'll ask this one.”

Teiara-san placed her delicate finger on the question book.

Due to the dim light, I had to bring my face closer and focus my eyes on the question. Uh, let's see.

“Can you solve this geometry question with me?”

Suddenly, I heard Teiara-san’s voice next to my ears.

Teiara-san, aren’t you too close? What will happen if I turn to her right now...?

I remained on the spot. Then, the door opened with a flashy sound.

“Thanks for the wait! Sorry, I’m late!”

Eh, why is she here!?



“Sorry, I went to the wrong...room...”

Teiara-san and I hastily distanced ourselves from each other.

Remon Yakishio. The smile on the girl who shouldn't be here gradually turned into a confused face.

“...Eh, am I interrupting you two?”

“No!” “You aren’t!”

We answered in sync. Yakishio's face turned even stiffer.

No, really. It's not what you think. I stood up and brought Yakishio to the corner of the room.

“Right, Yakishio, why are you doing here? Aren't you with Komari?”

“Huh? It's because karaoke sounds more fun than board games.”

Eh, what is she talking about? Yanami, how did you explain to Yakishio...?

Yakishio looked over my shoulder toward Teiara-san.

“Sorry, I didn't think you two would be like this. I'll go home if you think I'm in your way.”

“N-No! We were just studying- this is just a study meeting!”

“Right, right, right! Look, he's just sitting next to me because there's only one question book!”

“...Study meeting?”

Yakishio took the question book on the table and flipped through it.

“Why are you two studying in a karaoke room? Aren’t you supposed to sing?”

“Eh, ahh, you’re right. Basori-san, how about you sing a song?”

“Yes, I don’t mind-”

“That’s right!”

Yakishio went to pick up the receiver. Teiara-san stood next to me.

“You were the one who called her here, right? Do you know what the word ‘secret’ means?”

“Eh? No, I mean, I didn’t tell her.”

Teiara-san stared daggers at me. I stuttered. She continued in an even colder tone.

“Nukumizu-san, don’t forget our promise. You know what will happen if you break it, right?”

She stabbed me with her stern gaze. It’s almost like the atmosphere back then never existed.

What did I do...?

*

Aichidaigaku-Mae Station. It’s the closest station to Tsuwabuki High School.

Teiara-san and I disbanded there. It was starting to get dark when I left the platform with Yakishio.

We're waiting for the traffic lights at the zebra crossing. I checked my watch.

It's already past 4 PM. It's been an hour since the promised time.

"I told you that the last song was unnecessary. We missed the train, right?"

"Wasn't Nukkun pretty excited too? You were pretty good at shaking the maracas."

Eh, really? Perhaps I did pay attention to the beat and rhythm.

I'm embarrassed due to receiving praise. Yakishio poked me with her elbow.

"Hey, did Komari-chan message you? My phone ran out of battery."

"Yeah, I guess she contacted me already."

I stuttered as I took out my phone. By the way, Komari has contacted me via Line, SMS, telephone, email, and Twitter DM. I didn't answer any of them.

Yakishio peeked at my phone next to me. She made an "uwah".

"Isn't she messaging you constantly? Nukkun, you're a bad boy."

...Ah, another "go die" came from the chat.

Yakishio covered her eyes with her palm. She stretched her back and watched the other side of the pedestrian crossing.

The board game cafe is right across the road. However, I can't see what's happening inside from here.

"Shikiya-san is that beautiful yet terrifying girl from the student council, right? Is Komari-chan okay being with her alone?"

"Komari has been getting used to that person lately. It should be fine for them to have a one-hour chat."

In front of us is the national highway with two lanes on each side. The traffic is heavy.

The lights aren't going to change any time soon. Then, I saw a woman entering the board game cafe.

-Her hair is tied into a twin tail behind. She seems familiar. Yakishio pulled my clothes.

"Hey, Nukkun. Isn't that Tsukinoki-senpai? Did you tell her to come here?"

I shook my head.

Tsukinoki-senpai has no idea about this whole fiasco nor that I have asked for Shikiya-san's help.

As for why Tsukinoki-senpai is here- I don't think it's a coincidence.

...I have a bad feeling about this.

I waited for the signal to change anxiously.

Yakishio started running the moment it turned green.

I quickly walked through the crossing and chased after Yakishio.

Something definitely happened between those two. I can feel a barrier between them.

However, they talk normally when they meet with each other face to face. I've never seen them arguing with intense emotions.

So, I must be worrying too much.

Yakishio started running with a worried look.

An unusual aura radiated from Tsukinoki-senpai's back.

...I followed Yakishio and opened the cafe's door. The two were glaring at each other across the table.

No, Tsukinoki-senpai is standing before the table with a stern face.

Shikiya-san is emotionless, as usual. She's sitting on the chair. Her beautiful white pupils are staring at Tsukinoki-senpai.

Yakishio is standing at the entrance. I asked her.

"I don't know. It was like this when I came in."

Komari had been fussing between the two of them. Then, she immediately ran toward me upon noticing my presence.

"H-Hey, I told Tsukinoki-senpai that I was here with t-that person. Sorry, uh, I-I didn't expect this to happen."

Tears are filling Komari's eyes. She handed me a small wooden model of a chicken.

I understand the whole story now, but where did this chicken come from?

"Not bad, Komari. So, what happened?"

"W-We have been glaring at each o-other ever s-since senpai joined in."

I see. There's still something else.

Tsukinoki-senpai smacked the table.

"Shikiya, what are you trying to do?"

Tsukinoki-senpai snapped and spoke up first.

Shikiya-san tilted her head in disbelief. She seems unfazed by her fury.

"What's...wrong?"

"I know you have been taking care of my kouhais, but you have gone too far lately."

"Is that a bad thing...? Everyone is really kind..."

Shikiya-san stood up while wobbling. Her long curvy hair sways gently.

Shikiya-san's white pupils noticed me.

Tsukinoki-senpai followed her line of sight. She saw me, and then her face twitched.

“So, it’s Nukumizu-kun this time, Shikiya? Perhaps all of this seems like a game to you, but have you thought about us?”

“Isn’t...a game nice...?”

“Tck! You!”

-Eh? Me? Are they talking about me? I quickly cut in between the two of them.

“Wait a minute! I asked Shikiya-san for help when senpai’s novel got confiscated. She’s not doing anything weird.”

“Nukumizu-kun, is that true? For me, Shikiya and-”

Tsukinoki-senpai went silent in the middle.

“Eh? Well, yeah. It’s not something that serious.”

“Senpai, ...Koto-san, ...the president asked me for help, you know?”

Shikiya-san stood next to me quietly before I even knew it.

“That’s why. You-”

“Everyone...is cleaning after Koto-san’s...mess.”

Shikiya-san approached Tsukinoki-senpai somewhat provocatively.

“Do you...understand?”

Tsukinoki-senpai glared at Shikiya-san’s face silently.

She stepped back and looked away before the tension was about to boil.

“I’m sorry, Nukumizu-kun. Komari-chan and Yakishio-chan, I’m sorry for dragging you two into this mess.”

Tsukinoki-senpai bowed to us deeply.

“Don’t involve yourselves in this anymore. This is my fault in the first place, so I’ll take full responsibility.”

Tsukinoki-senpai lifted her head with a powerless smile.

“So- don’t get too close to Shikiya.”

All of us fell silent upon hearing those words.

The whole place was quiet. I carefully chose my words as I asked.

“...Is this your advice as our senpai?”

“I suppose, even though it’s not my obligation to say it.”

“I understand. However, senpai- is already a retired member of the Literature Club.”

“Hey, Nukkun!”

Yakishio grabbed my shoulder from behind.

Tsukinoki-senpai bit her lips and lowered her head.

“...You’re right. I’m sorry. I won’t cause any more trouble to everyone.”

“That’s why you should leave the doujinshi and other things to the current members like us. Whether you’re retired or whatever, senpai is still part of the Literature Club. Leave it to your kouhai. Please believe in us.”

...I don’t know whether this is the correct answer.

But, at least, I’ve always been helped by this troublesome senpai.

I have suffered a lot at her hands, but she has given me a lot more in exchange.

That’s why I don’t want to see the senpais hurting anyone or themselves for our sake.

I don’t know whether she understands or not. Tsukinoki-senpai lowered her head once again.

“...My most sincere apology, everyone. I’m also sorry for causing trouble to everyone in the store.”

Then, she noticed Shikiya-san looking at her. She hesitated for a while before speaking up.

However, the one thing we hoped a little she would say to solve everything didn’t appear. Such magical words don’t exist, after all.

“Sorry for bothering you, Shikiya-san.”

With that, Tsukinoki-senpai quietly left the store.

I stood still. Komari was the first one to move.

“I-I’ll go after Tsukinoki-senpai.”

“Ahh, I’ll leave her to you, Komari.”

Komari nodded before dashing out of the cafe.

After a while, the hustle and bustle finally returned to the shop.

Shikiya-san stood silently. She then took a bill from her wallet and placed it on the table.

"I'm sorry. ...I'll leave my pay here..."

Shikiya-san walked out of the store with wobbling steps.

I hesitated to chase after her. Yakishio gently pushed my back.

"Go, Nukkun."

"...Can I?"

Shikiya-san just got rejected by her close friend.

Thoughts circled around my head, yet the answer seemed nowhere to be found.

"I think she wants to be alone at times like this."

Yakishio pushed my back again. Pretty hard this time.

"-Being alone and feeling lonely are different."

Yakishio's dark brown pupils are conveying an indescribable feeling.

I left the cafe. For some reason, I looked up at the darkened sky while pressing against my burning cheeks due to the sunlight a while ago.

-It's starting to rain.

*

Shikiya-san is heading toward Tsuwabuki High School on the sidewalk.

The sporadic cold rain quickly drowns out the faint winter twilight.

Shikiya-san was walking in the dark. The headlights of passing cars illuminated her.

I dashed toward her and walked next to her.

“Are you alright? Uh, where are you going?”

“Going...home...”

Shikiya-san mumbled in her usual helpless, childish tone.

“Where’s your house? I’ll walk you halfway through.”

Sha. The sound signals that the rain is getting heavier.

I urged Shikiya-san to keep walking. We went under the roof of a nearby apartment building.

Even though it’s before sunset, the sky is already dark, as if someone puts paint on it.

I sighed in relief and glanced at Shikiya-san next to me.

A drop of water dripped down from her wet bangs through her pale cheeks.

I searched my pocket and realized I had forgotten my handkerchief somewhere.

Messing up in the moments that actually matter is usual for me.

“The rain isn’t stopping yet. I’ll buy an umbrella there. Can you wait for a second?”

“It’s fine. ...I called a taxi...”

The rain soaks the screen of Shikiya-san’s phone. She looks at it emotionlessly.

Her face seems even paler than usual due to the phone’s light.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“...I don’t know.”

Shikiya-san mumbled powerlessly.

Is she so sick that she can’t even feel the cold? This is quite worrying.

“I don’t understand...what Koto mentioned.”

She mumbled even more powerlessly.

“Well, that person can be one-sided sometimes. Please don’t worry about it too much.”

Shikiya-san pinched the hair sticking on her forehead as she tilted her head.

“Am I...causing you guys trouble...?”

“Eh, no, that’s not true. We’re the ones who asked you this time.”

I handed her a packet of paper tissue I had found in my pocket.

"Thank you. ...You're so kind."

Shikiya took one out and wiped her soaked forehead.

"My little sister put it there for me. She's really kind."

It feels like a rom-com when I was told I'm kind just by giving her a piece of tissue paper.

Shikiya-san's fingertip touched mine when I was thinking about that.

"Then, ...just for now, ...please be kind to me."

Eh? What does-

My hand turned stiff. Her finger touched mine again.

Is this...handholding?

No, wait. Will this be sexual harassment if I take it too seriously and touch her?

It is said that many tragedies occurred due to misunderstandings around the time head pats became popular.

"Hey, Shikiya-senpai...?"

No reply.

Shikiya-san is standing so close to me that our shoulders are touching. She's not moving.

The taxi isn't here yet.

Then, Shikiya-san touched my fingertips with hers slightly before moving her hand away again.

She repeated it three times. Then, she didn't let go after touching my fingertips for the fourth time.

...I wonder how long it has been since?

It probably wasn't that long, but it definitely felt like an eternity to me.

That's why I grabbed Shikiya-san's hand just as her fingertips were about to depart once more.

Shikiya-san's fingers are very delicate and cold.

She gently holds my hand as if she's taking care of a tiny bird.

It's simpler than romantic feelings or anything like that.

Wanting to be in touch with people. Her emotions are painfully transmitted to me.

Shikiya-san's side profile remains emotionless as usual.

That was my first time realizing it.

-This girl doesn't shed tears when she cries.



Intermission: The Reason for Not Being Boyfriend and Girlfriend

“Uh, I need to go to the bathroom...”

The karaoke room. Sunday.

Only Yakishio and Teiara remained in the room after Nukumizu ran away from his seat.

Silence ensued. Yakishio took a sip of oolong tea and sat next to Teiara.

“Hey, Ba-chan.”

“Ba...? Uh, you’re calling me?”

Naturally, Yakishio nodded. She then passed her the microphone.

“Well, I have a question. Are you going out with Nukkun?”

“What!? W-Why did you ask!?”

Squeak. Teiara’s moan caused the microphone to scream.

Yakishio didn’t seem to mind. She continued pushing the microphone toward her.

“The distance between you two reaffirmed my question, no matter how I see it, right? Will people really be so close if they are just studying normally?”

‘T-That’s because!’

Teiara-san robbed the microphone away.

“That’s because there’s only one question book here! Is there a problem!? What’s so weird about me studying with a boy!?”

After saying all of that at once, Teiara caught her breath before passing the microphone back to Yakishio.

“Uh, ...indeed, it’s not weird.”

Yakishio seems to be overwhelmed by her ferocity. She nodded and turned off the microphone.

Teiara-san chugged the remaining tea. She spoke up calmly.

“Nukumizu-san and I have met before, and then we were just studying together. Well, what’s your relationship with him then, Yakishio-san?”

“Hmm? We’re both in the Literature Club. He called me here today to-”

Yakishio paused. She frowned and looked at the ceiling.

“Eh, did he call me here...?”

“Uh, what does that mean? You mean you came here without him telling you?”

Yakishio crossed her arms and tilted her head.

“Hmm- I’m not sure. Come to think of it, the explanation I got wasn’t really detailed- I just thought I would stop by karaoke when I snapped out of it.”

“...I got it.”

Teiara-san repeatedly nodded as if she had completely understood.

“This is a kind of marital fraud, right?”

“Eh? Marital fraud?”

“Indeed, it’s a technique to tempt the other party into bearing his responsibility through vague words. What if your lover says, ‘I can’t marry you because I have a lot of debt’ instead of ‘please marry me’? What would you do?”

“Debts are scary. I’ll say I’ll help you too. Let’s try our best and repay...”

Yakishio seemed to have noticed something. She clapped her hands.

“Did you finally see it? He just lets you think you can marry him once you’re done repaying his debt. In other words, Nukumizu-san is using marital fraud tactics despite being a high school student.”

“Have I fallen into a marital trap right now? But Yana-chan was the one who called me.”

“Although I don’t know who that person is, this is a classic strategy as well. Preparing a third party beforehand.”

Teiara stared daggers at the room door, where Nukumizu had just left.

“But I feel like Nukkun isn’t a person like that. He’s more like an unintentional and dense boy. Far different than those evil, calculating masterminds.”

“Hmm, indeed. He’s not an intelligent person like that. He lacks the personality to commit marital fraud. He’s quite dense today as well...”

Teiara-san poured tea into her water bottle as she mumbled.

“Ba-chan, did he do anything to you?”

“I’m not saying he has done anything to me. I’m just saying that a girl should be fully prepared when going out, no matter who it is.”

“Heh, ...yeah, I guess.”

Yakishio whistled quietly.

“It’s not that you must be aware of these things when you want someone. However, Nukumizu-san doesn’t seem to understand the girls’ efforts. He’s dense.”

“Ah, I get it. Nukkun is like that. Whoever falls in love with him will have a rough time.”

“Indeed, he’s a so-called enemy of girls.”

“Nukkun is really unforgivable.”

The two exchanged glances and laughed cheerfully.

During this time, Nukumizu opened the door. He seemed startled.

“...Uh, what’s wrong? Why are you two staring at me?”

“This is why I don't like this part of him.”

“Yep, exactly.”

The two girls burst into laughter again. Nukumizu could only sigh helplessly-

Chapter 3: Name My Feelings

December 21st. Monday morning.

The sky is clear. It's almost like the rain yesterday was just a dream.

Even though I arrived an hour early, the school had already "woken up".

Sports clubs aren't the only ones that show up early.

There are sounds of instruments from the Music Room. The Orchestra Club is preparing for its competition.

I entered the west building while listening to the music. The lights inside the quiet Art Room are on.

Both students and teachers are present.

The Literature Club room is at the end of the west building. I yawned and checked my watch.

Usually, at this time, Kaju would be driven out of my room for trying to change clothes for me.

Someone's in the room. I decided to open the door.

"Good morning, Nukumizu. It's been a while."

The person lifting his head sleepily from the chemistry reference books is ex-president Shintaro Tamaki.

He's a student preparing for the university entrance exam and Tsukinoki-senpai's boyfriend.

"I heard from Koto yesterday. Sorry about that."

Tamaki-senpai said with a bitter smile. I returned the same expression.

"Sorry, I didn't tell you beforehand. I should've said it earlier."

I told him I would like to have a chat with him yesterday. So, he decided we should meet in the club room in the morning.

Perhaps Tamaki-senpai knows what happened between Tsukinoki-senpai and Shikiya-san in the past.

"Koto didn't let you tell anyone, right? Don't just stand around. Have a seat."

I sat on the chair before him.

"I've been busy with my own stuff lately, too."

Tamaki-senpai glanced at his reference book again. He tore down a post-it note and stuck it onto the page.

"I've heard that you're transferring to major in science. Do you have enough time to prepare for the exam?"

-Majoring in science. Despite being in a Liberal Arts class in high school, he's going to study science at university.

Changing his intent in the second semester of the third year definitely isn't easy. Also, the national university he's aiming

for has a reputation for being the hardest to get into in the prefecture.

“I still got an A in the mock exam a few days ago. The national university has been my first choice all along. It could’ve been worse.”

“Isn’t that amazing? What about Tsukinoki-senpai then?”

Tamaki-senpai put out a bitter smile with a few tinges of sternness.

“Probably a private university in Nagoya. She casts her net in every major she’s interested in. However, her mock exam scores- sigh, I’ll say it’s so-so.”

No matter what, these two will proceed on different paths by spring.

It’s not just Tsukinoki-senpai. Tamaki-senpai must be worried too.

Breakups caused by different plans for the future are way too common.

“I am kind of sorry for bringing you out in such difficult times.”

“I don’t blame Nukumizu. Don’t apologize to me. I’ll talk to the teachers and the student council. Let me deal with the confiscated doujinshi, please?”

With that, he showed a smile, trying to ease my worries.

However, senpai frowned as soon as my expression turned stiff while I was attempting to return a smile.

“What’s wrong? Is there something else?”

“Actually, not even the teachers or the student council president know about that book. The only one with a direct relationship is the vice president.”

Pure confusion appeared on Tamaki-senpai’s face.

“The vice president is the first-year Basori-san, right? How did that girl cause such a huge mess by herself?”

“It looks like that person has a lot of opinions toward the Literature Club- or, I should say, Tsukinoki-senpai.”

I sighed for the first time in the morning.

“...She asked me to cooperate with her when I tried to take back the doujinshi. She said if I wanted the novel back, I would have to do what she said.”

“Do what she said? That’s literally a threat, right?”

It’s not literally. It’s precisely a threat.

“Yes, hear me out. That request is-”

“...Is it okay for you to say it?”

I paused for a moment and looked at senpai’s face.

“-Put an end to Shikiya-san and Tsukinoki-senpai’s relationship.”

Senpai’s face twitched after hearing that. I immediately approached him upon confirming that.

“What happened between the two of them?”

I questioned. Tamaki-san frowned and pondered about it.

Then, he slowly shook his head.

“...Sorry, I need some time to think about it.”

“Sure, I understand.”

Did something really happen between the two of them? No, based on Tamaki-senpai’s vague attitude-

I stopped thinking and gave a wry smile. Now’s not the time to investigate that.

Right now, I should consider how to solve this problem.

“But I need senpai’s assistance. Can you help me out?”

“I don’t mind it. What are you up to?”

“The two of them are the only ones who can put an end to this, right? They need to meet each other and talk it out.”

Tamaki-senpai looks deflated after hearing that.

“You think they will see each other for good? Especially Koto.”

“They won’t. Especially Tsukinoki-senpai.”

Also, these two just fought with each other yesterday.

However, the window will forever be closed if we don’t do something now.

“If their relationship has become twisted already, they need some kind of reason. Like unusual events or common enemies, for example. Anyway, we need to create an opportunity.”

“I get what you’re saying, but what will you do exactly?”

“Uh, borrow this to me for a bit.”

I took out an eraser from Tamaki-senpai’s pencil case and put it in the center of the table.

“For example, let’s say Tamaki-senpai is meeting Tsukinoki-senpai somewhere, and then Shikiya-san has to show up at the same location and time.”

After that, I removed the highlighter’s cap and put it next to the eraser.

“When they both notice each other, the people they meet will call them and say they will be late. This will force them to wait together.”

“So, you mean we’re lying to let them see each other?”

“Not the same, actually. We have to let them realize that they have been tricked. We have to become their common enemies.”

“It doesn’t hurt to try...”

Tamaki-senpai touched the standing cap with the eraser.

The rolling cap circled around and returned to its original position.

“But we can only bet that it works.”

“It already counts as an ‘end’ if someone runs away in that situation.”

Perhaps.

Mending their relationship is just one of the results. It doesn’t have to be the standard answer.

The request from Teiara-san is putting an “end” to their relationship.

“Well, then, the problem now is how to ask those two out, right?”

Senpai took out his phone and stared at the screen.

“Christmas Eve is on Thursday, right? I have planned to meet Koto at the light show before the station. We’ll have dinner afterward.”

Christmas. The neon light show in front of the station.

“Is this senpai’s revenge for last year?”

They weren’t going out yet at last year’s Christmas.

Tamaki-senpai wasted a superb opportunity under the neon lights.

After all kinds of mistakes, they finally became a couple. However, a lot has happened. Indeed, a lot.

“Well, how about you tell Shikiya-san to go there then? This will be Nukumizu’s so-called ‘unusual event’, right?”

“But is senpai okay with this? This is your first Christmas ever since going out with her.”

“I can wait until dinner, you know? Also, Koto and I still have the next year and the future beyond.”

Tamaki-senpai seems a little troubled. He smiled as usual.

“I don’t know what’s on Shikiya-san’s mind. However, they used to have a good relationship. Ending it on such a note seems a little...”

“A little sad?”

“No, it’s more like I feel a sense of responsibility.”

-Responsibility. Senpai had already started packing up before I could even ask him.

“6 PM on Thursday. The light show before the station interchange. Koto should be there by that time. Then, Nukumizu will call Shikiya-san out on the phone.”

“Got it. I can’t let her know Tsukinoki-senpai is there, right?”

Tamaki-senpai left. I remained in the room to think this out.

I’m calling Shikiya-san to the neon light show before the station on the night of the 24th. What happens next can only be decided on that day.

...Hmm? Hold on, December 24th. In other words-

...I’m inviting Shikiya-san to spend Christmas Eve with me.

*

“Well, see you. I’ll go to my make-up classes.”

After school, club room. Yakishio dropped her shoulders and walked outside. Only Komari and I remained in the room.

It feels a little terrible to see Yakishio going in and out of the club room after she's banned from participating in club activities due to failing the exam. However, the Literature Club people are just chilling in the room doing nothing usually...

I thought about that as I opened the calendar on my phone.

-The plan takes place at night on the 24th.

Today is already the 21st. I have to plan this out immediately.

In other words, I'm asking Shikiya-san out on a Christmas date-

"...No, it's just coincidentally the 24th. Yep, indeed, nothing strange at all."

I mumbled to convince myself. Komari's eyes targeted me.

"W-What's wrong, Nukumizu? A-Are you hallucinating?"

How impolite. It's just that I can't tell the boundary between fantasy and reality sometimes. My body is perfectly healthy.

"I just have something on my mind. By the way, Komari, on the night of Christmas Eve~"

As if it was to interrupt me, the door to the club room opened.

Yanami's peeking at us while trembling.

"...Greetings. You two are here."

“What’s wrong? What’s with the formality?”

“Uh, I want to apologize to you two.”

Yanami looks pretty apologetic. She curled the tip of her hair.

Apology? Komari and I looked at each other. Yanami suddenly bowed down.

“I’m really sorry for yesterday!”

“Uh, what is it?”

“About Remon-chan! Didn’t she end up in the karaoke room? It was because I didn’t communicate with her properly. That’s why I felt I need to apologize after hearing about it from Remon-chan.”

Ah, I see. But she’s Yakishio, after all.

“Well, I mean, even though you’re right, the result wouldn’t change much even if Yakishio was in the board game cafe, right? Also, if anything, I’m at fault for being late as well.”

Komari nodded.

“A-Also, I-I was the one who brought Tsukinoki-senpai over since I was scared. S-So-”

That’s right, you know? This argument wouldn’t have happened if that person wasn’t there.

“Well, let’s just say this was Komari’s fault.”

“G-Go die.”

Didn’t you say it yourself?”

But it's rare to see Yanami being aware of her mistakes for once.

Is there some unknown reason behind this? However, I don't have time to dig into that now.

"We can talk about that later. Yanami-san, what are you planning to do on the night of the 24th?"

The topic suddenly changed. Yanami blinked in confusion.

"Eh? Just spend the night with my family normally."

"Isn't there a neon light show in front of the station? I want you to go there with me."

Indeed, it feels a little weird to invite Shikiya-san out by myself. I don't need to worry about this if I have another person.

"Heh!? No, I mean, uh, are you serious? Ehh!?"

Yanami let out a weird scream. She looked between Komari and me.

Fine, the sudden invitation is my fault, but you being so upset hurts me a little, you know?

"Sorry, it's whatever if you're busy. Well- Komari."

"Wha!?"

I looked at Komari. She jumped.

"Can you hang out with me on Christmas Eve?"

"Go die! D-Die at least 5 times!"

Ehh, ...what's with the rudeness?

Alright, perhaps suddenly asking them to make room in their Christmas Eve schedule is a little too much.

"Sheesh, I'll ask Yakishio then..."

With that, I took out my phone.

"Ha?" (x2)

Yanami and Komari groaned. Then, the two girls surrounded my seat.

Uh, what's with all of this? Why are these two making the mood so tense...?

Yanami crossed her arms and glared at me.

"Nukumizu-kun, sit tight."

"Hmm? I'm sitting."

My perfect answer had no effect. Yanami raised her thumb and pointed downward.

"-On the floor."

What? Why would I do that?

"No, hold on. Hey, Komari, help me out here."

"S-Shut up. No talking."

Huh!? Is something wrong with Komari too?

As usual, they are looking at me like I'm a piece of garbage, but aren't they too mean this time?

“Alright, let’s calm down first. What did I do?”

The girls looked down on me silently.

The pressure is immense. However, a man must not bow to outrageous acts like this.

“That’s why I told you- uh, …well, …yes, I got it.”

However, isn’t backing down when I should be a sign of maturity?

I earnestly kneeled on the floor. Yanami stared at me coldly.

“Nukumizu-kun, do you know what you have done?”

“Uh, what have I done? Let me think…”

“I asked you whether you wanted to go to the light show before the station with me…”

“You asked Komari-chan right away after me, and then you tried to invite Remon-chan after she rejected you. What on Earth are you trying to do?”

What do you mean by what I’m trying to do?

“It’s because, look, don’t I have to bring Shikiya-senpai out too-”

“Wha!? That senpai is next? Nukumizu-kun, aren’t you overstepping your bounds a little!?”

“Eh, haven’t I told you two this? I talked about it with Tamaki-senpai. We have decided to let Tsukinoki-senpai meet with that person. After that, our plan is for me to call Shikiya-senpai on the phone on the night of the 24th. That’s why I want…you two to help me out…together…”

Why? I can feel Yanami and Komari getting more horrifying by the second.

"Uh- did I say anything weird?"

The girls' cheeks blushed in anger.

"This is why I don't like this part of you, Nukumizu-kun!"

"Y-You should really g-go die!"

They turned around after dropping those words on me.

Ehh, ...what's happening here? Didn't I just forget to explain beforehand?

"So, you two, on Christmas Eve...?"

Yanami turned her head a little. Her side profile glared at me.

"I'm sorry. I have to eat with my family that day. Do whatever you want."

Komari smacked her tongue and stared at me.

"I-I'm busy too. I have to have cakes with the kids at my house. G-Go die alone."

Aren't young people these days too hotheaded?

I'll probably receive even worse treatment if I just find Yakishio after this. Well, I guess I'll have to invite Shikiya-san alone.

However, with what happened yesterday, isn't it a little hard to ask Shikiya-san out today?

I still remember how cold her hands were.

It's different from Yakishio's powerful grip on the beach. It's also not the same as Kaju's innocent palm when she wants me to spoil her. Instead, her petite hands were as brilliant and glamorous as a piece of artwork as they tangled with my finger-

...No, that person definitely didn't reach her hand out to me with that in mind.

At least, I think there wasn't any romance or other thoughts the moment our hands touched.

I closed my eyes and reminisced about the feeling from yesterday.

Shikiya-san's timidity and melancholy- and how I felt when I was next to her.

The more I think about this, the more unbelievable I am toward my own hazy feelings. Then, I remembered Shikiya-san's wet side profile under the rain for the last time.

She looked very lonely after being rejected- this is what Teiara-san told me.

I don't know whether the side profile Teiara-san and I saw was the same one. However, I can guarantee the emotions we feel won't differ too much.

I made up my mind and opened my eyes.

The club room is the same as usual. However, my sight seems to be at a lower angle.

By the way, ...how long do I have to kneel on the floor?

*

At night, I carefully checked the door lock in my room.

Very well. No one can come in this way.

I changed into my uniform and looked at my whole body in the mirror.

After that, I tilted my head 45 degrees and spoke with determination.

“Do you want to watch the light show with me at Toyohashi Station this Thursday?”

...That's it. I think it's coming together.

After all, I'm inviting a senpai to go out with me on Christmas Eve. Practices for formal situations like this are necessary.

Even though I want it to come off as clean as possible, perhaps it's a little frivolous to abbreviate the whole thing as a “light show”?

Is it better to be a little more casual...?

Ahem. I cleared my throat and made my pose before the mirror again.

“By the way, this year's neon light show before the station has already begun, right? If it's okay with you, do you want to check it out with me on Christmas Eve?”

This is a plain and natural route. This way, I can inject that into a casual conversation.

“Onii-sama, why don’t you try to be a little more indirect?”

“The person may not be aware that this is an invitation and skips it over if I do that, right?”

“If that’s the case, she’s explicitly avoiding it. Listen up. A girl won’t be unconscious of the fact that she’s being invited while in a conversation.”

Eh, really? Girls are scary.

“...By the way, why is Kaju in this room? I’ve already locked the door, right?”

“Ara, it’s not locked, you know? I’m here to return your books.”

Kaju smiled and handed the book to me.

When was the door unlocked? I think this happens every once in a while. I should probably get it fixed...

Kaju even decided to just sit on my bed. I guess she’s going to chill here for the time being.

This can’t be helped. I walked toward my desk and pretended to take out my homework.

“Alright, onii-chan needs to do his homework. Go back, Kaju.”

“Onii-sama, who are you inviting on Christmas Eve?”

...It looks like she’s not letting me go. I stuck my face onto the book purposely.

“Uh, fine, there’s something I need to do. Alright, it’s getting late. Go to bed. Otherwise, you can’t wake up tomorrow,

you know?"

I wanted to keep pretending that I was doing my homework. Then, waves of sobs can be heard from behind.

I hastily turned around.

I'm not hallucinating. Kaju's crying. Huge drops of tears slash through her cheeks.

"What's wrong, Kaju!?"

"It's because, ...it's because...I can't believe onii-sama is going on a date with a girl on Christmas Eve despite not having any friends in the first semester. ...Kaju is so, so happy..."

Sniff. Kaju wiped her nose with a paper towel.

"I-It's not what you think. There's a reason-

"Even Kaju thought it was too much when onii-sama was being indecisive between the group of girls, you know?"

"That didn't even happen, right?"

Kaju wiped her tears and stood up.

"Onii-sama has finally decided who your true love is going to be. Well, Kaju has to give everything I've got. The interview can be delayed first!"

Are you still going for an interview after all this? Kaju hugged my head tightly with teary eyes.

"Please leave the rest to Kaju if the Christmas Eve date goes well! The entrance ceremony to the Nukumizu family has already been completed. It's nice to make new year's dishes

together too. The 30 or so <Onii-sama's Handbook> must be delivered little by little-

Uh, what's <Onii-sama's Handbook>? I don't dare to ask her despite my curiosity. The amount is a little scary as well.

"Okay, listen to me, Kaju. We're just going out together. It's not a date."

I pulled Kaju down.

"But, onii-sama, that's Christmas Eve, you know?"

"Yeah, it's just a coincidence."

"It's a date. At least this is an invitation to a date."

"...!"

I went silent with Kaju's strong judgment.

I tried my best not to think about the word "date". Yet, it's filling my brain right now.

"No one would possibly reject onii-sama's invitation. If by one in a million chance you're rejected-"

Kaju hugged my head tightly once again.

"Please don't worry. Onii-sama still has Kaju, okay?"

"O-Oh..."

But I'm getting increasingly worried.

There are- 3 days until Christmas Eve.

*

Lunch break. I'm in the corridor of the old building with curry bread in my hands.

It's Wednesday today. A day before Christmas Eve.

It's been two days since that. However, I still haven't invited Shikiya-san out yet.

...I'll go ahead and say this first. I already did my best. Specifically, even though I didn't do anything, I tried my best.

Things like this are all about opportunities. It's definitely not because I chickened out. The evidence is that I already practiced countless times with Kaju yesterday night.

I opened the door to the emergency stairs after finding an excuse for myself. A cold breeze descended on me.

It's been a while since I last came here. This place gets really cold in late December-

"N-Nukumizu, you're here."

I raised my head after hearing that. Komari is sitting on the stairs."

"Komari, what are you doing in such a cold..."

I jolted before I could even finish my sentence upon seeing her look.

She's wearing fluffy earmuffs with a scarf on her neck. There's a Hang Ten cotton gown and lap blanket on her body. She has even prepared a cushion to avoid the freezing floor.

"You're in full gear. Did you bring all that by yourself?"

Komari smiled and pointed at the wall.

“I-I brought a little every time. I put a hook on the maintenance door and hang my bag there.”

This girl is enjoying her blessed life at the emergency stairs.

“N-Nukumizu, it’s been a long time since you have been here, right?”

With that, Komari started chewing her bread.

She’s eating the king among national food- breadsticks. It must be the leftovers from the kids in her house.

However, I came here today because I want to be alone. It looks like this is the wrong place...

Komari called me again when I wondered whether I should go to another floor.

“T-The thing you’re doing tomorrow, is it going well?”

The thing I’m doing tomorrow- is that I have to invite Shikiya-san out.

I fell silent. Komari seemed like she couldn’t bear me anymore and shook her head.

“C-Can’t you just text her or something?”

“I thought about doing that. However, trying to invite a girl on Christmas Eve has an extremely high possibility of rejection.”

“I-Indeed, it’s also an invitation from Nukumizu.”

The last half was unnecessary.

“What I mean is that she will probably ignore me if I text her on Line or something. What if she puts out an ‘I already rejected you, which part do you not understand’ face when I ask her face to face? My heart will be chopped up at that point.”

“G-Go worry about that after you i-invited her.”

She’s right, but boys are sensitive, you know?

“Don’t worry about it. There’s still time after school today. The future me can definitely pull it off.”

“T-This future is right around the corner, you know...?”

No point in keeping thinking about it. I leaned on the railings and chewed my curry bread. As for Komari, her eyes floated around. She seems suspicious.



“What’s wrong, Komari? Are you waiting for someone?”

“N-No. Uh, well, h-here.”

Komari suddenly handed me a small box.

I remember this packaging paper. It was the same one Komari dropped when I ate crepes with Teiara-san.

“Eh, for me?”

Komari didn’t look at me. She nodded silently.

What does the sudden gift mean?

I saw the bookmark within after opening the package carefully.

It’s a thin metallic plate. There’s a hollowed Japanese icon on it. Honestly, it’s pretty well-made and fantastic.

“Are we exchanging Christmas presents? But I didn’t prepare anything.”

“N-No- that o-one is for N-Nukumizu specifically.”

“Eh, so, is this a birthday present?”

I didn’t expect Komari to prepare this for me.

I remembered how I felt when the stray cat I picked up allowed me to feed it for the first time as I carefully observed the bookmark.

“This is really well-made. Isn’t this expensive?”

“N-Not that ridiculous...”

"The print is a river and red leaves. What about this sphere? ...Is it a temari? [TL: It's a ball with numerous decorations on it. They are highly valued and cherished gifts that symbolize friendship and loyalty.]

"...S-Shut up."

Why is she mad at me?

"Did I say anything I wasn't supposed to?"

"T-That's why...I don't like t-this part of you!"

Komari covered her head with the lap blanket. She hid inside and started munching the bread.

Uh- I don't understand. Did I step on a landmine somewhere?

Even so, that Komari is giving me a present. Come to think of it, we have been through a lot together.

I observed the sky over the bookmark.

The winter sky is clear and cloudless. The weather report says that it will be sunny tomorrow too.

-I have to go for it. The match will take place after school.

I took a bite of curry bread to cheer myself up.

*

It's finally after school. I'm standing in the corridor outside the student council room. I slapped my cheeks to cheer myself up.

“Alright, here I go.”

I can do it. It's just asking Shikiya-san out for a Christmas Eve date.

A Christmas Eve...date...

How about I just text her on Line? But I can't do anything before she answers. If she ignores it, the opportunity for the next step will be-

“...Sensei is so lonely.”

Suddenly, a pair of hands covered my eyes from behind.

I shook off her hands and distanced myself immediately.

“Uwah, what are you doing, Konuki-sensei?”

“You didn't even come to the nurse's office, even though you promised me.”

“I'm really sorry. I've been swamped lately.”

I actually completely forgot about that, but I wasn't lying. I'm really busy.

Konuki-sensei approached me. I backed down one step at a time.

“Throwing me away after I have no use anymore? Sensei doesn't remember teaching you that.”

I don't think she has taught me anything, right? But I should give a mellow reply here.

I kept a certain distance and showed sensei a standard business smile.

“Sensei, you’re our advisor. You can visit the club room whenever you want, you know?”

“But someone may get hurt in club activities after school, right? I’ll get scolded if I’m not in the nurse’s office.”

She seems unconvinced.

“Then, are you sure you don’t want to be in the nurse’s office right now?”

“I’m here for a pre-meeting for the teacher’s conference tomorrow. ...Nukumizu-kun, why do you always avoid sensei when I get close to you?”

“It’s because sensei is getting close to me. We’ll chat with you next time, so please feel free to attend the meeting.”

That’s all I got. I wanted to get rid of her with a half-assed reply.

“Konuki-sensei, you’re here.”

A determined voice echoed throughout the corridor.

The voice owner is the student council president, Hibari Hokobaru. She approached Konuki-sensei. Her long hair swayed around.

“Isn’t this Hokobaru-san? What’s wrong?”

“I’ve brought the survey questionnaire you asked for. The statistics are here too.”

“Ara, thanks a lot. I’ll thank you properly the next time you come to the nurse’s office.”

“This is just my responsibility as part of the student council.
Please don’t worry about it.”

Why do I feel like Prez is subtly avoiding Konuki-sensei?

With this opportunity, I planned to escape immediately. In the end, sensei quickly turned around and faced me.

“...Where are you going leaving sensei behind?”

“I have something important to do. Sensei, aren’t you supposed to attend the meeting as well?”

“It’s fine to be a little late. Let’s continue talking about love with sensei, hmm?”

When did we talk about love?

It’s kind of awkward. Then, Prez stood next to me.

“Sensei, I’m sorry. I have to talk to him about the Literature Club activities. Can I bring him away?”

I’ve never heard of that before.

I’m confused. As for Konuki-sensei, she scratched her head full of regret.

“Ara, ...that’s a shame. Nukumizu-kun, don’t get too carried away, you know?”

Her advice is somewhat confusing. I nodded for the time being. After that, Prez put her hand on my shoulder.

“Nukumizu-kun, sensei allowed it. Let’s go.”

“Uh, well...”

Prez ignored my reaction and walked toward the new building.

After a while, she glanced behind her.

"That teacher is a headache. Even though she's really considerate to her students, she goes overboard sometimes."

Seeing Prez's bitter smile, I realized she was helping me out.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to trouble Prez about my problem."

"No sweat. This is just a president's responsibility."

Even so, why is this girl still hugging my shoulder? But she may think I'm annoyed by her if I say it...

"Uh, I want to talk to Shikiya-san."

"Shikiya's in the playground. She's making a catalog of the equipment in the PE storage. I'll bring you there, alright?"

Eh, I see. Is she following me all the way to the shoe shelves?

I don't know if Prez noticed my little display of emotions, but her lips curled up.

"Also, I was serious when I said I wanted to talk to you. You've been hanging out with Shikiya tons lately. Aren't you two close?"

"Uh, no, not really."

I can't say it. The reason I'm with her- is to take back a doujinshi with you in it.

I pondered about it. Prez looked at me and laughed.

“Don’t need to hide it anymore. I know all of it.”

“Eh? Prez knows already!?”

Seriously? This person can remain unfazed by a genderswap doujinshi with her name in it.

I’m surprised. Prez hugged my shoulders tightly in excitement.

“It’s not like I’m blind, you know? What I mean is, ...young man, you have fallen in love, right?”

“No.”

Prez is blind.

“What’s there to be worried about? Being crazy in love is the specialty of teenagers, even if your love can’t come to fruition.”

She also just assumes that I’ll definitely be rejected.

It will be a pain if I deny it here, so I decided to keep my mouth shut. Then, Prez suddenly spoke up sternly.

“You also seem to know vice president Teiara-kun.”

“Ah, I guess.”

“She seems to be hiding something from me recently. Do you know anything?”

“What? Why are you asking me?”

“Hmm, what do you think?”

Prez spread her arms and quickly blocked me.

"Love is a human's freedom as long as they don't go off the path of morality. However, in other words, those who decide to deviate from it have no right to love. Don't you agree?"

"Uh, ...what does that mean?"

"There are a few rather quiet spots in this school. Someone saw Teiara-kun and a boy going into one of those places a while ago."

That's me.

I couldn't hide the fact that my heart was pounding. Prez approached me.

"I think something is wrong with her lately. She's always saying weird terms like 'totoi', 'bottom', and 'ideal lover' these days. She even glared at me with a tie she found in her hand once." [TL: Totoi (尊い), use this word when moe (萌え) isn't enough to express how cute someone is.]

I see. Teiara-san is already doomed.

"Uh, she has been consulting me recently."

"I see. ...Is it about love?"

"Uh, yes, close. So, please don't ask any further."

"I understand. Problems like this are better left unseen."

Prez patted my shoulder like she understood everything. I don't think she knows what's going on.

"Hiba-nee, did you check up on the Orchestra Club? It's almost time, you know?"

The savior who just appeared is Sakurai-kun, the treasurer of the student council.

“It’s Hiroto. Can’t you see I’m heading there?”

Prez smiled chicly. However, Sakurai-kun sighed in exhaustion.

“The Music Room is in the opposite direction. Here, quick.”

Sakurai-kun grabbed Prez’s hand. He nodded in gratitude at me and left.

I think he’s having a rough time too. If that’s the case, how about you help me take care of those Literature Club girls as well...?

I sped toward the shoe shelves as I thought about that.

*

This is the PE storage at the edge of the playground.

The door is opened. There’s no one around.

Metallic battling sounds can be heard from afar. I slowly approached the storage.

I’ve never been to this place since I got locked in with Yakshio in July.

...Also, I really didn’t look at her at that time. I just thought I might take a peek.

I peeked inside. A girl is standing with her back against me.

White hair. Her pale legs reach out of her short skirt. I’m getting cold from seeing this alone.

She must be Shikiya-san.

This is a great opportunity for me to talk to her without letting anyone see us. I made up my mind and entered the storage.

“Senpai, do you have a moment?”

My voice echoed at an unexpectedly loud volume within the cramped PE storage.

Shikiya-san remained stiff. She then suddenly turned her head around and looked at me. Scary.

“Nukumizu-kun, ...what’s wrong...?”

She quickly closed her notebook. Her body wobbled as she approached me.

Do your best, Nukumizu. I’m already this far. I just need to be brave and say it.

“Uh, ...I want to ask you whether you caught a cold after going back that day?”

Yes, I chickened out. What are you going to do?

I didn’t learn from my mistake. Shikiya-san nodded.

“No, ...I’m fine. ...Thank you...”

“Good.”

It’s good, but it’s also not good.”

I fiddled with my fingertips. Shikiya-san stared at me.

“You came...all the way here...to say that...?”

“No, it’s not like...”

Sigh, let’s just get this over with.

I took a step forward and looked into Shikiya-san’s white pupils.

“H-Hey! Are you busy tomorrow night?”

“Not...really?”

I took another step forward.

Shikiya-san’s body wobbled as if someone had pushed her.

“If you’re free, can you go to the station with me and watch the Christmas light show?”

Yes, I said it!

My whole body is enveloped in a sense of freedom. There seem to be cheers from behind, too.

I can’t blame them. I really did my best. A cheer or two is well-deserved-

“...Eh?”

I turned around while trembling. A group of people had already gathered at the storage entrance before I knew it.

What!? When did they get here?

I’m in a miserable state right now. During this time, Shikiya-san put her hands on my shoulders from behind.

“Yeah, ...sure...”

After whispering next to my ears, Shikiya-san just wobbled as she stepped out of the PE storage.

As they lingered around the door, the sports club students immediately made a path.

Then, among the crowd, I saw the only girl wearing a uniform- Yakishio.

*

Aichidaigaku-Mae is the closest station to the location.

I got on the train sliding into the platform, and sat in an empty seat.

...A Christmas Eve date. I didn't expect this to work.

Honestly, my goal is just to bring her out. So, in reality, this isn't a date.

However, Shikiya-san doesn't know about that. That's why-

A girl with short hair jumped on the train when the door was about to close. It's Yakishio.

Back then, when Shikiya-san had just left the PE storage-

Yakishio and I looked at each other quietly. Her friends then brought her away.

Even though I didn't do anything, it feels...very awkward.

Yakishio sat right next to me. She seems to know that I'm on this train beforehand.

There's an empty seat between us.

“Yakishio, are you done with your make-up classes?”

“Yeah, I can be in club activities again starting tomorrow. That’s why I dropped by the Track and Field Club to say hi just then.”

That’s why you’re wearing your uniform.

The conversation paused for a moment. Yakishio suddenly showed a playful look.

“Hey, I didn’t even know about this before. Nukkun, so that’s what has been going on-”

“Eh, what are you talking about?”

Yakishio reached her hand out and smacked my shoulder. It hurts.

“I’m talking about you and Shikiya-senpai. We aren’t strangers, right? I would’ve helped you if you had told me earlier.”

Ah, she did misunderstand.

“No, it’s not what you think. I asked senpai out, but it’s not a date.”

“Spending Christmas Eve together is a date! Even though Shikiya-senpai is a bit scary, she’s indeed a beautiful girl. Make sure you take her down tomorrow!”

“Sorry, I haven’t told Yakshio yet, right? Tamaki-senpai and I had a discussion. I’m responsible for calling Shikiya-senpai out.”

“You and Ex-Prez?”

I told her everything about our plan. Yakishio nodded in admiration.

“...I see. The goal is for that person to mend her relationship with Tsukinoki-senpai, right?”

“I don’t know whether they can do it. However, those two used to be close. That’s why I want them to have a proper chat, at least.”

“Ha- I see. I had no idea at all.”

Yakishio looked toward the sky. She seems a little lonely. She repeated.

“-I had no idea at all.”

Yakishio is excluded from this. Even though I didn’t do it on purpose, I’m a little worried about her.

Yakishio is the ace of the Track and Field Club. At the same part, she’s part of the Literature Club.

However, that’s just Yakishio’s identity. It doesn’t represent her own feelings.

I should’ve noticed it in the beginning.

“...Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

Instead, she gave me a sad smile.

“Look, it’s because I think you’re busy with make-up classes. The Track and Field Club is tough on you as well, right?”

“Hmm, indeed, you’re right. There’s a lot in the Track and Field Club.”

Yakishio sighed slowly. An indescribable smile appeared on her face.

“...Did something bad happen?”

“Not really. But the advising teacher and captain have a lot of expectations for me.”

“Right, you got a medal at the prefectural competition, right?”

“Yeah, 3rd place in the 100-meter race. I’m the fastest in the Track and Field Club. I guess that includes every distance.”

“This is already incredibly strong for a first-year student, right? It’s normal for the people you know to have expectations of you.”

“But I’m not good enough for the national races yet. I know I still need to work hard even if I can go.”

Her body tilted toward me slightly as she continued quietly.

“Even though I can’t answer those expectations, I’m getting special treatment. It makes me feel a little restless.”

Sometimes, she shows a slightly cold yet mature expression.

I looked away from her and toward the window.

“I know Yakishio has been working hard. You can chill in the Literature Club any time you want.”

“But I can’t write novels, right? Even Yana-chan can write.”

“Yeah, she finished hers as well.”

The novel Yanami has submitted this time is also about convenience store food appreciation. There seem to be new developments too, but it definitely has to do with food.

“In contrast to her, I can’t show up every day. I always wonder whether I’m doing my part in the club.”

An announcement of arrival played. The train started slowing down.

Yakishio stretched her body and stood up.

“I’ll have to decide when I’m a second-year student.”

...Decide?

“Yakishio, it’s not at your station yet.”

“I want to run. Well, Nukkun, do your best.”

“Do my best for what?”

The train stopped. Yakishio walked toward the opening doors and threw something at me.

My limbs flailed around as I tried to catch it. It’s a protein bar.

There’s a “Happy Basude” written on it with a marker.

She probably doesn’t know how to spell birthday...

“It’s not like Christmas happens every day, you know? Go get her.”

Yakishio pointed toward me determinedly. She quickly got off the train.

We aren't doing anything related to that tomorrow. Does this girl even understand...?

I watched as Yakishio disappeared behind the platform, as I remembered Shikiya-san inside the PE storage.

Her hands felt really soft when she touched my shoulders. Her cold breaths from her lips tickled my ears-

The train is moving again. I sat down and closed my eyes tightly.

I attempted to empty my brain. However, the touch of the protein bar in my hand dragged me back to reality.

By the way, Yakishio, who told you about my birthday?

Komari knows it too. Did Yanami talk about me in the club room?

I gave up on clearing my brain of those chaotic thoughts and sank deep into the chair again.

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Literature Club Report - Winter Edition

<The Duel Has Just Begun?> by Anna Yanami

I'm already in the 7-Eleven on my way to school early in the morning.

The speaker in the store is playing Christmas songs.

The decorations are already radiating Christmas vibes. However, everyone is so busy in the morning that they don't have time to care about trivial things like this.

As usual, I occupied the food court by myself. However, someone called my name this time.

"Hey, Ako-san. You seem so chill today, you know?"

The guy trying to talk to me is XX-kun from the same class.

We aren't that close.

"I'm just eating breakfast. Can you stop bothering me?"

My breakfast is a pork bun.

The meaty stuffing and chewy dough are extraordinary. I have to try it 5 times every week in winter.

XX-kun doesn't seem to know where he's heading. He looked in my direction and said, "Oh, I see." What a smartass.

Outside the window, OO-kun is waiting for the traffic signal at the zebra crossing. A girl is standing next to him.

That's Jko-chan.

She's the girl who has been hanging out with him lately. I can see they are chatting happily.

Going to school with a guy in public, I think this is a little indecent.

XX-kun put a cup before me when I was eating my pork bun silently.

It's a hot latte, a large one also.

I glared at him because it blocked my sight. As for XX-kun, he sat down two seats away from me.

"Here. You like coffee, right?"

XX-kun didn't say that loudly.

Come to think of it, it's December 24th today. Is this a Christmas present?

Even though I don't really like it, I'm not a girl who tramples on other people's kindness.

The pork bun has already depleted the moisture in my mouth. A cup of hot coffee can soothe my body.

The coffee is thick, but there's a refreshing taste of milk mixed within. This is delicious every time I try it."

XX-kun, did you put sugar into this?"

"I did. Ako-san wants two packs of sugar, right?"

You can't be helped. I sighed internally.

A large cup needs three packs of sugar.

However, a mature woman must not expose her emotions so easily.

The traffic light turned green. He and Jko-chan laughed and walked across the zebra crossing.

Seeing that, I can feel there's an extra tinge of bitterness in my latte.

*

December 24th. The evening of Christmas Eve.

Toyohashi Station. A massive pedestrian bridge connects the private metro and tram station.

The light show is on the right-hand side of the station's east gate. There's a spacious circular area in the middle.

I observed the situation from afar at the exit of the tram station.

-There are 15 minutes left until the promised 6 PM.

The sky is getting dark. A faint white glow appeared due to the street lights.

Bright neon spots sparkle at the light show corner. Despite having some distance, I can feel I'm attracted to that dreamy atmosphere.

“Yo, thanks for waiting.”

Tamaki-senpai came here with a slightly nervous expression.

He's wearing a slightly mature lapel coat.

“Ah, good work, senpai.”

It feels a little awkward to chat outside of school...

Tamaki-senpai reached his hand out and took off something from my hair.

“What is this? Confetti?”

“My little sister Kaju did it. She caught me when I was heading out.”

“Why would this be the case if you were just caught by your little sister...?”

I don’t know, either.

“She thought I was going on a Christmas date and gave me a grand farewell. I had to remove the celebration banner from the balcony to stop her.”

“...I think things are indeed tough on you.”

Not as tough as senpai, right?

Is it luckier to be messed with by your little sister or girlfriend?

No, before that, having a girlfriend already makes you a great winner in life...

“Are we really going to do it today? Christmas happens once a year, you know?”

“Well, I have already decided to apologize frantically during dinner.”

I meant to say that as a slightly sarcastic joke, yet senpai returned with an ultra-showoff attack.

Indeed, I’m inferior to a person with a girlfriend. Just as I sighed deflatedly due to the subtle hopelessness, senpai’s face suddenly grew anxious.

“...I think Koto is already here.”

I followed his line of sight. Someone who resembles senpai seems to be standing at the bridge afar.

Eh, shouldn't she be the girl next to her? I can't tell when she's not wearing a uniform...

"Don't get too close, hmm? We're screwed if they see us."

That's right. I won't accept a result like that after going this far.

I hid behind senpai and secretly observed Tsukinoki-senpai.

"Shikiya-san isn't here yet. Don't tell me she will be walking past us here?"

"She seems to be in a taxi. I don't think she'll go through us. I just texted her."

The only message in the chat is <I'm on my way.> She's really cool despite dressing like a gal.

"That works. It's a little much for me to see her-"

Perhaps he's still a bit worried. Tamaki-senpai looked around.

I spoke up toward his back.

"...Is it time for you to tell me?"

"Tell you what-"

Senpai hesitated to speak up. I finally understood.

"Not long ago, I thought something happened between those two."

I'm almost entirely sure about this. I stared at senpai as he tried to look away.

"It's not because of those two. Instead, there was some sort of conflict between the three of you. Am I right?"

Senpai looked around again. He looked elsewhere and spoke up.

"...That was when Koto and I were just second-year students. Tsuwabuki Fest just ended. Koto was still in the student council, a good friend of Shikiya-san."

He avoided being swallowed by the crowd as he continued stuttering.

"That relationship is...a little different from Koto and Komari-chan's. It was like I couldn't interfere."

Even Tamaki-senpai couldn't step into those two's close relationship.

Something like that could never happen today. I didn't know there was a time like that.

"I'm in the club room alone one day after school. That girl uncharacteristically showed up. Then..."

His tone turned deeper. Senpai's expression doesn't seem to be angry or sad. Instead, it's confusing.

"What happened after that?"

He nodded silently and slowly spoke up.

"Shikiya-san- pushed me over."

"Ha?"

Wait, what is this guy talking about?

"Wasn't it because she suddenly fell!? No, what were you two doing!? Were senpai and Shikiya-senpai like that?"

"Hold on. We didn't do anything! We didn't- I should say Koto came in at that key moment!"

"Wasn't that the worst scenario possible?

"...Yes."

Seriously? No wonder those two have a twisted relationship.

I leaned on the railing and sighed.

...But wait.

"Can these two even face each other after something like that? In Tsukinoki-senpai's eyes, isn't that like seeing her boyfriend's mistress while on a date?"

I don't know what senpai's thinking. He closed his eyes and frowned tightly.

"-I don't think that girl had feelings for me."

I don't get it because no one has feelings for me.

After opening his eyes, senpai stared at the bridge adorned by the light show.

"Koto and I have been avoiding talking about this on purpose. However, we still can't pretend nothing has happened."

...Now I know these three's past.

However, the meaning of what had happened- is still unclear.

“Nukumizu, Shikiya-san is already here.”

Senpai looks at a girl whose appearance resembles a beautiful butterfly.

A brown coat wraps around her body. There's a knitted hat on her head.

This aura can't be mistaken. It's Shikiya-san.

I took out my phone.

The answer waiting for us ahead is still unknown.

However, if Tamaki-senpai has already decided to face it, I just need to fulfill my promise to Teiara-san.

*

5:54 PM, December 24th

Ring Section, Toyohashi Station East Exit Bridge

The light decorations spread as they tangle up the bridge. With Koto's location at the center, the whole decoration shape resembles that of a heart. It's an excellent spot for taking photos.

A group of high school girls is taking pictures excitedly.

A pair of siblings made their pose. The mother before them pressed the shutter.

Koto's sight floated around the crowd. She's letting herself bathe in the gentle blue and white light.

Last year's Christmas seems like it was yesterday.

At that time, she was just Shintaro's childhood friend.

She looked forward to that light with a heart full of expectations. Yet, in the end, she had to return home with her tail between her legs.

However, right now, she can already treat that incident as a joke. She lowered her head and attempted to hide her smile. Snowflake-shaped shadows dance around her legs.

She has always looked forward to romantic scenes she saw somewhere.

However, she can't thoroughly enjoy them due to the embarrassment in her heart.

“...At least I can this year.”

It's the last Christmas in high school.

The coming year remains unknown. However, their future is already entirely different.

She wants to be with him forever, together for eternity.

Such words appear to be so empty and vague.

She can tell despite being as young as she is.

Her thoughts are interrupted by her phone's notification sound.

The person she's waiting for sends her a message.

<Sorry, I'll be a little late. Can you stay in that spot for a while?>

...Did something happen to Shintaro?

A worrying unusualness flooded her body.

-Stay there.

Usually, he should have asked her to wait for him in a warmer location.

What does that mean- is he preparing a surprise?

While he doesn't look like such a person, he sometimes follows his instincts.

...However, today, she wants something more ordinary.

An ordinary couple spending a normal Christmas together-

She wants to engrave today's "normalness" in her heart-

Koto lowered her head. A smile appeared on her face.

I have changed. She couldn't help but think about that.

She used to yearn to be a special person to the boy she loved. She wanted them to become a couple that was different from everyone else.

However, she doesn't need that now. She's okay as long as the two of them are together. That's all she asks for.

-Koto thought about these things. Then, a pair of brown boots entered her sight.

The scene is nothing out of the ordinary. Yet, it sent cold shivers down her spine.

That pace of steps seems a bit familiar. It reminded her of a distant memory.

Koto immediately raised her head as if something had stimulated her.

“...Shikiya.”

That was a person who used to be with her in real-life and in memory.

She's wearing a knitted hat. Her white pupils seem to be looking in Koto's direction.

Her bare legs are exposed under her short skirt below her coat. It feels cold to look at her alone.

“Why are you here?”

“I'm...waiting for someone...too...”

Koto is confused. The strength in her words dissociated into the night sky.

“Is it okay for you to go to another place? I can't leave.”

“Me...neither.”

She took a step forward. Her body wobbled.

“He asked me to...not leave...and wait for him...”

The meaning behind Shikiya-san's sentence slowly soaked into Koto's head. It didn't take long.

-Someone tricked her.

In other words, this is a farce meant for her to meet with Shikiya here.

Koto acted calmly and tried not to show any signs of nervousness. She asked.

"Shikiya, who are you meeting with? Don't tell me-"

"Nukumizu-kun...from the Literature Club..."

Shikiya tilted her head slightly. She seems complacent.

"He...invited me out."

That kouhai has a part in this, indeed.

Koto rubbed her forehead and shook her head.

"Nukumizu-kun is quite capable despite having an earnest and adorable look. He tricked you."

"What does...that mean?"

"Think about it. We fell into their trap."

Shikiya is in disbelief as she watches Koto waving her hand.

"Nukumizu-kun...isn't coming?"

“I guess.”

Koto thought about just leaving on the spot.

She hates to stay here and go along with someone’s else plan. However, running away isn’t exactly an attractive option either.

Shikiya continued to stand next to her dazedly. Koto gave up struggling.

She approached Shikiya and looked at the lights on the bridge.

“...Shikiya, are you going out with Nukumizu-kun?”

“No, ...we are...friends, right?”

“Why would I know that?”

She thought they would never have a conversation anymore.

She once thought there was already nothing left to talk about between the two of them.

However, instead of insecurity, Shikiya staying next to her doesn’t seem that unnatural to her.

However, she can’t explicitly avoid that one thing.

“Do you still remember what you have done in the Literature Club’s room last November?”

“...Yes.”

At the time, Koto did her best to schedule student council work and the Literature at different periods.

Shikiya and Shintaro shouldn't have any point of contact.

That's why Koto felt like she was watching that scene over a screen instead of reality when she opened the door to the club room.

Perhaps it was to protect her heart from getting hurt or that it was something she could never understand.

Koto took a deep breath and asked the question she had long been pondering.

"Do you- love Shintaro?"

The question is simple. However, unbelievably, Shikiya simply tilted her head.

"...I don't know."

"What do you mean by you don't know? You still can't tell whether you love him or hate him after doing something like-"

"Sorry, ...but, ...I don't understand..."

Shikiya acted like a depressed child. A tinge of pain appeared in Koto's heart.

"I'm the one who doesn't understand. Shikiya, you aren't a woman who loves to play with men, right?"

"Yes..."

"Then why did you do that?"

"It's because Koto-san...likes...Tamaki-san."

The answer came a year late, yet it was an unexpected one. Koto couldn't help but ask.

"Is it like you want something that someone else has? Is that what you mean?"

Shikiya gently shook her head. However, she seems determined.

"I want to be like...Koto-san."

"Eh? Me?"

Another unexpected answer produced another question for Koto.

"But, ...there's too much that...I don't understand... Koto-san."

Shikiya wobbled.

"So, ...I wondered...whether I could understand...if I fell in love with...the person Koto-san liked."

After that, Shikiya stopped moving as if she was a turned-off machine.

Her words repeated in Koto's mind.

She contemplated her words again and again. Koto stopped reaching her hand out when she felt her fingertips about to touch the girl's feelings.

The numbness on her fingertips tells her that she can't proceed anymore.

"...Even so, did you solve it by doing that? The most important thing is that what were you going to do if Shintaro

had feelings for you?"

"The person Koto-san loves, ...I think...I won't hate him."

She muttered. Her side profile under the dancing light show looks so beautiful that even Koto is attracted to her.

If Shikiya really is in love with Shintaro-

Such impossible worries flooded her chest.

"Why do you want to be like me? You're more beautiful, cuter, and smarter. You have a lot of friends as well."

"I don't...even know...how to smile."

Shikiya sounded like she squeezed that sentence out of her chest.

"Happiness, ...excitement, ...sadness, ...even though I can feel them, ...I can never be sure..."

Shikiya took a breath and continued.

"Koto-san can always...express your feelings...directly. ... You're so charming."

She sighed and took another deep breath, far deeper than her previous ones.

"That's why...I want to...be like Koto-san."

The emotions within this sentence definitely aren't intense.

If anything, they almost disappeared into the winter's breezes.

It's the vague dazedness from being unable to manifest her determination.

However, Shikiya did everything she could to send these words to Koto and Koto alone.

Koto gave her a warm smile.

"I don't understand everything you have said, but I can smile even when I'm not happy."

With that, she showed her usual mischievous smile.

"There are moments when I smile to go along with the mood. Sometimes I laugh just because others are laughing. It doesn't take much for me to be happy."

"Really...?"

"Yes, in the end, I don't even know whether I'm happy because I'm laughing or I'm laughing because I'm happy."

She reached her hand out and fiddled with the fur ball on Shikiya's hat with the tip of her finger.

Shikiya looked at her worriedly.

"You don't.. hate me..? It's because you have no idea.. what I'm thinking about."

"Even though you seem emotionless, I can tell when you're happy or excited, you know?"

This time, Koto laughed from the bottom of her heart.

“I won’t hate you, okay? Just be yourself, Shikiya.”

It’s her most sincere thoughts without anything else.

“Yes, ...thank you...”

After a tiny nod, Shikiya’s fingertip stroked Koto’s hair.

It’s almost like she wants to be spoiled. Koto mumbled.

“I’m sorry, Shikiya. I didn’t understand you despite spending such a long time with you. I’m an insensitive person, and I have hurt you a lot-”

Shikiya’s finger touched Koto’s lips as if she didn’t want her to continue any further.

“Koto-san, ...smile up...?”

Koto showed a slightly puzzled smile. As for Shikiya, she carefully stroked the contour of her lips.

After that, as if she wanted to imitate her, Shikiya tried to make a smile with her lips.

“Being with Koto-san...makes me...very happy.”

Shikiya distanced herself. Her wobbling steps are like the beginning of a dance as she walks toward the plaza center.

Koto followed her. Shikiya curled her fingers on her left hand and reached out to Koto.

“Let’s...make a heart with our hands...?”

“It’s like we’re a couple...”

Koto smiled bitterly. She reached her hand out and formed a heart shape.

“Alright, is this okay?”

Shikiya showed the smile she had just learned again.

“If we...look at everything through this heart...together, ... you can pass your exam.”

“You’re lying, right?”

“Yes, ...actually, ...it’s that we can fall in love with each other...”

“Don’t we like each other already when we can put out a heart together?”

This can’t be helped. She can’t jump ship anymore. Koto got her face close to Shikiya. Her eyes glanced at the heart they made.

“Is this okay? Shikiya, your face is cold.”

The moment she turned toward her-

Shikiya touched Koto’s lips with her own.

Koto paused because of the shock. Then, she finally noticed she was about to be swallowed by her lips. She quickly jumped away.

“Huh!? W-What are you doing!? Eh, wait, are you serious!?”

Shikiya-san put her finger on her lips and mumbled.

“It feels...very soft.”

“That doesn’t matter!”

Koto squatted down. She wrapped her hands around her head.

“Sigh, you, ...I was just going to pretend nothing had happened, and then you just threw all of that away and went on the attack.”

Shikiya remained in her poker face. She gently put her hand on Koto’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it. ...I can be the one engaging if it’s Koto-san...”

“You don’t have to, alright? By the way, how come you’re the top?”

“Then, is Koto-san...the bottom?”

“It’s because I have a boyfriend- uh, what are we even talking about?”

...That’s enough. It feels stupid when she thinks about it.

Koto moaned and stood up. She watched the sparkling neon lights.

It’s just a bunch of LEDs.

It’s just a bunch of slightly dazzling and romantic lights meant to lure a person’s true feelings out.

“The more I think about this, the angrier I am. Shikiya, you haven’t had dinner, right? Should we go eat something together?”

“But, …you’re waiting for Tamaki-san…”

“He’s definitely with Nukumizu-kun, anyway. Oh, Nukumizu-kun asked you out, right? Are you two really not dating?”

Shikiya tilted her head.

“We aren’t. …What’s wrong?”

“Look, isn’t today Christmas Eve? You accepted the invitation, so I thought maybe you were into him.”

“No…”

She shook her head. Her white pupils turned to the sky.

“But, …I think he’s…a little adorable.”

How should I interpret this? Koto pondered for a moment, but she decided to let it go.

It’s best not to touch something sprouting at this moment.

Koto took out her phone. She started making a call after glancing at the screen.

After two dial tones, the person picked it up. She immediately spoke up.

“Shintaro, can you hear me? I’m going to have dinner with Shikiya. I’ll go find you when I think it’s time.”

After that, she ended the call quietly and reached her hand out toward Shikiya.

“Here. I’ll spoil you today, okay?”

“Koto-san, ...are you sure...?”

“Alright, Shikiya, what do you want?”

“I...want fish...”

Shikiya acted like a shy child as she sheepishly reached her hand out.

“Leave it to me. I’ll let you try the best red goldeye snapper you ever have.”

Koto held her hand tightly.

She showed the same smile she had a year ago, but this time, it seemed more mature.

*

A cafe near the station.

The music box is playing Christmas songs quietly.

Under the dim candle lights, Tamaki-senpai and I are looking at each other across the dining table.

“Sorry to make you pay for me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can’t stand eating here alone.”

Tamaki-senpai gently smiled.

Senpai’s Christmas dinner is canceled on the spot. While I’m okay with him inviting me here, we’re surrounded by couples. Our appearance is at the wrong time and place.

“I’ve already reserved this place in advance. I worked my butt off preparing for the exam as I looked forward to this day...”

Senpai suddenly leaned on the table.

“How did this happen?”

I think this is some sort of fate.

But I’m the one who dragged senpai in, so I guess I’m also responsible.

“Alright, don’t be sad. It appears that Shikiya-senpai and Tsukinoki-senpai have already mended their relationship. She’s not mad at you either.”

“Really? I think she’s quite angry.”

“She’s just embarrassed, right? Alright, here are the drinks. Please raise your head.”

The waiter came to the table with drinks.”

“This is the Christmas special, Aranciata Rossa.”

Thud. A huge glass cup is put at the center of the table.

There’s red juice in the cup with two straws helically intertwined with each other.

-We’re supposed to share it.

“Senpai, I think something terrible has been served to us.”

“...It’s Christmas, you know?”

Senpai slightly leaned forward and put the straw into his mouth.

“It’s quite good. Do you want to try it?”

“Well, sure.”

Indeed, it’s a little bitter, but it’s delicious.

We took a sip in turns. Then, Prez seemed to have realized something.

“Nukumizu, try to drink it together with me.”

“Uh, no.”

“I don’t really want to do it either. Here. Come try it.”

Why are you trying it if you don’t want to...?

There’s no way. I did what he said. In the end, a heart-shaped imprint came into view.

“Oh! The juice will turn the straw into a heart if we drink it at the same time?”

“Yes, the heart can only be seen when looked at from above.”

They did spend some effort in making the straw. The waiter served us another dish when we were discussing its design.

“Thanks for the wait. This is the special Christmas appetizer.”

A square plate is put before us.

There are some snowflake-like white bubbles and all kinds of appetizers in various colors.

“You can eat these bubbles, right?”

“It’s called mousse, right? You’re supposed to paint it on Santa and eat it.”

“So, you mean this summoned beast-looking thing is Santa Claus?”

In the end, this is quite interesting.

After finishing the chicken main course, Tamaki-senpai has already regained his energy.

“-Seriously? Did Ayu-chan confess in the latest episode?”

Senpai leaned forward in excitement. I nodded sternly.

“Ehh, then something bad is going to happen next week. Confessing at this key moment is just setting up a flag by herself.”

“Uwah, I really want to see the next episode. I hope I don’t get spoiled before the exam ends.”

Tamaki-senpai laughed as he wiped his mouth with a handkerchief.

“You really were fully committed to your ban on manga and anime.”

“Yeah, there’s another exam right after the new year. I have to catch up on my homework after transferring to science.”

“Right. Did senpai already decide which major you are going to?”

“Did I not tell you? Agriculture. I’m planning to learn to brew.”

Brewing, ...like miso and sake? I guess it’s sake.

“If I remember correctly, Tsukinoki-senpai’s family runs a liquor store, right?”

“Not a liquor store. She’s the only daughter of a brewer.”

Oh, I see. That’s why he’s learning to brew. In other words-

“Eh, have you two already gone that far?”

“It’s not that ridiculous, right? I just want to share her burden a little in the future.”

Senpai chugged the drink as if he wanted to cover his embarrassment.

...Speaking of the future after graduation-

I do plan to leave my house after getting into a university. However, I can’t imagine leaving everything behind at all. Well, I can imagine eating dinner alone.

“...Hope everything goes well.”

“Trust me. You just need to prepare for my triumph.”

Senpai raised his thumb victoriously. I purposely showed my contempt.

“Forget about the exam. I feel like senpai has bigger issues with girls. You even said you weren’t popular with girls. Now I know that isn’t true at all.”

“Shikiya-san doesn’t count, alright? Also, I think the same goes for you, Nukumizu. You’re totally in your popular phase, right?”

“Hello? Girls don’t even like me.”

This is a natural retort, yet senpai doesn’t care.

“Nukumizu, just because you’re in your popular phase doesn’t mean girls like you.”

Uh, isn’t that BS? That’s breaking the very definition of “popular phase”, right?

Senpai continued with a serious expression.

“All first-year students in the Literature Club are girls except for you, right?”

“Ha, you’re right.”

“Of course, you’ll be surrounded by guys if everyone in the club is a man. It’s the same even if you’re in the student council, right?”

He’s right. I nodded in honesty.

“In other words, the core of a popular phase is you interacting with girls based on all kinds of coincidences. I’ve heard there are three such opportunities in one’s life. However, if you keep being so dense, it will be like nothing has ever happened if you keep being so dense.”

“Please wait. So, you mean there are two popular phases left in my life?”

“Assuming that this is your first one. Did you hang out with girls before?”

I don't even have a friend, not to mention girls.

I wanted to laugh it off. However, an ancient memory appeared in my mind.

"...Come to think of it, I did play house with girls in kindergarten."

Being a boy is rough, man.

"Then that was your first time. Are there any other moments?"

"Hmm, ...my little sister's friend often came to play when I was in middle school. I did hang out with her sometimes."

"Nukumizu, is your whole life a rom-com...?"

How come senpai sounds a little irritated?

"It wasn't great. That girl liked running away from school. My little sister was her only friend. She also came to my house even when my little sister wasn't there. There wasn't anything I could do aside from playing games with her. Both of us didn't talk to each other."

After thinking about it for a while, senpai nodded forcefully.

"This kind of counts as the second time, which means that right now, this is your final popular phase in your life."

Seriously? Then I'm fated to be alone for the rest of my life.

The plates on the table are being taken away as I think about my retired life. The desserts are the only dishes that haven't been served yet.

Tamaki-senpai frantically took out his phone when we were choosing our after-meal drinks.

“Sorry, I have to pick up a call.”

He left the restaurant after saying that. I can tell it's definitely from Tsukinoki-senpai based on his anxious look.

Outside the window, senpai keeps apologizing on the phone. He's apologizing like a crazed man.

Why do people keep bowing down when they say sorry over the phone...?

He clapped his hands toward me after coming back.

“Sorry! I'll have to go.”

“Did Tsukinoki-senpai forgive you?”

Tamaki-senpai got into his jacket and smiled bitterly.

“That depends on my upcoming performance. Take your time, Nukumizu.”

Tamaki-senpai paid at the cashier and dashed outside.

I remembered Teiara-san after he left.

Her deal is to give a solution to Tsukinoki-senpai and Shikiya-san's relationship before tomorrow.

I think I've accomplished that already, but she's the one calling the shot. I think she's kind of a weird girl. It will be troublesome to explain this to her...

During this time, the waiter came next to the table and smiled.

“My dear guest, can I serve you the desserts if you’re done ordering the drinks?”

“Hmm? Ah, sure.”

A cold shiver suddenly passed through my neck when I grabbed the beverage menu.

“I want...peach ginger tea.”

I trembled after that whisper into my ears. It can’t be anyone else. It’s Shikiya-san.

“Senpai, how did you know I’m here?”

“I asked...Koto-san...”

She took off her knitted hat as she sat in Tamaki-senpai’s seat.

The waiter is unfazed by the sudden change of personnel. He maintained his perfect smile toward us.”

“Peach ginger tea for beverages. Is that okay?”

“Ah, yes. We’ll have two, please.”

With that, the waiter disappeared into the kitchen. Shikiya-san remained still.

This is a little awkward...

I was about to speak up. Shikiya-san raced before me and mumbled.

“You broke...our promise.”

“Uh, I didn’t mean to-”

Honestly, my goal is just to bring Shikiya-san out. The whole invitation thing is a farce- yeah, I'm the worst.

"Uh, I'm sorry. I don't even know how I should apologize."

"But...I forgive you..."

Shikiya-san hesitated for a moment. Then, she lifted her lips with both of her index fingers.



“Uh, is this-”

“I’m trying to...smile...”

“...Okay.”

I didn’t know how to react. Shikiya-san covered her face with her hat.

“That...doesn’t count...”

“No, no, that was really nice! Here. The tasty desserts have already been served.”

I tried to energize the mood and recommended the desserts to Shikiya-san.

Buche de Noel. It’s a standard cake roll for Christmas.

Shikiya-san caught her breath slightly. She held the cup of black tea in her hands.

“That was...embarrassing.”

Was that my fault?

After recovering, she ate the dessert and muttered.

“Smiling...is hard...”

Shikiya-san’s face is distorted by the steam from the black tea.

I’ve never thought about whether smiling is difficult or not.

“But isn’t senpai smiling all the time?”

“Do I...smile...?”

Shikiya-san hastily leaned forward.

She's closer than I thought. It's a little terrifying.

"Uh, let me think. Even though you don't make noises, your overall aura seems happy."

"Aura...?"

Ah, how come she seems so deflated suddenly?

"Alright, here's an example. People say dogs express their feelings through their tails, right? However, if you observe closely, you can understand their emotions from their posture, movement, and eyes."

Even though I think this explanation is very awkward, Shikiya-san nods in satisfaction.

"Yes, ...dogs, ...I like..."

Yeah, I like them too.

I'm a little relieved as I continue to devour the dessert. Shikiya-san stared at me. It seems like she wants to say something.

"Is there something on my face?"

"Is everything okay...about the doujinshi?"

"I'll talk to Teiara-san tomorrow. I've already fulfilled her promise-

"Promise...?"

Ah, I still haven't told Shikiya-san about this, right?

After telling her about my promise to Teiara-san, Shikiya-san mumbled. She seemed quite content.

“Teiara-chan...is a very naughty girl...”

“I guess you two are similar.”

“Then I’m also... a naughty girl...”

Shikiya-san put down her tea cup silently.

-Koto Tsukinoki and Yumeko Shikiya.

Whether it’s the crack that has always been lying between them or their reaffirmed feelings under the rainbow lights-

I don’t have a way to figure them out. Perhaps not even the two of them understand.

But isn’t that how interpersonal relationships are?

Shikiya-san and Tsukinoki-senpai have already mended their relationship, while Teiara-san has one less thing to worry about.

All of this is already enough as my 15-year-old’s epilogue.

Shikiya-san had already finished her dessert when I snapped out of it. As usual, I don’t know when her mouth moved.

I pretended to be sipping my black tea while observing Shikiya-san in secret.

Her makeup is much lighter today. I’ll believe it if someone says she doesn’t have any makeup, excluding her beautiful white pupils.

Not long ago, Yanami said, “Don’t believe those girls who say they don’t put on any makeup.” Perhaps she’s jealous too.

That’s why girls are scary.

...However, this girl has really long eyelashes. Her face is beautiful too. Unlike Yanami, she gives off a mature woman’s flirtatious aura.

I’m a bit out of my mind from looking at her. Shikiya-san tilted her head and stared at me.

“What’s...wrong?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking about what you had talked about with Tsukinoki-senpai.”

Shikiya-san slowly put her finger on her lips.

“...It’s a secret.”

She whispered. Her crossed legs changed positions.

Uh, what’s with this atmosphere?

“Did something happen?”

Shikiya-san didn’t answer. Instead, her body wobbled in satisfaction.

...What on Earth happened?

I prayed for Tamaki-senpai’s success tonight as I chugged the remaining black tea.

-The music box is still playing a peaceful tune.

Inside the dim restaurant, Shikiya-san is trembling slightly under the candles.

There's no conversation. The tea cups are empty already.

Being alone with an older girl deprived me of my courage to utilize this silence.

Honestly, this is quite boring. I don't know what I should say.

But I can't just leave without any reason.

For some reason, I don't hate this awkward time I'm spending with Shikiya-san.

Shikiya-san is drinking tea silently as usual. Her white pupils seem to be staring at something.

But I'm willing to continue waiting for her sight.

Shikiya-san looked at me. She tilted her head gently.

I gave an unnatural smile and tilted my neck also.

Awkward and uncomfortable.

Yet I don't want this time to go away.

I relaxed to try to figure out an answer to my confusion.

-If I have to give a name to my feelings, I wonder which word suits it the most?

Intermission: Teiara-san's Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve.

Teiara Basori is sitting at the desk in her room. She puts one of her hands on her face as she looks at a book.

It's the real-life BL fanfic by Koto Tsukinoki.

She's also aware of the existence of the BL genre. She wasn't planning to give unnecessary comments on personal hobbies-

"Eh, wait, doing that in front of people...?"

Fwap. She put a post-it note on this page. She realized she didn't have many notes left.

She just wanted to check for some of the "obscene" areas, yet the end seemed nowhere in sight.

Teiara stretched her back as she remembered what had happened in the student council room a few days prior.

...The president of the Literature Club, Kazuhiko Nukumizu.

Unlike the character in the doujinshi, he seems like an earnest student.

However, he unknowingly closed their distance when she was checking the novel.

If she had noticed it just a second later-

If she had avoided his hand reaching toward her just a second later, the “Nukumizu” in the illustrations would have-

At this point, her cheeks have flared up. She’s sweating profusely.

“T-This is just a story!”

Bam! She slammed the table. A surprised voice came from behind.

“Nee-san, you have been mumbling for a while. What are you doing?”

“Ha!?”

She turned around. Her little brother has just finished taking a shower. He’s standing at the door in his tracksuit.

“H-Hold on, Takashi. At least knock before you come in!”

“I did. What’s wrong? You are freaking out.”

Takashi Basori, a second-year student in middle school.

She still hasn’t asked why her parents gave him a normal name but not her.

Teiara hid the doujinshi below her notebook and searched for her usual calm look.

“It’s nothing. What’s wrong?”

“Mom is slicing the cake. Come down, nee-san.”

“Sure, got it-”

Teiara stood up. She couldn't help but observe her little brother. This kid has been growing taller and taller ever since he was in middle school. He seems to have acquired a tinge of manliness recently.

“...By the way, Takashi. You've been hanging out with your friends in the Football Club, right?”

“Yeah, why are you asking that now?”

“You got chocolate last Valentine, right? Did...the classmates in your club give you that?”

“...There are only guys in our club.”

“What's the problem with that?”

Teiara-san blurted that out. She was frozen by her own words.

...Hmm, eh, what did I just say?

“Uh, well, it's nothing. It's nothing! Nevermind!”

Despite the cold weather, Teiara is sweating profusely. Her hands flailed around.

“Nee-san, I feel like you've been weird lately. Well, I'll go down first.”

Her little brother sighed and left. Teiara exhaled in relief.

...This is all because of that guy.

By the way, how is he doing with that “promise” to me?

Her phone rang the moment she suddenly remembered about that.

She flipped open the phone. The words “Yumeko Shikiya” are shining on the screen.

Teiara took a deep breath and pressed the accept button.

Chapter 4: 16 Years Old's Prologue

December 25th. Morning. The sunlight and the crisp cold air leaked into the room through the gaps in the curtain.

I dazedly covered myself in the blanket a little tighter.

Today's my birthday, Christmas, and the closing ceremony. What a busy day.

The alarm hasn't gone off yet. I'm still enjoying the warmth of my blanket-

“Merry onii-sama! Happy birthday to you!”

The sound of pulled party fireworks echoed in the room, along with Kaju's cheers.



So this is what she's doing this year. I rubbed my eyes and sat up.

"...Good morning, Kaju. You're so energetic."

"Indeed, today is worthy of celebration, after all. Here, onii-sama, get up."

Kaju spun around once in her red dress. The bottom part is swaying around.

"Eh, what's with your outfit?"

"Yes, I'm dressing up as Santa Claus because it's Christmas. What do you think?"

Kaju's outfit is a Christmas dress. There's a reindeer horn headband on her head.

"Yes, very cute. But Kaju, isn't Christmas banned in our house?"

"Indeed, onii-sama is right. It's because Kaju is baffled every year."

Kaju came here and kneeled on the bed.

"Even though today is onii-sama's birthday, people only love Christmas for some reason. Kaju has been up against a world like this constantly. In other words, this is Christmas versus onii-sama."

Isn't my enemy way too strong?

"But Kaju has realized it already. Perhaps everyone in the world is celebrating onii-sama, right? Are all of the light decorations for onii-sama...? I thought about this for the

entire night and had successfully made peace with Christmas."

"Glad to hear that. So, you should go to bed."

Eh, but she said she only accepted Christmas this morning-

"When did you buy this Christmas dress?"

"I don't know why this is under Mom's wardrobe-"

"Alright, stop. I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

Information overload in the morning.

"Kaju's winter holiday is starting today. That's why I need to do my best to prepare a big meal tonight. The main course will be a whole Mikawa roasted chicken. Please look forward to it."

"Oh, looking forward to it."

"Yes! In a sense, today marks a new beginning of onii-sama. Even though it's a little surprising, Kaju will do my best to support you!"

"Beginning....? It's indeed my birthday today, but aren't you exaggerating it a little?"

Kaju closed her hands before her chest thoughtfully.

"Kaju is very surprised with what happened yesterday. However, Kaju will definitely support onii-sama's decision!"

...What is she talking about? I just got home, took a bath, and went to bed normally yesterday night.

"Did Kaju tail me yesterday?"

I said that half-jokingly. Kaju nodded.

“Indeed, I was curious to see who onii-sama had invited.”

“Eh, you really saw us!?”

“That girl is from Tsuwabuki High School, right? I’ve seen her during the summer trip!”

-The Literature Club’s summer trip. I think Kaju was in that Toyohashi City Student Council Summer Exchange Camp on the same date as well.

Even though nothing had happened between Shikiya-san and me, it was a little embarrassing when my family saw that...

“Kaju, I think you misunderstood. I’m not going out with that person.”

“I knew it! That girl is a girlfriend candidate to onii-sama, right!?”

Kaju approached with a bright smile. Her cheeks are red.

“There are probably a lot of hiccups, but Kaju will always be on onii-sama’s side, you know?”

“That person is the senpai in my school. We don’t have that relationship. Here, get off my bed.”

“Sure, please cultivate the romance between you two! Kaju will definitely watch over you two silently this time!”

I see. Well, thanks a lot. Kaju yawned and rubbed her sleepy eyes.

“Kaju, you didn’t have a good sleep yesterday, right? No need to prepare dinner. Go to bed.”

“I need to bake a triple-layered cake. There won’t be enough time if I don’t start now. Also, the chicken is fresher if it’s killed in the morning!”

Uh, she’s killing it right now? No way, right?”

“Onii-chan just wants a simple cake! Just a single layer is enough!”

“But, but, onii-sama, won’t that be too lonely? I still want to kill and bake an entire chicken...”

“Then I want salty riceballs, tofu, and a plate of vegetable salad.”

I’m planning to be a vegetarian for the day. Kaju’s cheeks pouted unhappily.

“...Give me your arms.”

She mumbled quietly.

“What?”

“I’ll sleep if onii-sama gives me an arm pillow.”

Sleeping together has been banned in my house since Kaju entered middle school, ...but there’s no way out this time. I leaned on my bed and reached my arm out.

“I’ll only stay until Kaju falls asleep, alright?”

“Yes, onii-sama!”

Kaju immediately laid down next to me.

“Hehe, it’s been so long since I’ve slept with onii-sama, right?”

“It’s been two years since you entered middle school, right?”

“...Yeah.”

What’s with her tone? Don’t tell me she has been sneaking into my bed whenever I don’t notice.

I wanted to question her further. However, Kaju is already snorting regularly.

She didn’t sleep well last night. No wonder she falls unconscious this quickly.

Oh, it will be bad if my alarm wakes Kaju up. I reached my other hand out and turned it off. Now I have to prevent myself from falling asleep again.

However, there’s no way I can sleep since Kaju’s on my arm. I should just rest my eyes. Yesterday night was a lot for me, after all.

But the blanket...feels really warm. Perhaps it’s because Kaju’s sleeping next to me, right...?

I can...sleep for a little more, right...? I have set...an alarm, ...right...?”

In the end, I lost my perfect attendance award because I was late on the last day of the second semester.

*

The closing ceremony ended successfully.

The principal talked for as long as usual. His explanation of the winter holiday precautions was 5 times longer than Amanatsu-sensei's.

The student council committee is helping the Broadcast Club out with the ceremony. Right now, they are still busy finishing everything up.

Teiara-san is checking the equipment as she deals with the clingy Shikiya-san. In other words, Shikiya-san isn't working.

Perhaps a lot has happened between them in the past as well. However, as of now, we have solved everything we need to.

I watched the crowd at the gymnasium's entrance dazedly.

The third-year students are trickling out, but they probably still need more time.

I kept a short distance from my classmates. Yanami came next to me.

“...Nukumizu-kun, it’s rare for you to be late today.”

“I fell asleep again. I tried to run for it on my bicycle but couldn’t make it in time.”

“Eh, don’t you go to school by train? Why don’t you use your bicycle if it’s faster?”

“It’s too tiring. Summer’s hot, and the winter’s cold.”

She made a few “hmm” at my answer before asking quietly.

“By the way, Nukumizu-kun, what happened yesterday?”

“Didn’t I text you on Line yesterday? I guess everything went alright.”

“No, isn’t that too vague? What do you mean by I guess it went alright? I won’t have such a hard time losing weight if everything goes alright.”

What on Earth is she talking about?

“I’m not sure of the exact details. Shikiya-senpai didn’t seem like I could ask her any further yesterday.”

For some reason, Yanami glared at me after hearing that.

“...Hold on, didn’t you just let those two senpais meet each other yesterday? Did you go on a date with Shikiya-senpai?”

“It wasn’t a date. We were just eating at a cafe.”

“Isn’t that a date? Spending Christmas Eve together in a cafe makes it a date, right? Heh, Nukumizu-kun surely had a good time when I was counting pi decimals...”

Counting pi decimals...on Christmas Eve?

“Do you like counting that?”

“You think I wanted to?”

Then why did you do that? Yanami glared at me ferociously.

“I bought a pi table with a million decimals to last through Christmas Eve. All of my troubles went away when I was halfway through. I can lend it to you next time, you know?”

I don’t have that many troubles. Give it to me now if you have to.

The crowd in the gymnasium has almost disappeared.
Yanami took a step toward me.

“...Nukumizu-kun, about that thing after school.”

“Oh, there’s a Christmas party, right?”

Yanami nodded.

“I’m still hesitating whether I should go. How about this? I’ll convince Imouto-chan to let you go to the party with me.”

“But no one will notice me at the party. There’s no one to talk to.”

Yanami kicked my shoes displeasedly after hearing that.

“...You still have me.”

Not that she’s wrong, but everyone around will be so lively. I can predict that I won’t fit in at all.

However, in contrast to her, I don’t want them to come to talk to me just because they feel bad...

I was trying to come up with a good reason to reject her. Then, I saw Shikiya-san lifting a speaker with her hands and wobbling at the corner of the gymnasium.

It’s good that she’s working, but why do I feel it’s a little dangerous? The cable of the speaker seems to be tangled with her legs already. Ah, why is she walking sideways? She’s about to hit the wall...

I can’t take it anymore. How come that girl always makes people worry about her?

“What’s wrong, Nukumizu-kun?”

I ignored Yanami and started walking toward Shikiya-san.

I picked up the pace. Then, Shikiya-san stepped onto the cable and lost her balance.

The speaker made a huge noise when it slammed onto the ground. Everyone in the gymnasium looked here.

As for what they are looking at- I'm hugging Shikiya-san with both hands.

"Senpai, are you alright?"

Shikiya-san's thick eyelashes are twitching as she's in my hands. She seems surprised.

"I'm fine. ...What about the speaker...?"

"Who cares about the speaker-"

I suddenly calmed down after realizing our posture right now. This is like one of those signature moves of ballroom dancing.

Nearly a hundred Tsuwabuki students are staring at us.

"H-Hey, can you stand up on your own!? You can? Then I'll let go!"

I immediately tried to move away. However, Shikiya-san hugged my neck instead.

"Hey, senpai!?"

"Why did...you come here?"

"Huh? It's because senpai was wobbling. It seemed dangerous, so-"

“Are you...always paying attention to me?”

Her makeup scent radiated into my nose.

Shikiya-san’s white pupils are gazing at me dazedly.

“Do you want to...go out with me...?”

Her whispers are as sweet as nectar. It’s almost like she’s stroking my neck.

After a short silence, noise rippled throughout the surrounding students.

Being at the epicenter, I first repeated what Shikiya-san said in my mind calmly- and then I frantically shook my head.

“N-No! I won’t dare to do that- I’m saying it would be too arrogant for me to do so!”

“...No?”

“Y-Yes!”

I screamed in a high pitch. Shikiya-san mumbled softly.

“...I see. ...I misunderstood...”

Shikiya-san went quiet.

Everyone is looking at us from afar. They are whispering to each other.

What’s with this feeling? Did I mess something up...?

I remained still as cold sweat dripped from my body. Teiara-san squeezed out of the crowd and approached us.

“Hold on, Shikiya-senpai! What are you two doing in public!?”

She forcefully pulled Shikiya-san out of my hands.

I’m saved. Teiara-san glared at me sharply.

“N-Nukumizu-san! I knew it! You go after a girl whenever you see one! I’m disappointed in you!”

“No, no, I just helped her out because she was about to trip over. Senpai, help me out here.”

Shikiya-san nodded gently. Then, she tilted her head toward Teiara-san.

“Then, ...it’s Teiara-chan’s turn...”

“Wha!? I didn’t have any-”

What? Is there something else?

I’m a little startled. As for Shikiya-san, she lifted Teiara-san’s chin with her finger.

“Should I...help you say it...?”

“N-No, thanks! N-Nukumizu-san!”

Teiara-san blushed and stood before me.

“Ah, yes. How can I help you?”

“I want to talk to you today after school. Please free your schedule!”

“Eh? Sure, I guess...”

“D-Don’t you have any weird expectations, okay!? I’ll give you a call later!”

Teiara-san pulled Shikiya-san’s hand and left after saying that.

...Uh, what just happened?

I couldn’t move, so I decided to pick up the speaker on the ground to try and get rid of everyone’s attention.

Shikiya-san’s icy skin and the warmth within her body are still lingering around my palm.

“Uh, does anyone know where I should place this speaker...?”

The surrounding noise swallows my pathetic voice.

Two-timing, complicated relationships, love triangle. These unsettling words resonated throughout my ears.

Wait, what should I do...? I looked around for help and saw Yanami.

...Ah, she looked away.

Konuki-sensei showed up in her white coat just as I was having a hard time.

“Alright, return to your classrooms, everyone. Homeroom is about to start.”

Sensei asked the students to disband as she waved at me.

“Bring that speaker over here. Follow me.”

“Ah, yes!”

I’m saved. I feel very guilty for not wanting her to approach me at one point.

Konuki-sensei came close to me from behind when I put the speaker onto the shelf backstage.

“...Things are rough on you. Why didn’t you talk to sensei about your trouble in these boy-girl relationships?”

“No, there’s no such relationship at all. I’m serious. Please stop whispering next to my ears.”

I really don’t want her to approach me, after all. It’s best for her to keep a two-meter distance.

“Sensei is really generous with things like this. There’s a paid app that lets you disguise your chat account as 5 different ones. Should I introduce it to you?”

“Uh, I’m done here. Well, I’ll be leaving.”

I ignored her and attempted to leave.

“...Hey, Nukumizu-kun.”

Sensei called me with an unusually somber tone.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sensei has experienced a lot at your age as well. Of course, I have faced them from a young person’s perspective.”

A gentle smile appeared on her face.

“But, at this point, I sometimes think if only I had faced them with a more sincere attitude.”

“Sensei...”

Konuki-sensei carried an all-knowing look. She gave me a reassuring nod.

“That’s why, Nukumizu-kun, it’s not just the body. If you face her with your naked mind and soul-”

“Okay, first of all, we don’t have any body contact.”

I interrupted her.

“Ara, not yet? Sensei is very good at that. Are you planning to do anything about it?”

“Nope, but thank you, sensei.”

She must be worrying about me in her own way, right? I smiled reluctantly.

“No worries. Do your best, Nukumizu-kun.”

Konuki-sensei winked at me and left the backstage.

As if it was waiting for this moment, a notification ringtone played from my phone.

I forgot to switch on the silent mode. At least it didn’t go off during the closing ceremony...

I sighed in relief and took out my phone. It’s a mail from Teiara-san.

The title is <Excuse Me>. It’s simple and clean, much like Teiara-san’s personality.

<After school. Mukaiyamaoikecho Park. I'll be waiting for you on the bridge and return your thing.>

*

It's the last homeroom of the second semester. I remembered what happened in the gymnasium after closing my ever-unchanging comment form.

"Do you want to go out with me? Shikiya-san asked.

What would happen if I had given a firm answer at the time...?

I shook my head forcefully to get rid of that thought.

That's too good to be true. I did well there and avoided the bad ending.

Looking around the classroom, Yanami is having fun with her friends. Yakishio's sleeping on her desk. The Himemiya married couple is flirting. All of this is the same as the first semester.

I'm relieved to be in such a familiar scene. Then, the guys in the class keep glancing at me from time to time.

...What's wrong? Is there a ladybug on my head?

I rubbed my hair. During this time, Hakamada came and put both hands on my table.

"You were amazing there, Nukumizu."

"Huh? What?"

"In the gymnasium. I know you're close to the senpai in the student council, but I didn't expect you to have something

with the vice president too.”

Uh, what does that mean? I noticed the surrounding gazes and looked around. A few people immediately looked away.

“Hey, this is a total misunderstanding. I don’t have any relationships with those two.”

Hakamada nodded thoughtfully. He patted my shoulder.

“I get it. You’re having a rough time. Some people like to spread rumors, after all, no matter where you are.”

Yeah, one of those people is standing before me.

“Hey, I know you’re not a guy like that, but it’s best for you to figure out your feelings as soon as possible, you know?”

Hakamada returned to his seat after saying that. The final “like you’re the one to talk” of this year from me will be his...

The classmates have almost piped down after receiving their comments. Amanatsu-sensei clapped her hands.

“Alright, everyone. That’s all of the Christmas presents. Go back to your seats.”

Everyone sat down and waited for Amanatsu-sensei. The winter holiday won’t start until she’s done talking. The classroom finally went silent. Amanatsu-sensei spoke up respectfully.

“You know, sensei was working overtime on Christmas Eve yesterday. I went to the supermarket before it closed. There’s a 50% discount on cakes.”

...So, she's talking about this at the end of this year.
Amanatsu-sensei closed her arms and continued bitterly.

"So, sensei thought, if today is the real Christmas, wasn't it too early to put out the 50% discount sticker? It's fine for Christmas cakes to be left behind for two to three days, right?"

The classroom responded with silence. The wind is blowing the window, causing it to rumble.

The whole class is confused. Amanatsu-sensei slowly opened her eyes.

"-Sensei has already decided not to eat the cake until New Year's Eve to prove I'm right."

Please don't.

Ignoring our worries, sensei smacked the podium with her attendance sheet. She let out a parched noise.

"Alright, that's all I have to say to you all! Don't get carried away by the winter holiday, everyone."

Cheers erupted in the classroom.

I listened to the ever-unchanging complaints in the ever-unchanging classroom.

However, it's a little different from the last semester this time.

I'm 16 years old.

*

After homeroom, everyone in the classroom is talking about the Christmas party.

Based on my observation, around two-thirds of the class will be attending. Of course, a good chunk of people doesn't care, like me.

I took my school bag and stood up. Yanami and Himemiya-san are having a conversation.

"So, Anna can't go to the Christmas party after all?"

"I really want to go too, but there's work to do in the Literature Club. Sorry."

Huh, Yanami isn't going to the Christmas party?

What was the Literature Club work she talked about? Does she think there's a strategy conference today as well..? If she said she wants to go, it's not good for me to pretend I didn't see anything, right?

I entered Yanami and Himemiya-san's 12K zone.

"Yanami-san, we don't need to do anything in the Literature Club today, you know?"

"Eh?"

Yanami's expression turned stiff. As for Himemiya-san, her aura immediately brightens.

"Is that true, Nukumizu-kun? That's great, Anna!"

"Ah- look. Don't we have to finish the club magazine? Right, right, the printing isn't finished, right?"

Yanami said that as she winked at me.

Hmm? What is this girl doing?

I feel like she's giving a signal to someone, but there's no one behind me...?

"The printing is only for Tsuwabuki Fest and club registration day. There's nothing much to do this time."

"O-Oh, ...I see."

"That's great! Anna can come to the party! Hurray!"

Himemiya-san hugged Yanami with a bright smile. Even though I don't really understand, it's good that you two are happy.

"Well, I'll be leaving."

I prepared to leave. Yanami pulled my school bag.

Uh, what's wrong? Why is Yanami giving me a murderer's stare?

"...Obviously, Nukumizu-kun will go too, right?"

"I'll have to meet Basori-san, so I won't go. Well, Yanami-san, happy new year."

She feels a bit terrifying. I have to go to the meeting spot. I turned around and glanced back at the classroom for the last time. Yanami's eyes were like those of a dead fish as Himemiya-san dragged her away.

...But Yanami wants to go to the Christmas party, right?

Even though she has been hesitating before, a girl's heart is surely wonderful-

*

Mukaiyamaoikecho. It's near downtown Toyohashi. It takes around 15 minutes by bicycle from Tsuwabuki High School.

People will realize how big it is when I say its area equals three Nagoya Dome.

There's a promenade and park around. It's a tourist hotspot during the Sakura season too. However, it's a little desolate on a weekday in winter.

I left my bicycle in the parking lot near the cultural hall. I came to the pondside after walking along the promenade. A long bridge split the pond into two. The bridge seems to be over 100 meters long.

We're meeting on the bridge. By the way, why did she pick such a spot?

Even though it's a real-life BL doujinshi, we could have just done it in the club room or behind the school building. We are talking about Teiara-san here, but I don't think she'll threaten my well-being, ...right...?

After going through the promenade, the massive pond spreads out before me.

The pillar on the bridge writes, "Oikechohashi". The bridge end at the opposite coast seems to be wider.

There's a bench there. I think someone's sitting there upon closer inspection.

The crisp breezes from the west skimmed through the water. I couldn't help but shiver.

I can't imagine anyone other than Teiara-san is willing to stay in such low temperatures. I took a deep breath and stepped on the bridge.

Looking from afar, she seems to be wearing a coat and scarf outside her uniform.

She seems to have noticed me already. The girl stood up and sat down worriedly.

As her figure becomes closer and closer in my view, even I'm starting to get nervous.

It's Christmas today. Taking all that effort to invite someone to a quiet place is literally the prerequisite to a rom-com, normally.

I arrived. Teiara-san couldn't seem to wait any longer. She lowered her head.

"Thanks for coming here."

"I don't mind, but why this place?"

I asked flatly despite not feeling the same. Teiara-san looked around chickly.

"No one's here. We don't need to worry about being eavesdropped on. Is there a better place to talk about something we don't want others to know than this place?"

This location provides a 360-degree view of Oikecho. Indeed, there's no way other people can know what we're

talking about with such a far distance. It's three times bigger than Nagoya Dome, after all.

"I understand, but can't we just go to the karaoke room or somewhere?"

"Who was the one that brought another girl here last time?"

"Yakishio just- alright, my bad."

...Indeed, she's the usual Teiara-san. She raised her head and glared at me.

"Then, Nukumizu-kun, what happened in the gymnasium?"

"Uh, the gymnasium...?"

Don't tell me she heard my conversation with Konuki-sensei.

"It's about Shikiya-senpai! Why were you two talking about dating!?"

"I don't know, either. It's because we're talking about that Shikiya-senpai here."

"Hmm, ...that's true."

That was my last resort, yet she believed me. This girl is easy.

"Anyway, I can agree that you think my promise is fulfilled if you call me out here, right?"

"Yes. Honestly, I didn't look forward to the result at all."

This girl is impolite, as usual.

“As Tsukinoki-san’s kouhai, I just wanted to face this problem with you together. So, honestly, I didn’t hope those two could mend their relationship. I really appreciate you for that...”

Teiara-san seems a bit awkward. She lowered her head.

“...What happened?”

“I feel like Shikiya-senpai is getting closer to me. Nothing weird happened yesterday night, for real, right?”

“If Teiara-san is worried about that kind of thing, please ease your worries.”

“What do you think I’m worried about? Also, please don’t call me by my first name.”

Teiara-san took out a paper bag displeasedly.

“Uh, this is...?”

“I told you I’m returning your book, right? I’m a person who keeps her word.”

Isn’t there something else other than the book in the bag?

I took it in confusion. There’s a red paper box inside with a ribbon.

“There seems to be something else other than the doujinshi.”

“...It’s for you.”

Teiara-san looked away and muttered something.

-Why?

I swallowed my question back. I remembered the “Technique of Responding to a Present” Kaju taught me yesterday before I left home. I didn’t expect it to be helpful this early on.

Let me think. The first thing I need to do is...

“Uwah, I’m so happy. Can I really accept this?”

-Conveying my surprise and joy. This is absolutely important.

“Y-Yes, please don’t be so overjoyed. It’s just something a high school student can afford.”

“Don’t say that. I’m thrilled. Can I open it?”

“D-Do whatever you want.”

-Expressing my happiness repeatedly and showing the attitude and intent to open it.

Unwrap it afterward. The most important thing is to be careful here.

According to Kaju, only an elementary school boy will tear the package apart carelessly.

“...Uh, what should I do next?”

I couldn't help but mumble. Teiara-san looked at me in surprise.

"What? What does that mean?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing. ...Oh."

There's a green scarf inside.

"Eh, you're really giving me this? This is too amazing, right?"

Teiara-san's ears flared up after hearing the unexpected feedback. She plopped her head down and mumbled quickly.

"T-That's why I told you this is just a gift of gratitude. I referenced Aichi Prefecture's minimum wage and estimated a rough amount based on your effort, and here's the result!"

It looks like there's a labor contract between Teiara-san and me.

"Isn't that a lot of money?"

"Hmm, well, ...the value of this task can't be measured with money alone. That's why I didn't count it. Don't fuss over the details!"

Also, she seems to think I'm an office pick-up artist before I even know it.

"I see. Well, I'll accept it with gratitude."

According to Kaju's advice, the action required when receiving personal items is-

I put on the scarf and smiled at Teiara-san.

“It’s warm. Thank you.”

“Huh!? Uh, yes! It’s made with wool!”

Teiara-san’s words aren’t making sense.

Even though I’m following the tutorial, did I mess up somewhere...?

I observed Teiara-san restlessly. She has a red scarf on her neck as well-

“By the way, is this scarf the same as Basori-san’s except for the color?”

“I-It’s just a coincidence! This is the only kind of scarf the APITA Store has!”

“I don’t mean anything. I like green quite a lot.”

“Sure, that’s...great.”

Teiara-san seems to have found her composure. This is the final level.

Hmm, if I remember correctly, the line should be-

“Thank you very much. I’ll take care of this. This will remind me of Teiara-san every time I see it.”

...Very well. That’s all of Kaju’s technique for accepting presents.

I relaxed my shoulders. As for Teiara-san, her face blushes so hard that steam seems to appear on her head. Her whole body is trembling.



“Hey, are you okay?”

“...Don’t get carried away.”

Teiara-san plopped her head down and mumbled.

“What?”

“D-Don’t get carried away!”

Teiara-san glared at me with teary eyes. She poked my chest with her finger.

“Listen up! This is just a simple gift of gratitude! It’s just a coincidence that the package looks a little weird because it’s Christmas!”

What? ...Why is this girl so angry?

Indeed, Kaju’s technique is a little too early for me, right? I should have practiced with Komari first...

“Alright, I get it. Calm down.”

“No, you don’t! With this opportunity, let us have a nice discussion about fixing the inappropriateness in the Literature Club...”

Wait, it’s not over yet?

Her momentum forced me to the railings of the bridge. A cheerful melody played next to my ears.

“Ah, I have a phone call. Can I pick it up?”

I don’t know who you are, but you’re my savior. I turned away from Teiara-san and took out my phone.

The name of the savior displayed on the screen is- Anna Yanami.

...Guess I'm not saved.

Yanami should be at the Christmas party right now.
Honestly, I have a terrible feeling.

I have no choice but to press the accept button. Karaoke songs and people's laughter can be heard from the other side.

"Hello?"

No answer. The cheers echo afar like background music.

Well, it looks like I can hang up. I tried pressing the end button.

"...Save me."

Someone mumbled. Yanami's deep voice is drowned out by the noise.

"Ha? Hey, Yanami-san?"

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. ...Eh, she hung up on me. Did she die?

I turned to Teiara-san again as I prayed for Yanami.

"Uh, did something happen?"

"Well, it's not a big-"

Cheerful "dings" can be heard from my phone non-stop as if it was to interrupt me.

At a glance, text after text appears on the notification screen.

The sender is Yanami. She's still alive.

<Aren't you coming to the Christmas party?>

<It's really fun.>

<Just think of this as falling into my trap for once.>

<Come here.>

You aren't fooling me. Nothing good will come out of this.

I closed my heart, but more messages attacked me.

<Where are you?>

<Come over here.>

<Hurry up and let me fool you.>

See? She's tricking me, but things will worsen if I don't go now...

"Sorry, Basori-san. They asked me to go to a club meeting. I have to go."

"Eh, I see. Sorry for suddenly bringing you out."

Teiara-san lost her momentum completely. I shook my head.

"I'm the one to apologize. Thank you very much for your scarf!"

I purposefully looked at my watch and immediately departed the scene.

*

Even though a lot has happened, I have safely taken back the doujinshi. Now I can enjoy my winter holiday.

I returned to the promenade from the bridge. After confirming that no one else is there, I look inside the paper bag.

It's a self-made photocopy. For some reason, there are a ton of post-it notes on it. It looks like it's sealing up an evil spirit. However, this is undoubtedly Tsukinoki-senpai's real-life BL doujinshi. Those notes are full of detailed feedback upon a closer look. Why is she keeping those here...?

I opened the book to a random page. There are a lot of quality illustrations.

I'm on the top, so this is me, right? ...Haha, ...this is amazing...

Oh, shit, I don't have time to read everything. I have to report this to Tsukinoki-senpai on Line as soon as possible.

Kaju should be preparing for my birthday back home. I have to be back right after comforting Yanami.

I remembered it was this time last year. I had to prepare for the exam, and Kaju made me a list of questions she

predicted would be on the exam. We did the exam together. Finally, I defended my honor as the older brother with a slight advantage. That memory is still fresh to me.

My phone rang as I was about to call Kaju.

The screen displays “Koto Tsukinoki”. She’s fast. I wonder if she’s serious about her exam preparations.

“Hello, what’s wrong?”

“You’re still asking that? You did well yesterday.”

That’s the first thing she says. I took the phone away from my face and laughed.

“Yeah, I did that. Well, can I hang up?”

“It’s a joke. Thanks a lot.”

We chuckled. I started explaining after that.

“Sorry, I knew I was actually meddling in you two’s business, but I had to since it involved two student council members.”

“You’re right. Even though there is a lot I want to apologize for, I won’t ask you about your date with Shintaro. Let’s just call it a draw, hmm?”

“Tamaki-senpai was really sad yesterday. Please pamper him afterward.”

“Ah, my pampering has been finished perfectly. Winter nights are long, after all.”

“Can I charge you for topics like that?”

It looks like things are fine between them.

I passed a woman taking her dog for a walk and fell silent.

Senpai remained quiet. She then spoke up in a calm demeanor.

“...Nukumizu-kun, thank you very much. I have definitely learned my lesson.”

“Indeed, I hope you do.”

“It’s fine. I really have. That’s why I made some slight changes to that novel and made Shikiya a new character. I’ll send it to you later.”

“...Senpai, you have learned nothing, right?”

I made a mistake. This person is- Koto Tsukinoki.

I sighed and tried to end the call. Senpai continued anxiously.

“Wait, I really am reflecting on my mistakes. I’ll use a digital version with passcode protection instead of paper to avoid it from being distributed. Also, the password is the last 4 digits of the document.”

“Alright, please prepare for your exam. What if only your boyfriend gets into the university? That person will realize he’s very popular with girls, you know?”

“...I’ll do my best.”

I’m glad she understands. I stretched my back after hanging up.

Alright, let’s check up on Yanami next.

Facing danger with determination- is a sign of manliness.

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Literature Club Report - Internal Edition

<The Sweetness Between Teachers and Students> by Koto Tsukinoki

[TL: BL warning.]

Zavit Royal Magic Academy. It's the top noble academy on the continent.

Two men are heading toward the massive school building through the long stone slab road.

One of them is wearing a kimono with hakama pants. He looked around anxiously from time to time. He seems worried. The man is rubbing his cheeks right now. His messy mustache is spreading throughout his face.

“Hey, Mishima-kun, are we really going there? Aren’t there rumors about human-eating demons around here?”

“Where else can you go after getting kicked out of the elf village?”

The man in a khaki military uniform answered. He seems to be tired of answering.

“This is what I’m talking about. Shouldn’t the reincarnated receive some basic human rights? Getting exiled is too much, right?”

“What rights do you want when you have jumped into the river with an elf lady? Appreciate the fact that you’re still alive.”

Dazai is a little guilty after hearing Mishima out. He retorted childishly.

“It’s because that was the first time I’ve heard elves won’t drown. I was the only one who almost died. I feel like I was cheated on.”

“Those people are elves too. It was just a coincidence that they saved Dazai-san as well.”

Mishima wanted to let him be aware of his impatience. He sighed and started speeding up his legs, wrapped in military boots.

This is one of Dazai-san’s bad habits. He has to say that this person is utterly defenseless when it comes to women.

That’s why Mishima gave up his chill adventurer’s life and came here with him.

Mishima stopped and looked up at the building. Two spires are reaching toward the blue sky.

Dazai and Mishima are here to become teachers with Kawabuta’s recommendation.

Dazai looked at the school building in shock.

“This school is way too massive, right? Is there wine in the canteen?”

“You’re still thinking about that? They may feed you to the dragons if you don’t pay attention to your conduct.”

‘Don’t scare me. By the way, everyone here is a guy.’

Dazai frowned and looked around.

Talent is everything in a world of magic. There’s no difference between gender. Your capability is everything.

Even so, all of the people in uniform are boys.

“This is a boys’ school. No girls here.”

Mishima said plainly. He walked to a small demon statue next to the stone slab road.

The statue started moving when he inserted a letter from his pocket.

“Hey, watch out!”

Dazai already took a step back before he even finished his sentence.

The moving statue swallowed the letter and rose to the sky with its stone wings.

“Alright, we’ll wait for the guide here.”

Mishima shook his hands casually as he turned around and looked at Dazai again. He’s freaking out. Drum-like beast screams can be heard from afar. Dazai looked in that direction sheepishly.

“Wait, you were just joking about feeding me to the dragons, right?”

“Unfortunately, I still haven’t encountered someone who deserves to be eaten yet. Don’t panic. It’s okay if you don’t get any bad ideas.”

Mishima said that half-jokingly. Dazai nodded in silence.

The student council room is on the top floor of the academy.

Two male students are looking outside over the vast window.

The student council president, Hibari Hokobaru. He's handsome and tall. His crystal-clear pupils are described with utter brutality in rumors.

Also, no one can remain composed after witnessing his-sheer cold beauty.

"Are those new teachers? Their outfits are pretty weird. Where did they get reincarnated from?"

Hokobaru asked the man next to him.

"Both are from...Japan. ...Showa Era."

The person mumbling the answer out is the student council secretary, Yumeji Shikiya.

He tilted his head. His curled bangs are gently resting on his forehead.

"Japan again? Showa, what a strange era."

The two reincarnated appeared over the window.

The man with a single-edged sword wears the same clothing as them.

The other person is wearing some front-opening clothing fastened with a belt. It reminds him of people from a different race in the east.

Looking at those two, he felt- the man from the east looked over here worriedly.

No, that's absolutely impossible. The student council room has been sealed with blocking magic. No one can enter it or observe the situation from outside. His heart has been in a state of constant fear ever since that man played with him that day.

Prez smiled bitterly. As for Shikiya, he held Prez's hand with his cold, slim fingers.

"...No, we have to greet the teachers first. I have already taught you the academy's rules with my body, right?"

He's used to his flirting. However, Hokobaru suddenly couldn't laugh anymore. His body is frozen.

The spell appearing in Shikiya's white pupils is- <Bondage>. Hokobaru's smile froze.

"S-Shikiya, ...what are you planning to do...?"

Shikiya remained silent. His grip grew more assertive.

Hokobaru managed to shake off his hand, yet he couldn't avoid those white pupils-

He heard someone clapping from the other side of the room.

"As expected of the president, I can't believe you can still move under Shikiya-senpai's spell."

"This voice, it's Nukumizu...?"

The blocking magic affecting this room is one of the Twelve Complete Magic in the academy. A spell that allows

someone to sneak in here doesn't exist. The only possible scenario is- internal permission.

"A welcome party for the new teachers? Please allow me to participate as well."

Nukumizu stepped through the thick pile carpet silently. He hugged Hokobaru's waist.

"Nukumizu, you! What are you trying to do after taking away my freedom with such an underhanded method-"

"My my, Shikiya-senpai's spell should have ended already. Prez allowed me to hug you willingly. Just like that day."

"You forced me into it that day!"

Nukumizu put his hand on Hokobaru's chin and forced him to raise his head.

"Ahh, Prez, ...your face. Please allow me to see your face more."

Shikiya snapped his finger while standing behind him.

The walls suddenly started trembling. Rose vines reached out to tangle up Prez's limbs.

"Huh!? Shikiya, you!?"

"Please don't blame senpai. He wants to see the same view as Prez. I'm just fulfilling his tiny wish."

Facing the trapped Hokobaru, Shikiya-san approached him until their lips almost touched.

"Prez, ...I'm with you as well, ...so..."

The rose vine bit Hokobaru's body as he struggled. A moan came out of his mouth.

"Hmph! Nukumizu, don't think I'll let you get away with this easily!"

"You say that, but you're looking forward to it, right? I don't think you're trembling out of fear."

He reached his hand out to Hokobaru's chest and tore off the buttons on his shirt rudely.

A tinge of violence appeared on Nukumizu's face.

The students-only welcoming party (banquet) is getting a head start-

Epilogue: A Hidden Secret

It's been two days since the start of the winter holiday.

The Christmas vibe has faded away. The streets didn't take a break and started preparing for the new year.

I left the elevator. The sunlight coming in from the expansive windows made me squint my eyes.

The top floor of the eastern section of Toyohashi City Hall. This place is designed to be an observation deck. Everyone is free to enter.

As for why I'm here- it's because Yanami called me over.

The location for the Christmas party after the closing ceremony is in that karaoke store.

I opened the door to the room while shivering. It was precisely when the previous song ended. Everyone in the room looked at me. I was going to close the door immediately, but Yanami caught me.

“That was hellish...”

Forget about the normies in our class. For some reason, extroverts from the other classes are cheering along too. I was just thrown into the pit of fire.

I only remembered counting the bubbles in my cola at the time. Yanami was shoving potato chips into her mouth next to me emotionlessly.

And then I forgot what happened.

...Why did Yanami call me out today after I've spent such a terrible Christmas?

My guess is based on the metabolic syndrome poster at the lobby entrance. It must have something to do with this. I feel like Yanami seems a little more chubby lately-

Then, I stopped stepping toward the observation window.

The massive window clearly shows the sunny sky.

A young woman in a coat is wobbling around as if she's dancing to a rhythm.

Even though I can't hear from such a distance, she must be humming a song.

-What a cute girl.

However, I regretted it from the bottom of my heart after thinking about that.

The bottom of the girl's coat moved around. She turned toward me. It's Yanami.

...I messed up because her coat was different from the one she had in the karaoke room. That praise doesn't count.

I convinced myself and spoke up.

“Thanks for waiting, Yanami-san.”

“Ah, Nukumizu-kun. Thanks for coming here.”

With that, she turned around. Her face carries an unexpected helpless smile.

She looks pretty sick. What's going on? Is her liver having issues?

“Yanami-san, how come I feel you don't seem well?”

“I still haven't completely recovered from the Christmas party's damage...”

Yanami dropped her shoulders.

“Eh, but you were just-”

“Do you get me? I couldn't sleep well yesterday and roll out of my pillow. My neck hurts if I just laze around.”

Yanami pressed her neck with her palm. It made some weird creaking noises.

Uh, ...give me back my unconscious praise.

Come to think of it, it's hard to blame her. That Christmas party is a real trauma.

Luckily, I overwrote that memory by staying up all night and watching *<Documentary of the 15 Years Old Onii-sama>* with Kaju. I barely recovered from the nightmare.

“By the way, I saw Yanami-san sighing depressingly after I arrived. What happened? Did Himemiya-san and Hakamada

announce their marriage?"

"How come Nukumizu-kun is rubbing salt on my wound upon seeing me...?"

The earlier you die, the earlier you see nirvana, girl.

Yanami frowned and recoiled her shoulders.

"That's impossible. Those two remain the same. They are mean, but I'm kind of used to it."

"Then you didn't need to call me over, right? Don't you still have your friends?"

Yanami's face turned dark again. She stared at me and spoke up.

"...Nukumizu-kun, you have been hanging out with Shikiya-senpai lately, right? I saw you flirting with those two from the student council after the closing ceremony."

We weren't flirting. If that counts, I won't fall in love for the rest of my life.

"You know why I'm with them, right?"

"But everyone else doesn't. People are spreading weird rumors about me because of that, you know?"

What do the student council and I have to do with Yanami...?

"...What kind of rumor?"

Yanami shook her head slowly. She squeezed the following sentence out.

“They say it seems I’m rejected- by you, Nukumizu-kun.”

...Huh? I rejected Yanami?

I was speechless. Yanami frowned and glared at me.

“Don’t you think this is strange!? If anything, I should be the one to reject you, okay!?”

“No, I wasn’t rejected. Also, remember not just to deny such rumors fervently.”

Yanami ignored my calm answer and approached me.

“It’s precisely because Nukumizu-kun has been playing around with the student council people, right!? That incident in the gymnasium is literally hell to me!”

I feel like I’m in hell right now. She had already forced me into the glass window in the observation deck.

Without losing her momentum, Yanami took out her hand. She’s about to poke my face.

“...Confess to me, Nukumizu-kun.”

“Ha?”

I was pressed against the wall like a kabedon. Yanami got her face real close.

“And then I’ll reject Nukumizu-kun! That will solve everything, right?”

I don’t think it will.

“Calm down, Yanami-san. I really didn’t do anything to the people in the student council. Everyone will forget about the

rumor if you act normally.”

“Then what about everything I have suffered? Nukumizu-kun, can’t you be considerate to me!?”

Can’t you be considerate to me as well?

I took out snacks from my pocket to please Yanami.

“Calm down, Yanami-san. Here. It’s the mini yokan from Sugimotoya. You like it, right?”

“...It’s matcha flavored.”

She doesn’t like it.

Yanami tore the package and took a bite.

“Ah, but I think matcha is good too. Please bring Toraya yokan next time.”

Are her organs getting energy from the increased blood sugar level? She seems happier now.

I started changing the topic after seeing Yanami’s emotions cool down.

“Aren’t you here for a body check? Go to the reception desk.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? It’s this one.”

Yanami took out two tickets from her bag.

These are- the free lunch tickets from Tsukinoki-senpai.

The store is located on the 13th floor of the city hall, which is here.

“Nukumizu-kun, it was your birthday, right? I wanted to treat you to a meal or something.”

But this ticket is the reward for completing this mission, right...?

I’m not too satisfied. Yanami took out a thin, long box.

“Then, this is the surprise I have for you.”

... Surprise? I opened the box. There’s a blue ballpoint pen inside.

“Are you really giving me this? It looks expensive.”

Yanami curled the tip of her hair and looked outside the window as she spoke.

“Nukumizu-kun, the pen you have been using is in miserable shape, right? I chose this one because you can engrave your name on it- but that’s why I didn’t manage to give it to you on your birthday.”

I see. Also, I don’t think the pen I’m using is that bad.

Yanami raised her head and looked at me worriedly.

“...Do you not like it?”

“No, it’s cool. I was looking at it. My name is on it, right?”

I took the pen out of the box. This should be Yanami’s first time seeing the product too. Then, I looked down at the palm.

Let me see. There are some English letters at the tip of the pen-

The golden artistic letters form a name, Anna Yanami.

...Huh? Why is it Yanami's name?

"Huh!? I messed up!"

Yanami quickly took the ballpoint pen from me.

"Hey, hold on, Yanami-san."

"Sorry, let's just say nothing happened! I'll deal with this properly! I'll gift you a new one whenever I have the chance, hmm?"

"I'll feel horrible if you have to buy a new one after I have received one. Alright, let's just get rid of the useless name with nail polish."

"...Ha? Useless?"

Why is she mad?

"Then I'll give it back to you after changing the name! Alright, let's eat! No food will be left if we don't hurry, alright?"

Yanami pushed me and forced me toward the restaurant.

Sigh, ...I still didn't get the pen in the end. Did Yanami give me the one she bought for herself? That's impossible. Why would she choose the same ballpoint pen as I do?

Alright, Yanami is the same as usual. No point in thinking about it.

I sighed for the last time this year. Then, I saw Yanami glaring at my neck furiously.

“...What is it?”

“Nukumizu-kun, you have worn this type of scarf in school? Eh, did you wear that in the closing ceremony?”

Yanami tilted her head and pondered about it. As for me, I subconsciously gave a casual reply.

“I’ve worn it when it was cold before. I just don’t bring it to school.”

Yanami nodded emotionlessly and went past the restaurant’s automatic door.

I slipped through the door, following her. I’m still incredibly shocked by what I just said.

-I lied to Yanami.

It was a minuscule and trivial lie.

There’s no reason to hide it. Nothing will change if I say it.

However, I just wanted to do that for some reason.

And then I stopped.

Yanami suddenly turned around and stared at me.

“Eh, what’s wrong, Yanami-san...?”

Yanami didn’t answer. She smiled faintly.

After that, she reached her hand out and grabbed my scarf. She strangled my neck with considerable strength.

“Nukumizu-kun, don’t get a headstart before me, alright?”



Afterword

<Too Many Losing Heroines!> is finally at its 4th volume, thanks to everyone's support!

I'm pleased to deliver the once-mysterious Shikiya-san's story to everyone.

Actually, during the 1st volume's production, the editor Iwaasa-san and I discussed whether we could bring this girl out...?

"It's fine, right?"

He answered. So, all of these let Shikiya-san keep her original form.

Then, she turned into the current vision under Imigimuru-sensei's hands and can finally be used to adorn the cover.

Without Iwaasa-san's brilliant decision, the cover of Volume 4 would have been a twin-tail femboy. Don't underestimate me, everyone.

Iwaasa-san has taken great care of me during the release of Volume 4.

Even so, not everything is finished as of the moment of writing this.

I guess everything's done if everyone is reading this, right? Even though a lot had happened, we managed to finish it up

after cutting Iwaasa-san's sleep time. Thanks for the help.

...I'm really sorry (default apology).

Imigimuru-sensei's exquisite illustrations are even more sparkling. Teiara-chan's forming imagination is opening a new (world's) door for me. Don't hold back, everyone. Open all of them, hmm?

Then, Volume 1 of Itachi-sensei's losing heroines manga is out before the release of Volume 4! It's the losing heroines in another world. I highly recommend reading it!

I really like the page when Nukumizu-kun is reading the XX doujinshi in the club room. The tip of Takuya's tie is in the pocket in front of his chest. Please check that out in the manga.

Another piece of news! With the release of Volume 4, the Noihoi Park in Toyohashi is holding the second part of our collaboration event! Please enjoy the various puzzles mixed with the love from the collaborators.

...That's not all of the collaboration events for the losing heroines.

Can you believe it!? Tae Sano-sensei, the creator of <Morita-san wa Mukuchi>, drew an illustration map for me! She said, "That's why I like Toyohashi, right!?"

Make sure to check it out! It's more beautiful the further you zoom out!

"Well, there's an extra chapter this time, right?" Of course.

Please read about the coincidental meeting between two certain characters in the main story-



Extra: A Relieving Family-Friendly Version

[TL: Some of the terms here may be utterly incorrect because I'm unfamiliar with the BL genre.]

The flagship Seibunkan Bookstore. A young woman is standing before the bookshelves suspiciously.

She's probably a high school student.

At first, she walked around while being wary of her surroundings. Then, she stopped moving and stared at a certain novel's cover.

After that, perhaps she has made up her mind about something. She reached out her hand.

"You like school-type ones? That's a nice genre."

"!?"

The person letting out a silent moan after the sudden greeting is a first-year student at Tsuwabuki High School, Teiara Basori.

"Ha!? Tsukinoki-senpai, w-why are you here?"

"I always visit Seibukan, too, you know? It's on this shelf as well, here."

The person smiling gently toward Teiara is Koto Tsukinoki, a third-year student at Tsuwabuki High School.

She subtly put her hand on Teiara's shoulder. Her eyes turned toward the cover.

"Our interests seem quite similar. I'm glad to know that. Is there anything you like here?"

"It's okay. All of the encounters in this world are fated coincidences. Is this what you wanted to read?"

Koto reached her hand out and touched Teiara's pale cheeks.

"That's why I told you I'm just a little curious. It's not like I want to read it! It's because books like this aren't suited for Tsuwabuki students!"

"Reading is free. You can read anything you want. You can get any feeling you want from reading those books. Also, everything on this shelf is family-friendly. It's fine for a high school student to read them."

"Family-friendly...?"

Koto smiled and nodded gently.

"Indeed, commercial BL soothes one's soul. Something you never get from fanfics and second creations."

"Commerical BL? Is it different from the so-called doujinshi?"

"There are a lot of doujins as well, like secondhand BL, reversible, anti-CP. Different interpretations...lead to all kinds of landmines waiting for you. However, it's another story in commercial BL as long as the author is reputable."

Koto took out a book without hesitation and handed it to Teiara.

The title on the cover is <Student Council Room's Love Trap - The Icy President Is a Sweetie>

"The president is referred to as the Cold Emperor of Ice, yet he melts into honey whenever he's in another guy's arms."

"Prez...is like honey...?"

Teiara gulped and took the book while trembling.

"Basori-san, you're into this, right?"

"Ha!? P-Please don't say stupid things like that!"

This time, Koto held Teiara's arm tightly when she tried to return the book to the shelf.

"This is the best novel for you. There are no misunderstandings or landmines. It's just a world full of overflowing fragrance."

"A world of fragrance...!"

Teiara-san's breath is being taken away.

"Eh, well..."

"T-This doesn't mean I like this book the most, right?"

"I think you're a bottom girl in my eyes. I wonder if you're a total bottom or not. The Super Darling type is probably around here. Alright, here you go."

Koto quickly selected a few books and handed them to Teiara.

"Ara, are you more of a fantasy type or office type? It seems that you have a wild appetite. Well, then..."

Koto started browsing the bookshelf again. Teiara shook her head.

"T-This one will do! Thank you!"

Teiara bowed profoundly and walked toward the cashier. She then hastily returned.

"What's wrong?"

"Uh, Shikiya-senpai just invited me to play board games with everyone."

"Eh? Oh, I see."

"...Uh, senpai, please join us as well once your exam is over!"

Koto is startled by this sudden invitation for a moment. However, she quickly gave a gentle smile.

"Sure, I'll come to bother you guys when I have time."

"Got it! Well, I'll be leaving!"

Teiara took another book from the shelf before going toward the cashier.

Her look when she was looking around as she checked out reminded Koto of her past.

"That girl...has already fallen to our side."