



Random Numbers
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“Seven hundred, seventy five thousand, two hundred and forty nine.”

Those words, with the accompanying white breath, had barely reached my ear before the cold wind evaporated them into the sky. The sky was so blue that it felt like it would pierce you in the eyes, but the cold weather was just plain cold. Anyway, we still hadn't finished the third day of the new year. I supposed it would be quite a few days until we warmed up for spring.

I continued to walk along silently, but I felt my walking partner waiting for a reaction from me, so I obliged him a little. “Koizumi. What was that number? Did you count all the mochi you've ever eaten?”

“My goodness...” said the so-called esper, smiling with the slightest hint of self-deprecation. “That number had no significance whatsoever. It suddenly popped into my head as we arrived here. Wait, I can just barely remember what it meant. Now, I would say it's a number that's not only meaningless to you, but to all of humanity as a whole.”

So that monologue-ish number had no substance behind it, huh? You were just speaking out loud so anyone would be able to hear you. A direct message that suddenly arrived with no meaning. Well, speaking from the receiving end, it's a huge pain.

“Then please forgive me for saying it.”

Show me that you're actually sorry, don't just say it. What kind of number was that seven hundred seventy thousand anyway? I can't recall a number that big since last summer.

“Then how about we say it's the amount of money I've received from my relatives these first three days?”

Like I'd actually be happy to hear that. You could take over the role of wallet for the SOS Brigade, then. One way to start would be to arrive later than me to the meeting spot.

“That would be a difficult task indeed. While I can't say that we all circle around the station so we can arrive first, it's nearly impossible to arrive after you do.”

What the hell? If you just called me in advance, you could wait and arrive ten seconds after I do.

Koizumi, under a thick coat, covered his shoulders from the cold. “No, I've tried to arrive last before. I delayed my departure, but still I would arrive before you would, no matter how long I waited. I can't state whether it's merely by chance, or because Suzumiya-san wills it so.”

This time it was my breath that turned white. “That's an incredibly precise pain in my neck. At least I don't have to worry about making my offering to the café today.” As I shivered from the cold, I looked up at the solid stone arch, with its huge vermilion doors opened towards me.

It was past noon on January third, and we were standing outside one of the shrines in the city. During our snow mountain lodging trip, Haruhi said that we would come here, and so we came today. And we didn't arrive at this shrine randomly; there was one definite reason for us to be at this location today:

We came for our first shrine visit of the year.

By “we,” I mean the SOS Brigade, of course. It wasn’t just the sad tale of Koizumi and me coming here on our own; the three girls were also walking ahead of us. Once we arrived at our destination, the ringleader, that rascally brigade chief, turned around and declared, “Now then, we’ll start with this one! There’s no reason why we can’t visit every shrine and temple in the city before the day is done. Shift into gear!”

I didn’t have a gearbox or clutch inside me, but who could say that about her. No, she probably had a supercharger in her stomach.

“Since we didn’t come on New Year’s Day, I’m sure the god of this shrine has been waiting for us to arrive today. Make sure not to mention the late part in your prayer, okay?”

Haruhi, dressed in clothes that would adorn the best looking dolls in a gallery, flanked on both sides by Nagato and Asahina-san wearing similar refinement, pointed towards the sky and shouted, “It’s been three days since the start of our year-long plan!” She continued the impromptu declaration with an enthusiastic smile, so bright that you could feel the pressure starting to rise around her like a cyclone. “So let’s get these prayers over with before the day is done!”

When I nonchalantly arrived at our usual meeting spot in front of the station, I saw that the other Brigade members were waiting there for me to arrive, as usual. Despite time and again arriving just before we were supposed to meet, I could never stop feeling guilty over holding everyone up. I usually ended up playing gofer for Koizumi and the girls, but at least today I could rest easy.

Furthermore, the girls were supposed to meet at the Tsuruya residence before coming here, so I took the delay into account and left a little later today. Haruhi made the schedule yesterday, with a little help from Tsuruya-san. At the time I had a situation with the other club members, so needless to say, I didn’t take everything they said into account. It was unusual for me not to chime in.

As for why the girls stopped by the Tsuruya residence, well, if you took a look, you’d quickly realize why.

“These clothes look amazing, don’t they?!” Haruhi pointlessly puffed out her chest with a smile, brighter than the clothes she wore, that spread to all the corners of the heavens. “They look good on Yuki and Mikuru-chan too.” She pulled the other two beside her.

It was just as she said. No other words could describe how they looked besides “magnificent.” While the three girls could be described as reasonably fair, dressed to their utmost in the clothes of the Japanese soul, they stood out like the three stars of Orion’s belt in the winter sky. Especially Asahina-san. She wouldn’t have looked out of place as a brochure model for some clothing company, advertising to rich people, “Buy This for Your Beloved Daughter’s Graduation.” Her clothing was no doubt made of the finest materials, though what was wrapped inside was even more valuable. While we didn’t have to ignore Haruhi’s statement completely, it wouldn’t be too much to say that Nagato also fit right in the middle of the beauty of these goddesses. But still, Asahina-san, I don’t know how you look so beautiful.

“Their clothing really suits them well.” Koizumi, who was dressed much like me, interjected, and then glanced in my direction with that bitter smile I resent so much. Haruhi never recognized the good-for-nothing look on his face. Just thinking that I might be the only one who could notice the subtle differences in his expression made me sick. Now if it were Asahina-san, then I wouldn’t mind having that talent.

Even though he was speaking at me to begin with, he next addressed Haruhi. “Did Tsuruya-san choose these kimonos for you?”

I was curious as to just how that girl was able, miraculously, to have kimonos on hand that suited Haruhi, Nagato, and Asahina-san so perfectly. In any case, she lived in a rich house that made you feel like you’d dig up gold coins instead of water if you dug deep enough, and she had a vacation house near a ski resort. In fact, it was just yesterday that we five returned from the villa that she so graciously invited us to stay in, free of charge. I was exhausted from having lodged together, but I could still remember Tsuruya-san and Haruhi talking about wearing their best clothing for the first shrine visit of the year. It wasn’t that old a memory.

Tsuruya-san commented in her usual style, “Since I’m so kind, I’ll let you borrow some!” Just as cheerful as can be, as if she were lending out some disposable hand warmers. “My clothes are your clothes. Besides, if no one wears them, they’ll just end up as fertilizer in my dresser. Pops wants to wear them, but he’s not that great at putting kimonos on.”

For a moment, I got to see Haruhi’s thought process. “I’m not good at putting them on either, but I haven’t got anything I haven’t worn before either. I don’t want these antiques to go stale, so we’ll wear them instead!”

With that smiling declaration, she high-fived Tsuruya-san.

“Yeah!”

“Oh yeah!”

Their actions were meaningless to anyone besides the two of them.... Or perhaps this was something in the air that was beyond recognition, at least to anyone who wasn’t a positive personality.

Asahina-san was trying to keep up in their conversation, murmuring “What? Huh. Tsuku...mo? Right?” As for Nagato, “.....” She was focused on reading the pages in her abnormally large paperback, never once looking up, while the rocking of the train slightly moved her bangs. My sister was asleep against Shamisen’s carrier.

As it happened, Tsuruya-san would be in an airplane going to Europe today, so she wouldn’t be able to accompany us. She said she would let the staff know to expect the girls, and to allow them to borrow the kimonos. And in short, Haruhi ate up this exceedingly extravagant suggestion, all of which was said with a light smile. In return, Haruhi offered, “Then we’ll have a picture taken of us in our kimonos to return the favor. That’ll be perfect!”

“That’ll do!”

As Haruhi was giving a thumbs up, Koizumi and I simultaneously shrugged our shoulders, not knowing what was coming, nor making any predictions.

As my reminiscing came to an end, Koizumi said,

“You remember well. But it did just happen yesterday after all.”

Then, while putting an emphasis on “yesterday,” he said in a strange and slightly darkened voice,

“After all, for you, yesterday's memories didn't end there, did they? But for me, that was just about all of it. And for one other person as well: Suzumiya-san.”

Taking up the vanguard, Haruhi walked in long strides as if she weren’t wearing a kimono at all, while the rest of us continued through the shrine grounds. Even though it was the third day of the new year, there was quite a large crowd. Haruhi walked along happily with a gait like a wild rabbit, which really made her stand out, accompanied by the graceful Nagato and Asahina-san, who made clear trotting sounds as she followed them. The way they were, I certainly wouldn't lose sight of the three of them. The road approaching the shrine, lined with vendor stalls, was definitely the highlight, but when we reached the crowd of people visiting the shrine, and I wondered in the middle of this commotion where the heck they all sprang from, the population density reached the “no breathing room” level. It was indeed Haruhi's type of festival. I felt the hurry. All over the place, I picked up the scent of delicious baked goods, including my favorites. Oh yeah, I hadn’t had takoyaki lately.

At any rate, for both Haruhi and the members of the Tsuruya family, it seemed like their knowledge of kimono fitting was right on the mark, just as with smooth costume changing. Thanks to that, I was glad I wasn't stuck passing the dull hours away, like an image of two lonely boys waiting in vain as they shivered from a cold mountain wind. But in the end, maybe that wouldn't be so bad once in a while.

Koizumi's exhalation dampened the air, as I continued to pretend that his words were actually, intentionally reaching my ears.

“Your winter lodging with Nagato-san and Asahina-san weren’t over yet. Did the three of you enjoy your ‘extra innings’? It would be useless for you to ask me not to be jealous. I am the assistant brigade chief after all.”

Hah. Now I get it. I've finally figured it out. I didn't stop looking at the microscopic smile on his face that showed what he meant. From the time of our winter lodging to the time after we returned and met up at the station, Nagato, Asahina-san, and I “went to December 28th of last year and returned after departing for 62 seconds” ... Wait, saying it that way made it sound like we’d just pulled off some super-powerful move. I wasn’t tired, of course. Actually, I was quite refreshed. I couldn’t imagine you needed to ask Nagato how she felt either. Asahina-san was confused all the way through, and I was sure she didn't think Nagato's and my actions were anything but weird. Yet, all things considered, there was no

case in which the actions of Haruhi Suzumiya and her cohorts weren't weird ... Well, I suppose this was fine.

Seemed like this guy was jealous of what I'd call a chain of time-traveling turmoil.

"I feel like myself and Suzumiya-san have been left out."

Hey you, you have no business inviting Haruhi. I could certainly see her disappearing in the uproar of a time paradox.

"So no matter what, it's just me left out, is it?"

I couldn't give a damn either way. Because, in reality, you were not there in that time or that space. If you had any complaints, you could tell me at the second time leap. When the me from back then saw you and heard your voice, then it could be decided whether you should participate or not.

I could still see reproach on Koizumi as he looked at me with a thin smile, as I said,

"You always procrastinate about going into Closed Space, don't you? Being the 'boy who leaps through time' is tough – I'd even call it overtime. Have some respect for your own job."

"Then I'll definitely be counting on you next time. If you could be so kind as to keep it in a corner of your memory..."

As of right now, I wouldn't want any such opportunity to arise. And besides, if you had any wishes, you should tell them to the gods of this shrine and not to me. You could get some peace of mind if you gave them an offering. Though as far as gods for the so-called "Agency" are concerned, it isn't one among many; it's just Haruhi herself.

Haruhi led the way in front of me and Koizumi, arm-in-arm with Nagato and Asahina-san, her wooden sandals making a clanking sound as she walked. Of course, the sandals, socks, obi, obi clips, and everything up to the hair ornaments for the three kimonos were all courtesy of the Tsuruya family. For someone like me without the talent to price goods, I couldn't calculate the total monetary sum of all those articles of clothing, but if I brought them to a pawn shop, I would no doubt get a decent price for them. As I was having such insolent thoughts, I watched Haruhi from behind as we arrived at the fountain for cleansing our hands.

Under the guidance of Haruhi—who fussed over the small details, despite being abnormally easygoing about much bigger things—we took the provided ladles and washed our hands and mouths.

"You take it like this – ah, it's cold!"

Asahina-san rapidly blinked her eyes as she watched and mimicked Haruhi's movements, as if in a hurry to pass some coming-of-age ceremony.

"....."

Standing motionless and holding the ladle, Nagato looked like a water spirit visiting the shrine for a children's festival.

At any rate, after that we walked on, wondering whether to toss some coins into the offertory box, although the front of the main shrine was still crowded. I became anxious over whether Haruhi would charge through the crowd or not, as if she and her short temper might find a gap in the enemy's formation and launch a full assault. But even our great brigade chief wouldn't show such violence in front of the gods.

"It's obvious, of course. I choose the time, place, and people I'm with. Since shrine visits are first come first served, well, we may have to do just that."

Saying it with her usual duck mouth, Haruhi pulled Asahina-san towards her.

"But more importantly, Mikuru-chan, why don't we try that outfit next?"

She pointed ahead at what, in that instant, made a smile bloom on her face— at the front desk of the main shrine, I saw the forms of part-time shrine maidens, diligently selling votive pictures and fortune slips. The contrast of their white tunics and red hakamas caught my eye.

"A shrine maiden, a shrine maiden! That's right, I want to dress you up perfectly as a shrine maiden. After we get our fortune slips, we have to ask if they sell the shrine maiden clothes."

There was nothing wrong with that, though I was sure they weren't for sale...but whatever. I also wanted to see Asahina-san in a shrine maiden outfit. Among the sudden ideas Haruhi acted on, Asahina-san's obligatory cosplay was definitely one you couldn't put a price on.

Even Asahina-san showed some interest in it. "Are those real shrine maidens...? They're Shinto, right?" Her eyes were gleaming. They probably didn't exist in Asahina-san's time.

For a while after that, we became part of the hustle and bustle. We couldn't help but succumb to the flow of the slowly moving march of people, but because of that, we had to become a tight group of five, so there was no need to worry about getting separated.

At such a lively place, it was our brigade chief's tendency to take on energy, even more so than usual. Even among such a crowd of people, her eyes shone like those of a mole that burst out from a snow field. There was also the fact that she was clinging to Asahina-san as if they were sisters, which made finding them easy and encouraged us onward.

Following behind the two of them, the coldness of Nagato's black eyes seemed a few degrees lower than usual as she kept them straight ahead, observing the many festival booths with an expression like that of a shipmate looking for a sunken reef.

Since Koizumi and I following after them was the inevitable outcome, something came to mind.

"What was that seventy-something or other number you mentioned before?"

“Seven hundred, seventy five thousand, two hundred and forty nine.”

That's complicated when you phrase it like that. Can't you just say 775249?

“Is it a prime number?”

Right away he returned my sudden thought. “I would say that's a very good guess.”

With a somewhat careless air, Koizumi said,

“It's the number that results when you multiply three prime numbers. Since, by the definition of prime numbers where said number can only be divided by 1 and itself, that would make your guess incorrect.”

He didn't sound like his usual self as he spoke with a melancholic voice, so it seemed like he was still dragging on the whole “not being invited to the time-traveling event” thing, Hey, being “the boy who leapt through time” isn't such a great thing. It should at least be the “the girl who leapt through time.”

“Well, is there any meaning to that six-digit number?”

“There is none,” Koizumi declared in a firm tone. “It's just something I came up with when I randomly multiplied prime numbers I know. Honestly speaking, it isn't a number that has any significant meaning, even for me personally. But, that's right...”

Finally Koizumi showed me his business-as-usual smile,

“What were the original three numbers? Would you like to guess?”

Where did that proposition come from?

“I'll give you a hint – two of them are two-digit numbers and one of them is three-digits. It's easy, right? If you go through numbers one by one, you'll solve it in no time.”

What a pain.

“Suzumiya-san would get it right away, I think. If you say each prime number you think of every moment, most likely one of them will be one of the factors in the solution. I'd bet that the fortune slip she pulls is no doubt one for excellent luck.”

I continued walking with this guy who could calmly ignore probability statistics.

“Oh, and asking Nagato-san is cheating. How about the time limit being until we leave this shrine?”

What will you give me if I solve it?

“I'll give it some thought. What would you like as a reward?”

“That's right...”

However, in the end, my unreasonably non-scientific brain wasn't up to tackling this numerical calculation.

Should I have told him that I didn't have that kind of leisurely time?

"Kyon! Koizumi-kun! What are you doing? Hurry up and get over here!"

Before I realized it, Haruhi had made her way through the crowds to the front of the shrine and was waving both her hands.

Because Haruhi loved these kinds of festive places, and was frolicking around in high spirits like a puppy let loose in the savannah, for a while afterwards we were made to accompany her one by one. I really want a new word to replace "good grief."

I'll describe what happened afterwards in a simple manner.

We poured the change we got from the vending machines into the offertory box (this was actually quite a strenuous way of doing it), rang the big bell (what's the purpose of such a big bell anyway? A substitute for an intercom?), we did the traditional thing of bowing and clapping our hands with an obedient expression (it seemed like Haruhi was just praying for things that would provoke the wrath of the gods), we each pulled a fortune slip and reacted appropriately (the result of my fortune was as expected), we lined up at the food stands among the overflowing crowds to hydrate ourselves (every time Haruhi ate something, I got nervous about her getting her kimono stained), and before I knew it, as soon as I looked away I caught sight of Nagato anxious to go look at the billboards tottering around the shrine grounds (it seemed like things such as the history of the shrine and its deity were written on them), I watched over Asahina-san as she pleasantly did everything she wanted to do (if you were to compare Asahina-san's behavior to something, if she had time-traveled from the ancient Old Mound period, this was how I thought she would be)... and as we were mimicking these kinds of "things you do from the beginning to the end of the first shrine visit of the New Year" -

I can't remember the exact details, but before I realized it, Haruhi and I had gotten separated from the other three. I couldn't figure out whether this "tight" timing was good or bad. In any case, the strap on Haruhi's sandal broke.

"Geez, that's a bad omen."

I muttered something as Haruhi crouched down and grappled with the strap, then looked up at me, her beautiful eyebrows standing up on her face,

"Seriously, I want to tell them to return what I put in the offering box. I wonder if the god of the shrine is sleeping on the job or something."

I was relieved at the fact that she didn't seem to be angry at me.

“You're in everyone's way crouching there. Here, take my hand.”

We were in the middle of the road approaching the shrine. It felt like a melting pot between people coming to visit the shrine and patrons finishing up their business and going home, and Haruhi and I, stopped right in the middle, were nothing more than an obstacle.

“It's fine, that's enough.”

Haruhi took off the sandal on her right foot and held it in her hand while trying to hop around on just her left foot. However, unlike her usual, she was wearing a long-sleeved kimono, and hence things didn't go quite right, and she lost her balance.

Right away, I supported Haruhi as she was about to fall.

“It's okay already, just stand aside.”

I lent Haruhi my shoulder as we made an emergency evacuation to the side of the hanging lanterns. The glances of the surrounding people were somewhat painful.

“Doesn't look like it can be fixed.”

For a short while, Haruhi looked at the sandal from various angles, and then sighed. There was an unusual feeling there, as well. Was her standing there like a Japanese morning glory rather than using me for support what brought about that state of mind?

“It's got nothing to do with you.”

Haruhi put one hand on my shoulder, its power causing a slight change in my lower region.

“At this rate, if I go home hopping on one foot, the other sandal will get damaged too. I don't like to return things that I borrowed all worn out.”

Mostly because you have a habit of making the things you borrow your own, rather than returning them.

“What was that?”

Dodging the beam of an incoming glare, I took out my cell phone. First, I wanted to get back together with the other three. Koizumi would gladly buy Haruhi a walking stick.

However, Koizumi's response when I called him was quite unexpected.

First, I knew that Koizumi, Asahina-san, and Nagato were together.

Second, I knew the three of them were somewhere near the main entrance.

Third, even though it was a short distance, there was no good reason to go around the area again amongst a crowd of people. Even I could see that.

Fourth, if they came to where we were themselves, I'd be able to divide up the task of transporting Haruhi around with someone else, and I'd gladly carry out my mission that way.

Fifth, since we had nothing left to do on the shrine grounds, if I made a timely call, I could conclude that if we quickly departed from the shrine, our journey out would hopefully be on the same road. I couldn't sense the tiniest amount of a reason why we would purposely choose different routes to go.

But in any case, rather than one or all three of the brigade members coming to where Haruhi and I were, if Haruhi and I had to travel to where the three of them were, it would be logically obvious to anyone that they were where all the masks were.

"There's nothing difficult about it."

Koizumi's voice through the phone sounded slightly cheerful.

"It's fine if you just carry Suzumiya-san on your back and come to where we are. Carrying her in your arms is fine, too. I'll leave the method up to you."

And after adding that ridiculous proposal, damn him, the stupid jerk hung up on me.

While I was on the phone, Haruhi gazed at me, watching the color of my face change. When I informed her of Koizumi's terrible idea, she quickly got a dumbfounded expression on her face, and after looking around at the shrine patrons coming and going,

"Is there another way?"

She said that like a front line commander who was ordered to retreat, despite fighting a losing battle and being abandoned by allied troops.

It wasn't my intention either, but if it meant doing another "three-legged race" together, carrying Haruhi on my back was certainly more reasonable. Plus we could possibly get out of here faster that way, too. And by the way, it goes without saying that carrying her in my arms was perfectly out of the question. I thought of what people would say if they saw that.

"Well, I guess there's no other option then..."

I knelt down in front of Haruhi, who was looking scornfully at her sandal with its broken strap. Unexpectedly, she obediently got on my back. I felt her weight on my back and started to grasp her legs.

"Wait a minute! Don't touch anywhere you're not supposed to!" Personally, I had no idea what the proper form for carrying someone on your back was, but holding their thighs around you to act as a fulcrum to center your weight was probably the best idea, no? At least it was better than holding their rear. Just endure this.

I grimaced and looked back at Haruhi, whose eyebrows were wilted like a willow's branches. She looked at my face and commented, "My hem...."



“Ah...” I understood what she was thinking. Even she thought about that, huh? As a guy, there weren’t many occasions for us to wear formal kimonos, so I hadn’t thought too much about how they were designed, other than just how gorgeous they could be. Of course, if you picked up someone wearing a kimono and carried them like a child, their legs would be sticking out on either side of you, and their hem would rise. This wouldn’t be too bad if it was dark outside, but this was the middle of the day. If we tried to mix with this crowd of drone beetles, we’d stand out as if we were jewel beetles. It wouldn’t be bad if we were merely standing out of the crowd, but there could be students from North High here today. They’d easily get a wrong idea of what we were doing. Even if I said that I was training with Haruhi to climb that hill, they probably wouldn’t believe me. It wouldn’t match what we appeared to be doing.

“Ah, I could climb higher.”

If you climbed any higher on my back, I’d be crouching like a sumo wrestler instead of walking. I wouldn’t be able to hold her weight with my arms, so the entire stress would be placed on my back and head. I didn’t really want to crawl around like a dog, so let’s stop that line of thought.

“If you lean against me with your face covered, things should be fine.”

“It’d look improper; I’d rather be carried like a baby. But if we do this, it’ll wrinkle this kimono the least, wouldn’t it?”

She was in agreement. Though, usually you’d expect the person you’re carrying to be a bit stiff. Considering that my passenger held enough power in her to be one step short of poisoning me, she was pretty tranquil. “You’re pretty quiet back there.”

At about the same time that I lifted my back up from the ground, Haruhi noisily clattered, “Hurry up and go! Move faster!”

With us being surrounded by a lot of people, I wanted this task to quickly come to a close. However, unless my sneakers sprouted golden wings, I wasn’t going to move quickly through this crowd.

I heard her whispers, since she was so close to my ears. “This year started off feeling so good. Yesterday and the day before were both fun, but there’s nothing enjoyable about this third day.” The owner of the voice stretched her arms beside my head. On one side I saw a sandal, and on the other, I saw her purse hanging down.

“If this happened....” She stopped in mid-sentence.

“If what happened?”

“Nothing. Get to walking! Go faster!”

She might’ve been cursed today. Wasn’t this shrine’s deity a goddess? Maybe she saw this pseudo-goddess, as Koizumi would call her, and cursed her for being an eyesore. “Damn that girl who does whatever she wants,” or something like that.

“By the way, you’re surprisingly heavy. How much mochi have you been eating?”

The purse quickly brushed my side. “It’s the kimono! Shut up or I’ll gnaw on your ears with my molars!”

So noisy back there. This passenger on my back wasn’t the kind who treats their taxi driver kindly.

Soon, I saw the frog decoration with a smaller frog on its back. Below it were the big vermilion doors, with many words written on there by various visitors. We would get there in a few minutes and some-odd seconds. Well, hopefully, assuming that my internal clock wasn’t off or that I made a big mistake in my mental calculations. Anyway, no one would care to hear about these trivialities, I’m sure.

Waiting at the doors were the other three with various expressions. Koizumi had his arms crossed and smiling, Asahina-san had clasped her hands to her face and was murmuring “Oh...”, and Nagato, who had been squatting for some reason, quickly stood up and glanced at us with bright eyes.

Though our long, yet short, trip was at its end, it was only after we passed through the shrine gate that I could feel more at ease. As Haruhi hurriedly got off my back, my body felt a bit lighter. By the way, Haruhi, how did you plan to get home like that? I guess you could get replacement shoes before heading home.

“We shall not have to acquire some,” said Koizumi. “Let’s consider that an emergency measure. I inquired a while ago and Nagato-san considers this one of her specialties.”

If we dispatched Nagato to fix her shoe, wouldn’t that be an emergency measure.... But I would have to consider whether or not that was a good thing afterwards. The reason why?

“I was just thinking... we girls are dressed in our finest today, but Kyon and Koizumi-kun are dressed casually. That’s not right.”

Haruhi began talking with that “It just occurred to me” beaming smile of hers. Just a while ago she was chatting normally, and now she was talking like a heavenly revelation just flashed in her head. “So you two need to change into formal clothing to help celebrate the New Year as well. You’ve got ten seconds!”

That’s impossible. Besides, I don’t even know where my family crest is at the moment.

Koizumi spoke during the break in the conversation, “If that’s what you wish, then I have an acquaintance that runs a clothing rental store we could borrow clothing from, but I do not know if they could prepare clothing in a rush.”

He winced just a little. Besides, how many “acquaintances” did you have? Was the “Organization” on 24-hour standby once the New Year started? Must not get much of a break, huh?

No need to delve into that matter more, or else Haruhi would suddenly let her imagination run wild if she read my thoughts.

“It’d be troubling to suddenly go into a shop and ask for a full outfit. Right, unless you guys went into the store beforehand, they’d just think it was a prank. That’s why...” And Haruhi’s eyes started to sparkle, as if she got a brilliant idea. “you should tell us your heights and weights. Your waist sizes too!”

What was the best way to respond here? Wouldn’t those be embarrassing numbers for you to know?

However, Koizumi had a much different standpoint on the issue. Usually he was a first-class gentleman who always has a tactful reply, but I was surprised at the shortened “umph” reaction I felt from him. And then after a period of contemplating, he responded mysteriously, with a bittersweet smile. “...I should’ve expected that question from you, Suzumiya-san. I ask what you want to do with that information. It’s a very private and delicate matter for myself.”

Koizumi gave me a sideways glance as he extended a hand towards Haruhi and led her away to have a talk in private. I could see them whispering, and Haruhi was nodding her head, pleased.

What did he have to keep secret anyway? It’s wasn’t like he was a boxer who’s losing weight....

And then it hit me. The number Koizumi murmured to start the day. Seven hundred, seventy five thousand, two hundred and forty nine. The product of multiplying three prime numbers. Two 2-digit numbers and one 3-digit number.

I suddenly turned toward eyes that were staring at me.

“.....”

Nagato was staring at me with eyes that looked like she wanted to ask a question.

... Well, sometimes I was also flexible when it came to answering questions. So,

“Well, Nagato, it’s okay if you don’t want to answer something. Like today, you can just let me think about it.”

Nagato bluntly replied, “That so?” and then quietly erased the three numbers she had written down on the ground with the toe of her sandal.

A few days later...

Winter vacation was slowly coming to an end, and I was mentally preparing to do my morning exercise of going up that hill towards school that I love so much, when my little sister came barging into my room without knocking.

“You got a letter from Koizumi-kun!”

After handing over the letter, she went over and kidnapped Shamisen, who was sleeping on my bed in my place.

I turned it over to look at the writing. The sender wrote in slightly angular characters; it was definitely Koizumi's handwriting. I tore one of the sides of the envelope, turned it upside down, and two photographs fell out. There was no written card inside.

The first photograph was taken of the SOS Brigade posing however we liked. Koizumi and I were in our rental attire, while Haruhi, Nagato, and Mikuru were in their kimonos. That day, while we were walking from the rental shop to the next shrine, Haruhi spotted an old-time photo studio. The photographs were developed and mailed to Koizumi's place before he forwarded one to me. However, what could I say about that stupid expression of mine in the picture. It didn't match my clothing at all...

Ah! "So that's why everyone's dressed up..."

While I was admiring Haruhi's devotion to Tsuruya-san's request for a photo, I picked up the other photograph.

Given the composition, lighting, and skill of the photographer, this was definitely inferior to the one taken at a studio. Not only was this one clearly taken from a cell phone and printed out, the angle and light source indicated that it was taken secretly. Koizumi hurriedly clicked the button and this was the result. It was taken as simple confirmation for the subject in the picture.

However, there was one thing in the picture that caught my attention, or rather, tickled the muscles along my spine. It brought back memories of that time.

"So she stuck her face into my back, didn't she?"

Inside the scenery of that rectangular object was me, staggering along, carrying a heavy weight on my back, and Haruhi being that heavy weight.

Maybe Koizumi threw this one in as a freebie.