



**A Love That
Transcends
Time**

**Are
You
Okay
With a
(Slightly)
Older
Girlfriend?**

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vol. 3

A Love That

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THE STORY SO FAR

High schooler Momota Kaoru is in a slightly secret relationship with Orihara Hime, who is twelve years older than him. One day, a girl named Ibusuki Saki unexpectedly confessed her love to him. Facing her head-on with full sincerity, Momota told her his true feelings: "Even if I could redo my life a million times, I'd want to fall in love with Orihara-san."



The bond between Momota and Orihara-san is unwavering. Though they sometimes wander off course, they continue to nurture their love in spite of their difference in age and social status.



♥ Prologue

“Hime-chan, is there someone at school that you like?”

Uryu-sensei’s question was so sudden I felt like I’d do a spit take. Well, I say “I,” but I don’t mean the I who’s an office worker approaching her thirties; I mean the I who’s an elementary schooler. I don’t really remember my exact age at the time, but I was probably in my fifth or sixth year of elementary school. During my elementary school years—or I should say, until I started living alone during college—I lived in a rural town in the northern part of the prefecture. My hometown is so far out in the sticks that the school I went to has actually since closed down due to population decline. I was in the town’s small community center on that day.

“Wh-Where’s this coming from, Uryu-sensei?”

“Ha ha ha. Hime-chan, your face is all red,” she said as she laughed cheerfully.

Uryu-sensei—her full name was Uryu Kozue—loved to laugh. Her eyes were a little scary, but she was never intimidating since she was always smiling. She was tall and slender like a model. From my elementary schooler point of view, she looked like what it meant for someone to be a young woman.

Even though I called her Uryu-sensei, she wasn’t a schoolteacher but rather a teacher of a cooking class. Every year, during long vacations like summer and winter break, she acted as a lecturer for a kids’ cooking class that was held as part of a regional event. Well, I say it was a cooking class, but it was really just a small event with less than ten children participating. Still, I participated in it every year without fail. If I’m being honest, it was because my parents ordered me to attend. If I were left alone I would have spent my entire vacation playing video games, so my mother, unable to just stand by and watch, forced me to participate.

“You’re a girl, so don’t just play Nintendo and learn how to cook something,” she said to me, making an outdated, sexist statement that would have caused an uproar on today’s social media. And on that note, why do people from my Mom’s generation call any type of video game hardware “Nintendos” anyway?

Well, in hindsight, I'm grateful to my parents. The skills I cultivated in that cooking class were a lifesaver when I started living on my own... Not to mention, at the time I was way too into video games regardless of whether I was a boy or a girl.

It was because it was around the time that the Game Boy Advance came out. It's no hyperbole; all I did was play video games. I was so immersed in video games that during long breaks like summer vacation, they encroached on my sleeping and eating habits. It's only natural that my parents would be worried and try to get me out of the house.

"Y-You're laughing too much," I said.

"Ha ha, sorry."

It was just Uryu-sensei and me alone in the kitchen of the community center. The cooking class had already ended, and the other children had already gone home. My parents were late picking me up, so Uryu-sensei was waiting with me.

"Still, it's not something to get that embarrassed about, right? At your age, you'll be having those kinds of conversations with your friends soon enough, right, Hime-chan?"

"...I do." That's all my girl friends ever talked about during our breaks at school. It was always things like who they thought was cool and who they liked. Sometimes they even gave ranks to the boys. However...

"I...don't really get it," I admitted. I tried hard to join in with those girls and say things that went along with the conversation so I wasn't left out at school, but I had never held any special feelings towards the boys at my school.

I don't get it. I really don't understand, I'd think. My elementary schooler self still didn't know what it meant to fall in love with someone.

"Hmm, I see. Well, what *do* you like, Hime-chan?"

"The Advance!" I said, barely letting her finish. "Do you know about the Gameboy Advance, Uryu-sensei?! It's amazing! Even though the Gameboy Color was already amazing enough, it's even more advanced now! Right now, I'm playing a game called *Mega Man Battle Network*. It's really fun! Its original

setting and groundbreaking battle system are great, and it's a masterpiece that should be preserved for posterity—"

"...W-Wow, is that right?" Uryu-sensei said, a little bit taken aback. Seeing this, I returned to my senses. In elementary school, despite normally being the quiet type, when it came to that specific subject I'd become talkative. I was one of those types of kids... Um, wait. I don't really want to admit it, but I might still be that way now that I'm twenty-seven-years-old...

"I don't play video games, so I don't really get it. Sorry."

"...I'm sorry too. I got too excited."

"I see. You're more into video games than you are romance, Hime-chan? You're like a child of the times. You don't have any interest in boys at all?"

"N-No, it's not like I have no interest, but...it's just kind of too soon for me. I was thinking it'd be fine if I waited until after I became an adult." After I said that, I looked at Uryu-sensei's hand. On her left ring finger was a pretty wedding ring.

"You're married and have kids, right, Uryu-sensei?"

"That's right."

"Which means that you've already met your soulmate, right?"

A soulmate... When I was in elementary school I believed in that sort of thing. I only knew about love from television dramas and manga, and I thought that when everyone became an adult, they met their soulmate and got married. On top of that, I thought that people who got divorced did so because they had somehow married someone who wasn't their soulmate by mistake.

"My soulmate... Hmm, I wonder about that. That might not be true."

"Wh-What?"

"Our ways of thinking are totally different from one another, you know? We're always just fighting. We're two people raised in different environments living together... It's trying," Uryu-sensei complained, sounding like she was fed up.

"No matter how many times I tell my idiot husband not to do it, he always

stands when going number one, and his facial hair gets all over the sink when he's done shaving. And he says, 'I'm pretty helpful when it comes to raising our child compared to how other families do it.' Just what does 'helpful' mean? It's our child, right? Why is it just assumed that I'm the main one raising our child? I mean, we're not even talking about other families. I'm talking about ours. And then there was that night I tried to get things started and he was all, 'You're already trying to have another kid?' What even is that? So that's all being married is about? Is he saying that if we're not making kids then he's not going to do it with me?"

"U-Um..."



“Oops, sorry. You might be a little too young for that topic, Hime-chan,” she said and laughed it off. As an elementary schooler, I didn’t really understand the part about what they were doing at night... I do now, though. Couples everywhere sure have it rough.

“It’s just one frustrating thing after another. Maybe my soulmate’s still out there somewhere. Some wonderful person who would be my prince, who’s more perfect, more handsome, and richer, and who I completely agree with...”

“O-Oh no...”

At the time I probably looked really upset. *Uryu-sensei accidentally got married to someone who isn’t her soulmate, so her married life is going to be a disaster and she’ll probably get a divorce!* I was so worried I was at a loss for words.

“But you know,” Uryu-sensei continued, “I love him, for some reason.” She narrowed her eyes like she was slightly troubled, but she was smiling happily. At that moment, the usually easygoing and mature Uryu-sensei looked just like a little girl.

“Y-You love him?”

“Yes. I love him.”

“Even though you fight a lot?”

“Yes. We fight over and over, and there’s a lot of things about him I don’t like, but...I love him. It’s a pain, right?”

When faced with such blunt affection, I became so embarrassed I couldn’t say anything. Seeing my reaction, Uryu-sensei’s face also became a little red, and she added, “Aha ha. Keep this a secret from my husband, okay?” while laughing it off.

She let out a breath and continued. “If God or someone appeared and said, ‘Right now I’ll introduce you to someone who’s a more wonderful soulmate,’ I’d turn them down. I’d confidently tell them that I’m satisfied with the husband I have now.”

“...Well, doesn’t that mean that your husband right now *is* your soulmate?”

“Hmm... Well, I guess. That’s probably right. Aha ha, I don’t really know.”
Uryu-sensei laughed lightheartedly.

“Falling in love with someone really seems great,” I said with admiration.
Uryu-sensei gave me a kind smile and placed a hand on my head.

“Someday you’ll meet someone like that too, Hime-chan. Even if they aren’t your soulmate, someone will come along who’ll make you feel like you want to be together with them.”

I hate to admit it, but for a long time, I didn’t understand the meaning of that conversation. I just kept getting older while continuing to not understand at all what it meant to fall in love with someone. When I was a student, I didn’t participate in extracurricular activities and just played video games, so I got fat—I stabilized my center of gravity. I went through a hellish diet under Yuki-chan’s guidance after that, but just as I thought I was finally becoming thin, I found myself in an employment ice age. Then, after a hellish job hunt and getting hired, I became busy every day, and my few days off were spent playing video games... I did my best to live my life through whatever was thrown at me, and then, just like that, I had already started to push thirty.

I’m already twenty-seven years old, an age you could by no means call a child...and I’ve finally fallen in love for the first time in my life. I fell in love with someone aside from myself, and I’d come face to face with what it means to fall in love with another person.



KANAO HARUKA

★ Height: 176 cm

Birthday: May 20th

Blood Type: A

★ Favorite Food:

Soba noodles

Dislikes:

Any and all bugs, snakes,
lizards, frogs, etc.

(He likes turtles and has a pet one named Dave.)

♥ Chapter 1

The Princess Hits the Books A long time ago it was pretty hard for couples to call each other on the phone. Well, I didn't have a boyfriend until I was my current age, so I've never had to worry about phone troubles with my boyfriend, but I often heard my friends complaining about it.

The generation when cell phones started to become widespread began around the time I was an elementary schooler. However, in the region where we lived, "No cell phones until after you're a high school student" was the general thought process, so it was typical for my classmates in middle school to call their partner's landline. I remember hearing from afar a boy in my class being depressed and saying, "Yesterday her dad answered the phone..." Even after you became a high school student and got your own cell phone, the next thing that stood in your way was communication fees. Back then, the fees were very expensive, and the unlimited plans weren't even as good as they are now. I had a few classmates who told horror stories like "My cell phone bill was tens of thousands of yen, so my parents confiscated my phone..." I think there were also a lot of couples who had Willcom mobile phones just for their partner. Anyway, when it came to couples talking on the phone, the troubles never ceased.

I wonder how it is now. These days even elementary schoolers have their own smartphones—let alone middle schoolers—and making free calls on phone apps is commonplace. If you have Wi-Fi in your house and your own smartphone, you can talk to your partner as much as you want without having to worry about your parents or family. Do the kids really enjoy this all-too-convenient world, though? Wouldn't absence make their hearts grow fonder? Does being blessed with the ability to easily hear each other's voice instead turn

their relationship into something more diluted and low-effort? Does the convenience of being able to communicate anytime end up becoming an obligation where you have to communicate all the time— Nah, as if. I have absolutely no intention of saying something like, “Things were better in the old days.” In fact, I’m quite grateful. Smartphones are the best! Modern conveniences rock! I mean, thanks to smartphones and phone apps becoming so commonplace, I’m able to have fun calling my high school boyfriend every day.

“Final exams?” I asked. It was a night in early summer when air-conditioning had become a necessity. During a phone call with Momota-kun, which had become a part of my daily routine, he brought up a familiar set of words.

“Yes, exams for the end of the term start the week after next.”

“Oh...final exams. I remember those.” *Wow, final exams are so nostalgic. What a student-ish thing.*

“It’s my first final since entering high school.”

“That’s right, it is. Oh, speaking of which, how did your midterms go, Momota-kun?”

“...My midterms weren’t so good,” he said as his voice sank. “You see, the thing is...my midterms were around the time I first met and started dating you, Orihara-san.”

“Oh...” I got what he was hinting at. *I see. His midterms were around that time. He definitely wouldn’t have been able to focus on his studies then. It was just one crazy happening after another.*

“At the time I couldn’t think about studying at all.”

“Yeah...that’s understandable.”

“Also, *Mega Man Battle Network* was just too fun.”

“Oh, wow, I know, right!” I said as I vigorously nodded my head. “Um... I’m sorry... It’s all my fault...”

“No, it’s not your fault, Orihara-san. It’s all my fault. But yeah, that’s why I’ve been thinking I have to do my best on my final exams. I don’t want it to be that

my grades dropped because we were dating.”

“Momota-kun...” That was so like him. He’s so earnest and sincere, you wouldn’t think someone as mature as him would be in his first year in high school.

“Um... So, I wonder if it would be best if we didn’t really talk on the phone until after your tests?”

“Yeah, it would be...”

“Also, not meeting on the weekend and just studying might be best...?” I couldn’t help but sound depressed. After a lengthy stay at my apartment, my sister finally went back to our parent’s house, so I’d thought that this weekend we’d finally get to be together and...be lovey-dovey.

“...I’m sorry.”

“N-No, don’t apologize. It’s not your fault. It’s a student’s duty to study. I’ll be patient too, so do your best on your exams, okay?”

“Okay...”

“When your tests are over...I-let’s be lovey-dovey, okay?” I said that with the intention of cheering him on, but as soon as I did, an intense feeling of embarrassment boiled up inside of me and I writhed around in self-hatred on top of my bed.

Oh no, what am I saying?! Have I done it now?! Does he think I’m cringey?! I was trembling while I waited for his reply, but...

“Y-Yeah! Let’s be really lovey-dovey,” he said with excited breathing. *Thank goodness. I thought he was really turned off.*

“...You’re terrible, though. When you say something like that to me, it makes me want to blow off my test and go and see you, Orihara-san.”

“Wh-What... Oh my.” I felt the same way.

Aaah! I don’t like this after all. I don’t want to be patient for over a week. To be honest, I probably can’t endure not being able to meet and call him for that long. However, I don’t want to get in the way of Momota-kun’s studies... Besides, I don’t know if it’s my vanity as an older woman or my pride as a

woman close to her thirties, but I'm reluctant to be honest and make a fuss about how much I really really want to see him.

“...Oh, that's it!” After worrying about it, I thought of a great idea. “Momota-kun, come over to my house this weekend. I'll tutor you!” I announced.

After this and that, it was Saturday.

“Tardy! You're late, Momota-kun!” I said, directing my pointer with a snap towards my younger boyfriend as he entered the room. I was so happy I was getting to see him after such a long time (three days) that I became excited and unconsciously shouted something so out of character for me...but totally in character for this role.

“My goodness, it seems you've been slacking lately, Momota-kun. As punishment, go stand in the hallway!”

“...”

In contrast to how excited I was, Momota-kun looked dumbfounded and was completely silent. I was getting increasingly embarrassed after having completely bombed.

“...Orihara-san, what is that outfit?”

“Um... I'm supposed to be a teacher,” I mumbled as I looked down at my outfit. It was a white shirt with fine decorations around the buttons, stockings, and a tight black skirt. In addition to that, I wore fake glasses. Aside from the stockings and glasses, everything was cosplay goods I bought at the usual department store. It was the same shop where I bought the babydoll and the buruma.



“I-I thought that if I was going to be your teacher, it was important to get the look right first.”

“Orihara-san...are you hooked on cosplay or something?”

“Why do you say that?!”

“I mean...you’ve worn a school uniform and buruma. It makes me wonder if you’ve completely awakened to it.”

H-How could he say that? I felt something resembling anger towards his misguided assumption, and by all means felt like I wanted to object, but...when I thought about it rationally, I couldn’t make any excuses.

Yep. Just what am I doing at my age? I’m on the verge of becoming a regular customer at the department store’s cosplay goods corner. The salesperson there even had that whole ‘Oh, it’s that lady who always comes here’ kind of attitude when they greeted me...

“Also, that outfit...really looks like cosplay. There aren’t any teachers who dress like that.”

“L-Let me explain that. I looked up a lot of stuff, you know? I put in ‘female teacher’ as a search term...and then...”

“And then?”

“...What came up was nothing but lewd videos and pictures.” When I was looking for reference images, the more and more I searched, the more screenshots and packaging for female teacher videos popped up.

“Just what’s the deal?! Why do guys like teachers so much?!”

“I-I’m sorry...” When faced with my deep anger, Momota-kun apologized on behalf of all men.

“...Do you like them too, Momota-kun?”

“What?”

“Um, I mean, do you like this kind of teacher...?”

“No... Well, I mean...I do kind of like it. It’s like I have a certain...yearning for it...?”

“So... You’d be happy if I tutored you while wearing this?”

“Well, that’s...”

“Will you feel motivated?”

“Well... Yes, substantially,” he said, nodding shyly. I was relieved that he didn’t seem to hate it.

Thank goodness. If Momota-kun can feel even a little motivated then wearing this cosplay wasn’t for nothing.

“He he. Okay, today I’m going to tutor you with no mercy.”

“Yes, please do, Orihara-san.”

“Non non,” I said, waving my pointer that I’d pushed in and made small. “Today I’m ‘Orihara-sensei,’ okay?”

“...Y-Yes, Orihara-sensei.” Momota-kun seemed a little embarrassed, but he was a very good boyfriend and played along with me. After what a third party could only describe as the back and forth of a sickeningly sweet couple, we sat down at the table.

“By the way, you said that you did badly on your midterms, but how did you place?”

“Oh, um... There’s a little over three hundred students in our first-year class, and I ranked about 120th.”

“Huh? That’s not really that bad, right? It’s above average.”

“Well, that’s true, but...personally, I think that it’s pathetic that even though I don’t belong to any clubs, I’m in the hundreds. Plus, when I was in middle school, I was always in the top fifty...”

“I see. Well, it’s good to have high ambitions.”

“How about you, Orihara-san?”

“Hm?”

“H-How were your grades, Orihara-sensei?” Momota-kun said, unable to fully get rid of his embarrassment. I was waiting for his question, and when asked did a victory pose on the inside.

“Oh, *my* grades? You’re asking about *my* grades as a student? Well, if you must know... in high school, even at my worst, I think I was within the top twenty students.”

“Huh... That’s amazing! Orihara-sa—Orihara-sensei, you graduated from Tourin Girls’ High School, right?”

“Yeah, I may have. And I hear it’s the leading prep school for this prefecture, you know?”

“Speaking of which, you graduated from F University too, right?”

“Well, yeah, more or less. And actually, I think it’s a university that’s in the number one percentile for this prefecture. I didn’t want to leave the prefecture, so I just kind of chose it, you know?”

Man, the look of respect he was giving me sure felt good. I was always embarrassing myself in front of him, but I got the feeling I could finally show off my majesty as an older adult to him. To tell the truth, my grades were pretty good. I was nowhere close to being a truly talented woman like Yuki-chan—who was always at the top of her class and easily enrolled in the top percentile university in the Tohoku region—but I took pride in how I was decently good at studying.

“I thought for sure you were the kind of student who ignored your studies and just played video games.”

“He he he. You’re so naive, Momota-kun. For gamer kids, their grades are their lifeline. In my house, if you didn’t do your homework and just played video games, you’d get the plug pulled on you...”

“Yikes.”

“Right in the middle of your game, with no hesitation...”

“Oh no.”

“My parent’s generation didn’t understand the concept of saving your game... That feeling of loss from having your hours of data completely erased in an instant, I just... More than grief or anger, I feel like I’m going to hyperventilate thinking about it again...”

My body trembled as I recalled the trauma from my early childhood. The rare shiny Pokémon that I miraculously encountered, the liquid metal slime that I finally recruited after hunting slimes over and over again, the super-strong player I got from winning the gamble with Dr. Goodjob when he showed up at the end of Success Mode... Words can't describe my despair from having them erased so heartlessly.

Anyway, my parent's prejudice of "If you just play video games you'll turn into an idiot" wasn't really rare for the time, and I studied my butt off so they'd let me play video games. As long as my grades were good, they didn't say anything, so I devoted myself wholeheartedly to my studies so that I could play video games on the big TV in the living room.

"...Well, I'm grateful to my parents now, though. If they hadn't stopped me, I think I would have become a shut-in game addict... In any case, because of all that, my grades in school were pretty good."

"Is that so? Then first-year high school material should be no problem, right?"

"Hmm, it's probably fine. I studied liberal arts, so any serious science course material is impossible for me; still, I think I should be able to tutor you on first-year level stuff no problem."

"Okay, Orihara-sensei, I'm in your hands!"

"Ha ha ha, just leave it to me!"

Our study session began with that joyful mood. Momota-kun pulled out his textbooks from his bag.

That's when everything went to hell.

Thirty minutes later, there lay an adult who had broken down crying from her own uselessness. There lay a teacher whose only adult quality was her outfit. That is to say, I was doing all those things.

"U-Um..." Momota-kun called out to me in a worried voice, as I'd lost the power to maintain my posture and was splayed out on the floor.

"Are you okay, Orihara-sensei?"

"Stop it, Momota-kun. Don't call me -sensei."

“Okay...” Momota-kun’s face was distressed, as if to say, “But you were the one who told me to call you that...”

“A woman like me has no right to be called -sensei... Even adding -san onto my name is too good for me. Just call me by my first name. There’s no need to use respectful titles towards a woman like me...”

“No, um... I think it’d be a pretty momentous event between us if I called you by your first name, Orihara-san.”

“O-Oh... Is that so?”

“It is.”

Yeah, he’s right. Changing the way we refer to each other would be something very important that would have a direct bearing on our relationship. I can’t change it for something so frivolous.

“L-Let me see those textbooks one more time, Momota-kun.” I roused myself and once again challenged the material. Japanese, math, English... I opened my eyes as wide as saucers and pushed my focus to the limit as I looked over the textbooks for the three fundamental courses—but the results didn’t change at all. “Uuuuh... I can’t! I can’t do it at all!” Overwhelmed by despair, I once again broke down crying.

Crap, this is hard! What even is this?! I don’t understand it at all!

“Is it that difficult?”

“...No, strictly speaking, it’s a little different than being difficult.” It wasn’t like the curriculum had significantly changed or its difficulty had shot up. “I have recollections of every problem from every textbook. It’s like, ‘Yeah, I’ve totally done this kind of problem,’ and yet...”

“And yet?”

“...I’ve forgotten all of it,” I sighed. “I’ve forgotten all the ways to solve the problems and all the techniques for taking exams. Even though I remember desperately memorizing it, I don’t remember the actual material that I memorized...”

Simultaneous inequalities! Quadratic functions! Sine! Cosine! Tangent! I did

them; I did all of them! It's super familiar! However, I can't remember how to solve them at all. *What was it? What do I do?*

I majored in literature and haven't done mathematics at all since I took my entrance exams. After such a long time, just looking at numerical formulas makes me panic. It's not just math either. My English is terrible. What's S+V+C? What were "Nonrestrictive pronouns" again? I've forgotten most of the spellings and pronunciations that I worked so hard to cram in my brain. For an office worker nearing her thirties who has no experience studying abroad or overseas training, nor has even set foot outside of Japan, my English ability has only gotten worse with age.

Also, there's Japanese. Never mind modern Japanese...there's classical Japanese! Imperfective, conjunctive, plain, attributive, perfective, and imperative form. Yodan verb conjugation, the irregular conjugation of "ru" verbs, and the mnemonic for remembering it... Ah! I studied these! I studied them so much! It was the first thing in classical Japanese class that I was forced to remember while not understanding what was going on. But...it's disappeared from my mind, and I don't remember it at all!

"I-I'm sorry, Momota-kun. I was bragging a lot, but I can't tutor you at all..."

Of course, it wasn't like I'd forgotten everything like I had amnesia. I remembered and was able to solve simple problems. However, Momota-kun could solve those himself even if I couldn't teach them to him...and as a result, I discovered there wasn't a single thing that I *could* teach him.

Even if it were science or social studies, science and social studies for the first year in high school is just memorization, and it'd be more efficient to review by yourself than have someone teach it to you.

"I'm sorry for being such an unreliable adult... Who would have thought that I'd forgotten so much of my studies from school?"

"I-It's not a big deal. I mean, the last time you studied stuff from the first year of high school was ten years ago, Orihara-san."

"Y-Yes. That's right. It's been ten years. Ten years have passed since I've been in high school..."

“Come on, please don’t get depressed!”

I was delivered the killing blow by his kind follow-up. *Ten years, huh? It’s already been ten years since I was in high school.*

Ten years. That’s ample time for the knowledge acquired solely as a means to get into school to disappear from your mind. In this world, in every generation, there are always kids who say bratty things like “The things you learn in school won’t come in handy at all when you become an adult.” As a pretty bratty child myself, I thought, “That’s just an excuse that kids who can’t study make. They’re just trying to justify not studying,” but... No, you don’t use the things you studied in school. When you’ve become an adult, you really don’t use them at all, and since you don’t use them, you forget pretty much all of them.

Oh man... I wonder why, more than sadness or regret, I feel really lonely. At the time of my entrance exams, I studied so diligently, acquired so much knowledge, and thought I’d made it a part of my own flesh and blood, but...it seems that the creatures known as humans will gradually forget the knowledge they don’t use. They say that your muscles become weak when you don’t use them, but I suppose that’s probably the same for knowledge and memories. For some reason, completely and unconsciously forgetting the things I studied in school that had been such an important factor in my late teens felt so lonely.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this... Me tutoring you was supposed to go smoothly. I just wanted to be helpful to you, Momota-kun...”

“Orihara-san...”

“If this is how it was going to turn out, I should have prepared for my lesson instead of buying all this stuff for my teacher cosplay...”

“...You’re probably right.” His words were harsh. Honestly, there was a part of me that underestimated the situation. There was a part of me that thought that, since it was the final tests for the first year in high school and not something like entrance exams, it would be a piece of cake. The result of that was my current state of affairs, and I had no excuses.

“...I’m really so sorry Momota-kun. I called you all the way out here and couldn’t do anything for you. I’m sorry for being such a pathetic adult...”

“No, it’s fine! Please don’t apologize so much.”

“Instead, I’ll do my best to support you and make your studying pleasant!”

So, with that, while I wasn’t useful, I decided to do my best to create an environment where he could focus on his studies.

“Here you go. Drink as much as you want.” I thought that caffeine would be good for studying, so I made some coffee with my Dolce Gusto, Gucchan. By the way, Momota-kun likes his coffee black. He rather likes eating sweet food, but apparently he doesn’t like sweet drinks. I’ve come to gradually understand these kinds of tastes for Momota-kun. After all, I *am* his girlfriend!

“Thank you very much.”

“How’s the air conditioning? Is it too hot? Too cold?”

“It’s fine, just perfect.”

“Is there anything that you’d like me to do?”

“...There isn’t.”

“...Of course. Well, please do your best.” Momota-kun opened his textbook and notebook. He studied quietly while I stared at him without saying a word.

“Orihara-san, since you’re not doing anything, it’s all right if you play video games.”

“No, no, that would be, just...you know?”

Playing video games next to my boyfriend while he studies...that wouldn’t be okay. Although it is true I have nothing to do. Hmmm. There isn’t really anything to do. Even if I said I was going to do my best to make a pleasant study environment for him, there’s a limit to how much I can do. It’s like there isn’t much to do aside from leaving him alone...

The only things that could be heard throughout the room were the sound of the air conditioner and the sound of Momota-kun’s mechanical pencil as he wrote. I stared at the side of Momota-kun’s face as he studied earnestly and felt a desire to cause some mischief welling up inside me. Quietly, I extended my leg underneath the table. With the tip of my toe, I poked at his knee while he sat cross-legged. *Poke, poke.*

“Wha... Huh?” With a surprised look on his face, Momota-kun looked in my direction, and I looked to the side, feigning ignorance.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Huh? It’s nothing. My foot just grazed you a little.”

“...”

With a complicated expression on his face that was a mix of embarrassment and vexation, Momota-kun returned to his studies.

His face when he gets a little flustered is so cute.

Oh no. What should I do? Th-This is fun. This really feels like...something a couple would do! This is like where a girlfriend is pouting because her boyfriend won’t pay attention to her since he’s still doing work even after he’s come home. Well, what Momota-kun is doing is studying for his final exams, though...

Having become intoxicated by this couple’s mood, and while knowing what I was doing was wrong, I stretched out my leg again.

“Poke, poke.”

“H-Hey, Orihara-san.”

“What? What is it?”

“It’s your foot.”

“Huh? Are you sure it isn’t your imagination?”

“No, you said ‘poke’ just now...” He glared at me, but I kept playing dumb. Reluctantly, Momota-kun once again returned to his studies. Possessed by the magic of mischief, I once again stretched out my foot—but it was a trap. A large hand clutched my toe as if it had been lying in wait.

“Hyaa?!”

“Ha ha ha, I caught you Orihara-san. Honestly, doing something so childish.”

“Hyu... Wait, n-no, Momota-k... aha ha, ha ha ha!”

“Huh? Orihara-san?”

“I really can’t take being touched on the sole of my foot! I’m really s-sensitive

there! Pfft... Ha ha ha, I-let go of me...!"

Momota's fingers were touching right around the arch of my foot. I couldn't hold back laughing from the tickling sensation that was coming from the sole of my foot.

No more! I can't take it! I've been really ticklish since I was little!

"I'm so—" In a panic, Momota-kun started to let his hand go, but...he immediately stopped. Then, a completely out-of-character sadistic smile formed on his face.

"O-Oh, I wonder what I should do..."

"What?"

"Orihara-san, since you've been messing with me, I wonder if I should give you a little payback."

"W-Whaaat? N-Nooooo! I'm sorry, I apologize! F-Forgive—" I was in shock and terrified by this unexpected development. However, as expected of Momota-kun's kind nature, he didn't tickle the sole of my foot as I protested. He couldn't go full sadist, as he only made a tickling motion with his hand. However...

"Aha ha ha! N-No... I can't. I really can't take it!" Being as ticklish as I am, I couldn't take just having my foot held and the motion he made with his hand. Trying to somehow shake my foot free, I abruptly twisted my body. With that, my butt hit the table. Now, my table is the kind of size where if you laid down under it you couldn't turn over. No, by no means does this mean that my butt is too big. The size of the table is the problem. Definitely.

With great momentum, my butt pushed the table about five centimeters into the air. It immediately came down and with that shock— "Ah..." we both said, and in a magnificent display the coffee that had been on top of the table was overturned.



"Orihara-san, I'm sorry..."

"I'm sorry too..." After we finished cleaning up in a huge panic, we both

lowered our heads.

“Sorry, I totally got carried away... This is going to leave a stain on the rug, isn’t it?”

“No, don’t worry about it. It’s an old rug I bought a long time ago, and I was just thinking that I wanted to replace it. Besides, it’s my fault anyway... I’m sorry. It even got on your notebook...”

“I-It’s okay. A little bit got on the edge is all...” The two of us apologized over and over. The mood had been extinguished in an instant.

Oh man, I’ve done it now. Even though I called him here, I couldn’t teach him anything. Even though I decided I’d give him a pleasant study environment, I messed with him. And now this. I have a lot to be sorry for.

“Hey, Momota-kun, I think that today...it would be best for you to go home after all.”

“Huh...”

“I think you should go home so you can properly focus on your studying. If you’re here... I feel like I’ll just get in your way and you won’t be able to study, even though I was the one who called you out here. I’m really sorry.”

“Orihara-san...”

“And actually, it looks like next week I’m going to be busy at work. I have to finalize a new project, and I think that I’m going to have to do a lot of overtime...so next week, let’s keep phone calls to a minimum and have both of us focus on our own business.”

“...I understand.”

For a moment, Momota-kun looked hesitant, but ultimately he nodded. He got his textbook and notebooks together and prepared to go home.

Oh no, he’s leaving. He’s going to go home. Though I was the one to suggest that he do it, my heart felt like it was going to be crushed when he started to get ready to go. It seems ridiculous to get like this over just one week, but...in those two months since we started dating, talking every day became our normal. We used modern conveniences and constantly kept in contact with one

another to make up for our absences in each other's vastly different lifestyles. We didn't use Willcom cell phones or landlines, and we didn't have to worry about data plans; we used a social networking app on our cell phones to stay in constant contact over Wi-Fi.

Compared to how things were ten years ago, our relationship is truly fortunate. Maybe feeling so much pain at the prospect of just one week of limited communication is a harmful side effect of that.

I hate it. I'm so lonely. But I'm a good adult, so I have to endure— "...Um, Orihara-san."

I'd desperately bottled up my sadness and had gone to see him off at the entranceway when he turned around and looked at me. He had an embarrassed look on his face, but he had a slight determination in his eyes.

"C-Can I get a charge?"

"A charge?" *Like, a charge for your cell phone?* Right as I was going to say sure, he continued.

"I mean...like a charge of you..." he said with great difficulty.

"A-A charge of me?"

"Yes..."

"Huh? What? Sorry, I totally don't understand... Wh-What do you mean?"

"I mean...right here, right now, I want to get as much of a charge from you as I possibly can so I can focus on my studies from here on out... In other words," Momota-kun said with his face red and looking incredibly embarrassed, "M-May I hug you?"

I was slow on the uptake; it took me a few seconds to understand the meaning of his words. The moment I did, I thought my head was going to come to a boil.

"Whaaaat?! A-A hug?! By hug...you mean that kind of hug, right?"

"Yes, probably."

"Like, that thing...where you squeeze each other?"

“That’s right, yes.”

Wait. Wait a minute. A hug... No, I get that. I know what it’s called. I know that such an act exists. But hold up. I’m going to...do that? Right here? Right now?

“If you don’t want to it’s fine, though.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to! I don’t mind... I don’t mind, but I was surprised to be asked so suddenly...”

It’s not like I don’t want to. I mean... I actually want to do it. I want to hug him, and I want him to hug me. If I’m being honest, I’ve fantasized about it over and over in my mind. I’ve grinned to myself more than a few times while picturing Momota-kun holding me close and patting my head with those big hands of his. Who would have thought that my fantasy would become a reality so quickly?

“...W-We can,” I said, my voice sounding a little shrill. My heart was beating so much I couldn’t believe it. “Shall we hug?”

“I-Is it okay?”

“Y-Yes. Something like that is totally fine.” I felt like I’d panic if I lost my focus, but I desperately kept up appearances and played it cool. From here on, I wanted to take the lead so I could reward my boyfriend for having the courage to ask me to do this and, at the very least, display my maturity.

“W-Well, something like a hug is totally normal! We’re dating, so that much is normal, right?” I said.

“Th-That’s right! I hear that people overseas greet each other by hugging.”

“Exactly! Something like hugging is just a simple greeting! It’s not strange behavior at all!” We were unusually enthusiastic as we spoke to each other, and we immediately ran out of things to say. For a few seconds, we looked at each other without saying a word. It was as if this strange silence was keeping us in place while we didn’t know what to do.

“Um... Then, may I proceed?”

“...At your convenience.”

I was so tense I was speaking strangely formally. I desperately controlled my shaking hands and spread my arms right there on the spot. Moving awkwardly, Momota-kun spread his arms as well. With both of us spreading our arms, time froze. One second, two seconds, three seconds... We both gazed at each other in silence while we each looked like Kamen Rider waiting for his costume to change after he did his transformation pose. This mysterious interval continued for five seconds.

“...Wait, what even is this?!” I exclaimed with all my might. “Hey...Momota-kun! Why are you just standing there?! You’re not coming here?!”

“Huh?! I have to come to you?!”

“D-Do you mean you don’t?”

“With this type of situation, isn’t it standard for the woman to come flying into the man’s arms...?”

What? Which is it? Which is the correct answer? What should we do? Hugs are way harder than I thought they’d be.

“A-Anyway, Momota-kun. Today we’re both beginners, so...shall we try getting close to one another?”

“Th-That’s right. Let’s do that.”

Based on my suggestion, it was decided that we’d mutually close the distance between us. Slowly we edged towards each other. Like two kendo practitioners, we slid on our feet, little by little, and closed the gap.

What are we doing? What’s with this whole atmosphere like we’re two masters crossing swords? Are we going to fight to the death or something? Well, I guess this is a battle, in a sense.

Before long, there was zero distance between us.

“H-Here I go.”

“G-Go ahead.”

Slowly, with much fumbling about, we worked our hands around each other’s backs and finally embraced each other with a squeeze. It’s normal for lovers to do this. People overseas even do it with their friends. Lately, even idols do it

with fans. Hugging is a very wholesome act.

However, as we tried to get close, there was a squish as we felt two huge lumps getting in our way—or, to be precise, my boobs.

“...?!”

We quickly separated out of surprise—and not because the elasticity of my boobs bounced us back, of course. I think it was because we were surprised by the unexpected sensation. Momota-kun’s face was red, and mine was probably the same shade as I reflexively held my chest.

“I-I’m sorry!”

“I-It’s okay! It’s okay!”

“N-No... I didn’t mean to... I wasn’t trying to hug you because I was hoping for something like that.”

“I-I get. I get it...”

I understood that Momota-kun wasn’t trying to get fresh with me. However, who would have thought that this type of situation would happen? Hugs are supposed to be wholesome embraces and not vulgar at all.

To think hugs could become something as lewd as this!

“...I’m sorry. I’m sorry, it’s all my fault.”

“No... You didn’t do anything wrong, Orihara-san.”

“But, m-my breasts were—how should I say—really assertive, and didn’t read the room... They made the mood all weird.”

Really, just why are they so big? They make my shoulders hurt, during the summer they get all stuffy, when I wear a one-piece it makes me look fat, there’s not a lot of cute bras in my size, and a lot of stores don’t have my size to begin with... Sometimes people are jealous of me, but personally I’d be glad if they were a little smaller.

“To think it’d be so hard to hug each other...”

“I think the problem is more soft than it is hard, really,” Momota-kun said jokingly.

Now's not a good time to be clever, Momota-kun...

"A hug was probably too soon for us... It's a little too stimulating..." Momota-kun said, embarrassed. I also felt that the stimulation was a little too strong, and I could feel my face getting warm from how embarrassed I was. Still... I didn't like it. Since Momota-kun went through the trouble of saying that he wanted to hug, I didn't want it to end like this.

"M-Momota-kun!" I yelled as I took another Kamen Rider pose. "Let's hug one more time."

"What? B-But."

"I mean... I hate not being able to hug the person I love because my boobs are getting in the way."

"Orihara-san..."

"So, let's try it one more time. This time...even if I'm embarrassed, I'll endure it."

"...U-Understood," Momota-kun said, embarrassed. "I'll also do my best."

"Y-Yes. Let's do our best together."

We both spread our arms open and approached each other once again. Then, we embraced...and there was the same sensation as before. My large breasts squished against his chest.

"...?!"

I felt like I was going to explode with embarrassment, but...even still, I desperately endured it. I wrapped my hands around my boyfriend's back and cast off my hesitation as I held him tightly. Momota-kun also wrapped his large hands around me and hugged me tightly in return. *Geez. Oh my gosh, this is amazing...*

I felt his being with my whole body. It was summertime and we were both dressed lightly; separated by so little fabric, the feeling of our embrace wasn't that much different than if we were naked, so I felt his muscles and the frame of his body. We could completely feel each other's warmth and the beating of our hearts. The sound of our breathing was unbelievably close. *This...is a hug?*

It's great. Hugging someone you love is this amazing? Hugging makes your whole body this warm?

“A-Are you okay, Orihara-san?” Momota-kun’s voice came from above. Our difference in height made it so that Momota-kun’s face was right above my head when we hugged.



“I-I’m...probably not okay. I-I’m so embarrassed I could die...!”

“I’m pretty embarrassed too, but,” Momota-kun said and once again hugged me tightly, “I’m very happy.”

“...I am too.” I wrapped my hands further around his body and got closer. I wanted to make it so there wasn’t even a little bit of space between us. Even though we were supposed to be hugging each other, our difference in size made it seem like I was being wrapped up in Momota-kun’s body. I felt his warmth and the beat of his heart with my entire body, and it was so precious to me. Our bashfulness, our excitement, our nervousness—I felt like we were sharing all our emotions.

“...Momota-kun, you’re kind of stiff.”

“What?”

“You’re really stiff... It’s like you’re frozen solid.”

“No... Um, that’s... I’m s-sorry. I mean, I can’t help it... It’s my first time...”

“Yeah... It’s okay. I mean, I’m stiff too.”

“Wha?! Huh? You’re stiff too, Orihara-san?!”

“I-I’m nervous, so no matter what I do all my movements are stiff. It’s like I’m frozen solid and can’t hug right.”

“...Oh. You mean that kind of stiff.”

“What kind?”

“No, it’s n-nothing.”

Hmm? That’s strange.

I thought that we were able to share all of our emotions, but it totally felt like I was missing something there. It felt like I had touched upon a definitive difference between men and women that I could never understand. Also, totally unrelated, but...that entire time I’d been feeling something hard pressing against my stomach.

I wonder if it’s Momota-kun’s belt buckle? It’s a surprisingly big one.

We were both so stiff we couldn't move right or hug very well, but...little by little, as time passed, we gradually became accustomed to one another.

"You smell nice, Orihara-san," Momota-kun said suddenly, and I felt my face grow warm. I thought my embarrassment had calmed down, but it felt like it was going to explode out again.

"S-Sorry! Do I smell...?!" I reflexively tried to pull away, but I was stopped by Momota-kun's embrace.

"No! You don't smell bad at all! It's not that you smell bad... It's a good scent."

"I-Is that so...?"

"It's sweet and smells a little like citrus. It's a really good smell."

"S-Stop! D-Don't say that! I mean, don't smell me!"

Oh man, this sucks... If I knew something like this was going to happen, I would have used perfume. I mean, right now I have to smell bad! I'm already sweating because it's summertime, and since we started hugging, I've been sweating a ton from how tense and embarrassed I am... Still, he said I smell good... I really don't get him.

"Geez, you're horrible, Momota-kun... Sniffing a woman like that..."

"I-I'm sorry."

"As your punishment, you have to pat my head."

"...That's a punishment?"

"Yeah, sure, just do it!" I yelled to hide my embarrassment. Momota-kun hesitated slightly, but he placed his hand on my head. With his large, lean hand he gently stroked my head. His touch was awkward at first, but gradually his movements became smooth, and he even ran his fingers through my hair like he was combing it. Occasionally he'd touch the back of my neck with the tips of his fingers, and it tickled and felt nice... Somehow, I felt like I'd lose my mind from how happy I was.

"...I love you, Momota-kun." The words burst forth from my mouth as though my feelings were overflowing from my chest.

“I love you too.”

It was as if we couldn't control ourselves as we once again held each other tightly. It was the kind of intense embrace that made my breath stop. After about ten seconds, we let go of each other little by little. When our bodies were slightly apart, our eyes met once again.

The next moment, we kissed each other. Our lips met completely naturally. It felt like the kind of happy, passionate kiss that you'd see in the climax of a love story. However, in this casual everyday reality, it's okay if we kiss like this as much as we want, right?

Oh, for goodness' sake. Momota-kun is such a bad boy. Just what is he trying to do by making me fall so in love with him?

After we finished our very first hug and our first kiss in a while, we finally returned to our senses. We were enveloped in an intense feeling of embarrassment, and we couldn't look directly at one another.

Yeah... We became pretty excited even though we're just standing in the entranceway...

“Um... Momota-kun, did you get enough of a charge?”

“...Yes, I got more than enough.”

“I'm glad. Now you can do your best with your studies, right?”

“Yeah, but still...having to wait to see you after I've learned how this feels is pretty rough. If I could, starting tomorrow, I'd like to come here for a charge every day.”

“Geez, c-come on, Momota-kun. That'd just be counterproductive.”

“Ha ha.”

“Do your best on your final exams, okay? If you get a good score, I'll give you a reward,” I said casually without giving it much thought. The words kind of just popped into my head, and I figured it'd be nice if I could get Momota-kun to try even just a little bit harder. But then...

“A reward... R-Really?!” Momota-kun said. He was super hooked; unbelievably so.

“If I get a good grade, you’ll give me a reward, Orihara-san?!”

“U-Um...”

“You will, right?!”

“Y-Yes...probably.” Giving in to his intensity, I nodded my head and Momota-kun looked elated.

“Oh wow, I’m so happy!”

“Wait... Huh? B-But it’s no good if it’s just a little better than last time! It has to be a dramatic improvement...”

“I understand! I’ll work my butt off! All right, I’ll be going now!”

Momota-kun was in extremely high spirits as he left, and I was completely dumbfounded. I thought over what I’d just said and once again looked at what I was wearing.

“...”

I wonder if this is that thing? Did I unknowingly do that?

During the process of searching for a teacher’s outfit, whether I liked it or not, I caught sight of a lot of adult videos. Even though I wasn’t asking for it, I saw them...

Anyway, since I was a little bit curious, I kind of checked out their summaries and intros. It was then that I learned about that thing. One of the tried-and-true templates of those female teacher videos: the whole “If your grades go up, Onee-san is going to give you a naughty reward” thing.

Could it be that that’s what I did?!



I was in agony as time passed by. Momota-kun’s final exams ended, and on the day his results came out, Momota-kun came straight to my apartment. It was like he couldn’t wait as he showed me his report card in the entranceway.

“Please look at this, Orihara-san! I’m ranked number one in my grade!”

“Number one?! ”

He's ranked number one?! Even though he was ranked 120th for his midterms, now he's number one?! Isn't that kind of extreme?! The power of the reward was too strong, don't you think?!

"It's all thanks to you, Orihara-san. I worked my butt off for your reward."

"I-Is that right? Good for you. W-Well, for your reward, I'll use all my expertise to make you dinner! I'm already prepared, so—"

"...What are you talking about?"

The next moment, he pressed his hand against the wall of the hallway with a thud, right next to my face.

"My reward...is obviously going to be you, Orihara-san."

"...!"

As he looked down at me, his eyes were so serious it was scary, and I couldn't move at all.

"The truth is, you knew, didn't you, Orihara-san?"

"Th-That's—"

"Playing dumb even though you understand... That's so dirty. Or could it be that you were waiting for me to be forceful and come after you like this?"

"N-No. That's not...!" I tried to argue, but the words wouldn't come out. This commanding attitude wasn't like him at all. However, I was surprised how I didn't hate it.

"I'm at my limit. I can't wait another second!"

"W-Wait, Momota-kun! Th-This is the hallway! P-Please, let's at least go to the be—mmh?!"

My lips were forced closed as his tongue roughly entered my mouth. My sensitive areas were violated, and my whole body went a little numb. Before I knew it, his slender hand was inside my shirt groping around my stomach, and before long made its way to my breasts—



And that's the dream I had.

“...Wh-What kind of dream was that?!”

My self-disgust and embarrassment were just too much, so I was writhing around in pain on my bed.

Terrible. This is just terrible. Having such naughty dreams... I'm a pervert.

I was probably influenced by the fact that I hadn't been able to get my mind off that reward since yesterday. I'd never had a dream that obscene until now.

Man, that was dangerous. If I had woken up just a little bit later, we probably would have gone all the way. That was really dangerous. Really, why did I have to wake up when I did? I was already having the dream, so I might as well have kept experiencing—wait, no! That's not the issue here!

First of all, there's no way Momota-kun would be so rough and fierce. Momota-kun is kind, considerate, and always takes care of me... W-Well, there is a part of me that thinks it would be nice if Momota-kun were a little more forceful. Also, I surprisingly don't hate how in the dream he was so assertive when he—wait, no, no! That's not the issue here! The issue is the reward.

“...W-What should I do?”

Momota-kun is probably expecting...that kind of reward, right? There's no two ways about it; that has to be what he was so excited for. It looks like I can't get out of this situation with just my cooking.

I mean—it's not like I don't want it. Before, during our sleepover, I had already prepared myself emotionally and had more than enough contraceptives at the ready.

But when I thought about all that again, I felt like I was going to die from embarrassment.

“Oooh, what should I do, what should I do...”

We've already gone through kissing and hugging, so if we don't go beyond that, it won't be a reward, right? Oh, but...when I was researching those female teacher videos, I found out that this type of reward usually has steps. Going all the way happens at the very end, and before that...there would be scenes where the teacher shows off her underwear or breasts. In addition, she'd...um, use her

hand or mouth to...take the guy's stiff thing and—

Hmm? Wait a minute? Stiff... Could it be that when I was hugging Momota-kun, that's what that weird reaction was about?! Is that what he meant by "stiff"?! Huh... Th-Then, the thing that was pushing against my stomach at the time wasn't a belt buckle, but Momota-kun's—

"Ah, aaahhhhh..."

So, just like that, time passed by while I anguished excessively. On the day that the results of his final exams came out, Momota-kun came to my house after school. This time it was for real and not a dream. Naturally, I wasn't pushed against the wall in the hallway of my entranceway. We sat down facing each other just like always, and Momota-kun proudly showed me his exam results.

"Out of 318 people...you placed twenty-eighth. A-Amazing, Momota-kun. You've really improved your rank!"

Of course, it wasn't first place, but being in twenty-eighth place was amazing enough. He climbed to the top thirty ranks even though he was ranked 120th for his midterms; his improvement was almost unbelievable. This extraordinary improvement in his grades had to have been because...

"I worked my butt off the week before the test because...I really wanted that reward from you, Orihara-san."

"Ah... Oh, I see..."

So it is that, after all. This extraordinary improvement in his grades is because of the power of the reward. The adult classic of "If your grades go up, Onee-san is going to give you a naughty reward" is way too powerful.

"O-Orihara-san," Momota-kun said and sat up straight. His face looked a little nervous as he stared at me. I knew right away what he would say next and instinctively sat down on my heels.

"What is it?"

"I did pretty well, right?"

"Y-Yes. I think you did very well."

“Can I have a reward?”

“...Yes.” The moment I nodded, my whole body became warm and sweat gushed out.

I-It's okay. Relax. Just relax. I've already prepared myself. Also—I've prepared for all kinds of situations!

“Well, for my reward for working hard on my studies, I have a request that I want you to hear, Orihara-san...”

H-Here it comes! Calm down and relax. It's going to be fine! There's no problem. Right now, I'm wearing really sexy underwear. I still have the condoms left over from last time. And just in case, I bought some lubricant made with seaweed that's good for the body. With all that, I should be ready for any request!

“Orihara-san.”

“Y-Yes.” I felt like my head was going to burst from how tense and embarrassed I was.

“Won't you go camping with me?”

“...”

Huh? Like, doing it outside? He's asking for some pretty hardcore stuff all of a sudden. This kid is a serious pervert.

My brain was completely in that kind of kinky mindset, so for a second that's what I thought he meant; it turns out that wasn't the case.

ura



URANO IZUMI

Height: 158 cm
Birthday: March 17th
Blood Type: AB

Favorite Food:
Junk Food
(Absolutely won't eat it
with his bare hands)

Dislikes:

Outgoing people. Extroverts. Beauty salons. The dentist. Shots. Direct sunlight. Changes in temperature. Dryness. Pollen. Dust. High places. Dark places. Tight spaces. Women. Teachers. School events. Classrooms. Peer pressure. People who confuse bullying with just playing around. Needlessly big guys (with the exception of Momo). Good-looking, sociable guys (with the exception of Kana). People who use "being young" as an excuse for being stupid and immature. Using "everyone" as a category. Self-proclaimed allies of justice who mistakenly think they can do anything as long as they're right. Societies that prioritize making everyone happy so much that they ignore the minority. On the other hand, being overly protective of the minority also seems wrong. Anyway, society sucks. I wish the entire human race would perish. But honestly, I hate myself for being like that. There's a difference between enjoying being alone and being alone. I'm lonely. Shiitake mushrooms.

≡ Chapter 2

The Princess Goes Camping

It was the day before the unhelpful study session that was held at Orihara-san's apartment a week before final exams.

"Momota, Urano! Please go camping with us!"

"Let's go. It's fun."

As usual, Ura, Kana, and I were having lunch in an empty classroom when Ibusuki and Uomi came along. Ibusuki brought her hands together and lowered her head while Uomi had a serious expression and spoke in a monotone. Their sudden request left Ura and me with puzzled looks on our faces. Apparently, Kana knew about the situation beforehand and began to explain it to us.

"Uta-chan and Saki-chan got together with their friends and planned to go camping during summer vacation. It was going to be with eight people, and I planned on going too."

It was going to be four guys and four girls. The girls were going to be Ibusuki, Uomi, and two others from their group of friends. The boys were going to be Kana, two guys Kana gathered from our grade, and a guy who was in college. Apparently the college guy was the boyfriend of a girl from Ibusuki and Uomi's group.

"We had a cabin reserved and a lot of plans were made, but one of our couples broke up the other day," Kana said reluctantly.

Well, that type of thing does happen, I suppose.

"Our friend who broke up—whose name is Rin, by the way—it was her boyfriend who took the initiative and did the planning. So being told at the last minute that they're breaking up just makes it a hassle for us... I didn't think they'd last that long, to be fair. Rin was all like 'Anyone's fine as long as they have a car' when they started dating, after all," Ibusuki said.

"...Bah, just what I'd expect from loose, empty-headed party girls. They start dating right away and break up just as quickly. They probably only think of their lovers as fashion accessories."

“Urano, that’s going too far.”

“Wh-What? I’m not wrong!” As Ibusuki glared at him, Ura was paralyzed with fear.

Well, what he’s saying probably isn’t wrong, but in this world there’s things you should and shouldn’t say.

Kana then continued his explanation. “So, Rin-chan and her boyfriend aren’t coming. And when the adult boyfriend of the other girl, Mai-chan, found out that she’s going camping they got in a huge fight. It looks like she lied to him and said that it was a ‘girls-only’ camping trip.”

Yeesh, that type of thing seems really common...

“Then the two guys I invited said that they wouldn’t go if Mai-chan wasn’t going to come. The two of them were aiming for her, you see. At school, Mai-chan hid the fact she has a boyfriend because she’s been enjoying having the boys in her class chase after her.”

“...Are all of your friends skanks?” Ura asked Ibusuki.

“Sh-Shut up! They’re both good girls! It’s just...when it comes to boys, they’re a little careless.” Under Ura’s scornful gaze, it was gradually getting harder for Ibusuki to defend her friends.

“Well, anyway, with myself included, it was going to be an eight-person sleepover with boys and girls, but due to many unavoidable circumstances, the only ones left are Uta-chan, Saki-chan, and myself.”

“Even if we canceled now, it seems we’d still owe the campsite half the reservation fee. When we tried to gather the money to pay for that, Rin said she doesn’t want to speak to her boyfriend and won’t get in touch with him for us, and the two guys really looked like they didn’t want to have anything to do with it... So, in that case, we figured we’d just go on the trip and search for some other people to come along,” Ibusuki explained.

“Let’s go. It’ll be fun,” Uomi said.

Once again, Kana, Ibusuki, and Uomi were asking us to come. I folded my arms and thought about it.

“I pretty much understand the situation... But Ibusuki, even if Ura and I go, won't that just make five people?”

“Oh, that's no problem because the cabin we reserved is for six people. There are only six beds, but if people slept in sleeping bags you could fit in two or three more people no problem. We could still go with just three people, it'd just be...kind of lonely.”

“When camping, it does help to have male labor,” Kana added, and Ibusuki brought her hands together one more time.

“Come on, you'll go, right? I've really been looking forward to this. I was going to use it as motivation to get through final exams...but if it's canceled then I won't be motivated to study at all.”

Hmm... I never thought someone like me would go camping, but it does seem kind of fun. If some college student I didn't know was going to come, I'd kind of be on guard, but if it's all people I know it seems like it might be a little, no, a lot of fun.

I was positively considering this sudden invitation, but Ura started picking holes in everything as expected.

“Bah, what's so good about camping? That's just dumb. Why would you go all the way into the mountains for fun in the middle of this godforsaken heat?”

“What's so wrong with that? Being in the middle of nature while you have a good time eating and staying in a cabin with your friends is fun,” Ibusuki said.

“Staying in the cabin makes the whole nature thing pointless. It's just like a hotel. If you want to talk about nature, then do some solo camping. How exactly is having everything prepared for you by the campsite ‘camping’?”

“Having everything prepared for you is good because it's easy. They even lend you a barbecue set. Isn't that great?”

“Ha. And now here comes the barbecue talk. What a barbaric, evil, ridiculous custom... It's a bizarre event where an amateur goes out of their way to make something that'd definitely taste better at a restaurant taste bad. Also, you're just going to burn it. You're going to get distracted while talking to everyone and char it black right? It's rude to the meat and vegetables.” Ura was speaking

ill of everything like he was showing off.

Gradually, Ibusuki's irritation started to show on her face.

"...Oh, is that right? Well, that's fine. Don't come," she said like she was casting Ura to the side. Just then, Ura had a face like an abandoned puppy.

"Huh?"

"If you hate it so much, I won't invite you. You don't seem like you'd have fun even if you went with us. In that case, since Ura isn't coming... Hey, what about you, Momota?"

"W-Wait! No one said I wouldn't go!"

"What? You want to go?"

"I-I-It's not like I want to go, but... If you all insist on begging me to go, it's not like I'm totally against doing it for you..."

"Oh, I get it. Basically, you just want to be in a position where you can say you went because we begged you." Ibusuki was absolutely ruthless as she gutted Ura with her casual remark.

Those are probably some of the most taboo words on the planet.

With the nail hit on the head, Ura was left speechless. His face turned bright red and he started to shake.

"Seriously... You always start with being negative. Do you think that if you do that it puts you above who you're talking to? Even if you do that kind of thing, it's not like anyone thinks you're smart, you know? They just think you're being annoying."

Oh no...she's right.

Her cutting, sound arguments came like a rush of punches, one after another.

Ibusuki... Why was she drilling so precisely into his antisocial weak points? It was really scary how she didn't seem to realize it herself. The fact she didn't realize it made her merciless, and Ura looked like he could die from shame at any second. For an antisocial person who thinks that they're smart, there's nothing as shameful as another person seeing through you.

“I-Ibusuki, stop it,” I said, finally raising my voice against this excessively cruel treatment. “Think of Ura’s feelings too. It’s not like he meant any harm by it. It’s just that he has a seriously warped disposition and his self-consciousness is monstrously bloated. It goes without saying that he actually wants to go. Even though he pretends to be a loner, the truth is he hates being left out and in the end is just lonely. Since he worries about people not being interested in him, he’ll turn down invitations at first. Being in a position where he’s asked after he’s refused is a form of self-defense for him, in so many words... It’s his secret to protecting his delicate heart and petty pride. So, if we pretend not to realize that and assume a submissive attitude towards him, he’s actually a cute little guy who will easily come along—”

“...Momo, you’ve killed him,” Kana pointed out and I was brought back to my senses.

Oh no, I’ve done it now. I was trying too hard to defend Ura and let slip my “Do’s and Don’ts of Dealing with Urano Izumi.”

By the time I realized it, Ura had disappeared from my view. I looked around and found him sitting in the corner of the classroom while holding his knees and facing the wall. As I approached him, I could hear his resentful complaints leaking from the gaps in his arms as he covered his head.

“Die... Everyone just die... Let the world be destroyed... What did I...what did I do? Why do humans have to live if it means feeling this way... Ugh...” Ura said while on the verge of tears.

“Oh, um... Ura. Are you going to go camping with us?”

“...Yeah,” he answered.

“Okay,” I said and nodded. I patted him on the shoulder and then returned to where everyone was.

“He says he’ll go.”

“Geez, he should have just been honest and said so from the beginning,” Ibusuki said, sounding over it.

“Also, I’m going too.”

“Nice. Momo and Ura coming along makes me glad. Yay,” Kana said.

“Yay,” Uomi echoed Kana. Kana smiled and Uomi’s face looked serious as they both high-fived.

“So, this makes five people... Now who else should we invite?”

“Ibusuki, do we really need six people?”

“No, even five people is fine, but...the campsite rules are kind of like ‘If everyone is a minor, then...’”

“Oh, I see. Originally you guys were going to have a college student with you after all.”

“That’s right, Rin’s boyfriend—I mean, ex-boyfriend. Plus, the plan was that he was going to drive us there. It isn’t like we couldn’t take the bus to go there, but if we bring a lot of luggage with us it’ll be tough...”

Ibusuki then faced Kana. “Kanao, your older sister can’t help us after all?”

“Yeah... I thought about asking her, but right now she seems busy with a lot of stuff.”

“I see... Hmm, what should we do?” Ibusuki and Kana slipped into deep thought.

“Hey, Momota-kun. Is it okay to just decide that you’re going?” Uomi asked.

“Huh. What’s wrong with it?”

“You don’t have to get permission from your girlfriend?”

“Permission?”

“After all, this is going to a sleepover with girls.”

“Oh. I-I see.”

Come to think of it...that might be a little bit of a problem.

It’s a sleepover, but we’re all classmates. As for the girls, Uomi is Kana’s girlfriend, and Ibusuki is... Well, she had clearly become my friend due to what happened last month, so I haven’t really been looking at her as a member of the opposite sex. However, that didn’t change the fact that it would be a sleepover

with girls who weren't my girlfriend. Considering how Ibusuki's friend Mai is having a huge fight with her boyfriend after he found out that it was going to be a sleepover camping trip with guys, it would probably be best to get confirmation beforehand.

"It'd probably be bad if I selfishly made the decision. It'd be even better if she came along—"

"Sigh... I wonder if there's someone over twenty who can drive a car and would go camping with us—"

"For balance, it'd be nice to have another girl. But we're not going to find someone so conveniently—"

At that moment, we all went "Ah!" as Ibusuki, Kana, and I had the same idea flash into our minds.



Two weeks later, final exams were over, and we students had begun our summer vacation. It was early morning on the first Sunday of summer vacation, and I was sitting in the passenger seat while Orihara-san drove.

"Orihara-san, seriously, thank you."

"No, it's no problem. Actually, thank *you* for inviting me." Far from trying to make me feel indebted to her, she spoke very humbly. "Is it really okay for me to take part in something this fun? I mean...won't it bring the mood down if an older person is there?"

"No, not at all! Everyone is really grateful. It would have been a problem if we didn't have an adult with us, so we were really in a bind. Besides, you went out of your way to bring such a big car along."

The car we were riding in wasn't Orihara-san's beloved Cu-chan, but a minivan that could fit seven people. Apparently she brought it from her parents' house for us.

"Was it okay for you to take this car?"

"Yeah, it wasn't a problem. In fact, they were happy about it. When I said, 'I'm going on a trip with my coworkers, so lend me the car,' my mom and my dad

got really emotional and said, 'To think, you'd spend your day off like a normal person!' and even prepared some meat and vegetables for the trip... I'm a twenty-seven-year-old adult, but who knows how my parents see me?" Orihara-san said, becoming depressed.

To be honest, I knew how they saw her, but I decided to read the room and not say anything.

"But Momota-kun, are you really okay with this as your reward?"

"It's more than enough."

When I brought up the camping trip, I thought that I was making a pretty unreasonable request, but it was almost anti-climactic how readily Orihara-san agreed. I mean, you know. Depending on the person, going on a camping trip with your boyfriend's group of friends can be pretty tough. All around you are people you don't know, and on top of that, all of my friends are high schoolers who are twelve years younger than her. Orihara-san was being completely thrown into the position of the away team. That's why no matter how much of a reward it was, I had no intention of forcibly inviting Orihara-san along. However, her reaction was surprisingly enthusiastic, so I was really glad I'd invited her.

"You're coming along on a camping trip with my friends and you're even driving us there. It couldn't be more perfect. I'm so grateful."

"Ah... Um, that's not what I meant," Orihara-san said evasively.

As she looked forward, her face turned a little red. Then, after taking a short pause, she continued, "I-I was really nervous that you were going to ask for something more explicit as your reward, you know," she said, sounding like she was pouting a little.

"Huh? Wh-What do you mean by 'explicit'?"

"You know, like...s-something more explicit than a hug..." Orihara-san said as her voice became smaller and tapered off at the end. Though I was slow on the uptake, I understood what she was saying so shyly, and I was taken aback by the shock.

What?! So, the reward... was that kind of reward?! It was that whole "If your

grades go up, Onee-san is going to give you a naughty reward” type of reward?!

“Eh, ah, eh, um... It was okay if I asked for that kind of reward?”

“Huh?! Eh, ah... W-Well, it probably would have been possible. I thought that it would be that kind of reward, so I’d prepared myself...”

“Prepared...”

“B-But now it’s off the table! The deadline has passed! What a shame.”
Orihara-san spoke quickly as I became wrapped in endless despair.

*Are you serious? It was possible? I could have asked for an explicit reward?
Damn it, what am I doing?*

At the time, all I thought about was the camping trip. Even on the day we studied together, I was thinking about how I was going to bring it up to Orihara-san. However, I couldn’t figure out the right time to ask her. When she said she’d give me a reward if I worked hard on my studies, I totally thought that that was my chance...

Geez, I messed up. I blew a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If a reward “more explicit than a hug” was okay...just how far could I have gone?!

“D-Don’t get so depressed,” Orihara-san called out to me as if she noticed how I was sinking in a swamp made of my own deep regrets. “I mean, even if it’s not for a reward, I...”

“Huh?”

“N-Nothing, never mind. Um, hey, we’re about to arrive, so get in touch with everyone!”

I felt like I’d been told something really interesting, but we were about to arrive at the meeting spot, a convenience store close to the school. I had to switch gears, even if it was by force. After all, it’s not like we could be all flirty in front of everyone.



If I’m being honest, I had to really muster up my courage to come on this camping trip. I didn’t want to trouble Momota-kun, so when we were talking about it, I agreed without hesitation and acted like I was really enthusiastic the

entire time. However, on the inside, I was really conflicted.

Of course, I was looking forward to the trip. *Going on a camping trip with my boyfriend's friends? That's awesome! It seems like such a fun, normie type of thing to do.*

Fundamentally, I'm an indoors type of person, but it's not like I hate outdoor events. Whenever I'm invited, I go. It's just...I don't really get invited. Also, I don't have a lot of friends.

All that said, just as much as I was looking forward to it, I was nervous about it. Aside from me, everyone was a high school student and born in the twenty-first century. I was totally their adult chaperone.

This will be a page in their book of memories, and they can only experience it when they're teenagers... Is it really okay if an adult close to her thirties is written on that same page?

"Camping, huh... It looks like you have another difficult situation on your hands." Like always, I called Yuki-chan in advance and was given surefire tips for what to do in this type of situation. Were you to publish them in a book, it would be titled *How to Seem Like a Good Girlfriend When Hanging Out with Your Boyfriend's Friends*.

"Well, what I'm about to tell you isn't so special that it's gonna land me any book deals. Ultimately, when you're mingling with your boyfriend's group, remaining still is basically your best option. Don't do anything unnecessary and behave yourself. You'll just stick out like a sore thumb if you try to awkwardly stand out."

"Hmm."

"In terms of what you should do while you're there, what's most important is that you do whatever seems fun to you. Having said that, there's definitely going to be times where it's not fun. For example, your boyfriend might get so into hanging out with his friends that he forgets about you, or maybe everyone will start having fun talking about something you don't know about. There's a high possibility that there will be times where you're stressed out. It's most important that at those times you don't pout and get in a bad mood. For events like this, the worst thing that can happen is someone's partner they brought

along ruining the mood.”

“Oh.” *I see, that’s Yuki-chan for you. As usual, her advice is realistic and logical.*

I was admiring her...briefly, before she continued.

“However, this case is so different from the norm that I don’t know how valid my theory is. Don’t you think that it’s a little unusual for the twenty-seven-year-old girlfriend of a high schooler to come along on a sleepover camping trip with four of his high school friends? This type of weird situation is more than I know what to do with,” she added unhelpfully.

“N-No...”

“Maybe you should be saying stuff like ‘for realz’?”

“Oh, Yuki-chan. Momota-kun told me that high school kids don’t say things like ‘for realz’ anymore.”

“...For real?”

“...Yes, for realz.”

Thus my consultation with Yuki-chan ended without me receiving any definitive guidance.

If this type of situation perplexes Yuki-chan, just what is an amateur in romance like me supposed to do?

“Seriously, thank you so much, Orihara-san. I’m incredibly grateful to you for driving us there. I’m really glad that Momo has an adult girlfriend,” Kana-kun said to me with a beaming smile as he sat in the van’s second row.

A little earlier, we had arrived in the convenience store’s parking lot where everyone was already assembled. After briefly exchanging greetings, everyone got into the back seats of the minivan. I slowly pulled the car out, and we headed towards the campsite.

“Was everything okay with your job?”

“Yes. Work had just calmed down, and I’d been thinking about when I wanted to use my paid vacation.”

“Ah, that’s good then. I’d have been really sorry if we’d forced you to take off work for our sake. Well, let’s enjoy today and tomorrow and make lots of fun memories.”

Kana-kun was very sociable and very courteous as he spoke to me. *Amazing. He’s so... positive. I can feel this really warm energy from him.*

When we’d first met up, everyone else was a little nervous about meeting an adult nearly in her thirties, but he took the initiative and said, “First, shall we introduce ourselves?” to break the ice. Since then, he’d constantly been sure to keep me involved in the conversation. He had a really sunny type of disposition.

I heard from Momota-kun that he’s a great conversationalist, but who’d have thought that he’s this good?

“Momo always talks about you, so I’d been thinking that I’d like to meet you one day. I’m really happy that we’re getting to go camping together like this.”

“I-I’m also glad that we were able to meet each other. Momota-kun tells me a lot about you and Ura-kun. Um... It’s nice to meet you too, Ura-kun.” I felt bad for having these kids initiate all the conversations for me, so I tried doing it myself. However...

“Eh... Ah, y-yes... Nice to meet you...” Ura-kun was sitting in the third row of seats, and his response was pretty stiff. I felt an emotional barrier between us. Even when we first met, he wouldn’t make eye contact with me. He was just like a little kid who gets really nervous when meeting an adult for the first time.

Hmm. He’s got introvert energy. I could feel a wave of it coming from him.

Well, I’m pretty introverted myself, so I could understand how he was feeling. When I was in my teens, I’d be tense the entire time I was in front of an adult of the opposite sex. It would have been absolutely impossible for me to be social with them.

Sitting next to him was Ibusuki Saki-chan. She had bright hair and a bright personality, and we had met each other once before at the aquarium. She spoke to Ura-kun as she looked out the window and up at the sky.

“Hey, hey, look, Urano. It’s so nice outside. Don’t you think that today is going to be perfect weather for camping?”

“...Bah. Don’t be so giddy about all this.”

Oh, he’s suddenly got a bad mouth on him. So, this is what he’s like with classmates he’s friendly with.

Momota-kun had told me earlier that “He’s got a foul mouth, but he’s really wimpy,” and that image just clicked with me.

“What’s wrong with being giddy? You’re giddy too, aren’t you? Even though all you’re doing is complaining, you brought along all that luggage. You’re totally looking forward to this!”

“I-I’m just bringing the bare essentials for surviving in the mountains! And what’s the deal with *you guys* being so lightly equipped? You’re not taking the mountain seriously? If things get tough, I’m not going to share my emergency food with you!”

“What are you even talking about? We’re just going to spend the night in a cabin.”

“There’s a chance that a blizzard could happen, and we could get stuck in the cabin in the middle of the mountains!”

“It’s summer right now.”

“Th-There could be a typhoon.”

He really did seem to be wimpy and a bit of a worrier.

“Ura is usually fully equipped when he goes outside,” Momota-kun added from the passenger’s seat as he laughed cheerfully.

Now, this is a nice atmosphere. I’m going camping with teenagers born around the turn of the millennium, but it looks like things will go better than I thought. They’re all polite, good kids, plus Momota-kun seems like he’s having fun.

However, a certain someone had me a little concerned.

“ ... ”

Uomi Uta-san was sitting in the second row and had been silent the entire time. Whenever I glanced at her in the rear-view mirror, I would see her gazing

out the window expressionlessly. She appeared indifferent when we'd first introduced ourselves, and I couldn't really figure out her personality. All I had to go off of from Momota-kun was "I don't really understand that girl."

"What's wrong, Uta? You've been quiet for a while. Are you car sick?" Ibusuki-san asked.

"No, I'm fine. But are you okay, Saki?"

"Huh? Okay about what?"

"I mean," Uomi-san said in a very indifferent tone, "Saki, until just recently you were in love with Momota-kun. And even though you just confessed to him and got rejected, you're going on a trip with his girlfriend. Isn't that awkward?"

The inside of the car was instantly wrapped in an extremely uncomfortable atmosphere. The painful silence was like time itself had frozen—however, since it actually hadn't frozen, I had to keep driving.

The first one to speak after everyone was at a loss for words was Kana-kun. "...U-Um, Uta-chan... I think that might have been something you shouldn't have said."

"Wasn't it on your mind too, Haruka-kun?"

"...If I said it wasn't, I'd be lying. Honestly, I think it's on the minds of everyone here. However, we got all the way here without bringing it up, didn't we? It was like an unspoken agreement."

"Even I understood that. It kind of felt like the type of mood where I shouldn't say anything about it. But..."

"But?"

"I was curious about what would happen if I did say something."

"You totally did it out of spite!" Momota-kun interjected in a loud voice. He probably couldn't take it. I felt like if I weren't driving, I might have turned around and done the same.

"I-I'm... I'm a-already over Momota-kun!" Ibusuki-san said in a panicked, shrill voice. She was probably the most embarrassed person in the car. "M-Momota, make no mistake! I totally don't like you at all anymore!"

“O-Okay.”

“And Orihara-san... I mean, um, please don’t worry! I really do only think of Momota as a friend now! I’m not thinking of stealing him from you at all!”

“I g-get it! I totally get it, okay?”

“So, please don’t worry about me! You guys don’t have to hold back on flirting with each other on this camping trip!”

“F-Flirting...?”

“Hey, Urano! Stop trying to put on your headphones! Don’t run away from this!”

“Wh-What do you mean by run away! This has nothing to do with me, so don’t get me involved in this whole weird conversation!”

“Help me! Say something to dramatically change the mood!”

“You’re asking for the impossible!”

The inside of the car was pandemonium all thanks to this girl who intentionally stepped on a land mine that everyone else noticed but decided to leave alone. The girl who was the root of all this evil sat there completely unconcerned and detached from the whole thing while her boyfriend, Kana-kun, glared at her reproachfully.

“...Uta-chan.”

“I don’t feel sorry. I don’t regret it.”

“No remorse, huh...”

“I see, mentioning what happened last month makes everyone this uncomfortable? In that case, I probably shouldn’t have said anything.”

“...Yeah, that’s true.”

“However, this may have been for the best. I think that if everyone was just going to pretend that it wasn’t awkward and act like they were getting along, then it would be best for everyone’s sake to get it out in the open and release all the awkwardness in one go.”

“...I think you have a point, but that’s something for those involved to decide

to do for themselves, not for you to do for them.” It appeared that this situation was even more than her boyfriend could handle.

I remembered what Momota-kun had said to me before. *“...I don’t really understand that girl. It’s like I can’t even describe her. Just when you think she’s quiet and docile, she throws you a dirty curveball.”*

When he’d told me that, I didn’t really get what he meant, but now I understood the meaning of those words with not only my mind but also my soul.

I can’t really read Uomi Uta-san.



We took the exit off the national highway and got onto a small local road that took us up a winding mountain path. We arrived at the campsite in less than an hour.

When we got out of the car, Ibusuki had stars in her eyes as she shouted, “Wow! Amazing! It’s totally the mountains!”

Everyone else was impressed with the mountain view as well. It was fresh green scenery as far as the eye could see. Even though the sunlight was a little strong, it didn’t feel that hot thanks to a pleasant wind. I took a deep breath, and somehow the air seemed really clean.

Yeah, the mountains sure are great.

More than anything...it was good that the mood from before had been completely reset.

“Orihara-san, thank you for driving us here. Are you tired?” I got close and spoke to her as she got out of the driver’s seat and stretched. She drove a big car she wasn’t used to on a winding mountain road; I think it was a big burden for her.

“Yes, thank you. But I’m all right...even though it kind of got really awkward during the drive.”

“Yeah...”

“Still, I’m a little relieved.” Orihara-san lowered her voice so only I could hear.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t concerned about Ibusuki-san.”

“...”

“Oh, of course, it’s not like I don’t trust you and Ibusuki-san. I understand that what happened already ended... But there was a part of me that was still worried about it.”

The thing is, I felt the same way, and I think Ibusuki and the others did too. That’s why nobody had talked about what happened last month between Ibusuki and I up until now. Everyone was just trying to remain complacent and not say anything about the situation.

“Honestly, I didn’t know how best to interact with Ibusuki-san, but...I don’t care anymore. Now I feel like I can just be normal and talk to her,” Orihara-san said and gave me a relaxed and gentle smile.

“Orihara-san, is it okay if I open up the trunk?” Ibusuki said from behind the car.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ll open it for you right now.”

“Thank you!”

Orihara-san ran to open the door of the trunk and looked like she was really able to casually talk to Ibusuki just like she’d said. Ibusuki also looked like she wasn’t holding back anymore and could converse with Orihara-san naturally.

As I looked at the two of them, it felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders as well. Things moving in the right direction like this may have been a result of Uomi dropping that bombshell.

Perhaps this was all according to her plan. Or maybe she did it by accident.
Hmm. Who knows?

“Okay everyone, we’re going to have to walk a little, so come along with me,” Kana said after we unloaded the luggage from the car. He had come here camping with another group of friends before, so he had the map to the campsite memorized as the six of us walked along a gravel path.

“Orihara-san, I’ll carry your luggage for you.”

“Thank you.”

“Uta-chan.”

“Sure, thanks.”

Kana and I offered to carry our girlfriends’ luggage, and it seemed like Ibusuki was willing to go with this flow as well.

“Urano.”

“...Yeah?”

“If you say please...I’ll hold some of your luggage for you.”

“...I don’t...need your...help...” Ura was gasping for air as he carried a huge rucksack fit for a hardcore mountain climber on his back, and he had a wheeled suitcase to boot. He looked like he was about to be crushed by the weight of it all. His luggage was clearly way too heavy for someone as small and weak as him, but to make matters worse, the gravel path forced him to carry his suitcase in his hands. He looked exhausted.

“Momota-kun, I’m fine, so please help Ura with his luggage.”

“...That seems like the best thing to do,” I said as I gave Orihara-san back her luggage and grabbed Ura’s suitcase.

“Bah. Thank you.”

You’re actually thanking me? In this type of situation don’t you normally say, “I’m not going to say thank you”? Well, he must have really been tired.

Our walking pace sped up after I succeeded in lightening Ura’s load. We stopped at reception on the way, got our key, and then headed for the area where the cabins were.

The campsite was the type of mellow place where elementary schoolers came for nature field trips. It was located at the base of the mountain and was even connected to mountain trails. Close by there was an adventure park and hot spring facilities. Along with the cabins, there were areas where you could sleep in tents you brought along, and I could see some customers headed in that direction.

“You said you’ve come here before, right, Orihara-san?”

“I came here for class in elementary school a long time ago. We all made and ate imoni together.”

“Oh, we did an imoni party too when we were in elementary school. It wasn’t here though.”

“Hey, Momota-kun. Did you know that making imoni at school events and festivals and having imoni parties is something done only in Tohoku?”

“Really?! Imoni parties aren’t a nationwide event?!”

“I was really surprised to learn about it when I became an adult. Also, it’s not just that imoni parties don’t exist, a lot of people don’t know about imoni the food to begin with.”

“No way... Just what do people who aren’t from Tohoku make at events if they don’t make imoni? There’s nothing else you can cook a lot of that’s that cheap and easy to make, right?”

“I don’t know... I wonder if they make curry?” We continued to walk as I learned this shocking new fact, and we finally arrived at the cabin where we would be staying the night. It was the innermost cabin out of six, a wood cabin whose name was apparently “Acorn House.”

“Wow! Amazing! It’s totally a cabin!”

“Is that the only reaction you have?” Ura retorted when Ibusuki echoed the exact same reaction she had when she saw the mountains.

The cabin was a two-story house, and the grain on its outside walls gave off a nice ambience. Unpainted wood pillars lined the inner walls, and when I went inside, the smell of wood tickled my nose. There was a two-story atrium and a fan spinning on the ceiling.

“Oh wow, this is so awesome. It’s so nice! I’m getting so excited.”

“Yeah, this cabin is nice after all.” While Ibusuki was getting excited about her first cabin, Kana spoke like someone who was used to this type of thing.

“...Bah. Air conditioning, a fridge, a microwave, running water, a kitchen, a toilet with a washlet... Wow, there’s even a bathtub. This really is just a hotel,” Ura said.

“It’s fine having all these conveniences, right?” I said.

“This cabin’s wood smell is suspicious. It’s probably just a fragrance they used.”

“...Don’t be such a buzzkill,” I said, lightly jabbing at Ura’s complaints.

The inside of the cabin was abundant with warmth from the wood, yet it was full of appliances the modern person couldn’t do without. It was the type of environment that was a far cry from the middle of nature. However, for a group like us who only wanted to do something *resembling* camping, an environment as convenient as this was exactly right. After putting down my luggage I headed outside.

“Hey, Uta, come in a little closer.” Ibusuki and Uomi were taking a selfie together with the cabin in the background. After that they took a lot of pictures of things like the mountain scenery and log stools and uploaded them to their social networks. Incidentally, Uomi’s face is dead serious even when she takes pictures.

“Hmm? What is it? Do you want to take a picture together too, Momota?” Ibusuki asked.

“I’ll pass.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry. I won’t post pictures of you and Orihara-san on Instagram. I understand that much. I’m only writing ‘I went camping with my friends’ on Instagram.”

“I’d be grateful if you could be so kind.”

“Still, it’s amazing that you’re dating an adult woman, Momota-kun,” Uomi said. “I was really surprised when I heard about it.”

“Really? You don’t show your emotions, Uomi, so I didn’t really know.”

“That’s not true. I smile as well.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Just like this,” Uomi said as she smiled. It was the type of clear smile that an angel would make.

“...And now you’re actually smiling?!” I exclaimed unintentionally. Uomi soon stopped smiling and returned to her usual indifferent, expressionless face.

“Of course I smile. I’m a human being.”

“That’s not the problem, it’s just, is it really okay for someone of your character archetype to just smile at me? It’s hard for me to swallow...”

Aren’t these types of girls great because when they smile, they smile at critical moments? Don’t their smiles get value from the fact that they don’t smile a lot? Don’t sell your smiles so cheaply! Just why am I being shown Uomi’s smile at such a pointless time as this?!

“Since you’re dating an adult, does that mean you have a preference for older women, Momota-kun?” Uomi ignored how I was caught up in gloominess and calmly got the conversation back on track.

“...It’s not like that at all.”

“Then it’s boobs. You like big boobs, Momota-kun.”

“H-Hey... A girl shouldn’t say things like that.”

“No wonder you were unfazed by Saki’s boobs. If you’re normally looking at something as big as Olympus Mons, then something as big as Mt. Fuji is as flat as the ground to you, huh?”

“Hey, Uta! Wh-Who are you calling Mt. Fuji?!” Ibusuki said with a red face.

Olympus Mons... She’s talking about that volcano on Mars that’s even bigger than Everest. Is she trying to say that they’re solar system-level boobs? In that case, yes, I strongly agree.

All Ibusuki and I could do was keep being embarrassed while Uomi kept making fun of us.

I let out a sigh and said, “It’s not like I fell in love with her because she’s older or because she has big breasts. It’s just that the person I fell in love with happens to be older and has big breasts.”

“Wow. That’s so cool.”

“...Totally. Thanks for the meal.”

“Sh-Shut up. Don’t make fun of me.” This time Uomi wasn’t smiling, and Ibusuki smiled like she was troubled.



After everyone had unloaded their luggage, we were all going to take a commemorative photo together. I thought that since I was older, I would be the first to step out and take pictures of everyone. However, Kana-kun set up his smartphone on his selfie stick in its tripod mode, and preparations for taking photos were finished in a flash. After taking the pictures, we shared them in the blink of an eye using the group chat that we set up during the commute.

“Lately things have become so convenient,” I said, impressed. “Back in the day, when we took group photos, we’d have to have the person taking the picture do it over and over again with everyone’s digital camera.”

“...Sorry. I’ve never used a digital camera.”

“Y-Your generation’s never used digital cameras?!” I was shocked.

Wait, but... I see. That’s right. Momota-kun and his friends started with smartphones. They’re the generation that’s never touched a flip phone and say things like “What’s an email?” I was having my usual depressed feeling because of my generation gap when...

“Hey, since we’re all here, let’s make a TikTok video together,” Ibusuki-san said.

“...And here comes TikTok,” Ura-kun mumbled in deep disgust.

“Oh... I figured it was going to happen, and now it finally has,” Momota-kun said with a tense expression on his face.

“Sounds good! Let’s do it.”

“Yeah.” Kana-kun and Uomi-san, on the other hand, seemed eager to do it.

“T-Tick tock...?” I, however, totally didn’t know what they were talking about.

“What? You don’t know about TikTok, Orihara-san?” Ibusuki-san said, looking at me like she couldn’t believe that there was a person on this planet who didn’t know about it.

“U-Um, I’ve heard the name, and I feel like I’ve seen commercials for it on television and the internet...”

“Well, TikTok is...um, simply put, it’s a social networking site that’s mainly about uploading videos. It’s an app where you make short videos that match up to music, and... Here, it’s like this.”

Ibusuki-san used her phone to show me a video. On the screen were Ibusuki-san and her friends, and they did things like dance with just their hands and stick out their tongues and make funny faces, all in time with catchy music. It was clear that they were really getting into it.

“Oh, so this is TikTok...”

“There’s a lot of different templates for the music and dances. All you have to do is dance along with them, so it’s very easy for beginners.”

“What do you do after you take a video?”

“After you take a video, you upload it. Well, it’s best for anyone who isn’t trying to go all out and be an influencer to private their account and only share their videos with their friends. That’s what I do.”

“Oh, and then?”

“Eh...”

“What do you do after you share your videos?”

“What do you do? I mean, you show it to everyone and that’s it...”

So you take a video, share the video, and that’s it. Hm?

“What’s fun about that?” I asked with what was probably a really straight face.

“Wh-What’s fun about it...?”

“Um... If it’s the quality of dance cover videos on YouTube then I could understand, but I was just thinking, what’s so fun about a video about an actual amateur doing a dance that’s so easy even an amateur can do it? If it were a celebrity or an idol that seems like it might be interesting, but...I just don’t really understand the point of a regular person like us doing it. Besides, I also

don't think it's a good idea to share your face on the internet like—Oh!”

After saying all that, I finally realized that things had taken a grave turn. The unbelievably happy mood from before had turned cold. Also, the looks I was getting from these five high schoolers were painful. However, it wasn't like they were looking at me with criticism. Instead, it was a lonely look of resignation and pity that felt like it pierced my skin. Somehow, it felt as if they had distanced themselves from me. I couldn't help but feel extremely alienated.

“Ah... Um, th-that's right. It's probably not that fun. Ha ha,” Ibusuki-san said with a fake laugh and put away her phone.

She had a forced smile on her face that was oozing with resignation and understanding. It was like she'd said, “Oh. I should stop talking about this with her,” and had drawn a line between us.

Oh, I've done it now. How could I have said something so heartless? In no way did I mean to be mean. I simply just couldn't figure out what was interesting about it from that conversation and asked an innocent question.

In a sense, I guess that was meaner than criticism made out of malice. Because of my basic lack of understanding, I blindly criticized it. Right now, their treasure has been insulted. This is just like the way I felt all those times with my mom...

“Just what's so fun about video games?” “Those...monsters? After you work so hard to catch and raise them, what do they become?” “Do you get a prize from beating the game?” “How is getting stronger in a video game going to come in handy?” “Is losing your save data really something to cry about?” “A strategy guide? What are you doing buying something like that?” “Why do you want to buy two of the same game? It's the same whether it's gold or silver.” “Why do you want to buy two of the same game? It's the same whether it's Gregar or Falzar.” “Why do you want to buy three of the same game? It's the same whether it's Yugi, Kaiba, or Joey, isn't it? It comes with a god card? Hime, have you gotten hooked on some kind of weird religion?”

When I think about it now, I'm sure that my mom didn't mean anything bad with what she was doing. It wasn't that she was trying to reject what her daughter thought was important because of ill will. It's just that...the thing her

daughter was really into was so different from what she thought was normal that she had no hope of understanding her. However, at the time it felt like she was clearly disapproving of the video games I loved so much, and I was really sad. I was angry as well, but more than that, I felt empty and frustrated.

Unconsciously, I'd become the kind of adult you always see who completely disapproves of the culture that kids are into. If we chalked this up to just being a generation gap type of thing, then it would end right there. However, I couldn't let it end like this. After all, my boyfriend and I are twelve years apart.

A generation gap is an obstacle that's always going to be there for us, and that's why I can't let myself run away from it!

"W-Well, you know. Orihara-san doesn't really do things like social networking, so she's not used to this type of thing. I mean, TikTok isn't my thing either, so let's stop for today," Momota-kun said, desperately defending me.

However, I couldn't let myself take advantage of his kindness. I pushed him to the side and took a step forward.

"...Momota-kun, thank you. But I'm okay."

"Orihara-san..."

"Phew. I almost turned into a boring adult. Ibusuki-san!"

I called out to Ibusuki Saki, a modern-day high schooler—and to me from long ago who couldn't get her mother to understand video games. "I'm sorry about saying all of that stuff before without really understanding anything. Please, teach me how to TikTok! I'll give it my all!"

And so, I gave it my all and made a dance video on the teen-marketed application known as TikTok. I'd only ever danced in P.E. class, so it was my first time in about ten years doing something like dancing in front of people.

The video was just me dancing to rhythmic music with the great outdoors in the background. I waved my arms, shook my hips and my butt, and performed dance steps. It seemed like there weren't just videos about dancing but also ones that focused on your face, so I tried making a funny face too. It was probably the first time I'd voluntarily made a funny face in all of my twenty-seven years.

After filming a typical TikTok video, my heart was exhausted.

“U-Um... Are you okay, Orihara-san?” Momota-kun called out to me as I sat in the shade on a log stool behind the cabin. However, I didn’t have enough energy left to even lift my head. My spirit was almost completely worn away by my disgrace and shame. I felt like I could turn to pure white ash and disappear at any moment. I mean, I wanted to, anyway.

“...Where is everyone else?”

“Everyone said they were going to the adventure park area so they could...give you some time alone.” Apparently, they were worried about me. I wonder what the situation looked like from the outside. Also, I wonder how I, a twenty-seven-year-old introvert going all out on her first TikTok video, looked to those teens?

“Hey, Momota-kun? Is that really something that’s popular with kids these days? Everyone wasn’t just fooling me, right?”

I thought that if I’d rejected it without even trying it that it would make me a boring adult, so I tried it with everything I had, but... It was just so painful and embarrassing! All that happened was that my self-disgust piled up as I wondered what I was doing.

“I-It really is popular... Well, it’s not like every young person does it. People like Ura and I don’t do it.”

“You don’t?! Why?!”

“Why? Because it’s embarrassing...”

“...Huh.”

I suddenly became exhausted. *What do you mean by “embarrassing”? I could have just refused by saying it was embarrassing?! Could it be that the problem wasn’t our generation gap but simply our difference in interests?*

“I don’t think Ibusuki was trying to force you to do it, Orihara-san.”

“...Then what did I embarrass myself for?!” Honestly, it was the most embarrassing thing I’d ever done in my entire life. It was even more embarrassing than the time I washed Momota-kun’s back while I was naked.

“Y-You should have stopped me Momota-kun... Your girlfriend was making a fool of herself, so as her boyfriend you should have stopped her...”

“S-Sorry, it just didn’t seem like the type of situation where I could have stopped you.”

“...Also, why didn’t anyone else do it? Why did everyone cut things short when I was done?”

“Yeah, well... After they saw you, everyone kind of lost the courage to do it. After that, even Ibusuki said something like ‘I wonder if I should stop doing TikTok.’”

What is he saying? Just how horrible did I look? Did I look so disgraceful that I ended up robbing these youth of their culture?

“Momota-kun, don’t let that video get out, okay?”

“I-I know. I went ahead and told Ibusuki to delete it.”

“In that case, good.” I exhaled and put a hand on my chest. If that video had spread to the rest of the world, I probably would have hanged myself by tomorrow.



After waiting for Orihara-san to recover, we decided to head for the riverbed that was a short walk away from the back of the cabin. The river was shallow, and customers could go play in their swimsuits.

“I heard at the reception desk that all the other groups staying in the cabins today are families. On top of that, right now they’ve all gone to do parent-child hands-on learning at the museum, so we have the river all to ourselves.”

Just like Kana said, there was no one at the riverbed aside from us. It was a wide-open riverbed on the other side of a thick forest. The river was four meters across, and its pure water had a gentle flow. Since the water only came up to your knees, there was no fear of drowning, so it was the ideal kind of river for playing around in your swimsuit.

“They’re taking so long. Just what are those girls doing?” Ura groaned.

“There’s no point complaining about it. Girls take time to get ready,” Kana

admonished him. We guys had gotten ready quickly, so we went ahead and brought drinks and chairs to the riverbed.

Also, though I'm sure no one's asking, the three of us were wearing normal swim trunks. Since Ura has sensitive skin, he was wearing a rash guard shirt and rash guard pants to protect from UV rays.

I slowly pumped up an inflatable dolphin and gave it to Ura when I finished.

"Okay, Ura. It's done."

"All right. Good work, Momo. I praise your efforts."

"You complained so much, yet you brought along all these leisure goods like camping gear and swim rings."

"N-No! I'm just uneasy if I don't have my gear," Ura yelled, getting worked up.

Apparently, he didn't want people to think that he was looking forward to this; I smiled sheepishly at his tsundere antics. It made me think about what he was like a long time ago.

When I first knew Ura, he wouldn't have hated these kinds of events. Even though he's a denizen of the darkness nowadays, things were different in elementary school. He liked indoor games, but he was the type of kid who would actively go to play outside; I couldn't tell you how many times Ura took Kana and me with him to build a secret base. In elementary school, Urano Izumi was the kind of kid who was bright and positive like the sun.

"Still, you're looking forward to it, right, Momo?" Kana asked.

"To what?"

"'To what?' he says... To Orihara-san's swimsuit, of course." Kana spoke with a pleasant smile as he shifted the conversation towards sex.

"H-Hey, don't be looking at my girlfriend like that."

"Yeah, I've done my best to be mindful and know my place there, but I'd be lying if I said I'm not curious. I mean, it's gonna be quite the sight to behold, isn't it?"

"Yeah..." *To be honest, I'm looking forward to it too. Frankly, it wouldn't be an*

overstatement to say it's the thing I'm looking forward to the most on this camping trip.

"If I had to choose, I like slender girls, but...Orihara-san is kind of an exception. How about you, Ura?"

"Huh?! I-I don't know, idiot! Don't talk to me about that kind of thing! You horny guys keep that to yourselves!" Ura's face turned bright red. He's fine with dirty jokes, but he doesn't like talking about his own preferences and fetishes, and his tolerance for talking about dirty stuff is on par with that of an elementary schooler.

"Wow! Amazing! It's totally a river!" I could hear a reaction that was so repetitive, she had to have been doing it on purpose at that point. "Wow, it's prettier than I thought. Having this all to ourselves is going to be great." Ibusuki ran towards us sporting a dark-colored bikini accentuated by her healthy-looking skin. Her superb figure, with her large breasts and well-toned waist, could steal the attention of any man.

"It seems like there'd be fish in here." Uomi walked towards us with a serious look on her face. She was wearing a pure white bikini that matched her fair, pale skin. Her waist was surprisingly thin, and her slender legs extended from her swimsuit. Though her breasts were small, they caught your eye. As for the last person...

"..."



Walking with hesitant footsteps behind the two of them, Orihara-san was wearing a hoodie instead of a swimsuit. It seemed like she was wearing it on top of her swimsuit, and her exposed legs peeked out from the hem. Because the zipper was completely closed, her upper body was mostly hidden.

“Sorry we’re late.”

“No, it’s okay.” After responding to Ibusuki, Kana stared at Uomi. “Isn’t that the swimsuit that we picked out together the other day?”

“Yeah.”

“It really does look good on you, Uta-chan. You look really cute.”

“Yeah.” His compliments were so straightforward it made me feel embarrassed just hearing them, but they made Uomi smile. I figured I’d learn from him and looked at Orihara-san, but...

“No, this is...” Before I could say anything, she blushed and started making excuses as she hid her stomach with her arms. “Lately, I’ve kind of...let myself go around my waist, and it’s hard to look at. I tried to use an ab roller to get ready for today, but I’ve been sore since I first worked out. The soreness wouldn’t go away, so in the end I couldn’t get in shape at all...”

What an excuse.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Orihara-san. You’re not fat at all.”

“No, no, no... Sorry. I can’t. No way. I’m just... I’m not brave enough to be next to high school girls in their swimsuits... I mean, what’s with that youthful skin? And those tight butts?” She squinted her eyes like it was blinding her to look at the two high school girls. It was as if she were pining for something she would never obtain ever again. “I-I’ll be watching from over here, so have fun with everyone! Okay?!”

With the way she was speaking, I couldn’t make her do otherwise. Leaving Orihara-san to look after the luggage, we high schoolers got into the water and started to enjoy ourselves.

Man, this is sad... I wanted to see Orihara-san’s swimsuit. I wanted to play around and splash each other.

Over where the river was a little deep, Ibusuki made her way to Ura, who was having fun floating on the water with the inflatable dolphin.

“Hey, Urano. Let me borrow that. I want to ride it too.”

“Huh?! Screw you. This is mine.”

“Come on, just let me borrow it!”

“No way! Absolutely no way. I decided I’m going to play with this all day.”

“...Whatever, I’ll just go ahead and get on.” Fed up, Ibusuki forced herself onto the dolphin that Ura was already riding.

“Hey, stop it, dummy! This only seats one!”

“I can fit. Look, I’m riding—Aaaah!”

“Gyaah!” Clearly carrying more than its weight limit, the dolphin lost its balance remarkably and capsized.

“Ha ha ha, I guess I couldn’t ride it after all.”

“You... Screw you, fatty!”

“F-Fatty?!” Ibusuki said, her eyes going wide at Ura’s insult. “What?! Just what part of me is fat?!”

“You’re fat and definitely heavier than me! Just what’s your body fat percentage with that flabby body of yours?!”

“Y-You’re too thin! Even though you’re a guy you’re such a twig. It’s a disgrace!”

“Grr... That’s sexist! You should be ashamed!”

“You’re the one who was being rude first!”

“Shut up, fatty! Fatty, fatty! Faaaatty!”

“Ura, stop it,” I said, placing a hand on his shoulder and putting an end to his elementary school-level verbal abuse.

“Momo... Wh-What’s your deal? Why are you taking this woman’s side?”

I gazed to the side and said, “Because, over there, Orihara-san looks like she’s about to die.”

Orihara-san, who should have been sitting in a chair, instead had her hands on the ground and was writhing in agony. Ura's insults had apparently reached her as well. If Ura was telling Ibusuki that she's "a fatty" and has a "flabby body," then what does that make someone like Orihara-san, who looks like she has a higher body fat percentage?

Sensing an adult woman's suffering, Ura and Ibusuki suddenly stopped fighting and started sharing the dolphin. As for the other couple...

"Kana-kun, look, there's a frog."

"Uwaah! S-Stop it, Uta-chan... I don't like those types of things..."

"Hey, look, Kana-kun. There's a huge, weird bug with a gross shape over here."

"Uwaah! Stop it! Seriously, stop it! Don't just calmly grab some huge, weird bug with a gross shape!"

"...Ah. The bug flew over there."

"Gyaah!" Kana's handsome looks crumbled as he screamed. Kana has really hated things like bugs and snakes for as long as I've known him. Whenever Ura and I would go to capture grasshoppers and dragonflies in elementary school, he never went with us. He's become extremely sociable compared to how he used to be back then, but apparently this part of Kana hasn't changed at all.

And so, we high schoolers got our fill of playing in the river doing those sorts of things. We played with a beach ball that we blew up, but we soon stopped since the rallies would end every time it came to me.

Why? Why am I so unathletic that I can't play ball sports like an average person?

Orihara-san sat on the riverbank wearing her hoodie the entire time. I looked over at her again and again, and every time she'd smile kindly and wave at me. However, her smile seemed a little lonely and my chest tightened.

I feel like she shouldn't have to worry about her size and shape, but that's not something I should decide so one-sidedly. It must be a delicate issue for girls, and I don't want to force her to do anything.

However, lingering feelings and regret still swirled around in my chest. I wanted to see Orihara-san's swimsuit—and more than anything, I wanted her to enjoy being in a swimsuit as well. As I was lamenting my own inability to do anything, Kana suddenly held his stomach.

“...Ow.”

“What's wrong, Kanao? Are you okay?”

“Yes. Saki-chan, I'm fine. It's just that my stomach hurts a little bit.”

“Haruka-kun, could it be that you...ate that bug?”

“...I didn't eat it. What are you thinking? I just have an upset stomach, so I'm going to the bathroom.” After reacting to Uomi, Kana faced Ura. “Ura, come with me. I'll be lonely by myself.”

“Huh? Well...sure, that's fine.”

“Thank you. Also, Saki-chan, you said that you brought along some stomach medicine, right? May I have some?”

“Y-Yeah, I got it.”

“I'm worried about you, so I'll go too, Haruka-kun.”

“Thank you, Uta-chan.”

“Kana, shall I go too?”

“No, you're fine, Momo. Stay here. It's not really that big of a deal.” Kana and the other three started heading for the cabin, leaving just Orihara-san and myself in the wide riverbank. I gazed at Kana worriedly—and partway through he turned around. Instead of looking like he was in pain from an upset stomach, he gave me a big smile and winked.

“Hmm?” *What was that just now? What does it mean? His stomach doesn't hurt?*

“I wonder what that was all about...”

“Oh... Y-Yeah. I wonder,” Orihara-san answered, somewhat absentmindedly. She was blushing and playing with the zipper at the neck of her hoodie as she looked this way and that.

“Shall we head back for now?” There wasn’t any point in just the two of us staying behind. *I won’t have any fun playing in the river by myself, and it’s probably no fun for Orihara-san since she can’t get in the water.*

“Ah! Um, w-wait!” Orihara-san yelled as I was starting to get our stuff together. Her face was really red, and after she looked around her, she said, “Oh, w-wow, it sure warmed up.”

She sounded awkward as she put her hand on her zipper. Then, she pulled it down swiftly as if she were casting off her doubts. For a moment, I couldn’t catch my breath.

From the opening in her zipper appeared her premium body. Even though she had meant to cover them with her hoodie, her two voluptuous mountains barreled into the outside world with an overwhelming presence. The swimsuit she was wearing was a mature-looking bikini; it didn’t have enough fabric to cover her massive lumps, and my heart stirred just by looking. Of course, I wasn’t just looking at her breasts. Her curvy hips, beautifully shaped navel, the sexy lines of her body from her butt to her thighs... Everything about her was fiercely beautiful, and my eyes were practically magnetized.

“H-Hey... Momota-kun...you’re staring too much!” she said with a bright red face.

“Oh, s-sorry,” I said, turning my gaze away.

“Oooh... Don’t look at me too hard. I really have let myself go around my waist lately.” She held her stomach while facing the ground, embarrassed.

I don’t think she has anything to worry about. I mean, yeah, she has a little bit of a muffin top on her swimsuit, but that amount isn’t anything to be concerned about.

“A-Are you okay with taking off your hoodie?”

“I mean... I do want you to see it, Momota-kun... I bought a new swimsuit just for today.” Her voice was trembling. I slowly raised my head and once again gazed at her swimsuit, but this time, I wasn’t scolded.

“H-How does it look?”

“It looks great on you. It’s so beautiful I’m speechless.”

“Please... You’re flattering me too much. This would look better on Ibusuki-san or Uomi-san, right? They have such tight waists, thin legs, and supple skin.”

“That’s not true! I think...you’re the prettiest, Orihara-san.”

“Huh?! M-Momota-kun, even though we’re here alone together, that’s too direct!” Orihara-san became embarrassed and covered her face with both her hands. With that gesture, her breasts became caught between her elbows, which made her bikini slip out of place and caused—*hmm? Alone together? Oh, so that’s it.*

“So, Kana’s stomachache was a lie?”

“Probably. When he was walking towards the cabin, I think he looked at me and winked.” Apparently, his expressive gesture was a message for Orihara-san and not for me.

“So he was putting on an act for us.” He did it to let us be alone. In his own way, he was helping out us amateurs in love who couldn’t enjoy playing in the river. Orihara-san was really embarrassed about being compared to high school girls and showing off her swimsuit to guys, so it was as if Kana was saying, “Let’s at least show it to your boyfriend,” as he produced time for us to be alone together. Orihara-san got the message, gathered her courage and showed off her swimsuit for me.

It’s like...

“He’s just too cool.”

“He’s way too wise about a lot of stuff. Just how old is that boy, I wonder?”

Kana didn’t just look cool, but acted cool too. My feelings about him have gone beyond admiration and past exasperation to end up becoming gratitude.

Geez. Thank you, my friend.

“Then... Shall we play together a little, Orihara-san?”

“Yes. Kana-kun did all this for us, so it would be rude to not enjoy the river to the fullest,” Orihara-san said with a little nod as she placed her hoodie on the camping sheet. I took her hand and we got into the water.

“Ahh, it’s so cold. But it feels good,” Orihara-san said, smiling innocently like a little girl as she put her legs in the water. I was also happy and laughed with her. We splashed each other with no particular goal in mind. The way that the drops of water ran down the curves of her body was so attractive that I unconsciously wanted to focus my splashing on her chest, but I desperately used reason to control myself.

As we got more into it, we started playing with the beach ball. Of course, I was well aware of how bad at sports I was: I messed up time and time again and caused trouble for everyone when I played with the rest of the high schoolers earlier, after all. That’s why, this time, I paid the utmost attention to the ball and served while checking every one of my body’s movements.

“Nyeah!” My serve sent the ball in the wrong direction. “Hmm...”

Seriously, why? What’s the deal with my right hand? Is it cursed? I don’t even know what’s going on with me anymore. Actually, just what do you have to do to get the ball to fly into that kind of trajectory? I tried so hard to be careful too...

Well, carefully checking each one of my movements kind of did get my drive system out of order. I’m getting sick of how my reflexes are about as good as if I’m constantly being attacked by the Sakanade.

“Wh-Whoa... Aaahh!” Trying to catch the wayward ball, Orihara-san’s foot slipped and she tumbled into the water with a magnificent splash.

“A-Are you okay?”

“Ha ha ha, I tripped.”

“I’m sorry, it’s my fault.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I’m totally fine.”

“Let’s give up on the beach ball and do something el—?!” I was rendered speechless mid-sentence. I tried to look away and cover my eyes as Orihara-san stood back up dripping wet, but I accidentally saw it through the gap in my fingers. No matter how much I tried to control myself, my gaze was being pulled in by dreadful magic.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Momota-kun?”

“O-Orihara-san! Y-Your chest... Swimsuit!” I was so shocked I couldn’t speak clearly at all, but it seemed like my intention got across to her: she looked down at her chest, which had been laid bare by the disappearance of her swimsuit.

“Eeeek!” she screamed. Her face turned bright red and she made another splash as she crouched down in the water. She tried desperately to cover her chest, but her thin arms couldn’t hide her bountiful breasts at all. They seemed like they would spill out from the gaps in her arms and fingers at any moment.



“Wh-Wh-Why did this happen? Where did it go...?”

“...Oh. I found it.” Since Orihara-san couldn’t move, I glanced over our surroundings and saw her bikini top slowly floating away. It seems like it came off because of the shock from when she tumbled over.

Well...her boobs were probably too big.

I hurriedly grabbed the swimsuit and handed it to Orihara-san.

“Th-Thank you... Oh, why did this kind of thing have to happen?”

“It sure was a disaster...”

“Sigh... I’m glad that you’re the only one who saw me like that, Momota-kun.” The words that slipped from her lips made my heart beat fast. As I was unable to say anything, Orihara-san lifted her head with a start. “N-No! When I said I was glad... I-It’s not like I meant that I wanted you to look or anything like that!”

“I-I understand, it’s fine!” I didn’t misunderstand and totally got the meaning of her words. After all, I felt exactly the same way. I was glad that I was the only person there. I didn’t want to show Orihara-san’s beautiful body to anyone else.

≡

We waited until the time was right to begin the barbecue, just as the sun started to set. While the girls were getting the food ready in the cabin, the boys were tasked with preparing a charcoal flame. We headed for the cooking area that was a short distance from the cabin, and a rental barbecue set and charcoal were already prepared for us there.

According to my research on “camp dates” and “barbecue dates,” the thing you should be the most careful of is when you prepare the fire. Apparently things often go wrong when lighting the initial charcoal. Failing to start a fire at the very beginning is just embarrassing, plus if you don’t have a fire, all the cooking getting bottlenecked coupled with growing hunger ruins the mood. Also, a boyfriend who is able to stylishly start a fire is pretty cool. That’s why I properly rehearsed how to start a fire and intended to do my best in the battle against the charcoal... However, when the time came, it was so easy it was anticlimactic.

“Oh, wow. It’s done...”

“The only thing left is to fan it, huh?”

The charcoal set up inside the four-legged barbecue grill began to slowly burn and give off a red glow. The most difficult part of setting fire to the charcoal had been easily cleared.

“The firefighters you brought are amazing, Ura. It made this really easy.”

“Ha ha ha! Give me more compliments and praise me more! For someone like me who’s always watching hardcore solo camping videos, starting a fire is a piece of cake.”

“In that case you should have lit the fire.”

“I-It’s not like I was afraid to do it! I-I just thought I’d give you guys the honor!”

Apparently, he was afraid of fire. Ura gave all kinds of instructions on how to set up the charcoal and where to place the firelighter, but the ones who actually did it were Kana and I.

Well, I understand how he feels. Lighting a firelighter is a little scary.

Kana and I used a fan to fan the flames. As we made the flames bigger, we added large pieces of charcoal one after the other. We were able to make a pretty nice fire thanks to Ura’s naggingly accurate instructions like “Hey, dummy, don’t just put in such a big piece. Add them in order starting with smaller charcoal” and “No, no, no, why are you laying them evenly? You have to make them slanted and make a zone for strong flames and a zone for weak flames.”

“Okay, that should do it,” Ura said, nodding in satisfaction. He then said he was going to the bathroom and left the area.

“Ura sure seems like he’s having more fun than I expected,” I said with a dry laugh, and Kana chuckled as well.

“I’m glad we invited him too. You and I are with our girlfriends so I thought we’d make him feel lonely, but it looks like I was worried over nothing. Actually, it looks like he has a little bit of chemistry with Saki-chan.”

“Huh? Those two have chemistry?”

“Just a little bit of it.”

Really? I totally couldn't tell. On the contrary, I thought their personalities were the exact opposite and they weren't compatible.

“That's because you've always been dull when it comes to that type of thing, Momo,” Kana said like he was slightly hinting at something.

He's probably right. I've somehow got a girlfriend now, but the ways of men and women are still a weak subject for me.

“Oh, by the way. Thanks for giving Orihara-san and I some time alone together, Kana.” I thought now was a good time to thank him.

“It's no problem. How was it? Were you able to enjoy Orihara-san's swimsuit?”

“...You could say that.” *I enjoyed more than her swimsuit.*

“I see. I'm glad you were able to have fun. But you really don't have to worry about it. Consider it my apology.”

“Apology?”

“I mean, for what happened in the car on the way here... Uta-chan kind of made a scene, right?”

Oh, that bombshell she dropped. I didn't think it was anything that Kana had to feel sorry for, but it seemed like there was a part of him that felt like he had to take responsibility as her boyfriend.

“I'm sorry. Uta-chan really isn't a bad person.”

“You don't have to worry about it either. It was definitely awkward, but thanks to that it felt like we moved past some things. Orihara-san didn't mind at all either.”

“In that case, I'm glad.” He had a look on his face like he was thinking of something. He cast a shadow over his beautiful face and stared at the brilliantly glowing flame.

“...It's better to just get it all out in the open and be completely awkward than

it is to be half-hearted about it—it's probably just as Uta-chan said. Rather than pretending not to see the obvious scars, messing with them would probably numb the pain..." Kana spoke eerily, like he was only speaking to himself. There was a slight smile on his face that looked incredibly lonely.

"Kana...?"

"It's nothing." As soon as I spoke to him, Kana's face quickly changed back to his usual pleasant smile. However, the strange feeling in my heart wouldn't go away. *What was that just now?*

After that, Ura came back from the bathroom, and right after that, the girls came with the food.

"Wow! Amazing, it's totally a fire!" Ibusuki shouted with her usual reaction upon seeing the finished grill.

Yeah, I've gradually gotten used to it.

"Guys who are active outdoors sure are great. Unlike some people..." After nodding in approval at Kana and me, who were working with tongs and gloves, she turned to look exasperated at Ura, who was sitting down and having a drink. "Seriously... Don't just sit around! You help out too."

"I-I'm doing the brain work! Seventy percent of getting this fire started was thanks to me! Be grateful!"

"Huh? You're just talking nonsense again..."

"No, Ura really was a big help."

"It's true. He really knows a lot about camping. All we did was set up the charcoal and use the firelighters like Ura told us to." As Kana and I defended Ura, Ibusuki began to look impressed.

"Oh, I see... I'm sorry for saying you weren't working." Subsequently, Orihara-san also looked at Ura with respect.

"That's amazing, Ura-kun. You really know a lot about this kind of thing."

"I believed in you, Urano."

"You're surprisingly capable. I've changed my mind about you."

Though I felt like one of them was just speaking randomly, the girls sincerely praised Ura.

“I-I didn’t do anything special. Being thanked for something like this doesn’t even make me happy...” Ura said. He then blushed as he started to fidget.

“‘Be grateful,’ ‘don’t be grateful,’ which is it? You sure are a pain.” Ibusuki said with a vexed expression. *That’s right, he is a pain.*

After that, the girls laid out the meat and vegetables they’d carved up onto the wooden table in the cooking area. The fire was ready and the ingredients were good to go, so it was finally time for the barbecue to start. We passed out disposable chopsticks and Japanese-style bowls to everyone and put yakiniku sauce in each bowl. Since there were girls here, we didn’t use garlic.

“Okay, I’ll grill, so everyone eat up, okay?” Orihara-san volunteered to be in charge of the grilling and laid out the meat and vegetables onto the wire mesh of the grill. We accepted our elder’s kindness and enjoyed the grilled meat that was prepared for us.

Yeah, this is good. There’s no way it would taste bad. The great taste of the food went without saying, and the situation was perfect as well. Ura said bluntly that “It definitely tastes better in a restaurant,” but I think that barbecuing in the middle of nature has its own kind of charm that you can’t normally find in a restaurant.

“Wow! Oh man, this is delicious! The meat you brought along really does taste great, Orihara-san!” Ibusuki said.

“This meat really tastes good. Thank you, Orihara-san.” After Ibusuki and I thanked Orihara-san, she got an embarrassed smile on her face.

“Ha ha ha. I didn’t do anything much, but I’m glad you’re happy. Please, go ahead and eat up.”

“Oh. Orihara-san, I’ll switch with you, so please get something to eat.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I’ll find a chance to eat. Everyone eat some more, okay? You’re young so you have to eat a lot and—Oh!” Right then Orihara-san’s face convulsed like something gave her an extraordinary shock.

“Wh-What’s wrong...?”

“Just now, I realized that I was thinking like the kind of adult who tries to feed young people nonstop...” Orihara-san said as her face turned to an expression of deep despair.

“When I was little, I used to think, ‘Why do my aunts and uncles keep trying to feed me even though I keep telling them I’m full?’ and got annoyed at them, but...now I’ve come to understand them. It feels good watching young people be happy and eat. When you’re an adult you have to worry about getting an upset stomach and gaining weight, so you can’t eat a lot. It makes you want to feed others more than you want to eat. Right now, I’m thinking just like one of my aunts...” She became depressed. I didn’t really understand, but it seemed like to her it was the kind of problem that could break your heart.

After eating all the meat and vegetables, we used the can-shaped smoker that Ura brought along and smoked cheese and wieners to our hearts’ content. We finished up with fried noodles, and by that point even people like us were full. With paper cups of oolong tea in hand, we all enjoyed some friendly conversation next to the fire as its charcoal began turning to white ash.

“Come to think of it, in elementary school, Ura made his own card game.”

“That’s right, he did. The rules were like a mysterious mix of Yu-Gi-Oh, Duel Masters, Vanguard, and the Pokémon card game.”

“The quality was decent for an elementary schooler, but didn’t Ura say he had the ‘right of the creator’ just so he could have fun making his own personal cheat cards that made him unbeatable?”

“Bah. Shut up. I worked hard making them, so of course I’d have that privilege. Be grateful that I even let you play.”

As we talked about old times the girls gazed at us with exhausted looks.

“Boys sure did get into card games.”

“That’s true.”

“I also made my own cards. When Yu-Gi-Oh cards came out, I bought a lot of the Carddass version instead of the OCG version. I wanted the OCG version, but

my mom said, 'You've already bought enough!' and wouldn't buy them for me, so I used the manga for reference and tearfully made my own cards—I mean, y-you're right! Why do boys get so into those kinds of things?" Orihara-san started taking a trip all by herself down memory lane, but panicked and adapted her reaction to match the two high school girls. She was far too late though.

"You three sure are close. It seems like if you went to a mixer together you boys would just talk to yourselves," Ibusuki teased us. For some reason that seemed like a very realistic image of a failed mixer.

"Even though you have a lot of other friends, you seem like you have the most fun when you're with Momota-kun and Urano-kun," Uomi said.

"Really? Yeah... Well, that's probably true," Kana nodded bashfully. I also became a little embarrassed.

I'm the same way. It's not like I don't have any other friends, but I'm most relaxed and having the most fun when I'm with these two. It's because we've known each other for such a long time. We've been together since elementary school...

"Hey, have you guys ever had a fight?" Ibusuki said. She probably meant it as a light question without really expecting any kind of significant answer. It's the kind of simple question that you'd usually ask in a conversation. However, that question gave me a slight pain in my chest. Ura and Kana were probably feeling the same pain as well.

It would have been better if it were just a fight. In middle school, the rift that formed between us wasn't something as easy to understand as a fight. It was something that was more vague and more abstract, but it was definitely there.

Since then, Ura and Kana had changed. They changed so much it was scary. The positive boy who was like the leader of the class became the type of person with a closed heart who would pretend he's asleep during lunchtime and not talk to anyone. The shy boy who would spend all his time in the corner of the classroom reading a book became the kind of person who's so sociable that he's exchanged contact info with the majority of the students in his school year. I know that their true nature hasn't changed, but looking at them from the

outside, they seem like they've turned into completely different people.

Ultimately, I wasn't at the center of the issue. The ones caught in the turmoil were Ura and Kana, and I was just going back and forth while chasing after them. All I did was desperately struggle to fill the rift that had formed.

Well, that was a long time ago. Ura and Kana have changed, but somehow our relationship with each other didn't. As long as we could laugh with each other like we used to, I couldn't ask for anything more than that.

There's no need to open fresh wounds.

"We've probably never had a fight," I said, hoping to change the subject.

"If we're talking about fights...there was that little bit of a rough patch we had in middle school." The one who said it was Kana. I looked up shocked, and there he was with the pleasant smile he always had.

My mind felt like it was going blank. However, I ignored my mind going numb and kept my attention ahead of me as Kana formed his words with a smile and a cruel fluency. "Momo, Ura, and I almost stopped being friends."

My heart rate skyrocketed, and I could feel an uncomfortable sweat run down my back.

Hey, wait a minute. What is he... What is he trying to say? I couldn't even get the words out of my mouth to stop him because I couldn't believe it. Maybe I didn't want to believe it. I never thought that Kana would talk about what happened so casually.

"The truth is, Ura and I were in a love triangle," Kana said.

He said it like he was talking about some pointless thing to just kill time. He spoke so lightly of it you'd think it was just a story about a stupid mistake.

"A-A love triangle?" Ibusuki said.

"Yes, a love triangle. The kind of complicated thing between men and women that creates a rift in friendships," Kana responded to Ibusuki. Nodding calmly, he continued, "In middle school, there was a girl who transferred to our class. She was really cute and often hung out with the three of us. Her name was Ryuzaki, so we called her Ryu."

Ryuzaki—Ryu. I haven't heard that nickname in a long, long time.

Kana continued. "Then, at some point, Ura fell in love with Ryu, but... Ryu had fallen in love with me, it seemed. Ha ha ha. A pretty funny love triangle, right?"

This story that should have come to an end, these wounds that should have been closed up... Kana was viciously tearing them open with a beaming smile.

"When Ura realized that Ryu liked me, he did his best to get her and me together. He stifled his own feelings for her and supported her feelings for me. I think it was very admirable. However, I didn't have any romantic feelings for Ryu at all, so honestly it was just annoying for me. That misunderstanding was why for a period of time Ura and I—"

Kana was cut off by a loud slamming noise. It was Ura, who had hit the table. In his clenched fist was his crushed paper cup with its contents spilled out.

"You bastard!" Ura bellowed. He glared at Kana like he had betrayed him. The expression on his face was warped with anger, but you could see he was fighting back tears.

"What is it, Ura?" Kana was unfazed. With a calm face and soft gaze, he looked back at Ura. The air was tense, and a painful silence filled the area.

"..." Before long, Ura threw his crushed paper cup on the ground and ran away.

"Huh...? Wait, Urano! Where are you going?" Ibusuki yelled, looking confused and chasing after him. I wanted to go after him right away...but I couldn't move. I couldn't let myself move.

"...What's the meaning of this, Kana?" I said in a voice so low it surprised even me.

"What's with that scary face, Momo?"

"You know what that whole incident means to Ura, don't you?"

It was a love triangle where person A loved person B, and person B loved person C, but persons A and C were friends. If you put it into words, that's all it was. However, there's no telling just how much that one incident hurt Ura—nor how much it hurt Kana. He was wounded just as much as Ura, so I thought he

understood Ura's feelings more than I did.

"It's not some funny story...!"

"Something like that is a funny story."

"..."

"It's just a trivial story about the failed love of some middle schoolers going through puberty. It's the kind of funny story that you'd find all over Japan—no, it *should* be a funny story."

Kana became unnaturally talkative and continued. "You and Ura treat that time like it was serious trauma and just avoid the issue, but it wasn't a big deal. Romance in middle school is just like you're playing make-believe. It's nothing more than some little event that you forget when you become an adult... You two skirt around the issue, but if you're just going to be weird and drag it along like it was traumatic, then it'd be better if you'd just be more casual and laugh about it. It's not that big a deal." Kana repeated his words like they were an excuse.

Before I knew it, the smile had disappeared from his face, and he was looking straight at me. For some reason, his eyes looked like he was pleading with me. It looked like he was asking me to help him by seeking my understanding or maybe even begging for forgiveness.

"Or is it that that's just what you want to believe?"

Isn't it just that more than anyone else, you want to think of it like that?

For a moment, Kana's expression was twisted in pain. Then, after a few seconds of silence, he sighed. "...You're probably right. Sorry, I'm going to go cool off." He stood up from his chair and slowly walked off.

After waiting a little, Uomi stood up silently and followed Kana. Left behind were just Orihara-san and myself. We didn't say anything, and we could hear the sounds of cicadas and families in the distance.

How did this happen? Up until about ten minutes ago we were having a really fun barbecue.

"Momota-kun..."

“I’m sorry, Orihara-san... We made things weird.”

“I’m okay...but is everything fine?”

“...It’s fine.”

It was a vague answer to a vague question. I had no idea just what was fine. I went to pick up the paper cup that Ura threw on the ground. I took the crumpled paper cup into my hand and tried to return it to normal; however, it just became misshapen. I crushed it again and threw it into the garbage.

Suddenly I remembered when I was in middle school. Ura, Kana, and I were always together—then a girl transfer student named Ryuzaki joined our group. Having moved from the city to an unfamiliar place, this girl who probably had a lot to worry about was warmly added to our group by Ura.

Before long, we called her “Ryu,” and the four of us started playing together. She quickly opened up to us and unbelievably managed to blend in with us three childhood friends. I liked Ryu—not romantically, but as one of my friends. At the time, I didn’t know anything about romance, and more than that I enjoyed hanging out with my friends, so I loved when it was the four of us hanging out together. I loved the three of them.

However, I was the only one who was so innocent and carefree. The three of them had begun climbing the staircase to adulthood as middle school students who had started puberty. Ura fell in love with Ryu; Ryu fell in love with Kana; and Kana...liked a different girl. It was a laughably flawless love triangle, and in the end, I was just on the outside of it all.

While I understood the situation, I couldn’t do anything and was just running back and forth. It was like I was just wandering on the line of a triangle like the arbitrary point P that shows up in math problems...

If you’re just listening to the story, it may sound like Ryu ruined the friendship of us three guys akin to some new member ruining the dynamic of a club, but...Ryu was by no means to blame.

I understood well that no one was to blame, but I often wondered how things would be if that weren’t the case: if there were some obvious villain, I could have just defeated them; if there were some person I could hate, I could sort

out my feelings. However, there wasn't a single bad person here. Neither Ura nor Kana nor Ryu had any bad intentions. They were just following their hearts. That's why things got so complicated, and that's why our relationship was ruined.

A hell that resembled heaven changed Ura into someone else. A heaven that resembled hell changed Kana into someone else. Ryu, on the other hand, took the ideal and most realistic path and distanced herself from us. She went to a different high school and isn't in touch with us anymore.

I had assumed it was over. For better or worse, I had assumed the story was over. But that was probably something that I too just wanted to believe.



I ran to chase after Urano. I ran and ran with all my might. He was way faster than you'd expect someone who looks like such a homebody to be; he was so small and nimble that I'd lost sight of him before I knew it.

"What? I thought he came this way. Geez... Just where did he go?!"

I went to the river where we were playing in our swimsuits a few hours ago and felt like I was at a loss. There were a few parents with their kids playing in the river, but Urano was nowhere to be seen.

"Seriously, he's such a pain."

I started running again. I wasn't sure why I'd ended up chasing him as soon as he dashed off; I didn't know why I was searching around for him so desperately. It was just, somehow, I couldn't leave him alone. The moment he ran away, the expression on Urano's face was heartbreaking. He looked like a child who was going to cry at any moment.

After I searched all over the place, I finally returned to the cabin and found Urano's shoes in the entryway.

"...Oh, he's back?" I said, relieved... And then I felt anger boil up inside of me.

What's his deal? I was worried sick searching all over for him, and he just came back by himself and took it easy?

"Hey, Urano! Where are you! Get your butt out here!" After I entered the

cabin, I called out to him.

“Wh-What is it? Why are you here...?” he replied from behind a door.

I’ve finally found him.

I walked over and pulled the door wide open. I did it because I was being emotional, I suppose. There was also the fact that today was the first time I’d been in this building and I’d completely forgotten what room he was in. Incidentally, I’d noticed that Urano’s shoes in the entryway were wet for some reason, but I hadn’t thought about the reason why they were wet.

“Huh...?”

“Ah...”

For a moment, time stopped. The sight that jumped out at me when I opened the door was...a guy’s naked body. A body with a flat chest, and slightly visible ribs. Skin so white and a waist and legs so thin they made me jealous. There wasn’t a single piece of excess fat on this delicate body; seeing it would make any woman jealous.

However, his surprisingly wide shoulders reminded me that this really was a guy. And more than that, what *really* reminded me was the thing that only guys have, hanging firmly between his legs.

“Aaaa—”

Right before I could scream, Urano did it himself. It was girly and cute.





“Hello, Momota?”

Momota-kun got a phone call from Ibusuki-san. I knew I shouldn’t have, but I listened in because I was worried about how Ura-kun was doing.

“So, um, I found Urano... He went back to the cabin, and he’s with me right now.”

“Nice. Okay, I’ll head over there now.”

“Yeah... No, it’s probably best if you don’t come... Right now, he’s kind of depressed and probably needs some alone time. He’s locked himself inside the bathroom.”

“I see. Because of what happened...”

“Hmm... Well, yes, that happened too, but also, there was another completely unrelated event that happened. It seems like the reason he locked himself in the bathroom was because of that,” she said evasively.

What happened between those two, I wonder...

After the phone call was over, Momota-kun faced me. “It looks like...Ura is okay for now.”

“Really? That’s good. We can relax if he’s with Ibusuki-san.” I felt relieved, and even Momota-kun looked like he had relaxed a little.

“She said it would be best if we didn’t come, so...I guess we should continue cleaning up.”

“You’re right.”

We resumed cleaning up the barbecue. It was just the two of us, but it seemed like we could manage since there wasn’t much to do.

“Sorry that it’s just the two of us cleaning up, Orihara-san.”

“No, don’t apologize. It’s not your fault, Momota-kun.”

“But...” he began, but he didn’t continue. He looked so apologetic that it made me feel bad.

“Why did Kana-kun...say that, I wonder.”

“I don’t know...” Momota-kun said and shook his head slightly.

I didn’t know what the love triangle was like, but looking at Momota-kun’s expression, I understood even if I didn’t want to. I guess to them it was like a scar that the three of them didn’t want to be touched by anyone.

That’s how it had been up to now, but...even though Kana-kun should have wanted to leave that scar alone like his friends, he went ahead and opened those old wounds. Momota-kun and Ura-kun must have been feeling terribly confused by his betrayal.

“Would it be better if I *did* treat it like it’s a funny story?” Momota-kun said, his voice wavering. “I wonder if it’s like Kana said. Should I laugh off what happened instead of just putting a lid on it because I don’t want to remember it?”

“That’s...”

“Sorry for asking something weird like that. Please forget about it.” As I stood there unable to say anything, Momota-kun ended the conversation with a painful look on his face.

I’m pathetic. I couldn’t say a single helpful thing to him, and I felt so sorry.

While Momota-kun was taking care of the charcoal that had turned to ash, I went to throw out the garbage. Holding a garbage bag in each hand, I headed to the spot for disposing of it. On the way back, I ran right into Kana-kun.

“Oh. Orihara-san...” With a slightly awkward expression on his face, he alternated between looking at me and the garbage disposal area at the end of the path I had walked from.

“...Could it be that you’ve already finished cleaning up?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I see... I’m sorry. I made a show of leaving when I walked away by saying, ‘I’m going to go cool off,’ but once I’d calmed down I realized I hadn’t cleaned anything up... I hurried back, but... Geez, I’m really sorry.”

“No, it’s okay, we finished quickly. More importantly...” I looked at him hard

in the face and could see that Kana-kun's left cheek was red and swollen. "What happened to your cheek?"

"Oh... I was, well, slapped by Uta-chan."

"By Uomi-san?!"

"Yes...earlier when she chased after me, I turned around when she called out to me and she suddenly gave me a smack."

"H-Huh...?"

"Then she said, 'It's because you looked like you wanted someone to hit you' and walked off somewhere..."

"Y-Yeesh..."

Uomi-san sure is something. Everything she does is so outside the norm. It took me a while, but I might just respect her.

"Ha ha ha. It's been a long time since I've been slapped by someone. I think the last time was with my big sister when I was in elementary school?" Kana-kun was smiling as he said that, but soon his expression became melancholy. "...I probably did have that kind of childish look on my face, like I wanted to be punished so I could be forgiven."

"..."

"I really like that part of Uta-chan. She's really intense and doesn't make sense, but she gets to the heart of the matter," he said as he spoke about his girlfriend with both pride and loneliness in his voice.

"...Why did you say those things earlier, Kana-kun?" I said as I couldn't keep myself from asking. "You knew that doing that would hurt Momota-kun and Ura-kun, right?"

"...I figured that if everyone was just going to pretend that it wasn't awkward and act like they were getting along, then it would be best to get it out in the open and release all the awkwardness in one go," Kana-kun said somewhat jokingly. It was the same thing Uomi-san had said on the car ride over here.

"Honestly... I don't really know myself. Concealing those sensitive wounds over and over again... I probably got a little tired of continuing to pile it up like

that. I mean, I haven't even said Ryu's name in a long time since the three of us tried to not talk about it."

"..."

"In the end, it's just like Momo said. I personally just wanted to believe that it wasn't a big deal. I ruined our fun for my own self-satisfaction... Of course I'd be slapped for something so childish." As he laughed at himself, he rubbed his reddened cheek.

As I stood there unable to say anything, he said, "Orihara-san, won't you go for a walk with me?"



After apologizing over and over again through the door, Urano finally came out of the bathroom. However, he wouldn't look me in the eye. He sat down in front of the door holding his knees while facing down. I couldn't tell if he was upset or embarrassed. Well, he was probably a little of both.

"Come on...cheer up! I apologized a bunch, didn't I? I told you, I didn't mean to peek at you."

"...Screw you. I'll definitely never forgive you..."

"Oh, come ooon..." He'd been like this for a while, and it didn't look like he was going to cheer up any time soon. "So, why were you trying to take a bath in the first place?"

"...When I was running, I tripped by the river and got all wet." His reason was quite a simple one.

Oh, so that's why his shoes were wet.

"This sucks. Why did something like this happen to me?"

"Sigh. Come on, don't mope forever just because someone saw you naked. Man up and stop being a sissy."

"Haah?! You monster with your outdated sexism! If this... If our roles were reversed, this totally would be voyeurism! It would be taken to court for violation of the Minor Offenses Act! Even though there would be a huge uproar if a woman were peeped at, you're saying a guy should just laugh it off and let it

slide?! Are you saying that's what's masculine?! Is this the type of equality of the sexes that you women demand?!"

"I-I get it. I was wrong... I really regret what I did. Sorry. I'm really sorry."

"Dummy... You stupid dummy. I hate you..."

When I apologized after being overwhelmed by his furious words, he turned right around and became unbelievably depressed. He looked like he would cry at any moment.

Well, he was probably crying up until a little while ago in the dressing room.

Little by little, a feeling of guilt welled up inside me. I sat down next to Urano and desperately tried to come up with something comforting to say.

"U-Um... Oh, just relax. I mean, it was so quick, and I hardly saw anything. I have a feeling you were covered by steam!"

"There's no way the dressing room would have steam in it."

"A-Anyway, I wasn't looking. Besides, I have a little brother. I've been taking a bath with him every day lately, so I'm used to seeing a guy's, um, thing, so it wasn't that much of a shock."

"...How old is your brother?"

"He's in his last year of preschool."

"Pre—Y-You're trying to say that mine is preschool size?!"

"No! C-Calm down! I think yours was a little bigger than my little brother's..."

"You did look at it!"

"Geez, what do you want me to do here?!"

No matter what I say, his feelings get hurt! This little thin-skinned monster!

"You're so annoying! Someone saw your penis, so what?! It's just your penis. Every guy has one!"

"What? A w-woman shouldn't say a dirty word like that over and over..."
Urano said as he became embarrassed and blushed.

Well, that probably wasn't very lady-like. Maybe it's because I've been saying

stuff like “Make sure you clean your penis too” to my little brother, but I don’t really have any reservations towards the word penis.

“Damn it... Don’t think things will work themselves out because you went on the offensive... I’m the victim and you’re the assailant. I’m going to have you pay a fitting price!”

“A fitting price? You don’t mean... You’re not telling me to show you my naked body, are you?!”

“Huh?!”

“Geez, aren’t you a little pervert, demanding something like that.”

“N-No, idiot! Who would want to see your filthy body?!”

“Wh-What do you mean by filthy?! I-I don’t want to brag, but I think I have a fairly nice body!”

“I-I don’t care, you uggo! Uggo, uggo, Uuuuuggo!” Urano’s face turned even redder than before.

It seems like he wasn’t demanding to see me naked. That’s a bit of a relief.

“If you’re not asking me to get naked, just what do you want me to do?”

“I mean, like...s-something sincere.”

He didn’t seem to have anything specific in mind. So, after I let out a deep sigh, I said, “Fine. As an apology for seeing you naked...I’ll give you advice. And be sincere about it.”

“Advice?”

“About earlier, with the things Kanao said.”

For a moment, Urano’s expression became strained. “...Shut up. Talking to you about it isn’t going to do anything,” he bluntly spit out at me. However, he looked so lonely I decided to keep the conversation going by force.

“Did you...love her, Urano? That Ryu girl, I mean.”

“...! I-It’s...not like I loved her...I just...”

“You just?”

“I just...wanted her to smile...” Urano said. For some reason that felt like a more noble and purer emotion than just love.

“I loved it when Ryu smiled... So, even when I found out she liked Kana, I thought I would support her. It was frustrating and hard, but if it was Kana, it was fine...”

While hiding his own feelings of love, he supported the love of the person he fell for and his close friend. I wonder just how much pain was born in his heart from that decision. Just how much did sacrificing himself and playing cupid make him suffer?

“I was desperate. Without any reason, I pushed myself to jump to conclusions and thought ‘It will definitely go well’ and ‘I’m sure Ryu will be fine.’ But...Kana didn’t return Ryu’s feelings.” His words gradually became more personal. His voice was soft, yet somehow his words prickled my skin, and his tone was terribly cutting.

“Ahh, I mean, that was his personal choice. There’s no reason to go out with someone you don’t even like. Kana only did what was normal and was simply honest with his feelings. However, my middle school self couldn’t forgive that. I tried to tell myself that it was fine as long as everyone was happy. However, in the end, I... I just pushed my selfishness onto them. I was just a coward getting drunk on my own self-sacrifice. I wanted to turn away from how small I was, and...I blamed Kana. I made Kana the bad guy and convinced myself I wasn’t wrong.”

Before he knew it, his unconditional love had become a self-righteous kind of selfishness. His selfless and immaculate wish had become completely stained by his personal feelings. Even though he wasn’t looking for a reward, he was hoping for a desired outcome. It was a vicious cycle of self-righteousness and self-sacrifice. Since he had stifled his feelings and devoted himself to his cause, he couldn’t forgive the person who simply disregarded the thing that he would never have no matter how much he desired it.

“...After that it was just a mess. Our relationship fell apart decisively. Kana started dating some random girl out of spite, and I became a shut-in because I hated everything. Ryu...distanced herself and never associated with us again.”

He let out a deep breath like he was shaking something off, and then continued, "The fact that Kana and I can smile now is all thanks to Momo."

"Momota?"

"He was an outsider and totally out of the loop, but that's why he acted as an intermediary and tried to fix the deep rift between us. If Momo hadn't been there...I think I would still be a shut-in inside of my room. I wouldn't have gone to high school...and I'd have had no choice but to rake in the dough as a popular YouTuber or something."

"..." It was hard to tell whether he was joking or not.

I wish he wouldn't say something funny like that in the middle of a serious conversation. Why would you be a success in the bad vision of the future?

"...I totally hate myself." His self-flagellating, self-deprecating words wouldn't stop coming. It was like his normal pride and arrogance never existed, and he could only spit out words to torment himself. Or perhaps his normal bad, condescending attitude was fake and just a cover?

I wonder if the cowardly, sensitive boy holding his knees in front of me is the real Urano Izumi.

"I didn't want to believe that I was this kind of pathetic man... I was blinded by romance, and I even hurt one of my best friends... And even though it ended a long time ago, I'm still hanging onto it... I'm so lame. There has to be a limit to just how lame I can be!"



I was walking with Kana-kun on a path that ran between the dense trees.

"When was your first love, Orihara-san?" Kana-kun asked unexpectedly as we walked.

"My first love? It's happening right now." After I answered him without thinking, I was overcome with a fierce feeling of embarrassment.

Hey. Wait a minute. Could it be that I'm saying something really embarrassing?!

As expected, Kana-kun stopped walking and stared hard at me. "Right...now?"

“No, I mean—”

“In other words, Momo is your first love... He’s the first guy you’ve fallen in love with your entire life?”

“...Well, yes.”

This is embarrassing. I’m so embarrassed I could die! I’m enjoying my first love at twenty-seven years old and I’m totally embarrassed.

“S-Sorry for having my first love at twenty-seven...” I said, apologizing for some reason, and Kana shook his head.

“No. I’m sorry for being surprised. I had just assumed that you have a lot of experience... That’s right, love is different for everyone. So, you haven’t dated anyone aside from Momo, Orihara-san?”

“...No.”

“Was there ever a guy that you liked even though you weren’t going to date him?”

“I don’t think so. When I was a student, I lived a pretty plain life that made ever being head over heels in love a distant concept.”

“Really? Then that means...Momo really is your first love, and right now your romance is in full bloom, and you’re smack dab in the middle of happiness, right?”

“Th-That’s right...”

“Well then, may your love stay strong forever.” He looked at me with a kind gaze, and I couldn’t tell if he was making fun of me or being sincere. Either way, it was embarrassing.

“Um... I kind of messed up my first question,” he continued. “I’d actually been planning to listen to your stories about your first love and heartbreak, and from there I’d intended to expand the conversation, but... Unexpectedly, I’ve been put in a really good mood.”

It seemed like my romantic history had disturbed his plans. I felt a little guilty and also felt really embarrassed.

“Well, Orihara-san, it seems like your first love is going quite splendidly...but there are a lot of people in the world whose first love ends in failure. Many people’s first love doesn’t lead anywhere. Even when it does, oftentimes they’ll break up with their first love in a few years. I suppose there are almost no people in the world who are able to date their first love and eventually marry them.”

What he was saying was definitely true. Personally, I don’t have any experience, but I’ve known a lot of people who failed in not only their first love but in romance in general: people who’ve been rejected after confessing; people who were able to start dating, but who then got dumped or even dumped their partner themselves; people who got back together with someone even though they dumped them, only to dump them again...

“Not even just first loves. For an adult, love when you were a kid or love when you were a student probably just looks like you were playing pretend. Well, there are couples who start dating when they’re students and keep going until they’re married, but those cases are the rarest of the rare... The majority of young couples are just excited over a brief love and end up having a messy breakup.”

For a second, I forgot who I was talking to. The person in front of me was a boy named Kanao Haruka, a playboy with a cute girlfriend who was in his first year of high school. Despite that, he was speaking of things from an extremely broad perspective. He himself was a student presently engaged in a high school romance, yet here he was giving a cynical view on that very thing.

“Romances when you’re a kid probably just become funny stories when you grow into an adult. I think it’s great to be able to have a drink and talk fondly about how ‘A long time ago I had a heartbreak like so and so.’ If you can just take your failures, your pain, and your feelings of emptiness and turn them all into funny stories...”

Kana stopped mid-sentence and then looked straight at me. “By the way, Orihara-san, this is a little off-topic, but it’s said that a child’s sense of taste is more sensitive than an adult’s, isn’t it?”

“Huh... Yes, it seems so. Like how children can’t eat vegetables because their

strong sense of taste makes them taste way more bitter.”

“When you flip that on its head, it becomes that adults’ sense of taste becomes duller. When you become an adult, your sense of taste becomes duller, you become numb to bitter things, and then you become able to find the vegetables you hated delicious. The more someone becomes an adult, the more numb they become... I wonder if the heart is the same way?”

As he continued to look at me, Kana asked me, “When you become an adult, do you gradually become more numb and more able to laugh about and accept painful memories? When you become an adult, do you stop caring about the mistakes and pain from your childhood before you realize it? And are able to forget about them? When I become an adult, will this feeling that’s filling my heart right now disappear?”

“When I become an adult.” Kana-kun said those words again and again while his hand gripped his chest. His questioning eyes made him look like he was cornered and in imminent peril. He looked like he was asking for help; it was like he was hoping for some kind of decisive and dramatic change to happen when you become an adult. This boy, who was only old enough to be called a kid, was questioning me, who was old enough to be called an adult, like he was confirming something.

“What’s it like, being an adult? When did you feel like you had become an adult?”

That question suddenly pulled me back into the past. It was so nostalgic. A long time ago, I had asked an adult the exact same question.



It was summer vacation in elementary school. After the usual cooking class had ended—because my mother was once again late picking me up—Uryu-sensei and I were killing time with just the two of us.

“Adults just don’t understand!”

“Oh, you’re in a bad mood today, huh, Hime-chan?” It was just as Uryu-sensei said; that day, I was in a bad mood. I remember that I’d had a fight with my mom, but unfortunately, I don’t remember what the fight was about. Well, it

almost certainly had to do with video games. We'd fight about video games, and from there it'd turn into something about my daily habits... That was more or less how it usually went, I think.

"No matter how many times I explain things to my mom, she just won't understand anything about video games. I told her I'd do my homework after I save my game... I mean, I have my own routine too! And no matter how many times I explain it to her, she just calls the N64, PlayStation, and SNES all 'Nintendo.'"

"Ha ha ha. Well, what can you do about that? It wouldn't be strange for someone from your mom's generation to not know anything about video games."

"Grr... I want to hurry up and become an adult! When I become an adult, I'll buy as many games as I want and play them as much as I want!" my elementary school self said triumphantly.

At this juncture I'm grateful for my mother scolding me, and I understand well enough that being an adult isn't all that great, but...in elementary school, I admired being an adult. I thought that being able to buy anything you want with your own money and being able to do the things you enjoy without anyone getting mad at you was wonderful. This admiration I had towards being an adult was way too pure and way too inaccurate.

"When you become an adult... Well, there's a lot of hard parts to being an adult, Hime-chan."

"Really?"

"Yes. You'll understand when you become one."

"When did you feel like you'd become an adult, Uryu-sensei?" I asked, and she had a puzzling look on her face.

"Hmm... I wonder. I've never really been aware of it. It's like, I just slid into adulthood, or someone just decided 'She's an adult now.' Or maybe I'm still a kid?"

"Huh? But you're a good adult, Uryu-sensei. You work, you're married, and you have a kid."

“Well, that’s true, but... From society’s point of view, it’s kind of questionable whether I’m good or not. To tell the truth, I had a shotgun marriage,” Uryu-sensei said in an indifferent tone.

These days they call it a “marriage due to unexpected pregnancy,” but long ago it was normal to call it a “shotgun wedding.” I feel like society was much more critical back then than it is now.

“I had a shotgun wedding, plus at the time my husband was still a teenage student... Yeah, that whole time was awful. It became this whole uproar that got both of our families involved. My husband’s parents were so mad at him, and my parents were so mad at me.” Her tone was light as she spoke, but I think it was definitely a pretty big uproar. Even though I was a kid, I was somehow able to picture it. Now that I’m an adult, I’m able to picture it more.

“Neither one of us was thinking about marriage at all, but when I got pregnant, we thought that getting married was the only thing to do. We got married in a huge panic...and when my child was born, my husband had a part-time job while going to school, and I also worked while raising the baby. We had our parents help us as much as they could... A lot of stuff’s happened, nothing went according to plan, we’re flying by the seat of our pants in our hectic everyday lives, and the result of all that is what you see before you.” She spoke in a humorous tone, but it felt like there were a lot of different emotions mixed in there. I couldn’t possibly imagine the grand drama that had surely taken place before I was even born.

“Even though I’m still a high schooler in my mind...I’ve gotten older. I’d probably get yelled at and told, ‘Aren’t you aware you’re a mother?’ for saying this kind of stuff, but I still can’t believe that I got married and even had a kid.” After saying that, Uryu-sensei placed her hand on my head. “When I was your age, Hime-chan, I used to think that adults were much more outstanding creatures. I thought that when I became an adult, I could do things more properly. But when I finally did...it was really tough. I’m always worrying and failing; I’m not able to do anything properly at all.”

Her words were a shock to an elementary schooler like me. Like her, I’d baselessly thought that when you become an adult, surely you’d become an outstanding person. *All I do now is play video games, but I’ll surely become an*

upstanding person. I'll become the kind of adult who won't be unsure or be worried and will do what needs to be done perfectly, I thought.

To put it in terms of Pokémon, I thought of it like reaching the Pokémon's final evolution: elementary school is Charmander, middle school is Charmeleon, and being over twenty years old is being Charizard. I'd vaguely pictured a gentle image of the future where, when you finished growing as a child, you became this complete existence known as an adult.

"Well, I don't think I'm good enough at adulting to the point that I can proudly stick out my chest and say 'I'm a good adult.'"

"Now that you mention it, you don't really seem like an adult, Uryu-sensei... You're kind of like a child."

"Ah."

"Oh. Um, like in a good way!"

"In a good way? In that case it's okay. Ha ha ha." She laughed cheerfully again, and this time looked into the distance. "It might be that there are no adults in this world. I'm sure everyone is doing their best to pretend they're an adult."



Now that I'd become a twenty-seven-year-old adult, I could understand Uryu-sensei's words with my whole heart in a way that I couldn't as a kid.

"When did you feel like you've become an adult?" I understood her feelings when she was asked that question and made that puzzled expression so well that it hurt. I also had that feeling that I was just pretending to be an adult while I lived as one. Even though I feel like my mind hasn't changed much since I was in high school, I've continued to age, and before I knew it, I wasn't allowed to be a kid anymore. I started doing my best to pretend to be an adult. I've somehow managed to cater to my environment and live as an adult while not understanding just what an adult was. I was living as a completely different person than the one that I pictured as a child.

In front of me now was a boy, a single child. He was totally different from my younger self, but he resembled me in some ways. He was seeing the creatures

known as adults in a special light and thinking of them as an existence completely different from his own. He was thinking that if you evolve from a kid into an adult, you become stronger; he was thinking that if Charmeleon evolves into Charizard, it can fly.

However, that's unfortunately just a childish fantasy. It's not like something dramatically changes because you became an adult—also, there's no way you can fly. It's just like the first Pokémon games, where even though your Charmeleon evolved into Charizard, it couldn't learn Fly. Well, they fixed that with every game from Pokémon Yellow onward, but putting that aside...

What should I say to him? How should I answer this child's question as an adult?

After a great deal of hesitation, I said, "Hey, Kana-kun. Do you watch Kamen Rider?"

"K-Kamen Rider?" Perhaps because he was confused by the sudden change in topic, Kana-kun was stupefied. "Um... I watched it when I was little. The ones where Suda Masaki and Fukushi Souta starred."

"I-I see."

Oh man, really? He was little during "W" and "Fourze." He was little during Heisei Kamen Rider Series Phase 2. As expected of a child of the twenty-first century... He's from that generation where it's normal for the transformation belt to talk...

I felt like I would faint because of the shock from our age difference, but I desperately cheered myself up.

"I... I still watch it," I said proudly with my chest puffed out. "I watch it every week without missing an episode. I've watched Kamen Rider every Sunday for twenty years, since *Kuuga*. I watched it when it was shown at eight in the morning, and I've even watched it since it changed to nine in the morning. I even watch the movies and direct-to-video ones. And whenever an actor who starred in Kamen Rider acts in a movie or television drama after that, on the inside I go 'I knew who they were before this' with a smug look on my face."

"I-Is that right?" I felt like he was looking at me like "What is this woman

saying?” and felt like my heart was going to break. Even still, I frantically continued.

“I’ve loved it since my childhood. I thought I would grow out of it when I became an adult, but I never did, and now I’m this age. Even though I became an adult, I didn’t change.”

“...”

“Aside from Kamen Rider, I’ve also kept playing video games since I was a kid. *Smash Bros.* is a game that came out when I was in middle school, and I play it even now. For twenty years, I’ve loved it the entire time.”

“The entire time...”

“Earlier you guys were talking about card games like they were a memory from elementary school, but...the truth is, I still play them.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes. I buy them on a regular basis. I just can’t forget the feeling of elation from getting a rare card or how fun it is to build a new deck. Well, I don’t have anyone to play with, so I’ve been doing it by myself this entire time...”

“B-By yourself...?!” Kana-kun said, looking taken aback.

Crap. I said something unnecessary. I accidentally talked about a secret I had never told anyone! It’s come out that I’m a twenty-seven-year-old woman who plays children’s card games in her room by herself! The woman at the toy store holding a smartphone in her hand that wasn’t calling anyone saying, “Was it this blue pack? There’s so many that look alike I just don’t know...” like she came to buy a present for her relative’s kid was just me in camouflage!

“D-Don’t tell anyone what I told you just now! It’s a hobby I’m keeping a secret from even Momota-kun! It’s a total secret!”

“I-I understand! I won’t tell anyone...” Kana nodded like he was going to take the secret to his grave. It felt weird being nodded at so seriously, though.

“A-Anyway,” I said, forcibly changing the conversation. “You don’t really change, even when you become an adult—rather, even when you become the age where people start to call you an adult.”

“...”

“I still like the things I liked back then, and I hate the same things too. Even if my sense of taste has become dull, there are still things I can’t eat.”

I continued talking, doing my best not to mince words and thinking I would be sincere. In this situation I didn’t know what the right thing to say was. If I were a good adult, I could have probably said some wonderful proverb that leads children down the right path, or I could have calmed the situation down with some believable lip service to avoid crushing a child’s dreams. However, I couldn’t do that. So, at the least, I thought I would be sincere. He asked me his question with his true feelings, so I would answer him with mine—not as an adult, but as a person, just like Uryu-sensei did for me long ago. Just for now, I would stop pretending to be an adult and speak to him from an equal position.

“When did I feel like I had become an adult? I’m sorry. Honestly, I don’t know. It’s like I slid into adulthood. I don’t feel like there was a change that was that dramatic.”

“...”

“Of course, a lot of things did change. There’s a lot of things that I’ve forgotten from when I was a student. In fact, the other day I had a study session with Momota-kun, but I had forgotten so much about high school studies it was laughable. Even though I had worked so hard studying, all of it had just fallen out of my head. Ha ha ha.”

After I chuckled it off, I continued. “However, there’s a lot of things that haven’t changed and that I haven’t forgotten. Good memories and bad memories remain in my heart.”

Some memories fade, and some you never forget. Some memories are beautified as time passes, and some deteriorate along with time. And then there are some memories that, as time goes by, cast a deep dark shadow on your heart.

“There’s a lot of people who talk about problems in human relationships like they know everything and say things like ‘Time heals all wounds,’ but nobody knows that. If all problems could be solved by time, then no one would suffer. Actually, aren’t the majority of the problems in the world ones that can’t be

solved by time?”

Just because time has passed—just because you’ve become an adult—doesn’t always mean that the problem will be solved. Time treats everyone equally and continues regardless of subtleties of the human heart.

“...You’re right,” Kana-kun groaned like he was in pain. “There’s no way that time passing by and becoming an adult solves everything... I knew this. The truth is, I did. There’s no way that something would change dramatically just because I became an adult.”

“Yes, that’s why,” I said as I looked straight at this boy who was denying his child self so much that he was overly beautifying adults, “I think it’s fine if you don’t push yourself to try to become an adult.”

“Huh...”

“By the way, thanks for cleverly supporting us and giving Momota-kun and me time to play by ourselves at the river earlier.”

“No problem...”

“I think you’re able to deal with anything cleverly and that you’re very mature for your age, but I also think you’re still a kid after all. I think you should stay a kid. You shouldn’t just hold things in; you should let it out when things are bitter or painful. 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.”

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“Momo, isn’t it about time you came out?” Kana murmured with a sigh. He had been lingering alone for a little bit after he parted ways with Orihara-san.

I was embarrassed, but I resigned myself to my fate and came out from behind a tree.

“...You knew I was here?”

“Yeah, I did. Your body is big and stands out, after all. It doesn’t seem like Orihara-san noticed you though.”

“My bad. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop on your conversation...” Since Orihara-

san was taking so long to come back from the garbage disposal area, I was worried and I went to look for her. When I saw her talking with Kana, I knew that it was wrong to hide, but I was so curious about their conversation I couldn't help myself; I instantly hid myself and listened in.

"It's fine. It wasn't like it was a secret... Well, I think it would be kind of you to forget that part with the card games."

"...Yeah." I felt like I was going to cry when I heard that conversation.

I'll figure out some way to bring up card games indirectly sometime. I'll act like I really want to play card games with her, no matter what.

"Orihara-san is a good woman," Kana said, his face becoming slightly cheerful. "If she weren't your girlfriend, I probably would have fallen for her."

"Even if it's a joke, knock it off. I'll get mad."

"Sorry, sorry," Kana chuckled and continued. "She didn't get mad at me or cheer me up. It wasn't like she talked down to me or lectured me either... Orihara-san had empathy and engaged with my perspective. However, that made me painfully aware of just how much of a child I was being."

"..."

"I'm sorry, Momo. I was acting childish earlier."

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to Ura. Geez... It's all your fault my plan was ruined. I'd planned a fun event for after we ate."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah. When the barbecue was done, I was planning to present my poem."

"..."

"This time I worked hard to write one about nature. It's a theme I wasn't familiar with, so I struggled with it a little. But thanks to that, I feel like a new door has been opened inside of me."

"...Momo, stop. You wouldn't call that an event, you'd call it an accident. I mean...why are you even acting like an expert poet?"

My poems are as unpopular as ever. Even though I came up with a good one...

“Momo, you sure do act weirdly childish sometimes.”

“Ah, lay off it. After all, it’s fine if we’re childish, right? We’re still kids after all. You, Ura, and me.”

After pausing slightly, Kana nodded his head and said, “That’s right.”



“Okay, and what’s so bad about being lame?” I blurted out my response to Urano instantly without stopping to think about it. “You have all this self-loathing, and you keep saying you’re lame and uncool, but it’s fine if you’re lame. What are you even trying to look cool for?”

“...”

“I mean, even if you’re lame that doesn’t make you lame. Given the circumstances, it’s normal to be lame, so calling yourself lame is wrong. Honestly, thinking it’s lame is what’s really lame...”

“Please speak Japanese.”

“H-Hold on. I still haven’t gotten my thoughts together,” I said while I racked my brain. I tried to put my feelings and thoughts into words as best I could; if I didn’t, they wouldn’t reach him. “Um, yeah... I mean, last month I was pretty bad, right? You know, how I’d really lost sight of things because of everything with Momota... When I think back on it, I think I was really uncool and pathetic.”

“You’re right.”

“Ngh...”

Don’t agree with me. Say no to that part!

“I really hated how lame I was. I thought everything would go well, but in the end I couldn’t do a single thing the way I’d planned to. I had so much pride and kept trying to act cool despite nothing working out, but that was just me being even more lame... Anyway, the whole experience got me thinking, maybe everyone is like that.”

“Everyone?”

“I feel like maybe everyone acts uncool when they get feelings for someone or when they fall in love. Everyone loses sight of what’s around them, isn’t sure what they’re doing, isn’t able to calm down at all, and gets nervous because of every little thing...and before they know it, they’ve become pretty lame.”

Uncool. Pathetic. Lame. When you fall in love, it’s...

“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.”

People who are desperate, earnest, engrossed, and at their wit’s end in their seriousness end up looking uncool. They become unaware of their surroundings, don’t realize how foolish they look to others, and are only able to see that one person.

“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.”

“...”

“Or, well, I hope that’s the case, anyway. Hopefully I’m not the only one who gets lame like that,” I said, smiling and trying to poke fun at myself.

However, Urano wasn’t smiling. His eyes were slightly squinted, and he was quiet as if he were thinking about what I said.

“Urano, did you confess your feelings to Ryu? Did you tell her you love her?”

He shook his head and frowned as if he was in pain. “I couldn’t say it. In the end, I couldn’t say anything... While I was taking my time, she found out how I felt, and things ended in chaos without being settled...”

“I see...”

Urano’s love was over without it reaching a clear ending. So that’s why. That’s why Urano was so serious when he helped me out—he was serious like it was his own problem.

“You laughing like that just pisses me off.” “Ultimately, you’re just running away.” “If you’re going to wallow in that half-assed pining for lost love routine and force yourself to laugh about it so pitifully, you should try putting it all on the line at least once.”

He probably wasn’t saying those things only to me with that oh-so-serious and scary face of his. His sharp and aggressive words were aimed at none other than himself, and he probably wanted them to pierce through his chest.

“Laugh it up. Even though I acted all high and mighty with the things I said to you, I wasn’t able to do any of them myself. I just tried to get you to do what I couldn’t...”

“I won’t laugh. I won’t laugh at you, no matter how lame or pathetic you are. I mean...you didn’t laugh at me.”

“...”

“It doesn’t really matter what you were thinking. Thanks to you, I was able to feel better and hold my head up a little higher. Isn’t that a good thing?” I said flatly as I stood up slowly. “I don’t know how much of a hard time you guys had in middle school with that love triangle. I won’t try to tell you ‘Forget about it’ or ‘Keep your chin up’ as if I know what you went through. However, I don’t think you have to be embarrassed about how uncool you were, you know? Probably every person on the planet gets embarrassed when they fall in love.”

*Everyone looks uncool when they truly fall in love with someone.
However...that in itself is a wonderful thing and totally cool.*

Urano said nothing; he was silent like he was deep in thought.

I extended my hand towards him. “All right. Let’s get going.”

“To where?”

“Isn’t it obvious? To go make up.”

“M-Make up?”

“After coming all the way here to camp, we can’t let it end with this crappy mood, right? There’s still a lot of fun things to do, after all. I won’t let you just keep sulking forever.”

“I-I get it.” Urano seemed like he’d gotten convinced by all my rambling. He timidly reached out his hand and grabbed mine.

“...Ibusuki.”

“What?”

“No, um, I mean...th-th—”

“...P-Pfft.” Urano had started to say something, but partway through, I’d lost it and burst out laughing. “Pff... Ha ha ha!”

“Wh-What’s so funny?”

“I mean, all of a sudden you called me Ibusuki like a normal person. Up until now you’ve just called me things like ‘you’ and ‘dummy.’”

“Come on!”

“What’s with you all of a sudden? Oh man, this is rich. You really can call people by their names if you try, ha ha ha!”

“Grr... Wh-What’s wrong with that?! You’re laughing too much! Y-You just said that you wouldn’t laugh at me!”

“This is different from that... He he. It’s funny in a weird way. Ah man, what am I going to do now? I feel like I’m going to laugh every time you call me Ibusuki now.”

“Ugh! Shut up, idiot! I’m never going to call you that again!” He shook off my hand, stood up, and quickly walked away.

“W-Wait. I’m sorry.”

“...Shut up, uggo. Don’t follow me, dummy.”

“I said I’m sorry! By the way, what were you about to say?”

“Nothing! I’m not going to say it again!” Urano said, seeming pretty angry for some reason.



The sun had set before we knew it. The fresh green of the trees became dyed in black, and the mountains were wrapped in the darkness of night. We all

assembled in front of the cabin, and Kana and Ura faced each other while bathed in the light of the entrance.

“I’m sorry about earlier, Ura.”

“Bah. It’s fine. I don’t care. I’m broad-minded after all,” Ura sneered at Kana, who was lowering his head. Kana smiled broadly and reached out his hand in the face of Ura’s usual arrogant attitude.

“Huh? What’s this?”

“It’s a handshake. To make peace.”

“Tch...” Ura clicked his tongue, sounding extremely irritated. However, he shook Kana’s hand while the four of us gazed at them with a look of relief.

“Seriously, he’s such a troublesome boyfriend,” Uomi said with a serious look. Apparently, she had unreservedly given Kana some tough love while I wasn’t looking. I suppose she was worried in her own way, though I couldn’t really read her emotions from her face.

“Yes! Friendship restored! Mood reset! All right! Let’s shoot off some fireworks!” Ibusuki shouted. She clapped loudly to change the mood and lifted up the fireworks set we’d had on the ground, her eyes glittering with anticipation.

In the middle of the darkness, we started the summer tradition of playing with fireworks. We lit the candle we were going to use for igniting the fireworks, and everyone chose their favorite firework from among the large amount we’d purchased.

“I’ve got dibs on this big one!” Ibusuki said. She grabbed the biggest stationary firework first, lit it, and placed it on the ground. The fuse grew shorter and shorter, but even when there was nothing left of it, the firework didn’t go off.

“...Huh? What? It didn’t go off?”

“Maybe the flame went out partway?” Ura said.

“No way... Why is it doing this? Hey, Urano. Go check it out.”

“What? Screw you, why do I have to?”

“I-It’s fine, just go! You’re a man, aren’t you?!”

“Screw you! Go yourself! D-Don’t push me!” As they pushed each other, they gradually got closer, and just as they were a few steps away...the firework ignited, splendidly shooting out a colorful flame.

“Kyaah!” they both yelled, and they fell on their behinds. After that they loudly argued with one another, but their faces quickly changed to cheerful expressions as their attention was stolen by the beauty of the firework.

As for Kana and Uomi, they were playing with handheld fireworks.

“Fireworks sure are pretty, huh, Kana-kun?”

“Yes, they are.”

“They’d be more pretty if they weren’t fireworks.”

“Yeah... Wait, what? Wh-What do you mean?”

“If you don’t understand, that’s your answer.”

“...Huh? S-Sorry, I don’t understand at all.”

“Relax. I’m just speaking without thinking about anything.”

“Yeah, I felt like that was the case.”

“Fireworks sure are pretty, huh?”

“...Yes, they are.”

Well... What’s important is they’re having fun.

I also thought I’d play with something, and I looked through the mountain of fireworks when Orihara-san got close to me.

“Momota-kun, won’t you do these with me?” she said, holding sparklers. I didn’t see why not, so as the two of us crouched on the ground and blocked the wind, we lit the sparklers. They crackled with an orange sphere of light that shone in the darkness.

“Wow, it’s really pretty.”

“It sure is.”

“It’s been a really long time since I’ve played with sparklers.” Behind the pale

light and thin smoke, Orihara-san smiled silently. “Thank you, Momota-kun. I’ve been able to make a lot of summertime memories because you invited me to a fun trip like this. This is the first summer I’ve ever been so extroverted.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you,” I said. “Thank you for getting along with my friends, Orihara-san.”

“Wh-Why would you be the one thanking me?”

“I mean... Until now I thought that dating was just something between two people. I thought the most important thing was the couple’s feelings, and as long as they treasured one another, things would go well. But coming camping with my friends and my girlfriend and playing around with everyone like this was totally fun.”

Also, even though I wouldn’t say it—even though I couldn’t say it... Orihara-san sincerely heard out Kana. She took care of an important friend of mine the same way she took care of me, and that made me truly, incredibly happy.

“Of course, the most important thing is our feelings. There’s no mistaking that, but...it’s not like that means everything else doesn’t matter. You and I have our own relationships with people and our own worlds we live in, after all.”

My girlfriend is twelve years older than me, and we’re an adult and a high schooler in a secret relationship; perhaps that’s why there was a part of me that was excessively on edge. I’d had this cool, somewhat narcissistic resolution that I’d protect Orihara-san no matter what kind of enemy may appear, and that I’d be by Orihara-san’s side even if it meant making an enemy of the entire world. However, when I thought it over, I realized we’re not only surrounded by enemies.

“I think...I can’t really put it into words well, but you taking care of what’s important to me...made me really happy.”

We both have people who are important to us aside from one another—things aside from our partner that we cherish. And because we cherish these things, we wish for our most cherished person, our partner, to understand them as well. That may just be my ego talking, or that may just be me forcing my values onto other people, but I think there’s no greater happiness than getting

your partner to understand the things you cherish.

“I-I didn’t really do anything that special. I’m really happy that everyone included me in the activities!” Orihara-san said as she waved her hands, embarrassed. “But yeah... I see. That might just be what dating someone is all about.”

She lowered her tone. “Yuki-chan also said that ‘marriage is the joining of two houses.’ She said that getting along with each other’s family is just as important as getting along with one another.”

She continued as I listened on. “It’s not like we’re Adam and Eve, with just the two of us in love and alone in the world. We both have people aside from each other who are important to us, like our friends and family. No matter how important your partner is, ignoring everyone aside from them doesn’t feel right.”

“Even the type of romance where you elope seems cool, but, like, things going well on the whole is what’s best, right?”

“Yeah...things being good overall is definitely what’s best.”

Our vocabularies struggled a bit to describe things, but I felt like we both understood what we wanted to say. It’s a really simple feeling: having a world that you cherish be cherished by the person you also cherish makes you happy.

“Hey, Momota-kun.”

“What is it?”

“Little by little, it’d be nice to get to know more about each other’s worlds like this from now on, huh?” Orihara-san said.

“Yeah.” I firmly nodded to the precious sound of her voice.

Right now, I’m still a secret: a pathetic boyfriend that Orihara-san can’t proudly tell her family or friends about. However, one day I will definitely, absolutely become the kind of outstanding boyfriend that Orihara-san can proudly brag about. I’ll be the kind of wonderful boyfriend who’s a part of her world and who can protect the people who are important to her.

“Oh,” Orihara-san said as the ends of our sparklers fell to the ground at the

same time, “Oh no... It fell off. It’s kind of sad when a sparkler’s flame runs out. It feels like the summer is ending right along with it.”

I also really understood that feeling. However, I said, “What are you talking about? Summer is just getting started,” and pulled out some new sparklers. “Let’s do lots of fun stuff. Our summer break’s only just begun!”

“Yeah! That’s right!” Orihara-san nodded firmly, but her face became clouded with a dark expression. “Well, I normally have work, though. Unlike high schoolers, me getting a one-month vacation is just impossible.”

“...”

“And not just that, but... I just got a text from my office, and I kind of need to go to work tomorrow afternoon. Do you think it would be okay to head back a little early tomorrow?”

“...Oh. Yes.” Looking at her face with extreme sadness written all over it, I couldn’t find any words to say to her. No matter how much I try to understand her world, this melancholy is still something that’s beyond this high schooler’s understanding.

♥ Chapter 3

The Princess is Out of Shape While students enjoy their summer vacation to the fullest, adults have to work. Still, even adults have vacation. At my company we get exactly two weeks of vacation, and if you work on the weekend, you can use that as time off on a different day. In fact, they get mad at you if you don't take time off; apparently, the government has gotten finicky lately about things like reduction of overtime and the use of paid vacation.

Getting more time off might be nice, but just because there's more time off doesn't mean there's less work. You do overtime in the first place because you have unfinished work, so it's like, what do you want us to do about that work if you don't want us to take overtime? "Take time off and don't do overtime, but increase results" is the type of impossible-to-win game that modern-day adults are forced to play.

I think that if you want to end overworking, rather than just ordering people not to do overtime, more radical reforms to labor are necessary... That said, there's little point in a single worthless company drone like myself thinking those things. I just have to make use of the privileges and time off that I'm given.

I used two of my days off for the camping trip; Sunday and Monday were to be the camping trip, and I had taken Tuesday off as well. In the end I got called

into work on Monday, but luckily the trouble was solved within the day. Today, Tuesday, I used my day off to come over to my friend Yuki-chan's house to hang out.

"Oh my gosh! Ma-kun, long time no see!" In the living room of a house that still had signs of being brand new, a one-year-and-a-few-months-old tiny little boy was waddling over to me.

Oh wow, he's so cute! He's so super cute! What's the deal with this little guy?!

I couldn't wait for him to walk to me, so I went to go hug him. After not seeing Macaron-kun for such a long time, I instantly became super-duper excited when I saw him.

"Oh, wow, you've gotten so big and heavy!"

"Goo...gah."

"Do you remember me? It's Hime-chan."

"...Gah, gah."

"What?! H-He talked?! Yuki-chan! It's amazing! Ma-kun talked! He said my name! This child could be a genius!"

"He isn't saying that. Calm down," Yuki-chan said wryly while she placed some cups filled with tea on the table.

After I put Macaron-kun down, he walked over to Yuki-chan while saying, "Mamma."

It looks like mommy is his number one.

"It's amazing. It's only been one or two months since I last saw him, but I feel like he's gotten so big. Kids really do grow up fast, huh?" I said, impressed. I sat down and reached for a cup. "His body's gotten bigger, and he's gotten really good at walking."

"That's right. I'm with him every day, but I'm still surprised by how fast he's growing. Today he'll be able to do something like it's only natural when yesterday he couldn't," Yuki-chan said with deep emotion as she lifted up Macaron.

I felt strangely impressed at how Yuki-chan was being a proper mother. Her experienced touch was completely different from the awkward way I had been holding him.

“Okay, eat this, Macaron.” After Yuki-chan sat him down in a high chair, she took out some vegetable bread from its package and placed it on plastic dishware. Macaron immediately reached for it.

“What about grace?”

“G...wace,” he said in a tiny voice, and he brought his hands together shakily.

“Oh, that’s just so cute!” All I could do was let out an enraptured sigh. I then unconsciously pulled out my smartphone and hit the shutter button rapid-fire style. I don’t really take selfies or pictures of my food, but I take a lot of pictures and videos during moments like these. “Macaron-kun really is so cute! Has he been scouted by a talent agency yet?”

“No.”

“No way... Just what are the talent scouts of the world looking at?! Right here is a future Academy Award-winning actor—no, even better, a candidate for a future *Kamen Rider*!”

“...So, to you, *Kamen Rider* ranks higher than the Academy Awards?”

“Oh yeah, Yuki-chan. Here’s a souvenir for Macaron-kun.”

“Oh, thank you. Hey, Hime...this is really hard to say because the feeling is appreciated, but can you stop bringing a new *Kamen Rider* doll every time you come here? My child isn’t the suitable age for it, and he likes *Anpanman*.”

“That’s no good, Yuki-chan. If you don’t give him the gifted education he deserves when he’s little, he won’t grow up to be a good Kamen Rider.”

“Why are you trying to turn my kid into a Kamen Rider?”

“If you foster his love for *Kamen Rider* at a young age, one day he’ll go down in history as a great suit actor, like the great Mr. Heisei Rider, Takaiwa Seiji-san.”

“You want him to be a suit actor?”

“Hey, Yuki-chan, are you dissing suit actors because you think they work behind the scenes? Takaiwa-san is really amazing, you know. Aside from *Hibiki* and *Kuuga*, he was the suit actor for the main Rider in all of the Heisei-era series. He changes all of his actions and gestures to match the personality of the main character, and his range of expression is extraordinary! It’s always amazed me how he was able to do all those actions in that heavy suit with only a few centimeters of visibility—”

“Please understand that I’m not making fun of suit actors, I’m making fun of you,” Yuki-chan said, reproaching me as she teased me. She then let out a tired sigh and had an exacerbad smile on her face. “Be careful, Hime. A single woman doting too much on her friend’s kid... Well, it doesn’t bode too well.”

“Oof...” She hit a weak spot, and all I could do was groan.

“If kids are so cute, then make one yourself and dote on them.”

“E-Even if you tell me to make one...”

“You should try it with Momota-kun,” she teased me. My face became warm like it had ignited.

“Wh-What are you saying, geez! W-We still...aren’t ready for that kind of thing.”

“I’m just joking. Of course getting pregnant now would be a problem. If you’re going to do it, be sure to use protection.”

“Th-That’s not what I meant! Geez...” I was so embarrassed I couldn’t say anything. Seeing my reaction, Yuki-chan’s smile grew.

“He he he. I’m happy to see that you’re still having a pure romance like a middle schooler.”

“You’re so mean...”

“I’m complimenting you this time. So, how was the camping trip?”

“Oh, yeah. On the whole it was fun,” I said, simply giving my impression of the other day’s camping trip. There were of course a few things I didn’t need to bring up, so I just talked about the fun parts.

“...I see. I wondered what would happen when I first heard about the trip, but

I'm glad it seems like you had a good time."

"It's because Momota-kun was considerate about a lot of things. They were all nice kids, so I was able to have fun like I was hanging out with my friends."

"That's excellent. I'm sure Momota-kun is happy too. As a boyfriend, he should be pretty delighted that his girlfriend gets along with his friends."

Is that so? If that's the case, I'm happy too.

"Although there *were* a lot of times where I kept realizing 'Yeah, these kids and I really are twelve years apart,' and it gave me some mixed feelings." I was still concerned about things like the generation gap and the difference between adults and children, even though I'd tried not to worry about them.

"That's...something that's unavoidable. It'll be a problem that'll probably follow you as long as you continue to date Momota-kun."

"Yes, I understand." I nodded firmly and stood up from my seat. Macaron-kun had just finished eating his bread, so I picked him up from his highchair. "All right! Now that you've had your snack, let's have lots of fun with your onee-chan, Ma-kun!"

In my arms, Ma-kun went "Goo..." and nodded his head. I felt like he was saying, "Yeah, I love playing with Hime-chan," so I said to him, "Yes, I love it too," right back to him.

I stretched out both my arms and lifted Macaron-kun up high with an "Upsy-daisy!" It was dangerous to toss him or do it vigorously, so I only did it slowly. As I lifted him up, Macaron-kun smiled for me.

Oh, so you like this?

To be honest, it was killing my arms and lower back because he weighed a lot more than before. However, the fatigue disappeared since I got to look at his smile, and I did upsy-daisy with Macaron-kun a couple more times.

"Hey, Hime, are you okay? If you hold him like that, you're going to hurt your back."

"Ha ha ha. What are you saying, Yuki-chan? Don't treat me like an old lady, I'm still twenty-seven. I'm young." After I finished boasting, my arms *were* a

little tired, so I lowered Macaron-kun to the floor once and then tried to pick him up again. Unthinkingly, without bending my knees at all, I bent my back, leaned forward and tried to lift up this approximately 17-and-a-half-pound one-year-old with all my strength. I was standing firm and building up momentum when...

“...?!” I felt a shock like I’d been struck by lightning that ran through the core of my body.

≡

“Let’s spend some time apart for a little while.”

“Huh?” It was the morning of the first week of summer vacation. I was in the middle of the summer vacation homework that I was trying to get done early when suddenly, without any warning, I got a text from my girlfriend that made me doubt my own eyes. I stared hard at my smartphone screen.

“...What? Huh? Time apart?”

What does that mean? Is she...mad? Did I do something?

Until yesterday everything was fine. We were in full-on sappy couple mode, and her last message to me was, “Nyoo! I hate work. I wanna spend summer break with Momota-kun. If I do my best at work, will you give me head pats again?” so the difference was kind of staggering.

What could have happened? Did I step on some kind of landmine without realizing it? If I made her mad, I have to do something about it...but I have no idea what happened, so there’s nothing I can do...

“...Hm?” Just as I was at a loss about what to do, I suddenly received a rare phone call from a certain number.

“H-Hello?”

“Momota-kun, it’s been a while.” The caller was Orihara-san’s friend Yuki-san. I exchanged contact info with her back when I was called to the pub and given the task of taking Orihara-san home when she was drunk.

“Is it okay to talk right now?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m just doing homework at home right now.”

“You mean your summer break homework? Wow. You sure are diligent. It hasn’t even been a week since summer vacation started, right?”

“Well, I don’t have anything else to do.”

“That takes me back. Summer vacation homework... It’s an awful tradition that sums up the negative side of Japanese school education. Children should be able to study a field that they’re interested in during breaks... The only advanced nation that has tons of homework during long breaks like this is Japan, you know. Compulsory assignments like these make Japan’s youth think things like ‘I’ll be fine as long as I can finish homework,’ and it damages their sense of autonomy and imaginative ability. We need to reform the educational system into one that enables children to independently realize that studying isn’t for their parents’ or their school’s sake, but their own—”

I was listening to her speak until she finally stopped herself. “Whoops. Sorry. I kind of went off on a tangent there, huh?”

“...It’s fine.”

I feel like I’ve just had my motivation completely stolen from me. I’d even planned it all out and worked hard since morning, thinking I’d get it done early...

“Arrogantly firing off my opinion at a youngster makes me quite the grandma myself, I suppose. I really have gotten old.” She laughed at herself and then got to the main topic of the conversation. “By the way, Momota-kun, have you been in touch with Hime?”

“With Orihara-san? Umm, well...I got a weird message from her.”

“A weird message?”

“It says ‘Let’s spend some time apart for a little while.’”

“Oh...I see. So that’s how she’s going to be.”

“Do you know anything about it?” I asked on reflex since she sounded like she knew what was going on.

After not answering my question and remaining silent like she was thinking something over, she said, “Momota-kun. I’m sorry, but could I have you go over to Hime’s apartment right now?”

“Her apartment? Huh? Orihara-san is at work today.”

“She took time off and should be at her apartment.”

“...What do you mean? What happened exactly?”

“Did Hime tell you she came over to my house yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“The truth is...there was a bit of an accident.”

“A-Accident?! What? Is Orihara-san all right?”

“Yes, it wasn’t anything that serious. It’s just...her lifestyle might be a little inconvenient for a little while.”

“Oh no... Wh-What happened?”

“...I’m sorry, but I can’t say. Hime told me, ‘Don’t tell Momota-kun!’”

“What?”

What does that mean? I don’t understand what she’s saying.

“Well, of course you’d be worried. If you could, I’d like you to go check on her. Can you do that for me?”

I immediately hurried to Orihara-san’s apartment on my bicycle after the phone call ended. I still couldn’t follow what was going on; however, if my girlfriend had an accident and her lifestyle was made inconvenient, then as her boyfriend I couldn’t help but rush to her side.

I pedaled my bike, sweating underneath the blazing sun all the while, until I arrived at Maison Heim Heights. I stood in front of her apartment, and I could hear Orihara-san walking through the hallway after I rang the doorbell. However, for some reason her footsteps sounded awfully slow. Her pace was pretty sluggish, like she was walking while pressing her hands on the wall. When she finally reached the door, she must have seen me through the door’s peephole.

“M-Momota-kun?!” she said, raising her voice in surprise.

“Orihara-san, please open the door.”

“Why are you here?”

“What do you mean ‘why’? I came here because I’m worried about you, of course.”

“Why? I said we should spend some time apart.”

“That message made me worried. Also, I heard what happened from Yuki-san.”

“What?! I told her not to tell you...”

“Are you all right, Orihara-san? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I-I’m f-fine, okay! I’m totally fine! I’ve got so much energy that I don’t know what to do with—oh, ow!”

“Orihara-san?!” I heard painful groaning and the sound of her falling to the floor. My mind instantly went blank, and I’d opened the door before I knew it.

“Orihara-san! Huh?” As I was overcome with worry and fear, the sight that greeted me was...incredible. Orihara-san was face down in the hallway. However, for some reason, the back of her shirt was flipped up. She looked foolish, and stuck on her exposed back were compresses for back pain. She must have messed up when applying them because they were a little out of place and crumpled.

“N-No... Don’t look, Momota-kun... Don’t look at me like this... Ugh... O-Ow...” she sobbed. She tried to lift herself up, but halfway through her expression became distorted, and she collapsed to the floor. I panicked and hurried to her side.

“A-Are you okay?”

“Ow... Momota-kun...”

“What happened?”

“My lower back...it hurts...” Orihara-san said, looking like she would cry at any moment.

Unfortunately, it seemed that I had rung the doorbell right as Orihara-san was applying the compresses to her back. While she was in the middle of struggling

with them because she wasn't used to them, I showed up as a sudden visitor. Her hand had slipped in surprise, so she'd put the compresses on wrong. Apparently, she was trying to fix them as she spoke to me through the door, and that had caused her to lose her balance and fall over.

"I'm done putting them on."

"Th-Thank you..."

I affixed new compresses to Orihara-san's back as she lay face down on her bed. The line of her back was so pretty it made my heart pound, but I desperately did my best to keep control while telling myself it was just a medical procedure.

"I'm really sorry for all of this... Up we go," Orihara-san said as she very carefully sat up. She didn't use her back at all and supported herself with just her arms. It was a movement characteristic of a person with lower back pain.



“Are you okay? Please don’t push yourself.” I couldn’t stand watching her be in pain, so I helped her support her body.

“I-I’m okay... I’m taking the pain medicine I got from the hospital, and I feel a lot better than yesterday,” she said apologetically after somehow getting up.

According to her, when she went over to hang out at Yuki-san’s house yesterday, she got excited from being able to meet her friend’s child for the first time in a while and kept playing upsy-daisy with him. In the midst of all that, she felt an intense pain in her lower back. She said it was a shock like being struck by lightning. Since she was unable to move from the spot she was in because of the pain, Orihara-san was taken to an orthopedist by Yuki-san; the orthopedist examined her and gave her painkillers and compresses.

“It really wasn’t anything serious, and it looks like I didn’t strain my back. I was told that the sudden burden on my back only injured my muscles, so I’d get better if I took it easy for two or three days.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I said in a reprimanding tone. “If you were in that much trouble, please tell me. I’m in the middle of summer break, so I have tons of time...”

“B-But,” Orihara-san said, looking like she was on the verge of tears. I stared hard at her, and with resignation she continued, “i-it was embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing?”

“Hurting my lower back like that... I’m like an old lady, right? Even though I’m still twenty-seven... It’s embarrassing how my body is getting older and older.”

“You were worried about something like that?” I laughed, flabbergasted.

“D-Don’t laugh! I’m really worried... I was worried about what I’d do if you thought, ‘What’s the deal with this woman? She smells like compresses.’”

“That’s why you said we should have some time apart?”

“Yes...” she said and gave a little nod.

Apparently things like her appearance and pride as a woman are weighing heavily on her mind...

“You’re worrying too much about it. Getting hurt and using a compress is totally common.”

“B-But!”

“Besides, there’s a lot of people who hurt their lower back even though they’re young. Our customers include people in their twenties who come in for treatment for their lower back.”

“Really...?”

“Anyway... Please rely on me more.” I was a little embarrassed, but I spoke decisively. “I’m your boyfriend, after all. When my girlfriend is in trouble, I want to be the one she can depend on more than anybody else.”

“Okay... I’m sorry, Momota-kun,” she said, smiling with a bit of self-deprecation. “It looks like I was being weird and putting up a front again. I should have relied on you from the start, Momota-kun.”

“That’s right. If something’s up, tell me whatever you need and I’ll do anything I can.”

“Thank you... But I really am okay.” She started to stand up from the bed very slowly. She moved just like someone with lower back pain: she didn’t bend forward at all, and she was using only the strength of her arms and knees to stand.

“Yesterday even just walking hurt, but I’ve recovered a lot. I’m surprisingly fine, as long as I don’t bend forward. Besides, I definitely have to go to work tomorrow. The weekend and my time off have overlapped, so I’ve already been gone for five days.”

Even though she said all that, I was still worried. It must have hurt a lot. I’ve never experienced it myself, but there’ve been many times I’ve seen up close how much pain our customers with lower back pain seem to be in. The lower back is located at the body’s core and is the base point for all kinds of movements; when you have lower back pain, it becomes exceedingly difficult to rest because every single movement causes pain. Depending on the person, even sneezing or coughing can make them have sharp pain.

I wonder if there’s anything I can do. Anything...

“Oh, that’s right. Orihara-san,” I said, having come up with a good idea, “won’t you come to my place?”



After I went to work the next day wearing a back supporter and somehow finishing my normal duties, I returned to my apartment and picked up my beloved Cu-chan. My lower back still hurt a little, but as long as I was careful to not take a forward bending posture, I was able to recover enough that it didn’t interfere with my daily life.

Ahhh. Why did something like this happen? Momota-kun said he doesn’t mind at all, but...as a woman reaching thirty, I have mixed feelings. According to the doctor, one of the causes was muscle weakness from a lack of exercise, so I have to exercise more. Onee-chan has been stretching and working out for the last few years whenever she finds time; I need to learn from her example. They say that after you turn thirty your metabolism slows down, so for the sake of my health and staying in shape, I have to be conscious about exercising.

Ugh, I really have gotten older. My only hobby is video games, but lately playing them all day makes me feel exhausted. Apparently, you need physical and muscular strength for long gaming sessions... I wonder if that’s the reason a lot of pro gamers from overseas are so buff.

Anyway, I need to get some proper exercise. I feel like I made the same resolution last year, but this time I’m definitely going to exercise. I have a lot of unused exercise equipment I bought, but this time I’m serious. Yes. First off, so I can exercise efficiently, I’m going to buy that exercise equipment that anyone can use to get thin that’s been getting talked about on the internet lately.

With all these worries and decisions on my mind, I continued to drive with proper posture and without bending my back until I finally arrived at my destination.

“Momota Chiropractic” was written on a billboard in big letters.

Wow, amazing. Momota-kun’s family really does run a chiropractic clinic.

It looked unexpectedly nice. It wasn’t like the clinic was part of a remodeled house, but rather the whole building was a chiropractic office from the start.

Impressed, I parked in a nearby parking space. I carefully reached out my hand for my smartphone that was in the passenger seat, being sure not to bend my lower back.

It sucks how pain in your lower back makes all kinds of movements so difficult. Every time I pick something up off the floor, I feel like my lifespan is shortening. Also, brushing my teeth and washing my face in the morning and at night is really painful. The hardest thing is putting on my stockings and socks; I'm risking my life every time I change clothes.

"Hello, Momota-kun. I'm here."

"Okay. There's an appointment under your name, so you can just come right through the front entrance. I was able to get you a little bit of a discount since you're 'the older sister of my friend.'"

At Momota-kun's wonderful proposal, I'd come here today to his father's chiropractic office to have my lower back looked at.

"I could give you a massage, but for an external injury, I think it would be best for someone with the proper qualifications to do it. What's more, you can even have them do electrotherapy here."

"Thank you for being so thorough, it really is a big help. This is my first time coming to a massage parlor like this."

"...Strictly speaking, it's different from a massage parlor. Only people with national qualification as judo therapists are allowed to open up chiropractic and orthopedic offices, and they mainly perform treatment for external injuries like sprains and lower back pain. The ones that can perform medical practices for sudden ailments covered by insurance are chiropractors and orthopedists, and things like massage parlors, shiatsu massage, and relaxation salons are all kind of a falsely similar trade..."

"R-Really..."

"...Sorry about that. As the son of a chiropractor, I just wanted you to understand that part," Momota-kun said, embarrassed.

I was also sorry for my lack of knowledge. It's the business of my boyfriend's family, so I should have properly prepared beforehand.

“I thought you’d feel more comfortable with a woman, so I requested that one of our female employees be in charge of you.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I’m already receiving a discount as it is... I wouldn’t mind if it were a man.” I couldn’t bring myself to be any more selfish.

Well, if I could choose, I’d like it to be a woman, but saying “It has to be a woman” in this kind of situation feels excessively self-conscious and kind of embarrassing as a woman.

“B-But... Um...” Momota-kun said somewhat hesitantly, “I don’t want some other guy aside from me touching you, Orihara-san...”

“Huh...” For a second, I didn’t get what he meant, and I was dumbfounded. As I gradually began to understand, my face suddenly became warm. “H-Hey... What’s that supposed to mean, Momota-kun?”

“I’m sorry... It’s creepy, right? Me being so openly possessive...” he said shyly—but honestly, I was the one that was pretty embarrassed.

Wow, just what is this feeling?

My heart was fluttering, and no matter how hard I tried to fight it, my face broke into a smile and I started to grin.

I don’t think there’s anything creepy about it at all. In fact, I’m happy. I’m so happy I’m on cloud nine.

I see... So Momota-kun is really possessive with me, huh? He wants to keep me all to himself that badly, huh? He doesn’t want to let anyone else touch me, huh? He sure loves me a lot. He he. He he he...

“Honestly...you’re such a jealous boyfriend, Momota-kun. It’s going to be difficult for me from here on out. Every time I go to the beauty salon or doctor, I’m going to have to make sure it’s a lady.”

“No, I mean...”

“He he. Well, for today I’ll take you up on it and let a lady take care of me.”

“Okay, I’m sorry... Anyway, I’ll go to the clinic and start doing odd jobs, but if we run into each other—”

“I know. I’ll act like I’m ‘a friend’s big sister who you’ve never really talked to, but you know my face,’ right?”

After confirming things with him, I ended the phone call and got out of my car. As I walked to the front entrance to the chiropractic office, I became more and more nervous. I mean...this was going to be my first visit to my boyfriend’s house.

“H-Hello,” I said as I gathered up my courage and walked through the automatic door.

As I did, a man who was operating a computer at the check-in desk faced me and said “Hello” with a charming voice and kind smile. He was nearing his forties, and he had a tight, muscular body that you could notice even underneath his white work clothing. His arms were especially muscular, and they filled out the short sleeves of his shirt. He had a pretty sharp gaze and a bit of a stern-looking face, but because of his friendly customer service smile he wasn’t scary at all.

I instantly realized: he was Momota-kun’s father!

It’s definitely him! He has “Momota” written on his nameplate, so there’s no doubt about it. Also, more than anything else...he looks a lot like him! Wow, their eyes look exactly alike!

This person is Momota-kun’s dad... He’s eleven years older than me at thirty-eight years old, and...he’s a little bit closer in age with me than I am with Momota-kun. I heard his name is Momota Shigeru...

“Um...” he said to me. I returned to my senses and stopped zoning out.

“Oh. I’m sorry... My name is Orihara, and I have an appointment today...”

“Oh, Orihara-san? Yes, I heard about it from my son. I’m Momota Kaoru’s father. It looks like your little brother is friends with my son.”

“I’m glad that they get along.” After greeting each other like caretakers, Shigeru-san showed me around the clinic.

“Okay, take off your shoes and please come this way. The person handling you today will be along shortly.”

“Okay... U-Um,” I said as I took the sweets out of the paper bag I was holding and handed it to him. “If you don’t mind, please enjoy this with everyone.”

“Oh? Thank you kindly...” Shigeru-san seemed a little perplexed, which was understandable. I was bringing sweets to the clinic of my little brother’s friend. What’s more, they were the kind of high-class sweets whose price could cover the discount I was receiving. Even still, I couldn’t just be lazy about this greeting—no, this first meeting. Even if it was full of lies, I still wanted it to be sincere.

“Today, I’ll be in your care.” I bowed my head deeply, and inside my heart I whispered, *It’s nice to meet you. My name is Orihara Hime. I work at Harumi Seikatsu. My age is...twenty-seven years old, and I am in a serious relationship with Momota Kaoru-san.*



After going to the chiropractor, my lower back was miraculously healed!

Well, not really, but thanks to them it was a lot better. The person in charge of me, Sawaki-san (forty years old, married, and a parent), was friendly and easy to talk to, so I had a comfortable time getting treated. That said...when I was asked, “Do you have a boyfriend?” Momota-kun just happened to be close by doing his part-time job, so I was pretty startled. It felt like I was having a secret office romance.

Still, I didn’t know they would apply electricity and ultrasound to the affected area. It’s a bit of a new discovery. At first it was scary, but when you get used to it it’s pretty fun. Your muscles convulse and get all twitchy. Supposedly, applying electricity and ultrasound loosens up stiff muscles and helps them heal faster.

Since there were no signs of a dramatic recovery with this one treatment, I ended up going to Momota Chiropractic every other day after work. Thanks in part to Momota Chiropractic’s well-equipped facility and the excellent medical treatments of its well-educated staff, my symptoms had mostly disappeared by the end of my third time going to the clinic. You could say I’d made a full recovery.

My lower back doesn’t hurt when I bend over! I can pick up things I’ve dropped on the ground! I can stand up from a chair! I can wash my face at the bathroom

sink! I can put on stockings and socks! I don't feel like I want to die as soon as I wake up! Long time no see, lower back pain-free lifestyle!

“...and just like that, it doesn't hurt anymore. I'm finally cured,” I said. It was early afternoon on a Saturday. I had the day off from work, and I headed to Momota Chiropractic in the early afternoon.

After finishing my fourth treatment, I was politely told by Sawaki-san, “If it seems like there isn't any more pain, then this will be the last time. If something else happens, please come back anytime.” After that I made a phone call while in my car in the parking lot.

“Thank you. You really helped me out, Momota-kun.”

“I didn't do anything; I just introduced you to our clinic. But still, take it easy. The time just before you've completely healed is when you're most vulnerable.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Also...I think it'd be for the best if you exercise and build some muscle. The best thing to prevent back pain is building muscle.”

“...I-I know.”

All right. This time I'm really going to work out! But I'm worried that my back pain might return, so I think I'll take it easy for a little while...

“By the way, Momota-kun, what are you doing today? I didn't see you at the clinic.”

“I'm just in my house. I was doing my summer vacation homework.”

“Really? You're such a hard worker.”

“What are your plans for the rest of the day, Orihara-san?”

“Nothing, really. I was just going to head back home.”

“I see. Um...” After pausing in hesitation for a moment, he continued, “If you have time, won't you come here?”

My eyes went wide. “Huh? Here? You mean, like, to your house?”

“It's a short walk from the parking lot. It's right behind the chiropractic clinic.”

“What? I-Is that okay? With your family, I mean...”

“It’s fine. Today my father is at a training course in Sendai, and my big sister is out having fun. It looks like the two of them will be getting back late, so right now I’m at home alone.”

“I see. Then that’s a relief—huh? Y-You’re alone right now?”

Our relationship was a secret from even our families, and that of course included Momota-kun’s family. That’s why, for a moment, I thought that it might be all right for me to go over to his house, but...

Wait a minute. He’s alone? I’d be going over to his house when he’s the only one there? Does that mean...

“...Oh. N-No! I didn’t mean it like that!” Momota-kun panicked and started making excuses like he had gotten the same idea as me. “This might look like a situation where a high schooler is trying to call his girlfriend over while his parents are away, but... Well, it doesn’t ‘look like,’ it *is* that kind of situation!”

He pointed it out himself...

“...I really didn’t mean anything deep by it. It’s just that we haven’t been able to talk to each other in person at all lately, so I thought that I want to see you.”

“Momota-kun...” My chest tightened like it was in pain, but it was a kind of happy feeling. I also wanted to meet him. I’d been going to the chiropractor every other day lately, but even if we passed by one another in the clinic, we barely talked face-to-face.

“Well...maybe I’ll go pay you a little visit,” I said. I also wanted to talk to Momota-kun in person. Besides, I was a little curious about just what kind of house he lives in.

Behind the chiropractic clinic was a house with a tile roof. It was a large house with two floors, and it had a well-maintained garden.

“Th-Thank you for having me.”

“Please, come in.” I took my shoes off in the entranceway and made my way inside the house as Momota-kun urged me on.

“Wow, Momota-kun...you live in such a nice house.”

“No, it was built by my late grandfather, so it’s just old.” While we talked about that kind of thing, we climbed the stairs and headed for Momota-kun’s room on the second floor.

Hmm. Yeah... I kind of feel guilty after all. I feel like if it were a high school couple, calling your girlfriend over when your parents aren’t around would be kind of cute, but...I’m already an adult. I’m old enough to know better, so the act of sneaking into a home when the owner isn’t home is causing my common sense and my morals to sound an alarm. I’m sorry, Momota-kun’s dad! Also, I’m sorry, Momota-kun’s big sister!

While I was mentally apologizing to them, we arrived at his room.

“Um, please make yourself at home.”

“Wow... So this is your room.” It was a small six-tatami-mat room. There was a desk for studying and an aluminum garment rack where his uniform was hanging. There was a PS4 and a Switch on the floor.

It might be rude to say this, but there wasn’t anything particularly special about his room. It was the very unremarkable room of a high schooler. Still... It looked special to me when I thought about how this unremarkable room was where Momota-kun spent his time.

“Ha ha... I’m kind of nervous. This is the first time in my life I’ve gone into a guy’s room.”

“I was also really nervous the first time I entered your apartment... Lately I’ve gotten pretty used to it though.” We were both being awkward with each other.

“Um... Oh. Can I hang your jacket for you?” Momota-kun asked.

“O-Oh, that’s right. Yes, please.” I took off my jacket and gave it to Momota-kun, and he hung it for me on an empty hanger from the rack.

“By the way, Orihara-san, you’re wearing your business suit today, but wasn’t today supposed to be your day off?”

“Oh... Well, that’s true, but I always come to your family’s chiropractic clinic in a suit after work, so I thought it would be a little weird if I came in casual

clothes at this point...”

Frankly speaking...choosing casual clothes to wear was a pain in the butt. It's embarrassing how ungirly I am.

“I totally goofed on this one. If I knew I was going to meet you, I would have chosen a better outfit.”

“You don't have to worry about that. I...really like your business suit.”

“R-Really? These are just the clothes I wear to work...”

“It's like...you have this adult charm to you, and you look cool. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“Oh, no, it's nothing.”

“What?! Why? Don't stop there, it just makes me more curious!” I said, pressing him on it.

“Well, um...” Momota-kun blushed, and with great difficulty said, “I-I think the stockings that you wear with your business suit are...really hot.”

“...”

After I was taken aback for a moment, my cheeks became warm like my face was coming to a boil. Unconsciously, I turned my gaze downward and looked at the stockings I was wearing.

“Huh? These? These stockings...?”

“Yes.”

“This is...hot?”

“Yes...” Momota-kun sounded embarrassed, but he nodded firmly.

Huh? What is he talking about? Stockings are...hot?

“Guys...like these kinds of things?”

“I think that the people who like it like it a lot, probably...”

“...So, you like it, Momota-kun.”

“No, it's just... I also didn't have any interest in them before, but... Remember

when I was studying at your house, and you messed with me by poking me with your foot and then I grabbed it?”

“Y-Yes...”

“That was the first time I’d ever touched a woman’s stockings, and...I was a little shocked by how smooth it felt.”

“They had that much impact?!”

I was certainly wearing stockings that day. I was supposed to be dressed as a teacher, but the stockings I was wearing were the same ones I always wore.

“I thought they’d feel coarser, but they were surprisingly smoother than I expected. Since then, the way they look has changed for me. It’s like, they’ve started to look really attractive...” he said shyly.

Well, stockings do feel good. A boy like Momota-kun wouldn’t have had a chance to touch them before, so their smooth sensation must have been quite the revelation to him.

“...I’m sorry. I seem like a pervert, right?”

“N-No. Don’t worry about it. I was just surprised...”

I see. Momota-kun is into this kind of thing. He thought that my legs covered in black stockings...are hot.

“H-Hey, Momota-kun. If you liked it so much...why don’t you try it again?” I blurted out.

We were sitting next to each other on the bed in his room, and I couldn’t believe how hard my heart was beating. I could even feel how nervous Momota-kun was as he sat right next to me. The type of tension you’d feel right before war broke out had filled the room.

How did this happen?! Why did this happen?! Well, yeah, it’s all my fault, but I was told by my beloved boyfriend that I was hot and charming! I’m so happy it makes me want to do anything for him!

“Um...is it really okay?” Momota-kun said like he was asking for final confirmation. His eyes were looking right into mine—or at least, they sort of were, since he kept glancing downward at my thighs.

“Y-Yes... It’s fine if it’s my legs... It’s totally nothing.”

“...”

“I-I didn’t mean it in a weird way! This is just some physical contact! It’s the same type of thing as holding hands... It’s not like you’re trying to touch my boobs or my crotch!”

“P-Please calm down, Orihara-san!” I was being chided.

Shoot. I tried to play off my embarrassment, but I ended up blurting out something even more embarrassing. What does my crotch have to do with this?

“Well... If you insist...then just a little.”

“P-Please go ahead.” As I endured my embarrassment, I lifted up the hem of my skirt just a little. Momota-kun timidly reached his hand towards my thighs covered in black stockings and touched them.

“...?!”



It felt like an electric current ran through my body in an instant. It was completely different from the electric current that was used in my treatment at the chiropractic clinic; it was a somewhat sweet and sensual kind of electric current. The place being touched by his large, slim hand felt extremely hot. Also, maybe because he was restraining himself, his touch was incredibly soft and made me feel ticklish.

“Haah...” Because of his exquisite soft touch, I felt like my whole body would shiver if I let my guard down. The sensation of his fingertips touching my inner thighs was...especially intense. A shudder ran down my spine, and the core of my body became hot.

“H-How is it? Momota-kun?”

“How is it? All I can say is it’s intense...”

“You mean intense in a good way or a bad way?”

“I-In a good way.”

“In what kind of good way?” Our conversation had no substance, since apparently our attention was focused on where his fingertips and my inner thighs made contact.

“Hey, that tickles... Don’t stroke there too much.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be disappointed because my thighs are...a little squishy, okay? The truth is I wear black stockings to hide that...”

“I’m not disappointed! If anything, it’s awesome—I mean, it’s an absolutely wonderful feeling... No, I mean...” Momota-kun desperately tried to cheer me up, but he gradually stopped talking.

I chuckled. “Momota-kun, you’re becoming more and more of a pervert, huh?”

“H-Huh?”

“When we first started dating you were such a good young man, but it feels like you’re getting kinkier.”

“Isn’t that...your fault, Orihara-san?” he said and stared at me with a bit of a pout on his face. “It’s your fault because you’re so cute, Orihara-san.”

“Wha—c-come on, stop... I don’t need that kind of flattery.”

“It’s not flattery. You’ve always been cute... And you’re steadily becoming cuter.” As he spoke the kind of words that would make you melt just by hearing them, Momota-kun lifted himself a little off the bed and got closer to me. He took his hand off my thigh and tried to use it to embrace me. I was about to be hugged like I was before, and the moment I realized that...

“S-Stop!” I said and abruptly pulled myself away. I ran away from his outreached arms, jumped on the bed, and headed all the way to the edge. For a second, Momota-kun’s expression was filled with guilt.

“Oh... S-Sorry, I got carried away.”

“N-No! It’s not like I didn’t like it. It’s just that... You know...” As I desperately made excuses, I felt around my lower back. “I...smell like compresses, you know?”

I was mostly healed, but because I still had leftover compresses from the hospital, Sawaki-san kindly applied them today as well. I instantly refused his hug because I thought that if we got too close, I’d be found out because of the smell.

Geez... This sucks. If I knew I was going to meet Momota-kun, I wouldn’t have put them on.

“What? That’s what you’re worried about?” Momota-kun said and gave a smile of relief. “I told you before, I don’t care about that.”

“Really?”

“There’s no way the son of someone who runs a chiropractic clinic would care about the smell of a compress, right?” Momota-kun said kindly while he slowly made his way on top of the bed and over to me.

I didn’t intend on running away this time.

I’m going to accept this hug. I’m going to have Momota-kun accept how I smell like a compress and wrap me up in his arms. Then, after that...well, we’ll

just have to let things take their course, won't we?

After making my silent resolution, I waited for Momota-kun. However, he caught sight of something and suddenly stopped moving. He had a stiff expression, and his gaze was focused a little to my side, around the gap between the bed and the wall.

"...What's wrong?" I asked and followed his gaze. "Huh? There's something behind there."

Something had dropped between the bed and the wall, and Momota-kun reached to pull it out. It looked like a simple wooden frame with a stand attached to it.

"So this is where it was..." As he stared at the frame, Momota-kun squinted his eyes slightly, making a difficult expression like he was suppressing his emotions and bewilderment.

"That's a picture frame, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's a picture of my mother. My sister made it for me a long time ago."

Momota-kun hadn't said "mom" or "mommy," but rather the somewhat formal "my mother." For a moment I couldn't help but feel a bit of tension. I'd heard that Momota-kun's mother passed on. It seems that before Momota-kun had any memory of her, she'd died in a traffic accident.

"I... I must have dropped it when I was redecorating my room," he murmured like he was talking to himself. Momota-kun then took the frame and quickly put it inside his desk. It was like he was hiding it.

"What? A-Are you sure? You're not going to display it?"

"Oh... Well, it might be better to display it, but...it's like, I have a hard time looking at my mother's picture." He gave a vague, forced, and somewhat lonely looking smile.

"A hard time?"

"I think I've said this before, but my mom died before I was two years old. So I mostly...no, I honestly have absolutely no memory of her."

Before he was two years old... That's about the same age as Macaron-kun,

when you start walking and start learning your first words. It wouldn't be a surprise if he didn't remember anything from when he was so young. I mean, I don't remember anything from when I was two years old.

“However, my sister, who's four years older than me and was six at the time, remembers our mother, unlike me... It looks like my sister really loved our mother.”

“...”

“That's why when I started elementary school, my sister did her best to tell me about our mother every day. She showed me a lot of pictures and told me things like ‘This is our mother’ and ‘Our mother was a really cool and pretty person.’ She told me about a lot of things, like our mother's job, her hobbies, and her favorite food. That frame is actually something that my sister made for me then.”

“...She's a good sister.” In my mind, I had a heartwarming image of the two of them opening a photo album when they were little. However, Momota-kun's expression was stiff and somewhat dark.

“Honestly, though...that time was painful for me.”

“Huh...”

“How should I put it? It was like the more my older sister would eagerly tell me those things, the more I was made aware of how different our enthusiasm was. Even as a child, I understood that I couldn't share the same feelings as my older sister, and I felt kind of guilty.”

“...”

“I guess I didn't respond to her very well; my sister gradually became more aggressive, and over and over again she said things to me like ‘You don't even remember a little bit about mom?’ ‘You had her hug you a lot and breastfeed you, you know,’ and ‘Try hard and remember her.’ Eventually I couldn't take it anymore, and I told her how I felt.”

Apparently, at that young age he yelled at her that “I don't remember mom!” “No matter how much you tell me I don't understand!” and “I'll never be able to love mom the way you do, Onee-chan!”

“After that we got into a fistfight and cried while we grappled each other... Our dad stepped in and somehow got us to stop fighting, but after that my big sister stopped talking to me about our mom.”

I couldn't say anything. I understood how his big sister felt so well that it hurt. She wanted to tell her little brother about the mother she loved so much. She wanted him to know. I think it was both her way of showing love and her sense of duty. She probably wanted to share her memories of her mother as much as possible with her little brother who was only able to spend just a little bit of time with his real mother.

However, I also understood how Momota-kun felt. No matter how enthusiastically he's told about her, his mother isn't here anymore, and he can't remember her even if he wants to. No matter how hard he tries, he can't love his mother the way his big sister does. I think that was a lot of stress for Momota-kun at that young age.

“...I was in the wrong, wasn't I?” Momota-kun murmured as he smiled bitterly. “If I'd just played along and said ‘I love mom too,’ then everything would have been settled peacefully just like that. But, somehow... I was really stubborn about it. It's like...I'd never even talked to her and I didn't remember her, so simply saying ‘I love her’ felt rude,” he said with a distant look.

“Oh... I'm sorry for the depressing story,” he said with an uncomfortable expression.

“N-No, don't be...”

“That wasn't the kind of conversation to have with your girlfriend on top of your bed, huh? Ha ha ha,” Momota-kun said cheerfully, laughing it off. I wondered if he was trying to change the mood.

I should probably be positive and not get depressed or walk on eggshells around him.

“He he. You're probably right. But I'm glad... I got a little worried at first that I had found some porn you were hiding.”

“That's what you were thinking?” Momota-kun said, slightly taken aback.

C-Crap! I tried too hard to brighten the mood and said too much!

“I don’t have any porn...”

“R-Really? Isn’t every boy going through puberty supposed to have porn under their beds? I mean, I often see that kind of situation in manga...”

“These days I don’t think there are any boys who hide porn under their beds. I think everyone just does it on their phones or something.”

Hmm. That makes sense.

Boys hiding porn under their beds is a kind of situation I’d seen a lot in manga, but when you think about it, it’s kind of an old trope. This is the era of most people owning a smartphone during puberty; with just a smartphone, you can easily get your hands on pictures and videos without the difficulty of doing things like strolling along the river to dig up the heritage of your predecessors or searching around for bookstores and video stores with lax rules run by an old man.

“So, does that mean you do it on your smartphone too, Momota-kun?”

“Huh? No, that’s...” Momota-kun said, giving a blatantly troubled reaction. I mean, it was just my expectation, but if you had an information monster like a smartphone at your fingertips during your impressionable teenage years, I don’t think you could help looking at some weird stuff.

Well, it’s not like I’m a teenage girl, and I have no intention of complaining if my boyfriend has some weird pictures or videos in his possession. This is surely something normal for a healthy boy. Still... Momota-kun looks cute when he’s flustered, so maybe I’ll tease him a little more?

“He he he. You’re horrible, Momota-kun. Even though you have me, you look at other women’s lewd pictures? As punishment for your cheating, I’ll—?!”

Suddenly, I was pushed down. With both of his hands grabbing my shoulders, I was pressed down on top of the bed.

Huh? Huh? Huh? W-Wait a minute?! What’s this sudden development?! Is he mad because I made fun of a sensitive subject for boys?! Or...did he get turned on?! Is he trying to come on to me by saying “You’re way sexier than any lewd pictures”?!

“N-No, Momota-kun... During the day like this? It’s... It’s not like I hate it, but it’s just embarrassing when it’s so bright—”

“Orihara-san, hide!” I tried to form words as my face felt like it was burning red, but his response was desperate. Momota-kun wasn’t looking at me as he pushed me down, but rather somewhere far away outside the bedroom window. From his words and behavior, I finally realized that I wasn’t being pushed down, I was being hidden.

“My big sister’s home!”

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“Please, just hide for now!”

“G-Got it!”

I burst out of my room in a great hurry and skipped steps on my way down the stairs. I didn’t have a second to spare. The reason was that Orihara-san’s shoes were left in the entranceway. If my sister saw those pumps, everything would be over in an instant. I had to get outside before my sister got in the entranceway and not let her set foot inside the house.

Damn it! Why is she home so early? She even said that she didn’t need dinner!

As I complained inside of my head, I headed for the entrance at full speed, but I didn’t make it. A moment before I could get there, the door opened.

“I’m home.”

“W-Welcome home, Nee-chan!”

“What?!” My sister raised her voice like she had come across a suspicious person. It was no wonder since her little brother had suddenly come running and was out of breath when she opened the door. “You scared me... What’s the deal, Kaoru? What are you doing?”

“Wh-What am I doing? Come on, I was so happy that my big sister came home that I came to greet her.”

“Huh? What are you saying? That’s gross.” My big sister, Momota Kaede, was making a blatantly unpleasant face.

“Wh-What’s up with you too, Nee-chan? Didn’t you have a mixer today? Weren’t you going to have a barbecue with guys from another university and stay out partying until nighttime?”

“Yeah, but the barbecue ended early. It was the worst; it ended before anyone had even gotten a fire going! I mean, if you’re going to be the ones inviting people, then practice starting a damn fire!” she spit out in a bad mood.

Apparently, taking a long time to start a fire does turn the mood sour. We were lucky to have Ura with us then.

“It sucked. I’m tired and I’m sweaty. Kaoru, after I shower, give me the usual massage—hmm?” She stopped in the middle of her sentence. As she tried to enter the house, I blocked her with my body. “What’s the deal? Move.”

“No.”

“What?”

“No, no, no. There’s no need to be in such a rush, is there?”

“I don’t get it. Move.” Puzzled, she tilted her head and tried to proceed, but I became a barrier and stopped her. I lowered my hips, stretched out both of my arms, and executed a defensive position like in basketball.

“What’s your deal?!”

“Nothing! I mean, it’s, you know?”

“Is there some reason you don’t want to let me into the house?”

“What?! O-Of course not!”

I hate how honest my reactions are. It’s no use. Why am I so bad at ad-libbing?

“Oh, you were taking advantage of dad and me not being here to watch some weird DVD, weren’t you?”

“N-No, you idiot!” I reflexively denied her teasing, but then I realized.

This is my chance! I just have to take advantage of it!

“Th-The truth is...you’re right.”

“...Huh?”

“I thought no one would come home, so I...watched something lewd.”

“Wh-What?”

“I was streaming a video I downloaded to my smartphone to the big screen television in the living room.”

“O-Oh, is that so? Well, you are at that age...” My big sister was freaking out because of her little brother’s unexpected response. She tried hard to play it cool, but her face quickly turned red. I too was so embarrassed I could die.

We’re siblings, what the hell are we talking about? But I can’t back down now! I have to keep going!

“Also, Nee-san...right now I’m in the middle of watching it.”

“Th-The middle?!”

“I’m at a good part.”

“A good part?!”

“It’s climactic.”

“Climactic?!”

“So, could you go somewhere else for about thirty minutes? If I have that much time, I think I can get refreshed and ventilate the living room.”

“O-Oh...really? Well, if it’s the climax there’s nothing you can do about it. That type of thing is hard for guys...”

It seemed like my college-age sister inferred what I was saying from her experience of having a boyfriend.

Yeesh... She’s definitely creeped out. She’s even acting nice.

I had a feeling that our sibling relationship was going to be awkward thereafter, but...what was done was done. I’d accepted that it was a necessary sacrifice.

“A-Alright, I’m going to go somewhere...”

“Please do.”

“Oh, but, let me change my shoes. I was wearing new shoes, so my feet hurt.”

“Nee-chaaaan!” As my sister looked down to change her shoes, I firmly grabbed her face. I grabbed her face with both my hands and forced her to look forward so as to keep her gaze away from Orihara-san’s shoes.

“Wh-What are you doing?!”

“Only look at me, Nee-chan!”

“What?!”

“Please look at me more! Don’t look at anyone else aside from me! Please let me make your eyes belong to only me!”

“Wh-What is with you? Ever since I’ve gotten home, you—your hands! Did you wash your hands?!” My big sister’s expression went past being creeped out to being afraid.

Oh, that’s right. From her point of view, her little brother had come here while being in the middle of masturbating. Having your face touched by a guy like that, you’d have nothing but fear...

“S-Stop being horny, you idiot! Let go of me! Piss off!” She must have been really afraid because she shook herself free from me with tremendous strength. And then...

“Hmm?”

She found them. She found the pumps that belonged to another woman and not her.

“What’s with these shoes? They’re...not mine.”

“Th-Those are...” At that moment, I decided to sacrifice it all. “...mine!”

“Huh...”

“...I bought them on the internet. They’re...used women’s shoes.” I probably could have tried to fool her by saying my hobby was cross-dressing, but the shoes were clearly not my size. It was the worst thing I could think of, but I couldn’t think of anything else. “Lately, I’ve been enjoying smelling these types of things... I love it.”

“You...”

“I-It’s okay! They don’t belong to a minor. They’re used shoes from an adult woman!”

“...No, that’s not it.”

Yeah, that’s right. That’s not what she’s concerned about.

My sister had already gone beyond being creeped out and afraid, and now had a look of pity in her eyes. That look in her eyes felt like it was saying “I see. It’s been hard for you, huh?” If any older sister found out that her little brother was in an empty living room with used shoes that he bought from the internet dancing the five-finger shuffle... Well, they would probably be concerned.

Huh. That’s strange. My ruse is going well, and yet it feels like I’m going to cry...

“Nee-chan, I’m sorry for being such a pervert...” I started to pretend (but kind of seriously) cry.

“Look at me, Kaoru,” my sister said to me in a kind voice and slowly came closer to hug me. “Don’t worry. No matter how much of a pervert you become, I’ll be by your side. The two of us are brother and sister after all, aren’t we?”

“Nee-chan!”

“Psych, dumbass!” I let my guard down. When I looked up, what was waiting for me wasn’t a hug, but my sister flawlessly grabbing my collar and my wrist with her hands and giving me a huge leg sweep like they do in judo.

“Oof.”

“Phew! That was close. I was almost fooled by how shocking that all was, but it wasn’t all quite adding up. If you really do get off while smelling pumps, then why are they in the entranceway?”

“Ngh...”

“Kaoru, you brought a girl over, didn’t you?” she said with a triumphant and fierce grin.

Oh man... I’m done for. I’m totally done for. Even though I embarrassed myself

like that, it was all for nothing. I tried so hard to fool her because her intuition is so sharp, but my plan to make her feel awkward and get her out of the house with my really lewd story didn't work!

“Ha ha ha! Bringing a girl over when no one's around? Not bad, Kaoru. Well then, I wonder where she's hiding...”

She went inside. I chased after her in a panic. My astute older sister went up the stairs and headed straight for my room. “Ha ha. Don't worry, Kaoru. I don't plan on acting like a sister-in-law. It's your business who you want to date, and I don't intend on stopping you. I just want to see what kind of woman likes a blockhead like you.”

That's...understandable.

It was none of my sister's business who I went out with. She just wanted to see my girlfriend's face out of curiosity, and she probably had no intention of interfering. However, this situation was an exception.

Even if it is my sister, there's something I had to hide from her. My girlfriend isn't a high school girl!

“Knock knock! Where's Kaoru's girlfriend?!” I desperately chased after her, but I didn't make it. Right as I got up the stairs, she burst into my room and made her big entrance. The only thing left to do was pray.

I tried to buy some time. Maybe Orihara-san had skillfully hidden somewhere... Maybe she had even already escaped and gotten out of the house. While praying for a miracle, I peeked into my room. However, I was given a taste of true despair.

“Ngh... Wh-What should I do...? I-I can't get out...!”



Orihara-san was stuck with her head underneath my bed. It looked like...her breasts were stuck. She probably tried to quickly hide underneath the bed, but she couldn't go any further because of her massive chest, got stuck in a weird place, and was now in a horrible situation where she couldn't get further or get out. She didn't seem to realize we were there, and she was struggling to escape. Her head was hidden, but her butt was out in the open, and she was wiggling and shaking it. After a little bit, she finally made her escape.

"I-I did it! I got out! Okay, I have to hurry up and hide—oh." She noticed us, and upon realizing that it was all too late, Orihara-san's face instantly turned pale. I probably had a similar look of despair as well.

I mean, I knew it'd be like this. It's Orihara-san. This is the type of quality she brings to the table. If I'm being real, I didn't think for a second that she was smart enough to have gotten out of this dilemma.

On the other hand, my sister was frozen. She seemed unable to process this unexpected situation, was at a loss for words, and stuck in her tracks. Her gaze was directed at Orihara-san, the mysterious woman wearing a business suit who was in her little brother's room.

Soon, in a puzzled voice, she said, "...Are you a door-to-door saleswoman?"

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For a second, I thought about running with Orihara-san being a door-to-door saleswoman. I thought that maybe I could somehow fool my sister by pretending that Orihara-san was an insurance saleswoman. However, after considering it a little, I soon gave up on it.

I can't. I just can't anymore. I can't fool her.

In this situation, I didn't know how to convince my sharp-witted sister that that was who Orihara-san was. So, I decided to tell her everything: from the first time Orihara-san and I met to how we started dating, I explained everything in detail. However, for the sake of protecting Orihara-san's privacy, I left out the part about her dressing as a high school student.

"Okay... So, you're... Wait... You're Kaoru's girlfriend, right? This isn't a prank."

“Y-Yes.”

“You work at Harumi Seikatsu, and...you’re twenty-seven years old.”

“Yes...” Orihara-san said, and she gave a slight nod like she was trying to avoid my sister’s gaze.

We had changed locations and come downstairs to the parlor on the first floor. My sister faced the two of us with a large wooden table between her and us.

The mood was tense. I told her everything without hiding anything, but honestly...I was scared to death. I refolded my legs over and over again on top of my sitting cushion. Similarly, Orihara-san’s face was pale like she was a felon awaiting her sentence.

My sister was looking hard at Orihara-san’s business card and driver’s license on the opposite side of the table. I couldn’t see any anger or emotion in her attitude. Rather than looking upset, she made a face like she was greatly perplexed.

After a painful silence, my sister said, “...Okay, I’m going to be honest. I have no idea how to respond to this.”

Wow, that really is honest.

“My little brother’s first girlfriend is older than me. On top of that, she’s way older than you. She’s twenty-seven... How *should* I react to this?” she asked like she was lamenting, and even I didn’t know.

“Geez, why’d it have to go down like this? It’s not like I had any bad intentions, you know? I was planning to just go with the flow and give you some space after I’d gotten a look at your girlfriend and teased you a bit. And now... Just what is this? I don’t need this kind of trouble...” She slumped over the table and gave a bewildered sigh.

“I-I’m sorry. This is my fault,” Orihara-san said, bowing her head, unable to bear the scolding. “Coming into your home while your father wasn’t here... As an adult, I feel like my actions were thoughtless. I’m terribly sorry.”

“No, it’s my fault, Nee-chan! Orihara-san didn’t want to, but it was like I

forced her to come here...”

“Okay, it’s not like I’m criticizing you guys... I’m just shocked.” My big sister scratched her head like she was puzzled. “I mean... Orihara-san, was it? You don’t have to speak so politely. I’m way younger than you, after all.”

“B-But...you’re Momota-kun’s older sister, so I think it’s important to be respectful.”

“Huh... Really? Is that how this works...?”

It sure was interesting how they weren’t able to determine how much to distance themselves. Orihara-san’s boyfriend’s older sister is younger than her, and my sister’s little brother’s girlfriend is older than her; the rarity of the situation apparently left the two of them unable to find an optimal solution.

Before long, my sister let out a huge sigh and said, “Orihara-san,” and stared at her. It was like she was looking at some kind of rare creature.

“This isn’t a badger game, is it?”

“Huh?”

“Unfortunately, my family doesn’t have a lot of money. We run a chiropractic clinic, but we still have loans to pay off from our renovations, so we’re by no means rich—”

“Nee-chan! You’re being rude! There’s no way Orihara-san would do something like that!”

A badger game? Isn’t that where a woman seduces a man, and after he recklessly follows her to the hotel, some guy pops out and threatens him like, “Hey, man, what are you doing with my girl?! You better pay up”?

I got upset because it seemed like Orihara-san was being insulted, but my sister’s exhausted expression didn’t change. “I mean... It’s suspicious. If someone told me that a pretty adult woman working at a distinguished company was dating a fifteen-year-old kid like you, of course I’d think it was a scam.”

“...”

“No, I get that *you* would fall in love. Orihara-san is pretty, cute, and so

young-looking she doesn't look like she's twenty-seven years old... However," my sister shifted her gaze to Orihara-san and continued, "Orihara-san, I totally don't get why you would fall in love with my brother. Even for someone who's into younger men, he's...you know? He's not cute at all. Even though he's a teenager, he has kind of an old man face, he always has a scary expression, and he's way too big. There are much cuter boys out there, right?"

She laid into me with a full combo.

I'm sorry that I have kind of an old man face, and that I'm too big. I know I'm not boyish at all. But hey, you always have a scary look on your face too! That's totally our father's genes!

"Are you really okay with someone like him, Orihara-san?" My older sister was exhausted, but she tested Orihara-san nonetheless.

At first, Orihara-san's reaction was hesitant, but that soon changed to a dignified expression. She was blushing, but with a look of resolution she said, "He's sincere and manly."

Then she started talking like the flood gates had opened. "Momota-kun is the kind of really cool manly boy who faces me with integrity... No, he's not a boy. He's a man. An admirable man. At the very least, I respect Momota-kun as a man, and...I love him... I really love him."

Even after saying all that Orihara-san wouldn't stop. "It's like...even though I'm the one who's older, I'm just no good, always spinning my wheels, and it's always him helping me out. We've been dating for two months, but I already can't imagine living without him, and no matter what I do, I always think of Momota-kun..."

Oh no, she just won't stop.

"Um, you said that Momota-kun isn't cute at all, but he has cute parts to him too! Like, when Momota-kun gets depressed, he looks just like a puppy... Oh. Of course, most of the time he's cool! Also, I mean, I like how he looks... I think him being so tall is cool, and his face...is kind of my type. That sharp look on his face makes my heart skip a beat, and it makes me feel like I could lose my mind... Plus, his hands are big, rugged, and slim. Being touched and caressed by hands like that makes you feel happy, like lightning is running through your

whole body—”

“O-Okay, you can stop. I get it already.” My sister groaned painfully to get Orihara-san, who had disappeared into her own world, under control. “Let’s just stop this... If I have to hear any more, I’m going to get sick... Plus, my little brother looks like he’s about to die over there.”

It’s just as my older sister said—I was suffering and about to faint in agony.

Gyaah! Just what kind of shame play is this?! I mean, I’m happy? I’m happy, but I’m so embarrassed I feel like I’m going to die! If I were told these things in private, I’d be so happy that I could die, but having them said in front of a family member causes that happiness and embarrassment to have a chemical reaction and release a lethal gas into my body...

“Huh... Oh. N-No...” Having come back to her senses and realizing the embarrassing things she said, Orihara-san started to blush. “I-I just wanted to say what I was thinking...and let his big sister know just how much of a good boyfriend he is...”

“That’s enough, Orihara-san... Someone’s going to die if you keep going.”

It’s me. I’m probably going to die first.

Thanks to Orihara-san’s magnificently sweet speech, the air inside the room had become really stuffy. Even though the air conditioner should have been working, my weird sweating wouldn’t stop.

My sister finally gathered her breath and said, “...W-Well, now I understand Orihara-san’s feelings. And it’s been made clear to me she’s not running a badger game or some other weird scheme, and you both are taking each other seriously.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes. To an annoying degree.” After making a difficult expression of looking fed up while blushing, my sister said, “Excuse me, Orihara-san, but please let me talk with Kaoru privately for a little while.”

She stood up, faced me, and said, “Come here, Kaoru. It’s time for a family meeting.”

We left Orihara-san in the parlor and headed to the kitchen.

“...God, why did it have to turn out like this?” my sister said. She leaned against the sink with her arms folded and looked at the ceiling like she was totally fed up. “Damn it... I need a really hard drink after this...”

I took a step closer to her and said, “Nee-chan, I’m—”

“Yeah, I don’t need any of that. Stop looking so serious.” She waved her hand like she was shooing away a bug.

“I haven’t even said anything yet...”

“You were about to talk about how passionate your love is or how you guys are seriously in love with each other, right?”

“Uhh...” She hit the nail on the head, so all I could do was keep quiet.

“I’m already sick of that. I feel like I was forced to drink a liter of syrup. Any more and I’ll seriously throw up,” she angrily spit and once again let out an extra-large sigh. However, I didn’t expect what came after that. “Well, it’s not that big of a deal.”

“...What?”

“It doesn’t seem like it’s a badger game or like she’s a sugar mama, so if you say you love each other, then it’s like... Go ahead and do whatever you want.”

I stared at my older sister with a look of amazement. Just when I was thinking I had to somehow convince her to accept us, I got her unexpected approval, and she acknowledged our relationship. It was a real acceptance from my real family. I probably should have been happy, but I was disappointed by how abruptly it ended.

“Are you okay with that? You’ll allow us to go out?”

“There’s nothing for me to allow; I don’t have that kind of authority. Come on. If I said I wasn’t going to allow you to date, then would you just break up?”

“No...”

“Then, do what you want.”

“...”

“I’ve never had any intention of interfering with who you go out with in the first place. Well, I never thought you’d go out with someone twelve years older than you, so I was surprised and couldn’t believe it, but... If you’re saying you’re serious about each other, there’s no point in me trying to stop you, right?”

It’s scary how understanding she is. How are things working out so quickly?

“B-But... I mean, you know... Legally, an adult and a minor dating is a crime...” Maybe it was out of confusion, but I was digging my own grave by saying that.

“Hmm... Oh yeah. You’re a minor, so it’d be sexual misconduct,” she said like it had just crossed her mind. “Technically speaking, it would be a situation where a grown adult took advantage of a naive minor. I see, I totally didn’t realize that. You’re a guy and you have such an old-looking face, so the idea of sexual misconduct didn’t even occur to me.”

“Give me a break...”

“Well, if by chance you do get found out, the one who has any actual harm done to them will be her.”

“Yeah...”

She’s right. If our relationship came to light, the one who’d be punished socially would be the adult, Orihara-san. Things probably wouldn’t be nearly as bad for me, the minor.

“Then, isn’t it fine? If it doesn’t harm our family then it doesn’t matter. Oh, and I don’t plan on telling dad, so relax.”

I couldn’t say anything. My sister’s reaction was stoutly rational yet a little cold. I couldn’t help but be disappointed by her indifference. I thought that she’d definitely be opposed to me being with Orihara-san, but she easily approved of my relationship with a woman who’s twelve years older than me.

No, that’s not right. This was less approval and more like her just being hands-off.

My sister and I are blood related, and it’s just the two of us siblings. However, ultimately, we were just very indifferent towards one another. Neither of us

tended to dote on the other. It's not like we didn't get along, but it's not like we got along especially well either. As siblings of the opposite sex, we had a normal relationship with a moderate distance between one another. We didn't interfere with one another more than was necessary. Surprisingly, we were probably the same way towards each other's love lives.

Looking back, when my sister had a boyfriend, I honestly didn't think anything of it. I didn't consider supporting her or interfering with her. All I had was a weird kind of admiration as I thought, "Hmm. So there are some weirdos who are into people like my sister." I also didn't feel anything special when I heard that she broke up with him. "Oh, is that so? Well, that type of thing happens" is about all I thought. That kind of indifference is probably normal for brothers and sisters.

"Getting married or having kids would probably change things, but...you guys haven't gone that far, right?"

"R-Right."

"In that case, thinking seriously about it is just a pain in the ass. You'll probably have a fight and break up on your own in a week. It'd be ridiculous to be anal about it."

"...You're way more rational about this than I thought you'd be," I said, and my sister smirked.

"This is just how big sisters are. It's not like I'm your mother, after all."

Her words seemed resigned, yet they were awfully caustic, and it sounded like she was taking a dig at me. The fight we had as kids flashed in my mind, and I felt a pain in my chest.

While I stood there unable to say anything, my sister switched gears and flashed a mischievous smile. "Although, depending on how you think about it, this kind of interesting situation doesn't really come around that often... All right, I'm going to have some fun."

My sister and I returned to the parlor from the kitchen. Orihara-san was waiting for us while sitting with her back straight and her legs underneath her on our sitting cushion, trying to look as formal as possible. I felt guilty because

she was probably really anxious being left alone like this.

“I understand the situation, Orihara-san,” my sister said in an awfully heavy tone as she sat down on a cushion. She was putting on a strange act with her attitude, and I had a bad feeling. “It seems that the both of you are sincerely in love.”

“Y-Yes. That’s right.”

“Kaoru spoke very romantically just now. He hit me with so many romantic phrases like ‘Orihara-san is the best woman in the world,’ ‘She’s the cutest in the world,’ and ‘I’ll definitely make her happy’ that I ended up feeling embarrassed.”

“H-Hey, Nee-chan...”

“M-Momota-kun...” I panicked and tried to say something about my sister’s remarks, but Orihara-san became embarrassed while looking like she didn’t exactly hate what was being said.

Hmm. Sure, why not? I didn’t say those things, but I do think them.

My sister looked like she was holding back laughter as she looked at us being flustered. She gave a cough and then said with a stiff face, “Nevertheless, I can’t just acknowledge your relationship so easily.”

Orihara-san said nothing as she continued to listen to my sister.

“Kaoru is our eldest boy and our precious heir. Also...he’s my super-cute little brother. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Y-Yes. I am very aware of that.” I couldn’t help feeling guilty towards Orihara-san as she took my sister’s lie seriously.

I’m sorry, I can’t stop my big sister.

“As his big sister and his family, I’ve always been considerate of Kaoru’s needs. I even intended to choose a suitable partner for him when the time was right.”

And the lies don’t stop coming. Just what does my sister plan on accomplishing by saying all this stuff she doesn’t even mean?

“I can’t just hand Kaoru over to some woman I know nothing about. That’s why I’m going to have you take some tests, Orihara-san.”

“T-Tests?!”

“They will be tests to decide if you’re worthy of being Kaoru’s girlfriend. Your brains, your skills, your elegance: many things will be tested. For generations, we Momotas have given this test to all women who date the male descendants of our family, and only the women who have passed this test are allowed to court them. Yes, in other words, this is a traditional test that has been conducted for generations in the hundred-year history of the Momota family!”

“Y-You have that kind of tradition...?!”

No, we don’t... What kind of weird test is that? In the first place, my family doesn’t even have a hundred-year history.

It was an absolutely absurd lie, but it seemed like Orihara-san was naively taking her seriously. Perhaps because she found Orihara-san’s honest reaction interesting, my sister took her performance up a notch.

“Orihara-san. First, let me tell you one thing. In our family’s tests, many qualities are tested, but the most important of all...is love.”

“L-Love?!”

“If your love for Kaoru is the real thing, then you’ll surely pass the test.”

“I-I understand!” Orihara-san abruptly stood up and clenched her fists. “I’ll take the tests! And I’ll definitely have Momota-kun and I’s relationship acknowledged!”

“Fantastique! Très bien, Orihara-san!” My sister was overacting so much that she was losing sight of her character.

“All right Kaede-san, what do I have to do?”

“Um...”

You didn’t think about that part? Your details need work.

After thinking it over for a few seconds, the lie my sister came up with was, “Umm... Th-The first test is...umm, cooking.”

“Cooking?”

“Th-That’s right... After all, cooking is something a woman should know how to do. Well, a woman having to cook is an outdated way of thinking, but it doesn’t hurt to be able to do it.”

“I see, then...what would you like me to make?”

“I shall have you make a dish using what we have in our fridge! We can test one’s cooking ability by seeing what they can make with what’s on hand.”

“I understand. I’ll do my best,” Orihara-san said, nodding deeply in response to the questionable reasoning my sister trumped up. After that, I took Orihara-san to the kitchen and told her about where the cooking utensils and seasonings were.

“Watch me, Momota-kun. I’m definitely going to pass all of the tests,” she said with a blinding smile, and I couldn’t look directly at her. As I felt like I was going to be crushed by the weight of the guilt I was feeling, I made my way back to the parlor where my sister was waiting.

Speaking of my sister...she was holding her stomach as she laughed. “Pshh... Ha ha ha. Oh man, she cracks me up. Who would have thought that she’d actually be fooled by that? Ha ha ha.”

“Cut it out, Nee-chan.” I sat down in front of my sister and glared at her. “I’m going to get mad if you plan on teasing her with any more stupid lies.”

“Geez. Why are you being so serious? Yeah, yeah, I’m sorry. I got a little carried away,” my sister said while raising her hands in submission. “Don’t be so crabby. She’s the woman who’s stealing my cute little brother away from me, so it’s all right if I tease her a little, right?”

“Knock it off. You don’t even mean that.”

“Besides, wouldn’t it be good for Orihara-san to have this kind of opportunity?”

“Opportunity?”

“She seems like she’s worried about your age gap and is thinking ‘They’ll be against him dating me,’ right? So I thought it would be good for her to have this

kind of simple opportunity to get rid of those negative thoughts because she ‘passed the test’ and was acknowledged by us.”

I was almost convinced for a second, but...when you get right down to it, this was probably just something she made up after the fact. She just wanted to play around.

“He he. Actually, I was just starting to get a little hungry. I’m looking forward to Orihara-san’s home cooking.”

Faced with my sister’s cheerfulness, I was totally at my wit’s end. However, at the same time, I felt relieved. For better or worse, Orihara-san was already being accepted. This whole test or whatever was just like a fixed race, and my sister had no intention of interfering with us. Regardless of how we were getting there, ultimately, our happy ending of being accepted by her was guaranteed.

That’s what I thought, and that’s what I believed. And that’s why Orihara-san’s cooking bringing about the kind of situation it did was so unexpected.

≡

After about twenty minutes, Orihara-san had finished cooking.

“H-Here you are. Please enjoy your meal.” She placed a rolled omelet on the table.

“Oh, so you made a rolled omelet. That’s quite the orthodox choice,” my sister said, seeming a bit irritated. She sounded like a food critic as she looked carefully at the rolled omelet, which looked like it had cooked nicely. “Why did you choose this as your dish?”

“Rolled omelets are my specialty, and...” Orihara-san glimpsed at me. “Momota-kun told me that he likes them.”

“Well, well...” My sister gave me a look like she was making fun of me. “So, you’ve already enjoyed her home-cooking?”

“Well, yeah. Orihara-san is really good at cooking, you know.”

“N-No, I’m not good at all...”

“He he... Well, time to dig in.” My sister reached out with her chopsticks and

began to sample the rolled omelet.

Well, there's nothing to be worried about. This whole test is a fixed race in the first place, and even if it were a real examination of her cooking, she should pass no problem. Orihara-san is good at cooking to begin with, and her rolled omelet is exquisite. It's like...it really suits my palate. It has the type of comforting flavor that makes me feel like I've been eating it ever since I was little. In other words, it resembles the flavor of rolled omelet that my older sister always makes, so she should like it.

That's what I thought as I began to let my guard down, and then...

"...?!" After she put a piece of rolled omelet into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed, my big sister's eyes went wide. The expression on her face was one of surprise and confusion. The chopsticks she had been holding slipped from her hand and fell to the floor. "What... What is this?"

"Oh no... I-I'm sorry. Did you not like it?"

"There's no way! You're joking, right, Nee-chan?! You think it's delicious, right?!"

"...It's delicious. I have no complaints about that." Hearing that, I felt relieved.

"O-Of course it is... I'm glad. There's no way that Orihara-san's rolled omelet would taste bad. I mean, it tastes just like the kind you make, Nee-chan."

"Yeah. That's right. It... It tastes like the rolled omelets I—no, that's wrong. They don't taste like mine, they taste like..." My sister murmured like she was talking to herself, and she had a scary expression as she went into deep thought.

Then she raised her face. Without any more of her weird acting, and with a face so serious it was scary, she asked Orihara-san, "There's...grated yam in this, isn't there?"

"Y-Yes. It was in the fridge, so I used it."

"I also put it into my rolled omelets because it makes them turn out fluffy. Also, it's a pretty sweet seasoning. Does your family also make them like this, Orihara-san?"

“Um... The rolled omelets my family makes are saltier. This is from a recipe that someone else taught me.”

“Someone else...”

“It’s a flavor that I learned from a cooking class that I used to go to in elementary school,” Orihara-san said. It was the first time I had heard this story. “Apparently, my teacher made this type of rolled omelet at home and said that the recipe was born from a fight they had with their husband.”

There was a nostalgic look on Orihara-san’s face as she continued, “It seems that my teacher’s husband said ‘You can’t eat rice with a sweet rolled omelet’ even though they’d worked hard to make it. So—”

“—she got mad and instead made one that was really sweet,” my sister interjected in the middle of Orihara-san’s story. It was like she knew what Orihara-san was going to say. “Even though she made it to mess with him, he ended up liking it, so from then on she started making her rolled omelets super sweet like this. Did that woman say something like that?”

“Y-Yes... Huh? Wh-Why do you know that? Also...huh? Did I say they were a woman?”

Orihara-san was puzzled, and my older sister continued in a voice that sounded like she was suppressing her emotions. “Orihara-san...where are you from?”

“I’m from the countryside in the northern part of the prefecture...” Orihara-san then said the name of the town she was raised in. Hearing that, the expression on my sister’s face looked like she had realized something, and she faced towards the heavens.

“I see...so that’s it.”

“Wh-What is it, Nee-chan? Just what’s been going on with you?” I restlessly asked my sister, who looked like she had come to some sort of conclusion.

My sister didn’t answer me and stood up straight. With a mysterious look in her eyes, she looked at Orihara-san and I.

“Please come with me.”

Kaede



MOMOTA KAEDE

Height: 165 cm
Birthday: August 8th
Blood Type: O

Favorite Food:

Rolled omelets

Dislikes:

Mama's boys
(Due to her bad experience
with her ex-boyfriend.)

♥ Chapter 4:

Momotaro and Uriko-hime

Do you know the story of the princess Uriko-hime? She's relatively minor compared to more popular princesses like Cinderella and Snow White, so I think there's a lot of people who don't know about her.

Uriko-hime is a princess who appears in the old Japanese story "Uriko-hime and the Amano-jaku." Depending on the region, she's called different names like Urihime, Urihimeko, or even...Uriko Orihime.

Once upon a time, there was an old man and old lady. One day, the old man went to the mountain to gather firewood, and the old lady went to the river to do laundry. As the old lady was doing laundry in the river, a large melon came floating from upstream. The old lady picked up the melon and brought it back home. The old man cut it in two, and wouldn't you know it, a cute little girl was inside. They named this girl Uriko-hime, the melon princess.

The fairy tale begins like that, and the one who told it to me was Uryu-sensei. She said that the old story had left an impression on her because her surname, Uryu, was similar to Uriko-hime's.

"If you go with the version where her name is Uriko Orihime, it's like they combined our names together, isn't it?" she told me with a smile.

It was a summer break when I was an elementary schooler, and it was the last day of that year's cooking class. Unlike every other time, my mom wasn't late coming to pick me up: I'd told her the wrong time on purpose. It was the last class of the year, and I wouldn't be able to see Uryu-sensei again until next year. In the end, I wanted to talk to her as much as possible, so I made the kind of plan a kid would and made my mom come late.

I think Uryu-sensei probably picked up on my little trick, but she didn't say anything and went along with it for me. All she said was that today was special since it was the last class, and she used the leftover ingredients to teach me how to make the rolled omelet that she always makes at home. Apparently, it

was a special recipe that came from when she'd had a fight with her husband. It seemed that she didn't teach it in her class because it had a lot of calories and was unpopular among housewives. As she cooked, Uryu-sensei told me the story of "Uriko-hime and the Amano-jaku."

As an elementary schooler, all I could say was, "Isn't that just a rip-off of 'Momotaro'?" I had only heard the introduction of the story, but there was a huge resemblance between the two. The only things that changed were that the peach had become a melon and that the little boy had become a little girl. I couldn't really defend it. It was impossible that this was just a coincidence. It was obviously plagiarism.

"Ha ha ha. They certainly are alike." Uryu-sensei laughed while she skillfully cracked eggs with one hand.

"So what happened to Uriko-hime after she was born from the melon? She doesn't go to Onigashima and exterminate the ogres there, does she?"

"No, she doesn't go to Onigashima. Well, an ogre does show up. It's the amanojaku from the story's title, and it's pretty much a kind of ogre."

"...Even the bad guys are the same? This just makes the story seem like even more of a rip-off."

"What happens to Uriko-hime after that...is a little hard to explain," she prefaced and then started to talk again.

According to Uryu-sensei, the princess known as Uriko-hime was loved by the old man and the old lady, and she grew quickly. She was good at weaving, so she weaved fabrics every day while she sang. However, one day, while the old man and old lady were away, Uriko-hime was tricked by an ogre called an amanojaku and killed by it. After killing Uriko-hime, the amanojaku stole her kimono and tried to pose as her and do bad things. However, the amanojaku was soon found out and killed, and then they all lived happily ever after.

"It's a really abridged and short synopsis of the story."

"That's an unpleasant story..." I said, giving my frank opinion.

"It sure is. However, depending on the region, the story of Uriko-hime varies in great detail. In our region there are a lot of endings where the princess dies,

but in western Japan the most popular version of the story is the one where she's saved and survives."

"Huh... That kind of thing happens?"

The story's ending is decided by the region? Even though it's a folk tale, it has multiple endings?

"Which one is the real ending?"

"Who knows? I wonder that myself. I don't know either," Uryu-sensei said vaguely. "By the way, Hime-chan, you said that it's a rip-off of 'Momotaro,' but...the truth is that Momotaro is probably a rip-off of Uriko-hime."

"What?!"

Momotaro, the symbol of folk stories, is under suspicion of being a rip-off?

"There's a theory that Uriko-hime existed first, then the main character was changed to a man, the story was reformed to be a catchy tale about good punishing evil, and that became Momotaro. Though I don't know if it's true or not."

I felt so baffled. I didn't know if Uriko-hime's official history was her survival or her death, and I also didn't know who was the original between Momotaro and Uriko-hime. I felt so uneasy. What was true? What was the correct answer? I was so concerned about it that I just couldn't help being anxious.

"I wonder what the real story is," I said unconsciously, and Uryu-sensei smiled kindly at me.

"Isn't it okay to let them all be real?" she said.

"Let them all be real? What? But there's only one real Uriko-hime, right?"

"Well, that's true. I think the original story of Uriko-hime that someone somewhere came up with is the real one, and it surely exists somewhere in the past. However, that doesn't matter. I think what's important is how we interpret it and how we want to interpret it."

"..."

"We all just search for the right answer, right? No matter what the situation is

or what kind of problem it is, we just think ‘What’s the correct answer?’ ‘Where’s the truth?’ ‘Which one is the real one?’ ‘Isn’t this the best solution?’ and ‘Isn’t this how it would normally be?’ But searching for the correct answer like that is only one way of thinking about things. I feel like when you search too much for the most correct answer, you actually end up losing sight of what’s most important.”

“...”

“Even with Momotaro and Uriko-hime, trying to forcibly get to the bottom of who was the original or what is the correct story is just...lacking emotion. Isn’t it fine if they’re all real?”

“...That’s right.”

“Well, Momotaro and Uriko-hime aren’t real and are just from made-up stories, though. There’s no way a baby would come out of a peach or a melon,” Uryu-sensei said and placed her hand on her own stomach. “Babies come from here, after all.” She looked affectionately at her abdomen and tenderly stroked it.

“Huh? S-Sensei, it can’t be...”

“Yes, I’m pregnant with my second.” Uryu-sensei grinned and held up two fingers. I think she was making a kind of pun by making the number two and a peace sign with the same gesture.

“Wow, congratulations!”

“Ha ha ha. Thank you.”

“I totally didn’t realize it. Your figure hasn’t changed at all.”

“I don’t really swell up. It was the same thing with my first baby.” Uryu-sensei smiled softly as she placed her hand on her stomach.

“I really am happy.” Her words sounded natural, like they unintentionally spilled from her heart. “My shotgun wedding left me swamped with a lot of things, and I really did have a tough time, but...in spite of all that, when I think of everything as a whole, I’m really happy. Even though he gets on my nerves, I have a husband I love, I have a cute daughter...and I have a new member of my

family on the way.”

After she said all that, she exclaimed in surprise, “Oh, the baby just moved.”

“What? The baby is already moving?”

“Yeah. This kid is really energetic and kicks a lot. Hey, Hime-chan. Would you like to feel it?”

“I-Is it okay?”

“Go right ahead.”

I carefully, timidly reached my hand to her stomach. When I looked again from up close, it was hard to tell because of her clothes, but Uryu-sensei’s stomach was getting pretty big. I carefully touched her stomach, and it felt harder than I thought it would. It was like her stomach was being stretched by how full it was.

“Um, right now, the baby is kicking around here,” Uryu-sensei said as she moved my hand. I placed my hand on the part she guided me to, and after I waited, I felt something. The soft impact touched the palm of my hand.

“Wow, the baby moved!”

“Ha ha ha. The baby kicked really hard just now!”

“W-Wow. Amazing, it’s really kicking a lot!”

“Isn’t it? Oh, it suddenly started moving. Well, well, I wonder if this kid likes you, Hime-chan?”

“Oh wow, this is amazing! It’s so cool!”

I didn’t have any younger siblings, so it was my first time touching a pregnant woman’s stomach like this. Even though I’m twenty-seven years old now, I still remember how it hit me that babies really do come from inside their mothers’ bellies and how I was very excited and deeply moved. I felt the movement of a little life with my hand.

“This is amazing. I wonder what kind of kid it will be...”

“Do you want to meet the baby?”

“Yes!”

“Well, when this kid is born, maybe I’ll bring them to next year’s cooking class.”

“Really?!”

“If I do that, will you hold the baby for me, Hime-chan?”

“Yes! I definitely will!”

“All right. It’s a promise then.” Uryu-sensei and I pinky promised, and after that the rolled omelet was done. It was sweet and soft, just like a cake. I did my best to remember the recipe, and I practiced it over and over again at my house. As I did that, I wondered if Uryu-sensei’s baby would also eat the same rolled omelet when they were born and became bigger.

However, I wasn’t able to keep my promise with Uryu-sensei, as that was the last year of the cooking class for long vacations in that town. It seems there were a lot of reasons for it happening, like a lack of students and the town’s finances.

Since the cooking class disappeared, so did the point of contact between Uryu-sensei and me. It was different then; elementary schoolers didn’t have cell phones, and I didn’t know Uryu-sensei’s phone number or her address.

Well, I think if I had seriously tried to search for her, then I probably could have found her. However, I figured if I had gone that far to find her, it would have just been a bother to her, so I gave up and never saw her again without being able to meet the baby that she carried in her stomach. However, I thought optimistically that I would probably meet her someday, somewhere.

We live in the same prefecture, so as long as we’re alive then we’ll probably run into each other sooner or later. Sometime, before long, we’ll surely meet somewhere...



Now, in the present, I’m meeting Uryu-sensei again for the first time in fifteen years. She still had the same kind and reassuring smile from back then...right in the middle of a small square frame.

“It can’t be!” I stood there in shock. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of loss

like the floor had collapsed from underneath me, and I felt like I would collapse if I didn't keep my focus. Kaede-san had shown us to the room for a Buddhist altar in the back of the house. On the altar was a single picture frame. The person in the picture...was Uryu-sensei.

"Uryu was my mother's maiden name. Even though she got married, she didn't change her name at work because she thought it would be a bother," Kaede-san said, speaking in a soft voice. "My mother taught cooking classes all over. Oh...come to think about it, I think she complained about how the cooking class in Orihara-san's hometown was canceled. She said, 'There's a little girl I promised to meet again,' but I was little so I don't really remember, though."

"..."

"I feel like she said something like, 'When Kaoru gets a little bigger, let's go play with that girl, Kaede,' but right after that was when the accident happened..."

I was so shocked I couldn't even speak. My mind had gone blank, and I couldn't think of anything. It was like there was a hole in my heart and a dry wind was blowing through it. I couldn't believe that Uryu-sensei was Momota-kun and Kaede-san's mother. Also, I didn't want to believe that Uryu-sensei had already passed away.

"...Ha ha. It's an amazing coincidence. The girlfriend that Kaoru brought home was actually a student from my mom's cooking class. It makes me think that this is more like fate than a coincidence." Kaede-san spoke with a bitter smile and a fleeting look in her eyes as she looked at Uryu-sensei, the mother she loved so much who was in the picture.

"I was never taught my mom's recipes for rolled omelets because I was still little, so I struggled to recreate it, relying only on my memory of how it tasted. It was my favorite of all my mother's cooking, and I also wanted Kaoru to know what mom's cooking tasted like."

Uryu-sensei died before Momota-kun turned two years old. Even if he had eaten baby food and lightly seasoned food for infants, he probably didn't have an opportunity to eat normal home cooking.

"However, I've never been able to get it just quite right. There wasn't any

mention of her rolled omelet in the materials for her cooking class, after all.”

“She said that her rolled omelet wasn’t very popular among women because of how it was so high in calories, so she didn’t teach it in the class. I...just happened to be taught it.”

“Your rolled omelet has the same taste as my mother’s, Orihara-san... It was truly nostalgic. It felt like I was eating my mother’s cooking for the first time in over ten years.” Kaede-san let out a little sigh, and lightly hit Momota-kun on the back of his head with her fist.

“What’s up with that? You got to try mom’s rolled omelet behind my back?”

Momota-kun didn’t say anything. After he’d entered this room and heard my story, he had been staring at Uryu-sensei’s picture.

Earlier he said he had a hard time looking at his mother’s picture...

“Nee-chan and I...” Momota-kun suddenly said.

“Huh? What did you say?”

“Ah...it’s just, I thought that Nee-chan and I definitely got the scary look on our faces from our dad, but mom has a pretty scary look as well.”

Kaede-san and I didn’t know how to respond to his words.

“This is the first time I’ve looked at Mom’s picture in a while... She’s got an evil eye on her, doesn’t she? Ha ha. What’s the deal with this family? Does every parent and child look like a bad guy?”

“What are you saying—” Kaede-san tried to object, but she caught her breath. Momota-kun was crying as tears welled up in his eyes and flowed down his cheeks.

“Kaoru...what are you crying for?”

“Huh? Oh...I am. What? Why am I crying?” He touched his own cheeks and looked surprised. “What is this? I don’t know. After listening to you two talk and looking at mom’s picture for the first time in a while, it hit me once again that she’s my mom,” Momota-kun said, unable to hide how baffled he was. It was like he was struggling to put into words the feelings in his heart that he couldn’t control or sort out.

He looked at me with tears in his eyes and asked me, "Orihara-san...did you like my mother?"

"...Y-Yes," I said and firmly nodded. "When I was in elementary school, I liked Uryu-sensei, your mother. Even though she was mature, she didn't try to put on airs, and she sometimes acted childish. Uryu-sensei would always tell me interesting stories, and she always cheerfully listened to mine... I really liked her."

Momota-kun looked down at the floor like he was thinking about what I had just said. "I... In the end, I couldn't remember my mother, and felt like if I said I loved her it would be dishonest. However, I wonder if I should have thought of things more simply. If she's someone that my sister, my dad and you loved, then it's all right if I love her too. After all, she's a loved one of someone I love..."

"...Geez. Of course, it's all right, you big dummy!" Kaede-san said harshly, hitting Momota-kun softly. "You're a guy, so don't cry."

"Nee-chan..."

"I mean, what's your deal? When I tried so hard long ago to teach you all about mom, you hated it! Do you just accept it when it's your girlfriend talking?"

"I-I'm sorry, Nee-chan... Ow, ouch."

"My stupid dummy of a little brother!" With her fist slightly shaking, Kaede-san hit Momota-kun again and again. There were tears welling up in her eyes. It seemed like she was overflowing with unexplainable feelings that were more complicated than I could ever imagine, and she couldn't stop them.

"Oh, that reminds me." After she put away her fists, wiped her eyes, and caught her breath, Kaede-san looked at me. "I have to announce the results of the first test." Her eyes were red, but she smiled somewhat mischievously.

Test? Oh, now that you mention it, that was what we were doing.

"You passed," Kaede-san said. "You've already passed with flying colors. Your results were so excellent that you're exempt from the rest of the tests. As the eldest daughter of the Momota family, I officially accept you as the girlfriend of

our eldest son, Kaoru.”

“H-Huh? Umm...” As I became bewildered, Kaede-san bowed her head to me.

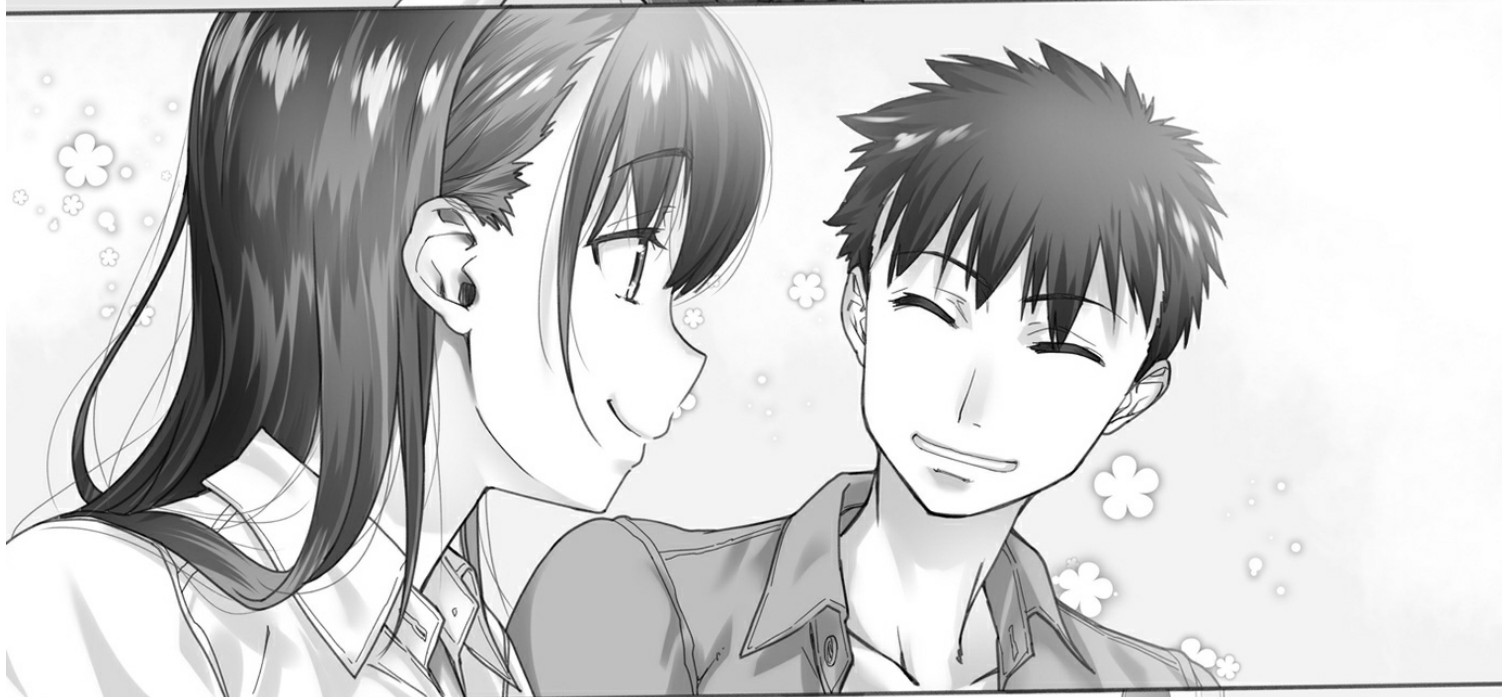
“Please continue to take care of Kaoru from here on out.”

“Y-Yes. P-Please do the same for me...” I panicked and also bowed my head.

Kaede-san raised her head and turned around to look at the altar. “Well, how should I put it... If my mom approves of you, then there’s no way I can’t do the same.”

“...It’s not like Mom approved of this.”

“Shut it. Right now, I feel like Mom is approving of it from heaven.” Kaede-san laughed cheerfully at Momota-kun’s comment, and in the background behind the siblings, the picture of Uryu-sensei showed her smiling very happily.



≡ Epilogue

That night, after I had finished having dinner with my sister and was washing dishes in the kitchen, my dad came back from his workshop in Sendai.

“Welcome home, Dad.”

“Hey.” Keeping his greeting short, my father opened the fridge, took out a beer and some side dishes that my sister had made for dinner, and sat down at the table.

After wiping my hands, I sat in front of my dad. I grabbed his beer, popped the tab, and urged my father to grab a cup. My father gave me a surprised look.

“Well now, this is rare.”

“It’s okay once in a while.”

“You want some money or something?”

“No, it’s not that.” He held out his cup, and I poured beer into it. I did so carefully so as to keep it from having too much foam. My dad looked like he enjoyed it as he took a sip of the beer his son had poured for him. “You know that lady, Orihara-san, who I introduced you to the other day?” I said.

“Oh, your friend’s older sister?”

“Yeah. She... A long time ago, she attended Mom’s cooking class.”

My dad’s eyes went wide. “Is that true?”

“Yes. It seems true. She also didn’t even know we were family. She offered some incense to the altar today.”

“...I see. That’s an amazing coincidence.”

It is an amazing coincidence. It’s a coincidence that seems just like fate.

“I heard this from Orihara-san, but...apparently Mom told Orihara-san that she loves you.”

My dad spit out his beer and coughed as he choked. Then with an uncomfortable face, he said, “...I wonder if Kozue would say something like

that? Maybe Orihara-san just said that to be nice?”

“Who knows. I don’t get it, but that’s what Orihara-san said.”

I don’t get it. I don’t know my mother. However, the people I love do know her.

“Hmm... She loves me, huh? I was barely told that to my face by Kozue because she was older than me and I was no match for her. I was always making her mad and just kept causing her trouble because of how unreliable I was.”

My father had a frail look in his eyes as he continued. “When she got pregnant with Kaede, I was still a friggin’ teenager who couldn’t make any money on my own. I really caused trouble for Kozue. I received so much from her, but I couldn’t do anything in return—”

“She said she was happy,” I said. “Apparently, Mom said that she was happy. She told Orihara-san that she was truly happy because she had you, Nee-chan and me.”

“...I see.” My dad nodded as he considered those words and took a sip of his beer. “Hmm. This is a strange feeling, talking to you about your mother like this. Do you remember when you got in a big fight with Kaede a long time ago?”

“Yeah, that did happen, didn’t it?” I once again picked up the can of beer and poured it into my dad’s cup. “Well, I’m a little more mature now.”

Sometimes I’m an adult, and sometimes I’m a kid. Sometimes I’d desperately bite off more than I could chew and act like an adult, only to realize that I’m still just a kid. Sometimes I’d realize again that I’m a child who was born to be loved. At the end of the day, who I am is a fifteen-year-old living with a vague and unclear self-identity who’s still in the middle of a growing process that even I don’t understand.

After I finished pouring out the contents of the can and it was empty, I stood up from my seat. This was a little too much, and I was starting to feel embarrassed; I couldn’t stand doing this whole “father and son” time much longer.

“Kaoru.” As I tried to leave the kitchen, my father spoke to me. “Make sure you sit down when you go number one.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Unable to understand what he meant, I tilted my head. “I know that already. You’ve told me that since I was a kid.”

“Oh, that’s right.” He nodded in approval, narrowed his eyes and smiled quietly.

≡

Later, I came to hang out at Orihara’s apartment like I always did.

“By the way, how has Kaede-san been since then?” Orihara-san said as she sat beside me.

“How has she been? She’s normal. Nothing’s changed.”

“Hmm. Really?”

“Well... She’s been making nothing but rolled omelets using Mom’s recipe that you taught her. They taste good, but I’ve started to get sick of eating them.”

“Ha ha ha.” Orihara-san laughed cheerfully.

After a short, hesitant pause, she said, “H-Hey, Momota-kun,” in a nervous voice. “Can you turn around for a second?”

“Turn around?”

“I’d like you to turn your back to me while you sit down.”

“Hmm? Okay, fine.” I followed her instructions and rotated my body, turning my back to Orihara-san. When I did...

“Got you!” Orihara-san hugged me, wrapping her arms around me from behind.

“Huh?”

“D-Don’t move. Just sit still.” She restrained me with her words, coiled around my arms, and hugged me tightly with a squeeze.

She smelled nice. It was Orihara-san’s scent, and I didn’t smell even a little bit of the stink of a compress. She probably didn’t apply one today. Also, above all else...the feeling of her boobs was amazing. I strongly felt those two

overwhelming presences on my back. It was such a wonderful feeling that I foolishly wondered if I could somehow grow another hand from my back at that moment.

“...What are you doing all of a sudden?”

“Well, you see...I made a promise with Uryu-sensei, your mother,” Orihara-san said into my ear. “I promised I would hold her baby when it was born.”

“...”

“It’s been fifteen years, so I can’t really hold him, but I thought I’d at least try giving him a hug.”

“Orihara-san...” An indescribable feeling welled up from the bottom of my heart. It was a warm, sweet, and mysterious feeling that spread happiness to every cell of my body. “I can’t believe you met my mom while she was pregnant with me.”

“Well, there’s not a lot of girlfriends who’ve stroked the tummy of their boyfriend’s mom when they were still a fetus. Ha ha...” Orihara-san laughed dryly at this strange occurrence that could only happen with a couple who had a considerable gap in their age.

“If my mom were alive...I wonder what she would have said about us?”

“You mean if she found out about you dating a woman twelve years older than you?”

“Well, something like that. What do you think, Orihara-san?”

“Umm... I-I don’t know,” Orihara-san said in a puzzled voice, and then continued, “but if it’s Uryu-sensei... I have a feeling she would have somehow approved of us.”

“...”

“It seems like she’d say, ‘There’s no helping it if you’ve fallen in love with her’ and laugh about it.”

“Really?”

“I-I don’t know for sure though. A lot of my wishful thinking is mixed up in

there...”

“No... I kind of feel the same way.” I imagined my mother, who I only knew from pictures. Right now, on top of the table in my room was the picture frame that my sister made for me. I resolved to no longer hide it or turn my eyes away from it. As I picture her smile, I’ll speak to her from within my heart.

Mom, thank you for giving birth to me. You were with me for less than two years, but I’m sure you took care of me a lot, breastfed me, gave me baby food, and changed my diapers. I’m sure you gave me a lot of love. However, I’m afraid I don’t remember any of it.

That feeling was why I somewhat rejected my mother. I was apprehensive about accepting her. I felt like if I simply said I loved her, it would be insincere. I think I felt guilty towards my older sister and father who truly loved my mom.

However, for some reason, I’m strangely accepting of my mother now. Maybe it’s because I now have someone I love too. Maybe it’s because for the first time, I truly love someone. Now that I know what it is to love someone, I’ve become able to imagine what it was like for my mom to love my father, my sister, and me. I can now imagine it, so I wish to give love back to her. I’ve never met or talked to her, but I want to tell my mom, “I love you too.”

“I wonder if it’s fate,” I said.

“What?”

“I mean, like... It’s a really huge coincidence, right? To think, even though we met by chance, our fates have been intertwined for fifteen years. We’ve been connected since before I was even born. I can’t think of this as anything else but fate.”

“Hmm... I wonder. If you and I really are a couple destined to be together because of heaven’s will...then I think it might be okay that I was born into this world twelve years earlier...”

“That may be true, but...”

“Oh, s-sorry, I didn’t mean to kill the mood!” Orihara-san said, getting flustered.

Well, calling it fate was probably a little bit of an exaggeration. Being joined by fate before you were born may seem like a miracle, but in the end it's just the story of a small world within the same prefecture. Aside from Orihara-san, there were dozens of people in this prefecture who'd attended my mom's cooking class. If that person and I had fallen in love, I still probably would have thought, "This is fate."

Also, there's our twelve-year age difference. This age gap that Orihara-san worries about is a problem that we'll have to deal with forever, and it is an obstacle of sorts. The fact that we have that obstacle probably means that we aren't a couple blessed by the heavens.

However, that's fine. Even if it was a coincidence, if I think that it's fate, then that's what it is. It's just like how we don't know whether Momotaro and Uriko-hime is the real story, and what's important is which one you yourself think is real: I think what's most important is how I feel.

"You're my destiny, Orihara-san," I said, and I squeezed her hands that were wrapped around me. "Even if you're not the one I'm destined to be with, if I feel like I want to be with you, doesn't that make you the one I'm destined to be with?"

For a moment, Orihara-san's eyes went wide with surprise. However, they soon went back to normal, and she gave me a very happy smile. "Yes, you're right." She silently nodded and once again embraced me tightly.

It was frustrating—and by that, I mean I couldn't stand being the only one hugged, so I undid Orihara-san's hands, turned around, and this time I hugged her from the front. She returned my embrace, and all that filled us was happiness.

I wished time would stop just like this. However, at the same time, I felt like I wanted to walk together through the flow of time. I think I'll call these conflicting feelings "love."

Afterword

The word “rom-com” is short for romantic comedy, and it’s an expression used to describe the genre of works that depict romance in a comical fashion. But why can the romance between a man and a woman be humorous? Why can love be a comedy?

When I think it over again...I think that it’s because it’s serious. It’s because the characters are serious. It’s because they are seriously in love. Them being seriously in love causes them to make a lot of mistakes and blunders, which the reader sees as comedy. It then becomes a funny love story. It’s comical because it’s serious, and it’s a gag because it’s earnest.

However, the same may be true in real life as well. When anyone falls in love, they become serious, earnest, and desperate, and it all looks funny and lame to someone watching from the sidelines—and that’s why it’s also the coolest. This time as well, I think that all the characters in the story earnestly faced their own love, but I wonder how it looked to everyone reading this?

And with that, I am Kota Nozomi, and this is the third installment of a rom-com about a twelve-year age gap. The subtitle I chose that I felt might tie together all the various themes and happenings in the book is “A Love That Transcends Time.”

The story I had pictured when I started writing this series is just about done, and I feel like I’ve done what I wanted to do. However, I was told, “You should write more!” so I’m going to keep going! Even I, the creator, can’t predict what’s going to happen from here on out!

By the way...the part where Orihara-san hurts her lower back is based on the author’s personal experience. Everyone, be careful with your back when you hold a child!

Also, I have a sudden announcement. The manga version of *Slightly Older Girlfriend* is being serialized on the app *Manga Up!* Also, the first volume of the tankobon for the manga will go on sale at around the same time as this third volume! Please look forward to it!

Now then, my thanks.

To my supervisor, Nakamizo, thank you once again for your help. To my illustrator, Nanasemeruchi, thank you for more wonderful illustrations in this volume as well. They were boobtastic. I look forward to working with you again. Also, to the readers who have picked up this book, I give my greatest thanks. May we meet again in the fourth volume.

**Are You Okay
With a Slightly
Older Girlfriend?**

**~A Love That
Transcends Time~**



vol.
3

"That's not true!
I think...you're the prettiest,
Orihara-san."

"Come here, Kaoru.
It's time for a family
meeting."

"Phew.
I almost turned
into a boring
adult."

"Thanks for going
out of your way to bring
such a big car. Everyone
is really grateful."

"I don't
feel sorry.
I don't
regret it."

"Oh man,
this is rich.
You really
can call
people by
their names
if you try."

"This sucks.
Why did something
like this happen
to me?"



MOMOTA
KAEDE

MOMOTA
KAORU

ORIHARA
HIME



KANAO
HARUKA

UOMI
UTA

IBUSUKI
SAKI

URANO
IZUMI



“H-Hey...
Momota-kun...
you’re staring
too much!”



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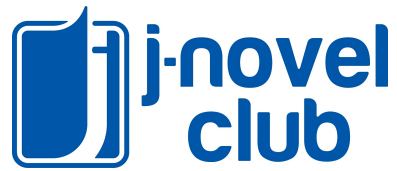
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by Kota Nozomi

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