

6th
Date

You Were
Experienced,

I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko
Nagaoka

Artist / magako



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Prologue

“I hear the whole thing about giving the second button of your uniform to someone you like at graduation has to do with it being the closest one to your heart.”

I could clearly remember Runa saying that with a smile even now, as though it had been yesterday.

“I’ll give you this, though!”

Runa had given me her uniform ribbon with an awkward smile on her face. I’d kept it in a drawer of my desk in my room ever since then.

“It’s not washed, though, so it would be pretty embarrassing if it smells funny! Let me spray some perfume on it!”

Smiling cheerfully as if to hide her awkwardness, she’d taken off her ribbon and sprayed perfume on it a few times. That was my last memory of Runa in her school uniform.

That floral-or-fruity scent had permeated the ribbon so thoroughly it could make you choke. Even now, whenever I opened the drawer where I kept it, I could still faintly smell it.

The scent made me remember those days—back then, I’d been hopelessly inexperienced and had been holding my hands out toward the sky, yearning for what had been out of my reach no matter how much I tried.

“Will you give me something too?” Runa had asked me with upturned eyes. When I’d nodded, she’d reached out for my tie. “Hey, it feels like we’re husband and wife.” She’d smiled embarrassedly at that.

“Untying it makes you feel that way? Not the other way around?” I’d asked.

“Huh? I kinda wanted to do that kind of thing when you come home from work... You don’t want that?”

“It *would* make me happy...but probably also a bit horny.”

Runa had blushed at that. “Jeez, you’re such a pervert,” she’d said quietly, pushing on my chest in apparent embarrassment.

The warmth of her hands had felt like it’d passed right through my clothes and my skin and reached my heart directly. The heart that was still hopelessly captivated with Runa.

Even though it had already been almost two years since that day.



Chapter 1

Beep-beep-beep-beep... Beep-beep-beep-beep...

My phone alarm went off next to my ear—the sound hung in the cold morning air. “Ngh...”

Taking my phone in my hand, I turned the alarm off while being careful not to touch the snooze button instead. The clock read seven in the morning.

“Phew...”

It would’ve been bad if I were to go back to sleep now. Motivating myself, I opened my eyes.

Bright light slipped through the gaps between the curtains of the window above my head. It seemed like today’s weather was good.

I got dressed, then rechecked the contents of my backpack, which I’d filled the night before.

“That’s everything I need for my four classes today...”

I’d use my daypack today since I needed quite a lot of textbooks. Black and shaped like a box, this daypack *did* look worn compared to when it had been new, but I still used it a lot. It had taken me through my cram school days and college exam season.

“All right...” Putting it on my back, I went to the entrance of the apartment and called out. “I’m off!”

My mother peeked out from the living room. “Take care,” she said.

Giving her a glance, I put my shoes on and stepped outside.

“So cold...” I let out inadvertently.

The morning air outside was chilly enough to bite at the few exposed parts of my body, namely my ears and forehead. I could also feel how cold my eyelashes

were whenever I blinked.

I stuck my hands in the pockets of my coat and was happy to put on the gloves I'd had stowed in there. I'd gotten them for Christmas from my girlfriend a year ago. They weren't handmade, of course, but they were great—not only were they warm, but I could also use my phone with them on.

As I got closer to the train station, the foot traffic grew heavier. By the time I passed through the ticket gates, it was crowded enough that my sleeves brushed against other people's.

Trains departing from Station K at this hour were crowded as hell, even after those who'd just arrived had stepped off and onto the platform. Lots of the people still inside would get off at the nearby Station A, so I only had to put up with it until the next stop, but this was what made things so depressing when I had a first-period class on any given day.

I boarded the first car. I got pushed next to the door on the other side and leaned on it, pressing my face against the cold window. Unable to use my phone in this situation, I could only stare vacantly at the outside scenery.

This was the second winter since I'd gotten into college. At this time of year, it felt like the trains were one and a half times more packed than they were in the summer because of the thick coats everyone was wearing.

The bone-chilling cold I'd felt earlier was now replaced with intense heat and humidity. It always made me regret wearing a coat, but I couldn't exactly dress lightly just because of this brief crowded train ride.

Before I knew it, the train approached a riverbank and went over an overpass. My eyes were drawn to the lines of cherry blossom trees that appeared before me. Being winter, there wasn't a single leaf on them. Instead, they were tinged a melancholic brown.

Recalling the happy smile Runa had worn that day amid those trees, I felt my chest tighten. My feelings were the same today as they'd been back then.

When the train left Station A, I could finally stand properly without being crushed by others. Luckily, I found an empty seat. It wasn't a priority seat either, so I could relax for a while.

I checked the messages on my phone.

Morning!

I'll be really busy this month, but I'm gonna do my best!

That was the message my girlfriend had sent me yesterday morning.

Ryuto: How was your day?

Ryuto: Good night.

Ryuto: Good morning.

Ryuto: I'm going to my first-period class.

I sent a few new messages after the ones I'd sent the night before and closed the app. For a while, I just stared at the phone in my hand. The case on it was a little fancy for a guy's phone, but this was the third one I'd used that matched my girlfriend's.

Pretty much the only people who got off at the station nearest to my school were office workers and students. Everyone walked briskly and had their eyes pointed at the ground in front of them.

I checked my phone on my way to campus, but there still weren't any replies from my girlfriend. As I passed through the stylish gate of Houo University, all I could think about was the fact that I might've been the most uncool student there.

I got to the lecture hall about ten minutes before the lecture was supposed to start. For some reason, however, it already had.

The elderly professor stood at the podium, not looking at the students. "I have to leave fifteen minutes early today to attend a meeting, so I'll give you these printouts now." He spoke in a voice so subdued that you couldn't possibly

have heard him from a distance if he weren't using a microphone.

The lecture hall could hold several hundred people, but given how early it was in the morning and the fact that the professor had started things before the scheduled time, there were so few students here that you could reasonably count them if you wanted to.

The rows of long desks here were placed at different elevations, similar to the architectural design of ancient Greek theaters. The rows became shorter the lower you went and the closer they were to the professor's podium.

In my experience, students kept filing in even after a lecture had started, and groups of friends would always sit in the back. That was why halfway into a lecture, the population density of the back seats would rise. To avoid getting caught up in that situation, I went to the front and sat in the third row.

"Here you go." The professor handed me a stack of printouts without looking me in the eye.

I was the only one in the third row, and there was nobody in the fourth and fifth, so I had to get up and bring the rest of the papers to the students in the sixth row.

There, in that sixth row, a guy and a girl were sitting next to each other. When I handed them the stack, the girl took a passing glance at my face.

"...yeah?"

"Heh heh, no waaay..."

Hearing them flirt behind me as I went back to my seat got on my nerves a little.

Today's lecture was as boring as always. This Symbolic Logic class was a general elective. I'd only chosen it because it would be a few easy credits. The things the professor would say, however, were so niche and hardcore that they all flew over my head. Some theorized that he was only teaching this to sell his book to hundreds of students every year—it was a thick textbook that cost several thousand yen. The fact his lectures basically consisted of reading said textbook seemed like pretty good evidence of that. I'd already given up on taking notes in this subject back in the first semester.

He didn't take attendance, so there apparently were plenty of students who only read the textbook and would come to take the exam at the end of the semester. I remembered being surprised at the unprecedented number of full seats during the first semester's final exam.

"That will be it for today. We will move on to the next section next time," said the professor, putting an end to his ever-incomprehensible lecture. He then hastily packed up and left.

The whole thing left me feeling empty on the inside. I didn't have any friends that I could say that to, though, so I just put my textbook in my backpack and left the hall.

"Man, I don't get his lectures at all. What the hell is he even talking about?"

"Me neither..."

"What a load of crap."

"I know, right?"

"Do people who go to every lecture even get any of it?"

"Who knows? This is only my second time coming this semester."

"Damn..."

Two guys who'd come from the same lecture were talking about it right behind me.

"By the way, Yukari said she's gonna go get a parfait in Shinagawa after this."

"Seriously?"

"She posted about it on Instagram. I replied, and she invited me to come. Wanna join?"

"Wait, what about our next class?"

"Can't we just ask Iida? I'm sure he's gonna be there."

"Ah, a'ight. I'll go too, then."

"By the way, I hear Yukari's close to breaking up with her boyfriend."

"Seriously? That guy from the advertising agency?"

“Yeah. She was talking to me about it, so maybe, probably.”

“Man, those beauty contest girls sure have high standards...”

I wanted to get away from them as soon as I could, so I stopped at the bathroom even though I didn't need to go. They went in too, however, and we ended up lining up at the urinals.

“Forget about Yukari, though. What about that girl you mentioned from your club?”

“Oh, I'm not serious about her yet.”

“You're, like, friends with benefits?”

“Nah, just a bit more than friends, I guess. I'd totally do her again, no problem, but she looks like the type who'd start acting like she's my girlfriend. I'm keeping my distance for now. How're things on your end these days, anyway?”

“I'm hitting the streets, bro. Girls are too proud here at Houo, but outside? There're a lot of hotties ripe for the picking. Ever try hitting on them by flashing your student ID?”

“What, really? That's enough to become a chick magnet?”

“Yeah, totally. The Houo brand is amazing, dude. Girls get this fire in their eyes when they find out you're going to Houo.”

“Damn... I better take advantage, then.”

“Then again, it would be best if you got a girlfriend like Yukari. Me, I'll stick to my guns and play the field.”

“Hah, dude, you're not making much sense there.”

Yeah. He really wasn't.

“Oh man, getting to my third class is gonna be such a pain after skipping the second one.”

“I know, right? I'll just pretend I've got nothing after this.”

As I thoroughly washed my hands, lathering up the soap over and over, the two left the bathroom ahead of me.

It was relieving. And, at the same time, overwhelmingly tiring.

“I go to the same university as those guys...?” I said miserably to myself, left alone in the bathroom as I wiped my hands near the sink with a small towel.

“...but outside? There’s a lot of hotties ripe for the picking.”

Was that true? It made me a bit jealous. *Quite* jealous, actually... Then again, I didn’t have the balls to do that, and I had a proper girlfriend too.

But even if I didn’t have a girlfriend, it would be too much for a shy introvert like me to continuously befriend girls I’d never seen before. Just thinking it was soul-crushing.

That’s right—the important thing here was the soul. I wasn’t looking to date a girl’s hot body. What I wanted was to be *open* with a girl, and the resulting emotional bond would make me feel comfortable being intimate with her.

Though I hadn’t had the pleasure recently...

I remembered to check my phone, but the last message in the chat was still me telling her I was going to my first class.

I tottered to my next class as melancholy swept over me.

Thus, the second class of the day came to an end, and I made my way to one of the cafeterias. When I had back-to-back classes in the second and third time slots, there was no time to eat anywhere else.

There was also a larger, more spacious dining hall in this university that was located below this cafeteria, but I liked the stark feel of the cafeteria I’d gone to. This one resembled a classroom and was lined with the kind of long tables and folding chairs you’d find in a conference room. While it had a no-frills kind of feel, the food was hearty and delicious. There was yet another cafeteria on campus too, one with a fancy look and feel and a menu supervised by a hotel

chef, but too many girls opted to go to that one. It took courage for an introvert to go there, so I'd only been there once.

This one was plain, after all. Most people coming here were hungry sports club members looking for a big meal or students who ate alone and stared at their phones all the while. As for me, I didn't eat all that much, but as a guy, I appreciated being able to get a large serving for cheap.

I bought a ticket for pork cutlet curry, exchanged it for my food, and then sat down with my tray. I started moving my spoon to my mouth without a word, but then...

"Kashima-dono. I should have known I would find you here."

Someone put a tray with the same pork cutlet curry down next to mine.

I greeted him. "Kujibayashi-kun."

This was Kujibayashi Haruku—a second-year Japanese literature major and my only friend at this school.

We'd been in the same linguistics class in our first year here. When we'd paired up for conversation practice in class, we'd hit it off after realizing we were both introverts. He and I had been close friends ever since, both sticking to the shade here on this resplendent campus.

"What troubles you, my friend? You appear joyless."

As you can see, his manner of speech was really peculiar.

He'd told me that in his first year of middle school, he'd been so introverted that he hadn't been able to talk to anyone in his class, even come May. Anxious to do something about it, he'd made up his mind to act like a whole different person, hoping to get a chance to talk to people that way. He'd started using literary language as a result—his classmates had loved it, and he'd become popular. Ever since then, he'd apparently been unable to talk to others unless he spoke this way.

"Well... I was just feeling down after seeing some pickup artists who'd been in the same lecture as me."

In reality, I was also bothered by the lack of a reply from my girlfriend, but

talking about her to Kujibayashi-kun would upset him. I decided not to bring it up right away.

“A most curious topic, my fellow scholar. So even *you* experience that sort of ordeal. You, an infinitely bigger normie than yours truly.”

Incidentally, his manner of speech only appeared to be authentic, so it wasn't like he was mimicking the manner of a specific social class from a specific era. Because of that, it didn't look like it was against his principles to use slang.

“You're far better in the looks department than me, though,” I said.

That's right—despite his personality, Kujibayashi-kun was handsome. His thick brows and eyelashes, as well as his shapely, finely chiseled features, made him appear to have some Latin blood flowing in his veins. Even so, both of his parents were apparently a hundred percent Japanese. He was a bit taller than me, but his build was pretty much perfectly average, so it didn't bother me.

He had a really bad case of nearsightedness, however, and wore thick, black-rimmed glasses. This, in turn, made his distinct features excessively prominent, so he unfortunately didn't seem to be popular with girls. Even I hadn't taken him for a good-looking guy until several weeks after I'd come to know him—I'd only noticed after I'd seen him remove his steamed-up glasses at a ramen place we'd visited together.

Despite my compliment, Kujibayashi-kun flashed me a cynical smile, holding his spoon in his hand.

“Thou, my brethren, art the only one who would extend me such words.”

“Well, yeah, because neither of us has any other friends...”

“Hah, hah, hah!”

I ate my curry while Kujibayashi-kun laughed like an actor in a classical play. He was my source of comfort here at this university.

“And yet I must say: Unlike yours truly who was but a clown, you, my good sir, had friends in high school, yes?” he asked. “Do you not keep in touch with your former companions?”

“Oh...”

My hands now frozen, I stared in front of me. There, at another table, was a muscular guy who seemed to be from a sports club. I watched him shovel two plates of pork cutlet curry into his mouth.

“I guess I haven’t talked to them in a while, now that you mention it,” I admitted. “They seem to be doing well, though, at least.”

Ichii was still an active Kid—I knew that much from his Twitter and from KEN’s videos. I saw Nisshi go online on a game-related Discord every now and then, so he was all right too.

The thing that had kept us together the most back in high school had been a shared interest—being fans of KEN. Recently, however, I hadn’t been keeping up with his videos. I was busy with school and my part-time job, and when I would lie down after coming home while planning to watch some videos, I’d end up falling asleep just like that. At some point, the number of videos I hadn’t watched had turned into a mountain of content—I’d never get through all of them if I just watched a few when I had the time.

“I want to see them, sure... I just don’t think we’d have anything to talk about if I saw them now.”

After graduating from high school, Ichii was an architecture major at Nichiyo University. Nisshi had gone to study law at Seimei University. These schools were in Tokyo, and both of them lived with their families, so I could see them whenever I wanted. But since I was a sociology major, we wouldn’t have much in common to talk about when it came to things we were studying in college.

“‘The flow of the river never ceases, and the water never stays the same. Bubbles float on the surface of pools, bursting, re-forming, never lingering...’”

Kujibayashi-kun had begun reciting the opening passage of *Hojoki*. This must’ve been a piece he’d learned as a Japanese literature major, rather than his usual mimicry.

While he was only a sophomore, he was already aiming for graduate school. He’d told me he was particularly interested in modern literature and was going to write his graduation thesis on Mori Ogai. After all that, he wanted to go for his doctorate too and go into research. Apparently, his father was a college professor as well—specializing in American literature—and he’d named his son

after something in his favorite American comic books.

“If two bubbles once formed on the surface of the same pool, they may yet be brought together once more by the flow of the river.”

These words weren’t Kamo no Chomei’s—the author of *Hojoki*—but Kujibayashi-kun’s own. He seemed to be consoling me. Had I been making such a melancholic face?

“Thanks,” I said. “I hope it comes to that at some point.”

After that light reply, I looked at my phone, which had been lying on the table. First, I checked the time, but then my mind focused on the lack of a reply from my girlfriend. I had notifications enabled, so their absence from my lock screen meant that no reply had come. There was no point in opening the app.

I wondered what was taking her so long to reply. Surely she must’ve already woken up today and gone to work. In fact, I was concerned that I hadn’t heard from her since last night.

Is she okay...?

“My friend, is there another matter on your mind?”

Kujibayashi-kun had noticed my unease, of course.

“Well, the thing is, I haven’t heard from my girlfriend since last night...” I began.

“Oh?”

Betraying my expectations, he looked happy. Normally, he seemed jealous when I talked about her and wouldn’t listen to me much, so maybe he just liked that things weren’t going great between us right now.

“Why, she must be living a life of pleasure so ecstatic as to forget you.”

Immaturely, I replied with unconcealed discomfort. “That’s not true. She has work today.” However, my tone was proof that I wasn’t calm about this situation. “I was actually thinking she might be unwell... *That’s* what I’m worried about, okay?”

“Were there an emergency so severe, her family would surely let you know,”

he said.

“Maybe it’s a less severe emergency.”

“Why, then, she shall recover tomorrow. Either way, there is nothing you need trouble yourself with.” Kujibayashi-kun had a smirk on his face. “May this give you a taste of how empty life feels for a Virgin Fiend who has never in his life had the pleasure of so much as touching a girl, let alone holding hands with her.”

“Virgin Fiend” was a moniker Kujibayashi-kun would use in self-deprecation. He’d gone to a prestigious all boys’ school that had spanned both middle and high school grades. The despair of having spent his youth with all knowledge of real girls out of his grasp had twisted his libido and brewed resentment for everyone who led a satisfying life inside of him. He’d become a fiend, mentally...or at least that’s how he’d described it. I don’t really understand what I’m saying here myself.

“That’s not nice of you...” I said with a deep sigh, pretending to be hurt.

Anxiety then appeared on Kujibayashi-kun’s face. He was a kind guy deep inside.

“Anyway, I gotta go,” I said. “My third class’s on the fifth floor of the south block,” I said.

“Very well...”

As I got up, holding my tray with an empty plate on it, Kujibayashi-kun gave me a shy look.

“Should it be malady, you shall hear of it by tomorrow—of that I have no doubt.”

I smiled involuntarily, having been consoled by him a second time today. “Yeah, you’re right. Thanks.”

I returned my tray and left the cafeteria. My steps were now a little lighter than before.

It really was all about the soul. I didn’t know what it was like for other people, but it seemed like I was the type to find encouragement or consolation through

sincere conversations with people with whom I had mutual trust.

I used to have multiple people like that in my life. Thinking back on it now, that brief period had been the only time in my almost twenty years of living when my days had shone so brightly.

I missed my high school years, which I'd spent smiling together with Runa and my friends. Every day back then had been filled with fun and revelry.

The fourth class period came to an end—which was the last lecture I had today—and it was now past 4 p.m. Leaving behind the lecture hall where I didn't have even a single acquaintance, I headed away from campus as fast as I could and hurried to the station.

At 4 p.m., the trains were still rather empty. The only things standing out were the conversations of middle and high school students on their way back from school. People on the train had peaceful expressions on their faces.

There were just enough riders to fill all the seats in the car, so I stood by a permanently closed door on the opposite side of the train and watched the scenery outside. The decorative lights in the trees that lined the downtown area outside had just turned on. Young couples were walking around, huddling close together.

At that point, my phone vibrated in my pocket. Taking it out in a hurry, I saw that it was a notification from a game saying that my action point gauge filled up.

My own mental gauge had taken a hit instead.

I got off at Station K—the one closest to my home—and headed to the nearby shopping district. There was a five-story commercial building with family restaurants and the like, and I worked in a place inside it. Right after getting into Houo, I'd become a tutor at the cram school on the first floor and taught one-on-one.

My parents paid my tuition but no longer gave me pocket money, so I'd had

to find some work right away. Working at a café was the classic choice, but that would've been too much for an introvert. I didn't think I could handle physical labor either.

In the end, as I'd never really done anything other than study, a teaching job had been the most accessible thing for me. Better yet, I was teaching one-on-one. I would've probably been too nervous in front of a crowd, but this seemed like something even I could handle. I'd known about this cram school for a long time too since it was close to where I lived, so this had become my workplace of choice.

I hopped at the entrance and bowed. "Good afternoon," I said.

"Good afternoon," came the disjointed replies of the employees from behind the counter as well as tutors.

I had a feeling there were a lot of introverts here who did nothing but study, so even when people from the same generation were here at the same time, there wasn't much casual conversation. I didn't feel all that uncomfortable here.

I went to the tutors' lobby and left my things there before making my way to the staff room near the entrance to prepare for my tutoring sessions.

The staff room was about the size of a school classroom and had lines of folding chairs and long desks like you'd find in a conference room. The walls were lined with bookshelves, which were tightly packed with students' files. Their names were written on the spines of the files.

"Today I have...Makimura-san for third period, and then Kuwabara-kun for the fourth," I said quietly to myself while checking the timetable.

Second-period sessions were currently ongoing, and there were other tutors like me here who were preparing for third period too. The textbooks for the students were kept in the staff room. Everyone here would be holding sessions of their own. We tutors had to copy the materials we'd be covering today, write down answers, think about what we'd write on the board, and do other simple preparations.

Furthermore, after sessions, we had to fill out "tutoring reports" that detailed

what we'd gone over and what the students'd had trouble with. We would run those reports by a staff member, put them in the student's files, and then we could leave.

I wasn't good at filling out the tutoring reports—I tended to write small and include plenty of details, so they took me a lot of time. We were only paid for the time we were holding sessions, so I ended up working without pay for about an hour every day I had a shift—thirty minutes before sessions and another thirty afterward.

Currently, my hourly wage was 1,400 yen. That was pretty good for a student's part-time job, but when you added in the unpaid work time, I couldn't be sure the working conditions were actually all that good.

I mainly taught English to middle and high school students here at this cram school. I'd said I could teach any humanities subject, but there weren't many students who came here to learn Japanese or social studies. At the same time, there were plenty of tutors who could teach Japanese, so inevitably, I often ended up teaching English as it was in high demand. It also seemed that the staff thought too highly of my skills because I was from Houo, so they often assigned me burdensome high school students who were aiming for top universities.

And whether I was tutoring a primary schooler or a high schooler, my hourly wage was the same.

“Kashima-sensei.”

Another tutor had called out for me just as I was finishing copying some papers for my upcoming session. She was petite, looked about my age, and must've been a college student too—I often saw her on this day of the week. She gave off a nice, clean impression, but this was actually my first time talking to her.

“I wanted to talk to you about Megumi-chan...” she began.

“Okay, I'm listening.”

Makimura Megumi-san was a girl in her third year of middle school—I would be tutoring her for the third period today. She went to a local public school and

her entrance exams were coming up, so we were working through past exams of the high school she wanted to get into.

“Kashima-sensei, you teach English, right? I teach Japanese,” the young woman said.

“Right.”

I looked at the name tag on her chest and saw it read “Umino Yuuko.” I’d seen her name on students’ files. At the same time, I got self-conscious about the fact I’d never made a connection between her name and face, even though I’d seen her plenty of times before. I was way too much of an introvert.

As I nervously wondered what Umino-sensei might’ve wanted to talk about to someone as unsociable as me, she gave me a friendly smile as though to dispel my wariness.

“Megumi-chan called you kind and handsome. She’s a big fan of yours. Recently she’s been saying she’ll miss you once her exams are over and she stops coming here.”

“Really...?”

Makimura-san was a timid girl, so I’d never gotten that impression at all. In fact, I’d been worried she might’ve actually hated me, so this was relieving to hear.

In one-on-one sessions, the compatibility between the tutor and the student was important. A student could switch tutors at any time if they or their parents requested it. The staff wouldn’t tell us why changes were made unless they were for administrative reasons, such as schedules not matching up anymore. But when you thought you were doing well with a student and they were suddenly taken away, it was shocking and made you frantically search for reasons.

Then again, I had been tutoring Makimura-san since the start of her third year in middle school, so I wasn’t worried she’d go to someone else at this point.

“By the way, Kashima-sensei, will you be coming to the nomikai party this Saturday?” asked Umino-sensei, as if the question had just come to her mind.

“Huh? People go out drinking?”

“Yes,” she said. “I just realized I’ve never seen you at one. The tutors who are sophomores and above get together about once a month.”

I’d been a tutor at this cram school for almost two years now, but I’d never heard about the tutors here having drinking parties. Was it just the social types who went and I had simply never been invited? This felt like culture shock.

“Would you like to come?”

“Yes, certainly.”

I didn’t have the nerve to refuse on the spot and couldn’t keep myself from accepting the offer. But then, something occurred to me.

“I’m still nineteen, though. Is that okay?”

Umino-sensei nodded with a sweet smile. “Absolutely. I’ve been going to it since before my birthday. You can simply order soft drinks.”

“Okay...”

I became absentminded, having lost my excuse not to show up.

“So you were born early in the year, Kashima-sensei. I was born in February myself, so I’m glad our birthdays are close.” She smiled at me gently. “Okay, I’ll let the organizer know. Can I ask how to contact you?”

“Oh, sure...”

“You’re here today until fourth period, right? Me too. Let’s meet in the waiting room before we leave for the day.”

“Okay...”

Umino-sensei then turned her back toward me and left. As for me, I hurried to prepare for third period.

Today’s third-period session with Makimura-san was the same as always. While she listened to me talk, our eyes would occasionally meet, but she wouldn’t smile. Her behavior was confusing after what Umino-sensei had just told me.

After a ten-minute break, fourth period began. This session was the bulk of my work for the day—the highest in calorie drain.

Kuwabara-kun, my student for this period, was in his second year of high school. He went to a private school in Tokyo that focused on getting students into high-ranking universities, and he wanted to get into one of those too—potentially a national university.

Frankly, it took some nerve for a university freshman or a sophomore to tutor a high schooler regardless of either's academic performance. I couldn't simply disregard the fact that I'd been in high school myself until recently, and my student didn't look all that different from me either in build or facial features. It felt awkward to act like a teacher in front of someone like that. To make things worse, he went to a school that was at a much higher level than Seirin High. In the beginning, I'd even had to wonder if I was really the right person to be his tutor.

It had been almost a year since I'd started tutoring him, so we'd come to understand each other quite well. I didn't have such a hard time anymore. I couldn't let my guard down, though, since if I was absentminded while giving my lessons, he'd sometimes start shooting me pointed questions and quips.

"Sensei," he suddenly called out to me during our session. "I got a girlfriend."

His eyes sparkled, and he was blushing. It didn't seem to be a joke.

"Oh, I see," I replied, briefly glancing around.

The "classroom" we were in was a finely partitioned booth. This floor was filled with countless "rooms" like that, each with just enough space for one desk inside and a whiteboard in front of it. They were surrounded by thin plastic walls. You could hear people from nearby "rooms" almost as clearly as if they were right there with you, so when there were many sessions held at once, tutors had to raise their voices so that their students could hear them.

"Where is she from?" I asked.

There didn't seem to be any staff patrolling nearby, so it was okay for me to chat with him a bit. Kuwabara-kun went to an all boys' school, so he must've had few opportunities to meet girls.

“Another cram school,” he said. “We’re in the same Classical Japanese class there. We were having lunch together between our winter classes the other day, and she asked me out.”

Kuwabara-kun went to two cram schools. He studied most subjects he would need for college entrance exams at the other cram school in groups with other students, but since he struggled with English, he came here for one-on-one lessons.

“That’s great,” I replied, feeling happy for him.

His face darkened, however. “My parents got angry when I bragged to them about her, though. Said dating would make me an idiot and that it really isn’t the time for it when I had college entrance exams coming up. They told me to break up with her.”

“I see...”

I could understand his parents’ concerns. When I myself had been a high school senior and had gone to cram school, there’d been a couple in my class who’d started dating during summer break. The guy ended up having to settle for his fifth school of choice. The girl, on the other hand, had gotten into her most preferred one through the general admissions process. Apparently, the two had broken up very quickly after that. It was a tragic story.

Incidentally, neither of them had been friends of mine or anything—I’d heard all this from Sekiya-san. He loved breakup stories, so he’d asked a tutor he was friends with to tell him about students’ love lives in order to learn about any breakups in real time, even though it had given him heartburn and made him sulk. What a masochist.

As I got nostalgic, I realized Kuwabara-kun was staring at me.

“Did *you* have a girlfriend when you were in high school?” he asked.

“Yeah. I did.”

His eyes began to sparkle with curiosity. “Oh? Since when?”

“Since my second year.”

“And you were with her in your third year too?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did you keep seeing her even when you were taking your college entrance exams?”

“Yeah...”

“I see...” Kuwabara-kun’s face was full of life. I liked that he was so straightforward and up-front with his feelings. “And you still got into Houo University. I should say that to my parents.”

“That’s just my situation, though.”

His pure eyes froze for a moment.

“It’s up to you if getting a girlfriend makes you stupid or smart,” I added.

Had I not started dating Runa, there was no way I would’ve ever aimed for Houo University—a place that had been far out of my reach. I would’ve just done a moderate amount of studying without pushing my limits and would’ve aimed for wherever my mock exam results had said I could get into.

The last mock exam I’d taken during my third year of high school had indicated I’d fail to get into Houo University. Sekiya-san had suggested I apply to multiple departments at once, but in the end, I’d only gotten a passing grade for the humanities department.

“If you’re not confident that you can be smart about it, then I think you should do as your parents say and break up with her,” I said.

Wording things like this had a way of making people defiant. I knew that because I was the same.

As expected, Kuwabara-kun bit his lip tightly for a moment, then looked up at me. “I’ll do my best,” he said quietly but confidently.

Seeing him like that, before resuming the session, I couldn’t help but think...

Go for it, kid.

Having finished my two tutoring reports, I brought them to the tutor manager

for review.

After affixing a seal to the reports, he said, “Kashima-sensei, next week will be Makimura-san’s last time here.”

“Oh... Okay. I understand.”

Her entrance exams were going to end around that time, so I’d expected to hear this news one of these days.

“Would you be okay with the same working days for the rest of the year?”

“Uh... Yes, I would. Although I can’t say what times would work for me until April.”

“If you’d like to have fewer sessions so you can focus on job-hunting, let me know ahead of time. Starting in February, there won’t be anyone coming in to replace Makimura-san and the other kids who will be leaving after their entrance exams, but when we get someone good, I want to assign them to you.”

The tutor manager was a small-built man who looked to be in his forties. He didn’t talk much, but when something needed to be said, he spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. I appreciated that.

“Would you be interested in holding even more sessions per day instead?” he then asked.

“Uhh...”

I was stuck trying to answer. It wasn’t because I had plans to get busy with something else, but because I’d been feeling a bit tired from this work as of late.

I was currently working here four weekdays a week after my own classes, as well as Saturdays. I had just over ten students in my care. If exam-takers like Makimura-san quit, that was going to leave me with four sophomores from high-level private schools like Kuwabara-kun. And because they all had college entrance exams coming up at the same time next year, it was clear that I’d have more work to do in tutoring them.

“Well, I won’t force you. But it would be very welcome if you did,” added the

chief tutor without hesitation.

I didn't know how he'd taken my silence, but there was a smile on his face, which was unusual—he was typically rather expressionless.

“Okay,” I replied.

As a tutor, I appreciated that a member of the staff would flatter me. Giving him a light bow, I left.

I then found Umino-sensei in the waiting room.

“Hey, Kashima-sensei.” Now clad in a thick overcoat, she looked up from her phone and smiled at me.

I felt a bit flustered. “Oh, sorry, did I make you wait?”

Umino-sensei shook her head with a smile. “No, I was about to reply to a friend of mine before leaving, so you came at a good time.”

I knew she was just saying that to alleviate my worries. She was a good person.

We exchanged contact information. I was about to leave, but she called out to me.

“Would you like to walk together until we get to the station?”

“Ah, well...”

I didn't really have a reason to refuse, so I decided to take her up on the offer.

“Have a good night!” we both said on our way out of the school.

“Good night...” said the tutor manager behind the counter, though he did a double take upon seeing us together. He must've found it really unexpected that I was leaving together with another tutor. Though, to be fair, this *was* my first time doing that.

The shopping district in front of the station was still dazzlingly bright at 10 p.m., thanks to all the street and store lights.

Umino-sensei was short—her head was at about the level of my shoulders. It felt a bit strange walking side by side with someone I'd never talked to until today.

“Megumi-chan tells me you go to Houo University. Is that true?” she asked all of a sudden.

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“Hmm, impressive. So you’re a Houo guy.”

Though I got that a lot, I didn’t know what to say back. As I kept silent, Umino-sensei gave me a meaningful look.

“So you must be popular with girls.”

“Not at all...” While I fully denied it at first, I realized I needed to make a correction. “I already have a girlfriend—we’ve been dating since high school.”

“Oh, I see.” A serious look appeared on Umino-sensei’s face for a moment before being replaced with a smile once more. “So you’ve been together for a long time? Three years?”

“Yeah. About three and a half now.”

“Wow. You’re really devoted to her.” She opened her eyes wide before smiling awkwardly. “That must be nice. I broke up with my boyfriend recently...”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“We’d been dating since high school, but he met a younger girl in his college club.”

“Huh...”

The topic was too personal for talking with someone for the first time. Honestly, it was hard to find what to say in response.

Umino-sensei seemed to pick up on that and smiled again to smooth things over. “Sorry. I must be troubling you by saying these things.”

“It’s okay...”

“It’s just that it’s somehow easy to talk to you. It feels like I’m talking to an old friend,” she said.

Maybe it was because I was such an introvert, but it didn’t feel that way to me at all. I was at a loss. I did, however, feel a bit happy to have a girl acting

familiar with me.

We reached the parking lot in front of the station.

“Okay, see you at the drinking party on Saturday. I’m looking forward to getting to talk to you, Kashima-sensei,” Umino-sensei said and then took her leave.

As I stood in place for a while, I got a feeling of déjà vu for some reason. My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I checked the screen. It was a call from my girlfriend—I answered in a hurry.

“Hello?”

“Ryutooo!!!” came a familiar voice.

“Runa...”

Despite being outside, hearing the voice of my beloved girlfriend made a smile appear on my face all on its own. The fact that I hadn’t heard from her had been on my mind the whole day, but I stopped caring about that in an instant.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t get back to you at all today!” she said. “When I was leaving work last night, my area manager suddenly invited me out for a drink, and I didn’t get enough sleep the night before, so just drinking a little bit made me barely able to walk. I managed to get back via taxi and slept like a log until morning. When I woke up, I only had five minutes until I had to leave, so it was a really crazy morning. I had to rush through a shower, get dressed, and then I did my makeup in a taxi on my way to work... There was no time to use my phone at all.”

During her third year of high school, Runa had started working at a clothing store alongside her job at the cake shop. She had a good figure and was affable to everyone, so she’d immediately become popular with customers. After graduation, Runa had gotten a full-time job with that same clothing company. She was currently an assistant manager at one of their stores in a fashion mall in Shinjuku.

Her hectic explanation continued.

“So when I came in today, things were crazy busy because it was the last day of a sale. There was a limited-time sale every other hour, and there were so many people trying things on and such a huge crowd at the register... The manager was off today too. I gave our part-timer girl my break time, so I didn’t have time to eat myself, and before I knew it, I went like eight hours without going to the bathroom. I really thought I was done for! We just closed up, and I finally got to leave...”

“Wow... Good job handling all that.” That was the only thing I could say.

I had to wonder—while I’d had my phone on my mind all day, had Runa actually been unable to find even half a minute to use hers and send me a message? Then again, time must’ve moved at different speeds for university students and people with full-time jobs.

There was another thing bothering me, however.

“That area manager... He’s a man, right?”

Runa had mentioned someone with that job title a few times in the past.

“Yeah, a guy in his fifties. Used to work in a restaurant. He’s this really sporty type—he often gathers up the managers and assistant managers to drink together. Even before I turned twenty, he was all like, ‘We’re gonna go drinking on your birthday!’”

“Right, I remember you saying that...”

He must’ve been an energetic, extroverted guy like Mao-san. Mao-san was her uncle, so it was okay, but this area manager wasn’t related to her, so it just didn’t sit right with me.

“Would it be bad to turn down his offer?” I asked.

“Well...” Runa seemed to give the matter some thought. “It kinda looks like he has some things to say to me recently. He’s been talking to me more and more often.”

What?!

While that objection had appeared in my mind, a total introvert like me couldn’t press her for answers directly.

“A-Are they work-related things?” I asked.

“Yep yep. But like... It’s kinda...delicate?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well... I’m still not fully confident at work,” she said. “And I think he’s just trying to figure out how I feel.”

My curiosity grew. What was that supposed to mean? Was this really just about work? *He’s not just some pervert, right?! Is he trying to get her to cheat on me?! Is there really nothing for me to worry about, Runa?!*

But as I knew nothing about either clothing brands or how things worked at companies, I didn’t know what exactly I needed to ask Runa to get the answers I wanted.

“What about you, Ryuto? How’d your day go?” she asked.

“Huh? Well... It was the same as always. I had my lectures, finished up at work, and I was just heading home.”

“Good work as always, Ryuto!” Runa’s energetic voice always brightened things up for me. She must’ve been more tired than me, so how could she still be so animated? “Man, I still gotta look after Haruka and Haruna after this when I get back!”

Those two were Runa’s sisters.

“Because I was fast asleep last night, Misuzu-chan must’ve gotten tired from looking after them by herself. I better take over for tonight.”

Six months after Runa had graduated high school and got a full-time job, she’d gotten new sisters. They were twins. They’d been born to her father and the woman he’d married—Shirakawa Misuzu. Her maiden name was Fukusato.

In her third year of high school, Runa had befriended Misuzu-san, and when she’d found out that Misuzu-san was pregnant that autumn, she had moved into the house where Runa, her father, and her grandmother lived.

Misuzu-san’s pregnancy hadn’t gone very well, and she’d ended up on bed rest for the last few months of it. Runa’s father was busy with work, so Runa and her grandmother had their hands full looking after Misuzu-san and making

preparations for the children about to be born. Then, since their successful delivery, Runa had been proactively taking care of the children once she'd got home, no matter how tired she was from work. She'd feed them milk, change diapers, and so on. It was almost like she was their second mother.

"I gotta go, my train's almost here!" said Runa.

"Okay. Thanks for calling. I know you're tired."

Through the phone, I could hear the sound of a train stopping nearby and an announcement being made.

After ending the call with Runa, I looked up while walking down the street. There was a thin crescent moon hanging low in the sky.

"Runa..." I muttered, my chest hurting a bit from how badly I wanted to see her smile.

Recently, I'd been frequently recalling something Sekiya-san had once said to me.

"I've really noticed something after I graduated high school. Compared to your time there, there's a lot less going on in life after you graduate. High school is a really special, precious time."

Back then, I could go to school and see Runa as if it was only natural. Icchi and Nisshi had been there too. All the people I liked were always there at the same place. There'd been no need for us to agree to meet up—it had been normal to see them, talk to them, and laugh with them every day.

Now, I was painfully aware of just how special that had been.

"Is something wrong, Kashima-sensei?" Umino-sensei asked as I absentmindedly sipped on my melon-flavored soda.

I was at the Saturday drinking party with other tutors, having come here after finishing all of the sessions I'd had today.

There were a lot of bars near the cram school, but we'd gathered at a place some distance away from the station. They'd apparently chosen this location

out of consideration for the students and their parents.

This dimly lit bar had a calm atmosphere and clearly wasn't the kind of place where college students came to fool around. I could feel that the person who'd set this place up had put thought into keeping people from cutting loose.

"It's nothing... I was just thinking a bit," I replied.

"Okay." Umino-sensei smiled—she did it often. "Is this seat taken?"

"No, go ahead."

"Thanks." Umino-sensei sat down next to me.

There were roughly ten of us here at the moment, all tutors, and we were sitting on benches on either side of a long table. The party had started at 7 p.m.—just in time for me to be done with my work. Apparently, there would be more people joining after the end of the next period.

I knew the faces of most tutors here, but I'd never talked to them before. After we'd made a toast, I'd followed everyone's example and made small talk for a while. But as time passed, more and more people had taken their glasses and broken into small groups with people they were close with. Since it was my first time here, there'd been nobody near me for a while now. It had been hard to endure.

Umino-sensei brought her drink over and took a sip. "By the way, there's this girl I was going to take in to fill a gap in my schedule..."

Judging by the design of her mug, I thought she was having a highball. A faint smell of alcohol wafted from her.

"I'll be teaching English to a girl in her first year of high school," she went on. "So, I was choosing vocabulary flash cards and I found a set that looked nice. I showed it to my supervisor and was told it was you who left them there."

"Oh... Those ones."

I still used them, so I instantly knew what she was talking about.

"I'm teaching a boy in high school named Kuwabara-kun," I explained. "He struggles to memorize English vocabulary, and there aren't any good textbooks for that at our cram school. I went around to some bookstores to look for

something fitting to use in sessions. I asked my supervisor to keep those around.”

“That’s very enthusiastic of you.”

“Not at all... I’m not very talented myself, so when I see smart kids whose studies aren’t going so well because they can’t find the right method to study, it feels like a waste and makes me want to do something about it. I think about it a lot, even when I’m not teaching sessions.”

“Wow. I couldn’t go that far, myself. You’re pretty suited to be a teacher, wouldn’t you say?”

The moment Umino-sensei had said that with an impressed tone, someone else’s voice echoed in my mind.

“You’d probably make a good teacher or something.”

I thought back on that cute, sweet, high-pitched voice. That gentle smile.

“Someone else said that to me once, a long time ago,” I replied.

Kurose-san. That’s right... Her voice must’ve guided me to this.

“I just realized... Maybe this job is something else I chose because of what that person said to me.”

Umino-sensei listened in silence, only nodding at my words.

“But now that I’ve tried being a tutor, I’m not sure if I’m actually suited to be a teacher.”

I wondered why I was telling her so much. Was it because she’d said the same thing as Kurose-san?

“I’ve been feeling a bit tired lately,” I continued. Since I was drinking melon-flavored soda, I couldn’t make excuses and say I was drunk. “I’m taking classes in a teacher-training track at my university, just in case...but I feel like it might be better if someone like me doesn’t become a teacher. For the sake of my mental health...”

“Umino-sensei!”

Out of nowhere, Imoto-sensei, the organizer of the drinking party, had called

out from across the table.

Imoto-sensei was probably older than me. It had felt like he'd been working at the cram school for a while by the time I'd started, so perhaps he was in his third or fourth year of college. He could've even been a grad student. He was lanky and looked a bit geeky, but he was also cheerful, so he was popular with students who came for tutoring.

"Maruyama-sensei is in a choir! Isn't that your thing too?" he asked.

"Oh, really?" Umino-sensei took her glass in hand and stood up. "I'm sorry to leave in the middle of a conversation, Kashima-sensei..."

"It's okay, no problem."

Watching her leave, I figured she must've been in a choir too.

I didn't know anything about her, not even what college she went to. I didn't really *want* to know either.

Since the ice in it had melted, my melon-flavored soda was now rather bland.

Despite how out of place I felt, I ended up staying with the group until the main part of the gathering had ended and the group was ready to leave that bar. That was because I didn't have the nerve to gather attention to myself by saying I was leaving, even if they would all forget I'd said anything just a few minutes later.

"Now, who's going to the after-party?!" shouted Imoto-sensei, tottering near the right edge of the sidewalk. He seemed pretty drunk, and his face was red.

It was already thirty minutes past ten, but it looked like there were many tutors here who lived in this area like I did, so nobody seemed to be concerned about missing the last train. As tomorrow was Sunday, there would generally be no sessions running at the cram school.

"All right, let's hit the next bar!"

Nobody seemed to care if I was going to the after-party or not, so I started walking toward the station. I was intent on leaving unnoticed, but...

"Kashima-sensei," came a voice from behind me, and a head appeared by my

shoulder. It was Umino-sensei. "Are you going home?"

"Ah, yes..."

"Me too. Let's walk together partway."

"Okay..."

I checked to see if anyone else was leaving, but we were the only ones walking toward the station.

"You're not going to the after-party?" I asked.

Unlike me, she seemed to be friends with everyone there.

"It's okay. I have some reports to submit on Monday, so I don't want to stay up too late tonight."

"That makes sense," I said.

"And I couldn't talk to you much, even though I started our conversation."

So it *had* bothered her. She had a strong moral character.

"Did you enjoy yourself today?" she then asked.

"Well, what can I say...?" I searched for the right words while not wanting to lie. "Maybe it would've been more fun if I could drink alcohol."

"Ah, I get what you mean. I'm sorry. What month's your birthday in?"

"March, near the end."

"That's pretty late. Come to the drinking party two months from now, then."

"Hah hah..."

This was a purely forced laugh. If I were going to drink alcohol for the first time, I wanted it to be somewhere more fun.

As we chatted idly, we came to the front of the station. But even after we passed the parking lot, Umino-sensei hadn't left my side.

"You didn't ride your bike today?" I asked, curious.

She shook her head. "No. Since there was the drinking party tonight, I walked."

“Oh...”

So that’s why, I thought. Even if she was riding a bike, that would still technically count as drunk driving.

“Is your place close?” I asked.

“No, it’s about a fifteen minutes’ walk from the station.”

That made sense. She wouldn’t ride a bike if it were closer.

“So you’re going to walk home?” I asked.

Umino-sensei’s eyes wandered. “Well... My family goes to sleep early, so I can’t ask anyone to come pick me up.”

“Do you always walk home?”

“When I go to these parties, I normally stay for the after-party, and Imoto-sensei takes me home after that. We live in the same direction.”

“I see...”

It was kind of starting to feel like I *had* to walk her home, which made me feel restless.

I recalled that time in my second year of high school that had ended with me quitting being friends with Kurose-san. I’d walked her part of the way home, and then we’d split up. After that, she’d been molested at a shrine with no one else around.

“How about calling a taxi?” I suggested. “It’s dangerous for girls to walk alone at night.”

Umino-sensei looked troubled. “I haven’t received my paycheck for the month yet, so I don’t have enough cash. I only brought my share for the main party today, and I don’t have anything in my digital wallet...”

Was that really possible? If her place was only a fifteen-minute walk away, she should’ve only had to pay the basic fare. Even if that cost more at night, it should have been less than a thousand yen.

Was she, perhaps, using this as a means of getting me to walk her home? But why would she do such a thing?

“Yeah, totally. The Houo brand is amazing, dude. Girls get this fire in their eyes when they find out you’re going to Houo.”

As I remembered what that pick-up artist had said, I hit upon a realization.

“Megumi-chan tells me you go to Houo University. Is that true?”

I replayed Umino-sensei’s words too.

“Hmm, impressive. So you’re a Houo guy.”

“I broke up with my boyfriend recently...”

She had said that...

I must’ve been overly self-conscious, though. A nice girl like Umino-sensei didn’t need to settle for a total introvert like me—there should’ve been plenty of guys she could choose from.

“It’s okay, I’ll walk. There’s this big dark park in my area without any lights and it’s a bit scary walking through there, but it’s all safe after that,” she said with a smile.

Now, when I looked back on my days in high school, they’d shone brightly. But the one thing I regretted was not doing what I could’ve for Kurose-san back then. And because I hadn’t, somewhere deep inside, I still felt guilty.

At the time, I’d had no money, little experience, and hadn’t been used to dealing with girls at all. I hadn’t known what the right thing to do in that situation had been.

Umino-sensei wasn’t Kurose-san, and I didn’t think doing this would redeem me before the latter. But I wanted to do something for Umino-sensei that I’d failed to do for Kurose-san.

“Take a taxi,” I said after walking to the taxi stand in front of the station.

The confusion on Umino-sensei’s face deepened. “But I really don’t have any money on me... And walking is free.”

“Use this.”

I took out a thousand yen bill and tried to give it to her.

“I’m out of money, so I won’t be able to pay you back,” she said.

“You don’t have to. I’m just worried.”

She wasn’t taking the money, so I put it into the bag hanging from her shoulder.

I should’ve done the same for Kurose-san back then. Instead of abandoning her halfway. I really couldn’t have imagined her encountering a molester there, though. I’d thought I’d known that such a danger existed for girls, but maybe I hadn’t truly been aware of it back then.

Having said that, I didn’t think that danger justified walking a girl who might’ve been into me home when there was no one else present. There was only one girl whose safety I wanted to ensure in person, and that was Runa, my beloved girlfriend.

So, this was the only way.

“But...” Umino-sensei was still reluctant.

“Do it for my sake, and use this money to cover the fare. Please.”

Perhaps intimidated by the serious look on my face, she took a step toward the taxi stand. A driver opened the door, and Umino-sensei got in the back, looking like she’d given up resisting.

I stuck my head a bit into the taxi. “You really don’t have to pay me back. And please don’t let it bother you. I’ll just be glad if you make it home safely.”

She didn’t say anything in reply and only looked at me awkwardly.

I stepped away from the car, and the door closed. Inside, Umino-sensei was saying something to the driver. After a while, the taxi sped off. Another taxi pulled up from behind to take its place, took in a drunken customer, and drove off too.

Here in front of the station on this late Saturday night, there were plenty of adults who looked unsteady on their feet—maybe it was because this was the season for New Year’s parties. Those who weren’t alone were all loud and seemed to be having too much fun.

After watching for a while, I headed home in silence—alone and sober.

“Here, Kashima-sensei.”

One day the following week when I showed up to cram school after my own classes, I ran into Umino-sensei in the waiting room. She was holding something out to me—an envelope with pretty flowers drawn on it.

“It’s the thousand I borrowed from you the other day. Thank you for that.”

“Oh... Right. No problem.”

Didn’t she say she was out of money and wouldn’t be able to return it?
Regardless, I accepted it on the spur of the moment.

“Today is Megumi-chan’s last session, right? She told me yesterday how sad it makes her feel.” Umino-sensei was talking as if nothing were strange about this situation. I liked that about her, though. “Well, see you later.”

I wasn’t ready to start my session yet, and Umino-sensei was heading out before me. But just as she put her hand on the door handle, she turned around as though she’d decided to say something she hadn’t planned to.

“I’m jealous of your girlfriend. A faithful guy like you will surely treasure her forever,” she said, bashfully hanging her head. Then, she looked up at me. “I wish you the best. Even if it’s none of my business.”

With one last playful smile at the end, she left the waiting room.

Even during our last session, Makimura-san was as cold toward me as always.

Two weeks later, I overheard two tutors in the waiting room saying that Umino-sensei and Imoto-sensei had started dating.

“I’m jealous of your girlfriend. A faithful guy like you will surely treasure her forever.”

Was I really treasuring Runa, though? It was already February, and I hadn’t

seen her this year, not even once. After the New Year holidays, I'd been busy holding winter sessions at the cram school. My schedule had been jam-packed from morning to night with students who had entrance exams coming up.

Runa often had days off on weekdays, and since that was when I had my own university classes, our schedules hadn't lined up very well once my winter break had ended.

As if that weren't enough, Runa was not only busy during the day with her job, but also at night when she took care of her sisters. For the past year and a half, she'd constantly looked sleep-deprived. Even on her days off from work, she still had to drop off and pick up her sisters from nursery school, write their names on plenty of diapers, pick up the solid foods they were introducing to the babies, and so on.

While I thought it might've been better for her to start living alone after graduating, she seemed really fond of her little sisters. Runa didn't complain in the slightest and looked full of energy every day.

Then, one day, I suddenly got a call from her. It was around 9 p.m. on a Saturday. I'd already come home from my part-time job, finished dinner, and gone to my room.

"Hello?" I could hear the overexcitement in my voice.

But the next moment, my thoughts froze.

"Kashima-kun? It's been a while."

I pulled my phone away from my ear in surprise and checked the name of the caller. It definitely said Runa.

"K-Kurose-san?"

"Sorry to call you so suddenly," she said. "I'm at Runa's house today, and she said I could use her phone. I don't know your number myself."

It was really hard to hear her due to the loud voices of little children and the sounds of a children's TV show on her end. However, Runa saying, "It's time for bed, Haruna! You're gonna wake up Haruka!" came through too. It seemed

beyond a doubt that Kurose-san really was at Runa's house.

"Did something happen...?" I asked, raising my voice to compete with the noise on the other end.

"Um, so, you know how I'm currently working at Iidabashi Publishing in their manga editing department?" Kurose-san said.

"Yeah, I've heard about that from Runa. It's very impressive."

Iidabashi Publishing was a major publisher everyone would've heard of, even people outside of the world of publishing.

Kurose-san laughed in self-derision. "It's not. I got in through connections."

She was a sophomore at Risshuin University studying Japanese literature. Runa had told me that on her days off, Kurose-san often read and was preparing herself to fulfill her dream of becoming an editor.

"Uncle Mao referred me," she explained.

"Ah, Mao-san..."

I recalled that he had, in fact, been a travel writer, at least in name. Apparently, he had mainly been published online, but he also put out a new book once a year or so. It wasn't strange that he'd have connections to a publisher.

"Anyway, other part-timers have been quitting one after another lately..." Kurose-san's voice sank as she continued speaking. "They all come here because they admire the editors, but part-timers are only entrusted with menial work that anyone can do. Their motivation doesn't last."

"I see."

"But while it's busywork, there's still a lot of things that need doing, and a lot of it falls on my shoulders since I haven't quit. We can't suddenly hire lots of people either. I was asked if I knew somebody who'd want the job, but out of everyone I know, the only student smart enough to be able to work at a major publisher who can also be trusted not to irresponsibly quit partway is you, Kashima-kun."

"Huh?"

This sudden development took my breath away.

“Runa said you might be interested, so I borrowed her phone to call you,” she explained. “So, how about it? Would you be interested in a part-time job in an editing department? If you’re lucky, you might get the chance to meet a famous manga artist or read manuscripts for popular manga before they’re published.”

She’d kept talking about a world I’d never even thought about, which left me dumbfounded for a short while. But somewhere deep inside, I felt that a change like this might’ve been just the thing to save me from the sense of helplessness that had been troubling me as of late.

“How about it...?” Kurose-san asked once again, reserve in her voice.

“Okay,” I said. “I could try it out.”

“What?!” She was surprised, despite being the one who’d made the offer. “You’ll...do it...?”

“Hey, Maria! Can you get that diaper for me?!” I could hear Runa’s voice at that point. “Ryuto said he’ll do it? That’s awesome!”

Some part of me was relieved to hear her say that.

“You understand how people feel, and so you couldn’t leave Maria alone, right? But since you did that with Maria...I can’t let it slide.”

I still remembered her face when she’d said that to me once. But what I’d just heard Runa say meant that, unlike back then, she trusted me enough to not be bothered by me working at the same place as Kurose-san. And, of course, she trusted Kurose-san too.

My relationship with Kurose-san had been my only regret. Three years and several months had passed since the day I’d stopped being friends with her and today’s sudden call.

At this point, I already had a hunch that the start of my new relationship with her would shake up my boring university life.

Chapter 2

“Sorry to have you working on your first day, Kashima-kun,” Fujinami-san said with a smile.

It was now evening. I’d just finished the work I’d been told to do and reported as much to Fujinami-san, a member of staff here.

Having come to the manga-and-magazine editing department of Iidabashi Publishing after Kurose-san had referred me, I’d had a quick interview, filed some paperwork, and had been put to work right away.

Fujinami-san was an editor who must’ve been in his late twenties. Apparently, he worked with many writers and it kept him very busy. Thanks to his medium build, his kind face that didn’t leave much of an impression, and his amiability, even an introvert like me could talk to him comfortably.

“Kurose-san said you were earnest and talented, so I had some expectations. You’ve outdone them.”

“Oh, it’s not like this work makes you use your head...”

I’d meant that as an expression of modesty, but then it occurred to me that it might’ve sounded like I was making fun of the work I’d been given. I panicked a bit.

Fujinami-san didn’t seem bothered, though, and smiled gently. “It may seem like work that doesn’t make you think and that anyone could do, but it takes a smart person to do it efficiently.”

“Huh... Thank you, sir,” I said.

Despite my fears, he’d praised me. It made me embarrassed how much of an adult he was compared to me.

“All right, you can go now. And Kurose-san, you can leave early if you want too. Why don’t you two go together?” he said.

Kurose-san’s hands stopped. She seemed to have been organizing documents

at a desk in another part of the room.

“Okay. Thank you, sir,” she said.

Thus, the two of us left together.

It was just before 7 p.m.

It was Wednesday, so I’d normally be holding tutoring sessions at this time of day, but all of my Wednesday students had been studying for entrance exams. I’d actually been free on Wednesdays since earlier in February. My university was already on spring break too, so I’d gone to the editing department from home by 2 p.m., as instructed.

As I’d seen through the window earlier, it was completely dark outside already.

“Kashima-kun, are you hungry?” Kurose-san asked as we approached the station.

“Well... Yeah, I guess,” I replied, though I was hesitant at first. I’d been a bit hungry for about two hours by this point, so I couldn’t lie.

Looking up at me, Kurose-san grinned. “Wanna get something to drink?” At some point, her face had become that of an adult woman.

“Oh, you’re still nineteen,” said Kurose-san.

I’d just told her that I couldn’t drink alcohol yet.

“Sorry to bring you to an izakaya.”

“That’s okay. You can go ahead and drink yourself, don’t mind me,” I replied.

It was already February, so almost all of the people I’d gone to school with before were now old enough to drink. The only person I ever ate out with besides Runa was Kujibayashi-kun, but since he wasn’t good with alcohol, I hadn’t thought much about it until recently.

“Okay, I’ll take you up on that, then,” said Kurose-san. After briefly looking over the menu on the table, she raised a hand toward a waitperson. “I’ll have a

draft beer. Do you know what you want, Kashima-kun?"

"Um, well... Do you have cola?"

"We do. A draft beer and a cola, then."

After the waitperson left, I looked around the place. We were in a cozy, bright, Japanese-style establishment that felt like something between a restaurant and an izakaya. Judging by the menu paper on the wall, there seemed to be a good amount of cheap options here. It looked like the kind of place where men came to relax after work.

"Here you go. One draft beer and one cola."

A different staff member brought our orders. A mug of foaming liquid was placed before me.

"Yeah, figures." Kurose-san chuckled and swapped the mug with the glass of cola from her side of the table. "To your first day on the job. Cheers!" she exclaimed and clinked her beer mug against my glass.

"Cheers," I replied, drinking a gulp of my cola and putting the glass back on the table.

Kurose-san drank her beer in big gulps, holding the mug at a large angle against her lips. It was almost like she was trying to pull in all the foam from the surface.

"Phah! Man, there's nothing like a beer after work."

Licking off the bit of foam stuck above her lips, she put the mug down. The grimace-like smile on her face told me just how much she loved alcohol.

"You like beer?" I asked.

"Yeah. Any alcohol, really. Though I'm not a big fan of shochu."

"I see..."

Given her prim-and-proper image back in high school, I couldn't have imagined her being like that. I was surprised beyond words.

"It looks like I can hold my liquor pretty well. Runa can't, though. When we drink together, she usually gets dead drunk right away," Kurose-san explained.

“Huh...”

Whenever Runa and I ate together, she would order nonalcoholic drinks because of me. It seemed like she didn't like alcohol much, but it turned out that Kurose-san had no problems with it.

Kurose-san now felt like an adult woman I didn't know. With such a person telling me things I didn't know about Runa, it felt like I was left behind all alone, being nineteen.

“Though...maybe Runa is bad with alcohol because she's always tired,” said Kurose-san all of a sudden, looking nowhere in particular. “She's really working hard. I saw it firsthand the other day too.”

She must've been talking about when she'd borrowed Runa's phone to call me.

“It looks like Misuzu-san hasn't fully recovered yet. I hear she still has a prescription from the hospital.”

“Huh...?” I didn't know what she was talking about and ended up staring at her.

Kurose-san gave me a puzzled look. “Runa didn't tell you? Misuzu-san has postpartum depression.”

What even is that...? I wondered, my breath taken away.

Kurose-san then explained to me that after Misuzu-san's infertility treatments, she'd only just barely managed to get pregnant. She had then been bedridden with threatened preterm labor and had become a mother of twins. Without having time for the wound on her stomach to recover, she'd been immediately beset by hectic days of childcare. Looking after newborns would've been harsh enough on its own, but her situation had made things twice as rigorous. She was also in such poor shape that she had been unable to breastfeed. Apparently, she'd been completely overwhelmed mentally.

Runa's father was busy with work and barely got involved with home matters at all. Her grandmother—Misuzu-san's mother-in-law—was helping with shopping, laundry, and cooking, but she refused to look after the babies, perhaps out of reserve.

Until Misuzu-san had gotten married, she had always lived in Kansai, so she didn't have any siblings or friends in the area who could help. That was why Runa had proactively taken on the duty of looking after her new sisters in order to relieve Misuzu-san's burden however much she could.

That concluded Kurose-san's story.

"So that's how it was..." I said.

"Just don't tell Runa I told you. I think she didn't say anything of consideration for Misuzu-san's privacy." Kurose-san took another gulp from her mug. "You two haven't been able to see each other at all, right? You might've been wondering why she's going that far to look after her sisters from a different mother—that's why."

"Right..."

"She's so nice," Kurose-san said with a fond look on her face. When her eyes met mine, she smiled amiably. "Though I'm sure you know that already."

"Yeah..." I said, sitting there feeling overwhelmed with emotion.

"By the way," began Kurose-san as if having thought of something. "Let's order something to eat." She opened up a menu and passed it to me. "Pick what you want. It's my treat today, since I'm your senior at work."

Saying that with a smile, Kurose-san looked more natural and relaxed than I'd ever seen her. She was now a very attractive adult woman.

Come next week, I was having lunch with a certain someone.

"Sup, Yamada."

Sekiya-san was in front of the Ikefukuro statue where we'd agreed to meet, raising his hand toward me.

I smiled awkwardly. "It's been a while since you last called me that," I replied.

"I kinda just suddenly remembered what you were like in high school."

Despite everything, Sekiya-san and I still went out to eat together once every few months.

The station was lit up more than it would be during the daytime, thanks to all the artificial light here. As we walked side by side, he looked at me and smiled.

“Man, you’ve grown.”

“Huh? Really?” I asked. “I’m only a centimeter taller than I was in my sophomore year.”

It didn’t feel like the difference in our height had shrunk since then.

“Don’t be so shallow. I’m talking about, like, what you’re made of as an adult. Guess you Houo folks are just built different.”

“What does that even mean?”

“There you go again.”

His words left me at a loss.

“I can tell, okay?” he said. “You’ve grown over these past three years. Me? I haven’t changed after all this time. So you look radiant to me.”

Sekiya-san was still studying for college entrance exams. His relationship with Yamana-san hadn’t changed since its beginning three years ago.

I couldn’t ask him to hang out since he was so busy studying that he had no time to see his girlfriend, so he was always the one inviting me somewhere. We were probably meeting up now since it was already the middle of February—he was mostly done with his exams.

We entered a yakiniku place without having a reservation and sat on opposite ends of a table. An employee came by and lit the grill.

“So, how are things? With your girlfriend, I mean. She still busy?” Sekiya-san asked casually.

“She is... It feels like things will stay this way forever, really.”

“Really? It’s like you’re talking about my life as a ronin there. Wait, there’s nothing funny about that. We’re gonna jinx it.” Going through this full routine on his own, Sekiya-san smiled. “Anyway, if the only problem is how much effort it is to look after her sisters, children *do* grow up eventually, so.” Despite the faint smile on Sekiya-san’s face, he got a distant look in his eye. “I’d better find

a happy medium too..." He then began to radiate melancholy. "I've been leeching off my parents all this time. Not having to work to put food on the table, going to cram school for free... My old classmates who went on to four-year college programs without failing their exams will already be working adults this April."

As I sat there, lost as to how to reply, Sekiya-san lifted his gaze and smiled at me.

"I'll make sure this time will be the last. This year, I've also applied to more places, not just medical schools or ones with majors in medicine. I've already been told that I passed some exams, so it looks like I'll finally get to go to college."

"What about the medical schools? Still no word?"

Please don't say that, I thought to myself.

Sekiya-san smiled in self-derision. "The results I already got are all failures. But there are still some schools that haven't held exams yet."

"What? Are you sure you should be going out with me like this at such an important time?" I asked, unintentionally raising my voice in surprise.

Sekiya-san seemed to find my behavior funny. He listened to me while lining up the meat that had just arrived on the grill net using tongs.

"I haven't done anything but study for these past four years. If eating yakiniku with you for two hours a bit before an exam is enough to make me fail, then I wasn't going to get in anywhere regardless."

He had a point. Though I was talking about his mindset, more like.

"I'm tired," he said all of a sudden. Putting an elbow on the table, he leaned his whole face on it. "I wanna see Yamana."

The moment I heard him say that, I realized that maybe he'd called me here today for that—to tell someone how he really felt.

"It's great for girls. When they want to see you, they can just say so," Sekiya-san grumbled as he flipped the meat on the grill with tongs as if having nothing else to do.

I didn't want to see him be so negative, so I spoke up. "Is there a reason guys can't say it too?"

Sekiya-san stopped moving the tongs and looked at me.

"Just say it. Tell her you want to see her," I continued.

For a moment, he looked taken aback. Then, he stared at me. "Have *you* been able to say it?"

This time it was my turn to be surprised.

Sekiya-san looked at me with eyes filled with what looked like either self-derision or sympathy. "Tomorrow's February 14th, you know?"

On Valentine's Day three years ago, I'd received homemade chocolate from Runa. We'd gone on dates the following two years as well after making plans several weeks in advance. She'd given me chocolate those times too—not homemade, but from a popular brand.

This year, however, I'd yet to hear about Runa's plans for the 14th. And as if that weren't enough, she hadn't sent me any messages today either. Was that area manager keeping her busy again?

I'd never worked any jobs that involved responsibility, couldn't drink, and didn't know the first thing about the world of adults. It was frustrating.

"Have you been able to say it?"

As I lay on my bed at night with my phone in my hands, I recalled Sekiya-san's words.

"But if I told her now, it would make me look like some guy who just wants chocolate..."

And as I gazed at my chat log with Runa, racking my brains over whether I should press that call button or not...I got a call from her. The timing was too perfect—for a moment, I thought I was the one who'd pressed the call button.

"R-Runa?!"

"Ryuto! I'm sorry again!" she said. "The area manager invited me out last

night too...”

Her words startled me.

So he really had been involved...

While that instantly brought my mood down, we’d been dating for three and a half years. I had to show composure as her boyfriend.

“I see... That must’ve been rough,” I replied.

“Ryutooo...” Runa’s voice suddenly grew sweet. “I wanna see you...”

She sounded discouraged. I could almost feel the air trembling under her breath with my ear just by holding my phone to it. I felt a pang as I recalled what Sekiya-san had told me a little earlier.

“I want to see you too,” I replied on an impulse.

I could tell that Runa held her breath for a moment. “Really?”

“Yeah. All this time... Every day, I’ve thought about how badly I want to see you.”

Runa had a full-time job, and I had my own responsibilities as a student. I’d kept telling myself it was only natural that we couldn’t see each other as much as we’d used to as I desperately went about my life. But the truth was that, even now, I wanted to see Runa’s smile every day. After all, she was the one special girl in my life whom I’d made up my mind to treasure forever.

“Ryuto...” Runa’s voice trembled. But in the next moment, it took on a resolute tone. “Then let’s meet up. Are you free tomorrow night?”

“What?! A-Are you sure?”

I should’ve been happy about the offer, but the suddenness of it threw me off.

“Yeah. I was drinking with the store manager last night, and she said that since I’ve worked so much lately, I must be tired. She told me I could leave early tomorrow.”

“I see...”

So she wasn’t drinking alone with the area manager? I was relieved. The

manager of her store was a woman.

“Okay, I’m looking forward to tomorrow!” Runa said cheerfully after we agreed where to meet up.

“Me too.”

I was excited as I cut the call.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered if Sekiya-san had found it in him to call Yamana-san.

Runa and I met up shortly before 7 p.m. in front of Shinjuku Station.

“Ryuto!” she exclaimed.

We hadn’t seen each other in a while, and she was as lovely as always. I couldn’t say what exactly had changed about her, but it felt like she’d become even prettier than before.

She also seemed to have become even more stylish after she’d started working at a clothing store. Yamana-san and Tanikita-san had been saying as much since our last year of high school, so I could be certain my hunch was right.

“Let’s go, let’s go. I’ve got a reservation,” said Runa.

“Oh, okay... Thanks, and sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it—that’s just how excited I was!”

Runa leaned close to me to avoid bumping into the crowd. The fingers of her right hand interlocked with those on my left as she held on tight.

I could feel the touch of her skin. She was warm. My heart began to race as I once again thought how much I loved her. It genuinely puzzled me how I could’ve gone all this time without seeing her.

No matter how many years passed, I still loved Runa.

She’d reserved a table at a wine bar with a mature atmosphere. Transparent

wine racks were set up along a wall, and the bottles in them gave off a refined vibe.

We were led through the bar to a private room deeper inside. It had a sliding door that could be closed and was completely isolated. In the room was a table and couches on either side of it that could fit two people each.

“There was a private room available when I checked online while on the morning train, so I just went for it,” said Runa. “Someone probably canceled their reservation.”

“I see. Thanks.”

I nervously sat down on the luxurious couch, situating myself across the table from Runa. After the waitperson left, Runa and I both looked at the menu.

“The area manager often takes me here,” said Runa. “The marinated octopus they have is super good, so I wanted you to try it too. You like octopus, right?”

“Sure. I do want to try that.”

“Also, the grilled mushrooms are awesome! They’re big like shiitake mushrooms. I was crazy excited when I first tried them!”

“They must be pretty good, huh?”

We’d been dating long enough that Runa had a good grasp of my tastes in food.

“So, can I order what I want you to try?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“As for drinks...”

Runa opened to the page with soft drinks, but I flipped it to the one with alcohol.

“You can drink if you like,” I said.

“Oh, that’s okay! Let’s both get some nonalcoholic wine!”

Closing the menu with a smile, Runa pressed a button to call the waitstaff.

“I always get drunk from one glass, so I wanna taste the food today.”

I *did* think she was doing it just to match me, but as always, her smile was too gentle and precious for me to worry about that. However, while I did have an angel in front of me, there *was* something bothering me...

Everything Runa had ordered was delicious and to my taste, so I ate with relish. Once the meals had sated my hunger somewhat, I restlessly looked around the room. Though the interior was simplistic with basic white and black tones, the space brought you peace of mind. There were several geometrical pictures hanging on the wall—maybe they were modern art.

But when I imagined Runa eating with another man in a place with this kind of atmosphere, I just couldn't stay calm.

"Do you always eat in rooms like this with that area manager?" I asked timidly.

Runa shook her head a bit. "No. He really just invites me out on a whim, so he doesn't make reservations. He always calls a place just before we go there, and if all the tables are taken, we go somewhere else. You won't find a private room that's available unless you make a reservation."

"I see."

Her words brought me some relief.

"I just had my eye on this—I realized this bar had private rooms after passing it on my way to the bathroom once and I wanted to come here with you." Then, Runa gazed at me with a teasing smile. "What, don't tell me you're jealous of the area manager?"

"N-Not really..."

She'd hit the nail on the head. I couldn't put up a good enough front on the spot and got flustered. Seeing me like that, Runa laughed.

"Don't worry about it. He's just a cheerful middle-aged guy," she said. "He's got a real pretty wife, and his daughter's so cute."

"Well... Those kinds of things don't necessarily stop people from cheating, do they...?"

Runa got a gloomy look for a moment. “I guess not...”

“Oh...”

I’d had celebrities on my mind when I’d said that, but now I recalled that Runa’s father had cheated too. Thinking about how she’d react made me nervous.

“I mean, uh, I’m not, like, suspecting he’d cheat with you,” I said, desperately trying to smooth things over. “I was just thinking he might be sexually harassing you or something, and also hoping you didn’t have to deal with nasty people at work...”

Runa looked up with a smile. “I see. Thanks. You really are kind.” Her expression seemed like she was trying to give me peace of mind. “But really, there’s nothing to worry about. He invites the store managers and their assistants out all the time, so it’s not just me. And you know how these things go nowadays—if he was a pervert like that, it would lead to a scandal in the company right away.”

“Good point...”

It seemed that companies were much more strict with their employees than I’d imagined. Only having realized that now was a little embarrassing, but there was still something bothering me.

“B-But remember how you said he was ‘trying to figure out how you feel’?”

“Oh, that...” Runa seemed to recall what I was talking about, and a serious look appeared on her face. “Thing is...” she began in a slightly stiff voice.

But just then, a vibrating sound could be heard in the otherwise silent room. Runa rifled through her bag and pulled out her phone—it was vibrating with a lit screen.

“Oh, it’s my grandma. It’s unusual for her to call at this hour...” she said, gazing at the screen.

“Take it. It might be something urgent.”

“Right...”

After glancing at the door, Runa pushed the answer button. She must’ve

judged it was okay to take the call here because this was a private room.

“Yes, Grandma?” she began in a quiet and reserved voice.

“Runa-chan, where’s the weaning food?”

Runa’s grandmother always spoke clearly—I didn’t have to strain my ears to make out her voice coming from the phone.

“Misuzu-san asked me to look after the girls while she went to a drug store that’s a little far away... They both immediately started to cry and I don’t know what to do. Maybe they’re hungry? Misuzu-san never said anything about it, though.”

Runa was calm. “They probably aren’t, Grandma,” she said. “Misuzu-san feeds them at specific times. They’re probably sleepy right now. Did you try holding them?”

“What? Hold them? Which one?”

“Both.”

“Well, how can I? One is heavy enough. It makes my back hurt.”

“If you sit down on the couch with one in each hand, it shouldn’t be a problem. If you hold them against your chest and stomach, they’ll calm down and stop crying.”

“Easy for you to say... I’m not their mama or you...” her grandmother said dejectedly. “Hey, Runa-chan, will you be home late again?”

Runa glanced at me, then spoke up with a resolute expression on her face. “Yeah, sorry. I’ve got something important today. I’ll come home before it gets too late, and if Misuzu-san only went out to buy something, I’m sure she’ll be back right away too.”

“This is really too much for me... Looking after one would be hard enough, but twins... I doubt I can do this on my own. I’m sure the girls will be nervous unless their mama looks after them.”

“I’m not their mama either, and I was also worried at first. But it works out. You’re their family too,” said Runa. She had a gentle smile on her face.

“Children probably unconditionally like people who they’re around often and

who treat them kindly. So I think that even in extreme cases, a person can still be like their mother, even if they're not a family member."

Seeing the gentle expression on Runa's face, I could tell just how much love she always gave her half sisters. At first, maybe she had just wanted to help Misuzu-san. But she wasn't doing all that only out of a sense of duty. Runa loved her sisters, which must've been why she could put in so much effort even when she was tired from work. And right now, from this phone call with her grandmother, I could tell just how big her role in House Shirakawa was.

Her grandmother kept grumbling to Runa for a while until...

"Oh, Misuzu-san came back. Thank goodness..." She suddenly cut the call.

Runa sighed. "My grandma isn't good with kids. Even though she raised two herself." She smiled awkwardly.

But in the next moment, her phone started vibrating again.

"Oh, come on. What is it this time, Grandma?" she said into the phone without really checking who was calling.

"Sorry, Runa, can you do me a favor?!"

The voice of a young woman came from Runa's phone instead. It seemed like the caller was so desperate for help that Runa mentioning her grandmother didn't bother her at all.

"What?! O-Oh, hello, miss!" Runa pulled her phone away from her ear and opened her eyes wide when she checked the screen. "Is something the matter?"

"That cherry blossom display we're doing—I just found out it's not starting in two days, but tomorrow! I got a call from the head office earlier after you left. Kanna-chan helped until we closed up, but I can't force a part-timer to work overtime, so I let her go home just now..."

It seemed to be a work call.

"I wanted you to dress up the mannequin at the entrance since you have such good fashion sense... If you're in the area, could you come back? Please! I'll treat you to anything you like!"

After staring at the table for a while, Runa finally closed her eyes, breathed in deeply, and let it out.

When she opened her eyes again, she looked at the door. “Okay. I’m still in Shinjuku, so I’ll come now,” she said in a clear voice.

“Really?! Thanks! I’m so sorry I screwed up!”

The woman showered Runa with apologies until the call ended. After that, Runa stared at her phone for a while with a difficult look on her face.

“I’m sorry, Ryuto. I gotta go back to the store, stuff came up at work.”

“Okay.” I nodded deeply, having more or less understood what was going on. “Sounds like you’ve got a lot on your plate. Take care.”

Runa smiled apologetically at me. “I’m sorry. I thought we could have a slow, relaxed date tonight.” Saying that, she put on her coat and started getting ready to leave. “Feel free to finish eating this—it would be a shame if it went to waste. I’ll pay the bill too.”



“Huh? You don’t have to. I’ll pay my share...”

“No, let me. Today’s a special day, no?”

With that, Runa picked up the small paper bag that’d been sitting next to her purse and held it out to me.

“Here. I got you some chocolate.”

The paper bag had the logo of a famous, luxurious chocolate brand on it.

“Oh, thanks...” I replied, accepting it.

Runa smiled faintly at me. “I should be the one thanking you. I couldn’t work so hard if it wasn’t for you.”

Her gentle smile was filled with affection and sincerity. I’d once fallen in love with it, and as the feeling continued to burn within me, that smile had grown more beautiful and mature over the years.

Once I had seen her off and was alone in the room, I looked into the bag. Inside was a bar of high-quality chocolate and a small note card. It read:

Thank you for always supporting me.

I love you, Ryuto.

I can’t wait for when we can be together every day.

Runa

After reading the card, my mind went blank for a while. Then, filled with emotion, I quietly said, “Let’s get married.”

Both at work and at home, people needed Runa. They relied on her and she fulfilled her duties well. As her boyfriend, I had to strive to do what I had to.

I was now working in the editing department three days a week. I didn’t have many sessions at the cram school at this time of the year, so I’d put as many of my new third-year high school students on Wednesdays as I could and got shifts

at the editing department on days when I'd previously tutored those who'd had entrance exams coming up.

Incidentally, Kurose-san worked four days a week, so she was always there on days when I went in.

I saw her sigh as she worked.

It was 8 p.m.

"I hate how you have to do this after proofreading," she said, otherwise silently gathering completed proofs that'd been scattered on other employees' desks.

I'd only recently found out myself what a galley proof was—a sample copy of a publication that was created for review before it would be sent to print. Simply put, it was like an unfinished book.

Basically, one had to make corrections—even minute ones—to all manuscripts waiting to be published. Then, the completed proof would be submitted. Working on galley proofs was the most intense period in the editing department's life cycle.

This department published a monthly manga magazine for young people titled *Crown Magazine*. When a deadline for a completed proof was close, the air in the company would be strained. You'd see more editors that were in bad shape—some would pull all-nighters—and once they successfully met the deadline, the editors would go home looking like zombies.

The proofreading process involved the production of lots of galley proofs. And today, it was up to us part-timers to sort the huge stacks of galley proofs those editors had left lying around all over the place so that they could go back to business as usual tomorrow.

In fact, we weren't finished yet—we were very much working overtime here. At least we were going to get paid hourly wages for the effort.

You could say that, in the world of publishing, *Crown Magazine*—or "Cromag," as it was otherwise known—was considered to be the kind of manga magazine that anyone who really liked manga would know about. I'd previously heard of the title myself, though I'd never read an issue before starting to work

here. Judging by the lineup, however, it was the kind of magazine that covered a rather broad range of topics, and authors of once-phenomenally popular manga were publishing serialized stories about things they were into themselves. It also had picaresque novels with peculiarities you'd expect to be off-limits in a classic shonen manga magazine. At the same time, there were also works with a heavy moe focus.

The area we worked in wasn't all that spacious. The editing department's space took up about half of the fifth floor of the company's building and was roughly the size of two or three school classrooms. Aside from the editor-in-chief and other executives, there appeared to have been at least ten editors here, and some worked from home. I'd yet to meet all of them.

Right now, none of them were here. Kurose-san and I were the only ones in the room.

"Kashima-kun, how long do you think it'll take on your end?" she asked.

"Well... Things are looking much better now, so maybe an hour...?"

"Should be about the same for me." She sighed again. "Cleaning up is so boring. There's no creativity involved. No wonder the part-timers quit."

The fluorescent lamps on the ceiling routed through three different switches to save power. Out of all of them, only the ones directly above us were on.

"It's so dark outside..." Kurose-san's hands stopped moving all of a sudden and she turned around to look out the window. "It's even raining."

"Oh, you're right."

"Did you bring an umbrella?"

"I didn't..."

We were currently working next to each other. Kurose-san was cleaning up the galley proofs on the editor-in-chief's desk, while I did the same with those on his assistant's. Since the windows were behind us, we hadn't noticed the change in the weather. We hadn't heard the rain either—maybe the room was soundproof.

"Did the forecast say it would rain today?"

“No, they said not to worry because the skies were clear...”

As we talked, we could see a flash of light shoot by in the corner of our vision, piercing through the darkness outside the window. It was followed a few moments later by a thunderous roar.

Kurose-san screamed, holding her ears.

“Lightning, huh? You don’t see a lot of that at this time of the year,” I said.

Lightning was strongly associated with summer.

“Is this spring thunder?” asked Kurose-san. “The weather’s been on the warm side recently.”

““Spring thunder’?”

“It’s a seasonal phrase in haiku, meaning the coming of spring.” After saying that casually, Kurose-san went back to work.

That’s a Japanese literature student for you, I guess.

She’d always been the intellectual type, but her intelligence seemed to have grown even more since she’d begun college.

However, her composure came apart once more when the next bolt of lightning struck.

She shrieked again. Abandoning her work, she went up to the window and looked outside through the gaps in the blinds.

“Huh...? Didn’t that seem really close?” she said.

“Yeah...”

I stopped working for the moment as well and went over beside her, looking out the window.

A roar of thunder came almost simultaneously with the next flash of lightning. It startled her, and she screamed once more.

“It seems to be *way* too close...” she said.

Suddenly, all the lights on the floor went out.

“What?! Oh gosh, what’s going on?!” Kurose-san said frantically.

Another lightning strike.

“Aaahhh!”

I felt something bump into me. It wasn’t until I’d picked up on a sweet scent that I realized Kurose-san was clinging to me.

“K-Kurose-san?!”

I was about to pull away from her in a hurry, but she was trembling as she held on to me tightly.

“Did the power go out...? Please, no, I’m scared of the dark...”



Her voice shook, and she sounded feeble.

Then, it hit me.

Back in our second year of high school, Kurose-san had been assaulted by a molester at a dark shrine with no lights around. Perhaps she'd trembled the same way afterward as she was now.

I couldn't push her away from me. Stumped as to what to do, I looked up at the dark ceiling. And at that moment...

"Oh," I let out.

The fluorescent lamps flickered, and the lights came back on. The outage was over—maybe the building's backup power had kicked in.

"Th-The lights are back on, thankfully..." I said cautiously to Kurose-san, who was still clinging to my chest as she shook.

For a while, she didn't move. But once her shoulders shifted up and down a few times like she was taking deep breaths, she finally, quietly, said, "Yeah." Slowly letting go of my chest, she then took three steps back. "Sorry. Let's get this work done already," she said with an awkward smile on her face as if nothing had happened.

When we stepped outside after finishing for the day, the rain had already ceased. We were starving, so I accepted Kurose-san's invitation to go to the same izakaya as last time.

"I need to tell you something, Kashima-kun," Kurose-san said after she'd finished her first mug of draft beer. "I'm scared of men."

As I wondered what this was about, she lowered her eyes.

"Simply passing a man I don't know on the street at night is enough to startle me. It's weird, right?"

"Is it because of that molester by the shrine?" I asked timidly.

Kurose-san glanced at me. "Yeah. I guess that's when it started." She hung her head again. "When I was a freshman, I started working part-time at a stylish

café,” she said, keeping her eyes down. “I don’t know if it was purely a coincidence, but there were many extroverts there, and all the guys touched the girls like it was nothing. It scared me, so I quit in two weeks.”

Even I would want to quit in that scenario. People like that are just too different from me.

“Everyone in the editing department is a gentleman. Maybe they’re just introverts, but so am I. It’s a good match,” Kurose-san joked and then smiled in self-deprecation. “When the lights went out earlier, I was surprised. Surprised that I’m still not scared of you. I even clung to you of my own accord.” As she spoke, there was an intricate smile on her face with lingering elements of self-derision.

I recalled her touch and scent from when she’d held on to me earlier. It further led to me remembering that encounter we’d had in the gym storage room in high school—it shook me up and made my cheeks burn.

“Um, I...” I began in a shrill voice. “I’m planning to marry Runa after I graduate.”

I myself didn’t know why I said something like that. It wasn’t like Runa and I had talked about it. I simply wanted to do *something* to drown out the lingering sensation of Kurose-san’s body on mine.

“Okay. Congratulations,” she said, glancing at me with upturned eyes and smiling. “Heh heh.”

I didn’t know what she’d found so funny.

“All this time, I couldn’t tell what I should do with my feelings for you. But now, I see... I guess when the time comes, you’ll be my brother.” Kurose-san stared at the corner of the table with a fond look on her face. “Maybe that’s how I should act toward you...” After vocalizing her thoughts with a happy expression on her face, she looked at me and added, “Brother.”

Her smile then turned into a mischievous one, which shook me up a bit again.

Kurose-san averted her eyes from me and went on in a calm tone. “It’s not very consistent with what I said earlier, though. I’m scared of men, and yet here I am, being attracted to one. Even I think it’s weird.” She then looked off

nowhere in particular with dreamy eyes, as if she were gazing into the distant horizon instead of some spot in this bustling izakaya. “I’m scared of them being taller than me, of their broad shoulders, of their large hands...but some part of me wants to touch those things anyway. If those belonged to the one special guy in my life who wouldn’t hurt me, and who would instead treasure and protect me.” Lowering her eyes, she smiled bashfully. “When I touched you earlier, I recalled these feelings that’d been dormant inside of me.”

Kurose-san started fidgeting again a little, but at that point, her second mug of draft beer arrived. She began drinking it in large gulps.

“Ah, where oh where can I find a faithful guy like you?” she said after removing the mug from her lips, sounding a little peevish.

“I-I think there’s quite a lot of them,” I stammered. “Neither Icchi nor Nisshi would act overly familiar or go around touching girls, and I doubt they’d cheat either...”

Kurose-san frowned at that. “Nishina-kun still loves Nicole-chan, and you know that if I made a move on Ijichi-kun, Akari-chan would kill me, right? Give me someone else.”

“Eh...?”

“What about your friends from college? If there’s someone suitable, can you set me up with them? It’s about time for me to experience love.”

“Uhh...?”

This was starting to sound like too much of a bother, so I felt like changing the topic.

“Anyway, did you see the special feature in this month’s Cromag? It was in a galley proof from earlier...” I said.

“Oh? What’s it about?”

While I managed to temporarily shift the conversation...

Thirty minutes later, we were back.

“Hey, Kashima-kuuun! Set me up with a guy! Come *on*!”

Kurose-san was plastered, all right. She was knocking her empty beer mug against the table. Her cheeks were red, and her eyes were out of focus.

“K-Kurose-san... Calm down, you’re making a scene...!” I said.

So much for the claims of being able to hold her liquor! She’s totally a pain in the ass when she’s drunk!

Though, to be fair, she’d been drinking at a faster pace tonight than the other day—she was already on her fifth mug.

“Heeeyyy, are you listening?! Why aren’t you saying anything?!”

“Wh-What...?”

“I just told you—set me up with a guy!” she whined. “Surely there’s at least *one*! Some guy who doesn’t have a girlfriend or a girl he’s into.”

“W-Well, I do know somebody, but...”

The one coming to my mind was, of course, Kujibayashi-kun. I didn’t know anybody else.

“Then ask him right now!”

“It’s just, well, he’s not really the right type for this, you could say...”

“Just do it already! Are you my brother or not?!” she complained.

“F-Fine...!”

Starting to mind the eyes around us, I finally gave in. Taking my phone out, I opened the app to send a message.



Ryuto: My girlfriend's twin sister is asking me to set her up with a guy who's single. Would you like to meet her?

Ryuto: She's super drunk and won't leave me alone

Ryuto: So you'd really help me out! Please!

I got a reply from him right away.

Haruku: Sure

Haruku: When?

While I was already used to it and it didn't feel wrong to me, Kujibayashi-kun talked in a normal way when writing. *What a weirdo.*

And, actually, if he couldn't stand "normies" so much and always acted like he had no interest in love, why did he accept an offer to meet a girl? To my surprise, he even seemed enthusiastic about it.

"He agreed," I said.

At that, Kurose-san's drunken eyes lit up. "Reallyyy?! Yaaay! ≡" Still holding the empty mug, she called out to a waitress. "This calls for a celebration! Miss! Another, please!"

"I'm sorry, she doesn't need it! Please bring water instead!" I said.

I firmly resolved to never let Kurose-san drink too much alcohol again.

After that, I arranged for Kurose-san and Kujibayashi-kun to meet up the following day.

However...

The day after that, when I saw Kurose-san in Cromag's editing department, she came up to me with a scary look on her face.

"Kashima-kun... What was that all about? Was that your way of getting back at me for that time in our second year of high school when I tried to make Runa

look bad?”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“He talked about Mori Ogai for two hours and then left. Without looking me in the eye even once,” she said.

“Huh...?”

What the hell...?

I’d messaged Kujibayashi-kun asking him how it had gone and he hadn’t replied, so I *had* assumed it probably hadn’t gone well, but still...

“Oh, yeah, well... He’s a Japanese literature major, you see...”

My desperate attempt to defend him only worsened the look on Kurose-san’s face.

“You realize I am too, right?” she said.

“Y-Yeah, but he’s never dated anyone before...”

“I haven’t either, you know?” The frown on her face kept deepening. “But even I realize it’s not a good idea to go into a specialized lecture when meeting a member of the opposite sex. And I don’t even go to a top-level university.”

Having exhausted my ways of defending Kujibayashi-kun, I went silent.

Kurose-san cast her eyes down, looking hurt. “If I wasn’t his type, he should’ve just said so.”

“Ah, no. You see...” I began. “There isn’t a guy in this world who likes girls but isn’t into girls like you. I guarantee it.”

My words made Kurose-san go quiet for a moment. She blushed after a short while.

“Th-Thanks...” she said in a very thin voice.

“I don’t think he meant anything by it. He didn’t seem like a bad person, did he?”

“Well, I guess not...”

Nonetheless, Kurose-san didn’t seem quite satisfied just yet.

“I was serious,” she said peevishly. “I actually want to experience love. And I had hopes, since he’s your friend... I’m not good at dealing with guys, but I do want to try dating one properly.” She sighed a bit and had a somewhat melancholic look on her face. “It was such a letdown.”

Even I hadn’t thought Kujibayashi-kun would be a good fit for Kurose-san, but since I’d set her up with him, I felt really sorry.

“So, who’s next?” she asked in a clear voice.

“Huh?” I raised my face.

“You’ll give me someone else, right? You’ve been going to your school for two years, so there’s no way you only have one friend, right?”

Even now, as she was being downright brazen as she spoke to me, she looked exceptionally beautiful.

“So send someone good my way next time, *Brother*.”

Since she’d said it with such cute upturned eyes, there was no way I could refuse her on the spot.

There wasn’t going to be a next time, though. The only one I had in my arsenal was Kujibayashi-kun.

Next week, when we met up for lunch in the usual cafeteria, I made my way straight to where he sat before getting my own food.

“Hey, Kujibayashi-kun!” I called out. “Is it true that you talked to Kurose-san about nothing but Mori Ogai for two hours and then left?!”

“Indeed,” he replied calmly. There was a plate of pork cutlet curry in front of him.

“You realize it was your first date with a girl you’d never seen before, right?”

“I am perfectly aware.” He nodded deeply. “The moment I met her, I knew with certainty that a female so lovely could not possibly become my girlfriend.”

“Th-That’s not a light novel title by any chance, is it...?”

Kujibayashi-kun was well-versed in both classic and modern Japanese literature, so was naturally also highly familiar with the otaku culture of today.

“I really don’t think what you said is true,” I went on. “You’re a good-looking guy and all... Also, can you not call her a ‘female’? She’s a human being, like you and me...”

“Perish the thought. Whenst confronted with a wretched virgin fiend such as the one before thee, and a beauty as dazzling as a jewel, canst thou truly say they art both human beings?”

“Man... You’re not a fiend or anything...” His self-derision was amusing, but I had to be serious with him for once. “And besides, it’s not just you...”

I thought I saw a sharp glint in Kujibayashi-kun’s eyes, so I stopped myself there.

“Hm? Did thou sayeth something? A veritable normie such as thyself who does the deed with his beloved girlfriend day and night?”

“‘D-Deed’?! ‘Day and night’...?!”

I didn’t know which part of Kujibayashi-kun’s statement I had a bigger problem with. Either way, it seemed like that was his image of me.

“I-I told you I haven’t been able to see her recently, right? It’s not like we live together...”

“Uh-huh. So then thine bedsheets art dry of late, thou sayeth? A most delightful revelation.”

“‘Of late’ isn’t exactly how I’d put it...”

More like, they were never made wet in the first place...

As I hung my head in shame, Kujibayashi-kun stared intently at my face.

“Do not tell me...” he began.

I held my breath, wondering if this was when I’d finally have to come clean to him. I’d considered doing so at several points in the past, but I hadn’t quite managed it due to how much faith he’d had in me being a “veritable normie.”

However...

“Though I suppose it is out of the question when a young couple full of vigor has been in a relationship for three years.”

Having come to a different conclusion all on his own, Kujibayashi-kun then dropped the subject.

I’d once again missed the chance to tell him the truth. Then again, it didn’t matter. There was something more important I had to say now.

“You didn’t like Kurose-san?” I asked.

“Oh, I did. Alas, the path I took was the only one open to me. It was surely a more worthwhile time for her than if I had kept silent from start till end. Especially considering she did not seem to lack interest in modern literature.”

“Well, of course. She majors in Japanese literature at Risshuin University.”

“Oh?” Kujibayashi-kun seemed a little impressed.

Wait, they didn’t even get to telling each other what they were majoring in? This is so over.

“What about her name? You at least told each other your names, right?”

“Kurose Something, was it not? Thou told me thyself.”

There’s seriously no hope here.

“Look, Kujibayashi-kun.” I sat down on an empty seat next to him.

“Remember what you said to me when we first talked? ‘My name may come from the Hulk, but alas, my height leaves much to be desired. Had I been outright small, it could at least have been something I could joke about.’ *That’s* how you should’ve introduced yourself.”

Kujibayashi-kun went silent.

“So next time, just forget for a second that she’s a girl and that she’s beautiful and talk to her normally, okay?”

I did my best to make things easy for him to understand. It was like I was talking to a child.

Kujibayashi-kun firmly pulled in his chin. “You know full well there shall be no next time.”

“Huh?”

“Even I could comprehend that much. I have exhausted her patience.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily—”

At that point, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I took it out and checked it.

Maria: So, Brother, have you found me someone else?

It was a lost cause—Kurose-san had completely given up on Kujibayashi-kun.

Having reached that conclusion, I no longer had it in me to say anything to Kujibayashi-kun. He was being stubborn anyway.

Whenever I saw Kurose-san after that, she kept pestering me to “give” her someone.

I *did* feel responsible for that incident with the molester that had led to her androphobia, so I wanted to do something for her. But...I just didn’t have any friends I could introduce her to.

One night, I was lying on my bed, looking at my phone. After some hesitation and drafting a message in the notes, I copied it into a LINE group chat I hadn’t opened in a long time.

Ryuto: Hey, it’s been a while.

How are you guys doing recently?

I’m working part-time at Iidabashi Publishing’s editing department. Kurose-san referred me.

I’d thought I wouldn’t get a reply until tomorrow morning, but two “read” marks appeared immediately.

Yusuke: Long time no see!

Yusuke: Man, that's impressive!

Nishina Ren: Wait, you still have connections to Kurose-san?

Nishina Ren: Oh, right. She's Shirakawa-san's sister

Their replies came in so close together it was almost as if they'd coordinated them. They were so natural, as though we'd talked both yesterday and the day before that.

Looking at the chat history, I saw that the last time we'd used this chat room had been over a year ago.

Ryuto: Also, sorry this is out of the blue, but do you guys know anyone I could set up with Kurose-san?

Ryuto: She wants an earnest, faithful guy who isn't an extrovert. But you know how few friends I have...

Nishina Ren: That's a tough one, man. We don't have friends either

Yusuke: And even if we did, they'd all be creepy geeks. Good luck getting Kurose-san to take an interest in a guy like that

Yeah, of course that's how this was gonna go!



My situation wasn't getting any better in the slightest, but somehow, I felt happy anyway.

Nishina Ren: Anyway

Nishina Ren: There's something I want to talk to you about, Kasshi

Nishina Ren: Can I call you now?

Yusuke: What? You're leaving me out?

Yusuke: Is it because I'm a creep among the active Kids?

Nishina Ren: It's about Nicole

Nishina Ren: Take a hint lol

Yusuke: Of course, I should've known

Yusuke: So you're still at it

Yusuke: Good luck

Nishina Ren: You don't sound like you believe in me!

Nishina Ren: Have a little faith, yeah?

Ryuto: Sure, I'll be waiting for your call

As we stopped messaging and waited, Nisshi's call came in.

"Hey, Kasshi. Man, it's been so long."

"Yeah, sure has. Are you doing well?"

"More or less. Anyway, I got my driver's license during summer break."

"Oh yeah?"

"I've gotten used to actually being behind the wheel, so I want to take Nicole out on a drive. But you know how cars are enclosed spaces and all? I figure she'd be on her guard if we were alone together."

"Oh..."

He had a point. Maybe it wasn't so easy to invite a girl who had a boyfriend out somewhere.

"So I was hoping you and Shirakawa-san could come too. Nicole should feel safe with Shirakawa-san there, right? And you have your license too, don't you? If something happens, you can take the wheel, so that would be reassuring for me too."

"I hardly have any experience driving, though."

I'd gotten my license during spring break before I'd started going to university. That had also been the starting point of Runa's constant busyness, so I hadn't had much to do after going through my entrance exams. On top of that, my family didn't own a car, so the last time I'd driven one had been during my final driving test about two years prior.

"Well, anyway, ask Shirakawa-san to come. Please," said Nisshi.

"Okay," I replied.

I *did* want to see him after all this time, and it was a happy coincidence that I'd get another opportunity to see Runa too. Plus, I was curious about Yamana-san's current situation.

Once I got off the phone with Nisshi, I called Runa right away.

"Sure!" she replied. "I'll see if I can get half a day off on Sunday and invite Nicole! I'm really looking forward to it!"

While I'd grown estranged from Icchi and Nisshi, Runa still kept regular contact with her close friends from high school.

It didn't take long to arrange things with Yamana-san, and so the four of us ended up going on a drive two weeks later.

"Wow, that's a nice car," I said upon seeing Nisshi in the driver's seat of a silver sedan.

We'd agreed to meet up at the roundabout in front of Station A at 3 p.m.

"It's used, though," replied Nisshi. "My dad's into cars, so after I asked

enough times, it worked.”

The car was indeed a discontinued model that was popular with middle-aged people and the elderly. As someone who liked cars too, I could tell this was the choice of a real connoisseur.

“Man, it’s been so long,” I said.

In the span of over a year that I hadn’t seen Nisshi, he’d become a little fashionable. While he hadn’t shot up in height despite how much he’d wished for it, he was wearing a modern, oversized top that suited him well. His thick-soled sneakers were from a popular brand too. And sure, maybe he’d simply chosen his best outfit for going somewhere with Yamana-san, but he looked really stylish.

Runa and Yamana-san appeared together shortly after.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” Runa exclaimed.

“Wow, Kashima Ryuto,” Yamana-san said. “I can’t believe how long it’s been.”

Apparently, she went out to eat with Nisshi every now and then. I hadn’t seen her since the graduation ceremony, so it was a surprise to see how much more adultlike her appearance had become in two years. While she was still a gyaru, her look was now more refined and mature.



“Can I sit with Runa in the back?” I asked casually when we started getting into the car.

“Sure, go ahead,” Nisshi said from the driver’s seat, looking at me through the side mirror.

I wondered if he’d realized I was trying to help.

Yamana-san looked unsatisfied as she opened its door. “Ehh? So I’m in the passenger seat?”

“You don’t like being up front?” asked Nisshi.

“You know how they say people in the passenger seat have the highest mortality rate in car accidents?”

“What? Have some faith in my driving skills.”

“You expect me to have faith in a guy with new driver marks on his car?” replied Yamana-san with a laugh as she fastened her seat belt.

The two of them seemed to be getting along as well as always.

“So, where we going?” she then asked.

“For a drive, so of course we’re going to the beach,” replied Nisshi.

Runa was surprised. “Huh? But it’s still cold.”

“Eh, whatever. So, are we going to Yokohama? Or Shonan?” Yamana-san asked.

Nisshi shook his head while fiddling with the GPS. “Nah, there’s no way an introvert can go anywhere but Chiba.”

“You really owe Chiba an apology, you know?”

“It’s fine,” Runa said. “I love Chiba!”

As a congenial mood filled the car, we took off on our drive.

That said, the weather wasn’t exactly suited for it.

“Damn, it’s raining,” said Yamana-san.

I looked at the window and saw fine droplets sticking to the other side of the

glass.

“It’s fine; it’s just a shower. The forecast said it’ll clear up in the evening,” said Nisshi. We were still on a local road and hadn’t gotten onto a highway yet, so he looked comfortable enough. “Also, Kasshi, can you take the wheel later today?”

“What?!”

While I was surprised, Runa got a gleam in her eyes as she sat next to me.

“Yay! I really wanna see you drive, Ryuto!”

“Well...”

When she put it like that, I kinda felt like showing off a little. But I also didn’t want her to see me freak out because I was bad at driving—it was hard to make up my mind.

“I guess I did bring my license, just in case. And I’ve reread the driving manual,” I said.

“Yaaay!” Runa was delighted.

“A guy with new driver marks and a guy who hasn’t been behind the wheel since driving school, huh? Maybe today’s the last day of our lives...” Yamana-san let out an exaggerated sigh. She was unexpectedly pessimistic.

“By the way, does Sekiya-san have a license?” asked Runa.

“He doesn’t,” replied Yamana-san. “He said he’ll get one after he passes his exams.”

If he’d been studying ever since his third year of high school, then he certainly wouldn’t have had time for that.

“So it won’t be long now, right?” asked Runa.

“I don’t know about that...” Yamana-san said peevishly. There was a distant look in her eyes. “I try not to get my hopes up anymore. It’s not like there’s anything I can do for him either...”

“But it’s already a fact that he’ll be a college student next year, right? Since he passed an exam for another department,” I said.

At that, Yamana-san turned around, looking shocked. “Wait, seriously?!”

Whoops. I didn't realize I wasn't supposed to say anything...

"Yeah... He told me that himself. Sorry if you didn't know... Forget I said anything."

"Forget'? There's no way I could!"

"Maybe he was going to make it a surprise?" I said. "I'm really sorry."

"Well, guess I'll keep quiet about it to him..." she said reluctantly. "Which school, by the way?"

"He hasn't told me, but it's probably somewhere close. It was a backup option."

"I see... So this is his last exam season, finally..." Yamana-san sounded deeply moved. Her cheeks were flushed red, and her face was completely that of a young maiden in love.

I looked at the rearview mirror. Nisshi was keeping his eyes on the road and his hands on the steering wheel, not saying a word.

The car sped up after we got on the freeway.

"Wait, stop! This is way too scary, I can't take it!" shouted Yamana-san. She made herself smaller and held on to the handle above the window with both hands.

"Out of my way!!!" Nisshi shouted as he floored it. Satisfaction was written all over his face. He looked the same way he did during heated moments in shooter games.

"Are we gonna be okay?! Are we?! We're not gonna get rear-ended, right?!" Yamana-san yelled.

"I said trust me!"

"And I said there's no way I can trust a guy with new driver marks on his car!"

With the two in front engaged in a shouting contest, Runa and I looked at each other.

"Nishina-kun actually is a good driver, huh," she said.

“Yeah.”

I figured he’d probably practiced a lot to take Yamana-san out for a drive. I was a little jealous since I didn’t have a car.

We proceeded on the freeway toward Chiba without any major issues, but we did hit a few snags along the way.

“What the hell? Why’s everyone going so slow?” asked Yamana-san.

“The GPS says it’s a five-kilometer traffic jam. Maybe there’s been an accident, or a lane is blocked off,” replied Nisshi.

“What? We can’t just take the other lane?”

“Nope. People are stuck on that one too.”

Yamana-san sighed. “What a pain in the ass.” There was mild irritation in her voice.

But as the mood in the car started to worsen...

“Nicole, want some financiers?” Runa asked, taking them out from her bag. “I got these at the cake shop I used to work at.”

“Hell yeah I do! Everything from that place is great,” replied Yamana-san.

It just happened to be time for a snack, so maybe she’d been a little hungry. The mood in the car became harmonious at once, and I fell in love with Runa all over again.

Fortunately, the traffic jam cleared up in about twenty minutes, and we went back to driving at a high speed.

At last, after going through a tunnel, we came upon a bridge with the sea on both sides of it. Because of the poor weather, the water looked almost gray, but to someone who lived far from the sea, it was still a captivating sight.

“Man, this road is so cool!”

“It’s amazing! There’s water all around!”

“We’re on the Tokyo Bay Aqua-Line. Wanna stop at Umihotaru?”

“I dunno what that is, but sure!”

Thus, we headed to Umihotaru’s parking lot.

I hadn’t really known what it was either, but Umihotaru was apparently a rest stop in the middle of the Aqua-Line—the road connecting Kanagawa and Chiba. It really was an artificial island with nothing but water around it, so you could enjoy a 360-degree view of the sea.

“What an amazing view!” Runa exclaimed. It seemed like just walking on the deck was giving her a sense of freedom. “Look, there’s a place to set up your phone! Let’s take some pictures!”

“Oh, sounds great!” replied Yamana-san.

“Okay, I set the timer for ten seconds!”

“Hurry back, Runa!”

“Eh, wait! My heel got stuck in a gap in the deck!”

“The hell are you doing there?”

“Aha ha!”

Amid all the noise came the click of a shutter.

“Look at you, Ren! Your eyes are half-closed!” exclaimed Yamana-san.

“And you’ve got a face like you’ve been sentenced to three hundred years of hard labor,” Nisshi said.

“I told you not to make fun of the sharp look in my eye.”

“I do like that about you, though.”

“What a masochist...”

Seeing them banter back and forth, I felt like they were a good match for each other. They were like the kind of couple that fought all the time but still stayed together.

“Anyway, sorry I messed up the timing,” said Runa with an embarrassed smile.

“Don’t worry about it,” replied Yamana-san.

“I’ll take the next shot. Stay there, Runa,” I said.

“Ah, thanks, Ryuto!”

We took some more pictures without any further issues. Once we were done, we bought drinks and returned to the car.

The skies cleared up, making the evening coastal drive a pleasant experience. Nisshi’s phone was connected to the car’s stereo with a cable, and it played English music that even I had heard before.

“‘We, are never, ever, ever’...”

Yamana-san and Runa both quietly sang along with the chorus.

“Is that the only part of the song you know?” Nisshi asked with a smile when the song was almost over.

“What? I’m pretty sure *you* sang the first part of that too,” replied Yamana-san.

“It’s hard to remember the lyrics, even if you actually try, since it’s in English,” Runa said.

“I know, right?” added Yamana-san with a smile.

I wondered what I’d been so worried about. Nisshi and Yamana-san were both just as I’d remembered them. I’d probably think the same about Icchi and Tanikita-san if I were to see them again. I wished I’d gotten in touch with my old friends sooner instead of thinking there were some obstacles between us. Even if we didn’t talk about KEN or have any other things in common, we were still friends, like we had been. If we could spend time together and see the same things, that’d be enough to make things fun.

The realization filled me with emotion.

And so, we arrived at the beach. It was evening and the spring equinox had yet to come, but it was still colder than I’d expected—maybe the fact it had been raining until a short while ago had something to do with it.

Beyond the gray sandy beach was the dark blue sea. The water had white ripples on it.

“So cold!” exclaimed Runa.

“I’m gonna freeze to death!” added Yamana-san.

The two of them were approaching the water’s edge.

“Hey, it still feels like winter here! Does it really have to be so cold?!”

“I can’t walk on these heels here either. No way.”

“Me neither! Guess I gotta take them off.”

“Wait, isn’t it gonna be even worse if we’re barefoot?!”

The girls both laughed. Then, they moved close together as if hugging and started taking selfies in gyaru poses with the sea in the background.

Nisshi and I watched them while sitting on a piece of driftwood on the beach. The sea breeze was so cold that my cheeks and ears stung like they’d been hit with a sharp blade.

“It’s fine if Nicole loves another guy. As long as I get to be by her side,” Nisshi suddenly said. “We may spend time together, but I can’t make her heart belong to me. No one can tell you who to love.” Instead of looking at me, Nisshi was watching Yamana-san play by the water’s edge. “If you start wanting things you can’t see, I don’t think you’ll still be able to tell if those things actually belong to you or not—even if they do. You’ll start doubting the other person, and it’ll bring you pain. So I want to give instead.” After saying all that while hanging his head, he finally looked me in the eye. “I tell her I love her every time I see her, even though she shrugs me off every time,” he said with an awkward smile. “But it’s fine. The way I see it, the fact she spends time with me in spite of that is the answer I’m looking for.” While I listened without a word, Nisshi went on as if trying to convince himself. “All I can do is believe. Believe, and give. That’s it.”

The sandy beach was like a desert. There was no trace of the life-forms of all shapes and sizes that lived here in the summer. I listened to Nisshi’s speech while looking at the inorganic patterns in the sand—they’d been created by

wind or high tide.

“Even if you become boyfriend and girlfriend, or even if you get married... In the end, that’s how love is, I think,” he went on.

“That’s a big talk for a virgin,” I said.

At this moment, Nisshi looked to be a far bigger man than me. I became ashamed of myself as his old friend, and before I knew it, that anxiety had made me poke fun at him.

“You know, it’s pretty annoying when people look down on you like that,” he replied.

I would’ve had to be *above* him to be able to look down on him, and I wasn’t. But, apparently, that was his view of me. Then again, I supposed it was only natural for him to assume my own romantic relationship had progressed in the long time we hadn’t seen each other.

At some point, Runa and Yamana-san came back from the water’s edge.

“It’s sooo cold!”

“So, what’re we gonna do next?”

“It’s freeeeeeezeing! I wanna go somewhere warm!”

Nisshi smirked at all of us. “Well then, how about we go for some hot sake?”

“What?! You realize you’re driving today, right?! Are you planning to drive drunk?” Yamana-san asked.

“There’s another driver here, you know.” Nisshi looked at me. “You’re still nineteen, right?”

“Y-Yeah...” I replied.

“So then you can’t drink! Which means you’ll be driving on the way back! It’s settled, then!”

“Whaaat?!”

And so, without anyone waiting for me to agree to it, at some point, our outing had become a drinking party. We were now in the kind of izakaya that

felt very local and was probably visited only by, as you'd expect, locals. The signs outside it advertised fresh and local fish, so we'd come here for fresh seafood.

Since it wasn't even 6 p.m. yet, there were no other customers here. We sat in its raised seating area, and everyone drank according to their tastes.

"Cheers!"

Yamana-san had ordered umeshu, Runa had gone for cola like me, and Nisshi—as he'd proclaimed—had asked for hot sake.

It felt kinda strange seeing my old classmates drink alcohol like it was no big deal. The same thought had crossed my mind when I'd gone to an izakaya with Kurose-san too.

"So you drink too, Nisshi," I said.

"Well yeah, who wouldn't want to at least try it when they're old enough? Aren't all college sophomores like that?"

"Now that you mention it..."

There'd been that time with Umino-sensei, and then Kurose-san... So this was why I'd been seeing people from my age group drink as of late.

"So, anyway..." said Nisshi as if changing the topic. His face was a little red—maybe he was getting drunk already. "Starting in our third year of school, we're gonna take seminars and all. Kasshi, you already decided which ones you're gonna take?"

"Yeah, I guess so. There's a professor holding some interesting lectures in a general elective subject, so that's what I picked." I kept things brief since there wasn't really anything else to say about the matter. "What about you? What's the law department like?"

"Well, I'm planning to go to law school afterward, so I chose seminars a law professor is doing."

"Huh? Law school...? You mean, you'll be a lawyer or a judge?" I asked in surprise.

"Well, honestly, with the quality of the law department at my school, it's

probably gonna be hard to pass the bar exam on my first try.” After flashing a self-deprecating smile, Nisshi went back to his usual expression. “But the only profession in the field of humanities that can rival a doctor is a lawyer!”

Glancing at Nisshi, Yamana-san spoke up while resting her chin in her hand. “I keep telling you, it’s not like I fell in love with senpai because he’s going to be a doctor.”

It appeared Nisshi had been talking to her about his aspirations for some time now.

“It’s good to have a dream, though! Way to go, Nishina-kun!” exclaimed Runa.

“What about you, Runa? Your work, I mean,” asked Yamana-san. “You said there’s a lotta stuff going on these days, yeah?”

“Oh... About that...” Runa put on a serious look and glanced at me. “I haven’t actually told Ryuto yet—the area manager is asking me to become a store manager in Fukuoka.”

“What?! F-Fukuoka?! You mean, in Kyushu?!” I asked, freaking out.

Runa nodded with a stiff expression. “Yeah. It’s our flagship store in western Japan, so it’s a pretty important position... The area manager insists on me.”

Was this, perhaps, what she’d come close to telling me at the wine bar the other day?

“The current store manager and assistant manager will be transferring somewhere else in April. Something about sales being down a little. So, apparently, the head office wants to take drastic measures and send some young staff from a different area there to change things up. My area manager has been going out drinking with various store managers and their assistants, and he chose me as his candidate.”

Yamana-san praised her teasingly. “They really have high hopes for you, huh?”

Runa smiled awkwardly, but there was a little pride there too. “Heh heh. I’m actually really good at my job. I’m in the top five in Kanto.”

“Damn. Though it’s no wonder—anything looks good on you.”

“That’s not true. The customers actually try things on before buying them.”

“Well yeah, you’re a smooth talker too. You get them in a good mood, and they buy stuff.”

“C’mon, why you gotta say it like I’m some kinda swindler?!” Runa puffed her cheeks in jest.

“Hah hah. Anyone can tell you really mean it when you praise someone. Customers aren’t stupid enough to fall for obvious flattery.”

“Nicole...”

“So, are you going to Fukuoka?” Yamana-san asked seriously.

Runa hung her head, looking just as serious. “Well... I haven’t given them a proper reply yet.”

“So you don’t wanna go?”

“Ngh...” Runa groaned, pulling her chin in. She held her glass of cola in both hands and stared at a point near the straw. “I’m happy that they think highly of me. But...”

“Do you really have time to give it much thought? If people are moving around in April... That’s right around the corner, no?”

“Yeah...”

Appearing to have picked up on something from Runa’s indecisiveness, Yamana-san suddenly put on a cheerful expression. “Well, you’ll be fine no matter where life takes you! It’ll suck if we can’t easily meet up anymore, but we can still call each other, though.”

Runa smiled at her with a worried look on her face. “Don’t say that. You’re kinda making me sad here.” Then, she forcefully went back to a normal expression. “What about you? Have you already decided where you’ll be working in April?”

“Yeah. There’s a salon really close to where I live—I already landed the job. It’s by Station A again.”

“Oh, cool! Man, I wanna be your first client, since you’ll be a pro nail

technician and all!”

“What? You’ll come all the way from Fukuoka for that?” Yamana-san asked. “I’m sure there’s plenty of salons over there too.”

Runa smiled awkwardly again. “Like I said, I haven’t decided if I’m going yet!”

“Why not just go for it? It’s not like it’s forever, right? Isn’t it amazing to become a store manager at twenty?”

Runa hung her head with a serious look on her face. “I guess so... I *am* grateful, but...”

“I’ll come hang out with you. Oh man, I wanna have some of that Hakata ramen—the real deal! And isn’t mizutaki from there too?”

“Hold your horses, okay?!”

As for me, most of their conversation had been going in one ear and out the other for a while now.

Runa is going to Fukuoka...?

I felt Nisshi staring at me from the side, but I couldn’t look his way. Instead, my eyes were fixed on the glass in front of me.

Everything I ate after that—even the fresh sashimi and local seafood delicacies—tasted bland.

On our way back, I had no choice but to get behind the wheel for the first time in two years.

“Your turn in the passenger seat, Runa,” Yamana-san said, getting into the back seat with Nisshi.

“Eh...? This is kinda making me nervous,” replied Runa.

She sat in the passenger seat and kept glancing at me while fastening her seat belt. Her cheeks, illuminated by the light in the car, appeared flushed.

“Here’s the key, and here’s how you start the engine.”

After Nisshi's brief instructions, I started the engine and stepped on the gas pedal.

My body remembered how to drive unexpectedly well. I'd gone out of my way to take the driving test with a manual shift since I liked cars, so maybe it just felt easy to drive one with an automatic transmission.

"Wh-What is it?" I asked and looked at Runa. I'd felt her stare on me since some time after we'd gotten on the road again.

"Nothing," she replied, gazing at me. "I just thought you look good when driving." As I remained silent, stuck on how to reply, Runa smiled happily. "I've been looking forward to going on a drive with you since we were in high school."

"You have? I'm sorry."

I recalled that time we'd gone to Mega Web together. So much time had passed that it was gone now.

"Nah, I'm the one who should be sorry," said Runa apologetically. "I've been too busy for these past two years and couldn't find time to see you at all," she went on as I tried to figure out what to say. "I wanna be with you. I wanna have a satisfying job. And all this time, I've been thinking about how to make it happen."



When I looked over, Runa's eyes were pointed straight ahead. She had an earnest expression on her face too.

"I'm your ally," I said to her.

No matter what she chose, no matter which path she took... And even if her decision would put distance between us. But while I felt that way, my sadness probably still showed on my face.

"Ryuto." Runa gave me a worried look. "I already know what I want to do. But it's probably a more difficult path than the one I've walked so far...so I just can't make the final call." Runa hung her head a little. Her lips trembled. "I won't do anything to make you sad." She lifted her face and looked at me. "So don't worry, and watch me."

"Runa..." Feeling emotional, I nodded while keeping my eyes on the road. "Okay. I'm rooting for you," I said.

Inside, I felt conflicted. I wanted to end the conversation there and went silent for a moment, but then, I decided to say it anyway.

"But if *I'm* what's shackling you down and keeping you from doing what you want to do...I want you to not mind me. Choose the life that you want."

The two behind us were awfully quiet, so I checked the rearview mirror. They were both sleeping, leaning on their closest window. Maybe the drinks had something to do with it.

Feeling a little relieved, I said to Runa, quietly, "I'll always love you... No matter what you're like, or where you are."

"Ryuto..." Her voice trembled.

Suddenly, I recalled what Nisshi had said to me earlier.

"All I can do is believe. Believe, and give. That's it."

Maybe that *was* it.

Wanting something inevitably brought dissatisfaction, because no matter how close you were to the other person, they were never going to be one hundred percent the way you wanted them to be. And so, if there were words you

wanted to hear, you should say them to your loved one yourself. That was the only way, and Nisshi was amazing to have realized that.

Then again, until he'd become able to say those things, he must've desired Yamana-san's love deep inside so badly. It pained me to think about it.

The two behind us didn't seem to be waking up anytime soon, so I didn't stop at the service area on the freeway. I headed straight back to Tokyo instead.

Runa didn't talk much after that. When I stole glances at her face every now and then, it shone with the lights of the night city center.

Somehow...she looked like someone I didn't know.

"What?! No way! I pretended to be asleep and actually conked out! That's hilarious," said Yamana-san when I pulled up by her place.

Runa had put her address into the GPS.

"Me too," said Nisshi. There was an awkward smile on his face.

So they had shown consideration for us after all. I felt sorry about that.

"Today was fun. Thanks for driving." With that, Yamana-san took her things and got out of the car. "Oh, right." She felt around her purse and pulled out a bag. She gave it to Nisshi, who was still in the car. "Here. In return for Valentine's Day."

"What, really? Thanks!" replied Nisshi.

"Don't tell me you weren't expecting it."

"Yeah, well..." Nisshi laughed embarrassedly.

"I made these myself this time. Senpai's busy with exams, I've already landed a job, and I don't have classes to go to, so I've been dying from boredom."

"Seriously?! I'm really happy!"

"Just so you know, this only cost me a third as much as the chocolate I made for senpai on Valentine's Day," Yamana-san said bluntly.

Nonetheless, Nisshi had a bright smile on his face. "That's okay. Still, I'm

thrilled. I'll eat it with gratitude."

The look on Yamana-san's face gave me pause.

Wait...

She seemed concerned, troubled, or sad. It didn't really feel like the kind of face one would make at a guy who was just a friend. On the other hand, she was Sekiya-san's girlfriend, and she supposedly only loved him...

All I could say was that, maybe, relationships between men and women could have forms other than those of simply "friends" or "lovers." For example, there could also be "friends who treasure each other but can't date," or "people who wanted to date but couldn't and became friends instead," or "people who are only friends for now, but could date in the future."

Maybe there was no need to fuss over friendships between members of the opposite sex. At the end of the day, they were still friends.

Considering that I'd had to stop being friends with Kurose-san in the past, I'd never thought there'd come a day when I'd think this way. Had I grown up a little? Or had I become a little sullied instead?

Either way, had I not ended up in a situation where I could talk to Kurose-san at work, and had she not pressed me to set her up with someone, I wouldn't have been able to have a fun time with Nisshi today. Perhaps I would still have been exhausting myself physically and mentally at my cram school job, and upon coming home at the end of the day, I'd have been staring at the ceiling of my room and reminiscing about my high school days.

I wanted to thank Kurose-san. And I hoped that we could become friends all over again, without any other people in the picture.

Even if Yamana-san was Sekiya-san's girlfriend, she and Nisshi still had their own bond as friends, which they'd built up over three and a half years. Nobody had a right to deny them that—not me, not Sekiya-san.

Then, we headed to Runa's house. Once we arrived, she unfastened her seat belt.

“Here, Runa, I’ve got something for you too,” I said. I took a bag out from my backpack I’d had near my legs.

Her eyes sparkled. “Oh, thanks! Is it for White Day?”

“Yeah. It’s from Champs De Fleurs, though—I didn’t know you’ve been buying cakes there too these days. Sorry.”

“Nah, that’s perfectly fine! I love their stuff, so this makes me really happy!” Looking into the bag right away, Runa made a delighted face. “Ah, that’s the one that was sold out when I went there! I love it!”

Runa had a natural talent for making people cheerful. I doubted I would ever meet any other girl as wonderful as her again in my life.

And so, I would treasure her. Even if we couldn’t see each other very often anymore, I would only love her. That was the resolution in my mind as I watched her leave.

Finally, I dropped Nisshi and his car off at his place and had to go home by train all alone. This was yet another thing that made me a little resentful of alcohol, even though my twentieth birthday was right around the corner.

Chapter 3

Runa might be going somewhere far away.

It wasn't like we saw each other frequently right now, but there was a difference between being at a distance where, if something were to happen, we could simply hurry to each other if we had to and a distance that required a several-hour plane flight to traverse.

I missed her already. But for now, I had to trust what Runa had said to me.

"I won't do anything to make you sad."

Right now, all I could do was wait—to wait for the day when she would come to a decision in regards to something, and then tell me what that something was.

And as I spent my days trying not to think about things...

"Kashima-kun, are you free after this?" Fujinami-san—one of the editors at my workplace—asked me one day close to the end of the part-timers' shift at work. "I have a meeting with Kamonohashi-sensei at a French restaurant in Kagurazaka in a little while. The editor-in-chief was supposed to come too, but he won't be able to make it. Could you come in his stead?"

"What? Kamonohashi-sensei? You mean *that* Kamonohashi-sensei?!"

Kamonohashi-sensei was a renowned manga artist responsible for a series that had been a nationwide hit from a popular magazine for young people. It was a rather old work and had already finished by the time I'd grown old enough to become aware of things around me, but its popularity had yet to fade. Kamonohashi-sensei wasn't drawing anything for Cromag yet, but maybe that was about to change?

"That's right, it's the Kamonohashi-sensei you're thinking of," Fujinami-san replied.

Editors didn't normally call authors they worked with "sensei," no matter how popular that author was. Apparently, people of Kamonohashi-sensei's caliber were an exception.

"Sure, I'm available...but is it really okay for me to go?"

"It is. It's hard to get a reservation at that restaurant, and Kamonohashi-sensei said it would be a waste to miss out, so I should bring someone young along."

"Wouldn't Kurose-san be a better choice here...?"

"Yeah, but well, girls might have things to do. Like dates with their boyfriends."

I might have a date with my girlfriend too, you know! But sadly that wasn't the case, so I couldn't say it.

"Kamonohashi-sensei is a little too big of a persona, you could say. I figured it was better to bring a guy along," Fujinami-san added with a serious look on his face.

And when I actually met the manga artist in question, I more or less understood what he'd meant.

"A guy? Really...?"

When Kamonohashi-sensei showed up at our restaurant table, the disappointment on his face was clear as day.

"S-Sorry..." I said, getting up.

He then smiled cheerfully. "It's fine, I already knew who was coming. Fujinami-kun sent me an email earlier. You're the new part-timer, right?"

Kamonohashi-sensei was a large man who looked to be in his fifties or sixties. His stomach protruded like Icchi's used to—maybe he ate too many delicious foods. He was wearing a seemingly high-quality jacket. His face looked refreshed like he'd just finished taking a bath. Overall, he had a clean image.

After we sat down, Kamonohashi-sensei asked me a question. "So, you looking to become an editor?"

The three of us were sitting at an equal distance apart from each other at a round table.

“No, not really...” I replied vaguely. After all, I’d only gotten this job because Kurose-san had invited me.

Kamonohashi-sensei waved his hand in an exaggerated manner. “Then you should quit! You’re wasting your youth by working at a publisher in this day and age—it won’t get you anywhere. Just look at Fujinami-kun here.”

Fujinami-san laughed that off cheerfully. Somehow, I sensed a kind of love in the things Kamonohashi-sensei said, so even though this was my first time meeting him, it didn’t put me off.

While it was supposed to be a work meeting, Kamonohashi-sensei didn’t bring up anything specifically about work. Instead, he went on and on, proudly reminiscing about when his bestseller had been in vogue, then grumbling about the trends in today’s manga market, saying what was good or bad about the currently popular works. He even cracked jokes about his own declining body.

It was interesting to listen to him talk, and Fujinami-san’s unobtrusive comments to keep the conversation going were just right too. Listening to them was like listening to the radio, all while enjoying the rare opportunity to eat a full-course dinner in a famous restaurant. The fish meunière with its thinly foamy sauce was particularly delicious.

Fujinami-san had told me it was hard to get a reservation here, and indeed, almost all of the tables were taken. The rest of them had signs on them which read “Reserved.” There were four tables for four here, and two of the dining area’s walls were lined with tables as well. Even if you were to reserve the whole place, you probably couldn’t fit more than fifty people or so in this space. Judging by the chandelier hanging from the ceiling and the deep red carpet underfoot, this was a high-class restaurant that valued style.

We ate for a while, and as I was enjoying the main dish—a Japanese Black fillet—while feeling comfortably full, the door opened, and a new pair of customers was led in by a waitperson. A man and a woman sat at an empty table by the wall. I looked at them for no particular reason, but there was something about the woman that felt off to me, so I did a double take. Then,

my eyes became glued to her.

It was Tanikita-san.

Over the two years I hadn't seen her, her aura had changed a little. She had been a fashionable gyaru with a unique style, but now, it felt like her outfit and hairstyle were even more girly than before. But when I looked at her face, she was unmistakably Tanikita-san.

The man with her was an adult with an air of composure, looking to be in his thirties or forties. I couldn't see his face well because he had his back toward me, but the back of his suit didn't even have a single crease. He seemed high-class.

Was he her boyfriend?

It wouldn't really have been strange, but somehow, I felt a distance between the two of them.

"Thank you," Tanikita-san said when he passed her the drink menu.

Maybe he was her boss? But then again, she'd gone to a two-year program at a technical school for stylists, so she must've still been a student...

"Aha ha! Well, what do you think?! It's money! It's all money!" came Kamonohashi-sensei's loud voice at that point.

I hadn't been following the conversation at my table, but he seemed to be in good spirits and pretty drunk on red wine.

Lured by Kamonohashi-sensei's voice, Tanikita-san looked our way for a moment too. Finding this development undesirable, I instinctively averted my eyes. But even after I waited for a while before glancing her way once more, I found her staring at me with a frozen expression.

"What's wrong, Ayaka-chan?" asked the man across the table from her.

"Ayaka"? So it's not Tanikita-san?

"Oh, it's nothing... This aperitif is great." said the woman in a monotone way.

It had undeniably been Tanikita-san's voice.

Our so-called "meeting" with Kamonohashi-sensei that'd actually just been us eating together ended after exactly two hours.

"Well, I'll be going now. My nights have been crazy recently, and in more ways than one. Ha ha ha!" With that, Kamonohashi-sensei got into the taxi parked directly in front of the restaurant. He was gone moments later.

"Was that how you wanted this meeting to go?" I asked Fujinami-san.

He smiled awkwardly. "He doesn't want to draw manga anymore. But maybe one of these days during our occasional meetings, he might get a whim to draw something, and then he could ask me, you know?"

"So that's part of an editor's job too, huh..."

"Pretty much. At the end of the day, this industry is built on relationships between people. Though that probably goes for any kind of work."

We continued to talk as we walked toward the station.

"So you don't want to be an editor?" Fujinami-san asked me.

"Well, no, I actually just took this job because Kurose-san practically begged me to... I didn't really think things through."

"I think this job suits a guy like you, though." Fujinami-san smiled at me calmly. "Writers and manga artists may seem like they all have different personalities, but at their core, they're all sensitive people who are easily hurt. Some are stoic or hard to please, but as long as you're polite to them, it's pretty rare to run into one who's impossible to get along with."

"Huh."

"It's the same as with stories—you have to analyze people. Look at their works, their ways of thinking, their personalities, and imagine what kind of life they'd led up to that point. You get to understand their characteristics as writers and artists, and that's when you first become able to suggest that they make something that they themselves don't yet realize they want to make."

“Sounds like work with a lot of depth to it,” I said.

“Then again, I myself am still far from getting to that point.” After having said all that in a serious tone, Fujinami-san put on a foolish look to hide his embarrassment. “By the way, what kind of relationship do you have with Kurose-san? Are you two dating, maybe?”

“Not at all!” I really didn’t want him to misunderstand the situation, which led me to involuntarily raise my voice. “Her twin sister is my girlfriend.”

Fujinami-san didn’t seem to doubt me. “Oh, I see. Huh... That’s nice... If they’re twins, her sister must be very beautiful. I want a girlfriend like that too...”

“Did you know Kurose-san is looking for a boyfriend?” I said as if instigating him.

My question seemed to throw Fujinami-san off. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“She keeps pestering me to set her up with someone nice. So I’d like her to get a boyfriend already...”

Fujinami-san was a sincere man who didn’t seem like he’d be the type to cheat. I myself was out of options for who I could set up with Kurose-san, so all I could do was look for someone in her vicinity.

“I see... Then again, she’s a student and a part-timer...” he mumbled to himself, but he didn’t look unhappy with the idea. “Anyway, I’ve got some work left to do, so I’ll head back to the editing department. Thanks for coming with me today,” he said once we reached the station, and then he walked past it.

“Thank you for treating me,” I said.

Now alone, I was about to head to the ticket gates, but...

“Kashima-kun!” came a voice from behind me.

Turning around, I found Tanikita-san there.

“Huh? Weren’t you eating at that restaurant...?”

“This is important, so I had to leave early. Forget it all.”

She was making a scary face. Looking at her now, she felt like the same person she'd been back in high school.

"Are you planning to tell Runy and Mia what you saw earlier?" she then asked.

"If you don't want me to, then I won't tell anyone I saw you today."

What's this about...? I wondered, choosing my reply carefully.

"Just so you know, I don't do otona," she added.

"O-Otona...?"

"You can get five to twenty thousand yen just for dinner. And you don't have to pay for it either."

I hadn't the slightest idea what she was talking about.

"I-Is that some kind of job you have? I thought you were going to be a stylist?"

"What're you talking about? There's no way you can put food on the table working as a stylist right off the bat." She glared as she threw words at me with the same energy she'd had back in the day. "There's dreams, and then there's reality. Though I guess a guy of your level wouldn't know that." Having said everything she'd had on her mind, she turned her back toward me. "Anyway, that's how it is," she added before heading back uphill.

"What was that about...?"

Unable to figure out what Tanikita-san had meant with all that, I stood in a daze in front of the station for a while.

On the train home, I looked up the meaning of "otona," and the result was as follows:

Having a sugar daddy with sex involved.

"Having a sugar daddy...?" I involuntarily let out.

No way, right? I mean, this is Tanikita-san we're talking about.

I recalled how, in our second year of high school, she'd suspected Runa of having a sugar daddy and that she had come to talk to me about it.

"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."

She'd once said that, and yet...

I wondered what in the world had happened to her over the past two years.

Kujibayashi-kun asked me out to lunch.

"Kashima-dono. I am honored you would accept my invitation."

We'd met up at an Italian family restaurant next to our university. I had a fifth-period class later that day.

"It's not often you ask me out somewhere," I said.

Whenever we met up outside of having lunch at the cafeteria, it was usually after I'd invited him first.

"Well, um, how do I put it..." His reply was evasive, and he looked at me as I sat across the table from him. "I was too ashamed of my behavior from the other day."

"Huh?"

Is this about that time he talked to Kurose-san about Mori Ogai for two hours? Has it been bothering him all this time? What a conscientious guy.

"Don't worry about it. I doubt Kurose-san still thinks about it, anyway."

I'd said that jokingly, but Kujibayashi-kun looked unsatisfied. He didn't talk much after that, even once our food came.

"I am truly sorry," he said. There was a plate of steaming hot Milan-style doria in front of him, but he wasn't picking any up with his spoon.

"It's fine, seriously." At this point, I was starting to feel like I should apologize. "Actually, I'm sorry too. I knew you didn't want to meet girls and I set you up

with one anyway. So thanks for doing that, but really, don't let it bother you."

I wanted to eat my chicken, but couldn't start eating all by myself.

"—though..." he said quietly.

"Huh?"

I couldn't hear what he'd said very well.

"It is not as though...I had no interest in meeting girls," he said, hanging his head and fidgeting. "Only...I expected one who was a little more ordinary..."

"Huh? Was Kurose-san really that weird?"

I *did* think there were some slightly odd things about her, but someone who'd only just met her surely wouldn't be able to notice that much.

"No. I mean...she was too cute," Kujibayashi-kun said quietly, dropping the literary talk for a moment. He kept his eyes down, and his cheeks were a little red. "The moment I laid my eyes upon her, my sanity left me. I felt the need to put my excellence on display to maintain superiority. For it was the only way I could so much as sit in front of her..."

The pressure I felt exuding from him was nearly overwhelming.

"Superiority...? Why not just be equals?" I asked.

He shook his head firmly. "You know full well that in the animal kingdom, it is in the male's nature to want to display his excellence in front of his desired female."

"Oh, o-okay..."

He was speaking in a roundabout way, but I felt like I was gradually coming to understand what he'd wanted to tell me after calling me here.

Kujibayashi-kun had always made fun of "normies" as well as himself, but it wasn't like didn't have any interest in romantic relationships either. That'd been why he'd accepted the offer for him to meet Kurose-san.

However, she'd proven to be simply too beautiful for him. And because she was his type to such an extreme degree, he'd freaked out, and in his desperation to get her attention, he'd ended up talking about Mori Ogai for two

hours. That seemed to be what had actually happened.

So he wanted to explain himself?

Even Kujibayashi-kun probably realized he'd messed up. He wasn't so obtuse about people's feelings to not notice that Kurose-san's mood had quickly deteriorated. However, it seemed that given his lack of experience, he'd been unable to correct his course partway and ended up pushing through with the whole thing instead.

As far as I could tell, he probably hated himself for it, and he'd been obstinate on the subject for a while. It was only now that he was finally managing to be honest about it.

"I would like you to convey my apologies to Kurose-san for that day. And to let her know that my name is Kujibayashi Haruku."

"O-Okay... I'll tell her."

It was hard to tell him here and now that Kurose-san had already put him behind her.

"Incidentally, what would her name happen to be?" he asked.

"Kurose Maria. Written with the kanji for 'sea' and 'love.'"

"Huh. The name of the Madonna?"

Who...? Ah, he means the mother of Jesus. Talking to Kujibayashi-kun sure requires using your head sometimes.

"That's right. She's my girlfriend's twin, so their names form a pair."

"And what is your girlfriend's name, may I ask?"

"Runa, written with the kanji for 'moon' and 'love.'"

Kujibayashi-kun raised his eyebrows, looking impressed. "Interesting. A moon and a dragon, is it...? Quite the pairing. One too miraculous, if you ask me."

"Huh?"

Sure, the kanji for "dragon" and "moon" were in my and Runa's names, but I couldn't follow his train of thought here.

“Both are something indistinct. A moon shines faintly without showing its outlines. A dragon is a fictional creature, and therefore its true form is unknown. That is why when you combine those two kanji, you get the kanji for ‘indistinct.’”

Really? Damn. I’m ashamed to admit I didn’t know that, despite being a humanities student.

“So...is that a good thing or a bad thing?” I asked nervously.

Kujibayashi-kun shook his head calmly. “That is beyond me. But at the very least, I find it moving.” He then gazed intently at me. “I feel something of a fateful bond in your names.”

I went silent at that.

The love between me and Runa had been anything but fateful. Had she not borrowed my pencil that day... Or had my score on the test been worse than Icchi’s or Nisshi’s... Had anything gone differently at all, Runa and I would have surely still been practically strangers with a great distance between us.

But... When I’d been born into this world, if the one gift I’d received was a future bond with Runa, then maybe, no matter what kind of life I’d lived, I would’ve ended up with her in the end, one way or the other.

And when I thought of it that way...was it really a big deal if she went to Fukuoka? No matter how great the physical distance, it couldn’t separate us.

Because fate was on our side.

“Thanks, man,” I said, looking with gratitude at my friend who’d given me courage. “I’ll tell Kurose-san what you said earlier.”

At that point my phone vibrated—Kurose-san had messaged me at just the right time.

Maria: Fujinami-san said dinner’s on him after work today. Do you want to come too?

So he's finally made his move...

Since I'd spurred him on, I wasn't about to get in his way.

Ryuto: I'm eating with a friend today. Say hi to Fujinami-san for me.

If things went well between her and Fujinami-san, there would never be an opportunity for Kujibayashi-kun to improve his reputation with her.

"Is something the matter, Kashima-dono?" he asked, oblivious to the dilemma in my head.

"Sorry, it's nothing." I then stabbed my fork into my chicken at last. It was already getting cold.

At work the next day, I looked for a good opportunity to talk to Kurose-san.

"How did things go yesterday?" I asked.

"Huh?" For a moment, she looked puzzled. "Oh, the food was great. I wish you could've come too."

"Right..." That wasn't what I'd wanted to ask, though. "What did you and Fujinami-san talk about?"

"Just work, I guess? Ah, he did tell me about his love life a bit, though."

"What?! R-Really?!"

I was shocked, but Kurose-san looked rather indifferent.

"He said he hasn't had a girlfriend for years. And that even when there *was* a girl he was good friends with, he was stuck in the friend zone every time. I told him I knew what it was like, and that seemed to depress him a bit. Is it such a big problem for him?"

"Huh..."

It didn't look like Kurose-san saw him as a member of the opposite sex. Perhaps that would be good news for Kujibayashi-kun.

"Say... Remember Kujibayashi-kun, the friend I set you up with earlier?" I asked.

"Ah, the Mori Ogai one? What about him?"

"He said he never introduced himself. It's 'Kujibayashi Haruku.' His name has the kanji for 'clear' and 'sky.'"

"I see." Kurose-san didn't look very interested. "Forget about him, though. When are you going to give me someone else?"

"S-Sorry... I'm having some trouble on that front..."

Things were too hopeless here, so I wanted to change the topic. At that point, I remembered Tanikita-san.

"By the way, since we graduated, do you ever see Tanikita-san?"

"Akari-chan? Sure. We used to hang out a lot—sometimes even a few times a week." Her expression finally returned to normal. "I haven't seen her since the start of the second semester, though. She said she'd be busy looking for work, so I didn't think I should ask her to hang out. She hasn't called or messaged me either since then... Maybe it's about time I got in touch with her."

"Huh..."

"Why do you ask?"

I immediately got flustered. "W-Well, I was just wondering if she's doing all right..."

"Really? That's unexpected." Kurose-san opened her eyes wide. "I thought you weren't good with girls like her."

"Huh?"

"Even I found her a bit overwhelming at first..." She smiled awkwardly and lowered her eyes. "She may not look like it, but she's actually pretty fragile. It's humanizing, and I kinda like that part of her."

She is?

Just as Kurose-san had pointed out, I *did* find it a bit difficult to deal with girls like Tanikita-san. But what she said surprised me.

No matter what I did, I had Tanikita-san on my mind for the rest of the day.

“There’s dreams, and then there’s reality. Though I guess a guy of your level wouldn’t know that.”

Her words were lodged in my chest like a lead bullet. No matter how you looked at it, she’d been higher than me in the social hierarchy back in high school. I couldn’t imagine it had changed now, so what made her think otherwise? And why would she have sugar daddies?

I opened LINE and scrolled through my friend list. Finding the airsoft group chat, I tapped on the member named “A.T.” and sent them a message.

“So, why’d you bring me to a place like this?”

When I met up with Tanikita-san at a family restaurant the following afternoon, she had a sour look on her face.

“W-Well, it’s just, I was wondering what that was all about...” I said. “What I saw the other day, I mean...”

“I told you, we were just eating together. I don’t do otona,” Tanikita-san replied shamelessly, folding her arms. “We went our separate ways at the station, and I made ten thousand yen that day. Satisfied?”

“But that means...” I paused for a moment, gathered my resolve, and continued. “You’re...involved with sugar daddies, right?”

Tanikita-san held her breath for a moment. Then, staring fixedly at me, she awkwardly said, “Yeah. And?”

“Why?” I asked impatiently, remembering that time in high school. “Why would you...?”

“Because I want money. Why else would anyone do it?”

“But even then...”

“Everyone needs money to live,” she said while sighing and then unfolded her arms. “Even I had a normal job at first—I worked at a café. But when you’re still young and you go selling off your time in little bits like that, all one hour gets you is a Frappuccino and some gum. It costs too much for girls to live fashionably in Tokyo. You can forget about ever getting that brand-name bag you want. And with how many assignments I have at school, I can’t work a lot of shifts.”

“But if you graduate and become an actual stylist...”

Tanikita-san looked away, looking hurt. “Yeah. If that was what I wanted, maybe I would still be giving it my all.” Raising her eyes all of a sudden, she looked around the café.

On this weekday afternoon, this family restaurant was pretty full of people eating a late lunch or a snack. When I’d asked Tanikita-san where she’d like to meet up, she’d picked Shibuya—maybe she had another date with a sugar daddy coming up after this.

“In my first year at school, a graduate got me a job as a stylist’s assistant. It was horrible. You have to iron dozens of borrowed clothes to make them wrinkle-free and run around at work from morning to evening. They constantly shout at you too. Once you’re done, you have to go return all the clothes... And it’s not like you get to sleep at night either. I had to go three days without showering. You may be working in fashion, but there’s nothing fashionable about the job. It paid *worse* than my café job too. You basically don’t have human rights in a job like that.” Tanikita-san looked down at the clothes she was wearing. They were more girly than what she’d worn in her high school days—it felt like her style had grown a bit closer to Kurose-san’s. “These clothes, and this bag... They won’t suit me when I’m old. This is the only time I’ll be young. And I’m supposed to waste such an important time of my life on exhausting work without even getting to wear anything fashionable...? I can’t bear it.”

“Weren’t you looking forward to working as a stylist, though?” I asked.

“That was because I didn’t know what it was really like. If I did, I wouldn’t have idolized it.” Smiling in self-deprecation, Tanikita-san once again averted

her eyes. “The world I admired was completely different from what I expected. And when I found that out, I didn’t know what I was working hard for anymore. That was when a classmate invited me to work at a lounge.”

“A lounge...? What kind of lounge are we talking about here?”

“I guess it’s like a high-class hostess club. I don’t really get it either. Apparently, there are a lot of girls who are of a higher level than those at regular hostess clubs,” Tanikita-san explained briefly. “So, like, that classmate I mentioned? She always wore dazzling, fashionable clothes. She also had many brand-name bags that I wanted. She said a girl like me could easily earn that much money, but it was a bit scary to think about going straight to working in the nighttime entertainment industry... And since I couldn’t make up my mind, she offered to connect me with a sugar daddy who was looking to have dinners with girls, and that’s where I started.”

“Ah, I think I know how that feels.”

Tanikita-san frowned at my sudden claim. “Excuse me?”

“I have a part-time job as a tutor. I wasn’t confident that I could suddenly hold proper classes, so I got a job where I could teach one-on-one.”

Tanikita-san’s expression relaxed. “Oh. I guess maybe that’s kinda the same, then.” She lowered her eyes and smiled in a relaxed way. “You look ordinary, but you’re actually kinda weird, you know that? Though it was the same in high school.”

“R-Really?” I didn’t think what I’d said was all that strange.

“Then again, I guess if you *were* really just some plain old guy, you wouldn’t be able to date Runy. And look at you now—you go to Houo. Runy sure has a good eye for guys.” Tanikita-san hung her head and smiled. “I’m jealous of her. If I had a boyfriend like that, maybe I could’ve treasured myself more.”

“What about that K-pop band you rooted for?”

“They’re on hiatus because they’re all doing their military service,” she said with a stiff look on her face. “There aren’t any other bands I’m interested in, and I’m too busy to go looking.”

“Military service...”

That was an intense term for us Japanese. I could only go silent.

After that, our conversation ended up being all small talk. Once we finished our drinks, we headed to the register.

“Oh, right,” said Tanikita-san with a look of realization on her face when it was time to pay.

She searched her shoulder bag—the luxury brand logo on it was one that even I recognized.

“It’s been a while since I had to take out my wallet when meeting with a guy,” she said, looking filled with emotion as she had her eyes on the wallet she’d taken out. It was from the same brand.

“Oh, sorry.”

I asked her to meet me, so I probably should’ve at least paid for her drinks.

“Nah, we’re friends, so let me pay. I’d feel guilty to Runy otherwise,” she said with a smile. The look on her face was much more gentle compared to when we’d arrived.

We paid the bill and headed out.

Opening the door, Tanikita-san said, “High school was fun, you know? We all hung out and did lots of stuff.”

“What about Icchi? Are you over him?” I asked after resolving myself.

She shook her head without a word. “Of course not. He’s too much my type.”

“But then...”

“I’m still stalking him online.” After saying such a scary thing without any hesitation, she bit her lip. “I can’t see him in person anymore... Not with what I’m like now.”

As we walked down the streets of Shibuya, we passed a group of three high school girls in their uniforms. They looked at their phones and giggled a lot.

“I wanna go back to high school...” Tanikita-san said, watching them go by. “I

liked who I was back then. Even if I didn't have pretty clothes or brand-name bags."

Her voice disappeared into the cloudy sky of this slightly cold March day.

Chapter 4

A certain shocking piece of news came in.

Sekiya Shugo: I passed the exam for one medical school. It's in Hokkaido.

"Hokkaido...?!"

"Waaaaah!" Yamana-san wailed from the other end of the line.

I was on the phone with Runa.

"Thanks for taking tomorrow off, Ryuto," she said. There was anxiety in her voice.

"Don't worry about it. I only had one student tomorrow, so we'll just move that session to another day of the week."

It was already late at night. Since Yamana-san was with Runa in her room, she was probably going to stay over.

"Is it really okay, though?" I asked. "Wouldn't it be better for them to have a date on their own before he leaves?"

"It's okay, yeah... You can hear what Nicole's like now. She said she wants me to be with her..."

Runa had just told me we were going on a double date tomorrow. Apparently, they wanted us to make memories as four before Sekiya-san left for Hokkaido.

The news had been too sudden for late March. And maybe it was actually *good* news overall, but to Yamana-san...

"I keep telling you, it's not like I fell in love with senpai because he's going to be a doctor."

“I see... So this is his last exam season, finally...”

I was sure that it didn’t matter to her if he went to a medical school or not. What must’ve been important to her was that he got through his exams so the two of them would get to spend more time together than they did now.

And yet...Hokkaido?

Even if we talked about me...

“...the area manager is asking me to become a store manager in Fukuoka.”

I couldn’t stop thinking about what course of action Runa would take. Maybe Yamana-san’s current state was a reflection of how I felt myself. The very thought made me unsettled.

The next day, the four of us went to one of the largest theme parks in Japan—Tokyo Magical Resort. This time we entered MagicalSea—the sea-themed park that’d been built next to Magicland.

“Man, it’s been a while!” exclaimed Runa. She broke into a half sprint and spread her arms upon passing the gate.

“When was the last time we were here? I remember we came wearing our uniforms when we graduated,” said Yamana-san.

“Yeah! With Akari and Maria, the four of us! That was the last time for me.”

“Same here.” Yamana-san clung tightly to Sekiya-san’s arm.

I’d just seen her the other day and Nisshi had been with us then too, so I was strangely restless—thinking of Nisshi made me feel guilty, like I was complicit in adultery here. It wasn’t like Yamana-san was doing anything wrong since Sekiya-san was her real boyfriend. Maybe it was just the fact that she and Nisshi were close enough that they looked a bit like a couple.

Tokyo Magical Resort was a world-class theme park with a cat mascot. The first thing we did once we arrived was buy headbands with cat ears on them for each of us and put them on.

“Wow, Runa, you look super cute!” exclaimed Yamana-san.

“Yours totally suits you too!” replied Runa.

“All right, let’s take some selfies for Instagram.”

“Yeah! This kind of headband is so adorable!”

The girls were being loud and excited. Their headbands had ribbons on their ears, making them look girly. Since I was an introvert without the kind of looks Sekiya-san had, this was my first time wearing something like this on my head. I was losing my nerve.

Then again...

“Heh heh, it suits you too, Ryuto,” Runa said happily when she looked at me.

It *was* really cute, and if this was enough to make her happy, then I was glad I’d come along.

“Congratulations on getting into medical school,” I said to Sekiya-san while the girls were busy taking pictures with the globe.

Yamana-san had been stuck to him like glue since the moment we’d met up, so this was my first opportunity to talk to him.

“Thanks.”

“But...Hokkaido? That sure surprised me.”

“Me too. They only take a small number of students, and I didn’t expect to pass an exam held later on in the year.”

Sekiya-san was calm—his ronin life of many years had finally paid off. He’d been a show-off from the start, so maybe he was just suppressing his urge to get carried away...or maybe there was something that made him feel conflicted.

“So you’re really going,” I said.

“I am, since I got in. I’ve always wanted to be a doctor.”

“Right...”

This was making me feel sentimental, especially considering the thing with Runa, but Sekiya-san gave me a cheerful look.

“I’ll come here on long breaks, so let’s meet up again sometime,” he said. “It

won't be any different from now, will it?"

"I guess not..."

That was indeed the case for me since we'd only see each other once every few months. But for Yamana-san... For someone who wanted to see him every day, was that not a distance that would feel like they were billions of light-years apart?

"Senpaaai! ≡"

At that point, Yamana-san came back and clung to Sekiya-san's arm again. They looked as excessively sweet together as always, but today, it somehow pained me to look at them.

Sekiya-san was leaving Tokyo in two days. Apparently, it was too much of a rush to set up movers, so for now, he was going to Hokkaido and would stay in a budget hotel or something until he picked a place to live. At that point, he'd ask his parents to send his stuff over little by little.

"Ryuto." Runa had come to my side at some point and now held her hand out toward me. She looked cute, smiling with those rosy cheeks and a pair of cat ears on her head.

I unintentionally let out an awkward chuckle. Being such an introvert, I could never get used to being this intimate with my girlfriend in front of people I knew.

Nonetheless, I resolved myself and took her hand in mine.

"Yay! ≡" Runa coyly drew closer to me.

As we passed the entrance with its colorful facade, her perfume tickled my nostrils. It wasn't the fruity-or-floral scent she'd had back in the day—at some point, it had changed into one that was more intricate and adultlike.

We first headed to an attraction in the center of the theme park. It was a popular roller coaster that took you through a volcano at a high speed. Apparently, it had been there since the park had first opened.

Since the park had just started letting visitors in for the day, there weren't

many people here yet. Our turn to ride it came after we had waited in a line for about twenty minutes.

“This goes pretty fast. I’m a bit scared since I haven’t ridden this in a while...” Runa said after she sat down in one of the roller coaster’s cars.

“What, really?” Seeing the traces of fear in Runa’s expression, I started to feel nervous too.

“Is it your first time on this ride? Didn’t you say you’ve been to MagicalSea before?”

“Well... Even if I’ve been on this roller coaster before, I must’ve been in primary school at the time...”

Being a total introvert, I’d never had the kind of friends who’d want to go to MagicalSea as a group of guys. My only memories of this place had been from when I’d come here as a child with my parents.

“You’re not good with thrill rides?” Runa asked.

“I’ll probably be fine... Probably...”

I’d gone to Hanayashiki with some introverted friends in middle school. You could argue that the roller coaster at that amusement park didn’t count as a thrill ride, but either way, I didn’t think I had a problem with them.

“I can’t be sure because it’s been a while...” I added.

“So are you a little scared?”

“Nah, like I said, I’m fine... Probably.”

As we spoke, at some point, the roller coaster started moving. The first stretch was a mystical area that was like a deep mine with shiny, colorful LEDs. We were passing through it at a medium speed.

“Heh heh, okay, I’ll hold your hand, then. ≡” Runa smiled and placed her hand over mine, which I had on the car’s restraints.

Yamana-san and Sekiya-san sat in front of us, so I wasn’t worried that someone might be looking.

I lowered my hand from the restraint and placed it in my lap, returning Runa’s

grip. I could feel her eyes on me, but it was too embarrassing to look at her.

Immediately afterward...

“Aaaaahhh!” Yamana-san shouted from in front as the coaster rapidly picked up speed.

Runa squealed—she seemed to be having fun.

The coaster rapidly ascended, taking us outside in an instant. Once we were at the ride’s peak, I could see exotic scenery below—it was like I was in a different country. But there was no time to be fascinated by it.

“Aaaaahhh!!!”

The ride descended at a steep angle.

Runa gripped my hand tight, and I did the same in return. Even if we were to fall all the way to the other side of the earth, I wouldn’t let go of her hand—I wouldn’t let go of Runa.

Of course, our descent ended in an instant, and we all got off the ride with smiles on our faces.

“That freaked me out! I didn’t think it would go down like that,” said Yamana-san.

“You really shouted a lot,” replied Runa.

“It’s less scary that way, you know?”

“Sure is!” After their cheerful exchange, Runa came up beside me and took my hand. “Since I was holding hands with you, I couldn’t tell what exactly made my heart beat so fast,” she said in a voice so quiet that only I could hear her. Then, she looked up at me and smiled.

“I still make your heart beat fast?” I asked, quietly as well.

Runa averted her eyes from me and had a slightly awkward smile on her face. “Well, I still don’t know *everything* about you.”

Knowing what she was talking about, I blushed a bit too.

“Oh hey, it’s Magickey!” Runa suddenly exclaimed in a high-pitched voice as we walked around the theme park.

Looking over, I saw someone in the open space ahead of us wearing a costume of Magickey—the mascot of Magical Resort. There were staff members around the mascot as well as a crowd asking to take pictures with them.

“I wanna take pictures too!” Runa said.

“We sure got lucky!” added Yamana-san.

They both joined the crowd. After waiting for the people ahead of them to have their turns, the two girls energetically approached Magickey.

“It’s so cute!”

“I want a hug! ≡”

“Me too! ≡”

Magickey was supposed to be male, so seeing Runa cling to the mascot so much didn’t quite sit right with me. But when I noticed that I was being small-minded, I hurried to distract myself.

I looked beside me and saw Sekiya-san checking his phone with a calm look on his face.

“Thanks! ≡”

“Bye! ≡”

The smiles never left the two girls’ faces as they finished their business with Magickey. When they were done, they came back to us.

“Sorry for the wait!” exclaimed Runa.

Sekiya-san apathetically raised his face from his phone, and seeing that, Yamana-san gave him a teasing smile.

“Senpai, don’t tell me you felt jealous of Magickey,” she said.

He was indifferent, though. “Not really. That’s a woman in there. You can tell from the height.”

R-Really?! Now that he mentions it, the person in the costume did seem kind of small.

Sekiya-san was far ahead of me.

“Hey, you can’t say that in the land of dreams! There’s nobody ‘in there,’ okay?!” exclaimed Yamana-san.

“Exactly! It was Magickey himself!”

When even Runa was lashing out at him, Sekiya-san flinched all of a sudden.

“R-Right... Sorry,” he said.

And I learned that having a keen eye doesn’t mean you should say things without thinking.

When the sun rose high in the sky, we all got a little hungry and bought some things to snack on at a food cart.

“These spring roll hot dogs are great! ≡”

“Let’s have some of those ‘beach ball buns’ they’ve got over there too!”

Runa and Yamana-san were excited all the while.

“Here, Ryuto. Say ‘ah.’”

“Have some of these too, senpai. ≡”

I didn’t know how many times we’d had these kinds of exchanges, but I knew I’d never get used to double dates—they were way too awkward for me.

While we spent a happy time together, the theme park was gradually becoming crowded. I could tell both from my senses and through the increasing waiting times for attractions.

“Wow... It says it’s a 160-minute wait,” Runa said after seeing the number displayed in front of the line for the attraction we’d come to. It rendered her speechless.

“That’s spring break for you, I guess!” Yamana-san was nearly at a loss for

words too.

“So, what do we do now?”

“I wanna go on this ride, though.”

“Yeah, no way we’re skipping this one!”

“Guess this is where we should’ve come first once the theme park opened.”

It was a theater ride where you flew around the world on something similar to a hang glider. It was a fairly recent addition to the theme park and apparently had been constantly popular since it’d opened up several years ago.

“Oh well. There’s lines for every attraction anyway...”

We used the app to check the waiting times for other attractions, and a lot of them showed as being over an hour. So, we gave up and lined up here.

“Man, we should’ve gotten popcorn before getting in line,” said Yamana-san after seeing a family in front of us—a child was stuffing their cheeks with popcorn.

Runa and Yamana-san had both brought along the souvenir popcorn buckets they’d previously bought at this theme park.

“I-I’ll go buy some! What flavor do you want, Nicole?” asked Runa.

“Hey, I’ll go with you,” Yamana-san replied.

“It’s fine. Don’t you want to be with Sekiya-san as much as you can?”

Yamana-san blushed. “Oh... Thanks. Chocolate, then.”

“Gotcha. Be right back!”

As Runa left the line with two popcorn buckets, I realized that I probably should’ve gone with her. I wasn’t all that tactful to begin with, so I’d ended up spacing out.

Now that we had even fewer things to occupy ourselves with, Sekiya-san unlocked his phone. “Wanna watch some videos?” he asked.

“Sure! Are you good on data, though?” said Yamana-san.

“It’s whatever. Even if they charge me for using too much, my dad’s paying for

it.”

Sekiya-san opened up TikTok and started watching what was currently trending.

I kept some distance from them while more or less being able to see the phone screen. And after a while...

A LINE chat notification appeared at the top of Sekiya-san’s phone screen.

“Hey, who’s this ‘Marina’ person?” Yamana-san asked. The look on her face changed when she saw that.

“A friend from high school,” Sekiya-san replied calmly.

Yamana-san’s expression began to look suspicious. “It’s a girl, isn’t it?”

Getting a bad feeling about this, I took half a step away from them.

“We’re in a group chat. There’re dozens of people there, so there’s always someone talking.”

Sekiya-san had given her a casual reply, but Yamana-san looked completely serious.

“Why haven’t you turned off the notifications?” she asked.

“Well, what if someone starts talking about me? When I’m studying, I set it to Do Not Disturb so it doesn’t bother me.”

“Then do it now too.”

“It’s okay to get notifications now, though, since we’re just waiting, right?”

“We’re not ‘just waiting’—we’re on a date, no?”

They’d both stood their ground for a while, but eventually, Sekiya-san finally gave in.

“Okay,” he said, setting his phone to Do Not Disturb.

But Yamana-san didn’t seem satisfied quite yet.

“I’ve seen that name before,” she said, bringing the topic up again right away. “You got messages from her plenty of times when we were together.”

They had moved way past TikTok now.

“Like I said, it’s a group chat. She was talking to her other friends,” Sekiya-san said. He looked fed up with the topic.

“You told me not to message you because you’ve been busy with studying, so why is it okay if you see people say things in a group chat?”

“Because if it’s from you, then I feel the need to write a reply. With a group chat, I can just watch people talk and not say anything myself.”

“If you don’t have to say anything to them, why not just turn off notifications in the first place?”

“Like I said...” Sekiya-san looked tired of the argument.

At that point...

“I got popcorn! There was a huge line over there!” Runa had returned with two buckets of popcorn. “I had to think about which one to get, but you gotta go with the caramel flavor first, right? Here, say ‘ah.’”

“Ah...” Yamana-san’s best friend was holding popcorn up to her mouth so she had to open it, but she still didn’t look happy. As she chewed, though, a smile finally returned to her face. “Yeah. You’re right about that,” she said.

“Ryuto, want some? And you too, Sekiya-san!” Runa presented her open bucket to us.

“Oh, thanks,” I said.

“Thanks...” added Sekiya-san.

The caramel-flavored popcorn felt somehow nostalgic and relievingly sweet.

“You want some of this too?” Yamana-san asked Sekiya-san. She opened the bucket she’d gotten back from Runa and offered him some popcorn.

“Sure...” he replied a bit awkwardly and then brought some popcorn to his mouth.

By the time we had gone on the ride we’d lined up for, it was already evening. And while it had been fun, I honestly wasn’t sure it had been worth the 160-minute wait. Maybe it was because I wasn’t all that familiar with the world of

dreams and magic.

We went to get dinner at a nearby restaurant in an area that resembled an Italian port city. The main things on the menu seemed to be pizzas and spaghetti. There was a second-floor loft with some tables overlooking the first floor, and that was where we sat.

The sun had already set, and while these coastal buildings would normally slowly fade into the twilight, they instead started to shine dazzlingly due to the countless lights they'd been decorated with. Their outlines stood out in the dark.

"Well, I'm full!" Runa exclaimed, satisfaction in her voice. We'd shared some pizza and pasta and had just finished eating most of it. "I gotta go to the restroom." She got up with a light motion and took her bag.

"Okay." As Yamana-san watched her leave, something on a table in the back caught her eye. "Hey, that's really cute. Is that a drink?"

I looked closely and saw a cup on that table that had a colorful illustration of Magickey on it. It was probably either a drink or a dessert.

"Want me to get one of those for you?" Sekiya-san asked her, getting up.

"Is that okay?" replied Yamana-san.

"Sure." He then looked at me. "I'll get one for your girlfriend too." With that, he went down to the first floor.

"Oh, ah, sorr—" I began.

"Yay! Me and Runa'll match!" Yamana-san exclaimed cheerfully, but then, she looked downcast all of a sudden. "I wonder if he just wanted to put me back in a good mood..."

Guess she's talking about Sekiya-san.

Sure enough, the air between them had been a little strained since earlier when we'd been waiting in line for that ride.

"I'm just worried," Yamana-san said quietly after Sekiya-san had fully disappeared from view. "Because, unlike me, he's been with other girls. I can't help thinking that one of his old classmates from high school might be an ex."

Maybe I should've assumed she was talking to herself and paid no attention. But I felt the need to say something to her, so I searched for the right words. After all, she was feeling the very way that I myself used to feel in the past.

"I was like that too."

Yamana-san looked surprised—she didn't seem to have expected a reply from me.

"When I only just started dating Runa...I sometimes felt such worries toward her too," I said.

I still vividly remembered the beginning of summer when I'd been a high school sophomore. It'd been the most bittersweet time of my life.

"I wasn't confident that I could be equals with her since I'd never been with anyone before... I saw her as being ahead of me because she had experience with other guys. But preconceptions like that get in the way of properly seeing the person in front of you."

Yamana-san looked on with interest, resting her chin on her hand.

I continued speaking. "The past is in the past... Thinking about what your partner's been through and treating it as if it's still happening doesn't benefit you or them in any way. I want to be with Runa, not her exes, so that's the conclusion I reached after thinking a lot on the subject," I said, finishing my speech while thinking through it.

Yamana-san watched me without a word for a while, but eventually, she spoke up. "You know, I've always thought you were weird ever since I first talked to you." Lifting her head from her hand, she smiled a little. "But now, I realize that you're not weird—you're *wise*. Boundlessly so."

"Huh...?" I was confused—I didn't expect to get complimented here.

Yamana-san seemed to find me funny. "I was bad at studying, but I'm still confident I've got an eye for people." She lowered her gaze and smiled softly. "I think I know why Runa chose you, and why senpai became friends with you too. I'm jealous." The usual confident expression on her face had now been replaced with a meek one. "If I wasn't a girl, I'm sure I would've never grown close to senpai."

“What do you mean?”

Yamana-san smiled at me. “We live in different worlds. At some point, that became true for you and me too.”

Unable to find the right words, I felt like I missed the moment where I could say something.

“Fools don’t act like fools because they like to,” she continued. “There’s just no other way. You can’t escape it. Because you don’t know what you’re supposed to do. That’s why they continue to be fools.” She spoke while keeping her eyes down, and despite what she was saying, the expression on her face was peaceful. “Runa is a fool too, but you’re nice, so I’m sure you say things in a way she can understand. Like you did for me just now.” Making eye contact with me for a bit, she smiled.

When had she learned to smile like that? Or maybe... Maybe nothing had changed about her, and instead, it was our relationship that had changed. Perhaps it was different than the first time we’d talked. Did she now see me not just as her best friend’s boyfriend, but as her own friend?

“If senpai was nice like that too...I’m sure things would’ve been better for me...” Her straight hair fluttered in the night breeze that came off the sea. “But I love him, so what can I do...?”

There was warmth in the wind hitting my cheeks, which signaled the coming of spring. But maybe that warmth wasn’t reaching the heart of the girl in front of me.

“I guess I have to learn to put up with this sadness...if I want to go on loving him...” said Yamana-san, as if to convince herself.

As the evening’s bright coastal scenery reflected in her eyes, her face looked much more mature than it had in high school.

When we left the restaurant, it looked as though the sea were surrounded by jewels tonight.

“Wow!” Runa’s eyes sparkled and she took out her phone.

“Hey, it should look awesome from here! C’mere, Runa!” Yamana-san said, calling her over.

The girls started taking selfies with the nighttime scenery in the background. As I watched from some distance away, Sekiya-san came up to me.

“Sorry about today,” he said. “Things got messy and all...”

“It’s okay...” I knew he was talking about when we’d waited in line for that ride, so I wanted to say something supportive. “I’m sure Yamana-san is worried too.”

“Yeah. She probably can’t have faith in me... We haven’t spent enough time together for that, after all.” Sekiya-san looked away a little. “I really love her, though. I wanna marry her.”

I couldn’t see his expression, but his voice was gentle.

“Have you told her that?” I asked.

He turned to me and let out a self-deprecating chuckle. “Of course not. I’m a ronin who leeches off his parents.”

“That won’t be the case anymore, though, will it?”

“Only starting in April,” he replied with a stiff voice before turning to the side. “When it was hard, I often imagined how things could be. We’d get married, have children, I’d be a doctor... I’d come home and she’d be there, taking care of our kids, making dinner, and waiting for me... The mental image made my fatigue disappear...” Sekiya-san laughed in a self-mocking way as if to hide his awkwardness. “Imagining a future like that is how I’ve managed to do my best for the past three and a half years. I wanted to make it happen.” His eyes were fixed on Yamana-san—she was having fun with Runa and the seaside railing was behind their backs.

“Have you said it to—”

“Like I said, there’s no way I could,” Sekiya-san said, interrupting me with a smile. “That would be way too cringe. It’s not my style.”

“But if you don’t say it, she’ll never know.”

“Maybe...” Laughing at himself a little, he slumped his shoulders. His eyes fell

to the ground below him. “She came to my place on Valentine’s Day. It’s always like that—when I miss her, she shows up of her own accord. I’ve been dependent on that... I don’t know what to do now.”

Ah. So he couldn’t say it.

“Have you been able to say it?”

His words had given me a push on the back that time, but as for Sekiya-san himself...

“I wonder what’ll happen to us when we’re so far apart that we can’t just see each other whenever. She’s not that strong either, mentally.”

“You could go see her like you did when we were on that school trip, if push comes to shove,” I suggested.

“Med students are different from ronins. I won’t be able to just drop my classes and assignments and go,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone. His lips turned up into a smile as his eyes remained pointed at the ground. “The next six years are gonna be rough... And I might become an intern there too.”

“No way...”

I’d heard that, unlike students at colleges with four-year programs, medical students apparently had to study for six years. Then, they had to pass a national exam and do a two-year internship before they could get a job in the field.

“So that’s eight years in all...” I said.

Eight years ago, I’d been finishing up primary school. Back then, I couldn’t have imagined what I’d be like eight years into the future.

Did Sekiya-san and Yamana-san have to spend such a long time away from each other—so long that it’d make the future impossible to predict? And just when they’d thought they could finally be together too...

“Sorry for the wait!” exclaimed Runa. She and Yamana-san had just come back after finishing taking pictures.

“We had to take a ton because the camera shakes so much! My phone gallery is packed with pics now!” added Yamana-san.

“Here, let me choose some... How about this one?” said Sekiya-san.

“What?! But it’s super blurry!”

“It makes you look more beautiful, though.”

“Why you gotta be like that, senpai?!”

When these two were together, Yamana-san looked completely different from when she was with Nisshi. But she and Sekiya-san must’ve always been like this, ever since when she’d been the manager of their ping-pong club in middle school.

“Hey, the show’s starting! Let’s go over there!” Runa then pulled me there by the arm.

The open space next to the shore was already full of people.

Runa was amazed. “Wow!”

Countless decorative lights went dark at once, leaving only the ones illuminating the show that was starting by the sea. A tune that felt like an amalgamation of dreams and magic started playing at a very high volume. For the next thirty minutes, we watched as Magickey rode a boat while his friends came aboard one after another.

Not long after it wrapped up, the last few fireworks shot up above the theme park.

“They’re so pretty!” said Runa, her face illuminated by the explosions.

Seeing this, I recalled one of the summers in my high school years.

“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...”

Runa and I had seen fireworks countless times together since then. Every time I’d seen them reflected in her large eyes, I’d thought about how much I loved her. I no longer cared that I wasn’t the first guy she’d seen fireworks with.

However, I hated the idea of us not being able to watch fireworks together anymore. I wanted us to always be together like this, at least in our hearts.

“Hm?” Runa looked confused as to why I’d been only looking at her face instead of above.

“It’s nothing.” I meant to smile in a calming way but didn’t manage to. My mouth contorted instead.

As Runa gazed at me, there seemed to be something on her mind.

I loved her and didn’t want her to go anywhere. So...

“Huh...?” she let out when I suddenly put my hand on her shoulder and pulled her toward me.

Sekiya-san and Yamana-san were in front of us, but even so, there were plenty of strangers nearby. Had I been the same as I’d been back in the day, I surely wouldn’t have been able to do something like this with so many people around.

“I guess I have to learn to put up with this sadness...if I want to go on loving him...”

“I wonder what’ll happen to us when we’re so far apart that we can’t just see each other whenever.”

It seemed that I’d grown a little worried myself after having watched Yamana-san and Sekiya-san today.

“Ryuto...?”

Feeling Runa’s eyes on me, I looked up at the fireworks and wrapped an arm around her shoulders without a word.

“They were super pretty!” exclaimed Runa.

“It was crazy!” added Yamana-san.

The two of them sounded thrilled as we headed to the entrance amid the crowd after the fireworks were over.

“MagicalSea and Magicland are cool and all, but how about we go to Universal next time?” Yamana-san suggested.

Runa’s eyes sparkled. “Sounds great! On summer break, then?”

“It’s in Osaka, so I’m not sure we can go and come back on the same day...”

“Yeah. Let’s get rooms next to each other and go between them until we go to bed.”

“You mean like a room for guys and a room for girls?”

“It’s not a school trip, you know.” Yamana-san laughed. “Obviously, I mean a room for each couple.”

Runa blushed. “R-Right... Of course.”

I started fidgeting too after hearing all that.

Yamana-san and Sekiya-san had apparently booked a room in a nearby hotel tonight. Sekiya-san was leaving in two days, so they were probably going to be together until then.

“What’re you guys gonna do after this?” he asked when we were close to the entrance.

I stopped. “Oh, I just recalled something I need to do.”

Runa stopped beside me too, surprised. “Huh? What is it, Ryuto?”

“You guys go on without us. Let’s split up here for today.”

“Huh? What’re you up to?” Yamana-san asked.

While she was pressing me for answers with a puzzled look on her face, Sekiya-san seemed to have picked up on something.

“Let’s go,” he said, taking her by the arm. “See ya guys. Thanks for today.”

“Yeah, see you in two days.”

Because in two days, I’d be seeing him off.

“Bye-bye, Nicole!” exclaimed Runa.

“Later!” replied Yamana-san.

We waved goodbye as they left.

“So, what is it that you wanted to do?” asked Runa.

“Right, uh, well...”

My eyes wandered. It wasn't like I had a plan, but I wanted to do *something*. I had to let Runa know how I felt right now. With impatience being my driving force, I spun around so my back was to her.

"Wait here a minute! I'll be right back!"

"Huh?!" came Runa's confused voice behind me as I took out my phone.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" I said as I returned. I was totally out of breath.

Runa smiled at me. She was standing right where I'd left her, holding a drink in a paper cup. "Welcome back! Hey, I bought a bubble tea. You want a—"

"Here!" I said, holding out what I'd been hiding behind me.

"Huh...? A glass shoe?" Runa had an amazed look on her face. "You bought this?"

"Yeah. I wanted to give it to you."

I took the bubble tea from her hand and gave her the glass shoe instead.

"Thanks..." she said. "It's pretty, but...why?"

She had all the right to ask that.

"But if you don't say it, she'll never know."

What I'd said to Sekiya-san earlier came back to hit me like a boomerang.

"Um, the glass shoe is the clue the prince had when he went looking for the girl he wanted to marry..." I began.

"Yeah?"

"He wanted to marry the girl it belonged to, so..."

Even I didn't know what I was saying now, so I resolved myself to get to the point.

"When I graduate... Let's g-get married."

I didn't have it in me to look at Runa's face, so I couldn't raise my eyes any

higher than her skirt.

“Ryuto...”

When I heard Runa’s amazed voice, I finally looked up.

While she was surprised, there was a joyful look on her face too. Relieved by it, I gazed at her.

“So, um, if you’ll be in Fukuoka, I’ll look for a job there...” I said haltingly. My impatience was making it difficult for me to speak coherently. “So, it’s okay! I’ll be starting my third year of school in April, so there’s just two years left!”

Runa kept silent as I continued to talk.

“I’ll come see you during summer breaks, and also during winter ones, and for spring ones too... I’ll save up money to visit and even come every week if I’m able...”

Runa smiled at me softly. She looked overcome with emotion as if her feelings were spilling out.

“Ryuto... Thank you,” she said quietly, then hung her head a bit. “Okay. I’ve made up my mind. I’ll give the area manager my reply tomorrow.” Then, she raised her face and looked at me. “I’ll let you know once everything’s set in stone. But don’t worry.”

“Okay...”

It bothered me that I didn’t know what exactly she was going to say to her area manager. But she was probably going to tell me afterward.

“Man, though, you surprised me. I never thought I’d hear such a thing today.” Runa smiled cheerfully.

Her smile made me go back to being my usual self.

“S-Sorry,” I stammered. “When I looked up how you can surprise your loved one at MagicalSea, all the results were about proposals... And I *did* think it would be rushing things too much, but hey...” Seeing the glass shoe in Runa’s hand, I felt sweat start to trickle down my back as a bit of embarrassment set in. “But...it’s...how I really feel.” And that was the one thing I wanted to tell her again, properly.

“Of course... It makes me happy.” Runa beamed as she gazed at the glittering object in her hand. “To tell you the truth, I was a bit curious when you’d say it.”

“Huh?”

As I looked at her blankly, Runa gave me a teasing smile. “You told Maria you’d marry me after graduating, didn’t you?”

“Ah, that’s...!”

Damn it, Kurose-san...!

Then again, it was also my fault for not having asked her to keep quiet about it.

“I-I’ve...been thinking about it since high school,” I admitted. I’d been getting cold sweat for some time now.

“Me too.” Runa looked at me, and I could see the awkwardness in her eyes. “I’ve always wanted to marry you.”

“Runa...”

Suddenly, I remembered that we were in public and looked around. Ever since the fireworks had ended, the park visitors had been leaving. There was a lot of foot traffic here since we were close to the entrance. Everyone was preoccupied, talking about what souvenirs to buy and what they’d do now, so nobody was watching us as we stood near a building and talked.

I wondered if Yamana-san and Sekiya-san had already made it to their hotel.

“D-Do you have work tomorrow morning...?” I asked awkwardly.

Runa nodded, seemingly a bit flustered too. “Y-Yeah...”

“Right, thought so...”

We must’ve been thinking the same thing. Sure, we’d missed the timing once, but why had it become so difficult? We surely must’ve felt the same way we had three years ago, and yet...

After a long silence...

“Let’s get going, I guess.” Runa held out a hand to me and started walking.

“Yeah...” I took her hand and fell in line beside her.

The warmth coming from her hand made me think of the coming of spring. Or was it just that my hand had been cold after holding Runa’s bubble tea?

“I’ll take good care of this,” Runa said, showing me the glass shoe in her hand and smiling.

There were glimmering moonstones adorning Runa’s ears and her finger. She had been taking good care of my presents to her all this time, even though they probably weren’t valuable enough to wear for years.

“I’ll do my best so I can give you something even better.”

I had said that quietly out of embarrassment, and apparently, it’d been too quiet for Runa to hear.

“Hm?” she said.

I smiled and shook my head. “It’s nothing.”

Even if no one else could, I wished the setting crescent moon had heard my humble vow.

Chapter 5

The morning after our double date, I was on my bed and unlocked my phone. I was startled by what I saw.

Yusuke: I might be getting a girlfriend.

“What?!”

Sure, now that Icchi was handsome in addition to being tall, it wasn’t strange at all for him to get a girlfriend. But where would a total introvert like him find a girl? What was she like, and how did they become close?

Nishina Ren: What the hell, dude?!

Nishina Ren: Who is she?!

Nishina Ren: Is she cute?!

Nishina Ren: Tell us about her!

Nishina Ren: I’m gonna call you!

Nisshi seemed to be curious about it too. After immediately shooting off a bunch of messages in succession, he started a group call.

“Well, there was an offline meetup yesterday,” said Icchi.

“For KEN Kids?” asked Nisshi.

“For my fans, more like...?”

“What?”

“I met up with people who follow me on Twitter and often reply to my posts,” Icchi explained.

“Huh...”

“And there was this girl who said she really liked me.”

“Haah...”

“Hey, that’s pretty nice,” I said.

“Like, she really seems to be all over me. She’s already tweeting about yesterday too.”

“Oh yeah?” said Nisshi.

“She even gave me a present and all.”

“I see...”

“That’s great,” I said.

“We’re seeing each other this afternoon.”

Nisshi seemed to be losing interest, so I took the initiative.

“Huh... So, you’re gonna date her?” I asked.

“I dunno! If she asks for it, then maybe!” Icchi said. He was in a really merry mood.

“Okay. Best of luck, then.”

After the call ended, I felt myself getting emotional.

“So Icchi’s getting a girlfriend...”

Suddenly, the matter of Tanikita-san passed through my mind.

“Of course not. He’s too much my type.”

Then again, what could you do? If Icchi liked that girl, it was none of Tanikita-san’s business.

And as I couldn’t shake off the ill feeling for some reason, my phone suddenly vibrated—I was getting a call from Nisshi.

“Nisshi?”

“Hey, I just found the Twitter account of the girl Icchi must’ve been talking about.”

“Huh?”

He sure worked fast... And actually, did he need to go that far? Maybe he was just frustrated that Icchi would get a girlfriend too and he'd be left behind, but still.

“She's crazy,” he said.

“Huh?”

“See for yourself. I'll send you a link.” With that, Nisshi cut the call.

I tapped on the link and saw the girl's account. I couldn't contain my surprise.

“Wow...”

Chamotaro: Just back from my date with my favorite Kid ♡

The picture in her post showed two glasses on a table. But wait, if it'd been an offline meetup, hadn't other people been there too...?

Chamotaro: Got a matching one. Think he'll find out?

Her next post had a picture of a mug. I didn't know what this was about, so I looked at Icchi's account and saw that he had posted a picture of the same mug just before Chamotaro had.

Cheerful Yusuke: Got this at the offline meet. Thanks!

“She even gave me a present and all.”

I recalled Icchi had mentioned that.

So she'd bought the same mug that she'd given to Icchi for herself, and now she was acting like they were close because they had matching ones? It wasn't a very elaborate scheme, so I couldn't say she was particularly underhanded, but this was pretty cringe regardless.

I checked some more of her tweets and her replies to people were just wonderful too.

Minami: It's an offline meetup, not a date

Chamotaro: lol well isn't that Minami-san who couldn't make it to the meet lmfaoo Are you too ugly? lol Don't be so jealous ha ha

"She's really riling people up..."

Even I cringed at this.

I called Nisshi back. "You were right, man. She's totally unhinged."

"See?! Icchi doesn't realize it at all, though. I just called him, and he said she 'simply likes him too much' and laughed it off. He's totally lost it."

"And they're gonna meet up with just the two of them, right? That's bad," I said. "He's gonna get even more carried away."

"That's why I asked him to let you and me come too."

"What?! You didn't ask me first?!"

"You got other things to do?"

"My shift at the editing department starts at three..."

"Ah, don't worry," Nisshi said. "He told me they're meeting up at 10 a.m., so I'm sure they'll be done by then."

"Eh..."

That said, I *was* worried about Icchi. Sure, Nisshi and I were both introverts who weren't used to girls either, but Icchi was even more socially awkward. The excitement of our school's festival three years ago had inspired him to suddenly confess to Tanikita-san even though nobody had put him up to it. It was hard to trust his judgment when it came to girls.

In the end, I agreed to show up to Icchi's date with Nisshi. I got off the phone and started getting ready to go out.

Suddenly, I got an idea. I opened LINE and began typing a message to “A.T.”

“Hi, nice to meet you. I’m Chamotaro,” the girl said amiably to all of us.

We were in the family restaurant where she and Icchi were meeting.

I’d met up with Icchi and Nisshi thirty minutes ago and we’d been waiting at a four-person table ever since, wondering when she’d finally arrive. The moment she had, our tension peaked.

“Oh, you can sit here,” said Icchi.

“You got it. ≡”

She sat on the couch by the wall, putting her next to Icchi and in front of me. I watched her shyly.

Honestly, she wasn’t my type. If I were to describe her, her tagline would be “the sixteenth cutest girl in class” or something like that. She seemed to care about fashion and wore girly clothes with some frills. Perhaps her tastes were close to what Kurose-san had liked back in the day.

Being a KEN Kid, she must’ve been a geek, and yet she smiled a lot and seemed sociable. Was that because Icchi... Er, because her loved one was here?

“Gah. Seriously...?” Nisshi said from his seat beside me. It looked like he just couldn’t help himself.

I nudged him with my elbow a bit strongly.

“My friends said they really wanted to meet you,” Icchi said cheerfully. “We’ve been buddies since high school, and they’re both KEN Kids too. We always talked about KEN at school.” He seemed to be in high spirits.

“That’s nice! I don’t have any Kid friends at my school...” she said, sounding just as excited.

Maybe this was an indication that they were suited for each other...but I knew what she was like on Twitter. It was hard for me to see her in a positive light.

“Cha— Chamo— Chamotaro-san, how old are you?” I asked. She looked a bit young to me.

“I’m seventeen,” she replied with a smile.

“Wait, so you’re in high school?”

“Yep.”

“Huh...”

Nisshi and I exchanged glances. Not only was she unhinged, but she was still in high school...

I now had *another* reason why I didn’t want her and Icchi to date. That said, Icchi was all over her already, so I didn’t know what I could say to keep their relationship from forming.

“You’re really young, Chamo-san... You have such nice skin.”

“And you’re so handsome, Mr. Cheerful...”

Icchi’s “Cheerful Yusuke” username was starting to grow on me. And, at this point, wasn’t it completely ironic that his nickname was “Mr. Cheerful”?

“Wow...” I heard a voice beside me say. Nisshi was looking at his phone on his lap. “Check this out, Kasshi.”

I could see Chamotaro-san’s most recent tweet on his phone.

Chamotaro: Another date with my favorite Kid ♡ Matching drinks ♡ Love ♡

There was a picture attached that showed two glasses on a table. I didn’t know when she’d taken it, but it was true that she and Icchi were having the same kind of cola. She’d even included our location. Was she trying to assert dominance over the whole world or something?

Icchi and Chamotaro-san’s unbearable flirting continued on after that with no indication of stopping.

“That building you made was amazing, Mr. Cheerful. ≡ The one that’s like

Itsukushima Shrine.”

“Ah, that? It was easy! I made it in an hour!”

“No waaay!”

“It’s a walk in the park for a guy like me!”

“Wow, you’re a genius! ≡ I love it!”

“I know, right? Don’t go falling for me now.”

“I already have, though!”

“Ha ha ha!”

While I had plenty of qualms with Chamotaro-san, at this point, I had a problem with Icchi too. Sure, maybe he was coming close to getting his first girlfriend, but I didn’t expect my close friend from high school to be so corny. Just thinking about it was gradually making my astonishment turn into something akin to anger.

The same seemed to be true for Nisshi. He looked fed up. “Whatever, man. I’m leaving. Let’s go, Kasshi,” he said.

“Yeah...” I replied.

Icchi was a goner. At this point, I wouldn’t really care if KEN were to permanently ban him after people found out he had laid his hands on a fan and it caused an outrage in the community or if he were to get arrested for having sex with a minor.

But just as Nisshi and I were getting up...

“Hey, what the hell do you think you’re doing?!” someone yelled in a voice unfitting for a family restaurant.

All the customers looked where it had come from. There was a young guy standing behind our seats, glaring at us. Naturally, I avoided making eye contact and assumed he had business with people from another table, but then, he walked straight toward us.

“So, which one of you is ‘Cheerful Yusuke’?” After looking at each of our faces in turn, he turned his glare to Chamotaro-san. “Answer me, Chamo!”

At that point, I finally realized the two of them knew each other.

Chamotaro-san hung her head in silence.

“Is it you?” the guy asked, staring at me.

I instinctively, forcefully shook my head no.

He glared at Nisshi next. “You, then?”

Nisshi strongly shook his head too.

“So it’s you...”

Ichii didn’t deny it, but he didn’t admit it either. Instead, he simply stared at the guy in a state of shock, showing no reaction.

This guy was clearly younger than us—he looked like a high school sophomore, just like Chamotaro-san. He was assertive in his speech, but he didn’t seem like a delinquent. If anything, it felt like he was a bit of an introvert—a completely ordinary teenager. That made his pure anger come across even more, and it filled me with fear.

“What do you think you’re doing with another guy’s girlfriend?” he asked.

I’d already half expected this, and his words made everything clear.

“G-Girlfriend...?” said Ichii, overcome with surprise. He wore the expression of someone who’d been cast out of heaven and sent straight to hell.

“What was all that about a date, anyway? ‘Cause it sure doesn’t look that way to me. Did you think I wouldn’t notice what you said on Twitter?”

Chamotaro hung her head as her boyfriend glared at her. “Um, I’m sorry,” she said. “I was just happy to get to meet my favorite Kid... I wanted to brag about it to other girls who were his fans... That’s it...”

“Did you do him?”

“I didn’t...” she replied in a gloomy voice, still hanging her head.

“You *really* didn’t?” The guy glowered at her, eyes full of doubt.

“It’s true! I met him for the first time at the offline meet yesterday!”

For some reason, I desperately had to cover up for Ichii. Nisshi followed suit.

“They definitely haven’t done it! This guy’s been a virgin forever.”

“He’s not capable of it!”

Ichchi remained silent.

The curious eyes of the onlookers in the restaurant hurt.

“Never see him again. You got that?” the guy said to Chamotaro-san.

She nodded deeply. Ichchi, meanwhile, looked at her with sadness in his eyes.

“We’re leaving now,” added Chamotaro-san’s boyfriend.

She got up, and for some reason, Ichchi did too. There was no point in me and Nisshi staying here, so we stood up as well. It was rather surreal how we all made a big line at the register and paid for our drinks from the self-service area without saying a word.

And when we got outside...

“Let’s go,” said the guy. I could still hear the anger in his voice.

Chamotaro-san glanced at Ichchi and seemed to be about to follow her boyfriend without a word.

“Wait!” exclaimed Ichchi. “Chamo-san!”

Chamotaro-san and her boyfriend stopped and looked our way.

Ichchi’s eyes were only on Chamotaro-san. Sorrow was written on his face.

“Break up with him and go out with me.”

“What?!” Her boyfriend became visibly enraged.

As people walked under the straight lines of roadside trees near the station, they directed eyes full of curiosity at us.

That didn’t stop Ichchi, however. He lowered his head, looking desperate. “I love you, Chamo-san. Please...”

Chamotaro-san looked troubled. “I’m sorry. I loved you as my favorite Kid. I didn’t mean it *that* way...”

“What is that supposed to mean...?” he asked. Then, he lifted his face and spoke with persistence. “If you love me, isn’t that good enough?! You’re my fan,

right?! Go out with me...!”

“Icchi...” Nisshi said and grabbed his arm to try to stop him. But the difference in their builds was too great—Icchi easily shook him off.

“The fuck is wrong with you, asshole?!” The boyfriend approached us, furious again. “You wanna get hurt, huh?!”

He then raised his hand high, and Icchi fell on his bottom in fear. Just like me, Icchi had probably never put his life on the line for a fight. I could understand how he felt, but he was being extremely pathetic right now.

“Chamo-san...” Icchi said desperately, his hands still on the ground behind him.

“Shut up! I’m seriously gotta hit you!” The boyfriend flared up and once again raised his hand.

But all of a sudden, someone came running up from behind us and got in front of Icchi.

“What are you, stupid?!” a high-pitched female voice said. That outburst was followed by the sound of a slap. “Stop being so pathetic! I saw everything, even from when you were in the restaurant!”

The newcomer straddled Icchi and grabbed the chest of his top.

“T-Tanikita-san?! Seriously?!” Nisshi exclaimed next to me.

He sounded astonished, but since I hadn’t told him anything, it was no wonder he was surprised.

Ryuto: Icchi might get a girlfriend. Are you okay with that?

A. T.: It’s Chamotaro, isn’t it? She seems to have a boyfriend, though. I wonder if she wants to dump him for Ijichi-kun.

Ryuto: Oh, you knew...

Ryuto: Anyway, I’ll send you the address of the family

restaurant they're meeting at.

I recalled our LINE exchange from earlier. I hadn't noticed her there, but she must've been watching the whole thing from somewhere else in the restaurant.

"Why is it her?! I'm ten times cuter than her, and I love you a hundred times more!" As Tanikita-san pinned Icchi down, she barraged him with words. "Stop acting so pathetic in front of girls like her and making my three-year love go to waste! You're too handsome for all this!"

"Eh, Tanikita... Uh, wh-why...?" Icchi finally began to speak.

"Does the name 'Minami' ring any bells?" Tanikita-san replied with a brazen look on her face.

"Huh? You mean...that fan who always replies to me on Twitter...?"

Tanikita-san nodded deeply. "*I'm* Minami. I had other accounts before, but I screwed up and you blocked me, so I made new ones."

"Eh...?"

"Did you think I never came to any of your offline meets, despite living in Tokyo, because I was so ugly I couldn't show my face?"

"What...? Huh...?!" Icchi kept opening and closing his mouth, seeming incapable of processing what was happening. "Wait... You...*like* me...?"

"I wouldn't reply to your tweets every day if I hated you, would I?" Tanikita-san sounded so disgruntled that you wouldn't think she was talking to the guy she loved.

"B-But do you mean you like me as a fan...?" Icchi then asked. Considering what had just happened with Chamotaro-san, he was being cautious.

"It doesn't matter. I love Ijichi Yusuke, and I love Cheerful Yusuke too. I'll date you if you ask, and if you want to have sex, I'll let you do me. You're just too hot."

Tanikita-san had blurted that all out with a frown on her face and without taking a breath.

Icchi suddenly looked panicked. “Wait, you shot me down so hard at the cultural festival, though...”

“Because you were so fat! I’m a boy band stan, so of *course* looks come first to me! If you were going to confess, you should’ve lost weight first!” After rattling all that off with reproach in her tone, Tanikita-san bit her lip. She looked miserable.



“Then I wouldn’t have had to go on for so many years feeling this way...” she added.

The passersby walked some distance away from those two, turning around and watching the unfolding scene. Nisshi and I stood a bit away as well, but it felt like people were watching us too. It honestly made me uneasy.

The main pair here, however, seemed too preoccupied to care.

Ichhi was flustered and was trying to process the situation. “Wait, so, could it be that... Even now, you still...love me...?” he asked.

A sharp look returned to Tanikita-san’s face once again. “Come on, are you stupid?! How many times are you gonna make me say it?! Why would I come here if I didn’t love you?! Look what you got me involved in... This is so embarrassing! How’re you gonna make it up to me?!”

Ichhi’s face turned red in an instant.

And then...

“Huh?!” It just so happened that Tanikita-san had been sitting on his crotch. She lifted herself up in a hurry. “H-Hey, what’re you getting hard for?!”

“Oh, sorry...” Ichhi replied, flustered.

Flushed, Tanikita-san shouted at him mercilessly. “You pervert! How depraved are you?!” In the next moment, she looked at Ichhi with earnest eyes. “I love you...” she said deliriously before sealing his lips with hers.

Watching them kiss in public and in broad daylight, I held my breath. I couldn’t even bring myself to glance at Nisshi.

“I always wanted to do that,” Tanikita-san said after she’d pulled her face away from Ichhi’s. She gazed at him—the look on her face seemed both painful and ecstatic.

Ichhi blushed and looked back at her. His gaze was both dreamy and full of disbelief.

“W-Wait, Tanikita-san! That’s enough!” I said.

“Knock it off! Go home!” added Nisshi.

It kind of felt like they were about to get it on right here in public, so the two of us rushed in to pull Tanikita-san away from Icchi.

At some point, Chamotaro-san and her boyfriend had disappeared. No wonder.

“So, uh, I guess you two are dating now, right?” Nisshi asked a bit offhandedly.

Icchi had gotten up, and we were now standing out of people’s way, next to the trees that lined the street. It was relieving to finally escape public attention.

Icchi and Tanikita-san were looking at each other silently as if trying to read each other’s expressions. Judging by what they were like, the answer to Nisshi’s question could only be “yes.” With that in mind, I took Icchi’s left hand and Tanikita-san’s right and brought them together.

“There you go. Well, that’s that, I guess,” I said.

Now holding hands, the two glanced at each other and then averted their eyes. It was like they were in a trance. Their first kiss was probably still on their minds.

“I’m sure you’ve got a lot of things to talk about, so we’ll leave you two to it,” said Nisshi, pushing Icchi’s and Tanikita-san’s backs to get them to go on their way.

The two of them started walking along the sidewalk, still holding hands.

“Man, even Icchi’s got a girlfriend now...” said Nisshi, sounding unamused. He watched them walk off and disappear among the crowd of people on the sidewalk.

“Yeah...”

“Damn... Well, that was stupid.”

Despite what he’d said, I could tell from the expression on his face that he felt relieved.

Giving one last look at the backs of the pair fading into the distance while holding hands, I said, “May you be happy together.”

Akari: Thanks for today, Kashima-kun!

Akari: Don't worry, I've already blocked all my "daddies"!

Akari: I'm so happy right now!

When I saw the messages I'd gotten from Tanikita-san on LINE that night...

"Yep, that's the Tanikita-san I know."

I couldn't contain a somewhat strained smile when I saw that she was doing well.

Late the next afternoon, I went to see Sekiya-san off. It was Saturday, so I normally would've had a tutoring session to hold at this time, but fortunately, the student I would've been seeing had asked to hold our session on a different day.

Since this was so sudden and it was a busy travel season, Sekiya-san had apparently been unable to get a plane ticket for a flight that would take place at a fitting time of day. He'd decided to take the shinkansen instead.

I met up with him at Omiya Station.

"Sup. Sorry to make you come all the way," he said.

Yamana-san was already there with him. Just like yesterday, they must've been together all day today.

Sekiya-san only had a blue suitcase and a sling bag with him. It was almost like he was just going on a four-day trip.

As for Yamana-san, she wasn't talking much. Her expression was more like someone at a wake.

Runa watched her best friend with anxiety in her eyes. "Nicole..."

Apparently, Yamana-san had asked Runa to come too because she wasn't confident she could stay calm if she were left alone after seeing Sekiya-san off.

That had naturally led to me coming as well.

“Guess it’s time to go to the platform,” said Sekiya-san.

“Yeah...” Yamana-san replied.

They weren’t talking much today. Maybe they didn’t know what to talk about at this point, given that the moment of their parting was close.

Sekiya-san’s shinkansen would leave shortly before 6 p.m. Apparently, it would take him to Hakodate, and he’d spend the night in a budget hotel there.

The four of us got through the station crowds typical of a spring break evening and arrived at the track for the shinkansen. Lines of passengers stretched from the marked lanes at the edge of the platform. Sekiya-san and Yamana-san stood at the end of one.

The train’s departure time was displayed on a sign above us, and it was drawing ever closer.

Yamana-san covered her mouth and started sobbing.

“Nicole...” Sekiya-san pulled her by the shoulders toward him. Naturally, he looked to be in pain himself.

I called Runa over and we moved away from the two somewhat.

Sekiya-san and Yamana-san leaned close together and quietly said something to each other. The latter sobbed every now and then. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

An announcement let us know that a train was arriving. The streamlined front car of a shinkansen approached while braking—the very shinkansen Sekiya-san was to board.

“Sekiya-san...” I let out.

We neared the entrance too, in order to say goodbye to Sekiya-san, who was about to get on.

“Be well,” I added.

“Sure. See you on summer break,” he replied. He waved broadly as if to dispel the melancholic mood.

At that point, Yamana-san broke into a crying fit and crouched down. “I can’t take it...” she said. “Summer is too far... It’s not even really spring yet...”

“Nicole.” Sekiya-san took her by the arm and pulled her up to her feet.

The people who’d lined up at the platform had all boarded the shinkansen already. Sekiya-san put his suitcase into the car and braced Yamana-san with both hands.

“Yamana,” he said quietly, stooping down and lining his face up with her disheveled, tear-stained face. “Come with me... I don’t want to be away from you.”

I’d never seen him look like this before. His usual composed and relaxed expression was nowhere to be seen—instead, it’d been replaced with a painful, begging look.

Yamana-san opened her eyes wide as if having had a revelation.

“Ah...” She opened her mouth, but she didn’t say anything else. Her lips only trembled in vain.

At that point, the mercilessly loud departure bell rang through the platform.

“Senpai...” Tears streamed down from Yamana-san’s eyes. “I...”

Then, with the voice of someone having difficulty breathing—like a drowning person at the mercy of the waves with the water parting to reveal their face for a moment so they can beg for help—she said...



“...can’t go...”

Her tears flowed endlessly, marking the floor as if it had rained.

“I see,” Sekiya-san said quietly. He looked helpless, like a young boy who had gotten lost.

Sekiya-san removed his hands from Yamana-san and stepped into the shinkansen. Its doors closed immediately as if having waited for him to do so, and the couple was separated by a sheet of cold steel. His face through the window grew distant and eventually disappeared from our view. My only salvation was that the last expression I saw on his face was a faint smile.

“Senpai...!” Yamana-san held her knees on the platform and broke down crying.

“Nicole!” Runa ran up to her, crouched down, and put her arms around her friend’s shoulders.

“He’s so terrible. How could he say something like that at the end...?!” Yamana-san said between sobs. “I’m not a little girl anymore. I’ve got a job here, and I have a way of life I need to protect.”

Looking worried, Runa patted her friend’s back without a word.

“My mom... I can’t leave her...” Yamana-san continued. “She’s my only family...”

“Yeah... I know what you mean.” Runa had tears in her eyes too as she embraced Yamana-san.

“Was I supposed to throw everything away, put my blind faith in senpai, and follow him to an unknown land far away...? I’m long past the age when I could love somebody like that...”

“Yeah...”

“We’ve grown up...”

“Yeah... Exactly...” Nodding deeply, Runa held her friend tight as if shielding her.

As I stood there and watched, I wondered what Sekiya-san might be thinking right now, alone in a crowd of unfamiliar faces on the shinkansen.

After that, we went to an izakaya located in a shopping district next to Omiya Station.

“I don’t know how I can get through a day like this without drinking,” Yamana-san said.

She was doing better than I’d expected. Her eyes were swollen from crying, but otherwise, she was back to her usual self.

The cheerful and lively mood in this izakaya kind of made me recall Bacchus—the one she’d worked at before. Maybe this was part of the reason it felt like Yamana-san was back to normal.

“Yep yep, let’s drink! I’ll join you today!” Runa was acting cheerful, perhaps in order to lift her friend’s spirits. And just as she said, there was a mug with a Jim Beam logo in her hand. “So you’re finally turning twenty tomorrow, Ryuto.”

“Really? Then he can join us if we drink until midnight,” said Yamana-san.

“What?!” I exclaimed.

It was still just past seven—midnight was a long time from now.

“Give me a break,” I added.

“Yeah... I’ve got work tomorrow anyway,” said Runa with a smile, taking my side.

That was how she was in the beginning, anyway...

“What do we do about this...?” asked Yamana-san.

Two hours later, Runa was sleeping peacefully next to me. Her arms were crossed on the table, and she was resting her cheek on top of them.

“Well, uh... Worst-case scenario, we’ll have to call a taxi, I guess...” I replied.

A taxi ride from here to Runa’s house might’ve cost around ten thousand yen,

but what other option was there?

“She forced herself to join me... She doesn’t drink normally, so she did it for my sake...” said Yamana-san. Resting her chin in her hand, she watched Runa’s sleeping face out of the corner of her eye. She held a glass of umeshu in her other hand—since the ice in it had melted, it was nearly colorless now. “This might be it for me,” she said all of a sudden. “Maybe I should break up with him.”

“Huh...?”

This was completely unexpected. I gazed at her face, trying to pick up on what she’d really meant.

Yamana-san continued with her eyes still on Runa. “Whenever he hugs me, my worries disappear. But when we take just one step away from each other, I get worried again. It’s so stupid, right?” She shifted her arm that was holding up her face, lowering it until it was flat on the table. Her chin went down right along with it. “I’m such an idiot... If that’s the case, then why didn’t I go with him? If he’s so important to me, and if I’m going to regret things so much...” She stared at the table with moist eyes.

Yamana-san was across from Runa, and it didn’t look like she was all that drunk. I felt like she’d been more drunk that time when we’d gone on a drive, so this was probably her speaking her mind due to heartbreak.

“Remember how you said the other day that you used to be like that too?” she asked.

After thinking for a moment, I realized she was talking about our conversation at MagicalSea.

“I’m just worried. Because, unlike me, he’s been with other girls. I can’t help thinking that one of his old classmates from high school might be an ex.”

“I was like that too. When I only just started dating Runa...I sometimes felt such worries toward her too.”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“I realize now that we’re different, you and I. Runa wouldn’t cheat...but I can’t

be sure about senpai.” After saying that with a stiff expression on her face, Yamana-san straightened herself and sighed a bit. “I’ve realized that the senpai I’ve always known isn’t the one who I can’t have faith in... It’s the one in the future.” Resting her chin in her hand again, Yamana-san looked at me. “He’s gonna be a doctor, you know? Japan’s full of girls who would gun for someone like that. And to make things worse, his real girlfriend’s gonna be in Tokyo. Even if *he* doesn’t plan on cheating, girls will do their best to take him from me.”

“I don’t know about—”

“No,” Yamana-san said, flatly interrupting me. “There’s just no way I can believe in him. I mean, we’re not even walking on the same piece of land anymore.” Then, suddenly, she looked anxious and ready to cry. “I’m sure I’ll doubt him every time he’s even a little bit late to call or message me. And I’ll confront him about it. I don’t want him to see such an ugly side of me anymore.” She knitted her eyebrows tightly. “And so, I feel like...it’s better if I end this, leaving this love as a pleasant memory for both of us.” After saying that with calm resolve in her voice, Yamana-san smiled in self-deprecation. “I can’t think of any other way... I’m an idiot, after all.”

She was no idiot. Not a fool either. She simply must’ve held herself back too much.

Looking back on it, she and Sekiya-san had experienced only a few nice moments together since they’d reunited at the cultural festival during our second year of high school. After Sekiya-san had spent four entire years of abstinence as a ronin, there’d been barely any time to celebrate him getting into college before he’d had to leave for the north.

“What was the right thing to do? Should I have abandoned everything—my work, my family, my friends—and gone with him?” Yamana-san asked in a teary voice. She pressed her hands to the sides of her face near her eyes. “I couldn’t believe in him enough to make such a decision on the spot. There hasn’t been enough time, enough words, for me to do that.”

I knew how she felt. All too well. However...

“We started dating three years ago, and for all that time when I couldn’t see him, it wasn’t him who kept me going.” Yamana-san’s expression looked tired,

but she was smiling. “To tell the truth... The person I couldn’t stand parting with the most...was Ren.”

I held my breath—I hadn’t expected her to say my friend’s name.

“Maybe...I’d be happier going out with him.” She had a gentle smile on her face. “With senpai, I was always worried if I was the only one who wanted to see him. Like it didn’t matter to him if I was there or not.”

No. You’re wrong about that, Yamana-san.

“It’s great for girls. When they want to see you, they can just say so.”

“I wanna see Yamana.”

That’s the kind of person Sekiya-san is. Don’t you know that? Didn’t you love him knowing what he’s like?

I couldn’t say that, though. If I did, Yamana-san might’ve abandoned the idea of choosing Nisshi and instead continued to love Sekiya-san, who was far away.

Could I, an outsider, be so irresponsible as to say something here and now that could ruin things for my friend, someone whose love of many years might finally come true?

“It’s fine if Nicole loves another guy. As long as I get to be by her side.”

What was I supposed to do?

If only there were two of Sekiya-san...

Look at me, wishing for such unrealistic things this late in the game...

What would Sekiya-san want her to do?

“There’s no way I could. That would be way too cringe. It’s not my style.”

Sekiya-san himself had chosen not to tell Yamana-san his feelings. And so, I wanted her to respect his decision.

“When it was hard, I often imagined how things could be. We’d get married,

have children, I'd be a doctor... I'd come home and she'd be there, taking care of our kids, making dinner, and waiting for me... The mental image made my fatigue disappear..."

"Imagining a future like that is how I've managed to do my best for the past three and a half years. I wanted to make it happen."

"Ngh..." Before I knew it, I was clenching my teeth and holding back tears.

Yamana-san looked slightly taken aback by my behavior. "Why're *you* crying? You're not even drunk." Then, as if having suddenly come to her senses, she smiled awkwardly, lifted her chin from her hand, and a distant look appeared in her eyes. "It's so weird. Why am I telling *you* all this? You, and not Runa."

I wondered the same thing. Why was I the one in front of her right now—and not Runa, or Nisshi, or even Sekiya-san? I was completely useless here. I couldn't embrace and comfort her as she cried.

"Well, I guess you'll have to do. I feel like I'll crumble down if I don't tell *someone* all this," said Yamana-san a little peevishly before looking off into the distance.

In this izakaya, the peak hours had passed us by. The tables on both sides of ours had been left messy for a while now, and the plates and glasses sitting on them had leftover food and drinks after people's dinner parties.

Looking over that mess, Yamana-san said with tears in her eyes, "Is it okay if I stop loving him now?"

She blinked, and her tears fell to the table as though her long eyelashes and mascara had flicked them off. "It's so tiring... I can't... Can't do this anymore..." She combed her long dark-brown hair with manicured nails as her lips trembled. "I love him so much... But I guess some relationships just aren't meant to go well..."

The way her strained, painful voice mixed in with those of drunk customers in the distance made things even sadder for me.

"Hey... I did my best, right?"

I could tell—there was no turning back now. She'd already chosen her path: she'd be with Nisshi, not Sekiya-san.

The thought of it made my tears stop.

Yamana-san must've really had it rough. Even now, she must've been feeling heartrending pain.

I wanted to be nice to her, in part to fill in for Sekiya-san.

If I ever have a child in the future... If it's a girl, and if I see her being sad... Maybe this is how I'll feel. Suddenly, for whatever reason, I couldn't help feeling that way.

Yamana-san looked a little startled when I reached out across the table and patted her head, but she didn't say anything. She went on crying quietly.

At that moment, that hand of mine was Sekiya-san's.

"You've done so well for so long," I said, recalling Sekiya-san's calm, deep voice and thinking about what he might say to her. "It's okay now. You did great," I added quietly.

A moment later, tears began to stream down from Yamana-san's eyes.

Had it not been for her, things would've been extra painful and depressing for Sekiya-san during the long time he'd spent as a ronin. I knew well how much emotional support he'd found in her.

Only I knew that, and for the rest of my life, I would keep it to myself.

"Sekiya-san loved you...from the bottom of his heart."

So let me say it. As his friend...and as yours.

"Thanks for everything."

For loving Sekiya-san, and for giving him more happiness than one could count.

Thinking about it made me cry once more.

“Again, why are *you* crying too...?” Yamana-san asked.

And as if I’d influenced her, her face scrunched up, and her crying intensified.

“It’s just...” I wiped my tears with the back of my hand, feeling embarrassed.

“We’re friends...aren’t we?” I said, sniveling.

Yamana-san smiled a little at that. “Right...” Another teardrop streamed down from the corner of her eye, but no new tears came. “Guess so.” She laughed a little. “You’re a ridiculously good person, you know that?”

Some of her makeup had come off from her tears. The area around her eyes was a mess, but she smiled. When our eyes met for a moment and I smiled in return, she raised her glass.

“Well, cheers!”

We brought our glasses together—one umeshu with no ice left in it and a long-empty glass of melon soda.

I had to wonder—where did dreams go if they wouldn’t come true? The happy family with Yamana-san that Sekiya-san had dreamed of... The life of the child they might’ve had... They must’ve been somewhere out there, in a different timeline. I wanted to believe it.

After all, to Sekiya-san, it had been a reality that almost truly existed, something he’d had in his head all along. A reality that had supported his soul.

And because I could think about it that way...

Nishina Ren: Nicole and I started dating

When I got that message soon after, I could sincerely say, with a smile on my face, “Congratulations, Nisshi.”

Epilogue

The next day, Runa and I met up in Shinjuku at 3 p.m. She'd said she wanted to celebrate my birthday.

She'd actually wanted to take the whole day off from work today, but recently she'd been taking sudden breaks from work quite a lot—what with the MagicalSea visit and seeing Sekiya-san off. She'd apparently worked this morning instead to make up for it.

“Ryuto!” Runa exclaimed once she spotted me in the crowd near the entrance of Bic Camera. She came running to me. “Did I make you wait?”

“No, don't worry.”

“You always show up ahead of me. Even though I make sure not to be late... How frustrating.”

“Hah hah.”

We got going. Runa's hand slipped into my jacket pocket. I was still used to keeping my hands in my pockets for warmth because of the winter, so mine was in there too—I held her hand inside.

The weather was much warmer now—apparently, today's high temperature was to be twenty degrees Celsius. The cherry blossoms in Tokyo were taking a little longer than usual, but it was said they would enter full bloom in a day or two.

Spring was right around the corner.

We passed by the eastern exit that led to Kabukicho and headed to a movie theater. It had been a while since the last time we'd watched a movie together. A famous anime director had released a new movie sometime last year and its long run in movie theaters was about to end, so we'd decided to go watch it last minute.

I hadn't been to a movie theater since that Valentine's Day three years ago. Remembering that time made my heart race.

We were about to head to the crowded counter selling tickets in front of the entrance when Runa pulled on my sleeve.

"This way," she said.

"Huh?"

We boarded a small elevator that nobody had been waiting for, and I followed Runa when she got off the floor she had selected.

"P-Platinum lobby?" I asked, perplexed by the sight of a luxurious white reception desk before us.

"It's your twentieth birthday, so I splurged a bit."

"What?!"

After Runa gave her name at the reception desk, the clerk led us to—if you could believe it—a private room.

This room wasn't wastefully spacious, but there was a luxurious fabric sofa in the center of it. The lighting here felt somewhat atmospheric.

"Wait, wasn't this expensive?" I asked after the clerk had left and I'd sat on the sofa.

Runa giggled. "Don't worry, I have a full-time job." Then, she took out a box from the paper bag she'd had with her. "But...maybe I splurged a little *too* much, so is this good enough for a present?" She placed the box on the table and opened the cover. "I made a cake. Happy birthday, Ryuto."

"Wow, this is amazing!"

The cake was decorated in a way that was uncommon in store-bought confections. Its surface was utterly covered with heart-shaped cookies in various pastel colors, with things like the number "20" and "Happy Birthday Ryuto" written on them.

"When Misuzu-chan was in Osaka, she took classes on how to make iced cookies. So I've been learning some of it from her recently."

“‘Iced’ cookies...?”

“Ones decorated with frosting. Like these.” Runa then pointed at the pastel cookies on top of the cake.

“Oh, I see.”

“As for the cake, I kept what the patissier taught me at Champs De Fleurs when I worked there in mind.”

The more people Runa had connected with in her life, the higher her level rose. She’d already been too wonderful before this, and yet she was still growing into an even more attractive woman. I could tell as much from seeing this cake with the iced cookies or whatever—I’d never seen cakes like this before.

“Thank you, Runa,” I said with a smile.

After putting the cake aside, Runa brought her hands together in front of her face. “Anyway, sorry about yesterday... I didn’t think I’d conk out after one highball...”

“Don’t worry about it. Did you have trouble getting up this morning?”

“Nah, I got up at four.”

“What?” I asked. “That’s so early.”

“I had work today, and I needed to make the cake in the morning too. I also had to do my makeup properly. I made the cookies yesterday...but that was why I didn’t get enough sleep and crashed at the izakaya, heh heh.” Runa rushed through her excuses, probably to avoid making me feel guilty. “Also...I was probably tired from some work stuff I had to think about recently.”

“Right, about your job...”

I’d been wondering about her decision all this time. As I finally asked her about it, Runa gave me a nod of understanding.

“Yeah, I told the area manager,” she said. “He was really disappointed, though. But he’s a good person, so he respected my decision.”

“Huh...?”

Does that mean...?

Runa gazed at me with a serious expression on her face. "I'm not going to Fukuoka."

My gulp was clearly audible in this quiet room we were alone in.

"They officially appointed someone else to the position today. So, I can finally say it to you." Then, Runa smiled at me. "I'll stay by your side as always."

"I see..."

I'd already prepared myself for a long-distance relationship that would last years, so I felt strangely burnt out—I wasn't sure if I was relieved or demotivated.

Suddenly, I recalled what she'd said to me before.

"I already know what I want to do. But it's probably a more difficult path than the one I've walked so far...so I just can't make the final call."

What had she meant by that?

"Are you okay with it?" I asked.

"Yeah. There's another kind of work I'd rather do."

At that point, there was a knock on the door and it opened right away. The clerk was bringing the drinks we'd ordered upon coming to this room.

There were two tall glasses of faintly golden drinks with thin lines of sparkling bubbles inside.

"Your champagne." The clerk also put down another glass that contained individually wrapped luxury chocolates and plates with gelato madeleines before leaving.

"They're gonna melt... Let's eat these first," said Runa. After we ate our gelato, she put down her spoon. "I wanna work with kids."

"Huh...?" Her unexpected confession made me freeze up with chocolate in my mouth. "With kids...? You mean, like, being a nursery school teacher or something?"

Runa nodded, then smiled a little.



Her eyes were tender and gentle.

“I like children,” she said. “Even I didn’t really know that until I met Haruna and Haruka.” Runa’s gaze rested somewhere near the glasses of champagne on the table, and she had a fond look on her face. “Children are possibilities incarnate. When I look after them every day, I think about what kind of people they’ll bloom into. If she’s playing with her hair accessories, then maybe she’ll be a beautician. Or if she’s playing with a ball, she could be a volleyball player or something. Is that too naive?” After looking at me and smiling awkwardly for a moment, she looked away again. “But as I watch them, one day, I’ll suddenly notice the signs that they’ve grown past the point of no return.” I could see a strong light in her eyes as she said that. “And I feel that there’s no going back for me either. That just like those children, I’m living a time of my life that I can’t turn around and do again.”

Runa’s expression had been serious, but now it relaxed, and she looked at me slightly bashfully.

“Trends move too quickly in the world of fashion,” she went on. “It’s exciting to get to wear new, stylish clothes all the time, but it’s kinda tiring to work in it. Sometimes popular stuff from the previous season doesn’t get attention at all anymore. Like, mentally? I can’t keep up with it so well... Customers still wear those clothes, right? So even though I just recommended those things to them, saying they’re popular...it’s almost like I lied to them. And if I turn around and say that those clothes *aren’t* popular anymore and get them to buy something else...doesn’t that really make me sound like a swindler?”

I knew well that Runa couldn’t tell lies.

“It’s just a little bit hard to bear.” She smiled in a somewhat forced way. “Like... I dunno. Even I thought I was suited for it. It’s usually pretty fun to talk to customers.”

I’d always thought Runa was a born extrovert and that she was dozens of times better than me at dealing with people...but I could sense just a little bit of social awkwardness in her too. That part of her must’ve been showing itself now.

“But Runa, if you want to work in childcare... Don’t you need some kind of

qualifications for that? What about the job you have now?”

“I do, yeah,” Runa replied with a calm expression. “I’ve only finished high school, so apparently, I have to go to a technical school to get qualified. So maybe I’ll ask to step down from being an assistant manager to get more control over my shifts... And if that doesn’t work, I guess I could go back to working part-time. Is that even an option? I haven’t talked to anyone about it yet, so I dunno.”

“I see...”

“I’d need a job to pay tuition and all, so I think I’ll have to study and work at the same time... And I’ll probably be even busier than I am now.” An anxious look appeared on her face—she must’ve been thinking about what was to come. “And besides, I’m not good at studying, so that’s another thing to worry about.” Runa let out an embarrassed laugh.

I’d never thought she’d willingly choose a path that involved studying. That must’ve been how strongly she wanted to work with children.

“Still, I’ve made up my mind,” she continued. “Even if I stayed at my current job while feeling like it’s not quite right, became a manager in Fukuoka, and kept building my career at this company, I’d never end up where I actually wanted to be, you know?” Runa looked me in the eye—it was almost as if she was trying to persuade herself too. “My only option is to work hard.”

“Right...” Seeing the refreshed look on her face, I understood that there was no need for me to say anything special here. “I’m rooting for you,” I replied.

“Thanks!” Runa smiled pleasantly. Her smile was like that of a goddess, one who never failed to charm me. “Now, let’s drink!”

I picked up my glass of champagne.

“Happy birthday, Ryuto!” she said in a gentle tone as she gazed into my eyes, here in this room with no one but us. “To your twentieth birthday...”

As Runa raised her glass, I brought mine next to hers. “And to your new beginning,” I said.

Runa giggled bashfully back. “Cheers. ≡”

The sound of our glasses lightly clinking together resounded through the room. Seeing Runa bring her glass to her mouth, I sipped from mine too.

“How’s the taste of adulthood?” Runa asked, acting like an older woman. She stared at me with curiosity.

So, while it was a little frustrating for me to tell the truth here...

“A little bitter...” I admitted.

Seeing me lick off the drop stuck to my lip with a grimace, Runa gave me a carefree smile.

“You’re so cute, Ryuto. ≡”

Then, she leaned toward me as if taking a closer look at my face and gave me a brief kiss.

Before the movie began, the clerk came again and led us to a “Platinum Room”—a private balcony with seats for two.

The awfully soft couch was more than spacious enough for the two of us, and when we sat down, the screen was right at eye level. Looking down, I saw lines of seats for people with regular tickets below. It felt like we were medieval nobles leisurely watching an opera from our balcony seats...not that I’d know how that would actually feel.

“Wow, this is so soft!” Runa exclaimed happily after sitting down. “I kinda feel like I could fall asleep here!”

It was what felt like roughly an hour since the start of the movie when I realized that her words had actually been prophetic.

Feeling something on my shoulder, I looked over and noticed Runa leaning against it. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing rhythmically. She hadn’t gotten enough sleep last night, and she’d also had champagne just before the start of the movie, so those might’ve been partially to blame. She looked so comfortable that it didn’t feel right to wake her up.

I recalled the time we’d gone to see a movie three years ago. I’d lent her my

shoulder the same way back then.

So it's been three years...

There was an unfinished glass of champagne on the table in front of us. Small bubbles kept forming at the bottom of it, showing no signs of stopping. Earlier, in the bathroom, I'd secretly looked up how much renting a Platinum Room was. It apparently cost thirty thousand yen.

"Don't worry, I have a full-time job."

"But...maybe I splurged a little too much, so is this good enough for a present?"

Runa must've gone so far to celebrate my birthday because reaching the age of twenty was a turning point in a person's life. The thought of it made me deeply grateful and filled me with love for her. Though she needn't have done all this—simply having her by my side was enough for me.

I took her hand from her lap and put it on mine, then linked my hand with hers. I looked to see if she'd wake up from that, but she only moved her head a little—there was no sign of her opening her eyes anytime soon. I decided to let her be.

Feeling Runa's scent and warmth, I refocused on the screen even though I had slightly lost track of the movie's plot.

"Man, I didn't think I'd fall asleep again!" said Runa, covering her face.

We were having dinner at a Japanese-style restaurant in a building next to the movie theater. We sat across from each other at a table in a private room that Runa had reserved. It was designed after the Kamakura period of Japanese history.

"It's fine, you were tired and all," I replied.

"So how'd it end? Did they save the world?"

"They did," I said. "With the power of love."

"What happened to them after that?"

“Well... The heroine went home, but they’ll probably see each other at some point.”

“What, why?!” she asked. “They loved each other so much!”

“That’s just how that director’s movies always go, you know?”

“Ehh...” Runa looked unsatisfied with the way the movie had concluded. “I wanted them to get married if their relationship developed so much...”

When Runa watched movies with romantic elements, she inevitably would say that she wanted the involved characters to get married. This was probably what she found so attractive about love to begin with, and I was doing my best to give her the conclusion she desired. I hoped she could let the unsatisfying ending of a fictional relationship slide in the meantime.

Look at me, acting like a poet inside my mind...

“Hey, this is completely unrelated, but...” Runa began, suddenly changing the topic. “I really hated what the area manager said to me the other day!” There was anger written on her face, which was unusual. “I told him I wasn’t getting to see my boyfriend much recently, and he was like, ‘Then he’s definitely going to prostitutes.’”

“What...?”

“You don’t...go to prostitutes...right, Ryuto...?”

“N-No, I don’t,” I stammered.

Her unexpected suspicion had shaken me up and made me falter in saying it, which in turn made me even more flustered.

“Really...?” Predictably, I could see the worry in Runa’s upturned eyes.

“I really don’t.” I nodded deeply. “I don’t like touching people I don’t know, and I wouldn’t want to pay a lot of money for that kind of thing... I-I’m also afraid of getting diseases... But before all that, I have you.”

“But the area manager said all the guys do it.”

Runa was practically tearing up. It was cute, but also pitiable, so I was anxious to prove my innocence.

“‘All the guys’ is obviously an exaggeration... Maybe your area manager really means all the guys he knows, but I probably couldn’t be friends with people like that... At the very least, I don’t think any of my friends among guys go to prostitutes...”

“Really? Like, *really* really?”

“Yeah... Really.”

As I nodded over and over, Runa calmed down for the time being. “So then, what do you do when you get horny?”

“I look at porn or think about you, and take care of things alone...”

The uneasiness finally disappeared from Runa’s face, and she leaned toward me. “You still do it to me?”

It was an awkward topic, but Runa seemed to like it.

“Even though we’ve been dating for almost four years?” she continued.

“I’ll do it till the day I die,” I replied in desperation.

Runa’s eyes sparkled a bit, but then she puffed her cheeks. “Eh, I don’t like the sound of that. Let’s do things together.”

“What...?!”

Her bold statement made me doubt my ears. I went speechless.

Runa awkwardly averted her eyes from me. “If I go back to working part-time, I’ll get more days off, right? And so... Wanna go on a trip together? In the summer. To Okinawa, maybe. For four days.”

“F-Four days...”

Images of ecstatic nights with Runa on a southern island appeared in the back of my mind for a moment, making me gulp.

“I can’t breathe well when you’re not by my side,” said Runa all of a sudden. Her eyes lingered on the oolong tea on the table. “It’s only when I’m with you that I feel alive.” Her lips formed into a small smile, and her eyes were seductive. “Your heart’s the other half of mine.” Then, her gaze rose, and she looked me in the eye. “It’s been like that for these past two years, ever since we

graduated.” Taking bashful glances at my eyes, she added, softly, “So, it’s about time...you know?”

After a pause...

“Yeah,” I said, nodding awkwardly as I heard my heart pound violently, and then proceeded to drink my oolong tea.

After finishing our meal and leaving the restaurant, we descended from the seventh floor to the first and opened the door leading outside.

In order to get back to the street, we needed to go up a set of stairs. At the top of those stairs stood a young man and woman who had their backs to us. Both of them wore completely black, punk-rock-style clothes. Their relationship appeared to be intimate—in fact, the man’s hand was reaching for the woman’s black pleated miniskirt.

In the next moment, he pulled up her skirt, revealing her butt and G-string underwear. His hand then started caressing her fair skin.

As we stood downstairs from them, Runa and I were too astonished by the scene unfolding right before us to look away.

“Ahem.” Runa was kind enough to clear her throat.

At that point, the boyfriend’s hand quickly parted from the woman’s butt, and the flustered couple turned our way.

For ten whole seconds after we’d passed them, Runa and I didn’t say a word.

“It was a pretty good-looking butt. It was nice and small and all,” Runa said quietly.

“Yeah...”

“Wait, you looked too?”

“Huh? I-I mean, it was right in front of us. Of course I did,” I said.

Seeing me get flustered, Runa’s slightly angry face relaxed. She giggled. “I wonder if he couldn’t hold back until they were alone together.”

“Maybe,” I replied curtly. I was still trying to keep my heart from pounding

due to the strange encounter.

Holding hands, Runa and I walked toward the station through the Yasukuni-Dori area. It had been warm in the afternoon, but the wind at night was a little cold.

“Wanna go on a trip together? In the summer. To Okinawa, maybe. For four days.”

As I recalled what Runa had said, the warmth in my hands lifted my spirits.

“I guess maybe we’re a bit weird,” Runa said a little awkwardly after a while.

“Maybe,” I added shortly after, managing to keep myself from forcing a smile.

The world functioned on lust. Cities were full of provocative images of beautiful men and women, and when you browsed on social media, it wouldn’t be long until you ran into illustrations of women in sexy outfits.

I seemed to remember reading in some article that men thought about sex once every fifty-two seconds. And while I thought it was probably an exaggeration...

A man’s brain was dominated by sex. It was especially true for young guys like me.

But I feel more than lust toward you. It’s too embarrassing to say just how deep my love for you runs, so I never truly have. But that’s how I’ve felt all along. That’s what keeps the beast in me in check.

I’ve imagined pushing down that dainty yet curvy body of yours and making love to it fiercely enough to make you cry. A scene like that has played out in my head hundreds—no, at least thousands of times.

But whenever I see you in reality, I feel like being nice to you. I don’t want to see you look sad—instead, I want you to always smile happily.

I want to treasure you forever. Your heart, your body, and even every teardrop you shed.

I don’t want random couples passing by to see the precious parts of your body. So when we do things like that, let’s make sure it’s somewhere private. I’ll wait

until you're ready.

That time had finally come. It had to have.

April arrived, and my college classes started up again.

I met up with Kujibayashi-kun to decide our schedules for the school year with the list of new classes in hand.

“Kashima-dono, have you had the pleasure of viewing the cherry blossoms at Zojo-ji?”

“No. Are they still in bloom?”

“In full bloom, at that. 'Twas a most splendid sight from Tokyo Tower.”

“I hear you.”

“Would you care to go see them?” he asked. “I shall accompany you if so.”

The view of cherry blossoms throughout Shiba Park from up on the main deck of Tokyo Tower was indeed amazing. There didn't seem to be a lot of people here who'd come to look at them, so we could hear some of the visitors expressing their astonishment at the unexpected sight.

“It's spring, all right,” I said, feeling uplifted too.

“One may attest to the onset of spring, but doubt I shall, not till I hear the call of the bush warbler...”

“Huh?” I'd been glued to the scenery beyond the glass, so I was confused by Kujibayashi-kun's sudden recital of poetry.

“‘They may say spring has come, but I shall not believe it until I hear the bush warbler cry.’ That is the meaning of the poem in *Kokin Wakashu*, written by Mibu no Tadamine.”

“I see.”

“Bush warblers cry not in our times, so spring is never to come.”

I sighed.

“Much like in the life of yours truly,” he added.

Right. So by “spring,” he means “love and relationships” here.

I felt somewhat apologetic as the distant look in his eye seemed to be gazing somewhere past the cherry blossoms below.

We went to a café located on the main deck, and after getting something to drink, we spread the list of classes out on the table to discuss our schedules.

“Are you taking that third-period on Japanese linguistics? Guess I’ll take it too,” I said.

“But would that not make your schedule a tad too cramped? Now that you will be embarking upon your third year, you will be looking for full-time work, will you not?”

“I’m studying to become a teacher, so taking a lot of classes is unavoidable,” I explained. “I want to only have seminars in my fourth year.”

“Does the prospect of having less time for your loved one not bother you?” His tone stung a bit.

I forced a smile. “It’s okay, she’s busy too. And besides...”

I raised my face and looked toward the window. Beyond the heads of the numerous visitors, I could see the clear sky of the early afternoon and a far-stretching view of Tokyo.

“I’ll be going on a trip with my girlfriend in the summer and spending a few nights there,” I added, keeping my heart from leaping.

“Interesting. I suppose that explains your restlessness.”

“Huh?”

So he could notice? I could tell my face was getting red from embarrassment.

“Will it be your first trip together?”

I got flustered a little under Kujibayashi-kun’s probing gaze. “Y-Yeah,” I replied. “She’s been busy until now...”

“Either way, looking at you, one would think you were excited to lie with her for the first time. It may be your first trip together, but not your first night.”

The look behind his glasses became even sharper—it was frightening, like he was a skilled detective interrogating a suspect.

Seeing that, I figured this might be the time for me to finally tell him the truth.

“Well...” I began hesitantly. “Uh... The thing is...”

Kujibayashi-kun watched me with wariness in his eyes.

“It’s true that...she and I were very much set on doing it since years ago...” I looked down at the list of classes out of embarrassment, but my eyes slid right past the text on the paper. “And I mean, we still are. It’s just...” When I looked up, I saw Kujibayashi-kun still looking directly at me. “This is going to be a bit long, but will you hear me out...?”

At that point, Kujibayashi-kun looked startled. “Now, just a moment there, Kashima-dono.” He raised his hands in front of his chest, gesturing for me to wait. “Surely... Surely I misunderstand...” he said with a look of disbelief. “But, could it be...” Kujibayashi-kun gulped before continuing. “Are you...a virgin fiend too...?”

After he timidly asked that question...

...I nodded awkwardly.

Afterword

Kimizero has suddenly moved on to college. How did you like it?

The last sentence of volume 5 was actually a message for my readers. This development is something I'd been planning with my editor since volume 3, but to make it a surprise, I asked to leave it out of the prerelease plot summary. I was glad that I could bring Maria back to the center of the plot now that three years had passed too.

I'm currently writing a series of shorts about Ryuto's and Runa's lives in their last year of high school for *Dragon Magazine*. They function as a sequel to volume 5. For those of you who still would like to see more of the main pair in high school, please take a look at those!

When I started writing the college setting in this volume, my memories of being a total HSP (highly sensitive person) introvert in college came back to me one after another. It was really hard. Ryuto has come even closer to just being me. He's practically me already!

The name of the fictional Houo University is a mashup of Keio University (where I went) and Hosei University. In terms of what Ryuto's school is like, though, it ended up being just like the one I went to... Then again, universities probably don't differ all that much, at least not in terms of the way they're built, their systems, and the like. Or that's my excuse, anyway.

My student life was inseparable from the bottle, so even though I know that young people these days don't drink so much, it was unimaginable for me to write college students who didn't. My editor didn't like it but looked the other way anyway, "because it's me." I never imagined that the fact that Ryuto's birthday was in March would make things so interesting here. When I wrote volume 5, I realized that Ryuto's birthday hadn't been celebrated by that point yet, so I shoved it there in a hurry.

When I first tried beer in college, even I grimaced from the bitterness. Incidentally, I usually drank oolong tea highballs at the time.

Now, let's discuss the new character Kujibayashi-kun. My editor immediately nicknamed him "Kujirin" because of the kanji in his name. Feel free to use it for him too, if you like!

Kujirin is modeled after a male friend of mine in college. As for him being a virgin with low self-esteem despite being attractive, that comes from the character Kurokawa in my debut work *Chuu no Ge! (Lower Middle!)*

My friend from college didn't talk that way, of course (that was someone else entirely), but thanks to him, things were much easier for me in college. He was to me what Kujirin is to Ryuto—a precious friend. I hope he's somewhere out there, reading this book.

Once again, I'm really grateful to my illustrator magako-sama for making so much finely crafted, gorgeous artwork! Sorry to take up your time, I know you're busy!

And thanks so much to my editor, Matsubayashi-sama, who's been extremely helpful as always! I'm sorry I can be sloppy here and there sometimes—that's just how much I trust you!

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to the people I've come to know as part of the process of creating the anime adaptation—the screenwriter Fukuda Hiroko-sama (head writer of *Kimizero*) and the animator Ito Yosuke (responsible for the series's character designs). I got to talk to them while writing this volume, and they definitely boosted my creative urges. I'm sincerely happy to have made not one, but two friends at this age, and that we've had conversations where I've gotten so absorbed that I've forgotten about the time.

Thanks to the efforts of the wonderful team behind the anime, it's approaching its completion as I write this. Please look forward to it!

Now then, may we see each other again in volume 7!

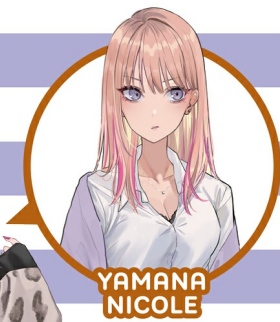
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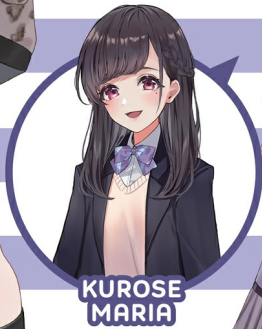
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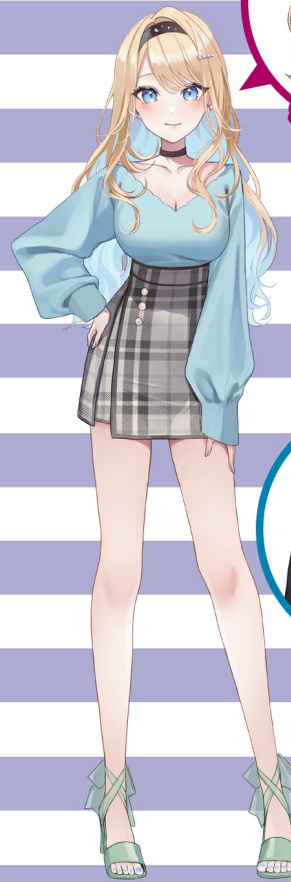
characters



YAMANA
NICOLE



KUROSE
MARIA



SHIRAKAWA
RUNA



KASHIMA
RYUTO



characters



SEKIYA
SHUGO



TANIKITA



IJICHI
YUSUKE



NISHINA
REN





6th
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You Were
Experienced,
I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko
Nagaoka

Artist / magako



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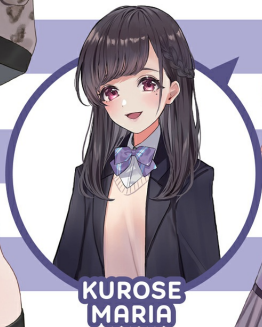
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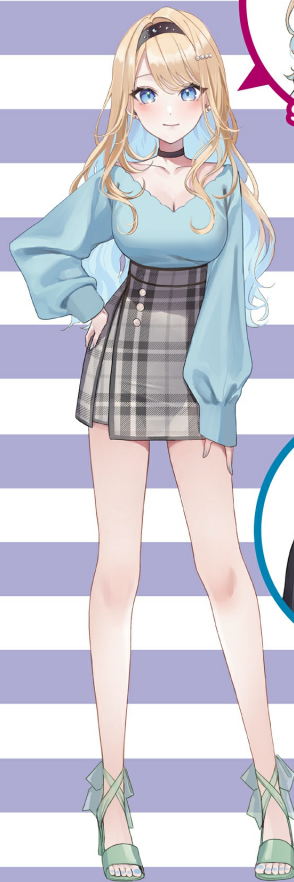
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KEIKEN ZUMI NA KIMI TO, KEIKEN ZERO NA ORE GA, OTSUKIAI SURU HANASHI. Vol. 6

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