3rd Date

You Were Experienced, I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko Nagaoka

Artist / magako

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Prologue

The dazzling summer was over in a flash, leaving me with a chest so full of memories that it felt like it could burst.

My first summer with my first-ever girlfriend taught me many things: What it meant to believe.

What it meant to accept the past.

What it meant to love somebody...

All the firsts that my experienced girlfriend had given to someone inexperienced like me were irreplaceable. I found them to be a source of happiness.

They made me want to treasure her forever.

To *be* with her forever.

And as that wish grew stronger and stronger in me, another one was on the rise—one akin to impatience.

I can't wait to become a good match for you. To have everyone see me as someone worthy of you.

Spurred on by that sort of restlessness, I found myself hitting the books on my own more often than before.

Chapter 1

On a certain Sunday morning in September in front of the Statue of Liberty in Odaiba...

“I’m Tanikita Akari.” A petite girl introduced herself to us and gave us a quick bow. “Wait, we should already know each other ’cause we’re all in the same class here except for Nishina-kun, right? And Nishina-kun was in my class last year too.”

“Nishi...!” exclaimed my friend beside me and started to fall over.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Nisshi?!” I called out. I instinctively held him up by his arm.

Icchi propped up his other arm so Nisshi could just barely manage to keep standing.

“A... A girl...said my name...twice...” he quietly uttered. He looked upward, looking thoroughly discomposed.

“I know exactly how you feel, man!” exclaimed Icchi, sympathizing (?) with him. He couldn’t hide the look of excitement on his face.

I too understood how he felt, and painfully well.

“This is looking to be one hell of a day...” I said.

And Nisshi was already in a critical condition.

Propping him up, I looked over the people in front of me once again.

The girl who’d just introduced herself was Tanikita-san from my class. She was Runa’s friend—the one she called Akari. Particularly short among the girls in our class, she was energetic and stood out a fair bit, even among the extroverts.

As one would expect from Runa’s friends, Tanikita-san had a pretty face with large eyes. Her hair was cut into a wavy bob that was dyed a lighter color—typical of a sunny type—and adorned with a large ribbon. Below that, she wore a loose-fitting top and shorts. Her style seemed to be a unique variation on

gyaru fashion. Even when I'd seen her in her uniform, there had been something fashionable about her. Girls like her were the ones who made me lose my nerve the most.

"It's time, right? We gonna go in or what?" asked Yamana-san, folding her arms. She was standing beside Tanikita-san.

Today, Yamana-san was wearing a top that sat below her shoulders, a tight miniskirt, and tall boots—a rather hard-core gyaru style. Her casual look was just as I'd pictured it in my mind.

"You're right! Let's go, let's go!"

And standing next to Nicole—and to me—was Runa. The top she wore today exposed not her shoulders, but her midriff. She also had a zebra-print miniskirt on.

Sometimes, I carelessly let my eyes wander to her waist, and I ended up looking away in a hurry.

Ahh, she's so cute... I want to touch her... Wait, what am I thinking at a time like this?!

Even though it was still the beginning of September and the temperature exceeded thirty degrees, the girls kinda looked dressed for autumn. That was probably part of being fashionable.

The guys, on the other hand... Icchi and Nisshi had typical everyday summer getups on—T-shirts and jeans. The same went for me, of course.

As we all faced each other, forming a sort of circle, I once again felt horribly out of place.

"C'mon, Ryuto! Let's get going already!" said Runa. She wrapped her hand around my arm and started to walk.

Without really meaning to, I started moving as a result too.

"R-Right... W-Wait, Ru— I mean, Shirakawa-san."

"Ehh? Why're you calling me by my surname again?"

"Er, well..."

It was too awkward for a guy like me to act like the boyfriend of a beautiful girl who made heads turn from every direction—especially in a place where there were so many people around.

Also, I didn't want to antagonize Icchi and Nisshi by being too intimate with Runa in front of them. But as I thought that and checked behind me, it appeared that my friends had other things to worry about. They were close behind me with stiff faces, cautiously looking around as they walked. The two seemed like they were trying to make themselves small and were sticking to each other like glue.

On Sundays, Odaiba was alive with families, couples, and young people in general. Of course, I was young too, but all those people directing their cheerful smiles at the blue ocean under the kind of clear skies you'd expect from the height of summer? They were all so dazzling that I, like Icchi and Nisshi, kinda felt awkward.

Runa stretched her arms toward the sun. "Mmm, it's the perfect weather to play airsoft!" she said with a smile. Her fair armpits peeked out from under her shirt, along with her smooth, exposed waistline. Her features were sexy and dazzling.

"Y-Yeah, true... The play area is indoors, though," I replied.

During summer break, Runa and I had stayed at her great-grandmother's place. When she'd cried at the summer festival, I'd wanted to invite her to something that we could do together that would be the first time for both of us, and this had been my suggestion. I'd thought of airsoft because I'd suddenly recalled that Icchi and Nisshi had mentioned how they wanted to play.

And that brought us to today, where we had all gathered here to do so.

Airsoft commonly refers to a game that involves players armed with airsoft guns. Players split into two teams and shoot at each other. However, the place we had reserved for today was geared toward groups like ours—smaller parties with no experience. It had a dedicated indoor arena inside a commercial building. The minimum number of players required for a reservation was six, and there was an ample selection of rentable gear.

While we'd be using airsoft guns, the game still involved shooting living

people, and there were only so many arenas and pieces of equipment that minors could use. It was scary to fight seasoned adults with bulkier, rugged gear. This arena was pretty much the only one that suited us.

Icchi and Nisshi trembled as they talked among themselves.

“Wish this was in Akihabara... Akiba would accept us...”

“Well, what can you do? Akiba’s arenas are for the hard-core folks.”

“Normies are real scary...”

“We’re normies too, just for today... We’ve got girls with us and all.”

“That just freaks me out even more!”

When I’d invited the two of them, they’d been like “Say *what*?! Airsoft with *girls*?!” and got all hyped up. But ever since we’d met up today, they hadn’t uttered a word to said girls.

“What’s wrong, you two? You look kinda down today,” Yamana-san asked them.

“I-It’s the demon gyaru!”

Icchi and Nisshi then froze up, going speechless for a moment.

“She sure pulled a fast one on us at that Bacchus izakaya...”

“‘Caplis Soda’ my ass...”

The two brought their faces close together, speaking quietly. They’d previously said things like “I’m gonna cut her head off with a Nichirin sword!” behind her back, but now that they faced the girl herself...

“I didn’t think you’d hold on for so long,” said Yamana-san, sounding impressed.

The two guys looked taken aback.

“I thought you’d be worse off than you were. It’s pretty amazing that you managed to get home on your own.” Then, she winked at the two. “I’ll be counting on you today. ≡”

Icchi’s and Nisshi’s faces flushed instantly. They couldn’t say anything for a

while, but their breathing became rough.

“A-All right!” shouted Icchi and ran ahead of us.

Nisshi followed him. “Man, demon gyaru really are the best!”

“I’m taking a bullet for a demon gyaru today!”

They both shouted energetically as they hurried ahead. It appeared they’d temporarily stopped caring about the eyes of the sunny types around them.

“How simpleminded can they be...?” I wondered aloud.

This, too, was the sad nature of gloomy types.

Because it was our first time playing airsoft, when we arrived at the venue, a member of the staff gave us a lesson about the basic rules, the etiquette of the game, and how to use the airsoft guns. After that, we split up into gender-segregated changing rooms, got changed into the camouflage uniforms that were included in our rentals, and started getting ourselves ready for the game.

“Ta-da!”

As we guys had finished changing first, we’d been messing with the airsoft guns and their magazines in the safe zone. However, when that voice called out, our hands froze and we all looked up.

The three girls had just left their changing room.

“Whatcha think?! Does it look good on me?” Runa, clad in a camouflage uniform, struck a pose with her unloaded airsoft gun.

“Whoa!” I let out, captivated for a moment, before coming to my senses. “Sh-Shirakawa-san, your buttons!”

“Huh?” Runa looked down at her chest.

The chest of her camouflage shirt was wide open, putting her cleavage on display. Looking at the girls beside her, I saw that the same went for Yamana-san. Tanikita-san, on the other hand, wore her shirt loose in a high-fashion style that showed off her neck.

“Hey, it’s dangerous to leave your skin exposed!” I told them.

Sure, it wasn’t like we’d be using real bullets, but a pellet fired from an electric airsoft gun would surely hurt if it hit your skin directly.

Yamana-san frowned at me. “Ehh? You realize a gyaru’ll die if she doesn’t show any skin, right?”

“I’ll button it up just before the game starts!” added Runa in a cutesy voice.

“Yep yep. We’ll wear ’em normally after we’re done taking pics, ’kay?” said Tanikita-san in a matter-of-fact tone as she took out her smartphone.

“Yay!” the three of them cheered, and the safe zone instantly turned into a selfie photo shoot.

“They sure are gyaru, all right...” Icchi uttered quietly in a daze, watching the scene.

Nisshi’s nostrils flared and he breathed in deeply. “They smell so nice...” he said, then continued to load pellets into his magazines.

“Oh, wait, I’ll take a pic from below,” said Tanikita-san. She got down on the floor with her phone while Runa and Yamana-san struck poses with their airsoft guns as though they were models posing with props. “Move your hand a bit left, Runy.”

“Like this?”

“No, like, my left!”

“Ah, you mean right?!”

“’Kay! Now show some emotion.”

“Aka-taso, thank you very Maicching!” exclaimed Runa.

“Iyaan!” they all uttered in unison.

At this point, I had no idea what they were saying. The girls all bounced around with cheerful smiles on their faces.

Until now, I had mostly spent time with Runa in private, so it was new to me to watch her with her female friends up close. Seeing her having so much fun, I grew jealous of Yamana-san and Tanikita-san. I sure couldn’t keep up with her when she was like this.

As these thoughts passed through my head, my eyes suddenly met Runa’s.

“You guys, c’mon! Join us,” she suggested.

“Huh?”

“I’m gonna get the tripod!” said Tanikita-san, and she ran off to the storage area with small, quick steps.

“Oh, thanks, Akari,” said Yamana-san.

Tanikita-san came back with a small tripod about ten centimeters high, and before I knew it, we were preparing to take a group photo.

“C’mon, Ryuto!” exclaimed Runa, taking my arm and pulling me toward the front of the camera.

“Whaaat...?!” I exclaimed in return.

My arm grew hot from her touch. That floral-or-fruity scent of hers made me dizzy for the umpteenth time.

“Wow, look at those lovebirds!” Akari said exaggeratedly, looking at her phone.

Her reaction made me feel awkward.

Suddenly, I felt hostility from nearby. Looking over, I saw that Icchi and Nisshi were glaring at me with the kinds of faces you’d find in a manga about delinquents.

“Kasshi, you bastard!”

“Go to hell, normie!!!”

“Agh!” I exclaimed in reply.

I meant no harm; please forgive me!

Yamana-san approached them. “Hey, am I not good enough for you two?”

She stood between my two friends. Nisshi was about her height, and she put her arm over his shoulders like a male friend would. As Icchi was taller, she instead put a hand on his shoulder like a fashion model posing for a photo.

The two were shocked and they completely froze up at the unexpected physical contact with a girl.

“’Kay, angle’s good!” announced Tanikita-san after checking her phone atop the tripod. She ran up to us with those same small, quick steps and then struck a pose. “Takin’ it now!”

She seemed to have a remote control for that purpose, and the phone clicked on its own as soon as she said that.

I didn’t know what face I’d made in the shot, but either way, we were done taking a group photo.

“The warmth of a demon gyaru...”

“The scent of a demon gyaru... The smell of coconut...”

While Icchi and Nisshi were entranced, Runa pulled on my sleeve.

“Hey, whatcha think about this outfit?” she asked. “Does it suit me?”

“Huh...?” I then realized that I hadn’t properly told her my thoughts earlier.

Perhaps her current getup didn’t feel right to her because she normally dressed in a completely different way. She looked at me with her upturned eyes, but they seemed slightly nervous.

“Um...” I began, looking her over once again.

My eyes stopped on the open chest area of her partially unbuttoned camouflage shirt. I then brought my gaze back to her face in a hurry.

“I-It suits you well... Y-You look cute,” I said falteringly.

Runa smiled in relief. “Really? I’m so glad!” Next, she switched her handgun from a one-handed grip stance to a two-handed one and pointed it at me. “My performance today’s gonna hit a bull’s-eye on that heart of yours, Ryuto! Bam!” she said and giggled bashfully.

Her cuteness made even my ears burn.

“Weren’t you just told you shouldn’t point that at people?” I complained in order to hide my embarrassment.

“Oh, you’re right!” replied Runa, bringing her hand to her mouth as a serious look appeared on her face. “Sorry, Ryuto!”

“It’s okay this time,” I bashfully replied. My heart pounded violently as I recalled how she’d been a moment ago.

“My performance today’s gonna hit a bull’s-eye on that heart of yours, Ryuto!”

You sniped my heart long ago, though...

Runa stared at me, seeming to find me strange. “What’s wrong, Ryuto? Why’re you grinning like that?” she asked. “Ah! Were you...looking?” she asked, pushing up her chest to accentuate her cleavage.

“I-I wasn’t!”

So much for all my efforts to keep averting my eyes in hopes that she wouldn’t get the wrong idea and take me for a pervert.

“If you fess up, I could show you more...”

“Like I said, I wasn’t looking!”

With the face of a prankster, Runa teased me by trying to direct my attention to her cleavage. Somehow managing to dodge her attempts, I went back to getting ready for the game.

Once we’d finished our preparations, we headed from the safe zone to the combat area in order to start the game.

“Whoa!”

“Holy crap!”

Icchi and Nisshi sounded mesmerized.

“Isn’t this like *Apax*?!”

“More like *POPG*, dude!”

They were louder than they had been at any point earlier in the day, bringing up names of famous battle royale shooters.

Naturally, the arena we’d rented wasn’t as spacious as an outdoor field. It might have been more like a conference room in terms of size, but there were walls and obstacles set up all around, so its visibility was poor, like a maze. It felt fitting for a group of our size.

It was decorated with things like artificial ivy and tape that read “KEEP OUT,” giving it the feel of a battle royale video game—something that I was secretly hyped about. Icchi, Nisshi, and I had started talking about airsoft a while back precisely because we’d admired those games’ worlds and wanted to experience them in real life.

We hadn’t hired a game master to run the game since it would’ve cost money, so it was just us players. After splitting into two teams, we got to our starting areas.

Team Red was made up of me, Runa, and Tanikita-san. Team Yellow had Yamana-san, Icchi, and Nisshi. The teams had ended up like this for no particular reason after the photo shoot. To avoid any friendly-fire accidents, each of us wore an armband with our team’s color over our camouflage uniforms.

“Begin!” we all yelled out, marking the start of the game.

For a while, we all waited to see what would happen. There was no time limit and the game would only end when all members of one team were eliminated, but things would no doubt be decided quickly because there were so few of us.

We—Team Red—stuck together as we waited. Then...

“I’m gonna go take a look,” said Tanikita-san all of a sudden. She took advantage of her small build to hide behind the barricades as she moved

forward.

“Be careful, Akari,” said Runa.

We both followed Akari. And at that point...

“Die, normie!!!”

The shout was followed by a pellet whizzing past my ear.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed.

Looking over, I saw Nisshi off to the side, his upper body visible behind a barricade as he aimed in our direction.

“Get down!” I told Runa. Stepping in front of her, I used another barricade to cover half of my body as I readied my rifle.

“Damn it! I’m gonna send you both to hell!” exclaimed Nisshi, his sights still set on us after his misses.

It felt like his persistence was fueled by hatred. Fortunately, none of his shots had landed, so I pulled the trigger a few times myself.

“Augh, I’m hit!” he announced.

It appeared I’d managed to get a shot in. Nisshi raised his hands in frustration. The rules said that those who’d been hit had to leave the arena immediately.

“One down...” I said, relieved to have won the firefight.

Then...

“I’m gonna avenge you, Nisshi!” came a voice from not too far away as I heard another pellet fly past me.

“Oh, crap!” I exclaimed.

That was close.

Hiding behind a barricade for a moment and peeking through a gap, I saw Icchi pointing his rifle in my direction.

“You okay, Ryuto?” asked Runa behind me, concern in her tone.

“I’m fine. Stay down.”

With that, I once again peeked over my cover and readied my rifle.

“Take this, Kasshi!” shouted Icchi, unleashing a massive stream of pellets at me.

“Whoa!”

It didn’t seem like I had time to take aim before he’d get a hit on me, so I was forced to duck behind the barricade again.

“Die, normie!!!” shouted Icchi.

Wow, this guy’s not messing around. Honestly, I can’t match his fighting spirit.

But as I started to panic with those things on my mind...

“Take that!” came a voice from another direction along with the sound of flying pellets.

It was Tanikita-san. She’d gone on ahead of us and was now shooting at Icchi from up close.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed, stopping his barrage at me. When he saw Tanikita-san, he hid behind a barricade to reset the engagement.

“I missed! Wah!” whined Tanikita-san.

She had sneaked up on Icchi, but missed her perfect chance to take him out from up close. At the moment, she was behind a crate only as tall as her knees, so if someone were to shoot at her, she’d be in danger.

But as she started to run toward another barricade, Icchi pointed his rifle at her back.

“Ah, Tani—” I began.

“Watch out, Akari!” exclaimed Runa from behind me, rushing out from behind our cover.

“Shirakawa-san?!” I exclaimed.

I wasn’t the only one her play had caught by surprise, however. Icchi was confused by a new target suddenly revealing herself in full, and it threw off his aim.

Now's my chance!

I peeked over the barricade and aimed at Icchi. Before he could fix his aim on Runa, my pellet struck his shoulder.

"Argh, what?! Damn it! I'm hit!"

Icchi's end came all too quickly as he was caught off guard.

I immediately called out to Runa and Tanikita-san. "Take cover, quick!"

I'd taken down Icchi and Nisshi, but Team Yellow still had one more member to take into account—Yamana-san.

The moment I thought about that, a figure appeared in the corner of my vision.

Runa had given up the nearest barricade to Tanikita-san and was working on returning to my position. However, Yamana-san was suddenly behind her. Pointing her handgun at Runa without a word, she was about to pull the trigger.

I didn't have time to call out to her. With that in mind, I rushed out from behind my cover...and got in front of Runa.

"Ngh!"

And that was it.

"I'm hit!" I announced, raising my hands, and started to leave the arena.

Having made it safely to a barricade, Runa watched me go. "Ryuto!"

But even before she had finished saying that, Yamana-san made her move.

"Ahh! She got me!" yelled Tanikita-san, leaving her barricade as well. It appeared she'd been shot while trying to shoot at our opponent.

Yamana-san then spoke for the first time this game. "All right, it's just you and me now, Runa." Hiding behind a barricade, she wore a daring smile.

"Nicole..." uttered Runa, seeming to have mixed feelings. She gripped her handgun tight. Then, after glancing at me as I headed toward the exit, a newly determined look appeared on her face. "You won't get me that easy! I'll make up for Ryuto too!"

The engagement that followed only took mere moments.

Runa peeked out and pointed her gun at Yamana-san. Then, Yamana-san rushed out from behind her barricade and took cover right next to Runa's. Once Runa took a shot, Yamana-san peeked out and fired back, which Runa responded to with more shots.

The pops of pellets being fired came from both girls' locations several times.

"Ah!" The first one to speak was Yamana-san. "Tsk... I'm hit!" Clicking her tongue in frustration, she raised her hands.

Thus, the winner was decided.

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"Damn iiit!!! Why couldn't we bring down those normies?!" Icchi exclaimed in exaggerated frustration once we'd all returned to the safe zone and let him know the outcome.

"Next time, then! Next time, we're gonna focus fire on that couple!" announced Nisshi, who was just as worked up as his friend.

"Ehh, don't you think that's a little cruel?" Tanikita-san asked.

Nisshi froze up from her reproach. He was, in truth, easily hurt.

Yamana-san approached him. "Hey, can I have that for a sec?" Taking Nisshi's rifle, she aimed it at the wall. "I *knew* it. This thing's way easier to aim."

Out of the airsoft guns they had to rent, the guys in our group had chosen rifles while the girls had gone for handguns. This was partially due to the staff's recommendation. The reason was that while rifles were easier to aim, they were heavier too, so they'd be unwieldy for girls who weren't quite as strong.

"Thanks," said Yamana-san, returning Nisshi's gun and heading toward the reception area with her handgun. "I'm gonna go swap this for a rifle."

She sounded so bold that I figured she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Hey, Ryuto," said Runa, approaching me. "Sorry about that back there. When you got shot...you were protecting me, right?"

She lowered her eyebrows and smiled. It was so cute it made my heart flutter.

“Y-Yeah... Don’t worry about it, though. I’m sure it would’ve been more impressive if I shot back instead...”

“Not at all.” Runa shook her head. “You looked really cool,” she quietly said, her cheeks turning rosy. She bashfully averted her eyes. “Thanks, Ryuto.” After that, she looked at me once again. “That’s why I did my best and won.”

“Yeah... Thanks. You were great out there,” I replied.

It had been such an impressive and intense gunfight that I’d involuntarily stopped to watch for a moment while returning to the safe zone.

“Ehe he.” Runa smiled happily at my praise. Then, suddenly, she looked around.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

Taken aback, Runa shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

I was puzzled by her behavior.

As we chatted, Yamana-san came back. Now, she had a rifle in her hands.

“Ah, Nicole! What happened to your nails?” asked Runa in surprise upon seeing Yamana-san’s hands.

“Hm? I borrowed a pair of scissors and cut them. It was hard to pull the trigger earlier because my nails got caught,” Yamana-san explained.

Checking her hands, I saw that her nails, which normally boasted some hard-core decorations, were indeed short now. I didn’t remember how long they’d been before, but I was sure she’d had them long on a regular basis.

“Your nails were so cute, though...” said Tanikita-san.

“Thanks. It’s fine, though. I can just grow them out again. I can also make them longer with sculpting,” replied Yamana-san, concentrating on aiming her rifle at the wall as practice. After doing it a few times, she smiled confidently. “Okay. I feel like I’ll shoot better next time.”

She wasn’t kidding—in the next game, Yamana-san was on fire.

“Come and get some! Who’s first?!”

“Ahh, I’m hit!”

“Nicole, you’re too good at this!”

We couldn’t really play as teams anymore because the game would end in an instant, so we tried playing battle-royale-style with only one winner.

But even then...

“That all you got?! I eat chumps like you for breakfast!”

“Augggh, it huuurts!”

“The demon gyaru got me!”

Yamana-san really was invincible.

Despite everything, we still had fun. We played about ten rounds in all, fully using up the two and a half hours we’d rented the arena for.

As we all got changed and prepared to leave the safe zone with our belongings...

“Huh?” Runa sounded troubled as she searched inside her bag. “My earring’s gone... I put it in a case when I first got changed.”

Tanikita-san looked at Runa’s ears. “Huh? You’ve got earrings in both, though.”

Runa shook her head. “I had one more on when we got here.”

“Ah, with a moon and a star? The one-sided one you wear with casual outfits,” asked Yamana-san.

Runa nodded. “Yeah, that.”

“It’s important to you, right? You said you don’t wear it to school ’cause you don’t want it confiscated.”

“Mmhmm...”

“It’s *that* precious?” I worriedly asked and started to search the floor around me.

“Oh, I found it!” Runa sounded cheerful now. “Sorry, it was in my bag. Looks like it fell out of its case. I should’ve looked harder for it before bringing it up...” she said with an awkward smile.

I smiled back at her. “As long as you found it.”

“Yeah!” she replied.

“’S all good,” said Tanikita-san.

With everyone watching her warmly, Runa put the earring she’d found back on. Dangling on a chain below her ear was a crescent moon and a star. The earring stood out quite a bit.

“The one-sided one you wear with casual outfits.”

I recalled what Yamana-san had said. I might not’ve had any interest in fashion, but I was ashamed to realize I’d never noticed that my girlfriend had an earring that was precious to her. Normally, I hadn’t looked at her earrings much—partially because her hair was often in the way.

But why only one? Aren’t earrings normally sold in pairs, for both ears?

While that thought bothered me a little, I figured it might’ve simply been a trend among girls and disregarded the matter at the time.

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We headed to a restaurant after that.

“Gotta say, though, I never thought the demon gyaru would go winning everything by herself...” Icchi said quietly to Nisshi, sounding very serious. “Guess the ‘demon’ part isn’t just for show...”

“She closed in on us three times as fast as a normal person could move,” said Nisshi.

“She stayed several steps ahead of us too.”

“We really had no idea, did we...?”

“Still got lots of levels to grind in this life...”

Since we’d booked the airsoft arena for the morning, our games had ended just in time for lunch. Nobody had suggested going home, so the six of us ended up going to an Italian restaurant in the same commercial building.

The seating was similar to what you’d find in a family restaurant. There were many teenagers and families here too, but the interior design and the lighting felt somewhat stylish—it wasn’t the kind of place we’d go to if we didn’t have girls with us.

We sat at a six-person booth facing each other—guys on one side and the girls on the other. It felt like we were at a mixer, which made me feel a bit awkward. Incidentally, Tanikita-san was sitting across from Icchi, Yamana-san was opposite Nisshi, and Runa was in front of me.

“Gotta say, airsoft was pretty fun...” Tanikita-san said quietly with a smile as she drank the iced chocolate she’d gotten at the self-service drink area after we’d eaten lunch.

“You mean it? I thought you’d say that—that’s why I invited you! Good thing I was right!” replied Runa with a happy smile.

“Yeah. Different kinds of airsoft guns fire pellets in a different way, right? Like, how far or how fast they go. It might be fun to buy a bunch of this stuff and try it out for myself.”

“Exactly!” Icchi said suddenly, sounding excited. “These guns are probably what gets people hooked on airsoft. I thought this stuff was really fun too. It made me want to try shooting different kinds. You know how the ones we rented today were electric, since they used batteries? They’re easy to use ’cause you only need to pull the trigger to shoot, but some airsoft guns out there use gas and springs and stuff like that. Apparently, they all handle differently, so it’d be cool to be good at all of them.”

This was the first time Icchi had spoken to a girl of his own accord today. I was pretty surprised on the inside.

However, since Tanikita-san was an extroverted girl that Runa hung out with, she didn’t find herself at a loss for an answer. “Oh, really? Don’t airsoft guns

cost a ton, though?”

“Well... There’s high-end and low-end stuff. Low-end guns cost about five thousand yen.”

“Some go for as low as three,” added Nisshi, taking the opportunity to join the conversation. Perhaps he didn’t want to be left out.

“What about the high-end stuff?” asked Tanikita-san.

“Well, they’re something like fifty thousand.”

“Dude, some of them cost a hundred thousand.”

“I guess? I can’t afford them anyway, so I never looked into the expensive ones.”

“Figures... It sounds fun, but I’m hooked on enough things already...” replied Tanikita-san.

“You’d be surprised how much of a geek Akari is. Though the same goes for me,” said Yamana-san.

At those words, Icchi’s and Nisshi’s eyes lit up.

“What?! For real?”

“What kind of geek?!”

They must’ve never expected the word “geek” to be used for a sunny gyaru. Feeling like there was a connection here, Icchi and Nisshi took an interest in her at once.

Tanikita-san happily answered as though she’d been waiting for someone to ask. “I stan VTS! Every time they drop a new album, I always have to buy multiple copies to get all the extras. That stuff sucks you in and there’s just no end to it! I’m learning Korean too!”

“Vee...what...?”

Seeing my confusion, Runa explained. “It’s a K-pop boy band. Akari’s always gushing about them. They’re all the rage right now—you haven’t heard of them?”

All the guys present—myself included—only had blank looks on their faces.

Tanikita-san continued energetically as if someone had flipped a switch inside her. “I used to be hooked on Disney stuff—I got an annual pass to Disneyland one birthday and used it a ton. And I still play soshage. And I like making accessories out of resin! Actually, I like clothes and fashion in general, which is why I’m planning to go to a school specializing in that after I graduate!”

“And I’m a nail geek,” added Yamana-san, bringing up her own obsession. “Gel and accessories are cheap on their own, so at some point, I got a hell of a collection and now I don’t know where to put it all.”

Presented with a ton of stuff they had zero interest in, Icchi and Nisshi went silent. A playboy might’ve been able to come up with some shallow response to keep the conversation going, but this was the limit for introverted virgins like us. I could easily tell how they felt since I was no different.

“I think it’s amazing how you two can get so deep into something...” However, Runa’s natural way of continuing the stalling conversation was a big help.

Yamana-san smirked at her. “You’ve got something you’re crazy about yourself, don’t you?”

“Huh...?”

Feeling Yamana-san’s gaze on me, I started to fidget.

Once Runa noticed it too, she instantly turned red. “What? Are you talking about Ryuto?! Come *on*!”

“Watching you two today sure was something. Frankly, it’s pretty hard to swallow all that PDA when you’re single,” said Yamana-san, poking fun at us.

“I’m so jelly of how well you get along!” added Tanikita-san with a smile.

At that point, Nisshi muttered something beside me and I focused on listening to him.

“Hey, does the demon gyaru actually not have a boyfriend...?”

“Ah, yeah,” I said. “So it seems. It’s pretty surprising, right?”

Runa had mentioned it at the summer festival.

Hearing that, Nisshi looked at me with astonishment. “You knew?! You should’ve told us sooner.”

“Huh? Nisshi, you’ve got a thing for...?”

“That’s not it! It just changes the value of some things!”

I wasn’t sure if I understood what he meant or not. Incidentally, we were speaking in hushed voices, so only Nisshi and I should’ve been able to hear it.

“Couldn’t you two get boyfriends whenever you felt like it?” Runa asked Nicole and Tanikita-san.

“Well... My head’s full of Jaemi right now, so honestly I don’t need a boyfriend or anything,” replied Tanikita-san.

Wondering who this Jaemi was, I looked to Runa in front of me, and she explained he was a member of VTS.

“There’s a lotta things I wanna do, so I’m having fun even without a boyfriend,” continued Tanikita-san. “And if you’re gonna do your hobby with somebody else, isn’t it easier if it’s with someone of the same sex?”

I can agree with that, I thought. Nisshi and Icchi beside me nodded deeply.

“Do you two have any preferences when it comes to boyfriends?” I asked nervously to keep the conversation going.

Sure, I’d gotten used to speaking to Runa, but it still took a lot for me to speak to other sunny girls. I was doing it as a favor to Icchi and Nisshi.

A shadow appeared on Yamana-san’s face. “I still can’t really think about that.”

I’d never seen her look like that before. Something about her expression was sad and bittersweet.

“You still can’t let go of your ex?” asked Tanikita-san after a pause.

Yamana-san nodded. “Yeah. I mean, he was *really* cool.”

“Like his looks?”

“Nah. His attitude, I guess? He always wore earbuds, and when I asked him what he was listening to, he was like, ‘Sutras.’ Like, how crazy is that?”

“That *is* pretty crazy...”

While I was speechless, I looked around and saw that Tanikita-san had a blank look on her face.

Nisshi then burst into laughter. “Sounds like that guy’s got a real bad case of chuunibyou!”

However, Yamana-san instantly shut him up with a glare. “You say something?”

Apparently, she sincerely liked her chuuni ex. After sitting there with a faraway look in her eyes for a bit, she suddenly returned to her senses and gave us a faint smile.

“It’s so stupid, right? Being hung up on a guy I dated for just two weeks in my second year of middle school. It’s just, he was my first love, so...” Nicole trailed off there.

This was really unexpected.

“Two weeks...” uttered Nisshi beside me, surprise in his voice.

I know, right? I never would’ve thought that either.

It seemed like she’d never dated anyone else since then. And I couldn’t imagine that a relationship from your second year of middle school could’ve progressed too much in just two weeks.

Does that mean that despite how she may appear, Yamana-san is actually...?

“You’re a vir— OWWWWW!!!” Nisshi began to say something, but he suddenly cried out in pain and held his leg.

“Ahh? What the hell did you just say to me?”

Yamana-san was glaring at him with an even sharper look in her eyes than usual. The expression on her face and her threatening tone were exactly the sort you’d expect from a hard-core delinquent.

“I’m a what? I’m a ‘virtuous’ girl? Or maybe you think I’m ‘virtually’ perfect? Say it again!”

“Ahhh! It’s nothiiing!!!”

Faced with hellish lines from the poet Nicole-sensei, Nisshi took back his words and he began to tear up.

“Y-You okay, Nisshi...?” I asked as he still held his knee in pain.

He gave me a fine smile. “Dude, I got to taste a pure demon gyaru’s ten-centimeter heel... I’m so grateful...!”

It appeared Yamana-san had stepped on his foot under the table.

Well, as long as he’s finding joy in the pain.

“Just so you know, I’ve gone all the way,” said Yamana-san, giving us guys a menacing look. Her tone suggested she was stifling her embarrassment and was particularly displeased. “*All* the way...”

Really? She has? She did the deed with her first boyfriend from middle school over the two weeks they spent dating? Guess I should’ve expected no less from her...

But as I thought that...

“...right through the kissing part,” she quietly added, blushing and turning her face away from us.

Silence fell over the table.

Y-Yamana-san might be a bit cute...

With the way she alternated between soft and scary, she was a bit of a walking emotional roller coaster.

Taking a glance at Runa, I saw her watching Yamana-san with a gentle smile. She seemed to already be aware of what we’d just learned—which was to be expected, given they were BFFs.

“As for me, I’d wanna go out with someone tall!” Tanikita-san announced cheerfully.

That seemed to be her reply to my question about her preferences for boyfriends. Though I’d asked it myself, Yamana-san’s revelation had been so shocking that I’d forgotten what the topic was for a moment.

“W-Wait, how... How tall are we talking?” asked Icchi, showing an interest in

Tanikita-san's answer. It must've been because he was aware of his own height.

"Well... I'm small, so I think even Jaemi is big. But a guy as tall as Jungwoo would be real hot!"

I didn't need to ask Runa this time to figure out that all the names Tanikita-san mentioned belonged to members of this "VTS" group.

"Wait, Ijichi-kun, you're pretty big. How tall are you exactly?" asked Tanikita-san. It seemed like she had only just noticed it.

Telepathically sensing Icchi's turmoil, I looked at him.

He panicked as he struggled to open his mouth. "A hun...hundred and eighty-one..."

Hearing that, Tanikita-san's eyes went wide. "Wow, that's the same as E-Joon! That's, like, so hot!"

Icchi was stunned to hear that.

I know how you must feel, buddy.

This was a *crazy* thing to hear. I already knew what he would be doing whenever he remembered those words after he'd gone home.

When Tanikita-san had said, "That's, like, so hot!" she'd probably had this "E-Joon" in mind. But even then, to a gloomy virgin, being told something like that was like receiving a medal of honor.

"Ah... Eh... Um... That...uh..."

As expected, Icchi's face was beet red. He was so discomposed that he couldn't continue the conversation.

After an unexpected, lively, and fun (?) chat about love over lunch, we didn't really have a reason to stay in the commercial building anymore. We all left and headed toward the train station. The time was half past two—a bit of an odd hour.

"I gotta run. I have work after this," said Yamana-san.

"And I've got a live stream concert to watch, so I'ma go with Nikki here,"

added Tanikita-san.

“Thanks for today!”

“This was fun!”

Yamana-san and Tanikita-san each waved a hand at us as we stood there and then walked away. As if taking their cue to leave next, Icchi and Nisshi took a few steps toward the station as well.

“I should go too...”

“Same... I gotta join KEN’s six-hundred-player *Yourcraft* server...”

The two of them looked dazed. It seemed they still had the day’s events on their minds. I could hardly blame them—the past several hours had been way too intense for introverted virgins.

Thus, Runa and I were the only ones left.

“Shira— R-Runa, what about you?” To this day, I still felt a little nervous when I called her by name.

Runa gazed at my face, her spirits seeming a bit on the high side. “I’m still good. Whatcha wanna do? Wanna go on a date here in Odaiba?”

My heart fluttered at the sight of her coy and cute upturned eyes.

“Y-Yeah, sure. Let’s go, then...” I replied.

But just before we got going...

Tanikita-san, who was already heading to the station with Yamana-san, suddenly turned around.

“Oh yeah, I forgot!” she exclaimed and came running toward us. “Kashima-kun!”

“Y-Yes?!” I asked.

I’d been sure she’d wanted to talk to Runa, so I froze up in astonishment when she stopped right in front of me.

After looking at me and then to Runa beside me, she spoke up. “Okay, so, remember how back when I didn’t know you and Runy were dating, a friend

sent a pic of you and Nikki eating together to our group chat and I wrote back ‘lmao’?”

After thinking for a bit, I recalled what she might’ve been talking about.

Nicole was on a date in McDonalds with some plain guy from our class lol

For real? Lmao

Did she mean those LINE messages Runa had once asked me about? The ones with the photo of me and Yamana-san after the latter had told me to come with her and we’d met in private.

Apparently, that’d been Tanikita-san. Naturally, I hadn’t taken a close look at the names.

“It’s true that you’re not the kinda guy that stands out, but you’re kind and you’re considerate of your girlfriend, so you’re a good person. After spending some time with you today, I think you’re a good match for Runy,” she said, hanging her head a bit. Then, she lifted her face. “Well, that’s all I wanted to say. It felt like I dissed you before and that bothered me a bit. A’ight, see ya!”

Looking relieved, Tanikita-san waved to me and Runa and left again. Had she really come back just to say that?

“Tanikita-san kinda does things at her own pace, huh? She’s funny,” I remarked.

Runa, who was still waving to Tanikita-san, smiled at me. “I know, right? Akari’s funny like that. She’s not easily swayed by people and pushes forward to get what she wants,” she said, with a hint of admiration in her voice.

Runa then nimbly twined her hand around my arm. The sight of the shiny ring with a natural gem on her right hand made me bashful and happy.

“Okay, let’s go,” Runa then suggested.

“Y-Yeah,” I replied.

That floral-or-fruity scent mixed in with the salty sea breeze as it reached my

nostrils. As the afternoon temperatures remained high, Runa's skin felt hot to the touch. It brought me back to the mood this summer'd had as we'd spent it together in that seaside town.

Unbeknownst to anyone else, my heart was pounding.

Chapter 1.5: Kurose Maria’s Diary

My love for Kashima-kun has come to an end.

Ah, it’s really over... At least that’s how I’ve finally become able to think about it recently.

After summer break, my seat in class was moved away from Kashima-kun’s.

I thought it would hurt more, but maybe this unexpected calm in my mind is proof that I’ve recovered?

No... Even now, when I see Kashima-kun together with Runa, I still feel unsettled. But I’m sure that won’t last long.

I’m okay. I’m doing fine.

I’ll keep telling myself that every day and keep moving forward, even if it’s slow.

Because my life won’t have Kashima-kun in it anymore.

Chapter 2

Runa and I headed toward Aomi Station. Why? Runa had asked to ride the Ferris wheel.

The gigantic Ferris wheel, which was kind of a monument in Odaiba, was getting closer and closer. Its presence could be felt even from far away. I'd always thought, "Who'd ever ride that thing except for children and couples? It's not like it's in an amusement park," so to think there'd come a day when I, of all people, would be in one of those couples riding it...

My first Ferris wheel ride with my girlfriend... We'll be all by ourselves in a tiny space...

The mere thought of it made my heart race. Sure, there'd be glass around us and we couldn't do anything too indecent, but maybe we could kiss... My heartbeat pounded as I imagined it.

And actually, in Runa's mind, just how close has she come to wanting to have sex with me?

I felt like our hearts had grown much closer after that incident in the summer, and when we'd kissed at the festival, I'd felt that she was happy amid her bashfulness.

Aren't we nearly there? Hell, maybe this Ferris wheel ride is going to be the big test for that...

My desire had led my train of thought to take a strange route.

Fortunately, there was no big crowd at the Ferris wheel, so we were able to board it right away. For no particular reason, we sat facing each other on the C-shaped seat, and we both looked outside the windows for a while.

The wheel rapidly lifted us up, showing us a panoramic view of the seaside area. My head, however, was filled with thoughts on how to lead things to a kiss.

We were in a confined space, so I could smell Runa's scent permeating the whole gondola.

Ah, I want to kiss her... A kiss... Kiss...!

I want to kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss!

But as my brain came close to bursting from my ulterior motive...

Runa, who had been looking out the window, suddenly turned to gaze at me with a smile—one that was happy and as gentle as sunlight filtering through the trees in spring.

I wondered what was up, but then she began to speak.

"You know, I feel like I'm in love for the first time in my life," she began. "I always thought the kind of love which makes your heart race was something you'd only find in a shojo manga...but it looks like even I get to experience it," she said, her eyes darting up and down as she did. Her cheeks were flushed pink.

Then, she looked right at me. “Every time I see a new side of you, my heart pounds and I think, ‘Ah, I’ve fallen in love with him again.’ Though when I say that to Nicole, she laughs at me. Like, ‘don’t you have things backward?’”

Deeply moved, I listened closely to Runa’s words quietly.

“She says that a normal girl just has this thing where one day, a boy catches her eye for some reason. And as time passes and she watches him, she thinks how nice he is and that she likes him. She feels a nervous excitement when she talks to him and starts to want to go out with him.”

That was just like how it had been for me as I fell in love with Runa. I didn’t have a single doubt that it was love.

“And apparently it’s not just a manga thing—it’s how *everyone* experiences love, she said. And I feel like I’m finally standing at that starting line for the first time.”

The sudden mention of a starting line had me feeling a pang in my chest.

“At first, I thought my heart was beating so fast only because you threw me off. Like how different you were from my exes... But after spending the summer with you, I was convinced: it’s definitely love.”

So the answer to “How close has she come to wanting to have sex with me?” is that she’s at the starting line, huh. But wait, it’s not like sex necessarily lies at the peak of love... Who knows—maybe it’s step five or something like that?

Maybe it’s even step three. Let’s think positively. Yeah.

When I thought about it, I remembered that she hadn’t even known my name until we’d started going out. And now, our love was apparently mutual. Even if she was at the starting line, if she steadily moved forward from there, I figured *that day* would eventually come in the not-too-distant future.

Considering the events of the first day of our relationship, I no longer had a right to ask her for it, and that *was* hard to bear given what she’d just told me...

Still.

“You know, I feel like I’m in love for the first time in my life.”

Runa's heart had remained out of reach of all her exes. The thought of it filled me with joy.

"I see," I replied.

Though I had some mixed feelings, her words made me genuinely happy. As I gazed at Runa with a smile, she gave me a gentle one of her own. Her expression was so sweet that my heart began to flutter with happiness.

"So you read shojo manga, huh," I remarked, since I'd found what she'd said a minute ago unexpected. Reading books kinda didn't fit my image of her.

"Ah, yeah. My mom has a lot of those, so I read them back when we lived together. They were all old, though, since they were from when she was young," Runa said happily. "In my favorite one, the heroine and her boyfriend go on a Ferris wheel, eat chocolate candies, and then kiss."

"Huh..."

Her words made my heart skip a beat since I'd just been thinking about a kiss myself.

"The girl says the kiss tasted like their chocolate candies and laughs. Since I read it when I was in primary school, I thought, like, wow! That's such an adult thing to do—it made my heart race."

"W-Well, they don't let you eat in here," I remarked.

The conversation got awkward once I suddenly started thinking about kissing her.

"Yeah. And it's not like we have chocolate on us, anyway." Saying that, Runa looked at me with upturned eyes. "But...can we?"

"Can we"?!

Can we what? Obviously, that wasn't a question I needed to ask.

"Y-Yeah. Sure."

How could I refuse?

But as much as I'd wanted to kiss her, I felt nervous now that we had actually come to it.

It’s your third time. How pathetic can you be? I thought to myself as Runa began to rapidly approach me.

My heart pounded deafeningly as she quickly got close to me and made the cramped gondola tip in the process. I started to wonder if anyone was watching us in the adjacent pods and began looking around.

As I acted strangely like that, Runa, who was now sitting beside me, faced my way. Her hair touched my shoulder—it had a pleasant scent.

Even looking at Runa up close, she was really beautiful. With her glossy skin and lips, she was like a jewel.

Her captivating eyes closed in a meaningful way while gazing at me all along.

I slowly brought my face toward hers...and sealed her lips with mine. Runa’s warmth was just as tender as I remembered it.

I wanted this to go on forever. I wanted to feel Runa more deeply. My chest ached with that urge.

I can’t. I’ve resolved to wait for her.

Reluctantly, I pulled away from Runa, at which point she gazed at me with mischief in her eyes.

“What did it taste like?” she asked.

“Huh?!” Her sudden question threw me off. “I-It smelled like peaches, I think?”

“Bingo!” replied Runa with a happy grin. “I bought a new lip tint. I’m a huge fan of it ’cause of the peach tea scent! And the color is totally MLBB!”

“ML what...?”

“Means it’s natural, basically! It’s not stuck to your lips either—it’s super great!” she said, looking satisfied after checking my lips. Then, she rested her head on my shoulder. “Yeah. I really do love you,” Runa said quietly, as though making sure of her feelings. “I think I can fall much deeper in love with you...”

She had a calm smile on her face, but then she looked up as if she’d just thought of something. “Hey, Ryuto.”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Can you pat my head...?”

As she gazed at me, the cheerfulness in her eyes raised my pulse once again.

“B-But why...?”

“I just remembered that when we played airsoft earlier, I wanted you to pat my head and say I did well.”

“Oh...”

I recalled the conversation I’d had with Runa after she had returned to the safe zone.

“Something wrong?”

“It’s nothing.”

That’s what she’s talking about.

“Everyone was there, so I held back, of course...” said Runa. Then she added in a whisper, “So could you?”

I nodded. “S-Sure.”

“Yay!” she replied with a happy smile. “It’s all yours.”

As she tilted her head toward me, I awkwardly patted it a couple of times.

“L-Like this?”

“Thank you, Ryuto.” Lifting her face, Runa smiled like the sun. “Love you!”

Without me realizing it, our gondola had almost reached the platform.

***

After getting off the Ferris wheel, we decided to head to VenusFort—another request from Runa. As we passed through another building on our way, I suddenly stopped in my tracks.

“Wow! There’re so many cars,” I remarked.

We were in an atrium—some kind of an event venue—with rows of sparkling cars. We were on the second floor of the building, but there were even more

cars displayed on the first one. I thought that we must've passed through here when going to the Ferris wheel too, but evidently, my head had been so full of said attraction (or rather, kissing Runa inside it) that this place hadn't registered to me.

"Oh, this is Mega Web! It's kind of like a car showroom, I guess?" said Runa.

"Interesting..."

"You like cars?"

I timidly nodded. "Ah... Yeah, kinda. I had a big collection of toy cars and stuff when I was a kid."

"Oh, really?" asked Runa, blinking. Then, her face lit up. "So...when you get your license, will you let me ride shotgun?"

"Sure, of course. Though that'll probably have to wait until after college exams..."

Despite that last part, Runa was so delighted you'd think she was going to get a ride next week. "Yay, I can't wait! Let's go skiing and camping together too!"

Before I knew it, her innocence had brought a smile to my face too.

"We don't have a car, so I'd have to rent one," I said.

"That's totes fine! What kinda cars do you like?"

"Well... Sports cars, I guess. Like that one."

I pointed at a bright red Supra displayed some distance away. As far as I could see, all the cars here were Toyotas, so the place must've been run by Toyota. I seemed to recall seeing this place in a news piece about some motor show or something.

"Ah, that one's nice! Let's rent that one, then," suggested Runa.

"Yeah but... If we're going skiing or camping, it's probably better to get something like a minivan."

"Why? We can't go in a sports car?" she asked.

"You can't put much stuff in it...and it might not be very comfortable."

“What do you mean?”

It seemed like Runa didn’t know much about cars—she’d looked puzzled this whole time.

And so, I figured it was time for an in-depth explanation.

“Sports cars are stylish and suited for driving at high speeds, but in terms of their utility as cars, they lose against ones made for families living in cities since their designs focus on the interior’s comfort and carrying capacity. A good example of that is a minivan. However, if a car is as spacious as a minivan is, or has even more room, the resulting shape will make it harder for it to go fast. For the comfort of the passengers, you need a room-like interior that’s almost like a box, but that makes the car’s wider surface bear the full brunt of the air in front, which means there’s a lot of drag, right? And so, to make a car fast, you have to give up interior comfort. The fastest cars are designed with an extreme focus on aerodynamics as their shape will let them quickly get past any air in front. Aerodynamic cars are low to the ground and difficult to get in and out of. You also have to get rid of the back seats and there isn’t a lot of space to put things, so they lose in terms of utility. Since the economy’s been in a slump recently, I hear there aren’t a lot of people who can afford to replace their cars or own more than one. They say that super practical box-type cars are popular now since they’re suited for caregiving and parents. If you ask me, though, sports cars are what it’s all about.”

I suddenly snapped back to my senses once I noticed the flabbergasted look on Runa’s face.

“Ah... S-Sorry!”

I did it again. Just because I’m into something doesn’t mean I can go into rapid-fire mode and give a lecture like that.

Maybe this time *Runa’s fed up with me?! Judging by the look on her face...*

While I was completely freaking out inside, Runa gave me a small smile and shook her head.

“It’s okay, don’t worry. But wow, Ryuto, you’re amazing...” Saying that, she averted her eyes from me and hung her head in front of her. “I guess maybe I

was a sports car all along," she quietly added, narrowing her eyes and looking off into the distance. "I kept an empty head and all I wanted was to rush past things. My childhood, I mean. To zoom through it and become an adult as soon as I could." A self-deprecating smile then appeared on Runa's face. "But while I copied adults and gathered all that experience with nothing to show for it, I guess I'm still just a child on the inside."

It was heart-wrenching to realize that she must've been talking about her previous relationships.

"You can pick a subject and give it a whole lot of thought," Runa continued. "Like that time with bubble tea—that was really amazing too."

"Oh, uh..."

"Me? Whenever I had it, I only ever thought, 'Bubble tea's great!' And that's it." A gentle smile appeared on her face. "I'm not good at thinking about things. Isn't thinking like worrying? When I think about things on my own, I feel like my mood just drops more and more."

"Then I'd say you don't need to force yourself to think. I'm the kinda guy who'll go thinking about things even if you tell him not to. There's both good and bad sides to it."

"But, like, even *I* have to start giving things some thought soon, no? About the future and stuff," she replied, pouting. "These days, I've been thinking about the distant future all the time. Like how it would be nice to have three kids. And how it would probably be hard to raise twins, just like it was in my family. I'm kinda going past 'thinking' and right into 'wild fantasy' territory, I guess?"

"K..."

Kids?!

Before I knew it, my face grew hot and my heart was pounding.

It didn't quite click for me since we still hadn't even done the deed yet, but her words *did* shake me up since baby-making was on my mind every day.

But wait, if she's bringing this up... Maybe that day *isn't so far off after all.*

Thinking that way made my heart leap.

“I think how I wanna raise a boy like you, but if I have a girl, then of course I want her to be like me...” Runa continued happily.

“What, you’re saying a girl who took after me wouldn’t be cute?” I joked back.

“That’s not what I mean. I just can’t imagine how you’d look as a girl.” Though she smiled as she gave her reply, she suddenly lost her cheerfulness. “That’s not what I’m talking about...”

Internally I was flustered, wondering if I’d said something that got on her nerves, but Runa hung her head.

“I need to start thinking soon...about my own future...” she added, quietly and softly, before lifting her face. “I won’t be a child anymore once I’m out of high school.”

Runa gazed off into the distance—there, several small children were playing around in front of the cars.

“I guess maybe I was a sports car all along.”

“I kept an empty head and all I wanted was to rush past things. My childhood, I mean. To zoom through it and become an adult as soon as I could.”

To think Runa thought of herself that way...

But even if that was the truth... Even so, I...

“You know, sports cars don’t go fast to get to their destination quickly. They enjoy speeding in itself,” I said.

“Huh?” Runa gazed at me in surprise.

“When I watched you from a distance, you were always surrounded by friends, you had boyfriends... It looked like you were enjoying the springtime of your life to the fullest. I envied you.”

She’d been like the sun I could never reach, no matter how far I stretched to try. I’d thought that Runa was someone too dazzling for me.

As I spoke about the longing I’d once held for her, Runa stared at me, her lips trembling.

“Ryuto...” she uttered.

“I like sports cars. There’s something genuine and cool about a car born to speed.”

“Hey, wait a second.” Runa stopped me there. “I’m kinda getting confused. Are you complimenting *me* right now?”

I nodded. “Well, aren’t you a sports car?”

“Yeah...? So you’re telling me to, like, ‘don’t think, feel’?”

Her rough summary of what I’d said got a chuckle out of me.

“In human terms—maybe, yeah.”

I figured that thinking ahead and calculating your actions, or crafting elaborate plans before doing something in order to avoid failure... That just wasn’t Runa’s style.

What made Runa *Runa* was how she’d naturally extend a helping hand to someone in front of her who needed it. How, if something fun happened, she’d gather her friends and laugh together with them. These were simple things, but for some people, they were nonetheless difficult.

Since she had lived that way her whole life, her accumulating a lot of experience through her prior relationships must’ve been a result of that too.

That was why I figured I should accept Runa, together with all of that baggage.

Because I loved her.

Because *that* was what made Shirakawa Runa who she was.

This was the conclusion that I had come to.

***

After passing through Mega Web, we entered VenusFort without making any further stops along the way.

VenusFort was a large commercial building located near the Ferris wheel. Its three floors were full of clothing stores, general goods shops, restaurants, outlets, and the like. They also held events for geeks every now and then, so I was kinda familiar with this place too.

“Ah, it’s been a while!” said Runa, looking up and raising her hands toward the atrium’s ceiling once we’d passed through the main gate on the second floor. “I like this place. Though I haven’t come often recently since Odaiba is just a bit far.”

The second floor of VenusFort seemed to be designed with a European town as its motif. It felt like a theme park.

“Have you been here before?” asked Runa.

“Yeah. I came here a long time ago with my family. We went to the outlet stores, I think.”

“Uh-huh.”

As I considered asking Runa the same thing, I froze up all of a sudden.

I could ask something like “*You said ‘it’s been a while’—when was the last time you were here?”* How would she answer that?

I recalled what she’d said at the summer festival.

“It’s not my first time. It wasn’t at a festival around here, but walking like this in a yukata with a guy by my side? And watching fireworks together...”

Was the same thing true for this place? Had she...come here with her exes before?

W*hat about the Ferris wheel? Surely she’s ridden it with several previous boyfriends. And then they kissed just like we did...*

As these thoughts crossed my mind, I started to hate myself a little.

I’d thought I’d accepted Runa’s past and come to terms with it... I’d even reestablished that resolution again just a little bit earlier.

It seemed like I still needed some time to completely accept it—but only just a bit longer. I was sure that it wouldn’t be long before these things stopped making me lose my composure.

It was a big step forward for me to be able to think that way.

“Ryuto...? Something wrong?”

Runa’s voice brought me back to my senses.

“It’s nothing. You got any stores you want to go to?”

“Nah, I just wanna walk around! Simply wandering is fun!” She then looked up.

An illustration of a pleasant blue sky covered the atrium’s entire ceiling. It had fluffy white clouds that looked like sheep drifting across it. Coupled with the fact that the atrium’s design resembled a European town, it made me feel like I was walking along a street in a different country.

“I like how this place feels like you’ve gone abroad. Hey, you ever done that, Ryuto?”

“Well... Once, a long time ago, my family planned a trip to Guam...”

“Wow, that’s nice!”

“So we got to the airport, but it turned out Dad’s passport had expired, so we couldn’t go.”

“Whaaat?! Isn’t that real bad?!” she asked.

“It was hell. My parents made a huge scene and fought at the airport. My older sister burst into tears.”

I felt bashful telling Runa about my family, so I stretched the truth a bit when mentioning the parties involved.

“Oh, yeah... I feel bad for everyone there...” said Runa.

“In the end, we went to a pool in the city, and that was it for our summer break.”

It wasn’t a great punch line, but Runa still laughed.

“So you’ve never left Japan either, Ryuto.” She looked a little happy as she said that. “When I asked my dad about going overseas, he told me to save it for my honeymoon. Who’s he kidding? I know he just doesn’t want to spend money on it.”

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of a honeymoon.

Runa brought her face close to me. “I wanna go someday,” she said.

Her mellow voice was pleasant to my ears and made me feel awkward on the

inside.

“Me too,” I replied, wishing so from the bottom of my heart.

“Hey, Ryuto, where d’you wanna go?”

“Well... I’ve never been abroad, so I’d be fine with anywhere,” I said. “Wh-What about you?”

“I wanna go to Europe! Like Italy or France maybe? Rome would be nice too!”

“Rome is *in* Italy.”

“You’re kidding. Okay, majority wins—it’s Italy, then!”

I didn’t quite understand her reasoning, but our honeymoon destination had been chosen.

Speaking of Italy...

“Isn’t VenusFort a recreation of an Italian town?” I asked.

“Huh? Really?”

“Maybe... I think there was a replica of the Mouth of Truth around here, so I figured it was.” I felt like my mother had told me about it when we’d come here as a family long ago.

“The Mouth of What...?”

“It’s this round sculpture with a face on it. It was in an old film called *Roman Holiday*.”

“Ah, I saw that in an ad recently! They have that here?!” asked Runa with sparkling eyes. “I wanna see it! Let’s go see that Mouth of Truth thing!”

And so, after checking the building’s directory, we headed to the replica of the Mouth of Truth.

It was located right next to the main gate. Nobody paid any attention to it, so we’d passed right by without noticing it either when we’d come in. It was kind of a shame since it resembled the real thing so much (not that I’d ever seen it in person).

“Wow, it’s just like on TV!”

“I hear if a liar puts his hand in the mouth, it’ll get bitten off,” I explained as Runa made a fuss over the sculpture.

She smiled. “I guess you’re safe, then.”

“Huh?”

“You’re ‘the last man’ and all.”

Runa must’ve been talking about that sentence we’d once come across while studying English grammar together.

He is the last man to tell a lie.

It was a little awkward that she thought that line described me, but it made me happy too.

“Y-You know, that kinda sounds like the title of a Hollywood movie. *The Last Man.*”

“Aha ha, Nicole said the same thing!”

I figured that, at this point, I might as well put my hand in.

“This is a story of a man who swore his eternal love for Shirakawa Runa to the Mouth of Truth...”

Runa started narrating as I stuck my hand inside, making me burst out laughing.

“I’m doing what now...?”

“Ehe he. It was a nice beginning, right?”

“Of *The Last Man*?”

“Exactly,” she replied. “I want DiCaprio to play the lead! I cried so much when I saw *Titanic* on TV the other day...”

“Yeah, there’s no way DiCaprio could play a high schooler at his age.”

“I guess I should’ve known... I don’t watch a lotta movies, so I’ll have to google young Hollywood actors!”

“No need to go *that* far.”

While our conversation was silly, my time together with Runa was really fun.

May we be together forever like this—I couldn’t help wishing for that every time we saw each other.

After leaving the Mouth of Truth behind, Runa and I walked around the building some more. We also took some photos at the fountain and went halfsies on a rainbow cake at a café set up in the open space. We were getting ready to return to the main gate.

“Man, that was fun! We’re all set for our trip to Italy, yeah?” asked Runa, walking beside me and holding my hand with a satisfied look on her face. “I do feel bad for your mom and sister...” she suddenly began. “But thanks to your dad’s mistake, we’ve got another thing we can do together. Another ‘first.’”

She must’ve been talking about traveling abroad.

“Y-Yeah, you’re right...” I replied.

Would we really go on a honeymoon? How many years would that be from now? I couldn’t picture it yet, but it was a bit embarrassing to think about. Nevertheless, it made me happy.

“Thanks for inviting me to airsoft too. It was fun!” she said. “And I got to see you do something cool.”

“You were cool there yourself. You won a shoot-out against Yamana-san.”

“Ehe he. I had no idea Nicole would be so good at it!”

“Yeah, none of us could put up a fight at all after she got herself a rifle.”

“Maybe I should get a rifle next time too!”

Runa’s words gave me pause.

“You want to play airsoft again?” I asked.

If she’d enjoyed it that much, it made me glad, since I was the one who’d invited her.

Runa nodded energetically. “Yeah! I wonder if everyone else would join us

again.”

“I think Icchi and Nisshi would.”

“Akari was hooked too. I’m sure we’d get everyone from today! We’ll have to get more people next time and catch up to Nicole so we can play as a team that can win...”

Suddenly, Runa went silent. Looking at her face, she seemed overcome with emotion.

“Something wrong?” I asked, staring at her face in surprise.

Runa shook her head. “Not really. I just felt kinda happy.” Her eyes were red, and her voice trembled. “It’s been two months since we started dating... It’s almost three now, but we’re talking a lot about what’s to come, we’re experiencing ‘firsts’ together, and planning all sorts of things... Oh gosh, I’m so happy I might cry.” While she said all that, something glistening welled up in her eyes.

“Runa...”

She’s tearing up over things like that?

Still, when I thought about her previous relationships, I couldn’t tell her she was exaggerating.

“What should we do for our three-month anniversary? We’ll have school that day. Anything you wanna do?” I cheerfully asked.

“Mmm...” Runa’s reaction was lackluster.

She fussed over our anniversaries so much before, so what changed...? Could it be that she was hoping for a surprise, and here I am, asking her beforehand what to do? Is she angry?

I thought about all that and started to panic, but...

“It’s fine,” Runa said, sounding resolute. “I don’t care about anniversaries anymore.”

“Huh...?”

There was no anger on her face. In fact, she looked to be in high spirits.

“If you’re with me, then that’s all that matters.” Smiling at me bashfully, Runa nuzzled her face into my shoulder. “I’ve realized that being able to spend every day with you is what’s important to me. Every day is a special anniversary in itself.”

I felt myself getting emotional. “Runa...”

She looked up and grinned at me. “Anyway, I’ve outgrown anniversaries!” Her cheerful voice resounded across the atrium’s ceiling.

Runa’s gushing smile was dazzling.

Ah, I love her, I thought.

I love her.

I love Shirakawa Runa. I’m hopelessly in love with her.

She’s the most wonderful girl in the world, and I’ll never hurt her, no matter what. I want to make her happy from the bottom of her heart.

So that her smile may never falter.

“Oh, wait,” Runa suddenly said, like she had realized something. “Let’s celebrate our half-year anniversary when we get to that! And our full-year one too!”

“So much for growing up,” I quipped with a laugh, at which Runa giggled and stuck out her tongue like a little girl.

The artificial sky illuminating the building had at some point turned red like a sunset. While the real world was still only approaching the evening hours, the night appeared to come early at VenusFort.

Even as we walked down its main street while holding hands, it was almost as if the air were more melancholic now than before.

“Have you heard? Soon, VenusFort won’t be a thing anymore,” began Runa.

“What, really?” I asked in surprise, looking at her beside me.

Runa didn’t seem to be joking. She nodded with a serious look on her face. “Yeah. The Ferris wheel and Mega Web too. Everything in this area.”

“But why?”

“What was it...? ‘Redevelopment’ or something? I don’t really remember. I was so shocked when I found out...”

“Yeah, that’s shocking all right...”

The whole area still looked totally usable. *Kinda feels like a waste...*

“This place is so wonderful, so unreal, so amazing—I thought that of course it’d still be here in another ten or twenty years. But I guess I was wrong,” Runa said quietly in a somewhat sentimental tone. “I’m sure in a hundred years, even *we’ll* both be gone. That couple over there, and that family over there? They probably will too.”

Suddenly, it was almost like the people Runa was looking at kinda started to blur, their silhouettes becoming transient and ephemeral like mayflies.

“I’m sure everyone will be gone. Everyone and everything, someday,” Runa added. Judging by her tone, this was anything but an offhand comment. Instead, there was a fondness in her voice. “If that’s the case, what’s the point in me going through life worrying about things and suffering?”

She suddenly gazed at me, and I couldn’t come up with anything quickly enough to say in response.

Maybe if the girl by the name of Shirakawa Runa was just a sunny beauty and a bottomless well of cheerfulness with nothing else going for her... If that were the case, I might not have been attracted to her so much.

She was completely different from me, but when we were together, she always managed to move me deeply. She made me feel things I’d never felt before.

As I remained quiet, Runa averted her eyes and gazed ahead instead. “And so, I’m okay with being a sports car after all.” There was a dignified sparkle in her eyes that felt like the glittering of Runa’s life itself. “I’ll live in the moment. I’ll live for the sake of living. Just like I’ve done until now,” she said in a light, melodic voice before gazing at me. “Will you still love me despite all that?”

She’s such a gorgeous girl. And not just because of her face.

Everything about her is beautiful and precious.

I felt overwhelmed. “O-Of course!” I frantically replied. I was doing my best not to be left behind. “I’ll love you my whole life... You and only you.”

Embarrassing as it was to say, those words came from the heart.

Holding Runa’s hand with the same hand I’d used while making a vow to the Mouth of Truth, I tightened my grip, awkward as it might have been.

Chapter 2.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“’Sup, Runa.”

“Hey, Nicole!”

“Airsoft was hella fun!”

“I know, right? You were awesome today!”

“Tell everyone I wanna do it again.”

“Oh, I told Ryuto already! But man, we just played and you’re already looking to play again?”

“Hell yeah I am! It was super refreshing. All my stress is just gone.”

“Also... Nicole, was it really okay?”

“Hm? What was?”

“Telling everyone about *him.*”

“Yeah, it’s whatever. Not like I’m hiding it. Unlike you and Akari, I rarely have guys confess to me even when they know I don’t have anyone.”

“You do look the type to shoot them down without mercy.”

“Even though that’s not the case at all, yeah. Guys really don’t get it. Girls like Akari? They’re the ones with no mercy.”

“Aha ha.”

“Me? I’m just a pure, heartbroken girl.”

“Gotta say, though, you’re really something. It’s been what, three years? Two and a half? And you’re still in love with your ex.”

“It’s a love I can’t leave behind. It’s just, I really liked him, so...”

“Nicole...”

“Wait, isn’t that poetic? ‘A love I can’t leave’? Works pretty well, right?”

“Oh, come on, Nicole-sensei! Stop making me laugh when the mood’s all serious!”

Still laughing, Runa got up from her bed and reached toward her desk. She picked up a pencil cup with numerous photo booth stickers on it.

One of the photos included Nicole and her then-boyfriend. The date written on it was from sometime in Runa’s second year of middle school. Runa narrowed her eyes and smiled wistfully as she looked at the photo.

Chapter 3

Sometimes, Runa looked much more like a *woman* than her age would suggest. Perhaps it was because of the way she'd lived all this time—trying to become an adult as soon as she could, as she'd put it herself. Or maybe it was due to her accumulated experience.

She normally looked innocent, but occasionally, a more mature look would appear on her face. It always caught me off guard and made me more attracted to her every time it happened.

I wanted to catch up to Runa as soon as possible. To become a man worthy of being her boyfriend.

However, it wasn't like one's mental age could rise so quickly. There wasn't really a way of making an effort to do so.

And so, the most I could do was scramble to find a way to improve myself, no matter what I had to do.

"Like how it would be nice to have three kids."

Though recalling Runa's words put a smile on my face, it also planted seeds of anxiety in me.

Three children, in these times? I didn't have a good idea of what Runa would do after she graduated, so didn't this mean I pretty much *had* to get into a fairly reputable university and then get a well-paying job at a fairly reputable company?

As I started to overthink things, my head became filled with things both wild and realistic. So, I picked up the cram school brochure I'd received during one of my summer lectures.

***

"Hey, Ryuto!" Runa called out to me one day after classes and approached me as I was about to leave the classroom with Icchi. "Me and Akari are making

croffles at my place this Saturday. Wanna come eat?”

“Cro-what...?” I asked.

“Croissant waffles! I hear they’re popular in Korea right now. When I told Akari we had a waffle maker at home since my grandma bought it some time ago, she asked if I’d let her make some. Said she’ll bring the ingredients.”

“Sounds interesting...”

I didn’t really get what these “croffles” were, but I definitely wanted to eat them if Runa was making them herself... But then, something occurred to me.

“Oh... Sorry. I have cram school on Saturday.”

An “Ah!” appeared on Runa’s face.

“Oh, right. That’s starting this week, right?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m gonna go submit the paperwork today.”

“I see... Then I guess Sunday...? Oh, I’m going shopping with Nicole on Sunday.”

“Yeah,” I said. “No need to force things.”

“But...then we can’t see each other much,” Runa said quietly in dejection.

“I-It’s okay,” I told her. “We’ll still see each other at school every day.”

It was unfortunate that we wouldn’t be able to see each other on our days off, but I didn’t want to come between Runa and her friends.

“Yeah...” she said. Though her shoulders remained slumped, she gave me a smile. “All right, then. Do your best at cram school.”

“I will. Thanks.”

“I’ll try to free up my Sundays from now on,” she told me.

“Okay... I’m sure you want to hang out with Yamana-san, though, so don’t go out of your way too much.”

She’d previously told me that Yamana-san’s shifts often started at noon on Saturdays. That was why she and Runa often hung out on Sundays instead.

“Thanks. I’ll try. Nicole sometimes has work on Sundays too,” said Runa. She

then turned her eyes toward Icchi—he'd been standing still beside me like a statue this whole time. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Ijichi-kun. Okay, see ya, Ryuto!"

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

I waved lightly at her and Icchi broke out of his petrified state. He gave her a rather unnatural bow.

Icchi then sighed. "You have it so nice..." he said quietly as we walked away from our classroom. "Tanikita-san's making sweets...? I want some of that..."

Icchi had been mentioning Tanikita-san frequently ever since the other day. He'd probably fallen for her. Though Icchi himself denied it with an "I-It's not like that!"

As a species, virgins had it rough. Though I supposed the same went for me...

No, wait, I'm on my way to becoming a man worthy of Runa, and then *I'll lose my V-card. Cram school is my first step toward that.*

It's a bit painful that we might not see each other as much anymore, but I should work all the harder for it so I can bring about our bright future.

As I roused myself once more, we met up with Nisshi in the hallway and went to the train station together. I then said my goodbyes to them and boarded a train heading in the direction opposite from home.

I'd decided to attend Cram School K, which was a major one—anyone would've heard of it. Its goal was to help you pass your college entrance exams. My school wasn't all that hard-core about preparing students to get into good universities, but I'd heard that even several students from my high school had been attending this cram school since they were freshmen. That had been how my choice had, simplistically, fallen on this school when I'd had to decide where to take my summer courses. It was the same thing as buying something from a genre you're unfamiliar with—you end up choosing works people talk about often and that have good reviews.

After arriving at Ikebukuro Station and making my way through the crowd, I left through its West exit. After a few minutes' walk through an area that felt

like a business district, Cram School K's building came into view.

At the reception desk, I submitted my enrollment papers with my parents' signatures and seals. After I listened to what the staff had to say, I officially became a student there.

I sighed. It felt like I'd instantly become a high school senior who was focused on preparing for his college entrance exams. It was a bit depressing. From now on, I would have to take English classes here every Saturday. Since I'd said I was considering elite universities, they'd put me on a high-level course—I could imagine that preparing for classes and reviewing the material afterward would be hard. And there'd probably be *more* classes once I got to my third year of high school... My steps were heavy as I headed to the stairs.

Since I'd gone here during summer break, I was already familiar with this building. I didn't feel like just heading to the underground study room, so I went to the lounge on the top floor first. I figured I'd skim the textbooks I'd received while drinking tea or something.

After I opened the door to the lounge, the sight of its bright interior made me feel just a bit dizzy. Two of its walls were made of glass. The tables and chairs inside were placed at a comfortable distance from each other. There weren't many people here yet, which made someone as afraid of strangers as I was feel relieved.

I looked over the lounge once more, trying to decide where to sit, but my eyes suddenly became glued to a certain spot.

"Kurose...san...?!" I exclaimed, spotting her from the side. She was at a table by the window.

She wasn't alone, and a few other girls sat with her at the table. All of them were eating sweets and chatting. Other than Kurose-san, they were all wearing the same sailor uniform.

Kurose-san seemed to be having fun—I'd never seen her like that at our school.

Perhaps noticing my gaze, she started to turn her head my way, at which point I crouched on instinct and hid under a table.

“Why is Kurose-san here...?” I wondered aloud.

Could she have chased me here...? But I shrugged off that thought, figuring I was being too self-conscious. Judging by how close she seemed with her friends, it was unlikely they’d only recently got to know each other. It was safe to assume that she’d enrolled at this cram school before I had.

“What should I do...?”

I hid on the spur of the moment, but now what? Do I make a run for it? Or what, do I go over there without a care in the world and be like, “’Sup. I’m going to this school now too”?

Ever since then... Ever since that last day of the first school term when we’d talked about that photo of us touching, I hadn’t had a proper conversation with Kurose-san. A big part of the reasoning behind that was the fact that since the beginning of the second term, we’d ended up sitting far away from each other. We no longer had much of a reason to talk. I’d ended up hiding like I had in part because of the awkwardness that gap had brought about between us.

And besides...

“But...then we can’t see each other much.”

I couldn’t help feeling guilty about the idea of making Runa lonely and then meeting up with Kurose-san at cram school. After all, if I did, I’d be seeing a girl who’d...liked me...until just recently, and without my girlfriend around.

Now that it’s come to this, I have no choice but to run away from Kurose-san at every opportunity. I need to make sure to avoid all contact. That’s how I can do right by Runa.

Having come to that conclusion, I pretended to be unwell and, feeling embarrassed, left the lounge on all fours.

That day marked the beginning of my survival game at cram school, where running into Kurose-san would mean a *game over.*

I’d been enrolled in English classes, and they’d already been held twice before I’d started here. At first, I had to diligently come to the school on a regular basis

in order to catch up on them with video lectures. I also had to discuss my goals of how high I was aiming in terms of universities with the school's staff. But while I was at cram school, as well as on my way there, I constantly kept my guard up and surveyed my surroundings, watching out for Kurose-san.

The most stressful times were in the study room. Kurose-san was there regularly, and whenever I went there, she was pretty much always present. So, I would go inside, and if I spotted Kurose-san sitting somewhere, I would predict which way she'd go to get in and out of the room. Then, sometimes, I had to get out, go back to the reception desk, and ask for a seat that was away from that predicted route. This was a real pain.

Even if I went to the annex for self-study, I'd run into the same problem. On some days, or even during some hours on the same day, Kurose-san would be there, and I had to go through the same trouble again.

But since I was doing all this, I somehow managed to study at cram school without coming face-to-face with Kurose-san for the first two weeks.

However, one Saturday—after my second-ever English class at cram school—an incident occurred.

During that day's class, I'd happened to correctly answer the teacher's question. I was happy about it, which made me less wary of my surroundings than I usually was.

All students had to take the stairs to move from floor to floor. If you ran into someone on the stairs, there generally was no escape. So, when taking them, I had to wait at landings and carefully check the area I was headed to.

That day, however, I neglected to do that and went downstairs in a normal fashion, thinking it would be fine. That was my mistake.

By the time I saw the familiar black hair and an "Ah..." crossed my thoughts, it was too late. Kurose-san and her friends had just turned at the landing ahead and were heading my way.

I instantly dodged, but she was already too close. There was only a meter and a half of distance between us.

It's over. She'll see me.

But as I thought that...

"Oh hey, Yamada! Long time no see!"

Suddenly, some guy grabbed my head and forcibly pulled me toward him.

"What...?!" I exclaimed.

I didn't know him. Since I was of average height and he'd managed to do a full nelson on me from above, he must've been pretty tall. Perhaps he was as tall as Icchi—though, unlike my friend, this guy was slender.

Whoever he was mistaking me for, he'd ended up covering my face, and thanks to that, I appeared to have avoided the danger.

He led me to the hallway on the floor I'd come from while Kurose-san and her friends went farther upstairs. They were probably heading to the lounge.

Seeing that she was gone, I spoke up timidly. "Um... I'm not Yamada..."

"I know," replied the guy, finally removing his hands from my head and freeing me. "I helped you out. That cutie you're always running away from was finally about to see you, right?" he asked, grinning at me.

This guy was good-looking, but that said, it wasn't like he had finely chiseled features. He had a prominent nose, but also monolid eyes with long slits, as well as thin lips. His bushy, black hair with thick bangs stood out more than his face—I felt like the length must've been annoying as his hair probably got into his eyes.

Basically, he was one of those guys who just had an aura of handsomeness. I wished a gloomy guy with a generic face like me could have something like that.

"Wait, what did you just say?" I'd inadvertently been staring at him, so it had taken me some time to process his words. "Do you know me?"

He nodded. "I've seen a lot of you these past two or three weeks. You're always running from the same girl in the study room. It was way too suspicious, so you stood out."

Someone else noticed me avoiding Kurose-san...? Man, that's so

embarrassing.

“So, what’s up with her? She your ex? A stalker? Would it be dangerous if she saw you?”

“Huh?! N-No...”

My relationship with Kurose-san was difficult to explain. As I hesitated to say more, the guy put his hand on my shoulder again.

“Well, it sounds fun, so tell me your story,” he said. “I’ve been in the study room since morning, so I’ve been looking for a change of pace. Let’s go to the lounge...though she’s likely to be there, so let’s make that some café in the area instead.”

“What...? Whaaat?!”

I couldn’t keep up with him, but since he’d rescued me from my predicament, I couldn’t just shrug him off either. Before I knew it, my legs were obediently carrying me out of the cram school at his suggestion.

“I see...” The guy sighed once he’d heard me out at a nearby café. “So, of all people, your first love, who once broke your heart, turned out to be the sister of the girl you’re dating now, huh.” He spoke quietly and sounded impressed.

His name was Sekiya Shugo. Apparently, he was what they called a ronin—someone who’d graduated from high school, hadn’t gotten into a college, and was waiting for another chance to do so. At Cram School K, he attended a course for high school graduates. He’d explained all this on our way to the café.

“So, what’re you gonna do?” asked Sekiya-san. “Are you gonna keep running from her until your college exams are done?”

That left me at a loss for words.

I’d ordered an iced coffee since it was the cheapest thing on the menu, but it was bitter and I wasn’t a big fan of the taste, so I didn’t feel like continuing to drink it. Sekiya-san had offered to split the bill, however, so I would have to finish it before we left here.

“I do think it’s unrealistic, but right now...” I replied.

“How about going to a different campus?”

“I don’t think that’d be worth it...”

At our high school, Kurose-san and I spent every day in the same class. Moving to a different campus farther away from both my house and my high school just to avoid her felt like going too far.

“Maybe I should’ve just said hi the first time I’d run into her, but since I hid myself instead, things kinda ended up like this...”

“Why?” he asked. “Do you feel guilty because of your girlfriend?”

I thought about it for a while and then told him the truth. “I don’t want to make her worried anymore,” I said, remembering last summer’s events. “She’s important to me, so I’ve decided to avoid getting personally involved with Kurose-san from now on...that is, her sister. But now we’ve ended up at the same cram school. On top of that, now I have less time to see my girlfriend while I’m preparing for college exams, so if she finds out that Kurose-san goes here too, I think that might make her worried.”

I hadn’t imagined for a second that Kurose-san might’ve been here when I’d applied.

“I’ve thought about it—how *I* would feel if our positions were reversed. If my girlfriend went to a cram school and her ex was there...and then I found out... I’m pretty sure it would bother me, at least to some degree.”

“I hear you...” said Sekiya-san, lifting his face after listening to me with his arms folded. “Guess you’ll have to stay on the run for now. I’ll help you out.”

“Huh...?”

I *was* grateful for his offer, but he’d said it so casually that I couldn’t think quickly enough to thank him properly.

“I’m at the Ikebukuro campus every day,” he continued. “If I see her, I’ll tell you where she is over LINE. Give me your LINE ID.”

“O-Okay...”

Doing as I was told, I somehow ended up exchanging contact information with someone I’d only just met. This was a first for me.

He looked at my account profile. “What...? Your girlfriend’s not your profile pic?” he asked, sounding disappointed. “You say they don’t look like each other, but your girlfriend’s gotta be hot as hell if she’s her sister, right? You don’t have pics of her?”

Sekiya-san seemed like a lady-killer, and his eyes were filled with curiosity.

I shook my head on instinct. “No. None.”

“Bullshit. I know you just don’t want people to realize what a horndog you are.” Even though he said that, he didn’t press further for pictures. “All right, I’m gonna go to the study room. You?”

“Huh...? Ah, me too.”

I was about to quickly force down the remainder of my almost-full iced coffee when Sekiya-san reached out for it from his seat.

“Let me have that if you don’t want it. I’m a caffeine monster.”

“Eh, huh? Oh, okay...”

Avoiding the straw sticking out of it, Sekiya-san drank what was left of my iced coffee directly from the glass in large gulps like it was a beer.

“When you spend the whole day in the study room, you get sleepy, no matter how much coffee you drink. I’ve had so much over the past half year that it doesn’t really affect me anymore,” said Sekiya-san, putting down the glass. There was only ice left inside. He then got up, holding the tray in his hands. “Order something you actually want to drink next time. I’ll help pay again,” he casually added.

As I was still sitting down, I grabbed my bag and hurried to my feet. “Th-Thank you, very much,” I said.

I felt a little pathetic doing nothing but following his lead and kowtowing like I was his lackey, but being older than me, Sekiya-san looked really mature.

“Gotta say, though, I’m sure you’re worried about Kurose-san or whatever her name is, but you should focus on studying while you’re at cram school,” Sekiya-san said from beside me on our way back to the building. We’d be heading to

the study room once we got there. “Trust me—there’s not a single good thing about becoming a ronin.”

Coming from a guy who actually *had* missed his chance to get into college, those words sounded convincing.

I sighed. “I’ll do my best.”

“It must be nice to be in your second year of high school. You can still aim for anywhere you want. If only someone had told me that back then...”

Just then, I heard Sekiya-san’s breast pocket vibrate. He pulled out a smartphone, looked at the screen, and clicked his tongue.

“Something up?” I asked him.

“It’s my old classmates from high school. They’re like, ‘Are you sure you don’t want to come to the class reunion today?’ Of course not, those fucking idiots,” he said, practically spitting that out. He then put his phone away in his pants pocket. He wasn’t carrying anything in his hands since he’d apparently left his stuff in the study room. “It’s only been half a year since we graduated. What fucking class reunion? They’re just a bunch of smooth brains getting together to brag about their sparkling college life.”

Wow. He looked so mature back at the café, but he’s actually rotten to the core...

Ronin sure are scary.

Then, as we were just outside the cram school...

“Ah!” Sekiya-san suddenly cried out, crouched down, and hid behind me.

“Huh? Seki—” I began.

“Don’t say my name! Just stand there silently!”

Without much of a choice, I did as asked, having no idea what this was about. Several students left the cram school and passed by us.

“Phew...” Sekiya-san eventually stepped out from behind me. “Those were my juniors from high school. It’s way too lame when your huge show-off senior ends up as a ronin bumming around at the same cram school as you, don’t you

think?”

I sighed. I considered telling him it was even lamer to keep avoiding them like this, but couldn’t bring myself to.

Hey, wait a second... Did he notice I’m steering clear of Kurose-san because he’s been doing the same thing with other people?

“Okay, look,” he began. “When you’re outside like this, you can hide behind something. But when you’re in a building, it’s important to check where people are headed in advance. Oh, and it’s a must to get on good terms with the staff. Sato-san at reception is kind, so when I stop by, she tells me stuff like ‘The girl in School A’s uniform was headed to the lounge.’”

Watching Sekiya-san explain all this with pride, I thought to myself, *Man, ronin sure are scary...*

***

Thanks in part to my encounter with Sekiya-san, my life at the cram school started to more or less get on track.

Meanwhile, however, a new topic came up at my normal school.

It was the last long homeroom of September.

“I’d like five volunteers for the school festival committee,” the class representative announced, standing in front of the blackboard. “Anyone interested, please raise a hand!”

The cultural festival at my school was held at the beginning of November and included the public holidays.

Just like the previous year, this committee wouldn’t be active for too long, but it *would* be rather busy, so joining wasn’t very popular with extroverts who had fulfilling personal lives.

“I have my club, so I can’t.”

“Me neither...”

At the same time, introverts who just went home after classes didn’t want to

do something that would put them in the spotlight like that, so we could only keep quiet.

“C-Come on, isn’t there anyone? I’m sure it’ll be fun.” Our homeroom teacher sounded desperate. She was a young woman who had just started taking care of our class this year.

However, the room was completely shrouded in silence. Everyone stared at their desks and nervously held their breath. We were all trying to avoid eye contact with the teacher and the class representative.

“You know, it’s hard to raise your hand at times like these unless someone else does it...”

“Yeah, exactly. If only somebody volunteered first...”

Whispers like that passed through the room as students began to watch out of the corners of their eyes to see what everyone else was doing. That was when...

“I’ll do it,” came a feeble voice, and a fair hand timidly rose into the air.

It was Kurose-san. Her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment, and her nervousness made her hand tremble above her.

“Thank you, Kurose-san,” the teacher replied, sounding fairly relieved.

“You’re a big help, Kurose-san,” the class representative added, looking glad.

Gazing back at the two of them, Kurose-san looked happy and bashful.

Kurose-san...

I recalled what she’d looked like at cram school, surrounded by friends.

Perhaps she actually did have many friends. But considering what she’d done here right after transferring to our school... After she’d spread rumors about Runa, our classmates were still keeping her at arm’s length.

Was she lonely? Did she volunteer because she wanted everyone’s gratitude?

Another thought crept into my head too. *Wait, maybe she genuinely wants to participate in the committee*.

“Anybody else?” asked the class representative.

Immediately...

“Yes, me!”

Surprised to hear that voice, I turned to see Runa raising her hand with such vigor that she was practically about to stand up in her seat.

I was astonished. *Runa’s going to participate in the school festival committee, of all things?!*

“Oh, if Runy’s in, I’ll bite too!” said Tanikita-san, raising her hand as well.

For some reason or another, I looked at Yamana-san too, but she was looking at her nails and not showing any interest in this. I figured she couldn’t join because she had work.

Then, I caught sight of Icchi, whose seat was diagonally in front of Yamana-san’s. He had a hell of a look on his face, like he was in agony or in torment... His face shifted from red to blue and back again as his expression changed over and over.

And then, it hit me—it must’ve been because of Tanikita-san. Since she’d volunteered, he must’ve wanted to participate as well, but he struggled to find the courage.

Then...

“Hey, Ryuto! You should join too!”

Turning to the source of the voice, I saw Runa looking at me with sparkling eyes. The sight of it made me recall something.

“I’m thinking of becoming friends with her.”

“What?!”

“Even if I go with a direct approach, she’ll reject me. But we’re classmates, right? Nobody at school knows we’re related. So even if I’m all pushy and ask to be her friend, I don’t think Maria can just shrug me off.”

“So you want to become friends with her like ordinary classmates, keeping the fact that you’re sisters a secret from everyone...?”

“Yeah. And I want your help with that.”

Was she trying to put that plan into action now? I’d never imagined it would happen so soon. However...

“Autumn will come and go, and by the time winter starts, I want to be able to be by Maria’s side again. I want to once again go halfsies on papico ice cream with her as we watch TV under the kotatsu together.”

Giving it more thought, I realized that it was already the end of September. Perhaps this was Runa’s best opportunity to start things.

“O-Okay... I-I’ll join,” I said. Many of my classmates were looking at me, and it was freaking me out.

At that, some people started teasing us.

“Don’t start making out at committee meetings now!”

Regardless, the committee almost had enough members from our class now, so everybody looked relieved.

“Does anybody else want to join? We need one more,” said the class representative, surveying the classroom.

“Umm!” I called out, my hand still in the air. It was embarrassing to have so many eyes on me, so my voice came out horribly falsetto. Though that made me even more mortified, I desperately continued forcing the words out. “I-I think...I-Ijichi-kun...is a good candidate...”

“Huh?” the class representative uttered, surprised. Perhaps she hadn’t expected me to suggest an introvert. “Is that okay with you, Ijichi-kun...?” She looked skeptical—maybe she thought I was just getting at him.

Acting strangely, Icchi nonetheless nodded. “Yes...!” he said in a happy voice—though one unfittingly quiet for his size.

Festival committee members were recruited from first-and second-year

students with five per class every year. Each cohort had five classes, so the committee had fifty members in total. Everyone was split up into subcommittees to manage different things, like the reception desk and keeping track of equipment, and subcommittees would be responsible for their areas until the start of the festival.

That day after school, when committee members were being assigned to different areas, Icchi was in high spirits.

“Man, you telling me you can’t just do your committee work by yourself? Oh well...”

He seemed to have assumed I’d recommended he join because I’d wanted a fellow introvert with me. I figured he’d get angry and go all “I-It’s not like that!” if I said I’d been trying to give him an opportunity to be with Tanikita-san, though, so I let him believe what he wanted.

Right now, the committee members, including me, were sitting in no particular order in the chemistry room. We’d borrowed it to decide on our duties. I sat together with Icchi, and Runa and Tanikita-san were in front of us. Kurose-san sat at some distance behind us by herself.

A student in our cohort from a different class had been selected as the head of the committee after she’d announced her candidacy. She told us all about what would be required of us.

“Now then, we should decide who does what,” she said afterward. “Please raise your hand if you’re interested in the task I mention. I’ll begin with those that don’t require many people. First, we’ll need three people to make pamphlets. I’d like second-year students to take care of this.”

This subcommittee would be making pamphlets that included the festival’s timeline and guide maps of the school. Apparently, the people assigned to do this would also need to consult a printing office as part of the process. It was unlikely to be all that difficult since we could almost completely reuse previous years’ pamphlets as templates. However, the head of the committee said this task was best suited for people who were good at writing and those interested in publishing.

I figured it wasn’t for me, and it didn’t require many people either. But as I let

my mind wander...

“Only you?” the committee head asked as she looked behind me.

Turning around, I saw Kurose-san raising her hand without a word.

Runa had turned around as well. She then faced forward again and immediately raised her hand. “Me too!” she announced. Next, she turned toward me. “Ryuto...”

Her eyes seemed to be pleading for help. It appeared that she really *was* trying to put her plan into action.

“M-Me too,” I said, putting my own hand up.

“Very well, that’s the required three,” announced the committee head.

And so, the three of us—Runa, Kurose-san, and I—had ended up in the pamphlet-making subcommittee. Just us.

Wait, how are we even gonna do this?! The mere thought of it made cold sweat appear on my skin.

“Whaaat?! Runy, didn’t you say we should do something together?” protested Tanikita-san.

“S-Sorry, I just got this urge to make pamphlets all of a sudden...” said Runa with an awkward smile, making an excuse.

Meanwhile, a certain matter appeared on my mind and I turned to look behind me.

I was startled as my eyes nearly met Kurose-san’s before she immediately turned her face away. Her cheeks were red, and she was clearly discomposed.

Of course she’d feel that way... She must’ve never seen this coming.

After that, one subcommittee was formed after another, and Icchi managed to be put in charge of decorations together with Tanikita-san. They’d have to do things like set up an arch in front of the school gates and decorate the hallways and the gym. There were a lot of students assigned to that one, including some freshmen, but they’d probably have at least some opportunities to talk as long as they worked on the same things.

“Now, split up into your areas, introduce yourselves to each other, and that will be it for today,” announced the committee head. “Each subcommittee will have a supervising teacher. They’ll give you more details later on about what exactly you have to do for the upcoming festival, as well as your deadlines.”

At that, everybody got up and started slowly walking around.

“Equipment over here!”

“Decorations, gather here please!”

Giving a sidelong glance to the subcommittees calling out to each other, Runa and I looked at each other and, without a word, headed to the back of the classroom.

Our subcommittee only had three people, so there was no need to use our voices to get together.

And so, Runa and I went over to Kurose-san.

It was awkward for all three of us. Even Runa couldn’t hide it, and she had willingly created this situation.

We didn’t need to introduce ourselves—we all knew each other’s faces, names, and everything else quite well. For a while we just observed one another, standing in the shape of an equilateral triangle.

“Let’s do our best together.” Runa was the first to speak. Though it was an awkward one, her lips were curved into a smile nonetheless.

“Yeah, let’s...” I added, since this standoff would probably never end if I didn’t say anything.

Kurose-san had been hanging her head and holding one elbow with her other hand, but at that point, she lifted her face. Giving us a momentary glance, she turned away and slightly opened her mouth.

“Let’s...”

Though there were many difficulties waiting ahead of us, Runa’s “Friendship Project”—her plan to become friends with Kurose-san—was about to be set in motion.

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Things sure were getting complicated. My relationship with Kurose-san had been complicated enough as it was, but now this took things a step further. I still had to keep avoiding her at cram school too.

The following Saturday morning, I was doing my homework for the previous days' classes in the study room when Sekiya-san approached me.

"'Sup, Yamada!" he called out.

I *had* told him my real name, but he'd said it would be bad if Kurose-san overheard it, so he continued to call me Yamada. One time when he'd called out to me at the reception desk, the woman staffing it had done a double take since she had known me.

Outside of that, it didn't really inconvenience me in any way.

"You haven't had lunch yet, right? Why don't we get some together?" he offered.

"I'll be done in about ten minutes."

"All right, then. I'll wait for you outside."

With that, he left the study room. We both had people we were avoiding at this cram school, so this must've been the right time for him to get out.

Sekiya-san was pretty considerate of me, but he acted like it didn't matter to him at all, so even a guy like me who tended to overthink things could get along with him pretty well. I wasn't part of any clubs because I didn't like hierarchical relationships, so I'd never thought I'd find myself talking so candidly to a good-looking guy who was older than me by two whole years.

Sekiya-san would give me tips, like how to save a seat in class and when to ask tutors questions. There was no denying the fact that he'd made my life at cram school more comfortable, so I wanted to treasure our acquaintanceship.

"So, what's the matter?" he asked me from across the table. We were at a family restaurant specializing in ramen.

"Huh?"

“You were sighing in the study room earlier. Is this about that Kurose-san again?”

I didn’t reply.

“Come on, spit it out. It’s easier if you tell someone about it. I’m pretty confident about giving advice when girls are involved.”

I thought about it for a moment, but since he was kinda getting on my nerves, I decided not to tell him the truth.

“No, I was just having trouble with my English homework.”

“Really? Need my help? Don’t stress about stuff so much; you’re still in your second year.”

I sighed. The truth was that I wanted to work hard so I didn’t end up like him, but I would’ve felt bad to actually say that to his face.

Then, a question popped up in my mind as we waited for our ramen. “How did you end up as a ronin, Sekiya-san?”

“Ah...” He covered his face. “Do you need to ask? I failed my college exams when I was a third-year. What else could it be?”

I’d figured as much, but I had wanted to ask just in case something in particular had held him back.

“I kinda spent too much time on girls back in school...” he then added. “Didn’t have time to study...”

“Wow...”

He’s a sunny type, all right. And he even had a lot of fun in school...

Seeing me recoil, Sekiya-san waved his hand as if he were flustered.

“Look, when an introvert like me who never dated anyone until middle school suddenly becomes a chick magnet when he gets to high school, how could he *not* get carried away and fool around?”

“Whaaat...?”

Was that even possible? He hadn’t always been popular and fooled around?

As I looked at him doubtfully, Sekiya-san tapped on his phone and showed it to me.

“Look at this. That’s me in my third year of middle school.”

Displayed on the screen was a middle schooler in a PE uniform. The boy had something of a short haircut and gave off a completely different impression than Sekiya-san’s current self. His eyes looked evil, and you’d think he went to a school out in the middle of nowhere. Could someone really change that much by changing just their hairstyle?

“See? How would a guy like *that* be popular?” he asked.

“Wait, you’re just randomly showing me pictures of yourself back when you didn’t have good looks...?”

Aren’t you embarrassed? was the part I left unsaid.

“It’s not like that,” replied Sekiya-san, laughing. “This was taken when I won a local tournament. That’s why it’s one of my favorites. It was a moment of glory in my life.”

“A tournament? You were athletic?” I asked.

He burst into laughter. “It was just ping-pong! You can see the paddle right there in my hand! You really don’t give two shits about me, huh?”

While Sekiya-san had a sharp tongue, he smiled with his whole face, and the tone of his deep voice was friendly. Because of that, even when he used foul language with me, it didn’t bother me at all. When you took his current looks into consideration too, it was no wonder he’d become a chick magnet.

“But if you were so good at ping-pong, weren’t you popular with girls even before changing your image?” I asked.

“With a younger girl from my club, yeah.”

“See?” *And here he called himself an introvert.*

As I stared at him scornfully, Sekiya-san laughed again.

“It was just her, though. She was our manager and we got along pretty well. We even started dating after we graduated middle school. She told me I should

change my hairstyle. I grew my hair out some after I stopped going to ping-pong club, so...”

“You did a one-eighty when coming to high school?”

“Exactly.”

“So, what happened with that girl?” I asked.

Sekiya-san lowered his eyes and didn’t reply.

“Did you...?”

Cheat on her a hundred times, toy with her until you were bored, and then toss her aside...? was the continuation inside my mind.

Seeing my judgmental look, Sekiya-san’s reply was flustered. “Nah, the way I broke it off with her wasn’t *that* horrible... Well, I guess it kinda *was* horrible...for her.”

Sekiya-san went silent after that. He seemed to be conflicted about that girl.

Then, our ramen arrived, and we moved away from that topic.

No amount of talking to Sekiya-san would do anything about my situation with Kurose-san. There was no denying that.

For the time being, I had to not let her see me at the cram school while assisting Runa’s Friendship Project to the best of my ability.

October came, and the committee’s work began for real.

As the subcommittee in charge of pamphlets, our primary task was to get clubs and classes who were preparing something for the festival—as well as teachers and the festival committee head—to write content for us. We’d then put all of that together and prepare a manuscript before the deadline. We already had the previous years’ versions of the guide map of the school as well as an introduction page to start from, but it was up to us to decide on things like the layout and the cover. That was how we could make this year’s materials stand out from the rest.

The cultural festival had a different theme every year. This time around, its

slogan was “For the Future,” written in English. How we’d apply that to the pamphlet’s design was up to us.

First, we had to discuss our plan of attack for the pamphlets. And for that reason, the three of us had borrowed the meeting room at school one day after classes and were now sitting together at a rectangular table. Runa and I were on one side, and Kurose-san was on the other.

Silence hung over the room. Runa had been restless for a while, quietly watching Kurose-san as she sat across from her. The latter was looking at some pamphlets from recent years in her hands, which had been left on the table as a reference.

After a while, Runa spoke up, as if having gathered her resolve. “Have you been well, Maria?”

Kurose-san’s shoulders twitched. She still faced the pamphlets in her hands, but her eyes moved toward Runa.

“Yeah,” she said with a stiff expression and then gave the slightest nod by only pulling her chin backward just a bit.

I felt like this was my first time witnessing these sisters communicate directly.

“What have you been up to recently?” Runa asked her.

“What do you mean...? Nothing in particular.”

“I mean, like, hobbies.”

Runa anxiously asked question after question as Kurose-san gave her curt replies.

“Hobbies? I watch videos and stuff, I guess.”

“Oh, you do?! Ah, hey, have you seen Gyaru School’s new dance vid?! I think it’s even better than Yarirafi!”

“Huh...? What’re you even talking about? Are we speaking the same language?”

Runa went silent and looked dejected at the fact that Maria gave her a cold reply even after Runa had found something they could talk about. The look in

her eyes practically said, “My HP is low. I want to rest for a turn.”

That prompted me to nervously speak up. “Kurose-san, what kind of videos do you watch?”

She looked at me in surprise, then thought for a short while before saying anything back. “I like to watch gameplay videos.”

“What?!” It was my turn to be surprised. “What games?”

“I guess there’s a lot of horror games... I watch Kino’s and Gachaman’s videos often.”

“Yeah, I know them. I watched their Let’s Plays of *Reticent Evil* and stuff. They’re really good...”

They were both popular so I’d watched them a few times, like after a game I had been interested in came out.

“Oh, you’ve watched them? I’ll watch pretty much anything when it comes to horror games, even if the YouTuber isn’t that good at it. Though Let’s Plays of popular ones are surprisingly fun. Have you seen Karino Eiko’s?” she then asked.

“Ah, no, I haven’t. I know he blew up, though. Guess his channel is good, huh? I’ll check it out sometime soon.”

This is getting fun. This is my first time talking to a girl who likes gameplay videos. Who could’ve thought Kurose-san had a hobby like that?

“I guess sometimes I watch videos of other kinds of games too if I feel like it. I think I watch pretty much all the popular gaming YouTubers.”

Hearing that, I made up my mind to ask *the* question. “So... You know KEN? I’m a fan of his...”

“Ah, he’s a former pro gamer, right? I watched him when he did videos of *Identity VI* and *Mafia Punishment*. I’ve stopped watching him because he doesn’t post those anymore, though.”

“He still posts videos on *Mafia*, actually!”

“Really?” she asked. “I’ll take a look sometime, then.”

“Wait, you don’t watch stuff like his sixty-person *Yourcraft* videos?”

“I’m not a fan of those audience-participation videos where he plays with active Kids. It’s so lame when a video is just a constant stream of inside jokes.”

“That’s not true! It’s mainly KEN talking, and as you watch, you’ll gradually get to know the personalities of different Kids and it’ll become fun.”

“But even then, where am I even supposed to start watching?”

“Anywhere is fine, but I recommend—”

Then, with a start, I remembered that Runa was here too. Looking over at her, I saw she had a blank, dumbfounded look on her face, just as I expected.

Damn. I wanted to support her Friendship Project, but I ended up getting excited all on my own and neglecting her.

“A-Anyway, I think it’s about time we got to the main topic...” I suggested as things got awkward.

After that, we finally began to discuss the pamphlets.

I’d never thought that Kurose-san would have geeky hobbies. In my mental image of her back in middle school, she was just a beautiful girl who was an honors student. I’d only been attracted to her appearance, so I supposed it wasn’t so strange that I’d never known about this.

I couldn’t tell if Runa’s Friendship Project was making progress or not, but our discussion regarding the pamphlets got underway with an adequate start, perhaps thanks to the chat we’d just had.

“We should decide on the concept of the overall design,” I said during our second discussion.

“Well... Why not go with something really cute? It’s a festival, so something sparkly and colorful would be great! And we could make the cover pink with glitter...”

As Runa said all that with sparkling eyes, Kurose-san tilted her head.

“I don’t know about that,” she said. “The cultural festival isn’t only for girls, so

I think a more refined design—maybe something monotone—would be best. That way, boys and parents wouldn't be embarrassed carrying them. The theme we're working with is 'For the Future,' so we should set our eyes on it and make the kind of pamphlets adults would make."

"Eh...? But we're still in high school, so can't we make it at least a *little* cute...? You know, like a bright future... Is that not an option?"

Runa looked unsatisfied, but her Friendship Project seemed to have left her unable to push back too strongly against her sister.

She then looked at me as if asking for help. "What do *you* think, Ryuto?"

"Ngh..."

This was quite the predicament. Why? Because I *definitely* preferred Kurose-san's suggestion.

However, as Runa's boyfriend—and also because of the trouble that had happened between us which had begun with Kurose-san—I felt like I couldn't support her here instead of my girlfriend.

"W-Well... Why don't we try something in the middle?"

At my last-ditch suggestion, both girls' faces clouded over.

"What do you mean by that?" Runa asked.

"What kind of design are you talking about, specifically?" Kurose-san added.

"W-Well..." I desperately racked my brains. "Like, we can make a monotone, refined design, but with just a bit of pink, sparkly stuff..."

"What're you talking about? If we muddy the concept like that, don't you think it'll just look ugly as a result?" Kurose-san shot down my idea out of hand.

Judging by her behavior, though, it appeared that Kurose-san didn't have any feelings for me anymore. It was a little sad to think about, but this was for the best.

In the end, we didn't manage to agree on the pamphlet's concept that day.

"You don't communicate enough," a veteran teacher told us after checking on our progress. She was about forty and had been supervising pamphlet-makers

for a long time. “First, you need to have a good discussion. Please agree on something by the next time I check up on you.” And with that, she left.

We don’t communicate enough, huh...

I supposed it was true. After all, there were two sisters here who hadn’t had a proper conversation for years now.

Runa sighed. She seemed fed up with herself over the fact she was getting nowhere in her attempts to get along with Kurose-san. But after taking glances at her sister who was gathering the previous years’ pamphlets and preparing to leave, Runa put on a smile as though to encourage herself.

“Hey, Maria,” she said, prompting Kurose-san to stop what she was doing and look at her. “Do you ever watch makeup videos? Have you heard of Sekimoto Misa? If you’re looking to buy new makeup, her videos are really helpful.”

“I don’t watch her and I’ve never heard of her. I don’t even wear makeup.”

Another cold reply.

Runa must’ve picked this approach because Kurose-san had said she liked watching videos. *Poor girl, being shot down again like that,* I thought, but Kurose-san seemed to have given the matter more thought.

“Ah, but...” she began, making Runa’s face light up with hope. “I guess I put on a bit of makeup when cosplaying.”

Confusion appeared on Runa’s face again. “Huh? Cosplaying? Maria, you do cosplay?”

“Yeah. Like when I feel like dressing up as a character from a game I like. I don’t have friends who’ll cosplay with me, so I’m simply one of those cosplayers who do it at home and take selfies purely for themselves.”

“What kind of costumes do you make?”

“Stuff like this.” Kurose-san then showed Runa her phone.

Sitting beside her, I caught sight of the screen too.

“Ah... Hey, isn’t that the gardener from *Identity VI*?” I asked.

Kurose-san nodded, a little gleam appearing in her eyes. “Yeah. I like Yuma-

chan.”

“Did you make that outfit yourself? It’s just like in the game.”

“No, I bought it on a secondhand app for two thousand yen. Pretty cute, right? It’s my favorite out of all of Yuma’s outfits.”

“That’s nice. I guess you didn’t go for the button eyes, though.”

“I have photos with those too,” she said. “Here.”

“Whoa, this is amazing! It’s perfect. It’s like looking at a live-action adaptation,” I said in admiration when she showed me a different photo. “Wouldn’t this go viral if you put it on Twitter or something?”

“Eh, I don’t want to. It’s embarrassing.”

“But isn’t it a waste when it’s so perfect?”

“I don’t wanna.”

As my heart almost skipped a beat upon seeing Kurose-san’s bashfulness and her flushing cheeks, it hit me—once again, I’d left Runa behind.

With her mouth hanging open, Runa was watching me and Kurose-san talk. When my eyes met hers, her expression turned a bit sulky.

She’s being jealous... How cute. But even though I thought that, I couldn’t let this situation continue.

“L-Let’s call it a day, I guess,” I suggested.

Thus, Runa’s Friendship Project had not only made little progress, but it felt like it was advancing in an undesirable direction. While the latter was my fault, I couldn’t do anything about it.

***

One Sunday, an unofficial get-together for committee members took place.

Since we were in charge of making pamphlets, we’d be done with almost all of our work a week before the festival. Many other subcommittees, however, would be at their busiest during the festival itself. The point of this get-together was so that everyone involved could mingle without worrying about social hierarchies so we could work together better when the festival happened.

Then again, I had no doubt that this was just a pretext—in reality, I was sure that all the extroverts in the committee simply wanted to meet up and have fun.

The get-together started at 10 a.m. and was held in a party room at a karaoke place in Shibuya. While the extroverts in the group had fun eating and singing karaoke, Icchi and I talked about KEN instead. Runa was boisterously chatting with Tanikita-san and girls from other classes.

To my surprise, Kurose-san had shown up too, even though participation wasn't mandatory. She'd spoken to several guys and girls who'd taken turns striking up conversations with her and was now quietly sitting by herself.

After roughly three hours of constant clatter, the get-together came to an end. I'd come because Icchi had looked like he'd wanted me to keep him company (probably because he'd wanted to be in the same room with Tanikita-san), but in the end, I was left thinking that introverts like me really shouldn't be at such events. I left the karaoke place feeling a little tired.

At that point, Runa spoke to me. "It looks like people are going to Saizeriya after this. Me and Akari are going—what about you?"

"Ah, I'm heading home. I have to study for cram school..."

There was going to be a short test there the following Saturday. If I did poorly on it, I couldn't take the advanced English classes offered during the winter term, so I had to be thorough in my studies.

"Okay. Well, guess I'll see you tomorrow. Good luck studying," said Runa.

"Thanks."

Waving at me, Runa walked uphill together with Tanikita-san and the others.

Then, Icchi, who'd been keeping some distance from me, returned to my side.

"I'm going home too..." he said.

"Okay," I replied.

Icchi looked reluctant to leave. He must've been curious to spend more time with Tanikita-san, but they'd probably split into several groups once they got to the family restaurant. Being social in smaller groups would surely require a

higher level of communication skills. I figured he didn't have the confidence.

I glanced at Kurose-san and saw that she didn't seem to be going with everyone else either. I wondered if she was going home or to the study room at the cram school.

In fact, I was actually planning on going to the study room myself. That was why I'd taken my supplies with me when I'd left home that morning. The reason being—I couldn't stop myself from watching videos at home, and as a result, I couldn't focus.

If Kurose-san was heading to the same place as me, I couldn't let my guard down at any point from now until I got to Ikebukuro. We'd also arrive at the study room at the same time. This was dangerous in many ways.

I *could* go to a different campus of Cram School K and use the study room there, but Sekiya-san had told me that the norms and unwritten rules in these rooms differed between campuses. I didn't want to bother going there if I had to mind things like that.

Going to a café or something similar was an option too, but some of them weren't suitable for studying. And, if possible, I wanted to go somewhere quiet where I could study for free.

The idea of going to a library suddenly came to mind. I did a search on my phone and found a metropolitan library in Hiroo. Apparently, it was about a ten-minute train ride away from Shibuya. Parting with Icchi, I decided to try my luck there.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Library's Central Branch was located in Arisugawa-no-miya Memorial Park. It was spacious with lots of trees and some areas with different elevations and small hills. I went up the stairs while looking at the kind of playground equipment you'd find in a regular park, a tasteful pond that looked like it would belong in a Japanese-style garden, and some other features. Eventually, the library's modern building came into view.

This quiet area was far removed from the hustle and bustle I'd just left behind in Shibuya. It made me hopeful that I'd be able to focus here.

I was worried that they might not let me in since I wasn't a resident of metropolitan Tokyo, but to my relief, my library pass was enough to get me access.

The reading rooms on each floor of the library had long tables by the windows at an appropriate distance from each other. There was room for several people at each. I figured it would be nice to have the park's greenery in view as I studied, so I went to an area that looked unoccupied.

I felt awkward about blatantly studying for college exams in a reading room, so I picked up a book to use as camouflage before taking a seat by the windows. Someone else's stuff was across the table from me, but this was the only space by a window that wasn't taken. Hoping the other person would never show up, I laid out my textbooks and got to studying. But then...

"Ah..." came a quiet voice.

I looked up and went wide-eyed. "Kurose-san...?!"

Sure enough, Kurose-san was standing in front of me. She was just about to sit down with her books as I'd done earlier. Her eyes were full of disbelief.

"Wh-What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I wanted to study..." she replied. "Our midterms are close."

"R-Right... Me too."

I recalled that we certainly did have midterms coming up next week. I couldn't afford to give all my attention to the cram school.

It then hit me that if she were to see my cram school textbooks, she'd realize I went to Cram School K. It would then only be a matter of time before she found out we went to the same campus. With that in mind, I casually moved my notebooks so they'd hide my textbooks. Since I had my normal school's textbooks with me too, I figured I'd study for the midterms today instead.

However...that didn't answer the question I had on my mind.

"Why are you here, Kurose-san...?"

But at that point, a man beside us cleared his throat, so I went silent.

Let's just study for now. It would be weird to change seats at this point.

After that, while I did have Kurose-san on my mind, I was able to more or less focus in the now-quiet room. I studied for about an hour and a half.

"Kashima-kun," called out Kurose-san from diagonally behind me.

I turned around to find that at some point, she'd made her way there. Her books and notebooks were arranged neatly at her seat across from me.

"I'm going to the cafeteria for a break. Would you like to go together?" she suggested.

"Oh, uh, okay."

We can't chat here, not even a little bit. And she bothered to ask. Plus, we're in the same committee group. It should be fine to just have tea together or something...

With all that in mind, I got up too.

Just like the reading rooms, the cafeteria on the fifth floor was a pleasant room with large windows. We sat at a table by a window, facing each other, and took a break.

Kurose-san ordered a corn dog.

"There wasn't much to eat at that karaoke place," she said before opening her small mouth wide and stuffing it with the corn dog.

She really is cute.

Today, Kurose-san was wearing a striped, pink jumper dress. It was layered over a blouse with a large collar, and the frilly lace on the blouse made it look extremely girly. Since she and Runa were twins, I was sure clothes like this would suit Runa too. I wanted to see how she'd look in them.

"There wasn't nearly enough food and the guys wouldn't stop eating, so I barely got to have anything," said Kurose-san.

"Sorry..."

I hadn't been one of the people responsible, but I apologized, as a guy.

“You didn’t eat much either, did you?” Shooting me a glance, Kurose-san giggled. “You’re having something now, after all.”

She motioned to the plate in front of me. As she’d pointed out, I *was* a little hungry, so I’d been eating french fries.

Kurose-san’s natural smile caught me by surprise. It felt like this was my first time seeing it. Her cunning smile that she normally showed to guys—the one I’d grown used to seeing since middle school—was cute too, but somehow, this one was more relaxing to see.

If she can act so naturally in front of me, then she probably really is over me already. That’s a relief...

Would it be a good idea to tell Runa that I ran into Kurose-san here at the library today? I probably should. It’s not like I’m doing anything to be ashamed of.

As I went silent in thought, Kurose-san spoke up again. “Do you come here often?”

“Huh? No...” I shook my head. “It’s my first time. I only found out about it when I looked it up. What about you?”

“I came here often when I was going to my previous school. It was just one train station away.”

“Really? Your school was in a hell of a place...”

A school in the Minato ward, and in an area lined with embassies at that?

“Was it, by any chance, a school for girls from rich families?” I asked.

“It was,” Kurose-san readily admitted, and she placed the stick of the corn dog she’d finished eating on her plate. “My former stepfather was in management there. He said I might as well go to a school with good resources, so I got into Girls’ School T.”

“Huh...”

It was my first time hearing this from Kurose-san, though I felt like I’d heard rumors from classmates that she’d gone to an all-girls school before transferring to ours.

“I liked that school... That’s why the saddest thing for me about Mom getting divorced again was the fact that I had to transfer.”

I thought about that for a moment. “But wait, if the school is in this area, couldn’t you have kept going to it, even from your new home?”

Kurose-san’s place was in this city just like mine, so it couldn’t have been so far away that she couldn’t go there.

She smiled at my question, but there was sadness in her expression.

“I didn’t transfer because it was far. After my parents stopped getting along, my father didn’t pay the tuition for the first term of my second year. I couldn’t stay.”

“Tuition... I see. I guess it *would* be expensive at a school like that...”

I felt embarrassed that I was such a commoner that I hadn’t realized such a thing.

“Ah, but didn’t your mother get at least a bit of your stepfather’s fortune from the divorce...?” I asked.

It felt like I’d heard something to that effect in the news at some point.

At that, Kurose-san bit her lip. “I wonder if he even *had* that much money. About a half year before they got divorced, his business failed and he ended up in debt. That was when he became irritable and started to get violent with my mom. Money wasn’t really on our minds when we left at the end.”

“I see...”

I felt like I finally understood why Kurose-san had transferred to our school at such an odd time.

“Once my mom started considering a divorce, she found her current job, but she’s not a permanent employee... We don’t have much money. I got these clothes and this bag from my stepfather back when he was nice.”

A nostalgic smile appeared on Kurose-san’s face as she narrowed her eyes. There was something heartrending about her expression, and I felt like I had to say something here.

“But hey, I’m glad you don’t have trouble going to our school at least,” I said.

Our school was a private one too, so it must’ve been difficult for her to go there if she was really badly off.

However, Kurose-san gave me a cheerless smile. “The tuition is less than half of what it was at my previous school. And thanks to the assistance system that covers high school tuition, it’s effectively free for us.”

“What, really? I-Is that a thing...?”

My parents never told me anything like that...

As I got flustered, Kurose-san once again gave me a weak smile. “That system only works for schools in your prefecture. Officially, I’m living at my aunt’s place.”

“O-Oh, I see...”

So they’d found a loophole. It felt like I’d just heard something I wasn’t supposed to, which made my heart pound.

Kurose-san gazed at me. “You don’t find it strange, Kashima-kun? Why do you think I chose to transfer to our school?”

After a bit of hesitation, I asked, “To have your revenge on Shirakawa-san?”

Kurose-san smiled. “No.” She then cast her eyes down. “It’s true that I held a grudge against her. She had our dad, our fashionable grandma who’s even a good cook, and a stable livelihood... I’ve taken it out on Runa before: why am I the only one who has to deal with all this? I’ve even changed my surname so many times...”

It pained me to imagine how Runa must’ve felt to hear that. I felt sympathy for both sisters.

“But as for why I transferred to this school... I probably did it to please her.”

“Huh...?”

“She likes surprises. I’m sure you know that, as her boyfriend,” said Kurose-san with a faint smile.

“Ah, yeah.” I nodded.

“I’ve said so many nasty things to her... Told her that I hated her so many times... But I think that, somewhere deep inside, I took advantage of her kindness. I thought she’d still forgive me. That she’d always like me.” Kurose-san looked just a little happy as she spoke. “So I was hopeful. I was sure that Runa would be happy to see me enter her classroom and that she’d go like, ‘Oh, Maria! Hey, everyone, that girl’s my sister!’” Her mimicry of Runa’s voice was still really impressive. She was describing a scene that could’ve easily happened in a parallel universe. “Which is why it was shocking for me. The way Runa looked utterly bewildered when she saw me.”

So that’s how it was...

At the time, I’d had too much of my own stuff going on and couldn’t have spared any attention to Runa’s reaction toward the transfer student.

“Was that why you did what you did?”

Kurose-san nodded at my question. “It was. Now that I think about it, what I did was stupid. Everything that involved her and you, in fact,” she said quietly, looking disheartened and frowning just a little. Then, she lifted her face. “But thanks to that screwup, I’ve stopped faking it like I used to. Everyone hates me anyway, so what’s the point in playing the coquette?”

I’d sensed that, even at the get-together earlier today. Speaking like this to her now, I felt like I understood her real personality even better.

“You see, Kashima-kun, I had an easy time at that all-girls school. Because there were only girls around me. I didn’t need to make guys like me, so for the first time, I could be myself at school. I feel like...little by little, I’m coming back to that now.” Kurose-san then gazed at me with lowered eyebrows. “I’m sorry for a lot of things.”

She’s not a bad girl. Though I’ve had a hunch about that for a while.

Of course she wasn’t. She was Runa’s sister, after all.

“It’s fine; don’t worry about it,” I said.

It was in the past now.

Though at the same time, my ego made me a little bit sad about the fact she’d

completely moved on from me.

“Well then, what do you say we get back to studying?” I suggested.

“Ah, wait a moment. I need to use the bathroom.”

Saying that, Kurose-san took her handkerchief and accessory case out of her bag and started to get up from her seat.

However...

“Wait, is that...?” The light hit a certain object she was holding and made it shine. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. “Is that a moon and a star?” I asked.

I pointed at the zipper pull of her case. The crescent moon and star attached to it looked familiar to me.

“Ah, yeah. I got this from Runa long ago.”

I was taken aback by her words.

“Runa gave me this earring when it was decided that Mom and Dad would get a divorce and we’d be living separately. She said we should wear a piece each once we’re in high school.”

As I listened to her explanation, I clearly remembered where I’d seen it before—it was a lot like the earring Runa had looked for after we’d played airsoft.

“Wait, an earring? But that’s...”

“Yes, I made an accessory out of it,” Kurose-san said casually and without delay. “My ears aren’t pierced. It’s against school rules to wear earrings, you know. I think our school is lax on that front, but it’s not like they’re explicitly allowed, so I couldn’t complain if some teacher took it and reprimanded me. She doesn’t even wear it herself—it stands out too much. Then again, this is Runa we’re talking about. She’s probably forgotten all about it.”

“Uh...”

I stared fixedly at the crescent moon and star design. There was no way I was mistaking it for something else.

“It’s important to you, right? You said you don’t wear it to school ’cause you don’t want it confiscated.”

I recalled what Yamana-san had said.

Runa hadn’t forgotten about it at all. She remembered the earring she’d given to Kurose-san and the promise she’d made. She was taking good care of her piece.

But as I was about to tell that to Kurose-san...

“Hey...” she said bluntly, prompting me to look at her again. She seemed

awkward and her cheeks were a bit flushed. “Can I go now? This has my sanitary stuff in it.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Though I had instinctively apologized, I didn’t actually understand what she was talking about. While Kurose-san was in the bathroom, I did a search on my phone and went red in the face when I realized she was talking about period products.

***

When I returned to my seat in the reading room, I got a LINE message from Sekiya-san.

Sekiya Shugo: You coming today?

Sekiya Shugo: Kurose-san isn't here. It's the perfect opportunity to use the study room.

If Kurose-san was going to continue studying here, then perhaps I could go to Ikebukuro by myself. Knowing that she wasn't coming would let me study in peace.

However, for some reason, I didn't feel like going. I ended up studying across the table from her for about two hours after that.

Before I knew it, it was already five. I hadn't eaten much since lunch, so I was hungry again and figured it was time for me to go home, when...

Without any prior indication, Kurose-san began to put her things away.

"Are you going home, Kashima-kun?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"Me too."

And so, we ended up leaving the library together for no particular reason.

When we stepped outside, it was already starting to get dark. I hadn't noticed it on my way here earlier, but the pond had leaves floating on its surface. They were already starting to turn crimson, giving the scene a bit of an autumn feeling.

"Do you always go home at around this time, Kurose-san?" I asked.

"Yeah, I did when I came here on my way back from school. If it gets any later, I might run into molesters on rush hour trains again."

"Oh... I see." I was flustered to hear something like that so casually.

Molesters, huh. I didn't have the nerve to do something like that. And even if I did, I wouldn't do it. There sure were some wicked people out there.

"It's probably fine today because it's not a weekday...and I have you with me." Kurose-san looked at me and gave me a small smile.

She looked so cute that it made me jittery. I could feel my heartbeat rise a bit.

While it wasn't intended to cover up the guilt I felt over that, I decided to bring up Runa. I wanted to tell her the things I'd missed my chance to say earlier in the cafeteria.

"Shirakawa-san wears that earring," I said.

Kurose-san seemed confused for a split second, but a look of understanding immediately appeared on her face.

"She said she only wears it when she doesn't have school because she doesn't want it confiscated. I didn't see if she wore it today or not, but she did the other day. I was wondering about yours earlier since it looked familiar."

Even though I wasn't being very clear, Kurose-san seemed to have understood what I was getting at.

She looked downcast. "I see... Runa always loved accessories, makeup, and all that stuff," she began quietly, as if talking to herself. "Dad wasn't very happy about that. He always told Mom that she looked best without makeup too. But even Mom didn't stop wearing eyelash extensions and trendy makeup. They're a lot like each other, Mom and Runa."

Kurose-san spoke with a distant look in her partly closed eyes. "I did as Dad told me and didn't wear makeup or do my nails. Because I wanted him to think I was cute." She then bit her lip in frustration. "But the one my dad loved was Runa, not me... It's no wonder. After all, he married Mom because he loved her. So I should've done what my mom did too, just like Runa."

"I'm not sure Shirakawa-san was trying to copy your mom... I think she just liked that sort of thing from the start."

"I know," Kurose-san replied flatly. "That's why it pisses me off..." she added quietly. "I couldn't escape like that."

The word “escape” bothered me and gave me pause. “What do you mean?” I asked.

A sardonic smile appeared on Kurose-san’s face. “You think girls become gyaru because they like the fashion? Sure, maybe some do, but I don’t think that’s true for Runa. At the very least, it didn’t look like that was the only reason to me.”

I waited for her to continue, wondering what she meant.

“We had different personalities from the start, so we didn’t share interests either. But that only became apparent when our parents started talking about divorce when we were in our fifth year of primary school or so.” Kurose-san had a grim look on her face—perhaps she was recalling those days. “To escape my bitter reality, I became absorbed into things like manga and games. It was more comfortable to spend time as someone else...”

The desolate ambience of the evening in Arisugawa Park fit Kurose-san’s tone. It was heart-wrenching.

“Runa, meanwhile, got hooked on gyaru fashion. At one point, she even wore makeup to primary school and Mom got summoned there as a result.”

Really...? I had no idea she’s been a gyaru since primary school...

“I don’t think people see gyaru as delinquents these days, but I’m pretty sure there’s an element of that to it. After all, if she really just liked the fashion style, why not wear that look in secret, on days when she doesn’t have school? Makeup, nails, and dyed hair are all against school rules.”

What Kurose-san said made sense to me, so I didn’t interrupt and went on listening.

“If you break the rules, adults will scold you and start keeping an eye on you, right? Isn’t that stupid? That’s why, I think, Runa actually wanted that.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She wanted teachers to see her. If the teachers called our parents, even said parents would shift their attention to her, right?” Kurose-san gave me a sardonic smile again. “We were scared. Lonely. Our parents fought almost every

day. What if our environment was going to change a great deal? The fear of it was so crushing that we had to find *something* we could do about it."

It pained me to think that all of this had happened to two girls who were only in their fifth year of primary school.

"I looked for salvation in the world of fiction, but Runa tried to fight her solitude and anxiety in the real world. Her becoming a gyaru was a manifestation of that, I think." After saying that in a matter-of-fact tone, Kurose-san got a distant look in her eyes. "Somehow, it felt that way to me."

Perhaps it was something that only Runa's twin sister could've noticed. I recalled the mixed feelings Runa had toward her family, which occasionally cast a shadow on her usually cheerful face.

"While I escaped reality by retreating into myself, Runa tried to fight loneliness on the outside. Maybe she was a bigger adult than me for it." Smiling in self-deprecation, Kurose-san put on a serious look. "Though it's more like... Maybe Runa wanted to become an adult as soon as possible." She then nodded, as though becoming convinced she had it right. "She's an adult...so maybe she'll forgive me. After everything I did..."

"She has," I replied. "After all, Shirakawa-san joined the festival committee and volunteered to work on pamphlets because she wanted to rebuild her relationship with you."

I didn't want to get in the way of Runa's plan, but it seemed safe to tell Kurose-san that much.

Kurose-san looked at me for a moment before hanging her head. "I thought so. She's not suited for that job at all."

"But then..."

Why does she have to be so irritable with Runa? Why not approach her in return, at least a little bit?

I felt like telling Kurose-san that, but before I could, she spoke again.

"But I still haven't forgiven myself. Every day, when I find myself alone...I end up thinking about lots of things."

That was surprising to hear.

“So... I don’t have the courage to get along with Runa yet,” she added weakly, and then hung her head.

“I...see...”

I’d thought Kurose-san still felt animosity toward Runa. That wasn’t the case?

“But I still haven’t forgiven myself. Every day, when I find myself alone...I end up thinking about lots of things.”

These twins really were polar opposites of each other.

“I’m not good at thinking about things.”

Recalling Runa’s words, I strongly felt that way.

I guess their voices really are the only thing they share...

“Ah!” exclaimed Kurose-san at the sight of something.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I see a bubble tea café. It looks really delicious.”

“Huh...?”

Her excited voice raised my heartbeat for a moment.

We had been walking away from the park and toward a subway station. Now, as Kurose-san looked at the sign of a fancy café that was by the roadside, her eyes were sparkling.

“You like bubble tea...?” I asked.

“I do.” After giving me a nod, Kurose-san seemed to give it some thought for a bit, and then stuck her hand in her bag and pulled out her wallet. “Love it, actually. I’ve resolved to keep drinking it even if everyone in the world becomes tired of it.”

“H-Huh...”

My heart was pounding.

Bubble tea had started trending only a few years ago—it must’ve happened when the two sisters were already estranged. And yet they’d both gotten

hooked on the same thing without any awareness of the other.

As I stood there, secretly being deeply moved, Kurose-san disappeared into the café that served bubble tea made with regular milk.

I waited outside for some time, and Kurose-san eventually came out with a plastic cup in her hand. A thick straw was sticking out of it.

“I paid an extra fifty yen to get a larger size.” Kurose-san had the smile of a child who’d secretly done something bad.

“We don’t have much money.”

I’d been worried after she’d said that earlier. Perhaps she thought that way because she compared herself to her well-off friends from School T, but her reality seemed to be different from my mental image of a poor household. I felt relieved.

“Sorry I didn’t get one for you,” said Kurose-san.

“That’s okay. I have a bottle of tea with me.”

We started walking again. This quiet street that ran alongside the park was interspersed with embassies and fancy stores.

“You don’t like bubble tea?” asked Kurose-san.

“I do like it. But I prefer the kind with milk and brown sugar. Like, isn’t the taste pretty bland when it’s just regular milk tea with tapioca pearls?”

Remembering how I’d previously made Runa speechless with my extensive thoughts on bubble tea, I gave only a short summary this time.

“Huh...” Kurose-san uttered indifferently as she sipped her bubble tea with regular milk.

I was glad that I hadn’t given a long speech about it.

Then, Kurose-san released the straw from her mouth. “You must be considering bubble tea a dessert and thinking about how well it works that way.”

“Huh...?”

“It’s not a dessert. It’s a drink, at the end of the day,” continued Kurose-san as

I blinked in confusion. “The tapioca pearls are just something to kill time with. If you drink regular milk tea, once there’s nothing to drink anymore, that’s it. But when there’s boba in it, it lasts for a while. You drink a bit of the milk tea and chew the boba in between like they’re gummies. I think bubble tea became popular with high school girls because it’s the kind of drink you can enjoy for twenty to thirty minutes as you chat with your friends.”

“Makes sense...”

The scales fell from my eyes.

So bubble tea with regular milk is just a drink, and the boba’s there to kill time with. I never looked at it from this perspective.

“You know, it’s interesting to talk to you,” I said.

Talking with Runa raised my pulse, cheered me up, and was fun.

But talking with Kurose-san, on the other hand, was highly interesting because it made me realize new things. Perhaps this was because she was the kind of person who thought about things a lot, just like me.

“Really?” Giving me a surprised look, Kurose-san smiled. “I’ve never had a guy say that to me before.”

For some reason, she looked a little happy.

Thus, the two of us continued heading home together until we reached the main street past the traffic circle outside of Station K.

Kurose-san was the first to stop walking. “Are you continuing this way, Kashima-kun? I’m going that way.”

“Ah, yeah...”

“See you tomorrow.”

As I gave her a light wave, she turned her back toward me and began to walk.

Yeah... I guess this must be how partings go with girls who aren’t your girlfriend. Though it’s a bit anticlimactic after the exciting conversation we just had on the train, recommending gaming YouTubers to each other.

It just felt strange because I'd never had any female friends before. It was no different from being friends with a guy.

Still... Was it really okay to treat her the same as a male friend?

"If it gets any later, I might run into molesters on rush hour trains again."

She'd been casual about it, but she must've hated it when she'd dealt with one of those.

The sky was already completely dark, like it was late at night. We were still in front of the station, so there was plenty of light and people around, but I had no idea if that would last all the way until she reached her place. Trains weren't the only places you could run into a molester or the like.

What if she encountered someone like that after parting with me...? The thought of it made me uneasy, and before I knew it, I was running.

"I-I'll walk you home!"

As I approached her again, Kurose-san looked surprised. She'd walked quite the distance while I'd hesitated, so by the time I'd caught up to her, I was out of breath.

"Huh? You don't have to," she said with an amazed look. She then lowered her eyes. "It won't be fair to Runa if we spend too much time together..."

"But I'm worried about you."

Kurose-san went silent at that. Her cheeks turned red before my eyes and she adjusted her hair to cover her ears as if to hide her embarrassment.

"Okay... Thank you," she replied quietly while looking away from me.

Kurose-san's place was a fifteen-minute walk away.

"Sorry. It's far, right? Usually, I ride a bike to the station, but they said it would rain sometime after noon today," she said apologetically.

It was true that this morning's weather forecast had said it would rain. There had been clouds, for sure, but that seemed to be it for the day.

"We're almost there. It's that building."

Kurose-san pointed at an apartment building seven or eight stories high that was ahead of us and off to the right. We were walking along a narrow street with little pedestrian traffic. There was a small unmanned Shinto shrine in front of us too.

Seeing numerous posters on nearby utility poles and notice boards saying “High rates of bag-snatching in this area!” I shuddered. I was glad I’d decided to walk her home.

“It’s on the second floor here. Thank you,” said Kurose-san at the entrance to the building, trying to lead things to a goodbye.

“I’ve come this far, so I might as well stick around until you get to your apartment,” I said.

We stepped inside the building together. There was no automatic lock on the front door, so anyone could get in. Since I’d spotted those posters outside earlier, I felt safer walking her the rest of the way.

There was only one elevator in the building, and it was on the eighth floor right now. Kurose-san chose to take the stairs instead.

And as we got to the second floor...

“Ah, Maria!”

The voice that I heard made me doubt my ears.

“Runa...!” Kurose-san was surprised too.

There, in the second-floor hallway, was Runa.

That said, I hadn’t seen her myself yet. Kurose-san had gotten there first, while I was still on the stairs behind her with just one foot on the second floor. From where I stood, the wall was in the way of me seeing the whole hallway.

“Runa... Why’re you here?” Kurose-san asked, glancing at me for a moment before looking at her.

“I kept calling the intercom but nobody answered. I don’t have a key, so I can’t get in,” replied Runa.

“Ah, Grandpa is at the hospital right now... I think Grandma will be home at any moment now. It’s about time Mom got back too.”

“Huh? Is Grandpa okay?”

“Yeah. It’s the usual thing.” Giving brief replies, Kurose-san looked at Runa once again. “I asked why you’re here, though.”

“Ah, you see...” began Runa in a slightly reserved tone. “After the get-together, I went to Shin-Okubo with Akari to hang out. But ever since we made croffles at my place the other day, I really got hooked on them, and I had some at Shin-Okubo which were made by pros and those were, like, crazy good, *super* delish. So I got some to-go because I wanted you to try some.”

I could hear a sound like a plastic bag rustling.

“Since, you know, we had the same taste in food and all. So I was sure you’d like them too...”

As Runa spoke, I heard footsteps approaching.

“Eh? W-Wait, Runa...” said Kurose-san.

I could tell she was flustered.

“Huh? Is someone with you?” asked Runa.

Her footsteps came even closer. And then...

“Ryuto...?!”

I ended up running into my girlfriend, whom I’d parted with a few hours ago, and in front of her sister’s home, of all places...

“Ah, yeah, Kashima-kun walked me home,” Kurose-san explained in a bit of a panic. “We ran into each other at a library after that and studied together.”

“A library?” asked Runa, her face clouding over in worry. “Not the study room? The one in that Cram School K at Ikebukuro where Ryuto goes...”

“Huh?” This time, it was Kurose-san’s turn to be surprised. “Kashima-kun, you go to Cram School K too...? And in Ikebukuro...?”

Kurose-san had turned around and was looking at me in disbelief. At the same time, Runa was patiently waiting for me to speak. I didn’t know where to even begin explaining myself.

This couldn’t get any worse...

Looking up above, I cursed fate.

Chapter 3.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“...And so, like, when I ran into my old classmate from middle school, I remembered senpai again.”

“I see...”

“You gotta love it... Why can I run into some random classmate I don’t care about, but not senpai? I don’t think he moved away, and his place should be pretty close, so it wouldn’t be strange if I got to see him somewhere...”

“Yeah...”

“I could tell him, the way I am now... I could ask him to go out with me again. It would be fine if he rejected me. I feel like I’d be able to move on this time.”

“The reason he gave for dumping you three years ago *was* pretty weird.”

“Exactly. ‘I don’t want to hurt you, so let’s break up.’ What’s up with that? Like seriously, what the hell?”

“Yeah...”

“I didn’t want him to hate me, though, so I couldn’t stand my ground. If I threw a tantrum and insisted I didn’t want to break up, he’d probably think I was a pain in the ass.”

“Mm... I know what you mean.”

“It’s not like he said he hated me, so I couldn’t fully give up on him, but I didn’t have it in me to get in touch with him either... Then, at some point, my phone broke and I lost his contact info, so I couldn’t get in touch with him even if I wanted to. I’m so stupid for dragging this out so much.”

“That’s not true...”

“Is something up, Runa? You sound kinda down.”

“Huh? R-Really?”

“Did something happen?”

“Yeah... It did, actually...”

“Something at that get-together?”

“...On my way back, I brought croffles to Maria’s place, and I saw her coming home together with Ryuto.”

“What?! That guy *still* hasn’t learned?!”

“I-It’s not like that. Ryuto said that after the get-together, he went to a nearby library and ran into Maria there. And it got dark, so he walked her home...”

“Huh... Shouldn’t he be more careful after what happened before, though?”

“But we’re all in the pamphlet-making group... And I asked Ryuto to help me with my plan to become friends with Maria.”

“It still bothers you, though, right?”

“Mhm... But it’s not like I’m doubting Ryuto. It’s just...”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t know... I can’t put it into words yet. I’m just worried for some reason.”

“Hey, if there’s *anything* I can do, just let me know. I don’t care if it’s him or her—I’ll beat some sense into them.”

“Aha ha, there’s no need for that! You’re always the one helping me out... Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. There’s nothing you can do to help a girl who’s clinging to a love that’s already over.”

“That’s not...”

Runa looked up at her pen holder with several photo booth stickers on it. She stared at the image of a boy with a bashful smile standing next to a black-haired Nicole, as if to sear his image into her eyes.

Chapter 4

"I *told* you you should've come to the study room," uttered Sekiya-san, sounding amazed.

I'd just finished telling him all about Sunday's events.

Speaking of which...

When Runa and I had ended up alone after everything that had happened, I'd explained to her that I'd simply felt like studying at the library at the time. There, I'd happened upon Kurose-san, and I'd planned to tell Runa about it later. She'd certainly heard me out, but I couldn't tell if she'd been completely satisfied with my explanation. There was no denying that it could've been more natural, considering I'd left out the part about how I'd been running away from Kurose-san at the cram school—that was too pathetic to share.

"You went through so much trouble to avoid her, so why would you go studying at a library together? She probably still has a thing for you, you know. Wanna go for both twins at the same time at this point?"

Sekiya-san was poking fun at me, but I wasn't in the mood. Hanging my head, I drank some peach tea from a plastic bottle. When I'd gone to the study room earlier, he'd noticed that I'd been feeling down and had invited me to the lounge. We were now sitting at a table and having something to drink.

Since Kurose-san had already found out I was here, there was no need for us to go outside for this. And, apparently, Sekiya-san's former underclassmen weren't going to show up on this day of the week. He'd bought my drink for me from a vending machine—perhaps having remembered the promise he'd made.

"I'm not you, so..."

Hearing my snide remark, though it was both belated and weak, Sekiya-san knit his brows, looking upset.

"And what do you know about me?" he asked. "I'll have you know, my first relationship was as pure as they go. It took us a week to get to holding hands,

then another week until our first kiss...”

“But then you went into the harem route, no?”

I heard things about Sekiya-san’s high school days every now and then. While I still didn’t know the whole story, he seemed to have had quite the active love life—enough to become a ronin.

“Grrr...” Sekiya-san went silent after that—my retort seemed to have been effective.

He sure has it nice. Me, I end up feeling guilty before my girlfriend, even though I haven’t really done anything I need to feel bad about.

“You know, I’m surprised your exes haven’t taken a knife to you,” I said.

“Well yeah, I was on top of things.”

“Oh...?”

I wasn’t very sharp, so even if I were to become popular, I doubted I could do a good job fooling around with many different girls.

“To give you a serious answer, though,” Sekiya-san began as I sat there, impressed. “It’s because none of them loved me enough *to* stab me, probably. I only went for girls that I could be casual with.”

Makes sense...

“And besides,” he continued. “When it comes to love, girls always get right over things. The guy they’re currently dating or one they just have their eye on always comes first. Wishy-washy girls who get hung up over some dude they stopped dating forever ago? They only exist in our imaginations.”

“R-Really...?”

His words made me recall what Yamana-san had said when we’d played airsoft.

“It’s so stupid, right? Being hung up on a guy I dated for just two weeks in my second year of middle school.”

“Actually, an acquaintance of mine is like that...” I didn’t know if it was okay for me to call Yamana-san a friend, so I ended up wording it that way. “She

can’t forget her boyfriend from many years ago and can’t move on to new romances because of that,” I said.

Sekiya-san folded his arms, not appearing intrigued. “Is that so? Must’ve been a hell of a guy, then.”

“It sounded like he had a bad case of chuunibyou, actually. He listened to sutras and stuff.”

After a moment’s pause, Sekiya-san said, “Well, that’s a phase everyone goes through.”

“Listening to sutras?!”

“I found it good for raising my concentration before matches.”

“Then... Do you still listen to them to raise your concentration when studying for exams?”

“If I listened to them *now,* it would be like I was trying to become a priest,” he retorted and smiled in self-deprecation. “Man, it’s been a while since I thought about all that stuff. And I’d rather forget it.”

“W-Well, anyway, apparently she liked that in her ex.”

“Huh... Normies.”

Sensing extraordinary irritation in his voice just now, I asked a question that had just popped up in my mind. “Do you have a girlfriend at the moment?”

I figured he’d be more tolerant of other people’s love lives if he did.

“Nah,” replied Sekiya-san, as I’d expected. “There are some girls who get in touch with me every now and then, but that’s it... And, actually, this is really no time for me to have a girlfriend. Ronins aren’t even popular to begin with.”

“Huh...”

“Even *your* girlfriend would dump you if you become a ronin. If you do that and your girl starts living the life in college, she’s gonna join some club, one of her seniors will bang her at the club’s welcoming party, and that’ll be it for you two.”

I went silent at that. If Sekiya-san was speaking from experience, then he had

my sympathy. *But Runa would never,* I started to think (although I didn't know if she was going to college in the first place), but then I considered it further. It would certainly be pathetic if I failed my college entrance exams, and she might become disappointed in me to some degree. I wanted to avoid that.

"Anyway, I suggest you line someone else up in case you get dumped," said Sekiya-san. "It wouldn't be easy to go for her sister..."

"Again, I'm not gonna do something like that..."

"Oh, speak of the devil."

I turned toward where he was looking and saw Kurose-san enter the lounge together with several friends who were wearing sailor uniforms.

I couldn't help putting myself on guard out of habit.

"She's always with girls from that T school," remarked Sekiya-san.

"Huh...?"

"See those sailor uniforms?"

I looked back toward him. "I'm surprised you recognize other schools' uniforms."

"Don't you realize how famous Girls' School T is? Its standard score is on the high side, and lots of cute girls from rich families go there."

"Huh..."

It was famous? Schools like that were part of a world I had no connection to whatsoever, so I hadn't had the slightest idea.

"Ah," Sekiya-san then uttered.

I turned in the direction he was looking. Kurose-san, who was surrounded by other girls, was staring in our direction. It felt like our eyes met and I lowered my head a bit, at which point she gave me a pleasant smile and a light wave.

"Huh, that's kinda nice," said Sekiya-san. "She clearly still has a thing for you, Yamada."

"What?!" I looked at him in panic at his outrageous statement. "You're kidding! I-It would be a problem for me if it was true!"

“A problem? Why? All you gotta do is keep it together.”

“Well, sure, but...”

Why does he only make sound arguments at times like these?!

“Even so...” I continued.

Kurose-san was extremely cute, all right. Sure, the same went for Runa, but they were completely different types. What made things worse was that if we were only talking about looks, I naturally preferred girls like Kurose-san.

If somehow, by some chance, she were to try and seduce me again like she’d done back at that gym storage room...would I still be able to fight off the temptation? I’d come so close to giving into it last time too.

If such a cute girl kept throwing herself at me over and over, did I have the iron will I needed to remain faithful...?

“Could you do it, Sekiya-san?” I asked.

“Eh, nah. I’d totally go for it.”

“Eh...?” I gave him a cold look.

“Look, I know myself well, okay? That’s why I broke up with my first girlfriend,” Sekiya-san explained, seeming rattled. “When I kissed her, I realized I wanted to treasure her. From the bottom of my heart. We’d been in the same club for a whole year, so we knew a lot of things about each other—good *and* bad. It was really comfortable to be with her. Hell, I thought we might even be together our whole lives.”

“But then...”

You should’ve just kept dating her instead of breaking up, I thought.

Sekiya-san then continued. “But when I got to high school and was suddenly popular with sunny beauties, I could tell our relationship wasn’t going to end well. That it’d only be a matter of time before I gave in to temptation and started two-timing or even three-timing. I’d hurt *her* in the worst way possible.”

“So you broke up with her before getting too deeply involved?”

“Exactly. I do feel sorry for her, though.”

Seeing how dull his eyes were, I asked, “Do you regret it?”

Perhaps sensing the attempt at consideration in my tone, Sekiya-san put on a smile that looked forced. “How could I not? I wanted to treasure her forever, even if that thought only visited me once.” He then hung his head a bit. “But I didn’t want to hurt her by cheating or something like that. She was really pure.”

What kind of girl had managed to occupy his heart like this? I kinda wanted to meet her now.

“Still,” Sekiya-san continued quietly as if talking to himself. “If I could relive my life starting with my first year of high school, I definitely wouldn’t break up with her that time.” The serious expression on his face made him look like someone completely different than the typical Sekiya-san who joked around all the time. “There’s really something special about the girl you fall in love with for the first time in your life. You don’t fall for her ‘just because,’ and it’s not a calculated approach based on previous experiences—she’s someone you’re instinctively drawn to.”

His words startled me—in my case, the things he was saying applied to Kurose-san.

“Sure, I got to date lots of cute girls thanks to breaking up with her...but that only made me realize that my first girlfriend was the best. Even though it was too late to do anything about it at that point,” muttered Sekiya-san. He looked more downcast than I’d ever seen him before.

I thought for a moment before saying anything. “Well, why not become a priest, then?” I suggested, since I wanted Sekiya-san to get back to his usual self.

He seemed to get my intent. “I told you I don’t listen to sutras anymore.”

Seeing him force a joking attitude, I could tell he was a good person.

“I’m gonna go wild after I pass those exams,” he said.

“That’s what I’d expect from the Don Juan of our day.”

“You bet!” replied Sekiya-san with a smile. He then quietly added, “What kind of image do you even have of me?”

That question would linger in my ears for a while.

“Don’t go doing something you’ll regret, Yamada,” he said at the end.

***

Perhaps Sekiya-san, who was two years older than me, was me two years into the future.

I didn’t want to have regrets.

My first love was Kurose-san, but the one I was currently dating and wanted to treasure forever was Runa.

She was my number one. I wanted to treasure her—only her.

With that in mind, I did my best not to concern myself with Kurose-san as I went about my daily life.

The middle of October came and the weather improved. Autumn was the best season for doing sports, after all.

Even at our school, a sports day was held one Sunday.

“Runa! You’re so fast!” a girl shouted from our student cheering area set up alongside the track.

Runa, who was participating in a relay race that pitted classes against each other, was running on the track with light steps.

She was athletic and could run fast. Her hair was roughly tied up and it fluttered in the wind behind her as she nimbly moved her long legs that stretched out from under her sports uniform. She was heading to the zone where the next runner was waiting for her.

“Wow! Keep it up, Runa!”

As she ran past my class’s seats, the cheers grew louder.

“Ahh, she passed one!” someone exclaimed as Runa overtook a person from another class who had been running beside her.

“Runa’s amazing!”

“She’s so fast!”

Our class had been in third place, but Runa put us in second as she got to the end.

“That was incredible, Runa!”

When she came back, the girls took turns expressing their gratitude to her. I looked on from a distance as I sat amid my class.

“Man, your girlfriend’s really something,” uttered Icchi, who sat beside me.

“She is...”

Runa was amazing. She was as sunny as they came. And such a girl was my girlfriend... It was strange to think about, late as it might have been.

It wasn’t like I had no athletic ability either. I figured I was either average, or at the very least, just below average. But when it came to second-year students, the really athletic ones could reach the level of professionals. And it didn’t take that much to surpass me—my ability was far from that of people who worked out in sports clubs every day.

That was what made it particularly surprising that Runa was so athletic, despite not being in any clubs just like me.

“Ah, it’s Tanikita-san,” said Icchi all of a sudden.

At some point, the next event in the program had begun at the track. Tanikita-san and some other girls, all dressed as cheerleaders, were dancing to a popular song. It appeared that it was a cheerleading competition.

“Man, Tanikita-san is cute...” uttered Icchi.

“Yeah,” I replied, just to say something appropriate.

That, however, prompted Icchi to give me a fierce look. “Dude, you have Shirakawa-san and you’re still gunning for Tanikita-san?”

“O-Of course not. What’re you talking about?” I said back, flustered.

Icchi looked at me with deep-seated doubt. “You’ve got a criminal record with Kurose-san, after all...”

“Criminal record”? Is he talking about when that photo of us supposedly

embracing each other was making the rounds?

“Man, I told you that was a misunderstanding...”

As I tried to protest, Icchi, who had been looking at the cheerleaders, let out a cry of surprise.

“Hey, Kurose-san is there too.”

Noticing it, I replied, “You’re right.”

Kurose-san was dancing while wearing a cheerleading uniform and a hair ribbon that matched everyone else’s. She had a humble smile on her shapely face.

Besides cheerleading competitions, cheerleaders also had to do stuff for various sporting events, so they had a lot of things to prepare for. That was why students too busy with club activities, as well as those like Runa who were chosen to take part in many sporting competitions, couldn’t become cheerleaders. I remembered how at the long homeroom concerning today’s sports day they hadn’t managed to get enough cheerleaders to meet the quota.

Had Kurose-san applied afterward? Between this and how she’d joined the festival committee, perhaps she was doing her best to fit into the school in whatever ways she could.

Recalling how she’d been when I’d talked to her at the library, along with how she seemed to be enjoying herself at cram school, I started to feel differently about her than before.

Sure, it was hard for me to forgive her for what she’d done to Runa in the past, but I wanted her to find happiness too. She was Runa’s sister, after all.

“Now that I look at it, the girls in our class are pretty hot stuff. Kurose-san’s cute too.”

Having learned my lesson, I didn’t say anything to Icchi this time.

Or perhaps it was because I *couldn’t.*

“Huh, that’s kinda nice. She clearly still has a thing for you, Yamada.”

It was because Sekiya-san had said things like that. If a guy like him who’d been with many girls had said it, perhaps it was true.

“Ryuto!”

Runa’s voice brought me back to my senses. Turning around, I found her right next to me.

“Hey, wanna have lunch together...?” she offered.

“Huh? Y-Yeah?”

It was then that I noticed that the cheerleading competition had already come to an end. There was nobody left on the track. The morning’s events seemed to be over.

“Don’t mind me,” said Icchi beside me, taking his stuff and leaving in a haste.

Seeing him do that, Runa quietly asked me something. “Does Ijichi-kun hate girls?”

Her words surprised me. “Huh?! No... N-Not at all.”

I’m pretty sure he loves them, in fact, I added inside my mind.

“Really? Okay, then. Akari said that when they’re working on festival decorations, she has trouble keeping a conversation going for very long with him. They aren’t really getting along.”

“Ah...”

Icchi, you dumbass! What’re you doing?! Tanikita-san’s even coming to talk to you...

Granted, I understood how he felt. And that made it all the harder for me...

“He’s just shy. It’s not like he means any harm,” I explained.

“Oh, I see. I’ll let Akari know.” After saying that, Runa took the seat Icchi had freed up.

At lunch on sports days, everyone was free to eat where they wanted. Some students went back to the classrooms, and it was also possible to eat together with your family on the blue tarps in the parent fan area.

Just like the student cheering areas, the parent one was set up on the side of the track. Not many of its seats were occupied—by my estimate, fewer than half of all students had brought their families today. I didn’t have much to show off either, so I’d told my parents not to come because it would be awkward. Icchi and Nisshi had done the same—perhaps it was a thing with introverts.

“How could Dad do this to me? He said he had a sudden business trip or

something. And here I was, looking forward to it...”

It appeared that Runa’s father had planned on coming, but something had come up at the last minute.

“Though at least that saved me from having to make his portion... About half of what I made was a mess, so if he’d said he was coming after all, I would’ve been in trouble...”

Saying that with a smile, Runa took a lunch box out of the bag she’d brought with her. The box had two layers in it—it looked large enough to hold food for two or three people.

“Here you go! ≡” she said.

“Whoa!”

Runa had told me ahead of time that she’d make lunch for me, but now that I saw it in person, I was so moved that it felt like tears were on the way.

“Th-Thank you! I’m so...”

Happy...! So this is what they mean by being on cloud nine.

As my grin was starting to escape the confines of my face, I came back to my senses with a start. It would be embarrassing if someone saw me and thought, “Look at this gloomy introvert, getting full of himself just because Shirakawa Runa made lunch for him.”

Each student cheering area only had a large blue tarp spread out there—there were no chairs or anything like that, so everyone sat where they liked. As I looked around us, it seemed that many students had gone inside the school. It was relieving that nobody seemed to mind us as we sat in a wide open space amid our classmates.

“C’mon, open it!” Runa urged me. For some reason, she was sitting in the seiza position, all formal. She’d put the lunch box in front of me and was now pushing it closer to me.

Seeing her like that, I once again thought about how cute she was.

Even in a gym uniform, she was exceptionally beautiful. That headband—blue, as it was our class’s color for the day—tying back her brightly colored

hair... Her ample bosom that filled out her uniform with a name tag attached... The mismatched impression she gave off in a gym uniform seemed to express both the showiness of her looks and her inner purity, which I was highly fond of. Her nails, also painted our class's blue, were shorter than usual, and her earrings were plain and small. I could tell how serious she was, in her own way, about this sports day.

"C'mon, hurry up!"

"O-Okay, here goes..."

At Runa's insistence, I placed my hands on the lid of the lunch box, nostalgically recalling how tragically uneven her omurice had looked when I'd first had her homemade cooking at the Ueno Zoo. And as I opened it...

"Whoa! It looks delicious!" I couldn't help voicing my surprise at the unexpectedly good looks of the lunch.

It wasn't uneven this time. The reason it was split into four different areas was probably because they were tightly packed with side dishes. It was a well-balanced arrangement of classic foods—karaage, tamagoyaki, and octopus sausages, with garnishes in the form of cherry tomatoes, broccoli, and the like.

"Thank you, Runa..." I said, deeply touched, and she smiled happily.

"Ahh, I'm glad it's all even!" It seemed the matter had been on her mind too. "This time, I had my grandma teach me how to make it, and I practiced a bit too."

"Huh... Thank you."

To have *Shirakawa Runa* of all people do something like that for a generic, gloomy guy like me... Recalling how I'd used to feel before we started dating, I felt even more deeply moved.

"But wait, the octopus sausages are pretty crazy. Look," said Runa.

"Hm?"

"Aren't these basically aliens?"

Looking at the octopus sausages at Runa's suggestion, I noticed that their legs weren't spread apart and instead went straight down. Runa picked one up and

held it between her fingers to show it to me.

“They’re kinda gross, right? Sorry...” she said with an exaggerated face like she was about to cry.

I flashed her a manly, magnanimous smile. “Oh, they have long legs? I’m sure they’re just built like runway models.”

“Ah, that makes sense. Maybe I cut them too deep...” Runa said quietly, pouting. Then, she clenched her fists. “I thought I got everything right this time, but I’ll have to give octopus sausages another try!”

Another try! So she’s going to make a boxed lunch for me again at some point...

As I savored the happiness Runa’s words had brought me, she smiled at me.

“C’mon, Ryuto! Eat it already!”

“Oh, sorry. I was just so moved...”

“Hey, it might taste awful, you never know! Don’t go raising the bar like that!”

“Don’t worry—even if it is, I’ll hold my breath and finish it all.”

“What, so you *expect* it to be bad?!”

“N-No I don’t!”

We had that exchange with smiles on our faces and then dug into her lunch. There was no need to hold my breath—Runa’s handmade lunch was just as tasty as it looked.

“Yeah, it’s great!” I said.

“For real? Yay!”

We continued to eat, and as I was digging into the onigiri in the second layer of the lunch box...

All of a sudden, Runa began to stare at my face.

“Ah, Ryuto.”

“Y-Yeah? What?”

“You have seaweed on your face!” she exclaimed with a smile, then extended

her hand toward me.

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

“C’mon!”

My heart skipped a beat when Runa’s fingers touched my lips. After removing the piece of seaweed, she showed it to me, then brought it to her own mouth and put it inside.

“Ehe he.”

When I saw her giggle like a little prankster, my face grew hot.

“Sh-Shirakawa-san!”

Under the clear autumn sky, as I shouted while minding my classmates’ eyes, Runa gave me a cheerful smile and said, “Thanks for the meal!”

***

Runa’s spectacular performance continued even in the afternoon’s contests.

She got first place in the obstacle course and in the girls’ chicken fight. Yamana-san served as the front part of her “horse,” and Runa went on a spree removing her opponents’ hats.

Then, when we got to the scavenger hunt...

As usual, Runa ran down the track with unmatched speed and was the first to pick up the instructions on what she had to borrow from someone. Her face flushed as she read the card.

What does it say?

As this question appeared in my mind, she lifted her head and looked around —it felt like our eyes met. The next thing I knew, she was running across the track straight toward me.

“C’mere, Ryuto!” she shouted at me once she’d come closer. It appeared that I hadn’t imagined that our eyes had met.

M-Me?!

Confused, I got up and headed to the track.

Runa came up to me, took my hand, and we started running together. First, we got to the track, which put us in the area with the instruction cards, and then we headed for the finish line. There seemed to be other students near us who had also procured what their instructions had asked for, and besides Runa, two other girls started running for the finish line at almost the same time. Among the three, Runa had gotten a late start.

“Run with all you’ve got!” said Runa, still holding my hand.

“Okay!”

We hurried, our hands linked.

One of the two girls ahead of us seemed to have been instructed to bring our elderly school principal—we quickly passed those two. That just left the other girl, who was running several meters ahead of us with a red bandana in her hand. If we could pass her too, we’d come in first.

When Runa put her mind to it, she was really fast. I’d thought she was only fast for a girl, but I knew I couldn’t slow down in the slightest or she’d leave me behind.

At that moment, I strongly thought I didn’t want to be left behind by this sports car of a girl who’d become an adult before I had.

I wanted to run together with her.

To keep running into the future.

Never letting her hand go.

Never!

Those thoughts pushed me to keep moving my legs forward, giving it all I had.

“Keep it up! You’re almost there!”

I could hear our classmates’ cheers from our student fan area.

“Runaaa!”

“Kashima-kuuun!”

Even classmates I’d never even spoken to before were shouting my name.

It felt like everybody was rooting for us.

Give it all you've got, Ryuto!

You're almost there. It's just a little farther.

When you overcome this anxiousness, this feeling of guilt, and everything else, I'm sure a happy future with Runa will be waiting.

So...

"You can do it!!!"

With our classmates giving us an extra loud shout of encouragement, Runa and I jumped into first place. Then, we crossed the finish line.

***

"Haah... Haah... We did it, Ryuto," said Runa. She had let go of my hand and now had her hands on her knees. She was looking at me with upturned eyes and a smile. Her short, repeated breaths were sexy.

"Yeah... Congratulations... Sh-Shirakawa-san," I replied, puffing and panting as well.

My breathing wasn't calming down. I felt like I'd gone even more all out than I had during the morning's foot race I'd participated in.

"Ehe he... It's *our* victory," said Runa with a coy smile. "I'm so glad I got to run with you..."

Runa's instruction card had told her to bring along someone she liked. When it had been read aloud after we'd crossed the finish line, teasing shouts had resounded across the sports field.

It still felt like people around us were grinning at us. My face was still hot and my heart was still pounding, but I didn't think it was only because I'd just run with everything I'd had.

"But wait, 'someone you like' didn't necessarily mean in a romantic sense, did it? You could've brought Yamana-san or Tanikita-san, for instance," I said.

Tanikita-san had been at the track as part of the cheerleading team, so bringing her would've let Runa return to the course faster than fetching me. It could've made for an easy victory.

"Huh...? Oh, I guess you're right," said Runa, looking taken aback. It appeared that doing that hadn't occurred to her at all. "It's just, when I saw it say 'someone you like,' your face appeared in my mind..." she continued, looking at me with rosy cheeks. "Before my family or my friends...I thought of you. Before anyone else."

"Shirakawa-san..."

Her words filled me with warmth.

"Hey, Ryuto." Her breathing back to normal, Runa removed her hands from her knees and took a step toward me. "Let's do our best in the pamphlet subcommittee too."

"Ah, yeah..." I sensed a slight shadow falling over Runa's expression, so I wanted to say more. "I'm really sorry about that time in the library... I'll be sure to immediately tell you from now on if I'm with Kurose-san or another girl..."

Runa shook her head. "It's okay, you don't have to go that far. I have faith in you." She took my hand as she said that.

Startled, and minding the eyes of people around us, I timidly gripped her soft hand back.

We're all right. Just look at how much we love each other.

Having faith in that, my grip became strong and firm.

***

After the scavenger hunt, the sports day proceeded without issue. Eventually, it finally came to be time for the last contest—a relay race between different grades.

A team made up of pairs of representatives from each class—a boy and a girl—would go against equivalent teams of students from different grades. Freshmen rarely won this event, but the seniors weren't in their best shape due to studying for college exams, so apparently, second-years had won a lot in

recent years.

Naturally, Runa had been chosen as one of the representatives. It really felt like a waste that she wasn't in the track-and-field club.

I admired her from our student fan area, watching her stand in line with the other participants near the exchange zone, rolling her wrists and ankles to warm up.

She was so cool. Despite how cute she was, right now, Runa looked cool to me. I was proud to have her as my girlfriend—she really was too good for me.

Then, as I watched her in fascination while waiting for the race to start...

"Hey, is that Runa's mom?"

"It's gotta be! I was thinking the same thing! She looks just like her!"

"Huh?!" I looked at the nearby sunny girls from our class whose conversation I'd just overheard.

They had their gazes set on the parent fan area adjacent to the student ones. Scanning the crowd closely, I was taken aback.

Anyone who knew Runa would probably assume this woman was her blood relative—that was how similar they looked. The woman's eyes were fixed on the track.

Her long hair was loosely bound and had been dyed a more subdued color than Runa's dirty blonde. Somewhat large earrings swayed as they hung from her ears. Runa had a sister who was a few years older than her, but the woman in the parent fan area looked to be in her forties, so it was probably safe to assume she was her mother instead.

Perhaps it was because she'd only just arrived, but she was standing alone behind the people sitting on the blue tarp in the parent fan zone. She was gazing at the relay track.

It's my first time seeing Runa's mom...

As I thought that, a startling realization hit me. If she was Runa's mother, she was Kurose-san's too—and those two were living together.

“Hey, let’s go say hi!”

“Yeah, good idea!”

Squealing as they chatted, the sunny girls headed to the parent fan area together.

“Excuse me!”

“Are you Runa’s mom?!”

They spoke up to her in such merry voices that I could clearly hear them even from where I sat without straining my ears.

The woman turned toward them. I got a bit of a shock when I thought our eyes had met, but she was looking at the girls who were talking to her, not me.

“Yes, I am. And Mari—” she began to reply with a smile on her face, but she was cut off by the girls leaping in joy.

“Ahh! I knew it!” said one of them, squealing.

“You’re *so* pretty!”

“How can you look so good at your age?!”

“Hey, that’s rude to her!”

“Really?! I’m sorry! It’s just, you’re so, so beautiful!”

“Is this how Runa will look when she grows up?!”

“It must be nice to stay beautiful forever!”

As the girls chattered with excitement, Runa’s mother watched them with an awkward smile.

“Ah, it’s starting!” one of the girls then called out, noticing the track.

At the same time, a gunshot rang out, and the first runners took off.

Runa was to run second, so she was standing in the baton pass zone. It was on the opposite side of the starting point and closer to our fan area.

“You show them, Runa!”

Runa waved at the girls who were cheering for her, but then, she looked

startled. She must've noticed her mother.

"Runa! Your mother's rooting for you too!"

"Give it your all!"

While the girls shouted enthusiastically to voice their support, Runa's mother waved at her daughter.

"Do your best, Runa!" she shouted.

When Runa saw her, cheer spread through her face. "I will!"

At that point, the first runner reached her. She took the baton and started running herself.

"Runa!"

Her mother was cheering for her. Then, suddenly, the woman looked away from her and waved toward the inner part of the track.

Kurose-san was standing there with the cheerleading team. She was facing away from us and waving a large flag for the runners.

"Maria, you do your best too!"

When they heard Runa's mom shout that, the girls still standing next to her looked surprised.

"Maria...? Are you talking about Kurose-san?"

"You know Kurose-san?"

"Huh...?" Runa's mother looked at them in confusion, but then she seemed to have realized something. "Well, it's a long story."

She stopped calling out to Kurose-san after that.

The small figure waving a large banner around with her back to us looked even frailer in my eyes than usual.

Perhaps owing to her mother's cheering, Runa got ahead of a third-year and took first place before passing the baton to the next runner. While the tables were turned once after that, the last runner on Runa's team retook the lead. This year's relay race ended with a victory for the second-years.

“Mom!” Runa yelled as the runners left the track and she ran at full speed toward her. “I didn’t know you were here!”

“I managed to get some time off this afternoon, so I’ve been watching since the chicken fight. You were amazing, Runa.” Saying that, she placed a hand on Runa’s head. “That’s my girl.”

After patting her head for a bit, she smiled and took Runa’s cheeks in her hands. It was like she was playing with a little girl. In response, Runa blushed and giggled with a happy smile on her face.

Then, Runa looked my way all of a sudden.

“Mom, there’s someone I’d like you to meet...” Then, she beckoned to me. “Ryuto! C’mere!”

Guess this is it, then.

I’d been thinking that I should go introduce myself, but the sudden invitation made my pulse skyrocket.

As I started dragging my feet over to them, Runa happily looked between me and her mother.

“This is my boyfriend, Kashima Ryuto,” she explained.

“I know! I watched the scavenger hunt,” replied her mother with a bashful smile on her face. She was speaking loudly as if to hide her own embarrassment. “It’s so nice to be young. Even I felt awkward watching you two.”

Not knowing what face I should make in front of her, I simply kept bowing over and over.

Runa’s mother gave me a ceremonial smile. “Please take care of my daughter.”

There was something oddly charming about her smiles—they made my heart feel light. It also made me think of Mao-san, who’d taken care of me at that beach hut in summer.

“Oh, n— I mean, yes... I-It’s my pleasure!”

Watching me speak incoherently, the woman gave me another pleasant smile. Runa must've inherited her sunlike warmth and affability from her mother.

At that point, the cheerleading team walked by us.

"Runa," her mother said quietly as she saw them.

"Yeah? What is it, Mom?"

However, her mother then looked around and seemed to have changed her mind, because she shook her head. "It's nothing, never mind."

"Ehh, what is it? Now I'm curious, Mom!" said Runa in a wheedling tone with a smile on her face.

But then, I saw it. Kurose-san, who was walking with the cheerleading team not far away, looked ready to cry at any moment. She sneaked away from the group and walked toward the school building at a brisk pace, alone.

Runa and her mother probably couldn't see her because of the angle. I was the only one who'd spotted it. And because I had, I couldn't leave her alone.

"Ruuunaaa! Let's go to the closing ceremony!" called a sunny girl.

Runa left with her, and I excused myself and parted from her mother too.

Then, I headed to the school building.

***

Kurose-san wasn't in our classroom.

As I wondered where she might've gone, it occurred to me to check the stairs leading to the rooftop. That was where Kurose-san had previously run off to after spreading rumors about Runa and we had our argument in the classroom.

I didn't find her there this time, but the door leading to the rooftop was open. Normally it was closed, but the school photographer had gone up to the roof to take pictures of the sports events from above, so it was open today.

As I'd expected, Kurose-san was on the rooftop. She stood there, clinging to the fence that was twice as tall as she was. Her back was turned toward me as I approached.

“You haven’t told your mom?” I asked. “That you’re keeping your connection to Shirakawa-san a secret from everyone.”

At my words, Kurose-san spun around in apparent surprise. Her eyes were red and wet.

“How could I? It’s so pathetic that I can’t let people know we’re sisters anymore because I did something stupid and nasty,” she said, a sulking look on her face. “She’s supposed to be *my* mom...” Her voice trembled weakly as she spoke. “I showed her the sports day handout and asked if she could come, and that’s why she’s here—to cheer for me. And yet...”

When I’d previously heard Kurose-san’s story, I’d assumed she resented her mother because of her decision to get a divorce from her beloved father. As it turned out, she did still love her mother. Enough to be feeling like this.

“She’s a mother to both of you,” I said. “You and Shirakawa-san. And adding in your older sister—to the three of you.”

However, Kurose-san kept looking down. It didn’t appear that my words got through to her.

“Runa has everything. A father, friends, a boyfriend... But she just has to go and take our mother from me too.”

“That’s not...”

“Why did you come here, Kashima-kun?”

When Kurose-san raised her head, tears ran down from her red eyes.

“Oh, uh... I saw you walking into the building...” I replied, shaken up by the sight of her crying face.

Her expression became stern. “Leave me alone. Like I’ve said before, I don’t need Runa’s boyfriend to console me.”

“B-But...”

“Go already. You don’t even care about me, do you?” Kurose-san said, looking straight at me.

“I *do* care.”

Her eyes trembled at my words. After a moment's pause, she then asked, "Is it because I'm Runa's sister?"

I was quiet for a moment. “There’s that... And we’re teammates.”

“Are you talking about the pamphlet subcommittee?”

“Y-Yeah.” For some reason, I was anxious. “Also, we’re classmates...”

“I like you.”

I went speechless. It was as if her words had struck me down.

“I still like you. So do me a favor and don’t make me fall for you even more.” As Kurose-san continued to cry, there was even anger mixed in with the sorrow on her face. “Isn’t that a problem for you? So go already.”

Seeing that I wasn’t saying anything, she then gave me a ridiculing smile.

I still couldn’t bring myself to leave, however. How could I abandon her when she was so badly hurt...?

She might have been putting on a strong act, but I felt like I knew what she was really like. In truth, she was the kind of girl who deserved to be loved by everyone, just like Runa. I felt pity for her—had things played out just a little differently in the past, she wouldn’t have been left all alone.

If even *I* left her now, just how lonely would she feel?

I felt like I couldn’t do that. As her classmate...and as a human being.

Seeing that I wasn’t going anywhere, tears welled up in Kurose-san’s eyes once again.

“If you don’t go...then I won’t give up on you.” Then, she angrily added, “Are you okay with that?!”

I didn’t have an answer for her. It wasn’t like I wanted to get her hopes up. I didn’t, but...I couldn’t abandon her either.

“I said leave...”

Her face scrunched up. She then broke down into tears, and before I knew it, I was running up to her.

“Kurose-san!”

Since I was in my gym uniform too, I didn’t have a handkerchief or tissues or

anything like that on me. I wanted to give her something to wipe her tears with, but I figured I couldn't simply take off my shirt and give it to her. Instead, I felt around my clothes in a panic, trying to find anything I could.

"Heh heh."

As I looked toward the source of the laugh, I saw that Kurose-san was smiling. Several strands of her black hair were stuck to her tear-stained face. And despite all that, she was beautiful.

"You're too nice, Kashima-kun," she said with a gentle smile as her cheeks turned pink.

When I saw her like that, something occurred to me all of a sudden.

"Kurose-san, um, I, uh..."

"If you don't go...then I won't give up on you. Are you okay with that?!"

She'd said that to me and I was still here anyway. I felt sorry for giving her hope even though I had no plans to leave Runa.

But as I stood there at a loss, not knowing what I should say, Kurose-san flashed me a self-deprecating smile once again.

"I know how you feel, Kashima-kun. Don't go rejecting me over and over." Her face radiated sorrow. Then, all of a sudden, her expression turned serious. "This is a matter of my own feelings," she said resolutely as though making an announcement. "*I* decide who I fall for and who I continue to like. My feelings are mine to do with as I please, wouldn't you agree?" Saying that, Kurose-san smiled at me. "I'll keep liking you as much as I want. That's all." Her smile was like a dignified flower. You could even call it sublime. "That's all there is to it," she added quietly, holding her knees. Her eyes had finally dried.

When Kurose-san brushed the hairs that were stuck to her face away and looked up at the sky, she looked far more beautiful than the girl I'd once fallen in love with.

***

Once the sports day was over, excitement for the festival instantly took over the school.

As the preparations entered the final stages, there was something that needed to be decided at long last.

A woman from the printing office was here in the meeting room with us—the members of the pamphlet subcommittee. “We made two different cover designs reflecting the different ideas we’ve received from you,” she said, taking out two pieces of paper.

We were amateurs when it came to publishing, so we were completely dependent on the printing office when it came to making the actual designs for the pamphlets. Runa and Kurose-san had previously suggested two concepts —“pink and sparkly” and “monotone and refined”—and the two corresponding samples were now in front of our eyes.

“Wow, it’s so cute! Let’s go with this!” exclaimed Runa.

In her hands was a colorful piece of paper. Its surface had glitter over a pink background, and the writing was in a dainty typeface printed with silver foil. There were even butterflies drawn in the corners—a guy would be pretty reluctant to take such a paper in his hands.

“Don’t you only want it because it matches your tastes?” said Kurose-san. “This one would definitely have broader appeal. It’s stylish too.”

She picked up the other piece of paper that had a marble, monotone background and a luxurious feeling to it. It used a somewhat thin Gothic font for the writing, which used golden foil instead. It was a very refined design.

“They’re both wonderful, but we can’t put this off any longer. You must make a decision today,” the teacher overseeing our group told us, looking at the two girls with drastically different opinions.

“Well... If I were in high school, I’d say this one is cute and exciting,” the woman from the printing office began, pointing at Runa’s preferred sample.

“But this isn’t an all-girls school. Considering that the design also needs to appeal to boys and parents, I would definitely choose this one.” The teacher was in favor of Kurose-san’s choice.

It was now two against two.

This is bad... Real bad...

As I started to get anxious, my eyes met those of the teacher.

“What do you think, Kashima-kun? You’re the only one here who can speak for the boys. You should be frank,” she said.

What have things come to...?

“Y-Yes, I guess so...” I replied.

Runa and Kurose-san were looking at me. Both of them were knitting their brows in unease. No wonder—my opinion would probably decide which cover we would be going with.

“Um...” I began.

To be honest, I wanted to support Kurose-san’s design.

But could I say something like that? Things had been awkward since that time I’d run into Runa in front of Kurose-san’s place when I’d walked her home after our encounter at the library. That hadn’t been all that long ago.

No, I can’t. Even if this was just about choosing pamphlet covers, I couldn’t favor Kurose-san.

“Th-The theme for this festival is ‘For the Future’... And a rosy future would...”

Man, this is so hard to say. But somehow, I have to make it sound like I support the flashy pink option.

But as I went about making my argument that was a hell of a stretch...

“That’s enough, Ryuto,” said Runa in a calm voice. She was gazing at me with a melancholic expression. “Tell the truth. I don’t want to make you into a liar.”

Hearing that, I suddenly recalled a conversation we’d once had.

“I hear if a liar puts his hand in this mouth, it’s gonna get bitten off.”

“I guess you’re safe, then. You’re ‘the last man’ and all.”

That had been back at VenusFort.

“So, what will it be, Kashima-kun?” asked the teacher, giving me a dubious look. She wasn’t in charge of any classes in our cohort, so perhaps she didn’t

know about my relationship with Runa.

I couldn't say a word.

Choosing Kurose-san instead of Runa...? It should've been completely out of the question. However... It felt like there was a prayer in the look Runa was giving me.

"I don't want to make you into a liar."

Her voice had been resounding deeply in my ears all this time.

"I..." I began.

Kurose-san was hanging her head, and her shoulders were drooped. Doing my best not to look at her, I continued.

"If I had to carry one of these myself, I...would rather it was monotone..."

For a while, I couldn't look anyone in that room in the face.

I heard Runa let out a long sigh.

***

On our way home that day, Runa and I walked from Station A to her house without saying a word.

With the coming of evening, the sky, which had been overcast since morning, was finally starting to change for the worse. Runa and I both walked with our umbrellas overhead as drizzling rain fell around us like it was the second coming of the rainy season.

I regretted bringing mine. Using separate umbrellas was widening the physical distance between us, which felt like a representation of our current emotional states.

Kurose-san's suggestion had been the winner for the pamphlet cover.

I was too ashamed to face Runa.

With my eyes fixed on the toes of my shoes as rain droplets fell around me with every step, I walked on in silence.

"I've been thinking recently..." began Runa.

I looked at her beside me, but her eyes were on the ground below her feet instead of on me.

“You know... Maria’s a better match for you than me.”

“What’re you—”

As I tried to say something back, Runa finally turned to look at me.

“Isn’t it obvious? You had the same taste in pamphlet covers, and you have more in common with Maria than me. Like those...gameplay videos?”

“I’m sorry about the pamphlets. I wanted to side with you...”

“That’s okay. I wouldn’t be happy if you lied to pick mine.” Neither Runa’s face nor her tone suggested she was angry, but I *could* tell that she was feeling thoroughly sorrowful. “At the beginning, I found you interesting because you were completely different from me.” Then, she looked down. “The more I fall in love with you, the more I realize that we’re nothing alike. It makes me anxious.”

“I...”

“I start wondering if I’m really the right person for you. If I can be with you forever, the way I am now... If you’ll always love me.”

“That...”

Should be obvious, right? I’ve known from the start that we’re different, but I still want to be with you.

However, Runa didn’t wait for me to say anything and continued speaking with contemplation written on her face.

“You yourself might lose interest in me at some point. I’m a gyaru, and I wanna do all the things that gyaru do. All the places I wanna go, all the things I wanna do—none of them interest you at all, right?”

“That’s not true... I like bubble tea...”

“That’s the only thing!” Runa raised her voice as she said that, sounding impatient, but then immediately went back to speaking quietly with a dejected look on her face. “Even Maria likes bubble tea...I’m sure...”

Of course, I should’ve known...

“Since, you know, we had the same taste in food and all. So I was sure you’d like them too...”

I recalled what Runa had said when she’d had croffles for Kurose-san that time we’d run into her when I’d walked Kurose-san home.

As I remained silent, Runa hung her head. “Maybe you’ll be happier going out with Maria instead,” she said quietly.

“Again, what’re you—”

“You liked her back in the day, right? If it wasn’t for me, you might’ve been going out with her now,” said Runa with a frown.

“But that didn’t happen,” I replied. “The reality in front of our eyes is more important than what-ifs.”

“But in reality, Maria’s in front of our eyes now! Every day!” Runa exclaimed loudly, then quickly slumped her shoulders as if having given things more thought. “How can I keep dating you while pretending not to notice that you and Maria are drawn to each other...? I’m not *that* happy-go-lucky.” Then, she looked at me again. “During the sports day’s closing ceremony, you were with Maria, weren’t you?”

For a moment, I couldn’t breathe.

I hadn’t told Runa about what had transpired on the rooftop. Kurose-san had felt alienated after having seen Runa getting along nicely with their mother in front of everyone. The fact I’d followed after Kurose-san to smooth things over felt like I was blaming Runa for her behavior, which was why I’d kept quiet to her about it.

I’d thought there was nobody on the rooftop, but perhaps someone had seen us.

Seeing me hold my breath, Runa put on a stern look. “I knew it.”

Her words gave me a start. It wasn’t like she’d heard it from someone—she’d simply assumed that had been the case because we’d both been missing.

“Um, well... Kurose-san was crying, so...” Now that it had come to this, I had no choice but to explain what’d happened. “Apparently, she asked your mom to

come that day, but when she saw that everyone saw her as only *your* mom, she felt lonely...”

“I know. Of course you were too kind not to go to her.” Runa gave me a smile that looked a little sad, but it quickly disappeared from her face. “I felt sorry for Maria, but I miss my mom too. All the time. Is it that bad for me to cling to my mom on the rare occasion I get to see her?”

I couldn’t reply.

I didn’t blame Runa. Or her mother, naturally. Kurose-san had brought this on herself when she’d acted to spite Runa at the beginning and had made it difficult to reveal herself as her sister.

Still... I couldn’t have let her cry alone back then. Because I’d noticed how lonely she was.

“You understand how people feel, and so you couldn’t leave Maria alone, right?” said Runa as if showing that she understood. Then, she furrowed her eyebrows. “But since you did that with Maria...I can’t let it slide.”

I watched her from the side as she spoke, and she looked startlingly beautiful. I was close to being captivated by her, despite the feeling in the air.

“You’re kind...so I figured I had to say it.”

“Runa, I...”

I didn’t know where to begin. It wasn’t like Runa was blaming me.

“I won’t reach out to you for a while,” she told me.

Her words made pain shoot through my chest.

“I want you to think about...if it’s really a good idea for you to keep going out with me.”

“Wait, I...!”

There was no need for me to think about it. *Runa* was the one who was important to me. I still felt that way.

But she wouldn’t listen to me anymore and instead started running through the rain.

“Runa!”

I tried to give chase, but my legs wouldn’t move. They were stuck because I figured I couldn’t catch up with her.

When she ran with all she had, I knew I couldn’t keep up. And her house was right over there.

As the rain kept falling around me, I dazedly watched Runa’s back grow smaller and smaller.

When I heard her close the front door of her house, I realized that today was our four-month anniversary.

Chapter 4.5: Kurose Maria’s Diary

Kashima-kun’s so unfair.

I thought I could finally forget him. I came so close to all of it just becoming memories. But how can I forget when he’s so kind to me...?

Kashima-kun’s cruel.

He has no plans to choose me. I know that. He’s always looking only at Runa.

But still... When he concerns himself with me like this, even if it’s on a whim, I can’t stay calm. It makes me wonder if there’s a chance that even I could have someone love me.

Runa’s his number one. I know that.

But maybe, just maybe... Could I become his number two?

I’m sure Runa wouldn’t put up with that. If *I* was his number two, I mean. She might step aside instead and pretend like she and Kashima-kun were never an item.

It’s not like I want that to happen... *I* don’t want such an outcome...but my heart does. Deep in my heart, like a flower that blooms in the dark of night, I’m quietly hoping for it to happen.

I can’t do anything about it.

I’ll keep this tiny, bomb-like ambition locked away deep inside...but the fact that it’s there is what makes me feel like I’ll be able to get through another day of solitude.

Chapter 5

Starting that day, Runa stopped messaging me on LINE every morning and every night. Even when I sent her messages myself, they were left unread and ignored.

When we saw each other at pamphlet subcommittee meetings, there was something distant about her attitude.

After several days of that, I couldn't handle it anymore.

At today's meeting, we finally had a full draft of the pamphlet and we were ready to send it to the printer.

"Well then, I'll summon you all again once we have a sample pamphlet to review. Thanks, everyone," said the teacher, at which point we all started getting ready to leave.

Runa left the room ahead of everyone, so I grabbed my bag and stepped out into the hallway to chase after her.

It had been over an hour since the classes had ended, so the only students still at school were those in clubs. The hallway was deserted. I could hear the sound of the school's brass band practicing in the distance.

"Shirakawa-san..."

She didn't turn around even though I'd called her.

"Sh... Runa!"

Runa stopped that time. I approached her in a half run to take my chance.

She slowly turned around. When she looked at me, there was pain in her expression.

"Um, I..." I began.

I wanted her to at least hear me out, but as I tried to get close enough that we could speak quietly...

“Ah!” uttered Runa, and she suddenly reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out her phone.

The screen was lit and vibrating. The only thing displayed on it about the caller was their number, but Runa looked surprised. She pressed the answer button.

“Sorry, I gotta take this, let’s talk another time!” Runa quickly said and then pressed the phone to her ear. “Yes, that’s right... What, right now?!” Turning her back to me, she walked down the hallway in a dignified way. “No, it’s okay. I’m on my way!”

Who was calling her? She was speaking rather politely, so it couldn’t have been a friend. Someone older, maybe? As I wondered if the one calling her was a man or a woman, I noticed that my heart was astir.

It was a call important enough that she had to take it. Normally, I would’ve been able to casually ask her whom it was from.

Runa’s back disappeared, and as I walked down the hallway, I had no choice but to leave the school by myself. I then headed to cram school.

***

Unusually, Sekiya-san wasn’t in the study room today. People who had already graduated high school had classes during the day on weekdays, so if I came here on my way back from school, I was normally pretty much guaranteed to run into him.

Checking my phone, I saw that I’d received a LINE message a few minutes prior.

Sekiya Shugo: One of our teachers held a class at the Shibuya campus today. I just got to Ikebukuro.

Sekiya Shugo: There’s someone I gotta see first, so it’ll be some time before I go to the study room.

“That’s different,” I remarked.

Sekiya-san, somebody who kept running from people he knew, was meeting up with someone?

Ever since Kurose-san had found out I went to this school, Sekiya-san and I had been making a habit of having a snack in the lounge once I arrived and then going to the study room. I'd been planning on doing that today too, so I'd bought a sweet bun at a convenience store. With no other option, I went to the lounge on my own.

I figured that even if Kurose-san was there, she'd be with her friends from School T as usual. But as I opened the lounge door, I found her sitting by the window, all by herself.

Back at our high school, I'd left the meeting room earlier than her, so she must've gotten here first because I'd stopped at a convenience store.

Kurose-san was reading a textbook with a drink nearby.

She's so beautiful, I thought to myself. The plastic bottle of tea in her hand looked more like a teacup on a saucer to me. The biggest difference between her and Runa must've been the air of a refined, high-class lady that Kurose-san had.

Kurose-san still hadn't noticed me. She wasn't sitting directly in front of the entrance, so I pretended not to notice her either and sat next to the door.

However...

"Kashima-kun."

Before I knew it, Kurose-san was standing in front of me just as I'd finished my bun.

"It's not often I see you alone. You're always with that tall friend of yours," she said.

"Ah, yeah..."

My eyes wandered—both because I was shaken up by the fact that she'd called out to me and because it felt awkward to have her refer to Sekiya-san as my friend.

"I-I could say the same for you, Kurose-san," I stammered. "What about your

friends from School T?”

“They’re on an autumn break right now, so they only come to classes here.”

“An autumn break?”

Those schools for girls from rich families have something like that, huh... I’m so jealous.

Kurose-san gave me a small smile. “Ah, yeah. School T has two school terms. I guess it would be more accurate to call it a break after exams? Finals for the first term have just ended.”

“What? Two terms? Does the first one end in October?” I asked in confusion.

Perhaps figuring this conversation would take a bit, Kurose-san pulled up a chair and sat across from me. “Yeah. It’s just a matter of how to divide things up, so pretty much the only difference from our three-term system is that they have an autumn break.”

“Huh... That’s nice.”

“Isn’t it? I love that school... Well, loved.” A shadow fell on Kurose-san’s face. “When I had to leave, I asked Mom to at least let me go to this cram school as a substitute. Many of my friends went to Cram School K, and some of them came to this campus too. It’s cheap to take a stand-alone English course, and I figured it would let me go to the study room every day.”

“You come here every day? That’s amazing,” I said, impressed.

She was still only in her second year of high school. Even I wasn’t here that often.

Kurose-san smiled and hung her head. “There’s nothing amazing about it... I’m just running away.”

“Running? From what?”

She gave me a weak smile. “My grandpa has dementia. He’s had it for years now... My grandma takes care of him, but it must be hard on her...”

“Oh... I see.”

I had no idea. At that point, I recalled that Runa’s maternal grandmother

couldn't take care of Sayo-san—her own mother—which was why she'd asked Mao-san to do it. I hadn't known why she couldn't do it herself, though.

"We left the house when my mom remarried, so we've been away for a few years... When she got divorced again and we came back, Grandpa's symptoms were even worse than before."

The conversation was too serious for me to say anything back naturally, so I wordlessly listened while nodding.

"My mom has to work, so I know I should be at home and helping my grandma...but I don't really want to be in the same room with my grandpa when he's the way he is now... So, before I know it, I just find myself here."

Her words made me realize something.

"Kurose-san, were you here during summer break too? I was taking summer classes here..."

"Really?" she asked, her eyes wide in surprise. "There were a lot of people here then, so I was always in the study room in the annex. I also hung out at my aunt's place sometimes. I barely came to the main building."

"Makes sense..."

No wonder I'd never run into her.

"I get to see my best friends if I come here. And besides...I want to go to college," said Kurose-san with a happy smile. "I can get a scholarship. I want to go to the kind of school my friends from School T would aim for and be on campus with them all again."

"I see..."

I'd had the image of those schools that automatically let their students advance to higher education without having to pass an entrance exam in my head, but School T had a high standard score. It must've been somewhere that prepared its students to get into high-ranking universities as well.

Kurose-san cheerfully went on. "I like manga...so I wanted to become an editor or something. Maybe I could edit a game magazine."

"Oh wow..."

She likes it that much, huh.

“Then...why not become a mangaka yourself?”

Kurose-san smiled a bit at my simple suggestion.

“I don’t think I’m suited to be a creator. When I read manga, I do think things like ‘It would be more fun if the author did this instead,’ but that doesn’t inspire me to draw manga myself.”

“That makes sense...”

I liked watching gameplay videos and giving my impressions on them, but it didn’t make me want to start making any. Maybe this was the same.

Suddenly, Kurose-san gazed at me. “What do *you* want to be, Kashima-kun?”

With her large eyes pointed directly at me, I felt myself getting flustered for no reason.

“I-I don’t know... For now, I’m just planning to go to college.”

“Science? Or humanities?”

“Humanities, I guess... I’m not that good at the sciences.”

“Huh...” Kurose-san seemed to think for a bit. “You’d probably make a good teacher or something.”

“Me? A teacher?” I’d never been told such a thing before.

“Yeah. Since you’re going to college, why not get a job that requires a degree? I think you’d be a good teacher who keeps all of his students’ feelings in mind.”

“I’ve never considered that before,” I replied after a moment. “I thought I’d just work at some company like most people.”

“That would be fine too. Got anywhere specific in mind?”

“Oh, I haven’t really thought about it yet...”

The best company that would hire me for my skills and would pay the best. That had been the extent of my thoughts on the subject.

“Maybe a consulting company or something. You’re kind and all.”

“Consulting...?” I asked, not understanding at all.

“I don’t really know much about it myself, but apparently, it’s where you give your customers advice about their work.”

“Huh...” *Never heard of that before.* “You know a lot about different kinds of companies, don’t you?” I said.

“I looked into it a bit recently. Since I told my mom I wanted to go to college, I thought I should at least explain to her what kind of company I’d like to work at. And so I was thinking it would be nice to work for a publisher,” said Kurose-san, looking a little bashful. “I figured I wouldn’t sound very persuasive if I didn’t look up concrete statistics about hiring rates first to prove that college graduates had an advantage, but it seems like even my mom has noticed differences at work based on a person’s academic background. So, thankfully, she approved more easily than I’d expected.”

“I see...”

My parents had both graduated from college and my older sister was currently going to one too, so it had felt like going to college was a predetermined course to me. I’d never considered that I might have to persuade my parents that it was worth it for my future.

“She’s an adult.”

Kurose-san had said that about Runa the other day. To me, however, the way she was now, Kurose-san herself looked very much like one too.

She was a wonderful woman as well—just a different type from Runa.

Later that day, after having left the study room, I walked toward the train station.

“So teaching or consulting, huh...” I muttered to myself.

This was the first time I had a concrete image of my future. It had been vague in my mind for as long as I could remember.

A teacher could certainly hope for a steady income. And, apparently, being a management consultant was one of the most popular professional aspirations among college students in Tokyo.

I looked it up on my phone as I walked. “Interesting... This looks like it pays well,” I remarked. “I wonder what Runa’s going to do.”

Her postgraduation prospects were still unclear.

“I’ll live in the moment. I’ll live for the sake of living. Just like I’ve done until now. Will you love me despite all that?”

Of course I would. My feelings on the matter hadn’t changed. So I couldn’t ask her too persistently about it.

But...

Now that there was some tension between us, why did I end up having a private conversation with Kurose-san of all people? And to make things worse, I felt that time had been fun and meaningful... A terrible feeling of guilt was now catching up with me.

“Damn it... I blame it on Sekiya-san and School T’s autumn break...”

I knew I was barking up the wrong tree, but I couldn’t help but put the blame on someone else.

I’ll talk to Runa tomorrow. And I’ll make her understand how I feel.

Having made up my mind, I walked resolutely through the crowd and headed to the ticket gate.

***

The following day, when I came to school...

“Kashima-kuuun!”

After passing through the school’s gate, I was heading to the entrance of the building when I heard a clatter of footsteps approaching from behind and someone calling my name. Turning around, I saw it was Tanikita-san.

“I wanted to talk to you for a bit. I’m glad I ran into you here!” After she said that, Tanikita-san looked about restlessly, darting her eyes around. “Okay, Runy isn’t here. Come with me!”

She then led me to the staff parking lot behind the school—the same place where I’d once called Runa to and confessed to her.

“T-Tanikita-san? What’s going—”

“Okay, look. And don’t be shocked when you hear this,” she said, gazing at me with a serious expression on her face. Her large eyes were full of tension. It was scary. “Runy might have a sugar daddy.”

“A sugar...daddy...?”

My tension vanished in an instant. Frankly, I felt relieved at the fact that it did.

I was glad that I could have faith in her. That I was confident she wouldn’t do something like that.

I had no way of knowing what this was about until Tanikita-san explained herself further, but she had a way of doing things at her own pace. She must’ve misunderstood something.

“You’re talking about when girls go on dates with older men and get paid for it, right?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Tanikita-san nodded, still with that serious expression on her face. “I’ve been thinking recently that it’s been a bit weird. Runa had a Gucci bag I’d never seen her with before at that get-together the other day. And when we met up on Saturday last week, she had a Dior tote!”

“Wh-Whaaat...?”

Even I knew those high-level brands. That stuff must’ve been expensive, but still...

“They cost like three hundred thousand yen!” exclaimed Tanikita-san. “They can get even more expensive depending on the collection and size! Isn’t that crazy? There’s no way a high school girl could buy something like that, right?!”

“Y-Yeah...”

I didn’t have any interest in fashion to begin with, so I’d never really looked at the brands of Runa’s belongings.

“Maybe she got it from her grandma, though? I hear she’s fashionable too,” I suggested.

Runa’s grandma on her father’s side lived with her. From what Runa had told

me, her grandma had some pretty modern hobbies—after all, she'd learned hula and had a waffle maker. It wouldn't be strange if she had some brand-name bags too.

"Ehh? But isn't it weird that she'd suddenly start borrowing one brand bag after another recently? Runy always liked more affordable bags up until now."

"R-Really...?"

I was on the ropes here since I'd never talked to Runa about handbags. Tanikita-san was a girl, and she even wanted to go to a technical school to study clothing and accessories. She likely talked about fashion with Runa often.

"Have you asked Shirakawa-san where she got those expensive things?"

"I can't ask her something like that! Wouldn't it sound like I'm jelly? But if Runy went bragging about it, then sure, I'd ask."

I couldn't tell if this was how things worked between girls in general or if it was something specific to the relationship between Runa and Tanikita-san.

"So anyway, it would still be fine if it was *just* bags," she said. "But I saw something else yesterday..."

"What?"

Tanikita-san's tone grew even more strained, so I tensed up too.

"Yesterday I went to a K-pop store in Ikebukuro to sell a VTS hat. On my way back, I saw Runy in front of the train station, and I was going to call out to her...but then I saw she was walking with a man. An *older* man."

"What...?"

Hearing that, I recalled the phone call Runa had received the previous day.

"What, right now?! No, it's okay. I'm on my way!"

So that was who'd called her. It was a man... It appeared that my guess about it being someone older had been on point.

It wasn't like I was convinced she had a sugar daddy or anything, but my pulse was now higher than it'd been a moment ago.

"That man... Was it this guy?" I asked, showing her a photo of Mao-san on my

phone in the faint hope it was him. We'd taken that photo together with Runa when we'd worked at his beach hut over the summer.

Unfortunately for me, Tanikita-san shook her head. "No, it wasn't. It was someone younger than that guy. Maybe more like a college student."

"A college student...as a sugar daddy? Is that even possible?"

At my simple question, Tanikita-san tilted her head. "I dunno. Maybe he works part-time and has some money? Or maybe he's not in college and already works full-time."

Fair enough, I thought. Spending more mental energy on it wouldn't give me any more answers than that.

But seeing a sugar daddy... Would Runa really do something like that...?

It was extremely hard to believe. But still...

"You yourself might lose interest in me at some point. I'm a gyaru, and I wanna do all the things that gyaru do."

I recalled what Runa had said on that rainy day.

"Is having a sugar daddy something that gyaru do?"

"Huh?" Tanikita-san looked at me in wonder. "I guess it depends on the person. Even some prim and proper girls do it, I think... You'd expect to see a lot of gyaru at hostess clubs and other places where women coax guys into giving them money, but I've got no interest in being a hostess or having a sugar daddy."

"I-I see... You're right." That made enough sense to me. "Then what would you say are 'things that gyaru do'?" I asked.

"What's *that* supposed to mean? Doesn't that depend on the person too? Me, I do everything I wanna do."

"Okay..."

"It depends on the person" is certainly a universal truth. It applies to pretty much everything out there.

I was well aware of that. Perhaps the reason I'd asked Tanikita-san anyway

was because I still didn't know Runa all that well. I didn't know what she liked, what she wanted to do, what things she had on her mind... The thought of it made me ashamed.

Still, that man couldn't have been her sugar daddy. That was the one thing I wanted to believe.

"Do you think Runa is the kind of girl who'd have a sugar daddy?" I asked, approaching the matter from a different angle.

Tanikita-san looked taken aback. "Well... I don't know." Her expression was a little awkward. "Runy's a hell of a good girl, but isn't there something about her that just makes you worried? She's, like, reckless... Also, things aren't going well between you two recently, yeah? I heard about it from Nikki. The guys Runy used to date weren't exactly stand-up guys, so if she's unstable because of what's going on with you, maybe she's getting desperate... I think it's possible."

"Makes sense..."

I now understood a little better how Tanikita-san saw Runa. I still wanted to believe Runa wouldn't be seeing a sugar daddy, but I could agree with some things Tanikita-san had said.

"When I told Nikki that Runy might have a sugar daddy, she was all like 'There's no way!' and laughed it off. But I only got to know Runy in our second year here, so...I still don't know her well enough to believe that," said Tanikita-san. She sounded restless like she was making an excuse. Then, she looked up at me. "I hope I'm wrong. But what if I'm not...? It worried me to think about it, so I thought I should let you know."

"I understand." It was up to me how to act on this information. "Thank you for worrying about her."

The worry and discomfort on Tanikita-san's face were replaced with a bit of relief as she heard me say that.

I had mixed feelings on the matter since I knew she'd told me this out of genuinely good intentions.

Honestly, it was shocking.

I didn’t think there was a sugar daddy involved, but regardless of her reasons, it seemed to be a fact that Runa had been walking together with a man that day.

I wanted to find out why as soon as possible to put my mind at ease. Surely it had been someone like her cousin or her older sister’s boyfriend, something like that.

But while I thought that, there was another possibility that felt more realistic than the idea of her having a sugar daddy and it wouldn’t let me calm down in the slightest.

That it was an ex-boyfriend.

Runa had once told me that she would delete her LINE account every time she broke up with a boyfriend. But what if an old boyfriend knew her phone number and still remembered it...? That phone number with no recorded name had appeared on her phone screen that day...and her formal tone... Wouldn’t it explain all that?

Still, what would she talk about with an ex-boyfriend she’d once distanced herself from? Romantic advice...? Had she complained about me, by any chance?

I wanted to ask Runa about it immediately.

But what could I say? Could I go demanding answers from her like “You were with a man, weren’t you?” when I myself hadn’t told her I’d been spending time with Kurose-san?

At the very least, considering our current circumstances, I would only be making our relationship worse by doing that.

As I headed to my classroom, racking my brains on what to do...

“Kasshi!”

Icchi called out to me in the hallway. Nisshi was behind him too.

“Morning...” I said.

However, the two didn't look in the mood for pleasantries.

"What were you talking about with Tanikita-san?" demanded Icchi with a menacing look on his face.

"I saw it, man. You two were whispering in the parking lot," added Nisshi. He looked scary too.

"Oh, it's, uh..." I hesitated in my reply, considering what we'd talked about. "I-It was about Shirakawa-san—"

"You've really changed, Kasshi," said Nisshi, angrily interrupting me. "You're dating Shirakawa-san, but then you went laying your hands on Kurose-san and now Tanikita-san's next?"

"You're not gonna get away with this... Have you thrown away your humanity?! Where's the reason you once had as a human being?!" Icchi brought his face closer to mine, looking ready to get violent at any moment—probably because this involved Tanikita-san.

"Like I said, it was about Shirakawa-san..."

"And what, exactly, were you discussing about Shirakawa-san?"

I couldn't answer that.

"See, you've got nothing! Think before you say shit next time!"

After being told off by Icchi, I bit my lip. My head had been close to bursting even before I'd run into those two, and this encounter certainly wasn't helping.

"Sorry. Leave me alone for a bit..." I said.

I wanted to talk to someone, but Icchi and Nisshi wouldn't listen to what I had to say.

It would just complicate things even further if I brought this to a girl, so I couldn't talk to Yamana-san either. And Kurose-san was out of the question for a lot of reasons.

There was only one person left whom I could share my troubles with.

"Things sure got messy, huh..." said Sekiya-san, folding his arms and groaning

after hearing my story.

We were in the lounge at Cram School K as I'd headed there after my normal high school classes were over. Since the pamphlet subcommittee didn't have any work to do today, I'd headed here as fast as I could and there weren't many people at the lounge yet at this hour. Kurose-san was nowhere to be seen either.

"So, what do *you* want to do, Yamada?" asked Sekiya-san.

"I..." I thought about it as I started to reply. "I want to patch things up with my girlfriend...and ask her about the man she was with."

"Won't it get awkward again if you ask that *after* patching things up with her?"

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Look, for now, you just want to know who he was, right? I can just ask for you," said Sekiya-san with a grin.

"What?! How would you...? Are you planning to meet up with her?!"

"Well yeah, that would be the best option. It'd be suspicious if I asked over the phone."

I went silent again.

I felt just a little conflicted about letting Runa and Sekiya-san meet up. When I noticed that this came from a complex I had toward him—a tall, good-looking guy with a satisfying life (at least before he'd become a ronin)—I started to hate myself a little.

"Okay. Please do," I said, accepting my fate. "But how...?"

"If memory serves, you have a school festival next week, right? Invite me. I actually wanted you to do that anyway—I need a change of pace."

"What?!"

While I was astonished, Sekiya-san proposed his idea, his spirits high. "Then, you just let me know once you find your girlfriend at school. I'll act all dumb and be all like 'Oh hey, ain't ya the girl who was walking with that guy in Ikebukuro

the other day?!’”

“You know, when *you* say that, it sounds like a new pickup line...”

“But if I’m with you, won’t she know that I can be trusted? If her boyfriend’s friend said something like that in front of the boyfriend himself, wouldn’t she be forced to explain?”

“You do have a point...”

It wasn’t the most natural or the most honorable plan, but at the moment, I didn’t have anything better.

“Guess I’ll finally get to see your girlfriend, huh... Looking forward to it,” said Sekiya-san. “Still, if they were in Ikebukuro, maybe I’ve seen them somewhere too...”

While his cheerful and carefree attitude made me a tad uneasy, I looked forward to next week’s school festival.

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The day when the school festival was opened to the public had arrived.

We, the pamphlet subcommittee, had nothing specific to do today. We had checked the samples a week prior and had already turned in the printed brochures to the reception subcommittee. Because of that, we were free until other groups called for our help.

I didn’t keep track of what Runa and Kurose-san were up to today. They were probably either helping other groups or they’d asked for free time and were spending it as they pleased.

Sekiya-san was at cram school during the morning and was planning to come in the afternoon.

After 1 p.m., I was asked to watch the committee HQ tent next to the reception area while the committee head was away. I checked my phone every now and then while watching people walk past. That was because I’d just received a LINE message from Sekiya-san and he’d said he was on his way.

Then...

“Hey, isn’t he kinda hot?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. He looks your type.”

When I heard the freshmen girls in the reception area whispering to each other, I had a hunch about what was going on. Sure enough, when I looked over, I saw that Sekiya-san had arrived.

When he passed by the reception area, he saw me at HQ and walked over to me.

“’Sup!”

Seeing this, almost all the students at both the reception and HQ areas looked at us.

“Huh? They know each other?”

“That’s unexpected... Ah, but wait, isn’t he that second-year girl’s boyfriend? Shirakawa-san’s?”

“Ah, that explains it. Guess a guy with a hot girlfriend would have hot friends too.”

Overhearing the reception girls’ quiet conversation, I felt even more embarrassed.

At that point, another person took my place watching the HQ tent. I had free time now, so I started walking around the school with Sekiya-san.

Wherever we went, I could feel girls’ eyes on us. They all glanced at Sekiya-san and then looked at me with surprise.

Well, this is kinda awkward...

I often felt similar stares directed at me when I was with Runa, but with her, we’d have roughly an equal number of boys and girls looking at us. It was doubly embarrassing to have only girls’ eyes on me. As an introvert, I would never get used to it no matter how many times I experienced it.

We walked around the school, looking for Runa. I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

My relationship with her was still strained. Ever since I’d started suspecting

her of seeing her ex in secret, even I had kinda ended up avoiding her without realizing it.

After we had gotten through summer break, I'd thought I had much more confidence as her boyfriend than when we'd started dating.

But now, there was a reason to suspect Runa's exes were still somewhere in her orbit. And so, my confidence proved fragile and started to waver.

Frankly, I was scared to learn the truth. But I couldn't stand the thought of our relationship just fading into nothingness.

I wanted to clear the bad blood between us. To make Runa understand that I wanted to keep dating her instead of switching my affections to Kurose-san.

And that was why I had to learn the truth about her potentially seeing her ex. With that in mind, I dragged my heavy feet around the school.

Unusually enough, Sekiya-san wasn't very talkative today. His face looked serious and tense—he kept vigilantly looking around as though searching for someone.

"You're kidding me... This uniform, it has to be..." he muttered.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Nah..."

Then...

"Ah, Kashima-kun!"

A petite girl came running our way from across the hallway.

It was Tanikita-san. Even after having said all those things to me before, she still treated me as a fellow member of the festival committee without any particular difference from how things had been. For a guy like me who tended to drag things out, it was a bit overwhelming to deal with someone as candid and straightforward as her.

"Good timing! One of the decorations in the gym peeled off and fell down. I'm so short that I can't reach it, not even with a stepladder. I can't find the boys in our subcommittee right now, so would you mind helping me out?"

“Oh, uh, okay...” I replied.

When I looked at Sekiya-san, wondering what I should do, Tanikita-san looked up at him too.

“Ah...!” she exclaimed.

For a moment, I thought she was captivated by his looks, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Instead, there was astonishment written on her face.

And when I heard what she said next, I froze.

“Kashima-kun, it’s him! He’s the guy who was walking with Runy in Ikebukuro!”

I was at a loss for words.

What? It was Sekiya-san...? What kind of relationship does he have with Runa?

Is he...her ex?

But when I thought about it, it wasn’t all that unthinkable.

Sekiya-san seemed to have had many casual relationships during his time in high school, so if he’d run into Runa somewhere and dated her for a couple of months and then they broke up... He’d apparently fooled around enough to fail his college exams, so I could imagine that he’d two-timed or even three-timed her and then dumped her.

“No way...”

I’d been happy that I had become friends with him. He was a good-looking guy, and yet even an introvert like me found him easy to talk to. He’d looked out for me. I’d looked up to him as someone with more experience in life.

And yet...

Runa had done her best to please her exes, and they’d toyed with her and

hurt her with their infidelity in return.

If Sekiya-san was one of them...

I couldn't forgive him...

"What, seriously?! Is your girlfriend Shirakawa Runa?!"

So he *did* know her. He really was...her ex-boyfriend.

"I've been thinking she might be from this school. The girls' uniforms looked familiar... Kurose-san looks so different in hers that I never considered she went to the same school," he said.

If he really was her ex, his attitude was way too flippant. He didn't even remember the name of his ex-girlfriend's school?

"Sekiya-san... You're such a..." I started. Anger, contempt, and disappointment mixed inside me, causing my shoulders to tremble. "I never wanted to see any of Runa's exes...because I would hate them too much." My fists shook and I fixed my gaze on Sekiya-san. "Why did *you* of all people have to be her ex...?"

At that point, perhaps intimidated by the look on my face, Sekiya-san opened his eyes wide and shook his head.

"What? Hey, it's not like that!" he exclaimed.

"Don't you think it's a little late for that...?"

I'd considered the possibility that the man Runa had met up with that day had been her cousin or her older sister's boyfriend. But if it had been Sekiya-san...then he *must* have been an ex. I couldn't imagine any other possibility that made sense.

"You've got it all wrong, okay? Calm down!" Sekiya-san firmly grabbed my shoulders and looked me in the eye. "Listen closely to me."

I don't want to hear your excuses, I thought, glaring at him.

"Shirakawa Runa isn't my ex."

"Then what—"

“She’s a friend of my ex.”

When I heard him say that, my mind screeched to a halt.

“A friend...of *your* ex...?” I asked.

“If you think I’m lying, ask my ex yourself. I’m sure you know her—she’s at this school.”

“I’m sorry, I really don’t get what you’re saying. What’s your ex’s name...?”

Sekiya-san looked away, then hesitantly answered my question.

“Yamana Nicole. She’s a close friend of Shirakawa Runa’s, no?”

“What...?”

Yamana-san...?

Such an unexpected revelation caused enough chaos in my head that it felt like my brain could freeze like a computer at any second.

“Wait, so *you’re* Yamana-san’s ex...? And, um, you’re the one she dated for just two weeks in her second year of middle school...?”

He nodded. “That’s right.”

“And you listened to sutras...? Huh? You’re that chuuni ex?”

I couldn’t keep from laughing a bit while I said that, and Sekiya-san glared at me a little.

“That’s what I keep telling you,” he said, blushing. He then glanced at Tanikita-san out of the corner of his eye.

Tanikita-san, meanwhile, was looking at us with relief on her face. “So she wasn’t seeing a sugar daddy, then? That’s great!”

“What? A sugar daddy? You two have some really wild imaginations,” said Sekiya-san with a chuckle. He looked between me and Tanikita-san. “It looks like we need to talk, so would you mind getting someone else to help with the decorations?” he asked Tanikita-san, but he let out a noise as he noticed

someone else in the distance. He beckoned that person over. “*That’s* a tall guy. Hey, come over here for a sec.”

The guy he’d called out to timidly approached us. It was...Icchi.

“Wh-What...is it...?” he asked.

“Oh, Ijichi-kun! Good timing!” Tanikita-san said. “Come help me!”

Icchi had been looking at me and Sekiya-san with suspicion, but his eyes immediately began to sparkle when she spoke to him.

“Y-Yeah, s-sure...!” he replied.

As Tanikita-san and Icchi half ran to the gym, they looked like a small animal and a bear running through a forest.

Sekiya-san and I went to a classroom where a freshman class was running a coffee lounge.

Though the afternoon peak hours were over, almost all the seats were taken. Incidentally, the individual classes at my school weren’t required to run anything for the cultural festival. There hadn’t been many students in my class who’d wanted to participate, so our class had ended up sitting it out.

I ordered a random drink and fidgeted as I waited for it. When it arrived, Sekiya-san began to speak.

“The other day... Sunday, was it? I left home and was heading to cram school when a girl I didn’t know stopped me in front of the station. That was Shirakawa Runa.”

I listened to him speak without a word.

“She was so cute and I thought it was my lucky day if she was trying to pick me up, so I heard her out. But then she goes like, ‘I’m a close friend of Yamana Nicole in high school. Nicole still hasn’t forgotten about you. Would you mind meeting up with her once again?’ Apparently, she was on her way to hang out at Yamana’s place, and she called out to me because she’d seen my face in photos.”

I recalled the expression on Runa’s face when Yamana-san had told us about

her past love that time we'd played airsoft.

I thought it was just like her to do something like that. When she was walking through town and happened upon her best friend's ex-boyfriend who she still had feelings for, she must've called out to him on reflex. I could never do something like that, not even for a good friend. If I'd only known his face from photos, I would worry it might be someone else, overthink things, and miss my chance to call out to him.

"That day, I had an interview with the staff about what college I want to go to. I told your girlfriend I needed to go or I'd be late, so she pulled a receipt out of her purse, wrote down her phone number with eyeliner or something, and gave it to me. Said she wanted me to call her when it was convenient for me."

I could see her doing just that. She must've been desperate, for Yamana-san's sake.

I loved her so much.

"Then, for a few days, I forgot all about it, but I remembered it when that receipt fell out while I was sorting through my bag. Her looks were really gyaru, but she was really cute too, so I figured I'd call her just to see her again." Noticing the silent complaint in my eye, Sekiya-san cracked a smile. "Relax. I still didn't know she was your girlfriend, okay?"

"I'm calm."

If stuff like this put me on edge, I wouldn't have been able to be Runa's boyfriend.

Okay, I admit it did make my jealousy flare up a bit.

"So, I met up with her in Ikebukuro," continued Sekiya-san.

That day, Runa had gotten a phone call. I recalled how, after that, Sekiya-san had also been late showing up to the study room.

"Nicole this, Nicole that... She really didn't talk about anything except Yamana. I kept telling her it was all in the past, but she got all heated about it and insisted it wasn't over at all in Yamana's mind. She said if I agreed to see her she'd arrange it, but I didn't and don't feel like it, so we went our separate

ways without reaching an agreement. That's all there was to it."

Having finished his story, Sekiya-san raised his hands as if to prove his innocence.

After thinking it over for a bit, I asked, "Why didn't you want to see Yamana-san?"

I recalled what he'd said when he'd told me about his first girlfriend.

"If I could relive my life starting with my first year of high school, I definitely wouldn't break up with her that time."

He must've still loved her, at least enough to say something like that. So why?

"There's no way I could," he replied. "I dumped her because I wanted to fool around with other girls. After I had my fill of that, I couldn't go back to her and say, 'I should've stayed with you after all.' There's a limit to how selfish a guy can be, you know."

"But..."

Yamana-san still hadn't forgotten her ex Sekiya-san. If they still loved each other, couldn't they start things over?

"I hurt her," he said in a somber voice. "Back in her first year of middle school, Yamana was plain and didn't stand out. She was a quiet girl with black hair. Just like me, she had that evil look in her eye, so she didn't have many friends either," Sekiya-san said, nostalgically narrowing his eyes as he spoke. "But she was caring. If you got her to open her heart to you, she was really devoted. We were both shy, so it took us a while to get on good terms, but she was a good junior and an excellent manager."

Ah, I see now.

She'd stood in line together with Runa to buy those limited-edition phone cases. She'd call Runa over and over so that the latter didn't oversleep. Yamana-san must've been just as considerate back in middle school.

"So we started going out...but after we broke up, Yamana ran wild. I think that was also when her parents fought a lot, after her dad cheated. She told me about it even before we hooked up."

I'd previously heard from Runa that Yamana-san's mother was single now. I guessed that was when she'd gotten a divorce.

"Things calmed down a bit around the time we started dating. It even seemed like they might not get divorced," continued Sekiya-san, as though making excuses. "After she and her mom moved, Yamana dyed her hair blonde, got lots of piercings, and started hanging out with some bad sorts... I hadn't stayed in touch with her, so I was surprised to learn about it from a schoolmate sometime later." After saying that, Sekiya-san clasped his hands on the table. Looking down at them, he then said in a quiet voice, "The truth is, I needed to support her... Wanted to. But instead, I..."

If he loved her so much, he shouldn't have broken up with her. Though I'd said as much to him before. I was sure he thought the same way, so there was no sense in blaming him at this point.

"So you're too ashamed to see Yamana-san now?"

Sekiya-san didn't reply, so I must've hit the nail on the head.

It was so frustrating.

"Just so you know, I've gone all *the way...right through the kissing part."*

Because I'd seen Yamana-san looking just like a maiden in love.

"It's so stupid, right? Being hung up on a guy I dated for just two weeks in my second year of middle school. It's just, he was my first love, so..."

"Sure, I got to date lots of cute girls thanks to breaking up with her...but that only made me realize that my first girlfriend was the best. Even though it was too late to do anything about it at that point."

They both still loved each other. With that in mind...was it too late to start things over?

"Sure, maybe you did hurt her, but..." I began.

Sekiya-san and Yamana-san had been each other's first love and had started dating with pure feelings. And because that love had begun in such a clean way, one might think it was impossible to fix the damage that'd been done.

"If you can forgive yourself for the scars you left her with and your mistakes

that led to it, I think you should be able to move forward," I said.

I...

My first girlfriend already had many scars. Scars that'd been unceremoniously left on the pure Runa by guys who weren't me. She had already been covered in them when I'd started dating her.

I wanted to embrace her, with all of her scars. Because...that was what it meant to love her.

"Especially if the scars she has to live with...were left by you..." I added.

Sekiya-san was looking down, but I could tell he was listening closely to my words.

"I think you should make her happy," I continued as he remained silent. "Like Runa, I want you to meet up with Yamana-san again."

After keeping his silence for a while, Sekiya-san raised his head. "When did you become such an expert on love, Yamada?" Though he spoke in a ridiculing tone, I could tell by his awkwardly twisted lips that he'd taken my words seriously. "Say, what's she like these days, Yamana?" he suddenly asked.

"What do you mean...?"

"Her looks and stuff."

"Her looks? Well..."

I figured a picture would do better than any shoddy explanation I could give, so I scrolled through the photos on my phone. I found the group photo from the time we'd played airsoft, zoomed in on Yamana-san, and showed it to Sekiya-san.

"I knew it; of *course* she's a gyaru. But hey, she looks grown-up now." His gaze looked nostalgic and warm. "Does she still pick fights?"

"Fights...? What kind?" I asked, startled by the alarming word.

"In her third year of middle school, on a bank of the Arakawa River, she apparently beat up twenty delinquents from another school. I heard that from my junior," explained Sekiya-san in a matter-of-fact tone.

“T-Twenty?!”

That’s way too crazy... What the hell are you, Yamana-san?!

“Would that happen to be when she went by ‘Nicole from North Central’...?” I asked.

“Ah, yeah. I stopped hearing about her new nicknames after I graduated, so I didn’t know what high school she went to.” Saying that, Sekiya-san smiled with a bit of a distant look in his eye. “I wonder if she made some good friends in high school. The kind who can support her,” he quietly added. “I guess this Shirakawa Runa is probably like that.” Looking directly at me, he smiled. “You’re good people. A good couple too.”

“Sekiya-san...”

“Make up with her already. I want you two to be happy.”

I didn’t reply.

This was frustrating. Even Sekiya-san could become happy.

“I’m scared,” Sekiya-san then said in a self-deprecating manner with a half smile on his face. “My memories with Yamana are too pure... For a long time, I thought my feelings for my first love had ended long ago. I don’t have the courage to continue all that now.”

“Sekiya-san...”

No matter what I said at this point, I knew that we’d probably just be repeating the same exchange.

But as I was about to sigh out of frustration...

“There you are, Kasshi!”

Hearing a familiar voice, I turned to look at the entrance of the classroom and found Icchi standing there.

“Huh? Icchi? What about the decorations...?”

“That’s over with!” he said. “But listen, I was on my way back from the gym...”

He walked over to me despite the eyes of the people around us being on him. Whatever it was must’ve been serious enough that an introvert like him didn’t

mind standing out.

“I saw some gaudy flirts from another school hitting on Shirakawa-san! You okay with that?!” he asked.

“What...?!” My pulse shot up. “They’re hitting on her...?!”

“Yeah, and on the demon gyaru too. They looked like nasty types—she was turning them down, but they were really giving them a hard time. They were like stalkers.”

What...?!

The next thing I knew, I was on my feet.

“So you’re going?! Yeah, I knew Shirakawa-san was your one and only!”

Icchi sounded happy. Had he really thought I’d wanted to make a move on Tanikita-san? Then again, that didn’t matter right now.

“Sekiya-san, you come too,” I said.

“Huh? Oh, okay...”

Sekiya-san got up as well. I figured the decision to follow me must’ve been easy because he didn’t know who the “demon gyaru” was.

Icchi led us to a different part of the school building.

“They’re over there,” he said.

Sure enough, I saw Runa right where Icchi was pointing.

Standing in a corner of the hallway, she looked to be at her wit’s end. A visibly irritated Yamana-san stood next to her, and in front of them were two guys wearing the uniform from a different school. With their faded blond hair and earrings jingling from their ears, the guys looked about as gaudy as they came.

“Ah...” came from Sekiya-san beside me.

I could tell he was holding his breath. He must’ve noticed Yamana-san.

“Hey, c’mon. What’s the harm, girl?”

“I told you to leave us the fuck alone.”

“Oh, don’t be like that!”

“You’re sooooo cute, I’m gonna die if I can’t get a kiss!”

“Oh yeah? Well just fucking die already.”

“Ah, I *wanted* to hear that!”

“Thanks a bunch!”

Yamana-san was fighting back against the two flirts. They weren’t quite on the same wavelength—it was almost like Yamana-san’s refusals were having the opposite effect on the guys and were inspiring them to tease her more.

“Let’s go, Runa!”

“Okay...”

“Hol’ up!”

“Not so fast! Try getting through this defense, my girl!”

When Runa and Yamana-san tried to get past them, the two guys spread their arms apart and blocked the way, obscenely shaking their hips.

This is awful...

These guys were real scum. The girls seemed unable to escape with them in the way.

Guess I have no choice but to go...

Things were still awkward between Runa and me since we hadn’t talked for a while, and I was afraid of the gaudy guys too, but my desire to help her immediately had won out.

Our classmates were looking on curiously from a distance. I knew this wasn’t the time to get embarrassed about it.

“Runa!” I called out, approaching her.

She opened her eyes wide when she saw me. “Ryuto...!”

I looked back at her. “L-Let’s go...”

Though I was scared of the guys hitting on her and Yamana-san, I offered her my hand. Runa reached out and took it.

“Ehh, for real?! Boyfriend to the rescue?!”

“Well shit, man! So much for that!”

With the two’s instigating complaints behind us, Runa and I held hands as we got out of there.

“Ah, hey...” Flustered, Yamana-san tried to follow Runa, but the guys blocked her way again.

“Not you, girl!”

“You should come hang out with us enough to make up for your friend!”

“What?! Fuck off!”

“Go on, go on!”

Yamana-san was enraged, still unable to shake off the two guys. As I walked away from her, I looked toward Sekiya-san, who was standing among the spectators.

“Nicole...!” Runa cried out as she reluctantly watched her best friend.

Sekiya-san...!

I looked at his face as if sending him a silent prayer.

He turned away from me. His face had a brooding expression on it. But the next thing I knew, he heaved a large sigh, as if he were putting something behind him, and he started moving.

He was headed toward Yamana-san.

With his hands in his pockets and his face looking a little stiff, Sekiya-san stood next to the gaudy flirts bothering Yamana-san.

“Take a hike. She’s my girl.”

At that, the two guys and Yamana-san simultaneously looked at him.

“Huh...?”

“Oh, seriously? Sorry, man...”

The guys parted the way for Sekiya-san, and they suddenly looked like complete wimps. Sekiya-san was tall, handsome, and didn't look like he'd take no for an answer, so unlike when I'd made my appearance, they didn't seem to have the composure to joke around.

Stepping between them, Sekiya-san took Yamana-san's hand.

"C'mon, let's get out of here."

Yamana-san stood with her mouth hanging open, gazing at him with amazement.

"Senpai...?" Her tone was completely different from when she'd hurled abuse at the two flirts a moment ago. Yamana-san now spoke in the feeble voice of a young girl in love. "Why...?"

In the next moment, something glistening appeared in her eyes.

"Sorry I took so long," said Sekiya-san. His smile was a little awkward and bashful.

"Senpai..."

As Sekiya-san pulled her down the hallway by the hand, Yamana-san used her other hand to cover her mouth as she cried.

Runa and I had watched the whole scene from a secluded corner of the hallway, and Sekiya-san brought Yamana-san to where we were.

"Senpai... Why...?" Yamana-san was crying her eyes out as she looked up at him.

The same spectators who'd watched those two guys hit on her and Runa were all around us. They were still staring at us with interest.

Sekiya-san noticed them too. "Hey, come on, don't cry..." he said, looking flustered. "This isn't how you act at school, right?"

"It's just..." Making fists to shield herself from her long nails, Yamana-san wiped her unending tears with her hands.

Seeing her like that, Sekiya-san smiled at her in a fond, loving way. I'd never seen such an expression on his face before.

Then, as Yamana-san continued crying, he embraced her.

“I’ll do this, so stop crying soon, okay?” he whispered in her ear as he cradled and patted her head.

“Senpaaai... Hic...”

The sound of Yamana-san’s muffled sobs made a smile appear on my face by itself.

Thank goodness... I’m happy for you, Yamana-san. Fate let you see the person you’ve always loved again.

As I stood there with those moving thoughts in my mind, I felt a pull on the hem of my uniform. I looked beside me.

Runa was gazing at me with eyes that said something was on her mind. “Let’s give them some space,” she suggested.

“Oh, yeah... You’re right.”

We made our way somewhere a bit away from the two.

“Ryuto, you knew Sekiya-san?” she asked.

“Y-Yeah. We go to the same cram school...”

“I see.”

It had been a while since the last time I’d talked to Runa, and her floral-or-fruity scent made my pulse rise.

“I guess we have you to thank for all this, then,” she said. “You heard what I talked about with Sekiya-san, right?”

“Ah, yeah...”

Though I’d only learned about it a few minutes ago.

“I couldn’t convince Sekiya-san... Thank you, Ryuto.” Runa looked at me with a bashful smile. There seemed to be something glistening in her eyes.

“Runa...”

I had to say it.

I was glad about how things had gone with Yamana-san and Sekiya-san, but

we still hadn't talked about *us.*

But as I was about to open my mouth...

"Well, I don't really get it, but I'm happy for the demon gyaru."

Icchi walked over to us from amid the spectators. For some reason, even *he* had tears in his eyes.

"Man, love is so nice..." Watching Yamana-san and Sekiya-san from a distance, Icchi narrowed his already narrow eyes until they were practically just lines on his face. "You know, I'm thinking of confessing to Tanikita-san."

"Whaaat?!" My shout was about as crazy as the thing I'd just heard.

"I mean, you know what she said when I helped her with the decorations earlier? 'Thanksies! You were a big help, Ijichi-kun!' What do you think she meant by that?"

"What she meant...?" I gave it some thought. "Didn't she just mean 'Thanksies! You were a big help, Ijichi-kun!'...?"

However, it didn't seem like Icchi had really heard me.

"Honestly, I don't think it's hopeless. If I go confess to her now and it turns out the feeling's mutual, we can dance at the bonfire tonight, right? I was just thinking how great that would be."

He was speaking happily, his plump cheeks rosy. I'd never seen him like that before.

"But I'm too afraid to do it alone...so I wanted you two to come with me," he said.

"Huh? 'You two'...?" I asked.

"Me too?!" added Runa in round-eyed wonder. She'd been standing a bit off to the side until that point, fidgeting and looking like she did her best not to hear our conversation. "Are you sure?"

"Y-Yeah... You guys are my ideal... I was hoping I could be like you, and that's why I decided to be brave and confess."

Runa and I wordlessly exchanged glances.

Thus, the two of us somehow ended up going along to see how Icchi's confession would play out.

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"I-I like you! Please go out with me!" Icchi's voice echoed through a classroom with only four people in it.

This was the classroom for class 3-D, and the festival committee was currently using it for storage. Clothes and other things lay disorderly on top of chairs placed on desks as well as on various spots on the floor.

Since Icchi had only just parted with Tanikita-san, he'd known where to find her and he'd called her here.

And then, he'd gone ahead and confessed to her.

Tanikita-san was frozen and had a surprised look on her face. She stared at Icchi with large, wide eyes. Then suddenly, she looked toward the ground.

I figured she was about to reject him. Tanikita-san took a deep breath.

"Ijichi-kun..." she began, appearing to be angry. "Did you know they call that sort of thing 'confession terrorism'?" She rapidly threw one word after another at him as Icchi stood there, frozen. "I still don't even know you well. So what made you think I'd accept?"

"Eh...? Oh, uh..."

"Are you even sure you like me? Why? Since when? What started it? Which part of me? Is it my face? So what, are you asking me to like you just because of your looks too?"

Witnessing Tanikita-san's verbal assault made me start to tremble. I wished she'd go easy on Icchi.

I knew well how he felt. Falling in love with a girl just because she had thanked you for lending her a pencil was the same as getting feelings for a girl who'd said tall guys were hot. That's just how virgins were.

If we had the opportunity to get close to a cute girl, that'd be enough for us to fall in love.

"I believe confessing is what people should do as a final confirmation of their feelings, when they already love each other," she explained. "So I don't think you should go trying your luck when you don't know how the other person feels. Sure, you'll be hurt if you get shot down, but it hurts to reject people too, you know? 'Cause you know you're *definitely* hurting the person in front of you that you have to reject."

Tanikita-san's rejection was more like a lecture. It seemed endless.

"Kashima-kun confessed to Runy because you ordered him to as punishment as part of a game, right? Runy told me about it. She said she was glad it happened because she got to date him as a result, but I was like, 'What the hell?' Ijichi-kun, you take confessions too lightly. Isn't that why you could order someone else to do it so easily?"

"Eh... Uhhh..."

Having turned a sickly pale, Icchi looked nauseated. It appeared that she was giving him such a thorough verbal drubbing that he was becoming physically ill.

"Confessing your love isn't a game. If a gacha has a one-in-ten chance of winning, you can spin it ten times and win once, but if you confess to the same person ten times with the same timing, that doesn't mean it'll go well one of those times. When there's no chance, there's really no chance. It's not even like you can save scum in real life."

Icchi's health had fallen to zero long ago. "Overkill" didn't begin to cover it.

At that point, Tanikita-san bit her lip. "If you actually liked me, I wish you kept quiet right now. If you did and we became good friends, then maybe... Maybe I would've eventually come to know you well and fallen for you too. But you went and confessed now, thinking it wouldn't do any harm, and hurt both yourself and me as a result. Is this what you wanted?"

Icchi couldn't reply. He leaned against the wall limply.

Tanikita-san gave him a stern look. "Isn't it important not to be pushy with your feelings when it comes to love?"

Having said her last piece, Tanikita-san turned toward the door and left.

Silence hung over the classroom for a while. The only people left here were Icchi in a corpse-like state and me and Runa in astonished ones.

After some time had passed, Runa walked up to the dazed Icchi.

“I’m sorry Akari said all that, Ijichi-kun...” She sounded apologetic—perhaps it pained her that her friend had done this. “You know how Akari’s always single even though she’s cute? That’s why guys often confess to her. She always feels down afterward and says something might’ve gone differently if she’d become closer with him first.”

Icchi’s eyes were still vacant, so I couldn’t tell if he was listening or not. “I’m sure you were shocked to hear such awful things, but I think Akari was surprised too... Could you forgive her?”

Maybe Runa was right. But I felt like that was a bit too harsh to say that to Icchi, given his current state.

“Okay. I’ll...go check up on Akari,” said Runa to me, and then she left the room.

Once we were alone together, Icchi, who had been leaning on a wall, slid down to the floor.

“It’s important not to be pushy with your feelings when it comes to love, huh...” he muttered after a while, sounding like he’d taken Tanikita-san’s words very seriously. There was heartbreak written all over his face. “I guess when she says it like that, I only *liked* her and didn’t actually *love* her...”

“Well... I guess so,” I replied.

Just like how I’d been before going out with Runa, most guys in high school probably only wanted a girlfriend to kiss and cuddle and to do all the other stuff with.

“You took a shot at it because you wanted to start dating her as soon as possible, right?” I asked.

“There’s that too... But if I didn’t stand a chance, then I just wanted her to

stop giving me hope. I thought about her every day and my feelings for her grew too much every time I saw her. I couldn't contain them anymore..."

The decoration subcommittee *had* been meeting every day recently. And today would be the end of that. That fact must've pushed Icchi to confess today.

"To be honest, some part of me did think I shouldn't confess right now. But it was my first time falling for a girl in real life so strongly. I couldn't go on without settling things..."

Poor Icchi, I thought, seeing the pensive, melancholic expression on his face.

"It's hard to keep liking a girl when you don't think you stand a chance with her. You'd need to be really deep in love for that. And I couldn't handle it, at least not the way I am now..."

"Icchi..."

Now, it was getting painful, even for me. I was looking for words to console him with, but all of a sudden, the door opened and Nisshi showed up.

"Oh, this is where you were," he said.

Something about him was different from usual too.

"Nisshi? What's—"

"Hey..." he began, interrupting me. "I saw the demon gyaru walking around holding hands with some good-looking guy... What was that about...?"

"Well, it's what it looks like," I replied after a pause.

"Is he her brother or something...?"

"I'm afraid not..."

Nisshi went silent at that.

Ah... Guess he really did have a thing for Yamana-san.

When I saw him go pale and look like he might throw up, my chest hurt once more.

***

“We’ve lost at youth...”

The three of us remained in the classroom for a while after that. Icchi and Nisshi were sprawled out on the floor, looking up at the ceiling with lifeless eyes. I sat on the floor and watched over them.

“Kasshi. You keep things going well with Shirakawa-san. Marry her, have lots of kids, and make up for us loners not contributing to the next generation...” said Icchi.

“C’mon, man, you’re obviously exaggerating...” I replied.

It wasn’t like being rejected once meant he’d be alone for the rest of his life. I sympathized with him, though, able to understand just how badly Tanikita-san’s words had devastated him.

“So anyway,” began Nisshi. “If Kasshi has a beautiful daughter, I could marry __”

“That’s the one thing I *won’t* let happen!” I replied firmly out of concern for my yet-unseen future daughter.

Icchi sighed. “But man, you’re amazing, Kasshi. Seriously.”

“He really is...”

Judging by my friends’ tones, they weren’t being snide or jealous.

“It’s practically a miracle when you fall in love and the other person returns your feelings...”

“But I guess couples around the world are born from miracles like that.”

“Even some generic couple you see walking around out there managed to bring about such a miracle...”

“I really can’t imagine *I* can do it!”

“Me neither... You’re a lucky dog, Kasshi.”

I didn’t reply, but I had to agree. I was still living out the aftermath of a miracle. And yet...

“At the beginning, I found you interesting because you were completely

different from me. The more I fall in love with you, the more I realize that we're nothing alike. It makes me anxious. I start wondering if I'm really the right person for you. If I can be with you forever, the way I am now... If you'll always love me."

Of course I would. I really loved her, even now.

The one I wanted to be together forever with wasn't Kurose-san, but Runa. And I wanted to tell her that again.

"Kasshi...?"

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah... I'll go look for Runa."

Saying that, I left the room.

***

When Tanikita-san had been wiping the floor with Icchi earlier, I'd been thinking about Kurose-san.

"I like you."

"I know how you feel, Kashima-kun. Don't go rejecting me over and over."

"This is a matter of my own feelings."

It wasn't like Kurose-san had asked me to break up with Runa and go out with her instead. At the time, I hadn't understood why, and that part had been left unclear to me...

"Isn't it important not to be pushy with your feelings when it comes to love?"

"It's hard to keep liking a girl when you don't think you stand a chance with her. You'd need to be really deep in love for that."

I thought about it. *If Kurose-san's love for me is that strong... Can I still resist letting myself be swayed by her?*

"All you gotta do is keep it together."

That's right, I realized. *Even if Kurose-san loves me, there won't be any problem as long as I keep it together.*

She's Runa's sister, and that fact is never going to change. If I dare hope to become a family with Runa, that's all the more reason I can't allow myself to have feelings for Kurose-san.

"Okay."

It'll be fine.

Sure, Kurose-san is exactly my type. She's attractive both on the outside and on the inside. We even have similar tastes. But she's Runa's sister.

It'll be fine. I'll never see her as anything more than that again.

If I keep this attitude up, I'm sure even Runa will eventually understand and feel at ease.

So I'll go to her and tell her that.

That I want her to keep going out with me, like before.

"Ah!"

As I walked around the school looking for Runa, I ran into some familiar faces.

"'Sup."

It was Sekiya-san and Yamana-san. Holding hands, they were walking close to each other like a couple of many years.

"So yeah, this is how things ended up," Sekiya-san said, showing me their linked hands with intertwined fingers.

"Thanks for your help with that." Yamana-san bowed a little bashfully to me.

"Sure. I'm glad for you two."

I meant it too. But what was on my mind right now...

"Do you know where I can find Shirakawa-san?" I asked.

“Ah...” began Yamana-san. “She went outside with Akari. Said they have to mess with some stage decorations.”

“Okay. Thanks,” I replied.

The cultural festival was going to end at four, at which point there’d be closing events for students only. After singers and bands who wanted to perform built some hype onstage, everyone would do a folk dance together around a campfire in the schoolyard, and that would be the end of the day’s events.

The clock had been ticking all along, and before I had realized it, it was almost four.

“I’m grateful to you and your girlfriend too, Yamada.”

“Yamada?” asked Yamana-san.

“Speaking of which, how long am I going to be ‘Yamada’ for?”

Kurose-san had found out about me long ago, but somehow, I’d kept missing an opportunity to correct Sekiya-san.

“Huh? I don’t remember your real name, though.”

“What?!”

This guy... I’m amazed he had the nerve to thank me in spite of that.

“I’m kidding,” said Sekiya-san with a smile. “Thanks, Ryuto.”

***

I walked down the stairs as I headed outside, talking to myself.

“I feel sorry for Nisshi, but that guy’s too strong of a rival...”

The difference in attractiveness between Sekiya-san and Nisshi was as overwhelming as the difference between Frieza and Yamcha in combat. Even the demon gyaru Yamana-san had become sweet like a kitten by his side.

It pained me to think about how Nisshi must’ve felt, but I didn’t think there had ever been any chance that Yamana-san would forget about Sekiya-san and consider Nisshi as a love interest in the first place, even if I hadn’t helped bring

her back together with her ex.

“Well, enough of that.”

I should focus on my own problems.

I want to see Runa soon.

With that in mind, I headed to the outdoor stage, but Runa was nowhere to be seen.

“Shirakawa-san? The committee head called her over to the gym.”

“Runa went to help dismantle the reception area.”

“Oh, we already finished that. Shirakawa-san went to get her things.”

Runa had unknowingly given me the slip at every destination. I was like an RPG protagonist forced to go on a wild-goose chase.

“Wait, the room used for storage... That’s...!”

The classroom for class 3-D, where I had just been with Icchi and Nisshi. Meaning, had I stayed there, I would’ve already met up with Runa.

I wasted so much effort...

Looking at the clock, I saw that I’d been walking around in search of her for over thirty minutes.

“Huh?”

However, Runa wasn’t in 3-D either. Icchi and Nisshi seemed to have left already too because I couldn’t see anyone inside. The room was deserted, with the things previously stored inside it gone. The lights were off too.

Suddenly, I realized that the whole building was completely silent. On the other hand, the climax of a performance was happening on the stage outside. The loud music and cheers coming from that area felt like something of another

world.

What am I doing?

Why not just call Runa if I want to see her?

I'm her boyfriend.

I'd acted so rashly that I'd forgotten about modern conveniences. When I took out my phone and pressed the call button, I heard a familiar ringtone playing nearby.

"Huh...?"

I saw Runa's back on the balcony beyond the classroom window. From where I was, she was behind the window frame, so I hadn't noticed her as I'd only paid attention to what was inside the room.

"Ryuto!" she exclaimed, bringing her phone to her ear.

When I opened the door to the balcony, she turned around in surprise.

It seemed like Runa had been watching the closing events. Looking down, the schoolyard stage was easy to see from up here.

"Hey," I greeted her. "No more work today?"

"Nope. You?"

"I'm done too."

As we had this safe conversation, I went up beside Runa and placed my hands on the balcony's handrail.

"This was a good day, thanks to you," said Runa. "My best friend found happiness at last." Watching the stage, she smiled all of a sudden. "I heard the story from Akari. She said sorry for thinking I had a sugar daddy and for telling you that."

"Ah, yeah..."

So Tanikita-san had told her about it. That meant I suddenly had one less thing to explain to Runa.

"Did *you* think I had a sugar daddy?" Runa asked jokingly, her eyes fixed on

me.

“No. I didn’t,” I said, shaking my head.

She smiled at that. “I got the brand-name bags from my grandma. Until recently, she wouldn’t lend them to me no matter how much I asked. But apparently, she read a book about preparing for death and got into decluttering. It was just two bags, though.”

“I see.” So it really was just as I’d thought.

“You know, Nicole hadn’t seen her loved one for over three years...and now they’re finally together again,” said Runa in a quiet and serious voice, looking at the stage. There was a rock act on now. “While I watched Nicole and Sekiya-san together, I realized the sheer stupidity of what I’ve been doing. You told me you wanted to be by my side, and even I wanted that too, but I thought too much about Maria and decided to put distance between us instead.”

Then, she smiled. “We should be together if we love each other, right?” Runa said as though to persuade herself, and then she turned her face toward me. “The only guy I want to be with right now, the only one in the whole world, is you, Ryuto,” she quietly said while bashfully keeping her eyes down. After that, she gazed at me. “I thought I should put that feeling above all else. Life’s short and all.” She grinned as if to hide her embarrassment. “It’s a waste of my youth to distance myself from the guy I love!” she called out, and then her voice disappeared into the autumn sky of the evening.

Sports cars sped for the sake of speeding. Runa lived for the sake of living. That was what drew me to her—that purity of hers. I was charmed by how she lived in the moment, simply trying to find happiness.

“What a waste... There’s a school festival going on, and I couldn’t even see you during it. What I did was so stupid,” Runa said quietly all of a sudden, sounding regretful. “I’m always like this. Doing things at the drop of a hat and then regretting it...”

When I considered what she was referring to, I found it heartrending.

“I wanted to go to a haunted house with you and see lots of other places.”

“Runa...”

I'd wanted to spend the day with her too. Thinking about how we hadn't been able to do so was unbearable.

Unable to contain my emotions, I spoke up. "Let's go to a haunted house next year. I'm sure it'll be there."

"What if it isn't?"

"Then I'll suggest it," I said. "That our class runs a haunted house."

I didn't know if an introvert like me had that kind of courage, but that was how I felt right now.

"Next year, huh..." uttered Runa, seeming a bit happy as she looked up.

The sky was still bright, but the sun was nowhere to be seen. Sunset must've been close.

"If next year doesn't work out, there's always the one after that," I said.

Runa turned to look at me. "You mean we could come as alumni?"

"Yeah." I gave her a deep nod. "I'm sure life can be short or long, depending on how you look at it."

I wasn't a sports car. I couldn't live as lightly as her. But that was precisely why I was attracted to her. The same must've been true for her too. Because we were different, we were drawn to each other. And because we were different, we grew anxious. Back when I'd been alone, I'd never imagined that being so close to someone was so difficult—and so wonderful.

"As long as we're alive, there's always next year. And the one after that...and all that follow," I said.

I wasn't good at talking, but there was a feeling I wanted Runa to understand. Looking her in the eye, I made a strenuous effort to communicate it.

"Because...I think...even in that distant future...we'll still...be together..."

I didn't want her to say things like *that* anymore.

"I want you to think about...if it's really a good idea for you to keep going out with me."

Of course it is. Because I want to be with you.

With that on my mind, I returned Runa’s gaze.

“Okay,” she said, giving me an apologetic smile—perhaps I had gotten through to her.

“I’m sorry, Ryuto.”

“I’m sorry too, for making you worried.”

Sure, a lot of coincidences had happened at the same time, but it was a fact that I had been the one who’d made Runa anxious about Kurose-san.

“I...love you, Runa.” It wasn’t my first time saying this, but it still felt awkward every time. “It will always be...just you, for me.”

I was an introverted virgin, and I couldn’t be smooth about this like Sekiya-san. But I hesitantly extended my hands, put them on Runa’s shoulders...and timidly pulled her toward me.

Showing no resistance, Runa leaned in close to me and buried her face in my chest.

This was our first embrace since that time at the inn in Enoshima.

It was my first time holding her by my own will.

I felt the shape and warmth of her delicate, soft body with the entirety of my own. Her floral-or-fruity scent filled my lungs, raising my pulse. My chest felt tight, and I had a hard time breathing.

“Me too,” said Runa, wrapping her arms around my back. “You’re the first one who made me really feel like I didn’t want to give up...” Then, she looked up and fixed her eyes on me. “Because it’s you.”

As she held me tight, my heart pounded so hard that it felt like my breathing would stop.

Enveloped in her scent, I buried my head in her hair and held her worryingly small shoulders carefully, but firmly.

Chapter 5.5: A Voice Message from Nicole to Runa

Ah, Runa? I’m sending a voice message ’cause you’re not picking up. I really can’t type right now!

This is crazy.

Why?! Isn’t this seriously nuts?! I can’t believe it!

Getting to see senpai again, it’s like a dream!

And he’ll even date me again... Is this a dream?! Tell me it’s not!

I feel like I can die now...

Damn. I’m crying so much my falsies are gonna fall off. I just put them back on earlier.

Senpai left after the main part of the festival. It was a bit early, but I went with him.

I’m in the back room at work right now.

We were walking and holding hands until just a moment ago, but I feel lonely already.

Ah... I wanna see senpai... I’m gonna die from the wait...

Have you two managed to patch things up?

Love is so nice. Seriously.

Let’s make sure we become happy. You and me both.

Let’s be happy.

All of us.

Epilogue

When we heard the door open, Runa and I let go of each other.

“Oh, great, you’re still here.” The one who had shown up was Kurose-san. “Takei-sensei said we should throw a little wrap party for the pamphlet subcommittee in the classroom after the folk dance. She got cola and sweets ready.”

Takei-sensei was the teacher supervising the pamphlet group.

“Huh...? Oh, okay,” I replied.

“Th-Thank you, Maria,” added Runa.

Though we were both flustered, I figured we’d replied naturally enough.

“Oh, you can see the stage and the bonfire from here too,” said Kurose-san, coming over.

Stepping out onto the balcony, she grasped the handrail a bit away from us and looked down.

The song that had just played on the stage seemed to have been the last one, and now the folk dance was about to start.

There was a wooden yagura structure in the center of the schoolyard some distance away from the stage. It was a burning red, but since it was still bright outside, it didn’t stand out. Pairs of boys and girls made a circle around it, holding hands and waiting for the song to start.

“Last year, I wondered why they do a folk dance at the end of all this,” began Runa, her eyes fixed on the waiting students. “But maybe this is fine too. Makes it feel like the festival’s coming to an end.”

“Yeah.”

Just as I’d said that, the song began—the famous “Oklahoma Mixer,” aka “Turkey in the Straw.”

The boys and girls holding hands began to dance, letting go of each other every now and then to move on to a new partner. The scene went on and on.

“That looks nice. I wanted to dance to this tune,” Kurose-san said quietly, looking down at the group.

“What, really?” asked Runa, sounding surprised.

Kurose-san nodded. “Yeah. I went to an all-girls school before, so I’ve never done this folk dance.”

“Then why didn’t you go down there and dance?”

“I was looking for you two to tell you about the wrap party.”

“Oh, that makes sense...” Runa looked a bit uncomfortable, but then her face brightened as if she had thought of something. “Wanna dance? Here, right now.”

“There’s three of us, so we can’t,” Kurose-san replied curtly.

Runa drooped her shoulders. “Okay. Then we could... I guess we won’t make it in time if we go down there now.” Suddenly, Runa looked like an idea had come to her. “All right, I’m gonna go snag someone!”

“What...?!” I exclaimed in surprise.

Shooting me and Kurose-san a look, Runa rushed back into the classroom.

“We can dance if we have another guy with us, right? I’m sure there’s someone around, so I’ll go bring ’em here!” As soon as Runa said that, she dashed into the hallway, leaving us speechless.

There she goes.

Seeing Runa so enthusiastic put a smile on my face.

“That looks nice. I wanted to dance to this tune.”

Runa must’ve been eager to fulfill her sister’s wish. Even though Kurose-san had been cold to her all this time, she had spoken up about it anyway.

Now that our relationship had been repaired, Runa’s Friendship Project would no doubt start going according to plan.

As I thought that, I was surprised to feel a light touch on my right hand.

“Huh...?!” Looking over, I saw that Kurose-san had taken my hand. “K-Kurose-san...?”

My heart pounded at our unexpected proximity.

Kurose-san had her large eyes fixed on me. “Help me practice,” she said and puffed out her cheeks like she was sulking a bit. “You can do that much for me, right? It’s my first time.”

I didn’t know what to say.

O-Okay, so she’s just talking about the folk dance...

Kurose-san held my hand as I remained speechless. She closed the distance between us and assumed the correct stance for dancing to the “Oklahoma Mixer.” As her black hair swayed smoothly, a girly scent filled the air. Unlike Runa’s scent, it was a soapy one.

My heart was pounding. My hand that touched hers felt hot.

It was the same hand I’d put in the Mouth of Truth back then.

“I hear if a liar puts his hand in the mouth, it’ll get bitten off.”

“I guess you’re safe, then. You’re ‘the last man’ and all.”

What had I vowed back then? One day, when Runa and I would go to Italy, would I be brave enough to put this hand into the real Mouth of Truth?

The “Oklahoma Mixer” was still playing at the schoolyard.

I started my clumsy dance with Kurose-san.

I loved Runa. I wanted to be with her forever. These feelings were unwavering.

But...

I didn’t have the courage to shake off this fair, delicate hand. I couldn’t steel my heart to stop it from pounding so much either.

At least not the way I was now.

Afterword

This is volume 3. Just like how Ryuto smashed Runa's "two-month barrier" (she kept breaking up with her boyfriends within two months), this work smashed down my own "two-volume barrier."

This is all thanks to all of you who support me... Thank you so much.

Of course, I wanted to release a third volume, but I didn't want to get my hopes too high. When it was decided that volume 3 would actually be published, I panicked a little bit, but I was overwhelmed with emotion that I'd be able to return to the world of this story.

Once again, I had to educate myself on the youth I'd never experienced. I've never done that folk dance! What's an "airsoft"? There weren't any boys at my school! I'm gonna go to a coed school...in my next life.

Anyway, volume 3 made Maria a deeper character, which I'm glad about, as the author. I love Maria too, so... And I even love Icchi and Nisshi.

I was worried that the *Dragon Ball* comparison in this volume wouldn't work for today's teens, so at one point I considered going for something else, but I couldn't come up with any others that were from something currently popular and that people in a variety of age groups would understand. I figured that since it's a legendary work and many young people are probably familiar with it, I'd stick with the option that basically shouted, "The author's not young anymore!" Sorry, kids. You didn't get it? You've still got a lot to learn, then.

As usual, I'm thoroughly indebted to my illustrator magako-sama. Akari is extremely *Akari*—I was moved and astonished when I saw her design. Thank you for always enriching the world of my work with your wonderful illustrations!

I'm always grateful to my editor Matsubayashi-sama too. I appreciate your support in bringing the work closer to perfection, but thank you for thinking about promotional materials too, like videos! If you haven't seen them yet, try

searching online!

Also, the September issue of *Dragon Magazine* includes an “Episode 0” which shows Ryuto and Maria in middle school. Please give that one a read too.

And on top of that, the audiobook of the first volume will be available online on September 30!

Well then, let us meet again in volume 4!

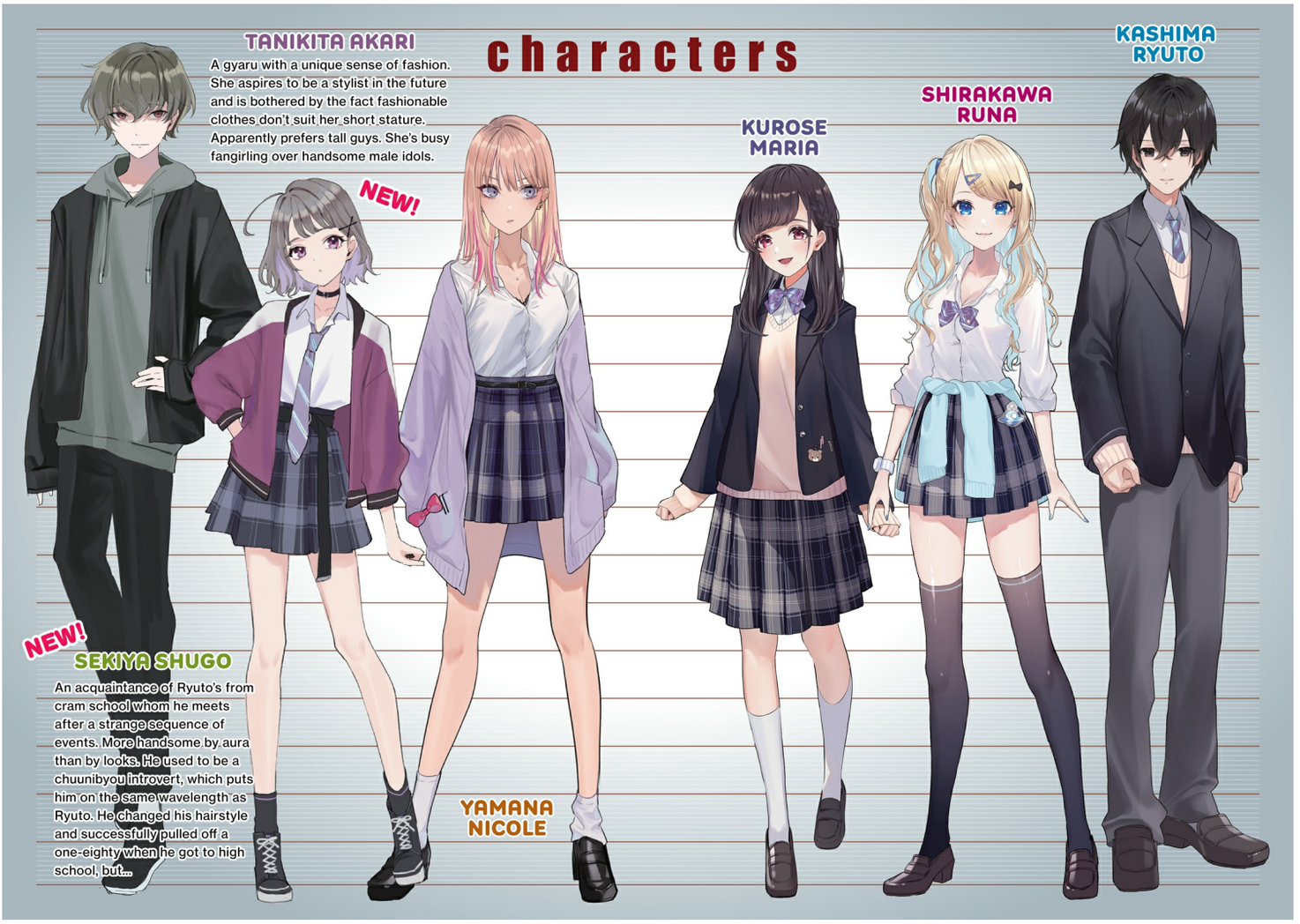
August 2021, Makiko Nagaoka

3rd Date
You Were Experienced, I Was Not:
OUR DATING STORY

This is bad...
Really bad...

We should be together
if we love each other, right?

characters


TANIKITA AKARI
A gyaru with a unique sense of fashion. She aspires to be a stylist in the future and is bothered by the fact fashionable clothes don't suit her short stature. Apparently prefers tall guys. She's busy fangirling over handsome male idols.
NEW!
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SEKIYA SHUGO
An acquaintance of Ryuto's from cram school whom he meets after a strange sequence of events. More handsome by aura than by looks. He used to be a chuunibyou introvert, which puts him on the same wavelength as Ryuto. He changed his hairstyle and successfully pulled off a one-eighty when he got to high school, but...
YAMANA NICOLE
KUROSE MARIA
SHIRAKAWA RUNA
KASHIMA RYUTO

“Run with all you’ve got!”

3rd Date

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OUR DATING STORY

Makiko Nagaoka

Artist / magako

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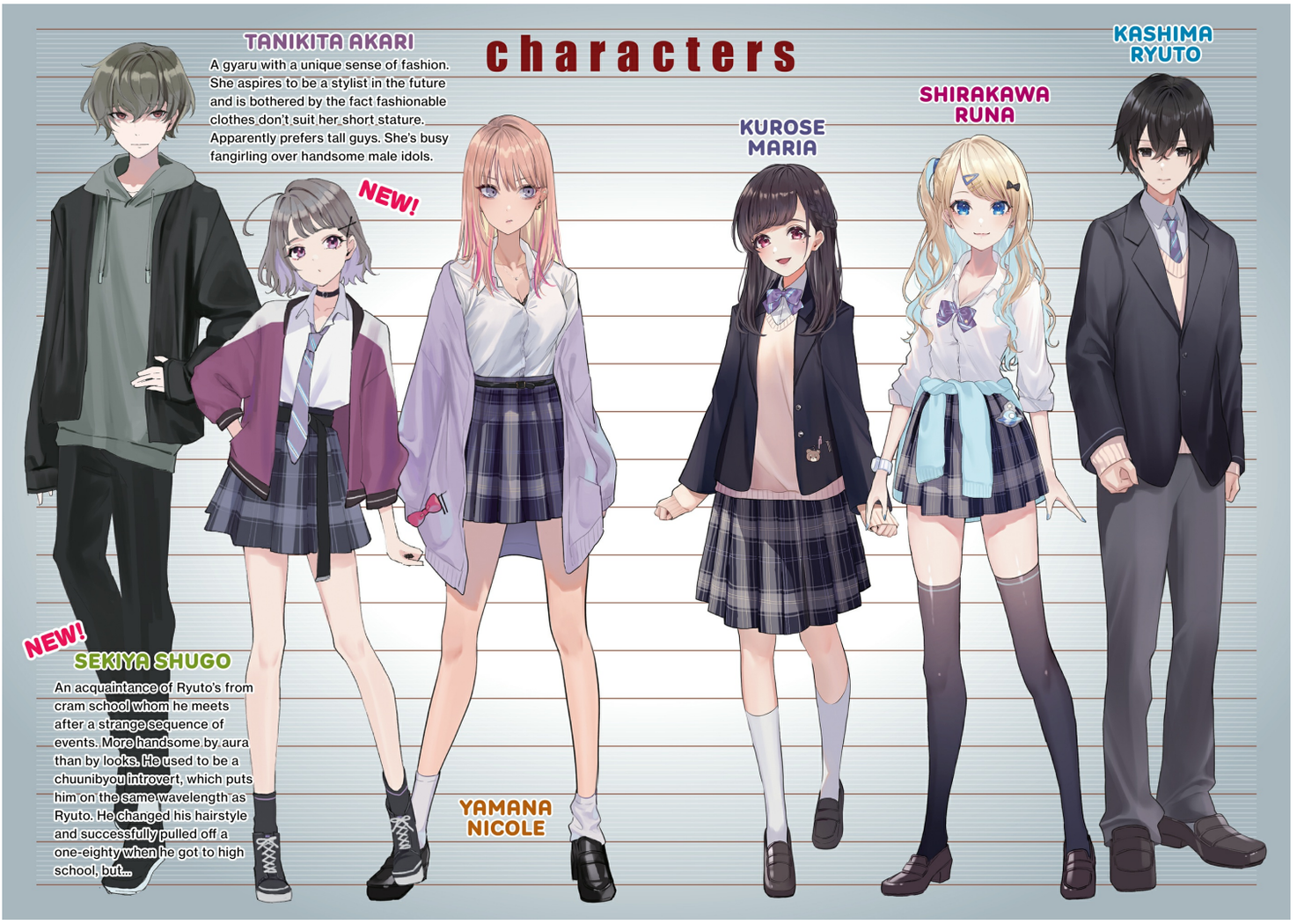

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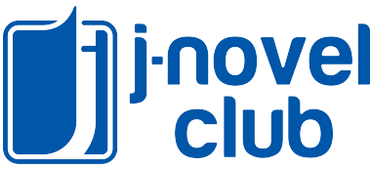
An acquaintance of Ryuto's from cram school whom he meets after a strange sequence of events. More handsome by aura than by looks. He used to be a chuunibyou introvert, which puts him on the same wavelength as Ryuto. He changed his hairstyle and successfully pulled off a one-eighty when he got to high school, but...

“Run with all you’ve got!”



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You Were Experienced, I Was Not: Our Dating Story 3rd Date by Makiko Nagaoka

Translated by Adam Edited by T. Burke

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KEIKEN ZUMI NA KIMI TO, KEIKEN ZERO NA ORE GA, OTSUKIAI SURU HANASHI. Vol. 3

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