

Kota Nozomi  
Illustrator  
Nanase meruchi

The  
Peerless  
Prince  
Charming

Are  
You  
Okay  
With a  
(Slightly)  
Older  
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# he Peerless

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~The Peerless Prince Charming~

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## THE STORY SO FAR

Fifteen-year-old high school student Momota Kaoru's relationship with his twenty-seven-year-old girlfriend, Orihara Hime, was supposed to be a secret. However, their relationship was brought to light when Hime's older sister, Kisaki, was set to marry none other than Momota's father, Shigeru. Kisaki wanted them to break up because of their not-so-slight age difference.



However, their strong bond remained unshaken, and they decided that they would believe in their future together and press on until the day their relationship became socially acceptable. Now, as the season changes, the school festival is about to begin, with it being a first for Momota ★ and a slice of nostalgia for Hime.



## ≡ Prologue

Once upon a time, there were three little boys who were the best of friends. They all called each other by their nicknames: Ura, Kana, and Momo.

Ura was very lively. Although he was short in stature, his curiosity was boundless, and he was full of energy. Since he was always pushing them to do this and that, he was like a leader to his two friends. His only flaw was that he was a little bossy; still, he treasured his friends very much.

Kana was a quiet boy who didn't talk much. He was shy, and he preferred to read books rather than play outside. However, when Ura or Momo would invite him to join them, he'd happily come along and play with them.

Momo was a laid-back kind of boy. While he was the largest of the three boys, he possessed a kind and gentle heart. Momo was always there to cheer up Ura whenever he got too carried away and made a mistake, and whenever Kana was scared and crying, Momo would stay by his side until he calmed down.

The three of them always played together. They never doubted that their current relationship would last forever, even once they'd grown up and become adults.

One day, when the three of them were in middle school, a girl appeared before them. She was a transfer student from the city who had no friends; Ura, being the leader, added her to the boys' group, and the three of them called her "Ryu."

Having gained a friend, the boys became even happier than ever. Ryu and the boys played games together, ran around in fields and hills, helped each other study, and so on and so forth.

After doing many things together, the four grew closer and closer. Though their group of three had become a group of four, the three boys' friendship remained as strong as ever. Indeed, their friendship would last forever—or so the laid-back Momo had thought. The other three had grown up a little bit

faster than him.

Ura had fallen in love with Ryu. The girl he had considered to be his dear friend had suddenly become the object of his affection. However, Ura was stubborn: he couldn't let her know about his feelings, so he buried them in his heart forever.

But then the day came that Ryu asked Ura for advice. "I'm in love with Kana," she confided in him.

Ura was completely shocked. It was like his whole world had turned dark. However, he decided that if it was Kana, then it was okay. Kana was a friend he cherished more than anyone; from the bottom of his heart, Ura wanted Kana to be happy with the girl he loved.

Ura suppressed his feelings. He told Ryu, "Leave it to me. I'll definitely make you guys a couple."

With a very happy look on her face, Ryu smiled at Ura. "Thank you. I'm glad I talked to you, Ura." Ura smiled back, but there was a pain in his chest, and it hurt so, so much.

From that day on, Ura tried to make Ryu and Kana a couple. Yet try as Ura might, Kana would never return Ryu's feelings. The truth of the matter was that there was nothing Ura could do: Kana was in love with another girl.

Because Ura had desperately suppressed his own feelings and supported Kana, he couldn't forgive Kana for refusing to return Ryu's feelings. Ura took his promise seriously and tried to force the two together, but Kana continued to reject his efforts.

Things became worse and worse between them as this continued, and when the situation became too painful to endure, Kana finally said, "Knock it off, Ura. Why are you trying to get me and Ryu together? The truth is...you like her, don't you?"

Kana, who was sensitive to subtle matters of the heart, had always known about Ura's true feelings. This was why he couldn't stand to see Ura stifle his own feelings and support someone else's love life. He had thought that Ura and Ryu should be a couple the whole time.

Ryu overheard their conversation. Once she finally realized the truth about Ura's feelings, she realized just how cruel she had been. Seeing her after this realization, Ura felt terribly ashamed. Since the feelings he had hidden were found out, he felt so embarrassed and so pathetic that he could die.

It was at that point that the relationship between Ura, Kana, and Ryu was definitively ruined.

Ura became fed up with everything and shut himself in his room. The boy who had been so energetic and so full of bravado became like a different person: Ura became dark, withdrawn, brooding, and unable to open his heart to anyone.

Kana became desperate and began dating a girl he didn't even like. The boy who had been so quiet and so shy became like a different person: Kana became bright, sociable, and capable of engaging in superficial relationships with a fake smile.

Consumed by a deep guilt, Ryu distanced herself from them.

That was how it all ended. These four good friends were deeply hurt by the way their feelings never aligned, and they parted ways.

However, Momo wouldn't let it end there. Unlike the other three, Momo was a laid-back boy who didn't understand love. He truly didn't know why the other three had been so invested in the issue and why they had had their feelings hurt so deeply.

He hated it. He truly hated the idea of his friends going their separate ways. That's why Momo did his best. It wasn't like he had a way to bring everything back from the brink of disaster or like he could perform some kind of wonderful miracle. He simply tried to get along with everyone.

Every day, Momo went to Ura's house to play; every day, he talked to Kana and Ryu. In this way, he earnestly, desperately, sincerely tried to fix their friendship. He dreamed of a future where the four of them would play together again, so he continued to desperately try to keep his friends together. He truly believed that everything would go back to normal if he never gave up.

As a result of his efforts, his feelings reached his friends. Ura came back to



school, and Kana and he gradually became able to talk to each other again normally. The three of them were able to go back to being such good friends that they all went to the same high school together.

However, not everything went back to normal. Ryu alone decided to go to a different high school. “I’m too ashamed to face them,” she explained.

No matter how much Momo tried to persuade her, Ryu’s guilt wouldn’t subside. She couldn’t forgive herself for ruining the relationship of the three friends with her selfish feelings.

Ura, Kana, and Momota were back together. However, the story didn’t end with a happily ever after—and their story continues even now.

## ≡Chapter 1: Momotaro's New Family

I'd had a dream about long ago, and it was weighing on my mind. I had dreamed of a time I was with Ura and Kana—and with Ryu as well. In the dream, the four of us were laughing together. It was an irreplaceable and dazzling memory from when I was in middle school.

"..." I got out of bed and threw some clothes on.

*It's strange. I haven't had a dream about those days in a long time. I hardly even remember them very much anymore.* I let out a small sigh. Maybe it was because I was still sleepy, or maybe it was because of my dream, but when I left my room, it felt like my head was sort of heavy.

As I walked downstairs while stifling a yawn, I ran into a woman wearing an apron. I was momentarily speechless because I still wasn't sure what I should call this person. It felt like it would be strange to suddenly change how I address her, so I ended up calling her by what I had before, but...

"Good morning, Kaoru-kun," she said, greeting me before I could greet her. Her gentle smile greatly resembled the smile of the person that I love.

"Good morning, Kisaki-san," I said. In the end, I called her "Kisaki-san." Somehow, it was too embarrassing to call her "mom."

"Breakfast is ready, so I was just about to go and wake you up. If you don't hurry up and eat, you'll be late for school," she said in a perfectly normal tone. When I didn't respond, she looked at me strangely. "...What's wrong? You look out of it."

"No, it's just... I'm still not used to you being here."

She looked puzzled at first, but then she giggled. "Oh, come on. You're still saying things like that? It's already been a week since I started living here."

"That's true, but..."

"If we're going to talk about getting used to things, I'm the one who's still got

a long way to go. I don't know where everything is kept, and I can't quite master using the washing machine and dryer. Besides...you won't let me wash your underwear, Kaoru-kun."

"No, that's just... I mean...you know?"

"But it's a bother washing your own underwear afterwards, isn't it? Not to mention that it's a waste of money on laundry detergent and the water bill."

"I-I get that, but..."

"Sigh... Oh dear. It sure is tough being a mother with a son going through puberty," Kisaki-san said jokingly.

*Is it because of puberty? Is that what this is?*

*In any case, I don't want Kisaki-san to wash my underwear. It's partly because it's embarrassing, but it's also because she's not just my new mother, she's my girlfriend's older sister. I'm not sure I'm comfortable letting her wash the underwear that even my girlfriend hasn't washed.*

"He he. Well, okay. Hurry up and wash your face," she said as she returned to the kitchen. For some reason, she was energetic and had a very satisfied look on her face.

Orihara Kisaki was the older sister of my slightly older girlfriend, Orihara Hime. She was thirty-four years old and a divorcée. I'd met her a few times before, but the other day I found out that she was dating my father. What's more, she was apparently already pregnant with my new little brother or little sister.

My father stubbornly insisted that this wasn't a shotgun wedding kind of situation and that he didn't do things out of order, but I'd heard the truth from Kisaki-san. Apparently, when she went all out on my father to avoid letting the opportunity get away from her, my father gave in to her. Additionally, judging from the timing of it all, it seemed like she had gotten pregnant when they first met. *Come on, Dad, you're almost forty...*

I had complicated feelings about it, but it was without a doubt a happy occasion. However, because of the unbelievable incident that was my girlfriend's older sister getting married to my father, Kisaki-san discovered the



secret Orihara-san and I had been keeping about our relationship. There was a bit of a commotion as a result, but somehow things had settled down. Kiseki-san hadn't completely let us off the hook, but things had worked out, with us gaining her silent consent.

After such a turbulent September, it was now the first week of October. My father and Kiseki-san had registered their marriage at the end of last month. Since they'd both been married once before, they were undecided about how to handle the wedding; thus far, they'd only talked about having a family-only wedding after their child was born.

Now that they'd officially gotten married and Kiseki-san had officially become my stepmom, she'd been living in this house since the beginning of October. I knew there must have been a lot of things that were difficult and stressful about living in an unfamiliar environment while she was pregnant, so that was why we as a family had to do everything in our power to support her. That was what we were determined to do, anyway...but she was doing a marvelous job as a housewife, and she was handling the chores and cooking splendidly.

"So, Momota-kun. Will you have rice? Will you have bread? Or maybe...you'll have soba noodles?" Kiseki-san asked gleefully.

She was acting like a newlywed. Well, I mean, she did just get married.

"By the way, you'll have to get the bread yourself, and the soba noodles are just the instant ones we have saved up."

It looked like there had only been one real choice. I mean, she'd already laid out grilled fish on the dining table anyway.

"...I'll go with rice."

"Okay, rice it is!" As I sat down at the table, Kiseki-san prepared me some rice and miso soup. I brought my hands together, gave thanks, and started to eat.

"How's it taste?"

"It's delicious."

"Really? You aren't thinking something like 'Hime's cooking tastes better,' are you?" she said with a playful look.

"I'm not," I responded with a wry smile.

*Jeez... You don't have to tease me just because no one else is around.*

"By the way, where's Dad?"

"He already ate and went to the clinic."

"And my sister?"

"I think she's still sleeping."

"I see."

"I wonder if I should finally go wake her up?"

"No, I think it's fine. Surprisingly enough, she's not the type to oversleep, so I think she's just sleeping because she doesn't have anything to do."

"Really? Well, okay then."

"...Um, Kisaki-san?" I put down my chopsticks. "It's just... Please don't push yourself too hard."

"What?"

"Kisaki-san, since you've started living in our home, you've woken up early every day to make us breakfast, and you've been working really hard doing the chores and stuff... Of course, I'm very happy and grateful, but I'm worried we're overworking you."

"..."

"It must be hard living in an environment you're not used to. Besides, it's no longer just your body right now. I think you should take it easier. We'll all just get something to eat in the mornings by ourselves, so it's okay if you sleep in..."

"You really are kind, Kaoru-kun," Kisaki-san said with a gentle smile. "Thank you for being concerned about me. But it's all right, I'm not pushing myself. I'm just doing what I can."

"Really?"

"Really. My morning sickness has calmed down, and lately I've been feeling good. Plus, just staying put isn't good for me either."

“Well, as long as you’re okay.”

“Shigeru-san is also very considerate of me. On the other hand, Kaede-chan doesn’t worry about that kind of stuff and is just very straightforward, which is relieving in its own way. It’s all kind of fun, so I’m fine.”

“...”

“After all, you don’t have to worry. I’m not going to try and put on airs in front of you. It’d just be ridiculous. After all, my goal of being my son’s ideal stepmom went up in flames a while ago...” Kiseki-san said in a self-mocking tone as her smile twitched slightly.

“Ha ha ha...” All I could do was laugh. A lot had happened, after all. I’d met her a few times before I found out she was going to be my new mother, and she thought that I was twenty-five years old, so yes, a lot really did happen—and most of it was of a sexual nature. In any case, Kiseki-san was very open with me, so I could understand why she’d feel like it would be ridiculous to put on airs with me.

“I originally treated you like my potential brother-in-law, but who’d have thought that before that you’d become my stepson? There really is no way of knowing what life is going to throw at you.”

*“I hear that.” I totally agree. There’s no way I could have foreseen that my girlfriend’s older sister would become my stepmom...*

“Well, that’s why life is so interesting,” Kiseki-san said in a decisive and clear voice, like she was wrapping everything up. “Like I said, I’m not going to force myself to act like a mother now. You’re already a high school student, Kaoru-kun, and Kaede-chan is an adult. If you two were a little younger I might have taken on the role of your mother, but honestly, doing that now would just be annoying, right?”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I nodded with a smirk.

It was a pretty frank conversation. When I was little, I did have those kinds of feelings. I would be lying if I said that I hadn’t been frustrated back then: I didn’t have a mother, and I wished for a new one. However, now that I’d become a high schooler, those feelings had pretty much faded away.



“So, let’s be straightforward with each other, Kaoru-kun,” Kisasi-san said. “We both have secrets that we can’t tell Shigeru-san, after all... Let’s help each other and rely on each other when we’re in trouble, without worrying about trying to make our relationship something it isn’t. Let’s approach each other as equals rather than as parent and child.”

“That’s the best way to do it, huh?”

Frankly, I appreciated how straightforward she was being. I was glad that she could look me in the eye and have a two-way conversation instead of needing to act superior.

Treating each other as equals instead of having a parent-child relationship felt a little lonely, but I guess this was just one kind of shape that a family could take. If we’d suddenly tried to treat each other like a parent and her child, we’d have just been asking too much of each other, and even then our relationship would have been superficial. So, for now, I was happy with this kind of strictly business relationship.

Kisasi-san got a mischievous look on her face. “But if you ever want to call me ‘mom,’ you can just go right ahead, you know?”

“...If I feel like it.” I looked away, feeling kind of embarrassed.

“He he he. Aww, look at you all embarrassed,” Kisasi-san giggled.

Orihara Kisasi—who was actually now Momota Kisasi—was my girlfriend’s older sister and my father’s new wife. For me, she was quite an interesting acquaintance, since she was my stepmom and would probably become my sister-in-law. I didn’t know how things would turn out with her at first, but now I was feeling like they could go better than I’d expected.

≡

“...Oh. Well, that’s nice.” Orihara-san’s voice sounded pretty gloomy over the phone—or maybe it’d be more accurate to say it sounded like she was sulking and biting back her anger.

After Kisasi-san saw me off and I left the house, I got a text from Orihara-san. It was just a simple message wishing me a good morning, but as I explained what had happened during breakfast, her mood got stranger and stranger.

Since she was still in her apartment, I called her after I got off the train. I tried talking to her, but it just kicked her bad mood up a notch.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Orihara-san?”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not actually ‘nothing,’ right? Are you upset?”

“I’m not upset. I’m not upset at all.” Her tone was prickly, and she was clearly upset. “I’m not jealous at all of your fun little breakfast with my sister.”





*"..." So that's the reason. "So that's why you're upset, Orihara-san."*

"I said I'm not upset! It's just...I have this legitimate concern that something is a little off." Orihara-san continued to pout. "I mean, come on... This is weird, right?! Why is my big sister eating and sleeping under the same roof as my boyfriend?!"

*"..." I couldn't object right away. After all, it was a fair question.*

*Seriously though, why did things turn out like this?* "Well, even though we're eating and sleeping in the same house, my sister and father are here with us, so..."

"I know that, but...you've been eating my sister's cooking every day lately, haven't you?"

"Well, yeah."

"You're about to have had her cooking more times than you've had mine, aren't you?"

*"Well..." I've only had Orihara-san's cooking a few times, and at this rate I'll soon surpass that. After all, I've been eating Kisaki-san's cooking for breakfast and dinner lately.*

"At this point, you've seen my sister even more times than you've ever seen me, right?"

*"...Yeah, that would be the case." I mean, we do live together. Unless one of us tried to avoid it, we'd see each other no matter what.*

"Jeez...how did things turn out like this?"

"I'm sorry." I couldn't help apologizing.

"Oh, no, it's not like that. It wasn't that I wanted you to apologize. I know that's just the way things are now, and I understand that it's not your fault, Momota-kun. In fact, as her little sister, I'm glad that she's comfortable living in your house. But I can't help getting jealous when I think about how my sister gets to live under the same roof as you and enjoy a side of you I don't know about," she said.

“...Yeah, I understand.” I felt like what I was being told was a bit needy, but I understood her feelings. If our positions were reversed, I probably would have been annoyed too. I don’t have an older brother, but if I did, and he started living with Orihara-san even though her family was there...I probably wouldn’t be able to stay calm about it.

“On top of that, all my sister does is talk about you, Momota-kun. She calls them ‘status reports.’ She says stuff like ‘Momota-kun complimented my cooking today’ or ‘Momota-kun won’t let me wash his underwear. It’s so cute how he’s going through puberty.’”

“Sh-She’s been doing stuff like that?”

“Today she sent me a picture of your face while you were sleeping and bragged about it!”

“She’s been doing stuff like *that?! Just what is my stepmom doing?! Why is she trying so hard to get a rise out of my girlfriend?!*

“She tried to provoke me with a message that said, ‘I sent you a mail pic of his face while he was asleep. Oh, Hime, could it be that I got to see his sleeping face before you did?’ I can’t stand it! Why does my sister have to get one up on me like this?!”

“P-Please calm down.”

“Well, it’s pretty old-fashioned the way she said ‘I sent you a mail pic.’ That’s such an eighties kid thing to do! I wonder if kids these days would even know what that means. Well, a nineties kid like myself totally doesn’t use the word ‘mail pic’ because I have young sensibilities! I can get with the times!” Orihara-san said, trying to one-up her sister with her youth.

“*Mail pic,*” huh? For people from the flip phone generation, apparently it was normal to call a picture you took with your phone a “mail pic,” which was short for “picture mail.” Even now, people from that generation tend to call pictures taken with their smartphones “mail pics.” I think it’s like “Don’t touch that dial” and “rewinding” videos, where it’s leftover language that comes from old technology. I’m from a generation that’s never used flip phones, but I’ve heard about “mail pics” because my dad and adults around me use the term.

*Honestly...I think Orihara-san sometimes says “mail pic” too, but I won’t bring that up right now...*

“Sigh... My morning’s barely started and my sister is already making me feel frustrated.” Orihara-san let out a deep sigh.

“It is frustrating, isn’t it? All right, I’ve got it. Next time we meet up...let’s be so I-lovey-dovey that it blows all of that frustration away!” I suggested. I was a little embarrassed, but I tried to be cool about it.

“...” I could hear her gasp on the other end of the phone.

*Oh no... What should I do? Did I mess up? Have I become the kind of boyfriend who tries to solve his problems with his girlfriend by just flirting?! In that instant, I was overcome with intense anxiety.*

“...Y-Yes, absolutely. Let’s be really lovey-dovey.” Orihara-san sounded happy and relaxed, and I felt relieved.

*Thank goodness. It looks like I didn’t mess up after all.*

“I’m sorry for spending the morning making you listen to me complain, Momota-kun.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Thank you. I feel a lot better now.”

“Well, I’m glad. Oh, sorry, I’m about to reach my school.” After walking and talking on my smartphone for a few minutes, I could see the entrance to my school across the street. “I actually have a kind of meeting with my class this morning, so I have to be there a little early.”

“A meeting... Oh, that’s right. It’s almost here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you later. I have to head to work too.”

Our phone call finished. After I put my phone into my bag, I looked up at the school entrance again. Right now, the school gate that I should have recognized looked slightly unfamiliar. Plywood, flower decorations, and other tools that would be used to decorate and make the entrance more eye-catching were

lined up next to it. They hadn't started working on it yet, so I suppose they were just getting things prepared.

It was time for the school festival. For most high schoolers, it's a festival that they only get to experience three times during their high school career, and my very first one was just a week away.

## ≡Chapter 2: The Festival of Princes

It was lunchtime, and I was eating with my friends Ura and Kana in an empty classroom as usual.

“It looks like the school is getting more and more lively,” Kana said.

“It sure does,” I said with a nod.

It was a week until Seizan High School’s culture festival, the Seizan Festival, and right now every class was staying late to prepare for it. At our high school, it was normal for the second years to be at the center of the culture festival: third years were busy with entrance exams, and first years didn’t have any prior experience with the festival, so lots of classes were unmotivated. My first-year class more or less fit the mold and was moderately enthusiastic toward the school festival.

That said, with the festival a week away, my class was influenced by everyone else and became more motivated. We were making soba noodles—the most classic of classics, the most cliché of clichés. According to information I got in advance of the festival, it seemed like about two other classes would be making soba noodles as well. Our school apparently didn’t worry about things like this overlapping.

I wasn’t a member of the culture festival organizing committee or a class representative, so I was just fulfilling the role I had been given in my class; still, even I was getting a little excited.

“I’m looking forward to it. It’ll be our first school festival, after all. Well, since we’re first years, there’s not much we can do, but if we’re going to do it, we might as well have as much fun as possible.”

“Ha ha. Look who’s talking,” Kana said as he burst out laughing. “When preparations for the festival started, you totally weren’t thinking about it.”

“Ah...”

“You were clearly putting Orihara-san before the culture festival and trying to



look all cool by saying you couldn't imagine your youth without Orihara-san anymore."

"O-Oh..." I didn't have a response, so all I could do was face the floor.

It was just as Kana had said. When preparations for the festival had started about three weeks ago, I honestly wasn't in the mood. I'd found out that my dad was getting married to Kisaki-san, and she'd found out about my relationship with Orihara-san... That mess had thrown things out of whack at the time. However, now that that problem had somehow settled, I was able to relax and start to feel like I could dedicate myself to the school festival.

"Speaking of which, will Orihara-san be coming?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

At first, I'd debated whether or not I should invite her. Orihara-san had told me before that she wanted to see the high school I go to, and I'd thought it was a good opportunity since outsiders were allowed to attend. However, I hesitated when I thought about how our relationship might be brought to light. But when I talked to Ibusuki the other day, I realized something. Since my dad and Kisaki-san are married, that means Orihara-san and I have become relatives. We'd had an emergency plan to pretend we were related if we were ever seen by someone we knew, but surprisingly the fiction had become reality. Since we were officially relatives, it was no problem if I invited her to the school festival. Orihara-san could participate without issue.

"Oh, I see. So that's why you're suddenly all motivated, Momo. You don't want to look lame in front of Orihara-san," Kana said in disbelief. "Your youth really does revolve around Orihara-san, huh?"

"...Shut up," I said, unable to firmly deny it.

*It feels like I can finally focus on a school-related event now that my non-school-related troubles with my family and girlfriend have finally calmed down. I'd be lying if I said there isn't a part of me that only wants to work hard because Orihara-san is showing up, though. I mean, my girlfriend is coming, so it's only natural that I'd want to work hard! I want her to have a good time, and I don't want her to think I'm the kind of guy who just blows off school events like the culture festival.*

*Jeez. It's just like Kana said after all. I couldn't deny it if someone said that she's the center of my youth.*

Just as I was mentally chiding myself, Ura, who had been hurriedly eating bread from the school store, opened his mouth and spoke for the first time in a while.

“Bah. You sure are carefree.” When I looked, I saw that he was already done eating his bread. If anything, Ura was a slow eater, but today he'd finished his lunch at an unusually high pace. “With this festival, everyone's just so...”

Normally, this is the part where Ura's bad attitude would start to rear its head. For example, you'd expect him to say something like:

“The school festival is just a celebration made by extroverted extroverts for extroverts! It's the epitome of an event for the ignorant masses and a negative legacy that's been passed down through the generations... Why does the Japanese education system force students to do group activities, anyway? Is there a point in forcing students to do things together within the framework imposed by the school that's known as a 'class'? This is just an event to let extroverts pretend to be nice while they force those who are lower in the pecking order—who can't resist even if they want to—to run their errands, all while adopting the slogan of 'Let's all work together as a class.' Then, even though they were so quick to close the gap between you and them, when the festival is over, those extroverts will just shrug you off and say, 'Oh, I'm done dealing with commoners.' Also, they make you buy some kind of crappy merchandise for your class, right? They take your cash from you by putting you in the kind of situation where you can't refuse. Pressuring someone to buy something in a situation where they can't refuse is a scam, you know! It's using hypnosis to do business! I'll sue!”

I think I did a pretty good job of making such an extended prediction of what he'd say, if I do say so myself. Maybe it's because we've been friends for so long, or maybe it's because the part of me that's an introvert slipped out... Anyway, if this were the normal Ura, I think he would definitely curse the school festival. However, as for today's Ura:

“The school festival must be nice for people who are all like 'Let's join in!' and

‘Let’s have fun!’ I bet they don’t have much of a sense of responsibility. I’m the one who has to lead them, flatter them, appease them, organize them, and somehow whip them into shape. Being in charge is such a pain in the ass! I’m so busy. I’ve got another meeting today after this, so I don’t have time to take it easy and eat lunch.”

Both Kana and I were speechless, but Ura didn’t notice. He simply got his stuff together and stood up from his seat. “All right, I’m going. Well, it’s just final adjustments that they probably don’t really need me for, but our class has a lot of unreliable types in it. They begged me to come. Seriously, it’s such a pain in the ass.”

“...”

“Hmm? What are you guys staring at me for?”

“No, it’s just... I thought you looked like you were really enjoying yourself,” I said.

“What?!” Ura’s face turned bright red. “J-Just what part of me looks like I’m enjoying myself?! Screw you!”

“No, you look like you’re having fun. Like, a lot of fun...”

“D-Don’t get me wrong! I don’t care about this school festival, and I don’t feel attached to my class! It’s just... I just kind of have an interest in this profit-driven corporate activity! I just find it rewarding to use my authority to utilize those useless background characters to make a profit!” Ura shouted like he was spitting out his words. Then, with a red face, he left like he was running away. After he ran away, I could hear the voice of a girl from outside the classroom.

“Oh, Urano.” I couldn’t see her, but the voice probably belonged to Ibusuki. It sounded like she ran into Ura just as he left the classroom.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“What’s with the attitude? And after I came all this way to come get you...”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“Well, pardon me. I was just worried that you’d run away again.”

“...The only time I ran away was when you had that crappy suggestion of

making me introduce myself in front of the entire class.”

“I-I said I’m sorry about that. I regret what I did.”

“Bah. Let’s hurry up and go.”

“Hey, hold up. You walk too fast.”

“We won’t have any time if we don’t hurry up. If we don’t decide on the goods for the whole class today, then we won’t make it in time for the festival.”

“I know, I know.”

“These types of goods are very important. There are some people who criticize them by calling them a scam or saying that making someone buy something in a situation where they can’t resist is a way of using hypnosis to do business. However, when you consider the overall performance...” Ura’s and Ibusuki’s voices echoed in the hallway, becoming smaller and smaller. As the class representatives, they were probably headed to a meeting for the school festival.

“...Well, that’s a shocker,” Kana said after a brief pause, a lingering look of surprise on his face. “I didn’t think Ura would be so excited about the festival.”

“...Yeah.”

Urano Izumi was an introvert among introverts; the reason he was in such an out-of-character position as his class’s representative seemed to have been because Ibusuki invited him to do it. Apparently, after being chosen first as the class’s female representative, she nominated Ura. At first, Ura seemed like he would stop coming to school out of despair and humiliation, but two weeks had passed since he was appointed to his mismatched position, and he’d been performing as the class representative with a lot of enthusiasm right before my very eyes. *He said that it’s a pain in the ass, but he looks like he’s really content.*

“There have been a lot of group meetings for the class representatives, but he’s fitting in,” Kana, who was also a class representative, explained. “He only cowered next to me during the very first meeting, and now he’s actually sitting in the front and giving his opinions.” Kana seemed impressed.

“At one point, I was wondering what was going to happen, but it looks like it

worked out.” I let out a sigh of relief.

*Two weeks ago, I was so busy with my family and love troubles that I really couldn't give much attention to Ura. I felt bad about it, but it looks like my worries were for nothing, and he didn't need my help in the first place.*

*Oh man... No wonder Ibusuki calls me overprotective...*

“It’s like he’s back to being the old Ura,” Kana said with a distant look in his eyes.

“It is,” I said with a nod. It did remind me of the old Ura. He was a lively and spirited boy who was overflowing with the kind of leadership that made him the center of attention in his class. “I thought that he’d changed a lot...but I guess, deep down, he didn’t change as much as I’d thought.”

“He didn’t. The part of him that still pushes himself too hard in front of the girl he likes really hasn’t changed.” The words Kana spoke through his thin smile were a little stinging. However, I think that sting wasn’t aimed outwards, but inwards. His self-mocking and self-deprecating words were meant for his own past, not someone else’s.

I suddenly remembered the three—no, the four—of us in middle school. At the time, Ura definitely overworked himself and pushed himself too hard.

“Ha ha. I look forward to what happens with those two,” Kana said in a light voice after changing gears. He probably wanted to change the mood since our conversation had become a little gloomy. “I heard that a lot of couples start dating after the school festival, so maybe the same will happen for them.”

“I wonder.”

“Well, I think those two are a good match for each other.”

“You seem concerned about other people’s love lives, but what about yours, Kana?” I didn’t mean anything deep by this; I was just trying to make casual small talk.

“Me?”

“Are things going well with Uomi?”

“Oh, yes. I’m having a good time with Uta-chan.”



“I see.”

“...Honestly, I didn’t think that we’d last this long,” Kana said like he was lost in thought. “We started dating right after I entered school in April, so I guess we’ve been dating for about six months. For me, that’s a new record.”

*Now that I think about it again, this is probably the longest Kana’s ever dated someone. After that incident in middle school, he suddenly became very sociable and popular. He’d date anyone who confessed their feelings to him. However, none of his relationships lasted long. At most, they’d last two months. That’s probably normal for dating in middle school, but Kana’s had quite a number of these short relationships.*

“My stance has always been to accept whoever comes to me and not to chase after whoever leaves.”

“That’s such a popular-guy thing to say,” I said jokingly, but on the inside, I had mixed feelings about what he’d said. He probably intended to “accept whoever comes to him and not chase after whoever leaves,” but that’s probably not what actually happened. The part about not chasing whoever left was probably correct, but the part about accepting whoever came to him was a lie. I think the truth of the matter is that Kana kept refusing every woman who approached him and tried to deepen their relationship; as soon as they became girlfriend and boyfriend, he wouldn’t let them get too deep into his heart.

“I hear the same things over and over when I get dumped. It’s always things like ‘Do you really love me?’ and ‘I can’t tell what you’re thinking.’”

“...” It sounded like such a sad breakup story, one where the problems existed before there was any fighting. It was like there was never any love there to begin with.

“However, with Uta-chan...” Kana began, and his expression became clouded. His face changed from a sorrowful, troubled expression to an indescribably complex one. “Yeah... With her... Well, I can’t tell what *she’s* thinking.”

“Oh...” *Makes sense. Uomi Uta is the kind of girl whose thoughts you can’t read. It’s not like she’s an airhead or she’s mysterious. I can’t describe it with those kinds of words. It’s just that...I don’t know what she’s thinking.*

“I never get bored when I’m with Uta-chan. Basically, she doesn’t make sense, but she’s surprisingly polite, and she has good manners, and she’s considerate when she needs to be. So that’s why...I feel like I missed the right moment to break up with her.”

“...” I felt a sting in my chest. The words that had spilled out from him sounded like his true feelings had leaked out from deep inside his heart, and somehow, it made me feel lonely. *He missed the right moment to break up with her? That makes it sound like he never intended to stay with her for a very long time, and he was looking for the right timing to break up with her from the very beginning. It’s normal for relationships between students to last a few months or so, but it seems like it would be a very sad relationship if you’re going out with someone on the premise that you’re going to break up with them from the start...*

Kana was smiling coolly as usual. He seemed like he was fine, but I wondered if what happened in middle school was haunting him even now. Even though he was always giving me good advice with a knowing look on his face, I felt like when it came to his own love life, Kana was horribly inept.

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“The school festival, huh? That takes me back.”

It was evening on that same day, and after I ate dinner and took a shower, I called Orihara-san. I didn’t really have a reason to do so; I just wanted to hear her voice. Being boyfriend and girlfriend means that’s a good enough reason to call each other.

“My school festival was about ten years ago.”

“That’s true.”

“...It’s been ten years. I’m getting old...”

“Orihara-san, please don’t bring stuff up that’s just going to make you feel depressed.” Like always, that kind of thing was a delicate subject. “Um, so... You can come, right, Orihara-san?”

“Yes. It’s a normal day off for me.”

This year's school festival was this Saturday, and Orihara-san usually had Saturdays and Sundays off. She didn't normally look like it, but the truth was that Orihara-san was an elite career woman working in an excellent position at a prestigious company.

...It was pretty rude to preface my statement with "She doesn't normally look like it." Let's just pretend I didn't say that and go with "She looks like and gives off the impression of being an excellent career woman."

"I'm glad. I've always wanted to see what your high school is like at least once. It's difficult for outsiders to enter school grounds without this kind of opportunity," Orihara-san said, sounding truly happy. "Your class is going to make soba noodles, aren't they?"

"Yep. The classic among classics."

"Okay, then I'll go with an empty stomach. I'm looking forward to seeing you in action."

"D-Don't raise the bar, please. It really will just be normal soba noodles. Besides, I'm not really the type to be very active during school festivals and stuff." *I've always been inconspicuous in my class, and I'm proud to say that I won't be standing out at the school festival either. I just did what I was told to do the way I was told to do it, and I'll probably be the same way on the day of the festival.*

"I told you before, but my class isn't the type that works too hard at these kinds of events..."

"I heard you say that, but it's you, Momota-kun, so I totally thought that you united your unmotivated class and got them excited by saying something like 'You only get one chance at youth, so let's enjoy it to the fullest!'"

"...Just who do you think I am?" Her assessment of me was strangely high. *Well, Orihara-san doesn't know how I normally am, after all. At school, I really am just a plain student, and I'm sort of toward the lower middle in terms of popularity.*

"I'm just a guy that's being used by the girls to decorate high places."

"You are tall, Momota-kun. But...that does make me a little worried."

“Huh? What does?”

“I mean...if you help out those girls like that, then some of them might fall in love with you, you know?”

“What are you talking about? There are no girls like that.”

“But when I have you grab things for me from high places, it gives me butterflies.”

“...Huh? O-Oh... Thank you.”

“Y-You’re welcome.”

“ ...”

“ ...”

*What even is this conversation?! We’re acting as innocent as if we’d just started dating, but we’ve been going out for like half a year!*

“W-Well, I’m looking forward to the school festival,” Orihara-san said like she was trying to shift gears. “It’ll be my first school festival where they let in outsiders. I’m pretty interested in seeing what that’s like.”

“Really?”

“My school’s festival wasn’t like that. Every year, we rotated between a theater festival where every class acted out a theme they decided on and a choir festival where every class sang a theme song.”

“Oh, I see.” The high school that Orihara-san attended was Tourin Girls’ High School, a private school for girls. Their school was one of the most prestigious all-girls high schools in the prefecture, and their festival was very elegant.

“I also want to meet Ura-kun and Kana-kun again after so long. Without a chance like this, I can’t really see them.”

“Those two are both class representatives, so they’re putting way more work into the school festival than I am.”

“It seems like they are. I can understand Kana-kun doing it, but...I wouldn’t have thought that Ura-kun would be a class representative as well. Oh... That’s not very polite, is it?”

"It's okay. I'm thinking the exact same thing." I couldn't help but laugh.  
"Well...I think that Ura has finally moved on a little bit."

*I've never thought badly of Ura, of course. Even if it is widely accepted that he's an introvert among introverts, everyone has their own way of living. I think it's terribly discriminatory to assume that introverts are unhappy and miserable and to pity them for it. However, I know how Ura used to be a long time ago. He was a boy who was bright and lively who always led the way at the center of his class. It's not like I hate the way Ura is now or that I've ever wanted him to change...but when I see him getting a little closer to how he used to be, I feel a little relieved. I don't know if his reason for it is his feelings for Ibusuki or what, but whatever it is, I don't think it's a bad thing.*

"...You're like Ura-kun's mom, Momota-kun."

"Oof..." *At last, even Orihara-san has hit me with that line. I don't get it. I thought I've just been treating him like a normal friend would.*

As we continued our telephone call, it became late.

"Well, I'll see you on Saturday."

"Okay. When you get to the school, just contact me, and I'll go get you."

"Thank you. I'll be prepared," Orihara-san said, and the phone call ended.

"...Prepared?" *What does she mean by "prepared"? Does she mean she'll get dressed up? Hmm?* "Well, whatever."

I was a little concerned about the last thing Orihara-san said, but I didn't think too much about it.

As it would turn out, I would deeply regret this decision on the day of the festival, and I'd be tormented by regret for not having pursued it any further. That said, it was probably inevitable regardless; just before the festival, a terrible incident would happen that would make me forget all about what she'd said.



I found out about the incident three days before the school festival.

With the festival fast approaching, every class was in the final stages of



getting ready. The hallways were lined with everyone's preparations spilling out from the classrooms, and most classes had students staying after school to make final adjustments to their decorations or do rehearsals.

I could feel the pre-festival mood as I walked down the hallways. Since it was lunchtime, I went to Ura's class to invite him to eat lunch with me like I always do. However...

"Huh?" He wasn't there.

"...?" I looked all around the classroom, but I didn't see him.

*Hmm? That's strange. Kana sometimes has lunch with Uomi or his other friends, but as long as Ura doesn't have anything to do, he almost always spends lunch with me.*

*Maybe he did have something he needed to do? He's been pretty busy since he became his class representative, and it wouldn't be unusual if he had work to do during lunch... Still, if that were the case, Ura would have told me about it beforehand.*

*Oh well. I'll just get in touch with him.*

I didn't want to just whip out my smartphone in the hallway, so I decided to get in touch with him after I went to the usual empty classroom. However, right as I started to head there, someone called out to me.

"Hey, Momo!" It was Kana, and he ran up to me.

"Oh, hey, Kana. What's the matter? Why are you in such a hurry?"

"There's a problem... Just now, a girl from Ura's class talked to me..." Kana looked extremely panicked. "She said...Ura didn't come to school today."

## ≡Chapter 3: Urashima Taro Becomes a Shut-In

I waited until after school, but Ura still never came to school that day.

Not only was he absent, but no one could get in touch with him. That wasn't surprising on the face of it, since he'd never had many friends to begin with, and Ibusuki was the only one in his class who knew his number; however, after becoming his class's representative, he had actually exchanged his contact info with his classmates. Nonetheless, no matter how much they tried to contact him, he never responded. Apparently, he didn't even read their texts.

He did respond to me, albeit his response was quite curt.

"What was up today, Ura?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You didn't feel well?"

"It's not that."

"Okay, then why weren't you at school?"

"It's none of your business."

"Fine. Then what about tomorrow? You're coming tomorrow, right?"

"No. I'm not going tomorrow, the day after that, or the day after that."

"Why not? What are you going to do about the school festival?"

"I don't care."

"You don't care?"

"I don't care about any of it anymore."

"But you're the class representative, right? You worked so hard on it up until now."

"I don't care."

That's about how our texts went. After that, no matter what else I sent, he

just responded with “I don’t care.” Ura apparently responded to Kana’s texts as well, but, like mine, he wouldn’t talk about the important matters, and he just kept saying “I don’t care.”

“Well, I’m stumped... I wonder what happened to him,” I said. Kana and I were talking after school in the empty classroom where we normally eat lunch together.

“What happened to Ura, I wonder?”

“It was all so sudden...”

“I know. When he stayed late to give everyone directions during preparations for the festival, he was so upbeat.” Kana had a troubled look on his face.

*It really was so sudden. He was fine until yesterday. Even though he was uncharacteristically enthusiastic about the festival, today he’s skipped school and has that attitude...*

“My best guess is that something happened yesterday.”

“Yeah...and it probably happened yesterday after school.”

*Something happened. Something that made Ura stop caring.* As we were deep in thought, a girl entered the empty classroom.

“Um, Kanao-kun...” It was a girl from Kana’s class. “I’m sorry, but can you come here? They’re fighting about the materials and the job assignments for the festival...”

“What? Okay, yeah, I’ll go now,” Kana replied, and the girl went back to her classroom. “Oh man...”

“Go, Kana.”

“Momo...”

“They need their class rep, right?” *The school festival is three days away, and every class is finalizing their preparations. If a class rep were to be absent at a time like this, it would throw the class into chaos.*

“But this isn’t the time for something like that...” Kana’s face was twisted with anguish.

It was understandable. On the one hand, he'd only been absent one day, we'd been able to get in contact with him, and we knew that he wasn't sick or injured. It probably wasn't something to get too worried about. Still, we couldn't help remembering the time in middle school when Ura stopped coming to class. The current situation gave me a bad feeling, one that was filling up my chest.

Be that as it may, I told Kana, "Leave Ura to me," in the most upbeat way I could, even though I had no basis for saying so.

"...Will your class be okay?"

"I'm not my class's representative or anything like that. Besides, for better or for worse, my class won't be doing anything special. We're also almost done preparing, anyway."

"I see... Well, sorry to do this, but I'll take you up on your offer. Tell me as soon as you find anything out."

"Yeah, I'll keep you posted."

Kana left the room and went to his class to finalize the preparations for the school festival. No matter the class, if their representative were to go missing, it would surely have an effect on the chain of command. Ura's class was the same way, of course: their representative had suddenly gone AWOL, so there was no telling just how much confusion would arise.

"...What are you doing, Ura?" I said to myself.

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The first place I headed to was Ura's classroom.

"Hey, isn't this tablecloth too small?"

"No, it's the right size. You're supposed to use two together, remember?"

"Who went shopping the other day? There aren't enough materials for the decorations."

"Urano was in charge of materials, text him."

"I keep texting him, but he won't answer."

“Hey, were we going to use these clothes or not?”

“We’re still discussing it! Urano said that we were going to talk about it again after school...”

It was just as I’d expected; the entire class was in a total state of disarray. Most of the students had stayed after school and were swamped with preparations for the festival. Despite being first years, the students in Ura’s class were putting considerable effort into their attraction—in other words, the amount of work they had to do was comparatively larger than ours. With only three days left, they were at the point where they needed to make final adjustments to a lot of their preparations. It was simply inevitable that things would fall into chaos were the class representative who led the chain of command to be absent without contacting anyone.

“...Listen, I asked Mai to do that, so go talk to her! Oh... I’m going to make a call about that, so hold on a minute! Those decorations are... Um, what did Urano say about them again...?”

I found Ibusuki in the midst of the confusion with her classmates gathered around her, awaiting her instructions. With Ura gone, it seemed like the responsibility had fallen onto her shoulders as the class’s other representative.

“Phew...”

“Ibusuki.” After Ibusuki had finished giving instructions, I entered the classroom and called out to her.

“Oh...Momota...”

“Looks like you have your hands full.”

“...Do you know about Urano?”

“I heard about him from Kana.”

“I see... Yeah, I’m getting totally overwhelmed here.” She let out a deep sigh with a tired look. “I’m really happy that Urano worked so hard to think up a lot of stuff as the class representative, but...he’s still bad at giving directions. He’d just say stuff like ‘It’s faster if I do it myself’ and take on a lot of work himself.”

*I kind of figured that’s what happened. He said that he’d gotten a little used to*



*the class, but it looks like it really was just a little. If a guy who'd closed off his heart could simply open up to a bunch of people he's never talked to before in a few weeks' time, there wouldn't have been a problem.*

*I can actually understand Ura's thought process, though. If communicating instructions to people is so stressful, it really would be faster to just do it yourself.*

"Urano took the initiative with a lot of the annoying stuff, and we were pretty spoiled by him... Now we're really feeling the repercussions of that. Everyone's in a huge panic just because he isn't here..."

"It looks that way..."

"...It's lame, right?" Ibusuki said with a dark expression on her face. "I'm a class representative just like him, but I was just piggybacking off Urano. It was so easy for me; for every random idea I came up with, Urano would decide whether it was feasible and figure out realistic steps to take... That's why I can't do anything without him here."

I couldn't stand to see the pained look on her face, so I pushed back. "That's not true, right? Just now, I saw how you were doing your best to organize everyone."

"..."

"It does look like Ura was playing a major role, but I think you were too, Ibusuki. Besides, the reason he was able to work so hard was because you approached him and bridged the gap between him and your classmates."

"...Thank you." Ibusuki gave a listless smile, and it looked like my words were only a small comfort to her.

"...By the way, Ibusuki, I'm sorry, but I need you to come with me for a bit. I have something to talk to you about," I whispered so no one around us would hear, and then I took Ibusuki outside the classroom. I didn't want the other people in the class to know what I was about to say. I was reluctant to take away their only representative when they were already really busy with preparing for the festival, but right now I needed to talk to her.

After we moved to a stairwell with nobody around, I said, "The truth is, I

talked to Ura,” and her eyes went wide.

“No way... R-Really?!”

“Yeah. He’s only responded to Kana and I.”

“...What did he say?”

“Well...there isn’t much to tell. Even though we asked him directly, he wouldn’t tell us the reason he’s absent, and his replies were really evasive.”

“...”

“Well, what’s certain is that he’s not hurt, and he hasn’t gotten sick all of a sudden. It’s clear that he’s healthy enough to respond.” I tried to speak in a cheerful voice even though the subject wasn’t that cheerful.

There was no worry of him being sick or hurt, plus I could get in touch with him. In other words, Ura’s absence wasn’t because of unavoidable circumstances, but rather his own volition. He knew what would happen if he skipped out on school three days before the festival, yet he still did it without telling anyone while cutting off communication with his classmates. It was like he was throwing it all away and trying to pretend these last few weeks of preparing for the school festival had never happened.

“I see...” Ibusuki said curtly as she stared off into space.

“Hey, Ibusuki... You wouldn’t happen to know anything about this, would you?”

Her thin shoulders twitched at my question. “Wh-Why do you ask that...?”

“I can’t really prove it, but...ever since I started talking to you, something’s felt off. I mean...you’re not even mad.”

“...” Ibusuki turned pale and bit her lip.

From the outside looking in, it must have seemed like what Ura was doing was horrible. After all, he was skipping school, and he had gone off the grid with his classmates; it was totally irresponsible. Even his classmates who I glanced at earlier all seemed to show their annoyance toward Ura in their arguments and attitudes.

However, Ibusuki, the person who should have been the most troubled, didn't seem upset. Normally, Ibusuki would have complained to me and said something like, "Just what is that idiot doing?!" But today, there wasn't any anger or even annoyance showing in Ibusuki's expression. Furthermore, it was strange that she hadn't come to see Kana or me. I felt like normally she'd come straight to us and ask something like "Hey, I can't get in touch with Urano. Do you guys know what's up with him?" However, we'd had no contact from Ibusuki until I came to see her. Even the person who'd asked Kana for help with Ura wasn't Ibusuki herself, but rather a girl from Ibusuki's class.

"I thought that if you weren't mad, you were worried that he wasn't just skipping school and was actually sick or injured... But that's not how it is, huh?" When I'd told Ibusuki about how I'd gotten in touch with Ura, what I saw on her face wasn't relief, but acceptance. "The way you reacted was like you kind of expected that he was absent by his own will."

"..."

"Hey, Ibusuki. If you know something, then tell me. What happened to Ura?" I tried to say it as gently as I could, but I ended up sounding like I was pressing her. Ibusuki looked down, and her shoulders shook.

"...I-It's probably my fault," she said, sounding like she was about to cry. Then she began to speak falteringly about the incident that happened yesterday after school. It may have been too trivial to call an incident, but for those two, it was probably a very serious event.



It had happened yesterday, when most of the preparations keeping us after school were finished and the majority of the class had already gone home. The only ones left in the classroom were me and my friends, Rin and Mai. Rin and Mai were helping me do some paperwork I was submitting to the festival committee. Well, it was less like helping me, and more like I was working by myself while they chatted next to me.

"Mai, are you going to invite your boyfriend to the festival?"

"No way! I don't want the school to find out that I have a boyfriend."

“Are you still pretending you don’t have a boyfriend so boys fawn over you? Are you having fun toying with the unpopular guys?”

“You’re making it sound bad. I’m just keeping their dreams alive. Besides, if there’s a better boy at school than my boyfriend, I’ll just trade up. I’m not fooling them, I’m just giving the boys here a chance.”

“It’s all about how you look at it, I guess.”

“How about you, Rin? Are you going to invite your new boyfriend?”

“There’s no way.”

“Yeah, I mean, there’s no way you could invite that old man here.”

“H-He’s not old! He’s only twenty-five!”

“This thing you have for older guys is a problem. That college guy from before was fine, but dating a full-on adult is a crime, you know? He’s a criminal.”

“Oh my god, shut up! Stay out of people’s love lives.”

*...Seriously, why are these two having this conversation while someone’s working beside them?*

*Rin and Mai are good friends, but...when it comes to romantic relationships, we aren’t really on the same page. They’re so advanced that I can’t keep up. This is why I couldn’t ask them for advice that time with Momota...*

“Hey, you agree with me, right, Saki? There’s no way you could date someone ten years older than you, right?”

“...What?” I was at a loss for an answer after Mai had suddenly swung the conversation my way.

“Y-Yeah... Well, it’s not totally impossible, you know. I think what’s most important is how the two people feel about one another.”

“Huh? Now there’s a surprise. Who knew you were so broad minded?” Mai seemed dissatisfied, while Rin silently nodded in agreement.

*Before, I would have said that dating someone ten years older than you is unthinkable. Personally, I’ve never been romantically interested in someone that much older than me. I figured that when everything from where you are in life to*

*your sense of values is different, there's no way you could have a relationship with someone twelve years older than you.*

*But now I know those two. Looking at them has changed the way I think. When I see how seriously in love they are and how seriously they think about each other, I think they're a wonderful couple. It's not to say that if you have love, an age difference doesn't matter—I think. At least, I'll bet that those two don't think that way. They don't look away from the obstacles and problems that come with their age difference; they try to overcome them while accepting each other for who they are. That's why that couple looks so precious and beautiful.*

“Okay, I’m done!” I said. I’d been keeping my hands busy while mulling over those thoughts, so I’d completed the paperwork. “After I turn this in with Urano, I’ll be done for today.” Urano was making the final phone call to the store that we were renting the maid outfits from. *He should be back any time now, I believe.*

“Oh, way to go,” Mai said, offering me her canned appreciation.

“You sure are working hard at this, Saki. Were you always like this?” Rin asked, which made me think.

“Well, you know. I honestly didn’t think I’d work so hard myself.”

*It wasn't like I wanted to be the class representative or anything. Everyone was like, "Do it, Saki," so I was like, I guess I'll do it. I thought it would be fine if I could just do whatever and get the job done.*

“But Urano is working harder than I thought he would. That’s why I thought I should work hard too, so I’m not outdone,” I said, accidentally sounding a bit happier about it than I’d intended. The two of them nodded in agreement, as if to say, “That’s for sure.”

“Who would have thought that he’d run the class so well?”

“He has no presence. I knew he was friends with Kanao-kun, but I’ve never seen him talk outside of class.”

“I’m sorry to say it, but I didn’t even know his first name.”

“Oh, yeah, me either. I mean, I wasn’t even sure about his last name.”

“When you first nominated him, Saki, I honestly thought it was some new kind of bullying.”

“He was all teary eyed and freaked out.”

“And sure enough, at first he was just scared and hid behind you...but now, the whole class is following his orders.”

“He’s smart, rational, and quick witted. At first, I didn’t like him telling me what to do, but he only says things that make sense, so it makes you feel like you’d rather follow his lead than push back on it.” Both Rin and Mai were speaking highly of Ura, and for some reason it made me feel proud.

“He he he. He’s a pretty amazing guy. I knew that all along, though,” I said with a smug face.

*Well...I didn’t know he’s this amazing. It seems like he overcame his own limits all for the sake of working hard to make the school festival a success. I’m glad he did, but at the same time it feels kind of strange.*

*Hmm. Just why is Urano trying so hard?*

“Hmm... It’s suspicious,” Mai said as she stared hard at me.

“Huh? Suspicious...?”

“Saki, you’ve been close with Urano for a while now, right? Didn’t you go camping with him when Rin and I canceled?”

“That’s because...he’s friends with Kanao...”

“...Now that you mention it,” Rin said like she just remembered something, “there was a rumor going around for a while that Saki went to this year’s summer festival with Urano...”

“No... I mean, I did, but...”

“What?! That proves it!”

“It sure does.” Mai got a joyous look on her face, and Rin nodded deeply.

“W-Wait a minute! It’s not like that! Urano and I aren’t like that! Even with the summer festival, it’s not like it was just the two of us! My little brother was

with us! My little brother gets along well with Urano, so I just invited him because my brother asked me to.”

“Wow, so you’re already acting like a family?”

“Someone’s moving pretty fast.”

“I said it’s not like that!” The two of them were making fun of me with grins on their faces as I became intensely embarrassed. *Oh, come on! It’s not like that! It totally isn’t!*

“I see. So that’s your type, Saki. You like those cute-looking baby-faced guys.”

“I noticed recently that Urano does have a cute face if you look closely.”

“Oh, totally. I didn’t realize it until now because of his messy hair, but he’s got some surprisingly nice features. If he changed his haircut or something, he’d look like a new person right away.”

“It’s not like that!” I said reflexively. “That kind of guy isn’t my type at all.” I was so embarrassed that I started to speak more firmly. “I told you before, right? My type is tall guys! Urano is totally the complete opposite. There’s no way I would be into someone shorter than me! He’s just a friend. I’ll admit he’s nice and an amazing guy, but...I’m not interested in him romantically. He’s like a little brother that I need to take care of. I can’t leave him alone, so I just let him be with me.”

As I said that, a noise that came from the entrance of the classroom that sounded like someone dropping something. When I looked, the person standing there was...

“U-Urano?!” He had come back from his phone call and was standing there. What he dropped at his feet was a boxed drink that still didn’t have the straw poked into it.

*It can’t be... Did he hear what we were just talking about? How long has he...?*

After a brief moment, Urano sprinted like he was running away, and he quickly disappeared.

“W-Wait, Urano!” I instinctively stood up from my chair, picked up the drink he dropped, and chased after him. Urano nimbly ran through the hallways

crowded with materials for the festival and quickly descended a flight of stairs. I remembered that he was actually pretty fast. If I didn't do anything besides run after him, I definitely wouldn't have caught up. "W-Wait! Wait, Urano!" I desperately called out to him as he drew further away. "Sorry! I'm sorry! I apologize!"

The moment I apologized, Urano stopped in his tracks. He stopped so suddenly that I almost accidentally bumped into him. We'd stopped at a stairwell with no one else around.

"Huff, huff..."

"...You're sorry?" As I caught my breath, Ura turned to look at me. "What are you sorry for? Why are you apologizing to me? Just try and say it."

He was upset. There was an intense anger in his eyes, and his tone was harsher than usual.

"Wh-What do you mean, why...?"

"You don't actually think my feelings are hurt, do you?" Urano said, his voice shaking with anger. "You think I'd be upset just because you said I'm not your type and that you're not interested in me romantically? Seriously, screw you. There's no reason I'd be hurt by that."

"..."

"Don't get full of yourself, you egotistical woman. I don't give a crap at all if you like me or hate me."

"...Then, why are you mad?"

"I'm not mad!"

"You are!"

"I just said I'm not! What I'm upset about is your whole mistaken attitude!"

*He's upset after all...*

He took on a rough tone and continued. "Damn it... This is why I hate sluts like you all. When a guy isn't there, you make a game out of judging him... It's not even like I want to be with sluts like you all."



“We...were wrong. Sorry.”

“Listen. The reason I’m pissed is because I’m disappointed in and despise you three for your ugly personalities. I’m not...I’m absolutely not upset because of what you said! Do you understand?!”

“I understand, okay...”

After Urano had reiterated his furious words, his voice trailed off, and he mumbled, “...Why?” His voice sounded like it was about to fade away. “Screw you... I’m not your little brother...”

“Huh...?” *What? Didn’t you just say you didn’t care about what I said?* “I-I know. All that was just the spur of the moment...”

“Bah! Here it comes. ‘The spur of the moment’? You extrovert types are just a bunch of single-celled organisms who only ever act based on ‘the spur of the moment.’ No matter how much trouble you cause people or how much you hurt others, you just write it all off on ‘the spur of the moment.’”

“...”

“Damn it... What do you mean tall guys are your type...? You don’t still have feelings for Momo, do you?”

“Huh? What are you saying?” I really had no idea what Urano was talking about. I couldn’t understand why he was upset.

“Screw you... Dummy. Uggo... Seriously, what the hell? If that’s how you feel, then you shouldn’t have bothered with me in the first place...”

“Oh my god! What is with you?!” I lost my temper. I was frustrated with Urano’s attitude that made it impossible for me to understand what he was saying or thinking. Also...I was frustrated with myself for not being able to understand him. So, that frustration exploded out of me. “I don’t understand you at all! What are you being so indecisive for?!”

“Huh?! Who’s being indecisive?!”

“You are! You’re being all indecisive and talking nonsense! It’s not very manly!”

“You... That’s sexist! Don’t talk about men and women with that kind of

outdated prejudice!”

“God, you’re so annoying!” I decided to stop just taking it and started to dish it out. “Yeah, I said some kind of rude things... But there’s no reason for you to get that upset, is there?! What’s wrong with you? Don’t tell me...”

My next words came out by reflex, as I wasn’t thinking too hard about them. However, I would come to deeply regret these horrible words:

“Do you love me or something?”

There wasn’t any kind of intention or deep meaning to what I’d said. It wasn’t like I knew about it, and it wasn’t like I was trying to provoke him; I was just getting carried away with the back and forth of our argument. I’d just said what came to my mind.

When I said it, I thought Urano would say something back like, “What?! Screw you, ugly! Who would fall in love with an insensitive and crass woman like you? Don’t be so full of yourself!” That’s how our fights always went. We’d become friends around June of this year, and we’d only been friends for about three or four months... I got the feeling that, for such a short relationship, our fights were surprisingly frequent.

Well, they were more like arguments than fights. Whenever he became confrontational, I tended to get emotional. I couldn’t tell you how many times we argued during this month of preparing for the school festival. However, we were always able to quickly make up after our little spats. That was our normal.

I thought what was happening was normal, and that’s why I couldn’t believe the reaction that the boy in front of me showed me.

“Wha?!” Urano was visibly upset. His eyes were wide open, his lips quivered, and before long, his face turned red. Urano stood there unable to say anything, like time had frozen. The expression on his face was one of shock, confusion, and incredible embarrassment. His cheeks were a bright crimson, and it looked like he was about to cry.

“What...? U-Urano...?”

“...” When I called out to him, Urano, who had been frozen stiff, came back to his senses and covered his face with both his arms. “Ooh...” A sob spilled out

from the gap in his arms.

“U-Urano...” Without thinking, I reached out my hand, but Urano ran away. He turned his back and sprinted as fast as he could...and I couldn't move. It was like my feet were sewn to the ground, and I couldn't take a step. All I could do was look dumbfoundedly at Ura's back as he ran away and became smaller and smaller. My mind was a confused mess, but after I couldn't see Urano anymore, I somehow understood. No matter how insensitive a girl might be, she would understand what was going on after being shown that face.

*I see. Urano wasn't mad. Well, he was probably mad too, but more than that, he was hurt. With my heartless and irresponsible words, I hurt him so deeply. The reason his voice shook the entire time wasn't because of anger, but because of sadness and frustration.*

*Urano fell in love with me.*

≡

“...I see.” After I finished listening to Ibusuki's story, I let out a deep breath. It was looking like the situation was more complicated than I'd thought. It was so complicated I had no idea what to do.

“...It's my fault,” Ibusuki said, in a voice that sounded like she was about to start crying. “It's all because I said those horrible things to Urano.”

“...It's not your fault, Ibusuki. You didn't know Ura was listening.”

“But I...I didn't realize how Urano felt. I totally had no idea that Urano I-loved me.” Ibusuki sounded truly sorry. “I didn't know how Urano felt. I went too far when I said those terrible things... I'm horrible, right? Even though we argue all the time... I can't believe that's how I found out about his true feelings...”

“...”

Without a doubt, what Ibusuki said must have hurt Ura a lot. It doesn't matter who you are; if you saw the person you were in love with saying that you're not their type or that they're not interested in you romantically, you're bound to get hurt.

Of course, the worst thing about all this was how she found out about his love

for her. “Do you love me or something?” was probably the last thing that Ura expected to hear, which was why he let it show how shocked, embarrassed, and shaken it made him. Because of his easy-to-read behavior, Ibusuki Saki was now completely aware he was in love with her, and that was what was most embarrassing for him above all else. For a guy like Ura, having your affection laid bare in such an unexpected way was so embarrassing it’d make you want to disappear. I could understand him wanting to skip school, to an almost painful degree. Make no mistake: Ura was hurting a lot. However...

“It’s not your fault, Ibusuki.” Ibusuki was in pain just like he was. “You said that you didn’t realize how Ura felt, but he was hiding his feelings, so it’s normal that you wouldn’t have. Ura might be sulking about it, but it’s not like he ever confessed to you in the first place.”

“...”

“Plus, neither of you are at fault. Neither of you had any ill will toward the other. You guys were just a little unlucky that you weren’t on the same page.”

“...Yeah.” Even though I was trying to cheer her up, Ibusuki still had a dark expression on her face. “I totally didn’t realize that Urano loved me...” Her words spilled from her lips as she hung her head. “I mean, he’s always so mean! He always picks fights with me, he has a foul mouth, and he calls me things like ‘stupid’ and ‘ugly.’”

“Well...he’s doing that thing. You know, that thing where the more you like a girl, the more you bully her. You don’t know how else to show your affection, so you tease her.”

“...Isn’t that something you’re supposed to grow out of in elementary school?”

“Well, he probably didn’t.” *Hmmm. I’m worried about Ura, and I feel sorry for him...but it’s not like Ura isn’t to blame as well. I mean, most of this is his fault. I feel like this whole problem was caused by his own twisted humanity.*

“...Did you know, Momota?”

“Huh?”

“Did you know...that Urano loved me?”

“...Well, kind of. I never heard it directly from Ura, but I thought it might be the case.”

“I see...”

To be more specific, the one who realized it first was Kana. Kana seemed pretty sure about it, but I was skeptical. However, after hearing her story, I was sure of it. Ura loved Ibusuki. He loved her, so that’s why her words hurt him more than they should have. It’s because he loved her that he got mad, became stubborn, and couldn’t stand the embarrassment of having had his love for her revealed.

“Maybe I’m just being full of myself, but...do you think the reason Urano worked so hard preparing for the school festival as the class rep was because of me?” Her voice was tinged with anguish.

“...”

“I wonder if Urano was doing his best because I invited him.”

“...I think that’s possible.” I couldn’t think of a single good excuse, so all I could do was answer truthfully. The expression on Ibusuki’s face was growing ever more pained.

“I...I totally thought that Urano was doing his best because he liked this kind of thing. He didn’t like it at first, but as our preparations kept moving along, he seemed to really be having fun... But all that was for my sake... All of it was my fault...”

“...”

I didn’t think she was wrong about him liking that type of thing. It was also probably true that he’d started to enjoy himself while he did it. He’d always been the kind of guy who didn’t mind these kinds of events, and he’d always get hooked on something once he started doing it.

However, I think that when he started, everything he was doing had been for Ibusuki. The reason a denizen of the darkness with a closed-off heart like him had thought to step foot into the light was probably that he had feelings for her. He wanted to show off to her; he wanted to show off his good side and his cool side to the girl he loved. Well, that’s what I’d like to say, anyway.

It's a very common story. An introverted boy who separated himself from his class is talked to by an extroverted popular girl and now shows up on everyone's radar. Then, just from being treated a little kindly and given a little attention, the introverted boy falls in love with the girl; the girl's kindness feels special because the boy isn't used to it. Since he thinks that kindness isn't something you do for anyone other than a special person, he mistakenly thinks that he's special to the other person as well. However, for the extroverted girl, everything she was doing was just something she does naturally. She can treat others kindly without any particular reason or ulterior motives for doing so. Such human virtue can sometimes be poisonous to a man who is self-absorbed and has little experience in love.

"When Urano was in middle school, he stopped going to school because of the love triangle between him, Kanao, and that other girl, right?"

*Oh, I see. She already knew about that too.*

"What should I do? If Urano stops coming to school again because of this, it'll all be my fault..." Ibusuki whispered in a deeply regretful voice.

*It was clear that she truly cared about Urano. Ibusuki Saki is strong willed, forceful, sometimes insensitive, and willing to say some pretty cringeworthy things like they're normal. However, she truly is a very kind girl. I'm sure Ura knows that as well; her kindness is probably what drew him to her in the first place. And now, it's because of that kindness he's had his heart broken.*

"What should I do...?" Ibusuki asked again.

"...I think you shouldn't do anything." Ibusuki seemed like she was going to be crushed by her own remorse. "There probably isn't anything you *can* do, Ibusuki."

"..."

"Oh, I'm sorry, that came out wrong. I wanted to say that you haven't done anything wrong, so you should just carry on as normal with your head held high, Ibusuki." Since Ibusuki suddenly looked like she was about to cry, I panicked and also said, "If you apologize any more, Ura will just get upset. Plus, it's not really something to apologize for in the first place. So please, take care of the festival."

“The festival...?”

“The class is in confusion because Ura is suddenly absent from school, right? Go take care of that. If you were to get depressed like Ura and the attraction ended in failure, Ura would probably just get even more hurt later.”

“...”

“I’ll take care of Ura,” I said.

“Momota...”

“We’ve known each other for a long time. I just can’t leave him like that.”

“...Thank you.” It was then that Ibusuki finally gave me a smile. Though it was a weak smile, it shined with a little bit of hope. “Please, take care of Ura.”

“Leave it to me. Ah... Ibusuki, can I just ask you to confirm something?”

“What is it?”

*It might be against the rules for me to ask something like this. It also might be shameless to ask for the answer without solving the problem. However, in order to protect my two precious friends, Ura and Ibusuki, I have to ask her.*

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but if you can, please tell me. How do you feel about Ura?”

“Huh...?”

“It looks like Ura’s been in love with you this whole time, but...what about you?”

“...” At first, Ibusuki looked confused. However, after a few moments of silence and shifting her gaze from side to side, she began to speak softly. “I-I...”

## ≡Chapter 4: Momotaro Pays a Visit to Urashima Taro

After I parted ways with Ibusuki at school, I hurriedly headed to Ura's house. The problem was that Ura's house was pretty far from the school. It wasn't impossible to get there by train, but it would have taken a while to walk there from the nearest station. Since it was already past five o'clock, I'd have felt bad if I were to show up there when it was already late.

Incidentally, Ura got to school by either taking a commuter bus or getting dropped off by his parents. Seven times out of ten, he had his parents drop him off at school.

Anyway, I could have taken the local bus from the bus station near my house, but the next bus was an hour later. As a student, I was left with no option but to ask someone to drive me there. I could have gone home and asked someone to take me, but I chose another option.

"I see. So, you asked Orihara-san to give you a ride," Kana said over the phone. I was calling him as I sat in the passenger seat.

He must have been just as worried as I was. I promised I'd keep him informed, so I made sure to keep my promise by letting him know what was going on.

"I thought that transportation would be an issue if you were to go to Ura's house, but I forgot that you have your reliable girlfriend, Momo."

"Come on, don't make fun of me."

"...I would have liked to have gone along with you if I could have, but it looks like preparations with my class will still take a little while. Even if I were to go after we get done, it'd be too late in the evening... Plus, my sister isn't here anymore."

"Oh, that's right. Your sister..."

"Yes. She moved out after she got married. Right now, she's living outside the



prefecture.”

*Now that I think about it, he did kind of mention that when we went on that summer camping trip...* When Kana and his friends lost their driver and adult chaperone because of a sudden cancellation, Kana’s older sister was brought up as another option. However, he said that she was busy lately and didn’t ask her. Apparently, the reason she was so busy was because of her wedding ceremony: Kana’s sister had gotten married that summer and moved away.

“...Come to think of it, when you and I would go to play at Ura’s house a long time ago, my sister was the one who took us there and picked us up. That sure takes me back.”

“Kana...”

“Well, anyway...it looks like I’ll have to leave Ura to you, Momo. I’m counting on you.”

“...Yeah, leave it to me,” I said. Our call finished, and I put my smartphone in my pocket.

“You’re finished already?” Orihara-san asked me from the driver’s seat.

“Yes.” After nodding, I lowered my head slightly. “I’m sorry I asked you to do this after you got off work, Orihara-san.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I didn’t have any particularly big plans.”

“Thank you.” Orihara-san gave me a carefree smile from the driver’s seat. She was wearing her business suit. Apparently, when I’d contacted her, she had just gotten home from work, so she came to get me at school without changing clothes. I was really grateful to her.

“It looks like things have gotten kind of messy, huh? I wonder if Ura-kun is okay?”

“I’d like to think he’s okay... I guess all I can do now is talk to him in person. We’ve texted back and forth a few times, but now he’s stopped checking my messages.”

The same thing apparently happened with Kana too; Ura had finally stopped responding to the both of us. *The reason he responded to us those few times*

*was probably just to let us know that he wasn't absent because he was sick or injured. I wonder if he did that because he felt sorry or because he was just annoyed... Either way, he probably wanted to tell us that he was shutting himself indoors of his own volition.*

"By the way, Momota-kun... I'm sorry to inconvenience you, but...what time do you think you'll go home? I have an early day tomorrow, so if it gets too late it'll be kind of tough for me..." Orihara-san said apologetically.

"I won't take long. It'd be rude to his family if I stayed too long, after all."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"...No, I'm the one who should be sorry. I'm really sorry to make you help me with my problems even though you're busy."

"No, like I said before, you don't have to worry. In fact, I'm kind of happy."

"Happy?"

"Yeah. I mean, this is the first time you've relied on me for something like this, right?"

*"..." That's probably true. The old me, the me who'd just started dating Orihara-san, definitely wouldn't have been able to call her for a ride like this. I'd have made excuses like "I'd feel sorry for calling her to come and get me" or "I don't want to annoy her" or "I shouldn't get her involved in my problems with friends," and I wouldn't have been able to rely on her. Now, however, I feel like I can rely on Orihara-san. I do feel a little sorry about it, but I don't really hesitate or feel conflicted anymore.*

"I just kind of naturally relied on you, didn't I?"

"Yes, you kind of naturally did." Orihara-san laughed and honestly seemed happy. "I think it's totally normal in a couple for the one with the car to drive their sweetheart around for their errands."

"I think that it's usually the guy who does the driving, though."

"Hmm, well, yes, but I mean, that kind of sexism is outdated. I'm sure it doesn't matter who drives the car."

"Ha ha. You're right." I laughed too. Even though Ura was going through a

tough time right now, I couldn't help laughing. In a good way, I felt less tense. My heart, which had been hardened because of Ura and Ibusuki, was starting to become relaxed. *It's kind of a strange feeling. There was a time when I thought Orihara-san was the best girlfriend ever, so I had to push myself and act as cool as I could. That feeling hasn't gone away, of course, and I'd like to look as cool as I can even now. But I don't feel ashamed to show my weakness and rely on her anymore. When I'm in trouble, I rely on her. I can make that choice naturally now. I don't know if that means I'm being weak or being strong, but...I definitely know that it's not wrong. After all, Orihara-san and I are this happy.*

"Also, you don't need to be so distant by acting like it's just your problem. If this is a big deal for your friends, it's a big deal for me too. After all, even though we haven't really talked much and only went camping together the one time...I think of Ura-kun and Ibusuki-san as important friends of mine."

"Orihara-san..." Her words touched my heart, but...

"...But I don't know if they'd consider me a friend or not. They'd probably just cringe at having an old lady like me call them 'friend'... Plus, acting like their friend when we've just gone camping once kind of feels too forwardly extroverted, so it kind of bothers me..."

...she kept talking and ruined it. *Well, there goes the mood...she let her gloomy introvert side slip out. She just can't help herself. Even though she's bright, sociable, and very active in society, ultimately she's an introvert at heart...*

*I do love this pain-in-the-butt side of her as well, though...*

"A-Anyway, let's go full speed ahead to save your friend!" After knocking herself down, she picked herself back up the same way. That part of her was mature.

"Traffic has started to thin out, so I'm going to speed up."

"Please do. Oh...but, Orihara-san?"

"Hmm?"

"You were saying you didn't really have any particularly big plans, but doesn't that mean you did have some sort of plans?"

“Oh... No, it wasn’t anything special. A Let’s Player that I like is going to do a live stream, so I was just planning on watching them in real time...”

*Oh, a video game Let’s Play, huh? Now that I think about it, she said that she’s gotten hooked on them lately after hating them for so long without giving them a chance.*

“I’ll just watch it later, so it’s fine, but...I won’t be able to give them donations if it’s not a live stream, so I’m a little sad... Oh. I say ‘donations,’ but it’s not like I’m spending that much, okay?! They’re more like little tips!”

*“...” It looks like she’s gotten pretty addicted without me realizing it...*

When we first started dating, she wasn’t interested in Let’s Plays, and she was even biased against them. She hated them with a passion without even giving them a try, saying stuff like “I think games are most fun when you play them by yourself, after all. I mean, I don’t want to look down on anyone who likes those kinds of things, but they just aren’t for me. Yeah, I just can’t keep up with the culture of today’s youth. Why, when I was a kid...” Now here she was totally enjoying Let’s Plays and even giving donations.

*Well...for better or worse, people do change. Our relationship will change, and so will Orihara-san’s interests.*

*Right. That’s why I think there’s nothing to fear from change. It’s wrong to dwell on the past and continue to fear change.*

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When we arrived at Ura’s house, the sun had completely set.

“W-Wow... Ura-kun’s house is huge!” Orihara-san said in surprise after seeing the Urano residence for the first time.

Ura’s home was a huge two-story house reigning over a large expanse of rice fields and a mountain forest. The yard was quite large and covered with well-maintained grass. There were a few cars in the roofed parking area, including a luxury foreign car, a Japanese car for everyday use, a large family car... It wasn’t like they were a big family, but there were more cars there than members of the family. It was totally what you’d expect from a mansion in the boonies.

“The rice fields and the mountains in the back are all part of Ura’s property.”

“I-Is Ura-kun’s family rich?”

“Yes. Ura’s an only child, by the way.”

“Oh wow... I probably shouldn’t say this, but that makes a lot of sense...”

*The single child of a rich household—that’s Urano Izumi in a nutshell.*

As we talked about that, we got out of the car and walked to Ura’s house. We parked the car in a vacant lot a short distance away from the Urano family home. The lot was also owned by the Urano family, but they had no other use for it aside from being a parking lot for visitors.

*It seems like rich people in the countryside have a lot of land that they have no particular use for... Parking there without permission probably isn’t good manners, but the situation being what it is, it’s unavoidable. We’ll get permission after the fact; they probably won’t say no. Probably.*

“Do you come here a lot, Momota-kun?”

“Yeah. A long time ago, Kana and I used to come here to play a lot, and our parents would drive us.” *Yep, needing to have your parents drive you to go play at your friend’s house that’s far away is one of those common things in the boonies.* “Whenever we got together, we’d somehow end up at Ura’s house. After all, he had the most games and toys, and he was the type to invite his friends over to his house.”

Also, Kana and I had circumstances that made it hard to invite people over to our own houses. My father was reluctant to have people over since we ran the chiropractic clinic at home and I didn’t have a mother; he wasn’t able to look after us in case something happened. As for Kana...when he was in elementary school, his home was a mess. His parents got divorced and remarried, and apparently a lot had happened. He wasn’t in the type of situation where he could invite his friends over.

“I used to come here a lot, but...not so much lately. Nowadays we can play games and stuff together even if we’re both at home.”

“Oh yeah, games these days are like that,” Orihara-san said earnestly. “I guess

the culture of gathering at a friend's house with a game console has died out."

"Did you gather at your friends' houses to play video games too, Orihara-san?"

"No, because I didn't have any friends."

"Ah..."

"...Huh? No, it's not like that! I meant that I didn't have any friends who played video games! I had friends! I had a couple! So don't make that face like you just understood something! Stop looking all sad like you've just seen some painful scars of mine!"

"...You're right. I'm sorry. Let's go with what you said."

"D-Don't give me that kind look! You're wrong! I'm not lying! Listen, Momota-kun... When I was a kid, there were fewer girls playing video games than there are now. So I had to play games all alone, but that doesn't mean that I had zero friends..."

As we had our fun back-and-forth, we arrived at the entrance to the Urano residence. We stood in front of the luxurious gate and activated the intercom. There was a response, and after exchanging a few words, the door to the house soon opened.

A woman appeared from the inside and half-ran to the gate. She had long permed hair and calm eyes. She was wearing what seemed to be a brand-name outfit, with a stole on her shoulders. Her clothes and her face exuded grace and elegance. Much like her son, her face looked young for her age and she was quite small in stature. She didn't look at all like she was nearly fifty years old.

"Momo-kun, long time no see." Ura's mother was the kind of woman overflowing with such serenity and grace that it made you want to call her a noblewoman. She smiled cheerfully when she saw me.

"It has been quite a while, Sae-san," I said and bowed.

Ura's mother's name is Urano Sae-san. I'd been grateful to her for a lot of things since I was little. Whenever I would come over to Ura's house to play, she'd often treat me to luxury candy from overseas, and she'd give me a ride

home whenever I was heading home late.

“It really has been a long time. I’ve missed you since you haven’t come over lately. Kana-kun hasn’t really come over either since he started high school.”

“I’m sorry for troubling you so late in the day without any notice.”

“No, it’s all right,” Sae-san said, her face having a hint of sadness to it. “You came here to see Izumi-kun, right?”

“Yes.”

“...I’m sorry, Momo-kun. That boy won’t come out of his room. No matter how many times I call him, he won’t answer me at all.”

“...”

“However, he ate the food I brought to his room, and he finished his ten o’clock and three o’clock snacks.”

“...”

“Also, I thought I had to cheer him up, so I bought Izumi-kun that new laptop he’s been wanting for a while. But it seems like it wasn’t the one he wanted, so he got mad at me... Oh! If you like, how about you take it, Momo-kun?”

“...No, thank you.” She was still the same as ever, spoiling her only son to death.

Sae-san...wasn’t a bad person. She was nice and, for better or for worse, was very sweet. She didn’t get upset, and she’d buy Ura just about anything he wanted. She was the type of mother who spoils and dotes on her son.

“Goodness... My son is such a handful.” Sae-san gave a melancholy sigh. “No matter how many times I ask him why he’s shut up in his room, he won’t tell me anything... Did something bad happen at school again?”

“...” She was probably remembering when Ura stopped going to school in middle school because of the love triangle between him, Kana, and Ryu.

“So, did you come to save my son again?”

“...It’s not like I came to save him,” I said. “I just came to talk to him.”

I didn’t have any kind of presumptuous feelings like I was going to save Ura; I

didn't then, and I didn't now. I wasn't a great or capable person. I just hated how sickening the situation was, and I wanted to do something about it, so I was just giving it my best effort. *Nothing has changed from what I did in middle school and what I'm doing now.*

"I see... He he he. Izumi-kun really does have good friends." Sae-san smiled happily and looked content. "Now that you're here, Momo-kun, I'm sure that Izumi-kun will be fine. It makes me feel relieved."

"You overestimate me." I didn't want her to get her hopes up. *I came here because I wanted to do something about all this, but it's not like I have some kind of master plan.*

"By the way," Sae-san said while looking behind me, "I've been wondering...who is this woman?" She seemed puzzled as she looked over Orihara-san.

*Crap, I totally forgot about Orihara-san... I had Orihara-san come with me like it was natural, but when I think about it clearly, I probably should have just had her wait in the car.*

"Is this your big sister, Momo-kun...? Before, I heard that you had a sister who was slightly older than you..."

"No, she isn't my sister. She's, um..."

"N-Nice to meet you." When I couldn't answer, Orihara-san bowed her head and spoke. "My name is Orihara Hime. I'm in charge of driving Momota-kun around today, and...um..."

"Oh. You're Orihara-san?"

"...Huh?"

"I heard about you from Izumi-kun. You're Momota's relative who was in charge when you all went camping, aren't you?" Sae-san said with a smile.

"O-Oh, yes, that's right," Orihara-san said and nodded firmly.

*Oh, I see.* I couldn't really imagine Ura telling his parents about my girlfriend, so I thought there was no way that Sae-san knew about Orihara-san, but there was that time we went camping. He was going to stay the night away from



home, so it was only natural that he'd tell his parents about the adult who was in charge. Also, it seemed like Ura told his parents that Orihara-san is a relative of mine.

"Thank you for your help at the time. I'm sorry for never thanking you even though you drove."

"I-It's fine. Thank you for letting me make such fun memories."

"He really looked forward to going camping. For a week beforehand, he carefully selected his luggage and repacked his suitcase over and over again..." It was at that moment that an irritated and familiar voice came from the entranceway and interrupted our conversation.

"Jeez, how long are you guys going to stay out here?" Ura grumbled as he walked over to us from the entrance to the house. He was dressed casually in a T-shirt and shorts. When he arrived at the gate, he glared at his mother.

"Your small talk is taking too long. Don't tell them anything else."

"Izumi-kun... Good morning?"

"It's already nighttime."

"But this is the first time I've seen your face today!" Sae-san seemed surprised. She was probably surprised by him coming out of his room.

"Hmph." After Ura gave a little snort, he shifted his gaze to me. I inhaled a small breath and looked straight at him.

"Hey, Ura."

"...Momo. So, you came after all," Ura said with a difficult look on his face. He looked frustrated and annoyed yet understanding and resigned all at once.

"I didn't think you'd come down to meet me. I thought that I'd have to struggle to get you out of your room."

"...I know how persistent you can be. I didn't want to be bothered by you yapping outside my room, so I came down. You should be grateful for my generosity," Ura said in a pompous tone, and I almost laughed. Ura was probably remembering the same thing I was, the time when he became a shut-in in middle school. At first, he didn't show his face and didn't come out of his

room even when I came over. He finally let me into his room after I kept coming day after day.

“Come in.” Ura’s voice and the look in his eyes were both cold, but he welcomed us in.

“Are you sure?”

“You won’t go home even if I tell you to, right? In that case, there’s no point arguing about it. If we’re going to talk, we might as well do it inside,” Ura said curtly, quickly going back inside the house by himself. I bowed my head to Sae-san.

“Um... Thank you for having me.”

“Yes. Please come in,” Sae-san said with a smile as she gestured toward the entrance with her hand. Then, with a slightly troubled look on her face, she said, “...Momo-kun, please take care of Izumi-kun. Even though he said all of that, I think he was probably waiting for you or Kana to come see him.”

“...”

“He’s bitter, he’s stubborn, he struggles to say what’s on his mind... I have no idea who he takes after.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I don’t mind that part of Ura.”

≡

Orihara-san and I were led to Ura’s room on the second floor.

Honestly, I debated whether or not I should have had her come along. I thought about having her wait in the car, but Sae-san invited her to come with me by saying, “Don’t be shy and go right ahead, Orihara-san,” basically half-forcing her to tag along. I’d been hesitant to make her wait by herself, so I was glad when she was invited...but I felt a slight tinge of regret immediately after we entered Ura’s room.

“What?! Ura-kun, your room is amazing!” Orihara-san exclaimed the moment she came inside the room.

It’d been a long time since I’d visited Ura’s room, but it hadn’t changed at all. It was a ten-tatami-mat-sized room—slightly more spacious than a typical kid’s

room. Every inch of it was clean; there wasn't a speck of dust to be found. Lined up inside a glass case by the wall were figurines that Ura had meticulously selected: there were almost no figurines of cute girls, mainly just robots and tokusatsu characters. Manga, games, and anime Blu-rays adorned a large bookshelf.

The most eye-catching part of the room was Ura's gaming space. Underneath his desk was a large gaming PC, and on top of it were several monitors. There was also a microphone, headphones, video game controllers, and a gaming chair that looked like the driver's seat of a sports car. All of this was set up for him to enjoy his games to the fullest and stream his gameplay to the world. And, as you'd expect, Orihara-san's eager gaze was directed toward said gaming space.

"H-Hardcore... This the room of a hardcore gamer who really takes the hobby seriously! I-It's so cool! Oh wow, this is amazing! I'm so jealous. Ah, it's because people like this exist that it's hard for a casual gamer like me to say that games are my hobby..." She seemed to be having some complicated feelings about it, not the least of which were jealousy and envy.

"...This isn't anything special. I just copied some famous gamers and streamers," Ura said curtly. However, that didn't stop Orihara-san's excitement.

"No, this is amazing, Ura-kun! With this setup, could it be that...you stream video games?"

"...Yeah, for fun."

"W-Wow, that's amazing! And you're still so young... By the way, what name do you use when you stream? I might know you..."

"I'm not that famous, so there's no way that you'd know about me. I stream with the name 'Uranus'..."

"What?! Uranus?! *You're* Uranus-sama?!" Orihara-san yelled in surprise.

"Y-You know him?" I asked.

"Of course I do! He's my favorite Let's Player! He's the person whose stream I wanted to watch tonight!" Orihara-san passionately exclaimed to me.

*Are you serious? Orihara-san is a fan of Ura's streams?*

"Uranus-sama is a Let's Player whose age and gender are unknown because they never show their face and use a voice changer...I never would have dreamed that they were actually Ura-kun."

Orihara-san went beyond being surprised and talked with a shivering expression. "Uranus-sama is really amazing. His gaming skills are excellent, he has lighthearted conversations that keep his viewers interested, and best of all, everything he says and does shows respect for the creators of the games he plays. Sometimes his words are downright venomous, but you can tell that he does it all out of love for the game industry," Orihara-san raved, perhaps out of excitement. Ura was faking an emotionless expression, but he looked a little happy.

"That said...his lack of social experience and interpersonal skills shows in everything he says and does, so I thought he was probably a student who doesn't have a lot of friends. Also, I figured that all of the equipment for his streaming setup was probably bought for him by his parents." Orihara-san was saying some pretty nasty things...perhaps because she was excited? Ura was faking an emotionless expression, but he kind of looked like he was about to cry.

"I can't believe the real Uranus-sama is here! I have to give him a donation! I have to send him a donation so he says my name!"

"Calm down, Orihara-san!" I quickly discouraged her as she started to pull a ten-thousand-yen bill out of her wallet, and Orihara-san then came back to her senses.

"Oh... S-Sorry... I was just so excited that I felt this urge to throw my money at him..."

*...So, she's gotten pretty tainted by that type of environment, huh... I wonder if she's okay? Orihara-san has quite a bit of money, so this scares me.*

"Anyway... Let's put aside our excitement for now and settle down. We came here today to have a serious conversation, after all."

"...You're right. I'm sorry," Orihara-san apologized. Then, after shifting her

gaze around awkwardly, she said, “Um... I’ll just go wait downstairs after all. It looked like Ura-kun’s mother was making some tea, so I’ll go and help her out,” and left the room like she was making an escape.

*Hmm... I feel kind of bad. I didn’t really back her up even though I made her come along on my business. Now I’m making her go this way and that because I couldn’t predict how she’d behave at Ura’s house. I should reflect on this.*

Anyway, now that Orihara-san was gone, it was just Ura and I in the room, and that was all it took to make the mood feel a little heavy.

“Have a seat.” Ura pulled out a cushion and urged me to sit down. As I did, he sat down on his bed so as to look down on me from a higher position. It was a more comical situation than I’d expected, but from here on out we had to have a serious conversation. We had to get serious, even if by force.

“Ura—”

“I’m not taking part in the school festival,” Ura said suddenly. He interrupted me like he was trying to beat me to the punch and kill my enthusiasm.

“Well...I’ll go to school when I feel like going. I’m not so immature that I’m going to shut myself up in my room forever. However, I’m not going to participate in the school festival.”

“...Why not?”

“Why not? I already told you all about that, didn’t I? I don’t care.” Then, in a terrible, cold voice, Ura said, “I only took part in that whole stupid school festival event on a whim. Now I’m stopping because I don’t feel like it anymore. That’s all. All of it was just on a whim. Don’t get so serious about it.”

“You’re the class representative. Everyone will be in trouble if you aren’t there.”

“...I don’t care about them. They’re just getting along because they’re excited for the festival. I’m sure that they all think I’m just some kind of convenient tool they can push all of the annoying work onto.” As usual—actually, more than was usual—Ura was spitting venom.

I let out a deep breath. “I heard about what happened yesterday after school from Ibusuki.”

“What?!”

“That’s the reason, right? That’s the reason you skipped school today and said you don’t care about the school festival.”

“That damn woman...” Ura gritted his teeth and clenched his fists on his lap. “...Don’t get me wrong, I don’t give a crap about her.”

“Ura...”

“I don’t have the slightest interest in her. She’s not even on my radar. Actually, the next time you say that woman’s name I won’t let it slide, even if it’s you... If you so much as whisper it I swear I’ll—”

“Ura!” I raised my voice, causing Ura to cower in fear. His threatening expression had changed to one of fright. I glared at him and asked, “How long are you going to act stubborn like this?”

“...”

“Don’t try to act all cool in front of me. Just how long do you think we’ve known each other? Relax and tell me how you really feel...”

“...”

After that, Ura silently looked down at the floor. I didn’t say anything as I waited for him to speak. Then, after a few long seconds that felt like an eternity, Ura started groaning as he hung his head and pounded his fists on his bed over and over again. “Damn it... Damn it...” He continued to pound his fists again and again. “What the hell, damn it?! What’s wrong with me liking her?!” He yelled like a desperate man, then fell back on his bed and looked up. He then hid his face with both hands, probably because he didn’t want to be seen by me.

*Just now, Ura admitted it. He admitted that he loves Ibusuki. I know all too well how much courage it took and just how emotionally draining it was for him to tell me that.*

“I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with it.”

“Crap! Crap... Why... Why am I like this?! Why do I fall in love with people so easily?!” His howling cry was mixed with sobs. “I should have known that woman only bothered with me because she’s kind! I should have known she

only did it on a whim! It's easy for someone like that to ask for your phone number and even make physical contact with you. I should have known that mistaking stuff like that for affection and getting all excited about it was the stupidest thing I could do..."

In a voice mixed with misery and regret, Ura spoke his innermost thoughts and hidden feelings that he didn't want to show to anyone. "I had hoped... I mean, we went to Round One and the summer festival together! So, somewhere along the way, I started to think that she might have feelings for me."

He sounded like he was about to cough up blood. "When she nominated me for class representative...I was so pissed and thought she was being such a pain...but the truth is I was a little happy. I was happy that she said that she wanted to work hard with me. That's why I thought I'd do my best, because I thought that there might be something in it for me. That's the kind of ulterior motive I had." Ura's voice grew sadder and sadder, and it seemed like it was about to fade away.

"But...she didn't care about me!"

"..."

It's a very common story. A cheerful and sociable girl approaches a boy who doesn't have a lot of friends, exchanges contact information with him, and becomes friends with him. The boy thinks it was something special, but to the girl it was something totally normal and not special at all. It's the kind of love story about an introverted guy and outgoing girl that you could find anywhere in Japan. However, even though the story is commonplace, for the people involved, it's a big deal that can change their life.

"I'm so lame, pathetic, and embarrassing... I hate myself so much! That woman pisses me off, but I'm even more pissed off at myself..." Ura seemed poised to tear himself apart with all the self-deprecation he was spewing. "It's always like this... As soon as someone is nice to me, I get the wrong idea, get carried away like an idiot, start building up feelings one-sidedly, and then...despair. Nothing's changed since middle school..."

Ura had experienced another heartbreak in middle school. The situation was a

little different then, but his love had gotten the better of him, and his heart was deeply wounded because of it.

“Why did it turn out this way? It’s the same as last time... It would have been better if it had just ended with me being the only one to get hurt, but I dragged someone else into this and got them hurt too... It’s pitiful. Just how pitiful can I be?”

*It’s just like I thought. Apparently, Ura wasn’t really upset with Ibusuki, and he didn’t really harbor any resentment toward her for being nice to an introvert like him without having any intention of starting a relationship. Of course, he probably harbored those feelings to some extent, but more than that, he felt guilty. He was regretting that he needlessly hurt someone else because they found out about his love for them.*

*Sometimes, love can hurt the person who receives it. The kinder someone is, the sorrier they feel that they can’t return the other person’s affection; that’s what happened in middle school. After what happened, Ura was so fed up with everything that he shut himself up in his room. Ura was hurt because of his heartbreak, but because he hurt Ryu, he felt even worse. Ryu was hurt from finding out about Ura’s feelings, and Ura was hurt even more when he made her feel that way. It was the worst kind of negative cycle, the kind that you couldn’t do anything about.*

“That woman... She must be feeling so annoyed right now. I mean, she was just being nice to some introverted guy, and he went and fell in love with her. It’s the most annoying kind of situation. I’ll bet she doesn’t even want to see my face anymore. Well, she’s probably laughing about it right now and complaining to her friends about how gross it is to have the introverted guy fall in love with her—”

“Don’t just assume all that,” I said. I’d kept quiet this entire time, but that was the one thing I couldn’t stay quiet about. “Don’t just assume Ibusuki’s feelings.”

“...Huh?” Ura sat up and scowled at me with eyes that still had the remnants of tears he’d wiped away. He glared straight at me with a mixture of anger and anxiety in his eyes.

“I know that you’ve been hurt, that it’s hard, and that you’re in pain. But



there's no need to make assumptions about Ibusuki's feelings and feel worse than you need to."

"...Bah. Don't act like you understand how I feel," Ura said as if to provoke me. His lips twisted into a bitter grin. "Don't talk down to me. Hmph. It must be so nice. You get to date the woman you love, and she loves you back. Just a year or two ago we formed the 'Virgins for Life Alliance' to support each other, but now you're so outgoing and have a girlfriend..."

His thin, taunting smile gradually twisted into anger and frustration. "...You don't understand, Momo. Someone like you... Someone who's so straightforward and pure like you could never understand how a coward like me feels!"

"Yeah, I don't," I said plainly. "I don't know. I don't know how you feel, and the only person who does know is you. And, of course, Ibusuki's feelings are the same way. You don't know what they are."

"..."

"Only you can know what your own feelings are. That's why if you don't put your feelings into words, other people won't be able to understand them."

I remembered something that Kana had told me when I asked him and Ura for advice before I started dating Orihara-san. He said that all princes take action on their own. Even when a prince is rich and handsome, if he never makes a move himself, he won't get the princess. If he doesn't put his feelings into words, then nothing will begin.

"...The hell are you saying?" Ura said with a hint of annoyance in his voice. "Are you telling me I should confess my feelings? I should just do it and accept a noble defeat? Screw you. That kind of cliché is just—"

"No. I'm not saying you should confess," I said, cutting him off mid-sentence. "It's up to you to decide whether you want to confess or not. I'm not going to push you. All I'm saying is that you need to stop assuming foregone conclusions and sulking about them before you've even told her how you feel."

"..." A kind of bitterness that resembled embarrassment appeared on Ura's youthful face.

The truth was...I already knew the answer. Today after school, I'd heard straight from Ibusuki what she thought of the boy Urano Izumi and his feelings for her. However, I couldn't tell him that. *If I were to just jump in and tell him how she feels...somehow it feels dishonorable, not to mention rude. This is something that Ura has to muster the resolve to overcome on his own.*

"Just a minute ago...you called me pure, right?" I reminded him.

"..."

"You might think that, but...from my point of view, you're the pure one."

"I am...?"

"Yeah. You're pure. You're the purest person I know. You're so pure and sensitive...and that's why you're a coward."

"..."

"You've always been that way. You've always been so afraid of getting hurt...and of hurting others."

*He's a coward, and he's afraid. I wonder if that's just his nature, or if it's because of his experience in middle school. Or perhaps it's because of both.*

"In the end, you threw everything away because you were afraid of getting hurt and hurting someone else, right? But don't you think it would be okay to be a little more insensitive?"

"Insensitive...?"

"You're way too sensitive when it comes to your own pain and the pain of others. At best, you're too sensitive, and at worst, you're a smart aleck, overly self-conscious, bad at communicating, distrusting of others to a twisted degree..."

"...Your bad examples outweigh the good ones."

"Oh, sorry. I got carried away."

"What do you mean you 'got carried away'...?" Ura glared at me with teary eyes. I cleared my throat to get the conversation back on track.

"Anyway, I'm saying that it'd be okay if you were a little bit more insensitive

to your pain and the pain of others.”

“...”

“You don’t need to worry so much... No one is going to be that inconvenienced by you falling in love with them. Even if you did inconvenience them, you don’t have to feel too guilty about it. If everyone were to back down from their feelings because they had to be afraid of hurting the people they’d fallen in love with, then nobody would ever get together in the first place.”

“...”

“It’s the same for you too. You thought that you were embarrassing for falling in love, but you shouldn’t worry about that. Everyone acts really embarrassing when they fall in love.”

*Yeah. That’s right. When people fall in love, they become lamer than ever. Their imaginations run wild, they get anxious over every little thing, and their minds turn to molasses as they lose their way. People in love are fighting an intense battle with their own minds, and it must be hilarious to someone watching it all from the sidelines.*

“No matter how awkward you become, there’s no need to feel embarrassed. Everyone’s like that. When you truly love someone from the heart, everyone is really uncool, and that itself is really cool.”

*Ah... I can do it now. Now I can give some proper words of support to Ura when he’s being consumed by his love and reeling from the painful fate he brought on himself.*

*I couldn’t tell him anything in middle school. I still didn’t know about love, so I couldn’t tell Ura anything. All I could do was give him generic words of comfort. I couldn’t truly empathize with his pain and struggle. However, now that I have someone I love, I can do it.*

“...Hmph.” Ura was silent for a little while, but then he got an arrogant look on his face and snorted his nose. “True enough. You were really awkward and fumbling about when you were trying to start dating Orihara-san. When you got dumped the first time you confessed, you were so depressed, it was totally pathetic.”

“...Shut up.”

“But...you’re right.” Ura got a somewhat radiant look on his face. “This is probably how everyone becomes.”

“...It is.” *Everyone becomes uncool and awkward when they truly fall in love.*  
“Well, I guess I’ll head home.” I stood up from my seat cushion.

“Huh... Y-You’re already going home?”

“I’m keeping Orihara-san waiting, so I can’t stay long. Plus, I said just about all I wanted to say.”

Ura got a suspicious look on his face. “You...didn’t come here to get me to confess my feelings?”

“Like I said, that’s up to you to decide. I won’t encourage you to do it, and I won’t stop you either.”

“...”

“Of course, if you ask me to help you, I’ll give you my full support. You helped me with my confession, after all.”

“...You’re not going to tell me to come to school either?”

“Hmm... Well, it’s not that I don’t want you to come, but I’m not going to force you. You said that you’d come back when you felt like it, and I’m fine with that.”

“...”

“Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. Ibusuki told everyone that you’re in bed with an inexplicable high fever and that that’s why you haven’t been able to look at your phone. If you plan on going to school, you should go along with that.”

“...”

“If you’re not feeling up to it, you should take time off from school for a while. If you don’t show up, your class will probably have a hard time, but... Well, that’s not my problem,” I said in a light, joking tone.

“Ha ha... What’s with that attitude?”

“It’s just that it’s not my problem. Whatever happens to your class, it has

nothing to do with me. You'll probably become an outcast from your class because of this whole thing, but...it's fine, isn't it? I mean, you were already an outcast to begin with."

"Ha ha ha. You're right. I don't have anything to lose."

"All I'm saying is, if that happens, you can just have lunch with Kana and me every day again."

"Jeez... I don't get you, Momo. You're not telling me to confess my feelings or come to school, so what did you come here for?"

"I told you when I got here. I just came to talk." I didn't come here to order him around or beg him to do anything. All I came to do was listen and have a conversation with my good friend.

"Didn't you say you came to have a serious conversation?"

"Yeah, I did. I came here to have a serious conversation...about love. Though I guess that sounds a little cheesy." I felt a little embarrassed.



After Orihara and Momo went home, I lay on my bed for a little while and pondered while I stared at the ceiling. A bunch of different things that a bunch of different people had said were spinning around in my head.

"When you fall in love, it makes you really embarrassing, huh?" I said, speaking to the void. "Now that I think about it...she said the same thing too."

During summer break, when I went camping, I ran away from everyone when I got into an argument with Kana about the love triangle that happened in middle school. Since I fell into the river when I was running away, I went back to the cottage to change, but that woman barged in without even knocking and saw me naked... Yeah, I probably don't need to remember everything about that time.

Anyway, she came chasing after me, and we ended up talking about a bunch of things. In the midst of it all, she said, "Maybe everyone is like that. It's ironic. When you fall in love with someone and try to get them to like you, the more you try your best to look cool, the more uncool you end up looking. In other

words, it's proof that you're that serious about it. Things stop making sense because you're earnestly thinking about that other person. You start to hate yourself and wonder if you were always this lame."

Even though I was so pathetic and ashamed about not being able to get over my heartbreak in middle school, she didn't laugh at me. On the contrary, she validated me and acknowledged how serious I must have been because of how lame and pitiful I was.

*Oh yeah, that's probably when I fell in love with—*

"Izumi-kun, I'm coming in." The door to my room opened with a thud. It was my mom.

"...Knock first."

"I did. You didn't hear me?"

I didn't. I must have been really lost in thought.

"Momo-kun and Orihara-san went home."

"Yeah, I saw them from the window."

"They ate dinner too. Oh, there's food for you left over as well, so come down when you feel like eating."

"..."

*It looks like after Momo left my room and went downstairs, he and Orihara were forced to eat dinner by my mom. Orihara said that she was going to help my mom make tea when she went downstairs, but I guess the reason she didn't come back was because my mom made her help make dinner.*

*I swear... I hate when my mom meddles like this.*

"Momo-kun...sure has gotten much more masculine since the last time I'd seen him," my mother said to herself, making me feel a bit uncomfortable.

"Could it be that he's already gotten a girlfriend?"

"...Who knows?" I said, dodging the question. There was no way I could tell her that Momo's twenty-seven-year-old aunt is his beloved girlfriend.

"It would be slightly shocking if he did have a girlfriend. Momo is really my

type after all. Kana-kun has a nice face and looks way more handsome, but Momo-kun is my favorite.”

“Don’t talk about my friends like pieces of meat.”

*Also, don’t keep repeating that Kana has a better-looking face. I feel bad for Momo.*

“Your friends... Ha ha, that’s right. They’re your precious friends.”

“...”

“You don’t have a lot of them, but you’re blessed with friends.”

“...Shut up,” I said, and my mom giggled.

“Oh, by the way, Izumi-kun. Don’t you have to get ready? Didn’t you plan on doing a livestream at eight o’clock today?”

“...Why do you know that?”

“If nothing else, I’ll at least indulge in checking my son’s Twitter, Uranus-kun.”

“That’s a violation of my privacy, so knock it off.”

“There is no privacy for a child who got their parents to spend hundreds of thousands of yen on streaming equipment for them.”

“Bah.” I got up from my bed, went to sit down in my gaming chair, and pulled out my smartphone. “Today’s stream...is canceled. There’s something I have to do,” I said.

≡

That evening, right before I went to bed, I got a phone call from Ibusuki.

“Check this out! Urano got in touch with everyone!” Her voice buzzed with relief and joy. According to her, Ura sent a message to not just her, but to everyone in their group chat. He apologized for his absence due to his inexplicable fever. Also, he sent a bunch of files regarding preparations for the festival. There were detailed instructions for Ura’s own work, as well as the work assignments for the rest of the class.

“Urano went along with my lie and said that it was all because of a mysterious fever...”

“Yeah, that gives off a much better impression than just skipping school.”

It wasn't necessary to tell the class the truth; if they knew, it would just cause trouble for Ibusuki and, of course, Ura. It was for the best that the truth was known by only a select few.

“It's all thanks to you, Momota. You went to Urano's house today, didn't you? Seriously, thank you.”

“I didn't do anything. I just had a little chat with him.”

“...Yeah, but, thank you. I appreciate it...” Ibusuki repeated her apology, but her voice gradually sank. “I'm happy that Urano contacted us, and it really helps that his instructions were so precise, but...they were for tomorrow, the day after, and the day of the festival.”

*His instructions were for tomorrow, the day after, and the day of the festival? So that must mean...*

“I wonder if Urano isn't going to come to the festival...” Her voice trembled with uncertainty.

“We just have to have faith in him.” All I could do was console her.

“...That's right. All we can do is believe in him and wait.”

Our phone call ended, and I looked up at the ceiling as I let out a deep breath. *I don't want to get complacent and think that I did all I could do. I mean, I don't know what I should or shouldn't do... Also, this whole time I've been wondering about just how much I should actually get involved in this problem... I wanted to do something about it, but I also think that sometimes it's important to wait.*

*What should I do? What should I do for Ura right now?*



## ≡Chapter 5: The Festival Begins

A few days passed as we each dealt with our own thoughts and feelings, and the first day of the culture festival arrived. Ura ended up coming to the festival after all; he was absent for two more days after his initial absence, but he finally came back the day the festival began. Well, to be more precise, it was less like he came to school and more like he was escorted by me.

“Y-You got that, Momo? You’re gonna help me smooth things over with the class and shield me from their cold stares, right?!”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it...”

Ura followed me down the hallway at school, looking quite frightened. It’d been like this ever since we met up at a convenience store near the school.

Before I left for school this morning, Ura contacted me. The message was long, and its tone was high handed, but to sum it all up, it basically said, “I’m afraid of coming to school by myself, so please come along with me.”

*There was no way I could refuse that kind of request. Still...I’m not sure how to feel about this. I mean, I’m glad that he came back to school, but part of me was hoping for a more touching turn of events... Like, right when his classmates were in a pinch with the attraction and starting to think, “Damn it, if only he were here at a time like this!” Ura would swoop in and save the day. Who would have thought that he’d just end up asking me to accompany him to school... Then again, it is just like Ura to do something like this...*

“...You look like you have something you want to say.”

“Not really.”

“Hmph. Be grateful. I wasn’t planning on coming to this stupid event, but...you and my mom were being annoying about it, so I didn’t have any choice but to come.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks for showing up, Ura.”

“...Bah. Shut up.” Perhaps Ura wanted to hide how embarrassed he was, because I felt a fist lightly punch me in the back. And with that, the two of us continued up the stairs and headed toward our classrooms.

Now that it was the morning of the school culture festival, the floor for the first-year students was filled with vibrant decorations, and all the classes were decorated to match their attractions. Although there were already many students, no one from outside the school had shown up yet. It might have been because of the atmosphere of the festival, but everyone was a little restless.

After I briefly showed my face in my classroom, I took Ura to his.

“O-Oh man, what should I do? What if the class gets mad and decides to kill me?”

“Don’t worry. It’ll probably be okay.”

“Momo... Just in case things go wrong, can I say that this all happened because you ordered me to do it?”

“Ha ha ha... Yeah, no.”

The attraction for Ura’s class was a maid cafe. Despite being first years, they seemed to really be putting a lot of effort into it.

The entrance to their classroom was a life-size drawing of an anime maid. I peeked into the classroom from the side of the anime maid, and just when I was wondering how I should break the ice...

“Oh! Urano-kun!”

...a girl in his class shouted when she noticed Ura hiding behind me. With that, many of the students in the classroom became aware of Ura’s presence.

“No way! Ura came?”

“Really? Oh wow, he really did!”

“Hey, it’s Urano! Long time no see!” Many of the students rushed up and surrounded him.

“Urano, have you already gotten better?”

“You had a mysterious fever? Wow, that sucks.”

“We’re all set with the preparations, so you don’t have to worry.”

“Yeah, that’s right. The instructions you sent us really helped out.” Everyone was warm and inviting as they approached Ura. Apparently, Ura had become closer to and more beloved by his class than I’d thought. It also seemed like Ibusuki’s lie about him having an unexplainable fever hadn’t been found out.

Though Ura was overwhelmed by this warm reception, he somehow managed to keep up with them. I started to think that I wasn’t needed here, and I was just about to leave, but...

“Hey, wait a second.” A stern voice reverberated through the room and cut through the welcoming mood. A group of boys and girls came out of the classroom and approached us. “Isn’t everyone going a little too easy on him?”

The one standing at the head of the group and looking down at Ura was a guy who, I believe, was called Obayashi. I had never talked to him before; he was tall, on the soccer team, and, well, the kind of extrovert who was at the center of his class. “Are you all forgetting how much trouble we had because this guy was gone for three days?”

“Yeah! That’s right! It was really tough.”

“We had to stay so long after school yesterday.” The hangers-on around Obayashi agreed with what he said. Beneath the stares of these extroverts, Ura bit his lip.

“I-I’m sorry. I’m sorry I caused you trouble,” Ura apologized as his voice trembled.

“Nope, we can’t forgive you.” Obayashi and his friends shook their heads. “Just saying you’re sorry doesn’t mean anything. That’s why...you’re going to have to be punished, Urano.”

“P-Punished?” Ura shuddered, and before he knew it, Obayashi’s friends had surrounded him. Then, they gave Ura his punishment...



“Urano came to school?!“ I couldn’t help shouting even though I was by myself.

I was outside the school building because a notice from the planning committee said the area for collecting burnable trash had suddenly changed; I was checking out the new location when I got a text from Rin and Mai, who were in the classroom at the time. The text said that Urano had come to school.

“...” I started running to make my way to the classroom. I didn’t have to stop and think about it.

*He came to school... Urano actually came to school!*

A lot of thoughts were swirling around in my head, but I was mostly just grateful and relieved.

*Thank goodness! I thought that Urano wouldn’t come.*

My feelings were a mess, and I didn’t know what I’d say when I saw him. However, for now, I was just happy that he’d come. *I want to see Urano. I want to see him and have a proper conversation with him.*

I changed shoes at the entrance and hurried to my class. However, on my way there...

“Eek!”

“Whoa!”

I was in so much of a hurry that I ran straight into a girl who was coming toward me, and we both fell on our bottoms.

“Ow... Oh, I’m sorry, are you all right?” I rubbed my bottom as I stood up and extended my hand. I wasn’t sure whom I was speaking to, so I tried to be as respectful as I could.

The person who had fallen over was dressed in a maid outfit, which wasn’t too weird considering that today was the day of the festival. There did seem to be other classes who were also doing a maid cafe as their attraction, after all. *Wait...huh? I feel like I’ve seen this maid outfit somewhere before...*



“...I’m sorry too.” The girl in the maid outfit took my hand and stood up. *Wait...girl? Huh? Her voice sounded really deep. Also...her voice sounded familiar...*

“What?! Urano?!” I couldn’t help shouting. I mean, I couldn’t believe it. The girl in the maid outfit in front of me—no, the person who I thought was a girl—was, to my surprise, Urano Izumi. The boy I was dying to meet was currently standing in front of me wearing a maid outfit for some reason.

“Y-You...”

“...What are you doing? Why are you wearing a maid outfit?”

“Sh-Shut up! This was against my will!”

“Against your will? How on...” I tried to hold back my laughter, but it was no use. “Pff. Ha ha ha!”

“D-Don’t laugh!”

“Come on, how could I not? Ha ha ha! It looks so good on you.” Seriously, it looked so good on him it was funny. Also, it kind of ticked me off. Why did it look so good on him? It was a women’s size, but it fit him perfectly. *Seriously, I’m jealous of how thin and pale he is...*

“Nnn...”

“Oh, sorry. Don’t be sad... I understand. You didn’t do this on your own...right?”

“Of course not! Obayashi and the others made me wear this!”

“Obayashi...?”

“That jerk said it was punishment for causing everyone trouble and forced me to do it! Damn it, why did this have to happen to me?! Momo even said, ‘Just take your punishment and be happy that you’re getting off this easy,’ and didn’t help me out at all...” It looked like a lot had been happening while I was away from the classroom.

*Obayashi, huh?* He was a guy who had a central presence in the class, and he had a bit of a big head...but he wasn’t a bad guy. The reason he made Urano

wear the maid uniform probably wasn't to make fun of him; he probably just wanted to take away some of the animosity the class was feeling toward Urano. Urano suddenly being absent had thrown the class into chaos, so there were probably still some people with unresolved feelings toward him. By having Urano undergo such an obvious punishment, he was able to relieve some of their frustration. That was probably what he was aiming for.

Or maybe that wasn't his aim at all, and he did it without really thinking about anything...

"I reluctantly changed into this, and...I really don't know why, but everyone got more excited than I expected, and those girls in the class started taking out their makeup kits, so I panicked and ran away..." Apparently, they were about to give him a full-blown makeover. However, I understood how they felt. Right now, Urano seemed like a gem that would absolutely shine if you did his makeup.

"He he. Well, this is good, isn't it? It's just like Momota said; you should be glad it was only this bad. I mean, you did skip school at an important time like this."

"Shut up! Just whose fault do you think that was?"

"Whose fault?" It was then that I remembered. I remembered all of the feelings I had that had been blown away by the shock of seeing him in a maid outfit, and my chest started to hurt from how guilty and awkward I felt. "Hey, Urano... I'm sorry for—"

"Don't apologize," Urano said in a low, cold voice. However, he looked straight at me. "I'm...I'm the one who should be sorry."

"What...?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for causing you trouble." As he lowered his head, I was rendered speechless.

"Urano..." He didn't say much, but to me his words seemed way too honest and way too sincere. All sorts of emotions began to well up in my chest, but...

"All right! That's my apology! I apologized to you!"

...Urano raised his head and copped an attitude that immediately ruined all of those emotions. “That settles everything! You don’t owe me anything, and I don’t owe you anything! No one is indebted to anyone, and no one is to blame! We’re completely even!”

“...”

“You understand?! Now we can pretend like all of that stuff that happened the other day never happened! And don’t try to get a leg up on me with your rambling!”

“Sigh... Seriously, you’re just so...”

“Wh-What...?”

“No. It’s nothing.” He was so ridiculous, and I was so over it, but...for some reason I smiled. Surprisingly, I felt at ease. “Hey, Urano. Give me your hand for a second.”

“Wh-Why? Are you going to slap my wrist? Or are you going to squeeze my fingers?”

“Relax, you’re being too paranoid. Just give me your hand.” I urged him to hurry up, and Urano reluctantly gave me his hand. I wrapped the thing I pulled out of my pocket around his thin wrist.

“This is...”

“Yeah. This is the misanga bracelet from our class’s merchandise. It’s the one we chose together.”

It was a just normal good-luck bracelet that had orange as its main color. I felt it was a little conventional, but that was what we’d decided to go with when we considered the cost and the time we had to prepare.

“They came in yesterday. We gave them out to the class, and I held on to yours since you weren’t there... I thought I’d give it to you if you came today.”

“...” Urano gazed at the bracelet tied around his wrist with an emotional expression.

“All right, let’s get going, shall we?”



“...Yeah.” We headed back to the classroom together. Our school festival was about to begin.



It was nine a.m. when the Seizan Festival kicked off with an opening ceremony held in the gymnasium. Every class and club did their preparations, and then at ten a.m. the ban on parents and guests entering the school was lifted and the festival truly began.

By the way, while some of my classmates were cooking the noodles, I had been working with a few classmates ever since nine a.m. packing soba noodles for eating on the go. There were seats available in our class for people to sit down and eat, but there was a surprisingly high demand for packaged soba noodles you could carry around. According to information our class representative heard from the upperclassmen, people really like packaged soba for when they want to either eat outside or leave the festival before the afternoon.

My class had raffled off shifts that were a few hours long, and I ended up being assigned to work for two hours from the start of the festival. Packing noodles was simple and tedious behind-the-scenes work, but it did have the merit that I didn't have to work at all after those first two hours.

With five minutes left in my shift, as I was chatting with the other members of the noodle-packing group, tragedy struck. Right as I was arranging the packs of noodles so that they'd look nice, I heard a very familiar voice coming from the entrance to the classroom.

“Momota-kun!” It was Orihara-san. I'd told her to come at around eleven, but I guess she came a little bit early.

“Orihara-san?!” When I lifted my head, I was in for a shock. The moment I saw her I thought I was going to faint and lose consciousness. I gritted my teeth, steeled myself, and rushed over to her. “O-Orihara-san...”

“He he he. I guess I'm a little early. This is amazing...it really does feel like a school festival. I even saw you working for a little bit. You were working so hard! It was really nice to see you with your classmates like that.”

“Hold that thought for a second...” I desperately supported my knees that felt like they were going to buckle from despair. “Wh-Why are you wearing a school uniform?”

For some reason, my girlfriend was standing in front of me in a school uniform from her alma mater, Tourin Girls’ High School. At this stage in our relationship, you could say that seeing the quest item that had been instrumental in bringing us together was nostalgic.



*Impossible! What is that doing here?*

“Huh? ‘Why’? What are you saying, Momota-kun?” Orihara-san shrugged her shoulders as if I were saying something strange, got closer to me, and spoke in a whisper. “Since we’re going to walk around the school festival together, it would be strange if I were dressed in normal clothes, right? I have to pretend to be a student.”

“...”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry. I didn’t borrow this from Yuki-chan. This is actually *my* school uniform. I had my sister bring it back with her when she went back to our parents’ house to get some things. Now that I can share secrets with my sister, I can ask her to do this sort of thing.”

I’d held my tongue too long to prevent the smug grin Orihara-san was wearing on her face. “That’s not the issue... This is weird, right? Why do you have to pretend you’re a student?”

*It’s been a while since I’ve seen Orihara-san in a school uniform. What’s more, she went out of her way to prepare her uniform from back when she was a student...*

*Oh, I see. This is what she meant on the phone the other day when she said she’ll be prepared...*

“I thought that you were going to come in your regular clothes...”

“...Huh? But a school uniform is more convenient, right? Since we’re going to be walking around the festival together, it’d be best that no one finds out my age.”

“No... It’d be fine if people found out. We could just say that we’re relatives, couldn’t we? I mean, we’re actually related now, after all.”

“No way! Don’t you think that would be weird? If we said that, then you’d be the kid who hung out together with his aunt at the school festival, right? Wouldn’t it be more natural to hang out with a high school girl?”

Apparently, we had conflicting views on the matter. A school uniform, or regular clothes... They both had their own merits and demerits, and it was hard

to say which was better. Well, the real problem was that we hadn't communicated properly...

"I already told my classmates that my aunt is coming..." I muttered in despair.

"...Huh?" Orihara-san froze up like a broken machine. Then, at the worst possible time...

"Hey, Momota. It's time to switch."

...my friends from class showed up. There were about five total here to switch with me and start working.

"Sorry, we're a little late. Club activities took a while."

"I'm hungry, so let's do this while we eat."

"Leave the rest of this to us! You go enjoy the festival too."

"You said that your aunt is coming, right? Oh, she's already here. So, this is your relative... Huh?" One of them looked at Orihara-san, or to be more specific, at her uniform, and gave her a suspicious look. Then the rest of them got the same puzzled look on their faces.

"Huh? Um, this person is your relative?"

"Yes, no, um... That's right...sort of."

"...What? B-But why is she wearing a uniform from Tourin? Wait, didn't you say she has a job?"

"W-Well...she's into that. Yeah! She's that kind of person. The world is a rich tapestry of individuals with all kinds of hobbies, you know?" I desperately racked my brain, but I couldn't think of any better excuse than that. "R-Right, Orihara-san?"

"...What?! U-Um... Y-Yes, that's right! Boy, it's been such a long time since I've come to school, so I thought I really couldn't let a chance like this get away!"

"O-Oh... Really..." My classmates all gave me twitchy forced smiles. They were confused and cringing.

"O-Okay, I'll leave it to you then."

We hurried away from the classroom before we got busted. After we walked

for a little while, I sincerely apologized. "...I'm sorry, Orihara-san. This is all because I didn't take the time to check in with you..."

*Damn, I messed up. This accident could have probably been avoided. I can't deny that for the past few days, Orihara-san and I have been so busy worrying about Ura that we've been neglecting our own circumstances...*

*Ah, we've really done it now... Even though it's our big festival date, we've stumbled right out the gate...*

"No, I'm sorry too. I got ahead of myself again and caused you trouble, Momota-kun... This is going to have a negative impact on your school life from now on..."

"I'm fine. But I caused that weird misunderstanding about you..."

"No, I'm okay. Just now...I decided that I'm never coming to this high school ever again. Ha ha ha..."

"..."

*Her wounds are deeper than I'd expected...*

We had both prepared our own plans for today. I'd planned on telling everyone that Orihara-san was my aunt, while she'd planned on pretending that she was a high school girl. Since we didn't communicate enough beforehand, our plans clashed, and as result, a hybrid was created from the worst parts of both. Now Orihara-san had to play the part of a terrible character it pains me to even describe: an aunt whose hobby is cosplaying as a high school girl.

## ≡Chapter 6: Momo, Ura, Kana, and Ryu

“Well, no sense crying over spilled milk... Let’s switch gears and enjoy the festival.” Even though she was seriously depressed, Orihara-san recovered surprisingly quickly, and after that she walked around the school with confidence and an attitude that seemed to say, “Sure, I’m a high schooler. What about it?”

*That’s Orihara-san for you. Something like this would be impossible for your average woman close to her thirties. Anyone else would be too embarrassed to parade around the school in a school uniform, even more so given my classmates had just found out that she was a working adult in cosplay. There’s no knowing what kind of rumors will spread, but just look at her calm behavior.*

*She’s gotten so used to this. Or perhaps I should say...she’s become stronger? So much has happened in this relationship of ours that started with a school uniform. Come to think of it, I feel like she’s worn a school uniform during all the important parts of our relationship. I guess for her, wearing a school uniform in front of people is no big deal anymore. My girlfriend sure is amazing!*

“...Hey, Momota-kun, you’re not thinking anything rude, are you?”

“No, I’m not. In fact, I’ve gained a new respect for you, Orihara-san.”

As we cheerfully bantered back and forth, we enjoyed the school festival. It was Orihara-san’s and, of course, my first school festival. I didn’t really have any kind of plan for showing her around, so the two of us casually walked around together; I didn’t try to be a perfect escort, and the two of us were able to stroll around together leisurely on what felt like a well-rounded date.

≡

“Wow, school festivals sure are amazing...”

Afternoon came, and we were outside of the school building. After wandering around the different areas of the festival, we sat down on a bench set up for the event.

“I’m so full... Overall, I think the quality of the food at this festival was pretty high. The crepes from the second year’s Class 3 were very elaborate, and the tapioca sweets of the second year’s Class 5 were very authentic. The pancakes that Kana-kun’s class made were also amazing... The outstanding quality of the pancakes’ appearance was the epitome of what you’d expect to be popular on Instagram... Oh. Of course, the soba noodles that you made were also delicious! They had a really reassuring flavor!”

“No, it’s fine, you don’t have to make any forced compliments.” *I mean, I didn’t even make them. I only packed them.*

“Aside from the food, there were a lot of other fun attractions like the haunted houses and escape room games. There obviously wasn’t all that much money spent, but the way they made up for their low budgets with ingenuity was really interesting.”

“It was. They really did knock it out of the park.” Like I mentioned before, many of the second-year students’ attractions were impressive. It was very clear that the classes had come together to give it their all and do their best for today.

*I’m not the type of person who would work hard for the school festival, but...I felt a little regret after seeing all of those attractions that overflowed with enthusiasm. Hmm... I guess I should have worked as hard as Ura and Kana. Maybe next year I’ll try a little harder.*

“...It makes me wonder after all,” Orihara-san suddenly said as she looked at the school building and the people walking by. “The way the two of us are walking around together in our school uniforms... It makes me think about what would have happened if you and I were the same age and went to the same high school.”

“Yeah...”

“I wonder if we would have been a couple if that were the case.”

“I wonder too. I’m sure you would have been really popular, so there’s a possibility that you wouldn’t have even bothered with me...”

“No way! I wouldn’t have been popular at all! I’m an introvert among



introverts, after all. If it weren't for Yuki-chan, there's a chance I would have ended my high school career without talking to anyone..."

There we were, having an inane conversation about "what ifs" that there was no point in even thinking about. I wonder how many times we'd thought about what would happen if we were the same age. I feel like Orihara-san and I had probably both thought about it over and over again, and every time it cast a dark shadow over our hearts.

But Orihara-san's expression didn't darken, and my heart wasn't clouded. We were just talking about it like it was something funny, without any hesitation or pretense. We weren't regretting what we had now, we were just chatting about what might have been. In a paradoxical kind of way, it felt like we were affirming our current life, and it made me feel very at ease.

"Oh. We should exchange mail pics... I mean pics."

"Oh, that's a good idea." I took out my smartphone and decided to pretend for a moment that I didn't hear her say "mail pics." As we looked over the pictures we took today, we chose the ones we wanted to exchange with one another.

"We sure took a lot. But the only one we took together was this one." It was a picture that the two of us took together at Ura's class. Even though Orihara-san was wearing a school uniform, it was best to avoid standing out too much, so we weren't asking anyone to take a picture of us together. However, when we went to Ura's class, Ibusuki, who knew our situation, was kind enough to take one for us.

"I'm glad that Ura-kun came to school."

"Yes, I'm really glad too..."

"By the way, Momota-kun... What did you mean when you said that stuff to Ura-kun as you left the class?"

"Oh, that? Well, it's...kind of like a surprise."

"A surprise?"

"The truth is..." Without tooting my own horn, I explained to her about the

one surprise that I came up with when I was thinking about what I could do for Ura.



Our class's maid cafe was going all according to plan. We had a good turnout, and customer feedback was good. Naturally, there were problems, but they were all within expected parameters.

"Please change your dirty maid clothes now and wash them quickly. I learned how to clean them from the shop and I wrote it down on this paper, so hurry."

"I-I got it."

"It's about time to punish the customers who've been staying too long. Use the male maid brigade that we prepared for the occasion. Give them some good service."

"Wa ha ha! Leave it to us, Urano."

"A single Dolce Gusto can't keep up with the service? No problem. We'll use the spare I brought from my house just in case and use two machines at once."

"Wow, good thinking, Urano!"

I was dealing with a steady stream of problems in the part of the classroom which was partitioned off from the rest of the room. Whenever my classmates had an issue, they immediately dumped it all on me. I'm not so naive as to think that this was a sign of trust from them; I'm sure they were all just using me as a place to dump their problems.

In any case, it's fine. Whatever the reason, it was better to remain busy. When I stayed busy like this, I didn't have to think about anything else.

"Hey, Urano," Ibusuki called out to me, so I poked my head out from behind the partition. I lifted my head and was taken aback with surprise. Ibusuki, who was serving the customers, was dressed in an authentic maid uniform that I had meticulously selected. *Damn, it ticks me off how flustered it's making me. Why does it have to look so good on her?!*

"What is it?" I said in a calm voice, doing my best to suppress my inner feelings.

“You have a visitor.”

*“A visitor?” What do you mean, I have a visitor? I have no idea who it could be. My mom? She said that she had something to do today and couldn’t come, but maybe she came as a surprise? “What kind of visitor?”*

“Umm...a cute girl.”

“...?”

*Who could that be?*

I had no idea who it could be. Not knowing what to expect, I headed out from the space behind the partition and made my way to where the guest was.

“She’s right over there.” Ibusuki pointed to a seat in the corner. There was certainly a girl wearing normal clothes sitting there, but from where I was, I could only see the back of her head and couldn’t see her face. I had no choice but to get closer.

“U-Um...” I tried to call out to her, but she got up from her seat. Then she slowly turned around. When I saw her face, I thought my heart would stop.

“Long time no see, Ura.”



I couldn't breathe; my mind went blank. The way she carried herself had changed a lot, but her face was still the same. This was our first meeting in one or two years, but for some reason it felt like it had been ten or twenty years since we'd last seen each other.

"Ryu..." I spoke her name with a shaky voice. I had once again uttered that old nickname, like it was a perfectly normal thing for me to do.

Standing before me was Ryuzaki Natsume—Ryu, the girl I'd loved a long time ago.

I finally understood the reason Momo had said what he had earlier.

"Ura... Do you have any plans to walk around today?" he'd asked me. It was a little after lunchtime, and Orihara and Momo had come to our class to hang out. Momo asked me that question as he was leaving.

Incidentally, I was unable to ask Orihara why she was dressed in a school uniform because of how confident she seemed, and I wondered how that twenty-seven-year-old woman could parade around a place like this in a school uniform without feeling embarrassed.

"Huh? Why?" I responded.

"Just tell me."

"There's no way I could. The class can't run without me being here, and I don't really have anywhere I want to go. Plus, I don't have anyone to walk around with."

"Really? Well, that's good then."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"No, it's nothing."

That's what he'd said to me, and now I finally understood the reason why he didn't want me to leave my classroom.

"So, this is the high school that you, Momo, and Kana go to..." Ryu looked this way and that as she walked down the hallway, and I followed slightly behind her.

To be honest, I was a little hesitant to do this. This reunion was too sudden, and I was afraid because I didn't know what to say to her, and I didn't know the kinds of things she'd say to me. I thought about using my work in the classroom as an excuse to part ways with Ryu, but Ibusuki had looked right at me and said, "She's come all this way, so why don't the two of you walk around the festival? Go on, Urano. She's your friend, right?" Ibusuki probably figured it out when I called her Ryu by reflex. After all, I did tell her about Ryu that time we went camping.

*Jeez, she really didn't have to do this...*

"Hey." Ryu stopped walking, turned around, and spoke to me with the same friendly smile and tone of voice that she'd used when we were friends. "Your hair's really grown out, Ura. Don't you think it's a little too long?"

"...It's fine."

"What are you going for? Like, what kind of hairstyle are you trying to get from growing it out that long?"

"Shut up. I'm just growing it out because it's too annoying to cut."

"Hmm. I'm jealous of your hair's texture. It's so nice and smooth."

"D-Don't touch it... Well, what about your hair? It used to be so long, but you cut it all off."

"Oh, I cut it off when I got into high school. I kind of wanted a fresh start. How's it look? Do I look good with short hair?"

"How should I know?"

"Ha ha ha. You're as cold as ever, Ura."

It was unnatural how natural our conversation was. We were talking as if we were friends who had been hanging out until yesterday.

As we chatted, we walked through the crowd to a less packed area near the entrance. "...Did Momo put you up to this?"

"Ha ha ha. Saying he put me up to this has such a bad ring to it. But...yes, that's right. Momo asked me to come. I was really surprised to hear from him after such a long time." Ryu was laughing, but there was a slightly gloomy look

in her eyes. “Honestly...I didn’t want to come. I mean, I didn’t know how to face the three of you.”

“...”

“But...he asked me to help.”

“Asked you to help?”

“Yes. He said you were a little depressed and moping around because you had a lot going on...so he really wanted me to come and cheer you up face to face because he couldn’t do it...”

“That bastard... He didn’t need to do that.”

“Ha ha ha. I couldn’t not come when he asked me like that. If he’d said something like ‘Let’s all make up’ or ‘Let’s all be friends like we used to be,’ I’d have been a little apprehensive, but...he sincerely asked me for help.”

“...”

“All that said, I’m glad I came. I’ve been worried this whole time... I mean, I caused so much trouble for you three, and I couldn’t face you in particular, Ura.”

“...”

“But just now, when I saw your class’s maid cafe, I was kind of impressed. You’re the one running it, right? That’s amazing. It’s so authentic.”

“...Not really. I’m not doing anything special.”

“I almost cried when I saw how you’re enjoying your high school life.”

“...What about you?”

“Me? Well, I’m having a good time too. I go to an all-girls school, so I haven’t met anyone at all. Right now I’m looking for a boyfriend.”

“I didn’t ask for all that, idiot.”

“You don’t have to call me an idiot! You’re still a jerk.” Before I knew it, I was laughing along with Ryu.

*Huh? What is this feeling?* It felt like the cold, heavy lump of ice that remained

in my heart was slowly melting away. I had always been afraid of seeing Ryu again. I didn't know how to face her, and I was sure she never wanted to see me again. However, when I finally met her, I couldn't believe how it wasn't a big deal at all. It was like, "Really? This is it? Just what have I been so afraid of and so worried about this whole time?"

"Hey, Ura." The smile that Ryu had had this whole time left her face, and it turned into a painfully stern expression that was tinged with sadness. "I practically ran away when I distanced myself from the three of you, and I never gave you a proper apology, Ura. That's why today I—"

"It's okay," I said, cutting her off. "You don't have to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But..."

"Also, I didn't do anything wrong either, and I don't think it's anyone's fault. We were all just doing our best, but somehow we misunderstood each other and ended up clashing in a weird way." *Yeah, that's all it was. Now I'm finally able to see it that way and understand how that's all it was.*

"...Oh, yeah. Get this, Ryu." I couldn't believe I was saying this myself. "I found a girl I like." Ryu's eyes widened a little, and she looked dumbfounded.

"O-Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Really."

"Was it...that girl who called you over for me?"

"H-How did you know?"

"Oh, so it really was her. I kind of knew from the vibe I was getting."

*...This is humiliating. Why am I this easy to read?*

"I see, so that's the girl you like now."

"...Yeah, she is." I exhaled deeply. "I can't help laughing at myself. I was so depressed from that ugly heartbreak, yet, in spite of that, I immediately fell in love with a girl who I had kind of become friends with."

"..."



“That’s why...I’m sorry. I’ve already found a new girl I like, and I’m enjoying my student life and youth to the fullest. I haven’t even thought about you ever since I got into high school, all the way up until I met you just now.”

“Hmm, I see,” Ryu said, and gave me a playful smile.

“Wh-What is it?”

“No, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about how you’re still a terrible liar.”

“I-I’m not lying!”

“Ha ha ha.”

She opened her mouth wide and laughed happily. I liked the way she smiled; I had once fallen in love with her and the way she laughed like this. That was a long time ago, and I had been keeping those feelings of love sealed away deep in my heart. For me, those feelings were always a source of shame and misery. My love for her was a trauma that I didn’t want to remember... But now I was feeling like those painful memories had at last changed into beautiful ones.



The school festival was going to end soon. The gymnasium was featuring things like the drama club’s play and a volunteer band performance, and members of the festival planning committee were beginning preparations for the closing ceremony since the day’s scheduled activities were largely over.

Kana, Ryu, and I were in a corner of the gymnasium as it began to quiet down.

“I have to hand it to you, Momo. I didn’t think you’d drag Ryu here too,” Kana said with a mocking tone.

Ryu gave a sarcastic smile. “Well, if the one and only Momo’s gonna ask me to come, how could I refuse?”

“Give me a break,” I said with a grimace. By the way, Orihara-san wasn’t here with us. She told me to enjoy my reunion, and she was considerate enough to excuse herself.

“He he. No, I’m serious. If anyone aside from you had invited me...I probably wouldn’t have come, Momo. I didn’t want to refuse because you were the one to ask.”

“Hmm? What does that mean?”

“Good question. I don’t really know how to say it...but I had this feeling that it would work out because it was your idea. I figured I’d be able to laugh and have a good time with Ura and Kana again.”

“...I don’t get it.”

“I get what Ryu is trying to say,” Kana said knowingly. “She means that you’re special to the three of us, Momo.”

“You’re seriously overestimating me.” *Well, whatever. It seems like everything worked out in the end.*

“I kind of can’t believe that I’m able to talk to you two like this again. And Ura too,” Ryu said with a melancholy expression. “Ura seems to have found someone he likes, and Momo straight-up has a girlfriend. I swear, you take your eye off them for one second, and boys just grow right up,” she said jokingly.

Then, she looked at Kana. “How about you, Kana?”

“Me? Well, I actually have a girlfriend.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. You’re you, so I figured you’d have a girlfriend...”

“Oh...” Her question was worded strangely, but Kana nodded as if he’d figured it all out.

“Yeah... I’m okay now. I’ve finally gotten over it.” He spoke matter-of-factly through a thin smile. “My sister’s wedding took place during summer break. I was able to say congratulations to her and her husband there.”

“...I see.” Ryu smiled sadly at Kana, who seemed like he was somewhat relieved. Most people would probably think that something like telling their sister congratulations at her wedding was normal. However, to anyone who knew what Kana was burdened with, it would have been painful to hear him say that.

Kana and his older sister weren’t blood related. She was actually his stepsister from his parent’s remarriage when he was in elementary school.

The thing was...Kana had always had feelings for her; he had fallen in love

with a family member of the opposite sex. The only ones who knew about this were Ura, Ryu, and I. When the love triangle had reached its peak, Kana opened up to us with tears in his eyes. He couldn't go out with Ryu because he was in love with someone else—his stepsister. His stepsister didn't know about his feelings for her because Kana had kept them a secret this whole time, and the reason that Kana had started dating so casually since middle school was probably to rid himself of his feelings for his sister.

In spite of all that, his stepsister got married this summer and moved out of the house. I couldn't even imagine the impact that had on Kana's heart or how he dealt with it. However, from the relieved look on his face, it seemed like there wasn't much need to be concerned.

"At the camp...Orihara-san told me something. She said, 'You don't need to rush and force yourself to try to become an adult right now. The days where you'll have to start pretending to be an adult will come soon enough, whether you like it or not.'" Kana looked at me, gave a thin smile, and said, "I wonder if it's thanks to that? My heart feels a lot lighter now, and it's strange. I was struggling when I was trying to force myself to forget my feelings and overcome them, but when I tried simply accepting the situation for what it was, it was so much easier. I feel like I was able to face a version of myself that I didn't even know about..."

Kana's voice was calm as he spoke, but it was clear he was kicking himself a bit. "I always thought it was wrong that I was in love with my sister, but...I decided I'd acknowledge those feelings without forcing myself to deny them. I was able to realize that if I'm in love with her, I should accept that I'm in love with her...and then, having done so, I should give up and feel heartbroken."

It seemed that Orihara-san's words sincerely touched his wounded, melancholy heart. The rest of us...probably weren't able to do that. However, I think that because Orihara-san is an adult, her words carried weight and moved Kana's heart. Thanks to her, Kana was able to be heartbroken and move on. I think Kana was able to use his sister's wedding as a catalyst to come to terms with the secret love that smoldered inside of him.

"...I think I can finally move on now too. I think I can finally graduate from this unhealthy habit of continuously dating girls who I don't even like in order to

mask my feelings for my sister...”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that. Well, now you can finally have a serious relationship with me.”

“Yes, that’s right. Now I can finally have a serious relationship with Uta-chan, and—wait, what?!” Kana raised his voice in astonishment, and Ryu and I did the same a second after him. His girlfriend, Uomi Uta, was standing there matter-of-factly. Like always, she was aloof and had her usual emotionless expression. “U-Uta-chan...?”

“Yoo-hoo.”

“Why are you here...?”

“I saw you walking with some strange woman, and I decided that, as your girlfriend, I couldn’t ignore it. I followed you, and I’ve been eavesdropping on your conversation since I got here.”

“Eavesdropping...? Hold on... For how long?”

“From the beginning. I heard pretty much everything about you falling in love with your stepsister and going through women you didn’t like...”

“...” In an instant, Kana’s face turned pale and filled with anxiety and frustration. However, Uomi Uta’s expression didn’t change.

“Well...I kind of figured as much,” she declared.

“...What?”

“I kind of figured as much.”

“No, I heard you the first time... What do you mean by that?”

“I knew from the outset that there was someone else you loved, Haruka-kun.”

“...”

“The stepsister thing was a bit of a surprise, but I guess it isn’t too much of a shock.”

“You said you knew from the beginning... Then, why? Why are you with me...?”

“It didn’t matter to me if you had someone you loved. What was important was that I loved you, Haruka-kun. Besides, I had a feeling that, somehow, things would turn out okay. Even if our relationship was just for show, I thought that eventually you would fall in love with me.”

“That’s...quite confident of you.”

“It wasn’t confidence. I just believed. I believed in you, Haruka-kun. Isn’t that what dating is all about?”

“...It might just be.” The frustration and shock faded from his face, and all that remained was a smile. He was all smiles, and he couldn’t help it. “Well, there’s no beating you, Uta-chan. I feel like you can see through everything about me.”

“I can. After all,” Uomi said with a slight smile on the corner of her lips, “you’re easy to read, Haruka-kun.”

“...That’s the first time I’ve been told that. Girls have always told me they can’t tell what I’m thinking.”

“Hmm. Is that so? Well, those girls must have been blind.”

“You’re right. No one beats you, Uta-chan.” With the kind of natural smile that comes from the bottom of one’s heart, Kana hugged Uomi from the front. He embraced and squeezed her tightly, even though we were, of course, still surrounded by a bunch of people.

“Haruka-kun...”

“What?”

“Even I’m a little embarrassed to be caught off guard like this in public...”

“Well, I guess I got *you* this time. This is probably the first time I’ve made you feel embarrassed since we started dating.”

“Oh well, looks like you win.” Even though she was surprised at first, Uomi also eventually worked her hands behind Kana’s back. Gently, intensely, they affirmed each other’s existence. They did so while completely ignoring everything around them, including us.



“...” I gave Ryu a look that meant “let’s go,” and she shrugged her shoulders and nodded. We left Kana and Uomi behind in the gymnasium to be alone in their own little world.

“Sigh... I’m so jealous,” Ryu said longingly after we exited the gymnasium. “You, Ura, and Kana are all enjoying your youth to the fullest. I feel like I want to fall in love too.”

“Well...good luck.”

“Hey, tell me about you too, Momo. That Orihara-san you were with, she’s from Tourin, right?” Before we met up with Kana, Ryu and Orihara-san met briefly and greeted each other. “What year is she in? She’s not a first-year student, right? I haven’t seen her before...”

“Oh...that’s right. You go to Tourin too. Um... How should I put this? She doesn’t go to Tourin...”

“Huh? So, you’re saying that even though she’s not a student at Tourin, she’s just walking around at another school in a Tourin uniform? I have heard that people do cosplay like that sometimes.”

“No... I mean, it is cosplay, but it’s not like she isn’t a student from Tourin. Without a doubt, she went to Tourin...ten years ago.”

“...Huh?”

“She’s twenty-seven years old.”

“Wh-What?!” Ryu’s eyes widened in astonishment. “Wh-What do you mean?! Your girlfriend is twenty-seven years old?! Why?! How did that happen?! Why are you dating someone twelve years older than you?! Also, why is she wearing a school uniform?!”

“Ha ha. Yeah, how *did* all of this happen?”

*How did all of this happen? I don’t even know. All of it is like some kind of crazy joke. A ridiculous, dreamlike story, that to me is one of a kind and irreplaceable.*

I decided to take the opportunity to tell Ryu the story about us. I didn’t think I could explain it in just a few words, so it would take some time, but that was

fine. After all, we had once again become the kind of friends who could laugh together with ease.



Three days before the festival, that day when Urano didn't come to school, Momota asked me a question.

"How do you feel about Ura? It looks like Ura's been in love with you this whole time, but...what about you?"

"I-I don't know..."

I was so sorry for how vague my answer was. However, I still didn't have my feelings figured out, after all. *Urano loves me*. Having that information suddenly thrown at me caused a huge splash in the still waters of my heart, and the ripples it made had yet to calm.

"I've never thought about Urano being in love with me, so I still can't wrap my head around it."

"I see."

"But...I don't hate it. I'm certain of that, and...it makes me happy... I think?"

I was happy. Saying it out loud, it felt like I actually felt that way for the first time. Yes, that's right. I was really surprised when I found out that Urano loved me. I felt really bad for making him reveal his feelings in such a strange way, but I also felt other things...like the kind of excitement that made my heart skip a beat.

"I just thought of Urano as a regular friend. He's rude, he beats around the bush, and he's a pain in the butt... But there's a part of him that's also kind and manly."

"..."

"I've been having a lot of fun with him lately, so I've been thinking about him a lot... We've spent this past month getting ready for the school festival together, and thanks to Urano, it's been really fun. I got to see a whole new side to him, and I feel like I can really depend on him. Also, I was happy that everyone in the class got to know how kind and amazing he is, but I was a little



frustrated that I wasn't the only one who knew that anymore, and—huh?”

As I kept talking about my feelings, I realized it. “I’m in love with Urano?!”

*It looks like I really like him! I mean, it’s almost like it couldn’t be anything else but love!*

“H-Huh...? What? D-Did I always love Urano, but I just didn’t know it? Huh? Wh-What do you think, Momota?”

“...You’re asking me?”

“B-But...”

“I don’t know. From what I’m hearing, it’s sounding like there’s no way it couldn’t be love, but...in the end, it’s up to you to decide for yourself, isn’t it?” Momota said with a wry smile.

“Decide for myself...?”

“I think that falling in love with someone is a kind of...vague, unclear feeling. Also, I think what’s important is what you decide to call those uncertain feelings that have grown inside your heart.”

“What I decide to call them?”

“For example, when I fell in love with Orihara-san at first sight, I confessed my feelings to her on the spur of the moment... But at the time, I didn’t understand that what I was feeling was love at first sight. It was much more vague.”

“...”

“I called those vague feelings ‘love,’ and from that moment on, I was in love with Orihara-san. And when I looked back on things prior to that moment, it started to feel like I loved her from the first time I saw her.”

“...Yeah, I kind of get it.”

*What will I call these unclear thoughts? What will I do?*

“If you decide to call those feelings you have for Ura a delusion or a trick of your imagination, then I think that’s what they’ll become. But if they aren’t, and you call those feelings something else... No, I’ve said too much.” Momota gave an embarrassed laugh. “Anything more than that isn’t something you should

talk about with me.”



*Oh, thank goodness I talked to Momota three days ago. Thanks to that, I was able to properly sort out my feelings. These three days when I couldn't see Urano, I was able to come face-to-face with my heart and give a name to my feelings. Thanks to that, now I can somehow keep myself from running away.*

“...I-I'm only going to say this once, so listen good,” Urano said as his face turned unbelievably red.

We were behind the school building, where no one else was around. After the closing ceremony ended without incident and the turbulent school festival came to an end, I was going to my class's after-party when Urano said he had something important to tell me, and I followed him to this empty place.

Even someone as slow as me could figure out what was going on. I mean, I already knew how Urano felt, and in this kind of situation, there was no way I wouldn't realize what was going to happen. *I'm about to be confessed to.*

Urano's face was bright red, and his eyes trembled with fear and anxiety, but he didn't run away. He looked straight at me. *As I recall...he said that he didn't confess to Ryu-san. This is probably the first time in his life he's confessing to someone.* I could feel to a painful degree just how much courage Urano was mustering now to stand here.

*I'm happy. I'm so very, very happy. I thought that if Urano didn't say it, I probably would have, but...I'm happy that he's the one telling me. I mean, sometimes I want to feel like a princess and have the guy, the prince, be the one confessing.*

*The boy in front of me right now is a little bit small in stature, grumpy, foul mouthed, and a total contrarian, but... he's my own personal prince, and he's really cool.*

There were a lot of twists and turns along the way, but now I felt like we could finally face each other in earnest, and that being able to face each other like this was the most precious thing of all. I think that the most meaningful thing was that we were able to reach this moment. That's why, when it comes

to how the prince expressed his love, and how the princess answered him back... Well, some things are better left unsaid.



## ≡Epilogue

After the festival ended, Orihara-san and I left the school and walked down the street together as the sun began to set.

“It looks like Ura and Ibusuki...have decided that they’re going to go out together.”

“What, really?!”

“I just got messages from both of them. It looks like Ura was the one to ask her out, and Ibusuki said okay.”

“Oh wow, that’s great! I’m so glad for them... Ura-kun sure did do his best.” Orihara-san had a genuine smile on her face.

I was also truly happy. *You did good, Ura.*

“So, Ibusuki-san liked Ura-kun too, huh?”

“It sure looks that way.”

“Even though they may fight a lot, I think they really are a good match. I think they’ll definitely make a good couple.”

“...Hopefully.”

“Huh? Wh-What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean... It looks like there’s already trouble.” I showed Orihara-san a text from Ura on my smartphone that said, “Save me, Momo! This stupid woman’s talking about announcing our relationship to the whole class at the after-party! What should I do?! Hurry up and come save me! We’re friends, right?! We’re pals, right?!”

“W-Wow... I don’t know what to say except wow...”

“Looks like they’re in for a rough ride.” I just texted him a sticker and then switched my smartphone to silent.

*Good luck, Ura. There’s nothing more I can do. All that’s left is for you to do*

*your best as a boyfriend.*

“Speaking of after-parties...your class isn’t having one, Momota-kun?”

“We aren’t. Apparently, most of the first-year classes don’t have one. I think Ura’s class is just doing it because they really came together as a class for the festival.”

“Oh, I see. Well, that’s good.”

“That my class isn’t having an after-party?”

“Huh? Uh, I just mean...don’t worry about it!” a flustered Orihara-san said and waved her hands.

“Anyway, Orihara-san, shouldn’t you go home soon?” We had walked a long way away from the school. Since Orihara-san had parked her car in the visitor parking lot, we had to go back the way we came. Since the sun had started to go down, I figured it was about that time.

“L-Let’s walk a little bit more. Okay? It’ll be fine, right?”

*I couldn’t possibly turn down a request like that.* We walked along leisurely, with her leading the way ever so slightly, until we arrived...there.

“This is...” She’d led me to a park at an underpass that had nothing but benches and a sandbox.

“It takes you back, doesn’t it?” Orihara-san said in a somber voice.

“Did you want to come here?”

“Yes. It’s been a while since we’ve been here.”

There was something warm and nostalgic welling up in my chest. For both of us, this was a very special place. It was where I enjoyed Orihara-san’s boxed lunch after our shocking first meeting, and it was where I told her my feelings.

“Wow, this sandbox brings back memories,” Orihara-san said. She ran toward the sandbox. “This is where you made that sandcastle for me, right?”

“Yeah, with Ura and Kana’s help...” It was a handmade sandcastle that we lit up with Christmas lights from home. It was economical and the best I could do as a fifteen-year-old. At first, the plan was to have them light up the tree when I

snapped my fingers after I finished reading a poem that started with “I’ll put a spell on you.” However, the lights came on too early by mistake. “There was a certain charm to it. It was nighttime, so somehow it had a nice ambience to it.”

“No, it was really well made. I...was really moved, and I was so happy that I didn’t know what to do...” She squinted her eyes and had a blissful smile on her face.

I was also thinking back on that night. *It feels like it was a long time ago, but also like it was just yesterday. Our relationship...our forbidden relationship between a fifteen-year-old and a twenty-seven-year-old started from that moment. A lot happened after we started dating, and we overcame a lot of challenges together. A lot of things changed as well. However...there’s also something that hasn’t changed. Something that hasn’t changed, hasn’t faded, and has only become brighter since that night...*

“...Hey, Momota-kun, since we’re here, how about we sit on that bench over there?” Orihara-san pointed to the bench she’d been sitting on when I confessed to her. However, I didn’t take her up on her offer.

“Hime,” I said, calling her by her name, which I rarely used because I still wasn’t used to it.

“Huh?” Orihara-san had a surprised look on her face as I caught her off guard and knelt before her. Then I took her hand.

“I love you, Hime,” I said as I looked up at her. “I’ve loved you ever since we first met.”

*While some things change, some things stay the same. While some things become more fragile as time goes by, some things become stronger. I don’t know what will happen in the future. However, no matter what happens, I want to believe that this feeling that I swore to on that night and that I hold in my heart will never change.*

“Please, stay by my side for the rest of my life. Please, be my princess, and be only mine.” I felt embarrassed, but I couldn’t stop the feelings that were overflowing from my heart.

“Kaoru-kun...” Orihara-san said my name with a look of overwhelming

emotion on her face. She looked like she was about to cry as she looked down at me. “Did you...just confess to me again?”

“I guess I was inspired by Ura’s hard work.”





“...Ah, that’s not fair... You’ve made me so happy again...” Orihara-san smiled. “Thank you... I’m so happy I could just lose myself. I want to always be with you too, Kaoru-kun...” She smiled happily as she spoke those words that were more than I could ever deserve. The mood felt like the entire world was giving us its blessing.

*...Okay, now’s my chance. This is the perfect time to recite the poem I’ve put all of my heart and soul into. The poem that I’ve been thinking of since the night of my confession, the poem that’s been blocked at every turn, almost as if by the invisible hand of god. Yes, I feel like I could recite my poem now and create a whirlpool of emotions! My poem was meant for this moment!*

“O—”

“But...” Just when I started to recite my poem and got to the starting interjection of “O,” Orihara-san raised her voice. Once again, my poem was thwarted. When I looked up at Orihara-san again, I could see she had a sad look on her face.

“Why...are you saying that now?” Orihara-san said with a complicated expression that would be hard to put into words. There was sadness and confusion there, but there was also definitely happiness... It was such a difficult look that I couldn’t really describe it.

“Huh? Oh... I’m sorry. Did I say something wrong...?”

“...No. You didn’t do anything wrong, Momota-kun. I’m really, really happy that you confessed to me again in this place that holds so many memories for us. It’s just that...your timing really sucks.”

*My timing sucks?*

As I became confused, Orihara-san let go of my hand and reached into her school bag, which she had slung over her shoulder. What she took out was a bouquet...of bright red roses.

“Huh? What? This is...”

“...It’s a bouquet of roses. They’re just like the ones you gave me. I got these for today.”

“...Th-They’re for me?” I asked, flustered, and Orihara-san nodded firmly.

“I was thinking about confessing my feelings to you today...”

“What? Confess...?”

“You’ve always been the one to confess your feelings and propose, but I haven’t, right? That’s why I was planning on surprising you by confessing to you today.”

“A surprise...Wait, is that why we came here to the underpass?”

“...Yes. It was all planned. I brought you to this park, and I was going to confess to you with this bouquet I’d prepared...” Orihara-san complained with an expression full of anger and sadness that had nowhere to go.

“All that was left was to have you sit on that bench so I could surprise you by kneeling down and giving you this bouquet while I said something moving to create a whirlpool of emotions... Why did you have to go and confess first?!” Orihara-san said earnestly with tears in her eyes. “Why are you always like that, even during times like this, Momota-kun? Everything you do is just too cool...! You need to tone down being such a prince...”

*I can’t tell if she’s mad at me or praising me. Seriously though, I can’t believe Orihara-san prepared such a surprise for me. Also...I can’t believe that I ruined it for her.*

“Oh, I’m sorry...”

“...No, I don’t want you to apologize... You didn’t do anything wrong, Momota-kun. Ugh... Why did it turn out like this?”

“Seriously, why did it turn out this way...?” We both lamented, but a few seconds later...

“...Pfft!”

“Ha ha ha!” We both laughed; it was just too funny not to. Also, we were both so happy.

“Ha ha. Wow. We just can’t get it together, can we?”

“That’s true.”

“We’ve done this before too. Do you remember? On our first date, I wore a school uniform to match you, but you wore a suit to match me.”

“I do. I remember because it was the first time we held hands.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

*I’ll never forget it. We’ve been doing this type of thing over and over again. We believe we’re being considerate of each other, then before we know it, we’re covering for our own mistakes, agonizing and getting frustrated, flailing about, getting out of sync with each other, and turning the situation into a fiasco. It’s always been like this since we started dating.*

“Fun as always, huh?”

“...Yeah,” I said and nodded firmly. *It’s fun. It’s too much fun. I’m so happy every day that I can’t help but smile.* “Okay, Orihara-san, shall we head back soon?”

“Sure.”

I held out my hand, and she naturally took hold of it. In the beginning, holding hands made our hearts beat fast, but now it was natural for us. However, this excitement won’t fade away. No matter what happened from now on, I wanted to live without losing this feeling, and I thought that Orihara-san was probably thinking the same thing. There was no greater happiness than the emotions that I felt through the warmth of her body.

*I don’t know how much I’ve grown as a boyfriend these last six months. I also don’t know if there will be any obstacles in the future even greater than the ones we’ve overcome so far. However, it’ll be okay. I’m sure we’ll be fine.* I didn’t have any proof, but somehow that’s what I thought.

Orihara-san. Orihara Hime-san. She’s slightly older than me, but she’s my totally cute girlfriend, and from now on, I’m going to walk by her side.

## Afterword

The kanji for “heartbreak” mean “losing love.” However, I think the reality of heartbreak is that it’s so painful because losing the feelings of love you felt is no simple matter, even though the love itself is over. There are lots of times when a person’s feelings linger even when they’ve been rejected or broken up with someone. Heartbreak is the loss of things like a future with and a relationship with another person, not a sudden loss of your feelings for them. Or perhaps it’s called “losing love” because the moment you break up you gradually begin the process of losing your love? It’s a lonely feeling, but I like to believe that something new can be gained through that process of that loss.

And with that, I am Kota Nozomi, and this is the sixth installment of the rom-com with an age gap. This time the story was about the three princes, Momo, Ura, and Kana (with Ura getting the most screen time). It was fun to get to write the story about the three of them that I’ve been hinting at since the first volume. It was a story about how even men want to become princes, just like how women of all ages want to be princesses.

This time there are a lot of pages in the afterword, so suddenly I’m going to explain all of the characters!

**Momota:** The main character. Tall. Really bad at sports. I wanted to make a sincere and manly main character who a twenty-seven-year-old could date without feeling embarrassed, but he turned out so mature that I wondered if he was really fifteen. I still remember how it was a bit of a miracle that when I was thinking that he would look good in a collared school uniform, Nanase-san made it so that the uniform for his high school had a collar without me giving her any instructions. His name comes from Momotaro.

**Orihara Hime:** The main heroine. She’s a miraculous character pushing thirty who looks good in a school uniform and is a mash-up of the author’s tastes. Before the first volume went on sale, people felt strongly that older heroines didn’t belong in light novels, so a heroine around thirty years old was out of the

question; the editorial department would never let it come to pass. When I thought about how to persuade the editorial department, I came up with the devilish idea that I might be able to get away with it if I had her wear a school uniform on the cover. From there, I came up with the scene where they first meet... As a result, Orihara Hime, the heroine pushing thirty who wears a school uniform, was born. It could be said that the details of her character came about specifically because I conceived of her in an era where “older heroines don’t sell.” Since Momota-kun is too mature, she ended up being a bit of an airhead in the romance department. I touched on it briefly in the third volume, but her name doesn’t come from the legend of Orihime and Hikoboshi, but from the story of Uriko-hime and the Amano-jaku.

Urano Izumi: Friend of the main character. The most introverted of introverts. He’s monstrously self-conscious and paranoid. He’s a really fun character to write. In fact, I started writing my new GA light novel, *You Like Me, Don’t You?* because, as I was writing Urano, I thought it was really fun to write about an introverted character in love. He’s the true main character and heroine of volume six. His name is based on Urashima Taro.

Kanao Haruka: Friend of the main character. An extrovert among extroverts, and good looking. Part of his backstory is that he likes old music and is especially interested in the “27 Club” that’s famous for its members such as Kurt Cobain and Jimi Hendrix. I thought that I’d have him mention it in some way to Orihara-san, who is currently twenty-seven years old... However, no matter how hard I tried, it felt like the story would become too dark, so I scrapped it. He’s the opposite of Momota, in that a collared school uniform seems like it wouldn’t look good on him. His name comes from Kintaro. After I decided to base these three childhood friends’ names on Momotaro, Urashima Taro, and Kintaro, I came up with their nicknames, and...while “Momo” and “Ura” are good nicknames, I felt like “Kin” didn’t really match the character, so I settled on the trendier “Kana.”

Shirai Yuki: Friend of the heroine and stay-at-home mother who has a child. I wanted someone who could give Orihara-san love advice—someone who was a rational and sensible person, aside from her taste in names for her child. Her name comes from Snow White. I also had plans to introduce another friend of

Orihara-san with a Cinderella motif named Haimura, but Yuki-san was so capable that I was able to make do with just her.

Ibusuki Saki: She is both the foil heroine and Ura's heroine. I wanted a girl whose dialogue with Ura would be fun and who would be a kind of natural enemy to introverts. Her breasts are pretty big, but because of a certain pair of sisters, she doesn't really stand out in that department. Her name comes from Thumbelina.

Uomi Uta: She is both the out-there heroine and Kana's heroine. She's the kind of girl who you don't really understand yet who isn't an airhead or mysterious. As I was writing her, I had the image in my mind that she was like a grown-up version of the character Chifuyu-chan from another work of mine, *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace*. She seems like a hard character to write, but it was surprisingly easy, because no matter what she did, you could just say "That's just how she is." Her name comes from The Little Mermaid.

Orihara Kisaki: The heroine's big sister, and also, in the end, she's the main character's stepmom. As I wrote in previous afterwords, she is a woman who totally ignored the original plan and went wild. I had absolutely no plans to have her get remarried. This is why writing is so interesting. Her name comes from the character Orihime. As I mentioned above, Orihara-san's name is based on "Uriko-hime and Amano-jaku," while her sister is based on the legend of Orihime and Hikoboshi. Also, her ex-husband's name "Hoshino-san" was based on Hikoboshi.

So, those were the character introductions.

Now for a sudden announcement. The manga is currently being serialized in "Manga UP!" and the fourth volume will go on sale at the same time as this sixth volume of the light novel! Please look forward to it!

Now then, my thanks. To my supervisor, Nakamizo-sama, thank you again for your help. My progress on this book was the worst it's ever been, but somehow it worked out... To Nanase-sama, thank you again for your wonderful illustrations. The illustrations of the three different couples were lovely. Also, I would like to give my deepest gratitude to you, the reader who picked up this

book. May our paths cross again, if we have the chance.

—Kota Nozomi



Are You Okay  
With a Slightly  
Older Girlfriend?

~The Peerless  
Prince Charming~



vol.  
6

"I hear the same things over and over when I get dumped. It's always things like "I can't tell what you're thinking."

"He he he. He's a pretty amazing guy. I knew that all along, though."

"Why did it turn out this way? It's the same as last time..."

"I just kind of naturally relied on you, didn't I?"

"...Huh? But a school uniform is more convenient, right? Since we're going to be walking around the festival together, it'd be best that no one finds out my age."

"I can. After all, you're easy to read, Haruka-kun."



UOMI  
UTA



KANAO  
HARUKA



IBUSUKI  
SAKI



URANO  
IZUMI



MOMOTA  
KAORU



ORIHARA  
HIME





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